

Benefits 891

Chapter 891: Upset

"Gabe." Arabelle opened the door and immediately felt a wave of disappointment wash over her. She could have kicked herself for it. What had she been expecting? That Rafe would come to see if she was okay? That he would show up? To help her, console her perhaps? The thought was laughable now. Why would he come to her when he was so clearly ashamed of her? Ha! She almost snorted at her own foolishness.

Arabelle. If I weren't genuinely worried about you, I'd probably feel a little insulted by how disappointed you are to see me standing here instead of someone else."

It was a statement that Gabe would make. To tease her and get a smile out of her. But suddenly she felt overwhelmed.

Suddenly, everything she had been holding back—every secret and lie, threatened to spill over. She'd hidden so much from him. Too much. How was he not angry? How could he stand here, looking at her with that kind of patience and concern, when she had lied to him and hidden things for so long? Hadn't she opened him up to ridicule too?

How could she have been so foolish to think Rafe would ever be someone like that? Someone like Gabe? Her sister had lucked out like she deserved to. Didn't mean that Arabelle was lucky too.

The tears came before she could stop them, her chest tightening as all the emotions she had bottled up over the years spilled out. Arabelle let out a choked sob and stepped forward, throwing her arms around Gabe who immediately hugged her back and patted her head.

"It's okay," he murmured softly, "Everything's going to be okay, Arabelle."

She clung to him, her tears soaking into his shirt as she tried to find the words through the sobs. "I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely. "I'm so sorry, Gabe. I shouldn't have hidden those things. I shouldn't have lied."

He pulled back just enough to look at her, his hands resting on her shoulders. "Then why did you hide them? Did you really feel that we would not understand? Or that we would be disappointed in you?"

Because if you felt that, then I think me and Autumn should be the ones apologizing for not making you feel safe."

Arabelle shook her head and pushed away from him, "Don't say that. You guys were the best parents a girl could have asked for. I hid those things because... I was a foolish teenager."

Gabe said nothing. Letting her take her time to sort her thoughts as she continued, "I... I thought that Spencer loved me and I loved him. The kind of love you and Autumn had. So, when he said all those things and then went to humiliate me in front of his friends, I was shattered. I know you and Autumn always told me not to let the past control me. You never hid anything so that I would not be vulnerable to anyone. But hearing Spence reject me back then... it shook me. I wasn't prepared for how much it would hurt, and it made me feel like maybe I wasn't... good enough."

Gabe tried to interrupt, "Arabelle..." he started, but she cut him off with a shake of her head.

"Let me finish. After that heartbreak, Cai and Dora convinced me to go on a vacation. They wanted me to get away, to take my mind off things, and I agreed. But that's when I found out I was pregnant. Dora had just returned to Estonia at the time so there was just Cai and me."

"I was so scared. I didn't want a child, especially with someone who had no scruples about humiliating me. I couldn't even face myself, let alone the idea of being a mother. Cai tried to talk me out of it, told me to think it over and not hurry things up, but I was adamant. So he helped me—he took me to a clinic, and I... I took the pill. I begged him to keep things from you all. I didn't know why that was important to me."

"There are moments when I regret it. When I think maybe I made the wrong choice, that I was too hasty. But I've carried that guilt for so long. And I hid it from everyone because... I didn't want to face their judgment. Or my own. Which is foolish, I know now. But what happened tonight... it brought everything rushing back."

Gabe smiled then, "So, I don't have to lecture you about your foolishness? That is a relief."

She gave a small smile then and nodded, "No. You don't have to lecture me. I made the choices I had to, and I believe they were for the best at the time. And if anyone dares to judge me or tries to make me feel small for it... They'll regret it. I won't let anyone make me feel less."

Gabe smiled then, "That's the Arabelle I know. But... if you are prepared to fight for it, why are you running away?"

Arabelle looked down then at the carry all bag in her hand. She felt a shiver run through her as Rafe's words came rushing back. She was not yet prepared for this.

"I need time, Gabe. I know I should've told Rafe, but right now... I just can't face him. Not yet. I need to think things through before I decide what to do, how to go forward."

Gabe stiffened then and looked at her, "Arabelle, Rafe is over there fighting for you. And you want to run away? Seriously? I didn't take you for someone like that. We didn't raise you as someone like that."

"Raise me as someone like that? He announced that he is ashamed of me. Is that him fighting for me?" Arabelle asked angrily.

Gabe narrowed his eyes. "Did you not listen to what Rafe said in front of the press. I thought you were there. He is not ashamed of you."

Chapter 892: Impossible

"Your Highness, do you truly expect us to accept someone like her as our queen? This is preposterous!" The minister's voice thundered through the chamber, his hand striking the mahogany table with such force that the sound echoed. His face was flushed with anger, as he continued, "We will not stand for this disgrace. Mark my words, we are all withdrawing our consent for this union. By the end of today, the marriage license will be null and void!"

As his voice trailed off, a second minister rose from his seat, his expression a mix of contempt and feigned incredulity. He moved deliberately to the projector at the front of the room, switching it on to display a string of damning media reports. "Your Highness, you expect us to overlook her past? Fine. We are modern thinkers, after all," he began, his tone laced with sarcasm as he gestured at the headlines flashing across the screen. "Perhaps we could turn a blind eye to her past indiscretions. Perhaps we could even accept her position, given that she is carrying the future heir of Petrovia.

"But this?" His voice sharpened as he jabbed a finger at a particular headline, his contempt palpable. "This is another matter entirely. Her father—that man—was involved in the most abhorrent, inhuman deeds imaginable. You ask us to ignore this and allow such a stain to seep into the royal bloodline?

Impossible. This is not a matter of personal prejudice but of duty to the crown and the people. If the public were to learn of her lineage, the trust they place in us as guardians of this throne would crumble to dust. The monarchy's integrity would be irreparably tarnished."

The chamber buzzed with murmurs of agreement and discontent, the weight of the accusations rippling through the room. The ministers who had remained neutral until now shifted uncomfortably, glancing at one another as the truth sank in.

Victor sat back, his lips curling into a faint, knowing smile. The performance was flawless. He could see it clearly—the anger and doubt spreading among those who had once supported Rafe or chosen to remain impartial. The neutral ones would be the key now; they would now bear the burden of answering for this scandal, should they choose to remain silent. And if they chose to support Rafael... then he would have no problem exposing their scandals.

Before he could gloat, however, the doors to the chamber opened and in walked the woman in discussion herself- Arabelle Frost. Victor raised an eyebrow. Well, this woman had the audacity to still walk in here despite the furore that had been created because of her?

Victor shrugged to himself as he watched Rafael's face light up. The fool. He was in love with the girl and would choose to fight for her. Well, it was good news for him.

Rafael stiffened as he watched Arabelle walk in with her head held high. Quickly he stood up and walked to her, cupping her face as he looked at her with concern. "Are you okay?"

She nodded and held his hand over her face. There was something different about her, something that he could not pin point. But before he could ask her about it, "How touching it is to witness the two of you so... affectionate, Your Highness," Victor mocked, his tone dripping with venom. "Unfortunately, Miss Frost is not permitted here. I suggest you ask her to leave before we are forced to summon security to escort her out."

The venom in Victor's words struck like a slap, and Rafael's body tensed as his hands curled into fists. He had been waiting for a moment like this, a chance to strike back, to bring Victor down. But before he could act on his growing anger, his intentions were interrupted by Arabelle's calm voice.

"Mr. Ignis," she began in a cool tone as she looked down at Victor, "You, of all people, should be well aware that I do, in fact, have every right to be here." She took a step closer to Victor, her gaze almost threatening. "After all, I am His Highness' wife. And that means I have the right to be present in this chamber as the future queen consort of Petrovia. Or perhaps you're suggesting that you've forgotten about our marriage, Mr. Ignis?"

Arabelle's words were almost sarcastic, and her declaration sent a ripple through the room. Even the ministers, who had been so eager to decry her presence, seemed to falter for a moment, their attention now riveted on her.

"Are you truly trying to claim that you are already married to His Highness?" Victor asked incredulously. He turned slowly to Rafael, his gaze sharp as a blade. "Is what she's saying actually true? This is... quite the revelation."

"I find myself wondering why, of all things, you've been in such a hurry to wed, Rafael," Victor continued in a tone dripping with suspicion. "You took the marriage license long ago, and yet, despite the established tradition, you failed to officially introduce Miss Frost to the council as would be customary—something that has always been done in the past. That alone raises questions."

"And now, suddenly, you claim that you're already married? I must admit, I'm left wondering if there's a more calculated reason behind all this." Victor's eyes narrowed, his gaze piercing. "Could it be that you've known of Miss Arabelle's past all along? That you knew the full extent of it and chose to hide this information from the council and from the people? If that's the case, then I must say, it raises serious doubts about your judgment."

Victor took a step forward, his words now deliberately slow, meant to sink into the room like poison. "A man so blinded by love that he would conceal such vital truths... that, my dear Prince, is not a man fit to rule."

"It seems we need to change the agenda of tonight's meeting. We need to change it from opposing having Miss Arabelle as our future queen to asking Prince Rafael to step down as our ruler."

Chapter 893: Treason

"It seems we need to change the agenda of tonight's meeting. We need to change it from opposing having Miss Arabelle as our future queen to asking Prince Rafael to step down as our ruler."

Victor's words struck the room like a bolt of lightning. Rafael's body stiffened as his mind raced. The other ministers, too, were caught off guard, exchanging surprised glances and murmurs.

Things had changed, yes, but to most of them, this wasn't a concern that required urgent action. The issue of Arabelle Frost's unfortunate lineage was still worrisome, yes. While it raised questions, it wasn't enough to immediately end her chances. After all, she might carry stained blood but she also carried the Frost name. And no one in their right mind would give that up.

Instead of creating a furor, it was better to present information to the public in a positive manner. That way, they would wait to see how the people reacted. Honestly though, they had noticed the sheer support both the prince's had received from the people.

Victor Ignis, however, had never enjoyed the kind of popular support necessary to be a peaceful ruler. His bid for the throne might have been calculated, but without the trust of the people, his rule could never be as secure as Prince Rafael's.

Suddenly, while everyone sat still in shocked silence, Rafe grinned, "Victor, in your greed for the throne, you have forgotten one of the most important things. What did you say we are here for? Ahh, the matter about Arabelle Frost. Now Arabelle Frost-Ignis."

Victor's expression shifted slightly, but his composure remained unruffled as he frowned at Rafael. "What are you suggesting, Your Highness?"

Rafael walked forward, his eyes never leaving Victor as he continued conversationally, "Before we move forward with any decisions, we first need to find out who leaked the news. We need to investigate, then punish them severely.

Victor scoffed then. "So now you want to punish someone for exposing the truth?. Do you see that my dear councillors? Is that really the kind of rule you intend to establish, your Highness?"

"It is not about the kind of rule but upholding the law. If this news was spread when Arabelle and I were not married, this could have been overlooked. But this time it's about protecting the crown. According to the old laws, if any news could cause harm to the crown prince or his consort, care must be taken to ensure it is not leaked. If someone deliberately exposes such information, they are guilty of treason."

Victor's expression faltered, and he stiffened as the full weight of Rafael's words sank in. His eyes narrowed, and for a moment, he seemed to consider his next move carefully while Rafe continued, "If I don't punish treason, what kind of rule would I establish?"

Finally, he seemed to have thought of something and Victor defended, "You would punish someone for exposing the truth, Prince Rafael? For speaking what should have been known? What kind of ruler would you be, ruling with such iron-handed measures? That kind of rule is not a peaceful monarchy but dictatorship."

Rafael's smile still remained unconcerned. "A ruler who understands the value of loyalty, Victor. A ruler who knows the price of protecting the crown is not a dictator. If the truth is meant to be revealed, it should be done in a way that does not harm the kingdom. That is why we have laws. We do not simply expose the weaknesses of our rulers or consorts to the public for the sake of gossip or ambition. Which is what was done here."

Victor stilled, his breath catching in his throat. This was shaky ground. He could feel the weight of the moment pressing down on him, knowing that any misstep could tip the scales in Rafael's favor. He had to tread carefully now. Already, he could sense the shift in the room, the way the ministers were leaning ever so slightly in Rafael's direction. They were still blinded by the prince's charm, caught up in his words, his presence. How typical, Victor thought bitterly. They can't see beyond their loyalty to this man.

He forced his voice to remain steady and began, "Fine then. If you want to punish the person who exposed the truth, we can set up an investigation committee to search for this individual. But what about the public opinion, Prince Rafael? What will the people think of this? Will they understand that instead of addressing their concerns and asking for their forgiveness for keeping such crucial truths hidden, you're more focused on punishing the messenger? What message does that send?"

Rafael grinned, "People are not fools, Victor. Everyone understands the current political climate and the need for stability. They would be fools to doubt me or Arabelle based on these frivolous considerations when everyone knows Arabelle for her work in serving those in need. Both our actions have spoken louder than any words."

Victor clenched his teeth. Dam* it! He had never imagined that Rafael would turn the tables so skillfully, making the person who leaked the news the villain in the eyes of the people. He had expected a back-and-forth, a debate, maybe even a challenge to the legitimacy of Arabelle's position until she was forced to give up which would mean that Rafael would then be forced to give up the throne..

But instead, Rafael had framed the entire situation as a matter of protecting the stability of the throne and punishing those who would threaten it, which meant that if proven that he was the one behind the leak, he would be punished for treason.

Victor clenched his teeth, barely able to suppress his growing frustration. Dammit! He needed to do damage control now. First thing would be to make sure that he was not linked to this leak in any way. He cast a look at the three ministers with whom he had shared the information and his frustration multiplied. Those idiots were already breaking into a cold sweat out of fear. They could rat him out any minute.

Chapter 894: Are you Okay?

The return from the council meeting was quiet. Rafe didn't say a word to Arabelle, and she kept her eyes on the scenery outside, unsure of what to say. Her thoughts felt heavy, and she didn't know how to start a conversation.

She had misunderstood him earlier about how he'd said he was ashamed of her, and now that she realized it, she felt awful. She cast a glance at his reflection and sighed.

On top of that, she was grateful to him for standing by her side. He'd defended her in front of everyone and he'd defended her in front of the council of ministers. In fact, he'd even found a way to punish them, even though they'd only spoken the truth.

But guilt weighed her down. She felt bad for doubting him and now, due to all his support, even worse for hiding things from him. And then to add to her guilt, a part of her couldn't help but wonder if he had stood by her only to protect his own reputation.

How could she doubt him when he had defended her so strongly? He hadn't hesitated to support her, even when it might have been easier not to. Every word he had spoken, every action he had taken, had been for her. Yet here she was, letting doubts creep in. It felt safer to stay quiet than risk saying something wrong.

When they arrived at the mansion where she had stayed with Rafe the night before, her feelings became more tangled. Last night had been their wedding night and yet, they had slept separately, though he'd warned her that he would not be sleeping separately from her, since they were married. But what about now? She had no idea.

She wondered if she should confess her feeling to him. About how she had fallen for him. But what if he disregarded them or saw them as a ploy?

She paused at the door, gripping her shawl tightly as they stepped inside, her feet rooted to the spot. She felt completely at a loss, unsure of what to do or say. Damn it! She'd never thought she could be so much of a coward when it came to expressing her feelings. The realization flustered her, but the words still refused to form.

While she stood there dithering, tangled up in her doubts, Rafe moved with purpose, showing none of her hesitation. Without a word, he turned back, grabbed her wrist, and tugged her along with him. He led her straight into his study and before she could ask him what he planned, he turned and shut the door. The moment the door shut behind them, he didn't wait or ask for permission. Instead, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her like the world was ending.

Her eyes widened in shock as his lips claimed hers, stealing her breath and scattering her thoughts. Her first instinct was to freeze, but it lasted only a heartbeat. Her hands moved of their own accord, sliding up over his shoulders and clasping behind his neck, drawing him closer. It felt as though her entire body woke up under his touch, every sense ignited and alive. The doubts and guilt that had weighed her down melted away as she kissed him back with equal fervor.

When he finally broke the kiss, her lips tingled, and she found herself yearning for more. But instead of pulling away from her, he surprised her by wrapping her in a warm, protective hug as he asked her, "Are you okay?"

She would have answered but her face was pressed against his chest and all she could do was inhale his scent as he continued, "When I turned my head and saw you standing there all pale, my world almost stopped. I wanted to jump off that podium and kill those reporters for talking nonsense. Gosh! I was so worried."

Arabelle blinked. So he had not been angry at her but at the reporters? "You've been through so much, Arabelle. I am sorry that I pushed you into this marriage and you had to re-live all those things because of some people's insensitivity."

She tried to move her head but since he was holding her so tightly, she had to poke his side so that he would let her go. He loosened his hold, surprised at that and looked down at her. She smiled up at him then.

"Rafe. Thank you for everything."

Rafael frowned, "What do you mean?"

Arabelle's smile widened. That confused expression of his was an answer to all her doubts. Rafael Ignis had defended her simply for herself. Not because he needed to protect his rule or his throne. "I mean, thank you for your concern, Rafe. For caring for me so unconditionally, even when I've given you every reason to walk away. You defended me, supported me... stood by me. I didn't even know I needed that and you've already provided everything."

"You don't need to thank me," he said quietly as he leaned in close to her and slowly kissed her.

"Arabelle, when I asked you to marry me, I told you that I did not care about your past. And I meant every word. I... I fell in love with you at first sight. Your kindness, bravery, everything it enraptured me too much. So, whatever I did, it was out of selfishness for the woman I loved. You don't have to thank me for it."

She chuckled then, "You, Rafael Ignis are too direct. No games. No ploys to make me fall for you. Hmm? You simply push me into a corner, marry me, protect me and then declare your love for me, asking for nothing in return."

Rafe scowled, "It is love not a trade agreement. Why would I want something in return."

Arabelle leaned up on her tiptoes then, "Well, too bad then, you need to still accept something even though this is not an agreement, because I love you too."

Chapter 895: Missing Us?

"She's going to be the death of me," Demetri sighed, his gaze fixed on his Nora, who stood across the room, the center of attention among a group of men. Her laughter rang out like music, effortlessly drawing him and the others in. It was the others he had a problem with.

Erasmi leaned back in his chair, a knowing smirk playing on his lips as he observed his twin. "I've been hearing you say that for more than a decade now," he quipped, swirling his drink lazily. "And yet, here you are—still alive, still kicking, and still finding something to grumble about."

"Yes, well," Demetri muttered, rubbing the back of his neck as his eyes stayed glued to the scene. "My heart's been taking hits, one after another, every time I see those vultures circling her. Just because she's beautiful doesn't mean they have to flock to her like moths to a flame. Can't they see the wedding ring? It's right there on her hand, for God's sake!"

"Of course they can see it," Erasmi drawled, his grin widening with mischief. "But that doesn't stop them, does it? They're just trying their luck. You know, in case the younger, hotter wife is tired of her older husband and ready for an upgrade."

Demetri shot him a sharp look. "You think this is funny?"

"A little," Erasmi admitted with a chuckle, taking a leisurely sip of his drink. "Let's be honest, Demetri. You're jealous. And it's painfully obvious. Face it, old man—your eyes are starting to go, you need glasses to read anything smaller than a billboard, and meanwhile, your wife is over there glowing like she just stepped out of a magazine. Every guy in his prime is bound to take notice. And you hate it."

"Of course I'm jealous, genius!" Demetri snapped, throwing his hands up in exasperation as he shot a glance at Erasmi, "Look at them—hovering around her like she's the last drink at a desert oasis. They're not even subtle about it! And you think I like standing here watching it all unfold?"

Erasmi raised an eyebrow, his smirk deepening. "Oh, I think you more than like it."

Demetri gawked at him, momentarily stunned. "Are you serious? My eyesight might be going, but it's your brain that's deteriorating even faster. Would you be so calm if men were flocking around Ava like that?"

Erasmi put down his glass and gave him a pointed look. "Oh, hell no. I'd be pissed. Absolutely furious. I'd probably end up punching at least one of those idiots just to make a point. But here's the thing—there's a couple of key differences between you and me."

"Enlighten me," Demetri grumbled, folding his arms.

"First of all," Erasmi began, ticking off on his fingers, "your wife is way younger than you. That alone puts you in a completely different league. Second, and most importantly, you're a smug little bastard."

Demetri narrowed his eyes. "How am I the bad guy here?"

Erasmi laughed. "You love it. Don't even try to deny it. Every time one of those guys gets that crushed look on his face when Nora brushes them off and runs straight to you—like you're her sun, her moon, and all the stars in between—you eat it up. Admit it, it feels good, doesn't it? Deep down, you're proud as hell. She still knows how to turn heads, and despite all the attention, she chooses you every single time."

"Yeah, well," he murmured his voice softening as he watched Nora come towards him then and sighed, "one of these days, my heart might not be able to take it. And then what?"

"I doubt that day will ever come," Erasmi mocked Demetri before continuing, "You're going to be a lovesick fool till the day you die."

With that said, Erasmi raised his cheek expectantly as Nora strolled over, bending down to press a quick peck in greeting there before moving past him.

Without hesitation, she settled herself directly onto Demetri's lap, her arms looping casually around his neck as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Erasmi raised an eyebrow, shooting his twin a pointed look that practically screamed, Case in point.

Nora, however, remained blissfully oblivious to their silent exchange as a mischievous grin spread across her face as she looked between the two brothers. "What are you guys talking about?" she asked.

Erasmi chuckled, "Oh, we were just discussing how your husband is going blind."

"Really?" she said, drawing out the word as she turned her attention to Demetri, who groaned softly, already bracing himself for whatever was coming. "I think it's a good thing," she continued.

Demetri and Erasmi both stared at her, their expressions a perfect mix of confusion and suspicion. "A good thing?" Demetri and Erasmi echoed.

Nora winked at them, leaning in conspiratorially as if she were about to share some great secret. "Well, think about it," she began, her voice dripping with faux logic. "If he goes blind, then he won't see all those guys chasing after me anymore. And if he doesn't see them, his heart won't get weak from jealousy. That means he'll live longer."

There was a beat of silence as the words hung in the air, and then Erasmi burst into laughter, his shoulders shaking as he leaned back and clutched his stomach.

Nora grinned at his reaction before smacking a kiss on Demetri's lips and pushing his cheeks together to make him smile.

While the three of them laughed, Seb came to join them and plopped himself down on the chair with a thump. "I am tired of men chasing my girl."

Erasmi, Demetri and Nora both turned to Seb in surprise. Seb never had a problem about that because Olivia tended to scare men away with her success.

"Olivia has any new suitors challenging your position?" Erasmi asked with interest while Seb scoffed, "Olivia is too powerful for those wusses. It is my Innocensa they are chasing. My little girl! I think I am going to put her in a tower and surround it with Mines!"

Chapter 896: For The First Time

The first time Grant saw her, his heart stuttered, skipped a beat, and then almost stopped entirely. She was breathtaking, far more beautiful than he had ever imagined from the photos he had seen. Her build was delicate, almost ethereal, but her face radiating and laughing.

Grant's throat went dry. He clenched his drink a little too tightly, forcing himself to take a sip if only to keep from gawking like some love-struck fool. But even the cold burn of the liquid wasn't enough to dull his reaction to her.

Innocensa Frost descended the grand staircase with her twin brother by her side, their matching golden hair catching the chandelier's glow like halos. Her smile was warm, serene even, but it carried a subtle distance that made her seem untouchable. She wore diamonds—perfect, glittering fragments of light—and a gown that seemed poured onto her frame, the kind of designer creation that looked both effortless and priceless. There were other women in the room wearing similar finery, but none of them even held a candle to her.

Grant's gaze lingered on her unwilling to let go of the sight of her, even as his brain rebelled against the idea. She was the perfect princess, untouchable in every sense of the word. She carried an air of elegance so unyielding that it made the idea of even approaching her seem absurd. This wasn't a woman you could casually charm or impress; she was the kind you admired from a distance, knowing she was far beyond your reach.

He exhaled, pulling himself out of the daze that had overtaken him.

He exhaled slowly, dragging his gaze back to the amber liquid in his glass. What the hell are you doing? he chided himself. Why was he even thinking about her, let alone entertaining impossible notions? This wasn't just any woman—this was Innocensa Frost. The boss's daughter. The flawlessly unattainable.

Grant tightened his jaw, forcing himself back to reality. He had a mission here, a purpose that had nothing to do with her. Standing there, staring like an idiot, was not part of the plan. Still, his thoughts remained in disarray, and just as he tried to center himself, something else caught his attention...

Grant clenched his jaw, forcing his gaze back to his drink. He had a mission to complete here, and ogling Innocensa Frost was certainly not part of it. Just then, the older couple started to walk down the stairs and Grant's eyebrows rose in surprise. Sebastian and Olivia Frost. Their good looks and all were not what surprised him though. It was the fact that the couple was holding hands. Not just looping through the arm pretentious style, but really holding hands like new lovers.

Before he could think about how his thoughts were going haywire tonight, Sebastian Frost seemed to have spotted him. With his patent smile, the man gestured to him to come closer. He shrugged. He didn't mind following instructions as long as it got him to where he needed to be.

Sebastian Frost's smile widened as Grant approached and the older man threw an arm around him like they were long friends. "Grant," Sebastian said warmly, "It's good to see you. Let me introduce you to my family."

"Olivia, this is Grant Davis the latest visionary to earn our trust—and our investment for his solar powered AI storage facilities. So, if in the coming years, I cannot afford to put food on our table, you know you have to look for him for losing our money."

Olivia chuckled while Grant almost coughed. He would have to take several births to make the Frosts lose that much money that they would not be able to put food on the table.

Olivia smiled at him and extended her hand, "Welcome, Grant. It's rare for someone so young to make such an impression on him. Congratulations on your success."

"Thank you, Mrs. Frost," Grant replied with a polite nod. "It's an honor to be here, and I'm grateful for the opportunity."

Sebastian clapped him on the shoulder. "Oh you won't be so happy in some time. Now, let me introduce you to my children." He turned slightly and gestured to the younger version of himself. "This is Vincenzo, our eldest," Sebastian said. "He's been learning to handle the family's international interests and completing his studies in Harvard."

"Nice to meet you," Vincenzo said, extending a hand before he leaned in conspirationally, "So you're the guy with the startup everyone's buzzing about. What's the secret to getting Dad to open the vault?"

Grant chuckled lightly, shaking his hand. "Hard work, a solid pitch, and maybe a little luck."

Seb shook his head, "No luck involved, kiddo. I assure you, whatever I invest in you, I will earn ten fold of that from you. Now, there's one more introduction I need to make."

Grant's stomach tightened slightly, already anticipating who the next person would be.

"Innocensa," the girl who had been talking in a soft tone to another woman turned her head at her father's call and smiled at Seb, who continued, "Grant, this is my daughter, Innocensa. She's going to be the one to ensure that your vision doesn't just succeed but thrives. She'll be overseeing the integration of your work with the Frost portfolio."

Grant felt his stomach drop like a stone. It was one thing to be overwhelmed by her beauty, the kind that seemed almost otherworldly, but now Sebastian Frost was dropping this bombshell on him? That he would have to work with her? How on earth was he supposed to manage that? He could barely keep his head on straight just looking at her.

As she extended her hand, her fingers cool and delicate against his palm, Grant struggled to focus and wondered if he'd somehow ended up burning some of his brain cells before coming here. What else would explain the foolish urge in his mind to pull the girl closer, without any care that her father was standing right next to him.

Chapter 897: Babysitter

"Wow. You just returned from the hottest party in town, and you're seething? What happened? I was sure you would hook up with someone tonight. Didn't find anyone to your liking?"

Grant shot a sharp, withering glare at his friend, silencing any further questions before striding purposefully toward his desk. He yanked open the drawer and retrieved the contract he had recently signed with Frost Industries. His jaw clenched as his eyes skimmed over the finely printed text for what felt like the hundredth time. Damn it. He should have known better—should have realized that some deals were too good to be true.

Now here he was, locked into a partnership with the Frosts. Instead of celebrating the company's latest success, he would have to shift focus entirely—to safeguard his interests and, worse, babysit Miss Innocensa Frost.

Grant sat heavily in his chair, the frustration radiating off him in waves. The room felt smaller, suffocating even, as he continued to look for that stupid clause.

Dave strolled towards him, a curious smirk playing on his lips as he leaned casually against the edge of Grant's desk. "Why are you scrutinizing that contract like it holds the secrets to the universe? Any closer, and your nose will be rubbing against the paper. Spill it. What's going on?"

Grant snapped his head up, his glare turning icy. He tossed the contract onto the desk with a sharp slap of paper on wood. "Did you know about this?" he demanded in a tone that was almost accusatory.

Dave raised a brow, his smirk faltering at the intensity in Grant's voice. "Know about what?"

"That we're merging with the Frost empire," Grant spat the words laced with barely concealed anger. "Because I sure as hell didn't sign up for that."

Dave blinked, taken aback by the vehemence in his friend's tone. Straightening, his earlier amusement evaporated as he questioned. "Wait—merging? No, that can't be right. I thought this deal was about an investment and collaboration. Are you serious?"

Grant's expression drained and he snarled, "Of course, I am serious. Do I look like I am joking?"

Dave held up his hands in a calming gesture, though his own sense of dread was high. "Alright, alright, don't bite my head off. Let me see the papers." He reached for the contract, pretending a calm he did not feel.

"I think you're mistaken," Dave continued as he began flipping through the pages, his brow furrowing slightly. "Something like this wouldn't just slip past our legal team. They're too sharp for that."

Grant scoffed, his frustration bubbling over. "Have you forgotten who we're dealing with? This is the Frost empire we're talking about. Their legal team is legendary—and by legendary, I mean ruthless. They don't miss a thing. I'm sure there's some buried clause that made fools of us. I just need to find it... and anything else they might've tucked away."

Dave shook his head, still in denial, "No, no. Our biggest hope in this partnership with the Frosts was precisely because of their fair reputation. They don't need to resort to shady tactics. What even raised your suspicions in the first place?"

Grant leaned forward, slamming the desk with his palm for emphasis. "It's not suspicion. It's facts. I was just introduced to Seb Frost's daughter. You know what he said? That she'd be the one to make sure we thrive. He also mentioned how she'd help us 'integrate' into their entire portfolio." His voice dripped with sarcasm as he mimicked Seb Frost's words before calling himself a fool in his mind. He had been so enraptured by Innocensa Frost that he had missed such a key point.

"From what I understand, she'll 'learn the ropes' from us, and then, when she's nice and ready, they'll hand us to her on a silver platter. Gift-wrapped."

Dave's frown deepened as he processed Grant's words. He glanced down at the contract in his hands, the paper suddenly feeling heavier. His stomach twisted with unease as a gnawing doubt took root. "That doesn't sound like the Frosts," he said hesitantly, though his voice carried less conviction now.

Grant leaned back, rubbing a hand over his face in frustration. "I know. That's what makes it worse. They don't need to play dirty, which is why I never expected something like this. But damn it!

Determined to get to the bottom of it, Dave pulled up a chair and began poring over the document. If there was such a clause, they would have to find a way before things went further. Grant, unable to sit still, paced the office like a caged animal, muttering to himself as he waited.

Hours ticked by as the two men combed through the contract line by line, dissecting every clause, every phrase, every piece of fine print.

Finally, Dave set the contract down with a sigh, rubbing his tired eyes. "Nothing," he muttered. "I've gone over this thing three times, and I can't find anything that screams 'merger' or 'integration.' It's all standard business jargon. No hidden clauses. No red flags. Nothing that implies us losing our company."

Grant nodded and then shook his head tiredly. Could he really have imagined these things? Had he misunderstood? He had no doubt. Seb Frost had been too confident in throwing the words about merging with their portfolio. That was not good.

Dave looked at his friend and then knocked on the table, "What do you think we should do now?"

Grant sighed and then looked at his full table before closing his eyes, "I think the only option we have now is to wait and keep our guards up. Let's see what this Innocensa Frost brings to the table. There's no point tearing our hair out over what might happen. Let's wait and see. Play it cool, observe her, and when the time comes, we'll know what cards they're holding and meanwhile we keep our safeguards up. The research and development team, don't let her go anywhere near that.

Chapter 898: Late

Dave shut down his laptop with a quiet click and let out a long sigh as he turned to face Grant. "Alright," he began, rubbing the bridge of his nose, "I think we can at least rule out one of your worries. You're not going to have to babysit Miss Frost. From everything I've read, she's actually an expert engineer. Apparently, she spearheaded the shift to solar energy across all Frost hotels a few years back—and she

was only eighteen at the time. All her education is from top-tier universities, and her recommendations are glowing. We're talking endorsements from some very big names."

Grant snorted, folding his arms across his chest. "Yeah, because getting those is so difficult for the Frosts," he replied with a note of sarcasm.

Dave shook his head, his expression firm but calm. "Bro, we cannot walk into this meeting with that kind of defeatist attitude," he said in exasperation, "Even if the Frosts are playing the neoptism card, she's still coming in with the money, and we need that. You and I agreed, didn't we? A wait-and-watch approach is our best bet here."

Grant rolled his eyes but raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Fine, fine. I hear you. Just don't go defending the girl before she even steps into the room," he muttered. "It's not like I'm planning to rip into her the second she gets here."

"Thank the heavens for that," Dave muttered, leaning back in his chair with a wry smile. "Anyway, where is she? She was supposed to be here at 12 p.m., wasn't she?"

"That's what her assistant told me this morning," Grant replied, his tone dripping with annoyance as he cast a quick glance at his watch. The numbers confirmed his suspicions: she was late. Of course, she was late. People like her never seemed to care about trivial things like punctuality or respecting other people's time. Nope, those things were beneath someone of her stature. The 'princess' had called ahead to inform them she'd be arriving promptly at noon, and naturally, they were expected to drop everything and make themselves available. And yet, here they were, still waiting.

Grant's jaw tightened as he drummed his fingers on the edge of the table. His irritation was impossible to hide, but he didn't care. If this was the kind of impression she intended to make, she was off to a spectacular start.

Finally, when he was about to leave, the woman entered and once again Grant had to make sure his heart would breath. Today, she was dressed in a simple blazer and her glorious hair had been tied back, but even the simplicity took his breath away. She smiled at them as she placed her laptop bag on the table and apologized casually, "I am so, so sorry. I had a little accident before coming here—nothing serious, just a minor delay, but I should've called. I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

Grant snorted under his breath, crossing his arms over his chest as he almost rolled his eyes and muttered under his breath if she broke a fingernail or something.

Dave shot him a look at that and he pretended to be deaf and mute as the girl settled herself across from them.

Turning his attention back to their guest, Dave stepped forward with a polite smile. "No harm done. We're just glad you're here, Miss Frost. Welcome. If you're ready, we'd be happy to go over everything and take you on a tour of the facilities afterward. And get a better understanding of your role in this"

The woman shook her head, waving a hand in a casual, almost dismissive gesture as she grinned at Dave, "Please, no need to be so formal. Just call me Ines."

Grant watched as her smile lingered on Dave a moment too long, and he felt an odd pang in his chest. It wasn't like he cared about impressing her, but there was something about the way she lit up in Dave's direction that made his mood sink further into sour territory.

Dave, oblivious to Grant's reaction, returned the smile with ease. "Alright, Ines," he said, testing the name as if trying it out for the first time. "Shall we get started with a quick tour? It'll help you get a sense of the space before we dive into the details."

"Sounds perfect," she replied, her eyes bright with interest as if she was eager to look around.

Grant trailed behind them as they, his thoughts a swirling mix of annoyance and something he couldn't quite name. He told himself he was just frustrated with her tardiness and the entire situation, but the truth felt more complicated.

However, trailing behind her, gave him many more insights. She was indeed smart like Dave had said and well versed in the scientific aspect of the business. He watched as she charmed his staff so that even the most reticent ones were willing to answer her questions. It was... annoying, he decided. He needed his people to be on guard against her but instead, they were warming up to her as if she was their best friend.

Wanting to escape all this, he started to move towards the conference room when Dave intercepted him. "Grant, bro, what is wrong with you?"

Grant scowled, "What do you mean what is wrong with me? Don't you see the entire problem with all that is happening?"

Dave shook his head, "Bro, I see everything but so do the others. You are glowering at her as if she is your mortal enemy. We don't even know anything yet and already you are giving off vibes. You trying to scare her off or something? Because I doubt it is working. If anything, it is only making the others in the office more curious about her, since she is the one who has elicited such an interesting reaction from you, the 'expressionless' one of our office."

Grant schooled his features then and sighed, "Fine. I am going back to the conference room. Bring her there when you're done here."

Chapter 899: Not like her name

What the hell was his problem? Innocensa asked herself for the hundredth time within the last hour.. The man was smoking hot—like, heart-stopping, jaw-dropping hot. Intelligent too, with those piercing blue eyes that seemed to see right through her. Honestly, he was the perfect package. But why on earth did he have such a massive stick up his a**? Sure, it was a very nice a**, but really, the man needed to loosen up.

She let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding as she watched him disappear into the office, his rigid posture and purposeful stride practically screaming "no nonsense allowed." At least now, she could breathe a little easier and get to know her new colleagues without the human fire-breathing dragon shadowing her every move. His overbearing presence had been bad enough, but it was his look that was making her feel like she was on trial that truly grated on her nerves.

What on earth did her father see in that guy? She couldn't wrap her head around it. Sebastian Frost, her father, was laid-back to a fault—energetic, charismatic, and the life of every room he walked into. This guy? He was the polar opposite. Buttoned-up and serious to the point of absurdity. Did he even know how to smile? She sighed, shaking her head at her own question. Okay, maybe that was a little harsh, he could probably smile, but really, what was his deal?

Finally, as they finished meeting all the members of the team, Dave took her back to the office where the dragon awaited.

She gave him a smile as she entered and received a blank look in return. She was almost tempted to groan and ask Dave how he managed to communicate with that person.

She'd barely taken a seat when Grant bot out, "Why exactly were you sent to us, Ms. Frost? We were assured there would be no interference with our day to day work. So, why exactly the need to integrate into the Frost portfolio? Because Canary Tech has no intention of losing its identity and merging into the Frost Industries."

Innocensa blinked, momentarily caught off guard. Interference? She'd barely been here an hour, and he was already making it sound like she was a spy sent to dismantle their operation and acquire them. Yuck. Defensive much?

"Well," she began, keeping her tone light, "I wasn't aware that my presence would be considered interference." She smiled, trying to ease the tension, though it felt like trying to melt a glacier with a candle. "I'm here to observe and provide any support you might need. That's all. And that was indeed mentioned in the negotiations. Mr Frost has a few ideas of his own for expansion which he would like for you to ponder over. The two of you agreed to those terms as per the contract."

Grant leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his broad chest and Innocensa was a bit distracted. The man had super shoulders and those arms... with the rolled up sleeves.. 'Oops. Get yourself under control, not so innocent, Innocensa.', she reminded herself in her head as the man said flatly. "We don't need support."

"Right," she replied, forcing herself to maintain eye contact and not stare at all those sexy veins showing on his hands and arms. "And I don't need coffee to function, but it sure makes life easier."

She was almost certain the man came dangerously close to laughing, but with that stiff, unreadable face of his, it was hard to tell.

Thankfully, the much more affable partner chimed in, breaking the tension, "Ines, we honestly thought the Frosts might send someone to oversee our operations. We just didn't expect to be sent one of the Frosts." His emphasis on "the" was subtle, but it carried enough weight to make Innocensa chuckle.

"Well," she said, "we prefer a more personal touch when it comes to laying the groundwork. Later, there might be a manager stepping in to oversee things. But, we like to handle the foundations ourselves." She

paused for effect, letting her words sink in before adding with a playful smirk, "Besides, there are plenty of us Frosts to go around. We're practically a small army."

Dave laughed at that. It was true actually. It was difficult to go anywhere in the business world without encountering a Frost. And the new generation seemed to be getting in different things too. They definitely were an army. "So, why don't you tell us about what your role is going to be here."

Ines paused. This was to be expected. They were wary of her and yet, they were trying to play it off. "Think of me as...an intermediary. Someone who can bridge the gap between the higher-ups and the day-to-day operations. The Frosts have promised you two things when we bought the stake. Investment for scaling the operation with R&D and access to new markets."

"You have already received the investment and I will only be acting as a supervisor in that area. My job mainly at this time is to help open up the new markets for your product as well as get feedback for improvisation. Your market scale is good. But it needs to be much wider if you want to establish that. This is the plan I have in mind."

With that, Innocensa focused on her work and presenting her ideas and plan for the future ahead.

Finally, as she was done, she breathed a sigh of relief and finished, "I am open to any ideas that you might have about any of these proposals. I've sent them to your official email id's."

Dave looked at Ines and shook her hand, this time his words much more genuine than they had been in the last hour, "You've got some terrific ideas, Ines and I can see that our team would be much more impressive with you here. We'll get back to these as soon as possible. Thank you."

Ines smiled and shook his hand before turning to look at Grant, who simply nodded and left the room. However, as she watched the man's receding back(okay, she was checking out his ass... dam* she was obsessed), she knew she'd passed whatever test he had in mind.

Chapter 900: A Shoulder

"She's been with us for a week, and this is the time she chooses to get in? Always late."

Dave looked up from his work, his expression calm as he regarded Grant, who was pacing the office like a caged lion. With a deliberate lift of his eyebrows, Dave said, "Grant, I don't think I've ever seen you

this worked up about someone before. What's going on? Sure, she's been arriving late, but it's not like she's slacking off once she gets here."

"Remember, she did mention she'd have to come in late all of last week due to some personal reasons. Maybe those reasons have carried over into this week. Besides, her ideas have been solid, and from what I've seen so far, her execution has been just as strong. Isn't that what we care about most? We've always prioritized quality work over clock-watching, so why the sudden shift in tone?"

Grant stopped pacing for a moment, and turned to face Dave, "Why the shift in tone? Really? That's what you're asking me? Do you know what she is doing? She is setting up a bad example. It's almost like she is thumbing her nose at us."

"We've got an important meeting with the distributors today, Dave—one that could make or break this quarter for us and future investments from the Frost's themselves—and she's nowhere to be found. Do I need to remind you that she took the presentation model home last night? If she doesn't show up on time, we're going to look like unprepared fools in front of our biggest opportunity givers.. That's what's going on!"

Dave leaned back in his chair, "I get it Grant. You're worried. But so am I. The stakes are high, and the timing couldn't be worse. But we should give her the benefit of the doubt. She's new to us, but she hasn't given us a reason to think she's irresponsible. Let's wait a bit longer before we panic."

Dave leaned back in his chair, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. "Hmm. You know, the person who really needs to figure out a Plan B here might actually be you—something to deal with that little problem you've got going on."

Grant froze mid-step, narrowing his eyes at Dave. "What are you talking about?"

Dave snorted, shaking his head as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "Oh, come on, Grant. Don't play dumb. I'd have to be blind not to notice. The way you look at her? It's like you're a man lost in the desert, and she's the only oasis for miles. Or maybe a tall, cool drink of water you're dying to get your hands on." He raised an eyebrow, his grin widening as Grant's face darkened. "It's painfully obvious, my friend."

Grant's mouth opened, but no sound came out. For the first time, he looked genuinely flustered. "I—what? That's ridiculous!"

Dave laughed, a low, knowing chuckle. "Is it, though? Because, trust me, I know exactly how hot she is. I'd be lying if I said the thought hadn't crossed my mind. Honestly, I probably would've made a move myself if I hadn't seen the way you stare at her every time she walks into the room. It's like you're afraid to blink in case she disappears."

Grant rubbed the back of his neck stiffly, "You're imagining things."

Dave tilted his head, his smirk softening into something almost sympathetic. "Am I? You might want to get a handle on it, Grant. If you don't, you're going to drive yourself—and the rest of us—crazy. The biggest reason you're always picking fights with her is not because of neoptism, threats or her tardiness. Nope. You're trying to find faults because you don't want to focus on the good. So, you've got a meeting to focus on. Just... keep your head in the game, alright?"

Grant shot Dave a glare, but the heat in his eyes didn't quite land. Without another word, he resumed pacing the room, his steps heavier now, though a faint flush still colored his cheeks. He hated how easily Dave had gotten under his skin, but he hated even more that the man wasn't wrong.

Yes, he was attracted to her—painfully so. But it didn't matter. It couldn't matter. She was Seb Frost's daughter, and that single fact rendered her completely off-limits. Seb wasn't just their boss; he was a man known for his fierce protectiveness when it came to his family. If Grant so much as entertained the idea of acting on his feelings, it would be the equivalent of signing his company's death warrant. He had worked far too hard to build something from the ground up to let a fleeting attraction jeopardize it all.

Before he could dwell any longer on the tangled mess of his thoughts, a sharp knock at the door broke the tension and their joint assistant stepped inside, her expression uncharacteristically tense.

"Miss Frost is here," she announced, her voice clipped and urgent.

Grant's scowl deepened as he instinctively glanced at the clock on the wall. To his relief, she was early—barely, but still ahead of schedule. He allowed himself a brief exhale of relief before waving a dismissive hand. "Fine. There's no need to report it to us."

But the assistant shook her head, her expression growing more serious. "That's not the issue," she said, her tone firm. "Miss Frost asked me to inform you that she won't be attending the meeting with the distributors."

Grant froze, his jaw tightening. "What do you mean, she won't be attending? She has the presentation model. She knows how important this is!"

"She's already set up the product in the conference room," the assistant explained quickly, clearly bracing herself. "But she said she's taking the rest of the day off. She mentioned that she'll follow up with the distributors herself later."

This time, it was Dave who stood up in concern. Even he did not have a defence for this.