

Her Graceful War Song

#Chapter 1611 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1611

The sunlight filtered gently through the branches, and beneath the thick leaves, a pair of small legs swung back and forth in the air. The peaceful sight was enough to make anyone smile.

The girl's given name, the one recorded in the family registry, was Elizabeth Sanford. But later, she was given the nickname Elise. It was said that her mother thought she talked too much and chose the nickname to quiet her down.

However, Elise thought the nickname quite useless and not very pretty. The meaning of "Elise" was to be silent, but if one had a mouth and never used it except to eat, what then? Wouldn't she grow into a great fat pig if eating was the only thing she did?

"My dear lady, there you are! You had me searching high and low." Lulu stood beneath the tree, looking up with both fondness and exasperation. "Come down now. His Highness and Her Grace are asking for you."

"Aunt Lulu, what do they want with me?" came a bright, lazy voice from above, as content as a cat in the sun.

"Her Grace is going to Meadow Ridge and says she'd like to bring you along. Do you wish to go?"

At that, Elise's face lit up. "Truly? Then, let's go at once!"

She slid down the tree trunk without delay. Perched on either shoulder were two white cats named Blackbird and Whitefang, though neither name quite suited their soft white coats. They had come to her the year before, and Elise treasured them dearly. She had also trained them to be perfectly well-behaved.

In the side hall, Carissa and Rafael looked up as their daughter came bounding in. The two cats stayed perfectly still on her shoulders, not so much as twitching. The sight made both parents laugh aloud.

Elise ran forward and called, "Mom!", then sweetly added, "Dad!"

"They're all curled around you like that—aren't you hot?" Carissa asked with a smile, taking out her handkerchief to dab at Elise's damp brow and pluck a few leaves from her hair.

The two cats, who had been dozing with their eyes shut, suddenly opened them at the sound of Carissa's voice. Their amber eyes blinked, and they straightened at once. With dignified grace, they leapt down from Elise's shoulders and padded quietly out of the room.

"It's not hot at all; it's lovely and comfortable," Elise said cheerfully, linking arms with her mother and pressing her cheek fondly against her. "Aunt Lulu said you're going to Meadow Ridge. When are we setting out?"

"Tomorrow," Rafael answered from where he sat nearby. He watched his daughter's affectionate behavior with amusement, though he made an effort to keep a stern face. "Your mother's mentor has agreed to let you stay at Meadow Ridge and learn martial arts. You must treat this seriously. No fooling around or being lazy. Do you understand?"

Elise lit up with excitement at the news. "Truly? I promise I won't mess around. I'll train hard with Sage Adrian!"

The young girl had been to Meadow Ridge several times before and had once tried to stay to study martial arts. But as she had been too noisy and unruly, both Adrian and Everett had refused to keep her.

"This is your warning," said Carissa, though there was a smile on her face as she gently tapped her daughter's small nose. "If you make Sage Adrian unhappy, or if Sage Everett or your seniors complain, I'll come drag you home myself and give you a proper scolding."

"Complaining about me? Not likely! I was young and silly back then, but now I'm already seven years old. How could I still not know better?" Elise said proudly.

Rafael rolled his eyes at her.

Know better? If she truly did, she wouldn't have been turned away from Meadow Ridge more than once.

This time, it had been Adrian who had written to them, saying the place was too quiet lately—perhaps a noisy child might do some good. Truthfully, he had always hoped to bring Elise to Meadow Ridge.

It was Everett who objected, for he was the one in charge of discipline and couldn't abide noisy children. Back in the day, even Carissa had been scolded often by him. But in the end, Everett wouldn't refuse the daughter of Rafael, his most favored apprentice.

Elise did have real talent for martial arts—perhaps even more than either of her parents. If she trained diligently for a few years, her skill would surely grow by leaps and bounds.

And so, the following day, Carissa took Elise to Meadow Ridge. The two white cats, of course, went along with them.

Elise leaned against her mother's side, her usual mischief gone for the moment as she seriously asked, "Mom, you went to Meadow Ridge when you were seven too, didn't you? Did you ever think about what you wanted to be when you grew up?"

Carissa gently stroked her daughter's dark hair, her gaze growing distant.

She had indeed gone to Meadow Ridge at the age of seven or eight, full of bold dreams. She had wanted to become one of the finest warriors in the land, to right wrongs and help others, to be a true heroine.

Though she had trained diligently, Adrian never allowed talk of becoming a wandering hero. He said it was improper for someone who trained in martial arts to go around fighting and causing trouble.

Carissa had thought she might defy him one day, but before that could happen, trouble came to her family. Her dream of wandering the world and seeking justice faded before it could ever begin.

"Mom?" Elise asked again when she received no reply.

Carissa came back to herself and softly replied. "At the time, I thought if I could learn to defend myself, I would take up my sword and see the world from the beautiful sights of Starhaven, to the Southern Frontier and Victory Pass... the lands your grandfather and uncles once defended."

Elise looked a little sad. "You're stuck in the capital now, so you can't go. But that's alright. Once I've trained hard and gotten strong, I'll go for you."

"Alright, then." Carissa smiled, treating it as the sweet promise of a child.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1612 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1612

The branches bent under the weight of frost, and the orchids bloomed again and again.

Elise had a rare gift for martial arts. It seemed she had inherited the best from both Rafael and Carissa. Adrian often said with pride that among all the apprentices at Meadow Ridge, she was the most talented of them all.

Even Everett couldn't deny it. When Elise asked him whether she or her father was more skilled, he only gave a vague reply: "You're about the same. Each of you has your own strengths."

The martial arts Elise had learned by then were not taught by the Pathfinders Guild alone. She had trained under many guilds at Meadow Ridge.

When she first arrived, she was just a little girl-fair-skinned and delicate as glass, with a sweet smile that made everyone fond of her. She loved to talk and made friends easily. With her kind and clever words, she charmed the heads of each guild into teaching her everything they knew.

Though she had once been wild by nature, the discipline of focused training and the study of inner force techniques had calmed her spirit over time. She grew more composed and steady with each passing year.

When she came of age at 15, she returned to the capital. A grand ceremony was held to celebrate the occasion. It was a fine affair, and countless gifts were sent to her.

When Carissa presented her own crimson whip, Elise was overjoyed. She had long coveted the whip, though her mother never allowed her to borrow it in the past, no matter how sweetly she asked. To now receive it as a gift was more than she had hoped for.

She flung her arms around her mother and gave her a loud kiss. "Now that it's mine, you can't take it back!"

Carissa laughed, half amused, half exasperated. "Since I've given it to you, of course it's yours. What did your Aunt Violet give you? Have you opened it yet?" "Not yet. They're all still in the courtyard," Elise said cheerfully. "Won't you come help me open my gifts? Aunt Lulu kept a list of who gave what."

Carissa smiled. "Very well. But why haven't you asked what your father's gift is?"

"Oh, the gold and ruby set, of course. I already saw it," Elise replied. "It's very fine -truly lovely- but I've no use for it. Besides, you've got one just like it, don't you? They look nearly the same."

"You lost interest the moment you saw it was jewelery?" Carissa teased. "Then, you must not have looked closely. There's a bracelet in that set, one your father had specially made for you, just like the one your late great-uncle gave me. It has a hidden mechanism inside."

"Truly?" Elise's eyes lit up. She turned and dashed back toward the courtyard. "I'll go see it right away, then go thank Dad properly!"

Laughing and shaking her head, Carissa sent someone to fetch her husband so he might receive his daughter's thanks.

When Rafael heard the reason, he could only smile wryly. "No wonder she barely glanced at my gift and muttered a half-hearted thank you. So, she hadn't looked properly at all."

"You know what our girl is like," Carissa said fondly. "She's a martial arts enthusiast. She doesn't care for powder and pearls, only clever little weapons and unusual tools."

"Well, better that she doesn't spend her days fussing over how she looks. She's already so beautiful. If she went around all dressed up as well, there's no telling how many rakes and scoundrels she might attract," Rafael replied.

"There were plenty of noble ladies trying to make enquiries for their sons today," Carissa added with a knowing look. "Elise is the only daughter of the Sanford family, and has such fine features. She also

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behaved with grace and composure today, without a hint of arrogance. She was dignified and elegant. It's no wonder the great families are already circling around."

"What do you mean by that? Do you wish for her to marry early?" Rafael asked.

Carissa shook her head. "There's no

hurry. Truth be told, she still has a child's heart and longs for freedom. To shut her up in the inner

chambers so soon would be like clipping a bird's wings. Perhaps in time, she'll meet someone she chooses herself. That would at least

be better than forcing two strangers to live out their lives together."

Rafael couldn't help but think of how he and Carissa had been such strangers once, pushed together with no great understanding. Though they now knew one another's hearts well, it had been entirely one-sided at the start-he had loved her first.

"At the very least, the man must truly be fond of her, just as I was with you," he said softly, taking his wife's hand.

Carissa cast him a playful glance. "Why bring up the past out of nowhere?"

"Because I consider myself lucky," Rafael replied, pulling her into his arms. "That good fortune stayed with me all my life. I still remember how my heart leapt the day I saw you at the Southern Frontier And when I heard you were no longer married, I was so overjoyed I drank a whole bottle of wine that very night to celebrate."

Carissa laughed. "Nonsense! The Southern Frontier was bitter enough as it was. You even tricked Rod and the others out of their alcohol. What wine could you possibly have had to celebrate with?"

Rafael puffed up with pride. "That's beside the point. Even if it were only water, I drank it like wine and it still made me drunk."

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1613 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1613

When husband and wife now spoke of the past, they felt nothing but fondness between them. Especially Carissa, who once thought their marriage had been forced upon her.

Who could have imagined it would turn out so happy? Truly, the ways of the world were hard to predict.

Just then, someone came rushing in like a whirlwind. Before anyone could see clearly, she had already thrown herself into Rafael's arms.

"Dad, I adore the coming-of-age gift you gave me! Thank you so much! You're the best!" she exclaimed in a voice bright with joy and excitement.

"Still so impulsive? You're a young lady now, you ought to carry yourself with more grace," Rafael said.

Despite his words, there was nothing but warmth in his gaze. He gently fixed the hairpin in his daughter's hair as he added, "And you didn't like the ruby set? Your mother chose that herself with great care."

"I love it! I love everything!" Elise replied sweetly, her whole face lighting up with delight.

Rafael looked at her smiling face, and for a moment, it felt like a dream. The older Elise grew, the more she looked like her mother. When he first saw Carissa at Meadow Ridge, she used to smile just like that—bright and full of spirit.

But afterward, he rarely saw her smile that way. Even when she seemed glad, it was only a faint smile, as if joy never truly reached her heart. Thankfully, she had improved now. From time to time, she did laugh aloud, openly happy. Perhaps, with time, dust had settled over the wounds in her heart, softening them from view.

But even if hidden, those wounds would always be there. No feeling—no matter how deep—could make her whole again. Not a husband, nor a friend, nor even a daughter or a nephew could replace one's parents or elder brothers.

Whenever Rafael thought of that, his heart ached for Carissa.

"Dad? Why are you staring off into the distance?" Elise asked.

Rafael gathered his thoughts and told her to sit properly. Then, he said, "Your mother and I were just speaking of your marriage. We'd like to hear what you think about it."

Startled, her eyes widened. "Are we so poor now that you must sell me off? Why such a hurry?"

"What nonsense is that? Who's selling you?" Rafael said with a frown. "Marriage isn't selling you off. And your mother and I were only speaking in passing. We meant to ask your thoughts, not send you off at once. If you're willing, we might take two or three years to find a suitable match."

"I'm not willing, not at all," Elise said quickly, shaking her head. "I've no wish to marry so soon."

"Is it that you don't wish to marry yet, or that you don't wish to marry at all?" Carissa asked gently.

"Of course I'll marry someday. I plan to have seven children, after all! But there's no need to rush. I want to go out and see the world first," Elise replied.

Both Rafael and Carissa looked at her in shock.

"Seven children? Whatever for?"

"Grandma had seven, didn't she? I think it would be lively. And who knows? If pray to the heavens, perhaps my

my grandparents and

uncles might return to us, reborn into our family. Then, we could look after them and spoil them in their next life," Elise said matter-of-factly.

Carissa hadn't expected her to say such a thing and was momentarily stunned.

"Mind your tongue. They were your elders-how could you say they'd become your children? And besides, they've long since joined the immortals. Why would they need to return to Earth again?" Rafael quickly scolded.

Elise nodded at once, agreeing to everything her father said. He had only said such things to comfort Carissa, lest sorrow creep back into her heart.

Carissa said nothing more. She only smiled and beckoned her daughter over, gathering her into her arms and letting her be spoiled a little while longer.

It was said that once a girl grew up, she couldn't be kept at home. Other people's daughters left to marry, while her darling one wished to roam the rivers and hills, to see the wide world. The sky was vast, the seas endless. She might not return even once a year.

Now that her daughter was still beside her, Carissa meant to cherish every moment.

After a little while of being indulged in her mother's arms, Carissa took Elise back to open the rest of her gifts.

Elise was most eager to see what Violet had sent. And sure enough, when she opened it, she gave a little cheer upon seeing a hairpin with a hidden surprise. When twisted just so, a sharp blade sprang forth. If ever she found herself in danger, the little hairpin could very well save her life.

Most of the other gifts were the usual things: fine silks and satins, as well as gold and silver ornaments.

Victoria had gone all out, sending an entire box of jewelry, a hundred gold coins, and on top of that, three thousand silver coins in banknotes. The banknotes were easier to carry and would ensure Elise suffered no hardship when she travelled.

As for Helen, she had always cherished her granddaughter as though she were the apple of her eye. Elise was given whatever she wanted without question. Now that her beloved granddaughter had come of age, she naturally spared no expense.

Besides estates, shops, gold, and

silver, there were also rare silk

brocades, fine cloud satin, and precious furs. They were all

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delivered to Elise's room as though money were no object. The theme was clear: plentiful, expensive, and grand-enough to outshine all

others.

When Carissa brought her daughter to give thanks, she gently remarked, "Mother, it's only her coming-of-age ceremony, and yet you've prepared as though for a wedding. It's far too much."

"Too much?" Helen scoffed, not taking her eyes off her darling granddaughter. "I still think it's not enough. I've hoarded fine things for years, all for her. When she weds one day, even ten miles of wedding gifts wouldn't be enough to show how much she's loved."

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1614 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1614

Helen had the confidence to speak that way because over the years, she had spent very little and gained a great deal. The rewards from the palace, gifts from various families, and the respect

shown by the younger generation all added up. Many of them, especially Violet, were generous in their offerings.

For her only granddaughter, Helen could never be too reluctant. One of her favorite sayings was that, after she was gone, everything would belong to Elise.

Now, as Helen's daughter-in-law and granddaughter arrived at her residence, it was no surprise that she brought up the topic of Elise's martial arts training at Meadow Ridge again.

"It's not that it's bad, but it'll be so long. She'll hardly return home, and then she'll say she wants to go off on her own again. She's such a delicate little thing-how can she go wandering like that? I can't argue with my son, though. He's a man who doesn't understand such things. I can never make him see reason," Helen said.

"Grandmother, I'm not delicate. Look at this punch!" Elise proudly raised her fist and waved it in front of Helen's face. "One hit from me, and even a wild boar would fall unconscious."

Helen sighed inwardly. "Other girls use their hands to play musical instruments, write poems, or at least manage the household accounts. But you? You're out here using your hands to fight wild boars. What, do you think we're starving for your prized pork?"

"Grandmother!" Elise exclaimed, leaning against her with a mischievous grin. She wrapped her arms around Helen's neck, laughing playfully. "Other girls might be dainty, but they're not special. Only your granddaughter can knock out a wild boar with one punch. Don't you feel proud?"

Even though Helen adored her granddaughter, she wasn't placated so easily.

"I don't. It's fine for others to get into fights, but you? You're my precious heart. How can I bear for you to be hurt? Even a bruise would break my heart."

As she spoke, she shot a look of reproach at Carissa, silently blaming her for sending Elise to Meadow Ridge. Carissa simply smiled and kept her gaze down, pretending not to notice. It was better not to say anything at all.

Over the years, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law had remained cordial, all thanks to the latter's ability to appear unaware of things. Of course, Helen never pushed too hard. Whenever they disagreed, Carissa would simply offer a way out, and the older woman would take it without any airs of superiority.

Seeing that her daughter-in-law didn't argue or lecture, Helen gladly accepted the peace and added, "Of course, learning martial arts is good. It strengthens the body and keeps one from being easily bullied."

The following day, Elise's title and official records were issued. Her fief was located in the southern region, so her title was the Duchess of Southmere. With her own fief, she would never go hungry, no matter how far she roamed.

Southmere Eastmarch was located in Lumoria and consisted of fifteen districts. Its administrative centre was in Port Liantra. After sea trade routes were opened and the Maritime Trade Office was

over

established, the once-poor region grew into a wealthy and prosperous land.

This decision had been made with Cecil's approval, after discussions with his court officials. For years, Rafael had worked tirelessly as the regent, gaining the respect of all at court. Now, with Cecil fully assuming control as king, he had his own plans.

How could a mere duchess be given a fief in the southern region? In truth, it was a gesture meant for Rafael. With the region being far from the capital, once Rafael stepped down as regent, he could go there and rule as a sovereign in all but name.

Besides, only the Southmere area was prosperous. Other regions around it like Rosevale, Maplecrest, Riverlain, and Wellmere remained relatively poor.

By now, Cecil had taken full control of the throne. He was growing more steady and carried himself more and more like a real ruler. It wasn't that he feared Rafael; he simply wanted to provide him with a comfortable retirement.

Naturally, Cecil still depended on his uncle for now. Even if Rafael were no longer regent, he would still hold the position of prime minister. Cecil understood how weary his uncle was. So, when the time came for Rafael to retire, and if he truly wished to step away, the king would have no choice but to agree.

In his heart, Cecil saw no difference between his uncle and his father. It was his uncle who had supported him until he took the throne. It was his uncle who had helped him overcome his fears, who had taught him day and night, who had gently guided him, and who had shown him what it meant to be a king.

He had long since come to regard his uncle with the same respect and reverence

as he did his father.

When all the nobles at court learned that Elise had been conferred the title of the Duchess of Southmere, they knew that honor was far more prestigious than that of a princess, and that it was a title given in honor of Rafael. Though Elise had never visited Southmere Eastmarch, she had heard much about the famous cherries from the southern region. Cherries were rare in the capital, and the only time she had ever tasted them was at Meadow Ridge.

Adrian once had a craving for them, so he had Winona send her people on a rushed delivery. Elise had received a bunch herself, and the taste had stayed with her ever since.

So, Elise had decided. The first place she would visit was Victory Pass, to see her great-grandfather and great-uncles. The second place would be Port Liantra, where she would lie under the cherry trees and eat to her heart's content.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1615 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1615

After Elise's coming-of-age ceremony in the capital, another was held at the Pathfinders Guild.

This was the reason Adrian had not come to the capital for the first ceremony. His exact words had been: "Can't we hold a coming-of-age ceremony at Meadow Ridge? Why must we go all the way to the capital and deal with so many strangers?"

It had been some time since the guild had seen such excitement. Adrian was dressed in red formal wear, standing out in such a bright color. He sat at the head of the hall, smiling as he watched Everett greet the guests.

Adrian rarely socialized, especially as he grew older. The thought of mingling made him uneasy, but there were times when he found joy in observing others enjoy themselves. Today, watching the guests gather around his little apprentice, a sense of pride and satisfaction filled his heart.

Yet, there was also a feeling of wistfulness growing inside him. He couldn't help but feel sorry for Carissa, who had experienced the turning point of her life when she was fifteen. From a carefree girl, she had become a quiet and sorrowful young woman. However, it was a comfort to see how well she was doing now.

Also, it brought him peace to know that Elise would live a life full of freedom and joy. Where her mother had not ventured, she would go. The paths her mother had not walked, she would try.

During the feast, Adrian drank quite a bit, growing more relaxed as he spoke with the leaders of various guilds, exchanging idle conversation. As he aged, he found himself less interested in the affairs of the world. Now, he preferred to discuss the upbringing of his apprentices instead.

The apprentices at Meadow Ridge grew like wild grass-one season after another. When they came of age, they left the mountain to make their way in the world, and new ones soon arrived to take their place.

The methods of teaching among the mentors were not always the same. As time passed and their experience grew, their approaches changed.

Carissa's generation, now older and more experienced, had become the elders in the Meadow Ridge community. Some of them remained there and attended the coming-of-age celebration. As they watched Elise, they couldn't help but feel how quickly time had passed. It seemed like only yesterday that her mother had been the same age.

Elise enjoyed her time at Meadow Ridge. She had no need to follow rigid rules and played freely with the others, carefree and full of joy. As for what the elders said, she paid little attention. After all, she was too young to have a say in their conversations.

Though she belonged to the Pathfinders Guild, she had no official mentor as Adrian had not assigned her one. If anyone could be considered her mentor, it would be her parents.

After the coming-of-age ceremony, Elise spent a month with Adrian at the Pathfinders Guild before she began her journey to Victory Pass. She had planned to ride alone, but Adrian insisted that a young apprentice, Selene, accompany her.

Selene had only joined the

Pathfinders Guild a little over a year ago and was three months younger than Elise. A lonely orphan who had once lived on the streets, she was now Kyle's only apprentice. Back when she was a petty thief, she had even stolen from Kyle himself. When he caught her, he didn't scold her immediately, and instead asked about her life.

It turned out that her mother had once been a well-born lady, but her family had fallen on hard times. The woman had married a farmer, who died young, leaving her to care for Selene. To make ends meet, Selene's mother did laundry for others. When she had time, she would teach her daughter to read and write.

Paper, ink, and books were beyond their means, so Selene's mother taught her by drawing letters in the sand with a stick. Selene, clever and eager to learn, picked

it up quickly. Within a few years, she had learned much.

They had relatives, but those people could only offer a meal now and then. No one was willing to care for them long-term. At the age of nine, Selene found herself alone on the streets.

At first, she begged for food, never thinking of stealing. But one day, she became

a thief by necessity. It was her first time stealing, and she had the misfortune of running into Kyle. But truly, she had no other choice.

There was an old woman living in a

ruined temple-no children, no family to speak of-who had fallen ill. They had shared that shelter for some time, leaning on each other to get by. The old woman had no money for a physician, and it was clear she wouldn't last long.

Selene couldn't bear to watch her die like that. So, she went out to steal.

Kyle saw that she could barely feed herself, yet still had the heart to worry over someone else. And since it was her first offence, he chose not to hold it against her. Instead, he even sent someone to fetch a physician to tend to the old woman.

Sadly, her illness was too advanced, and the medicine did no good. When she passed away soon after, Selene buried the old woman herself. She needed no help, saying she was quite used to it.

Only then did Kyle learn that Selene had buried her own mother as well.

He saw in her a young girl who had been mistreated by life but still held onto a kind and determined heart. He admired her resilience, and for the first time, thought of taking on an apprentice.

So, he brought her back to Meadow Ridge with him.

Now, Adrian had sent Selene along with Elise because of her tough upbringing. She had seen the darker side of people, something Elise might not yet understand, and could offer wise advice when needed.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1616 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1616

And so, the two young ladies set off on horseback toward Victory Pass.

They had become fast friends. When Selene first arrived at the Pathfinders Guild, she was shy about eating too much, but Elise kept filling her bowl with food.

Selene had said that she was used to hard times, and now every day felt like a sweet dream.

Elise had laughed and replied, "Well then, let's make sure this dream lasts a lifetime."

Their journey was slow, with no rush to reach their destination. They took their time, stopping to enjoy the local food and customs at each place they passed through. They even attended a few weddings, laughing and having fun along the way.

By the time they reached Victory Pass, it was the middle of winter, and snow was falling heavily.

Elise went to visit her great-grandfather first. Though Dominic's hair and beard were white, he was still full of energy. When Elise bowed respectfully before him, he smiled, his face lighting up with joy.

"You've made me wait so long! I knew you were coming, but you made me wait until the cold of winter arrived," he teased.

As Elise shared all the details of her journey, Dominic gave her a thumbs-up, smiling as he said, "That's right! You should see more of the world. I've been stuck in Victory Pass for so many years; there are many places I've never been to. But I don't regret it. I can never get enough of this place."

"Of course, Victory Pass is where you've spent so many years. It's like home to you," Elise agreed.

"Yes." Dominic nodded, stroking his beard.

This place was where he intended to die, and where his bones would be buried when he passed.

He gently patted Elise's head, his voice full of affection as he said, "Since you've traveled so much, you must see all of Victory Pass too."

"That's certain," she replied with a firm nod. "I will walk every inch of land in Victory Pass. It's the place you've protected all your life."

Dominic smiled with satisfaction. He was old now, with most of his life already behind him, but if he had accomplished just one thing in this life, then he could say he had been useful.

To welcome Elise and Selene, Cindy hosted a family dinner. Victory Pass was no longer the cold, desolate place it once was. Now, there was good wine and fine meats, as well as steaming hot dishes that warmed everyone's hearts.

Later that evening, Elise's coming-of-age gifts were all delivered to her room, and she thanked everyone one by one.

Watching her, Cindy sighed and said, "You're as well-behaved as your mother was. It's been so long since I've seen her."

Elise knew how much Cindy loved Carissa, treating her almost like her own daughter. Seeing her now made Elise think of her mother.

"Mom said that when she's free, she'll come to Victory Pass to visit you and Great-grandpa," she said softly.

"As long as she remembers us in her heart, that's enough. I wouldn't want her to have to travel back and forth. After all, she has so many duties to attend to," Cindy replied with a gentle smile.

She pulled Elise closer and softly asked, "Tell me, does your father treat your mother well?"

Elise thought for a moment before answering: wouldn't call him exceptional: According to Aunt Lulu, managing even a month's worth of dinners with Mom each year is some kind of miracle. But bad? Not at all. The moment Mom walks into a room, his eyes lock onto her and follow her wherever she goes."

Cindy thought about how Cecil was now ruling directly, and that Rafael should have more free time. But little did she know, he was still as busy as ever.

Cindy sighed. "Your father truly leads a hard life."

Elise nodded in agreement. "Even when I returned from Meadow Ridge, I saw that Aunt Lulu and Uncle Jacob had more time than Dad did. He always has endless official duties to attend to."

"Does your mother complain about him?" Cindy asked.

Elise laughed softly. "How could she complain? Nowadays, in addition to being the commander of the Mystic Army, she sometimes helps train soldiers at the barracks. She's just as busy as he is, if not more so."

Cindy nodded. "No wonder you haven't had a brother or sister all these years."

"Mom says it's all about fate," Elise replied proudly. "She says I am the greatest blessing they could ever have."

Cindy tapped her gently on the nose. "That's right. You were not easy to come by.

It took many years of marriage before they had you."

Elise believed that having her was enough. In time, she would take a husband into the family-someone who would care for her parents in their old age.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1617 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1617

The next day, Elise and Selene wandered around Victory Pass, enjoying

themselves. Cindy had arranged for someone to guide them, but Elise declined, saying she preferred to explore at her own pace.

Victory Pass was now a town where two kingdoms met. Their cultures blended together, offering so many new things to see that the two young women were almost dazzled. Some snacks from Orivenia could even be found in Victory Pass. While wandering, Elise came across an embroidery workshop called Skye Embroidery and found it rather curious. She had seen

embroidery workshops all over, but only the one in the capital went by the name Skye Embroidery. How was it that this town had one too?

Curious, she asked Cindy about it when she returned. Cindy explained that this Skye Embroidery was a different one, founded by Viola as a way to raise funds. Unlike the one in the capital, this one was simply an embroidery workshop; women could either work there or at home, bringing their finished pieces to sell.

In Victory Pass, there were also women who had been cast aside by their families. But usually, their families would take them back in as the rules here weren't as strict as in the capital. Only women who truly had nowhere else to go would end up at the workshop, but even then, not many stayed there.

So, the Skye Embroidery in Victory Pass served more as a place for women to earn some income, since the people of Orivenia liked to buy the handmade embroidery to sell in their homeland.

Elise had naturally heard of Viola, but hadn't paid much attention to her. Elise had been away in Meadow Ridge for so long and didn't know that Viola had come to Victory Pass. Maybe she had heard about it but hadn't thought much of it.

"She must be making a fair amount of money, though, helping others sell their goods," Elise said thoughtfully.

"Well, not exactly," Cindy replied. "I've asked around. She makes only a small profit, just enough to cover the cost of renting the workshop. The majority of the money goes to the women who do the embroidery."

"She's really doing a good thing, then," Elise said.

Cindy nodded. "Yes, I've heard about her too. It's rare, really. She's turned over a new leaf, is genuinely trying to do good, and even takes care of many things herself."

Elise knew all about Viola's past, and also knew that Barrett had once been married to Carissa.

When Elise was younger, she was always curious about the past and loved to ask Lulu about her parents' earlier days. Lulu wasn't always careful with her words, and had once let slip that Carissa had been married to Barrett. From then on, Elise made it her mission to learn all the details of that part of their history.

One day, she had asked her mother if she still resented Barrett.

Carissa had only sighed and said, "It's all in the past. Who has room in their heart to cling to so many bygone grievances? Resentment hardly matters now. After all, my heart belongs to your father."

Since her mother wasn't angry, neither was Elise. She had no real fondness for Barrett, though.

Once, when he came to Sullivan Estate in Victory Pass, Elise had seen him. She thought he looked much older than her father, his age showing plainly, and he couldn't compare to Rafael at all.

Barrett had noticed Elise too, his gaze lingering for a moment as he recognized her as Carissa and Rafael's daughter. She resembled them both, and for a brief moment, memories from the past had rushed through his mind.

But soon, he pushed them aside. What was lost was lost. The most important thing now was to appreciate what he had in front of him.

That year, Elise spent the New Year in Victory Pass and didn't set out for Southmere Eastmarch until April. It was her territory, and as the Duchess of Southmere, she felt it was time to visit.

When the royal edict bestowing her the title had arrived, she had learned that the regional transport officer in Port Liantra had already begun construction on her official

vel.not

residence. It was being built at the court's expense, with the Ministry of Housing overseeing the project. So, the progress should be fast.

Elise and Selene were still riding the same way they had when they first set out-letting the horses wander as they pleased. Their destination was still Port Liantra, but for now, they simply followed wherever the horses chose to go. With so many mountains and rivers in the world, they had to see some of them for themselves.

It was nearly the end of the year by the time the two of them, unhurried and at ease, finally made it to Rosevale.

Winter was bitterly cold, and

Rosevale offered little relief. Still, travelers on the road had said it would be much warmer in Port Liantra. But with their leisurely pace, they knew they wouldn't reach it before the upcoming New Year, so they decided to spend the holiday in Rosevale instead.

The region was known for its famous natural wonder - an unusual mountain formation called Twilight Crest. Despite the cold, they climbed up to take a look. When they saw it, Selene's cheeks flushed bright red, while Elise was shocked and full of curiosity.

"Sure, women might look like this, but do men really look like that? They better not be that ugly," said Elise.

Selene smacked her lightly, her ears turning scarlet. "Don't talk nonsense! Is this something we should even be discussing? We shouldn't have come here at all."

"Why not?" Elise tilted her head back, her gaze fixed on the towering rocks. "Eventually, we'll have to find men to marry. Might as well take a peek now."

"Come on, let's go." Selene couldn't hide her embarrassment, so she quickly tugged Elise back down the mountain.

But Elise still looked back, marveling at the size. "Wow, it's huge!"

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1618 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1618

While in Rosevale, Elise and Selene made the acquaintance of several local peddlers who wandered the streets with goods for sale. It was something unique to Southmere Eastmarch.

Most of their wares were toys meant for children. Elise claimed she was too grown-up for such things, but in truth, she adored them and purchased two especially charming miniature griffin heads used for griffin dances.

In Southmere Eastmarch, griffin dancing was a beloved custom. Whether for the New Year or any joyful occasion, one could always hire a troupe. During Elise and Selene's time in Rosevale for the New Year festivities, things were particularly lively, with griffin dances all through the streets. The merriment was so grand, they found themselves utterly captivated.

After the New Year, Elise wrote letters home, sending one to the capital and another to Meadow Ridge, then continued on her journey.

They arrived in Port Liantra in February. The weather was neither cold nor warm just right.

Elise first sought out Bertram Yeats, the Commissioner of Transport for Southmere Eastmarch. Upon showing her duchess' seal, he received her with the highest courtesy and took her at once to see the progress of her new residence.

The duchess' estate-Southmere Estate-stood along the main thoroughfare of Port Liantra, not far from the local authorities' office. With such vast grounds, laborers and craftsmen were still hard at work. Bertram informed Elise that it would be another half-year before it was ready for her to move in.

So, she decided she would rent a house in Port Liantra for the time being. She also asked Bertram not to inform the lesser officials of her arrival, as she preferred not to be watched or disturbed.

Bertram treated the two women to a fine meal and shared the current state of affairs in Southmere Eastmarch.

The local troops were known as the Wintermark Guard. They had once served under the palace, but some years ago when Yuvan rebelled and the region was plagued by outlaws-the court had dispatched regional troops along with the Mystic Army to restore order.

Later, the Mystic Army left behind a hundred men, who then recruited more and formally established the Wintermark Guard. They had originally been stationed in Rosevale, but with Port Liantra opening trade routes with other kingdoms, the area had drawn the attention of pirates and bandits. The troops were thus moved from Rosevale to Port Liantra.

The Wintermark Guard was first commanded by Julian Gibson of the Mystic Army. After his passing, Rafael appointed Ansel Hargrove as their commander. Ansel's grandfather had once served in the Sinclair Army and had fallen in battle alongside Hector at the Southern Frontier, while his father used to be the governor of Rosevale.

Ansel himself was well-versed in both letters and arms—remarkably talented for his age. He had shown great skill in several campaigns against bandits, and it was Julian who had written to the court before his death and recommended Ansel for the post of commander.

When Bertram spoke of Ansel, he was full of praise.

"Your Grace, you may not know this,

but the Wintermark Guard is often

called the Rhantom Guard by bandits. They move like

shadows-silent and swift-and always seem to find the bandits' dens. In the past two years, banditry has lessened greatly, and that is all thanks to General Hargrove."

"Lessened?" Elise repeated. "Meaning there are still some left?"

"But of course. All under the sky chase after profit. Port Liantra is open by land and sea, so there's too much wealth to tempt them. Where there's gain, there will be those who risk their lives for it," Bertram replied.

"Have people been harmed?" Elise asked.

"In years past, yes. But over the last two years, only three commoners have died at the hands of bandits. The criminals have grown clever, and now wait until the ships are out on the water before attacking. General Hargrove is currently petitioning the court to build warships."

He went on eagerly about the benefits of such ships. With a proper fleet, the soldiers could patrol the rivers and escort merchant vessels. If the bandits couldn't succeed, they would eventually give up.

Elise could tell that Bertram was hoping she would speak to her father on the matter. But she gave no promise, pretending not to understand the hint. She would need to investigate the situation herself before deciding.

However, Selene was not so subtle and said, "Well, if there's a need, then build the ships. It's not as if the court has no money."

Elise gave her a sharp kick under the table.

Selene quickly recovered and added, "Naturally, everything must follow the proper process. One can't simply ask and receive."

Bertram let out a small laugh. "The

outa

young lady speaks wisely. The

process must be followed, of

course. But Port Liantra lies so far from the capital. Between the back-and-forth and the flood of petitions flying toward court, who

knows when the regent or His

Majesty will even see ours?"

Elise poured him a cup of tea, changing the subject with a smile. "I've heard that

in Port Liantra, tea-drinking is quite a fine custom. Is that true?"

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1619 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1619

Bertram had thought the Duchess of Southmere was still young and

inexperienced. He assumed the young lady she brought along was just a maid, and she had no advisor by her side. He believed it would be easy to make his

move.

He hadn't expected her to be a tough opponent.

The petition to build the warships had been submitted a long time ago, yet no reply had come. They were growing quite anxious.

In recent years, the court had been willing to spend money freely on the military. At first, Bertram thought this matter would be easy to settle. But now, after such a long delay, it seemed far more difficult.

A duchess' estate had been built just like that, without hesitation. So, why all this fuss over a few warships?

Bertram did feel some resentment, but he was a practical man. There was no point in forcing what could not be changed, and offending others would bring no benefit. He thought it might be worth trying a different approach—perhaps this path would lead to some advantage for them.

Even though he had hit a tough spot, he didn't lose heart. He knew he couldn't afford to offend the Duchess of Southmere. She wasn't obliged to help them, but if they angered her and she sent a letter to the regent with a few harsh words, there would be no hope for those ships.

After receiving her warmly, he let the ladies roam freely, though he did secretly send a few men to follow them, just in case anything happened. But to his surprise, Elise quickly shook off the men he sent. In the end, he had no idea where she was staying.

Bertram grew nervous. The women had already entered Port Liantra. If anything were to happen to them there, and Rafael held him responsible, he would not be able to bear the consequences.

Bertram could not help but blame Elise a little. She had brought no guards, only that girl he assumed was a maid. Plus, she had only just arrived in Port Liantra, and was thus neither familiar with the place nor able to speak the language.

What if she offended someone or broke some custom? Also, no one knew her identity. Wouldn't that lead to disaster?

Truly reckless.

Bertram went to find Ansel and told him everything, asking him to keep an eye out during his patrols.

Ansel was twenty this year. He had a clear, handsome face and the strong build of a soldier, with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and sharp, cold eyes.

After hearing Bertram speak of the Duchess of Southmere's sudden appearance and just as sudden disappearance-Ansel smiled and said, "Why worry, Mr. Yeats? If Her Grace came to Port

Liantra with only one person by her side, then either the regent has sent someone to protect her in secret, or she is quite capable of protecting herself. As the regent's daughter, she can't be an ordinary young lady."

Hearing this, Bertram nodded. "That does make sense. I mentioned our request for warships to her, but she said nothing in reply. I suppose she has no wish to help."

Ansel laughed, his two dimples showing clearly and softening the sharpness in his eyes. "You only mentioned it casually. Why should she agree to help when she doesn't even understand the full situation? You're thinking of it too simply, and of Her Grace as too naive."

"Is that so? I thought she was young and easy to sway," Bertram said with an awkward smile. "It seems I was foolish."

"You don't understand the regent," Ansel replied. "No one close to him is easily swayed. If they were, the court would be in chaos. As for the warships, we cannot rush them. If the court doesn't approve the request, we can always refit some civilian ships for now and make do."

Bertram gave him a look, thinking that Ansel was indeed steady and thoughtful.

Refitting civilian ships wasn't out of the question. The problem was that, with so many goods being shipped out these days, cargo ships were already in short supply. If they had to convert any, it would have to be the old and worn ones. Luckily, Ansel was a man with courage.

"Then, let's wait a little longer. If there's still no reply, we'll do as you say," Bertram said.

"Very well. Let's handle it that way for now. And as for Her Grace, there's no need

to worry. She must have found a place to stay," said Ansel before he took his leave.

It was now after the New Year, and goods were being moved more frequently. Bandits might very well take this opportunity to act. There had been a crackdown before, which kept them quiet for some time. But stolen goods had been sold off for money, which they had spent recklessly. So, surely, they would soon turn their wicked minds to mischief once more.

Her Graceful War Song #Chapter 1620 - Read Her Graceful War Song Chapter 1620

After the New Year, goods were to be sent out through the Pearl River, and the docks had begun to grow busy once more.

Southsea County was well known for its fine silks-luxurious, highly sought-after fabrics. In the past, merchants would always report to the authorities ahead of time when shipping such goods, and officers would be stationed nearby to keep watch, in case of thieves.

However, as there had been little sign of bandits over the past year or two, some merchants, wishing to save time, began skipping that step. Arranging for guards would take at least a day or two, which meant they would have to delay loading their ships.

Thinking there was no danger, they simply gave orders to load the goods straight away. But no sooner had the merchant ship left the bay than it was met by five or six tattered old boats. From them sprang a group of rough-looking men, who threw hooked ropes toward the merchant ship and began climbing aboard at

once.

At the same time, a small fishing boat pulled up swiftly alongside the merchant vessel. Onboard were only the boatman and two others-Elise and Selene.

The two young women were dressed in shabby clothes, disguised as common dockhands. They had been watching the docks for three or four days already. After hearing from Bertram that there had been reports of bandits stirring again, they had gone to the docks in secret to investigate.

Earlier, as the merchant ship was being loaded, Elise had noticed a few suspicious men keeping watch nearby. There were no soldiers present, and that alone made her suspect the thieves would strike. So, she rented a fishing boat and followed at a distance.

Now, seeing the pirates boarding the ship, she gave Selene a look. They leapt through the air together, using their Lightfoot Skill to land aboard. They thought the ship's crew would be caught off guard, but to their surprise, fighting had already begun.

Though the pirates were many, two of the men aboard the merchant ship were clearly skilled fighters. They were brave and fast, knocking down several pirates in a matter of moments. One of them was a young man dressed in black.

Elise and Selene quickly joined the fray.

The pirates were not highly trained, but used dirty tricks such as throwing lime powder, firing hidden darts, and the like. Such tricks might work on ordinary sailors, but not on the two women.

With a single swift movement, Elise dodged them all. She then noticed that the young man in black's movements were sharp and fast, his attacks clean. It was clear he had trained from a young age.

After taking down two of the pirates herself, Elise turned and froze when she saw the other skilled fighter.

It was Thomas!

When had he arrived? And how had he ended up aboard this very ship?

The sailors soon joined the fight. In no time at all, the pirates were either subdued or had fled. The young man in black gave orders to tie up the captured thieves, then lifted his head toward Elise.

But she had already darted to Thomas' side and exclaimed with delight, "Mr. Thomas, what are you doing here?"

He smiled and replied, "Your father sent me. And what about you-why are you here? I saw you leap aboard just now. Your Lightfoot Skill is quite something."

"Dad sent you?" Elise understood at once what had happened. As for his praise, she accepted it cheerfully. "My

foot Skill is indeed quite

good. My swordplay is even better."

Thomas let out a hearty laugh. "Just like your mother. Remarkable."

The young man in black was none other than Ansel. While seeing to the prisoners, he listened quietly to the exchange between Elise and Thomas. From just a few simple words, he was able to guess their identities.

Instead of feigning ignorance, he stepped forward with composure and bowed. "General Ansel Hargrove, at your service, Your Grace, General Farrell."

Elise studied the clear-eyed youth before her. She was not the least bit surprised that he had recognized them.

"So, you're General Hargrove. I've heard much of you," she said with a smile, looking him over.

"You flatter me, Your Grace," Ansel answered with modesty.

"Oh? And what exactly have you heard?" Thomas asked with a knowing smile, glancing over the young man.

Elise grinned. "I've made a few inquiries these past few days here in Port Liantra. Whenever I asked about General Hargrove, all the townsfolk sang his praises."

With a playful look, she turned to Thomas. "I'm sure you've heard the same."

Thomas gave a nod, then said to Ansel, "See to these men first. We'll speak further at the local authorities' office."

"As you command," Ansel replied with steady poise.