

War Song 1551

Chapter 1551

By the time they arrived at Laurel Palace, the sky had darkened.

Laurel Palace stood in an isolated corner of the palace district, separated from the Cold Palace by only a single wall. The bitter wind howled through the trees, its wailing like the cries of restless spirits.

As Carissa led Victoria's head chamberlain, Keith, along the narrow path, she took note of the wild grass lining the way. Most of it was dry and brittle, with only the occasional pale green shoot clinging to life. Winter in the north was unforgiving. It allowed no sign of growth, just as the abandoned Cold Palace permitted no trace of hope.

Ordinarily, Keith did not accompany Carissa on visits to the other residences. But this time, at Victoria's command, he had insisted on following her to Sylvia's chambers. Carissa understood the queen dowager's reasoning. Keith had served by her side the longest-if there was scheming afoot in the harem, none could decipher it better than he.

It seemed Sylvia had been waiting for them. When they entered, she rolled her neck with a slow stretch, as if shaking off fatigue, then cast a glance past them toward the doorway.

With a faint, indifferent smile, she said, "Only the two of you? I half expected you to bring an entire retinue to seal off Laurel Palace, Lady Carissa."

Carissa took note of Sylvia's attire-it was unmistakably Camila's work. The rich hues and intricate embroidery framed Sylvia's striking beauty, making her appear as radiant as the sun. And yet, her gaze held the same sharp defiance as ever. Even knowing what lay ahead, she carried herself with undiminished pride.

"Lady Sylvia," Carissa greeted, bowing respectfully as Keith followed suit.

Sylvia let out a mirthless laugh. "You're still greeting me with such courtesy? I thought I had already been condemned as the villain of this tale. Surely I do not deserve such formalities from the two of you, Your Grace and Mr. Finley."

She gestured languidly to the chairs. "Sit, then. Ask whatever you came to ask."

Heidi hurried forward to offer them seats and sent for refreshments.

Sylvia remained silent, watching them with an unreadable expression until the drinks were served. Only when Carissa lifted her cup and took a sip without hesitation did Sylvia finally speak again.

"So bold," she murmured, tilting her head. "Do you trust me so implicitly? Or are you simply unafraid that I might have poisoned your drink?"

Carissa set down her cup and met the concubine's gaze. "Lady Sylvia, Mr. Finley and I have been tasked with investigating Prince Connor's murder. As of now, we have yet to determine the culprit."

Carissa wished to convey that the evidence was not yet conclusive. So, there was no need for Sylvia to react so defensively.

Sylvia laughed coldly, her expression laced with skepticism. "And yet you suspect me, do you not? Why bother with all these pretenses? If you have evidence, then lay it before me."

She arched her brow. "It is the

caltrop, is it not? The Ministry of Defense has no shortage of such things. The one found beneath.

Prince Connor's saddle may pl

have been the same one my son played with. Even if it was, it disappeared long ago. Who knows who took it? It proves nothing."

Since Sylvia had already begun addressing the evidence directly, Carissa said, "We have questioned the guards and attendants who tended to them. The horses were inspected prior to the incident, and after that, only Prince Cecil

approached Prince Connor's mount. That is why Mr. Finley and I are here. We wish to speak with Prince Cecil."

At this, Sylvia's expression darkened.

"I have already questioned him myself. He swore he had done no such thing," she replied, her voice sharp with fury.

Keith spoke calmly, "Lady Sylvia, there is no need for alarm. The prince is but a child; he may not have meant any harm. It could have been no more than a—"

"Mind what you say, Mr. Finley!"

Sylvia's hand struck the arm of her chair as she interrupted him. "Ceci said he didn't do it, and that's the end of it. I believe him. He doesn't lie. You're not merely casting doubt upon him, you're accusing me of instructing him."

Keith frowned. "Many can attest to the fact that the caltrop belonged to him. And he alone was seen near Prince Connor's horse. With such evidence, Her Grace is bound to inquire further. Do you truly mean to forbid us from questioning him at all?"

"I do." Sylvia rose to her feet, her posture as unyielding as a fortress wall. "If you question him, he will believe the entire world suspects him of harming his own brother. As long as I'm around, I won't allow anyone to accuse him of such things."

Chapter 1552

Keith sighed. "Lady Sylvia, surely Prince Cecil must be allowed to speak for himself. Even if he is innocent, it should be him who says so."

"There's no need for him to speak. What I say is the truth," Sylvia declared firmly.

Her gaze shifted to Carissa, her eyes glinting with an icy, cutting hostility. "I know what you seek, Lady Carissa. You wish to satisfy your duty and claim merits. And since I have never treated you kindly, you will believe that Cecil and I are guilty, even when the evidence is not so clear. But I won't allow you to succeed. I won't allow you to harm my son. I will make my stand with my own life, if necessary."

As soon as Sylvia finished speaking, she reached for the scissors on the table. With a swift, deliberate motion, she plunged it into her own throat.

Carissa had already been on alert, but she didn't expect the concubine's actions to be so immediate and without any hesitation. By the time she reached Sylvia, the woman had already removed the scissors, and blood was pouring from the wound.

"Your Grace!" Heidi cried, rushing to Sylvia's side.

Given Laurel Palace's isolated location, even Carissa's swift run to fetch a physician seemed too slow. By the time she returned with medical help, Sylvia was already gone. However, her eyes remained wide open, as if still burning with fury. The blood from the wound had soaked the fine fabric of her dress, creating a dark, spreading stain of crimson.

Carissa struggled to accept the reality of what had just occurred. She barely registered Keith's calm voice cutting through the stillness as he turned to Heidi, whose sobs filled the room.

"Where are Prince Cecil and Princess Phoebe?" he asked.

"Lady Sylvia locked them away. She wouldn't let them leave their room," Heidi answered through her tears.

Carissa finally understood. Sylvia had already made up her mind to show her resolve through her death, so she had locked up her children, not wanting them to see this scene.

Instinctively, Carissa glanced at Keith. She found that he remained unshaken and was issuing orders with a sense of quiet authority. She realized belatedly that Victoria and Keith had known Sylvia would act in such a manner.

Although Sylvia had ultimately taken her own life, saying it was to show her resolve made it very different from just harming herself. Her death was actually a calculated move born of distrust. She had never believed that anyone would take the time to uncover the truth for her and Cecil.

Her passing would bring two possible outcomes.

The first-the world would always whisper that she and Cecil were responsible,

but no one would ever dare to claim they were guilty.

The second-perhaps out of some lingering affection, Salvador might allow Carissa to investigate fully. With that opportunity, perhaps the true culprit might be found, thereby securing Cecil and Phoebe's safety.

Carissa's mind worked swiftly as she grasped the full scope of Sylvia's intentions. She couldn't help but feel a profound sorrow for the woman who had been willing to sacrifice her life for her son. Though

Cecil was not of Sylvia's blood, she cect

had been willing to protect him with everything she had.

Carissa had once believed that of all the women in the harem, Kylie was the one who loved her child the most fiercely. Yet, the queen's love had always been one that demanded something in return.

Kylie's supposed devotion, compared to Sylvia's, now seemed small and tainted by selfishness.

Carissa crouched beside Sylvia's lifeless form, gently closing her eyes with a soft touch. With a heavy heart, she whispered, "Why didn't you trust me? I swear I would have done everything in my power to uncover the truth."

Heidi was on her knees, weeping openly. The isolation of Laurel Palace ensured that her cries would never reach outside its walls.

Yet, it was not long before Kylie and Grace were informed.

"So, she dares to make such a statement with her death? That just shows she's the murderer. To die like that is too easy for her!" said Kylie, still filled with resentment.

But Grace's brow furrowed in thought. Sylvia's death was a deliberate move. It would send shockwaves through the harem and surely cause tremors in the royal court. Because of this, the investigation wouldn't end. Her death would only serve to fuel the search for the truth.

Grace's plan wasn't flawless, and she had relied on Sylvia and Cecil as protection to cover her. But once they were out of the picture, there would be traces-small hints that would eventually lead to the truth. And as Grace considered Carissa's attitude, for the first time she felt a stirring of unease.

Chapter 1553

Connor had endured for three days, a feat that even Sebastian had not anticipated. Given the severity of his injuries, it was highly unlikely that he would survive past the second day, yet he defied expectations and lingered on.

As had been mentioned earlier, his survival meant that the internal bleeding had ceased. Though the journey ahead wasn't ideal, it was their only option. They had to set out.

Over the past three days, Victoria and Salvador had scarcely slept, remaining by Connor's side the entire time.

Connor was only awake for brief moments. When he was, his face was pale from the excruciating pain, leaving him unable to speak. But when he opened his eyes and saw his grandmother and father, it seemed to give him the strength to keep going.

He had no idea how much his determination had moved everyone. For three days, each time he woke, he endured the pain, only to drift back to sleep after the needle treatment. Asleep or awake, the only thing that filled his mind and dreams was pain.

He never said he wanted to die, not once.

But in his heart, he had thought many times that it might be better to die than to keep enduring the endless pain. But each time, he clenched his teeth and willed himself to endure just one more moment. That was how he had survived thus far.

Before Connor and Sebastian left the palace, Rafael and Carissa arrived.

Looking at the gathered faces, Connor weakly uttered a single word of gratitude. He longed to say more, but his body could not allow it, and his voice failed him. He was a frail, shattered figure, with a bandaged head, swollen face, and bloodshot eyes.

Carissa gently took his cold hand, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "You must hold on. We will come to see you soon."

Connor struggled to open his eyes to meet his aunt's gaze, wishing he could smile and reassure her that he would endure. But the pain was too great, and a smile was beyond his reach. Every tiny movement sent waves of agony through his body.

Salvador turned to Sebastian with tears welling in his eyes. "I entrust Connor to you. I believe you will do everything in your power to save him. I won't thank you for this great favor, but if you ever need anything, I will do my best to repay you."

At this moment, Salvador wasn't speaking to Sebastian as the king of a nation, but simply as a father desperate to see his son live.

"Everyone at Eldermere Keep will spare no effort in treating him. You need not worry, Your Majesty. Your own health must come first. Thankfully, the medicine is already showing results. If you continue with the prescribed treatment, no adjustments should be necessary for the next year. As for the Snowdrop Pills, continue with what you have for now. Once I have prepared a new batch, I will send it to the capital," Sebastian replied.

He turned to Carissa, adding, "Rowan will visit the palace several times a month. Should there be any changes after the medication is administered, or if Rowan requires my presence, you are to send word immediately by carrier pigeon."

Carissa nodded. "Understood."

Having given his instructions,

Sebastian turned to look at Connor,

his gaze filled with a deep

compassion. The boy's resolve.

touched his heart, and he was

determined to use all his skills and knowledge to save him.

I.ne

As they were about to leave, Salvador gripped his son's hand tightly. His heart was full of words left unsaid, but not a single one. would come forth. Not knowing whether this would be the last time he would ever see his son, his chest ached with sorrow and S apprehension.

How could he bear to part with his own flesh and blood?

"D-Dad..." Connor managed to whisper, faint as a breath.

Salvador could just barely hear him, and it brought tears to his eyes.

He fought to maintain his composure, his voice soft as he said, "Connor, listen to

Healer Dalton. You will recover. I will be waiting for you."

"Okay." Connor shaped the word with his lips, but no sound came.

Victoria gently stroked his cheek. "Good boy, your grandmother is proud of you."

Tears slipped down the eldest

prince's face. His grandmother's et

praise was so rare. Even though he had fallen off his horse and failed again, had she finally accepted him?

As Connor's gaze swept slowly around the room, Victoria asked, "Do you wish to see your mother?"

Originally, this was something they had hoped to keep from Kylie. But if Connor wanted to see her, Victoria would make it happen.

Connor cried even harder but forced out, "No..."

He did wish to see her, but could not bring himself to face her disappointment. His mother would surely find some excuse to mask his failure.

Though he protested, he summoned all the strength he had left to say, "Tell her... tell her I love her."

It was the first time since his fall that he had said so many words, and they were all for Kylie.

Chapter 1554

Victoria couldn't hold back her tears upon hearing those words. Connor was a dutiful child, and it was unfortunate that Kylie remained blind to that.

Night had fully fallen by the time they set off.

Kyle and Isaac, accompanied by Sebastian's apprentices, escorted them. The journey had been well-prepared by Rafael. The carriage wheels had been altered, and several layers of soft padding had been laid inside.

Sebastian had also ensured that Connor's injuries were properly secured, wrapping him in several layers. Each layer was padded with cotton, both to keep him warm and to reduce the damage from the bumps during the journey.

The bitter cold had driven everyone indoors, leaving the streets deserted. Snow fell in a steady, gentle stream, blanketing the cobblestones in a thin layer of frost. The carriage wheels crunched over the icy coating, the soft sound a contrast to the stillness of the night.

Salvador watched for a long time, well past the point when the convoy had disappeared from view. He was shivering from the cold, but wanted to stand there just a little longer before returning to the palace.

"Your Majesty, it's very cold. Let's go back," Rafael said softly, gently brushing away the snowflakes that landed on his brother's head and shoulders.

"Where's Mom?" Salvador asked as he turned away from where he was looking. Victoria hadn't come out to see Connor off. She was old, and farewells like this were the hardest and most painful.

"She's still waiting for you," Rafael replied.

Salvador's eyes lost focus as he asked, "Do you think he will survive?"

Rafael couldn't offer a certain answer. The journey to Eldermere Keep would take at least half a month, and with Connor's severe injuries, it seemed a daunting prospect. The exhaustion of travel, combined with the internal bleeding, made recovery unlikely. If further blood loss occurred, the chances of survival were slim.

Though Salvador knew the circumstances well, he likely asked because he needed some reassurance.

Sensing this, Rafael said, "He will survive. With Sebastian attending him, he will get better."

Salvador fell into a long silence, then slowly started to walk with Rafael. As they began their journey back to the palace, the king at last broached the topic of Sylvia's death.

Carissa wasn't with them, but Rafael knew the details of the investigation. So, he recounted everything from beginning to end.

Salvador reflected on the matter for some time before saying, "Sylvia was a simple woman. Her likes and dislikes were plain to see. Though she appeared domineering, she lacked the malice to be truly cruel.

"Perhaps I nurtured her ambition too much, leading her to take action against Jeanette's unborn child. But even so, the poison would have taken weeks to act. The fact that she was willing to stake her life to prove her innocence shows that she is not guilty."

Salvador's gaze darkened as he added, "Continue the investigation. It is imperative that the true culprit is uncovered."

Upon hearing this, Rafael knew at once that Sylvia had made the right wager.

For Salvador, Sylvia and Cecil were no longer under suspicion. Kylie would never harm her own son, and Sylvia had staked her life on proving her innocence. That left Grace as the most likely culprit. With only three princes in total, all signs now pointed to her.

That said, the investigation would not exclude Sylvia entirely. Personal judgment

could not override objective facts.

Sylvia's passing deepened

Salvador's melancholy. As king, he had never truly entrusted his heart to any of the women in his harem. However, Sylvia had been the one he favored most. Perhaps it was due to her beauty, or maybe it was because her mind had not been as intricate and treacherous as others.

"She loathed the winter, yet she perished in it. She feared pain, yet she chose to take her life with sharp pair of scissors. To protect Cecil, She was willing to sacrifice everything, even her life," Salvador murmured, pulling his sleeves tighter, as if trying to ward off the chill that seemed to have settled in his very soul.

He thought back to the choice he had given Kylie, when she had opted for her royal position, choosing her own ambitions over everything else.

Salvador returned to the palace secretly, with trusted guards replacing those at the gates.

Victoria fell ill upon her return to the palace. The cold weather, compounded by days without rest and a refusal to eat, had drained her entirely. Her energy seemed to have withered away.

Preparations for Connor's funeral were underway, with Rafael and Derek overseeing matters. Naturally, the coffin didn't contain the eldest prince's body. Since he was not yet an adult, there was no public viewing of his remains, and the coffin was sealed early.

The entire court was filled with sorrow and regret.

Kylie wept so deeply that she fainted several times. Yet, amidst the grief, she still had the audacity to propose that since Sylvia was gone, she would take it upon herself to raise Cecil and Phoebe at Everspring Palace.

When Salvador didn't grant her request, she sought out Victoria, who was weak and confused from her illness.

Hearing someone crying by her bed, the queen dowager struggled to sit up and slapped Kylie across the face. "Leave!"

Stunned, the queen stared at her mother-in-law's face, which was red with anger. Had Victoria just struck her?

In the past, the queen dowager was always reluctant to raise her voice to anyone. She would offer a few pointed words, and if one listened, fine. If not, she wouldn't say anything more. But now, Victoria had personally slapped Kylie.

Keith immediately had the servants escort the queen from the room. Outside, her sobs ceased. She walked away unsteadily, feeling as if the path of life ahead of her was slowly closing off.

Chapter 1555

While Kylie was still fervently attempting to bring Cecil to Everspring Palace, Carissa arrived.

"I have long been waiting for you to ask me whether Prince Connor said anything before he passed, Your Majesty. Yet, you never did," she said, looking at the queen.

Kylie sharply turned her head toward her, her expression filled with resistance. "There is no need to speak of it. He would have blamed me, for he was always angry with me."

"On the contrary, he said that he loved you very much," Carissa replied.

A bitter smile curled on Kylie's lips. She clearly didn't believe Carissa's words. "He is gone. Why would you make up such things to make me sad?" she said.

Carissa looked at the clear finger marks on Kylie's face and her swollen, red eyes. The pain of losing her son should have been a wound to the soul itself, yet here she was, scheming to bring Cecil to her side.

Was it for revenge? Or was she trying to secure leverage, pushing Cecil to become the crown prince and crushing Grace's hopes once and for all?

"I am but the messenger. Whether you believe it or not, that is for you to decide," Carissa said.

After offering a shallow bow, she took her leave.

Once Carissa departed, Kylie pressed her hands to her face and collapsed into uncontrollable sobs.

Of course she knew how utterly, ridiculously absurd her actions were. How could she not? But she had lost her son, and Sylvia had died. After all the fighting and scheming, the one who benefited in the end was Grace, the person she looked down on the most.

Kylie loathed Cecil. But if he became her son-the queen's son-he would be able to rival Caden.

As for Connor's murder, she had plenty of lawful ways to exact revenge on Cecil. Anything beyond that, she had not yet considered. All she knew was that she couldn't allow Grace to rise above her.

It was Salvador's lack of heirs that had brought her to this point. Had there been any other alternative, she would never have entertained the idea of adopting Cecil.

Lydia made no attempt to console her, allowing her to cry freely. The former felt a profound regret and an overwhelming sorrow. She realized that she should never have listened to the queen and done so many things.

Sylvia had probably carried out the murder because she and Kylie had plotted against Jeanette together, yet only she was punished. On top of that, Kylie even made a scene at Laurel Palace, kicking Sylvia while she was down.

Someone as proud as Sylvia could never endure such humiliation. Retaliation was only a matter of time-but no one had expected it to happen so soon, or that she would target Connor.

After the funeral, the year came to an end.

The investigation had continued without pause, though Carissa had refrained from directly questioning Grace. Instead, she carefully sifted through the court's staff, seeking to understand who served which concubine, and where loyalties truly lay.

This relentless digging left Grace on edge. It was as if a sword was hanging over her head, ready to fall at any moment.

As for Cecil and Phoebe, they were brought to Serenity Palace to be raised under Victoria's care. The queen dowager hadn't shared the true cause of Sylvia's death with her grandchildren, only telling them that she had succumbed to a sudden illness. The same explanation was also given to the public.

Cecil and Phoebe were heartbroken-losing their mother at such a young age left them feeling like their whole world had collapsed.

Patrick and Gladys were also devastated by the loss of their daughter. Violet visited them, and later told Carissa that Gladys had cried so much her eyes were nearly blind from grief.

Violet let out a heavy sigh. Everything had happened so suddenly and without warning. It was hard not to feel sorrowful.

Carissa didn't respond. Her eyes only dimmed, the image of Sylvia dying in front of her playing over and over in her mind. If she had been a little more alert, maybe she could have grabbed the scissors in time.

That thought crossed Carissa's mind, but she wouldn't dwell on it. Sylvia had made up her mind. Even if Carissa had managed to prevent it, Sylvia would have found another way.

The path to death was one she had chosen for herself.

Violet sighed again, then asked, "How's the investigation going? Did Lady Sylvia really kill Prince Connor? And was it really Prince Cecil who planted the caltrop?"

"Prince Cecil is a suspect, but I spoke to Ryan. That day, Prince Cecil was indeed riding Prince Connor's horse, but it was Prince Caden who helped him down. Prince Caden wasn't strong or tall enough, so it took some effort," Carissa replied.

"So, Prince Cecil wasn't the only one who touched the horse," Violet pointed out.

"Exactly. I verified Ryan's words with the guards who were there." Carissa paused. "But right now, Prince Caden is still recovering, and Prince Cecil just lost his mother. I haven't questioned them yet."

In addition to this, Carissa had gathered other pieces of evidence, all of which pointed toward Grace and Caden.

Once the truth was uncovered, she feared it would be even more painful to bear.

Chapter 1556

During her investigation, Carissa learned a troubling piece of information from a young chamberlain. The caltrop Cecil had been playing with had indeed gone missing, and a palace maid had picked it up.

The chamberlain had witnessed the moment the caltrop was picked up, and recognized the maid in question as Clara, who served Penelope, one of Salvador's concubines.

It was clear to Carissa that Penelope had no reason to harm Connor. Her relationship with Grace and Sylvia was rather indifferent. Thus, Carissa formally petitioned Victoria for permission to conduct an inquiry within the harem and see if Clara was secretly loyal to someone else.

As expected, Carissa uncovered that Clara had entered the palace years earlier as a low-ranking maid, assigned to laundry duty and forced to endure a hard life. She was from the same hometown as Lyra, one of Grace's trusted maids.

Lyra helped Clara by making arrangements with the head maid, sending her to Penelope's residence to work as a cleaner. Over the years, the quick-witted Clara managed to earn Penelope's trust, becoming one of her closest confidantes.

Further examination of the palace records revealed that when Clara was first sent to Penelope, her place of origin had been altered. Carissa only found her actual hometown in the records from the

year Clara entered the palace. If she had not been particularly diligent, she might never have noticed the connection between Clara and Lyra.

Following this lead, it was easy to uncover that Clara had secretly been in contact with Lyra, and it also revealed that Grace had planted people in various places.

Over the years, Grace had acquired many valuable things. Even during the years when she wasn't in charge of the harem, she was still able to easily obtain everything she wanted, whether it was rightfully hers or not.

This was the benefit of the humble and gentle persona Grace had built. Sylvia didn't bother competing with her, while Kylie thought that giving her a few gifts would help build a closer relationship and make it easier to use her.

And because of Grace's kind nature, the other lower-ranking concubines were also willing to give her gifts to please her. She had a good reputation both in the palace and in court.

No one thought about how easily that reputation had been built.

Strictly speaking, Grace hadn't done many humble or compassionate things at all. When Carissa investigated, she discovered that the people Grace had planted would always speak well of her in front of their own mistresses. They would praise her modesty, gentle disposition, and reluctance to engage in conflict. Over time, everyone began to believe it.

Would someone so clever have hidden their true nature for so many years just for a good reputation? Clearly, there was something else behind it.

The information Carissa uncovered had already been reported to Victoria and Salvador. The king instructed her to continue her investigation, though he ordered that no action be taken regarding Caden for the moment, as he intended to handle that personally.

Carissa understood Salvador's

strategy. His instruction to continue the investigation was designed to lull Grace and the others in the

harem into a false sense of net

making them believe that the truth might never be revealed. As the weeks passed, they would grow complacent, and only then would Salvador strike with a fatal blow.

Yet, Rafael believed his brother was merely buying time to mentally prepare himself for the harsh reality that his second son might have been involved in the attempted murder of his firstborn.

In the new year, Salvador failed to attend court for three consecutive days, so affairs of state were temporarily entrusted to Jeremiah and Rafael. Derek stayed close by, making sure he never left the king's side. He kept bringing Salvador medicine, as Rowan had said the king couldn't stop taking it.

On the 23rd of the month, Carissa came again to report, detailing how one of Salvador's close attendants, a man named Shawn, was known to be loyal to Grace.

Shawn was Derek's godson. Although he didn't usually serve in the royal study, when Salvador returned to the palace, it was mostly him who stayed by the king's side.

After Salvador fell ill, Shawn also helped with the medicine preparation. Every time Sebastian came to check on the king, Shawn was sent out. But if he wanted to, he could likely find out something.

In other words, Grace must have had at least a partial understanding of Salvador's condition.

Upon hearing this, Salvador's fury was immediate and intense. In a fit of rage, he hurled the vial of medicine on his desk, shattering it upon the floor.

The matter, when viewed through a narrow lens, was simply the ambition of a concubine, seeking to gain favor by using Shawn to spy on the king's habits and preferences. But when viewed more broadly, the possibility of Shawn poisoning the king's medicine was not so far-fetched.

Salvador could no longer tolerate this. He ordered that Shawn be detained

immediately, then headed to Iridescent Palace.

Chapter 1557

Grace received Salvador's arrival with a sense of dread.

The past days had been filled with Carissa's relentless probing, which had left Grace in a state of terror. Yet, despite her fear, a small spark of hope still flickered within her.

Connor was dead, while Cecil was but a child and of frail health. It was Caden- intelligent as well as gifted in both studies and martial arts—who was undoubtedly the most suitable choice for the throne.

If not Caden, then who? Could it truly be Cecil?

If Caden were chosen, Grace was certain she wouldn't be blamed for anything. Salvador wouldn't tarnish the reputation of the birth mother of the crown prince and future king.

Now, as Salvador arrived at Iridescent Palace, Grace's heart began to race. His presence could only mean one of two things. Either he had come to check on Caden's progress and finalize his selection as crown prince, or more dangerously he had come with evidence and questions regarding the events that had unfolded.

Either way, today would bring an answer.

Grace led the servants to kneel in greeting. She kept her head lowered, her gaze fixed on the king's golden silk shoes embroidered with flying griffins.

Salvador extended his hand toward her, his voice gentle but firm as he said, "Rise, Grace. It is far too cold to be kneeling for so long. Do not risk damaging your knees."

Her tense shoulders relaxed as she slowly placed her hand in his and stood up. Her expression remained as gentle as ever as she replied, "Thank you for your concern, Your Majesty. Are you feeling better?"

"Much better, thank you," Salvador responded, leading her further into the room. His demeanor was no different from usual. "It occurred to me that I haven't visited you or Caden in some time, and as I had some free moments today, I thought I would come and see how you both are faring. Has the medicine led to any improvement for him?"

Grace's heart soared at Salvador's concern for Caden, though her expression remained unchanged.

"The royal physicians have said that Caden's condition was caused by a great shock. He must rest for another two or three months before he fully recovers," she answered calmly.

Salvador seated himself with ease, his expression still kind and patient. "Bring him to me. He will be at ease knowing I am here."

Grace immediately signaled for Lyra to fetch Caden. Over the last few days, the second prince had seemed somewhat better. He ate and dressed normally, though he scarcely spoke.

She prepared Salvador for what to expect, saying, "Your Majesty, Caden is not speaking much these days. He doesn't answer when asked, but otherwise, his routine is normal... On occasion, he reads or practices his martial arts."

In truth, Caden had neither read nor practiced any martial arts. Grace had once tried to give him a book, only for him to tear it apart. Yet, in Salvador's presence, she needed to present Caden as a diligent and studious child-qualities the king valued above all.

Salvador's expression softened, a look of approval crossing his features. "That's good to hear."

At the sight of his gentle demeanor, Grace's heart finally settled.

Caden appeared from behind Lyra, a handful of servants trailing just outside the hall. However, they didn't approach any closer.

Caden had grown thinner, his face hollow, with dark circles under his eyes. His complexion was sickly pale, and his once-fitting garments now hung loosely about him. Even the cloak draped over him couldn't hide how his waistline had thinned. His expression was vacant, his eyes fixed and unblinking, as if he had lost the will to move.

Lyra gently guided him to stand in front of Salvador.

Grace immediately stepped forward. "Your father is here to see you. Show your respect to him, Caden."

The second prince knelt without a word. However, his lips remained sealed and he offered no reply.

Salvador watched him for a long while, then slowly extended a hand to help him rise. "Do not fear, my son. I am here."

But Caden instinctively withdrew his hand and shrank back, his discomfort palpable.

Grace quickly intervened, saying, "Your Majesty, he is much improved, though the royal physicians say it will take more time to fully recover."

Salvador nodded slowly, his gaze still fixed upon Caden, the sadness growing more evident in his eyes. understand. I know the bond between you brothers. You cannot yet accept that he is gone, and neither can I."

He paused, his tone lowering as he added, "Do you know how much he suffered

before his death?"

Salvador didn't look away from

Caden's face as he continued, "His legs were crushed, the bones shattered. His insides were

ruined his organs destroyed. His skull was fractured, and he bled

from every part of his body. He didn't just die, he died in agony."

Caden's pupils widened and his body trembled uncontrollably. In a reflex, he pressed his hands over his ears. Tears welled up in his eyes and spilled down his face relentlessly.

"Your Majesty, please!" Grace cried out in alarm, her voice frantic as she rushed

to her son's side and pulled him into her arms. "You cannot say such things to him. He is already in such a fragile state."

Her heart raced, panic rising anew as she felt as if the ground was slipping from beneath her.

Salvador sighed heavily. "You're right, Grace. I should not have spoken of such things."

Turning back to the second prince, Salvador gently wiped away his tears. "Don't be afraid, my son. I have something for you."

Salvador withdrew his hand and reached into his pocket, pulling out a caltrop. He placed it in Caden's hand, speaking in a tone that carried through the room.

"Take this and place it under your elder brother's saddle. Once he's dead, you'll be the crown prince."

Chapter 1558

Caden's eyes were wide with terror and his expression was one of sheer horror, as though he had been suddenly awakened from a nightmare.

Gasping for air, he clutched his ears and shouted desperately, "No! Mom, I don't want this! I don't want my brother to die! I don't want it..."

Grace collapsed to the ground. From the moment Salvador had taken out the caltrop, it was as if all her strength had been drained from her body, leaving her crumpled on the floor.

However, Salvador paid her no mind. His gaze remained fixed on Caden, the coldness in his eyes unyielding.

"It is too late. Your elder brother is dead. You killed him," said the king.

Caden whirled around, his head slamming into Grace's abdomen. A shrill, anguished cry escaped his lips as he shouted, "You lied to me! You said he wouldn't die! You said that he would only be crippled! You lied to me! You lied to me! I killed my brother-"

The force of the impact left Grace breathless, her insides twisting painfully as if they might shift from their place. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she lurched forward, trying to silence her son's outcries by covering his mouth.

But Caden, in his madness, seemed unrestrained. Still screaming, he leaped to his feet and hurled himself against the wall. He collided with the stone wall, his forehead splitting open with the force.

After quickly restraining the boy, Derek swiftly knocked him unconscious, then called for someone to take him away to bandage his wound.

As the door slammed shut, Derek positioned himself silently by Salvador's side. Meanwhile, Grace and Lyra remained kneeling on the floor.

Grace knelt upright, her back straight as realization sank in-she had lost. There was no turning back now. She had failed to secure what she so desperately desired. And with that failure, she knew that nothing could save her now. Her anger and frustration were meaningless in the face of what was to come.

Salvador's rage exploded as he drove his foot into her stomach, roaring, "Vile woman! How cruel you are!"

The force of the kick sent Grace tumbling backward, her body crashing to the floor. Pain radiated through her, yet she managed to cradle her abdomen with trembling hands.

"I'm not a vile woman, Your Majesty. I simply had no choice. What flaw does Caden have, apart from not being born of Queen Kylie's womb? In every way, he surpassed Prince Connor. Why should Prince Connor be the one to be made crown prince? It is not fair. It is so terribly unjust for Caden!" she said, laughing bitterly.

Salvador knew exactly how to strike where it hurt the most. With a flick of his hand, he signaled Derek to set down the edict in his hand.

"This is the edict I placed in the royal chapel, naming my heir. Read it," the king instructed.

Derek carefully unrolled the parchment and laid it in front of Grace.

As soon as she saw it, the mocking curve of her lips froze, and her face went pale with shock. Her hands, trembling uncontrollably, reached for the edict. She held it up, scarcely able to believe what she saw.

It was Caden's name on the scroll.

"No... it's impossible... this can't be..." She drew in a shaky breath, her disbelief growing. Then, a shrill scream tore from her throat as she shook her head violently. "No! No! Your Majesty, you cannot deceive me like this! You cannot trick me!"

She clutched the edict to her chest, inching backward. This was the edict she had dreamed of, the one she had schemed for so long to secure. Everything she had done was for this—for her son's name to be written on it. But now, as she held it, a chilling cold crept over her.

Derek wrenched the edict from her hands, his tone as sharp as ice as he said, "It is a pity. Prince Caden has murdered his brother and thus is unworthy to inherit the throne. This edict must be nullified."

Derek handed the edict to Salvador. Without a word, the king signaled for servants to bring forth a brazier. Before Grace's horrified eyes, he burned the parchment to ash.

Grace snapped back to her senses, throwing herself toward the fire, her hands frantically trying to snatch at the burning parchment. "No, it cannot be nullified! The king's

.n

is law! It cannot be undone! It was my fault. I pushed him to do it, he didn't want this. It took me so long to convince him..."

Her hands beat desperately at the flames, but it was futile. The edict, once her salvation, was now reduced to a charred fragment. Only a small corner of it remained, and even that bore no trace of her son's name.

Her mind seemed to unravel as she collapsed onto the floor, her body wracked with sobs.

She beat her forehead against the cold stone as she cried out, "Your Majesty, it is my fault. Caden had no part in this! Please, punish me, not him! He didn't murder his brother! Please, Your Majesty, I beg of you..."

Grace could accept failure, or even death by royal edict. But what she couldn't bear was the thought that her own foolishness had destroyed the very honor that had been within her grasp. She despised foolishness, just as she despised Kylie for always making blunders and stepping on her own feet. And yet, here Grace was, having made the same mistake.

Salvador merely gazed at her coldly without a word.

The edict he had just burned was not the original one kept in the royal chapel. When Carissa had first informed him of Grace's suspicious activities, he had already prepared a new edict.

He knew she would try to justify her actions to try and convince him that her wrongs were not as great as they seemed.

There was no point in debating with her. Grace would never listen or understand that the succession to the throne wasn't merely about talent or ability. No further words were needed. Just this edict alone would be enough to make her mourn her loss and drive her to madness with regret.

Chapter 1559

Salvador didn't grant Grace a swift death.

Instead, he commanded that her legs be shattered-one brutal strike at a time. Flesh split, blood pooled, and gleaming white bone pierced through torn skin.

The pain was so unbearable that Grace lost consciousness multiple times. After hours of torment, she was unceremoniously cast aside, her broken form left to suffer in the Cold Palace.

Salvador personally led Caden to the Cold Palace, his expression as cold as the wind that swept through its desolate halls.

The king pointed at Grace, who lay curled on the ground and howling in pain, then said to Caden, "Your elder brother suffered far worse when he fell from his horse. His pain was unbearable. He died from it-slowly, and with no reprieve."

Caden had long since been reduced to tears, his face streaked with grief and regret. As his legs gave out beneath him, he collapsed onto the cold stone floor, hands clamped over his ears as if that might drown out his mother's screams.

Salvador then ordered that Lyra be brought in. She was to remain at Grace's side, to ensure that the concubine did not die too swiftly. If she did, Lyra would meet a similar fate.

Though Lyra had once been complicit in Grace's schemes, even she had never witnessed such brutality. The only occasion that came close to this violence was the time Connor had fallen from his horse.

Back then, the sight of the injured prince had stirred a sense of satisfaction in her. Now, all that remained was the sharp sting of pain, as the reality of their ruthlessness sank in.

At Everspring Palace, Kylie was struck dumb with disbelief.

It was Grace-of all people, Grace!

She could scarcely comprehend what was unfolding before her when Carissa and Derek arrived. They had brought Caden, who was now so deeply affected by his guilt that he appeared half-mad, lost in a stupor.

Upon seeing him, Kylie's eyes flashed with hatred. "It was you! You wicked wretch, you murdered my son!"

Her words were a venomous hiss, as she raised her hand and slapped Caden hard across the face. He didn't react, simply standing motionless as though he were no more than a lifeless puppet. His face betrayed no emotion.

Kylie was intent on delivering another blow, but Carissa stopped her.

"Get out of my way! I shall see him dead myself!" the queen screamed, her face contorted with fury, as if she sought to pour all her rage onto Carissa and Caden.

Derek raised his hand in a quiet gesture. "Your Majesty, His Majesty grieves for your loss. In his benevolence, he has sent Prince Caden to be raised under your care."

Kylie's eyes widened in disbelief, her finger trembling as she pointed at Derek. "His Majesty would have me care for the murderer of my child? I would sooner see him dead than take him in!"

Derek's gaze remained impassive. "Didn't you once declare that you would take Prince Cecil into your care, despite believing Lady Sylvia had murdered Prince Connor? Why is Prince Caden any different? Perhaps you despise him because his mind is broken?"

"That's not the same!" Kylie hissed, her fury flaring.

Carissa couldn't help but feel a sense of bitter amusement twist within her.

Of course, it wasn't the same.

Caden was no longer a contender for the throne, while Cecil still had a chance. Caden had no family backing or influence to wield, but Cecil had the Lloyd family's help.

e wa

Derek's voice was polite, but laced with unmistakable sarcasm as he said, "His Majesty has made it quite clear. In your eyes, the murder of a son matters little. For the sake of the crown prince title, you'd surely embrace even a slayer who wiped out your entire family."

Kylie's expression faltered, as if struck by an invisible blow.

She seemed stunned by the accusation, her voice trembling as she asked, "is that truly how His Majesty sees me? Does he believe I am utterly driven by ambition? Lady Sylvia's death proved her innocence. I wanted to raise Cecil

because I knew she wasn't the

murderer. But now, Lady Grace has confessed-"

Perhaps even the queen recognized that her explanation sounded hollow. Her lips parted as she sought another line of reasoning but quickly abandoned it, shifting to a more pointed question.

"Am I to understand that my actions, driven by fleeting passion, have been so thoroughly misinterpreted? Does His Majesty hold no regard for the bond we share as husband and wife?"

Derek's reply was unwavering and measured: "This is not a matter we can answer on behalf of His Majesty. But if you wish, I shall relay your question to him."

Carissa had not spoken a word throughout the exchange. Her duty was merely to escort Caden here and to take him away again.

For now, the boy sat dull-eyed, lost in his shattered mind. But there were times when his madness would seize him, lashing out at those around him, or worse, turning that violence upon himself.

It was clear to all that Salvador could never leave Caden in Everspring Palace under Kylie's care. His presence here was a mere torment, a way to unsettle her.

Caden's future had already been decided. Salvador had arranged for him to spend the remainder of his days in a monastery, where he would seek redemption through prayer and penance.

That very evening, Salvador himself arrived at Everspring Palace. As he entered, the heavy doors were shut behind him, cutting off the chill winds that howled outside.

Without a doubt, Kylie knew that the king harbored no remaining tenderness for her. Thus, she sought to use their shared grief to elicit sympathy.

Her voice trembling with sorrow, she

said, "I never imagined Lady Grace could possess such treacherous ambition. Poor Connor... how wretchedly he died, how unjustly. Since his passing, he has visited me

in dreams. His spirit is restless, and

he's unable to find peace."

Salvador interrupted her sharply, retorting, "Connor couldn't have visited you in

dreams, for he is not dead."

Chapter 1560

Kylie's sobs ceased abruptly. For a moment, she stood frozen.

Her voice trembled with disbelief as she asked, "What did you say, Your Majesty? Connor is not dead?"

How could he not be dead? The funeral had already been carried out, and he had been laid to rest. The entire court knew of his passing.

Salvador gazed steadily at her and said, "He is not dead, but gravely wounded. Both of his legs were shattered. If he survives, he'll never walk again. Healer Dalton has taken him to Eldermere Keep for treatment. If he recovers, he'll live under a new name. If not, at least the keep is a good place to lay him to rest."

Realizing that the king didn't seem to be lying, a sudden wave of hope and joy surged in the queen's heart. But right after, confusion set in.

"If he is alive, why was the funeral held? Why not treat him here in the capital? What if his injuries aren't as bad as they seem? What if you've been deceived by Healer Dalton, Your Majesty? He's close to Lady Carissa, who has always wanted Cecil to be crown prince."

Salvador regarded her with a raised brow. "How do you know of Lady Carissa's wishes regarding Cecil?"

"When the workshop was being established, my mother urged me to make an appearance to set an example. I refused, which put Lady Carissa at a

disadvantage. But Lady Sylvia and her mother went eagerly, offering money, shops, and favors. It was clear they were trying to curry favor with Lady Carissa," Kylie replied quickly.

Listening to her, Salvador actually chuckled. "Ah, so it's that easy to win Lady Carissa's favor? Then, why didn't you step forward when the workshop was first established? Surely, you could have gained her favor?"

Kylie's face paled slightly at the question.

Had she known the workshop would be accepted, she would have gladly stepped forward to assist Carissa. But at the time, the public sentiment was cruelly opposed to the venture. She had been too frightened to risk her reputation for the sake of a widely-scorned cause.

Of course, regret gnawed at her now, but Kylie could not confess it aloud.

Pushing aside her discomfort, she focused again on the matter at hand, asking, "What is to become of Connor now? How is he? Is there any possibility of bringing him back to the palace for treatment? I cannot bear to be apart from him."

"Returning to the palace is impossible," Salvador replied, his tone softening, though still firm. "I have come to ask if you would be willing to travel to Eldermere Keep yourself, to care for him. Before he left, he asked for you. If you and Lydia tend to him, that will give me peace of mind."

Tears welled up in Kylie's eyes. "He is my flesh and blood. How could I refuse? I would go to him at once, if only it were possible."

Salvador's gaze softened slightly. "Your agreement is all I need. I shall first declare to the public that your grief over our son's passing has left you ill. Then, in

a few months, I will announce your death. From then on, you shall remain at Eldermere Keep with Connor. Though life there will be humble, I shall ensure the two of you want for nothing."

Kylie stood frozen, her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Your Majesty, do you mean that I may never return to the palace for the remainder of my days?" she asked, her voice unconsciously rising in pitch.

"Should you wish to return, it is

possible. I could proclaim that you have gone to offer prayers for the wellbeing of Starhaven, to seek blessings for the kingdom's fort

In ten years or so, you may return," Salvador replied.

Kylie drew in a sharp breath, her heart sinking.

In ten years—perhaps even longer—the capital would have changed entirely.

Would she still be able to be the queen, or even the queen dowager?

She quickly weighed her options. If she stayed, then even if Cecil ascended the throne one day, she would undoubtedly become the queen dowager. But if she left, she would lose everything.

Besides, what could she do for Connor at Eldermere Keep? It would be better to let him heal in peace while she secured her position before aiding him.

Shaking her head, she spoke with difficulty, her voice tinged with uncertainty as she said, "Your

Majesty am no healer. I cannot

offer aid at Eldermere Keep.

Moreover, in times past, the queen dowager never approved of my closeness to Connor. Should I now agree to leave, it would go against my duty to her. After careful thought,

I believe it best that I remain here in

the capital."

Salvador studied her for a long moment, his expression betraying little emotion. He seemed to have expected this answer, though perhaps with some degree of surprise.

"Very well," he said simply, before rising from his seat.

As the door opened, he gave Derek a signal.

Derek nodded. "I understand, Your Majesty."

Derek entered the inner chambers, where he and the other attendants swiftly blocked the palace servants, including Lydia, from approaching. They were pushed back with force, the sounds of struggles and harsh words filtering through the air. But despite the commotion, it was impossible to stop the flutter of black silk being hung from the ceiling.

Kylie's heart hammered in her chest as realization hit her-she had no choice in

this matter. If she agreed to go to Eldermere Keep, she would survive. If she didn't, she would die.

In a desperate attempt, she fought against Derek's grip.

"Mr. Walker, please go at once to inform His Majesty that I am willing to go to Eldermere Keep. Tell him I shall go!"

Derek's tone was cold and unyielding, his words cutting through her desperation: "It is too late, Your Majesty."