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“She’s not exactly old. She just doesn’t like doing business. She sticks to her hobbies.”

Such as being a stuntwoman, an amateur car racer, making

desserts, cooking her children’s favorite dishes, and also studying the medical problems Robert gave her.

“It’s okay. Ademar needs you to function, Benjamin. And only you can go against the Ryker Group.”

“Likewise, likewise.” Benjamin smiled politely.

“Anyway...” Abel got up from the couch. “I have to cook for the triplets now. We can discuss our plan after the meal.”

“Let me help you,” Benjamin

volunteered. “I want to know what the triplets like to eat.”/

Abel froze. His body slowly turned around. “Do take this as a declaration of war, Mr. Benjamin?”

Benjamin smiled again. “Don’t worry, Mr. Abel. I’m sure both of us will respect Emma’s choice.”

“Right. We will.” Abel nodded. In other words, if Emmeline picked Adrien, they had no choice but to respect it as well.

“You would be Emma’s only choice if it weren’t for Alana,” Benjamin

added.

“She is not an issue. My grandfather and I have an

agreement. If I can cure Alana’s

condition within a month, my

engagement with her can be annulled. I did find a medical expert but she is busy at the moment. So, all I can do is wait.”

Benjamin couldn’t believe what he just heard. He thought Abel was in love with Alana and that was why Abel almost implored the Wonder Doctor to cure her. If Benjamin had known that Abel was doing this to annul the wedding engagement with Alana, he would have asked Emmeline to intervene much sooner. However, it was all an “if” now.

Abel cooked whatever the triplets loved to eat. The food from Nimbus Hotel also arrived so everyone could have dinner. After the meal, the kids played in the room while Abel and Benjamin decided to devise a plan in the

study.

“This is the layout of the Imperial Palace,

“Okay. Now we elaborate on the operation.”

“Mhm.” Abel added, “They won’t let us win the bid. So a fight will eventually break out.”

“I have armed personnel with me,” said Benjamin. “But how do you plan to mobilize them?”

Abel clicked on Section G of Imperial Palace. “This is the office building in which the Palace Lord works. It has 29 floors in total and Emma lives on the 20th floor.”

“Which means Emma is there too?”

“Most likely, yes. The auction party will be held in a large conference hall on the second floor of Section G. That area has three exits in total.” Abel highlighted the exits with his mouse.

“If we take this exit here, we have access to the elevator, which can bring us to the 29th floor,” continued Abel.

“It will be heavily guarded.”

“Yes. So to rescue Emma, we should avoid alerting the forces there.”

“Naturally.” Benjamin couldn’t agree more. But he knew there was no way the Palace Lord would let the whole operation go that smoothly.

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Let our guys in so that they could check their position,” uttered Abel

“Okay.”

Benjamin left the room. Before long, Luca and twelve other elite guards came in. Abel dragged a box out of his wardrobe and unlocked it. There were only guns. and ammunition inside.

“Eric, head to my trunk and bring those babies in,” ordered Benjamin.

“Sure thing, Mr. Benjamin.”

Shortly after, Eric came with another box. Benjamin opened it. It was a box full of disassembled sniper rifles. With a few swift motions, Benjamin gathered all the components he needed and

assembled the rifle Abel was amused. It seemed like he wasn’t the only one who was professionally trained in the room.

“Mr. Benjamin, your identity is getting more and more mysterious,” Abel chimed in.

“This is nothing.” Benjamin tried to aim with the sniper rifle. “My boss is an expert in firearms.”

“Your boss tinkers with these too?”

Yes, Emmeline was a gifted shooter.

“It’s her hobby.” Benjamin smiled. It wasn’t a wrong answer. She did dip her toes into shooting like she did with car racing.

Abel then used a projector to show the guards the layout of Imperial Palace. They talked at length about the rescue route and their respective roles. When the meeting was over, everyone left the study.

Meanwhile, at Nimbus Hotel.

The floor manager ran into Adrien after delivering Abel's order to The Precipice.

"Mr. Adrien." The manager bowed.

"Where did you wander off during office hours?" interrogated Adrien.

"I didn't wander off, sir. I was working."

"Really? I have been waiting for you for more than an hour."

"Sir," The manager defended himself. "I was delivering food to Mr. Abel."

"Mr. Abel? Where to?"

"The Precipice, his mansion," answered the manager.

Adrien frowned. Abel was at The Precipice? Moments ago, Adrien paid a visit to Nightfall Cafe to check on the triplets. But what he saw was a notice that read "Temporary Shut Down". Just when Adrien was wondering where the triplets could be, the manager fetched him an answer. Abel must have taken those kids away to protect them. However, the thought of it didn't sit well with Adrien. He was their father. If anything, he should be the one protecting them.

Adrien stormed off. He grabbed his car keys and drove to The Precipice. Standing in front of the towering metal gate, he spammed on the doorbell.

"How may I help, sir?" A guard appeared.

"You don't know me?" Adrien sniggered.

"I don't I'm new here."

"Then remember this face. For I am the ever-charming Adrien Ryker."

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"Right. Yes, Mr. Adrien?"

"OPEN THE GODDAMN GATE ALREADY!" Adrien bellowed.

"Sorry, I'll need Mr. Abel's permission."

"I'm his older brother!"

"But Mr. Abel is my employer."

"What a load of bullcrap." Adrien cursed. "Tell him I'm visiting."

"Please wait here." The guard then sauntered to the mansion. The guard post was several hundred feet away from the mansion. But instead of using his intercom to ask for permission, the guard walked to the mansion. It took almost 15 minutes for the guard to get back to Adrien.

"Sorry. Mr. Abel said no visitor," the guard uttered apologetically.

“What did you tell him?” Adrien’s face twitched.

“I told him that his brother is here.”

“And?”

“But he said ‘I don’t care!’ and went back to sleep.”

“Sleep?” Adrien looked at his wristwatch. It was barely 9 PM. It was dinner time,

“He did go to bed.” The guard then pointed at the mansion behind him. “See? The lights are off.”

Adrien cranked his head to look at the mansion. It was brightly lit just now. But all lights were switched off as they spoke. It felt like a slap to his face.

“Abel Ryker!” Adrien shouted. “You can’t hold my kids hostage. You can’t!”

Only silence, replied Adrien.

“Motherf*cker! You won’t be able to keep them forever.” Adrien then drove away.

The lights came back to the mansion as Adrien’s car left. Abel rubbed his temple. “You just have to play deaf against Adrien. You can’t reason with him.”

“I don’t get it.” Benjamin also rubbed his temple. “Why would Emma let a guy like him touch her?”

“It must be a tasteless joke,” Sam pouted.

“It’s real,” said Abel bitterly. “The medical record under the Ryker Group proves it.”

Silence lingered for a short moment.

“Luca, tell all guards that no visitor is allowed in unless they have my explicit consent. Especially people from the Ryker family,” ordered Abel.

“Yes, sir.”

“Worst comes to worst, send the triplets to Glenbrook. The Rykers will not go near my place,” suggested Benjamin.

Abel thought about it before Rodding. “That might be a great idea. We have to rescue Emma the day after tomorrow and we cannot afford another slip-up here. Transfer the babies to Glenbrook immediately.”

“Okay. Before Adrien knows what’s going on, at least,” agreed Benjamin.

“Luca, get the car.”

“Yes, sir.

Everyone moved quickly so after one and a half hours, the triplets were transferred to Benjamin’s place. In his car, Adrien was planning to call Adam. In the meantime, Adam was enjoying his dinner in the Imperial Palace. He also wanted to check on the progress of those canaries.

beautiful women from exotic countries surrounded Adam in a fan-shaped formation. Under his mask, Adam smirked. Among the 11 beauties, he liked Emmaline the most. All the other women just paled in comparison to her.

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After a few days of training, Emmeline now knew how to dance and entertain. Every gesture from her was alluring and beguiling. No man could possibly resist her seduction. When Adam was busy taking in the sight before him, his phone rang. It was from Adrien. There was no way Adam would risk exposing himself here by answering the call. So he declined it. But Adrien was annoyingly persistent today. After a while, Adam decided to go to another room to take the call.

BANG!

He slammed the door behind him. "What is wrong with you, Adrien?" Adam hollered.

"Adam?" Adrien was taken aback by the vexation of his brother. "Did you have a bad day or something?"

"I'm about to go to sleep but you just have to call me at this hour."

"Sleep?" Adrien was dumbfounded. Was today International Go-to-bed-early Day?

Adrien couldn't care less. He had this priority. "Adam, Abel took the triplets away."

Adam processed that piece of information. "So? Who cares who raises them?"

"But they are my sons! I should raise them," Adrien cried out.

Inside Adam's mind, once the plan was executed, Abel would be fired from the Ryker Group and he would have sole claim on Emmeline. When that happened, Adam would get rid of the triplets. That was why he was unconcerned with their welfare. However, he still needed Adrien to be on his side now. If his plan failed, Adam would instead persuade Adrien to get Emmeline back. It was the contingency plan because Adam couldn't reveal his true identity now.

To make sure that his contingency plan stayed compliant, Adam forced himself to be patient. "Look. When you follow my plan and rescue Emmaline the day after tomorrow, those three kids will hail you as the hero, won't they? They will choose you over Abel."

Adrien couldn't find any flaw in that logic. "But Adam! Remember to tell the people of Imperial Palace to go easy on me. You know I can't fight."

"Yes, yes. Just get your cape and stand there like a hero."

"All right." That was enough to reassure Adrien. He then hung up.

"What a moron," Adam sniggered at his phone. "Why would I hand Emmeline to you once Abel is out of the picture? Just how dumb are you, Adrien?"

On the day of the auction. 6 PM.

Abel and Benjamin had a mock training with all 12 guards in the morning. Two of them were snipers while the rest were given an assault rifle. They put on a bulletproof vest before going about their business as usual. However, an informant Abel planted in the Imperial Palace reported that extra security

measures would be taken for the auction. Everyone had to go through a security check armed with infrared sensors. That meant firearms would be detected.

Abel's and Benjamin's expressions turned grim at the news. It felt like their enemies expected them to come. And the enemies had taken all the necessary precautions to stop them from coming. At the moment, Abel and Benjamin faced one problem. How were they supposed to carry the guns inside?

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"You know what?" An idea came to Abel's mind. "Since it's still possible to enter freely, let's smuggle our weapons inside first. Put it in one place and when our guys are in there, they can go to that spot to arm themselves."

"That works. I might squeeze Janie in," said Benjamin.

"Janie? She's a woman. How is she supposed to carry the guns inside?"

"There will be a performance before the auction. Janie can disguise as a performer, who can bring in her costumes and accessories."

"I can be Ms. Eastwood's assistant and carry her things around," Luca volunteered.

"Are you sure?" Abel chuckled. "What if you run into your friends?"

"I can do it. No one knows me anyway." A sniper came forth.

"Okay." Abel nodded.

Janie was overjoyed when she received a call from Benjamin. "Come to The Precipice right away."

"Now? Yes. No problem." Janie dropped everything she was doing and drove to the mansion.

When she arrived and saw the boxes of firearms, she slumped to the ground. "W... What are you doing? A bank heist?"

"To save Emmeline." Benjamin shook his head.

"To save Emma? Count me in," Janie chirped.

Benjamin then proceeded to brief Janie on the plan. Adel thought she would be too afraid to take up such a dangerous job. But Janie's excitement proved him wrong. No wonder she got along very well with Emmeline. Birds of the same feather flock together.

"Don't worry, guys. You can count on me."

"Good." Benjamin then pointed at the layout. "You will place the weapons in the dressing room behind the conference hall. You only need to lock the box. And put it somewhere obvious to avoid rousing suspicion."

“Okey-dokey. I’ll be waiting for you there,” said Janie.

“No, you’re leaving immediately,” ordered Benjamin.

“But why?”

“I don’t want you to distract me. You don’t want to distract us either, do you?” Benjamin replied.

It was true. During the crossfire, anything could happen. And if she was injured, she would just be a burden to Benjamin. Oh my gosh. Benjamin was actually protecting her.

“Okay.” Janie was touched by Benjamin’s kindness. “But promise me you’ll come back alive.”

“I will.”

“Waah!” Janie cried herself into Benjamin’s embrace. But for once, Benjamin let her hug him.

“Mr. Benjamin, you have to stay safe too. Don’t get shot.”

“I will. Don’t worry.”

Janie wasn’t willing to let go of Benjamin. Benjamin had to pry her away.

“Go now, Janie. Be careful.”

“Okay.” Janie nodded.

At noon, Janie came back. Everything went swimmingly. She passed the keys to Benjamin and said, “I even put numbers on them so that you can locate them.”

“Good girl,” complimented Benjamin. After he gave Janie a hug, she returned to Adelmarr.

At 4 PM, Benjamin and Abel took the invitation letter the auctioneer sent them as well as a 300- million-dollar cheque, and left for the Imperial Palace in separate cars.

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As expected, Imperial Palace’s security was tighter than ever. The censor could even detect metal implants, let alone guns. As it was for safety measures, nobody minded it. Abel and Benjamin passed through the security check successfully. Inside, the 12 elite guards split up and retrieved their weapons. They then went to their respective positions.

The time was 5:40 PM, 20 minutes till the auction took off. To liven up the atmosphere, several pole dancers started performing. Abel, Benjamin, and the 12 elite guards remained still in their positions. Two other guards went to scout out Emmeline’s room, to no avail. As all canaries were busy putting on their costumes and makeup. A round badge that had “No. 9” on it was attached to Emmeline’s waist. It had one purpose, To lead everyone’s eyes to the most titillating region.

Since Adam didn’t want to alert the Adelmarr Clan, his auction was much smaller in scale. He had 19 canaries in total, but only 11 would be auctioned off tonight. His plan was to get rid of both Abel and Benjamin. Profit was not This priority.

After the pole dancers came two belly dancers. And when the performance was over, an emcee in white appeared. He exchanged pleasantries with the rich businessmen present and ushered in the canaries. Buyers, who were dying from boredom moments ago, turned excited. This was the highlight of the night. They came for the visual feast. And soon, women in provocative attire lined up on the stage. What followed á the initial gasp was a long silence, as everyone was busy admiring the absolute beauty before them. The face of each canary was half- covered in thin veils, which only added to their charm.

“There once was a woman whose eyes outshone the star, whose body outcharmed the gems...”

A song was played. And for everyone present, it precisely described the way they felt now.

“Yes... I need her,” Everyone chanted.

Abel and Benjamin focused hard. They needed to locate Canary No. 9.

“Emma!”

“Emma!”

Both men stood up. But so did everyone else.

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The canaries had to close their eyes despondently. What they saw was a sea of portly, wrinkly men. And to think that after tonight, they would be their playthings...

As Emmeline reopened her eyes, she noticed two men who stood out from the crowd. They were Benjamin and Abel. She wanted to call out their names, but she couldn't. Adam was gawking at her while rubbing his chin.

Emmeline could only be his.

Adrien did not deserve her at all. Meanwhile, Adam also took notice of Benjamin or Abel. But no matter, Adam needed them to be there. Because they were his targets tonight.

The emcee appeared on the stage once more and introduced the canary one after another. When he reached Canary No. 9, a

commotion broke out.

“She is mine!”

“Back off now, all of you.”

Abel and Benjamin exchanged looks. They only had 600 million dollars in total. They had hoped that it would be enough to outbid everyone, but if not, they were ready to extract her by force. Though it was the least desirable option.

After all 11 canaries were introduced, they retreated backstage.

“Canary No. 9, I'll save you.”

“Canary No 9, sing for me!”

Emmeline’s gaze lingered on Abel and Benjamin. The thing that cut off her gaze was the descending curtains. Her vulnerable look broke both men’s hearts.

All of a sudden, Abel received a text from Benjamin.

“Did you see that? Emma looks weak. She must be drugged.”

“I saw.” Abel typed. “We have to be careful. This is a trap.”

“A trap that we have to run into.”

“I will save Emma at all costs.”

“Hey! That’s my line.”

Another performance was set up after the introduction of the canaries. Everyone waited with bated breath for the commencement of the auction.

“Awoo!”

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The see-through dress on Canary No. 9 was stoking everyone’s desire. Under her veil, her vulnerable, helpless expression made anyone want to be the hero for once. The auction started in numerical order.

“Canary No. 1, please come forward,” said the emcee.

A young female not older than 20 years old appeared.

“Canary No. 1 is 84/60/84, 5’43” tall, and weighs 105 pounds. She enjoys reading, listening to music, and traveling. Her starting bid is five million dollars.”

Within two minutes, the bid

reached eight million dollars.

“Nine million dollars, going once.”

“10 million dollars, going once.”

“15 million dollars.”

“15 million dollars, going once.”

“15 million dollars, going twice.”

“20 million dollars.”

In the end, Canary No. 1 was sold for 20 million dollars, to a land developer.

“Now, Canary No. 2. She is 86/62/86, 5’44”, and weighs 105 pounds. She likes food, watching dramas, and doing makeup. Her starting bid is five million dollars.”

Canary No. 2 was then sold for 23 million dollars. Canary No. 3 to No. 8 had very low bids as everyone was saving for Canary No. 9. Those who knew they didn't stand a chance bode for someone else instead. For the canaries, if they failed to get a caller tonight, they would be sold again in another auction, albeit at a lower price. Being a commodity was their fate now.

When it was Canary No. 9's turn, everyone stood up. Among the crowd, Benjamin and Abel stood out. They were so young and handsome. All other canaries could only hope to be owned by someone like them.

"Canary No. 9 is 84/59/85, 5'5" tall, and weighs 108 pounds. She likes to drink tea, exercise, and overthink. Her bidding price is... 100 million dollars!"

A middle-aged businessman slumped back in his seat. Some fainted and had to be resuscitated by their assistants. And some started chugging their meds to calm their racing hearts. The mastermind must know how much money Benjamin and Abel carried with them.

"We have 110 million dollars here."

150 million dollars."

It was a war to see who had the thickest wallet.

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Fewer and fewer bidders made the call. The price was getting absurd.

"200 million dollars!" said a newcomer in the industry that no one knew. Obviously, he was a bidder the mastermind planted in the auction.

"220 million dollars."

"240 million dollars," a famous tycoon bode. Everyone in the hall knew him. It seemed like he was determined to buy Canary No. 9.

"290 million dollars," said Abel.

"300 million dollars," Benjamin followed suit. Half of their budget was gone.

"310," The tycoon continued.

"330."

"Wait!" The emcee interrupted. "300 million dollars is beyond our transaction limit. To ensure proper payment, all buyers who bid above 300 million dollars have to pledge their assets."

Abel gave Luca a nod and the latter went to settle the

paperwork. Benjamin did the same. Together, they pledged 600 million dollars worth of assets for Imperial Palace. If they won the bid, the price would be deducted immediately.

*350 million dollars," the planted bidder pressed on.

“360,” said Abel Adam then looked at the planted bidder and asked him to hurry up. It was going too slow. The planted bidder got the message and the bid soared to 560 million dollars. And then, Adam beckoned his bidder to stop. If he pushed too eagerly, Abel might give up. Then Adam would have to shell out 560 million dollars for someone he already owned.

When 560 million dollars was called, Abel fell silent. Adam began to sweat. Did Abel give up already? That was bad. He immediately threw the emcee a look.

“560 million dollars, going once.”

Both Abel and Benjamin kept quiet. They were having another mental warfare of their own.

“560 million dollars, going twice.”

Under his mask, Adam’s face was as white as a sheet. Did he just screw himself over? If the deal went through, he would lose 560 million dollars while they lost nothing. Unless Emmeline was not even worth 560 million dollars in their mind?

“565 million dollars,” uttered Abel slowly. Adam let out a sigh of relief.

“565 million dollars, going once.”

“Going twice.”

“Sold!

Both Benjamin and Abel stood up. There was a new notification on their phones. 300 million dollars evaporated from Abel’s account while Benjamin just lost 265 million dollars. It was a price they were willing to pay to save

Emmeline. It was much safer too. They didn’t want things to get violent here and went home with a criminal record.

“Canary No. 9 belongs to Mr.

Ryker! Congratulations!” said the emcee enthusiastically.

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Abel then looked at Canary No. 9 with a wide grin. But that grin disappeared as soon as it appeared.

She wasn’t Emmeline.

“Sold canaries, please go back and rest. Once the auction is over, your new owner will take you home. Let’s proceed to the next canary,” the emcee announced.

Right then, Benjamin also noticed the fake Canary No. 9 they just bought. The mastermind had swapped the real Emmeline with another girl. Abel made a gesture to Benjamin to tell Benjamin that he would be on the move.

Benjamin received the message

and began to leave his seat while feigning nonchalance. Abel, on the other hand, snuck to the back door. They had to locate Emmeline before their enemies knew what they were doing. Luca then informed all elite guards to gather by the back door.

“We got a fake canary,” Abel told the sniper.

“What do we do now?”

“Head to Floor 20,” Abel

commanded. “If she isn’t there, we

fight our way to Floor 29.”

“Yes, sir!”

The group went to Floor 20 in two separate elevators. In all 19 rooms on the floor, Emmeline was in none of them.

“So Floor 29 now?” asked Luca.

“Yes!”

Everyone reached for their guns and loaded them with bullets.

Meanwhile, inside the conference hall, Adam smiled smugly. Oh!

How much he wished he could relive the moment again. Abel spent 565 million dollars to purchase a woman he didn’t even know. And since Abel spent so much, he wouldn’t be able to repay his debt to Oscar. And that meant Abel would lose his job as the

—

GEO. Benjamin also just lent Abel 265 million dollars. Although Adam highly doubted that Benjamin would ask that back, Benjamin would still have a lot of explaining to do to his superior in Adelmar. Adam was the clear winner tonight.

Adam couldn’t wait to see the look on Abel’s face when Abel noticed that he was outwitted. When seat, Abel had disappeared. That put him on high alert but he also caught a glimpse of Benjamin sitting comfortably in the seat.

“Maybe I’m being paranoid here? Perhaps Abel went to the toilet or something,” Adam mumbled to himself.

On Floor 29.

Abel and the guards bolted out the moment the elevator door opened

BANG!

The guards shot first.

“Mr. Abel,” Luca called out. “We’ll cover you. You go and look for Ms. Eastwood!”

“Thanks!”

Gunshots reverberated through the corridor.

Adrien was coming up through the elevator. According to the script Adam gave him, he was supposed to arrive to rescue Emmeline. But when the elevator door opened, a bullet safely missed his face.

Adrien was so scared that he covered his head and cowered in the corner.