

War Song 1541

Chapter 1541

Carissa ended up with a mouthful of dust. The sandy ground was nothing like the grassy fields. It had no beauty at all, just clouds of dust flying everywhere. Even standing inside the racetrack, she could hardly see who was in the lead.

It looked like Joseph's youngest son, Ingram Carter.

As the horses cleared the hurdles, it became clear that it was indeed Ingram. His horse had pulled ahead by a full length, and he continued to extend his lead with impressive speed.

While lively, the race was not a formal contest. It was merely a display to flatter the royal princes, so the position of first place held little significance.

None of the riders were willing to push themselves too hard, lest they raise the princes' anxiety by excelling too greatly. Thus, the others refrained from catching up. However, the pace was swift, even if it was not their peak performance.

By the time the current riders reached the third lap, Ryan and the three princes were preparing to mount their horses. Once the current race was completed, the four children would make their own entrance.

Cecil was already on his horse. The handsome young boy on the horse looked quite impressive. There was no trace of nervousness in his demeanor as he gripped the reins and adjusted his posture. He even leaned forward slightly to calm his horse.

Ryan and Caden followed, mounting their steeds with varying degrees of ease before turning their attention to Connor. Ryan's eyes held encouragement, while Caden's face was pale, his hand trembling ever so slightly as it gripped the reins. Mistaking his brother's tension for nerves, Connor gave a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Caden. You ride better than I do. Even I am not afraid anymore."

Caden's palms were slick with sweat. A sharp, cold wind blew, and the sand stung his eyes. He barely saw how Connor mounted. All he noticed was the fluidity of the movement, the way his older brother seemed to settle onto the saddle with practiced ease.

Then came the scream of a horse in agony-a sound that struck terror into everyone present.

As soon as Connor mounted, his steed went mad and thrashed violently. He pulled at the reins in a desperate attempt to calm the animal, waiting for the stableman to arrive. But before the stableman could reach the horse's head, the steed reared and bolted, its hooves pounding against the earth as it charged across the track, wild with panic.

The entire scene unfolded in the blink of an eye, a moment of chaos so swift that it left no time for reaction.

As Connor was flung violently from his horse, the riders on the track behind him failed to halt their own horses in time. Several were unable to avoid trampling him

as their steeds stumbled and tumbled over his fallen form.

A collective breath was held in horror.

Then, sharp screams pierced the air.

In an instant, Several figures darted across the field. Carissa

immediately dove to grab Connor, pulling him to the side with all her

might The others rushed to e

stop the horses from charging forward, while Thomas promptly set off in pursuit of the maddened steed.

Carissa clutched the eldest prince in her arms, trembling as the heavy scent of blood filled the air.

Connor's form was limp, as though

every bone had vanished from his body. Even his neck was unable to support itself, leaving him lying weak against her chest. His face and head were covered in blood, and he spat more from his mouth. His gaze was unfocused, but his eyes cleared slightly when they met her face.

With great effort, he murmured, "It's a pity... a pity I did not finish..."

As he spoke, blood flowed from his lips, staining his cheeks and his clothes.

"Do not speak," Carissa urged. "It is nothing, you are safe now."

She held him tighter, then shouted, "Sebastian! Sebastian!"

"Connor! Connor!" Kylie's agonizing scream rent the air as she staggered down from the raised platform.

With Derek's support, Salvador descended as well. However, it was Sebastian who arrived first.

Ryan dismounted from his horse and approached, his hands trembling as he covered his mouth to stifle the sobs that threatened to break free. Tears streamed down his face, but he dared not interfere. Instead, he stepped aside to kneel in silent prayer.

Caden shakily walked over. When he saw Connor's body, he dropped to his knees with a choked sob. His whole body was wracked with tremors, tears flooding his face.

Cecil was also stricken. Someone hastily scooped him up, bearing him swiftly from the scene.

Sebastian immediately took command, instructing the servants to raise partition screens. And without a moment's hesitation, he rushed in to tend to the eldest prince.

Though barely conscious, Connor gripped Carissa's sleeve with what little strength remained in him. She made no attempt to pull away, staying close by as the screens were set up around them.

Outside, Kylie's cries could be heard

as she attempted to force her way

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quickly

into the area, but Salvad

intervened, gesturing for the servants to restrain her. His face was ashen as he stepped past the screens into the makeshift room. The stench of blood hit him like a physical blow, but he forced himself to remain steady.

Yet, he couldn't hide the tremble in his voice as he said, "Spare no effort... no

expense. Save him! Save him!"

Chapter 1542

The guards were unable to restrain Kylie, who rushed past the partition screens. One glance at her blood-soaked son was enough to make her release a piercing scream of horror before collapsing in a faint.

Thankfully, royal physicians were also present. The servants quickly ushered the queen out, allowing a royal physician to attend to her. Once revived, Kylie's sobs were unrestrained, her cries echoing with raw anguish.

Leading some men, Rafael took swift action to restore order. He intercepted the frenzied horse and set the wheels of investigation in motion, determined to uncover what had caused such madness.

Inside the makeshift room, Salvador knelt beside Connor. As his trembling hands gently brushed the bloodied face of his son, his palms became stained with crimson.

Telling the king to move aside, Sebastian quickly administered needle treatment, meant to simply keep Connor alive for a little longer. The priority now was to stop the bleeding in the eldest prince's head.

The boy couldn't swallow any pills, so Sebastian gave Carissa a bottle of hemostatic powder and told her to feed it to Connor. As long as he could swallow it, it would slow the internal bleeding.

Examining with his sharp eyes, Sebastian quickly understood the severity of the situation. The horses' hooves had trampled Connor's body, and with such speed and weight, the internal injuries were grievous.

If he hadn't performed needle treatment, Connor would have already died. However, even with the needles, the odds of survival were slim.

Though barely conscious, the eldest prince could still hear Carissa's frantic voice calling his name, urging him to swallow something. The pain was all-consuming, his body wracked with tremors he could not control. Every part of him screamed in agony, and the overwhelming fear began to suffocate him.

Was this the end?

But he listened to Carissa and tried to swallow. It took so much effort, as he was too weak. His mouth was full of a bitter and metallic taste. He wanted to vomit, but couldn't.

He seemed to hear his father's voice telling him not to be afraid. Hearing how shaky his father sounded, Connor realized he might really die. He couldn't help but apologize to Salvador internally for disappointing him again.

He felt so tired; his eyelids were too heavy to keep open.

"Your Highness... Connor, don't fall asleep! Wake up!" Carissa cried, tears streaming down her face as she gripped his hand. "Open your eyes, look at your aunt. We are here. Your father and mother are here. Wake up!"

Salvador, his limbs numb with fear, sank to the ground, his gaze fixed upon Sebastian in horrified disbelief. His lips parted, but no words escaped.

Finally, he managed to choke out, "Healer Dalton... he...?"

Without lifting his gaze, Sebastian continued his work. After dressing the wound, he used Orchidstrike Needle Art. It was a technique he had mastered, specifically for treating internal bleeding.

Salvador saw Connor's eyelids twitch. His heart, which had been in his throat, suddenly settled. But when he saw his son spit up blood, his heart pounded in fear again.

Outside, a hush had fallen over the gathered onlookers. No one dared move, each person rooted to the spot, anxiously awaiting the fate sealed within the confines of the screens.

From beyond the screens came the stifled sobs of many-the Quinton family, Ryan, Caden, and Kylie.

Sylvia held Cecil tightly to her chest, but an overwhelming sense of dread swept over her. She felt a sudden sense of panic, as if something was about to happen.

Initially, Caden had been sobbing in Grace's arms. But now, he sat as though frozen, his body stiff and his eyes unfocused. It was as if his soul had departed, leaving only an empty shell behind. No matter how Grace called his name, he did not respond, his unblinking gaze fixed upon the partition screens.

"Why is he so cold?" Grace murmured, then quickly ordered servants to fetch a small hand warmer.

It was brought and placed in Caden's arms, but he didn't take it. He just remained blankly resting in his mother's embrace.

"Do not fear, my dear," Grace whispered softly, pressing her cheek to his. "Your elder brother will be fine. He will be alright."

Caden did not respond, his eyes dull and distant.

Rafael, accompanied by Michael, soon arrived with news from the investigation. The cause of the horse's madness had been quickly discovered.

A caltrop had been hidden beneath the saddle, and its sharp points embedded themselves into the horse's back when Connor mounted. The sudden pain had startled the animal, causing it to rear and bolt in panic.

When Rafael saw the caltrop, his brow furrowed with recognition. It had once been in Cecil's possession, a small curiosity he had taken

without permission. Rafael alone

ordered it returned, but Cecil had claimed it was lost. Rafael had ordered people to look for it, but it had never been found.

Rafael wasn't the only one who had seen the caltrop before. The guards who were responsible for protecting the princes had seen it too. As they gazed upon it now, their eyes instinctively shifted to the small figure in Sylvia's arms.

When Sylvia's eyes landed on the caltrop, the blood in her veins froze. A violent shudder ran through her body, and she could not suppress the trembling that seized her.

Chapter 1543

Connor was transferred to a smaller palace within the royal gardens. It was impossible to return him to the main palace at the moment, with the only choice being to treat him nearby.

As for his condition, everyone could guess by looking at Sebastian's face. It seemed like it wasn't looking good.

Rafael had the room cleared of any unnecessary witnesses, though he did not yet report the findings of the investigation. There were still questions to be answered, and the search for answers continued.

All the concubines, as well as Kylie, returned to the main palace. The queen had initially refused to leave her son's side, adamant in her decision to stay with him. But upon seeing Connor's condition, she fainted once more. It was then that Salvador gave the order to have her escorted away.

Ryan had also resisted leaving. He wouldn't abandon his friend, no matter the circumstances, and insisted on remaining at his side. Seeing the boy's resolve, Rafael allowed him to stay.

Salvador remained in the royal gardens that evening, and Victoria arrived at dusk. The events that had transpired had obviously been reported to her. When she arrived, she took over from Carissa and personally stood guard for Connor.

When Victoria had first taken the eldest prince to Serenity Palace, it had been out of necessity, not affection. Her indifference towards him was not born of dislike, but rather from a need to curb the spoilt boy's unruly behavior. At the time, her firm, authoritative manner had been the only way to bring him into line.

At first, Connor had not understood. He had resisted her corrections, not out of malice, but because he did not yet comprehend the need for change. But over time, as habits were corrected and discipline became routine, a shift had occurred within him.

However, the real change came when Victoria brought Ryan into the palace to serve as his study partner. Trevor was strict, and returning to Serenity Palace felt even more oppressive. But with Ryan as his companion, Connor felt much more at ease. Ryan was outstanding and had a positive influence on the prince, helping him improve more and more.

Now, looking at her grandson covered in needles, Victoria felt as if a knife were twisting in her heart, and she couldn't stop her tears from falling.

A royal physician had prepared the medicine as Sebastian instructed, a potent concoction that, if ingested even in small quantities, might offer some relief. Yet, despite their best efforts, Connor showed no response. He could no longer swallow, his throat entirely unresponsive.

Sebastian remained silent, and no one dared to ask anything. They could only watch as he tried every possible method to save the eldest prince.

As long as Connor was still breathing, everyone held on to the slimmest thread of hope.

By midnight, his breathing was barely there. Sebastian had no choice but to use the Orchidstrike Needle Art technique once more. After the treatment, Connor could finally swallow a bit of medicine, though only with great difficulty.

Ivy, Rowan, and Sebastian's other apprentices had also arrived. Sebastian instructed them to stand guard with the royal physicians. He then signaled for Victoria, Salvador, Rafael, and Carissa to step outside, leaving Ryan behind to remain at Connor's side.

The dim light from the lamp failed to brighten the heavy silence that hung in the room. Sebastian frowned deeply as he assessed the prince's critical injuries— each one severe.

Carissa was the first to ask, "How is Prince Connor?"

Victoria and Salvador both turned to Sebastian, their expressions equally grim.

Sebastian didn't sugarcoat the truth, replying, "He is in a dire condition-very dire."

At those words, the collective hope in the room crumbled. The weight of the statement was enough to send their hearts plummeting.

Choking up as he spoke, Sebastian continued, "The most

life-threatening injury is internal

organ damage and bleeding. Then et

Orchidstrike Needle Art technique is only slowing the bleeding, but his injuries are too severe. Even if he makes it through the night, he may not survive the next three days.

"Aside from internal injuries, he also has a head wound with internal bleeding, and both of his legs are almost completely shattered.

Sealing his acupoints has on net

provided temporary pain relief. The moment I stop using the

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Orchidstrike Needle Art technique, even if the internal bleeding doesn't kill him, the pain from his crushed legs will."

The weight of the boy's suffering was unbearable. No one, least of all a child, should endure such pain. Even a seasoned martial artist might not survive such injuries, let alone someone so young.

Victoria covered her face with a handkerchief, tears streaming down.

This was cruel-letting Connor die in agony was unbearable.

Even Salvador couldn't hold back his tears. His voice trembled as he asked, "Is

there truly no way to save him?"

Chapter 1544

Salvador's question hung heavy in the air, and for a long moment, Sebastian remained silent. His brow furrowed as he pondered, considering every possibility, weighing the odds.

The only sounds that filled the room were strained, shallow breaths and the pounding of hearts, creating a silence so profound it was suffocating and seemed to echo with despair.

At last, Sebastian slowly said, "There isn't really a solution. At best, there's a desperate gamble. But the chances of success... are very, very low."

"Tell us. Just say it," Victoria urged, even more anxious than Salvador.

Sebastian let out a deep sigh. "Even this gamble depends on him surviving the next three days. If he makes it through, I'll take him to Eldermere Keep. There, we will soak him in a brew made from the Everbind Herb, which grows only on those grounds. It might save his life. But the chances are slim. He may not last long enough to even get there."

"Can't we gather the Everbind Herb and bring it here? How would we move him in this condition?" Carissa asked.

Sebastian shook his head. "No, even though dried Everbind Herb has some effect, it needs to be brewed within an hour of being picked to unlock its full potential. It's said to have miraculous effects, but Prince Connor's injuries are too severe; even that might not be enough to save him."

He paused momentarily, then continued, "Should we choose this path, it will subject Prince Connor to excruciating pain. Even if he survives, he will never walk again. He will be bound to a life of constant medication, relying on the herbs from the keep. And he will be confined there, unable to leave, as required for the healing process."

Sebastian met Salvador's gaze, adding, "And I must be clear-if we choose this, I will not be able to return to the capital for at least a year."

In other words, the king would need to entrust his care to Sebastian's apprentices or the royal physicians during that time.

Salvador's face turned ashen, his features drawn and pale, drained of color. He gripped the arm of the chair with trembling hands.

"Healer Dalton, what are the chances? How certain are you?" he asked.

Sebastian's eyes flickered with reluctance. "Not much-not even one in ten. It's more like... a last-ditch effort. It will involve immense pain and suffering."

Filled with despair, Salvador's tears fell freely. As soon as he started crying, Victoria's own carefully controlled tears began to fall as well.

Rafael and Carissa also felt deeply troubled. They stood silently nearby, unsure how to offer comfort.

After a long pause, Sebastian said, "Your Majesties, you should deliberate on this decision. I will return to watch over Prince Connor."

With a respectful bow, he made his exit.

Salvador wished he could bear his son's pain and suffering in his place.

The chance of survival was so minuscule-less than one in ten. Should he risk it?

Or since the odds were so slim, should he abandon the idea entirely?

His heart was torn, filled with confusion and anguish.

He also thought about the heir to the throne-a crucial matter for the kingdom. As king, he couldn't let himself be consumed by grief. He still had to plan for the future of the kingdom.

Even if Connor survived, he could never become the crown prince. The choice would have to be between Caden and Cecil.

But no matter who was chosen,

Connor, as the eldest prince, would forever remain a thorn in the side of the new king. He would always be a reminder of what had been lost, and there would always be the thought of removing that threat.

"Your Majesty, this is your decision," Victoria's voice broke through his thoughts,

her tone choked with emotion.

Three pairs of eyes-Rafael's, Carissa's, and Victoria's-were fixed upon Salvador, waiting for his words. He sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity, before finally speaking.

"Tomorrow, announce to the outside world that Connor has passed. Begin preparations for the funeral, and let him be buried with the ceremonies befitting

the crown prince," he began slowly.

Victoria stiffened at his words. "You mean... to give up on him?"

Salvador shook his head.

"No, we will do as Healer Dalton suggested. He will be taken to Eldermere Keep. I want him to live even if there is only the slightest chance," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, each word filled with unbearable pain.

Everyone quickly understood why the death announcement had to be made.

As Sebastian said, even if Connor

survived, he would never walk again. He could never fulfill the role of

crown prince or king. Instead, he ne

wary of

would become a burden to the new king, who would always be him.

By announcing Connor's death, the new king could remember his older brother,

and their brotherly bond would remain forever.

Chapter 1545

Salvador announced his decision before asking Rafael about the investigation.

The king knew the colt wouldn't go wild for no reason. He had asked about the horses before-some had a bit of a temper, but the children had already tamed them.

Rafael didn't hide anything and handed over the caltrop. "Someone placed this under the saddle. When the saddle was empty, the thorn caused only a mild discomfort to the horse. But once Prince Connor got on, the sharp spikes stabbed into the horse's flesh, causing it to go berserk from the pain."

Salvador's gaze grew cold as he looked at Carissa. "Did no one inspect the saddles beforehand?"

Carissa hurriedly responded, "Your Majesty, we checked thoroughly. The horses were under constant guard, and aside from the three princes and Ryan, no one was allowed near them. They led their own horses; no one else handled them during the journey."

Victoria's expression was equally grim. "I gave strict orders to the guards. The horses, the three princes, and Ryan should never leave their sight. Unless one of my own trusted servants has betrayed me, no one should have been able to approach those horses."

"But this caltrop was placed under the saddle," Salvador said, his voice growing fierce with anger. "Who would want to harm Connor? This caltrop doesn't appear to be something that could have been made by just anyone. Whose work is this?"

Rafael hesitated, then knelt and apologized. "It was a device I brought for lessons with the children. When the guards found out that Prince Cecil had taken one to play with, they informed me. I ordered him to return it, but he claimed it was lost."

"Sylvia?" Salvador suggested, his mind immediately going to her.

Cecil was so young and innocent. He could never have been behind such a malicious act.

"She had a quarrel with Kylie in the past, and she harbors ambitions for Cecil to be the heir. It makes sense-revenge, and perhaps even an attempt to secure the crown prince title for Cecil," the king added.

Rafael had heard of the quarrel between Kylie and Sylvia. The motivations of revenge and ambition were plausible, and the plan seemed to have unfolded smoothly. But had Sylvia, in her scheming, truly not considered the inevitable discovery of the caltrop under the saddle?

How could she have overlooked such an obvious flaw? How would she cover her tracks now?

If she couldn't, then the entire plot would unravel. In that case, exacting her revenge on Kylie would come at the price of her own life, and possibly Cecil's as well. Perhaps there had been no ambition for the throne at all, only a desire for retribution.

But could Sylvia truly be so extreme?

Victoria's voice broke the silence, saying, "We must investigate further. This situation is not as simple as it appears."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Rafael responded firmly.

Victoria's eyes were red, tears threatening to spill. "I have failed him failed to protect him, allowing him to endure such agony."

"Mom, you did all you could," Salvador replied, his voice heavy with sorrow. "It is I who underestimated their ambition."

His face darkening with anger and grief, he turned to Carissa. "See to it! I want answers. No matter who is responsible, they will face the ultimate punishment!"

Rafael bowed. "I will investigate, Your Majesty."

Salvador sighed. "You and Jeremiah must manage the court affairs. Over the next three days, I will stay here with Connor. The arrangements for the funeral will be handled by the Royal Management Department and the Protocol Department. Let Derek oversee it."

Salvador paused, his throat tight as he struggled to continue.

Finally, he managed to say, "You and Derek will prepare the coffin. If Connor survives these three days, place his garments and crown in the coffin. But if he does not..."

The sentence died in his throat, two tears falling in quick succession.

"Understood," Rafael said softly, his own sorrow reflected in his eyes as he bowed his head.

Carissa left the room first,

determined to find Ryan. He had

refused to leave, staying close to Connor's quarters. When she arrived, she found him peering through the curtain, his eyes swollen from crying, his face filled with fear and uncertainty.

"Ryan," Carissa called gently as she moved to him, her arms enveloping him in a comforting embrace.

She stroked his back, murmuring softly, "Do not despair. Sebastian will do everything he can to save him."

Ryan sobbed quietly in her arms, too afraid to cry aloud. Judging from Sebastian's expression, which had never been so grim, he knew Connor's condition was grave.

"Aunt Carissa, will he die?" Ryan whimpered, his voice shaking.

Carissa just patted his back and let out a heavy sigh, saying nothing.

Chapter 1546

The next morning, Rafael announced Connor's death, leaving the entire court in shock and mourning.

"His Majesty is overcome with grief and has fallen ill. For the next few days, matters regarding the kingdom will be handled by myself and Mr. Murray. The arrangements for Prince Connor's funeral will be overseen by the Royal Management Department and the Protocol Department," Rafael said solemnly.

Malcolm staggered, barely keeping his balance. His eyes were bloodshot from a sleepless night. Even though he had mentally prepared himself, the news still hit him hard.

The news reached the inner palace at the same time. Since returning last night, Kylie had been wailing inconsolably, demanding to see Connor. Upon hearing the dreadful news, she fainted once more. Thankfully, a royal physician had been stationed at Everspring Palace and was able to revive her.

Once the queen was conscious again, her screams echoed throughout the entire area.

At Iridescent Palace, Grace felt a mix of relief and worry upon hearing the news. Relief-because her plan had finally succeeded, leaving no trace that could lead back to her or her son.

Worry-because ever since Caden returned from the royal garden yesterday, he hadn't eaten or drunk a single drop of water. He seemed completely dazed, and was unresponsive to anyone calling him. His eyes were vacant as if he had lost himself.

A royal physician said Caden was in shock, and would recover gradually with some calming herbs. However, the calming medicine couldn't be administered as Caden refused to open his mouth.

The older maids in the palace whispered that his soul had been frightened out of him and only a high priest's blessing could call it back.

Grace had no faith in such superstitions. Besides, with Connor now gone, summoning a high priest to Iridescent Palace would surely raise suspicion.

Wouldn't that be an admission of guilt in itself?

So, she dared not act. She could only wait and watch.

Next, there would undoubtedly be an investigation into Laurel Palace. Neither Sylvia nor Cecil would be able to escape their fate.

At Laurel Palace, Sylvia had not closed her eyes all night. Upon hearing the news of Connor's death, her blood ran cold. Since returning from the royal gardens the previous day, she had felt a heavy sense of impending doom.

Sylvia had already questioned Cecil about the matter of the caltrop.

The young boy had confessed the caltrop was his, though he had no idea how it ended up beneath the saddle. Knowing the caltrop had injured the horse and caused Connor's fall, Cecil wept bitterly, repeatedly saying it was his fault.

Sylvia had also asked if he had touched Connor's horse before the event. He told her he had ridden every horse, including Connor's.

At this point, Sylvia could no longer press her son for further details. She understood it was a trap that had been cleverly laid out. No matter how skilled the investigators were, all signs would point to her and Cecil.

Had it been another time, she might have been able to fight for her own innocence. But now, she had a past charge of conspiring against a royal heir, and there was also the matter of her open conflict with Kylie. She had even fallen out of favor with the king.

No one would believe her if she claimed to be innocent.

After being moved to Laurel Palace, many of her former confidants had been dismissed. The only one left by her side was Heidi, a maid she had never been particularly fond of. Yet, after spending their days together in Laurel Palace, the clever and loyal Heidi had done everything to lift Sylvia's spirits. Over time, a bond had formed between them.

Now, the maid knelt and wept. "Your Grace, let all the blame fall on me. I am but

an orphan and the last of my family. I do not fear death."

Sylvia gazed at her with a soft sigh. "Get up. This is not something you can bear. I have fallen into a trap; there is no way out. I am doomed to die, and can only hope that my death will protect Phoebe and Cecil."

"Your Grace, I've heard that Lady Carissa has been called to investigate. Perhaps the truth can be uncovered. Please do not lose hope," Heidi pleaded, her voice trembling with desperation.

"It's useless." Sylvia pressed her hand to her forehead. She was draped in a white fox fur, but her appearance was one of weariness and despair. "Heidi, people may act, but the heavens watch. Retribution is inevitable. I have harmed others and spilled blood. There is no way to escape unscathed."

Sylvia knew she was not a compassionate person, but the incident with Jeanette was the first time she had harmed a child. She regretted it, but what did it matter?

The deed was done. Regret was pointless.

Of course, Sylvia could wait for Carissa's investigation. But based on the information Sylvia had, even if the investigation proceeded, it would only confirm that Cecil had placed the caltrop beneath the saddle.

Once everything was out in the open, she would have no way of protecting Cecil anymore.

Chapter 1547

Sitting in front of her vanity table, Sylvia suddenly recalled that the dress she had once asked her mother to order from Camila had been delivered. She had

intended to wear it at the New Year's Eve banquet.

The dress was a rich shade of sunset yellow, embroidered with delicate camellia flower blossoms. Charming and vivid, the hem of the skirt flowed in graceful waves, the brightness of its color giving it an air of both beauty and refinement.

Sylvia asked Heidi to bring the dress over and help her into it. She gazed into the mirror, entranced by her own reflection. While doing so, she noted that although she looked a little haggard, she remained as stunning as ever. Her skin was still pale and smooth, free from the slightest sign of age or fatigue.

Her slender, pale fingers traced the intricate embroidery as she murmured softly to herself, "Ms. Moore's needlework is indeed extraordinary. This dress surpasses even the finest dress I own. How truly exquisite."

Heidi knelt at her side with tears welling in her eyes. "Your Grace, I know what you intend, but you mustn't. If you do, it will be as if you're taking your own life out of guilt, leaving Prince Cecil forever accused of plotting against Prince Connor."

Sylvia smiled arrogantly, though it carried a touch of coquettishness. "Who said I intend to end my life? A concubine who takes her own life would bring disgrace to her family. I have already failed in fulfilling my duty to my parents. How could I stain their name?"

Her fingers continued to stroke the intricate embroidery, her gaze firm. "I am innocent. I will not be driven to despair, but I shall protect my children at all costs. Let them conduct their investigation. Lady Carissa is swift in her work."

Sylvia only needed to wait for the investigation's results, which would undoubtedly point towards Laurel Palace and implicate both her and Cecil.

Hearing that Sylvia didn't intend to end her own life, Heidi felt slightly relieved.

Sylvia picked up a pair of scissors and snipped off a stray thread. Afterward, she made her way to the outer hall, placing the scissors in a conspicuous spot.

She turned and asked, "How are things on Lady Grace's end? I hear a royal physician has been summoned."

"I heard that Prince Caden has been terribly frightened," came the reply.

Sylvia sighed. "After all, he is but a child. How could he not be terrified, seeing his brother, whom he had grown so close to, lying in a pool of blood on the ground?"

Though Sylvia had her suspicions regarding Grace, she never once doubted Caden. After all, the child was not capable of such cruelty.

Children didn't possess the ruthless

ambition that could drive them to commit such vicious acts. And moreover, Caden was Grace's flesh and blood. Sylvia believed that a mother would never allow her child's hands to be stained with such blood. So, if Grace had truly sought to harm Connor, she would have kept the deed hidden from Caden.

Using her maternal instincts to speculate, Sylvia concluded that Caden was truly

pitiable, his mind no doubt shattered by the horror he had witnessed.

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Carissa had taken up the investigation. Though Victoria's instructions were clear that the inquiry should begin with Jeanette's miscarriage-Carissa's first line of questioning was directed at Ryan.

He confirmed that the caltrop was indeed Cecil's and verified that the boy had ridden their horses. Still, Ryan vehemently assured that Cecil's nature was innocent. Though lively and full of mischief, the young prince had no intention to harm.

After Ryan, the guards were questioned. All of them were familiar with the caltrop, confirming once more that it belonged to Cecil.

The guards, palace attendants, and nannies were questioned in turn, gathering their testimonies on the matter of Jeanette's miscarriage and Kylie's confrontation at Laurel Palace. When all the scattered testimonies were pieced together, everything pointed directly to Sylvia.

Before Carissa visited Laurel Palace, she made a stop at Everspring Palace.

Kylie lay in her bed, utterly exhausted from weeping. Though she had ceased her cries demanding to see Connor, she was in a state of madness. Upon seeing Carissa, the queen scrambled from her bed and, with all her strength, struck her across the face.

"Is this how you conduct your investigations? Is this how you deceive the king? You enjoy the

authority of a female official, butnet

have you done your actual job properly? If you had examined each horse thoroughly, this would not have happened. If we're to assign

blame, then you are the first to answer for it! You are the murderer!" Kylie shouted, pointing furiously.

Carissa could have avoided the slap, but the image of Connor struggling to swallow medicine flashed in her mind as the queen swung her hand. Her heart tightened and a wave of sorrow welled up in her chest, so much so that she endured the blow.

She said nothing in response to Kylie's accusations. Before arriving, she had expected the queen to ask if Connor had left any final words, for Carissa had been the one holding him at the time.

But Kylie didn't ask, so Carissa turned to Lydia and instructed her to go outside for questioning.

Kylie refused vehemently, her voice laced with fury as she said, "If there is anything to be asked, it shall be asked in front of me! If you intend to shield Lady Sylvia, I will not forgive you."

The queen had already made up her mind that Sylvia was responsible-not only because of the caltrop and the longstanding animosities between them, but also because Kylie couldn't fathom the only other alternative suspect, Grace, having the courage to carry out such an act.

Chapter 1548

Kylie had always looked down on Grace.

The latter's family lacked distinction, and her beauty could scarcely be considered remarkable. Her rise to the position of higher-ranked concubine seemed nothing more than the result of fortunate circumstances, particularly her giving birth to Caden.

Kylie guessed that Grace also must be aware of her limited connections and support, which was why she had long exercised caution and humility. However, there were times when she could not resist harboring a few selfish thoughts. Yet, she dared not plot too aggressively.

Such had been the case when Grace had sheltered Jeanette-likely in an attempt to solidify her position and strengthen her influence in the harem by using the other woman as a pawn. Despite Grace's attentions, Jeanette had remained ungrateful, resenting the way she constantly placed Caden in Salvador's presence.

Grace always had a habit of making things harder for herself, which was why Kylie had never held her in much regard.

Now, with what had happened to Connor, the queen's suspicions fell only upon Sylvia. However, things were just as she had feared.

Sylvia's family ties, connected as they were to Rafael's circles, along with Gladys' interest in Skye Embroidery, cast doubt upon Carissa's impartiality while in charge of the investigation. Kylie couldn't afford to let Carissa shield Sylvia. If there were questions to be asked, they must be posed under the queen's watchful eye.

Immediately seeing through Kylie's thoughts, Carissa simply sat down before asking Lydia, "Do you know anything about the details of Lady Jeanette's miscarriage?"

Upon hearing that, Kylie jumped to the conclusion that Carissa was indeed trying to cover for Sylvia.

"What does Lady Jeanette's miscarriage have to do with Connor's murder? Why are you dredging up such old matters? Are you trying to clear Lady Sylvia's name?" she asked, her anger flaring.

Seeing the queen's almost twisted expression, Carissa sighed helplessly. "I have no intention of covering for Lady Sylvia or anyone else. There are rumors that Lady Jeanette's miscarriage is linked to the people in Everspring Palace, while others say it involves Lady Sylvia. I am investigating to find out who might have a grudge against Prince Connor or the people in Everspring Palace."

Her anger rising, Kylie cut in, "Do you truly need to ask? It's Lady Sylvia! Even if Lady Jeanette had a hundred lives, she would never dare do such a thing."

Her grief turning into pure rage, the queen directed it all at Carissa.

Carissa knew she wouldn't get any more answers, but seeing Lydia's guilty expression and evasive gaze, there was no need to press further. It was clear that Jeanette's miscarriage was somehow connected to Everspring Palace.

She wasn't saying Jeanette had plotted against Connor, but it was necessary to investigate anyone who held a grudge against those in Everspring Palace.

"Please take care, Your Majesty. I'll take my leave," Carissa said, rising to her feet.

Kylie's bloodshot eyes locked onto her. "Carissa, I'll say this one more time. If you dare to cover for Lady Sylvia will destroy you, no matter the cost. That slap just now was a warning."

Carissa had already turned to leave, but at those words, she paused.

Looking back at the queen, she asked, "Why are you so certain it was Lady Sylvia?"

"Who else could it be? She hates me to the core," Kylie replied, her voice ice cold.

Carissa tilted her head slightly. "Why would she hate you? You've lost the king's favor and the right to raise your son, plus you don't even have the power to act as queen. I fail to see why she would hold such hatred toward you."

Carissa's words struck deep. She hadn't intended to be so blunt, but ever since she stepped into Everspring Palace, Kylie hadn't asked about Connor even once.

As expected, the queen's expression changed instantly. Rage and humiliation surged together, completely shattering her composure.

She ranted, "Because I gave birth to the eldest prince! No matter what, Lady Sylvia and Cecil will always be beneath me!

"She plotted against Lady Jeanette's child, yet she hesitated, so I took action myself. I made the move and she took the blame. She knows it.

But when I led people to choin crane

Lauret Palace, she had no choice but to endure it..."

"Your Majesty!" Lydia cried out sharply, trying to stop her from saying more. But Kylie, breathless and flushed with anger, waved her off. "There's nothing to hide! She already figured it out, or she wouldn't have come here to ask."

Carissa's voice was cold as ice as she said, "Your Majesty, if Lady Sylvia truly did it, then you're her accomplice."

At those words, Kylie's face turned deathly pale. It was as if all the strength had been drained from her body, leaving her to collapse against Lydia, gasping weakly.

Tears welled up and spilled down her cheeks. "N-no, I'm not... I'm not an accomplice!"

She had never thought of it that way before.

Never!

Chapter 1549

Carissa paid a visit to Jeanette.

Though the concubine did not explicitly say that Sylvia was responsible for the loss of her child, she did remark, "Those who commit wicked deeds will always face retribution. No one can escape it."

The words seemed not only directed at Sylvia, but also at Kylie.

As Carissa prepared to leave after questioning her, Jeanette suddenly spoke up, asking, "Your Grace, was it truly impossible to save Prince Connor?"

Carissa assumed Jeanette's words were born of sympathy for Connor. But when she glanced at the concubine, she saw no trace of sorrow in her eyes, only a subtle glint of something resembling satisfaction.

It was an emotion she clearly tried to conceal but could not, as though Jeanette had achieved a long-sought revenge. Carissa chose not to respond, instead turning on her heel to leave.

Kylie had caused Jeanette's loss, so it was no surprise that she wouldn't wish for Connor's recovery.

Carissa couldn't fault Jeanette for her feelings. How could she, when she had not endured the same pain? It was not her place to admonish.

Though Carissa had planned to visit Laurel Palace, she changed her mind and decided to stop by Iridescent Palace first.

She had originally thought to delay this visit, for she had heard that Caden had been deeply distressed. The shock and grief had caused him to lose his senses, leaving him in a troubled state.

So, when she went, her intention was not to speak with Caden, but rather with Grace.

The evidence clearly absolved Grace of any involvement in these matters. Neither Jeanette's loss nor Connor's plight could be directly or indirectly linked to her. However, there was one thing that continued to trouble Carissa-the rumors that had circulated in the harem.

The first rumor suggested Sylvia had been responsible for the loss of Jeanette's child, while the second implicated Kylie in the same act.

Both rumors had stirred a great deal of gossip within the harem, and it was the latter that had sparked the queen's wild outburst at Laurel Palace. It was then that everyone in the harem had learned of the bitter rift between Kylie and Sylvia.

At present, the prevailing speculation was that Kylie's outburst had provoked Sylvia's vengeful wrath, ultimately resulting in Connor's injury.

The harem was under strict governance; rumors without foundation were swiftly suppressed. Yet strangely, both these rumors had been allowed to spread unchecked, which suggested that someone was deliberately allowing them to spread.

If Sylvia were innocent, she might have spread rumors to shift the blame onto Kylie. But as it stood, she was far from innocent. She

understood fully that Salvado net

had

exiled her to Laurel Palace because

was aware of her actions. So, she

hey

would not have tried to cause

trouble with Kylie.

It couldn't have been Sylvia, nor could it have been Kylie.

But then, who could it have been?

Carissa made her way to Iridescent Palace with the hope of uncovering the answer.

Carissa believed Grace to be a very clever woman. The latter must have realized that even if she refused to provide the answer, the investigation would proceed regardless. The only question was how many would be caught in the crossfire.

Seated in the main hall of Iridescent Palace, Carissa observed the delicate, pale hands of Lyra as she served tea-hands that spoke of a life of comfort and privilege.

Grace appeared considerably more tired than usual, the dark circles under her eyes showing that she must not have slept all night.

She dabbed at her tears with a

vel

handkerchief, her voice thick with emotion as she said, "I never imagined such a tragedy would occur especially during His Majesty's birthday celebration. It is truly heartbreaking. Even I can scarcely bear to think of it. I'm afraid

both the king and queen must be... Oh, who could be so cruel?"

Carissa gazed at Grace's reddened eyes. Her tears were genuine, and the sorrow

in her expression was unmistakable.

"I hear Prince Caden was greatly frightened. Is he any better now?" Carissa asked.

Grace shook her head and sighed deeply. "He is much the same lost in his thoughts, unwilling to respond or even acknowledge anyone. I haven't dared to tell him about Prince Connor's death yet, for fear he would be unable to bear it."

From Ryan, Carissa had learned that Caden's bond with Connor had grown significantly stronger since they began studying together and practicing martial arts as a group. Whenever Caden had a special treat, he would think to share it with his elder brother. Likewise, Connor would always care for Caden, bringing him small tokens of amusement.

After Connor fell from his horse and was trampled, the scene was gruesome. Having witnessed it firsthand, it was natural for Caden to be terrified, but no one had expected it to affect him this badly.

Grace sighed again. "I know you have come to investigate at His Majesty's behest, but might I ask you to refrain from questioning him for now? I am truly concerned that he will not be able to endure it."

"You misunderstand, Lady Grace. I am not here to question Prince Caden. There is a matter I wish to discuss with you," Carissa replied.

Chapter 1550

Grace seemed momentarily taken aback, her grip tightening on the handkerchief. "What is it, Your Grace? Do not hesitate to speak plainly."

"Not long ago, the harem was abuzz with rumors. First, it was said that Lady Sylvia was responsible for Lady Jeanette's miscarriage. Then, the rumor shifted, claiming it was Queen Kylie. You've overseen the harem for so long, Lady Grace. You must have some idea of where these rumors originated and who might have spread them, yes?" Carissa asked.

Caught off guard by the question, Grace's sorrowful expression stiffened for a moment as she exchanged a furtive glance with Lyra. But she quickly masked the slip and regained her composure.

"The palace has always been rife with gossip. There is no need to dwell on such matters. Perhaps you might focus on the investigation into Prince Connor's murder, Your Grace?" she replied.

"The queen dowager has ordered me to investigate thoroughly, starting from Lady Jeanette's miscarriage. So, while the case of Prince Connor's murder must be investigated, everything else must be looked into as well.

"You and Lady Sylvia have managed the harem for quite some time and must be well aware of its affairs, Lady Grace. Rather than making a big spectacle of interrogating palace staff, I thought it would be more efficient to come to you directly for answers. That way, we can avoid sending people to the Disciplinary Tribunal. What do you think?" Carissa said.

Her gaze swept casually over Grace and Lyra before settling on the latter's hands. She smiled slightly and added, "Lyra, your fingers are quite lovely."

The maid's face turned visibly pale. She knew all too well what kind of harsh labor and punishments awaited at the Disciplinary Tribunal.

Rumors passed through many ears, but it wasn't hard to trace them back to the source. It was just a matter of whether they wanted to make a grand affair of it. Grace understood that, and so did Lyra.

Grace remained silent. Naturally, she had ordered the rumors to be spread-first by Lyra, then through others under her command. They were loyal, but once brought before the Disciplinary Tribunal, no secret was safe. Who knew what else they might confess?

Weighing the risks, Grace let out a soft sigh and said, "Since you've asked, I have nothing to hide. Yes, I was the one who ordered those rumors to be spread. But I had no ill intent.

"As a mother myself, I understood Lady Jeanette's pain at losing her child. So, I looked into it, hoping to get justice for her. At first, the trail led to Lady Sylvia. But as I continued investigating, I discovered Queen Kylie was involved as well. That was why the rumors surfaced twice."

Grace let out another deep sigh. "In truth, you are mistaken, Your Grace. These are not rumors, they are facts. Perhaps you don't understand why I haven't shared my findings with the queen dowager and the king to have them render judgment. However, I must ask you to consider my position.

"Though I once held the authority to oversee the harem, I never won His Majesty's favor. I dared not directly confront Lady Sylvia or Queen Kylie. Instead, I was left

to employ methods that, though underhanded, were necessary to secure justice for Lady Jeanette's child."

Grace repeatedly insisted that she was only seeking justice for Jeanette's unborn child, with no selfish motives whatsoever. On the surface, it aligned with her usual gentle and compassionate nature.

Of course, Carissa understood that

as long as there was no solid

evidence to prove otherwise, Grace's

explanation would hold up, even if everyone knew it was just an excuse. After all, while the rumors had driven a wedge between Sylvia and Kylie, they still had no clear connection to the attempt on Connor's life.

Plotting against a prince was a

crime punishable by death, while

causing discord in the harem would result in a demotion at most. But as Caden's mother, how far could Grace really fall? Even if she was stripped of her rank, it would only be a matter of time before she was reinstated.

After saying her piece, Grace felt much calmer.

However, Carissa wasn't about to let it go so easily.

Instead, she connected the pieces and said, "So, that's what their biggest conflict stems from. If anything happens to either Queen Kylie or Lady Sylvia, the other will be the first suspect. Is my reasoning wrong, Lady Grace?"

Grace's eyes narrowed sharply as her gaze snapped to Carissa. She couldn't deny her logic because that was exactly how these things usually played out.

Though her confidence visibly wavered, she still managed to say, "Your Grace, those are two separate matters."

"True. But the assassination of a prince can often be built on two, three, or even countless other events," Carissa responded.

Grace shot to her feet, her voice laced with anger as she snapped, "What are you implying, Your Grace? Are you suspecting me?"

Carissa shook her head slightly, her expression calm. "Don't be hasty, Lady Grace. I am simply investigating and making logical deductions. I have reason to suspect everyone, but I won't falsely accuse the innocent."

With that, Carissa took her leave. As she turned, her gaze briefly flickered to Lyra, whose face was completely drained of color. She was even trembling.