

Downfall of the Curse Bonus Chapter 1

By Deborah Grace White

Timeline: Between Chapters Twenty-One & Twenty-Two

Cody

Cody maintained his usual calm as he saw Matheus safely into his room, but inside, his mind was a whirlwind of activity. He returned to his own bed, but after the night's interruption, he had little hope of reclaiming sleep.

For a long moment he lay on the soft mattress, staring at the ceiling as he attempted to marshal his thoughts. There was a lot to mull over.

He wasn't sure whether to be amused or annoyed by Matheus's sudden insistence on supervising his interactions with Lucy. Perhaps annoyance would be out of place, but he had certainly been taken aback by the boy's unexpected rebuke. If even Matheus was starting to take heed of all this talk of reputation, perhaps it was of more importance than Cody had thought.

What would Scar want him to do? He searched his memory, but although Jo had spoken very directly to Cody about his children's physical safety, Cody couldn't think of a single conversation with either Jo or Scar about being careful not to damage Lucy's reputation.

Of course, they probably didn't anticipate him going to her rooms in the middle of the night, he admitted to himself. He felt a surge of irritation go through him. It wasn't as though he had anticipated it either! He had only gone because her physical safety was in question, and his instructions on that head were clear.

He sighed into the darkness. Lucy's safety was proving to be more of an issue than he'd expected. He'd assumed that neither of his charges would be important enough to be the target of any plot on this trip. Surely the royals had much more reason to be concerned about such things.

He'd been alarmed, but not overly concerned when Lucy had been injured in a suspicious balcony collapse within hours of arriving. But when that was followed by her being one of only a few witnesses to an inexplicable assassination attempt, he'd started to feel an extra layer of unease about her welfare. One that was only confirmed by Lord Yosef's rash attempt to abduct her in the marketplace.

So if he had reacted hastily to the discovery that someone had broken into Lucy's suite in the middle of the night, could anyone really blame him? He had plenty of reason to be concerned.

Cody scowled at the ceiling, still irritated that Lucy had gone out into the city that day without notifying him. She knew perfectly well that she shouldn't have done any such thing, and he'd thought her too sensible to take pointless risks. But unless Cody was mistaken, Lucy was falling prey to some subtle and very careful manipulation on the part of Rasad.

His scowl became contemplative as his thoughts turned to the Thoranian advisor. He was certainly up to something. Cody hadn't needed Lady Yasmin's warning to be convinced of that, but her hints certainly aligned with what he'd observed for himself. Cody was surprised to realize how determined he felt to discover what Rasad was really up to. He wished he could do so without involving Lucy or Matheus, but it seemed unlikely. The advisor had evidently taken an interest in Lucy, and while it was a little alarming, it was likely to be useful if they really wanted to find out Rasad's activities.

Cody frowned again. As long as Lucy could be trusted to keep her head. Cody didn't think she was in danger of losing her heart to the older Thoranian, but he was far from an expert on such things. He would just have to stick close to her, he supposed, to make sure that she wasn't going to make any more foolish attempts to cut him out.

Lucy's well-being should have been enough of a problem to keep Cody's thoughts fully occupied, but he found his mind instead turning toward an entirely different type of woman.

Lady Yasmin was unsettling in a different way. She was something he had never encountered before, and he was taken off guard by how very much he wanted to find out more. When he had burst into Lucy's room and realized that her intruder was the tall, dark-haired noblewoman, he had felt a surge of relief.

It was followed quickly by confusion—he didn't know Lady Yasmin at all, and had no reason to trust her motives in such a suspicious circumstance. And he certainly had no illusions that only men were a threat with a weapon. His time in the resistance had ensured he would never be so foolish. But he had been sure, instinctively, that Lady Yasmin wasn't there to hurt Lucy.

He hoped he could trust that intuition, and not just for Lucy's sake. He found that he didn't want to be wrong about Lady Yasmin, for reasons that made little sense.

He permitted himself a small smile in the darkness. Perhaps some people would be inclined to be suspicious of a noblewoman who picked locks, broke into people's rooms at night, and claimed to be able to fight with a sword. But Cody hadn't been able to help admiring her talent and

determination, even while he had outwardly been challenging her on her underhanded way of getting access to Lucy. The Thoranian woman would have been very much at home in the resistance.

Cody rolled over, trying to quiet his mind enough for sleep. He wasn't nearly rested enough to face another day of trying to keep both Lucy and Matheus in one piece. And that was without even counting the mental exhaustion of apparently having to keep up with etiquette as well as physical threats.

Besides, he thought, he would need some sleep if he was going to be up early enough to test Lady Yasmin's claims as to her swordsmanship...

Cody woke with the suddenness that was habitual to him. The sun wasn't yet up, but he could tell that dawn wasn't far off. He pushed himself off the bed, stretching his limbs briskly. A good solid spar first thing in the morning would be exactly the thing to set him up for the day.

He dressed quickly, donning the practical training clothes he usually favored. Before leaving the suite, he checked briefly on Matheus, unsurprised to find the fifteen-year-old still sound asleep. It would probably be a couple of hours before he woke, and Cody expected to be back long before then.

His other charge he obviously couldn't check on. But he wasn't concerned. Unless he was mistaken, Lucy would show up to the training hall herself after Lady Yasmin's half-challenge, half-invitation. Cody held back a grin. Lucy would probably arrive in an hour or so, congratulating herself on being up and going so early.

He made his way through the corridors of the palace, admiring the way the pale stone caught the rising sun. He had been to the castle at Kynton a few times. It was a beautiful building, but it was dark and cold compared to the Thoranian palace.

Cody smiled to himself. Many of the Kyonans from the delegation had been complaining about the heat since they arrived in the South Lands, but Cody didn't mind it. The part of his childhood spent in Nohl, or the jungle surrounding it, might be years in the past now, but he had found no difficulty in adapting to the climate. And compared to Balenol, Thorania was pleasantly warm. The air wasn't so heavy without the suffocating foliage. He found himself dreading the next Kyonan winter, and shook his head slightly. He'd never been one to complain about the weather, and he wasn't going to start now.

By the time he reached the training hall, the sun had risen enough to make the lanterns burning throughout the room unnecessary. But he noted their presence with interest—clearly it wasn't uncommon for people to train even before dawn. He'd have to remember that.

Cody scanned the large space, his eyes skimming over a few unfamiliar Thoranian men, guards by the looks of them. He felt a disproportionate surge of satisfaction as his gaze settled on the person he'd come here to find.

Lady Yasmin hadn't misled him when she said she usually trained in the mornings. She was warming up in a corner. She was the only woman in the hall, but the total lack of attention being given to her presence suggested that she was a regular fixture. From the little he knew of her, Cody would expect nothing less.

For a moment he hung back, observing Lady Yasmin's form as she trained. The exercises were a little different from what he would usually do, but she was clearly both capable and strong. There could be no doubt she had given considerable time to the skill.

Cody wasn't usually one to notice what people wore, but he couldn't help but examine her unusual outfit. Well, it probably wasn't unusual in Thirl, but he had certainly never seen anything like it in Kyona. It would probably be considered inappropriate, he thought dispassionately, even in the relaxed community of Raldon. The fabric was sheer compared to his own clothes, and fitted snugly, unlike the flowing garments he'd seen other Thoranian women wear since his arrival in Thirl. It looked extremely practical for training, and Cody naturally approved of it on that score.

But he caught himself by surprise in realizing that he was also admiring the way Lady Yasmin looked. He'd never found himself giving much thought to such matters. Being close with Scar since childhood, he'd come to think of beauty as something that shouldn't be taken seriously.

He knew that everyone considered Scarlett stunningly beautiful, and it wasn't that he disagreed. But he'd seen her as a leader and a spy before he'd been old enough to see her as a woman, and her beauty had never had much impact on him.

Her attitude, however, had. He knew that she hated being complimented on her looks, and that she had been contemptuous of most of the men in Nohl for their sycophantic flattery. Cody had never been tempted to make a fool of himself over any woman the way so many men made fools of themselves over Scar. And he'd never placed too high a value on beauty.

In fact, when he'd met Lady Yasmin, it hadn't even occurred to him to ask himself whether he considered her attractive. And yet, he seemed to be taking an unusual amount of notice of her appearance now.

He shook off the reaction, moving forward to gain her attention before she started a bout with someone else.

"Lady Yasmin."

She looked up, a quick smile lighting her face when she saw him.

"Ah, couldn't resist the challenge, I see."

Cody smiled himself. "I rarely can," he admitted.

"Have you warmed up yet?" Lady Yasmin asked, gesturing with her head to the training area she had just vacated.

"Not yet, but I see that you have. You were doing some exercises I'm not familiar with. Willing to show me?"

"Of course," said Lady Yasmin, showing neither surprise nor discomfiture at the information that Cody had been watching her train.

She led him through the exercises, her quiet manner quickly putting him at ease after his unexpected earlier distraction. He was just thinking that he was sufficiently stretched to start a proper bout, when his companion abruptly spoke.

"So you really were a slave."

Cody looked up in surprise, following Lady Yasmin's gaze back to his forearm.

"Yes, for a short while. I was pretty young when the slavers got me, but it wasn't long after I reached Balenol that I escaped and joined the resistance."

Lady Yasmin nodded, her expression thoughtful as she continued to observe his arm. "May I?" she asked, her gaze flicking briefly to his face.

"Sure," said Cody, holding out his arm.

Lady Yasmin stepped closer, taking his arm between her hands and turning it from side to side. Her touch was confident, no hint of self-consciousness at the contact. It was strangely comforting, Cody realized.

“It’s still very clear, after all these years,” she commented.

“Yes, it hasn’t faded any with time,” Cody agreed calmly.

Lady Yasmin was silent for another moment, before releasing his arm and stepping back. “Forgive my curiosity,” she said with a smile. “I’ve never actually seen one before, in real life.”

“Nothing to forgive,” shrugged Cody. “They’re pretty commonplace in the community I come from, but I still get plenty of curious looks from outsiders, even in Kyona.”

“I’m guessing your life is an interesting story,” said Lady Yasmin, striding to the bench where she’d left her weapon. “I’d love to hear more about the resistance. I was a young child when the slaves returned to Kyona. But certainly old enough to remember the commotion created by the news. I’ve never seen my parents so excited, before or since. They were always outspoken against the trade.”

Cody collected his own blade, trying to mentally calculate Lady Yasmin’s age according to this information. Several years younger than him, for sure.

“It’s not as interesting as it sounds,” he said. “As Lucy was so eager to point out last night, my age prevented me from taking part in the more exciting activities of the resistance.”

Lady Yasmin smiled. “Yes, so I gathered. I think I like your Lucy. She’s certainly different from the other girls in your delegation.”

Cody grunted. “She has a great deal of potential, but she’s very young, and it shows.”

“Not as young as you were when you were in the resistance, though, right?” Lady Yasmin pressed.

Cody sighed. “True. But her life has been very different from mine.” His eyes glazed over for a moment, picturing the home and family life Jo and Scar had created. “For which I’m very glad, don’t get me wrong. But she has the...luxury I suppose, of insecurities that I didn’t have time for. Sometimes she acts foolishly as a result.”

“Well, I wouldn’t want to be judged on my mistakes at that age,” said Lady Yasmin lightly.

Cody smiled. “Sounds like there are some interesting stories to your life, as well.” His expression grew serious for a moment. “But you’re right. Lucy has a good heart, and she’ll pull through this stage. Now,” he raised his sword, “you claimed to be a formidable opponent. Let’s see if you can live up to your boast.”

Lady Yasmin laughed as she adopted a fighting stance. “I claimed to be a more formidable opponent than my brother,” she corrected. She grinned. “That’s a much lower standard to meet.”

Cody smiled briefly, before pushing all humor aside and focusing on the bout. He was itching for a good fight.

Lady Yasmin didn’t disappoint. Cody realized after a few minutes that he was holding back, and he chastised himself for the presumption. Lady Yasmin was meeting him blow for blow, and clearly didn’t need to be patronized.

Cody pushed himself harder, and soon they were so lost in the rhythm of attack and deflect that all other considerations fell aside. Lady Yasmin was good—very good. And fighting with her was more exhilarating than Cody had expected. He had hoped to be challenged, but he hadn’t

anticipated the surge of satisfaction that would come simply from crossing blades with her, from realizing that she could meet him on his own level.

And she could, or very nearly. She was magnificent—he'd never fought a woman as capable.

They had been sparring for some time, with no decisive outcome, when Lady Yasmin brought her blade around in a particularly aggressive move. Cody blocked it, the clash of metal muffling his chuckle as he smiled appreciatively at the combative glint in the noblewoman's eyes.

A movement to one side caught his attention, and he looked up to see Lucy warming up nearby. He stepped back, Lady Yasmin doing likewise as she also caught sight of the new arrival.

"Lucy," Cody greeted her, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "There you are."

Lucy took a moment to respond, and Cody was a little thrown by the expression on her face. She was watching him carefully, looking confused, and he couldn't imagine what he had done or said to warrant that reaction.

But after a moment she answered lightly. Cody relinquished his place as Lady Yasmin's opponent with a reluctance he tried hard not to show.

As the two women began to circle one another, Cody found himself looking between them, his thoughts embarrassingly detached from the match. They were alike in their fighting stance, but so different in other ways. And not just because Lady Yasmin's poise and confidence radiated from her at all times.

Without his permission, Cody's mind returned to the question of beauty. He knew that Lucy was beautiful, speaking objectively—or as objectively as such things could be measured. It was still difficult for him to see her as anything but a child, but the reaction of most men was a clear indicator. Not to mention the fact that she looked so much like her mother, and Cody had always considered her mother to be a model of beauty as far as the population at large was concerned.

He looked from the young woman—noting with approval that her posture was good and her face serious as she gave her full attention to the fight—to the Thoranian woman beside her. Lady Yasmin was graceful in her movements, quicker than Lucy, but no less precise.

He supposed, considering it dispassionately, that Lady Yasmin wasn't as beautiful as Lucy, or as Lucy would be, if her mother could be used as a guide. And yet, she was appealing in a way Lucy never could be, not in Cody's eyes. In fact, her appeal was as powerful as it was unexpected.

Cody shook his head slightly, forcing his attention to return to the fight as he scrutinized Lucy's movements. He and Lucy and Matheus weren't even supposed to be in Thorania, strictly speaking. It was unsettling, to say the least, to discover in himself the hint of a desire to never leave.

This trip was becoming more complicated by the second.