

Extraordinary 731

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To no one's surprise, the first contestant in the International Piano Competition finals gained a decent score from the judging committee.

More contestants took to the stage for their turns, and while some flourished, others floundered.

As a special guest judge for the competition, Caleb naturally scored the contestants as objectively as he could.

One of the contestants got a very low score, yet she muttered through sobs, "I have no regrets left in my life after meeting Mr. Powell in person. My heart is full even though I've lost."

Soon enough, it was Hera's turn to compete.

She took a deep breath before exiting backstage, her heels clicking across the floor.

Hera was confident of winning the competition because of her recent hard work.

She did not disappoint Sisley as her fingers traveled nimbly across the black and white keys and brought a beautiful piece to life.

Hera's piece of choice was technically challenging and would have stayed off the list of options of most contestants, yet she did not shy away from the complex composition.

Her decision paid off. After she completed her performance, the audience erupted into enthusiastic applause.

Hera stood up from the piano bench and grabbed the microphone. Then, she walked toward the judging committee and said, "May I say a few words to Ms. Berry before the judges give their scores?"

Ashlyn looked at her coolly and replied, "Go on."

They locked eyes as Hera deliberately wore an awkward smile, acting the part of a poor, bullied woman.

"I hope you won't deliberately give me a low score because of our personal grudges. After all, too many rumors have been spreading on the web about your potential bias."

The audience immediately directed shocked stares in Ashlyn's direction.

Hera's mention of biased behavior reminded them of the rumors spreading on Twitter, which alleged that Ashlyn purposely assigned low scores to contestants she disliked.

Meanwhile, Ashlyn arched a brow in response, making her thick-lashed, almond eyes appear even more seductive.

Then, Ashlyn deadpanned, "You seem to be a fan of rumors, Ms. Chapman. Why didn't you remember any clarifications of the matter in other online articles? Instead, you only remembered the slanderous comments about me."

In truth, Hera had brought up the rumors about Ashlyn's unfair scoring out of concern that the latter would give her a poor score.

She believed that public scrutiny would force Ashlyn to give her a slightly higher score even if she underperformed.

After all, the public would believe that Ashlyn held a grudge against Hera if she graded her poorly.

"All right, judges. It's time to give your score." The host hastily spoke up to defuse the tense situation.

Ashlyn tossed aside her scoring device and declared, "Since Hera thinks I'm unfair, I'll just forfeit my score. I don't want to appear biased and harm my reputation. It's unfair to me too."

Ashlyn's declaration stunned everyone in attendance.

A judge forfeiting her scoring rights was unprecedented since the induction of the International Piano Competition.

Hera's expression froze as she pondered the implications of Ashlyn's decision. The score for each contestant was an average of the five judges' scores.

If she forfeits her right, only four judges will grade me instead of five. Will my average score be divided by five or four?

Her breath caught in her throat, and she gritted her teeth in indignance.

That b*tch! How dare she set me up like this! If the scores are still divided by five, I'll tank the competition! It might be okay if they decided to divide it by four.

The host's awkwardness was palpable as he asked, "What should we do now, Mr. Powell?"

Displeasure colored Caleb's handsome face. He replied sternly, "Where are your manners? How can you publicly question a judge's integrity as a contestant? How did someone like you make it to the finals?"

Apart from Ryan and Ashlyn, the other two judges on the panel looked away guiltily when they heard Caleb's words.

Lucas, who was clad in a black shirt with its sleeves rolled up to reveal his muscular forearms, had been sitting beside Joseph at the competition.

He crossed his legs elegantly as he sat. His handsome face, on the other hand, looked stony.

He narrowed his eyes and glared coldly at Hera's face.

Who the heck does she think she is to accuse Ashlyn in public?

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Seated with the rest of the judging committee, Ashlyn suddenly felt a pair of sharp eyes looking at her from a distance.

She looked up and caught Lucas' deep eyes falling upon her.

Glancing away quickly to placate her accelerating heartbeat, Ashlyn's gaze landed on Hera again just as the other four judges had decided upon their scores.

After the host reported her average score, Hera felt a weight lifted off her shoulders.

Good thing that it wasn't averaged out over five. Only four judges should improve my odds.

Caleb's voice sounded again. "Your skills are very good, but you are too technical. We couldn't feel your passion for the piano. Being too stiff will prevent you from really throwing yourself in and becoming one with the piano."

Ryan added after allowing space for applause, "Well said, Mr. Powell. I have nothing else to add, except that I hope you'll act with more decency in the future."

How humiliating that was to have the flaws in your character pointed out in public like that!

Seated with the rest of the audience, Sisley's face turned pale with anger.

"Mr. Yates is clearly aware of the relationship between us. So Why would he say something like that, Ms. Canter?"

Mary froze for a moment as she did not dare say Ryan did not know Hera at all. "My brother is a straightforward person," she said with deliberate vagueness after a pause. "All artists are inherently bad-tempered."

A male contestant took the stage after Hera. His scores were mediocre, and certainly not as high as hers.

Olivia was next. Throughout her wait, Charlotte stayed with her the entire time.

The two of them have hitherto remained silent since Ashlyn left.

The inexplicable atmosphere laced with awkwardness only fueled Charlotte to zip her mouth shut.

Being usually at a loss for words as she was, she found herself even more so when she needs them the most.

Olivia was also rather awkward. She suddenly felt very stupid upon recollecting that she used to like Lochlan and hate Charlotte.

Even more so, when I compare myself to Ashlyn. I have been a fool in the past. In fact, I'm not so different from women like Hera.

Self-righteous and aloof, the way she used to be made her embarrassed.

The things she had done made her feel especially ashamed.

"Good luck," Charlotte muttered before Olivia took the stage.

Olivia's heart trembled at the kindness in Charlotte's voice as she gazed back at the latter. "I'm sorry for the past. I don't expect you to forgive me, but I feel ashamed about it. However, that doesn't mean that I'll give up on Lochlan. I still like him. We'll compete for him fairly."

Charlotte smiled sweetly. "I don't like Uncle Lochlan that way. You must have misunderstood me; I've only seen him as an uncle. I like someone else."

Olivia gaped at Charlotte.

What did she say? She doesn't like Lochlan?

Before she could spare the revelation any further thought, the program director's voice sounded from the speakers, alerting her that her presence was expected on stage.

To the crowd's surprise, Olivia began playing a famous song by Jonathan as soon as she took her seat.

During his debut some years ago, Jonathan stunned the audience by accompanying himself on the piano. The song he performed that night became an instant hit.

The song Jonathan played and sang was a composition of Snowstorm.

His cover went viral and was ubiquitous for a while. Despite the public's familiarity, it was still an intricate and technical piece for most.

The piece was meant to inspire nationalistic fervor. It told a story about the glorious return of a soldier

to the country he fought for but found his heart full of tragedy as he became haunted by his recurrent nightmares of the battlefield.

The song placed a heavy emphasis on rhythm, especially the battlefield part. If the agitation and tragedy on the battlefield were not properly conveyed, the performance would fall completely apart.

However, Olivia's relentless practice at home had not been in vain.

With her head slightly bowed, a series of gentle arpeggios flowed from under her fingers.

Everybody, from the audience to the stage hands, was transfixed by the near-perfect performance.

Olivia stood up as the last notes rang.

As if snapping out of a dream, the crowd shook themselves slightly before incessant applause filled the auditorium like a tide.

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Ashlyn could not resist remarking, "You have made such great progress in a short time. That was an excellent performance."

Mollified by Ashlyn's praise, Olivia beamed. She looked beautiful and charismatic when she smiled.

"Thank you, Ms. Berry," she said appreciatively.

The other judges also had comments to offer.

A scowl instantly appeared on her face when Hera saw from backstage that her rival's score was two points higher than her own.

D*mn it! How could Olivia have made such huge progress?

Positive comments from the viewers constantly flashed across the screen on the live broadcast. "It sounded amazing."

"She really demonstrated Jonathan's style back then."

"What a delightful performance! She fully brought out that solemnity of going to war."

"Yes, you're right!"

Situated backstage at that moment, Charlotte was the only contestant who had yet to take the stage.

At the prompt of the director's voice, she started forward with grim determination.

Although Ms. Warhol played very well, I have no intention of losing!

Charlotte, too, desired Ashlyn's praise. She wanted nothing more than to stand on stage before the eyes of the world and bask in the gaze of admiration from the crowd below. I just want the Field family and Ashlyn to be proud of me! I cannot let the Fields down after all their kindness toward me.

She had never wanted to succeed more in an endeavor.

The audience watched as the slender girl stepped slowly onto the stage and seated herself at the piano.

To their surprise, the piece she played was one they have never heard before.

How refreshing!

Ashlyn knew in a matter of seconds that it was a piece Charlotte had written herself.

The girl was musically talented. Aside from being adept at the cello, she played the piano well enough to compose her own piece.

A rare musical genius, indeed.

However, the song was a little too sad.

Charlotte was soon lost in her own performance.

Based on her own life experience, the piece started with the tragedy and helplessness of her childhood before progressing to the pain of being driven out of the Fraser family. Finally, it resolved to the Field family's stability and warmth, which served as the catalyst for her final transformation.

Like a butterfly, she had broken free of her cocoon.

Charlotte was so intoxicated that she poured her heart into the music and endowed it with great charm, infecting the audience in its sway.

Some of the more sensitive audience members even shed a few tears.

"That touched my heart in a way I've never felt before."

"What a pianist."

"I could almost see the sun shining onto the drab and gloomy curtains."

The crowd was floored, to say the least.

Even the audience members who were tone-deaf were helplessly swayed by the emotions Charlotte conjured.

Even her harshest critics were forced to admit that the composition and performance were executed equally well.

After the girl struck the last note, she rose slowly to her feet and bowed to the crowd whose deafening applause nearly brought down the roof.

Seated amongst the audience, Lochlan gazed with silent pride at Charlotte.

Although I'm glad that she's shining brightly, she seems to be slipping farther and farther away from me.

The realization caused bursts of pain in his heart that were so intense that he could hardly breathe.

Caleb gaped at Charlotte. "That was perfect. You're the second genius to have me at a loss for words like that."

Ryan was similarly stunned as he had never heard that tune. "Your performance has matured and improved since the qualifiers. Did you compose this song yourself?"

Charlotte nodded, her beauty still apparent despite having her face wrapped in gauze. "I did," she said as a matter of factly from atop the stage. "I wrote this piece after overcoming my autism."

Standing tall like a strong pine, she refused to succumb to the tribulations of wind and rain.

It was there that Charlotte stood as she gazed up at the audience crammed in the theater.

I broke free! I really did! How liberating it is to be able to express my thoughts and speak without having my heart twitch in anxiety like how it used to.

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Tired of remaining stagnant, Charlotte decided to grow as she could not rely on Joseph and Fae all her life.

"Let's hear what the judges have to say!"

The host's voice shook the judges out of their reverie.

She was autistic? Simply shocking.

The audience could not tear their eyes from the score in awe when her average score was displayed on the screen.

"That's the highest score so far, isn't it?"

"This score is only a little higher than Olivia's."

"Yeah. But Charlotte is really gifted."

Caleb picked up the microphone. "You have talent and drive," he said to Charlotte. "I'm sure you'll have a bright future ahead of you."

Charlotte thanked him before walking off the stage.

Hera watched the live broadcast on a television set backstage where she sat and gritted her teeth in anger.

How could Charlotte have gotten such a high score? It was bad enough that Olivia scored higher than me, and now Charlotte has as well? Does that mean I now rank third? Who knows if there are any other hidden talents amongst the other competitors.

Feeling restless like she was sitting on pins and needles, Hera vented her discomfort by glaring resentfully at Charlotte who appeared from the stage. How could a b*tch disfigured to the extent of having to hide her face from the public obtain such a high score?

Her gaze was met by a warning look from Olivia.

Hera's eyes narrowed. What would a woman who Lochlan despised have to be proud of? She cast aside her dignity of being a rich family's daughter to be Ashlyn's lackey! What an embarrassment to the Warhols.

Her anger festered the more she thought about it until eventually, Hera was so angry that she was forced to keep her eyes fixed on the screen as a distraction.

She was in a daze upon the completion of the final contestant's performance.

I didn't even get bronze? Is this some kind of sick joke?

When all the contestants were asked to gather on the stage, Charlotte stood in the second row with Hera in the third. The latter happened to be standing directly behind the former.

The host expressed how successful the finals were with a series of flattering words before thanking the audience and judges present.

After building the necessary suspense in the crowd, he asked Caleb to announce the second runner-up, who was an amateur pianist from Maredania. The man was beside himself with excitement as he

stepped forward.

Next came the runner-up. Olivia was stunned to hear Caleb announce her name.

How could I be chosen out of so many other talented contestants?

Recovering from the shock quickly, she stepped out and stood beside the second runner-up.

“Finally,” Caleb announced sonorously against the pin-dropping silence of the theater, “let's give a big hand to our champion, Charlotte Lynch!”

Suddenly, a loud bang sounded from the orderly line of contestants.

The crowd saw to their shock Charlotte slumping down to the ground in a very awkward and undignified pose.

Her slender body trembled slightly as she got up from the ground before quickly walking toward Olivia.

Charlotte worked hard to contain her embarrassment and anger as she walked. Just a moment ago, when she was about to step out when her name was called, Hera had tripped her from behind.

A lapse of vigilance on her part had allowed Hera to embarrass her in public.

Hera, on the other hand, had blatantly carried out her act of sabotage as she expected Charlotte to know better than to lose her composure in her moment of glory.

If Charlotte had lost her temper and called out Hera for tripping her, Hera's stubborn denial would only lead to an ugly fight.

Taking the stage to claim my championship is an important juncture in my life. I need to be prudent with how I conduct myself.

By the time she arrived at Olivia's side and took her position in the middle, Charlotte had already regained her composure.

On her left was the runner-up, Olivia, and on her right was the second runner-up.

The host was trying to defuse the embarrassment of the situation. “Our champion may have been so excited at the news that she fell over.”

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Charlotte smiled pleasantly. “Thank you to all the judges, mentors, and the audience here today. I admired your insight to have chosen the three of us so much that I couldn't help but fall!”

Her tactful words had not only complimented the crowd but had also helped her out of her predicament by injecting a touch of humor.

The audience at the scene burst into warm applause again.

The host also smiled. "We would like to invite the mayor of Lake City, Mr. Field, the president of the International Piano Association, Mr. Powell, and the director of Lake City Theater to present the awards to our winners!"

The three honorary figures immediately came to the stage with different trophies and certificates in their hands.

The three heavy trophies in their hands were made of actual gold.

Although they were similar in shape, their weight differed significantly.

The champion's trophy weighed about two pounds and had a minimum market value of close to one million.

However, its value paled in comparison to the meaning it entailed.

As the champion of the piano competition held by the International Piano Association, the bearer of the title would find the concerts they conduct in any city in the world selling out within minutes.

The weight of the other two trophies decreased accordingly, though the runner-up and the second runner-up were also honors that were impressive in their own right.

Olivia received her trophy excitedly. "I would like to thank Ashlyn," she gushed in response to the host's interview question. "Without her, I wouldn't be where I am today. "

Ashlyn raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Being accustomed to seeing the girl scowl, Ashlyn found the change over Olivia a little disconcerting.

What's going on exactly? First, she defended Charlotte by humiliating Jenny, and then, she started saying that she would protect her rival in love. And now, she's thanking me?

"I met judge Ashlyn a long time ago. I was too immature back then. I thought I was good but in actual fact, I was a nobody. Just taking Ashlyn's advice to heart made me feel grown-up all of a sudden. Nobody has ever spoken to me like that before. Now that I have seen the light, I aspire to be a woman like her. She deserves to be every girl's role model."

The host smiled before asking the follow-up question. "Do you mind sharing the piece of advice Ashlyn gave you at the time, Olivia?"

Olivia froze a moment before muttering embarrassedly, "She told me off. As for what she said, I think I'd better keep that to myself."

It was really embarrassing back then. In fact, it still is.

At that thought, she leaned into Charlotte. "I'm sorry for my immaturity," she said. "I would also like to apologize to the lady who was with you."

Charlotte knew what Olivia was referring to. "I accept your apology," she said lightly. "I hope that you'll stick to your promise. Ms. Berry is not just your idol. She is mine too."

The host could not help but sigh. "Judge Ashlyn really is popular!"

The awards for most popular, most talented, and most promising were awarded next.

Having won the most promising award, Hera stomped onto the stage in a towering temper to accept it.

However, she did not expect Lucas to be the one awarding her.

Realizing her mistake just in time, Hera hastily rearranged her features to regard the man in black before her with affection. Despite his cold expression, he had a powerful presence that could not be ignored.

Hera was the last one to be interviewed by the host.

Holding up her trophy, Hera could not refrain from gushing, "I would like to express my gratitude to the gentleman in black seated in the first row."

As she did that, her provocative glance was fixed on Ashlyn at the judges' panel.

Yes, I'm doing this on purpose! Although the whole world knows you as Mrs. Nolan, I'm still going to challenge you for that title!

Smiling with equal measures of charm and viciousness, she gazed at the audience who had erupted into a buzz of shocked chatter about her proclamation.

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Go ahead and talk about it. I have nothing to lose! Between Grandpa's intention of appointing Ashlyn as heir to the Chapman family and my failure to stand out in this competition, Lucas' declaration of Ashlyn being Mrs. Nolan had been the final straw. What else do I have at stake? If I'm going down, Ashlyn's coming down with me!

"This man and I grew up together. You could say that we were childhood sweethearts. I'd even saved his life once when we were children. Despite being really scared then, I rushed up without thinking about

my safety to pull him to his own! I never expected Ashlyn to step in and take him away from me!"

Hera's eyes turned red as she spoke. She looked at Lucas with tears in her eyes.

"Despite her decent and proper appearance, she's actually an adulteress specialized in coming between couples!" she continued, her voice breaking in grief. "As a result, I was made out to be the mistress instead and had my reputation dragged through the mud by comments online. Not only did she officially become Mrs. Nolan, but she also used her connections to get the fashion industry to blacklist me! She was the one who stole Lucas, and through her skill at manipulating public opinion, she had me canceled by making me appear as the mistress!"

"I would never have imagined that she was capable of such cruelty," she went on, near tears by that point. "Have you forgotten how we grew up together, Lucas? Have you forgotten that I'd once risked my life to save you?"

The audience below the stage began making sympathetic noises as they regarded Ashlyn with suspicious hostility in their eyes.

Could the witty and sassy Ashlyn who's the founder of Saunders Charity, be as awful as Hera claimed?

Fae was so angry that her chest hurt.

What a shameless woman! How can she twist facts to such a degree?

Glancing instinctively at Lucas, she found his expression the darkest she had ever seen. Although his body was hidden in the shadows, a shocking coldness emanated from it.

From her position atop the stage, Hera instantly became the focus of the audience.

The media at the scene frantically took pictures of her lest they missed any part of the shocking news.

Ashlyn, however, could only manage a blank gaze at Hera. I can't believe someone this shameless could exist on my mother's side of the family. Mom must be so disappointed.

The coldness in her eyes emanated toward the figure beneath the spotlight.

"Will you come back to me, Lucas? Back to how we were when we were children?"

Hera's voice was full of sorrow, and she was already in tears. Her wretched appearance successfully evoked the pity of many in the crowd.

They gazed at Lucas and scowled at his heartlessness.

How could you let your childhood sweetheart go to be with a woman like Ashlyn? So what if she plays

the piano well? She's the third wheel here.

The man suddenly stood up from his seat.

Silencing the crowd with his staggering stature, his slender and powerful legs carried him quickly onto the stage toward Hera in a series of purposeful steps.

How dare this woman slander Ashlyn on an international stage? I can tolerate people scolding or even hating me, but I will absolutely not allow anybody to say a single word against my woman!

Hera's heart leaped with every step he took.

He's coming. Was he moved by my confession? Is he going to change his mind?

Hera waited with nervous excitement.

She gazed at Lucas with bright eyes until he finally stood before her.

"You still have feelings for me, don't you?" she blurted with actual tears of joy. "If you'll just say the word, we'll start all over. I will try to do whatever she does better!"

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Lucas' icy-cold gaze fell upon Hera as he stood in front of her. Due to his tall figure, he was able to see her facial expressions clearly by lowering his eyes.

Lucas, are you and Ashlyn seriously going to...

Fae instinctively clenched her fists at the thought of that.

She had nearly fainted from anger when she found out that Ashlyn was Lucas' secret wife. It felt like her precious little baby had been ravaged by a monster, and the fact that they had been married for a few years without her knowing only angered her even more.

She couldn't believe that Ashlyn had kept such a huge secret from her, especially since Lucas had tons of scandals going on all the time.

Is Lucas finally going to end his relationship with Ashlyn?

Even Joseph was feeling a little speechless after seeing that. Tinsor and Winsor, too, couldn't believe their ears.

Neither of the two brothers had any knowledge of art whatsoever. The only reason they were able to watch the piano competition was that one of the Jaquin family's business partners loved music and invited them.

Little did they know, they were in store for a much more shocking “performance” instead.

Winsor secretly made up his mind that he would propose to Ashlyn if Lucas dared divorce her.

I can't believe my idol turned out to be Lucas' wife! This is some bullsh*t!

Tinsor was the most devastated of the two.

No wonder Blair kept addressing Ashlyn so casually! He must've known about their relationship all along! I treated Blair like my best friend, and he ends up playing me like a fool... Not only did Blair's martial arts skills improve tremendously, but he was also blessed with such an amazing sister-in-law! I may never be able to have a sister-in-law even half as amazing as Ashlyn! I used to think that Winsor would someday be able to compete with Lucas over a woman they love, but there was no competition at all! However, things may change now that Lucas has screwed himself over with Hera! Oh, how I wish I could just run up to Lucas and tell him, “Take your d*mned childhood friend and get the heck out of here!”

Right as everyone was focused on Lucas, the man himself said, “You are unworthy of being with me!”

The look on Hera's face was frozen in shock when she heard that.

“H-How could you say that, Lucas? When we were little—”

Lucas cut her off coldly before she could finish, “Stop bringing up our childhood! Like I said, you are unworthy of being with me!”

Whatever feelings of joy Hera had in her vanished without a trace when she had that statement hurled at her a second time.

Forcefully suppressing the bitterness, pain, and embarrassment, she asked with tears flowing down her cheeks, “W-What's gotten into you, Lucas? D-Did I do something wrong? Has Ashlyn been badmouthing me again? She really likes to slander me in front of you, doesn't she?”

“Ashlyn has never mentioned a single thing about you. You give yourself too much credit if you think you're worthy of her badmouthing you,” Lucas replied coldly with an expressionless face.

Hera was as pale as a sheet at that point.

I saved his life, confessed to him in public, and accused Ashlyn of such horrible things! Why would he still defend her? He promised me he'd agree to anything I asked for!

Hera's tears continued to fall as she stared at him with sorrowful eyes.

She looked so pitiful that most of the people in the audience couldn't help but sympathize with her.

"B-But... Why, Lucas? Why? I've loved you for so long..."

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"When you hurt Ashlyn with that crazy stunt of yours at LX Fashion Ltd., I told you that we are only childhood friends at best. There is no romantic relationship between us."

Lucas' tone was so cold and distant that Hera felt her heart shatter into a million pieces when she heard that.

"What's so good about Ashlyn, huh? How is she any better than me? Why won't you ever see my strengths?"

The look on Lucas' face was so expressionless that it felt as if he had blocked out all emotions.

"Hera, need I remind you that this is an international piano competition? You're wasting everyone's time and energy talking about your feelings as well as badmouthing both me and Ashlyn. You want to know the reason so badly? Fine, I'll tell you. Mr. Chapman told me at the hospital that you weren't my childhood friend at all. Ashlyn was the girl in the mountains back then! In order to get closer to me, both you and your mother lied about it and said you were that girl!"

His words shocked everyone present to the core.

"Wait... Is Lucas saying that Hera pretended to be Ashlyn?"

"Was her whole childhood sweetheart story a lie all along? Is Ashlyn Lucas' real childhood sweetheart?"

"What the heck is with this crazy plot development?"

"Not only did she steal Ashlyn's identity, but she's even accusing her of being a homewrecker? That's ironic, especially since Ashlyn is Lucas' legitimate wife!"

As Ashlyn had always seen Hera as a mere joke, to begin with, she quickly turned toward Lucas after hearing what he said.

Lucas looked up at her in response when he sensed her gaze from afar, and their eyes met instantly despite the distance between them.

Huh? I saved Lucas when I was little? But I have no memory of doing such a thing... Urgh, my head... Why is it hurting so much all of a sudden?

Her head would ache whenever she recalled things from her childhood, and she went pale as a terrifying

thought formed in her mind.

C-Could it be that I've lost a part of my memories from my childhood? Lucas would never bother to tell lies, so I know I can trust him for sure. But how is this possible? When did I lose those memories? Why wasn't I aware of my memory loss?

“Back then, my sister and I were kidnapped by human traffickers while we were in the village. Ashlyn was the one who saved us from those human traffickers. Unfortunately, my sister fell down a cliff while we were making our escape...” Lucas stopped himself mid-sentence, but everyone present could clearly understand what he was trying to say.

His face was twisted, and his expression was as cold as ice.

Ashlyn was the only one who saw that he was suppressing a lot of pain when he revealed his past wounds to the world.

Even if it hurt him deeply to bring up such tragic memories, he was determined to do so in order to clear Ashlyn's name.

Ashlyn felt her chest heaving as an inexplicable sensation filled her heart.

“Hera, you will leave me alone and stop slandering Ashlyn if you know what's good for you! I only let you off the hook multiple times because I thought you were my childhood friend, but that turned out to be fake as well. When I was investigating your family, you were the only one whose age matches the girl from back then. That's why your family decided to have you play that role! It was quite a brilliant plan, I'll give you that.”

Lucas could feel his raging emotions banging against the walls of his heart like a wild beast trying to break free, and he had to grit his teeth really hard to keep them in check.

No! Get back! Get the f*ck back! You mustn't come out! I won't let you out!

Judging by the force he was clenching his fists with, it became obvious that he was trying really hard to keep something suppressed.

He was glaring at Hera like he wanted to rip her to shreds.

That scared her so much that she instinctively took a few steps back in fear. “No... Don't come closer!”

What a scary man he is! I've never seen a guy with such a terrifying aura!

Her heart was pounding against her chest like a jackhammer, and her back was drenched in cold sweat.

Hera had no doubt whatsoever that Lucas would actually tear her to shreds if he could.

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Hera knew that she had truly angered the one man she couldn't afford to mess with.

Before the crowd could even recover from their state of shock, Lucas stepped forward and grabbed her by the neck as he continued, "You and Ashlyn are worlds apart, you hear me? You have no right to compare yourself to her, let alone dream of taking her place!"

He moved so fast that Hera couldn't even dodge it, and she could feel the oxygen level in her lungs depleting as he continued to squeeze her throat.

Her eyes went wide in disbelief as she stared at the raging man before her.

"No... Let go of me! Let go!"

She mustered every ounce of energy she had to try and claw Lucas' hand off, but it was to no avail.

Fear filled her eyes, and tears flowed down her cheeks.

Everyone in the audience was utterly shocked by the sight before them.

What the... Lucas is strangling her in public! Has he really lost his mind? This is so scary!

Hera's face went red from the lack of oxygen, and she was about to die from suffocation when a slender figure came running toward them.

Hera saw a hand with fair skin reach out to grab Lucas', and the familiar voice of a woman could be heard shouting coldly, "Stop it, Lucas! Let go of her, or she'll die! Do you want to go to prison for murder? Are you listening, Lucas? Lucas!"

I can't believe Lucas actually went berserk on stage in front of everyone! To make matters worse, he did it solely to clear my name and to expose Hera's lies! One can only imagine the crazy stories those journalists are going to come up with after this! Everything that's happening right now is only going to hurt Lucas again! I won't let anyone judge him with their malicious thoughts!

Ashlyn thought to herself as she tugged at Lucas' arm with all of her might.

"Ashlyn..." Lucas muttered in a deep and sinister voice.

He then let go of Hera all of a sudden, causing her to fall to the floor like a sack of bricks. Hera was so traumatized that she curled up into a ball and trembled uncontrollably as she stared at them.

Lucas had an ominous look in his eyes and a devilish smile on his lips as he eyed Ashlyn from head to toe.

The spotlight shining on him only added to his menacing aura, and it felt like he had become a completely different person.

It felt as if his usual icy-cold aura had been replaced by an evil one.

Lucas held a thumb up and gently rubbed it against his lips as he recalled something from his memory.

Seconds later, he leaned in close and whispered into Ashlyn's ear, "I really want to know if kissing you really does feel that amazing!"

Ashlyn's eyelashes trembled slightly as she looked up at the familiar-looking stranger standing in front of her. Her heart sank a little with each step he took toward her.

At that very moment, she could clearly tell that Lucas' new personality had been dissociated from his existing one.

This man in front of me is just a stranger with Lucas' appearance. He's not Lucas... No, he's still Lucas! He's just sick, that's all!

Ashlyn sniffled as she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her cheek against his chest. "I'll stay by your side no matter what happens to you, Lucas!"

"Tsk, ts, ts... Are you in love with me or him?" he asked sadistically while gripping her by the chin.

Ashlyn looked up at him as she replied, "You're both the same person! Come on, Lucas... Let's stop all this and get off the stage, okay?"

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Lucas arched an eyebrow at her in response. The devilish aura he was emanating made him look like a demon that had come straight out of hell. "I can spare Hera and get off the stage with you if you want."

"Don't try to negotiate with me, Lucas!" It pained Ashlyn deeply to see him like this.

"If you kiss me, I'll get off the stage with you." Lucas ignored what she said and pointed at his lips as he continued, "You have to kiss me here, or it won't count."

He could feel a burning sensation in his chest that surged through his body like wildfire.

His eyes were like that of a wild beast that had set its sights on its prey, and he wasn't about to let Ashlyn escape his clutches no matter what.

His predatory instinct was so intense that it sent shivers down everyone's spines.

"If this is what you want, then... As you wish..."

Ashlyn closed her eyes and stood on her tiptoes as she grabbed the back of Lucas' head.

The next thing he knew, she kissed him on the lips with people from all over the world watching.

Even Hera stared wide-eyed at them in shock and disbelief.

What are they talking about? Why can't I understand a single word they said? I don't even know what's going on anymore! I can't believe I nearly got choked to death on stage! Lucas was actually going to kill me!

Having finally regained her composure, Hera clambered off the stage and ran away as fast as her legs could carry. She did not want to spend even another second around Lucas.

To Ashlyn's surprise, Lucas took control of the situation by force the moment their lips met.

He grabbed her tightly and pulled her close before assaulting her with a deep and passionate kiss.

Ashlyn instinctively tried to struggle free and pushed hard against his chest with both hands.

Seconds later, Lucas released her lips from his and panted heavily as he whispered in a seductive voice, "I will only listen to you for the rest of my life."

He then let go of her and walked swiftly down the stage with everyone's gaze fixated on him.

It wasn't until he returned to his seat that they finally snapped out of their state of shock.

A foreigner in the audience exclaimed all of a sudden, "Oh, my goodness! Did that man just hit a woman in public? She should exercise her rights and take legal action against him!"

His friend slapped him hard across the face and shouted at him, "That woman was at fault for slandering Ashlyn! Mr. Nolan simply exposed her lies in a spectacular fashion! I don't see anything wrong with his actions!"

Sisley could clearly hear their little exchange as she happened to be seated nearby, and the look on her face turned gloomy instantly.

The other members of the audience began discussing among themselves as well.

"Hera is from the Chapman family, right? Her grandfather is a famous pianist, so how did she turn out like this?"

"Slandering others and stealing their identity, only to fail and have her plan backfire in front of everyone... Looks like the apple fell really far from the tree!"

"I've never seen anyone so shameless my entire life! Not only did she steal Ashlyn's identity, but she even demanded that Mr. Nolan repay her favor? Unbelievable... Simply unbelievable..."

Sisley felt a splitting headache tear through her skull when she heard the audience criticize her daughter, and it hurt so bad that she could barely sit still in her chair.

Jenny, Penelope, and Mary were all staring at her with judgmental looks in their eyes.

"To think that the heiress of a family of scholars would be capable of such a heinous deed... This really is a first, Mrs. Chapman!" Mary exclaimed sarcastically while running a hand through her hair.

Sisley's face was so twisted from the emotional damage that it looked like she was going to have a stroke.

There was a sharp pain in her chest as her vision started to fade in and out.