

War Song 1531

Chapter 1531

There was little doubt in the minds of the assembled company that the equestrian competition, though seemingly designed for the military men, had a deeper purpose to showcase how much Connor had improved since the Verdant Hunt.

As for the explanation that the eldest prince's misstep during that time had been caused by stomach pains, many later came to see the flaw in that reasoning. Had he truly been unwell, surely he would have shown signs of it earlier. Indeed, he had been as lively as ever that morning.

And yet, it was not so much a mistake as a lapse in composure. To miss his mark and then break down in tears-where was the resolve expected of a prince in such a moment?

Upon hearing about the competition, Kylie felt a surge of satisfaction. She hastened to Serenity Palace and implored the queen dowager to permit a brief meeting between her and her son. This time, Victoria agreed, but with the condition that she be present. No private meeting was to take place.

Though Kylie had hoped to speak privately with Connor, particularly to explain the matter of her poisoning him, she had no choice but to accept the queen dowager's terms. A meeting, however brief, would suffice.

She arrived in the evening and attended to Victoria during her supper. After waiting for two hours, she finally saw Connor and Ryan return, hands clasped, with Caden following behind. It was so cold, yet their foreheads were drenched in sweat, which showed they had just finished training.

The moment Kylie laid eyes on her son, her heart clenched and her eyes welled with tears. It had been so long since she had seen him. He had changed so much, now thinner and taller.

Connor and Ryan were laughing as they entered the room. But when the eldest prince noticed his mother and grandmother sitting together, his smile slowly faded. He approached and greeted Victoria first, then softly greeted Kylie. His tone was markedly cool, the warmth and his usual affection gone.

Following his lead, Ryan and Caden greeted the two women and withdrew to stand at a distance.

However, Kylie paid them no mind. Her tears flowed freely as she could scarcely believe what she saw. Her son was no longer filled with joy at the sight of her. Instead, he acted cold and distant. In the past, he would have run to her and sought comfort in her arms.

It was clear that Victoria's influence had successfully driven a wedge between them.

The queen did not allow her resentment to show, but on the inside, her anger toward the queen dowager burned fiercely. There had been a misunderstanding between Kylie and Connor, one that could have been easily resolved if only they had been allowed to meet.

Now, it seemed that Victoria had used that matter to drive a wedge between them, causing the growing distance she now experienced.

"Come to me, my son," Kylie said, her voice trembling. She dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief, wiping away the tears. "It has been so long since I have seen you. Let me look upon you, my dear."

Connor had grown thin, and the

sharpness of his features, along with his dark brows and eyes, now made him resemble Salvador in many training, he

ways Yet, with Rafael's many

also carried a subtle air of

command, a quiet authority that belied his age.

He took a step forward. "I am here, Mom. You can see me quite clearly from where you sit."

"No, come closer," Kylie insisted.

She reached for his arm and pulled him toward her, enveloping him in her arms without hesitation. This time, her tears fell with a sense of helplessness.

"Why do you act so distant with me? Have you come to resent me for not being able to visit you? I have longed to see you, my son, day after day, but alas..."

As her voice faltered, she quickly silenced herself a silent message to both Victoria and Connor about her silent frustration and helplessness.

The queen dowager took a sip of her coffee, her gaze unfaltering as she gave no indication that she had heard the queen's words. She raised a hand, silently instructing Ryan and Caden to retire for supper

Connor quickly pulled away from Kylie and glanced at Ryan. "Wait for me. I will be but a moment."

Ryan paused. He noticed the tears on the queen's face, but simply nodded. "We'll

go on ahead. Take your time speaking to Her Majesty."

Connor hurriedly added, "Save me a drumstick, then. And leave three lamb meatballs for me."

Ryan grinned. "I'll make sure of it."

However, the eldest prince took the chance to walk over to his

companion, saying, "I don't think I can trust you to do that, Ryan. The last time I asked you to save me some pound cake while I was being punished, you two devoured it all."

As he came to a stop at Ryan's side, he turned slightly and gave Victoria a formal

bow. "Grandmother, I'll take my leave."

Kylie sprang from her chair and called out sharply, "Stop right there!"

Chapter 1532

Forced to stay back, Connor watched as Ryan and Caden departed for supper. Though he felt a slight indignation rise within him, he recalled Victoria's words. She had advised him to control his temper and not let it show too easily.

So, he calmly asked, "Is there something you wish to talk about, Mom?"

"What?" Seeing how he was acting, Kylie felt a mixture of pain and fury in her heart. "It has been a long time since we've seen each other. Do you not miss me? Is there nothing you wish to say to me?"

Connor looked at his mother, then at Lydia. Her pleading eyes softened his heart, and the prince's resolve wavered for a moment.

He hastily added, "Of course I missed you, Mom. However, I'm quite hungry and wish to have supper."

With that, he bowed to Victoria, then dashed out quickly to catch up with Ryan and Caden.

Kylie sat dazedly in her seat and remained silent for a long time. The only sound that filled the room was the sporadic sobbing she could not entirely suppress. It took her a long moment to wipe away her tears. When she finally spoke, the words came out as a barely contained snarl.

"He refuses to acknowledge me at all. Are you satisfied now, Mother?"

The hatred and bitterness in her eyes were as clear as day. She knew she wasn't in a position to challenge the queen dowager, but neither could she pretend everything was fine.

Victoria set down her cup, her voice calm but cutting as she replied, "If he doesn't acknowledge you, perhaps you should look within yourself for the reason."

The queen's eyes burned with anger as she shot her mother-in-law a venomous glare. "Was it not you who drove a wedge between us, Mother? Do not deny it. There is no animosity between a mother and son that lasts beyond the night, not unless someone is deliberately sowing discord."

Victoria knew that engaging with her further would only be a waste of time, so she calmly said, "You've seen him. That is all. Now go."

Kylie finally relented, sinking to her knees in desperation. "Please, I beg of you, let me explain the misunderstanding to him."

Victoria leaned forward slightly. "What misunderstanding is there to explain? Did you not poison him?"

Kylie trembled, her lips moving soundlessly for a moment before she weakly replied, "I only did it for his own good. I didn't want him to be ridiculed. It was a necessary strategy. I'm his birth mother. You know how much I've doted on him. How could I ever truly wish him harm?"

"Doting on him, poisoning him-neither was for his own good. Have you learned nothing from all those books you've read? Enough. You've seen him and said your piece. Now go," the queen dowager concluded as she rose to leave, looking clearly done with the conversation.

"Mother!"

Kylie scrambled forward on her knees and tried to block Victoria's path, but Keith stepped in to stop her.

"Your Majesty, it would be best not to press further. The queen dowager truly has Prince Conner's best interest at heart," he said.

Lydia hurried to help Kylie up, then bowed deeply to Victoria. "Your Majesty, the queen merely wished to offer a few words to Prince Connor. She wanted to assure him that there was no need to be nervous about the equestrian competition and to tell him to perform as he normally would. That is all."

"There is no need to trouble yourself. I shall speak to him myself," Victoria replied.

And with that, the queen dowager continued her departure without another glance back.

Tears streaming down her face,

Kylie clung to Lydia's sleeve as if it were a lifeline. "How could he treat me like this? I only ever wanted what was best for him. You know that,

right, Lydia? Go and tell him, please."

Lydia's expression was pained. "Your Majesty, Prince Connor will understand in time. Let's go back."

A completely devastated Kylie

allowed Lydia to support her as they stumbled away. She couldn't

understand it. How had the child she had lavished with so much affection,

the one she had doted on from the very beginning, grow so cold toward her over a single misunderstanding?

If this was how Connor treated her now, what would happen when he truly became king? Would he even acknowledge her as his mother then?

All her scheming and her efforts to secure the throne for him—was it all just to become a powerless queen dowager in the end?

"No, I have to clear up this misunderstanding, no matter the cost," Kylie muttered through clenched teeth. "I won't let the queen dowager keep driving a wedge between us."

Meanwhile, Caden had finished his supper and was escorted back by Grace's attendants.

Ryan and Connor had climbed up the large tree outside the palace. The cold wind whistled around them, though neither seemed to notice the chill.

"Your Highness, are you really that angry with the queen?" Ryan asked, his head tilted to the side.

Chapter 1533

Connor clutched the tree with both hands and leaned forward, pressing his face against its rough surface.

His eyes were clouded with confusion as he murmured, "I don't know. My mom has always been good to me, but that one time... my stomach hurt so terribly. It was so bad that it made me wish for death itself."

Connor turned to Ryan and asked, "Does Aunt Carissa treat you well?"

The eldest prince knew that his friend's mother had passed away. In the past, Connor would have spoken of such things without hesitation, but he was more sensible now. Also, Ryan was an important friend to him, and he didn't want to bring up anything that made him sad.

Victoria had often spoken of the importance of true friendship-the care and respect it entailed.

"Aunt Carissa is very good to me, especially so," Ryan responded.

"Then, do you think she would ever poison you for some purpose? Regardless of whether you were in pain until you wished for death?" Connor asked.

Ryan didn't even need to consider the question. His answer was immediate.

"No, of course not."

"What if it were for your future?"

This time, Ryan didn't answer immediately. He paused and thought about it. Having lived as a beggar on the streets, he understood the complexities of human relationships far better than most children his age.

If he said Carissa wouldn't do such a thing, wouldn't that just fuel Connor's resentment toward Kylie? But if he said Carissa would, that wasn't right either.

Friends shouldn't lie to each other.

After weighing his words carefully, he finally said, "For my future, Aunt Carissa would surely find another way. But perhaps your mother couldn't think of any other solution at that time, and had to take a desperate gamble."

"A gamble indeed," Connor sneered. "Even in my dazed state, I heard the royal physician whisper that the poison could have killed me. I could have died."

"Her Majesty would never have wanted that. She wouldn't want you dead," Ryan said, comforting him.

Connor stretched out his legs and swung them slightly, trying to mask the ache in his chest. "She definitely didn't want me dead. But the truth is, I was ready to listen to Aunt Carissa and apologize to my father. Still, my mother decided to do what she did. She just couldn't accept having such an ordinary son. She thought I was an embarrassment."

Ryan reached over and gently ruffled the prince's hair. "That's not true. A mother would never think her child is a disappointment."

"Ryan, am I really that stupid?" Connor muttered dejectedly, pressing his face against the tree.

"Of course not! Even Mr. Young and Uncle Rafael have said you've made great progress lately. If you were stupid, you wouldn't be able to learn at all. And during riding practice tonight, your maneuvers were great!"

Connor's shoulders slumped slightly. "But you've already mastered those maneuvers. We learned together, and even Caden can do it better than me."

"Don't compare yourself to others. Compare yourself to yourself. Haven't you already made progress?" Ryan said.

Connor had told Ryan about how Carissa said those words to him during the Verdant Hunt. Ever since then, it became the eldest prince's personal mantra. Whenever he felt exhausted or on the verge of giving up, he would repeat those words to himself, drawing strength from them. Ryan had heard him say it a few times now.

The shadows in Connor's eyes lightened a little as he straightened up.

"You're right. I won't compare myself to anyone else. I'll compare myself to who I was yesterday. And when I'm better, Mom won't see me as a disgrace anymore," he said, renewed determination in his voice.

Ryan grinned. "That's the spirit! We'll both keep pushing forward and growing together."

"Yes!" Connor declared, his voice steady with resolve as he nodded firmly.

Ryan waved his hand, as if brushing away the gloomy mood. "Enough of all this heavy talk. Mr Young gave us a list of middle names, and we're supposed to pick one to use after our coming-of-age ceremonies. There were so many-have you chosen yet?"

Connor tilted his chin up proudly. "Clarence. It means by cultivating oneself and governing one's household, one attains both internal and external clarity. I want to improve step by step and refine both my character and my skills."

"That's a good one," Ryan said with a smile. "You'll definitely grow better and stronger with a name like that."

"Of course," Connor replied with a grin of his own. "What about you? Which one did you choose?"

"Clement for peace and clarity," Ryan answered.

Connor's eyes shone with hope and determination. "That's perfect too. One day, our kingdom will surely achieve peace and prosperity, just like the meaning of your name."

Chapter 1534

Salvador's grand birthday celebration was set to take place in the royal gardens. The Royal Management Department had long since prepared everything, eagerly awaiting the day.

On the 25th of December, the princes, including Cecil, were still hard at training.

Cecil needed to be lifted onto his horse, but he made up for it with sheer courage. Following Rafael's instructions, he gripped the reins and urged his horse into a gallop. Of course, Rafael had arranged for someone to follow closely behind, just in case anything went wrong.

Connor and Caden had already mastered the required skills. Galloping on horseback was no challenge for them, especially since they weren't riding towering stallions but smaller, gentler chestnut ponies, which were easier to handle.

After they trained until late into the night, Rafael went over the key points for the next day's event, as well as how to handle emergencies. Just as he finished, Grace sent someone to fetch her son.

Caden had hoped to join the others for supper at Serenity Palace, but seeing Lyra beckoning him repeatedly, he had no choice.

He turned to Connor and Ryan and said, "Let's all do our best tomorrow and make Dad proud."

"Of course," Connor replied, smiling as he wiped his face with a towel. "Go on back now, Caden. Rest early tonight."

"I will." Caden turned to Rafael and bowed. "Uncle Rafael, I'll take my leave now." Rafael nodded slightly. "Go ahead."

No sooner had Caden left than a messenger from Laurel Palace arrived for Cecil. The young boy bounced on his toes, waving enthusiastically before skipping off with the messenger.

"Who would believe that Cecil has been sick? He doesn't need any rest. He has more energy than all of us combined!" Connor remarked with a laugh.

Ryan stayed silent, using a towel to wipe the sweat from his hair. Today's training had been grueling, and his legs were still trembling. Though he had some knowledge of Cecil's situation, he refrained from speaking of it openly.

Rafael gave the servants instructions to have the area tidied up, then told Connor and Ryan to return to Serenity Palace. Of course, there would be guards accompanying them along the way. Victoria had issued strict orders, and the Nightsteel Guard would be vigilant in ensuring no lapses in safety.

In Grace's residence, Iridescent Palace, she looked on affectionately as Caden devoured his supper, occasionally offering him spoonfuls of nourishing soup.

"Is it to your liking?" Grace asked with a smile.

Caden looked up, his mouth still full of meat.

His words were muffled as he said, "It's delicious. Everything tastes good when you're hungry. But Mom, Grandmother had roasted lamb, which love, prepared for us tonight. If you hadn't sent Lyra to fetch me, I would have had a good portion of that lamb. As it is, Connor and Ryan got to eat all of it."

"And how do you get along with Ryan?" Grace asked softly.

"Well enough," Caden replied, brushing aside a stray lock of hair as he continued eating, paying little mind to his disheveled appearance. "Ryan takes good care of me."

"You address him quite casually," Grace remarked, moving closer to her son as she gently tidied his hair "Of course, you can treat him like a close friend now, but you must always bear in mind that he is your subject and forever beneath you. And as for your eldest brother, he is your enemy."

Caden paused in his eating, his hands faltering for a moment. He slowly lifted his head, looking conflicted.

"Mom, I think things are quite good as they are now. Connor isn't as harsh as he used to be. He even thinks to bring me treats sometimes.

"Ryan is always looking out for me, and we all take care of Cecil, the youngest, though we tease him sometimes too. Training is hard but fun. Also, Dad has always said we should be loving and respectful to our siblings and friends."

Grace's eyes darkened with a glint of malice. However, her expression softened again when she moved to sit next to her son.

"I'm glad you listen to your father, my dear. It's true that brothers and friends should be loving and respectful to each other. As clever as you are, you must understand that your elder brother must first show you kindness and warmth before you can respond with respect and courtesy, yes?"

Caden nodded. "Yes. Connor has been very good to me lately."

Grace reached out to stroke his hair. "Oh, my sweet child, a devil is always a devil. They don't change. Have you forgotten how he used to treat you?"

"Not entirely. But when I look back on it now, it was mostly just pranks or a few harsh words. Nothing more than that," Caden replied.

"You're wrong," Grace said, her expression turning solemn. "Do you remember when you were so ill recently? Have you thought about why? I looked into it, and it was him-he poisoned your food. He wanted you dead."

Caden froze. "But when I was sick, you said it was a good opportunity to let the queen and Aunt Sylvia fight each other. You told me to stay out of it."

"You were truly poisoned, but I didn't tell you at the time. I feared it would upset you." Grace's eyes filled with tears, and her lips trembled as she spoke "It was the queen who instructed him to do it. They both wanted you dead. The poison they used was cruel beyond belief. It

would have torn through your

insides and left you in unbearable agony."

Chapter 1535

At his mother's words, Caden went pale and instinctively clutched his stomach.

Yet his mind was filled with memories of recent days-studying and training alongside his brothers and Ryan. Though the lessons were grueling, they encouraged one another and offered comfort in their shared hardships.

He hesitated, then asked, "Mom, perhaps it was all a misunderstanding? Connor and I... we're getting along well now."

Grace let out a long sigh, her gaze filled with both sorrow and tenderness. "Finish your supper first, my dear. When you're done, I shall take you somewhere."

"Where are we going?" Caden asked.

"Eat first," Grace replied gently. "Once you have finished, you shall see."

She remained seated beside him, attending to him with quiet patience, though she exchanged a subtle glance with Lyra.

As a sense of unease crept into Caden's heart, his chewing slowed. His thoughts weighed heavily upon him. He had long known that he and his elder brother were destined to compete for the title of crown prince. His mother had instilled that belief in him from an early age, urging him to see his brother as a rival.

Grace had always emphasized how vital the title was. And in truth, Connor had been insufferable in the past. Caden had once thought that if his brother were to inherit the title, he would become even more unbearable.

It was not that Caden had no ambition for the position, but life had been so pleasant as of late. The struggle for the title seemed far less important than it once had.

Grace observed her son in silence as he ate. She knew him well. He was intelligent, exceptionally gifted, and if properly nurtured—destined for greatness.

Yet, for all his intellect, he was still a child. He didn't yet grasp the full scope of power, and his heart was too easily swayed by fleeting joys. And though he was more thoughtful than most children his age, he was not cruel by nature. If asked to harm another, he would likely hesitate.

But Victoria remained ever watchful and left Grace no opening for any other plan. There was but one path left—Caden had to act of his own accord.

No one would suspect a child. And given how well the brothers seemed to be getting along recently, it would appear all the more unlikely.

As Caden continued eating, he suddenly set down his utensils. "Mr. Young has given each of us a list of middle names, in preparation for our coming-of-age ceremonies. I have chosen Asher as mine. What do you think, Mom?"

Grace's smile stiffened ever so slightly. "Weren't there any other choices?"

"I like this one. Mr. Young said the name means harmony and benevolence, that I should cultivate a serene mind and act with kindness," Caden replied.

Grace didn't directly answer and merely urged, "Finish your supper quickly. Once you have eaten, I shall take you somewhere."

A lingering unease gnawed at Caden, making it impossible to eat another bite. "I'm full," he said at last.

Grace rose to her feet and took his hand. "Very well, then. Let us go."

The dimly lit storeroom was thick with the stench of blood and damp wood. A chamberlain from Everspring Palace hung suspended by his arms, his toes barely grazing the ground. His robes were stained with blood, and his voice was hoarse from pleading for mercy

"I was only following orders! I beg you, Lady Grace, have mercy!"

The one conducting the interrogation was Stefan Harper, the head chamberlain of Iridescent Palace. He gripped a whip soaked in brine and struck another brutal lash.

"Speak! What orders did the queen give you? Were you asked to harm Prince Caden?"

A strangled cry tore from the prisoner's throat.

Finally, he said, "I... I will speak..."

Queen Kylie and Prince Connor

ordered me to place a spiked caltrop beneath Prince Caden's saddle.

before the competition to

Once he mounted, the three sharp points would pierce the horse's flesh and send it into a frenzy. In the chaos, Prince Caden would be thrown, and the horses behind him would trample him to death."

"What does this caltrop look like?" Stefan demanded.

"I... I have it here-wrapped in cloth in my pocket. Please, no more! I know I was wrong! Lady Grace, have mercy!"

"Does Prince Connor know of this plan?"

"Yes! This caltrop belongs to Prince Cecil. Prince Connor took it from him—"

The prisoner's screams were abruptly muffled as Stefan forced a rag into his

mouth. Only the desperate whimpers of a broken man remained.

Caden stood frozen outside the window, his face drained of color.

He had seen the caltrop before. It really belonged to Cecil.

During their training under Rafael, they had studied various weapons and hidden devices, including iron caltrops.

Rafael had explained how these cruel implements were used in

battle-scattered en masse ne

the ground to hinder pursuing forces. Any man or beast that stepped upon them would suffer deep, grievous wounds. Removing the embedded spikes was agonizing, and the injury was often fatal if left untreated.

Cecil had once stolen one to play with, but it had disappeared after only a few

days. Also, Rafael had punished him for it.

Chapter 1536

The caltrop was placed into Caden's trembling hands. Examining it carefully, he realized there was no mistake-it was the very one Cecil had once played with.

"As they have treated you, so must you treat them in return," Grace whispered in his ear, sending a shudder down his spine.

In a panic, Caden flung the caltrop away.

Grace retrieved it herself, then took her son's small, icy hand in hers and led him away.

"The fact that I no longer hold authority in the harem has emboldened Queen Kylie," she said. "She believes she may act against you without consequences. But she is mistaken. I still have people loyal to me placed everywhere. The moment I uncovered their treachery, I had them brought here for questioning. You saw it with your own eyes, and you know the man-he is from Everspring Palace."

Caden's mind was in turmoil, torn between fear and distress.

Kylie wished him dead. But did his elder brother wish that as well? Had all their kindness merely been an elaborate pretense?

Caden returned to his chambers, dazed, barely registering his mother's soft-spoken words.

"Tomorrow, you shall do as follows..."

When she finished speaking, Caden was shaking uncontrollably.

"If you do not act, it is you who will die," Grace added, her voice sharpening.

A sob tore from Caden. Once more, he hurled the caltrop away and threw himself into his mother's embrace.

"Mom, I don't want to die, but I don't want to harm my brother either. I am so afraid."

Grace stroked his back in soothing motions. "My dear child, I know you have a kind heart. But kindness does not mean you must stand idly by while others seek to destroy you. To refrain from harming others does not mean you cannot protect yourself."

As Caden cried, he asked, "Can I not do as I did before-win over Uncle Rafael and Aunt Carissa? If they stand by me, won't they keep me safe?"

"It is of no use," Grace replied gently, adjusting her approach. "They all know that your elder brother will soon be made crown prince. Their allegiance lies with him."

She paused before continuing in a softer, coaxing tone, saying, "Besides, I do not mean for your brother to die. Once he is thrown from his horse, the royal physicians will tend to him. He will live, with only his legs being ruined. Without the ability to stand, he cannot be the crown prince."

She carded her fingers through her son's hair. "When that happens, he will no longer be a threat to you, nor will he ever be in a position to harm you again. If you still hold brotherly affection for him, then so be it. You may grant him a life of wealth and comfort."

"Really?" Caden asked, lifting his tear-filled eyes to his mother.

Grace's gaze was filled with pity. "Of course, my dear. I am not a cruel woman. Taking a life should always be avoided if possible. Our only aim is to ensure they can no longer harm us."

For the better part of an hour, she coaxed and reassured him. At last, Caden took the caltrop into his trembling hands and hesitantly nodded.

700

venet

As it was meant for the battlefield, the caltrop was a small thing-no larger than a coin. Four wickedly sharp pointed edges jutted out precise angles. When placed beneath a saddle, it would cause discomfort to the horse. But without a rider's weight pressing down on it, it would not pierce the animal's flesh.

Even so, Caden remained restless. He clutched the caltrop as he lay in bed, unease written across his face. It was only after drinking a cup of warm milk that he finally drifted to sleep. Grace listened to the soft, steady rhythm of his breathing before exhaling slowly herself.

She cast a glance at Lyra, then rose and left with her. Seated in the quiet of her own chambers, Grace removed her hairpins, her expression composed and

serene.

Her voice carried the same tranquility as she said, "In the end, the blame lies with the queen dowager. Had she not arranged matters so meticulously, he wouldn't have needed to act himself. The poor child was trembling the entire time."

"Once His Highness becomes the crown prince and comes to know the taste of power, he will not regret it," Lyra remarked.

Grace hummed in agreement, the faintest smile gracing her lips. "Indeed. And we must give our thanks to Queen Kylie. If not for her turning on Lady Sylvia after their plot to harm Lady Jeanette's child unraveled, I wouldn't have dared to act so boldly."

Lyra chuckled. "Yes, once the deed is done, all will assume Lady Sylvia was responsible. After all, the caltrop belonged to Prince Cecil."

"You're certain no one saw you retrieve it?" Grace asked with a note of caution in her tone, meeting Lyra's gaze through the reflection of the mirror.

"I am certain," Lyra assured her. "It had been discarded in the underbrush. When I picked it up, not a soul was present."

Grace's shoulders relaxed, and then

she rolled her neck, easing the stiffness. At long last, the day hasz come. Soon, this will all be over. I shall retire early tonight. Tomorrow will be quite the spectacle. Ob, and see that the matter in the woodshed is dealt with properly. No traces must remain.

"Rest assured, Your Grace. He will be silenced, and the body disposed of."

Grace inclined her head. "Send the money I promised him to his family. He may not live to enjoy it, but his kin shall. Those who serve me faithfully are never left wanting. That said, take care they never learn where it came from."

"You need not worry, Your Grace. It is far from the first time I've done this," Lyra replied.

Chapter 1537

With so much on her mind, Grace couldn't sleep. She rose, pulling a shawl over her shoulders, and walked with Lyra to Caden's chambers.

Silently, she dismissed the attendants keeping watch over him for the night. Taking a seat by his bedside, her gaze fell upon her son's delicate, youthful face. He seemed to be having a nightmare. Even with his eyes closed, she could feel the fear emanating from him.

She let out a quiet sigh, a flicker of vexation rising within her.

Asher—that was the middle name Trevor had chosen for Caden, one meant to instill virtue and teach him kindness and humility. But in truth, it was a name meant to make him docile, to mold him into a man who would yield and never fight, forever content in the shadow of others.

Why should he settle for that?

Her son had every advantage but birthright. In every way, he surpassed Kylie's

son.

It was not that Grace wished to fight, but without a fight, there was no survival.

Kylie was narrow-minded, selfish to the extreme, and utterly intolerant of threats to her position. If Caden had been dull or unremarkable, perhaps it wouldn't have mattered. But he was neither. Instead, he was the brightest and most gifted of the three princes.

How could one tolerate a rival sleeping soundly beside them?

Connor might not be so ruthless now, but who could say what the future held? He and his mother would never tolerate threats to their power. To stand aside was to court ruin; to surrender was to die forgotten and unmourned.

Tomorrow, Grace would win. There was no alternative.

She had never entertained the notion of failure.

The plan was foolproof and carefully crafted to ensure success. Every detail had been meticulously arranged, and it was a strategy that would strike two birds with one stone-eliminating both Connor and Sylvia.

For nearly an hour, Grace lingered by Caden's side, watching over him in silence. At last, she rose and slipped away. Lyra quietly summoned the waiting attendants to return before following after her mistress.

"You should rest, Your Grace. It is late," Lyra murmured.

Grace pulled her cloak tighter, the high collar shadowing the edges of her face. Her eyes, however, glinted coldly in the darkness.

"This night is not meant for sleep. No doubt Queen Kylie is just as restless. She still clings to the foolish hope that Prince Connor will prove himself tomorrow, that the court officials might change their minds about him," she said.

Lyra shook her head. "If anything, Queen Kylie is torn between hope and despair. Prince Connor is improving, but has grown distant. She sought him out at Serenity Palace, yet he barely spoke to her. She left in tears."

"What a fool," Grace scoffed. "Who

vel

told her to resort to such extreme measures? She hurt her own son merely to preserve her dignity. Adults may understand her reasoning, but Prince Connopis still a child. How could he possibly accept that his own mother would go so far as to harm him in pursuit of her schemes?"

Lyra chuckled. "You're absolutely right, Your Grace. A royal prince doesn't act lightly, but when he does, he must secure the greatest advantage."

Grace remained silent, her brows knitted in thought.

It had never been her wish for her son to stain his hands with blood, but what choice did she have?

Meanwhile, Connor and Ryan were staying in Serenity Palace as they always did. Victoria had arranged shared chambers for them, believing that Ryan's presence would help drive Connor to improve.

Originally, their beds had been

placed at opposite ends of the room,

as per the eldest prince's request.

But as their bond grew, he had ordered the servants to move the beds closer, so they could speak more easily in the evenings.

An anxious Connor turned to Ryan, asking, "You don't think I'll falter tomorrow, do

you? If I ride poorly, my father will be so disappointed."

Ryan smiled reassuringly and said, "You've been training diligently. Even Uncle Rafael has praised your progress. Just relax. Don't let fear get the better of you. Ride as if it were any other day of practice."

"How am I supposed to not be

nervous?" Connor groaned. "Do you

remember the Verdant Hunt? Ugh

mustn't think of it. The moment I do,

I want to disappear from shame.

What was I thinking? I cried!

actually cried! How humiliating."

Mortified, he pulled the blanket over his face and kicked his legs in frustration.

"What's so shameful about that? I once fought a dog for scraps from a rubbish dump. Not only did the dog get the food, it also bit me," Ryan said lazily, his tone lighthearted.

He rolled up his sleeve, revealing a crescent-shaped scar on his arm. The edges

of the old wound were thickened with scar tissue-evidence of how deep the bite had been.

"See? Many were watching, and they all had a good laugh. Now, that was embarrassing. Your situation hardly compares," he added.

Connor gazed at the mark on his friend's arm, noting how deep the bite had been. A pang of sorrow stirred in his chest.

"You endured such hardships... It's a relief that Uncle Rafael found you. I swear, you'll never go hungry again, nor will you ever have to fight a dog for scraps."

Ryan grinned. "Of course. From now on, I'll stick close to you. I'll be eating fine meals and drinking the best wine."

"You will," Connor promised. "Where there's food for me, there will be food for you as well."

Chapter 1538

At dawn, Connor and Ryan rose with high spirits, brimming with confidence.

In stark contrast, Caden appeared weary and drained, his dark circles more pronounced than ever after having been tormented throughout the night.

Nightmare after nightmare had plagued him. One had consisted of visions of his own severed head rolling across the floor, pools of blood staining the ground. In another dream, Connor lay before him with both legs shattered, his agonized screams echoing through the darkness. He also dreamed of the tortured chamberlain, the man's words playing over and over in his mind.

Whether in sleep or while awake, terror clung to Caden, leaving him trembling uncontrollably.

Grace arrived with Lyra to personally dress him. As she helped him into his formal attire, she spoke softly, coaxing him and reminding him of what had to be done today. She soothed his nerves, assuring him that Connor would not die.

As she saw Caden's expression ease, she pressed on, painting a grand vision of power for him. With it, he could bring prosperity to Starhaven, making his reign a golden age that would be remembered for centuries.

Grace knew her son better than anyone. He was not without ambition, far from it in fact. But Victoria had been deliberately drawing the brothers closer by arranging for them to study, train, and play together-all to cultivate their brotherly bond.

Children were sentimental creatures and easily swayed by companionship. However, these feelings were trivial indulgences. If Caden lost sight of his future because of such things, the cost would be far too great.

With both Grace and Lyra urging him on, his resolve began to solidify. The doubt faded from his eyes, replaced by a steely determination.

Dressed and ready, they stepped out together.

-

Long before dawn, Salvador had already departed for the Celestial Sanctum, leading the court ministers and military officials in the sacrificial rites. By the time the royal concubines, princes, and princesses arrived, the ceremony was well underway.

The royal gardens were draped in blue, a festive air suffusing every corner of the palace. Salvador was in excellent spirits today. During the ceremony, he even made a wish-for a few more years of life.

The Archseer cast his divinations and assured the king that his wish would be granted. With that prophecy and Sebastian treating him, Salvador believed it.

Summoning all his children before him, he prepared to receive their well wishes and birthday greetings. He bestowed gifts upon each of his children, his expression warm as he exchanged a few words with them.

Victoria was absent today. The bitter cold made it unwise for her to leave her chambers, lest she fall ill. Yet before departing the palace that morning, Salvador had already gone to visit her.

With the formalities concluded, the king instructed the princes and princesses to spend time with their horses, ensuring they were familiar with them before the riding competition at noon.

Beyond the competition, the day promised further amusements in the form of various games and entertainment. A temporary stage had even been erected just for the occasion, and would soon be the site of an opera performance.

The military officers were also set to compete, showcasing their riding skills and engaging in a spirited match of polo. The stables were already at full capacity, with some horses tethered outside due to the lack of space.

However, the mounts belonging to the three princes and Ryan were kept under close guard. No one was permitted near them, lest some treachery be attempted. Their feed had been thoroughly inspected too.

Victoria had seen to these precautions well in advance. Though she had not come in person, she had sent Keith to oversee every detail.

Meanwhile, Carissa led soldiers from the Capital Guard and Royal Guard in conducting a thorough security sweep. The racetrack consisted of a dry, yellowed field, while the adjacent sandy terrain had been designated for polo. Though the three princes would not be participating in the polo match, the area was still checked just in case.

Seated within the main hall, Salvador received the well wishes of the court officials and accepted their gifts. He had little taste for extravagance, the gifts presented were not

particularly expensive but covers

with thought and care.

If he had any particular fondness, it was for calligraphy and painting, which was why Kyle's gift—a grand landscape painting with the sun rising high, creating a grand and majestic scene—was his favourite of the lot.

Salvador studied it for a long while, his admiration only growing the more he looked at it. He couldn't praise Kyle's artistry enough, even inviting the assembled ministers to step forward and appreciate the piece for themselves.

The artists who resided in the palace had come along today as well. After seeing the landscape painting, they couldn't help but admit its excellence, raising their thumbs in silent acknowledgment of its superiority.

Rafael stood by and watched too, but he had seen this painting before. It was Kyle's most recent work,

which he had worked on for over

three months. At first sight, it had astonished Rafael. Even now upon a second viewing, it still left him in awe.

Chapter 1539

The stables had already been thoroughly inspected. The horses were fed and groomed, ready for the day's festivities. The four children chattered excitedly, each tending to their own mount while exchanging lively remarks about the grand occasion.

Despite Sylvia's fall from favor, Cecil seemed entirely unaffected. His face was bright with a cheerful smile.

Naturally, Sylvia was present as well. No matter how she was treated within the harem, she remained, in the eyes of the public, Cecil's mother and an esteemed concubine of the kingdom.

However, Jeanette had been too unwell to make the journey and had remained behind.

Leading their horses out for a short ride, Cecil decided to test himself. Previously, he had always required assistance to mount. Today, he attempted the feat alone. To his delight, he succeeded in swinging himself onto his horse's back without aid.

His face lit up with triumph. "Connor, Caden, Ryan! Look at me! I did it all by myself!"

His exuberance was infectious. The others doubled over with laughter and showered him with praise.

"That's only because your horse is smaller. If you could mount any of ours, then I'd be impressed," Caden said with a smile, clenching his hand inside his pocket.

Cecil's competitive nature flared at once. Sliding off his horse, he strode determinedly toward Ryan's mount.

In truth, there was not much difference in height between their horses, though Ryan's and Connor's were slightly taller. But the challenge lay elsewhere—the other horses did not recognize Cecil as their master and showed signs of resistance.

Still, the young boy refused to be deterred. He made several attempts, undaunted by failure. At last, he managed to hoist himself onto Ryan's horse. His face shone with triumph as he took the reins.

"See? Ryan's horse likes me—I did it!" he announced proudly.

The horse, however, continued to prance about in mild agitation, unaccustomed to the unfamiliar rider.

Worried about a potential disaster, Ryan stepped forward at once. "All right, we acknowledge your skill. You should come down now."

Reaching up, he lifted Cecil from the saddle before any mishap could occur.

Still unsatisfied, Cecil made it his mission to try every horse in turn, leaving Connor's for last. Having successfully mounted each steed, he turned to Caden with an impish grin.

"Well, Caden, do you yield now?" he asked cheekily.

Caden stepped forward, reaching out to lift his brother down. "I concede defeat. Our dear younger brother is nothing if not nimble."

He attempted to lower Cecil to the ground, but the boy was heavier than expected. It took Caden two or three tries to manage it properly. Just before Ryan could step in to assist, he finally steadied himself and set Cecil down safely.

"You little imp, you're heavier than you look," Caden said with a chuckle, though his fingers trembled faintly.

Cecil lifted his chin, beaming with pride. "That's because I eat a lot. Mom says the more I eat, the taller I'll grow. One day, I'll be as tall as Uncle Rafael."

Connor nodded eagerly. "I don't just want to be as tall as Uncle Rafael, I want to be as skilled as he is too. I master my martial arts training, learn Strategy from him next. One day, I go to war and lead troops into battle."

To them, Rafael was a hero—a figure of legend. They longed to follow in his

footsteps, to one day prove themselves worthy of the same renown.

Caden turned his gaze toward his elder brother, lips parting slightly as if to speak, but hesitated and cast his eyes downward. He had always thought Connor's talent for combat was middling at best, and that he might never set foot on a battlefield.

But after today, Connor may not even be able to stand.

The thought of his proud, spirited brother being crippled sent a pang of unease through Caden. His fingers curled unconsciously as his eyes flickered toward the saddle. Earlier, when lifting Cecil down, he had taken the opportunity to slip the caltrop into place.

Now, regret gnawed at him. Should he retrieve it?

He had been careful-using his body as a shield when he planted it, ensuring the guards had seen nothing. Connor and Ryan had been too preoccupied with laughter to notice either. But retrieving it now would be far more difficult.

As Caden wavered in indecision, a cheerful voice cut through his thoughts.

"Your Highnesses, my lord." Galen approached with a respectful bow, flanked by attendants. "His Majesty bids you make haste. The riding competition is about to begin."

Connor tensed instinctively, nervousness creeping in once more.

Ryan reached for his hand, offering a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, we've got this."

Connor took a deep breath, nodding firmly. "Right!"

Chapter 1540

Carissa was especially busy today. Her presence was felt throughout the palace grounds, as she hurriedly moved from one task to the next. Now, she was back at the racetrack, overseeing the arrangements and ensuring everything was in order.

The equestrian competition was set to begin shortly. A large group of military officers and young men from noble families had already gathered outside the track. All of them held their horses, eagerly awaiting their turn.

The event itself was straightforward each rider was to complete three laps around the track. At intervals, two-foot-high hurdles would be placed in their path, and each rider would need to leap their horse over the barriers without knocking them down. The winner would be the first to complete all three laps.

In truth, calling it a "competition" was somewhat of an exaggeration.

For well-trained horses and skilled riders, the two-foot barriers posed little challenge. But the height had been chosen specifically for the three royal princes, or more precisely, for Connor and Caden, as Cecil might not participate. If he did, Carissa had already arranged for someone to lead his horse in the event.

According to the schedule, the princes would only race after all the other competitors had finished their rounds. This was a decision made by Salvador, ensuring his sons would have a chance to watch the more experienced riders go first.

As they waited in the staging area, the princes would watch the horses gallop, and feel the rush of excitement and anticipation. Perhaps they would even feel the thrill of wanting to ride themselves.

The competition was not just about the event itself, but about the emotions they would experience along the way-the tension, the adrenaline, and the eager desire to soon take their turn.

Salvador and the officials were already seated in an elevated viewing box, which offered the perfect vantage point to observe the race in full. Rafael and Jeremiah sat next to the king. As for the women of the harem, they were led by Kylie and seated on the opposite side, a respectful distance from the men, separated by a small section of space.

At the center of the track, a large drum had been set up, its blue velvet covering fluttering in the wind. On either side of the drum stood Thomas and Tyler, the judges of the event.

Carissa stood in the field, but she positioned herself just in front of the high platform where Salvador sat. While the chances of an assassin being present were slim, it was always better to be cautious.

With where she was standing, she would be in a prime position to intervene immediately if any threat to the king arose.

Ryan and the three princes arrived with their horses. They stood at the back of the line, waiting for the other competitors to finish their rounds before they took their turn.

The tension in the air was palpable, with even Ryan feeling sweat gathering in his palms. The scale of the event was overwhelming, especially with the sandy track and the imposing hurdles. The whole competition weighed like a heavy pressure on everyone involved.

But the greatest pressure, without a doubt, came from the spectators in the elevated viewing box.

Kylie was also feeling the weight of the moment. She kept casting anxious glances toward the staging area, but was unable to spot Connor among the others. When Salvador had been accepting congratulations from his ministers, Kylie had hoped to send someone to fetch Connor. However, both the Mystic Army and the guards had informed her that Victoria had given strict orders to not disturb Connor.

Frustrated, Kylie ground her teeth, powerless to do anything. She could only wonder about Connor's current state. Was he confident, or would he be overwhelmed with nerves?

She feared a repeat of the Verdant Hunt incident. If he lost the race and broke into tears, how would that be handled?

If that happened, the name of the crown prince written in the royal edict would likely be changed.

Kylie cast a glance at Grace, expecting her to be just as nervous. But to her surprise, Grace was leisurely nibbling on some candied fruit. She looked utterly unperturbed, without a trace of worry in her demeanor.

1.n

Then, Kylie's eyes shifted to Sylvia, whose expression was cool and detached her gaze unwavering as if no one around her existed. Her indifference seemed to reach the very edges of the room; not even a flicker of emotion passed across her face.

A cold smile curled at the queen's lips. Who could have imagined that the once adored and spoiled Sylvia would end up in such a state? But then again, it was her own doing. She had allowed herself to entertain thoughts she shouldn't have.

Just as Kylie's mind was tangled in thoughts of Sylvia's misfortunes, a sudden and thunderous drumbeat broke her concentration. The sound startled her, and she quickly turned her attention to the racetrack.

The competition had begun.

The thundering of hooves filled the air, and dust was kicked up in clouds. It was as though an army of wild stallions was charging across the track. The speed was so great that the riders were little more than fleeting shadows atop the horses.

The racetrack was vast enough to accommodate dozens of horses galloping at

full speed, each one racing along its predetermined path.

The sound of the horses' hooves was deafening, and the cheers of the crowd only added to the excitement. The scene was enough to stir the blood of any man. Even Salvador stood, clapping his hands in approval.

Unfortunately, the dust and the sheer speed of the race made it impossible for him to discern who was currently in the lead.