

REMEMBER,
IT'S ONLY A
GAME...

CARAVAN

STEPHANIE
GARBER



FLATIRON
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To my mom and dad, for teaching me the meaning of unconditional love



THE ISLE OF TRISDA

It took seven years to get the letter right.

Year 50, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Mister Caraval Master,

My name is Scarlett, but I'm writing this letter for my sister, Donatella. It's going to be her birthday soon and she would very much like to see you and your amazing Caraval players. Her birthday is the 37th day of the Growing Season and it would be the most wonderfulest birthday ever if you came.

Most hopefully,

Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle of Trisda

Year 51, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Mister Caraval Master,

It's Scarlett again. Did you get my last letter? This year my sister says she's too old to celebrate birthdays, but I think she's just upset you never came to Trisda. This Growing Season she'll be ten and I'll be eleven. She won't admit it but she'd still very much like to see you and your wondrous Caraval players.

Most hopefully,

Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle of Trisda

Year 52, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Caraval Master Legend,

I'm sorry I got your name wrong in those other letters. I hope that's not why you haven't come to Trisda. My little sister's birthday wasn't the only reason I've wanted you to bring your amazing Caraval players here, I'd love to see them too.

Sorry this letter is short, my father will be angry if he catches me writing to you.

*Most hopefully,
Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle of Trisda*

Year 52, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Caraval Master Legend,

*I just heard the news and I wanted to send my
condolences. Even though you still haven't come to Trisda
or responded to any of my letters, I know you're not a
murderer. I was very sorry to hear you won't be traveling
for a while.*

*Most kindly,
Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle of Trisda*

Year 55, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Master Legend,

*Do you remember me, Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle
of Trisda? I know it's been a few years since I wrote. I
heard you and your players have started performing
again. My sister told me you never visit the same place*

twice, but a lot has changed since you visited here fifty years ago, and I truly don't believe anyone would like to see one of your performances more than I would.

Most hopefully,

Scarlett

Year 56, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Master Legend,

I heard you visited the capital of the Southern Empire last year and changed the color of the sky. Is that true? I actually tried attending with my sister, but we're not supposed to leave Trisda. Sometimes I believe I'll never go farther than the Conquered Isles. I suppose that's why I've wanted you and your players to come here so badly. It's probably futile to ask again, but I do hope you'll consider coming.

Most hopefully,

Scarlett, from the Conquered Isle of Trisda

Year 57, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Master Legend,

*This will be my final letter. I'm going to be married soon.
So it's probably best you and your players don't come to
Trisda this year.*

Scarlett Dragna

Year 57, Elantine Dynasty

Dear Scarlett Dragna,

from the Conquered Isle of Trisda—

*Congratulations on your upcoming nuptials. I am sorry
I cannot bring my players to Trisda. We're not traveling
this year. Our next performance is by invitation only, but
I would look forward to meeting you and your fiancé if
you could find a way to leave your isle and join us.*

Please accept the enclosed as a gift.

From the pen of Caraval Master Legend

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Scarlett's feelings came in colors even brighter than usual. The urgent red of burning coals. The eager green of new grass buds. The frenzied yellow of a flapping bird's feathers.

He'd finally written back.

She read the letter again. Then again. And again. Her eyes took in each sharp stroke of ink, every waxy curve of the Caraval master's silver crest—a sun with a star inside and a teardrop inside of the star. The same seal was watermarked onto the enclosed slips of paper.

This was no prank.

“Donatella!” Scarlett plunged down the steps into the barrel room in search of her younger sister. The familiar scents of molasses and oak snaked up her nose, but her scoundrel of a sibling was nowhere to be found.

“Tella—where are you?” Oil lamps cast an amber glow over bottles of rum and several freshly filled wooden barrels. Scarlett heard a moan as she moved past, and she caught bits of heavy breathing as well. After her latest battle with their father, Tella had probably drunk too much, and now dozed somewhere on the floor. “Dona—”

She choked on the last half of her sister's name.

“Hullo, Scar.”

Tella flashed Scarlett a sloppy grin, all white teeth and swollen lips. Her honey-blond curls were a mess as well, and her shawl had fallen to the floor. But it was the sight of the young sailor, with his hands wrapped around Tella's waist, that made Scarlett stutter, "Did I interrupt something?"

"Nothing we can't start up again." The sailor spoke with a lilting Southern Empire accent, far smoother-sounding than the sharp Meridian Empire tongues Scarlett was accustomed to.

Tella giggled, but at least she had the grace to blush a little. "Scar, you know Julian, right?"

"Lovely seeing you, Scarlett." Julian smiled, as cool and seductive as a slice of shade in the Hot Season.

Scarlett knew the polite response would be something along the lines of "Good to see you, too." But all she could think about were his hands, still coiled around Tella's periwinkle skirts, playing with the tassels on her bustle, as if she were a parcel he couldn't wait to unwrap.

Julian had only been on the isle of Trisda about a month. When he'd swaggered off his ship, tall and handsome, with golden-brown skin, he'd drawn almost every woman's eye. Even Scarlett's head had turned briefly, but she'd known better than to look any longer.

"Tella, mind if I pull you away for a moment?" Scarlett managed to nod politely at Julian, but the instant they'd woven through enough barrels to be out of his hearing she said, "What are you doing?"

"Scar, you're getting married; I would think you'd be aware of what occurs between a man and a woman." Tella nudged her sister's shoulder playfully.

"That's not what I'm talking about. You know what will happen if Father catches you."

"Which is why I don't plan on getting caught."

“Please be serious,” Scarlett said.

“I am being serious. If Father catches us, I’ll just find a way to blame it on you.” Tella gave a tart smile. “But I don’t think you came down here to talk about that.” Her eyes dropped to the letter in Scarlett’s hands.

The hazy glow of a lantern caught the metallic edges of the paper, making them blaze a shimmery gold, the color of magic and wishes and promises of things to come. The address on the envelope lit up with equal luster.

Miss Scarlett Dragna

Care of the priests’ confessional

Trisda

Conquered Isles of the Meridian Empire

Tella’s eyes sharpened as she took in the radiant script. Scarlett’s sister had always liked beautiful things, like the young man still waiting for her behind the barrels. Often, if Scarlett lost one of her prettier possessions, she could find it tucked away in her younger sister’s room.

But Tella didn’t reach out to take this note. Her hands remained at her sides, as if she wanted nothing to do with it. “Is this another letter from the count?” She spat out the title as if he were the devil.

Scarlett considered defending her fiancé, but her sister had already clearly expressed her thoughts on Scarlett’s engagement. It made no difference that arranged marriages were very much in fashion throughout the rest of the Meridian Empire, or that for months the count had faithfully sent Scarlett the kindest letters; Tella refused to understand how Scarlett could marry someone she’d never met in person. But wedding a man she’d never seen frightened Scarlett far less than the thought of staying on Trisda.

“Well,” Tella pressed, “are you going to tell me what it is, then?”

“It’s not from the count.” Scarlett spoke quietly, not wanting Tella’s sailor friend to overhear. “It’s from the master of Caraval.”

“He wrote you back?” Tella snatched the note. “God’s teeth!”

“Shhh!” Scarlett pushed her sister back toward the barrels. “Someone might hear you.”

“Am I not allowed to celebrate now?” Tella retrieved the three slips of paper hidden within the invite. Lamplight caught their water seals. For a moment they glowed gold, like the edges of the letter, before shifting to a dangerous shade of bloody crimson.

“Do you see that?” Tella gasped as swirls of silver letters materialized across the page, slowly dancing into words: *Admit One: Donatella Dragna, of the Conquered Isles.*

Scarlett’s name appeared on the other.

The third only contained the words *Admit One*. Like the other invites, this was printed above the name of an isle she’d never heard of: *Isla de los Sueños.*

Scarlett imagined this nameless invitation was meant for her fiancé, and for a moment she thought of how romantic it could be to experience Caraval with him once they were married.

“Oh, look, there’s more!” Tella squealed as new lines of script appeared on the tickets.

To be used once, to gain entrance into Caraval.

Main gates close at midnight, on the thirteenth day of the Growing Season, during the 57th year of the Elantine Dynasty. Anyone who arrives later than this will not be able to participate in the game, or win this year’s prize of one wish.

“That’s only three days away,” Scarlett said, the bright colors she’d felt before turning to her usual dull shades of gray disappointment. She should

have known better than to think, even for a moment, that this could work out. Maybe if Caraval were in three months, or even three weeks—*sometime* after she was married. Scarlett's father had been secretive about the exact date of her wedding, but she knew it would not be in less than three days. Leaving before then would be impossible—and far too dangerous.

"But look at this year's prize," said Tella. "A wish."

"I thought you didn't believe in wishes."

"And I thought you'd be happier about this," Tella said. "You know people would kill to get their hands on these?"

"Did you not see the part where he said we need to leave the isle?" No matter how badly Scarlett longed to go to Caraval, she needed to get married even more. "To make it in three days, we'd probably have to leave tomorrow."

"Why do you think I'm so excited?" The glimmer in Tella's eyes grew brighter; when she was happy, the world turned shimmery, making Scarlett want to beam along with her and say yes to whatever her sister desired. But Scarlett had learned too well how treacherous it was to hope in something as illusive as a wish.

Scarlett sharpened her voice, hating herself for being the one to crush her sister's joy, but better she than someone who would destroy even more than that. "Were you also drinking rum down here? Have you forgotten what Father did the last time we tried to leave Trisda?"

Tella flinched. For a moment she looked like the fragile girl she pretended so hard not to be. Then, just as quickly, her expression changed, pink lips curving once again, shifting from broken to unbreakable. "That was two years ago; we're smarter now."

"We also have more to lose," Scarlett insisted.

It was easier for Tella to brush aside what had happened when they'd attempted to go to Caraval before. Scarlett had never told her sister the entirety of what their father had done as retribution; she'd not wanted Tella to live in that much fear, to constantly look over her shoulder, to know there were worse things than their father's standard forms of punishment.

"Don't tell me this is because you're afraid it will interfere with your wedding." Tella gripped the tickets tighter.

"Stop." Scarlett grabbed them back. "You're going to crinkle their edges."

"And you're avoiding my question, Scarlett. Is this about your wedding?"

"Of course not. It's about not being able to get off the island tomorrow. We don't even know where this other place is. I've never heard of Isla de los Sueños but I know it's not one of the Conquered Isles."

"I know where it is." Julian stepped out from behind several rum barrels, flashing a smile that said he'd make no apologies for listening in on a private conversation.

"This doesn't concern you." Scarlett waved him away with her hand.

Julian looked at her strangely, as if a girl had never dismissed him. "I'm only trying to help. You've never heard of this isle because it's not part of the Meridian Empire. It's not ruled by any of the five Empires. Isla de los Sueños is *Legend's* private isle, only about two days' journey, and if you want to go there I can smuggle you onto my ship, for a price." Julian eyed the third ticket. Thick lashes lined his light brown eyes, just made for convincing girls to lift their skirts and open their arms.

Tella's words about people who'd kill for the tickets echoed in Scarlett's mind. Julian might have had a charming face, but he also had that Southern

Empire accent, and everyone knew the Southern Empire was a lawless place.

“No,” Scarlett said. “It’s too dangerous if we get caught.”

“Everything we do is dangerous. We’ll be in trouble if we get caught down here with a boy,” Tella said.

Julian looked offended at being referred to as a boy, but Tella went on before he could argue. “Nothing we do is safe. But this is worth the risk. You’ve waited your whole life for this, wished on every fallen star, prayed as every ship came into port that it would be that magical one carrying the mysterious Caraval performers. You want this even more than I do.”

Whatever you’ve heard about Caraval, it doesn’t compare to the reality. It’s more than just a game or a performance. It’s the closest you’ll ever find to magic in this world. Her grandmother’s words played in Scarlett’s head as she looked at the slips of paper in her hands. The Caraval stories she adored as a young girl never felt more real than they did in that moment. Scarlett always saw flashes of color attached to her strongest emotions, and for an instant goldenrod desire lit up inside her. Briefly, Scarlett let herself imagine what it would be like to go to Legend’s private isle, to play the game and win the wish. Freedom. Choices. Wonder. Magic.

A beautiful, ridiculous fantasy.

And it was best to keep it that way. Wishes were about as real as unicorns. When she was younger Scarlett had believed her nana’s stories about Caraval’s magic, but as she’d grown, she’d left those fairy tales behind. She’d never seen any proof that magic existed. Now it seemed far more likely that her nana’s tales were the exaggerations of an old woman.

A part of Scarlett still desperately wanted to experience the splendor of Caraval, but she knew better than to believe its magic would change her

life. The only person capable of giving Scarlett or her sister a brand-new life was Scarlett's fiancé, the count.

Now that they were no longer held up to the lamplight, the script on the tickets had vanished and they looked almost ordinary again. "Tella, we can't. It's too risky; if we try to leave the isle—" Scarlett broke off as the stairs to the barrel room creaked. The heavy tread of boots followed. At least three sets.

Scarlett shot a panicked look at her sister.

Tella cursed and quickly made a motion for Julian to hide.

"Don't disappear on my account." Governor Dragna finished his descent, the sharp odor of his heavily perfumed suit spoiling the pungent scents of the barrel room.

Quickly, Scarlett shoved the letters into her dress pocket.

Behind her father, three guards followed his every step.

"I don't believe we've met." Ignoring his daughters, Governor Dragna reached a gloved hand toward Julian. He wore his plum-colored gloves, the shade of dark bruises and power.

But at least he still had the gloves on. The picture of civility, Governor Dragna liked to dress impeccably, in a tailored black frock coat and striped purple waistcoat. He was in his mid-forties but he'd not let his body turn to fat like other men. Keeping with the latest fashion, he kept his blond hair tied back with a neat black bow, showing off his manicured eyebrows and dark blond goatee.

Julian was taller, yet the governor still managed to look down upon him. Scarlett could see her father appraising the sailor's patched brown coat, and his loose breeches tucked into scuffed, knee-high boots.

It said much about Julian's confidence that he didn't hesitate before offering the governor his own, ungloved hand. "Good to meet you, sir.

Julian Marrero.”

“Governor Marcello Dragna.” The men shook hands. Julian attempted to pull away, but the governor held on tight. “Julian, you must not be from this isle?”

This time, Julian did hesitate. “No, sir, I’m a sailor. First mate of *El Beso Dorado*.”

“So, you’re only passing through.” The governor smiled. “We like sailors here. It helps our economy. People are willing to pay a lot to dock here, and they spend more money while they visit. Now, tell me, what did you think of my rum?” He waved his free hand around the barrel room. “I imagine that’s what you were down here tasting?”

When Julian didn’t answer right away the governor pressed harder. “Was it not to your liking?”

“No, sir. I mean, yes, sir,” Julian corrected. “Everything I’ve tried is very good.”

“Including my daughters?”

Scarlett tensed.

“I can smell from your breath you weren’t sipping any rum,” said Governor Dragna. “And I know you weren’t down here playing cards or saying prayers. So tell me, which of my daughters were you tasting?”

“Oh, no, sir. You have it wrong.” Julian shook his head, eyes widening as if he would never do something so dishonorable.

“It was Scarlett,” Tella broke in. “I came down here and caught them in the act.”

No. Scarlett cursed her foolish sister. “Father, she’s lying. It was Tella, not me. I’m the one who caught them.”

Tella’s face blazed red. “Scarlett, don’t lie. You’ll only make this worse.”

“I’m not lying! Father, it was Tella. Do you think I’d really do something like this, weeks before my wedding?”

“Father, don’t listen to her,” Tella interrupted. “I heard her whispering about how she thought it would help with her nerves before the wedding.”

“That’s another lie—”

“Enough!” The governor turned to Julian, whose brown hand was still firmly grasped in his perfumed plum glove. “My daughters have the bad habit of being dishonest, but I’m sure you’ll be more forthcoming. Now, tell me, young man, which of my daughters were you down here with?”

“I think there’s been some sort of mistake—”

“I don’t make mistakes,” Governor Dragna cut him off. “I’ll give you one more chance to tell me the truth, or—” The governor’s guards each took a step forward.

Julian’s eyes darted to Tella.

With a sharp shake of her head, Tella mouthed the name: *Scarlett*.

Scarlett tried to grab Julian’s attention, tried to tell him he was making a mistake, but she could see the resolve in the sailor’s face even before he answered. “It was Scarlett.”

Reckless boy. He no doubt believed he was doing Tella a favor, when he was doing quite the opposite.

The governor released Julian, and removed his perfumed plum gloves. “I warned you about this,” he said to Scarlett. “You know what happens when you disobey.”

“Father, please, it was only a very brief kiss.” Scarlett tried to step in front of Tella, but a guard pulled Scarlett back toward the barrels, grabbing her roughly by the elbows and yanking them behind her, as she fought to protect her sister. For it wasn’t Scarlett who would be punished for this

crime. Every time Scarlett or her sister disobeyed, Governor Dragna did something awful to the other as punishment.

On his right hand, the governor wore two large rings, a square amethyst and a sharply pointed purple diamond. He twisted both of these around his fingers, then he pulled his hand back and struck Tella across the face.

“Don’t! I’m the one to blame!” Scarlett screamed—a mistake she knew better than to make.

Her father struck Tella once more. “For lying,” he said. The second blow was harder than the first, knocking Tella to her knees as streams of red poured down her cheek.

Satisfied, Governor Dragna stepped back. He wiped the blood from his hand on one of his guard’s vests. Then he turned to Scarlett. Somehow he appeared taller than before, while Scarlett felt as if she had wilted in size. There was nothing her father could do that hurt her more than watching him hit her sister. “Don’t disappoint me again.”

“I’m sorry, Father. I made a foolish mistake.” It was the truest thing she’d said all morning. She might not have been the one Julian had *tasted*, but once again she had failed to protect her sister. “I won’t repeat it.”

“I hope you mean that.” The governor put his gloves back on, then reached into his frock coat and retrieved a folded letter. “I probably shouldn’t give this to you, but maybe it will remind you of everything you have to lose. Your wedding will be ten days from today, at the end of next week, on the twentieth. If anything gets in the way of it, more than your sister’s face will bleed.”