

## Royal Contract 631

Chapter 631: The race was on

"Are you sure that he is a good boy?" Jacky asked, staring at the big horse dominating the small space.

Her resolve earlier was slowly diminishing after staring at the domineering creature. She did not expect it would be big up close. Since in the few times she saw them, she was always far away.

She quickly stepped back when the horse made a sudden movement, making its unfriendly noise, frightening her even more. But Marcus held the horse on the rein, patting him on the head, calming him down.

"He is a good boy. One of the best and most reliable horses they have here." Marcus assured her, continuing to run his hand on its body. "But he could sense your fear. Come on, touch him."

Marcus beckoned her to come closer to the animal and pulled her hand gently towards him. Slowly, he guided her hand across the horse's side, making her feel his heartbeat.

"Wow, that feels nice," Jacky said, sensing her own heartbeat slowing down. She started caressing the horse on its side, feeling calmer with each stroke.

"You have to become one with him," Marcus whispered, using his voice to bond with the animal. "If he senses you are agitated, he will also feel that way."

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He once again pulled her hand carefully towards the front of the animal, making her face the animal. "Now, caress his head carefully like this."

He demonstrated, running his hand on the top of his head, going to the side of his cheek. Then down to the side of his neck. After, he gestured that she should follow what he did.

She hesitated at first, then remembered that the horse would feel what she felt. She breathed deeply and calmed herself down. Slowly, she lifted her hand and patted it on the head, following what Marcus did.

"Oh, you are such a good boy, Lightning." Jacky could not believe that she had patted a horse. Now, all that was left was to ride it. Luckily she had changed to jeans and a shirt just like Dani had suggested.

"Come on. Are you ready to mount, Lightning?" Marcus asked, patting the horse to prepare him.

He held her by the waist and guided her back to the side. Then, he made a final check on the saddle, ensuring that the locks were secure.

"So, how do I get up there?" She was never a fan of western movies or things with horses, so what might seem obvious to others was not for her.

She looked at the items in front of her but could not figure it out. It seemed to be one big puzzle for her. She only understood that the long line on the back of the horse was what the riders used to hold the horse.

"Put your feet here, and I will push you up, then sit your ass there." It was a simple explanation that Marcus believed she understood. Finally, after two tries, she managed to do it correctly.

"Hey, guys. What is keeping the two of you so long." Dani shouted outside the barn as she rode her own horse.

She was not an expert like Marcus, but she knew how to ride.

She kept the horse in a short gallop, trying to get the feel of its strength. At the same time, trying to bond with her.

"They are probably trying to beat our record," Alex said, trying to get back at their friends for the teasing they had received from them.

He was also riding his own horse. It was a new one since the one he used to ride had already passed away. It was a good horse, but it had been too old and sickly.

"You know this is my first time," Jacky uttered playfully at her friends when they finally emerged out of the barn.

She admitted she did take a lot of time before getting convinced that the horse would not harm her. But now, she was actually enjoying the thrill of being on one.

"Oh, I am glad that I am your first," Marcus whispered in her ears, not wanting the others to hear it.

He encircled her in his arms as they rode together on the horse. He knew that Jacky was not ready yet to be on her own, so she had her sitting in the front seat.

"Yeah, I am glad too," Jacky whispered back, giving him a kiss before they went to ride the sunset. The remaining morning anyway.

"Hey, you two. Are we going to ride, or do you want us to leave you alone?" Alex yelled at the two as he and Dani began to gallop ahead.

He wanted to show Dani his favorite spot in the area. It was a considerable distance. But with a horse, there was a shortcut into the woods.

He could see at least two of his security following them a few meters away, giving them some space. Then, Marcus was hot on their trail but slower than his usual speed, considering he was with a companion.

"Are you good?" Alex asked Dani, just checking if everything was in order.

He had never seen his wife on a horse before since this was their first time going on horseback riding. But he was confident that she knew what he was doing from the first time she touched the horse.

"She is such a darling." Dani patted her head, expressing her admiration for the horse.

She had ridden some and even had a horse on her own, but this one was far the best she had seen, at least, ridden. She seemed well trained, had a good breed, and was in her best shape.

"She is rare, just like you are," Alex said, riding his horse closer to her as they slowed down, enjoying the scenery before them.

He had followed this trek a hundred times, maybe more, but never saw it the way he was looking at it now. The trees appeared lush and greener in his eyes, the bird sounds were more melodic in the ears, and everything else looked perfect.

"Please, I am not something that will break easily, so stop putting me on a pedestal. But I love that you are always there to support me." She stated as they passed through a clearing.

She extended her hand to him, and he took it as their horses trotted at the same slow pace. It was a new feeling of having someone enjoying the same things as her.

In her past relationships, she never had the chance to do these things with them, especially with Nick. She was glad that she was sharing this moment with the man she loved.

"I know that." Alex understood what she was saying. "I am sorry if sometimes I can go over the top, but I will try to lessen it." He pulled her hand, raising it to his lips.

"Just tone it down a little." Dani requested, not wanting to discredit his effort to make her happy.

When he finally let go of her hand, he slightly turned to her. "Let us race." He nodded his head in his direction, trying to dare her to take the challenge.

She just did say not to treat her like she was made of glass. "Wait, I don't even know where we are going." She complained as she followed him, increasing their speed.

"Just follow the trail, and you will know when you get there." He shouted back as the wind blew on his face.

And the race was on.

Chapter 632: Former glory days

"Sir, Count Wellington wishes to see you if you can squeeze him into your schedule." His secretary approached him with a hesitant smile, knowing that her boss had a busy schedule.

She stood by the front of his desk as he waited for a reply. She had already told the Count that her boss was really busy, but he would not leave until he had seen him.

Her boss leaned on his chair and stared at her from his spectacle. Then, he took off his glasses, rubbing his eyes to ease the tension.

"Do I have time to spare?" He asked, knowing quite well that he had another meeting in a few minutes.

He rotated his neck and shoulder, using that time to release the tension building on his back and neck muscles. While his secretary worked on his schedule.

"Yes, Sir, but only a few minutes." She finally answered his boss.

She quickly turned around toward the door when his boss nodded his approval. She had no time to waste since her boss was pressed for time.

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"The Duke will see you now, Sir Wellington and Sir Asthorne." She announced to the two who were waiting impatiently outside.

The two did not wait for her to guide and introduce them. Instead, they marched inside immediately. She quickly returned to her desk to double-check the Duke's appointments and fixed it.

"I hope you don't mind if I tagged along with our friend, but we have some urgent matter we need to discuss with you." Count Asthorne spoke up when he entered the room.

He took the chair on the right while the Count took his seat on the left, not waiting for the invitation. They had no time for pleasantries when they all knew their time was limited.

"Not at all." The Duke still gestured that they made themselves comfortable. "So, what is this urgent matter we need to discuss? That both of you can't wait." He questioned, slightly intrigued by their presence.

They just had their meeting, and he believed that they had already covered most of the current problems of the Kingdom. He could not think of anything else unless they were here to convince him again to talk to his son soon.

"We only want what is best for the Kingdom, and I think the three of us will agree to that." Count Asthorne started, hoping that whatever would be discussed in this meeting would be met with the utmost discretion.

"Of course, I think that is what Fred wants too." Count Wellington said, dropping the formalities since they were just among friends.

"Get to the point because I don't have all day." The Duke frustratedly said to the two.

Whatever they were trying to say could not be that easy if they kept beating behind the bush. But he still had a few things to do other than discuss some puzzles.

"What Timothy is trying to say is that. We are working on finding a way to bypass the transition from the King to your son. if he still does not wish to sit on the throne." The Count finally stated the purpose of their visit.

It was a sensitive topic since it would mean they were trying to put Prince Lance's name on the next in line. His son would sit on the throne if his plan worked.

"You see, Prince Alexander had tasked me to find a way to take his name out of the list for the crown." Count Asthorne confided to the Duke. "Unfortunately, I still could not find a way to do that."

The Lord shifted in his seat, feeling uncomfortable for failing to inform the Duke about those plans. But as Alexander's godfather, he only wished to help him.

"Now, he sought my advice, and I thought we should consult this with you." The Count continued, thinking that it was better if he could get the Duke's blessing in continuing with this task.

Who would not want their son to be King? Well, if there was an opportunity for Prince Lance to be one. Then he believed his son had every right to be King.

The Prince had served this Kingdom with everything he got compared to the rightful heirs. If anyone should be King, it should be him and not them.

"This is a bit unorthodox, but you should have brought this topic to the meeting with the other Council. Why are we only now discussing it?" The Duke responded with a bit of trepidation.

Although the idea that his son would have an alternative to take his place in the position, he believed that going behind the back of the Council was not the way.

"You know many Council members don't like breaking the rules. Many still believe that your son, Prince Alexander is the rightful heir." Count Wellington slightly hesitated, not wanting to sound too anxious to put his son on the throne.

"But you think the Council will take your suggestion to be an act against the Kingdom because of the conflict in interest." The Duke finished the statement for him.

It would certainly help his son if Alex still did not wish to take the position. He looked at Count Asthorne and then the Count, trying to read what they might be thinking with this proposal.

Prince Lance was his son, after all. If he placed his son on the list, the other Counts and Lords might rebel against it. They might also demand that their sons be included in the list.

"Something like that. I don't want to be labeled as a traitor or something." The Count said, hoping that his alibi was working.

He needed the Duke to suggest the idea, not him or Count Asthorne. He wanted the Duke to find a way to put his son into a position of power.

The Blackstone had ruled this Kingdom long enough. For generations, no one had dared to go against them. Not anymore. It is time for another family to take on the task.

His son might not want the position, but he could force it on him. He believed under his ruling, this Kingdom would flourish. It could finally regain its former glory days.

#### Chapter 633: Big News

"You don't fight fair." She shouted when she was about to overtake him before they had entered a narrow opening.

"What did I do?" Alex asked, placing an innocent smile on his lips as he turned to face her. But he still maintained his speed as she followed closely behind him.

He did have a few advantages, including having one of the fastest horses in the stable. Then, he knew the landscape of the entire place by heart.

But in his defense, he never had the intention of winning. He only wanted to see his wife find her drive again to win. She had been hiding behind her fear that she barely dared herself to go out of her comfort zone.

"As if you did not know," Dani replied, picking up her pace. She could feel her adrenaline pumping, every nerve in her body was screaming due to the strain of the activity, but she was not ready to give up.

"I am entirely clueless." He stated with a big grin on his face.

He looked back, and he could only see Ben following not too far behind, but his friends were long gone, buried behind the tall grasses.

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"Storm." She called out to her. "Faster, baby." She encouraged the gentle beast to push herself a little more. "I know you have it in you to win this." She tapped her on the side as her legs kicked on her side to keep her going.

"You can say all you want, but the fact is, I am better than you, and the loser will have to clean the dishes tonight." Alex goaded her more, pushing her more to her limits.

"We never agreed on that earlier. But fine, because I am not going to lose." She claimed, passing him before entering the woody area of the place.

She looked behind her and could see that Alex was not far behind. The trail was narrow, with trees lining up on both sides, allowing only one horse at a time. But once it opened to another clearing, he would be able to overtake her. She knew it.

Unfortunately, she had no idea where she was going. She was unfamiliar with the terrain. She could not go faster than her current speed for fear that she might make a mistake and suddenly stumble on a cliff or something.

"You are doing great." She continued as she spotted a wide opening just a few meters away from her. She knew that was it. She would lose once they were in the open space.

But she still pushed herself and her buddy, not wanting to surrender that easily. She had never shied away from a challenge, and she would give it all to win.

Finally, the horse stepped into the open sky, surrounded by luscious grass and wildflowers. The sun brightly shined above them, unobscured by the branches and leaves of the trees.

The wind blew on her hair, making it fly even higher this time. But she never noticed it as her eyes feasted on her surrounding. She was mesmerized, slowing slightly down as she neared the middle ground.

"I guessed we win, Storm." She whispered to the horse, tapping her on the side of her neck.

A few seconds, Alex stopped at her side. She guessed he never intended to win because he could have sped up with his horse. But she still appreciated what he did.

She never felt more alive again after that thrilling run. It had been a while since she did ride a horse, but it was like riding a bike. She never forgot the steps.

"I guess the two of you did, fair and square." Alex declared as he gazed again at one of his favorite places to go when he visited this place.

"Yes, we did. Storm really did a great job." She dismounted the horse, knowing that they had arrived at the place. He did say that she would know it once she saw it.

"We are not sour losers. Aren't we?" He patted his horse on the head. "Right, Thunder." Letting him know that he also did a good job. They might not have won, but he accomplished his goal.

He also followed her and went down on his horse. He looked at his wife as her eyes wandered around the mountain tops on the other side of the hill.

Seeing the beautiful serenity surrounding his wife was prize enough for being the second-best. He could not ask for more. He was happy that he had placed that gorgeous smile on her lips.

"There is something I want to show you." He grabbed her hands and took the reins from her. He kept her hand on his right while dragging the horses on his left.

"Where are we going, and where are Marcus and Jacky?" She asked, turning back to look in the direction they passed by earlier.

All she saw still on his horse was Ben. He was busy scouting the place, probably checking for possible dangers. But this time, she did not feel threatened because she was assured that Alex would protect her.

"They are probably doing some leisurely ride since Jacky is still uncomfortable on a horse." He explained to her his presumption.

He believed even if Marcus was an expert horserider with a passenger like Jacky, it would be hard for him to ride as fast as them.

"I guess you are right." She followed him into a small shady area with a picnic basket set up for them. Whoever prepared it, all the food looked delicious.

"We are eating our lunch here." He announced, gesturing for her to sit down on one of the cushions scattered on the ground.

"How did you manage to prepare this?" Dani asked since he was with her most of the time.

"Not me." Alex sat beside her and leaned closer to her. "Ben arranged all this for us."

Ben had felt guilty for ruining their honeymoon when he failed to protect them, so he thought that doing this would at least make up for some of it.

"That is so thoughtful of him." Dani looked at her bodyguard and wondered why he was still single. He was a wonderful man with a good soul.

She believed she should do something about him. Maybe introduced him to some of her good friends. Any girl would be lucky to have a man like him.

"He is a good man." Alex acknowledged, finding Ben as a good friend he could always count on. It was why he assigned him to protect Dani in the first place. Because he believed in what he could do.

He never once blamed him for what happened to them. It was an unfortunate incident that one of his trusted men betrayed him.

"Anyway, there is something urgent that I wish to tell you." Alex was slightly hesitant as he stared into her eyes.

He took her hand, wondering how she would react to the news he was about to tell her. Although, he also did not know how to respond to what he had heard earlier when his father called him.

Dani was in the bathroom taking a shower, so he doubted if she had listened to their exchange. But he had kept his voice down, not wanting anybody else to hear about the conversation.

Still, he felt he had to tell her now before she heard it from someone else. It was indeed big news that would affect their future.

Chapter 634: Wild and free

"What is it?" She was not alarmed since she could sense the calmness in his demeanor. She could tell that it had nothing to do with a life and death situation. But she did wonder what it was about.

"I received some news," Alex said as he shifted in his position and decided to lay on the mat, resting his head on her lap.

Somehow, this position had become one of his favorites when they were together. When they were simply lounging in the living room on the couch. While watching a movie or reading a book.

"What kind of news?" She asked, placing one of her hands on his forehead while he continued caressing the other with his hands.

She had never heard anything since they left the city. But in fairness, she barely looked at her phone lately or even checked the internet.

She had promised that she was devoting her entire time to him during their renewed honeymoon. He also did promise not to touch a phone while together.

Then, she wondered where he might have received such news. Maybe from Marcus, she concluded. She just continued to stare at him, waiting.

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"Father called earlier while you were in the shower. He wanted me to know that the Council had convened the other day about a delicate matter." He knew he should just spell it out, but he was also conflicted by the things his father said.

He was not expecting that he would feel differently about his news. Suddenly, he was confused about how he should react since this would affect his plans and future. Well, their future.

"Go on." She did not want to push him, seeing that he chose his words carefully about this topic. It might be a sensitive subject that he had difficulty discussing with her.

She understood that not everything was easy to share, especially with him. She did hide a few things from him, not knowing how to tell him. But it did not mean that she was trying to keep it from him. She just needed the right time to say it.



"Father called to say that the Council had finally chosen me as the new heir. It was final since my cousin, Edward, had disqualified himself with his recent activities." Spilling out the news. Finally, getting it off his chest.

He wished that his wife would have some kind of word of wisdom that she could impart to him to make it easier for him to digest this new information.

Although he adamantly told his father and the Council that he never wanted anything to do with the crown. Currently, he was not too sure anymore if it was still his stand.

"How do you feel about it?" She asked, seeing the conflict in his eyes.

She remembered how he was against taking over the reign in their Kingdom. Precisely, why he had built his life with her in the city.

She contemplated if he suddenly changed his mind. Did he have a change of heart about ruling his people? Now, how would she feel about it if that was the case?

She had no idea since it had never entered her mind before. When she started a life with him, the only thought that came to her mind was building a home with him within the city.

"In truth." He paused, unable to answer her right away. "I am not quite sure." He finally admitted to her.

He looked at her for a reaction, checking if she would find his answer unacceptable or would she like the idea of being his queen. Not that he was already contemplating becoming King.

However, presently, it was a possibility he was not turning his back immediately. He wanted time to think about it. To weigh his options. The advantages and disadvantages.

"Whatever you decide, I will be here. As your wife, I will stand by it. As your friend, I will support you one hundred percent." She ran her hand through his hair, always marveling at how it felt between her dainty fingers. She could see that his eyes were still analyzing what she said. But his love was clearly the overpowering emotion in them.

She believed that when she had agreed to marry him and vowed in front of God and their entire family and friends, it also included the better or worse part. Besides, she completely trusted him with their future.

"How did I ever become so lucky to have you as my wife?" He looked up at her, staring at those beautiful eyes. "But still, I want us to discuss this thoroughly." He knew that he could not decide on his own.

"I need your opinion on this because this is not just about the Kingdom. It also involves our plan to build a family." Alex continued as he also caressed her cheeks with the back of his palm.

He hooked his fingers through her hair and gently pulled her down to him. As soon as their lips touched, he knew that there was nothing in this world that they could not face together.

Whether it was running an empire in the middle of the biggest city in the world. Or reigning a kingdom in an isolated land. As long as they were together, anything was possible.

"Hey, not again." A female voice once again broke into the silence. The sound of a horse's gentle gallops echoed on the ground. "You guys should really get a room." Jacky continued with her taunting.

She watched the royal couple emerge from their kissing activity. Thankfully, still fully clothed this time. It was private land, but still, it was an open area.

"What took you so long? We were getting worried about you guys." Dani responded, ignoring the teasing. She believed she was getting used to it, although she still did feel her cheeks were hot and not because of the sunlight around them.

"Well, my passenger here kept telling our friend here..." Marcus indicated to their horse. "...to stop in every bumpy ride."

He felt the need to stop every time she would agitate the horse because she thought they were going too fast when they were barely speeding up.

"I was not used to riding a horse. So, excuse me. I am just worried that Lightning might hurt himself," Jacky exclaimed, showing his sympathy for the horse who had to carry them on a rough, rocky road.

The three tried to control their laughter, not wanting to offend Jacky. But she was right. She still had a few things she needed to learn about horses.

"Come on, guys. Join us and let us eat." Alex beckoned the two, who slowly dismounted their ride.

However, Jacky was still correct about worrying about their animal friends. He stood from his position and took several bottled water in his hands.

Then, he placed them on the makeshift drinking keg positioned on the pole where he tied the horses earlier. That should hydrate the horses in the meantime. Until they were back again to the stables where they would be fed and allowed to rest.

They might not be as helpful as they used to be during the time of their ancestors, but they were still mighty, gentle beasts that had roamed this land, wild and free.

#### Chapter 635: The destiny

"Hey, boss." Jacky interrupted her busy morning by popping her head on her office door. "You are being summoned upstairs." She said, with the absence of the usual spirit in her voice.

It was no surprise that she lacked the energy and enthusiasm this early morning. They did arrive late last night from their weekend getaway. Then, she woke up early for work.

She was about to head back out to her desk when Dani stopped her by calling her back. "Jacky, what is wrong?"

She sensed something was off with her friend. She might have an idea. But still, it was better to ask rather than make assumptions.

"Nothing. I am just still groggy from the trip and a bit sleepy." Jacky made her excuses. But she could see from her friend's eyes that she was not buying it.

She stood in the middle of the room, contemplating whether she should tell her friend or just deny anything was wrong with her. But was it even a problem that she should even discuss?

"Yeah, it was an exhausting trip, but it was worth it," Dani claimed, enjoying every minute of it up to the last minute.

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She remembered catching Alex and Marcus arguing in the kitchen last night about the bet. Marcus was pissed, accusing Alex that he intentionally lost in the race.

He did not believe that Thunder would lose to Storm, and she actually agreed with him. However, Alex insisted it was a fair game. In the end, they have to clean up the kitchen.

"True, I did have a great time." She admitted except for that isolated incident, she did enjoy most of the trip.

"But?" Dani could still hear something odd in her voice. As if she had an inner struggle. "Is it something about the ring? Are you still slightly disappointed that he did not propose?"

It was the only thing she could think about that could have ruined the weekend for her. If she did not see that piece of jewelry, she might be on cloud nine at the moment.

"I guess yes and no." Jacky was slightly unsure how to explain what she was feeling to her friend. She could see that Dani was confused by her words as she raised her eyebrow at her.

"Yes, he never proposed, and it sucked." She could still feel the sting of waiting, but nothing happened.

"But then again, I know I should feel relieved because I believe we are both not ready for such commitment." Jacky confided as she finally sat on the chair opposite her.

She slumped down on her seat, head down, with eyes that formed moist on its side. She was never emotional before. Never like this, growing tough on the street.

But ever since meeting and being in a relationship with Marcus, her world had been spinning uncontrollably. She had been going up and down on a roller coaster of emotions.

One day, she was on a high and felt there was no way she was going down. Then, the next thing she knew. She was plummeting down to the ground.

"I think both of you are ready, just afraid to take the next step, to dive into the unknown," Dani told her friend, remembering her experience. She guessed almost everyone went through this kind of predicament.

"I guess you are right." Jacky could not agree with her more. She and Marcus would just have to figure this one out. "I think I took up most of your time. You should really go." Remembering about the meeting.

Dani rushed to her next unexpected meeting. Luckily, her morning schedule was more on paper works than meeting with clients.

"You can proceed inside since he has been waiting for you." His secretary told her as soon as she stepped into the office floor.

"Thanks," Dani mumbled to her as she proceeded to the room. "Good morning, Gerald." She greeted him, knocking gently on the door before stepping further inside.

She wondered why he had called for her. It could be several things, a new case, a problem with an old one, or it might be regarding her offer to him.

"Oh, Dani. Please take a seat." The senior partner offered, gesturing to the seat opposite him. "I am sorry if I have to ask you to come to my office. I know you might be busy too, but I need to talk to you."

He had been thinking about what his friend, Mike, had said during their last meeting. He had made several points that he believed he should carefully consider.

"No worries. I was planning to ask for an appointment with you, so you had just saved me the trouble." Dani disclosed, adjusting on her seat and smoothing her skirt.

"Very well. I have called you because there is an interesting case that I think you should look at. Maybe you might be interested in taking it off my hands." Gerald offered, handing her a file that was sitting on his desk.

"Meaning work on it on my own," Dani stated, a little surprised as she skimmed the folder for its content.

She could see from her initial assessment that it was a big case. Something that was usually handled by the Senior Partner. She was honored that he was entrusting the legal suit with her.

"Yes." He swiftly answered, sliding his chair away from his table, standing up, and walking toward her. "I believe you are more than capable of handling this one on your own."

He sat down on the seat next to her, watching her as her eyes glowed with excitement. She was indeed beautiful in every way. He was lucky to meet someone like her, but Mike was right.

He needed to walk away from her. There was more at stake than him obsessing about her. He was temporarily sidetracked from his mission, but now, he wanted to get back on track.

"Thanks for believing in me." Dani always wanted a break like this, and she was grateful that Gerald had finally seen what she could do.

"I know you can handle this," Gerald assured her, believing it was true. "Anyway, about your case. I think I am going to take it."

He thought by working closely with the couple, he would know more about their plans. From there, he could assess more carefully how to clean up the mess he had made by involving himself in this situation.

"That is great." She smiled at him, glad that he finally agreed. She still believed that he would be a great asset to their team against Nick.

She firmly believed that Nick should rot in jail and never have the chance to get parole. But she wondered if Gerald had heard of the underground organization involved in their abduction.

"I will do anything to be able to help," Gerald promised her. At the same time, he would investigate more.

His immediate concern was to secure his position in the underground organization. He would eliminate everything in his path that might ruin his reputation.

He just hoped that Dani would never cross him. He liked her, but he would not hesitate to take her down if he had to. No one would stand in the way of his legacy. The destiny he was born to.

Chapter 636: A good son

"You called for me." The Prince walked into the room where his father was busy entertaining some guests.

He knew most of them, so after greeting each one. He waited for his father to tell him what he needed from him. But he signaled for him to wait until he finished.

He proceeded to the kitchen to get something to eat instead. It was almost lunch anyway. He barely had breakfast earlier with his busy morning.

"Can you make me a sandwich and a cold fruit juice?" He asked one of the help who was busy preparing the meal, probably for his father and the guests.

The cook smiled at him and quickly did what she was told. He barely came home in this house, so he never knew the people around. It did not help that his father was very picky.

He kept changing his people like he changed his clothes. One wrong move, and then that person would be out of here. He always said that he had no time for incompetent people.

"Here you are, Sir Lance." The old woman carefully placed the plate, the cutlery, and the napkins in front of him. She followed him to the garden, where he decided to wait for his father.

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He liked the peace and quiet of this place compared to the chattering inside. He loved his family, but his father could be overbearing sometimes.

He did not see his mother in the kitchen. He figured she must be busy catering to the need of the guests. She was always a great host of gatherings and parties.

"Thanks," Lance quickly responded and smiled at the old lady, liking how she presented the food.

Instead of using the silver utensils, he grabbed the sandwich and never bothered with the napkin. He had lived long enough outside the roof of his father. He had stopped practicing the standard etiquette in his house.

He was already more than halfway through when another voice interrupted his snack. It was a familiar tone that he had not heard for a long time.

"Amelia, what are you doing here?" He quickly turned and greeted the girl walking toward him. "I thought you would be somewhere around the world, saving the planet." Dropping the sandwich back on the plate.

He was surprised to see her. He did not expect to find her back in town. She had been touring with her organization, trying to help poor communities in different parts of the world, using donations from people supporting her work.

She lived just a few miles from this place. They had gone to the same school when they were young and almost played every Sunday in the garden when she had visited or the other way around.

“Even superheroes need some time to rest and recharge.” She responded to his teasing. She was used to him since they almost grew up together.

But after getting her diploma, she established her own organization. It catered to helping others less fortunate than them.

Plus, she promoted social awareness regarding global crises like climate change, the greenhouse effect, etc. She had become a household name, becoming an ambassador for change.

“I never thought of that. I thought you guys never sleep.” He continued taunting her, but he held a chair for her to sit down. “Do you want a sandwich? I can ask for another one.” He offered.

He quickly sat back on the other side, observing his childhood friend, who seemed to have changed from the last time he saw her. One thing, she was more stunning now, not that she was not beautiful before.

“Thanks, but your father had arranged lunch soon. Are you not joining us?” Amelia asked, giving him a puzzled look.

Her father said that Lance would be home today to welcome her. It was the reason she came along. But it did not appear that way, not after the surprised look on his face when he first saw her.

“Honestly, I was unaware that my father is entertaining some guests today. I did not know that you were coming.” He admitted to her, not wanting to get her hopes up.

He did miss her since she had been a good friend when they were young. He would want to spend time with her to catch up. But today was not a good time.

“Oh!” She responded, sounding a bit disappointed. “I guess I should have expected that since you are a busy man.” She was actually looking forward to bonding with him again.

She always had a crush on him, even when they were young. She thought it would eventually disappear over time, but it only grew as they got older.

She ran away, thinking that time and distance would drive her madness and stop her from obsessing over him. But until now, her heart sought him out, stronger than before.

“Don’t get me wrong. I would really want to see you again, so we can talk and get updated. I am sure you have a lot of wonderful stories to share.” Lance quickly stated, seeing the hurt in her eyes.

It had been a while since they had last talked, and it would be nice to know what she had been doing recently with her life. Good friends were hard to find, and he considered her a very close one.

He saw her smile appear on her lips once she heard what he said. But before she could respond to his statement, his father showed up in the garden, interrupting their conversation.

“Amelia, so you finally saw your friend.” The Count announced as he approached the two on the small table. “I called you today so you can join us for lunch.” He directed his statement to his son, who was looking at him.

There was no time to tell him about the changes in his plan, but he was here, so he might as well capitalize on the situation. It was like hitting two birds with one stone.

He did not know that his long-time friend would be taking his daughter with him today, but it was a welcome surprise. He could finally discuss his wish to join them in matrimony.

“You know you should have told me that. I could not just abandon my other appointments just for you.” Lance said, not liking the glint in his father’s eyes.

He could assume that his father was concocting something in his mind. He was not saying that his father was an evil man, but he could be ambitious and greedy on occasions. Something he never liked about him.

“Actually, I only called for you because I have something to discuss with you. But I was not expecting Amelia was coming with his father.” The Count explained the situation.

“I thought I might as well invite them for lunch so you two could catch up.” His father continued before he could respond to him, appearing like it was merely a coincidence.

He knew that his son would fight his plans. But in the end, he had no choice but to follow him. He had never disappointed him before, and he would not start now. He had always been a good son.

Chapter 637: An extreme measure

“I am sorry, father. But this time, I would really have to decline. I still have another pressing matter that I need to attend to.” The Prince looked at his watch.

He still had more or less an hour to spare, but he had to leave soon. Or, he would be terribly late or probably miss his next appointment entirely.

“Sir, lunch is already served at the dining hall.” Their butler announced as he stood not far from his father. Afterward, he proceeded back inside to inform the rest.

“Maybe you can at least stay for a few more minutes.” Amelia stepped in, seeing the slight tension between the father and the son.

And just like his teasing, she was used to this scene, but the Count always won in the past. She wondered if anything had changed now.

“Listen to your friend. A few minutes of your time will not hurt your next meeting.” His father seconded, wanting the lunch to proceed without a hitch.

“Ok. But I can’t promise that I will be staying for the rest of the meal.” Lance finally conceded, seeing the worry lines on Amelia’s face. But, he was not doing this for his father.

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He did not want her to be caught up in his argument with his father. He still had time. There was no harm if he ate the first course, said hi again to the rest of the guests, and then bade his farewell.

"That is good enough for me," Amelia answered with a satisfied smile.

She could feel her heart doing a somersault when he gave her one of his signature smiles. The one that caused her stomach to twist into a knot and fill with butterflies.

"Then, shall we go?" His father said as he walked away, leaving the two of them to follow.

He could see how much Amelia liked his son. It was written all over her eyes. His son must be too dense to see it, or his eyes were blinded again by someone else.

He had been keeping tabs on his affair. Luckily, his son ended it with the foreigner. But lately, he was hearing a new girl circling around him. A female reporter spotted several times with him.

"I hope that I did not put you in a terrible spot." She took his offered arm, entwining hers with his. Suddenly, she could feel the electricity coursing through her skin from their connection. She wondered if he also felt the same way. She bit her lower lips, feeling slightly foolish for letting her silly attraction take control of her. When he did not even show a slight hint that he liked her.

She suddenly felt terrible that he might have been forced to join them. She did notice that he kept looking at his watch. He seemed to be in a real hurry to be somewhere else.

"Please, do not feel bad. I would not be here if I did not want to be." Lance assured her friend, observing her reaction, touching her hands gently. "It is just that my other meeting is important too."

He still remembered that she only bit her lips when she was nervous and feeling less confident. It was one of the few traits he still recalled about his friend.

"I understand. I wish my father had announced it a lot sooner so that we would not be in this unfortunate condition." She commented, hoping that she could dispel the awkwardness of their situation.

"Anyway, maybe I can just take you out to dinner one of these days. Make up for this terrible mix-up." Lance offered, wanting to give time to his friend.

He would really have enjoyed her company if not for another meeting he had already arranged. He did not want to make the others wait while he put up with one more of his father's schemes.

"Sure. I will love that." She answered him as they joined the others on the table. As expected, she was seated right next to him, while on the other side was her father.

On the other side, she greeted Lance's mother, who had arranged the delicious meal. As always, his mother looked lovely. Most of Lance's features, she always believed, he took from his mother.

The first course was over, but Lance's mother refused to let him leave until the main course was finished. She insisted that it was rude. Lance never talked back to her mother, so he had no choice but to stay.

"Now, I feel bad that you would be terribly late for your next meeting," Amelia whispered on his side.



Things were almost doing great between them. The adults seemed to be ignoring them, giving them the time to converse with each other without much interruption.

She took advantage of it, asking him questions about his life while she was far away. He did ask her about her life, and she answered him with full enthusiasm. She was extremely passionate about her work.

"It is ok." He did not want her to worry. "I know I still can catch up with her if I drive quickly." He stated, confident that he could still make it on time.

He mentally calculated it in his head, and if he beat a few speed limits, he would be there just a few minutes late. That would not be so bad since he was rarely late for any of his appointment.

He would just call her while he was in the car to explain his situation. He was convinced that she would wait for him. After all, she needed him.

"Oh!" She finally understood why he was such in a hurry. "I did not realize that you were going on a date. You should have said so, then I would not have insisted you stayed."

She suddenly felt more ridiculous, thinking she might have a chance with him. After his father told him that he was still single and not in any relationship.

She suddenly felt hopeful that there might still be a chance for them to be together. But hearing he was in a hurry to be with another girl. Her world crashed before her very eyes.

"No, it is not what you think." He was about to correct her assumption, but he suddenly realized what had just happened.

He saw it in her eyes. Her friend had been infatuated with him. He wondered if it was a recent feeling or something she had been carrying since they were young.

He suddenly felt awkward since he only saw her as a friend. Maybe a sister, a little sister that he liked to tease and bully when they were young. But protected when they grew older.

"Then, what is it?" She asked in her low voice, not wanting the others to hear their conversation.

She was embarrassed enough. She did not want to add to her humiliation anymore by letting them listen to what they were talking about.

"Yes, it is a date, but we barely knew each other." He quickly told her, wanting every notion that he might feel the same way about her erased from her mind. "But I really don't want to make her wait." He continued to make an emphasis.

If she believed he was already working on a relationship. It might stop her from pursuing any kind of feelings for him. He never liked lying, especially to a friend, but this was an extreme measure.

Chapter 638: No kingdom to rule

He ate faster than he wanted, but the first course already consumed most of his time. Although he agreed with his mother. It would be rude to the guest if he left before finishing the main course. It was something his mother would not stand for.

But immediately after swallowing the last bite, he made his excuses, not being able to wait a minute later. He was really running out of time.

"I am sorry, Amelia. It has been nice to see you, but I have to go." He whispered his excuses to the woman at his side, giving her a warm kiss on the cheek.

There was no malice in his gesture towards her. It was just a brotherly force of habit that he had done before during their friendship. But he still did not want to encourage her that there could be anything more in their relationship.

"Thank you. I think you have stayed long enough." Amelia forced a smile on her lips, thankful that he at least tried to remain a friend to her.

But she was not that stupid not to realize that he did not feel the same way as her. It was a childish puppy love that had gone long enough. She believed it was time to terminate her foolishness.

Although, she believed it would not be that easy, feeling the pain as it twisted her heart. Just like before, she assured herself that she would survive this. However, she regretted ever returning home.

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"Thank you for understanding." The prince told his childhood friend. Then, he stood up from his seat and faced his father on his other side. "I am sorry, but I really must leave."

He knew that his father was not happy with his decision, but he would not create a scene in front of the other guests. He apologized to the other people at the long table before finally saying goodbye to his mother.

But before he could leave the small palace, a voice called out to him and stopped him from his tracks. He was already in the hallway on the way out. But he had to turn around to face his father again.

"Before you leave, there are some matters that I wish to discuss with you. But because of the lack of time, I will just tell you now." His father said, already decided that this was the best time to tell him about his plans.

He could see that his son was curious, but he was not happy that he was delaying him from his plans. However, he was eavesdropping on his conversation with Amelia.

He did not like that his son had turned her down. As far as he was concerned, they were the ideal match. When his son became the king, he would need a good queen to stand by his side. Amelia would be perfect for the job.

"What is it?" Lance did not feel like being courteous at the moment, seeing that his father was taking his sweet time.

He was extremely late at this rate, looking again at the hands that ticked on his watch. The more his father took up more of his time. He doubted if he would make it to dinner, he mused to himself.

"I think you should know that my friend, Leonardo, had finally agreed to your wedding to his daughter, Amelia." He casually said as if he was discussing business as usual.

He could see the change in his son's face. Lance was clearly not happy about it, but he was already expecting it. It was better that he heard about this now before he concocted the idea of dating that lowly reporter.

He believed that her kind would not be suitable to be involved with his son, especially now that he was being considered for the throne. He needed a wife that would fit their criteria.

"You what?" He suddenly burst into anger, unable to control his temper. "What makes you think I will agree to such an arrangement?"

He was not a stranger to this kind of setup between families. But he never thought that his father would think of finding him a bride. He was more than capable of choosing his wife when the time came. But not before.

In addition, he thought that since he was not an heir to the throne, he was not required to undergo such a ritual. Never did his parents discuss this with him in his entire life.

"Because you are my son." He calmly said as if that should simply answer his question.

He could see the defiance in his son's eyes. He could tell that he would not surrender to him that easily. But he knew some tricks that could make him agree with his plans.

In the meantime, he would let him sit on this idea until he was ready to accept it and the rest of his future. Because, as much as he hated it now, he had no choice but to obey him in the end.

"I am not going to do this. I will not marry Amelia because I do not love her." He adamantly refused what his father was saying.

He wished that his father would simply drop the subject matter and leave him and Amelia alone. He did not want to string Amelia along in this insanity.

He could already foresee that she would only be hurt by this arrangement. Because he knew deep in his heart that he did not feel anything for her. She would only end up the loser in this nonsense agreement that their father's made.

"You are bound by tradition to perform your obligation. Else, our family will have to face humiliation and lose our honor if we back out of this arrangement." His father solemnly said, slightly changing his expression to match his tone.

He knew he would not win if he kept fighting with him. At this point, his guard was on high alert, and his walls were impenetrable.

He had to play his card right if he wanted to get his son's sympathy and cooperation. He could not let him win and do what he wished, or all his plans would be for nothing.

"Why are you doing this?" Lance asked, confused by the reason for such an arrangement. He did not understand the need for him to be arranged in matrimony.

It just did not make sense to him. If it was just about the money. He had produced more than enough for himself and his future children.

“Because I am protecting your future, your legacy.” Count Thomas admitted as much, but he knew that his son was not ready for his more explosive news.

He just had to wait until he had arranged everything before telling him about it. Once he succeeded in his plan, no one would look down on him like he was lower than them.

However, if he failed, he would be once again a nobody, struggling to be recognized in a kingdom where the king and the duke were the only ruling party.

If he did not succeed with his plans, he would be king with no throne to sit on, no crown on his head, and no kingdom to rule.

Chapter 639: Magic carpet ride

He could still hear his father in his head as he sat in his car, replaying the last minutes of their interaction. He still could not believe that his father would do this to him.

After his father’s last word, he turned around and left the building fuming, like he was about to explode. He rammed his hand on the steering wheel, hoping to release the tension in his entire body.

“Now, I know what Alex felt in this situation.” Lance suddenly remembered his cousin going through the same situation, feeling the frustration bubbling within him.

Then, his phone rang but seeing the name on the screen only angered him more. It was his father again, probably not through with his scheme. He stared at the caller for a few seconds, unable to answer the call.

Suddenly, he smashed the phone on the side of the car, venting his anger on the innocent machine. It had stopped ringing as expected as it shattered into pieces on the floor.

“This is insane.” He told himself as he geared up the car and revved its engine.

It was the only few things that could calm him down when he was in such a stressful situation. The hum of the motors as it roared to life could slow down his heart, contrary to what others might think.

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The world around him would disappear, and his focus would only be centered on the road ahead. Nothing else mattered but the road that would lead him to his goal.

After a few more minutes, he suddenly realized that he was supposed to be somewhere else. “Damn! How can I forget?” Now, he was rushing to his real destination.

He pulled out of the parking lot, revving his motor once again. Then, he sped out of their property into the main road. He checked his watch and figured he had already wasted so much time.

“Call her.” He immediately reminded himself as he swerved to the traffic. Then, he grabbed his phone from his pocket, only to remember that he had smashed it into pieces.

Looking at the phone’s condition, lying on the carpet of his car, he believed there was no way it would still be functioning. He had no way of calling her to say that he was sorry for being late.

He just had to make it there on time before she gave up and left without waiting for him. But he would not blame her if she did. He would have done the same thing under the same circumstances.

"You should not have fallen into his trap." He said to himself, feeling like an animal caught inside a cage.

He slammed one of his hands on the steering wheel again, feeling hopeless for the time being. Then, he jammed his foot on the gas, wanting the speed to drown his thoughts.

If he was an ordinary driver doing what he was doing on the street, he would have already slammed onto something. But the road was his life, and speed was his friend.

Finally, he had arrived at his destination, thankfully complete with all his teeth and limbs. He handed his keys to the valet, hoping to catch his lunch date.

"Is Ms. Eida Harlowe still inside?" He asked the hostess by the door, hopeful that she might still be waiting.

He stretched his neck inside, wishing to see a glimpse of her at one of the nearby tables, but he could not find her. She could be situated somewhere in the back of the restaurant. He concluded as he waited for the woman to confirm her presence.

"I am sorry, but I was out earlier, but the waiter inside told me that she had already left a few minutes ago." The woman said regretfully, wondering if the prince was here on a date with the reporter or was it purely business.

It was common in their restaurant to spot famous people, celebrities, high in society, and royalties out on a date. And the two could fall into the category.

"Thank you, Miss." He turned around and asked the valet to get his car. He was not hungry anyway, but he had something else he had to do.

Quickly, he returned to his car and drove away. After a few minutes, he had a new phone. He called his secretary, asking her to text him a few numbers he would be needing.

And seconds later, his new phone was ringing. But nobody was answering his call. It just kept going to her voicemail. He just realized that she was not accepting his calls.

"I am sorry, there was some form of emergency that needed my attention. I would have called you up, but my phone was accidentally damaged. I am really sorry for being late." Then, he suddenly hung up.

He drove until he found a decent parking space and stopped on the side. Then, he slumped down, face down, with his arms hugging the wheel.

"What is wrong with you?" He asked, finally questioning his sanity.

He wondered if he was going crazy, speeding up on the busy street like a maniac only to see her and apologize for being late. Then, he was begging on the voicemail like he had committed a capital crime.

He rubbed his face, trying to clear his mind. He believed he had temporarily gone mental due to the stress he felt. He breathed deeply, hoping to rid himself of this insanity.

Then, his phone rang, and seeing her name on the screen, he decided not to answer. He was done appearing like an idiot, desperate for her attention.

"If Eida, I mean, Ms. Harlowe, calls and sets up another appointment, put her on the last of my list for tomorrow." He instructed his secretary.

In the meantime, he wanted to forget about the reporter and his father. They were already consuming most of his thoughts, clouding his judgment.

He knew that going back to the office would be out of the question. He would not be able to concentrate anyway, he decided.

"Cancel all my remaining appointments. I will not be able to go back to the office today." He told his secretary as an additional thought.

He ended the call, not giving his secretary any further instructions. She would know what to do and where to call him if there was an emergency that would require his attention.

He pulled away from the curb and immediately sped up, knowing where he was supposed to go. It was the only place he wished to be during times like this.

Hardly an hour later, he was speeding up with no one to stop him. There were no traffic stoplights, no police to watch out for, and nothing blocking his way. Not that the police would be able to catch him anyway.

He was in his element, doing what he always loved to do. This time, he was alone, with only the road ahead of him as his company and the roaring machine as his mate.

The world could go into chaos, but he would be protected in his private bubble. That consisted of fiberglass, metals, and an engine that could make a car fly high like he was in a magic carpet ride.

Chapter 640: Hassle and bustle

"Do you think we can move here tomorrow?" Dani asked, seeing that the place was almost complete.

Instead of waiting for Alex to finish fixing the new place, Dani recommended seeking an expert and asking for assistance. And she knew the perfect person for the job.

Haley would know better what to do with the place. Besides, she had enough resources to accomplish the job in a short period. In addition, Haley understood what she wanted in her new home.

"Not that we are pressuring you or anything, but my wife thinks that the place already looks perfect," Alex commented, seeing the excitement in her eyes.

Ever since he had shown her this place, she had been in constant contact with Haley. Now that they were back. She had insisted on seeing the apartment even if Haley said it was not yet finished.

"As I said in our last phone conversation, just a couple of hours ago. I think it would be better if you move in by next week," Haley told her friend, directing the couple to the living room.

She showed them the living room was already finished. All it was lacking was the furnishing. Other than that, it was good. Then, she moved to the kitchen, which was already completed.

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"Everything seems to be in order." Dani insisted, seeing the beautiful granite marbles on the kitchen counter. Then, a beautiful mahogany table in the center aisle.

It was perfect for Alex when he would like to prepare something special for them. Though it still lacked a few more things. However, that could easily be arranged.

"Yes, these two rooms are already finished except for some light touches, but what about the other rooms." Haley insisted, guiding the couple to the open balcony where she had a table set up for them.

She usually had one location that was accessible and clean when she entertained her clients when they visited the area. She offered them refreshments and some cinnamon bread while they waited.

She showed them the plans and the current situation of the rooms. Although the living area and the kitchens were already almost finished. She still needed to put some final touches on them.

"I am just excited by this new house. I thought you would be finished by the time we returned from our trip." Dani said as she stared at the plans.

She would really like a new place for a fresh start. After all, she only had her honeymoon. But she could not do anything about it since Haley was right. It was not ready yet.

But she believed Haley had already done a great job fixing the place. She could not expect her friend to rush it, compromising her quality of work just to fulfill her whims.

"The rooms are still undergoing construction, which would still need a few more days. Then, the furniture still had to be delivered and arranged." Haley explained.

As much as she wanted to present the apartment to them tomorrow, it was impossible. She was an architect. She could not snap her finger and magically had the place ready for them.

But she understood her friend's excitement. She was a newlywed, after all. She also heard what happened to them, so she wanted to make this place as perfect as possible as her wedding gift. A great home where she could start her new life with her new family.

"Anyway, I was wondering when we can also visit the construction site of our housing project," Alex asked Haley, who was also handling the undertaking.

He also wanted to learn about the update since Dani's birthday was coming soon. He had grand plans for that day, and it would involve the participation of Haley and their project.

"The paper works were done. The construction crew is already set up next week. They are ready with the preliminary assessment of the place." Haley reported to her partners in this project.

She took a gulp of the cold drink, letting the refreshing liquid patch up the dryness on her lips. The day had been warm today, and she was working all day to finish this place as soon as possible.

"Maybe the two of you should visit it. I will give you a call when is the best time." She offered before the two could comment on her last statement.

She would really like to show them the place since they owned it in the first place. Then, she would give them a clearer view of what she had planned for it.

Based on her experience, looking at it on paper was completely different from seeing it firsthand. She would like to discuss with them what more she could do to make it more functional for the kids that would be living there.

“Then, set it up and let us know,” Dani responded excitedly.

Besides this apartment, the housing project for the foster kids was the other thing she was most looking forward to. She could already picture little Jacky and Andy having a more comfortable stay in such a place rather than a foster home.

Although she would still have to justify the legality of putting kids in such a place. She was already in contact with a few social services willing to help her case.

“It had been nice to see you, Haley. And thanks for doing a great job.” Dani said as she turned around and checked the place before leaving.

She could really see herself living in this place. Compared to the first house Alex bought her, this had a more homey feel that she could not describe.

Of course, the location was excellent because it was not too far from her work or Alex. And it was still in the center of everything she loved.

For her, this city was everything to her. It was where she grew up and lived all her life. She had been to many places, but this city that would never sleep was her home. She would always want to return to its hassle and bustle.