

Her Graceful War Song

#Chapter 1601 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1601

Still, as I saw Cari nearly every day—either she would come to the Inferno Guild to visit me, or I would go to the Pathfinders Guild to find her—I naturally still ran into Isaac from time to time.

Each time, he gave me such a resentful look, as though I had wronged him terribly.

Once, I could bear it no longer and asked him outright why he always glared at me. He said it was because I had spread rumours, saying he visited courtesan houses and other such places to look for women.

I was furious. He had behaved poorly, yet instead of reflecting on himself, he had the nerve to blame others. I had not spread any rumours. I had simply told the truth to my close friends. How was that gossip?

In my anger, I punched him and declared our friendship over.

Not long after that, Cari returned home to the capital. I thought, as before, she would stay for a month or so and come back. But this time, she stayed away far longer.

I went to the Pathfinders Guild to ask about her, but everyone kept their mouths shut. Not a single person would tell me a thing. In desperation, I planned to take Thia, Bun, and the others to the capital to find her.

But just before we left, Isaac came to stop us. For the first time, I saw a solemn, serious look on his face. He told us something had happened to Cari's family. Her father and brothers had died in battle, while her mother was gravely ill. Cari had to remain at home to care for her.

He said we were just children-barely in our teens-and knew nothing of how to handle matters of such weight. We would only cause trouble. Once things at

home were settled, Cari would return.

We were all heartbroken at the news.

I had met Cari's father once. He was a tall, commanding general, inspiring awe in all who saw him. I had also met Cari's second brother, who was just as handsome as Kyle, but carried even more authority in his bearing.

Cari had always loved to speak of her father and brothers. So, even if I had only met them briefly-or not at all—I felt as though I knew them well. They had been brave and noble men, true soldiers of honor.

And now, they had all perished.

Cari must have been devastated.

Death was no small thing. We wished to be at her side, but as Isaac had said, even the people of the Pathfinders Guild had not gone to her. What help could we possibly offer? All we could do was remain at Meadow Ridge and wait for news, as well as her return.

We waited day after day. Then, month after month. But not a single letter came.

None of us knew how she was. Eventually, we asked Isaac again. He said he didn't know either, but was certain that Sage Adrian did. He promised to try to find out what he could.

Isaac could no longer leave the mountains as freely as before. He said it was because of the "rumours"-Sage Everett had confined him to the guild because of them.

From time to time, Isaac would bring back vague news. One moment, he said Cari had gotten married. Next he claimed the marriage was false. Then, he would mention something had happened to her family, but he never knew the details.

It frustrated me to no end. Every time he brought news, it seemed unreliable, and there was no certainty in any of it. I decided then that I would go to the capital to find her myself.

I called on Thia and Rod, and just as we were about to pack, Sage Conrad arrived. He didn't say a word. He simply took me to the Pathfinders Guild, where Sage Everett was waiting to speak with me.

Sage Everett had a most frightening face. It wasn't that anything about him seemed overtly terrifying; he had no more eyes, ears, or nose than any other- but something about his expression made one uneasy.

He fixed his stern gaze on me and said, "You're old enough to understand now.

We are of the martial arts world. If you go, you will only bring her trouble. Do you want that?"

Of course, I didn't want to cause Cari any more trouble. However, I couldn't understand why martial artists like us couldn't have contact with her. She herself had come from the Pathfinders Guild. She was one

of us-a martial artist, and part of

the martial arts world.

I didn't get to go. In my heart, I was unhappy. Each day, I became more and more frustrated. Isaac came to see me and stayed with me for a few days to cheer me up.

"Sage Adrian said that no matter what kind of life she's living now, she's definitely safe. She has the strength to protect herself. If she really encounters something she can't handle, she'll ask Sage Adrian for help.

"If she hasn't asked for help, it means she wants to overcome it on her own. Just like when you practiced the Inferno Sword Technique. You had to comprehend it and get to the highest level by yourself, didn't you?"

I wasn't sure if Isaac's words were true. I only knew that I missed Cari terribly.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1602 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1602

The orchids of Meadow Ridge had bloomed and faded.

I couldn't help feeling somewhat resentful toward Cari. Did going home mean she had to abandon us too? Were all those years of friendship and shared memories worth nothing in the end?

Thia also called Cari heartless. It was fine that she had left, but why hadn't she sent even a single letter?

Gradually, we stopped speaking of her altogether. It was as if by not mentioning her, we were punishing her in some way.

We had made a pact. When Cari returned to Meadow Ridge, none of us would visit her. We wouldn't speak to her, and even if she sent a letter, we wouldn't read

it.

Days passed, and our martial arts skills grew stronger. It seemed we had all agreed that so long as we didn't die, we would practice until we could do no more.

Though we didn't speak of it, I knew that deep down, we all thought the same. Cari was no longer Cari. Isaac had told us that after Sage Everett sent her down the mountain, she hadn't smiled once. She always seemed lost in thought, troubled, and full of worry.

We didn't know what had happened to her. All we could do was continue our training, waiting for the moment when she would need us. When the time came, we would be ready, like drawn swords.

Then, at long last, her letter arrived.

It was not addressed to the Pathfinders Guild. It was for me, Thia, Bun, and Rod. In her letter, she asked us to come to the Southern Frontier to find her, though she didn't explain why.

Once, we had sworn we would never read her letters. But when it arrived, we wasted no time. We packed our things, mounted our horses, and left the mountain without telling our mentors.

When we met Cari at the Southern Frontier, she was no longer the same. Gone was her former lively spark; she now seemed like something left to soak in a jar of stale brine. Not quite lifeless, but carrying an air of quiet decay about her.

In her eyes, there was determination and steadiness, but not a trace of joy.

Perhaps when she saw us, she felt some happiness, but that fleeting light quickly disappeared.

Later, Cari calmly explained what had happened during her time away. We then learned that most of what Isaac had told us was indeed true. We were so heartbroken that we couldn't find the words to speak. We shed more tears for her than we cared to admit, though she never knew.

But the dangers of the battlefield gave us no room for excessive sorrow.

After everything Cari had gone through, I made up my mind to stay by her side. I would accompany her back to the capital and wouldn't go anywhere else.

As for the idea that someone from the martial arts world should avoid mingling with noble families, that was nonsense. When had I ever followed the rules so strictly? Besides, I came from the Spencer family of Ebonflow.

No words could express how regretful I was for not going down the mountain to find Cari back then.

We returned to the capital after accomplishing our mission, but the military achievements didn't cloud my mind. The Spencer family didn't serve in court, and I had no interest in being a military officer. I was happy enough with the reward I received.

Rod stayed behind in the capital with me. The money was part of the reason, but deep down, I knew he thought much like I did. He couldn't bear the thought of abandoning Cari again, not when we were unsure of what the future might bring.

Rod was like his mentor-loyal and full of compassion, with a heart softer than anyone's.

Thia and Bun didn't stay. They were the backbone of their guild, and had no reason to remain in the capital.

Rod stayed under the pretense of making money—an excuse his mentor couldn't argue with. Sage Isolde, though stern in words, was soft-hearted and fully supported his decision to stay and help Cari.

As for me, my mentor couldn't stop me. Whenever I made up my mind, he would try to use his authority, but would always yield to me in the end.

To be honest

when I saw Barrett

and Aurora at the Southern Frontier,

my anger flared up. I wanted to

off their limbs. Did those two

scoundrels think our

Meado

Ridge's reigning queen was some weakling they could bully however they wanted?

But to my surprise, things got complicated when Victory Pass became involved

later on, and we couldn't touch them right away.

Karma bit Aurora hard at Victory Pass. I enjoyed it privately, but showed nothing on my face.

Who cared about the greater good or matters of the kingdom? None of that compared to my best friend's hurt and suffering. At least, that was my view then- I was never one for grand undertakings anyway.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1603 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1603

Before I went to the Southern Frontier, I had no plan for my life, nor did I have clear goals or particular things I wanted to do. When we reclaimed the Southern Frontier and returned to the capital, the cheers of the people made me wonder whether it was a waste to let life pass by without a purpose.

I began to think about the meaning of life.

Following Cari's lead, I found myself involved in many things, from Skye

Embroidery to Gracewood Women's Academy. I saw so many women whose lives had been filled with suffering; I knew I had the power to help them.

I thought, perhaps, this was one of life's meanings. As it was only one possible meaning, that meant there could be more.

This wasn't a boast, but I always had a strong dislike for evil. So, when I heard of murderers and those who were guilty of terrible crimes going free because of a lack of evidence, I was furious. I believed that anyone who took a life should pay with their own.

At first, I didn't do anything extreme. I simply followed the leads from the Royal Citadel and continued the investigation, handing over the evidence I gathered to them.

Then, I came across a special case—a massacre.

One victim survived, though she had been driven mad with fear. She identified the murderer, but because she was now considered insane, her testimony was not accepted. In her madness, she even pointed to the Royal Citadel's governor as the killer, as well as accused several others in court, claiming they were all trying to harm her.

This led to the release of the original suspect due to insufficient evidence.

From the start, there was no real evidence—only the victim's testimony. There was no weapon recovered or other witnesses. After the victim's erratic accusations, the man was completely cleared of suspicion.

To be honest, when I first learned about this case, I also thought the suspect was wrongfully accused. He was the scholarly type—well-read in the classics and always helping neighbors, who all praised him endlessly.

The Royal Citadel sent officers to observe the suspect for some time. However, they found nothing suspicious, so they stopped the surveillance.

It was by accident that I discovered Cari was privately investigating the case. The words "massacre" and "family annihilation" hung over her like a sword, forever pressing on her heart. She would never forget how her family had been brutally murdered.

So, when another massacre case appeared, she was determined to find the murderer and bring them to justice. It was a way to soothe her own troubled heart.

I told her that I would handle the case with Claire, as it would be easier for us to investigate. I promised Cari that we would find the killer.

However, after looking into the case, I realized just how difficult it was.

There were no witnesses and no weapon. Plus, the relationships between the people involved were simple; no one seemed to have any enemies. The only survivor, Rhea Brook, was out of her mind, unable to speak clearly or coherently.

The accused was a young scholar named Stephen Lane, the son of a neighbor. Rhea identified him as her family's murderer, but her claim was dismissed in court when she falsely accused other people as well.

I visited the neighbors to ask questions. The Lane and Brook families had always been on good terms. Whenever there was

something tasty to eat, they we!!!

share it with each other. They also attended each other's weddings and funerals.

As for Stephen and Rhea, they had grown up together and were very close. Both their families had migrated here to run businesses, making them well-matched in social standing.

Now that this tragedy had occurred, Stephen's parents were taking care of Rhea. After all, she was the only one left from her family, and had been driven mad. It was terribly sad that no one else was around to look after her.

The neighbors were also helping to care for her, so it was clear that the Brook family had a good relationship with everyone around them.

Despite all my efforts to ask around, there was no progress. There were no clues and nothing to go on.

So, I disguised myself and secretly followed Stephen. When he went out, it was only to return to his academy or visit the bookshop. Occasionally, he would meet with his classmates for a drink, but was always careful with his behavior. When he passed beggars on the

street, he would give them food or a few coins.

This man did not seem like a cruel killer at all.

I only followed him because I had no other leads. I couldn't just sit around waiting

for something to happen.

Claire also investigated both

families' businesses. The Brook family's shop-a rouge and cosmetics store-remained open under its shopkeeper, Mr. Salter, with two assistants. He also regularly deposited profits from the business into Rhea's bank account.

The shopkeeper and assistants were loyal and trustworthy. There was nothing suspicious about them.

With that, the case had reached a standstill.

How was I to explain this to Cari?

It was truly frustrating.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1604 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1604

In the end, I had no choice but to keep watch in secret and follow Rhea closely.

The person who murdered her entire family must have had a reason. Such cruelty -could it have been for love, hatred, or money? In any case, it must have been for something.

Rhea was still alive. Would the killer truly walk away so easily? Was it possible that once things quieted down, he might return to finish the deed? It was a fair guess, though truth be told, I had no other lead to pursue.

Mr. Salter had first arranged for an older woman to care for Rhea, but she feared all strangers. In the end, he had no choice but to ask the neighbors to

occasionally look in on her and bring her food. Stephen's mother would come every other day to help bathe her and keep her clean.

I noticed the Lane family still treated Rhea well, though Stephen himself had not visited. For one, he had returned to his studies at the academy. For another, he may still hold some resentment. After all, it was Rhea's accusation that landed him in jail, even if only for a short while.

Young scholars often carried some pride. I was sure he couldn't swallow such an insult.

And besides, if he were to return, Rhea might accuse him as the murderer again. That would only stir up more gossip among the neighbors, which would be bad.

Claire and I took turns keeping watch-she during the day, and I at night.

The Brook family's residence had several side rooms. Since Rhea refused to let anyone else stay there, it was quite convenient for us to guard the place. We had space to sleep both day and night.

I chose the room next to Rhea's, which had once been her younger sister's chambers. The night the murders occurred, that poor girl had been killed in her sleep. Having seen the court files, I knew how her bed had been soaked in blood. Now, laying in that room, I fancied I could still smell the scent of it.

Of course, I didn't sleep in the bed. I had brought a thin quilt from the estate and made myself a place on the cushioned chair. From there, I could hear the faintest sound coming from Rhea's room.

Though I couldn't light a lamp, there was a small hole in the wall. If I pressed my eye to it, I could just manage to see into Rhea's room. So, whenever there was any disturbance, I would quietly go and have a look.

Every night, she let out muffled sobs. Listening to her cry like that made my own heart ache.

Yes, she had lost her mind, but she still remembered that her whole family had died. Even a madwoman could grieve.

I kept watch like that for half a month, but didn't discover anything.

One night, I was tired, so I ended up drifting off to sleep as I listened to Rhea's quiet weeping. In the haze of slumber, I seemed to hear the creak of the front gate, followed by soft footsteps.

The steps were light-it wasn't Rhea.

At once, I woke fully. I rose quickly and crept to the door, peeking through the narrow gap. The courtyard was pitch dark, but under the faint glow of the moon, I

could just make out a figure walking straight towards Rhea's room.

Her door had no bolt. Mr. Salter had had he

taken it off on purpose, in case something happened and someone needed to enter quickly. As for the front gate, Mr. Salter and the three neighboring households each had a key. As long as the bolt had not been drawn from the inside, one could unlock it.

Hearing the door to Rhea's room creak open, hurried back to my place and looked through the small hole in the wall. She was already asleep, but a small lamp was still lit inside, casting just enough glow for me to see who the intruder was. C6ntent

It was Stephen!

He stood beside her bed and swiftly clapped a hand over her mouth just as she stirred awake. His eyes were full of hatred-so different from the refined, gentle scholar he had once seemed like.

In a low and vicious voice, he said, "Don't scream. Or I'll kill you too and send you down to join your family."

Rhea made muffled sounds, but as she had her back to me, I couldn't see her face. I could only see Stephen's cruel expression.

I was stunned. It truly was Stephen. Was he here to silence her?

Just as I thought to rush out, I heard him darkly say, "Your whole family deserved to die. You've no one to blame but yourself. You were the cause of it all. You should have been the first to die. Why didn't you? Your mother is calling for you-don't you hear her? Go to her. Just hurry up and die already."

Rhea let out louder sobs, shaking her head in pain and terror.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1605 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1605

I watched as Stephen continued to speak such cruel, cutting words. It was as though he was trying to push Rhea to take her own life, so he wouldn't need to do the deed himself.

"Your whole family is dead, and here you are, still alive, half-mad and useless. You're a disgrace, just like everyone else in your family. You dared to mock me for failing the examination? All of you deserve to die. Do you see that rope in the woodshed? Hang yourself with it. That way, you'll be reunited with your family.

"If you stay alive, they'll be trapped in the deepest hell. They'll burn every day, as well as have their tongues torn out and their hearts gouged. This is your punishment. This is the heavens' justice. Your whole family was wicked-always spreading lies and stirring up trouble. This is the price you pay. Evil people don't deserve to live."

The more I listened, the more furious I became. The one who had done evil was him, yet here he was, twisting words and pretending he was the righteous one.

Rhea was already half-mad. If he kept provoking her like that, it was possible she might truly take her own life.

I flung open my door and rushed out. Our rooms were right next to each other, so by the time I reached Rhea's, Stephen had not yet reacted and still had his hand pressed over her mouth. When he saw me, there was panic in his eyes. He let go of her at once.

Rhea had tears streaming down her face from fear, but she didn't scream. She didn't even make a sound.

I looked Stephen straight in the eye. "You're the one who killed her family."

There was a flicker of alarm in his expression, but he quickly arranged his face into one of innocence. "Who are you? What nonsense are you spouting? My mother was simply worried about Rhea and asked me to check on her."

"Drop the act. I heard everything. You were trying to coax her into killing herself," I said coldly.

Stephen was clever, too clever. He pretended to be shocked and said, "That's nonsense! My family has always taken care of her. Why would we wish her harm? And who are you, to make such wild accusations?"

"You must speak with proof. When did I ever say I killed her family? Did anyone else hear it? Do you have evidence? Our families have always been close-why would I harm them? And what about you? What are you doing here, sneaking around at this hour? Don't leave. I'm going to call the authorities."

When I saw the shameless, smug look on his face, I was so angry that I wanted to wring his neck!

"It was you! You killed my parents, my brother, and my little sister. It was you!" Rhea cried out.

Stephen chuckled. "Rhea, you said those very same words in front of the judge. You even claimed the judge himself was the murderer. Your testimony counts for nothing. And truly, I am not the killer. I only came tonight because my mother asked me to. She feared you were having nightmares and might hurt yourself. She's ill, yet is still thinking of you. Is this how you repay her?"

"No, that's not what I meant!" Rhea sobbed, shaking her head.

"That's exactly what you meant. You're ungrateful. My mother treats you like her own daughter, yet you suspect her son?"

"It was you... It was you..." Rhea trembled as she pointed at him.

In her eyes, I saw something I couldn't name-terror, perhaps, or despair.

At that moment, I felt certain he was the murderer. He could deny it now all he liked and it wouldn't matter. I would make him confess.

Without

sharply on the back of the the back of the head. He collapsed at once, and I

is nother word, I struck him

coldly, watching over

Rhea stared at the scene, stunned. The usual emptiness in her eyes had cleared. She looked present and alert.

Hoping she had regained some clarity, I gently asked, "He's the one who did it, isn't he?"

Her sobs quieted. She nodded firmly, hatred in her eyes. "It was him."

"Why did he kill your family?" I asked, my tone softening. "How did he do it?"

Rhea shook her head violently, her voice trembling. "I don't know... I don't know."

I watched her eyes grow blank

again, her face tight with fear, her

mind beginning to unravel. I realized

then she was remembering the

horrors of that night, and her

emotions were slipping beyond her

control.

I was afraid she might scream, so I decided to remove Stephen first.

It didn't matter if Rhea couldn't recall the details. I would make sure Stephen confessed.

Under the cover of darkness, I took

him to the cellar beneath

Glimmering Tower. A bucket of icy

water to the face, followed by two sharp slaps-right hand, then backhand-cracked him back to consciousness.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1606 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1606

The men I had summoned worked quickly. By the time Stephen opened his eyes, the instruments of punishment had already been brought in. A brazier had been lit, with iron tongs resting in the flames, and a bloodstained whip cracked through the air with a sharp snap. It crackled and echoed loudly, sounding like thunder before a storm.

Ultimately, Stephen had killed before, so his nerves were steady.

Without so much as a blink, he said, "This is unlawful detention and interrogation -a capital offense. Do you not fear the law?"

Some men were like that. They believed the law existed to bind others, but never themselves. He had broken the law without care, yet now tried to shield himself behind it.

There was no point arguing with such a man. Words would only give him more chances to twist the truth. Instead, I took the red-hot tongs and pressed them to his arm. As the iron clamped down, his sleeve burned through at once, and his flesh sizzled beneath with a sickening hiss.

A terrible scream burst from his throat.

It didn't matter. The cellar was deep and hidden; he could scream until his voice broke and no one would hear him.

Even the strongest resolve could be broken with the right tools. I hadn't even started to pull out his nails when he gave in and confessed everything.

It was true that the two families had once been close. The parents and the children had all gotten on well. Stephen had been especially friendly with Rhea's elder brother, Darian Brook. One studied literature, while the other ran a business. They often joked together in harmless ways.

But when Stephen failed the national examination, it struck him harder than he let on. Though he laughed it off, saying he was still young and could try again, he couldn't sleep at night and his hair began to fall out in handfuls.

Then, at a family dinner one night, Darian jokingly said, "You've buried yourself in books all these months, yet you still failed. Wasn't that a waste of keeping the lamps burning at night?"

That one remark made Stephen transfer all the emotions he had been holding back since failing the exam onto Darian. Night after night, he turned the words over in his mind. The more he thought of it, the angrier he became until hatred took root.

Once he felt the urge to kill, he couldn't shake it. But he knew he couldn't defeat Darian in a fair fight, so he would have to outsmart his friend.

Stephen tried to lure him out under the guise of a friendly outing, hoping to find a chance to strike.

But Darian had replied, "You've failed the national examination once already. Shouldn't you be studying harder? Or do you plan to fail again?"

That remark had been meant as friendly advice, but Stephen took it as yet another insult, as though his failure were a joke. It hardened his resolve to kill Darian.

At last, the chance came.

One evening, the men of the Brook family-father and son-returned home quite drunk after an evening of drinking. As they passed by Stephen's home, he watched them stumble through their own gate without so much as locking it behind them.

Stephen crept in quietly and hid himself in the kitchen. He waited there in the dark, watching the lights in the house go out one by one. He waited a long while before he finally moved. He took a cleaver from the kitchen and slipped into Darian's room under the faint light of the moon.

The room was dark, but Stephen had visited often and knew the layout well, it wasn't pitch black, and with though it was dim, he could still make out shapes. He walked to the bed and saw a head sticking out from under the blanket. Without a second thought, he lifted the covers and brought the knife down on

Darian's neck.

It was a heavy knife that was used to slice through bones. The first strike brought forth a rush of blood.

But before Stephen could raise the blade again, he realized there was someone else lying in the bed. He hadn't noticed at first, as that person had been tucked under the blankets, fast asleep.

The man stirred and drowsily asked, "Who's there?"

Stephen knew that voice-it was Rhea's father. It seemed the two had been too drunk, so they had simply settled down in the same bed for the night.

Panic overtook Stephen. He raised the cleaver again and struck wildly. Once, twice, thrice...

He couldn't remember how many times he swung the blade, but the air was thick with the stench of blood. At first, there were muffled groans, but before long, there was nothing at all.

He turned to flee, but at the doorway, he met Rhea's mother. She had risen in the night and was passing by with a lamp in hand. In the grip of madness, Stephen sprang forward. He clamped a hand over her mouth and drew the blade across her throat.

After killing three people, his eyes were red with bloodlust.

From the calmness of his account, it was clear he feared the two daughters of the family would soon discover the horror inside. Rather than risk it, he chose to kill them too.

There was a mishap while killing Rhea's younger sister. Just as he finished, a scream rang out behind him. He turned and leapt toward the sound, only to be struck by a lamp Rhea had thrown. The blow slowed him, giving her the chance to escape and cry for help.

Stephen knew the neighbors would soon come running. He fled with the cleaver in hand, rushing back to his own home.

He changed his clothes, taking the bloodstained ones and the cleaver with him as he quietly slipped out through the back. Wrapping the stained garments and the cleaver tightly together, he tied a heavy stone

to the bundle and took it to a river. There, he threw it into the

water and watched it sink.

Then, as if nothing had happened, he made his way to a pleasure boat, where he ran into a few of his classmates who had also failed the exams. They all sat together, drinking wine and sharing the frustrations that weighed on their hearts.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1607 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1607

I had read the coroner's report in full. What Stephen described matched it almost exactly.

When I questioned him further about other details of the case, every point lined up. Only after confirming this did I hand him over to the authorities at the Royal Citadel and ask Lord Klein to send men to retrieve the murder weapon.

I believed the case was solved at last, that all my efforts and days of watching and waiting had not been in vain.

But what I didn't see coming was that once we reached the Royal Citadel, Stephen suddenly changed his confession. He claimed he had only confessed under torture, that every word he had said was fed to him by me. He cried out that he had been wronged, insisting he was innocent. Worse still, he demanded they arrest me, calling me a thief and a liar.

Then came more bad news.

The Royal Citadel sent dozens of men to the place he had described, but no matter how they searched, they found neither the bloodstained clothes nor the murder weapon.

Several days passed. As Stephen bore injuries, they didn't apply torture, and he continued to wail that he had been falsely accused. With no evidence, and with my conduct brought into question, they were left with no choice but to release him.

It was then I understood-some men were simply beyond the reach of the law. The case itself was not a complicated one, but Stephen had hidden the truth far too well.

After he was set free, he stayed at home and refused to show his face. He thought that if he remained quiet long enough, things would be forgotten in time. So, I sent Claire to take him and lock him in the cellar beneath Glimmering Tower.

When he opened his eyes and saw me standing there, all hope vanished from his gaze.

This time, he didn't even wait for torture and confessed at once. It turned out the bloodied clothes and cleaver were not thrown into the river after all. Instead, he had hidden them along the riverbank.

Days earlier, the water had risen, and that spot had been piled high with sandbags. He had simply moved one, tucked the weapon and clothing inside, then placed the sandbag neatly back on top.

I sent Claire with some men to search the place. This time, they found them. He had told the truth.

However, I didn't hand Stephen back to the authorities. Instead, I made him drink alcohol-cup after cup, until he vomited more than once. Then, I had someone help him aboard a pleasure boat, as if he had been out on a night of fun.

Before they reached the boat, he was pushed into the river. I had already placed someone nearby, ready to act. Once the person was certain Stephen had drowned, they at last cried out that someone had fallen into the river.

Naturally, what was pulled from the water was a lifeless body.

On the riverbank lay a bloodstained garment, and wrapped within it was a cleaver.

When Stephen's parents saw their son's corpse, as well as bloodied clothes and the weapon, their faces turned deathly pale. It was at that moment they understood-the son who had cried so loudly of his innocence was, in truth, the murderer.

After that case, there were some matters I dealt with directly once I had proof. Others, I still handed over to the authorities, but only after ensuring the evidence was solid and beyond dispute.

I couldn't say whether my way was right or wrong. I chose not to dwell on it too deeply. Thinking too much only led to hesitation, which served no good.

Wish

But I didn't wish for Isaac to be drawn into it. He truly was stubborn beyond reason. I told him that should ever be caught and

punished, at least there would el. net'

someone to see to my buriabHis reply was that he had always wondered what it felt like to be beheaded, and that following me might just give him the chance to find out.

What could I do with a man like that? I suppose we made quite the pair-husband and wife in crime.

I had been reckless all my life, doing whatever I pleased. Yet somehow, there was always someone beside me, supporting me through it all. Even if one day I was struck down for what I had done, I think I would have no real regrets.

My life was peaceful now, yet I still felt that the time I spent in Meadow Ridge was the happiest and freest of my days. Back then, we had not yet seen the true cruelty of the world. We were ignorant, yes, but our hearts were pure.

This year, Sage Conrad wrote to me. He said the orchids in Meadow Ridge had bloomed better than in any year past. So, I made plans to return, and brought along Cari, Rod, and the others.

My mentor had aged-his hair

streaked with white-but his manner remained much the same, only more serene and lofty than before. With Rod's mentor having taken in many more abandoned children, most of what Rod carried back with him were clothes and treats for his new martial siblings. His mentor had grown old too, her back now stooped. She was no longer the fierce old woman she once was and

had softened a great deal.

I prayed that all good people in this world would live long and peaceful lives.

**Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1608 - Read Her
Graceful War Song Chapter 1608**

When I, Salvador, ascended the throne, the campaign to reclaim the Southern Frontier had been ongoing for several years. Victory Pass was still unrestful, leaving the royal treasury depleted and many of the common folk displaced.

As I donned the golden crown and sat upon the throne, I made a quiet vow to myself. Even if I couldn't be as wise as my great ancestors, I would never be a weak or ineffective ruler. I would reclaim the Southern Frontier, make Starhaven prosperous, and ensure the people lived in peace and happiness.

Later, I realized that only someone who was either ignorant or extraordinarily capable would make such a grand promise.

The Southern Frontier campaign ended in defeat, and the seven heroes of the Sinclair family perished on the battlefield.

At first, both my father and I had hoped against hope. We believed that General Hector, with his wealth of battlefield experience and brave soldiers, would turn the tide.

Unfortunately, supplies had not arrived in time, leaving the soldiers fighting on empty stomachs. No matter how hard they fought, they were simply no match for the enemy. To make matters worse, the Southern Frontier had already been reclaimed initially. Though it was lost again, everyone thought General Hector could still recover the situation.

Many factors and concerns held me back from taking action sooner. I had hesitated to send my brother's army to assist.

But when the news of General Hector and his sons' deaths reached me, I could no longer delay or afford any further hesitation. I immediately named my brother Grand Marshal and ordered him to take the Hell Monarch Army to the Southern Frontier.

My brother was a brilliant strategist, and his soldiers were fierce in battle. With General Hector's experience to guide them, the Hell Monarch Army and the Sinclair Army quickly joined together, advancing with great speed and success. With each victory, the entire court was filled with joy, and I, too, was pleased. Yet, as time passed, my joy was tinged with a growing sense of worry. My brother's success could no longer be hidden; his brilliance shone too brightly.

He had reclaimed the Southern Frontier, cementing a great and unparalleled victory. The people of Starhaven would surely honor him, and all at court, both civil and military officials alike, would revere him.

Derek could see what my concerns were. He said to me, "When the late king couldn't reclaim the Southern Frontier, he passed away with regret. If you can restore it, not only will you bring comfort to the late king's spirit, but you will also establish a legacy that will be remembered for all time."

His words made me see clearly.

On the surface, the reclamation of the Southern Frontier would be Rafael's merit as my subject. But in truth, it was my triumph as sovereign, and would strengthen my position as king. When future historians wrote of it, I would be known as the king who reclaimed the Southern Frontier—a ruler for the ages.

Putting aside all other matters, this was also vital to the completeness of Starhaven's borders.

Just as our forces were advancing swiftly, I was struck with an unpleasant piece of news.

It was Carissa.

1.n

The Sinclair family and I had long been close friends, and I naturally held great affection for Carissa as well. I was deeply angered by everything she had suffered in her marriage. If it had not been for Barrett and Aurora's military accomplishments, I would surely have ordered a severe punishment.

f.n

The court had a need for young military commanders, but those two had used their own battle honors to request a royal marriage decree. Fortunately, Carissa herself had shown strength of spirit. She was clear-headed and unbothered, refusing to entangle herself with a man who held no true affection for her.

At first, that was how I thought of it. But then, she came before me. She told me

that because of what happened at Victory Pass, the Westhaven army had disguised themselves as Sandorian soldiers and was marching toward the Southern Frontier.

I was deeply disappointed.

Westhaven had already signed an agreement with Starhaven, and the credit for that victory belonged not only to Aurora, but also to Carissa's maternal grandfather, Grand General Dominic. Carissa shouldn't have been so petty as to attempt to use the battle at Victory Pass to undermine or even frame Aurora.

I couldn't help but scold her. She risked disgracing her father and brothers.

What angered me even more was that she tried to deceive me by presenting a forged letter, supposedly from Kyle. I truly couldn't understand her intent and assumed that she couldn't let go of Barrett, nor swallow her pride. In the end, she let pride and grievance cloud her better judgment.

Thankfully, she didn't cause further trouble after my reprimand. It seemed she had settled down and chosen to live her days in peace. There was no greater virtue than to recognize one's faults and seek to amend them.

But to my shock, everything she had said was true. I received a report stating that the Westhaven army had indeed disguised themselves as Sandorian soldiers and were on their way to the Southern Frontier.

The news came in a rush; the situation was urgent. We had won so many battles and reclaimed so many cities at the Southern Frontier. I was certain that Ilyrian City and Simonton City would fall into our hands just as easily.

Yet, even if I were to dispatch Barrett with reinforcements at once, they would still not arrive in time to outpace Westhaven's army.

Victory was so close at hand, yet this mistake arose at the final moment.

My heart sank as I prepared myself for the worst-that my brother wouldn't return, and the Southern Frontier would be lost with him.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1609 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1609

But-!

How could one person possess such determination and courage?

Who could have imagined that, after I had refused to trust Carissa, she would take matters into her own hands and ride straight to the Southern Frontier to inform my brother?

What an astonishing and unheard-of act it was!

A woman, who had been divorced and left her home, dared to march into the Southern Frontier camp alone, with no attendants or guards. The boldness and bravery she displayed were unmatched in the entire court.

Unlike me, my brother believed Carissa. He immediately began to gather soldiers and prepare for the united forces of Sandoria and Westhaven.

I knew full well how dangerous the battlefield could be there was no need to speak of the details.

When the news came that the Southern Frontier had been reclaimed, I wept with joy.

Then, my brother sent me a report, praising the soldiers for their efforts. Without a doubt, Carissa and her companions were the true heroes, and I would reward them accordingly. However, I was deeply disappointed in Barrett and Aurora. I had to think about the reasons why Westhaven had broken the treaty regarding the Southern Frontier.

It was not at this moment that I first began to reflect, for the border drawn at Victory Pass was counted among my own achievements, and I had taken great pride in it.

Greed was a part of human nature, but one had to recognize when it went too far.

When the truth was revealed, I could hardly contain my fury. I longed to punish Aurora and see her suffer. Yet, I couldn't kill her. I had to keep her alive and wait for the peace talks with Westhaven before handing her over to them.

Carissa's bravery made me see the spirit of the Sinclair family in her. She remained neither humble nor arrogant, facing both praise and insult with the same steady composure.

At first, I had seen her simply as Nathan's sister. But now, when she stood before me, I saw only Carissa. Despite her sun-darkened skin, she was still beautiful. Through her beauty, I saw her strength and unwavering resolve.

A woman like her was radiant and dazzling in her own right. She shone like a brilliant gem that anyone might wish to claim for themselves.

I was moved. Even now, as I thought back, I still remembered the feeling-my heart stirred, as if a small stone had been thrown into a still pond, creating ripples that spread through me. Even my breath had felt lighter and easier.

My harem could accept a woman who had been married before, especially if that woman was Carissa. I cared not for her past.

But I was deliberating.

My brother's military achievements were extraordinary. The entire court admired him, and his popularity among the people was soaring. At this moment, he still held command over the military.

I knew well that he cared for Carissa. But for a man, love was always less important than power. If he had any ambition to usurp the throne, he would never give up control of the military for her.

I issued an edict, ordering Carissa to marry within three months. If she didn't, she would be brought into the palace as a concubine.

I left the choice to Rafael.

Everyone knew it was my clever scheme. How my brother chose was entirely up to him.

Naturally, I hoped he would choose Carissa and relinquish his military command. But as I reviewed

documents in the royal study late at

into the night, I would quietly sip a cup of tea and reflect for a moment. It was one of the rare times I could relax.

I also privately considered that if Rafael refused to give up his power, I could simply take Carissa into the harem myself.

But he soon made his decision, choosing Carissa over military command.

I was pleased, but also not quite as

pleased as should have been. There was a faint emptiness in my heart, a sense of something lost that I could not name. I knew I couldn't let this emotion consume me. The stability of the kingdom was far more important than anything personal.

As a ruler, there were things that were destined to remain just out of reach. It was like the moon's reflection on water-visible, but unattainable.

There was little in life that I found hard to accept. If there ever was anything, I had long since learned to reason myself out of it. Over the years I had grown used to such restraint. If something I desired might stain my name, I had never hesitated to let it go.

Just this once, it was especially difficult.

Reclaiming command of the army brought a brief spell of joy, but it was followed by a deep emptiness, as though something dear had slipped away. That feeling lingered for a long time.

Derek suggested selecting a new concubine, but I refused. Some emotions couldn't be replaced.

Besides, I had invested so much energy into the affairs of the kingdom. My visits

to the harem were few and far between-what was the point of keeping so many women in empty rooms?

On the day my brother and Carissa married, my feelings were conflicted.

As a brother, I was happy for them.

As a man, I felt a pang of jealousy. It was a bitter feeling that was hard to bear.

As a king, I feared their marriage might one day create complications.

In the end, I buried those feelings deep inside. Let them be forgotten like the stirrings that once were.

A king was not entitled to such things.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1610 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1610

And yet, I knew well enough that Carissa held no affection for my brother. She chose to marry him only because she didn't wish to enter the palace and serve at my side.

Since their hearts were not truly united as one, I thought to raise Carissa's standing by granting her command of the Mystic Army. In the eyes of others, the Mystic Army would still be in the hands of Carissa and Rafael's household, and it would seem like I had not stripped my brother of his power.

At the time, it seemed a most clever arrangement.

However, I failed to foresee that they would not always be distant from each other. Time nurtured affection, and through marriage's union, their interests too became one.

I couldn't have known. The queen and I had never shared such closeness, nor had I ever given much thought to matters of marriage.

But thankfully, though their affection deepened, they never bore any ambition to replace me.

It was my own mistrust that led me astray.

At first, I believed that though Carissa was skilled in martial arts, leading the

Mystic Army would prove too great a burden. With so many under her command unwilling to accept her, I thought she might give up within a few months, after which I could appoint someone else.

Yet, to my surprise, she brought every unruly man to heel. The entire Mystic Army came to obey her without question.

Once more, I had underestimated her. Or rather, I had made the same mistake as so many others in this age: no one truly believed a woman capable. I had erred as they all had.

The more brilliant Carissa became, the more I found myself stirred by thoughts of her.

And so, when my brother left the capital on campaign, I committed a foolish act that gave rise to gossip. As a result, Carissa claimed illness and withdrew from public view, while I found myself the subject of criticism.

A moment of weakness and recklessness—such a thing ought never to happen to one in my position. I had disregarded the bond of brotherhood and showed neither virtue nor kindness.

Later, when the matter of succession grew fierce, I could not help but wonder if it was retribution—my misdeeds returned to me. I had cast doubt upon my own brother, pushing him aside, and now my sons and concubines fought among themselves like beasts.

I had not been a good father. I held my children to high standards, yet never gave them enough care or warmth.

Connor was my legitimate eldest son. If all had gone as it ought, he would have become the crown prince. But in the beginning, he was idle and dull, sharp-tongued and petty, his temper spoiled beyond repair. How could someone like that become the crown prince, let alone king?

My only regret was not sending him to my mother's care much earlier.

Power truly did have a way of leading one astray. Having held it so long, I understood that better than anyone.

Later, when I went to visit Connor, I

saw that there was no anger or despair in him. Instead, he had begun to study medicine and learn the use of herbs. It was as though he had shed his old self entirely. I was comforted by it, and yet, I grieved for him. He ought never to have been trapped in such a place.

Was this truly how the rest of his life would be? My heart ached at the thought.

When I left Eldermere Keep, I didn't go to see Caden. I had no wish to lay eyes on him. In this entire matter, it one claimed he did not have the slightest selfish motive and was

only led astray by his moth net

schemes, I wouldn't believe it.

I was deeply disappointed in him. To spare his life was already the greatest mercy I could offer.

Thankfully, Cecil remained untainted. My brother would guide him. And even if Cecil wasn't fit to be king in the end, that was fine. So long as he could father heirs, I trusted that my brother would return the throne to Cecil's line.

I never expected that I would come to truly trust my brother only in my final days.

As I lay dying, I thought back to the vows I had made when I first took the throne. Some, I had fulfilled; others, I did not. I didn't think I was a foolish ruler, but to say I was wise and virtuous would be a stretch as well.

There was weeping all around me, yet I felt at ease. So, this was what it was like to be at peace in the end. No more weighty matters of state. No more pain or illness.

It felt as though I were floating high above the earth. When I looked down, I saw my mother's hair streaked with grey, and my young son, still so tender and unknowing.

My heart ached with the knowledge that I had not been a good son, nor a good father. From this moment on, I had to leave everything to my brother and Carissa. There was much in this world I couldn't bear to part with, but at last...

I was free.