

War Song 251

Chapter 251

Frederick didn't place Ryan in his previous residence.

Although the place had been redecorated, Frederick was concerned that it might remind Ryan of his painful past. Instead, Frederick arranged for Ryan and Carissa to stay in Amethyst Hall. The place was spacious enough for the two of them, and they had plenty of room to settle in comfortably.

Frederick was mindful of the hardships Ryan had endured, and knew that Carissa would need to look after him closely. Since Ryan had not yet turned seven, it was appropriate for him to stay with his aunt. They would go with the arrangements like this for now, and after Carissa's marriage, they could consider other arrangements.

Once Ryan was settled, Carissa gathered everyone in the side hall and instructed Frederick to send word to Theodore and the Klein family. She mentioned that once Ryan's emotions were more stable in a few days, she would take him to visit everyone.

"If the Klein family members wish to see Ryan sooner, they can come to us," Carissa added. "Ryan is close to his grandparents and uncles, and won't mind their visit. As for Granduncle Theodore, we can delay that for a few days."

Carissa was unaware that the Klein family didn't believe the news. So, Frederick's message was met with skepticism. Not only did they refuse to come, but they also insisted that if Carissa wanted to find a substitute for the duke's title, they shouldn't use Ryan's name. They pointed out that Carissa had many young children from the Sinclair family to choose from.

In other words, they didn't believe and were unwilling to have Ryan's name used.

Frederick had not delivered the message personally but had sent Bobby, a newly appointed and inexperienced servant. In addition, Bobby had never met Ryan. So, he was met with anger from Anthony and was unable to offer any refute. Bobby then awkwardly left after being reprimanded.

When Bobby returned and reported the situation, Carissa was initially surprised but soon understood. After all, Anthony had been responsible for handling Ryan's remains. Given this, Carissa decided to wait until Sebastian had examined Ryan before taking him to visit.

Once Ryan had bathed and changed into fresh clothes, Sebastian arrived. Sebastian was well-acquainted with the Sinclair family, from the old matriarch to the various children. Over the years, he had maintained close ties with them and had personally treated many of their injuries and illnesses whenever they arose.

Sebastian had also been the one to attend to several of the women during their pregnancies, ensuring their well-being. His dedication was evident, and only the Sinclair family could inspire such devoted care from him.

Despite Ryan's severe weight loss and stunted growth, Sebastian recognized him immediately. In turn, Ryan also remembered Sebastian well. The physician had always been the one to administer the most bitter medicine, and as a child, Ryan had dreaded seeing him. However, Sebastian's needlework was painless, unlike the harsh pricks from the physician at Greenbrook County.

The image of the child beggar was entirely gone. As soon as he saw Sebastian, Ryan dropped to his knees and greeted him respectfully.

Sebastian was deeply moved. He helped Ryan to his feet and conducted a thorough examination. He

checked for any lingering toxins and examined his leg injury. Although Ryan had healed from many wounds, Sebastian wanted to ensure that no internal damage had occurred. After completing the examination, Sebastian's expression was serious. He asked to speak with Carissa privately.

Carissa glanced at Ryan, wanting to offer him some comfort, but Ryan gave her a reassuring look instead.

The child's consideration was heart-wrenching.

In the side hall, Sebastian sighed and shook his head. "The young lord has suffered greatly. While his external injuries are manageable, his leg injury and the remaining toxins are more concerning. The antidote should clear the poison within a month, but since Ryan has been taking the drug for nearly two years, detoxification will have to be gradual."

"Is it possible to cure him?" Carissa asked anxiously.

Sebastian replied, "It is possible to cure him, but the process will be arduous. Additionally, his leg bone has healed incorrectly. To correct them, it would need to be broken and reset. It will be incredibly painful for such a young child."

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Carissa knew all too well the excruciating pain of broken bones, having experienced it in her youth. Even with pain-relieving decoctions or acupuncture treatment, the agony remained sharp and penetrating. Carissa felt her heart break as she asked, "What about the addictive drugs he was using before? Is that still a serious issue?"

Sebastian replied, "The drug he was taking is called Peony Bliss. It is indeed addictive, but considering his current condition, he seems to be managing well. Did he experience any discomfort during the journey back to the capital?"

Carissa recalled that Ryan seemed to have had a few episodes along the way, but he endured them. After that, there were no signs of any episodes.

She said, "It didn't happen much. The last time it happened, he was able to endure it. Also, His Highness mentioned that Ryan had severe episodes while in Eldoria-he was hitting walls and hurting himself. I didn't see such extreme behavior when I arrived."

Sebastian sighed deeply. "Having to go through withdrawal at the beginning is very difficult, but the symptoms will gradually lessen until he is completely free of the addiction. The drug is harmful to the body, and he will need time to recover fully. His stunted growth is partly due to a lack of proper nutrition and also the impact of the drug on his young body."

He looked at Ryan with profound sympathy.

"Usually, withdrawal from Peony Bliss requires additional medicinal support. The child has endured it all on his own, showing remarkable willpower. Once he has fully recovered and is well-nourished, he has the potential to achieve great things."

Carissa listened to Sebastian's assessment, and realized just how tough Ryan's withdrawal period must have been. From Rafael's own haggard appearance, it was clear that the situation had been severe. Though Ryan was still quite thin, he was in better shape compared to when Carissa first saw him. His once -pale face now had a hint of color, and he no longer looked like a mere stick. There was a bit of flesh on his cheeks, signifying a slow but hopeful recovery.

It wasn't entirely accurate to say that Ryan had not grown in the past two years. Because of his lamed leg

However, he didn't look too short when he tried to stand straight. and hunched posture, he looked short Regardless, it couldn't be denied that he was shorter than an average seven-year-old child. Sebastian's treatment plan was to focus first on restoring Ryan's health and then address the broken bone. For now, detoxification and general nourishment were the priorities. Once the poison was fully expelled, there was hope that Ryan might regain his ability to speak.

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Sebastian left Ryan with pills to boost his energy and blood and prescribed a detoxifying formula. This reme

needed to be administered daily. Additionally, every other day, Sebastian would send an apprentice to perform acupuncture on the swollen area of Ryan's throat, which had been affected by the poison, "How long before he can speak?" Carissa asked.

Sebastian replied, "He can produce some murmuring sounds, which means the dosage of poison was not

large.

Sebastián was familiar with the crude methods used by those people.

"They likely used a smaller amount to avoid killing him outright. Since they already used Peony Bliss, they weren't concerned about him escaping, so they opted for a lighter dose."

Carissa harbored a deep hatred for those responsible, but she was somewhat reassured by Rafael's report. The genuine Beggar Guild was coordinating with other provincial authorities to rectify the situation. They would rescue all the abducted children and severely punish those involved.

In truth, the Beggar Guild might have been aware of the situation. However, since those people didn't openly use the Beggar Guild's name to carry out their crimes, the Beggar Guild couldn't be bothered about them.

Carissa recalled her master's words about the current Beggar Guild leader not truly embodying the spirit of chivalry. That was why her master had little regard for the Beggar Guild and avoided interactions with them.

However, Carissa knew it was her master's fellow apprentice in their guild who despised associating with the Beggar Guild. The eccentric man's name was Everett, and he thought the Beggar Guild were dirty people.

In the Pathfinder's Guild, even Carissa's master didn't dare offend Everett.

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As Carissa saw Sebastian out, he sighed and said, "Being captured by human traffickers is undeniably unfortunate, but escaping the massacre of your entire family is a great stroke of luck amidst the

misfortune."

Carissa didn't share his view.

Had Ryan delivered the candied apples to Valor Estate as planned, she would have personally ensured his safe return, though it would have likely meant staying a night at Northwatch Estate. If she had been there when the Westhaven spies attacked, she might have been able to save some of them, and the massacre might not have been so complete.

So, her hatred for the traffickers was deep and all-consuming. She hoped to see them utterly eradicated, and not a single one of them spared.

After sending Sebastian on his way, Carissa asked for a carriage to be prepared. She intended to take Ryan to the palace to meet the king and the queen dowager. Following that, they would visit the Klein family.

New clothes had been made for Ryan, as only a few of his old garments were left in the estate. During the funeral, many of his clothes were buried with his family, and only a few were left as keepsakes. Although Ryan's new clothes didn't fit perfectly, they were only slightly short. His facial injuries had healed, leaving only faint scars. After careful grooming, Ryan was dressed in his old finery, making it seem as though no time had passed and nothing had changed.

But in reality, it was only an illusion.

Holding Ryan's hand, Carissa walked slowly outside. Ryan's lamed leg made it difficult for him to walk quickly-he had to hop awkwardly to avoid falling.

Frederick watched them leave with tears in his eyes. The pain of broken bones was something he deeply understood; his own mobility was limited, though still much better compared to Ryan's suffering. Salvador received the aunt and nephew in Victoria's palace.

Victoria couldn't hold back her tears as she beckoned Ryan over. He hopped awkwardly on one leg, the pain from his broken limb worsening after the long journey through the palace. Seeing his struggle, Victoria's tears began to flow once more. She took his hand and guided him to sit beside her, gently stroking his cheek. "Oh, you're so thin... You've suffered so much." Ryan looked at Victoria, shaking his head and waving his hand as if to reassure her that he hadn't suffered too greatly.

Upon seeing this, Salvador felt a pang of compassion. He offered words of encouragement and bestowed some gifts. His gaze held both consolation and sorrow as he looked at Carissa.

"No matter what, at least the Duke of Northwatch's family has a trace of its bloodline left. Once his health improves, raise him well. With time, he will surely grow into a man like his father, strong and upright." "Of course, Your Majesty. Thank you!" Carissa replied.

Salvador's eyes lingered on her as he said, "You've lost weight yourself. Please take good care of yourself."

Carissa averted her gaze and murmured, "I will."

Salvador turned his gaze away from her and asked, "Derek mentioned that the Klein family is skeptical. Have you visited them yet?"

Carissa answered, "Not yet. Once we leave the palace, I'll take him there. Once they see him, they'll believe."

Salvador replied, "Shouldn't the Klein family have someone come to see for themselves, rather than dismissing the matter with mere disbelief?"

Carissa suppressed the pain in her eyes. "Your Majesty, I understand their skepticism. They have seen the child's body before. So, they might believe that I am simply presenting a look-alike to substitute for the heir of the duke."

Victoria added, "It is not surprising they think this way. The Klein family's former patriarch passed away after what happened with your family. Then, their matriarch has been bedridden for years. According to reports, she's on the brink of death. They fear that if it turns out to be false hope and she can't endure it, the Klein family's descendants would be blamed for negligence toward their parents." Victoria was reminded of Melanie as she held Ryan's hand, and her tears flowed freely.

The Klein family wasn't the only one. Even she couldn't help but weep when she recalled that horrific

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After leaving the palace, Carissa helped Ryan onto the carriage and headed toward Highcrest Estate. It was already evening, and the men of the Klein family would be finishing their duties and returning home. Inside the carriage, Ryan used Carissa's palm as a writing surface.

He scrawled, [Going to Grandpa's house?]

Carissa nodded and replied, "Yes, we're going to your grandfather's house. Don't you miss them?"

Ryan nodded and wrote a single word, [Yes!]

Yet, his expression was tinged with worry. The child was sensitive, and the Klein family's disbelief in his return made him fear they might not want to see him.

Carissa noticed his anxiety and reassured him, "Ryan, don't worry. Your grandparents, uncles, aunts, and everyone else are very eager to see you. They just don't believe you're still alive. Once they see you, they'll be very happy."

Ryan leaned against Carissa, his sharp little chin raised slightly. He opened his mouth, trying to make a sound, but nothing came out. He looked disheartened.

Would they be repulsed because he was now mute and crippled?

After thinking it over, he wrote on Carissa's palm, [Will they dislike me?]

Carissa's heart ached at his words. She gently stroked his hair, and comforted him, "Silly child, they'll be overjoyed to see you. How could they dislike you? Don't think such things. They will be very happy."

But Ryan had endured too many rejections, scorn, and beatings while he was a beggar. His confidence was shaken by the reports of the Klein family's disbelief. He feared that their disbelief meant they despised him for being a beggar before this.

When they arrived at the entrance to Highcrest Estate, Ryan hesitated to leave the carriage. He hid behind the curtain and shook his head at Carissa, unwilling to step out.

Carissa patiently said, "Ryan, don't be afraid. I've met your uncle before. He really wants to see you, and so does everyone else. It's true."

Ryan continued to shake his head, pointing at his throat and then at his leg, his eyes filled with frustration and sorrow.

Carissa sighed inwardly. It was clear he was feeling insecure.

She approached Highcrest Estate's gatekeeper and said, "Please inform them that Carissa Sinclair from the Duke of Northwatch's family has brought Ryan to meet the elders."

The gatekeeper peered in but didn't see anyone in the carriage. However, it was clear that someone from the Duke of Northwatch's family was present.

So he said, "My lady, please wait a moment. I will inform them right away."

The gatekeeper went in to report to the steward, who instructed him to keep the visit quiet and discreetly notify Anthony, who had recently returned from his duties.

Anthony frowned upon hearing the news. "She's brought that child beggar with her?"

The steward nodded. "Yes, my lord. They're at the gate. I heard that the child is reluctant to leave the carriage, so Lady Sinclair is still outside."

Anthony was displeased with Carissa's approach. He understood her intentions all too well. If the Klein family recognized this child as Ryan Sinclair, Carissa's chosen child could live as Ryan and become the heir to the duke's title and estate.

However, Anthony was determined not to allow it. The Klein family would not acknowledge someone who was not truly Ryan as Ryan.

"Don't disturb others. I'll go out and meet them myself," Anthony said.

He wanted to clarify the situation at the gate without allowing Carissa entry or alerting others, fearing the news might reach his grandmother.

The older woman was in no condition to handle such stress.

He and the steward stepped outside, seeing the carriage stopped at the main gate. Carissa was bending over, speaking through the carriage window.

Anthony cleared his throat and stood silently.

Carissa turned around and saw Anthony standing behind her with a stern expression. She greeted him," Anthony."

Anthony gave a slight nod, glanced at the carriage, and saw a small hand quickly pull down the curtain, hiding the occupant's face.

With an expression of cold detachment, Anthony addressed Carissa, "I understand what you're trying to do, but the Klein family will not cooperate. There is only one Ryan. No one can replace him. You have many other relatives in the Sinclair family. If you like one of them, you can just adopt them to inherit the duke's title. There's no need to find a child that looks like Ryan, especially one that used to be a child beggar."

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Carissa anticipated such a misunderstanding. While she had previously said she understood, in reality, she didn't fully comprehend.

It was just like when she had rushed to Eldoria upon receiving Rafael's letter. Despite her efforts to temper her hopes, she couldn't help but go and see for herself.

So, hearing Anthony's words now, her temper flared. She turned, threw back the curtain, and lifted Ryan up. The two stood before Anthony.

With a cold voice, Carissa said, "At least take a good look. Throughout the journey, Ryan wrote messages in my hand, worried that you might reject him. I reassured him that you wouldn't." Anthony was reluctant, but he instinctively glanced at the child she was holding.

In that one glance, he realized just how wrong he had been.

In that brief moment, his heart almost stopped.

The resemblance was undeniable.

Although Ryan was now gaunt and not as chubby and adorable as before, the similarity was unmistakable.

Anthony's lips trembled, and his eyes quickly filled with tears.

He tentatively called out, "Ryan?"

Ryan's tears fell relentlessly, and he struggled to be set down.

Carissa gently set him down, and he extended his hand, making a high-five gesture towards Anthony. Then, with two fingers, Ryan drew an imaginary shape resembling an inkpot in the air. After making the gesture, Ryan lowered his hands, his shoulders shaking as he cried.

Seeing the gesture, Anthony felt as though his heart was being torn apart.

This gesture was something only he and Ryan knew.

A month before the incident, when Anthony and Sophia visited Northwatch Estate to see Yvette and Ryan. Ryan had shown him his schoolwork, and Anthony had praised Ryan's writing. Anthony also gave Ryan a high-five, promising that if Ryan continued to work hard and received the teacher's praise, Anthony would gift him an inkpot from Ebonwood.

Ryan had mentioned that it was his teacher who told him that the ink made in Ebonwood was the finest.

Later, Anthony had gotten busy due to the affairs in the Royal Citadel, and he forgot about the promise. Each time he remembered, he felt immense regret. To ease his heart, he had purchased several inkpots but had never been able to give them away.

Anthony crouched down and lifted Ryan into his arms, his voice choked with emotion. "Your uncle didn't break his promise. I've bought the inkpot, and it's waiting for you."

Ryan's small hand wiped away Anthony's tears, then he struggled to be set down. He wanted to walk in by himself and didn't want to be carried.

Seeing this, Carissa's anger melted away. "Anthony, let him down. He likes to walk by himself."

But Anthony didn't release him. He held on tightly, unable to let go.

The steward, seeing the situation, also wiped his tears, Realizing that the child was indeed Ryan, he hurried inside to report to Anthony's parents.

The entire Klein household was thrown into a frenzy.

With trembling hands, Sophia gave Ingrid a Heartshield Pill before crying, "Ryan didn't die. Ryan has returned!"

Ingrid, who was bedridden and barely coherent, didn't grasp the news fully..She sighed deeply and mournfully cried out, "Yvette and Ryan... My precious ones, they're gone!"

Sophia quickly corrected her, "Grandmother, Ryan has returned. He didn't die! It's true! He will be here to see you soon!"

Ingrid's eyes widened, and a sudden surge of strength allowed her to grasp Sophia's wrist tightly. "What? What did you say?"

Outside, Diana clutched Ryan and cried so intensely that she almost fainted.

Her grandson was alive!

When Diana had first learned of her daughter and grandson's deaths, she even heard that her grandson's head and body needed to be sewn together for a complete corpse.

It had been devastating. The news had nearly taken her life-she had cried for a whole month.

Now, Ryan had returned! He was alive!

Diana was overwhelmed with emotion. She embraced him and wept for a long time. When she heard Carissa recount Ryan's experiences, the pain in her heart was so overwhelming that she actually fainted.

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The other Klein family members helped Diana lay down on the ground and elevated her legs, ensuring she was breathing properly. Then they fanned her and waited until she finally came to. Upon waking, Diana continued to cry, "Oh, Lord, how could you allow this child to suffer so much? The Sinclair family was full of loyal and brave souls-why did they meet such a terrible end? Lord, you're unjust! You're too cruel!"

Carissa couldn't bear to hear such heart-wrenching lamentations. She hurried outside, her tears flowing freely. In the past, she had managed to hold back her emotions. But now, the floodgates had opened, and all the tears she had previously stifled came pouring out.

Every Klein family member present had their turn to look at Ryan, and then he was taken to Ingrid's room. Fortunately, she had been given medication beforehand. Seeing Ryan as a mute and a cripple broke her

heart.

He was her great-grandson, whom she had cherished so dearly.

How could he have been reduced to this state?

Ingrid had lost her beloved granddaughter. Now, seeing this well-behaved child, who resembled his mother so much in her youth, in such a condition was a pain more profound than any wound. Ingrid's grief was so intense that it felt as if her heart had been cut out with a knife.

For a full hour, everyone struggled to hold back their tears and eventually managed to sit in the main hall with a semblance of calm. Ingrid was helped out of the room and joined the others as Carissa recounted everything that had transpired.

They learned that Ryan had gone to buy candied apples for Carissa to cheer her up, which had led him to escape the massacre. Though he had endured two years of suffering, he was, at least, still a Their gaze toward Carissa softened and was filled with gratitude, and their hatred toward the human traffickers diminished somewhat. However, they remained unaware that Carissa's feelings were quite different, and she chose not to reveal them.

After Anthony managed to calm his emotions, he asked about Ryan's poisoning and leg injury. Carissa relayed what Sebastian had told her.

"The poisoning is manageable but requires effort and time. We need to administer detoxification medicine daily and acupuncture every other day. As for the addiction to the Peony Bliss, it seems to be of less concern now. The detoxification formula Sebastian prescribed can also remove the poison from it. If the treatment is effective, he should be able to speak again within a year."

Carissa continued, "As for his leg injury, since the bone is misaligned, it will need to be broken and realigned. This will be quite painful, but we have faith in Sebastian's medical skills and his medicine. He will help Ryan endure the least amount of suffering possible."

Upon hearing that the bone would need to be rebroken and realigned, the room's atmosphere grew heavier with sympathy and concern for Ryan.

Sighing, Edward asked, "When will the surgery be performed? We can come over to help care for him. Or if you're busy with wedding preparations, we can keep Ryan here at Highcrest Estate."

Carissa replied, "Sebastian mentioned that Ryan is still weak. He hasn't been eating well for a long time, which caused severe damage to his digestive system and depleted his energy. He will need some time to recover before we can proceed with the surgery."

She glanced around at the gathering in the spacious hall, where everyone from the Klein family was present.

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She continued, "It would be better for Ryan to stay with me. Although I'm preparing for my wedding, it's

second marriage and doesn't require extensive preparations. Northwatch Estate is quiet and suitable for his recovery. Furthermore..."

Her voice grew more somber. "I discussed it with Prince Rafael. After our wedding, we will bring Ryan to live with us at Hell Monarch Estate. Ryan has come to trust His Highness. After all, His Highness rescued Ryan from that den of wolves.

"Once Ryan is in better health, His Highness will arrange for a prestigious tutor for him. My mother always hoped that her grandchildren would focus on scholarly pursuits rather than martial skills. Ryan won't need to exert himself too much-as long as he maintains good character and acquires a decent education, he can pass the peerage examination. With the duke's title, he will be assured of a lifetime of wealth and security."

At first, everyone was taken aback by the idea of Ryan moving to Hell Monarch Estate.

It was unusual for a woman to bring her nephew with her to her new home after her marriage.

However, Rafael had agreed, and living at Hell Monarch Estate would indeed broaden Ryan's horizons. Even if Ryan only held a ceremonial title in the future, he needed to have a proper perspective.

Yet...

Ingrid held her chest as she looked at her grandson, and then expressed her concerns.

"The only worry is that once he moves to Hell Monarch Estate, it will be harder for us to see him. I've also heard that Helen will be living at Hell Monarch Estate, and I'm concerned..."

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Ingrid didn't voice her concerns aloud, but everyone understood that she was worried Helen might make things difficult for Ryan.

Although the Klein family had rarely attended social gatherings over the past two years, they were still somewhat aware of outside events. They knew about Carissa's situation, though they chose not to delve deeply into it.

It was common knowledge that Helen was not entirely pleased with Carissa as a daughter-in-law. Bringing Ryan along might only increase Helen's displeasure.

"I will always prioritize Ryan's well-being. If Helen cannot accept him, then I will return to Northwatch Estate. I assure you, Ryan will not suffer any grievances," Carissa said.

However, her assurances did little to ease the concern of those present. After all, a woman marrying a second time and not receiving the favor of her mother-in-law would undoubtedly face daily challenges. Even if Rafael was fair and just, the strain between mother and wife could become burdensome over time.

Edward's brother, Elliot Klein, said, "Actually, it would be best if Ryan could stay here at Highcrest Estate. With so many of us to care for him, he would be well-protected and would certainly not suffer any undue hardship. As for finding a prestigious tutor, we can arrange that ourselves."

With these words, everyone nodded in agreement.

After her initial excitement, Ingrid's emotions began to calm. Though she wished Ryan could always be by her side, her life experiences had taught her to think more long-term.

Holding Ryan close, her dark, wide robe spread out like a mother hen's wings protecting her chick. Then, she said softly, "Ryan is to inherit a title in the future, and he's the only son left in the Duke of Northwatch's family. The Klein family will support him wholeheartedly. However, our support alone isn't enough. If he stays with Prince Rafael and is occasionally introduced to various circles and influential people, it will be more beneficial than all the efforts we could put in."

She then looked at Carissa and added, "I also don't agree with what you said earlier. Ryan shouldn't be a mere idle noble. He had an esteemed grandfather, father, and uncles who were all heroes in their own right. Even if he may not surpass his grandfather and father, he must strive to do his best and not tarnish their reputation or the name of the Duke of Northwatch."

Ingrid then looked at Ryan and said, "No matter whether you can achieve it or not, you must put in your best effort. If you do your best and still don't succeed, no one will blame you. But if you don't put in the effort, you will be ashamed to face your grandfather, father, and uncles."

Ryan looked up at his great-grandmother, and nodded vigorously.

He mouthed silently, "Understood!"

With tears welling up in her eyes, Ingrid hugged him tightly. "The Klein family will always be your support. We will always stand by you."

Cuddled in his great-grandmother's embrace, Ryan was as obedient as a little kitten.

Carissa thought about it, and realized that Ingrid's perspective was indeed far-sighted. A noble title without the capability to back it up would only attract envy. No one could protect Ryan forever; only by

being capable and self-sufficient could he stand firm in the world of power and influence.

This was the true message Ingrid wanted to

Copy. She wanted Ryan to take his grandfather and father

as examples and to be motivated by their legacy.

Everyone nodded in agreement. Suddenly, Sophia stood up.

"Lady Sinclair and Ryan will have dinner here before they leave. I'll immediately ask the kitchen to prepare more delicious dishes."

Although Carissa hadn't planned on having dinner there, it was obvious the Klein family wanted Ryan here for dinner. She was happy to comply with their wish and allow them to see him a little longer. Sophia was indeed skilled at managing the household. Within just two hours, she had arranged several tables, and all the family members gathered to share a meal together. Even Ingrid joined them and seemed rejuvenated after the dinner.

After they had eaten and talked for a while, Carissa and Ryan left.

Ingrid called everyone to the main hall. Her eyes, once clouded, now sparkled with clarity.

She instructed her children and grandchildren, "With Carissa getting married, the Klein family should assist with the wedding preparations and prepare a generous dowry. We must keep in touch with her frequently.

"You all need to be more active in social engagements-attend banquets and gatherings as and when you need to. Don't isolate yourselves as you did before. Build connections and networks. My great-grandson will be inheriting a title, and he needs influential support!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Her children and grandchildren, daughters-in-law, and sons-in-law all responded in unison.

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The next day, the Klein family sent over Ryan's favorite dishes. They also mentioned that the ladies of the house were busy with their needlework, making clothes, shoes, and socks for him. The Klein family was clearly showing their love and care for Ryan through their actions.

Ryan finally felt at ease. His maternal grandparent's family didn't despise him. In fact, they were genuinely concerned about him.

Today, Sebastian personally came over again, saying he wanted to check Ryan's pulse one more time, just in case he had missed something.

Given his medical expertise, Sebastian had already understood everything from the diagnosis the day before. His thoroughness could only be attributed to how much he cared about the bloodline of the Duke of Northwatch's family.

After Sebastian left, Rafael arrived with Dylan in tow. Rafael told Carissa that he was there to visit Ryan and to bond with him.

Ryan was thrilled to see Rafael. He even showed him the inkpots Anthony had gifted him, and generously offered to give Rafael one as well.

Rafael accepted with a smile, and taught Ryan how to use the proper wrist technique to write for a while before excusing himself to speak with Carissa.

As Rafael, tall and graceful, walked over to Carissa, he playfully waved the item in his hand in front of her and said with a grin, "He was actually willing to gift me an Ebonwood inkpot. Such generosity!" Carissa chuckled, and called for coffee. "He's being generous with someone else's gift. This was from his

eldest uncle."

"The Klein family must

have been overjoyed, right?" Rafael asked as he sat down, placing the inkpot aside.

Carissa recalled the scene from the day before and replied, "At first, they didn't believe it. But once they saw him, they were overwhelmed with excitement."

Rafael remarked, "The Klein family is passionate and sincere, though a bit obsessive. Don't let it bother you."

"Why would I?" Carissa smiled, watching as Rafael picked up the inkpot again and began to play with it. The thought of Meadow Ridge crossed her mind. She had been so focused on Ryan that she hadn't asked about it. "Your Highness, when you went to Meadow Ridge, what did my master say?" "He was hesitant at first, but once my master spoke to him, he had no objections."

Carissa was curious. "My master actually listens to your master? Who's your master?"

A mysterious smile appeared on Rafael's handsome face. "Why don't you take a guess?"

"How could I possibly guess that..." Carissa began, but suddenly, she remembered that Everett had an apprentice who didn't live at the Pathfinders Guild.

The apprentice only visited occasionally. Since everyone usually kept their distance from Everett, she had

never seen his apprentice before.

She quickly looked up. "Your master wouldn't happen to be Sage Everett, would he?"

Though Carissa called them masters, the title all masters and instructors in the Pathfinder Guild were given was "Sage".

Rafael was a bit surprised. He had planned to tease her a little, but she figured it out so quickly. He couldn't help but laugh.

"People say you're smart, and they're right. You guessed it-my master is indeed Sage Everett. You and I are both from the Pathfinders Guild, but we have different masters."

Carissa was genuinely shocked. She hadn't expected Rafael to be the apprentice of her master's fellow apprentice.

"No wonder you go to the Pathfinders Guild every year, and it's no wonder you know the place so well." Rafael shook his head. "I wouldn't say I know it that well. The apprentices from your master's lineage and I don't interact much. I rarely have contact with Kyle, Winona, and the rest of the senior apprentices." Carissa asked curiously, "Why? If you're the apprentice of my master's fellow apprentice, why don't you associate with us?"

Rafael's handsome face broke into a broad smile. "My master doesn't allow it. His exact words were..." He stood up and clasped his hands behind his back. Then, he put on a stern expression and furrowed his brows. "Don't associate with that useless bunch. That includes your martial uncle and his apprentices. None of them are any good. The less contact you have with them, the less you'll pick up their ridiculous habits."

Carissa couldn't help but laugh out loud at Rafael's spot-on impersonation of her martial uncle, from the expression to the tone.

"That's exactly how he looks! He always looks down on us!"

She still found it hard to believe.

"I can't believe you're an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild, my fellow guild member. I really didn't see that coming. Did you join before or after me? If you joined first, you would be my guild senior. But if I joined first, it would be the other way around."

Rafael held the inkpot in his hand, his gaze fixed on her with a playful smile. "By the way, have you taken Ryan to see Theodore yet? You should introduce him to the family and update the family registry." After all, Ryan was currently listed as deceased in the family records.

Carissa tilted her head slightly.

Rafael hadn't answered her question.

Did that mean she was his senior in the guild?

Chapter 259

Carissa blinked. "So you're my junior in the guild?"

Rafael's handsome face stiffened, and he turned away, still trying to maintain his composure. "I'm not really an apprentice of the Pathfinders Guild. My master made it clear-I'm his private student, but I'm not formally part of the guild."

Carissa smiled, her eyes sparkling. "My dear junior, you're just deceiving yourself. Sage Everett is part of the Pathfinders Guild, so as his apprentice, how could you not be? When did you join, dear junior?" Rafael tried to maintain his nonchalance and smile, but he stubbornly changed the subject. "We were just talking about taking Ryan to see Theodore. When do you plan to go?"

Carissa propped her chin on her hand, blinking as she looked at him. "My dear junior, your guild senior and Ryan will go tomorrow."

For some reason, now that she knew he was from the same guild, Carissa felt completely at ease, letting herself be much more playful around him.

Rafael was silent momentarily and rolled his eyes. "I'm older than you."

"Yes, my guild junior is indeed older than me, his senior," Carissa teased, thoroughly enjoying herself.

No wonder Rafael never mentioned it before and only said he went to Meadow Ridge every year. It turns out he was the apprentice of her master's fellow apprentice, and he even joined later than she did! Of course, back in the Southern Frontier, how could he possibly call her his senior in front of all the soldiers?

But on the battlefield, there were only generals and soldiers-there was no room for junior or senior apprentices from a guild.

Rafael felt a wave of dissatisfaction.

Clearly, he was more skilled in martial arts and older in age, so why did he have to be the guild junior between them?

Besides, Rafael was Everett's private student. It had been explicitly stated that he wouldn't be part of the Pathfinders Guild.

However, seeing her bright and mischievous smile, which reminded him of the spirited girl in red on Meadow Ridge, he sighed inwardly.

Fine. He would accept being her junior in the guild.

"But don't call me that in public."

His pride wouldn't allow it-how could a husband be his wife's junior?

Carissa's smile deepened, and the beauty mark beneath her eye looked especially vivid and alluring.

Rafael couldn't tear his gaze away.

Carissa was so caught up in her amusement that she didn't notice the emotions swirling in his eyes, though he was doing his best to keep them hidden.

Rafael returned to the topic of Meadow Ridge. "When the time comes, most of the Pathfinders Guild members will attend our wedding. My master has also Informed other guilds in Meadow Ridge, saying that he's marrying off his apprentice. I expect there will be quite a few guests."

"Then I'll need to host a banquet for the bride's side as well in Northwatch Estate." Carissa nodded in agreement.

It was more of a statement than a question. After all, if her master and the others were coming, they would represent her family, so it was only natural to have a banquet.

But as she said this in front of him, she felt her cheeks suddenly grow warm.

Whenever the topic of marriage had come up before, Carissa always felt calm. To her, it was just a marriage of convenience-a union where both parties would get what they needed, with the hope of a peaceful future.

However, after everything that had happened with Ryan, she found herself paying more attention to Rafael. Sometimes, when she looked at him and thought about him becoming her husband, a sense of anticipation would stir within her.

It was a completely different feeling from when she had been engaged to Barrett.

Even so, back then, she had genuinely intended to build a life with Barrett.

Rafael noticed her cheeks suddenly turning red as she spoke, even the tips of her ears flushing pink. It made him recall the time he had overheard her conversation with Ryan-how she had admitted that she had feelings for him.

Could there be some truth to that statement?

Of course there could!

Why?

Just because!

When it came to feelings, there wasn't always a reason for them. Trying to rationalize it could make it feel less genuine.

The two of them, lost in their own thoughts, locked eyes for a moment. When the two of them looked into each other's eyes, it was as if there was a subtle, almost imperceptible tension.

It was just a bit awkward.

Rafael broke the silence and said, "By the way, the king has appointed me as the Minister of Justice and the commander of the Mystic Army."

Carissa looked up at him in surprise. "What?"

Chapter 260

Rafael was the commander of the Hell Monarch Army. Even when there was no war and he remained in the capital, the Hell Monarch Army was stationed not far away. Also, military affairs were always demanding, often requiring him to lead training exercises.

How could he possibly take on the role of Minister of Justice at the same time?

Moreover, the Ministry of Justice was responsible for overseeing criminal cases, conducting reviews of death sentences, and handling important legal matters most of which were administrative work.

He was a military general, but he was appointed as Minister of Justice? Further, why was he also given command of the Mystic Army?

With both a civilian and a military position on his shoulders, not to mention his role as the commander of the Hell Monarch Army, how could he manage it all?

He said indifferently, "I've already handed over the military seal and authority. For now, Oliver Prince will command the Hell Monarch Army."

Oliver Prince?

Carissa knew of him. Oliver was the Earl of Silverstone, a man who once held significant influence in the military. However, after being injured in battle, he could no longer fight on the front lines. He had since inherited his grandfather's title and lived a reclusive life.

It seemed like the Earl of Silverstone's household was headed toward decline. Yet, out of nowhere, Salvador had chosen to elevate him.

But why appoint a disabled general to command the Hell Monarch Army at this time? And why replace the current commander? Rafael had just returned victorious.

Even if he handed over the military seal, he could still remain as the commander of the Hell Monarch Army.

As Carissa thought it over, she began to grasp the situation and couldn't help but blurt out, "Is His Majesty wary of you?"

Rafael's eyes were as deep as an abyss. "It's not that he's wary-he just doesn't want any rumors or misunderstandings that could damage our brotherly bond." Carissa fully understood.

But she was also confused. "Then why did you marry me? If His Majesty is wary of you, marrying me would only make it worse."

She was the daughter of the Duke of Northwatch, a respected general herself with military achievements and the loyalty of the troops. Whether it was the Hell Monarch Army, the Mystic Army, or the Sinclair Army that her father once led, they all held her in high regard.

Rafael had relinquished his military authority precisely to ease Salvador's concerns. But marrying her- despite giving up command-would hardly put Salvador's mind completely at ease.

Was there something she didn't know?

And did this have anything to do with Salvador's edict that she marry within three months?

Rafael knew she was perceptive and would inevitably piece things together, so he explained, "No matter whom I marry, my brother will think what he thinks. Given my status, could I possibly marry a commoner or the daughter of some low-ranking official?"

While the reasoning made sense, Carissa felt it wasn't as straightforward as that.

She could lead troops, something other noblewomen couldn't do. Marrying her was riskier for him.

"Did you propose to marry me because you knew I didn't want to enter the palace as a concubine? Were you trying to help me?" Carissa quickly guessed. "His Majesty didn't actually force you to marry, did he? You're helping me."

Sharp as always-wasn't that exactly what he expected?

Rafael smiled wryly. "You're mistaken. Even if His Majesty hadn't pressured me, I returned triumphant. In doing so, received over a hundred marriage proposals. Many women are eager to marry me, Refusing any one of them would offend someone. I'm not afraid of offending people, but I'd rather not if I can avoid it. The best way to navigate this was to settle the matter quickly.

"As for why I chose you," Rafael's smile turned more helpless. "You're my senior. You were being forced into the palace, and I was being put on the spot. So, why not make a match out of it? That's what I thought.

Lying was exhausting-he couldn't exactly tell her that marrying her meant he had to relinquish his military power, could he?

That was something he absolutely couldn't say.

If she knew, she would never agree to marry him.

Even if the truth couldn't be hidden forever, it would be better for her to find out after they were married.

There were many things she should only learn once they were truly husband and wife, and it would be preferably after they had consummated the marriage.

