

Chapter 1581

Two childhood friends were now each giving their all on very different paths.

Clarence had started with herbs, then medicine, and in time, healing became his entire world at Eldermere Keep. At first, it was merely something to pour his heart into, because he knew he would never be allowed to leave the mountain and open a medical hall of his own.

But then Ryan came, and afterward, sent Clarence a letter.

That letter changed everything.

For the first time, Clarence began to hope that maybe, just maybe, he could go down the mountain after all. And once that hope took root, he threw himself into his studies with more energy than ever before. He barely slept, rarely left the apothecary, and sometimes forgot to eat.

Because of the pain he had once endured, he focused his efforts on curing injuries and chronic pain. Of course, a good physician had to know more than one thing, so he studied every field without neglecting any.

There was a fire inside him now. A quiet flame that had not burned for many years.

From the moment Clarence had been sent to Eldermere Keep, he had known that even if he survived, this was all his life would ever be. But now, things were different. He had a chance to take on a new identity and a new face, as well as bring everything he had learned down the mountain.

He could finally be someone useful; he could live in the sunlight.

No more hiding. No more shrinking away from the world.

He was so moved by this hope that he spent several nights working at the apothecary, never once leaving. He ate there. Slept there. Lived there. Xander watched with wide eyes, and finally said that Clarence's hard work had begun to frighten him. He was even thinking of writing to Sebastian. 1

Clarence only smiled in response. And what a smile it was—bright and full of life, brighter than Xander had ever seen. It startled the man so much that he nearly called for a village priest to come examine Clarence, wondering if he had been bewitched.

Who smiled like that for no reason? Clarence looked like a different person altogether.

But what Xander didn't know—what Clarence hadn't told anyone—was that there was still a chance things might not work out. Ryan's plan might fail. And while Clarence tried his best to stay hopeful, he also knew he needed to be ready for disappointment, should it come.

Time passed quietly. Seasons changed. The moon waxed and waned. Before they knew it, two full years had slipped by like sand through one's fingers. 1


And then came the autumn equinox. The skies were clear, the weather crisp. The sun was warm but not harsh, and white clouds drifted gently from east to west.

Ryan returned to Eldermere Keep again—this time, not alone. With him was his childhood study partner, Evan, who had spent the last few years training under Travis. And though his skills were still no match for his mentor's, he could now hold his own against the older man. 1

When the mask, thin as a sheet of parchment, was pressed gently over Clarence's face, he could hardly feel a thing. It was so light, it was as though it wasn't there at all. Instinctively, he reached up to touch it. Because it was so thin, the warmth of his skin easily passed through, making it feel as real as his own face.

In the mirror, the reflection was that of a scholarly gentleman—not exceptionally handsome, but at least refined and gentle in appearance.

Curiosity stirred within Clarence, so he asked, "This mask is so thin. How does it change the shape of my nose and cheeks?"


Ryan smiled. "It doesn't, not truly. Your face remains the same. But if you hold it up under the sunlight and look closely, you'll notice a bit of color in certain places, either pale pinks or greys. When it's placed on your face, those colors mimic natural shadows and skin tones, creating the illusion of shape. That's how we sculpt your features without changing them. If it weren't for needing that effect, the mask wouldn't have taken two years to make." 

Clarence didn't know just how hard creating the mask had been, but if it had taken Ryan that long, it must have been very difficult indeed. Ryan had always been clever. That he had gone to such lengths filled Clarence's heart with quiet, humble gratitude.


And so, with Evan by their side, Ryan carried Clarence down the mountain.

For the past two years, Clarence had been persistent in his training. Walking on flat ground was manageable now, but climbing mountains, up or down, was definitely out of the question. He even refrained from eating too much, afraid that gaining weight would make it harder for his legs to support his body.


That was also the advice given by the Nerathian physician—to stay lean, and to exercise in moderation. Walking for too long was not recommended, and occasional light activity was enough. Despite all these limits, Clarence was already quite content.

After descending the mountain, they began to travel around. They headed south, then southwest, and finally northwest. Eventually, they reached Victory Pass. 

There, Clarence opened a humble medical hall named Healing Sanctum. In just two or three years, everyone in Victory Pass knew that the attending physician at the sanctum was particularly skilled at treating injuries.

Whether it was cuts from swords or knives, bruises from falls, or even broken bones, he could treat them all. Moreover, he possessed a rare medicine that could stop pain instantly. Even the military physicians of Victory Pass came to seek his advice. 

Rumor had it that he was the apprentice of one of Sebastian's apprentices. No one knew his full name, though—everyone simply called him "Mr. Azure", as that was the surname given to his generation of apprentices.

Some people were meant to shine. No matter where life set them down, they found a way to light the world. 

Of course, Ryan couldn't stay long at Victory Pass to accompany Clarence. Now, he had an additional title—he was both the Duke of Northwatch and the heir to Skywing Spire. In fact, he had already taken over all the family estates in the years before his title was officially granted. After all, Frederick was getting on in age, and Ryan couldn't possibly leave all the work to Jacob alone.

But Ryan would visit Victory Pass often. After all, his great-grandfather still lived there, and more importantly, so did his dearest friend.



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