

Benefits 761

Chapter 761: Princess In Shining Armor

"Someone is doing this intentionally," Dora muttered, stirring the pot of soup on the stove, her brow furrowed in frustration. She tasted a spoonful, then shook her head and added a pinch more salt. "And I don't like the suspects I have in mind."

"You mean, you do like the suspects," Cai corrected from beside her, his knife scraping lightly against the cutting board. He grabbed a slice of carrot and casually popped it into her mouth, interrupting her before she could argue. "And that's why you don't want them to be suspects." He smirked, wiping his hands on a towel. "But seriously, why are you so hung up on this? You don't need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, Dora. Let someone else deal with it for once."

Dora chewed the carrot, giving him a side-eye before turning off the heat and resting her hands on the stove. She let out a deep sigh, her shoulders slumping. "Maybe. But these rumors? They've gone too far. Even my picture—stolen from my phone, mind you—was called a fake! Now people believe that doctored story instead of the truth!" She tossed the spoon into the sink with a little too much force, the clatter echoing through the kitchen. "I don't care what Kael says about not letting it bother me as he is handling the rumors pretty well. It does bother me. I hate it!"

Cai handed her a bowl of chopped veggies and shrugged as she poured them into the pot. He leaned against the counter, wiping it down methodically, as if trying to clean away her worries. "We can't control every rumor. What matters is how we react. From what I've seen, Kael's handling it pretty well. So why are you still trying to be the knight in shining armor here?"

Dora turned around sharply, her eyes narrowing. "Hey! I am not a knight! I'm a princess in shining armor, okay?" She pointed at him with the wooden spoon, her tone teasing but with a bite of seriousness. "And why not? If the situation were reversed, and someone was spreading rumors about Kael, I'd want to step in and protect him. A relationship is about give and take, isn't it?" She shot a quick glance over her shoulder, making sure Kael wasn't around to hear.

Cai rolled his eyes, folding his arms. "A relationship is also about trusting your partner to handle things on their own. You're not trusting Kael right now."

"I am trusting him!" Dora's voice was defensive, but her expression softened as she stared at the pot. "I just... I don't want to sit by and do nothing."

Before Cai could respond, the kitchen door opened, and Kael stepped in. He paused for a moment, his eyes narrowing slightly at the sight of the two standing so close together, whispering. That old, familiar flicker of jealousy surfaced, though he quickly pushed it aside. He knew they were close but sometimes, he couldn't help but wish Dora would open up to him like she did with Cai.

But for now, he could only smile and wait for the day when she'd turn to him first.

Clearing his throat, Kael asked, "What are you two whispering about? Looks pretty intense."

Both Dora and Cai jumped at the sound of his voice, spinning around with wide eyes like kids caught sneaking cookies from the jar. Cai was the first to recover, grinning mischievously as he shot a glance at Dora. "Oh, nothing much. Just helping her decide if she should buy a shiny suit of armor," he said, smirking. "I told her it's a waste of money, but you know she is obsessed. What do you think, Kael?"

"A suit of armor, huh? Sounds a bit... extravagant." His gaze flicked to Dora, his voice softening. "But I'm sure she has her reasons."

Dora laughed awkwardly, glaring at Cai before shaking her head. "Don't listen to him. He's just stirring up trouble, as usual."

"Ha! I am the one stirring up trouble." Moving about, he picked up the plates on the counter and pushed them into Kael's hand while grabbing the bowl of salad that he'd earlier prepared to the table as he said, "Tell me, Kael, don't you think a woman donning an armour is prettu funny. She might be a princess and all, but does she also have to be the knight? Would you rather protect her or be protected by her?"

Even though the question was asked casually, Kael could not help but look at Cai. It seems the guy was actually trying to say something to him. Narrowing his eyes, he answered truthfully, "I'd rather protect her."

"See! So, who should be looking for the shiny armour? You or her?"

"Me?!" Honestly, Kael was thoroughly confused by the entire conversation that he'd been dragged into but apparently he was giving the correct answers as Cai seemed to be pleased... Dora on the other hand seemed to be frowning.

He was about to tell her to do as she wished and get the armour if she wanted it but before he could say so, Cai brought out a piece of bread to his mouth.

Kael stared at the piece of focaccia bread and then at Cai who was holding it to his mouth. Cautiously, he opened his mouth and ate the bread carefully. Cai nodded and then continued talking as if feeding someone like that was totally normal. "Now you see, Dora, even Kael agrees with me. So, you need to stop worrying about armours and strategies and focus on the food. Come on, sit and eat and appreciate."

"Kael. What do you think of this bell pepper?"

Kael looked down at the sliced bell pepper in the salad and then back up. What was he supposed to think about bell peppers exactly?

"Uhhmm." Thankfully, Dora came to save him and added, "He wants you to praise his cutting skills. Don't you see that all the bell peppers are evenly sliced? And check the carrots, too. Or he will complain about that."

Kael looked at the bell pepper, then back at Cai, "Right. They're... perfectly sliced," he said, nodding as though he was judging a cooking competition.

Cai grinned like he'd just won first place. "See? Even Kael recognizes greatness when he sees it. I'm practically a sous chef at this point. So, if I ever fail in brain surgery, I can always become a chef."

"I am sure your patients will be thrilled to hear that." Kael could not help himself from commenting. However, in the next moment, he felt almost awkward when both Dora and Cai turned to him in surprise. But before he could feel too out of it, Dora rolled her eyes and pointed at Cai, "Ha! You don't know his knife skills! He really is too good. And if his patients knew the things he's cut to practice his skills on, they wouldn't come to him in the first place. Do you know..."

"Dora Sterling! Stop right there..."

"Ha! Try it. When Cai decided he wanted to become a neurosurgeon, he started practicing his fine motor skills on vegetables and fruits. I swear, for an entire year, he was obsessed with cutting things perfectly. The kitchen looked like a science lab, with all these perfectly sliced fruits and veggies lined up. And then he moved on to animal meat, etc. Poor, Aunt Ava thought he was losing his mind or something, gearing up to be some sort of a serial killer. And every time she tried to ask him why he was doing what he was, he wouldn't tell her."

Kael chuckled. Although he had not met Ava Frost, he could just imagine a mother worrying over something like this.

"Oh please. Everything would have been fine if someone had not kept adding fuel to the fire." Cai bit out.

"I did no such thing! I just casually mentioned how you spent hours perfecting your 'technique'—you know, just in passing. And that this was a good deal of getting over heart break because the girl you liked had dumped you."

Kael whipped his head towards Dora then. That was little? Casual?

Cai groaned and ran a hand through his hair. "I swear, she nearly had an intervention planned for me before I finally sat her down and explained I wanted to go into medicine."

"So, in a way, you owe your surgical skills to... bell peppers and watermelons?" Kael asked carefully, though he did not believe it for a second. A world class surgeon...

Cai shrugged with a smirk. "Pretty much. Although, I think I owe it more to my mom and dad for not completely losing her mind during that phase. I can't even imagine what they must have thought when they would find their teenage boy hunched over a piece of raw meat, peeling back layers of it in the middle of the night with a scalpel."

Chapter 762: The Woman You love

"Was that the woman you love? The one who came to pick you up at the airport?"

Kael looked up at the girl standing in front of him, her voice trembling just slightly. He sighed inwardly, already knowing this confrontation was inevitable. He'd been doing everything he could to avoid this moment, dodging her questions and keeping his distance, but it seemed impossible now. As his gaze met hers, he saw the vulnerability in her eyes, the unspoken plea for reassurance, and he felt an instinctive urge to protect her from the truth. Yet, he knew that sparing her feelings would only prolong the pain.

"Yes," he answered, his voice steady but without elaboration. The word hung between them, heavy and unyielding. He held her gaze, refusing to soften the blow or give her any false hope.

She swallowed hard, her lips pressing into a thin line as she processed his admission. "I see," she said quietly, "Are you going to marry her?"

The question caught him off guard. Instinctively, he almost snapped, "It's too soon to think about marriage." But before the words left his mouth, he realized he wasn't entirely sure. Could he deny it? He'd already begun to consider the possibility—how could he not? Dora was everything to him. The thought of her was a constant hum in the back of his mind, and the idea of being with her, of making that commitment, felt inevitable.

And the thought of her being with anyone else, made his blood boil. Yes, he was going to marry Dora. Come what may. He could already feel the gears turning in his mind. He had no idea when he'd started seeking out and dismantling any obstacles that might stand in the way of their future. It wasn't going to be easy—nothing ever was when The Crown was involved—but for her, he was willing to face whatever challenges came.

When he'd been sent away to the university, carted off to "clean up" his 'playboy' image, he'd made a promise to himself: that he would never again entangle his life like this again, never allow himself to be overshadowed by the weight of a crown. He'd already lived through the burdens once, and had no desire to go through it again.

But with Dora, everything was different. Despite knowing that choosing her meant forever playing second to the nation, to the crown she wore, he found himself willing.

He looked up then, "Yes. I do plan to marry her."

The girl's slumped ever so slightly and Kael knew that maybe she'd finally let go of that one final hope.

"Why did you come here, Anna? You wanted to start a new life and you did have one. So why return like this? You should never have sought me out. You promised you wouldn't."

Anna's face paled at Kael's words, and she stepped back, almost as if the force of his revelation had physically hit her. She opened her mouth to say something, but no sound came out. It was as if all the excuses she had rehearsed, all the rationalizations she had told herself, had evaporated into the air the moment Kael spoke the truth out loud.

"I thought it was Rafael who was dating her. That's why I came to you..." Anna repeated, her voice barely above a whisper now, shaky and brittle, as if she were clinging to the only thread she had left. "I really did love both of you... in my own way. And even though you weren't the person I first thought you were... I thought it was you I was getting to know! All this time... I've been tortured by who I should love. Whether it was the person I'd always seen growing up or the man I'd only even spoken to on messages and emails."

Kael clenched his jaw, a surge of frustration rising within him. Anna's words were like salt in an old wound.

"Then stop loving, Anna!" His voice was sharp, cutting through the tension like a knife. "Just stop! What you should be worrying about right now is your future. No one knows what really happened that night... No one but me and you. Do you think for one second that you can just walk away from it all like nothing happened? That you can pretend that girl didn't die because of you?"

Anna's eyes welled with tears, her hands trembling as she balled them into fists. "You promised you wouldn't bring that up again! You swore to me, Kael!"

"I helped you cover it up because you were desperate! Because you begged me! And I felt guilty towards you! You told me you couldn't live with yourself—that you were going to jump into the river after her if I didn't help you! Do you remember that? Do you think I enjoyed lying for you to everyone? To your father? Do you think I wanted to protect you after what you did?"

"I watched my master grieve for you, his only daughter and the guilt of hiding you almost killed me. Do you know why I never confessed to him? Do you? Because I knew more than anything he'd want you to

be happy. And knowing that you thought you were nothing more than a pawn to him would have hurt him much more."

"But be careful Anna. I won't tolerate any more games. I've paid off my debt and more. This time, you are on your own. One last time, I am giving you one last chance. I'll make arrangements for you to go back. If you do, then we will forget ever knowing one another. If you don't leave, then you can prepare to explain yourself about how you caused an accident that killed someone but instead of confessing, you chose to run away."

"You're threatening me, Kael."

"I'm warning you, Anna. I've had enough interference in my life from unwanted people. You better not become one of them."

Anna wiped her tears at that moment and nodded, "Alright. I'll leave you alone. Thank you for all you've done for me, Kael."

Chapter 763: The Woman I love

"Isis! This is a pleasant surprise," Rafael said, gesturing for her to sit across from him.

Dora walked over and sat down, her eyes never leaving his. "Is it? I doubt you'll say that when you hear what I have to say."

Rafael raised an eyebrow, settling back in his chair. "That sounds ominous," he replied, watching her closely. She simply smiled, staring at him without a word. And then continued to stare as he waited for her to continue.

He shifted in his seat, leaning forward slightly. "Are you going to sit there and stare at me? I know I'm beautiful, but I'm sure you appreciate Kael's beauty more."

"Of course," she said tartly. "His beauty has a depth of character that I've recently discovered you lack."

Rafael winced, rubbing the back of his neck. "Ouch. I see what you meant about the surprise part. Was there really a need for the barb? Okay. So, Kael finally told you everything?"

The woman shot him a look as if to say, 'duh' and Rafael almost cowered. Dam* it! He was actually older than Isis but somehow, she'd succeeded in making him feel like a little school kid being scolded by the principal. He sighed and ran a hand over his face, "Okay okay. I understand that you are angry on behalf of KAel, but I really have changed, hmm? No need to look at me like I am an insect you would like to squish under your heel"

"What is your game, Prince Rafael?"

"My game?" Rafael asked, trying to stall for time. Truthfully, he had not expected such direct confrontation.

"Your game. I wondered initially why you did not refute those rumors. You even came to my office to fish about Kael's reaction and even fanned the rumors. So what were you trying to achieve with this?"

"Achieve? What do you think?"

"Truthfully, I don't know what to think. I liked you as a person Rafe and considered you as a friend. But you've tried to use me against Kael so I'm not so sure."

"I did not try to use you, Isis. I am not the one who started or spread the rumors. That is someone else. And the only reason I let things be is because I want Kael to see that the man he respects so much is the one who is tryin gto destroy everything he has."

Rafe paused and waited for her reaction and narrowed his eyes when she simply continued to look at him. "You know the source of the rumors?" He asked cautiously.

"Of course, I know. Or rather I can guess. But is the source the only reason you are letting these things happen."

Rafael narrowed his eyes then. He'd known and recognised Isis as powerful, but only as he stared at her now, unflappable and as if nothing could shock her, that he realized that this person would turn out to be a formidable enemy.

He sighed and confessed the truth," Because I want Kael to come clean."

Finally, she showed a reaction and frowned. "What do you mean?"

Rafael shook his head. It seems Isis had only one weakness. His little brother.

"He is hiding something from me about the past. Something that I need to know. So, when the rumors started to blow, I was waiting for my brother to come to me and ask me to clean up the mess. To deny everything. I actually expected him to be angry or even insecure due to our past... But it seems you've made him stronger. He didn't let the rumors bother him and he didn't try to come to confront me, leaving me no choice to let things continue."

"But why do you want him to come to you? What do you need from him? Though the two of you've recently tried to mend fences, things are not that bad that he would keep something from you deliberately."

"Deliberately, no. Bound by a promise. He would never break a promise."

Silence reigned in the office as Dora tried to make sense of everything. What was going on? What could Kael have kept from Rafael that would make this man go to such extremes?

"I see he didn't tell you everything." Rafael spoke slowly as if having just come to a realization. "It seems I have underestimated my brother's honour."

Dora frowned but said nothing as she waited for Rafael to continue, knowing that he would.

"The night that changed everything? Two people went missing that night. One was Lord Rupert's daughter- Anna. And the other was a gold digger- Anne. Two names that are too similar, aren't they? But one was a victim and one a perpetrator. One died, but where did the other go? Only one person seems to know- Kael."

"Hadn't the woman who played you both been discovered in her tactics? She'd probably run away. What is the conspiracy in that? Are you looking for her because you are still in love with her or something?"

"I am not looking for her. Anne is dead. I am looking for Anna."

Dora scowled, sure her brain was short circuiting or something as she tried to understand the entire mess. What the heck was going on?¹

"Just stop talking in circles and get to the point." Dora finally huffed out.

"The point is that I believe that the woman who died that night was not master's daughter Anna but the woman Anne. And I want to know why Kael is hiding her from me and the others!"

"How can you be sure?" Dora asked slowly.

"Because I know my brother! If he'd really been responsible for Anna's death, even indirectly so, he never would have been able to stand up to the master. At least not in the past! So, there could be only one of the two explanations. One, he was not responsible for her death. Or the second possibility was that... Anna was not dead."

The last words, said with such hope made Dora narrow her eyes at him.

Are all of my awesome readers wondering this as well?

Chapter 764: Another Meeting

"Why don't you just run yourself ragged," Cai said with a sigh. "I told you already, you need to let Kael handle this matter himself."

Dora folded her arms, indignant. "And what's so wrong about wanting to help him? I'm just looking out for him."

Cai let out a sharp laugh. "Oh, really? Do you honestly think he'll thank you when he finds out you've been confronting everyone left, right, and center because you were worried about him?"

"I have not been confronting people, okay?" Dora shot back, her tone defensive. "I just had a simple, friendly chat with Prince Rafael. That's all. And now, I'm going to meet with Kael's master. How is that confronting anyone?"

"Yeah, yeah," Cai said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Keep telling yourself that, and maybe—just maybe—Kael will believe you."

Dora rolled her eyes, exasperated. "Stop being so cynical for once, Cai. Actually, I've got good news for you."

Cai paused, the tension dropping slightly as curiosity got the better of him. "What good news?" he asked, though the irritation still lingered in his tone.

"They've found Mi Na's biological match," Dora said, her voice quieter, more serious now. "It's not a maternal or paternal match, but it's a sibling match. Rafe is going to invite the person to discuss things. They are still deciding whether to investigate her or not. Even the match was found by a coincidence so they have not started investigating the person."

There was a beat of silence before Cai's voice shot through the phone, louder and more urgent than before as he leaned close to the camera, probably glaring at her but all she could see was his forehead as he whined, "You're just telling me this now?! What is wrong with you? I've been nagging you, and you've been sitting on that bombshell? Unbelievable!"

Dora smirked. "Well, now you know. Guess you can stop nagging me for a bit."

"Don't push it," Cai snapped, though the excitement in his voice was unmistakable. "Get off the phone and go harangue Kael's old master or whatever. I've got important work to do now."

Without waiting for a reply, Cai disconnected the call. Dora stared at her phone, blinking in disbelief before rolling her eyes again.

"That guy," she muttered to herself, shaking her head with a small smile. "One second he's giving me grief, and the next, all he cares about is the new information."

With a deep breath, she tucked her phone away and looked outside as the driver continued to turn around the winding roads.

"Ma'am," the driver said hesitantly, glancing in the rearview mirror. "The security guard refuses to open the gate. He said Lord Rupert isn't accepting visitors."

Dora smiled. She had expected this. After all, Kael had warned her about his master's aversion to uninvited guests. But she wasn't one to back down easily, especially when something important was at stake.

"Roll down the window," she instructed the driver. As soon as the glass slid down, she leaned out slightly and beckoned to the security guard with a polite wave. "Would you be so kind as to deliver a message to Lord Rupert for me?" Her voice was sweet, almost too sweet, but there was an unmistakable edge beneath it. "Tell him Princess Dora is aware of the generous gifts he has sent to our family, and she would like to thank him personally. Oh, and do mention that if he doesn't accept my thanks in person, I'll be forced to express my gratitude publicly." She paused, her smile widening. "I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate the attention."

The security guard blinked, clearly catching the not-so-subtle threat behind her words. His expression stiffened, and he gave her a quick nod before retreating inside to pass on the message.

Dora watched him disappear through the gates and folded her arms across her chest, a smirk tugging at her lips. That should do the trick.

Inside the grand manor, the security guard relayed the message to the butler, who raised an eyebrow, confused.

"My lord, the princess claims you've sent gifts to her. Could it be she's mistaken? And even if she isn't, why would she be threatening you with such a message? Shall I contact Prince Kael and have him intervene?"

But Lord Rupert shook his head with a bemused smile. "No need to involve Kael," he replied, his voice calm despite the butler's concern. "She's a clever one. If she's figured out I've been involved, then I want to meet her. Bring her to the drawing room."

"My lord! The doctor said you are not to move about much..."

"I'm just going to be sitting there in the drawing room. Move quickly and help me get dressed."

As expected, the gates were soon opened and Dora was escorted to the same room from last time where Lord Rupert sat, "Princess Dora," Rupert greeted, nodding his head with respect as she approached. "I wasn't expecting a visit today, but I'm pleased to see you nonetheless. Please, take a seat."

Dora inclined her head politely in return, settling into the chair opposite him. "I would apologize for troubling you, but considering the fact that you've caused more than little trouble for me, I do think I can take this much liberty."

"I've caused you trouble? What kind of trouble can an old man like me cause? Tell me what sort of trouble are you having that you think it would be caused by me? I'll help you sort it?"

"Really? Do you really intend to help me? Why don't you start with why you are fanning the rumors about me and Crown Prince Rafael?"

"You're very sure that I am the one. How can you be so sure?"

"I have my ways of finding out. And you know it. So, Lord Rupert, why would a man who is treated with utmost respect by his disciple start rumors that would hurt his student? A master is supposed to protect his students but you are poking at his weak points. WHY?"

Chapter 765: Why?

"You tell me why," the older man said, his voice dripping with incredulity. His eyes narrowed, and his tone took on a biting edge. "After all, you've come this far, Princess Dora. So, go ahead. Tell me—why would I ever intentionally harm the very princes I've spent my life serving? I've done everything in my power to make them strong, to raise them above all others, to put them at the top of the food chain. So

why, then, would I turn against them?" His lip curled as he continued, "Your allegations are not only outrageous but deeply hurtful, and quite frankly, not something I'm inclined to appreciate."

"Are you denying the charges, then?" Dora's voice remained calm, her expression unreadable as she tilted her head slightly, watching his reaction.

The old man scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Denying the charges? Do you honestly believe you're some kind of courtroom, where I must stand trial before you and defend my actions?" He gave a mocking laugh, though it sounded forced. "I have no idea why you've come here with this nonsense, but I can assure you I have nothing to do with—"

"Anna," Dora interjected softly, her voice barely above a whisper, yet the name hit him like a physical blow.

The change in the man's demeanor was immediate and unmistakable. His body stiffened, and the mocking arrogance that had oozed from his words evaporated. His posture, once lazy and indifferent, transformed in an instant. Muscles tensed, eyes sharp—he now looked like a predator ready to strike, the sudden shift betraying a truth he'd hoped to keep hidden.

"How dare you besmirch my daughter's name by bringing it up here!" Lord Rupert glared at her, even as he felt his lungs struggle to draw in air. He tightened his hand on his stick but continued to glare at Dora, trying to intimidate her.

However, Dora was not one to be intimidated. Instead, she leaned back in the seat and continued, as if the old man had not spoken. "Yes. One might wonder what kind of a grudge would you hold against the princes that you would do something like this to ruin them, to harm their brotherhood. But then, one does not need to look far away. Where is your daughter, Sir Rupert? She hasn't returned to the country in more than a year. Why? You don't look too well to begin with and your daughter, is busy studying abroad, not even making time to visit her old father? Why?"

Lord Rupert's grip on his cane tightened, his knuckles white with tension as he stood up, banging his stick on the floor, "What does it have to do with you? If my daughter visits me or not? Why are you trying to involve her in your mess? She is innocent of all this!"

Dora leaned forward, her voice smooth. "If she's innocent, then why hasn't she returned? Why have none of her friends or acquaintances heard from her? Why haven't you heard from her, Lord Rupert?"

"You have no right!" he bellowed, slamming the cane into the ground. "No right to speak about my Anna like this! My daughter is not your concern, do you hear me?"

"But she is, isn't she?" Dora's calm reply cut through his rage like a knife. "Because your hatred, your rage—it all started the day she vanished. It all started the day you decided to destroy them. To destroy Kael because you know that Kael is responsible for her death. On the surface of it all, you seemed to believe Kael when he said that he did not intentionally harm Anna, but you still blame him."

"Kael," he spat, his voice full of venom. "He... he killed her. Kael took my Anna from me, and for that, I will ruin him! I will destroy everything he holds dear, piece by piece, until there's nothing left of him but the ashes of his broken life. It was Kael! Kael who destroyed me. He took everything from me! And then he had the gall! The gall to kneel in front of me and tell me that my Anna was probably in a better place and begging me for forgiveness!"

The older man's entire body trembled with rage as he spilled the truth of his feelings. She was about to ask more, to press him further and even present the doubts that Rafael had shared with her, but before she could say another word, Lord Rupert swayed on his feet.

"Sir Rupert—" Dora began, but it was too late.

The old man's eyes rolled back, and his legs buckled beneath him. His cane slipped from his grasp, clattering to the floor as his body began to fall backward.

Dora lunged forward, catching him just before he hit the ground, her arms wrapping around his frail form. "Lord Rupert!" she exclaimed, trying to steady him. But as she held him, she felt the unnatural slackness in his body—his weight collapsing against her as his consciousness faded.

"Help!" she shouted over her shoulder. "Someone, help!"

But the room was empty, and Lord Rupert remained limp in her arms, his breathing shallow, his eyes closed. He had fallen into unconsciousness, and for the first time in their entire exchange, Dora felt a surge of fear for the old man she had so ruthlessly goaded.

Panic rising in her chest, she fumbled for her phone with one hand, keeping her other arm around the unconscious man and quickly called an ambulance.

"Stay with me. Don't you dare die on me now.," she whispered urgently, lowering him carefully to the ground then before making another call. This time to Kael.

She ended the call and immediately shouted for the servants. "Help! Where is everyone?" Her voice echoed through the grand hall, sharp and demanding.

Within moments, footsteps could be heard rushing toward her. Two servants appeared, their faces going pale as they saw Lord Rupert's limp form with Dora kneeling next to him

"Fetch hot water, blankets—anything! He's out cold! Bring his medicine box as well."

Chapter 766: Shocked

Dora returned with a worried frown after consulting with the doctor about Lord Rupert's condition. Thankfully, the old man had survived this round, but the news about him having late-stage cancer did not sit well with her. It made her heart ache, especially when she thought about Kael. What was she supposed to say to him when she saw him just now? He was probably already waiting for the old man to be shifted into the room

Should she tell him about his master's betrayal and thus the reason for her confrontation which was responsible for putting the old man in this place? Or should she reassure him that Lord Rupert was safe for now? Or did she need to break the news that Lord Rupert was going to die in just a few months?

As she turned the corner toward the VVIP room, she suddenly stopped and narrowed her eyes. It seemed that Kael would be the one doing some explaining. She watched as he consoled a woman in his arms. Dora paused, leaning against the wall as she took in the scene before her. It was a heart-wrenching moment, as she clutched his shirt and Dora almost rolled her eyes at the sight. She couldn't believe that was feeling jealous even at a time like this towards some random woman who was only being consoled.

Just then, Kael seemed to sense her presence and immediately stiffened. She stared at him and raised a brow in question at his questionable embrace. He tried to push the girl away but she seemed to have used super glue. Finally, he mumbled something in her ear and the girl seemed to have realized that she was supposed to let go.

Dora watched as Kael finally managed to pry the woman from his embrace. He stepped back, taking a breath as if he had been underwater and had just surfaced for air. "This is Anna," he introduced, glancing between the two women. "Lord Rupert's daughter."

Dora's eyes widened, her heart sinking further. "His daughter? The 'dead' daughter? Are you sure this is not Annabelle?" The words slipped out before she could stop herself, and the moment hung heavy in the air, before Kael sent her a look. She did not seem surprised by this... or at least as surprised as she should have been.

Kael's face fell, and a palpable awkwardness filled the space between them. "Yes," he confirmed, his tone tight as he shifted uncomfortably. "Also, as far as the others are concerned, she was studying abroad. The rest...I'll explain everything later."

Dora nodded, letting Kael know with a gaze that she was not going to let this go before turning to the woman, "Anna. I know you must be worried about your father. Just rest assured, he is safe for now. They've already stabilized him and he will be moved here very soon. If you want, you can go inside and wait. I'll ask the doctor to come talk to you later."

Anna nodded and with another beseeching look at Kael, she walked inside. Kael sighed and was about to follow her when Dora stopped him. "There is something else as well."

Kael paused and turned to look back at her as Dora said softly, "Lord Rupert's diagnosis is not good. He has late-stage cancer."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Yes. And he knows it. He was diagnosed earlier in the year and already declined chemotherapy due to his age."

Kael nodded slowly, his expression growing more serious as he absorbed her words. "I see," he murmured, his gaze distant. "That explains a lot."

Dora furrowed her brow, unable to shake the feeling that there was more to this. What did he mean by there was more to this? Shouldn't he be showing concern or something. "What do you mean?" she pressed, crossing her arms. "What explains everything?"

He looked at her then before looking away, "It explains why he spread those rumors about you and Rafe. Why he chose to use such despicable means instead of coming at me directly. He was desperate to find something that would hurt me before he died."

"Do you mean you knew that he was the one behind this? Did you discover this recently or did you know from the get go?"

Kael looked at her and sighed, "I had my suspicions but no proof. It was only when I got your call today about master being unconscious that I guessed you'd probably discovered the truth and had gone to confront him... I... I don't want him to die even though he's done so much to harm you. Do you blame me?"

Dora sighed and gently closed the distance between them. She felt him shudder as she held him and spoke softly, "I don't blame you, Kael. And neither should you. Let's just focus on his health for now... We'll forget everything once he wakes up."

Just then, the door swung open, and Crown Prince Rafael strode in, flanked by a couple of officers. He paused next to Dora and Kael, eyes narrowed, "What's going on? How's Lord Rupert?" he asked.

"Not good. Or rather he is out of danger for now but, he has late-stage cancer and—"

Rafael cut him off, his gaze sweeping the room. "Where is she?"

"Who are you looking for?" Kael asked cautiously,

"Anna," Rafael replied, his urgency evident. "I thought she would be here by now."

Kael hesitated, casting a glance at the closed door before turning to his brother, " Rafe..."

Noticing his brother's gaze, Rafe turned to the officer and gestured towards the door, " Go inside and detain her."

Both Kael and Dora stepped forward then, trying to stop the officer, but Rafael simply gritted out, " Kael, don't try to step in my way or you won't like the consequences."

"What are you doing Rafe? Is this the time for all this? Her father is dying and..."

"Stay out of it, Kael! I know what I need to do and what I don't!"

Chapter 767: Arrested

Anna sat there on the small bench, shivering. Her father had almost died believing that she'd left this world. And all because she had been worried that he would not listen to her and let her choose a life of her own.

She had been so consumed by fear that he would never truly understand her desires, that he would dismiss her dreams without a second thought, that she had made a cowardly decision to run away instead of confronting him. In her desperation, she had turned to Kael, begging him to help her escape the confines of a life that felt stifling. If only she had been stronger, more resolute in her beliefs, none of this would have spiraled out of control.

What a fool had she been! All this while, she'd been cursing herself for not knowing whom to love. But in the end, she'd almost ended up losing the one person who loved her dearly and unconditionally.

Thankfully, nothing happened to him today and she'd already been in the country to come to him without wasting time.

Before Anna could take a relieved breath though, the door creaked open, and two officers walked in, followed closely by Crown Prince Rafael who closed the door with a finality.

Standing up, she quickly curtsied to him and even as she felt herself tremble with fear, she straightened and stammered with false bravado, "What is going on?"

The officers exchanged glances, their expressions unreadable, but Rafe's steely gaze sent chills down her spine. "The officers are here to arrest you," Rafe said, his tone devoid of warmth. "For faking your own death."

The words hit Anna like a punch to the gut. Her mind raced, searching for an explanation, a way to defend herself, but her voice caught in her throat. "What? This is a mistake! No no. I was away for further studies."

After she'd returned, she'd been scared of this, but Kael had assured her that he'd never had anyone prepare a death certificate and her father had never held her funeral to avoid any speculation about the reason for her suicide. He'd convinced her father to lie to everyone that she'd gone abroad...

"Are you sure? Because if you were, why does your father believe you to be dead? And he even tried to exact revenge from Kael because he believed that he was responsible for your death. So, Miss Anna, you are to be arrested for this. It is in your best interest that you come away right now."

"Rafe! My father is here. I need to see him. Please don't do this. I can explain everything."

"Miss Anna. I didn't realize we were this close that you could address me by my name. Now, I do believe that you should leave her quickly before Lord Rupert is brought back. Since he already believes his daughter is dead, why scratch old wounds. Do you want him to feel even more worst when he comes in to recuperate? That his daughter would rather choose to not be with him and prefer to fake her own death?"

Anna tried hard to explain, "But I'm right here! I came back because I wanted to be with him, to explain everything!"

"You put everyone through hell, Anna. Your father nearly lost his mind, and for what? Because you were afraid to face your own life? You can't just run away and expect everything to be fine."

"I didn't mean for any of this to happen! I just needed time to figure things out!" She said loudly as she glared at him, "You talk as if you are not to blame! Have you forgotten your part in this? You were one of the biggest reasons for me running away!"

Rafe gestured to the officers then, silently ordering them to retreat. The officers hesitated for a moment before leaving quietly. Anna did not even realise that the officers had left and as she waited for Rafe to answer her, she felt herself grow desperate.

Ultimately, she fell to her knees then and bowed her head, "Please, Rafe. Please. You know all that happened. I was reckless. Let me explain everything. Please. I'll do anything! Anything you say."

He walked closer to her then and hooked a finger under her chin, raising her head until their eyes met. "Are you really willing to do whatever I tell you?"

"Yes, I'll do anything! I just want to make this right. I want my father to understand. But please don't have me arrested. I know I've made a mess but my father! If you want, you can have me arrested later. I can promise you I won't go anywhere..."

Rafe studied her for a long moment, his expression inscrutable. There was a calculating glimmer in his eyes, as if weighing the gravity of her promise against the consequences that could follow. Finally, he turned and walked a few paces away before throwing a stack of papers at her. They landed with a soft thud on the floor, scattering slightly.

"Then start here. This is one way to make reparation. Your father, believing you to be dead, took some reckless decisions. And since he cannot make up for them now, you should take responsibility."

With trembling hands, Anna picked up the papers from the ground and tried to read them. But the words were all blurry and she wondered if she was hallucinating as she read the bold words on the paper.

Carefully, she wiped her tears with the back of her hand and hurriedly stood up, not able to believe what she was reading. She looked up at Rafe and swayed on her feet, "There is a mistake. This... How can this be?"

"What is a mistake, Anna? These are the papers that you need to sign if you want to meet your father and take back your place as his daughter."

"But Rafe... these are... this is a..."

"It is a marriage contract, of course. Between you and me."

Chapter 768: In Shock

Kael stared at Dora in disbelief, his mind reeling. Lately, it felt like shock had become the new normal in his life, especially where Dora was concerned. How had everything spiraled so quickly? Today alone, he had endured enough surprises to last a lifetime. The fact that he could still string together coherent thoughts was a miracle in itself. First, she'd gone behind his back to confront his master—my master, of all people—a move so bold it had nearly knocked him off balance. Though why he was still shocked he had no idea. It wasn't as if she was shy of taking the bull by the horns, but he was still shocked.

Then she'd found out about the old man's illness and even helped him get through it and have a word with Lord Rupert. In all his time in the world, no one had handled Lord Rupert better than her as far as he was concerned. And her composure had remained unshakeable when she'd learnt about Anna being alive...Then she'd handled the father-daughter reunion like a pro that he'd almost been forced wondered why he'd been hesitating coming clean to Master all this while.

And now, the most astonishing moment of the day had arrived: Rafe, who had almost gone inside guns blazing before master's arrival into the room had now waltzed out of the room and casually announced his engagement to Anna, as though he were reporting the weather.

Meanwhile, Kael felt like he was barely holding on. The room seemed to be spinning in the aftermath of all these revelations, and when he looked at Dora, sitting serenely across from him in the room, it made him wonder: How is she not shaken by all of this?

Rafe and Anna. Together. Engaged. And the news of their engagement had already started to spread. Did he enter some parallel universe by any chance. How could this be possible? He'd expected that braving through the rumors about her and Rafe would be difficult. That there would always be comparisons in the media and hints about him possibly stealing his brother's love. And instead, he was now suddenly being praised as helping protect Prince Rafael's love interest and helping in the royal engagement.

Kael swallowed hard, "This... doesn't bother you?" he finally asked, his voice low, trying not to sound as bewildered as he felt.

Dora glanced at him, "Why would it? It makes sense, doesn't it? This was actually the best way to get rid of the rumor. With Rafe's announcement that Anna has returned to take her place as Lord Rupert's heir and as his fiancée then any speculation about Rafe and me would be useless

"Sense?" Kael repeated, incredulous. "Nothing about this makes sense, Dora. Rafe and Anna... they're engaged. While just a few hours ago, you and him... were practically in the middle of a scandal!" He gestured vaguely, as if the very air was thick with the absurdity of the situation. "Did you see the netizens flocking to the various agencies to come out and support your relationship with him. And now, the entire tune has changed."

Dora giggled. "Of course, it has changed. The Prince is getting married and the love story he has spun is really interesting. His PR is saying that he's indeed been in love with Anna and had been waiting for her to return. So, the moment she returned, they are getting married. Everyone is going to eat that story up."

"But that is not the truth of it... Anna.. isn't he forcing her..."

"They are getting into an arrangement for marriage, but you don't need to worry about that. Rafe will handle it."

With a sigh, Anna wound her hand through Kael's and placed her head on his shoulder, "I'm just glad that everything is resolved and we all are finally at peace."

Anna sat by her father's bedside, her body trembling with a cold she knew wasn't just from the room's chill. She stared at the frail figure of her father, asleep and unaware of the storm that had turned her life upside down. Engaged. She was engaged. The one fate she had fought so hard to escape, the one she had sworn would never be her reality—a marriage born out of duty, out of manipulation—had finally ensnared her. A bitter laugh escaped her lips, though there was no humor in it. How had it come to this? She had run so far, tried so hard to carve out a life on her own terms, only to be dragged right back into the same nightmare. And Rafe... Rafe. The man who had driven her to flee in the first place. The man

she loved and hated with equal intensity, each emotion feeding the other until she could barely tell where one ended and the other began. She knew why of course. She'd been so shocked by Rafe's rumors with Princess Dora that she'd lost all her sense. She clenched her hands in her lap, the fabric of her skirt bunched between her fingers as her mind raced. Rafe had been playing her from the very start. She had been such a fool to believe him, to let him into her heart. How many times had he toyed with her feelings? Pretended to care? He had masqueraded as Kael for months—months—deceiving her into thinking she had finally found someone she could trust, someone she could love. And all the while, he had likely been laughing at her behind her back, enjoying the spectacle of her misplaced affection. She had confessed her deepest feelings to him, bared her soul, believing she was speaking to Kael, only to find out that it had been Rafe standing in his place. Her hands shook as the memories resurfaced and she looked away. Why. Why did he come to her again? Why was he doing this? Did he want her to be foolish again? Why was her fate so cruel to her? The moment she returned to the country, he had found her, trapping her in a contract she couldn't refuse. The terms were simple: marry him, or spend the rest of her life in prison. The choice wasn't really a choice at all. Rafe had seen to that. And yet, she did not know whom to ask the reason for it.

Chapter 769: A Test

"We're having a girls-only trip to Petrovia. We'll see you tomorrow."

Dora's heart sank as the message flashed across her screen. The one thing she'd been dreading had finally happened: the Frostie women were on their way to Petrovia. She glanced over at Kael, who was blissfully unaware, sound asleep. Of course, he was sleeping peacefully. He had no idea of the storm that was about to hit. And he was going to be the centre of it.

On one hand, she wanted them all to meet and approve of him but on the other, she was scared. Because her and Kael's relationship was not perfect... They had a few flaws here and there unlike the relationship between the others... But to her, even this little imperfection was perfect. She just hoped that they would see it this way too.

Her eyes flicked back to the message. At least Bella had given her a day's notice. She shuddered, remembering the last unannounced "surprise visit by Nora and Demon" that had thrown everything into chaos. This time, she had time to be prepared. More importantly, she could put Kael on alert.

Hurriedly, she jabbed his arm. "Kael. Wake up."

Kael stirred but didn't respond, instead he caught her wrist and pulled her close so that she landed backwards, straight into his arms as he threw an arm around her to anchor her to him with a sleepy grunt. He buried his face into her neck, his arm and leg draping around her waist, tugging her into the warmth of his chest.

"Kael," she protested weakly, her voice muffled against his skin. "I'm serious. You don't understand—they're coming. We need to—"

But her words trailed off as he shifted and his hand splayed across her back, holding her tighter. She was practically glued to him now, her face squished against his bare chest.

She tried to wriggle free, half-heartedly mumbling another protest, but the warmth and the comforting scent of him made her pause. Inhaling deeply, she gave in, her body relaxing as she melted into him. Maybe, just for a minute, she could forget about the impending chaos. She nestled closer, snuggling closer to him, squished cheeks and all. She threw her arm around him and sighed deeply. She was truly in love with this man...

Smiling, she kissed his chest, since it was available to her and then nipped there lightly, playfully.

Kael stirred again, the light nip at his chest pulling him from the edges of sleep. He grumbled something unintelligible, his fingers lazily tracing circles along her back. "What was that for?" he muttered, his voice thick with sleep, but a playful edge creeping in.

Dora chuckled softly, her lips brushing against his skin again. "Just making sure you're alive. You were awfully still for someone about to be thrown to the wolves."

"Mmm... wolves? There are no wolves in Petrovia." Kael mumbled.

"They are going to be in Petrovia tomorrow.... She wolves."

"Sounds like a problem for tomorrow." Kael sighed as he snuggled closer still, his body now awake even if his mind was not.

"Tomorrow is coming fast, Kael. Bella, Nora, and—" She hesitated, her nerves bubbling up again, but she swallowed them down. "—the others are on their way. Petrovia-bound."

Kael groaned, his face still half-buried in her neck. "The Frostie brigade? You weren't kidding..."

Before she could say more, he'd rolled over so that she was now lying on the pillow and smiled down at her, "Are you worried that they won't like me?"

Dora shook her head, "You're likeable enough. That is not the problem...But.."

Before she could continue, Kael leaned in, kissing her lips, stealing the words from her mouth. "MMMM."

Slowly, he broke the kiss and she frowned, "Hey! How could you do this! You are not being serious...they are going to be..."

Her words were stolen once again as he kissed her until she had no coherent thoughts left and could only respond to his kisses with moans of her own.

Finally, he broke the kiss but before she could fall down the worry-lane again, he quickly picked her up, carrying her to the bathroom so that they could clean up together... As he placed her on the counter top, he held her face in his hands, vowing, "Stop thinking, okay? Everything will be fine...Now... kiss me before we get into the shower."

Meanwhile, the 'she-wolves' in question had already gathered at the airport ready to fly on the small plane. As always, where there were Frosts, there was chaos and even now, the women were already dissecting the relationship with eagle eyes.

"We really need to help balance out this relationship at the soonest." Nora muttered while she pointed to each of them! This is all your fault, you know! If all of you had not been so lovey dovey with your husbands when she was of an impressionable age, all this would not have happened!"

Bella snorted, "Talk about being lovey dovey! Hey! All that is on you! Even now! Look look... Which of us is pregnant after a decade of marriage? Only you. And who told you to get those stupid tattoos with each other.. You and Demon are the ones behind Dora's obsession of having a perfect relationship!"

"Ha! You're just jealous that I'm going to have little cute ones to hold in my arms while yours are already outgrowing yours!"

Olivia rolled her eyes, "We'll see who is jealous when we can gather the next time all fresh as daisies while you will be running without the essential sleep fuel!"

"Oh please! As if Demon will ever let me suffer! He's going to start training the kid..." Nora trailed off as five pairs of smug eyes turned to look at her. Okay okay! Maybe they kind of had been a bad example for Dora, letting her think that a relationship had to be perfect... But then again, the Frosts were all perfect in their own way so it wasn't entirely their fault.

"Alright alright! I get what you mean! Then, we promise to make sure to find the imperfections in the relationship and in the man to make sure they are perfect for each other. okay?"

Chapter 770: Nerves

Kael was nervous, but not for the reasons one might have believed. Unlike the last time he had been in a similar situation, he had made a concerted effort to be better prepared to meet the Frosts. Or at least, that's what he had thought. Now, as he sat here, surrounded by seven ladies, with only Cai present to provide the necessary testosterone levels to balance the female energy, he found himself at a complete loss.

This was not at all what he had expected. All day yesterday and this morning, Dora had been buzzing around, a mix of happiness and nerves as she prepared for the ladies' arrival. Kael had braced himself for what he was sure would be an intense grilling. He had even gone so far as to look up the kinds of questions they might ask him, carefully preparing his answers. Dora's nervous energy had rubbed off on him.

But instead of being grilled, he found himself being—'doted on' should be the word. The entire scenario was the opposite of what he had anticipated, leaving him feeling slightly disoriented and unsure of how to respond to the unexpected wave of attention.

They complimented his looks with an almost clinical objectivity, nodded approvingly at his sense of style, and then praised him for taking on the 'challenge' that was Dora. It was at this point that he had actually expected the grilling to begin, but instead of questioning him, they started questioning Dora.

Shouldn't they be cautioning her against me? Warning me not to hurt her? What was this turnabout for? He was at a total loss. They questioned him about the food and asked if he had made it. When he admitted that he hadn't, they simply praised him for being able to order takeout so well. He felt like a little kid at that moment! For heaven's sake, even a seven-year-old could order takeout. Finally, Cai gestured for him to head to the kitchen, and Kael didn't need to be told twice. He hurriedly escaped from the room, almost tripping over himself in his haste.

Once in the relative safety of the kitchen, Kael turned to Cai and questioned him hurriedly. "What the hell was that all about? I was ready for an interrogation, and instead, they're acting like I've just won a prize for ordering dinner. Is this some kind of trick?"

Cai shook his head with a knowing smile. "You might be right about it being a trick, but not in the way you think. This is probably their way of throwing you off balance, giving you a false sense of security. Meanwhile, they're letting Dora calm down, relax a bit, lower her guard. Once she's not so tense, that's when they'll bring out the real weapons. Trust me, they're not done with you yet."

Kael blinked, the realization sinking in. "So, this is just the warm-up?"

"Exactly," Cai replied, leaning against the counter. "They're lulling you into a false sense of comfort. Once you think you've got it easy, that's when they'll strike. Be ready, Kael. The real grilling is yet to come. And don't let down your guard. Of course, if you're too scared the back door is open and you can always escape... Like I am going to, of course. Bye! Have fun"

But as soon as he re-entered the room, all eyes turned to him, and he could feel the shift in the atmosphere. The warmth and light-heartedness from earlier had cooled, replaced with a more focused, almost predatory gaze from the ladies and Dora was noticeably absent... So Cai had disappeared and Dora had disappeared... and he... had been ambushed.

"Don't worry, Kael. Just have a seat here. We don't really bite." Evana Sterling muttered as she invited him to sit... in the hot seat. Somehow, in the few minutes he had disappeared, a stool had been placed in the centre of the room, facing the couch set...

"Actually we do bite but only our husbands," Bella muttered while he stood there. The others all groaned at her words before Ava spoke up, "Just sit here before you have to listen to TMI from Bella. She can be like that. Anyway, Dora is going to return soon, so you better take a seat fast."

Kael took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves as he lowered himself onto the stool. So this was probably what an interrogation felt like. Looking at the gazes of the ladies, he was almost sure that if he let loose even one of them in Petrovia's prisons, the prisoners would all confess to their sins without being prompted.

He looked at each of them in turn, noting the curious expressions on their faces, but no one spoke. The silence stretched on, thick and uncomfortable, and Kael could feel his heart beating faster with each passing second. Why exactly was he getting nervous? He had no idea. He'd handled all sorts of negotiations and what not, and here he was... scared of a few ladies.

Finally, Olivia Frost, sitting near the corner, let out a sigh and shook her head in exasperation. "Can you say something?" she asked, her tone almost pleading.

Kael blinked, caught off guard. "Uh, I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to say," he admitted honestly, glancing around at the others. "I mean, you can ask anything you want to know. I'm prepared for all sorts of questions..."

Olivia leaned back and rolled her eyes, "Do we look like Quiz masters to you? Why would we ask questions. We are actually waiting for you to tell us..."

"What should I tell you?" Kael asked in confusion. He had no idea where to start. Should he make promises like... he didn't even know but even the thought of that sounded all cheesy.

Olivia leaned back, a small smile playing on her lips. "Maybe you could start by telling us how you plan to take care of Dora or something like that."

Kael hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Honestly, I could say a lot of things, but would you really believe me? I think it's better to show how much she means to me through my actions. Words are just... words. And let's face it, anyone can say the right things."

The room fell silent again, but this time, it was a different kind of silence.

"You do have a point. Gabe was like that...His actions kind of screamed louder than any words." Autumn pointed out.

"Yeah. You are right about that! Alright, then Kael, you've known Dora for a while, come on, there must be somethings that might rub you the wrong way, irritate you or something?"