

The Curse

The stables were quiet. In the distance, the noise of the racetrack hinted at a distant fervor and joy, but the quiet hum of electric fans was the only sign of life in the barn. It was a low slung, simple building, built generations earlier and worn from the hoofprints of its occupants. It had been the temporary home of many champions, and many more also-rans, and in the coming years it would hold many more. A gentle clip clop of hooves on concrete, growing louder, announced the return of its current occupant.

Led by a stable boy, an imposing chestnut colt rounded the corner, fresh from the dirt and the noise of the track. The boy led him into an open stall, removed the halter, and carefully closed the lower half of the door behind him, his duties for the day completed. The colt briefly watched the boy walk away before directing his gaze at another human figure, approaching from the same direction in which the boy was leaving. Giving a curt nod to the stable hand, the man, dressed in a suit, stopped directly across from the colt's stall, folding his arms across his chest and leaning back against the wall. He was balding, though his remaining hair was dark, creating a stark contrast with his white skin. He stared at the colt, who stared back at him with an expression equal parts contempt and dread. For a minute, they just gazed into each other's eyes, letting the fans occupy the silence between them.

Finally, the man spoke. "Congratulations."

The colt snorted. "What for?" he retorted, an indignant air in his voice.

"You're the only horse to have ever finished second in all three races. That's worthy of praise."

The colt shuffled his feet in the stall. "Fuck you."

The man shrugged. "Hey, you have to give him credit. It took three great races to beat you, and nobody wanted to so much as face either one of you in this one. A few extra strides, and you're the one in the winners' circle."

The colt paced in his stall. "Bullshit. I'm the better horse. I've got the champion bloodlines, the champion reputation, the champion silks—I should be the one wearing the carnations, not that no-name bastard."

"Well, he's wearing them, and we're in here." The man walked casually across the aisle, leaning on the wall next to the opening in the stable door. "Want my opinion?"

The colt glared at him. "No."

"He outworked you."

The horse gave an indignant nicker. "Fuck YOU! I worked my ass off and you know it!"

The man shook his head. "But you had nothing to prove. You were a star from the moment you were born. You grew up on the most famous farm in the country. People respect you for that alone, and with your bloodlines? There's no question, you're going to be famous. But he had to work his ass off to even get noticed. He came in wearing pink fucking silks, for god's sakes. Do you think anyone would have taken him seriously if he HADN'T beaten you a half dozen times?"

The colt turned away. "Fuck off."

The man leaned into the stall. "Oh, come on, Alydar. You just ran one of the best races in history and you've got a stick up your ass because you lost by a goddamned sneeze?"

Alydar whirled around. "Are you actually surprised that I'm mad? What the fuck do you expect? 'Oh, yeah, you're right, I'm just less of a stallion than Affirmed.' What kind of fucking idiot do you think I am?!? Are you so fucking stupid that you can't figure out why I'm mad?!? Take a wild fucking guess!" He paced around the stall. "Why am I mad? Because now it doesn't matter what happens. He won the fucking Triple Crown. If I beat him a hundred times after this, he'll still be able to hold that over me. If I'd beat him today, he'd just be another horse. But now he's the superstar, and I'm just some worthless fucker with all the qualifications and no goddamned trophy. I get to be a footnote for the rest of my fucking life. And you're surprised that I'm pissed off?!?" He returned to pacing his stall. "Give me some fucking credit, John. I know you're smarter than that."

John opened his mouth, reconsidered, and shut it again before changing course. "At least you'll best him at stud."

Alydar snorted. "That's what they said about my racing career. They were wrong about me on the track; what's to say I won't disappoint them in the breeding shed too?" He gazed past John toward the track. "Seven times. Seven fucking times now he's beaten me. And three times this year on national television..." he drifted off.

John sighed. It had been a long day, and he'd been dreading having this conversation since Alydar crossed under the wire mere inches behind his nemesis. "Well, there's not much you can do about it now," he said quietly.

"It'll never happen again," Alydar muttered, turning away from the doorway toward the back of the stall.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I did, but I have no idea what the hell you're talking about."

"There's never going to be another Triple Crown winner. Two of three, maybe, but nobody's ever going to win all three again." The colt turned around to face John. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

The human looked perplexed. "What do you want to do, fix the race?"

"I don't know, but I'm going to do something," Alydar shot back.

"There are a million ways for humans to fix races. They can change feed, pay off jockeys, pay off trainers, sneak drugs, change drugs, or god knows what else to alter the outcome of a race. But you? In a race that you might not even get to see on TV? There's no way in hell you could coordinate that."

"I just said I don't fucking know, alright?!?" Alydar snorted and resumed pacing. "But mark my words: Nobody is ever going to win a Triple Crown again. I don't care if I've got to recite some kind of chant, or perform some sort of fucked up ritual. It's never going to happen again, because I'm not going to let it."

John raised his eyebrows. "A curse? What are you, a unicorn?"

"It's worth a try."

The human sighed and shook his head. "Look, I understand you being upset at losing to Affirmed. But to throw your problems on colts who haven't even been born yet? That's a little harsh, don't you think? Your own damned kids will probably be running here someday. You want them to lose?"

Alydar glared at John. "My colts will win this race. I may not have, but they will. They won't let another horse win the Crown, even if it means they have to beat each other. I mean what I say."

John exhaled audibly and rubbed his forehead. "I really think you're overreacting to this."

"You don't understand." The colt turned away, lowering his voice. "You can't understand."

Sensing that Alydar was done talking, John walked away from the stall, calling back over his shoulder as he went. "Get some rest. You'll calm down by the morning. We're leaving on Monday. The higher ups were talking about maybe Saratoga for your next start, but that'll give you some time to recuperate. I'll be back to check up on you later." He reached the end of the aisle, rounded the corner, and was gone.

Alydar paced in his stall, finally pausing in front of the door and looking out toward the track, equally disgusted with himself and the world. All of the work he'd put in, all of the training and preparation, and he had nothing to show for it. The more he thought about it, the more

frustrated he became. Trying to distract himself just wasn't working, especially when he could faintly hear the celebration of Affirmed's supporters approaching the stables just a few buildings over. "This will never happen again," he thought to himself, turning away from the open end of the stall. "Never."

And he was right.