

## War Song 261

### Chapter 261

There were many things Rafael couldn't say, so he took his leave.

Carissa pondered for a long time. Some things seemed to make sense now, but there were still parts she couldn't quite grasp.

Lily noticed her distress and hesitated, wanting to approach her. However, Frederick stopped her.

He shook his head at Lily and said, "Prepare some food for Lord Ryan. He's been practicing his writing for a long time, and must be tired."

Lily glanced at Frederick, and sighed softly. "Alright."

She turned and went to the kitchen, while Frederick, limping slightly, followed her. Once in the kitchen, he lowered his voice, "I know you want to talk to Lady Sinclair, but don't say anything now. Wait until after the wedding."

Lily nodded. "I understand. I just saw she was troubled and acted on impulse. I know better than to act rashly"

She sighed again. "I only learned today that Prince Rafael gave up his military power. When I think about everything that's happened, it's clear he did it for our mistress's sake. The king used our mistress as bait to trap His Highness."

Frederick cautioned, "It's enough that we know this in our hearts. Don't let it slip out."

"Of course, such things can't be spoken of carelessly. But His Highness's feelings for our mistress- she doesn't know at all. Even when he proposed marriage, the late madam didn't allow her to be told." Frederick's expression darkened. "At that time, the late madam was frightened. If His Highness hadn't gone to the Southern Frontier, she might have agreed. But who could have predicted, after all that careful consideration, she would choose someone as unreliable as Barrett."

Lily's eyes reddened with sorrow.

"The late madam didn't choose a nobleman's son or a civil official because she knew our mistress was too wild for those strict, rule-bound households. And have you ever seen a noble family where the heir doesn't take concubines? Barrett was the only one brave enough to kneel before the late madam and promise never to take a concubine. The late madam was deceived in a moment of weakness." "Okay, that's enough," Frederick urged. "Bring some food to our young lord. Seeing how hard he's working really breaks my heart. He's still drinking medicine every day, but he never forgets to practice his writing."

How could Frederick not feel for Ryan? Ryan was the Duke of Northwatch's only surviving male heir, and he had suffered so much.

The next day, Carissa took Ryan to the sanctuary hall.

When Carissa first returned to the capital, she had already sent word to Theodore, asking him to gather the members of the Sinclair family and open the sanctuary hall. The purpose was to erase the words that had been written beside Ryan's name in the family records which indicated he was deceased.

Since Carissa wasn't allowed to enter the sanctuary hall, she led Ryan to the entrance and left him in Frederick's care. She waited outside while Frederick took him in.

There were bound to be many in the Sinclair family who didn't believe it. Some had even hoped to have

their own sons adopted into the Duke of Northwatch's family to inherit the title. Even those who did believe might claim disbelief

That was why it was necessary for Frederick to clearly explain the situation, informing the Sinclair family members present today that the authorities had already handled the case and that the human traffickers had been gradually apprehended.

The trafficker who had originally taken Ryan had not yet been found, but Frederick deliberately didn't mention this. Instead, he emphasized that the officials in Eldora had reported the matter to the court and that Ryan had been to the palace to meet with the king and the queen dowager. After that, he had also visited the Klein family and reconnected with the

With this information, even those within the Sinclair family who were skeptical had no choice but to accept it. Moreover, Ryan bore a strong resemblance to his father, which further convinced many of his legitimacy.

Once the murmurs of doubt died down, Theodore requested the family records be brought forward. He offered prayers to the ancestors and officially reinstated Ryan's name in the family registry, erasing the previous notation of this supposed early death.

While Carissa waited outside, she could hear the uproar of votes from within. At first, she was a bit worried, but when she heard Theodore call for the family records, she knew Ryan's place within the Sinclair family had been affirmed.

With Bryant's return, the need to adopt someone from the family into the Duke of Northwatch's family was eliminated. Also, Calissa and Theodore had never been fully satisfied with the candidates previously considered for this matter. After a brief discussion, the matter was dropped.

Theodore was thankful that they hadn't chosen anyone last time. Otherwise, someone would have been happy only to find it was all war. It was also hard to tell if they would have made trouble if that happened. Theodore felt both relief and sadness; he asked the file many questions, and Ryan wrote his answers for him, unable to speak a word.

Fortunately, Frederick assured him that Sebastian had promised Ryan would recover fully, though it would take some time for the treatment to be effective.

Theodore then addressed the gathered family members, reminding them that as long as there was a bloodline of the Duke of Northwatch, the Sinclair family would not decline. He stressed that safeguarding Ryan's interests was synonymous with protecting the interests of the entire Sinclair family.

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Most of the Sinclair family members were involved in business or had bought land to become landlords. How could they not understand the significance of Theodore's words?

The rise or fall of one affected everyone. Even if the Duke of Northwatch's family didn't offer direct help, having a duke as a powerful ally meant that anyone looking to oppress them would have to think twice. Because of this, everyone listened carefully to Theodore. The Sinclair family had always been relatively united. After the near-catastrophic events that had almost wiped out the Duke of Northwatch's family, there was no room for jealousy among them.

Theodore spoke at length, and Ryan took in every word. Previously, as a child, he had never been allowed to attend family meetings, let alone hear the patriarch speak about the responsibilities and legacy of their family.

A sense of duty towards his family began to grow within him. Ho

still Wasn't sure what his role would be, but he knew he couldn't afford to make mistakes that would bring shame to the Sinclair family and dishonor his late father and brothers.

By October, the weather had started to cool down. The Klein family sent over many garments for Ryan, along with some fine pelts. These days, whenever the Klein family got hold of something good, they made sure Ryan received it first.

Moreover, the Klein family offered to help organize the wedding. Lily reported back to Carissa, suggesting that while they might not need the help, it would be wise to accept their goodwill and allow them to assist in some small way. This would ease the Klein family's concerns.

Carissa agreed, instructing Lily to let the Klein family handle some minor tasks, but to ensure they didn't spend any money on it.

News of Ryan's return quickly spread throughout the capital, and many people came to visit, bringing gifts for him. Even Heather sent some fine silks, saying they were for making clothes for Ryan. Lulu was still upset over the time when Heather rejected the bridal gifts Carissa had sent.

She remarked, "Why should we accept their fabric, my lady? It's not like we're in need."

Carissa smiled. "If I'm not upset, why should you be? Besides, I still keep in touch with Leona. Let's not make things difficult for her."

"Not making things difficult for Lady Leona only puts you in a tough spot," Lulu muttered, turning away.

Carissa's voice softened, "No matter what, she's still my mother's sister. There's nothing I can't overlook."

Lulu noted that Carissa referred to Heather as "mother's sister" rather than "aunt," understanding that Carissa still held some reservations about the past. So it was likely that Carissa chose to accept the gift to maintain peace between the two families.

After thinking it over, Lulu decided it was best not to dwell on it. After all, they were still relatives, and there hadn't been any deep-seated hatred between them. So, there was really no reason to hold a grudge.

Accepting the gift wasn't so bad, especially considering it was fine silk worth a significant amount of

money.

With this thought, Lulu happily went off to store the fabric.

Carissa watched her go and chuckled, rubbing her temples. Lulu had a habit of getting worked up over the smallest things. If Carissa let herself be upset by everyone, she would never have peace. Just then, Pearl hurriedly approached from the corridor. "My lady, Sebastian requests your presence in the side hall. He's waiting for you."

Carissa looked surprised. "Sebastian came himself? Isn't it usually his apprentice, Rowan?"

Recently, it had been Rowan handling the acupuncture sessions, with Sebastian only occasionally stopping by to check Ryan's progress and monitor the detoxification process.

"Yes, it's Sebastian today," Pearl confirmed. "He just finished examining Lord Ryan and asked for you in the side hall."

Pearl had been assigned to assist with Ryan's care. She was thorough in her work, which gave Carissa peace of mind.

"Alright, I'll go right away," Carissa replied, thinking this might be about Ryan's leg treatment.

Yesterday, Rowan mentioned that the detoxification was progressing smoothly and that Ryan's health had visibly improved day by day.

When Carissa arrived at the side hall, she found Sebastian and Rowan already waiting.

She quickly greeted Sebastian, "Sebastian, it's good to see you. What brings you here personally today?" Sebastian sat comfortably in a chair, dressed in a narrow-sleeved long tunic and a black, cloud-patterned lightweight jacket. The temperature had dropped since it had rained a few days earlier.

He looked up at Carissa, and smiled warmly. "You seem to be doing well. You look much better than the last time I saw you."

"With all the nutritional meals I'm fed everyday, how could I not be?" Carissa responded with a smile. Then, she turned to Rowan and greeted him as well. "Thank you for your hard work, Rowan."

"There's no need for thanks, my lady," Rowan replied. He was a young man in his twenties, of average height, with a round face and kind eyes.

Once seated, Carissa got straight to the point. "Sebastian, is it time to treat Ryan's leg?"

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Sebastian nodded. "First, I wanted to update you on Lord Ryan's detoxification progress. After this period of treatment, I've just done a check-up and found that his condition is better than expected. The swelling in his throat has also decreased significantly."

"Really?"

Carissa felt a surge of joy. Although Rowan had informed her of the positive progress yesterday, hearing it directly from Sebastian was even more reassuring.

"That's wonderful news. Rowan, you've worked so hard in this period. Thank you."

Rowan smiled modestly, but acknowledged the compliment. He had indeed been putting in a lot of effort lately.

Sebastian took a sip of coffee, and continued, "Secondly, as you mentioned earlier, now that his overall health is improving, it's time to address his leg. As I've mentioned before, treating the leg will require resetting the broken bone."

Carissa's heart tightened. "I understand. It will be very painful."

"Pain is inevitable," Sebastian said. "You need to prepare him mentally. I do have some painkillers, but they're not very effective for the pain of resetting bones. I recommend using acupoint sealing to alleviate the pain."

"Acupoint sealing for pain relief?" Carissa asked, a note of concern in her voice. "You didn't mention this method before. Are there any side effects?"

Sebastian explained, "It requires precise placement and perfect timing. If the acupuncture points are left blocked for too long, it can hinder blood flow to the leg. If the blood supply is cut off for too long, he may still have difficulty walking later, even if we set the bone properly."

Carissa quickly asked, "I know how to perform acupuncture, but I'm unsure about the precision you're talking about. What does it require?"

Sebastian shook his head. "Acupuncture and acupoint sealing are similar. You don't need to do it yourself, but the challenge lies in timing. For a child, it's even more delicate. Any mistake could be irreparable." Though not a medical expert, Carissa could see the risks. If even Sebastian was unsure about the effectiveness of the acupoint sealing for pain relief, it increased the potential danger. The goal of treating Ryan's leg was to ensure he could walk normally in the future. If the bone was set correctly but he still walked with a limp, it would be as if the treatment had failed.

Carissa hesitated.



Would it be better to endure the pain of a broken bone, or opt for the risky method of using acupoint sealing for pain relief?

"Which method do you recommend?" Carissa asked after a moment of contemplation.

Sebastian considered his words carefully. "If it were an adult, I would suggest using a strong painkiller and enduring the pain. Adults generally have better endurance. The reason I mentioned acupoint sealing is to prevent excessive pain and struggling after the bone is set, which could hinder the treatment."

Rowan added, "Lady Sinclair, my mentor's point is that both methods have their pros and cons. It depends on whether you're willing to let the child endure the suffering."

Carissa was certainly unwilling to let Ryan suffer, but she was even more concerned about the possibility of him being unable to walk properly in the future.

She thought for a moment, and then asked, "Sebastian, how confident are you that you can perform the acupoint sealing within the precise time frame and ensure Ryan recovers well?"

Sebastian sighed. "Given that the leg injury has persisted for some time, I would estimate the success rate at fifty percent. The process could be lengthy, and it's best if the acupoint sealing is done not more than ten to fifteen minutes."

The idea of setting the bone and performing acupoint sealing within such a tight timeframe seemed quite daunting.

Rowan added, "Also, after the bone is set and the needles are removed, there will still be considerable pain, which could last for several days."

Carissa's brow furrowed in concern.

Sebastian said, "You should discuss this with the Klein family. Although Ryan is under your care, the Klein family is deeply concerned. You need to keep them informed of the situation so that if any issues arise in the future, they won't hold you solely responsible."

Carissa understood that, as a daughter about to be married off, Ryan's situation was not solely her concern. The Klein family members were coming the following day, and they might blame her if she proceeded with Ryan's treatment without informing them.

Sebastian said, "Discuss the options with them. We can schedule the treatment for the day after tomorrow. It's not difficult or dangerous, but it will be painful."

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After Sebastian left, Carissa first spoke with Ryan about his situation, allowing him to give his own input. Naturally, he wasn't expected to make the final decision, but having his opinion would make it easier for her to discuss things with the Klein family.

Ryan nestled against Carissa as he listened and smiled. Then he began to write in her palm, one word at a

time.

[Actually, Rowan has already told me that the pain will be unbearable. When my leg was first broken, I felt like I might die from the pain.]

Carissa asked him to rewrite it, since some words were unclear. After he completed the revision, she understood and asked, "So, you would prefer acupoint sealing for pain relief, correct?"

Ryan shook his head, and continued writing. [But if there's a significant risk of ending up with a permanent limp, how can that be acceptable? When I grow up, I will need to be the patriarch of the family. How can someone with a limp lead the Duke of Northwatch's household?]

He looked up at her, his once sharp little face now rounder, and continued writing. [Dad always got injured on the battlefield. He experienced both flesh wounds and bone injuries. I think he must not fear pain.] Carissa gently responded, "Everyone fears pain. Even your father feared it. But as an adult, he had to endure it."

Ryan quickly wrote back. [I understand. A true man must endure what others cannot.]

Carissa smiled. "That's right."

Ryan wanted to endure the pain himself, but Carissa still needed to discuss it with the Klein family as well. So, she personally went to their residence in the evening.

The Klein family took the matter seriously and convened a meeting with everyone involved, including informing Ingrid. They were reluctant to make a rash decision, torn between not wanting Ryan to suffer and worrying about the precise timing for the acupoint sealing, fearing it might lead to complications.

Hearing that Ryan was willing to endure the pain brought both relief and concern to the family. Despite their relief, they felt that such pain was beyond what a seven-year-old child should endure. How could he endure that kind of pain?

After much deliberation, they still couldn't make a definitive decision and decided to leave it up to Carissa.

Carissa had only intended to discuss the matter and fulfill her duty to inform and consult with them. She hadn't expected them to make the decision. With their input, she thanked them and returned to her residence.

On the day of the treatment, Anthony arrived with Ryan's grandparents, bringing with them the best medicinal herbs they could find. They knew that Sebastian was highly skilled in medicine and that his own prepared remedies were top-notch, and their herbs might not be needed. Even so, Ingrid insisted they bring them anyway.

Sebastian glanced at the herbs they had brought, and offered some reassurance. "These can still be used

after the treatment. They are nourishing herbs."

Diana quickly added, "If they can be used, that's good. Even if they are just for replenishing his energy and blood, it will be helpful."

Sebastian nodded slightly, and then turned to Carissa. Have you made a decision? Do you want me to use acupoint sealing?"

Carissa guided him out to the Amethyst Hall, with everyone following.

Carissa replied, "Ryan says he can endure the pain of bone setting. Neither I nor his maternal grandparents can make the decision, so we ask you, Sebastian, to decide."

The advice of a medical professional was always most beneficial for the patient.

Throughout the course of treatment, Sebastian had gained some understanding of Ryan's condition.

Sebastian said, "In my opinion, if he can endure it, then he should. He is likely eager to walk normally again. Being mute is already a disability, and so is having a limp. He hopes for a complete recovery. Considering the past two years, pain must be a regular part of his life."

Sebastian spoke the truth, but hearing it left a heavy feeling in everyone's hearts.

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When they arrived at Ryan's room, Pearl came out to greet them.

Ryan was lying in bed, waiting for the painkiller. He had made up his mind not to take any risks-he wanted to get better on his own.

He saw that everyone had worried expressions. They wanted to comfort him, but Ryan gave them an encouraging and determined look instead.

The sight of the young boy, only seven years old, trying to be strong in such a vulnerable moment made everyone's hearts ache even more. He was at an age when children were pampered and showered with affection.

Just as Sebastian was about to begin the treatment, Rafael arrived.

The Klein family members, knowing Rafael was Ryan's savior, had intended to express their gratitude. They didn't expect to see him here, and they hurried to pay their respects and offer their thanks. Rafael waved his hand dismissively, and smiled. "It was merely a matter of chance; no need for thanks. I am here today to accompany him through the treatment. Let's not discuss anything else. We should focus on the treatment first."

The Klein family had initially worried that once Ryan went to Hell Monarch Estate with Carissa, Rafael might grow weary of him over time. But seeing how attentive Rafael was towards Ryan, those concerns seemed unfounded.

Rafael addressed Carissa and the Klein family, saying, "I will stay with Ryan inside. You should remain outside; matters of a man are best handled without you."

He turned to Ryan with a reassuring smile. "Right, Ryan?"

Ryan nodded vigorously. He actually preferred not to have his aunt and grandparents there; it would mean he would have to pretend to be strong and comfort them not to worry too much.

He liked having Rafael by his side. Rafael was a warrior, a man like his grandfather, and he believed Rafael could give him strength.

He could endure with Rafael's support.

Carissa understood Rafael's good intentions, and saw that Ryan agreed.

"Alright, then."

She walked over to Ryan, gently stroking his head, and whispered, "We'll be right outside. Ryan, stay strong."

Ryan nodded and wrote two large words in the air with his finger: Not afraid!

The words Ryan wrote were large and clear enough for everyone to understand. They all gave him tender smiles, their hearts aching for him. "Alright, clear the room!" Sebastian instructed.

With reluctant glances at Ryan, everyone slowly withdrew.

Rowan brought in the painkiller, which Ryan drank down in gulps.

Rafael sat beside the bed, holding Ryan's hand. His gaze was steady and reassuring. "I'm here, Ryan. There's nothing to be afraid of." Despite Rafael's words, Ryan's hand still trembled slightly.

He was scared.

Sebastian joked, "Since His Highness is here, how about leaving the bone-breaking to him?"

A seasoned warrior like Rafael knew exactly how to carefully break crooked bones. For him, it was a simple task.

So, Rafael agreed.

He gently felt along Ryan's leg, locating the misaligned section of the bone. Ryan tensed up, and Rafael gave him a reassuring smile.

"I have a secret to share with you, Ryan. But you mustn't tell anyone, especially not your aunt. It's about her."

Ryan's curiosity was piqued. A secret about his aunt?

"Back when your aunt had just started practicing martial arts, there was a tall tree in Meadow Ridge. Every evening, many birds would gather on the tree, and your aunt would climb up trying to catch them." Ryan's eyes widened in surprise. Was his aunt really that mischievous?

After Carissa returned from Meadow Ridge, Melanie had insisted she followed proper manners-speaking correctly, walking properly, and behaving with decorum.

Ryan had never seen her as a troublemaker before.

"She could actually climb the tree, but it startled the birds. At that time, she had just started practicing her Lightfoot Skill. She thought she could chase after the birds, but she didn't realize she would fall as soon as she leaped. She ended up falling and breaking her leg..."

At this point, Rafael concentrated his inner force on the tip of his fingers to carefully break the misaligned bone, his touch firm yet precise.

Ryan couldn't help but let out a cry of pain, his whole body shaking and his face scrunched up in agony, followed by tears streaming down his cheeks.

Rafael immediately wrapped his arms around the trembling boy, and turned to Sebastian. "It's your turn."

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Sebastian was reflecting on the anguished cry Ryan had just let out. It seemed that the pain had quite an effect on Ryan's vocal cords, but for Sebastian, the sound was like music to his ears. Rowan was capable of performing tasks such as setting bones. However, Sebastian valued Ryan too much to leave it to anyone else. He preferred to handle it personally.

To him, this was a skill deeply ingrained in his bones. He carefully felt along Ryan's leg, inch by inch, until he reached the misaligned section. With great precision, he adjusted the bone. Ryan was drenched in sweat from the pain, his body trembling uncontrollably. He gripped Rafael's wrist tightly, his nails digging in and drawing blood.

The pain from setting the bone was excruciatingly real.

The pain-relief medicine didn't seem to help much, and he felt as though the pain was radiating throughout his entire body, even though the injury was in his leg.

Once the bone was set, Sebastian began applying the medicine. Two wooden splints were used to stabilize Ryan's leg, and he would need to remain bedridden until the bone healed.

Sebastian's medicated plaster, a formula he had personally developed, was highly effective. It wasn't available at other pharmacies, and it worked well to speed up bone healing. With the added benefit of the medicinal soup, Ryan should be able to walk again in about ten days.

After securing the splints, Ryan was given another dose of painkiller, which also had calming and sleep-inducing properties to help him rest. This would hopefully ease the pain when he woke up. Outside, those waiting heard Ryan's agonized scream, which left everyone feeling anxious and troubled. Hearing such a cry made it clear just how intense the pain was.

Carissa paced nervously, awaiting the door to open. Diana clasped her hands together, trembling as she prayed silently.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, the door opened.

Rafael stepped out first.

Carissa hurried inside to find Ryan lying on the bed, with Rowan administering acupuncture to alleviate some of the pain and help him fall asleep.

Sebastian gave a soft shushing sound, and said quietly "We should leave and let him sleep. He's a brave and resilient child."

Carissa was gently ushered out again. No one else could visit to avoid disturbing Ryan. If he couldn't fall asleep, he would have to endure the pain as best he could. Carissa noticed that Rafael's hand was covered in blood, clearly from where Ryan's nails had dug in.

Are your hands alright? Thank you for your hard work."

"It's nothing to worry about. It's not a big deal," Rafael said with a reassuring smile. "Ryan is incredibly

strong. He endured it all. We didn't use acupoint sealing for pain relief, so there's no effect on the blood flow in his leg. Once he's healed, he'll be fully recovered."

Carissa placed a hand over her heart. "Hearing him scream like that really frightened me... Please, come with me. I'll take care of your hand."

Seeing the blood on his wrist and the back of his hand made her uneasy. It made her feel both guilty and grateful.

Anthony also added, "She's right, Your Highness. You should tend to your wounds. We're truly grateful."

"There's no need to-"

Before Rafael could finish his sentence, Carissa had already taken his other hand. "It's necessary. At the very least, it should be cleaned up."



Her fingers were slender, with calluses in her palms, and they perfectly fit around his wrist. Feeling the warmth from her fingertips, his heartbeat quickened, and he swallowed his objections.

"Alright, then. Let's take care of it. It would be alarming if it were left in this bloody state."

The injury wasn't severe-it was only scratches. Ryan had scratched him several times, leaving a few bloody streaks that looked worse than they were.

Carissa led him to a side room, asking Pearl to fetch some medicine, Joy to bring clean water, and Lulu to get some gauze from Rowan.

Once everything was ready, Carissa cleaned the blood with a cloth, carefully applied the ointment, and then wrapped the gauze around his hand. She started from his wrist and covered the back of his hand while avoiding the webbing between the thumb and index finger. Finally, she secured it with a knot.

Handling wounds like this was second nature to Carissa. Back in Meadow Ridge, she had often tended to her own injuries with ease.

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Rafael watched Carissa's careful and quick movements. She lowered her head, and he could see her slightly curled, thick eyelashes trembling gently.

A subtle emotion stirred in his heart-she rarely displayed such a gentle demeanor.

Looking at the two layers of bandages wrapped around his hand, he couldn't help but chuckle.

"Isn't it just a minor wound? It's nothing seri

"How is it nothing serious?" Carissa looked up with wide eyes. "If it's not treated properly, it could get infected. I've experienced it before. Look, let me show you my hand."

She extended her hand, revealing a small scar on the back, about half the length of a finger. The scar was faint, just a trace of pink left behind.

"It got infected back then. It was only after my master treated it with medicine that it healed, but it left a scar. Your hands are so beautiful. If they were scarred, it wouldn't look...well, as good."

As she spoke, she suddenly remembered that when she had cleaned his wound earlier, his hands were already covered in many small scars.

Rafael's expression relaxed, and he teased her, "What's the point of a man having beautiful hands?"

Carissa replied earnestly, "It's definitely better than having ugly ones."

He smiled, his voice softening. "Then I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I have plenty of scars on my body."

"Those are all your battle honors," Carissa said as she washed her hands, her face brightening with a smile. "I have my own battle honors too."

"Are your wounds all healed?" he asked, concerned.

She had also been injured on the battlefield.

"They're fine now. I'm proud of them," Carissa said as she ordered someone to clear the items away and prepare some refreshments. "Invite Anthony and the others to join us for coffee."

Pearl entered and said, "Mr. Carter has already invited them to the main hall for refreshments. They'll be leaving shortly. Sebastian told them that Lord Ryan would be sleeping for a while, so they said they'll return tomorrow instead of waiting here."

"Alright, then," Carissa nodded, letting out a small sigh of relief. "It's just as well that they're leaving. I don't really have much to talk about with them. If they stayed, I'd have to keep them company." After all, leaving the guests and hiding away wouldn't be right.

Rafael asked, "And what about me? Do you feel uneasy with me here?"

"Why would I?" she replied, surprised. "You and I are not only comrades but also betrothed. We'll have to get along in the future."

Then she smiled sweetly and added, "Besides, how could a guild senior feel uneasy in front of her guild junior?"

Rafael rolled his eyes slightly, now the one feeling a bit uneasy.

Just then, the refreshments were brought in. Carissa personally poured him a cup of coffee.

"Even though you always tell me not to thank you, my family truly owes you a debt of gratitude. Without you, Ryan would still be under those people's control. He would still be forced to beg on the streets, get beaten up, looked down upon, and go hungry and cold.

As she spoke, her eyes reddened.

"I've heard from Anthony that disabled beggar children like him rarely live past ten. The constant beatings, the cold, and hunger make them sickly and weak. A simple illness could easily claim their lives, or a particularly cold winter night might be the end of them. Every year, the Royal Citadel collects the bodies of countless beggars. They die in all sorts of ways, but most often, it's from hunger or freezing to death."

Her voice choked with emotion.

"I can't bear to think about it. If Ryan hadn't met you, he might have died quietly, his body discarded in some desolate wilderness, becoming food for wild dogs. I've had nightmares about it-so many times." Rafael couldn't stand to see her cry; it pained him to see her like this.

"Why dwell on such thoughts? You

family's blessings from above must have protected him and led me to him. How else could it be that my eyes landed on him among so many scattered beggar children, and I even recognized him?"

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Carissa looked up, her lashes wet with tears.

"In any case, I will always remember this kindness. No matter what you ask of me in the future, as long as it doesn't go against my conscience, I will do it for you."

Rafael's expression turned serious. "I don't need you to do anything for me. If there's one thing I ask, it's that you live well. Live happily, live a life full of joy. That's how you can honor your family's spirits in heaven."

Her heart trembled slightly, and a single tear slid down her cheeks. Her tearful eyes were filled with confusion. "Why are you so good to me?"

Rafael felt his heart breaking at the sight of her like this. He recalled her fierce and determined figure on the battlefield, yet now, she was so delicate and vulnerable. He couldn't hide the tenderness in his eyes and had to turn his face away.

"Why wouldn't I treat you well? You're my betrothed, after all. We're going to spend our lives together."

Carissa should have been moved, but she had heard similar words before.

Thinking about that memory was an unpleasant thought, and she didn't know why it surfaced now. She said in an unusually soft tone, "I've heard those words before, but we all know what happened in the end."

She didn't understand why she was speaking like this-it was so disheartening. She wasn't usually so emotional, but recently, in front of him, she felt incredibly emotional.

Had a fox spirit possessed her? She was acting like a wretched woman.

Rafael's gaze sharpened. "Don't compare me to him. With me, there's only 'till death do us part.' There will be no divorce, and certainly no abandonment. I swear it. If you don't believe me, I'll spend a lifetime proving it."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Till death?"

He met her gaze with his clear, bright eyes. "I'll go before you if I can help it. That way, you won't have to take care of an old man plagued with aches and pains."

Carissa couldn't help but burst out laughing. She couldn't picture him old, but she imagined he might look something like the late king. Then again, the late king hadn't been that old when he passed. Sniffing, she felt even more emotional. "I'll remember everything you've said. If you ever go back on your words, this guild senior of yours won't forgive you."

Rafael let out a soft groan. "Are you really hoping I'll go before you?"

Carissa thought for a moment. "Well then, how about we go together?"

He thought for a moment. "Deal."

Lulu had been listening to their conversation. Their words initially moved her, but the more she listened, the more uneasy she felt.

She couldn't help but say, "Your Highness, my lady, why are you talking about such ominous things? Life

and death and all that... Are you two planning to follow each other to the grave?"

At Lulu's words, the two exchanged a glance. Carissa's cheeks flushed, and she shot Lulu a glare.

"Don't talk nonsense."

Rafael slowly sipped his coffee, using it to hide the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Follow each other to the grave? Of course, that was the plan. They would be husband and wife-their lives would be intertwined and never be separated again, whether in life or death.

That had been his dream before he went to the Southern Frontier and asked for her hand in marriage. He'd envisioned swiftly conquering the Southern Frontier and returning to the capital to marry the girl he adored.

On the battlefield of the Southern Frontier, he had truly fought with everything he had. He had won victory after victory, driven by the single thought of expelling the Sandoria people from the Southern Frontier as quickly as possible.

But then, after conquering thirteen cities, news arrived from the capital that Carissa had already married

Barrett.

When Rafael heard the news, he felt like a cold bucket of water had been thrown over him. It froze him from head to toe and pierced his heart with a cold, unshakable pain.

He couldn't understand it.

Melanie had clearly agreed, saying that Carissa would be his bride once he returned victorious.

Why had Melanie gone back on her word? Did she not hear about his continuous victories?

At that time, Rafael had already regarded Hector as his future father-in-law and was determined to complete the unfinished business that Hector had left behind.

But why?

The thought of that bright, lively girl marrying someone else had felt like a knife twisting in his heart. For a time, the pain was almost unbearable.

But the war was urgent, leaving him little time to dwell on his sorrow.

Every day, Rafael told himself to let it go. Carissa was married now, and he should just wish her happiness.

Though it was excruciatingly difficult, her happiness mattered more than anything else.

Chapter 269

When Rafael saw Carissa on the Southern Frontier battlefield, his emotions were a whirlwind of complexity.

He would often, almost subconsciously, bring up her husband, but she would avoid the topic. That was when he realized that Barrett might not be treating her well.

This thought alone had made his fists clench countless times.

It wasn't until later that he learned she had divorced. Barrett hadn't recognized her worth.

It was absurd!

Rafael committed the name to memory-Barrett Warren, a man unworthy of the gift of sight.

The fury Rafael felt then was so intense that he wished he could gouge out Barrett's eyes for causing her such pain,

After the anger subsided, Rafael felt a surge of selfish joy, though he carefully masked it. He couldn't let anyone know he was secretly celebrating.

During the days they fought side by side, he had to constantly conceal his feelings. He had to remind himself repeatedly not to let even a trace of personal emotion show in his eyes. Three years on the Southern Frontier battlefield saw his emotions rise and fall, only to rise again.

Even when he returned to the capital and faced the manipulations of his elder brother, Rafael didn't mind. There was no war, and he didn't care about military power-he only wanted her.

He understood Savaldor's suspicions, but that was how relationships between royal siblings were-never entirely pure. There would always be a mix of mistrust and brotherly affection. As long as they maintained the appearance of harmony, it was enough.

If things ever deteriorated into nothing but suspicion and resentment, he would simply take Carissa and Ryan to his fief, far from the capital. The king may reign high above, but his authority could only stretch so far, and they would live their days in peace.

As Rafael thought about this, he glanced up at Carissa just in time to catch her gaze.

Their eyes met, and his heart skipped a beat.

Carissa's cheeks flushed with heat, but her heart sank. She realized she had developed feelings for him, while his heart belonged to someone else.

How could this mismatched affection have happened to her? She had originally planned to marry him just

to get by.

She never imagined that after enduring a failed marriage, she would fall for another man so quickly.

Lulu noticed her lady's face suddenly flush as red as a sunset, and asked curiously, "My lady, why is your face so red?"

Carissa quickly lifted her cup, lowering her head to drink in an attempt to hide her flushed face.

Lulu was increasingly oblivious, and she didn't know when to hold her tongue!

Rafael sipped his coffee as well, though the curve of his lips was all too obvious.

Ryan truly was his lucky star. From now on, Rafael would never allow anyone to mistreat Ryan. In fact, if he didn't spoil the boy, it would be a testament to his own lack of heart. Perhaps there really was some divine intervention at play.

That fleeting glimpse when he first spotted Ryan stirred something within him. At that time, he only felt a resemblance, but he probably wouldn't have thought too much about it if things were different. After all, the Duke of Northwatch's family had been wiped out, and Carissa was the only one left. However, because of Rafael's strong obsession, he was convinced that it was indeed Ryan, and he went after the boy without any hesitation. However, the chaotic circumstances eventually caused him to lose track of Ryan. In the end, though, he managed to find Ryan.

Rafael couldn't help but wonder if Melanie had regretted her decision that day, and she had decided to bring him and Carissa together after all from her place in the heavens.

He liked to think that was the case.



Deep down, Rafael would never be able to overcome the fact that Melanie had chosen Barrett over him. He knew, in his heart, that he wasn't inferior to Barrett. Setting aside social status, Rafael knew he surpassed Barrett in martial prowess, character, and even appearance.

Well, maybe he shouldn't dwell on appearance and stature-those weren't things a man should concern himself with.

Casting another glance at Carissa, he set down his cup and said, "It's time for me to return to the Supreme Court, I've just taken up the position, and there's a lot to hand over. I'll come back tomorrow after work to see Ryan."

Carissa stood up. "Alright, I'll walk you out."

Rafael smiled, his eyes gleaming as he softly replied, "Okay."

As they walked slowly towards the door, she noticed that he was lightly dressed and reminded him, "The weather's getting colder. You should wear something warmer."

"Okay. You too-take care of yourself."

Her concern warmed his heart. So, this was what it felt like to have someone who cared about his well-

being.

There was a time after she got married when he felt like a lone wolf. But now, his heart was filled with a sweet warmth. The loneliness had vanished, and whenever he had a free moment, all he wanted to do was rush over to Northwatch Estate.

He wanted to give her the best things in the world, to make up for all the hardships she had endured.

Chapter 270

The next day, Ryan woke up. He was still in pain, but it wasn't as unbearable as when his bone was being

reset.

Despite the discomfort, he forced a smile to reassure Carissa and the rest of the family.

His resilience was heart-wrenching to witness.

Even so, the acupuncture in his throat continued. Rowan insisted it couldn't be stopped. Since they didn't do it yesterday because of the bone-setting, it couldn't be skipped today.

Especially since Ryan had cried out during the procedure, which had proven the treatment to be effective. So, both Sebastian and Rowan believed that the poison in Ryan's body was being expelled faster than expected.

Additionally, the withdrawal symptoms from the Peony Bliss had not resurfaced, which greatly surprised Sebastian. He knew that even for adults who committed to quitting, the process could take over six months.

Yet, here was a seven-year-old child with such an indomitable will.

In a private conversation with Rowan, Sebastian said, "The Duke of Northwatch's family truly has no weaklings. The spirit of this family is something to be admired."

Rowan wholeheartedly agreed. After treating Ryan for so long, he had grown attached to the boy, almost as if he were his own son. He felt both pity and admiration for the boy, and naturally hoped Ryan would recover quickly.

During Ryan's recovery, Carissa didn't leave his side. Although many visitors came to call, she had Frederick turn them all away, except for her cousin Leona and her husband, Samuel.

Samuel was a strikingly handsome man with a touch of arrogance. As the heir of the Earl of Gracehold and one of the top-scoring scholars, he had every right to be proud.

Marrying a prince's daughter only added to his accomplishments, especially since Leona was gentle and virtuous, and deeply in love with him.

At twenty-three, Samuel had already reached heights many people could only dream of achieving in a lifetime.

He had reason to be proud.

In fact, he was proud enough to look down on Carissa

His assessment of her was fair enough-she had a noble family background, was beautiful, skilled in martial arts, and had distinguished herself on the battlefield. Her traits were rare among women.

But in his eyes, noblewomen like her, who sought to remarry so soon after a divorce, were even rarer.

Samuel believed that a woman should remain loyal to one man for life. Divorce had been her first mistake, and now, remarrying was an even greater one

Though young, Samuel held very traditional views. He made no effort to hide his disdain for Carissa.

If it were just that, Carissa would have let it slide

With a smile out of consideration for Leona, Carissa wouldn't have taken it to heart, much less expressed any dissatisfaction.

However, it seemed Samuel had no intention of hiding his discontent with Carissa.

After she mentioned Ryan's situation to Leona, he remarked, "Lady Sinclair, aren't you worried that your actions will make it difficult for Ryan to establish himself in the capital? It might be better to let the Klein family raise him."

Carissa was momentarily stunned, thinking he was referring to the possibility of Ryan living in Hell Monarch Estate in the future. Though she didn't appreciate him addressing her as "Lady Sinclair," given her close relationship with Leona, she was willing to overlook it.

Still, out of respect for Leona, she explained, "Since His Highness rescued Ryan and is fond of him, he thought of personally raising him by his side. Ryan is happy with this arrangement as well. Moreover, I'm his biological aunt. Having him stay at Hell Monarch Estate with me isn't exactly relying on others. How could that make it difficult for him to establish himself in the capital?"

Samuel cast her a dismissive glance, and said, "That's not what I meant. It's a blessing for Ryan to be educated by His Highness. What I'm referring to is your second marriage after your divorce. It tarnishes the Duke of Northwatch's family's reputation. Even if Ryan inherits the title in the future, his name will carry a stain. The judgmental eyes of society will diminish his standing."

Leona twisted a handkerchief in her hands, and interjected softly, "Dear, please don't be disrespectful to my cousin."

Samuel replied, "If you still regard her as your cousin, then it's only right to offer honest advice. Honest words are often unpleasant, but I wonder if Lady Sinclair can accept them."

Carissa smiled. "If it's honest advice, of course, I can accept it. But may I ask, what do you mean by the judgmental eyes of society?"

With an air of cold arrogance, Samuel replied, "The judgmental eyes of society are naturally grounded in the principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness—the mainstream values that people are expected to uphold."