

Benefits 721

Chapter 721: You!

"You! What are you doing here?"

Cai paused mid-handshake with Prince Rafael, turning his head slightly to regard the younger prince with a raised eyebrow.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Cai replied smoothly before glancing back at Prince Rafael. "Prince Rafael, do I appear to be dancing, or something?"

Rafael chuckled, the corners of his mouth lifting in a slight grin. He sensed the tension crackling between Dr Caius Frost and Kael and found himself intrigued by the hostility in the air. With an easy, curious tone, he asked, "Well, it doesn't look like dancing... So, do you two know each other?"

"No." The said simultaneously with an edge that had Rafael looking at them even more curiously.

"Well, okay then. I won't pry but you two look like you might need a mediator. If I turn my back, I won't find you at each other's throat, will I?"

Cai scoffed and took his seat, turning to look at Prince Kael, we've already done that. So I am not interested. And Prince Rafael, I have a date tonight. So, if you would..."

Kael narrowed his eyes and snapped the question, 'With her?' before he could stop himself.

Cai raised an eyebrow at that while Rafael steepled his fingers and looked at the two. Things really were getting interesting. As far as he knew, Dr Caius Frost, who live in a different country entirely had nothing to do with his brother...But these two looked like mortal enemies...

Cai leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing slightly as he studied Kael. There was a glint of amusement in his gaze, but also a hint of something sharper. "Yes, Kael," he replied evenly, "with her. Is that a problem?"

Kael's fists clenched at his sides as he struggled to keep his composure. He had meant to keep his emotions in check, but the words tumbled out before he could stop them. "You're a fool, Caius. I've kissed her, did you know that? She's played me, and I'm sure she's playing you too. How can you be so sure she's not fooling you?"

Cai's expression didn't waver, though his gaze grew colder. "Because she loves me," he answered simply, as if that was all the explanation needed.

Kael let out a bitter laugh, shaking his head. "Love? Love requires more than just words, Cai. It requires loyalty, faithfulness. How can you trust her when you know what she's capable of?"

But then, he continued, "What is she capable of? Is she not allowed to be physically attracted to someone? She is a live human, not some doll! And so what if she has kissed you? Is that a crime? As for playing with you? Can you honestly say that you did not play her?"

Kael snapped his mouth shut at the question. Because he had indeed played with her. But then...

"Gentlemen, as interesting and as entertaining this argument is, I believe I do have an appointment that I might need to get to. So, if you guys could continue this later. Of course, I could send someone to mediate if you want to use the ring..."

Cai scoffed and shook his head, "Your brother's brain is already damaged. If I harm it more, not even I could guarantee a full recovery."

Rafael raised an eyebrow, "You really are a fearless, Dr Frost. I'll just handle my little brother if only for a moment."

"Kael, I really do need to work. So, would you please leave for now? We can discuss our things later."

Kael narrowed his eyes and glared at his brother. What kind of a business did his brother have with a doctor? He set his jaw, and was prepared to sit into the meeting when Rafael gave him a pointed look, "The guard dog we were discussing about earlier. The one you wanted to get rid of? Isn't he gone now? So, instead of waiting here, why don't you go and check things out..."

Kael stilled. The guard dog? He thought back to the comment he'd made to Rafael about how the man was now guarding her like a dog not letting him close to even talk to her. Rafael was right. If Caius Frost was here and in for a long meeting then Dora was all alone...

Decisively, he stood up and nodded to his brother. " You are right. I will leave you to your official business before."

As Kael left the room, his back straight and his steps purposeful, both Cai and Rafael watched him go in silence. The tension he left behind hung in the air for a moment longer until Cai let out a soft chuckle, leaning back in his chair.

"I never thought I'd be compared to a guard dog," Cai remarked dryly, his tone light, though his eyes still carried a trace of amusement.

Rafael turned to him, raising an eyebrow in surprise. "How did you know what we were talking about?"

Cai shrugged, " It is not that difficult. Kael was prepared to sit in on the meeting just now, ready to create trouble. But you got rid of him and even guessed my identity correctly. You are a smart one, Prince Rafael."

Rafe smiled and nodded, " But Kael just told me that you are protective of the girl. And yet, I don't see you rushing after him to stop him from going to her. So, I guess your relationship is not that serious?"

Cai shook his head, " Fishing on behalf of your brother?"

Prince Rafael shook his, " I am just curious who could be the girl that has the attention of the great Caius Frost and my own brother. She must be something."

Cai smiled, " She is something... But unfortunately for your brother, he lost his chance with her. Anyway, let him try. So, Prince Rafael. What business did you have with me?"

Rafael wanted to ask more but seeing that he'd finally had an appointment with Dr Caius, he decided to not waste it. "Yes, business. As you know, Petrovia is looking to expand its medical infrastructure. We're aiming to become a hub for medical tourism in the region. And for that, we need the best. And..."

Chapter 722: Dora

"Excuse me, please," she said, her voice polite but distant, as if she were addressing a stranger.

If anyone else had said those words, Kael would have stepped aside without a second thought. But not for her. Especially not when she couldn't even be bothered to look him in the eye, treating him as though he were just another obstacle in her path.

"No," he replied firmly, his voice low and unyielding. "I won't excuse you."

Her head snapping up then, to meet his gaze, her eyes blazing with sudden anger. Perfect. A surge of satisfaction coursed through him. Now she was finally looking at him.

"Dora," he said, "We need to talk."

"No." She said and then tried to step around him but he simply moved in tandem, not letting her take a step out. She could try as much as she wanted but he'd been waiting here for the last two hours, so there was no way he was going to let her get away so easily.

Once again, she shot him a look and he was reminded of that morning when he'd done something similar to convince her to go on a date with him. He saw the moment she seemed to think of that too, and gave her a soft smile, "Please, Dora. We need to talk."

He watched as she gave him a considering look and waited, holding his breath. He did not know why but he was worried...

"Fine. Let's go talk in the coffee shop."

Kael nodded and stepped aside, letting her walk out, satisfied. As long as they could talk, they would definitely clarify everything. He would ask her why she did what she did to Kit and then to him. If she was only interested in that Cai, then she should have not used them as substitutes...

She stopped suddenly and he frowned to look at her, "Don't walk next to me."

Kael raised an eyebrow at that, "We are going to the same place."

"Yes. But I do not want to stand next to you! So you can either walk in the front or behind me."

Kael opened his mouth to argue but then thought better of it. No need to fight useless battles. Raising his arms, he took a couple of steps backwards, letting her see that he would be following her. As she started to walk again, he quickly shifted back to his previous thoughts.

But even as he thought of asking these questions, he felt his stomach clench. No. He needed to not question her. Wasn't that what Rafael had told her. He'd already judged Dora as the culprit, and he needed to not do it...Being objective was the key...

Just then, he watched as Dora sped up and narrowed his eyes. He'd almost not noticed that she'd picked up speed. She thought she could fool him again. Picking up his pace, he quickly moved to walk beside her again, covering the distance between them.

"You're going in the wrong direction."

"No. I am not."

"The coffee shop was on the left. You took a right."

"Because I am going not to the coffee shop." Dora snapped back, still keeping up a brisk pace, ready to break into a run. Good thing she had worn sneakers today or else running away would have been a problem.

But before she could fully escape him, however, he caught her wrist, "You said we could talk in the coffee shop."

Dora narrowed her eyes and tugged her wrist out of his grasp, "I said we could talk in the coffee shop. Yes. But I did not specify a time! So, get out of my way! We'll talk, if I feel like it. Now, let go of me."

Instead of letting go, Kael stepped closer to her, pulling at her wrist, as he pulled her towards himself, "I won't let go, Dora. Not until I understand what has happened. So, I suggest you better feel like talking because I won't leave you alone until you do. Of course, if you want me to keep following you, keep avoiding the talk."

Dora stared at him and he stared back before she finally bit out, "Fine. I'll come and..."

"Is something the matter here?" Cai's voice interrupted them and Kael cursed in his heart! He was back already! Why? Why couldn't he have come a little bit later?"

He was about to snap at the man but was distracted when she pulled his hand from his and quickly walked to his side, "Dora... you..."

"Just wait a minute!", she snapped at him, and he quietened. However, he was not pleased with what he saw as she explained to Caius, "I'm going to talk to this man in the Coffee shop. Then we can go later..."

Cai nodded but then stopped her. Kael frowned. And then almost walked to him when the man knelt down on one knee. Was he going to propose? Out of the blue and in front of him? Like hell!

Just as he was about to march forward and stop this, he watched Caius pat his knee silently directing Dora to lift her foot. Without hesitation, she complied, placing her foot on his knee as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Her hands rested on his shoulder with an ease that spoke of deep familiarity.

It shook him. He stood there, feeling a knot form in his chest as Caius reached for the loose shoelace dangling from Dora's sneaker. He remembered how calm Caius had been when he'd claimed that he was not worried about Dora's feelings for him.

And this scene, in front of him was like a slap in his face. These two people... stared a connection that was almost palpable...

He looked away, feeling jealous and an inexplicable loss at the same time. She'd trusted him like this that night, and he'd felt on top of the world. But then everything had changed. And now, he could not help but wonder if the two of them would have shared something like this if everything had not been so complicated...

Chapter 723: Confession

"Are you going to say anything, or do I have to keep staring at you?" Dora's voice was sharp, cutting through the tense silence between them as they sat opposite each other in the coffee shop. Their first ever 'public' date. And she could not wait to get away from him already.

Kael shook his head at the irony of it and arched an eyebrow, "Me? I'm supposed to say something. Shouldn't it be you?"

Dora shrugged. "Why would I need to talk? You are the one who was stopping me, getting in my way and asking to talk. So...I assumed you had something to say. If you're waiting for me to talk then we have nothing to say to each other. Bye then."

Kael breathed in sharply, "Who is he, Dora?"

Dora glanced around as if expecting the person in question to materialise here, and feigning ignorance, casually shrugged. "Who is who?"

Kael slammed his hand on the table, his patience snapping. "You know exactly who I'm talking about! The man who tied your shoelaces just now like you're some sort of princess!"

"You've got memory loss, Kael? Maybe you should get that checked. The emcee introduced him that night at the celebration, remember? Caius Frost?"

"I know who he is! What I want to know is what relation he has with you? Why, when you were confessing to me did you call out his name. You ran to him as if he was your lover! What is he to you?"

"How does it matter to you if he was my lover or not! And confess to you? Who do you think you are? Why would I confess to you? Did you really think I might have fallen for you? We had some fun here and there but that is all. It does not equal undying love."

Kael's face flushed with anger, his hands balling into fists on the table. "Why does it matter to me? Because you made it matter! Because you matter. You led me to believe—"

Dora cut him off, her voice cold, "Led you to believe what, Kael? That I actually had feelings for you?" She leaned back in her chair, a smirk playing on her lips. "You were the one who assumed, who jumped to conclusions, who pushed me and tried to emotionally manipulate me. I never promised you anything. In fact, I repeatedly tried to avoid this... So, do not blame me for this."

Kael's eyes narrowed. "You think this is a joke, don't you? Playing with people's feelings just because you can. You are in a relationship with that Caius Frost and that is why you insisted on not going out on dates! So that he wouldn't discover your treachery!"

Dora's smirk vanished, replaced by a look of mild disgust. "Feelings? Is that what you're calling it? You don't care about me or anyone else. As for my not wanting to go out on dates, then I'd rather not be seen with you! And you need to remember you were just trying to win some twisted bet with Kit! Well, guess what, Kael? I found out about your little plan to humiliate me. I know all about it. And I chose not to let you win the bet."

Kael's expression faltered for a moment and Dora's heart ached. Despite everything, there had been a flicker of hope inside her that he would deny the charge of the bet.

She stood up, pushing her chair back with a deliberate slowness, "Sorry you lost your bet, but here's a tip: next time, try being a decent human being instead of playing games. And then talk about feelings. Also, I'd appreciate it if you backed off from now on. We're done. And just so you know, I actually do love Cai. Always have. So, you have no chance."

Dora grabbed her purse and glanced down at the untouched cup of coffee in front of her "Oh, and you can pay the bill. Enjoy."

Without another word, she turned on her heel and walked out of the cafe, leaving Kael sitting there, seething.

Kael watched Dora walk away, her words stinging far more than he'd anticipated. She loved Cai? Impossible. He refused to believe it! And yet, despite her claim that she did not feel anything for him, he found hope! She'd discovered about the bet. He didn't know how and when. But maybe that bet

was the reason that she had chosen to back off in that moment. Because of the bed, she had stood there but went to Cai. He needed to stop her and confirm this. He couldn't just let her go—not like this. Not until he knew for sure that she was not with Cai.

Without thinking, he jumped up from the table, throwing a few bills down to cover the coffee, and bolted out of the cafe. His eyes scanned the street, catching sight of Dora as she turned a corner.

Kael picked up his pace, his footsteps quickening as he closed the distance between them. When he was close enough, he reached out and grabbed her arm, pulling her into a nearby alleyway, away from the prying eyes of passersbys.

"Kael, what the hell—" Dora's protest was cut short as he spun her around to face him, caging her between the wall and his own body.

"I'm not done talking yet," Kael said, his voice low and intense. He looked down at her, his eyes searching hers, desperate to find something—anything—that would make sense. Just the other night, they'd been like this, in a similar position, their hearts beating wildly as they'd closed the distance between them.

Dora glared up at him, trying to yank her arm free, but he held her fast. "What more is there to say? I've heard enough of your lies. I have no interest in you, Kael Ignis!"

Kael's jaw tightened, "Lies? You think this is all just lies? You think I don't feel anything? That I'm some heartless bastard who just wanted to win a stupid bet? And what did you say? That you have no interest in me. Let us put that to test, don't we?"

Chapter 724: Let's Test

"Let's put that to test, why don't we?"

Kael's words hung in the air between them, the tension thickening as he leaned in closer, his breath mingling with hers. Dora's heart raced, but she forced herself to remain defiant, lifting her chin in challenge. She wouldn't let him see how her knees felt weak when he was this close to her. But as she felt his eyes on her dry lips, she licked them and gulped. She could not let him kiss her, even though her stupid brain was saying otherwise. She needed to say something to break this moment...

"You think you can intimidate me into admitting something that isn't true? Fine then, go ahead and test all you want." she spat, though her voice wavered slightly as she raised her chin.

But even as she laid down the challenge, she did not expect him to take her up on it. In fact, she was counting on him to back off. But instead, his hand came to rest on her shoulder, "I can feel your heart beating fast.. Of course, if you claim that it is due to the fact that you are scared and I have no way to prove otherwise."

"However can you deny the truth when I move my hand to this little pulse at the base of your neck.", he whispered.

Dora's breath hitched as Kael's fingers brushed lightly against her there. The warmth of his touch sent a shiver down her spine, but she clenched her fists, determined not to give in. Her heart was pounding in her chest, betraying the calm facade she tried to maintain, and she hated that he could feel it.

"You're delusional if you think this means anything," she managed to say, though her voice had lost some of its earlier bite and was instead shivering a bit.. "You think just because you can make my heart race, it means I care? It's just... adrenaline, Kael. Nothing more."

Kael's lips curved into a slow, confident smile. "Is that so?" he murmured, his thumb now tracing the delicate skin along her collarbone, sending tiny sparks of sensation through her body. "Then why are you trembling, Dora? Why are you having such a hard time pulling away? Why don't you stop me and walk away?"

Dora's jaw tightened, and she forced herself to meet his gaze, her eyes burning with defiance. "Because I refuse to let you win. So, if you're done with your tests, I need to go. I have a date toni..."

Before she could say more, Kael crushed his lips to hers, demandingly and almost punishingly. Like a man thirsty in the desert, he devoured her lips.

His hand slid from her shoulder to the back of her neck, holding her in place as his lips worked against hers, demanding a response. When she didn't yield, he nipped at her lower lip, a teasing bite that drew a gasp from her. It was all the opportunity he needed. His tongue swept into her mouth, tasting her, exploring her in a way that was both possessive and coaxing, as if he was determined to claim every part

of her, to leave no doubt that she belonged to him, even if just in this moment. She could give up thoughts of dating someone else...

Dora fought against it at first, her hands instinctively pushing against his chest, but as the heat of the kiss consumed her, she felt herself weakening, her resistance crumbling with every second that passed.

Her hands, which had been pushing against him, slowly relaxed and then betrayed her entirely as they gripped the front of his shirt, pulling him closer instead of shoving him away.

For a moment, she let herself get lost in the kiss, in the way it made her feel alive and energized again. Back like her old self. And thus, reality crashed back in.

This wasn't right. This was Kael—Kael, who had lied to her, manipulated her, and hurt her, betrayed her. And she would be damned if she let herself forget that, no matter how good he was at kissing her senseless.

Summoning every ounce of willpower she had left, Dora pressed her hands against his chest again, this time with more force, and finally managed to push him away.

The kiss broke, leaving both of them panting. Kael's eyes were dark, almost wild, with an emotion she couldn't quite place as he looked down at her, his hand still on her neck, he whispered urgently, "Listen to me Dora. I agree that I had ulterior motives in coming close to you. I promised Kit to extract revenge. But that is not the case now. This time, it is only for you.. It's different this time."

Dora scoffed, " Its different... what is so different Kael? Have you fallen in love with me?"

Kael stilled at the mocking voice that reached his ears. "I don't know what it is between us, Dora. But trust me it is..."

"Trust?" This time, Dora's laughter was encased with bitterness as she glared at him, " I will never again trust you Kael Ignis. Tell me, what did I do that was so terrible that you and Kit felt I deserved to be humiliated like this? Was it because I refused his advances? Because I wouldn't fall in line and be his plaything like he wanted. Or was it because I was a poor scholarship student who had the audacity to refuse him?"

"You used him for your own gains and..."

Kael began but she laughed at that, "Dam* it, Prince Kael! If you're planning to take revenge, at least do your research! Used him? I don't even know him, how was I supposed to have used him? The only time I knew of his existence was when he proposed to me. A proposal which I gently rejected! And this is how I was repaid my kindness!"

Kael frowned as he heard Dora speak of the events. This was vastly different than what Kit had told him. While he was still in shock, Dora pushed away at his hand and marched away from there.

Chapter 725: Past

Six months later:

"So, you've finally come out to join the party?" Rafe asked his brother, surprised, as he saw him step into the large ballroom in Petrovia.

Kael shook his head. "No, I'll be leaving soon. I'm just here to greet the envoy from Estania."

Rafael looked at Kael again, this time letting his worry show. Six months ago, Kael had suddenly returned home and thrown himself into work. At first, their parents were against his return, especially with all the rumors about him. But then they realized that their once rebellious son had changed a lot.

Instead of causing trouble and hanging out with the wrong crowd, always chasing the next thrill and single handedly keeping the gossip press in business, Kael had become completely focused on his work.

Kael had always been good at business, so his intense focus on work hadn't been a complete surprise. What had shocked—and secretly pleased—their parents were the sudden absence of women and the usual rumors that used to swirl around him. At least now they would not be waking up to see their son in tabloids.

But now, their initial relief had turned into concern, as their once carefree, all-play-and-no-work son had transformed into a workaholic. From being a regular on the front pages, he'd gone to being an absentee.

Rafael glanced at Kael again, studying the way his brother stood—stiff and detached, as if the lively atmosphere of the ballroom barely registered with him.

He thought back to that night when Kael had returned to him, smashed with alcohol and out of his mind. He knew that this drastic change was likely due to the heartbreak Kael had endured then.

Even so, Rafael was amazed by the extent of the transformation. The man who used to chase excitement and live life on the edge was now someone else entirely—driven, serious, and utterly consumed by his responsibilities.

"Why are you staring at me?" Kael asked as he found Rafe's gaze fixed on him.

"I'm just wondering, are you planning to greet the Royal envoy with that brooding face of yours? You might scare them off before they even get a chance to say hello."

Kael's lips twitched, almost forming a smile. "Maybe that's the plan. The quicker they leave, the quicker I can get out of here."

Rafe chuckled, relieved to see some of the old Kael peeking through. "You used to be the life of these parties, you know. I'm surprised you remember how to socialize. I half-expected you to turn into a hermit. Don't you miss it? I mean you were with that girl for only a month..."

Kael shot him a look that threatened to burn him at the mention of the woman who had crushed his heart before moving on to ignore that part and answering, "I didn't realize you cared so much about my social life, Rafe. Or is it just that you're tired of being the only one people look to for entertainment?"

Rafe grinned, sensing an opportunity. "Oh, I don't mind carrying the spotlight—after all, someone has to keep the family name interesting now that you've decided to become a monk. But...I think I should warn you, now that you've shown the council members what a responsible one you are, they are pushing for a marriage alliance for you."

Kael groaned, rubbing a hand over his face. "Of course they are. It's like they've been waiting for the moment I stopped being a screw-up to start planning my life for me. If they think I'm going to let them marry me off to some princess for political gain, they're out of their damn minds."

Rafe laughed, clearly enjoying his brother's frustration. "Come on, Kael. You can't blame them for trying. You've turned into the perfect little prince over the past six months. Ideal for being sold off on the marriage mart. Besides, it's not like you've given them any reason to think you're against the idea."

"Are you serious?" Kael snapped, his tone laced with irritation. "Just because I've been focused on work doesn't mean I'm ready to play the role of a dutiful husband. Also, what kind of enmity do they have for me. If I'm partying, they have a problem. If I am not, then too they have a problem! Also, If anyone should be getting married first, it's you. You're the heir, after all. What's the holdup, Rafe?"

Rafe grinned, unbothered by Kael's attempt to shift the focus. "Nice try, but I'm not the one who's suddenly on the council's radar. They're not going to bother with me until they've got you all tied up and settled down."

Kael cursed under his breath. "I swear, if even one person tries to set me up with some noble's daughter, I'm going to lose it and then they'll know not to mess with me. Maybe I'll remind them of my playboy days or something tonight. Should I flirt mercilassly with the women from the envoy?" But then Kael shook his head at that. "Better yet. Why don't you take one for the team and get hitched first, Rafe? That'll keep them busy for a while. What about the woman you liked?"

Rafe frowned at the thought of that and shook his head, "Isis? Unfortunately, I will have to abdicate the throne if I pursue her..."

"What do you mean? Are you?"

"Relax. Isis is an amazing woman, and I admire her more than anyone. But she is also the Crown Princess of Estania. Which means we cannot have an alliance unless one of us chooses to abdicate. So..."

"Crown Princess of Estania? Isn't she called Rosalind or something?"

Rafe shook his head, "You really need to pay more attention to politice... Her name is Isidora Rosalind Sterling.. And there she is."

Kael turned his head, his gaze following Rafe's line of sight. The moment he saw her, his heart nearly stopped. Standing at the entrance, her posture regal yet relaxed, was a woman he never expected to see again. The woman who he had seen in dreams these past few months.

Dora.

Chapter 726: Shocked

Dora... What was she doing here?

For a moment, everything around Kael seemed to blur. The vibrant music that filled the room, the lively conversations of the guests, and even the opulence of the ballroom itself—all of it faded into the background. His entire focus was consumed by the sight of her.

The woman who had haunted his thoughts for the past six months, the one he had tried so desperately to forget, was now standing right in front of him. She looked even more beautiful than he remembered.

He took a step forward excitedly, wanting to greet her, ask her how she was doing and why she had disappeared, but then stilled as he watched the council members greet her respectfully

His eyes narrowed in confusion. What was going on? Why were they treating her like this? Did they know her?

Then, as he watched Rafe approach her with that same warm, respectful demeanor, the pieces started to fall into place. Kael's breath caught in his throat as a realization hit him with the force of a freight train.

Dora... was Princess Isidora?

The shock of it nearly knocked the wind out of him. The woman he had fallen for, the one who had left him shattered and confused, was not just anyone—she was Isidora Rosalind Sterling, the Crown Princess of Estania. The truth was both staggering and deeply unsettling.

All this while, he had blamed himself for hurting her, for breaking her trust. But not once had she thought to mention that she was royalty too? Had everything been nothing but a game to her. He felt his anger surge. Not at her. But at himself.

Dora had already shown him that she did not care for him. She had been indifferent to him. But like a fool, he'd convinced himself that her cold attitude towards him had been a result of his own betrayal.

And then, as if the situation couldn't get any more complicated, another thought struck him like a cold slap to the face. Isidora Rosalind Sterling... Isis. The name Rafe had mentioned. The woman his brother admired more than anyone else in the world.

Kael's mind reeled. Dora was Isis. The woman who had captured not just his heart, but also Rafe's admiration, was one and the same. A bitter laugh almost escaped him, but he swallowed it down and started to walk towards her, knowing what was expected of him. The anger and the happiness warring within him would need to wait for now...

Taking a deep breath, he walked towards her...

The moment Dora had accepted the invitation to visit Petrovia, she had known this confrontation was inevitable. She had prepared herself for it, telling herself that she was ready to face Kael again.

And yet, she had not expected it to happen so soon. The moment she entered the large ballroom, she had felt his gaze on her. And it had yet to move away. It was as if his eyes were burning a hole through her, the intensity of his stare impossible to ignore. She could feel it as she was introduced to the various ministers, and she could feel it when she turned to greet Rafe. And this scared her.

What she had felt for Kael six months ago had scared her. Because even though he had hurt her and her mind knew that he was dangerous, her heart had yearned for him. So, she had done the only thing possible then. She'd run away from him. And over the last six months she'd convinced herself that she'd gotten over it. But here she was, feeling bothered just by knowing that he was watching her every move.

When she turned to greet Rafe, she could no longer resist the urge to look in Kael's direction. Slowly, almost hesitantly, she allowed her gaze to drift toward where she thought he was and as their eyes met, the world seemed to stop.

What she saw shocked her. The man she remembered was gone. In his place stood someone who appeared colder, harder. The east charm he'd exuded seemed to have vanished under something much more sharper. He'd even lost weight. Was he sick?

The question and the worry in her mind nagged her and she almost questioned him about his health.

Seeing that he'd almost reached, Rafe gestured Kael forward, "Isis, let me introduce my younger brother. Isis, this is Kael Ignis and Kael this is Crown Princess Isidora Sterling."

Kael nodded and stepped forward, extending his hand. As Isidora placed her hand in his, she felt a charge run up her arm. He smiled slyly then as he felt her almost tremble, slowly bringing her hand to his lips. Gently, he brushed his lips against the back of her hand and straightened, "Its a pleasure to meet you, Princess."

Dora smiled and gently extracted her hand, "Likewise, Prince Kael."

Before the two could say more, the ministers directed her attention, guiding her to sit on the places prepared. As Kael watched Dora slip a hand through his brothers proffered one, his heart hardened. She'd walked here into his territory on her own but there was no way she was going to be leaving without his wish...He'd seen the flicker of emotion in her eyes. It was probably guilt at her own deception being revealed. But whatever it was, he was not above using it for his own gain.

As he walked back towards his position in the ballroom, his eyes remained fixed on her, almost planning quietly. His mood, however, plummetted when he heard the people whispering about how beautiful their crown prince and Princess Isidora looked together. And how it would be a fairytale romance if the two were to marry each other.

His mood plummetted the more he heard the gossip and with a sulken look, started to walk out of the ballroom from a side door.

It was because of this that he failed to notice someone else entering the large ballroom from the other side...

Chapter 727: What?!

"Papa! I did not expect this from you, of all people! This is cheating!" Dora's voice wavered slightly, betraying the mix of surprise and frustration she felt. The only thing that kept her from stomping her feet in frustration was the strict lessons about not doing it!

"How is it cheating? It's only a blind date, sweetheart! There's only six months left to your birthday; we really need to hurry. And he is a handsome man. Also, he fits all the criteria." Alexander's tone was gentle, almost coaxing, as if he were trying to reassure a skittish horse. His eyes softened as he watched his daughter's reaction on the screen, knowing how stubborn she could be.

"I don't care how handsome he is!" She cared, of course she cared, but there was no way she was accepting that in front of anyone. She crossed her arms over her chest, her chin jutting out defiantly as she continued, "He is a known playboy!"

"He was a known playboy. But he is also a smart and astute businessman, as proven by him in the last few years. Also, there have been no scandals about him in the last few months. And the ones before that were also rumors. Didn't you want someone like Lucien or Demetri? Then he is it."

Alexander tried to convince his daughter who refused to look at him. And when she got up and disappeared from front of the screen, Alexander rubbed his forehead. He'd known convincing Dora was going to be a task then why did he have to do it.

"Dora! Come back here! We were still talking! Just because it is through a screen does not mean you can choose to end this conversation whenever you want! Do you think you're already the queen that you can disrespect me like this?" Alexander called out, his tone a mix of authority and frustration, and then he almost jumped when she popped back in front of the camera, her face filling the screen, "Does that mean I am allowed to be rude to you when I become Queen, Papa?"

As she batted her eyelashes at him, Alexander could not help but laugh. "No! You're not allowed to be rude to Papa, even then!"

Dora pouted, her lips forming a perfect little bow as she tilted her head, just like she used to when she was little. The look had always helped her get what she wanted, and she was not above using it again to

wriggle out of this blind date. "You're no fun, Papa! Okay, I won't be rude to you! But can I be rude to him?"

Alexander Sterling shook his head and sighed, his patience beginning to wear thin as he tried to not melt at The Look from his daughter. "No, you cannot be rude to Prince Kael as well. As far as I know, he is being coerced into this blind date too."

Dora sent her father a look then, one that spoke volumes of her reluctance, before looking down, her emotions carefully hidden from her father. Her heart sank. She did not want to go on this date. If she had known that this was what the council had been planning, she never would have agreed to come to Petrovia. A blind date with him. The very idea made her stomach twist.

"Come on, child. Cheer up! It's not as if they are forcing you to get married. It's just a blind date. Why not try to become friends with the prince and see where this goes? If things go well, then it's good for you and the council. If they don't, then you shrug it off because it wasn't meant to be."

Dora looked down at her hands and nodded slowly before looking up, "But daddy, warn them, that the next time they set me up, I won't agree so easily. I might end up on a blind date but they will end up blind."

Alexander nodded but inside he could only worry about the poor council as he bid goodbye to his stubborn daughter. Actually, he was a little scared and worried for her. Evana and even Nora both the girls had looked up to him and so did Dora... But there was an almost vindictive and stubborn streak in her that he found worrisome.

And the only person who had been able to handle that streak to a little extent was Cai. Thus, he knew Dora needed someone who would be able to hold her back when she wants to charge forward. Hold her back and distract her. And that person was Kael Ignis, according to Cai.

"Yo! Grandpa! How are you doing?" Cai's voice was as energetic as ever, the casual tone bringing a smile to Alexander's face despite the worries swirling in his mind.

"I'm doing well, Cai," Alexander replied, his voice warm but carrying the weight of the conversation that was about to unfold. "But I have something important to discuss with you."

"Uh oh! She knows about the blind date now? What did she do? Threaten to kill the council?"

Alexander laughed and shook his head, "More like blind them."

Cai laughed at that, "Sounds like her. Don't worry, Grandpa! She will be fine after a little while."

"Are you sure? She seemed pretty reluctant. Do you know Prince Kael well, since you suggested him?"

"I don't know him too well. But your daughter does." Cai murmured, which shocked Alexander.

"What do you mean?"

"I've given you a hint grandpa. Not telling you more or else she might blind me! Anyway, you can rest assured for a while. Other than one lapse in judgement, Prince Kael has always been smart from what I have found. He is the one Dora needs. And now that we've given them a chance to reconnect, let's see where this goes."

Alexander sighed as he nodded alongwith Cai's suggestion. He wondered what Dora would have to say when she knew that Kael had been suggested not by the council but by her best friend. But that was a worry for another day.

"Grandpa. You also don't have to keep an eye out for regular updates. I'm going to be reaching Petrovia soon. I can't miss this show..."

Chapter 728: Blind date.

Dora stood at the top of the stairs and clenched her hand on the balustrade. She still couldn't believe she'd agreed to this. A blind date, orchestrated by the council and her father. And with Kael Ignis, of all people.

"Just get through it," she muttered to herself, steeling her nerves. "Smile, be polite, and then get out. That's the plan. Do not engage. And do not challenge."

She looked at herself one last time in the mirror and nodded in satisfaction. For a date with anyone else, she might have gone casual. But with Kael, she needed an armour.

Hence, here she stood, decked up in a fitted dress, looking all unapproachable and regal. Satisfied that her expressions matched the aloof look she wanted to convey and started to walk down the stairs slowly.

What was his problem, anyway? She hadn't had any choice in this matter, but couldn't he have refused? It wasn't as if he needed to obey his ministers' every whim; that was more Rafe's headache than his. So, why had Kael agreed to this blind date?

After all, he was not the heir so he did not need to get married anytime soon. Was it part of some elaborate plan for revenge this time again, considering how she had ditched him and disappeared after their last encounter? If that were the case, then...

But as she reached the bottom of the stairs and caught sight of him, all her thoughts came to an abrupt halt. Damn it! If he had looked handsome before, losing weight should have made him look gaunt or something—anything that would have made this easier. But no, instead, he looked even more attractive, damn him.

Like her, he had chosen an all-black ensemble. A perfectly tailored black suit paired with a black shirt, making him look every bit the dark, brooding figure straight out of those romance novels. And Damn it again! They looked like they had coordinated their outfits on purpose.

As she reached the final step, he moved forward, extending his hand towards her in a gesture that seemed both polite and expectant. She stiffened at the sight. Did he really think she would just place her hand in his as if they were old friends? However, before she could ignore his outstretched hand, she caught sight of the paparazzi and other onlookers discreetly stationed at the corner of the room. Instantly, her expression softened, a beaming smile replacing her frown as she gracefully placed her gloved hand in his and thanked him with a composed nod.

But, of course, he couldn't just settle for holding her hand. No, that would have been too simple! Instead of the expected formality of placing her hand on his elbow, he wound his arm around her waist, his hand settling possessively on her lower back. Her body went rigid at the contact, her teeth clenching in frustration and she shot him a smile that was all teeth, a smile that promised retribution as her eyes sent a clear message—I will break your hand if you don't remove it.

She'd been so glad that she was wearing gloves and wouldn't have to feel his touch. But now, his hand remained on her bare lower back. Instead of taking off his hand, he gave her a knowing grin, and murmured, "You look stunning, Princess Dora. Thank you for dressing up for me."

Dora scoffed, "Who dressed up for you? Don't flatter yourself, Kael. I didn't even know you were going to be my blind date. I thought it was going to be Rafe."

She'd said it impulsively almost without thinking but as his eyes flashed in danger, Dora felt a thrill pass through her. She'd touched a nerve apparently.

His hands on her back tightened, fingers almost painfully digging into her waist. She stepped away from him the moment the car door was opened and sent him a frowning look. Was he trying to bruise her. As she stepped into the car, Kael stood frozen for a minute.

She'd dressed up like that for Rafe? Her words from that night echoed in his head for a moment- if you break my trust, I will break your heart...

For a moment, he stood frozen, his mind whirling with a storm of conflicting emotions. But then, without another word, he climbed into the car after her, almost glaring at her.

Dora barely had time to register his presence before he was beside her, his hand reaching out to grab her arm with a firm grip. She turned to him, her eyes wide with surprise, but before she could say anything, he pulled her closer, his breath warm against her face.

"Kael, what are you—" she began, but her words were cut off as his lips crashed down on hers, the kiss hard and almost punishing.

There was nothing gentle about it; it was fierce, raw, and filled with the anger that simmered just beneath the surface. His hand moved from her arm to the back of her neck, holding her in place as he deepened the kiss, leaving her with no room to escape.

Dora's initial shock gave way to a surge of emotions she hadn't expected. What did he mean by attacking her like this?

She tried to pull away, to regain some semblance of control, but his grip only tightened, his lips moving more insistently against hers. It was as if the last six months had never happened. As if they'd never been separated...

For a brief moment, she kissed him back, her mind hazy with the intensity of the moment. But then, just as quickly, she remembered herself, remembered the situation they were in, and what he represented. With a sudden burst of resolve, she wrenched herself away from him, breathing heavily as she glared at him with a mix of anger and confusion as she wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

"How dare you? Don't you ever do that again!"

"Then stay away from my brother!"

Chapter 729: Blind date (2)

The blind date was an icy affair. And she'd expected that. As the wait staff served one dish after the other, Kael kept up the pretence of being a dutiful host as he introduced the local dishes. Dora on the other hand responded politely to everything, her mind however elsewhere. All she could think of was how to escape as soon as possible.

Without warning, Kael placed his hand over hers, taking her fingers lightly. Startled, she instinctively moved to pull away, but he tightened his grip, leaning into whisper, "Smile. We have guests."

Dora didn't need to glance around to know who he was referring to—she could feel the eyes of the cameras on her, watching, recording every expression. Forcing a thin smile, she gritted her teeth. "Even if some people are peeping, we don't have to be holding hands. This is just a blind date. It's not like we're seeing each other."

Kael's lips curved into a smug smile. "You're right, of course. But I have a reputation to maintain. The paparazzi here has been following me around even before I knew what paparazzi was. So, if I don't make a movement, they will know something is up."

Dora rolled her eyes as she lifted her wine glass and took a slow sip. "Ah, yes. Your precious reputation."

"And since we're going to get married," Kael continued, completely unfazed, "I think it's best to give the impression that I've been enamored with you from the very beginning. Wouldn't you agree?"

Dora choked on her wine, nearly spilling it, in her shock. Quickly, she pulled her hand from his grasp and covered her face, not wanting the cameras to capture the ugly expression that was no doubt forming. She could feel the sting of tears at the corners of her eyes as she struggled to regain her breath.

When she finally composed herself, she let out a long sigh and glared at him. Let the cameras see her fury, for all she cared.

"Are you out of your mind? How did a blind date turn into a wedding proposal?"

Kael remained calm—infuriatingly calm. His voice was cool and collected, as if they were discussing the weather. "You know as well as I do why we're here. This so-called 'blind date' isn't about romance. It's politics. My people want to align with Estania for economic gain, and your ministers want to control their most headstrong princess." He met her eyes, daring her to deny the truth. "This arrangement benefits both sides. So of course they are going to push us for marriage."

Dora paused as she looked at him. He had a better understanding of the politics than she expected. But, "If you think I can marry you then you are out of your mind."

Kael's eyes glinted with amusement. "I haven't proposed, Dora. At least not yet."

"Then why bring it up at all?" she snapped, her voice a low hiss. "We are not getting married. Ever."

He tilted his head, as if considering her words carefully. "Are you a fortune teller now, Dora? Predicting the future?" His tone was playful, but there was an edge to it.

Dora's lips pressed into a thin line. "It's Isidora," she corrected sharply. "Only people close to me call me Dora, and you're certainly not one of them."

"Funny. A little less than half an hour ago, I would have said that I was the closest to you."

Dora stiffened, cocking her head as she gave up on any pretense, " What do you want Kael? Why are you doing this?"

"Me? What did I do? I am just playing along with what all those politicians have planned. After all, that is my fate as the younger prince. But you, I am wondering what you are going to do? What about your boyfriend? How will you marry him when you cannot even introduce him to your council..." Because she was on the defensive or because she wasn't looking for it, Dora missed the echo of jealousy in his voice.

"You mean Cai? Most of the council is aware of my closeness with Cai. And if they think that my marriage will break off that relationship then they are foolish."

Kael clenched his hands under the table, wanting to punch something! What did she mean by not breaking off her relationship with Cai....

"Are you saying..."

"Who cares what I am saying, Kael. It doesn't concern you. Now, if we're finished with the date..."

"Why in such a hurry to run away? I thought we'd do something special tonight..." With that, Kael gestured to the wait staff who discreetly disappeared from the room, making sure to close the curtains to keep out the prying eyes. As the lights dimmed and soft music started to play, Kael extended his hand to Dora who only gave it a look as she said, " What? There is no one here, so why pretend?"

"Are you scared Dora? Its just a dance..."

Dora's eyes narrowed as she glanced at Kael's outstretched hand, suspicion coursing through her. He was behaving oddly. He was too amiable and polite. Something that should not have matched his brash personality.

"Scared? Why would I be that?" Despite knowing that he was actually goading her into doing his bidding, Dora placed her hand in his and stepped closer to him.

His triumphant smile, however, turned to a frown when instead of placing her hand on his shoulder, she placed it on his waist. She looked up into his eyes then deliberately slow, pushed her hand under his suit jacket. Her hand lingered over the hard lines of his abdomen, then higher, teasingly tracing the muscles beneath until she reached his shoulder.

Dora leaned in, her lips curling into a smug smile of her own as she tilted her head up toward his ear.
"You're not the only one who can play games, Kael."

Her other slid around his back, pulling him closer, just enough for their bodies to almost touch as she continued to whisper, "Its better to come clean now about whatever it is you're planning..."

Chapter 730: Blind Date (4)

"You need to sleep with him."

Dora nearly choked as she heard Cai's words, glaring at him through the screen. "What is wrong with you? How can you even say something like that?"

"Do you think I want to say something like this?" Cai shot back, his frustration clear. "But look at you, Dora! Look at how much you've changed in the past six months!"

"Oh really? And how exactly have I changed?"

"You've become angrier." He shook his head. "Last time, when that officer made a crude joke, you almost had him beheaded! In the past, you would've shrugged it off or made a sarcastic comment, but now—now you're ready to bite everyone's head off. And your lust for him is clouding your judgment. I mean, tonight you went on a blind date with him, and did you two talk? No! You didn't even try to talk. And then you told me what happened, which is awful, by the way!" Cai groaned, rubbing his face.
"You're my aunt! I really don't need to know those personal details, okay? Do you want me to be so traumatized that I can never have a normal relationship in the future?"

Dora narrowed her eyes at him. She might have overshared, but who else was she supposed to talk to? Cai was her closest friend. While a tiny pang of guilt pricked her, Cai continued, relentlessly, making her guilt disappear instantly.

"So, yeah, just sleep with him already. Get it out of the way. Maybe once the 'lust monster' is satisfied, the two of you can finally have a real conversation and work out the issues in your relationship.."

"There is no relationship between us and there's nothing to work out, Cai," Dora said through gritted teeth. "Talking won't change what he tried to do."

"Yes, it will! You're just being stubborn. You already know he was given false information by his trusted cousin. No one could've expected they'd be misled like that." Cai leaned closer to the camera, his voice softening. "So, can't you give him a chance?"

"He didn't ask for a chance," she snapped. "So why should I? And are you on his side or mine? Why are you defending him? Is it because he's a guy?"

Cai raised both hands in surrender. "Whoa, whoa, calm down. No need to pull out the big guns, okay? I'm not taking sides. I just think if you really want to fix this, you need to sit down and talk things through. And if that means sleeping with each other first to clear your heads, then maybe that's what you need to do."

He gave her a pointed look. "But you've got to deal with it, one way or another."

Dora stared at the screen, incredulous. "You can't be serious. You really think sleeping with him will fix everything?"

Cai shrugged. "I'm not saying it'll fix everything, but it might clear the air. Get rid of all that tension between you two. You've been dancing around each other every time you meet. Don't you think it's time you faced it head-on? You ran away last time and it took a toll on you."

Dora leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms. "This isn't some romantic drama, Cai. Sleeping with him won't make me forget what he's done. How he broke my..." Dora paused. She was about to say heart but then changed her mind, "my trust." She finished, giving Cai a look.

She knew since his plan had not succeeded and that his reasons for that plan might have been valid from his point of view. But that did not make accepting everything any easier. She'd been willing to forget

everything to be with him. Ready to expose her most vulnerable side. But seeing him step back from that so easily, had shaken something inside her.

"I'm not asking you to forget, Dora. Just deal with it. Face your feelings. You're angry, sure. But underneath all that, there's something else. You wouldn't be so upset if there weren't."

"Simple," Cai said with a small smirk. "You tell him exactly what you told me. That you're mad and you don't trust him. And you go from there. Or, you know, jump his bones first and then talk."

"Cai!" Dora exclaimed, but this time there was a hint of laughter in her voice.

He grinned, leaning back in his chair, clearly pleased with himself. "I'm just saying. You'll figure it out, Dora. Just don't let your pride get in the way. You deserve to explore what your heart wants okay?"

Dora paused, her eyes softening as she thought about what Cai had said. As much as she wanted to deny it, there was truth in his words. She had been avoiding a real conversation with Kael, hiding behind her anger and hurt.

"Fine," she muttered. "But if this blows up in my face, you owe me an apology. A big one."

Cai chuckled. "Deal. But trust me, you'll thank me later."

"Yeah. We'll see about that... Now, can you help me?", Dora asked.

"Help you with what?", Cai asked suspiciously as he glared at Dora. She looked... not right.

"Well, you've shown me the way forward and I am thankful for that. The problem is how do I accomplish what I want..."

Cai's eyes widened as he leaned closer to his camera his face on the screen large, " Isidora Sterling, I am not telling you how to seduce a man! What do I look like to you?"

"Well you are a man so I thought you would know..." Cai frowned and muttered something foul under his breath before glaring, "Now you notice I am a man when until now you were treatign me like a gal pal! Well, I am sorry. I only know how to seduce women. So, if you want information about that, I can help you otherwise sorry you are on you own..."

"Cai! Listen to me."

But of course, before Dora could say something, the man had disappeared from the screen, leaving her behind with the most difficult question she'd ever faced. How to seduce a man...