

War Song 231

Chapter 231

Margaret looked into Carissa's clear and sincere eyes, realizing that her words came from the heart. She didn't blame the Marquis of Ironridge's family for this matter. With this understanding, Margaret felt relieved.

Setting everything else aside, the Marquis of Ironridge's family had no desire to make enemies without cause. When it came to either Rafael or the Duke of Norwatch's family, Margaret was especially reluctant to be at odds with them.

At the very least, based on their military achievements, they were people worthy of respect. The Marquis of Ironridge's family should befriend such individuals, rather than foster animosity or harbor grudges against them.

Margaret sighed. "You're wise and understanding, Lady Sinclair, but I still feel deeply guilty. If it hadn't been for the minister of the Astrology Department clarifying things, you might have borne the label of being negligent towards your parents for the rest of her life. For anyone, that would be a nearly devastating blow."

However, Carissa shook her head slightly. "Madam Winchester, it really wouldn't have been much of a blow to me. It's nothing more than a few idle words."

Nothing more?

Margaret looked at Carissa in astonishment, thinking the latter was intentionally dismissing the matter with a show of nonchalance. But seeing the calm and unaffected expression on Carissa's face, it was clear she truly didn't care.

After a moment of deeper reflection, Margaret understood why Carissa said it was nothing.

What Carissa had endured over the past few years made these idle rumors seem trivial in comparison.

Her father and brothers perished in battle, then her entire family met with a tragic end. Even though Margaret had no blood relation to Carissa, thinking of these events and looking at the strong, radiant girl before her, she couldn't help but feel a pang of

sorrow.

Those days must have been unimaginably difficult for Carissa. And yet, despite it all, she didn't fall into despair or succumb to the bitterness of the world. Instead, she chose to carry on her father and brothers' legacy, taking up the Rose Spear to fight on the battlefield.

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The spirit of the Duke of Northwatch's family stood strong and unyielding.

Margaret suddenly regretted not having more contact with Carissa in the past. The younger generation of the Marquis of Ironridge's family could certainly learn a thing or two from her.

Today, Margaret had come prepared with a gift-a golden bracelet adorned with interlocking pearl patterns. She instructed her attendant to open the box and present it to Carissa. Margaret even stood up, intending to help Carissa put it on.

The bracelet was inlaid with six gemstones-rubies and sapphires-that glittered brilliantly. It was clearly a valuable piece, far from something that could be easily purchased elsewhere, and the craftsmanship was on par with the best from the palace.

Carissa quickly stood up and politely refused, "I can't accept this. It's far too precious. I really can't."

"Lady Sinclair!" Margaret grasped Carissa's hand, her expression solemn. "You must accept it. This bracelet was never meant to belong to me. It rightfully belongs to your family."

Carissa was taken aback. "It belongs to my family? What do you mean, Madam Winchester?"

Margaret sighed softly. "It happened over three years ago. That was the only time I ever had an interaction with your mother."

Hearing that it involved her mother, Carissa quickly urged Margaret to sit down and explain slowly.

Margaret settled back into her seat and began recounting the events that had taken place at The Golden Tower.

"At the time, I had ordered this bracelet from The Golden Tower. After paying the deposit, it was agreed that I would pick it up in three months. But when I went to retrieve it, I found your mother there, holding the bracelet in her hands. The shopkeeper informed me that your mother had already paid the full amount.

"Naturally, I was furious-though my anger was directed solely at The Golden Tower. After all, I had reserved the bracelet, so they should never have sold it to someone else. Moreover, I wasn't even late. I came exactly when we had agreed."

Hearing this, Carissa found it odd. The Golden Tower was the largest jewelry store in

the capital-how could they have done something like that? Especially to the matriarch of the Marquis of Ironridge's household, who was a person of considerable status.

How could they sell something she had ordered to another customer?

"So, this bracelet was originally yours? The Golden Tower

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"You would be right, if that was how it really happened. Your mother was reluctant to let go of the bracelet that day, but she eventually gave it to me after I insisted. The Golden Tower refunded her money, and that should have been the end of it as it was handled appropriately," Margaret said.

Hearing this, Carissa knew there must be more to the story, so she remained silent, waiting for the older woman to continue.

Margaret's expression turned slightly embarrassed. "After returning to the estate with the bracelet, I realized that the one I had ordered was supposed to have five gemstones, but this one had six.

"Clearly, it wasn't the bracelet I had commissioned. When I sent someone to inquire at The Golden Tower, they explained that the jeweler responsible for making my bracelet had run into trouble and fled, taking my bracelet with him.

"As for this one, it was indeed a bracelet your mother had ordered, intended as part of your dowry. The Golden Tower hadn't explained the situation at the time because there were other customers present, so it wasn't appropriate to mention that a jeweler had run off with their goods.

"They had planned to visit me the next day to clarify the situation, but I discovered the mistake first and sent someone to ask about it, which was how I learned the truth."

Carissa was momentarily stunned.

Her mother had intended this bracelet to be part of her dowry?

Margaret continued, "I immediately returned the bracelet to The Golden Tower, asking them to send it back to your mother. However, they informed me that your mother had already purchased another one, "Then, your mother sent someone to say since I liked the bracelet, she willingly parted with it. I thought perhaps she felt it was unsuitable as part of your dowry since I had already worn it, which might be why she didn't take it back."

Margaret still looked a bit guilty. "Although this may seem like a small matter, I've always felt uneasy about it. And later on, after everything that happened to your family...

"In any case, I hope you won't mind that I wore it, and I ask you to accept this

bracelet. Your mother had it made for you; it was meant to be part of your dowry."

Suddenly remembering something, Margaret quickly added, "After I learned the whole story, I never wore the bracelet again. It's been kept in my private vault all this time. You can ask the people around me if you don't believe me."

Margaret's attendant was standing nearby. The woman curtsied and said, "My lady, what Madam Margaret says is true. The bracelet has never been worn after that incident, and is still as new as the day it was made."

Carissa held the bracelet in her hand, her fingers tracing the interlocking pearl patterns and the six embedded gemstones. Suddenly, she remembered that Melanie had once told her she had ordered a very special bracelet as part of her dowry.

Carissa had smiled and asked her mother just how special the bracelet was.

Melanie had rubbed her tired eyes that had grown dim over the years and whispered with tears in her eyes, "It holds a special meaning. Your six brothers will be with you when you get married. They will surely protect you, ensuring you live a peaceful life, have many children, and enjoy long-lasting happiness."

Later, when Carissa was organizing her dowry items, she found many bracelets but never identified one that seemed particularly special. However, she didn't dare ask Melanie about it, fearing it would make her weep over the memory of her lost sons.

Margaret spoke up again, "I've heard that you're marrying Prince Rafael. This bracelet was part of the dowry your mother prepared for you. Although it comes to you late..."

Margaret looked at Carissa with a meaningful gaze. "Perhaps it's not too late, but rather, just in time."

Carissa stood up and performed a deep curtsy to Margaret, her eyes reddening with emotion.

"Thank you, Madam Winchester, for your generosity. Whether you wore it or not, this gift holds immense significance for me. I'm deeply grateful. Please, allow me to repay you for the bracelet's full value." Seeing the redness in Carissa's eyes, Margaret understood her feelings.

A dowry item from Carissa's late mother, which had made its way back to her just as she was about to marry-it was indeed a timely and poignant reunion.

With a sigh, Margaret felt a weight lift from her heart-a long-held matter finally resolved. She spoke softly, "Just give me one silver coin and buy the bracelet back."

Margaret couldn't gift the bracelet; it had to be purchased. But as for the price, that was for her to decide.

Carissa quickly protested, "That won't do. The bracelet is worth more than that."

"One silver coin is enough," Margaret replied with deep meaning. "When your mother handed this bracelet to me that day, she did so with great reluctance. She could have argued with me-after all, she had ordered and paid for it.

"But out of respect for my seniority, she chose not to. She respected me, and I respected her. By accepting just one silver coin, I honor the grace and magnanimity your mother showed in letting it go."

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Margaret insisted on accepting only one silver coin. No matter how Carissa tried to persuade her otherwise, the older woman simply refused to take more. In the end, Carissa had no choice but to accept Margaret's gesture of goodwill.

As Margaret was about to leave, she said, "I feel a connection with you, my dear. If you ever find the time, you're welcome to visit my humble home. Or perhaps, I could come to your residence and we could have a chat."

This was a clear indication that Margaret wished for their two families to maintain a relationship in the future.

Carissa understood that this wasn't an attempt to curry favor. She was well aware of the traditions in the Marquis of Ironridge's household. They had no need to ingratiate themselves with anyone. After all, they were a prestigious family with a hundred-year legacy, with many of their members holding high-ranking positions at court.

Regardless, it was always better to have more friends than enemies, especially when there was a meaningful connection like the bracelet between them.

As she personally saw Margaret out, Carissa smiled and nodded. "It would be my honor, Madam Winchester. I look forward to it."

After bidding the older woman farewell, Carissa made her way to the part of the estate where her mother's wing was located-Brightwell Hall. Carissa sat on the chaise lounge where her mother loved to sit and slipped the bracelet onto her wrist. As soon as she closed her eyes, tears fell like rain.

Standing outside, Lulu didn't dare to enter and disturb Carissa. Instead, Lulu quietly wiped her own tears.

Carissa carried pain in her heart, but she never spoke of it, nor did she want anyone to see it.

Both Lily and Holly knew the story behind the bracelet. During dinner, Lily sighed deeply upon seeing Carissa's red and swollen eyes.

Lily recounted the old tale, "Back then, Madam Melanie was reluctant to part with the bracelet. But since The Golden Tower didn't provide an explanation on the spot, and considering that the other party was Madam Winchester, your mother didn't want to create any ill will over a single bracelet. She feared that it might lead to resentment.

"Given her status as a widow, Madam Melanie was cautious and decided to let it go.

She thought about commissioning another one from The Golden Tower, but there wasn't enough time. Besides, Madam Winchester already had the bracelet, so your mother didn't see the point and let the matter drop."

Holly wiped her tears, choking up as she said, "Who would have thought that after all this time, the bracelet would find its way back into your hands? It was always meant to be part of your dowry.

"And how fitting it is that just before you're about to marry Prince Rafael, this bracelet returns to you. Perhaps... it isn't just a coincidence. Maybe, in some mysterious way, Madam Melanie had an attachment to this bracelet and willed it back to you from beyond."

Carissa also began to believe that perhaps Melanie did have a lingering attachment. After all, her mother had said that her brothers would watch over her on her wedding day, with the six gems on the bracelet symbolizing her six brothers.

With this thought, she suddenly found herself feeling a small sense of anticipation about marrying Rafael.

It wasn't that she hoped Rafael would love her-she knew his heart already belonged to someone else. Even if it didn't, she thought it was difficult to expect a man's love, as the effort put into such hope often far outweighed what was received in return.

Instead, she felt that her life with Rafael might indeed be as peaceful as her mother had once wished for her.

Speaking of Rafael, he had been away at Meadow Ridge for several days now. She wondered when he would return and if he would bring news from her guild.

When Carissa thought of her master, she felt a deep sense of guilt. She had been back in the capital for three to four years and hadn't visited her master or her fellow guild apprentices even once.

When she married Barrett, she hadn't invited them to the wedding either. At the time, they had kept the ceremony low-key. Melanie didn't want to make a big fuss, so they hadn't invited anyone from the guild. Melanie had even said, "After Barrett wins his next battle, we'll go to Meadow Ridge together and have him pay his respects to your master."

But that opportunity never came.

In the days that followed, Rafael still didn't return.

Meanwhile, the scandalous gossip in the city continued unabated. Before, the rumors had targeted Carissa, but now, the focus had shifted to Jessica and even involved Eleanor

Harmony Palace had once been as impenetrable as a fortress, with no information ever leaking out. But now, the fortress had sprung a leak, and rumors about Henry's concubines began to spread. People said that over the years, Henry had taken no fewer than twenty concubines, yet only a few of them were still alive, with most of them rarely leaving the residence.

The secrets of the powerful and influential were always the most fascinating to the common people. They loved to speculate and spin stories, filling their idle moments with the thrill of uncovering secrets. Some said that all those concubines had met their end at the hands of Eleanor, the grand princess herself, because she was notoriously jealous.

Others argued that this was impossible. If Eleanor was truly so jealous, why would she allow her husband to take concubines in the first place? After all, her consent was required for her prince consort to take any concubines

ther-in-law had gone to Northwatch Estate to apologize to Carissa.

That realization made her heart burn with resentment. It seemed that as long as the old woman was alive, Jessica would never gain control of the household, nor hold any real status in her marital home. But no matter how many times Jessica harbored malicious thoughts, they were of no use. She couldn't tamper with Margaret's food or drink, as everyone in the household was on guard against her. As a daughter-in-law, Jessica relied on her title as the grand princess' daughter and didn't bother to pay her respects to Margaret, so she rarely had any opportunities to get close.

Both mother and daughter were preoccupied with their own troubles and didn't have the energy to bother Carissa.

One day, Theodore invited Carissa over and told her that now that her marriage was settled, it was clear that Rafael wouldn't be able to inherit the duke's title. But the position of the Duke of Northwatch couldn't just be left vacant.

Theodore suggested an option: they could choose a few children from within the Sinclair family to be fostered. After assessing their character and literary talent, they could then present a suitable heir to the court.

Carissa had considered this as well. Since Hector had been an only child, she had no uncles from his side of the family. Her grandfather, however, had two younger brothers, though they had both passed away. Their children no longer lived in the capital, and she wasn't sure about their current character or reputation.

She shared her thoughts on these two granduncles' descendants with Theodore, who simply waved his hand dismissively.

"I've already had someone look into them. They're not suitable."

With that, he handed some documents to Carissa.

She glanced through a few pages before closing them. These relatives were all involved in business in other regions. Not only were their ventures unimpressive, but their reputations were also questionable. Theodore then pulled out the family genealogy and had Solomon go through each potential candidate with Carissa. She listened but didn't express any opinions. After all, she hadn't met these children before, so it was hard for her to make a judgment.

Theodore himself hadn't found anyone satisfactory either. Seeing that Carissa hadn't made a decision, he recalled the exceptional sons of the Sinclair family, who'd had children of their own. Even at a young age, they were already outstanding. Comparing these children to them was pointless-they couldn't measure up. A wave of anger and sorrow washed over him.

"If only those assassins had spared the children... even just one to carry on the Duke of Northwatch's bloodline..."

"Grandpa!" Solomon quickly comforted him, fearing that the mention would cause Carissa further pain. "Don't dwell on it too much. It's not good for your health."

Carissa's thoughts drifted back to the time she returned from Meadow Ridge. She had been surrounded by her nieces and nephews, all calling her "Aunt" in their sweet

voices.

Back when she first learned of her father and brothers' deaths, she had cried herself to sleep every night. But her nieces and nephews had been so understanding and kind, willing to do anything to cheer her up.

Ryan had once said that if Carissa ever felt sad, eating a candied apple would make her happy. He promised that one day, when he managed to sneak out, he would buy

her one.

Ryan had died just a few days before his fifth birthday.

He looked so much like Carissa's second brother, as if he had been cast from the same mold. The only thing he inherited from his mother was a pair of shallow

dimples.

Carissa's eyes reddened. She couldn't think about it-each thought was like a dagger to her heart.

She quickly found an excuse to leave, realizing that the selection of a successor couldn't be rushed. It required careful observation.

Theodore watched her hurriedly retreating figure and let out a heavy sigh.

He turned to Solomon and said, "Keep looking. If we can't find anyone suitable, I have another idea, but I don't know if Prince Rafael would agree."

"What idea do you have in mind, Grandpa?" Solomon asked.

Theodore lit his pipe and took a few puffs before speaking, "If, in the future, the prince and Carissa have two sons, the eldest would naturally inherit the royal or ducal title. But perhaps the second son could inherit the Duke of Northwatch's title?"

Solomon thought for a moment and replied, "That could work, though it's unprecedented."

"We can discuss it with them after they're married," Theodore said, blowing out a ring of smoke. "If the Sinclair family doesn't have any outstanding children, they can't inherit the title. We mustn't allow the Duke of Northwatch's family to be tarnished by an unworthy successor."

"That's true!" Solomon agreed wholeheartedly.

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In the blink of an eye, it was already mid-August, and the Starlight Harvest Festival was approaching. Even so, Rafael still had not returned.

Carissa found it strange that he had not come back yet, especially since it had been over a month since he left. Initially, he had said he would just drop in for a greeting, then return immediately.

The journey to Meadow Ridge should have only taken two or three days. Even with a few days of rest and accounting for the round trip, he should have been back within ten days.

Could something have happened at Meadow Ridge?

Coincidentally, Carissa received a letter from Violet. It was several pages long, filled with amusing stories from Meadow Ridge. Violet mentioned that Travis had ended up being confined by his master as punishment for the cosmetics he had bought-though thankfully, not beaten.

Carissa couldn't help but smile.

The letter also congratulated her on her upcoming marriage, saying that her friends at Meadow Ridge were preparing a grand gift for her wedding.

The news of her marriage had spread throughout Meadow Ridge, which meant that Rafael had indeed been there and visited the Pathfinders Guild. It seemed that her master was fond of Rafael; otherwise, he wouldn't have announced her marriage to everyone at Meadow Ridge.

Violet also mentioned that the guild was preparing a dowry for her. However, the letter didn't specify whether Rafael was still at Meadow Ridge.

Curious, Carissa sent someone to Hell Monarch Estate to inquire. The response was that everything seemed normal; they were just busy preparing for the wedding and making arrangements for Helen to take up permanent residence at the estate.

Satisfied that nothing was amiss, Carissa decided not to worry. She picked up her quill and wrote a letter to her master, then asked someone to deliver it to Meadow Ridge. If Rafael was still there, she would find out when the messenger returned.

But ultimately, it didn't really matter. Perhaps Rafael had official duties to attend to.

A few days later, it was the Starlight Harvest Festival.

Northwatch Estate had already been adorned with star-shaped lanterns, giving it a festive atmosphere. There were also special cakes baked in the shape of stars for the festival, called starcakes. These were filled with sweet or savory ingredients, symbolizing the bounty of the harvest.

Lily had personally prepared a few batches of starcakes days in advance. Carissa had tasted them and found them delightful, so she had some sent over to Leona and Margaret.

However, Carissa decided against sending anything to Heather. She believed in treating others as they treated her. Whether Heather felt indebted to her was unknown, but Carissa certainly felt she owed her aunt nothing.

It wasn't easy to send anything into the palace. Without an official summons from the queen dowager, Carissa couldn't enter, and getting outside food into the palace was no simple task.

The Starlight Harvest Festival was a time for family reunions, but Carissa couldn't find joy in it. Though she forced a smile to cheer everyone up, the sorrow in her eyes was impossible to hide.

Lulu understood her mistress' feelings, so she chattered endlessly in Carissa's ear, trying to lift her spirits.

"Let's have some lobsters-they're as big as your arm! And we've got moon wine to go with them. We should each have a cup tonight. Oh, and the luna blossoms in the courtyard have bloomed. Would you like to go take a look? "I heard there's a fair tonight. If you're interested, I can accompany you. We could go play the riddle games-you're so clever, you'd surely win a prize!

"If you don't feel like going to the fair, we could release star lanterns into the sky instead and make some wishes for a peaceful and smooth future."

As Lulu spoke, her own eyes began to redden. The Starlight Harvest Festival was a time for family, but she had lost all of hers.

Carissa gently stroked Lulu's head, then took off her own hairpin and placed it in Lulu's hair.

"You should go out tonight. Have fun, and leave all the sadness behind," said Carissa.

Lulu tried to remove the hairpin, but Carissa held her hand down. "Keep it on. A girl in the bloom of youth should always look her best."

Carissa felt a pang of guilt. Lulu had grown up with her in Northwatch Estate, and had always been by her side- they played together, went to Meadow Ridge together, and Lulu even followed Carissa to the Warren family's residence when she got married.

And then, they both lost everything together.

Lulu used to be mischievous, but had become much more composed after the tragedy. Especially now, back in Northwatch Estate, she was responsible for Carissa's personal matters. The few maids she trained were calm and collected, reflecting Lulu's own steadiness.

But who remembered how Lulu had been when she was only eighteen years old?

"How about I find you a husband?" Carissa asked, trying to steer the conversation away from the rising tide of pain in her heart.

"I won't marry. I'll stay with you forever," Lulu said, her lips curling as she fought back tears. "Promise me you'll never send me away, my lady!"

"Alright!" Carissa gently tapped her on the nose with a smile. "If you don't want to marry now, then you won't. But when the day comes that you do, I'll prepare a fine dowry for you and see that you're married off in style."

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The midday meal was light-Carissa had only a bowl of chicken soup before she went to the family chapel to pay her respects,

The Sinclair family was a prominent clan with their own sanctuary hall, where memorial plaques of Carissa's parents, brothers, and in-laws were enshrined. However, as a woman, she was not permitted to enter the hall to worship and could only bow her head outside, al

The only way for a woman to "enter" the sanctuary hall was after their death, through the placement of a memorial plaque. As Carissa was a daughter, she would marry out of the Sinclair family eventually and could never enter-only the women who married into the Sinclair family had that right.

Thus, after her father and brothers fell in battle, Carissa had a small shrine set up in the family chapel, where she placed their plaques to facilitate seasonal rites. After the massacre, she had also moved the plaques of her mother, sisters-in-law, and nieces and nephews to the shrine.

Frederick had prepared the offerings: chicken, starcakes, and fresh fruits, Carissa entered the shrine, lit the candles, and gazed at the once-living individuals who had now become mere plaques.

After lighting the candles, she knelt on the floor and said, "Dad, Mom, Granduncle Theodore discussed with me the idea of adopting a child to inherit the title. However, the choice has not yet been made, and I'm unsure whether you agree with this decision. If you are watching over me from beyond, please give me a sign."

She was uncertain about the adoption. She hadn't personally selected any candidates-the thought of handing over the hard-earned title to another family's child troubled her deeply. Though they were all from the Sinclair family, they were not immediate family,

The lists provided by Theodore included children with living parents. The younger ones, without their parents, were pitiable, while the older ones had deep bonds with their parents. After inheriting the title, would they bring their parents to Northwatch Estate? If so, who would care about the Duke of Northwatch's family's reputation then?

It was one thing if the children were virtuous and loyal, but what if their characters were flawed? What if they used their title for evil, tarnishing the reputation of

Carissa's deceased father and brothers?

Moreover, inheriting the title would mean choosing a successor to be like a son to her elder brother. All her nephews were exceptional and irreplaceable in her eyes.

These considerations made Carissa reluctant to choose a successor for the title. The plaques could not offer any answers-they only provided a sense of solace while she knelt there, making her feel a bit more at peace.

She pretended that her parents and brothers were still by her side, and sometimes, such self-comfort could ease the pain in her heart.

After noon, she returned to her room to rest. Lulu then entered, leading Frederick inside.

"My lady, Prince Rafael sent someone with a letter, requesting you to read it immediately," Frederick said, handing the letter to Carissa. "The messenger said it was urgent."

Carissa quickly opened the letter, which contained only a few words: [Carissa, come to Eldoria immediately.]

It was signed by Rafael.

Carissa recognized his handwriting. The letter did not specify the reason for the urgency or what she should bring.

"Where's the messenger?" Carissa asked..

"He's downstairs in the kitchen, eating. He switched horses three times to get back here; he looks exhausted," Frederick replied.

Carissa immediately instructed, "Lulu, help me pack a few sets of clothes and other travel essentials. Once the messenger has finished eating, bring him here. I have questions for him."

"Understood, my lady!" Lulu quickly went further inside the room to gather the items.

Soon, after the messenger had eaten, he was brought to the side hall. Carissa was already dressed and ready. She looked up and saw that the messenger was Dylan. He appeared haggard, sunburned, and covered in dirt.

It was already mid-autumn, yet he was in such a state. He had clearly been on the road for quite some time.

"Deputy Ziegler, didn't you accompany His Highness to Meadow Ridge? Why did you go to Eldoria? What does His Highness need me to go there for?" Carissa asked.

Having just finished his meal, Dylan let out a burp. He stood awkwardly, likely due to prolonged horseback riding. Carissa quickly ushered him to a seat so they could talk comfortably.

"Thank you," Dylan said as he sat down. "His Highness did indeed take me to Meadow Ridge. We stayed there for three or four days and were on our way back when unexpectedly, in Greenbrook County, my purse was stolen. I caught the thief on the spot and intended to hand him over to the authorities, but I noticed several ragged beggars nearby fleeing in panic."

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Dylan continued to speak, sometimes with hiccups as he recounted the events in fragments.

As the group of beggars scattered, Rafael happened to look up and see a child beggar who looked a lot like Carrisa's nephew, Ryan. The child beggar had a limp and moved slowly. When Rafael attempted to approach and catch him, a cart suddenly appeared and crashed into several people.

While helping others in the aftermath of the crash, Rafael glanced at the limping child beggar. A burly man soon picked him up and loaded him onto a horse cart.

Instinctively, Rafael called out, "Ryan!"

The child beggar's head jerked up, and he stared at Rafael in disbelief.

Rafael immediately tried to pursue, but the same cart that had crashed earlier came rushing at him. It blocked his path and knocked several people to the ground. Rafael leaped over obstacles and finally reached the horse cart, only to find that both the burly man and the child beggar had vanished.

The streets of Greenbrook County were crowded and tangled with alleys, so Rafael had no way of knowing which direction they had gone. He had only brought Dylan with him, and the latter was preoccupied with holding onto the thief. He had no idea whom Rafael was pursuing and stood there in confusion, waiting for the prince to

return.

As Rafael couldn't catch up to the burly man and child beggar, he interrogated the thief Dylan had captured, who was also dressed as a beggar. He was mute and illiterate, so he couldn't provide any useful information.

Rafael handed him over to the authorities, and the county chief, upon learning that the Hell Monarch was involved, personally came to meet him. When asked about the beggars and the thief, the county chief shook his head and sighed.

These beggars have been in Greenbrook for a long time. Some beg for alms, while others engage in theft. They are controlled by someone behind the scenes. Despite several attempts, we haven't been

able to catch those behind them. It's not just Greenbrook-several other prefectures have the same problem.

The beggars are mostly rendered mute by poison, and some have had their legs broken. We can't determine their origins or send them back to their hometowns, so

they are only temporarily housed in the county's community hall. However, as soon as they are placed there, they escape. For instance, the thief you caught today has already been imprisoned two or three times for theft."

Furious, Rafael demanded to know how the county chief could fail to capture the people behind this.

Unable to keep the truth hidden any longer, the county chief finally admitted that these beggars were members of the Beggar Guild. Each of them knew martial arts, and the government officials had sustained many injuries in their attempts to eradicate them. Over time, they simply gave up.

Rafael reprimanded the county chief for neglecting his duty, then stayed in Greenbrook to continue the search for the beggars. He also sent a message to the Pathfinders Guild, asking Carissa's master to contact the leader of the Beggar Guild.

Eventually, the Beggar Guild intervened and revealed that these individuals were not true members of the guild, but were merely using the guild's name to steal and beg. They were then required to hand over all stolen goods and alms to their leaders.

"His Highness managed to track them to Eldoria, where he finally found the child beggar. But the child beggar had been rendered mute by poison, and had a limp. When asked if his name was Ryan Sinclair, he neither nodded nor shook his head and remained extremely wary.

"He tried to escape multiple times. When His Highness attempted to take him, the child beggar either harmed himself by banging his head against the wall or bit His Highness. Given the long journey back to the capital, His Highness feared for the child's safety, so he asked you to go to him instead."

Carissa listened to Dylan with a pounding heart, her mind reeling. She shook her head in disbelief.

"It's impossible."

It couldn't be Ryan. His body had been, mutilated beyond recognition, his head severed...

Ryan was dead!

The memory of that scene surged within her, causing her intense pain. She refused to believe it, she couldn't accept this false hope.

However, she ordered someone to immediately fetch Lightning, her horse. She needed to depart for Eldoria at once.

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When Lulu handed over the bag to Carissa, her hands were trembling.

No one wanted to believe the news was true because, during the initial headcount following the massacre, no one had been missing. The household's young servants and young masters and mistresses, especially the children, had all been accounted for.

Carissa's mind refused to accept it, though her heart clung to a sliver of hope.

The scene that haunted her was not just the severed head, but also the clothing of the body. Though it had been stained with blood, Carissa had recognized the outfit as Ryan's. It was the same one she had made for him when she returned to her family home and prepared clothes for all her nieces and nephews.

Carissa took the bag, her gaze vacant as she murmured, "Lulu, I'm just going to see for myself. I know it's probably not him, and I don't hold out much hope, but... but please fetch Ryan's favorite toy from Azure Hall. It's the slingshot I made for him, engraved with his name. I even painted the wood..."

"I know which one it is. I'll get it right away!" Lulu replied, hurriedly running off.

She stumbled down the stone steps, her legs giving way momentarily, but quickly picked herself up and continued limping away.

Soon after, Lulu returned with the slingshot and handed it to Carissa. She took the slingshot, her fingers gently tracing Ryan's engraved name. When she looked up after a long moment, she noticed that Lulu's knees were bleeding.

"Lulu, go take care of your wounds," Carissa instructed, regaining her composure.

"My lady, I'll accompany you. There's no need to worry about my injuries," Lulu insisted.

"No, I'll go alone. The horses here aren't as fast as Lightning," Carissa said, glancing at Frederick, Lily, and Holly.

Their eyes were filled with tears and carefully hidden hope. They dared not hope too much, fearing that it might lead to even greater disappointment.

As Carissa was about to leave, Lily called out, "My lady, wait a moment,

Lily hurried downstairs, quickly wrapping a starcake up and rushing back to hand it to Carissa.

"Ht, in case... Here, take this for the journey.

Carissa understood what Lily meant. If the child beggar was really Ryan, then give him the starcake.

She accepted the starcake and placed it in her bag, then mounted Lightning. As she turned to look back for a moment, everyone stood at the door. Tears that had been held back for so long were finally streaming down their faces.

A pang of sadness gripped Carissa's heart, and tears slipped down her cheeks as well. With a quick squeeze of her legs, she urged Lightning forward. The horse reared up and, with a long neigh, burst into a full gallop.

As Lightning raced out of the city, Carissa silently prayed to her parents, second brother, and second sister-in-law.

"Dad, Mom, Nathan, Yvette, please watch over me.... Please let it be Ryan!"

The journey to Eldoria was at least 600 miles.

Lightning could travel at least 300 miles a day and 250 miles by night, but that was under extreme effort. On a typical day, Lightning could manage 150 miles, then rest overnight to recover. The next day, they could cover 120 miles, then 90 miles on the following day. By the fourth day, Lightning could run 150 miles again.

In this manner, they would reach Eldoria in about four or five days, though Lightning would be very exhausted. Once they arrived, the horse would need several days of rest to fully recover.

August was a time of crisp autumn weather, the perfect season for a horse's performance.

Carissa's heart raced with anticipation. She wished she could instantly be in Eldoria, beside Rafael, to see that child...!

If... if Ryan were really still alive, he would be nearly seven now.

In the blink of an eye, it had been almost two years since the massacre.

Carissa couldn't think about it, she couldn't think of anything. She had to consider the journey as one with no real purpose. She shouldn't hold onto any hope. It was essential

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After five days, Carissa arrived in Eldoria just past noon.

Although she had stayed in inns along the way, she had barely eaten and limited her intake of water, fearing that frequent stops during the day would waste precious time. In those five short days, she had lost considerable weight.

Following the address Dylan had given her, she led her horse and asked for directions until she found Unit 13 on Verdant Lane.

This was a property owned by the Eldorian governor. Dylan had mentioned that Rafael and the child beggar were staying here.

Carissa was parched and exhausted as she stood outside the gate. The residence was located down a spacious alley. A man was stationed at the gate, dressed in official attire. He must be a guard Rafael had borrowed from the government to stand watch.

Noticing the woman with a horse who hesitated to knock, the guard cautiously asked, "Are you Lady Sinclair?" Carissa nodded. She was unable to speak, feeling as if something was clogging her throat and chest.

Seeing her nod, the guard knocked on the door. "Your Highness, Lady Sinclair has arrived."

Moments later, the door opened to reveal Rafael, who wore a green outfit but looked somewhat haggard. He had clearly lost weight, his eyes were shadowed, and he appeared to be sleep-deprived.

Seeing Carissa, Rafael sighed with relief but then frowned. "How have you lost so much weight?"

Carissa managed a soft sound, her throat choked with emotion, but her eyes were focused on the interior of the house.

"Take the horse and feed it," Rafael instructed the guard.

"Yes, sir!"

The guard reached for the reins, but Carissa gripped them tightly, her anxiety palpable.

Noticing her distress, Rafael reached out and took her cold hand. "Come inside. Whether or not it's him, you need to see for yourself."

Carissa released the reins but removed her bag, taking out the slingshot she had brought.

Taking a deep breath, she asked, "Where is he?"

"He's locked in a room." Rafael sighed. "The child... he's quite strong and somewhat wild.

He led her inside, closed the door behind them, and locked it. Seeing Carissa's puzzled expression, he smiled ruefully.

'He's escaped several times. Though he has a limp, he's surprisingly agile and stubborn. I feared injuring him, so I had to confine him for now.'

'Does he look very similar?'" Carissa asked, her voice trembling.

As she followed Rafael, her feet felt as though they were sinking into cotton. She didn't even notice that he was holding her hand.

"He does resemble him, but I can't be certain since I hadn't seen the child for several months before I went to the Southern Frontier. He also looks like your second brother," Rafael said.

Like a marionette, Carissa allowed Rafael to lead her to the door of a small room. From within came a series of loud banging noises, as if things were being smashed.

"He's been this way since he came here-very agitated. He bangs things whether it's day or night. Sometimes, he

even hits his own head. I've had a physician examine him, and it seems that he's been given medication that can be addictive. If he goes without it, it can lead to violent outbursts, Rafael explained.

Thus, Rafael's exhaustion was understandable.

The door was locked from the outside with a chain, and the window was boarded up.

Rafael took out a key and unlocked the door. As soon as it creaked open, a small figure rushed forward, trying to escape. Rafael quickly grabbed the child, who struggled violently despite being held securely. The child flailed, biting and making muffled noises of distress.

Carissa couldn't see his face clearly; he was thrashing or biting Rafael.

In a detached manner, she lifted the slingshot in her hand and numbly called out, "Ryan!"

She had come here to confirm whether this was indeed a false hope, so her call of "Ryan" was more of a test, lacking emotional depth. She just needed to see this false Ryan for herself.

The struggling child in Rafael's arms gradually quieted.

He slowly turned his head, his eyes still wild and red from earlier. His face was covered in small injuries, and he looked dirty and emaciated. His mouth hung slightly open as he stared at Carissa.

Carissa gasped, covering her mouth as tears streamed uncontrollably down her face.

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Carissa pulled the child from Rafael's arms and held him tightly to her chest.

It was heartbreaking to see that the boy was nothing but skin and bones. A foul odor emanated from him—a mixture of decay, filth, and possibly old blood. His hair clung in matted clumps, adding to the overall stench.

Yet, Carissa embraced him as if he were the most precious treasure in the world, her tears streaming down her face uncontrollably.

The child, now in her arms, ceased his struggles. He lay still, like a broken doll, his tears streaking through the grime on his face, creating yellowish trails. Gone was the fierce resistance he had shown Rafael. Now, the boy seemed lifeless, his eyes staring blankly despite the tears.

Seeing this, Rafael's long-held anxiety eased as he confirmed that the child was indeed of the Sinclair bloodline. It was a relief to know that a trace of the Sinclair family remained, though Rafael was puzzled about how Ryan had ended up in the hands of traffickers after escaping.

During the time he had been with Ryan, Rafael had tried in vain to glean any information from him. The child had been rendered mute by poison and was highly agitated, reacting violently to anyone who came near him. Initially, Ryan had responded when Rafael called his name, but as time went on, he seemed to lose recognition and remained either unresponsive or frenzied.

Even the Beggar Guild investigation had yielded no clues about the child's origins, possibly because the traffickers had hidden their tracks well.

After a long while, Carissa gently released Ryan, who clung desperately to her wrist. His long, dark nails dug into her skin, almost drawing blood. His gaze never left Carissa's face. When he saw the slingshot, his tears flowed even more freely. His lips trembled as he tried to speak, but all that came out were incoherent sobs.

Carissa's eyes were swollen from crying as her trembling hands gently touched the small wounds on Ryan's face.

With a choked voice, she said to Rafael, "Your Highness, could you please get a set of clothes and shoes for him? Are there servants here? Have someone prepare hot water for him to bathe." "The clothes have already been bought, but he refused to change. I'll have someone

prepare hot water. You stay with him for a while," the prince replied, his voice strained and eyes reddened.

Even after Rafael turned and left, Ryan continued to cling to Carissa's hand. She carried the boy into the room, sat down in a chair, and took out a handkerchief to gently wipe his face.

Despite her own tears flowing freely, she spoke softly, "Ryan, it's Aunt Carissa. I'm here, don't be afraid. You don't have to be afraid anymore."

Upon hearing this, Ryan opened his mouth wide and cried silently. He cried so hard he struggled to catch his breath. His tears seemed endless, turning his face even more smeared. It was as if all his suffering and grievances from the past two years had finally found an outlet, and the tears wouldn't stop.

Eventually, he cried himself into unconsciousness, collapsing in Carissa's arms.

Fortunately, Rafael had already arranged for a physician to be on standby. The physician had initially tried to examine Ryan, but the child was uncooperative. After he was forcefully held down, they discovered that Ryan had been poisoned and had taken addictive drugs.

After the physician administered some acupuncture treatment, Ryan did not wake but began to snore softly. The exhausted boy had been sleeping fitfully, and was now finally in a deep sleep.

Even Rafael, with his exceptional skills, could barely endure such distress, and Ryan's condition was far worse.

The physician assured Carissa that Ryan was only sleeping, which relieved her. She remained by his side, keeping vigil.

Rafael spoke softly beside her, "You've confirmed that it's him. You should go eat something. I'll stay here with him."

Carissa shook her head, wiping her tears away. "I want to stay with him. I'm afraid he'll be scared if he wakes up and doesn't see me."

"Alright. I'll have someone bring you something to eat," Rafael said, turning to leave once more.

He made arrangements for the physician to be settled in a nearby room, ensuring he was well taken care of. They would have to wait for Ryan to wake up and be bathed and dressed before a thorough examination could be conducted.

The child had truly suffered, but at least he was still alive.