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By Stephanie Garber

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Caraval

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The Once Upon a Broken Heart Series

Once Upon a Broken Heart

The Ballad of Never After

A Curse for True Love

Alchemy of Secrets

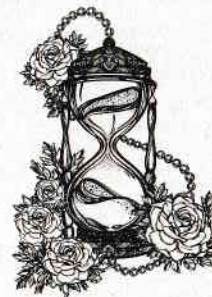
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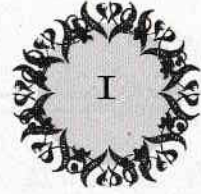
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The Isle
Of Trisda

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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 wonderful 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



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.'