

War Song 1481

Chapter 1481

Salvador returned to court, looking noticeably better than before.

Some of the older court officials couldn't hold back their tears-especially Irvin, who had nearly caused a disaster. Now, seeing Salvador's condition improving and knowing that Sebastian had entered the palace for treatment, there was finally a glimmer of hope.

As expected, the call to establish a crown prince was strong among the court officials.

However, Salvador didn't immediately agree. He simply stated that his three sons were still young and that it would be best to wait a little longer.

Among those urging for the appointment of a crown prince were some of Malcolm and Gerald's students. However, they merely echoed the sentiments of others- none of them took the lead in pushing for it.

Salvador had never truly believed Malcolm's claim that he only wished to serve as a loyal subject.

The Quinton family had indeed been keeping a low profile lately, but that was simply the result of being put in check.

Although he didn't agree to name a crown prince, Salvador did make a notable announcement: he appointed the Hell Monarch, Rafael, as the Deputy Royal Tutor. He would be responsible for teaching the princes equestrian skills and martial arts.

This was a clear sign that preparations for establishing a crown prince were officially underway.

The title of Deputy Royal Tutor was largely honorary-Rafael would remain in his position as Chief Judge.

Even so, everyone could sense that Salvador was laying the groundwork for the future. And within that plan, Rafael played a key role.

That realization was reassuring.

Unknowingly, the Hell Monarch had become the pillar of the nation. He was an unshakable shield-defending the kingdom from external threats while maintaining order within.

Meanwhile, the treaty signed between the Southern Frontier and Sandoria had been delivered to the capital. Sandoria pledged never to invade Starhaven's borders. Of course, treaties between nations were often little more than scraps of paper-easily torn apart when convenient.

In that sense, their guarantee of peace meant far less than the tangible benefits they had agreed to provide.

As part of the agreement, Sandoria would compensate Starhaven each year with 5,000 cattle, 5,000 sheep, 500 fine horses, 10,000 bushels of grain, and 100,000 silver coins.

Sandoria had always been an agricultural powerhouse with fertile land well-suited for farming. However, years of warfare and constant drafts had left vast fields abandoned. Now, with war reparations to pay-both in grain and silver-they would need time to recover. For the next 10 or 20 years, they likely wouldn't dare provoke another conflict.

Besides, the Hell Monarch was still young. No matter how ambitious others might be, when faced with true power, all they could do was prop up their pillows and dream.

Meanwhile, some of the military officers from the Southern Frontier began returning to the capital in batches. They took the opportunity to bring their wives and children back to the Southern Frontier with them.

That land was rich and fertile-surely, it would soon blossom into something magnificent.

After the busy farming season, Salvador announced that the Verdant Hunt would be held in early May.

This hunt, usually held in spring, was not merely a tradition-it had a purpose. Salvador intended to use it as an opportunity for his three sons to make their first public appearance before the court officials.

It had been years since a Verdant Hunt was last held. Back when Sigmund was alive, he had loved the event. He had used it to strengthen the bond between the royal family and the ministers.

Salvador had revived the tradition in his first two years on the throne, but with war breaking out year after year, the hunt had been set aside.

The princes had spent most of their lives within the palace, rarely meeting the court officials. This time, it was their moment to be seen.

The Verdant Hunt was a grand affair-before it began, there would be a ceremonial offering of game to the heavens. The court officials' families would also attend, making it a lively occasion.

Naturally, as queen, Kylie was expected to make an appearance as well.

By now, she understood that she could no longer rely on her maternal family. Instead, she planned to use the Verdant Hunt to forge new alliances among the court officials' wives and families.

Although she was still officially under house arrest, in the days leading up to the hunt, she copied numerous scriptures in preparation for the offering. Then, dressed in thin, plain garments, she knelt outside Serenity Palace, asking for forgiveness.

She knew that her house arrest would be lifted for the Verdant Hunt-but she had

to create the proper pretext. She needed to appear humble, to admit fault, to appease both Salvador and Victoria.

By chance, Grace, Sylvia, and a few others were already at Serenity Palace. Seeing Kylie kneeling, they joined her in pleading for mercy on her behalf.

Of course, this was nothing more than a social courtesy-everyone knew Kylie would be released soon, and it cost them nothing to lend her their voices.

Victoria wasn't the type to make things difficult for no reason. After Kylie had knelt for a while, and with others speaking on her behalf, Victoria finally allowed her inside. She was given a cup of hot coffee but no further words.

There was nothing more to say. Everything had already been made clear-

whether Kylie chose to listen or not was up to her.

Chapter 1482

As the newly appointed Deputy Royal Tutor, Rafael spent the days leading up to the Verdant Hunt instructing the three princes in archery.

Connor should have started learning long ago, but under Kylie's care, he had been coddled like a precious jewel. She couldn't bear to let him do anything too strenuous.

Even after moving to Serenity Palace, where his education was properly arranged, he remained sluggish and unmotivated. Keeping up with his academic studies was already a struggle-catching up in both areas was out of the question. He lacked talent, and worse, he had no desire to work hard.

More often than not, he found creative ways to slack off.

His biggest improvement so far was that he no longer threw tantrums when sent to the study. At the very least, he now had a passable attitude toward learning.

With Connor's laziness, it was Ryan who benefited most from the martial arts lessons. He picked up some basic skills but never pushed himself too hard— Sebastian had warned him to pace himself. A rushed recovery could lead to another leg injury, which would do more harm than good.

So when Rafael began teaching them archery, Ryan already had some foundation. Within a few days, he was making solid progress.

On the other hand, Connor struggled just to pull the bowstring. After a short while, he was complaining of pain in every joint and muscle, wanting to give up. The only reason he didn't run off was Rafael's stern presence, though his practice was half- hearted at best.

Caden spent two days working on his draw before moving on to actual shooting. Though his arrows didn't hit the target, he had the strength and took the training seriously-never once did he complain.

Rafael observed him for a few days before offering praise. However, a seasoned warrior could never be fooled-Caden had clearly trained before. His strength had been developed long ago, and a simple squeeze of his arm confirmed it.

Then there was little Cecil, barely three years old, who was only there for fun. He couldn't even draw a bow, so he simply took arrows and tossed them one by one. They didn't go far, but he found it amusing each time he threw one, he giggled happily.

Naturally, Rafael didn't force him to train. After letting Cecil play for a while, Rafael switched him to simple strength exercises. At this age, Cecil was full of energy- whatever his uncle told him to do, he did it happily. Of course, he never lasted long.

If a task was fun, he would do it a little longer. If not, he would go back to tossing arrows again.

Though it was said they would be training for days, in truth, the sessions lasted little more than two hours each day, with academics remaining their primary focus.

The goal wasn't to turn them into skilled hunters-only to ensure they could at least draw a bow properly in front of the court officials.

Salvador watched from a distance every day, observing their progress. As expected, Connor never failed to disappoint him.

Kylie also came daily, bringing the children sweets, pastries, and juice.

Each time, she would call Connor over first. Then, she would wipe his sweat and remind him to listen to his uncle.

But these reminders took up a great deal of time. Kylie fussed over Connor for so long that by the time he actually got back to practice, nearly 15 to 30 minutes had gone by. Even during the session, she would call him over to drinkwater and eat pastries.

By the end of the lesson, Connor's actual training time barely amounted to an hour.

Kylie wasn't entirely biased, though she also prepared refreshments for Caden and Cecil. But every time, Caden would take only a sip of water before returning to his practice.

On the other hand, Cecil was far more cooperative. With his chubby little hands, he eagerly grabbed whatever treats were in front of him, stuffing them into his mouth with delight. His words were just as sweet-every bite was accompanied by an affectionate "Mother, you're the best."

Of course, Cecil wasn't a threat to Kylie. So, she would take time to play with him, teasing him as he tossed arrows. Sometimes, when an arrow barely left his feet, she would laugh along with him, the picture of a doting mother with her children.

Grace and Sylvia never came in person, only sending attendants to watch from afar. Once training ended, their people would escort the children back to the palace.

However, Kylie remained.

Connor still lived in Serenity Palace, and she had few chances to see him. Naturally, she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible to strengthen their bond.

She feared that if she stayed away for too long, Connor would forget her—or that someone might turn him against her.

Connor was her only hope.

She couldn't afford to let anyone drive a wedge between them.

Salvador saw all of this, but he didn't interfere.

There was no point in forbidding Kylie from visiting. The real issue wasn't her presence-it was

Connor's attitude. The

child had no real commitment to his training. The only reason he

complied at all was out of fear of his uncle's authority.

After watching for a few days, Salvador sighed and said to Derek, "Perhaps some birds will never learn to fly, and they never want to even try."

And so, he began to wonder-was there any meaning in forcing Connor?

Some people were born without ambition, arriving in this world with broken wings.

He had to admit it.

His eldest son was dull, lazy, and hopelessly unmotivated.

And so, his gaze began to shift-slowly but surely toward Caden.

Chapter 1483

Though Salvador had trained in martial arts, he lacked Rafael's keen eye for detail. He hadn't noticed that Caden had prior training-he only saw a son who was diligent, disciplined, and improving rapidly.

A brilliant child.

If only he had been born to Kylie!

It would have made things so much easier. Salvador wouldn't have to hesitate- he could have simply chosen Caden.

The day before the Verdant Hunt, Salvador summoned Rafael to the royal study.

"What do you think of my three sons?" he asked.

Rafael answered bluntly.

"Prince Connor has no interest in martial arts. His talent is poor, and his attitude is indifferent. Even after days of training, he still holds the bow incorrectly. Every time I correct him, he makes the same mistake again the next day.

"Prince Caden is strong, skilled, and takes archery seriously. He already had a foundation before this, so he's nearly on par with Ryan.

"As for Prince Cecil, he's just there to play."

Salvador paused. "A foundation? Caden's trained before?"

"I checked his arms and bone structure," Rafael said. "He's practiced martial arts before specifically archery."

Salvador's expression eased slightly. "He's talented, hardworking... A child worth teaching."

But talent alone didn't make a crown prince. If ability was all that mattered, Salvador wouldn't be sitting on the throne-Rafael would.

Salvador's insistence on naming his eldest son born from the queen as heir... wasn't it, in part, a way of justifying his claim to the throne?

He studied Rafael, lost in thought.

Had their father ever regretted choosing him as heir? Especially when Rafael's brilliance began to shine?

When he saw such an exceptional son rising before him... Did he feel even a twinge of regret?

Now, the roles were reversed.

Now, Salvador was the one making the choice and he finally understood how impossibly difficult it was.

The day of the Verdant Hunt arrived.

A grand procession of carriages set out for Everwood Park.

Located on the outskirts of the capital, Everwood Park was a vast hunting ground reserved for the royal family, its rolling hills strictly off-limits to commoners. At its heart lay a pristine lake, its waters

ove

reflecting the endless blue sky and drifting white clouds-a breathtaking sight.

By the lakeshore, the families of court officials set up camp. Elegant ladies, adorned in fine silks and exquisite jewelry, sat surrounded by maids and attendants, their laughter bright as they chatted amongst themselves.

To make the hunt more exciting, Meredith presented an elaborate gold and glass hair clasp as the prize-whoever caught the most game would win it.

Kylie had also come prepared. She produced a pair of finely crafted gold bangles and an ornately carved ebony jewelry box as additional prizes.

Grace and Sylvia still held authority over the harem, so they couldn't afford to be too reserved.

To show her generosity, Sylvia brought out a dagger she had obtained years ago-sharp enough to slice through iron with ease. She declared that she wanted to drink deer blood today, and that whoever managed to hunt a deer would win the dagger.

Grace went even further, presenting an entire set of gemstone hairpieces, each one dazzling enough to steal the breath of anyone who laid eyes on them. The sight alone was enough to make the ladies around her nearly salivate with desire.

The other concubines joined in the fun, each offering up precious trinkets of their own to add to the excitement.

Rare and coveted as these prizes were, everyone knew the truth—no matter how many treasures were laid out, the real victor would be Hell Monarch's princess

consort.

Who could possibly compete with Hell Monarch himself?

Before long, the young men rode onto the field, their horses galloping through the open expanse.

Carissa had yet to arrive. As the

commander of the Mystic Army, she

was overseeing security today,

ensuring the safety of everyone

present. At the moment, she and

Michael were inspecting the

lakeside, checking whether the area had been properly treated with sulfur powder—this season was when venomous snakes were most active.

Only after completing the inspection did she ride toward the forest's entrance, where she spotted Rafael. He was dressed in fitted hunting attire of deep blue, sitting with effortless ease atop his horse.

Her brows furrowed slightly.

Sebastian had warned that Rafael must not use his inner force. While horseback riding posed no issue, the real danger lay in the hunt itself—if he got carried away and instinctively used his Lightfoot Skill, it could spell trouble.

Carissa rode closer, lowering her voice in warning. "Your priority is to protect His Majesty. Don't get greedy for prey."

Seated atop his horse, Salvador glanced over, flanked by Louis and Thomas.

At Carissa's words, Thomas laughed. "No need to worry, Your Grace. His Majesty has us by his side. His Highness can go on his killing spree as he pleases."

Salvador chuckled dryly. "As if I need him to protect me. I've hunted in Everwood Park more times than I can count. I know every hill and every dip in the land like the back of my hand."

Chapter 1484

Sebastian's treatments were indeed effective. In just half a month, Salvador's complexion had improved his face no longer carried that sickly, waxen pallor but instead held a faint flush of color. His strength had also returned significantly. If not for the occasional bouts of pain, he might have believed himself fully

recovered.

Sebastian wasn't present today, but the Royal Medical Department had sent several physicians. They claimed that since there were many people around, they needed to better guard against any unexpected incidents.

However, the real reason for Sebastian's absence was obvious-he didn't want the court officials and their families to realize just how much Salvador relied on him.

Connor and Caden, guided by guards from the Royal Guard, sat atop their horses. The two young boys each had a bow slung across their backs and looked remarkably serious, as if they truly belonged on the hunt.

On the other hand, Felix held Cecil in his arms atop the horse. Dressed in a thin red jacket, Cecil's cheeks flushed with excitement-he looked utterly charming.

At Salvador's command, a hundred horses galloped forward, their thundering hooves shaking the very earth. The young men charged into Everwood Park, sending flocks of startled birds into the sky.

Carissa felt uneasy and immediately urged her horse forward, following alongside Michael.

She had been to Everwood Park before, but only as a child. She had sat by the lakeside with the other noblewomen while Hector participated in the hunt.

This was her first time entering the forest itself.

Of course, a royal hunting ground held little true danger—no ferocious beasts were lurking within.

Though today's hunt was officially centered around Salvador, he intended for Connor and Caden to take the spotlight.

As soon as they entered the forest, Salvador reined in his horse and gestured for the two boys to take their turn.

In a clearing ahead, a cage held a few mountain rats—a test target for the young princes.

Connor was visibly nervous. He managed to pull his bowstring back, but as he released, the arrow slipped from his fingers and tumbled to the ground. He tried again and again, but the same thing happened. With each failed attempt, his panic grew. As he turned to see his dad and the gathered court officials watching him, his composure broke entirely.

Tears welled up in his eyes, and he suddenly burst into loud sobs.

The change in Salvador's expression was instant. His face darkened, his disappointment visible to all.

During his final day of archery practice at the palace, Connor had at least been able to draw his bow and shoot. His shots lacked power, but after extra training from Rafael, he had at least managed to land arrows near the target, even if he hadn't hit the mark.

But today, the cage was placed so close that as long as he could shoot normally, he would at least strike somewhere nearby.

Yet he had let his nerves get the better of him. His lack of mental fortitude was clear. And instead of gritting his teeth and trying again, he had given up entirely after just two or three failures-breaking down in front of everyone.

Even if he hadn't hit the target, as long as he had shown determination, the court officials might have seen him in a different light.

Now, he was nothing short of a joke.

Rafael couldn't help but sigh inwardly. He had given Connor the same advice just yesterday: If the arrows didn't fly true, it wasn't a

problem. He was to keep going

even

if his arms ached, even if the arrows didn't hit their mark.

What mattered was for Connor to say, "I'll practice harder and next year, I'll be able to bring down the game."

That would show the confidence he needed, and that alone would be enough. But here he was, crying.

It also made Rafael appear unfit as the Deputy Royal Tutor.

Salvador didn't care that his son was in tears. He only nodded at Caden. "Shoot the mountain rat."

Caden took a deep breath, focused, and pulled his bow with all his might. When he released, the arrow flew swiftly, embedding itself in the mountain rat's body with a sharp thud.

The onlookers clapped, their admiration for Caden growing.

But with Connor still crying, the applause quickly died down. No one dared speak further.

The faces of the Quinton family were awkward, especially Malcolm's. He tilted his head and sighed softly.

"Take him back. He needn't come into the woods again," Salvador said coldly.

Connor was swiftly lifted off his horse by one of the Royal Guards. Overcome by shame and frustration, he sobbed uncontrollably, his cries echoing through the forest, reaching the lakeside.

Kylie was deep in conversation with

several noblewomen. When she heard the crying, she was startled. Thinking something had happened, she jumped to her feet and ordered,

"Quick, go check on Co

Before Lydia or the young chamberlain beside her could do anything, they saw

the Royal Guard returning with Connor in tow.

Kylie hurried over, her heart leaping as she checked him over for injuries. When she found none, she let out a relieved breath. But seeing him sobbing pitifully, she turned to the Royal Guard.

"Weren't they supposed to be hunting? Why did you bring him back so soon? And

why is he crying?"

She assumed he had been forced to return.

The Royal Guard bowed and said, "His Majesty ordered me to bring Prince Connor back."

Kylie's face tightened at the news. "How could that be? He's the eldest prince! He must stay by His Majesty's side."

The Royal Guard lowered his head respectfully. "His Majesty said Prince Connor is not to return to the forest."

Chapter 1485

Kylie's heart sank at the Royal Guard's words. She turned back to the ladies and noblewomen present, noting the questioning and curious glances in their eyes. She forced a smile, though it didn't reach her eyes.

"Connor is unwell. He'll try again next year."

With that, she signaled Lydia to find out what had happened, then took Connor's hand and led him back to the tent to calm him down.

Connor was consumed by his grievances and cried pitifully, unable to get a word out. All Kylie could make out was, "Everyone's picking on me, even Dad...even Dad..."

Not long after, Lydia returned with the details, relaying them all to Kylie.

Kylie could hardly believe what she was hearing.

She looked down at Connor, whose swollen eyes made him appear even more pitiful. But this time, she didn't feel her usual maternal sympathy.

Instead, she felt cold.

No mother believed her child was truly stupid. Most would think their child simply hadn't tried hard enough. Even if he didn't succeed, she would still say he was clever, just lazy. As long as he tried, he could catch up.

But now, Kylie was beginning to doubt if she had borne a fool.

Her voice was sharp with anger, and she couldn't hold back.

"After all this practice, how can you not even be better than your younger brother? He's three years younger than you, and he managed to hit that mountain rat! But you can't even keep an arrow from falling to the ground? How can you be so stupid, huh?"

At her words, Connor cried even harder.

"Why are you still crying? That's all you do! You're a grown boy, yet you still can't stop sobbing! After all this effort to bring you out here, you've just embarrassed me in front of everyone!" Kylie shrieked.

Connor's cries upset her deeply. In a moment of irritation, she swatted his bottom twice.

"Your Majesty, please lower your voice. There are so many people outside," Lydia quickly intervened.

Kylie pushed Connor away in frustration. Though she lowered her voice, the anger still seeped through. "Everyone is watching him act this foolishly. Who's going to respect him now? And what about the Hell Monarch? Doesn't he care? If Connor can't do it, why isn't anyone guiding or helping him? This was just supposed to be an appearance. Well, now he's shown his face and lost his dignity too!"

Just then, Marjorie's voice came from outside, "Your Majesty, may I come in?"

Kylie's irritation flared anew. Thinking of how her family had stood by and done nothing, she didn't feel like meeting them. But with so many people outside, if she refused to see her mom, everyone would know there was trouble between them.

She suppressed her anger and said coldly, "Come in."

Lydia pulled back the curtain and bowed respectfully as she invited Marjorie inside.

Once Marjorie entered, Connor, who had gradually quieted his sobs, suddenly burst into a louder fit of crying. He threw himself into his grandmother's arms, wailing uncontrollably.

Growing impatient, Kylie snapped, "Mom, what are you doing here? He was starting to calm down!"

Marjorie crouched down, gently placing her hands on Connor's shoulders.

"Let me ask you-did your grandmother ever tell you what to do when you feel like crying because of a setback?" Marjorie asked, referring to Victoria.

Connor stopped crying for a moment, his face scrunched in confusion, His sobs turned into sniffles, as he answered,

"Grandmother said... If I want to cry, I

should repeat three times in my

mind that this isn't worth crying

over. If I cry, I'll get nothing."

"That's right," Marjorie said warmly. "And what happens after repeating it three

times? What else did she teach you?"

Connor's sobs came in broken, hitching breaths as he said, "She said if there's a problem, I should think of a way to solve it. If I'm not smart enough, I should ask the adults for help and listen to their advice. And if I don't do well in advise.

something, like when Mr. Young hit me on the hand for not getting my lessons right, she said I should work harder like I'm a fool-if they study for two hours, I study for four."

Kylie's face darkened. "You're not a fool."

She had just called her son foolish in frustration, but when anyone else did it, she couldn't bear it. Even if it were Victoria speaking, she would feel the same sting.

Marjorie ignored her entirely, continuing to ask Connor, "So, about today's matter, can you solve it on your own? Do you need to ask an adult for help? Tell Grandma what happened, and I'll offer you my advice."

Gently guided by her questions, Connor spoke about what had happened in the woods earlier.

"I was just too scared... Dad was watching me so closely. My hands were shaking, my whole body was shaking. couldn't muster any strength. It took all I had to pull the bowstring, and when I tried to Rock the arrow, my mind went blank. I forgot everything Uncle Rafael taught me. My stance was wrong, and the arrow just fell to the ground."

Kylie was frustrated beyond measure. "How could you forget? Your dad and your uncle were both there! What were you so afraid of? What was so terrifying?"

Marjorie shot Kylie a cold look, her gaze sharp. "What's the use of saying all this now? When it was time to teach and guide, where were you? What's the point of reproaching him now?"

Chapter 1486

Kylie bristled at the continued reproach.

"And what good is saying all this now? What we need to do is figure out how to turn this around! Now, His Majesty won't let Connor into the woods. Today, Lady Grace's son outshone him completely-are you satisfied now? If you have a solution, say it! If all you're doing is offering empty words, then there's really no need for that."

Kylie's resentment toward her natal family was always present, always simmering just below the surface.

Marjorie continued speaking softly to Connor. "When His Majesty returns from the hunt and all the court officials are gathered, you should go to him. Acknowledge that you're not the most gifted and that you've been lazy in the past. But after this failure, you've come to understand where you went wrong.

"From now on, you'll change your attitude, learn diligently from Mr. Young and Prince Rafael, and never again disappoint your grandmother or your dad. You'll ask your dad and the court officials to keep watch over you and ensure you improve."

Kylie's eyes widened, her expression full of disbelief. "Are you mad? You want him to admit in front of His Majesty and all the court officials that he's not gifted and that he's been lazy? Do you want him to be even more embarrassed? Is that your goal—to humiliate him again?"

Marjorie replied calmly, "You can't hide the truth. Everyone can see what his abilities and talents are. The court officials have seen it all. It's better to face it honestly. Instead of hiding his flaws, it would be more impressive for him to acknowledge them openly, reflect on his mistakes, and make an effort to change. That will leave a better impression on them."

"No! Don't tell me how to raise my son!" Kylie snapped, her voice sharp. She waved her hand dismissively. "Leave, now!"

Marjorie hesitated, still wanting to say something more, but Kylie's cold tone cut her off.

"To borrow your earlier words-when I needed your help, you weren't there. Now, when I don't need your advice, you show up with your empty words-what's the point? I don't need it. Go."

Marjorie left quietly, her face clouded with disappointment.

Kylie slumped into a seat, her hand pressed to her forehead as she began to cry.

Seeing his mom weep, Connor's tears, which he had been holding back, began to flow freely. But this time, remembering his grandmother's advice, he stifled his sobs, unwilling to let another sound escape.

After a few moments of silent crying, Connor wiped his eyes and began to think, desperately trying to come up with a way to fix the situation.

For the time being, there was no good solution, but Kylie still had to go out and socialize. After all, she couldn't let everyone only remember Grace and Sylvia, forgetting that she, the queen, still existed.

She had Lydia touch up her makeup, then glanced at Connor and said coldly, "Wipe your tears and come with me to greet the guests. After that, you can go play with the children from the noble families, but don't you dare bully anyone."

"I'm not going. I just humiliated myself I don't want to go anywhere!" Connor protested, tears still streaking his face. All he wanted was to hide somewhere, away from everyone.

Kylie's expression darkened. "You have no choice. If you won't take charge of your future, who else will?"

Without waiting for a response, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him toward the door.

As soon as they stepped outside, every eye at the lakeside turned toward them.

Connor, still fragile and sensitive, felt the weight of all the gazes bearing down on him. It seemed like everyone was laughing at him. In an instant, he wrenched his arm free from Kylie's grip and began to run toward the woods.

Kylie's face flushed with fury. It was utterly humiliating!

Realizing that calling him back would only lead more defiance, she decided to let him be. She ordered some attendants to follow him as he wandered near the woods, allowing him to calm down before bringing him back.

Max had just finished his patrol when he heard that Connor had run into the forest alone. He

immediately asked if anyone had gone with him. Hearing that only two young attendants had followed, he quickly mounted his horse and rode after the boy.

Today's hunt had opened the forest to everyone. While there were no dangerous

beasts, running into wild dogs or boars could still be extremely dangerous.

As for the noblewomen and court

line

officials' families present, most had no idea what had actually happened. They only knew that Connor had gone into the woods, returned in tears, and then run off again. To them, it seemed like nothing more than a child's tantrum.

Their concerns lay with the hunt-who would capture the most game?

Meanwhile, Sylvia, Grace, Penelope, and the other concubines seized the opportunity to catch up with their families, chatting about everyday

matters. Although noble everyday et

lden

could enter the palace to offer their greetings, having the whole family together like this was rare and precious occasion.

Hannah brought up matters about the workshop to Sylvia.

While Sylvia wasn't particularly interested, she was happy to play her part in maintaining appearances. Hearing that Camila was an exceptional embroiderer, she ordered two summer dresses from Camila.

Chapter 1487

Compared to Sylvia, Grace was far more approachable-kind and friendly. Even when with her family, she was constantly surrounded by people seeking her attention. She greeted everyone warmly, often offering small gifts to the young ladies, which earned her their genuine affection.

On the other hand, Kylie was no less popular. As the queen, her position commanded respect, and many came to pay their respects or simply make conversation. Yet despite her dignified stature, she still saw herself as the center of attention. She temporarily pushed aside her earlier displeasure and warmly engaged in conversation with everyone.

In such gatherings, people naturally sought to build relationships, either to further their standing or to scout potential matches for their sons among the noblewomen present.

Ever conscious of her position, Kylie had brought many gifts today, eager to present herself as a benevolent and approachable queen.

Before long, a Royal Guard approached with news that Salvador had caught a wild boar, marking a successful start to the hunt.

Kylie's delight was evident. She used this as an excuse to hand out even more rewards, further solidifying her image as a gracious ruler.

Lydia smiled and said, "I had thought the Hell Monarch would catch the first prey, but it seems His Majesty's strength has prevailed, and he secured the first prize."

The others chimed in with praises and the mood lightened considerably, the atmosphere growing more relaxed as they enjoyed the moment.

However, many people understood that the first prey had to be claimed by the king before others could join in and make their own catches. Still, there was no denying that a wild boar was a noteworthy prize and the success was worth celebrating. Earlier rumors of Salvador's illness seemed unfounded, as he appeared to be in perfect health now.

Though pleased by the news, Kylie couldn't shake the worry that Connor still hadn't returned. Her concern grew, and she sent someone to search for him once

more.

Meanwhile, Carissa was patrolling the area, and she spotted Connor slipping under the fence. He had snuck back into the hunting grounds, and she caught him just as he tried to make his way past.

There were distinct boundaries in the forest, with danger lurking beyond the fences-poisonous snakes roamed the area, and it was much riskier out there. To rejoin the main group of hunters, Connor had to venture beyond the barriers where the real game could be found.

Grabbing him by the collar, Carissa scolded him sharply, "What are you doing sneaking in here alone? Where's your guard? Didn't they follow you?"

Connor, his eyes still red and swollen from crying, didn't dare cry in front of Carissa. Instead, he lowered his head and answered, "They were chasing me, but

I ignored them. If I go back now, Mom will scold me."

Carissa led him over to a large rock and sat him down beside her. "Then why not play with the other children? Why come back into the woods?"

Connor lowered his head, his voice barely audible as he muttered, "I wanted to ask Dad for another chance to try."

Carissa studied him carefully. She

could see the change in

him-Victoria's upbringing had softened his once spoiled and arrogant nature. However, his ability to handle pressure and his mental resilience were still lacking. Years of laziness had ingrained poor habits, and it was clear he struggled to adjust his mindset.

Her voice softened as she replied, "Why do you want to try again? Aren't you afraid of failing again?"

"I am, but I want to try to overcome it." He sniffed, clutching at the sleeve of his tunic as he fought back tears. "I don't want to disappoint Grandmother and Dad...and I don't want to be laughed at."

Carissa sat beside him, her presence

calm and reassuring. "That's a good way to think. But this time, it doesn't matter. If you fail, own up to it-admit that you didn't try hard enough. Then apologize to your grandmother and your dad. After that, just focus on practicing with your uncle. You're still young. Mistakes can be fixed. Keep working at it and you'll see results, even if it takes time. Effort always pays off, one way or another."

Connor looked up at her, a puzzled expression crossing his face. "Grandmother said the same thing."

"Because it's the truth," Carissa replied simply.

He sat in silence for a moment, his mind wrestling with her words. Then, with a sigh, he muttered, "But right now, I'm worse than my second brother. If I try hard, he'll try hard too, and I still won't be able to beat him."

Carissa shook her head gently. "You don't need to compare yourself to anyone. Everyone is different. Just compare yourself to who you were yesterday. Trust in yourself. And when you feel like giving up, remind yourself to try just a little longer."

Carissa wasn't sure if he fully understood her words. She wasn't one to soothe children with false comfort, but she knew Salvador had never given up on him, so she kept talking, hoping that something might stick.

She believed Salvador's expectations were not too high. As long as Connor adjusted his attitude, everything else would fall into place.

Chapter 1488

After a while, Max finally arrived. Upon seeing Carissa and Connor together, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Commander Sinclair, we need to get Prince Connor back right away. Her Majesty is worried, and she's already sent people looking for him. However, the attendants are too afraid to go into the fenced area, so they've been calling from the outside." Connor clearly looked conflicted and didn't want to go back.

"Your mom cares about you. She'll be worried. You should return," Carissa said gently.

Connor pouted. "She doesn't really love me. She only scolds me. She's a bad person."

Carissa looked at him, somewhat surprised. Kylie doted on him—even spoiled him—so he should have been able to feel that love.

Now, after just a couple of scoldings, Kylie was suddenly the bad person?

However, as Carissa thought back to her time at the Pathfinders Guild, she understood. There, no matter how strict Everett was, no matter the punishments, she never dared to complain. But if Adrian scolded her even a little, she would sulk and feel as though he was a bad person.

Everett had once gleefully said to Adrian, "This is the result of overindulgence— too much pampering lowers one's authority."

It was true, but the difference was in the nature of the affection. Adrian, while loving, made sure Carissa learned when it was time to focus and trained her when

it was time to practice. He was strict but fair.

Kylie's affection for Connor, on the other hand...

Carissa reflected that Kylie must have endured great hardships in her youth. Now, as the queen, and with Connor being the king's firstborn, Kylie probably didn't want him to face the same struggles she had.

It was natural for parents to project their own childhood experiences onto their children.

Carissa comforted Connor a little longer before asking Max to take him back. Though he was reluctant, Connor didn't dare defy his aunt's request. With his head hung low, he followed Max, his steps slow and unwilling.

As she watched him go, Carissa couldn't help but recall how domineering he had been when bullying Ryan. There had been a noticeable change in him. Victoria's personal guidance had certainly made a difference.

Max escorted Connor back but didn't mention to Kylie that the child had secretly entered the enclosure. Instead, he simply reported that Carissa had found him.

When Kylie saw Connor return, his clothes were dirtied and the hem was covered in cockleburs. She immediately rose and led him inside, instructing Lydia to help him change.

Though Kylie had been occupied with socializing, her mind had never fully left Connor. She had worried he might have caused trouble, or worse, gotten into danger. Now that he was safe, her heart finally eased. She couldn't bear to scold him just yet.

Once he was changed, she exchanged a glance with Lydia. After a brief

hesitation, Lydia went to bring him some water.

"Here, drink this, Your Highness," Lydia said.

Thirsty from his run, Connor took the cup eagerly and drank it down in large gulps. Within moments of

the wa his stomach began to ache. The pain

intensified, soon accompanied by violent vomiting.

Kylie immediately sent for the royal physician, Dorian Judd, who examined Connor and asked about his symptoms. After a moment of consideration, he spoke.

"It seems he has eaten something that upset his stomach. What did he eat today? Are these symptoms recent?"

Connor was too preoccupied with pain and clutching his stomach. How could he answer?

"He mentioned having a slight stomachache when we set out this morning, but it wasn't serious-just some weakness all over," Lydia said. She thought for a moment and added, "Oh, right. He ate a few pieces of honey cake this morning. I made them yesterday, so maybe they went bad."

Dorian rummaged through his

medicine chest and took out a few pills. "Give him these for now. Later, we'll prepare a medicinal soup for

him to take in the evening. Witho

or three days of rest, he should recover fully."

"Thank you, Mr. Judd," Lydia said, taking the medicine from him.

She quickly administered a pill to Connor, whose face had gone pale, drained of

all color.

Dorian hesitated, as though he had something more to say, but Lydia had nodded and said, "I'll see you out."

With that, she discreetly slipped a gold coin into his sleeve.

Dorian let out a small sigh but didn't protest. He returned the nod and left the

room.

With the physician gone, the ladies of the court would surely be eager to check on Connor. Word had already spread that he had been feeling unwell that morning- weak, vomiting, and with stomach pain.

So, it wasn't hard to understand why he had performed poorly.

However, when Connor had been brought back from the forest earlier, Kylie had mentioned he was unwell.

It left the people wondering: If he was so ill, why did he even come to hunt in the first place?

Chapter 1489

In royal matters, people seldom delve too deeply.

Especially since Connor was still young, his failure today wasn't seen as anything of real consequence. After all, he was the queen's son, destined for great honor in the future-no one would judge him too harshly over a small setback.

As everyone saw him suffering in pain, many began suggesting various remedies. Some had oils to apply on his stomach, while others offered their own suggestions of concoctions.

Even Sylvia and Grace came in to inquire after him. After all, they had brought their children along and surely carried some medicine with them. Seeing Connor's discomfort, they offered their remedies.

However, Kylie made no use of their offers. Her goal was simply to have them see Connor's current condition so they would report it to their families later.

In short, Connor's failure needed an explanation, a reason to let everyone know that he wasn't incompetent-it was just due to his physical discomfort.

After everyone had checked on Connor, they left. Marjorie lingered, offering to stay and help. However, Kylie politely insisted that she leave.

Lydia was heartbroken as she gently rubbed Connor's stomach, secretly wiping away tears with her other hand.

The water she had given him earlier contained a trace of poison. The poison powder was originally used to repel mosquitoes and venomous insects. In large doses, it could be fatal, but in small doses, it only caused pain and vomiting.

As a royal physician, Dorian should have been able to detect it. However, he was cowardly, timid, and greedy for money he wouldn't say a word.

This was a plan Kylie came up with in a moment of desperation.

"It will pass soon," Kylie said quietly, her face a mask of complex emotions. Seeing her son suffer also caused her pain, but there was little she could do about it now.

Without a word, Lydia continued her ministrations and then went to prepare some medicine.

As the sun dipped lower, the hunting party returned, still in high spirits. Everyone had expected the Hell Monarch to have caught the most game, but to their surprise, he returned empty-handed.

It was Thomas who had the most impressive haul.

Not a single deer had been caught, and Sylvia shook her head with a wry smile. "It seems I won't be able to offer any prizes today."

She had planned to make a pair of deer-hide boots for Cecil, but hearing of a fox caught, she mused instead about crafting a small fox-fur cloak.

Salvador, clearly in high spirits, seemed completely unaffected by Connor's failure. He acted as though he had already forgotten about the incident entirely.

Caden dismounted from his horse, looking weary but still smiling as he made his way toward Grace. He had merely followed the hunting party, not having caught a single animal himself.

Grace laughed softly and took his hand. "Tired?"

"Not at all. It was great fun," Caden replied with a grin.

Meanwhile, Cecil, full of energy, rushed toward Sylvia. He had a handful of wildflowers clutched in his hand. "Mom, look at these flowers I picked! Aren't they beautiful?"

Sylvia quickly scooped him up into her arms, a playful scolding in her voice. "You're so noisy, don't you worry about tripping over?"

Cecil proudly presented the flowers, though by the time he reached her, they were mostly crushed, with only two or three still intact. Despite being a bit crushed, the mix of

colors was still quite nice

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Sylvia recognized only the wild chrysanthemums and clover, while the rest were unfamiliar to her. She set the chrysanthemums and clovers aside and handed the rest to a nearby servant.

"Take Prince Cecil and have him wash his hands and face. Then, find a physician and check if any of these are poisonous. If they are, make sure to give him an antidote right away."

"Of course!" the maid by Sylvia's side replied, taking the flowers with her.

As she spoke, her daughter, Phoebe, approached them. The girl pulled out a handkerchief to wipe her younger brother's face. "Look at you, you little ragamuffin! What did you manage to catch today with Dad?"

Cecil blinked up at her, wide-eyed with surprise. "You make it sound so easy, Phoebe. If even Uncle Rafael couldn't catch anything, how could I? I'm still too little."

Salvador, surrounded by his court officials, came into earshot and laughed. "Oh? So, you'll be able to catch something once you're grown up, is that it?"

Cecil smiled brightly, his eyes full of mischief. "Of course! I'll practice my archery every day, and next year when you bring me hunting again, I'll catch something too."

Salvador laughed heartily, clapping him on the back. "Good! You may not have the skills yet, but your ambition is commendable."

The court officials around them all joined in the laughter, nodding and offering praises for Cecil's spirit.

Chapter 1490

As Kylie stepped out, she caught sight of the scene before her, and a shadow seemed to fall across her heart. The feeling was difficult to describe.

She approached, seizing the opportunity with the court officials present, and spoke up.

"Prince Connor's failure today was indeed a disappointment. However, he had been suffering from stomach pains and weakness since this morning. I've already called for a royal physician and had medicine prepared."

Salvador's brow furrowed. "What did the royal physician say?"

"He believes it's due to something Prince Connor ate. He's taken the medicine,

and he's feeling somewhat better now," Kylie responded quickly.

Salvador's response was indifferent. "Then take good care of him."

"Of course!" Kylie answered, stealing a glance at the others in the room.

Though their expressions were unreadable, Salvador didn't seem particularly angry. Perhaps this matter was already behind them.

She smiled and was about to congratulate Salvador on hunting the wild boar, but then she heard him say, "His failure today has nothing to do with his illness. If he couldn't catch anything, then he simply couldn't. But to cry and carry on about it— what kind of behavior is that?"

Kylie's smile froze on her lips.

Salvador had kicked Connor out of the woods because he was crying? Wasn't today supposed to be a special day for them to compete and show their skills?

Kylie paused, momentarily taken aback. Perhaps Salvador didn't believe her. She quickly turned to instruct someone to bring Connor out.

With the help of Ryan and Lydia, Connor was led forward.

As soon as Ryan had heard of Connor's discomfort, he rushed to check on him. Although there had been tension between them in the past, their time spent together in recent days had allowed a bond to form.

Connor was doing much better, though his face was still pale and he seemed drained. Upon seeing his dad, a flicker of fear crossed his eyes. But remembering the encouraging words of Carissa and Marjorie, he found the strength to approach and fell to one knee.

"Father, I know I've been lazy and careless in my training. I didn't practice my archery properly with Uncle Rafael, and that's why I failed today. I've embarrassed you, and I understand my mistake. I'll work harder from now on and train diligently with Uncle Rafael. I won't disappoint you again."

Hearing this, Salvador's expression softened noticeably. "Good. Remember what you've said today. The other officials have heard it as well."

Connor's eyes brightened as he looked up. "I understand, Father. I won't fail again."

"Rise, then." Salvador's lips curved slightly. "Set your attitude right. Learning takes time, but as long as you're willing to work hard, progress will come."

"Yes, Father. I will learn," Connor responded earnestly, bowing low again before standing up with Ryan's assistance.

Kylie watched this with a flicker of confusion in her eyes, though she felt a quiet relief deep within.

She had expected the matter to pass, but little did she know, after the Verdant Hunt and their return

the palace, Lydia rushed in with ot

urgent news. Dorian had been

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summoned to Salvador's study for questioning.

Kylie shot to her feet, her face paling. "That day... Did Mr. Judd realize anything?"

"Most likely, he did," Lydia replied, concern lining her voice. "After all, the poison in the powder is different from food poisoning. He should have been able to tell the difference. And the prescription he gave along with the medicine, was correct."

A wave of panic swept through Kylie. "What should we do now? Will he speak?"

Lydia paused, thinking carefully before answering, "He took the bribe, so he wouldn't say anything willingly. But if His Majesty figures it out, Mr. Judd might be too frightened to keep silent."

Kylie's thoughts drifted back to Salvador's attitude on the hunting grounds by the lake—he hadn't seemed suspicious at all. In fact, he had appeared quite satisfied.

Could someone have said something?

"Prince Connor said he saw Chief Lewis and Lady Carissa after he ran off. Could they have said something to His Majesty?" Kylie said.

Lydia hesitated, her brow furrowing. "I don't think so. They didn't know anything about it."

She paused again, then added,

"Actually, the day Prince Connor

went to the hunt, he seemed full of energy and didn't show signs of being unwell. Maybe His Majesty thought something was off, and that's why he called for Mr. Judd to question him?"

Kylie sank back into her seat, her mind racing. The use of the poison had been a hasty decision, a quick fix without much consideration. So, she hadn't thought it through.

At the time, she figured it would be enough to deceive everyone.

Now, looking back, she realized it couldn't withstand even the slightest suspicion.

Overwhelmed with regret, she muttered, "If I had known this would happen, I should have just followed my mom's advice. It would have saved us all this trouble!"