

HER GRACEFUL WAR SONG

Chapter 1591

Carissa stopped and turned back to me. "Her family treats her well. It's just that things didn't go smoothly when they were arranging for her niece's marriage. Thankfully, that niece is now married to a good man.

"I think Viola worries that, being unmarried at her age-twice wed, no less-she might invite gossip. She doesn't want to burden her nephews and nieces or trouble her sister-in-law."

I nodded, thinking of Zoey-the fierce woman who was also kind-hearted. She had one son and one daughter, as well as more children from her late husband's concubines. She had likely faced many challenges while arranging marriages for all her children. I imagined the amount of gossip and judgment she must have endured.

I truly cared for Zoey like a sister-in-law, and I felt for all she had gone through. "Think it over," Carissa said.

I nodded, then glanced outside, where there wasn't a soul in sight.

I couldn't help but ask, "Aren't you afraid that Prince Rafael might grow jealous, you being here alone with me? Does he not know?"

Carissa looked rather taken aback, as though she had not expected such a question from me.

She appeared intent on avoiding answering, as she was already turning to walk away.

But after a moment's pause, she stopped and said, "If we can't trust one another even with something like that, how could I have held command of the Mystic Army for so long? I keep nothing from him, nor he from me. So, yes, he knows I have come to see you."

Carissa stepped out, and I followed. I couldn't help but wonder if the regent was somewhere nearby, quietly listening to our conversation. After all, no man would like his wife to be alone with her former husband.

Yet, I watched as she walked straight out, unhurried and unaccompanied.

No attendants emerged from either side of the hall, and she made her way alone to the front courtyard. There, I saw Prince Rafael seated next to General Sullivan, engaged in quiet conversation. When he looked up and saw Carissa, he smiled and waved her over to join him.

I watched from a distance, feeling a strange mix of emotions.

Was this really what a healthy marriage looked like?

But I couldn't help but wonder-whether in the city or at Victory Pass, shouldn't men and women take care not to be alone together? After all, if anyone spoke about it, their reputations would be damaged. And with their high positions, they certainly couldn't afford any gossip to spread.

As I thought about it, I felt almost foolish. What right did I have to worry about them?

But to hear Viola's words through Carissa was truly unexpected.

I had five days to think it over. After that, Prince Rafael and Carissa would return to the capital.

Truth be told, thinking of Zoey made

my decision clearer. But I hesitated, unsure if my feelings were just a moment of impulse, so I didn't immediately give Carissa an answer.

Over the next few days, I gave it more thought. I realized that Viola might not want to be my wife again she probably just wanted to ensure she had a place and some security, to protect her nephews and nieces from gossip.

As for me... Viola was right.

In the past, we both made mistakes. We should let bygones be bygones, and there was no harm in simply being companions.

So, when Carissa returned to the capital, I asked her to deliver a letter to Viola for me, along with a banknote. It was most of the savings I had accumulated over the years.

Six months later, Viola arrived at Victory Pass with a merchant caravan. She had sent word ahead, telling me when she would arrive.

I rode out to greet her.

Though it had been many years since we met, we both appeared calm when we saw each other. She stepped out of the carriage and curtsied to thank me.

I was right about her intentions-she only wanted a name, a place. Her manner was both grateful and apologetic.

Viola spoke plainly: "I've been selfish all my life, and I remain selfish now. I hope you can bear with me. I didn't spend the money you sent with Lady Carissa. I've saved a little myself, and can make some embroidery to support myself."

"Money is just a material item. But Victory Pass is not as prosperous as the capital, so I hope you won't resent life here," I replied.

She smiled. "It doesn't matter. It's the same wherever you are. As long as the heart is at peace, that's enough."

She really had changed a lot. Even her appearance wasn't as sharp and harsh as before; she had become more tolerant and kind-hearted.

'I don't know what the future holds. But for now, I suppose I'll just take things one step at a time.'

Chapter 1592

When did I truly realize how wrong I was?

It wasn't when Thomas returned, nor was it after my divorce from Barrett, nor even when the Prince family fell into misfortune.

No, it was when talks were going on to arrange the marriage of my niece, Courtney.

During the Prince family's fall from grace, I was imprisoned and narrowly escaped death. As I reflected on the past, I knew I had made mistakes and was willing to change. But I wasn't fully aware of just how deep my mistakes went.

At the time, I thought it was all my own problem. No matter how much I suffered, it was my burden alone. No one else had the right to speak on it.

I knew that my sister-in-law, Zoey, had suffered because of my stubbornness. She had worked tirelessly, running here and there, trying to help me, and perhaps I had grown accustomed to her always doing that for me. Because of that, I felt both gratitude and respect for her.

Still, I wasn't ready to face the full weight of my past. I didn't want to dwell on it—it only hurt me.

It wasn't until Courtney's marriage was being discussed that I truly examined myself. I let my regret gnaw at me, eating away at me every moment.

Courtney had become close with Merrick Saunders, a young man from the Earl of Averton's family. They shared similar interests and had developed feelings for each other.

Though our family's title was gone, Zoey still had the late king's favor and a good reputation. Her business had flourished, and my third brother, Isaac, had married Violet from the Spencer family. Now, he was gaining favor in the Ministry of Defense.

So, our family was considered to be on equal footing with the Earl of Averton's family.

But when Merrick went to his mother to ask for permission to marry Courtney, he was met with strong opposition. His mother, Maya Baker, forbade him from seeing my niece.

Merrick had always been dutiful to his mother, but he had already fallen deeply in love with Courtney. He told Maya that he would marry no one else, and would become a priest if she refused to approve their marriage.

In a fit of anger, she locked him up.

I'll never forget what happened the day Maya came to our house. She arrived with a large group of servants, storming in and immediately starting to yell at Zoey.

"Who do you think you are? What status do you think the Prince family has? How dare you set your sights on my son! You're nothing! Your daughter is just as shameless as that aunt of hers!

"She's still so young, yet she seduces a young man and even teaches him to threaten his parents, saying he'll become a priest if he doesn't marry her. Your whole family is just heartless! Let me make this clear: she'll never be part of my family-not unless I'm dead!"

With that, Maya ordered her servants to smash things and drag Courtney out of the house. They humiliated her in front of the neighbors, slapping her and spitting on her.

Zoey and I were held back by other servants; we were no match for them. After they finished destroying things and hitting Courtney, they left. Zoey immediately ran out and held her daughter, whose face was swollen and bruised from the beating.

Courtney didn't cry, but her body was trembling uncontrollably. She tried to comfort us, saying it was nothing, and that she wouldn't marry Merrick.

But later that night, in her bed, she cut her own wrist.

If Zoey hadn't been so worried and insisted on checking on her, Courtney might have been gone by the time we found her.

My sister-in-law, who had always been so strong, couldn't do anything this time.

She didn't know how to demand an apology from the Saunders family.

I saw her in her room, crying all alone. I had never seen her so broken or vulnerable before; it crushed me to see her like that. My guilt and regret were overwhelming, as if they would swallow me whole.

I couldn't help but reflect on all the mistakes I had made in the past; I felt like I didn't deserve to live.

That night, I sent all the maids away and locked myself in my room.

It was Violet who broke down the door and saved me. She slapped me hard and said, "Is this how you handle problems? Will it change anything? Will it make the Saunders family look at you any differently? Will it make anything better?"

I cried uncontrollably.

Isaac rarely came home, and even when he did, it was just to check on Zoey and the children. Violet came even less often, and she never really acknowledged me as her

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sister-in-law. But this time, she had made a special trip back to stand up for us.

The next day, she went to the Saunders family's residence alone.

I don't know exactly what she said, but a few days later, Maya came with a matchmaker to propose

again. This time, her attitude wamet

completely different. She was gentle and apologetic, and there was no sign of reluctance in her face or actions. She even took Courtney's hand and cried while apologizing, promising to treat her well once she married Merrick.

In the end, Courtney married Merrick, and their wedding was grand and magnificent. True to their word, the Saunders family treated my niece very well once she became part of their family.

However, I was afraid.

Though Courtney was married now, I had other nieces and nephews whose marriages needed to be arranged.

Reconciling with Barrett was the only solution I could think of. If I swallowed my pride and returned to the Warren family as Barrett's wife, at least I wouldn't drag my family down with me anymore.

Chapter 1593



Let me tell you about the day the Saunders family crossed a line even I, Violet Spencer, couldn't ignore.

It was beyond outrageous!

The Saunders family held nothing more than a minor earl's title, yet Maya dared act so arrogantly! In all my years alive, I had encountered plenty of ill-mannered women, but never had I encountered one among the powerful and influential.

When I heard that they had dragged Courtney out and slapped her, calling her shameless for having feelings for a young man, I wanted to storm into Averton Estate, break down their door, and give them a taste of their own medicine.

Cari was angry too, but she reminded me that we couldn't just go rushing in without thinking. The most important thing was to check on Courtney and Viola- who knew if they might do something rash?

I had to admit, Cari had been in court long enough to know how to handle these things. She could stay calm when it mattered most.

I rushed straight to the Prince family's residence. As I feared, I found that Courtney had slit her wrist. And when I heard Viola had sent away all her maids, I knew it was only going to get worse.

Sure enough, Viola was determined to hang herself up like winter provisions. I lost my temper and slapped her right across the face.

I've had a good temper these past few years, but seeing her like that, I couldn't hold back. All those years spent at the workshop and she never learned a thing. Not how to be strong, nor how to stand up for herself.

After that, I stormed over to Averton Estate.

When I arrived, I was taken aback to see Cari there, accompanied by some soldiers from the Mystic Army. My anger, still simmering, gave way to confusion.

As a court official, Cari wasn't supposed to be here. We had agreed I would be the one to storm in and deliver payback. Yet there she was, clad in full official robes, seated sternly in the main hall.

Michael stood at her side, while several armored soldiers restrained a prisoner. I took a closer look-wasn't that Merrick's brother and heir to the family, Gabriel Saunders?

The whole estate seemed to have come out, including the servants, and of course, Maya herself. It was clear something big had happened, though I wasn't sure what yet.

I stayed back and kept quiet for a moment, trying to figure out what was going on. Cari hadn't warned me she would be here, and now I was caught in a bit of a mess-fuming but unsure what to do about it.

From what I could hear, the Saunders family was bowing and scraping, begging Cari for mercy. And from there, I began to understand just what had happened.

It turned out that Gabriel had gotten involved with a wealthy merchant's concubine, and they had been caught in the act. Gabriel thought his noble Status gave him the right to act as he pleased and had beaten up the merchant.

Just as luck would have it, Michael and the Capital Guard were patrolling nearby and "happened" to come across the scene. They reported it to Cari, who had the man arrested and brought back.

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Now, the merchant intended to press charges against Gabriel for abusing his power, kidnapping the concubine, and assaulting the merchant's servants. If those charges were proven, Gabriel would never be able to inherit his title.

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The pleas for mercy had gone on for at least as long as 15 minutes, but Cari remained unyielding, her expression as stern as ever.

It was then that she gave me a look. We had known each other for so long that there was no need for words. I understood perfectly.

I stepped forward, my voice cutting through the tension, "Oh, quite a gathering here, isn't it? Perfect timing. I've come to settle a debt."

The people in the room seemed to just notice me for the first time, their eyes shifting toward me in

confusion. Recognition flickered across their faces, followed by bewilderment. What debt could I possibly have with them?

"However have we offended you, Ms. Spencer?" Maya asked.

"You went to the Prince family's residence with a group of people and beat them up. When two young people take a liking to each other, proper families either bless the match or decline with grace.

"As parents, you didn't approve. But instead of discussing the matter calmly, you went over to their home and used violence. And now, I see where your family's manners come from. No surprise, really," I replied coldly.

Everyone stiffened. Clearly, they had forgotten Courtney was my husband's niece. Admittedly, few knew of this connection.

Maya offered a razor-thin smile. "A misunderstanding, truly! My foolish boy failed to explain properly. He's always treated Ms. Prince as a sister, but she misinterpreted his kindness and clung to fantasies of marriage.

"And with his own betrothal negotiations underway... Well, we couldn't let such rumors jeopardize his prospects, could we? I may have acted hastily, but I fail to see how this concerns you, Ms. Spencer."

Her last remark seemed to suggest that I was meddling in matters that didn't concern me.

"How can it not concern me? Everyone in the capital knows that my husband is the third son of the Prince family," I answered coldly.

Chapter 1594



The reactions of the Saunders family were telling. They stood frozen, as if they couldn't believe what they were hearing. It was clear that no one in the capital had warned them, and they hadn't heard anything about it.

Seizing the opportunity, I spoke again, my voice icy, "Who doesn't know that my husband, the third son of the Prince family, dotes on Courtney more than anyone? She's been wronged so severely, and he's beside himself with worry.

"I had to talk him out of rushing to the grand queen dowager to complain about this. But since I'm here, whoever it was that raised their hand against Courtney should step forward and accept the consequences."

Isaac, while holding many positions in the capital, was most known as my husband, an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, the armory's overseer in the Ministry of Defense, and the owner of several enterprises in the capital. His connection to the Prince family was downplayed, but it still proved useful in situations like this.

Among his many fabricated and genuine identities, none would give doubt to his connection to Victoria. After all, it was well known that she held great respect for the guildmaster of the Pathfinders Guild.

I paused, allowing my words to sink in. Then, I calmly took a seat, matching Cari's composed demeanor.

It wasn't long before the Saunders family seemed to realize what was happening. The regent's princess consort herself had come with the Capital Guard to intervene on behalf of Courtney. I could only imagine that Maya never dreamed such a powerful ally was backing the young girl.

"Oh dear, it's all my fault for listening to slanderous whispers," Maya quickly apologized, rushing forward. "I will punish those who spread rumors, and I swear I will make things right with Ms. Prince. I'll personally go and apologize, and those who mistreated her will be dealt with."

I leaned back in my chair and replied slowly, "If you're truly intent on making amends, there's no need for the young lady to see the ugliness of it. It would be best not to let her eyes be tainted by such matters. If your family is too busy to handle it, Lady Carissa is here and can help you take care of things, including dealing with Gabriel."

The Earl of Averton, Franklin Saunders, quickly agreed, "Very well. Beat them all, then once they're punished, this matter ends here."

Maya hurried to summon the servants and women who had been involved in the misdeeds, offering them up for Cari and me to handle.

Cari calmly replied, "Since the young heir of the Saunders family has proven to lack virtue, inheriting the title is out of the question. Now that someone has filed a report with the Capital Guard, I can't turn a blind eye."

"Wrongdoing must be dealt with properly. If a few slaps were enough to brush it off, wouldn't everyone be able to escape consequences just because they are strong enough to withstand a few blows?"

I glanced at Cari.

Wasn't she here to

take action and settle this matter? Was she really going to back down now? And what of Courtney and Merrick's marriage? Those two were truly in love; it wouldn't do to let the Saunders family tear them apart just because they were too proud to accept the union.

Maya's expression grew unsightly. "Your Grace, is this how you intend to use your power to oppress us? Our family, though not of the highest rank, is known for our integrity. When it comes to arranging marriages for our children, we must be careful.

"How could we possibly agree to a match with someone from the Prince family, given their reputation? If our caution offends you, and you intend to use your influence to force us, we, a mere earl's family, would have no means to resist."

Cari replied, "Madam Maya, you should be speaking to Ms. Spencer about your family's issues. I am here to address the case of the kidnapped concubine. As for your quarrels with the Prince family, I am not involved. From start to finish, I have only spoken about the matter concerning Mr. Gabriel."

Franklin lost his patience and berated Maya, "If you don't know how to speak properly, then hold your tongue!"

After being told off so harshly, Maya stepped back in silence.

Franklin acted with brutal efficiency. At his command, servants dragged forward the maids and lackeys who had stormed the Prince family's

residence. The hall erupted with the sharp crack of slaps-one after another-until the offenders collapsed, sobbing for mercy.

"Enough," Cari said, raising her hand to stop the chaos. "Your feud with the Prince family is none of my concern. However, Mr. Gabriel comes with me now. You have one day, if the victim withdraws the complaint, he walks free. If not, the law takes its course."

With that, Cari ordered Gabriel to be bound and taken away.

The Saunders family followed in vain, pleading for mercy, but it was all for naught. Cari had made her decision.

Michael lingered behind and slowly said, "There is a way to save your heir, but it

is not without effort. As Commander Sinclair has said, if the victim chooses not to press charges, the matter will end.

"You must approach the victim yourself. It just so happens that the victim is a close friend of Mr. Isaac

If you're going to ask for help, you'll want to be certain that your request is made to the right people. Commander Sinclair is known for her fairness, after all."

Franklin nodded and respectfully replied, "Thank you for your advice, Lord Brown."

Chapter 1595



I finally understood Cari's plan.

Maya had made a scene at the Prince family's residence, and would naturally have to go there and apologize. But the real plan was to use the scandal around Gabriel's disgrace to put pressure on the Saunders family. From now on, even if Courtney married into their family, they would be too scared to mistreat her.

With both leverage and a secret weapon in hand, it was a solid move.

But for me, today was about getting some justice, especially with Maya. I wasn't going to leave without making my point.

Once Michael and the others left, I turned to Maya. "I heard you say that your family is one of high standing and noble reputation. Truly, that's a laugh. What kind of noble family would kidnap a woman and make a scene by beating up someone at another person's residence?"

"I was ready to tear your whole house apart and expose your hypocrisy to the city today, but you're lucky. Since Merrick genuinely cares for Courtney, I don't want to make things too ugly and embarrass them.

"Still, don't think for a moment that I'll let this go without a resolution. Courtney has been wronged, and I won't rest until she's properly compensated. She was raised with care; I won't let anyone pick on her. You may think that your title as a mere earl's family gives you the right to bully the Prince family, but remember-what goes around comes around.

"A small noble family like yours doesn't scare me. If you want the victim of your son's actions to forgive him, that's not my concern. But if you don't handle things properly with Courtney, I'll make it public. And once it's out in the open, I don't know if your precious title will survive. Just wait and see."

Maya's face turned bright red, but she didn't speak a word in reply. She couldn't, not after I had said all that.

In my years in the city, I usually preferred to handle things with reason. But if others didn't respect that, I had no problem showing them a different side of me.

It was clear now that Gabriel's actions were undeniable-he had been caught and the Capital Guard had taken him in. Maya knew that if I decided to make a bigger scene, I would make sure everyone knew the full story.

Maya remained silent as Franklin quickly apologized, promising that Merrick and Courtney were meant to be together. He explained that it was Maya's act of listening to foolish gossip that caused the rift with the Prince family and created trouble for the couple.

Franklin was a reasonable man. If Maya wouldn't listen to reason, he knew how to make her understand.

I didn't waste any more time and stood to leave.

Soon enough, Maya came to apologize in person. She also brought a matchmaker with her. She acted as though nothing had ever happened, calling Courtney by name with excessive sweetness, as though she hadn't caused so much harm to her.

Courtney appeared at a loss. She had been criticized and blamed by so many people throughout her life, yet had never once received an apology. She clearly didn't

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understand why Maya had suddenly changed her tune so dramatically.

I didn't say much to her about it, but privately, I asked her if she really wanted to marry Merrick.

Courtney seemed hesitant. Even though Maya had come to apologize, bringing a matchmaker and making grand promises, the family still frightened her.

"What do you like about Merrick?" I asked her.

Courtney's cheeks flushed slightly. "I like how hardworking and kind he is, and how he respects others."

"And what else?" I pressed. "The young man's certainly handsome. Did his looks attract you at all?"

Courtney fidgeted, clearly shy. "Maybe just a little."

I smiled. "What's there to be shy about? If men can admire women for their looks, why can't we appreciate handsome men?"

Courtney's face grew even redder.

I looked at her seriously. "A family like his will bring you trouble. His mother is a difficult woman, and if it were anyone else, I'd tell them to simply refuse."

Courtney's eyes reddened. "I know."

her nose a little tap,

"But..." I gave Fer

"Since it's you, I'd advise you not to

miss the chance with the man you like. Sure, his family is tough to deal with, but your own family isn't a bunch of weak-willed people either. With us at your side, you need not

fear any harm. As long as Merrick treats you well, nothing else matters. If it comes to it, you can live separately in another estate. You have enough support and a good dowry, so there's no need to be afraid."

When I saw the tears well up in her eyes, I added, "Don't think so little of yourself, okay?"

"Thank you, Aunt Violet!" she cried, her voice breaking as the tears flowed freely.

I gently patted her back to comfort

her. "From

now on, you must stand tall, Courtney. Remember, you are your own person. The mistakes your father and aunt made have nothing to do with you. You don't need to bear the faults of others in your life."

Chapter 1596



I heard Franklin endured quite a few rejections from Isaac. In the end, Franklin had no choice but to release Merrick and send him to plead on their behalf-only then was Gabriel rescued.

With the matter settled, they were deeply grateful to Isaac, though they all knew it had been a calculated move. What else could they do? After all, their son had behaved badly and been caught in the act.

When Merrick learned of his mother's mistreatment of Courtney, he kept quiet for a time. However, once they were married, he made it clear that he wished to live separately. He didn't want to cause a rift in the family, but in Starhaven's official evaluations, being dutiful towards family mattered more than talent. A single accusation of being disloyal could end a person's career.

Merrick's reason for wanting to live separately was perfectly reasonable-he said he needed peace and quiet to prepare for his upcoming exams. His family was too large, so the distractions would make it difficult to focus.

He had always been a dutiful son, and Maya had stirred up so much trouble this time. She also saw that Merrick had the support of powerful people, so she didn't try to stop him. She agreed to their separation.

The matter was handled quietly, with no gossip or trouble. At first, the couple had planned to live in Courtney's dowry house, but Maya worried that her son might be taken advantage of. So, she used her own dowry money to buy them a small house to live in instead.

The young couple seemed to be utterly content, as happy as could be.

I was glad for them.

Merrick, a smart and hardworking young man, was bound for success. Even if he didn't become a top scholar, he would find his own way in the world.

However, it seemed that Courtney's marriage had a much greater effect on Viola, who became withdrawn and downcast for a while.

I knew she had heard plenty of gossip over the years. Cari once told me that when a woman made a mistake, it was hard to start over. Everyone always celebrated when a man changed and turned his life around, but a woman was condemned when it happened.

Viola had truly changed, though. She no longer only thought about herself and started helping around the house. She even worked at the workshop, which had grown, taking in many women who had been abandoned by their husbands.

Viola and Zoey taught them how to read and write. They didn't need a great education, but knowing how to read and do simple math was important. Many of these women might leave the workshop one day, and knowing a trade or a skill would help them support themselves.

Viola had become quieter and less sensitive. But, despite all her progress, there were times when I saw that she was troubled. She used to care so much about her appearance and status, and always had to have the finest clothes and live in luxury.

Now, she was different.

She didn't care much about her clothes or how she looked. Most days, she didn't even bother to dress up, and rarely bothered with makeup. A few strands of white had started to show in her hair, which she didn't try to hide.

One day, she invited Isaac and me to her house. Zoey and Luna were there too. Viola wanted to share something she had been thinking about for a long time with

us.

"I've had an idea for a while now," she began, her voice calm, but there was a hint of nervousness in her eyes. "I've been hesitating, but I think I should tell you all and see if you think this a good idea."

"Go ahead," Zoey said gently.

Viola took a deep breath and coughed softly. Her hands twisted the handkerchief in her lap as she said, "I'm wondering if Barrett would ever consider taking me back. i were to marry him again, I think it might settle things for the children. Their marriages won't be affected anymore."

We were all surprised and exchanged looks.

The past between Viola and Barrett was complicated, to say the least. It was hard

to say who had made the bigger mistake. But the bond between them seemed long gone. Could it really be rekindled?

Zoey was always the practical one. After a long pause, she said, "If it's just about

the children's marriages, you don't need to do this. But if you truly want to be with him again, then that's a different matter."

Viola's eyes grew sad. Her voice dropped a little as she continued, "I know I'm getting older. I've been

selfish for so long, and I know it' et

burdened everyone. But should rely on my nieces and nephews to take care of me in my old age? I'm not just doing this for them. also want something for myself."

"But if you rush to him, do you think he'll treat you well?" Luna asked.

Viola shook her head slowly. "I don't know. I've been thinking about this for a long

time. I'm just asking what you all think. Honestly, I don't even know if Barrett would agree."

She turned to me and asked, "What do you think?"


I didn't think too much before I

answered: "If you really want to be with him again, then you should him. If he agrees, you can be together again. If not, you don' anything, except maybe a little pride. Does it matter to you?"

Viola lowered her voice, speaking almost as if to herself: "It doesn't matter. I don't

have much pride left. Maybe if I leave the capital, I could find some peace."





It had been a month since I arrived at Victory Pass, and I began to wonder what I ought to do with myself.

Though I was Barrett's wife in name, in truth, we had very little to do with each other. He spent most of his time at the camp, only returning now and then. As such, I had plenty of time on my hands and thought I might start a little trade.

Victory Pass was not quite as I had imagined. I thought a border town like this would surely be cold and short on supplies. But to my surprise, one could buy almost anything here-save for things like the finest jewels and luxurious brocade.

That was not to say they couldn't be found at all. When merchant caravans brought such treasures, they were quickly stored away and sent on to Orivenia, where they would be sold to nobles and the wealthy.

The common folk in Victory Pass bought ornaments for their prettiness rather than their worth, and no one really cared whether they were costly or not.

I had been thinking about what sort of business I might start. Whatever it was, I would need to purchase a shop first, would I not? So, I set out with my manservant and maid, wandering through streets and alleys in search of a suitable place.

When I came to Victory Pass, Zoey had given me a purse of silver coins. Luna and Violet had also added some, and I had my own savings as well. It was more than enough to buy one or two shops here.

My maid was a 14-year-old local girl called Lumi. When she was seven, she had been sold to be a child bride. But the boy in that household had fallen gravely ill, and the family had no choice but to sell her again to afford medicine. She had gone through a hard life.

I swore, as we wandered through the streets, that I truly meant to buy a shop and begin some trade. But when we passed Apricot Lane, my eyes came to rest upon an abandoned house.

It was a large place, much larger than where I was currently staying. But the courtyard was overgrown, and the gate was rotting and missing one side. From where I stood at the entrance, I could see tall grass growing wild within.

My manservant, Thane, was also a local. He told me that this building had once been a school. When the war broke out, no one had time to study they were too busy trying to survive-so the school had been left to ruin.

Later, when a new school was built with money from the court, it was placed elsewhere. Meanwhile, this old one, being too worn, was abandoned for good.

I told Thane and Lumi that I wished to buy the place and open a women's academy.

I said it calmly, but the moment the words left my lips, I startled even myself.

Starting a school was often a safe and profitable venture-but an academy for women? That was another matter entirely. Though many women's academies had opened across the kingdom, there were still very few families truly willing to send their daughters to study.

Even with Victory Pass thriving from border trade, most people here were set on earning money and saw no use in educating their daughters.

And truth be told, most girls from ordinary families had little need for learning. Once married, they only needed to know how to honour their in-laws, serve their husbands, bear children, and, if the family owned a small business, perhaps manage simple accounts.

I had heard that Victory Pass once followed the trend and opened a women's academy. However, only a few ever enrolled, and it eventually shut its doors.

So, if I wished to open a women's academy here, it would be terribly difficult. I might pour in all my silver and still not succeed.

Just as I was about to give up the idea, I suddenly remembered something Carissa once said, which Zoey had told me about. When Carissa first began her own

workshop, everyone said it would be too hard, that she would be mocked and misunderstood.

But she had said, "Yes, it will be hard. But it must be done."

It had to be done.

Yes, I believed so too.

Once the decision was made, it seemed my life's purpose was finally set.

Buying the old, abandoned house was no trouble at all. With Barrett's help in handling the arrangements, I was able to purchase it at an excellent price and began repairs straightaway.

Barrett never asked me why I wanted to open a women's academy. Perhaps it was because he knew it was something Carissa had done. If she did it, it must be right. Believe that was what he thought in his heart.

It was quite difficult to find students. I couldn't offer everything for free—my money only went so far.

At first, only three girls came. A few months later, the number grew to five. Even

so, I gave it my whole heart and did my best to teach them well.

Life became fuller. Most importantly, my heart felt at peace.

Or nearly at peace.

Looking back, I had made many mistakes in the first half of my life. I had hurt people with both my actions and my sharp words. While in the capital, I apologized to many of them, especially my family.

The only one to whom I never gave a true and heartfelt apology was... Thomas.

I owed him that much. I longed to make it right.

That was why my heart had not yet found full peace.

Chapter 1598



At times, I taught my students to face life with courage and own up to their mistakes. Yet, I had not done so myself.

All these years, I had hardly seen Thomas. If there was an event where he might be present, I would quietly avoid it.

Back when I was still stubborn, Zoey had scolded me, saying I owed Thomas an apology. At the time, I didn't quite agree. In fact, I felt rather aggrieved.

But thinking back now-what was I so aggrieved about? Who truly owed me anything? Had the heavens not already treated me kindly enough? Everything I lost, I brought upon myself.

More than once, I had unfolded a sheet of parchment, intending to write him a sincere apology from the heart. Yet, each time I put a quill to paper, the ink would fall, but not a single word would follow.

I feared the letter would seem sudden and out of place, that it might stir suspicion

in his wife's heart, or in Barrett's. Even though Barrett and I were husband and

wife in name only, I still didn't wish to disturb the peace between us.

During this time, Barrett returned home a few times. Perhaps he noticed the crumpled bits of parchment left in my study, for he asked someone to warm a pot of wine and prepare some snacks, then invited me to sit with him.

Whenever he came back previously, we would dine together, but rarely spoke. And we had certainly never shared wine before.

I could tell he had something on his mind, so I poured him a cup, then one for myself as I waited for him to speak.

He drank slowly, then set the cup down with ease. He looked at me and said, "I've seen some parchment in your study these past visits. Looks like you wanted to write something, but never finished. Who is it you're trying to write to?"

Since I arrived at Victory Pass, we had kept our conversations plain and direct. We only spoke when there was something to say, and never beat around the bush. I rather liked it that way. It kept misunderstandings at bay.

So, I didn't hide it. I laid my thoughts bare and told him everything.

When I finished, I added, "It's nothing more than that. I simply wish to admit my faults while I still live, and to offer apologies where they are due. Only then will my heart feel truly at peace."

A flicker of puzzlement crossed Barrett's sun-darkened face. "Why didn't you say the words you wanted to him while you were still in the capital?"

I sighed. "I didn't dare."

He laughed, showing a flash of white teeth. "Indeed, apologising face to face takes a great deal of courage. Writing a letter is easier. So, go on then-write the letter."

"Do you

mind?" I asked him.

He looked a little surprised, as though it had not occurred to him that I would care about his feelings.

After a moment's pause, he poured himself another cup of wine and drank it slowly. There was a touch of wistfulness in his eyes as he shook his head and said, "I don't mind. I

think what you're doing takes

courage." s̃novel

I looked at him and curiously asked, "Did you ever apologise to Carissa?"

"I did," he replied.

"She wouldn't forgive you?" I asked. "That seems strange. From what I know of her now, she doesn't hold on to the past. That's not her nature."

Truth be told, Carissa was doing well now. Even though I was Barrett's wife, I had to admit that Rafael was truly a fine husband. People who were living well didn't tend to dwell on old hurts or betrayals.

"She said it was in the past," he said softly, though I could still see regret in his eyes.

It wasn't that Carissa hadn't forgiven him—it was that he had not forgiven himself.

Of course. When one once had someone so good and failed to cherish them, how could there not be regret?

I regretted things too. But we had to look ahead, not remain trapped by what couldn't be undone. That was what I had learned during my years at the workshop. It was also the very reason I wished to apologise to Thomas.

To put it plainly-it was my way of making peace with my past.

If one couldn't forgive oneself, no one else truly could either.

"Yes, it is in the past. Let it stay there. You're now stationed at Victory Pass, with both rank and merit. What matters most is looking to the future. Even if we ruined the first half of our lives, should we let those mistakes ruin the rest of it too?" I said.

Something in him shifted. He looked at me for a long while, then reached out and took my hand.

His voice was low and hoarse as he said, "You've opened my eyes."

It was the first time he had ever held my hand since I arrived at Victory Pass. I squeezed his hand in return, and felt a quiet relief settle inside me.

I wrote a letter to Thomas. Two months later, his reply arrived.

He wrote: [The past is nothing but smoke now. Let it drift away and be forgotten.

I'm doing well these days, and I hope you and Barrett are too.]

I folded the letter neatly and placed it in my drawer. The thorn that had long been lodged in my heart had finally been removed.

I would strive to live the rest of my life well. And I hoped that any woman who had once made mistakes might also have the chance to begin again.

Chapter 1599



Back to me-Violet-again, and I had to complain a little.

About my husband, Isaac Prince, of course.

Heavens help me, but that man truly had a talent for being infuriating!

Before our marriage, we had come to an agreement. In the future, whatever I chose to do, he would not interfere, would not advise, and most certainly would not involve himself.

Well, it had only been a year since our wedding, and that agreement had already gone out the window. Now, he insisted on doing everything with me.

But could he even be part of the work I did? Of course not.

The Pathfinders Guild had strict rules, and there was even a rather fearsome man -Sage Everett-keeping watch. If they ever discovered I had taken Isaac with me to personally punish people in my own way... Wouldn't they grind my bones to dust?

Yet, Isaac claimed he was a man of the martial arts world, and that in such a world, one settled debts of gratitude and grudges alike. And yes, that included other people's grudges too. He argued that if we kept everything well hidden, the guild would never find out.

Had my dear husband forgotten he was in the Ministry of Defense now? And that he was a proper official? How could he still speak of settling grudges like some wandering hero?

The things I did I hadn't even told Cari all of it. And if she had guessed anything, she chose to turn a blind eye. It was a matter of roles, understand? Our positions didn't allow for such entanglements.

I wasn't an official, nor did I serve the court. I only did what I wished to do, and whatever consequences came of it, I bore alone.

Over the years, I had offered the Royal Citadel no small number of clues and pieces of evidence. As for cases with no evidence, I would use my own methods to force out the details of the crime. If the details matched, there was basically no chance of wrongful accusations.

Of course, Claire helped with the investigations. If it had been left to me alone, I would never have uncovered so much. But that was the extent of Claire's help. Everything else, I did myself.

Isaac and Cari-by their very identities-belonged in the light. I, however, could only move in the shadows.

I didn't know if there could be a middle ground between black and white. However, the law could only punish those caught and proven guilty. What about the rest? Should they just wait for retribution?

In that case, I would be their retribution.

I was happy that Isaac agreed with my view, but when he insisted on joining me in action, I was far from pleased.

He gave the rather charming excuse that if a wife took the lead, then naturally, the husband had to follow. Besides, he said that he only developed weapons in the Ministry of Defense. By day, he was part of the armory division; by night, he was simply Isaac. And what he chose to do at night, the people in the Ministry of Defense need not know.

I argued with him for a long while, but could not out-talk him or out-stubborn him. In the end, I gave in and let him come along.

Of course, I made him agree to one thing first. He had to follow my orders without question, and under no circumstances was he to challenge my authority or try to take control.

And so, it seemed we had come to walk the same path.

To think, when we first met, the idea of us ending up together was truly absurd.

When I married him, many laughed and teased, "Didn't you say you'd never marry? And now here you are, a bride!"

Everyone believed I was thoroughly against the idea of marriage—that I hated it from the bottom of my heart.

But that wasn't true.

As a child, I had attended many weddings. Everything, from the joyful scenes and lively music to the bride in her fine robes and splendid headpiece, had filled me with wonder.

Yes, I had once dreamed of it too.

Back then, I paid no mind to gossip. Even if I heard it, I never thought it had anything to do with me or the Spencer family. But as I grew older, I began to understand. The woman they whispered about—the shameless creature who ran away with a man—was Liana, a member of the Spencer family.

I began to see the scorn on their faces and understand what it meant. If it had only been the adults, I might have endured it. But even the children I played with repeated those cruel words.

How could I bear it?

I didn't yet know how to tell right from wrong, but I knew what it felt like to be bullied. However, there was nothing that couldn't be solved by beating the other person into submission.

I was fierce, unafraid of pain,
reckless even, and I struck hard.

Before long, they no longer dared lay
a hand on me. Instead, they used

what they thought were the Cruellest words to cut me down.

They said I would never marry, and that no one would ever want me. They said that I had a shameless aunt and was an evil woman myself. No one

would want to marry a woman like me, and even if they did, they would probably beat me to

death once I was married

I would stand with hands on my hips and shout back at them with all my might: "Then, I shan't marry! Not ever! In fact, I'll go learn martial arts and come back to beat you to death!"

Of course, I suppose that vow couldn't count.

For to keep it, I would have to stay unmarried and beat them all to death.

So, for the sake of their lives, I had no choice but to marry.

Yes, that was the reason.

Chapter 1600



But then again, I had to say-girls like me were quite popular with young gentlemen.

At Meadow Ridge, many a lad had taken a fancy to me. Those boys just growing their first bit of stubble would shyly pass me love letters, one after another. I never read a single one and tore them all up right in front of them.

At the time, I hadn't yet sorted through the logic behind my old vow. In my heart, those two words-never marry-still loomed large.

So, yes, I knew I was being cruel when I ripped up their letters in front of them. But I was sorry-not for the act, but for what it meant.

As a girl who had sworn never to fall in love, I had to be ruthless. I couldn't let them hold onto even a sliver of hope. Better they shed a few tears now than fall too deep and suffer heartbreak later.

Even when they pouted and claimed the letter was for Cari and not for me, I remained unmoved.

Ha! Not even men yet, and already they were learning the tricks of playing hard to get.

At Meadow Ridge, my best companions were naturally Cari, Bun, Thia, and Rod. Oh, and for a time, Thia's senior joined us in our games. But he later left the mountain to travel the land and help the weak. Thia said he was nursing a broken heart.

Those youthful days were simple, with no strange troubles, only joy in the wild hills and the aches from martial arts training.

At first, I didn't know Isaac, who was Cari's fifth senior in the guild, very well. After she and I made peace and became friends, I began to see more of him.

Looking back now, I had to say that he rather put on airs. While the rest of us spoke only of martial arts-swordplay, footwork, dagger forms, and the like-he alone would open a folding fan and begin reciting poetry, showing off his fine words.

At Meadow Ridge, there was only one person who could recite poetry with a fan in hand and look the part-Kyle. Gentle, learned, and polished, he seemed as though he had stepped straight out of a novel.

Isaac was merely imitating him, and not very well.

Still, he often went down the mountain and brought us back all sorts of oddities. He would also go to the theatre and return to tell us the stories. Tales of strange happenings, amusing events-we loved hearing them all.

There was a time when I was especially fond of stories about spirits and strange creatures. As luck would have it, that was just the sort of tale Isaac brought back from the towns below. But none of the others cared for such stories. I alone clung to him, begging for more.

He was a great storyteller who really knew how to set the mood. When he reached the frightening parts, he would lower his voice and glance about with wide eyes, as though checking to be sure no ghost was lurking nearby.

It was always at those moments that I grew terribly tense, clutching his arm out of fear, even though I still wanted to hear more. That mix of dread and delight was quite the thrill.

But my mentor, Sage Conrad,

disapproved of how often I spent time with Isaac. He said that though Isaac was an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, he was always wandering off to improper places. Also, with that shifty, sly look of his, he hardly seemed like an honorable man.

Honestly, Sage Conrad must have thought me terribly ignorant to judge him so. If Isaac's face was sly-looking, then there weren't many decent-looking people left in all of Meadow Ridge.

As for Sage Conrad saying Isaac visited improper places... Honestly, I didn't see what was so bad about them. Yes, they were pleasure houses. But Isaac was just listening to music, watching plays, and playing some card games there; it wasn't like he was spending a fortune.

Though, he probably should have visited those places less often. After all, given how stingy Sage Everett was, Isaac couldn't possibly have had that much money to spend.

Still, Sage Conrad insisted Isaac had been visiting those places to seek out women, and that many

apprentices from Meadow Ridgonet

had seen him coming and going from them. He even said Isaac had thrown money about like a lord, which could only mean he had stolen from his own mentor.

To convince me, Sage Conrad summoned several of my seniors to vouch for it. They all said the same thing that Isaac wasn't a decent man, and I ought to stay away from him.

Now, I loved stories most of all, and whether the storyteller was Isaac or someone else, I still wanted to hear them. So, I went to the others and asked just what sort of women Isaac had gone to see.

I heard many tales, and of course, I went straight to Cari and Thia, telling them everything. Everyone was terribly shocked. Cari wasn't sure it could be true. She asked whether I might have unjustly accused her senior.

But it turned out I hadn't. In less than a month, all of Meadow Ridge knew that Isaac's favourite pastime was visiting those very places.

Cari told me that Sage Everett had tied him up and given him a proper beating; Isaac's howls could be heard throughout the Pathfinders Guild.

A man with such poor conduct? Best I kept my distance.