

The thunderstorm had been raging for the better part of the night. Heather tossed and turned in bed, the premonition that something bad would happen creeping beneath her ribcage like an itch that would not go away. She bolted upright in bed as the thunder rumbled overhead and in the violent flicker of lightning, she remembered a specific moment of her childhood in which she had braced the horrors of a storm alone. She got down from bed and pulled on her robe before shuffling over to the window. Upon drawing back a fraction of the curtain, she saw that the scene she once thought was terrifying no longer scared her, but her heart clenched with her old, inexplicable fear of thunderstorms.

Heather wondered how the weather would look and whether all would go well tomorrow.

Gazing out the window absentmindedly, she suddenly felt fatigue wash over her as she thought about how things had turned sour within the short span of time since her return home.

A hard look passed over her face. She didn't know if fate was challenging or toying with her, but she couldn't recall the last time she had tasted defeat. It was ironic how everyone else around her thought she had it easy.

Alas, who was fortunate enough to say that life was a cabaret? In the past, she had chosen

to take the easy way out as long as she had the results she wanted. After all, why should

she endure the veritable hardship in order to achieve anything?

It had been a while since she evaluated herself. The phobia that had cast its roots deep

within her was her dirty secret that threatened to consume her.

She had been careful to keep it under wraps, terrified that someone else could find out—not

even Myra knew, although there was a time when she had asked about it. Heather had been far too proud to show so much as a crack in her perfect facade, so she never told the other girl about the secret that was eating away at her. There were many memories that Heather hated to recall. No one knew about the bullet holes she bore in her past or how imperfect she truly was. As she burrowed back into bed, she mused at how frequently she had been revisiting her past. Nostalgia marks the aging of the soul. Indeed, she was no longer the young woman she used to be. Now, she barreled toward one of her many first crises in adult life and along with it came melancholia. Her old self would have been occupied with a schedule that was planned down to the last minute, but things were different now. She was beginning to understand the importance of keeping oneself busy—it was the only way to suppress all unnecessary thoughts. The next morning, she hurried to Safford House after breakfast and was pleasantly surprised to find Matthias standing outside the entrance. Time management was something that she deemed important and it was clear to see that he had abided by this notion. Matthias, on the other hand, had been waiting for her by the front door and upon seeing her, he quickly paced over to greet her. It was only then that she began to second-guess her decision to bring him along to this meeting without first giving a heads-up to the Saffords. She wondered whether they would think poorly of his sudden appearance. “Shall we go in?” he asked as he gestured toward the humble-looking villa. He had seen the look of hesitation that flickered over her features. “Remember—to them, you are my business partner,” Heather said sternly. She wasn’t sure

how things would turn out if he truly were to assume such an identity. “Don’t worry. I promise I’ll be invested in my role,” Matthias replied assuringly.

However, unbeknownst to her, he had already prepared for the visit beforehand. Josiah was someone whom Matthias knew extremely well, even more so than Heather. Coincidentally, Josiah had owed the Locke Family a favor and he would have to return it today.

At the thought of this arrangement, Matthias grinned wickedly. Josiah had agreed to collude with him after their phone conversation earlier that morning, although something like this would naturally be kept secret from her.

He would have to put up an act alongside Josiah during the meeting later.

There was nothing he would not do and no effort that he would not put in, just to get what he wanted.

Being fresh out of campus, Heather was not as well-versed in such tactics as Matthias was.

She was completely oblivious to what he had done behind her back while he had taken

every precaution against her and did everything he could to make sure things would work out in his favor.

The both of them then stepped forward and Matthias was the first to ring the doorbell,

which was chivalrous of him. He was dressed in a meticulous white suit today, looking like the perfect picture of kindness.

He could easily deceive anyone with that pretty face of his for as long as his wicked smile

was kept at bay. Heather was used to seeing his devious, roguish side and now she was

taken aback by how innocent he looked.

If she had to draw comparisons, his features were just as handsome as Tony’s, although he

carried himself differently from the latter. While the majority preferred Tony’s masculinity,

Matthias' delicate, boyish charm would undoubtedly become irresistible to girls who liked a challenge.

After all, he had a strong chin and a delicately chiseled face that made him look as though he had stepped out from a painting. The longer one took in his features, the better they looked. While she had never appraised him too closely, she couldn't help but sneak a couple more glances now that they were standing side by side.

When he turned to look at her, he flashed a smile that reminded her of warm sunshine, making it hard for her to break her gaze. He had always seemed so menacing and devious, but now he looked every bit the golden boy and she swore she could feel the warmth radiating from him.

The door then creaked open to reveal Paige standing on the other side of the threshold.

Heather was mildly surprised to see her, but she shrugged it off when she realized that it was the weekend. Matthias, on the other hand, maintained a courteous smile on his face.

Meanwhile, Paige was surprised to see the both of them standing on the doorstep. She had only just read about their alleged scandal in the paper yesterday, and now they were right before her.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Heather said politely.

"That's alright. Come on in," Paige replied enthusiastically and beckoned her in. She did not dare to look at Matthias. He was much more handsome in person than she had imagined.

Upon entering the house, he saw Josiah reading the finance column in the paper and went up to greet him. "I'm sorry for being here without notice." He feigned a sense of humility as he said those words.

Josiah's gaze was a meaningful one as he regarded the younger man and after the both of

them exchanged a knowing look, they resumed the pretense of a first meeting. Heather appeared even more perfunctory as she quickly interjected, “He’s one of my business partners and he told me he would very much like to meet both of you today. Please excuse me for making such last-minute changes to our arrangement.” The both of them were so courteous with their greeting that the Saffords began to grow flustered. They didn’t expect those two important people to be so modest. Wanting to break the ice in the room, Paige hastily invited them to take their seats, although she couldn’t help but mirror their courtesy as she responded, “Please, there’s no need to be so formal with us. It would only make us look like complete tyrants.” While they might have seemed polite on the surface, each of them was harboring dark thoughts of their own. Paige and Heather sat on one side of the upholstery while Matthias took the seat across from theirs, smiling as he did so. Josiah’s gaze would flicker to him every once in a while and when she noticed it, Heather simply brushed it off as curiosity on the older man’s part. However, Paige had noticed this too and it struck her as odd that her father, who was not a curious man by nature, was constantly appraising Matthias. It made her take a few more glances at Matthias and she found herself liking him even more. She blushed and chided herself for having such thoughts. She had read about the scandal between him and Heather, after all. He was somebody untouchable and only Heather could match his standards. After reading the news yesterday, Paige had been sure that Heather would never fall for him, but their presence today had proved her wrong. She grew sullen at her own misjudgment and the abrupt shift in her expression stoked Heather’s curiosity. Once they had settled down, he was the first to break the silence, taking out a folder from

his briefcase as he said, "I've brought with me today a rough copy of our business proposal.

You may take a look if you're interested."

Heather shot a surprised look at Matthias. She had brought along a detailed proposal as well, but she did not plan on showing it to Paige and Josiah before they agreed to a partnership.

What was more mind-boggling was the fact that Heather had never told Matthias much about her proposal in the first place, so how would he have known to come up with one on his own?

Needless to say, his bold move made her uneasy. Has he always been this audacious?

Doesn't he think he's crossing a line here? She bristled and glanced at the proposal. He had

only prepared one and he was handing that copy to Josiah.

Trying to remain composed, she shot Matthias a dark look, as though telling him that she

was unhappy with how he had failed to consult her beforehand. Next to her, Paige was

quietly observing their silent interaction and she found herself getting inexplicably upset.

She never thought she would be drawn to someone at first sight. She was wistful as she

peeked at Matthias and lamented over how she could not call a handsome man like him her

own; he had belonged to someone else, namely Heather.

As of now, the four of them were quiet. The only sound that filled the space was the rustling

of paper as Josiah flipped through the proposal. While the man perused the pages, Matthias

subtly gave Heather a placating look, as if telepathically asking her to be patient.

Meanwhile, she was furious with him, but she had kept such a calm, patient front that not

even Paige could tell she had lost her temper.

She didn't know whether he was trying to help Heather or muck things up for her and she

grew antsy as she watched Josiah turn the pages. Even if they managed to humor the Saffords with the proposal, she wasn't sure whether she would be expected to follow through with everything written on it.

Time ticked by and after what felt like a long moment, he finally handed the proposal back to Matthias.

Much to Paige and Heather's astonishment, Josiah agreed to the offer. "It's an honor for me to be acknowledged by both of you. I won't have much to offer at this old age of mine, but I would be more than willing to help with the back end of the business."

He was a proud man who was set in his ways and persuading him was no easy feat. The

business proposal that had brought about such a rare occasion piqued Paige's interest,

although she could not summon the courage to ask Matthias for a copy. Little did she know

that he had no intention to hand her the proposal. He was only putting on a show, after all,

and Josiah happened to be his co-star.

Presently, the hardest part of the meeting was over and everything ended on a pleasant

note. Heather was about to leave with Matthias in tow when she turned and asked him for

the proposal. He merely chuckled and handed her the folder. When he proceeded to open

her car door, she gave him a quizzical look.

He was forthcoming and thick-skinned as he explained, "I asked the chauffeur to drop me

off this morning, and he left after that. I'm afraid I'll have to hitch a ride with you, Miss

Langston."

She made no retort and slid into the passenger seat of the car, her head bent as she

scanned through the proposal. How cunning of him, she thought as she perused the pages.

He had kept the terms vague and the ambiguity allowed her to do whatever she liked in the

future.

Matthias was maneuvering the vehicle down the road when Heather placed the proposal

down and remarked, "It's amazing how you've managed to persuade Josiah with such a

proposal." She was doubtful of him and she couldn't shake the feeling that he was hiding

something; she had seen how Josiah's eyes darkened with implication when he looked at

Matthias in the Safford House.

"The ends justify the means, don't you think? If you don't mind, we'll be driving back to Locke

Group. I believe there's an agreement that awaits both our signatures,"

Matthias replied

smoothly, raising a brow in amusement.

Of course he would bring that up. She heaved a sigh of resignation. She had promised to

sign the agreement yesterday and it would be a bad look on her if she were to go back on

her word. I wonder if I can come up with an excuse right now, she thought with mute

despair. As they rode in silence, the roguish grin on his face broadened.

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As the Locke Group came into view, Matthias' face brightened with triumph.

Meanwhile,

Heather had no idea why he looked cheery. Could the agreement be that important to him?

She calmly followed him into the building after they had gotten down from the car. Ever

since they assumed the mantle of a couple, she found that she no longer needed to fret

about a lot of things. Having said that, the gray areas that existed in their relationship made

her re-examine her plans to file a lawsuit against the Apple Gazette, especially when things

were not as clear as they once had been.

They were the only two who occupied the elevator. As they went up the building, they were

unusually quiet and while she stared at the floor numbers flashing in the elevator as they went up the building, his gaze flickered to her every once in a while. The first person that Heather saw when she stepped out of the elevator was his assistant, to whom she did not pay any attention during her last visit since she had been in a hurry. Upon proper appraisal, she saw that his assistant was a doll-faced young lady with an endearing, unassuming demeanor—the way Myra had been when she was younger. Heather noted the resemblance with mild amusement. She wondered where Matthias had managed to look for an assistant who looked so much like Myra. The younger girl had a pleasant look about her and unlike Myra, she had a bubbly edge to her disposition. Heather looked away from the assistant and gazed at him meaningfully. His lips were curved up in the barest hint of a smile as he pulled the door open for her and said, “After you.” He had been in a terrific mood since she saw him that morning, which made her uneasy. Her skin prickled as she tried to figure out the tricks he had up his sleeve. The door clicked shut and she was unruffled as she strode forward to take the seat across from him. He lowered his head as he took the agreement and deftly slid it over to her. Heather took the contract and as she scanned through it, she saw that the additional terms they discussed the day before had been incorporated into the contract. Basically, she could find no fault with the agreement. When she had consulted Mr. Presgraves yesterday, he did not seem to think the terms were problematic even after she had paraphrased them. Seeing as there was nothing fishy or peculiar about the agreement, she put down her signature without any complaint. A small smile colored her face as she recalled the days

when she had managed the European branch of Langston Group. She had signed her name with the same flourish back then.

Rising from her seat, she reached out to give Matthias a perfunctory handshake.

“I look

forward to working with you,” she said. The whole process of signing the contract was

simple; it was as though there was nothing more other than the inception of a business

partnership.

Matthias couldn't help but admire this particular side of Heather; it was a practical move for

them to draw out their partnership and state their terms in black and white. He would be

sure to take good care of the special contract which they had just signed.

Each of them kept a copy of the contract and while that should have been the conclusion of

this event, he noticed that she had no intention of leaving as she tapped her pen against the

stack of paperwork in her hand. As such, he decided to start a casual conversation with her.

“Is there anything else I can help you with, Miss Langston?” he asked politely.

She shook her head at first, but after a while, she nodded. “Actually, yes, there is. What's your

assistant's name?” At the thought of the young girl outside, she found herself remembering

how Myra had looked back in their schooling days.

“Lara Locke,” he answered. Upon hearing that, Heather frowned and began to wonder at her

identity. She had not been expecting the assistant to share the same family name as

Matthias.

“Is she a member of the Locke Family?” It was aimless to ponder on something like this

when she could directly ask him for an answer instead.

Matthias shook his head and chuckled as he answered, “No, she just happens to have the

same family name, that's all. She's the only daughter of an ordinary, middle-class family.” He

had placed emphasis on the term ‘only daughter’ to sound convincing.

Not wanting to dawdle any longer, Heather decided that it was time for her to leave. She straightened her posture and announced courteously, “It’s time for me to get going.”

He straightened his back as well and offered with the same air of courtesy, “Please, allow me to see you off.” As they were both stiff and formal, it looked like it would take a while before they relaxed around each other.

As she headed out of Matthias’ office, Heather deliberately glanced over at Lara. She had to admit that he had a rather acquired taste when it came to selecting his assistants. Where Nikolai resembled his younger self, Lara was essentially a replica of a young Myra. However, if she had to be honest, Matthias’ devotion to such details was perverse, in that it was borderline obsession.

After getting into the car, Heather made her way to the Stark Group to pay Myra a visit. At this point, the woman might as well make a home out of her office, seeing that she cared so little for her pregnancy and relentlessly threw herself into her work. Heather had not shown up at Stark Group since she argued with Myra, which explained why her sudden visit took the latter by surprise.

Meanwhile, Myra’s head was spinning from all the work she had been tied up with all morning, which made her naturally surprised by Heather’s unannounced visit. Nonetheless, she was happy to see Heather and pleasantly greeted her.

Empathy flashed across Heather’s beautiful features as she appraised the tired look on

Myra’s face. Pregnant women were supposed to stay away from caffeine and because there was a child in her womb, Myra was constantly fatigued.

Upon the sight of all the documents on Myra’s desk, Heather grew displeased and pointed

out in irritation, “You do realize that you’re pregnant, don’t you?” She sounded like a strict

parent who was about to lecture her child.

Myra pursed her lips and looked away in guilt. She didn't know how she was supposed to

respond to Heather's unexpected chiding.

Assuming the solemn look of an experienced doctor, Heather went on to say, "You can't

afford to be a workaholic during your pregnancy. Think about the baby!"

"Heather, there are things in Stark Group that need to be resolved as soon as possible," Myra

answered wearily, although she lacked the courage to look at Heather. Myra feared that if

she did, she would be met with a sharp look of disapproval.

"Isn't there anyone else who could do the work for you around here?" Heather snapped

incredulously.

Myra grew flustered at the sight of her friend's darkened face. Tony told me the same thing

yesterday and now I'm getting lectured by Heather. She didn't even know what she had done

wrong. As a result, she gazed at Heather with a resentful pout. It was bad enough that she

was swamped with work, but to be berated by both her husband and her close friend made

her feel worse.

Myra replied helplessly, "There are things that I need to do on my own."

Indeed, she would

much rather peruse all the paperwork than to let others take up the task. After all, there was

sensitive information contained in those.

Upon hearing that, Heather marched up to the desk and swept her gaze over the

documents. Then, she said stonily, "I'll take care of the rest." She had always been the more

efficient out of the two when it came to sorting through the deskwork.

Appreciative as she was, Myra was adamant that she needed to personally go through

those files. With that in mind, she eyed Heather hesitantly before she slowly answered,

"These are the company's backlog work. I don't know if..."

Heather was oddly insistent despite the reluctance in the other girl's tone. "I could always ask you for help if I run into problems with the documents, seeing as you'll be here."

There was no way of changing Heather's mind, so Myra vacated her seat and stepped away from the desk as Heather responded, "Go over to the couch and give yourself a break." It was as if she had taken charge of the entire office.

Before long, Heather had her head buried in the paperwork. With a document in hand, she broke the silence in the room by saying, "I'll be officially training under Langston Group from tomorrow onward, so I won't be able to help you out with much for the foreseeable future. Let me do what I can to assist you today." That was the way she had always treated Myra—with infallible altruism and kindness.

Although if she had to be honest, there had been days when she approached Myra with ulterior motives. However, she had made up for it with genuine friendship and affection toward the girl.

Taken aback by what Heather had told her, Myra asked, "What about your plans to start your own business? Why are you training at Langston Group all of a sudden?" Knowing Heather, she could not have voluntarily done so.

"This is all Blake's doing. You know how he's trying to set me up all the time and he asked me to train at the company in front of the whole family. It wasn't as if I could reject this while Grandpa was in the room, so I had to say yes." There was resentment in Heather's tone and Myra could tell she was extremely unhappy about being forced into something she didn't want to do.

Myra was well aware about Blake's hostility toward Heather, but after hearing what he had

done this time, she had to admit that he was an expert saboteur. Then, a sudden thought seized Myra. “I heard that your junior will be flying over soon to help you with your entrepreneurial plans. Won’t the training affect this in any way?” she asked worriedly. What if Heather can’t cope with all of this? “Don’t worry, I can manage. Besides, I won’t be staying at Langston Group for long. Blake’s leaving me in charge of some major project and once I’m done with that, I’ll leave the company.” He had sent her all the relevant information on the project and at the thought of the same, Heather grew frustrated and quirked her lips in dismay. Blake had mentioned that it was a straightforward project during dinner the other day, but after glancing through the paperwork, she realized that it was extremely complex by nature. It looked like he was trying to buy himself more time by making her struggle. She was pulled from her thoughts when Myra pointed out mockingly, “Blake is really going all the way to make you suffer, isn’t he?” Heather gave a rueful smile. “He’s twisted in his thinking. The way he treats me and Grandpa is borderline psychotic. He hates me, but he wants to defeat me at the same time. He also shares a weird love-hate relationship with Grandpa. I’m worried that he might do something bad to Grandpa one day.” Blake’s hostility toward her had worsened over the past few years, but thankfully, he had only acted out to spite Robert and he had not crossed any lines thus far. “I don’t think he would. Didn’t you say that he respects Old Master Langston the most? He might be twisted, but I don’t think he would go so far as to hurt somebody he respects.” To a certain extent, Myra was an advocate for the existence of conscience in others like the kind soul that she was.

Heather smiled and said nothing. Indeed, she had been the one who firmly believed that Blake would not dare to hurt Robert. However, now that he held so much power in his hands and coupled with the worsening of his already unstable temperament, who was to say he would not go berserk and do something crazy? “Don’t dwell on it and leave things be. You can’t avoid what has already been predestined, you know, but there are always ways to deal with it when it comes,” Myra comforted. After being friends for so long, it was natural for them to worry for each other and this time was no different. “I know. Maybe Blake isn’t as menacing as I thought.” Heather wondered what it might be like for her to trust in someone—to keep the faith in spite of the disappointment. Both women spent the rest of the day talking between intervals. Being the multitasker that she was, Heather was not distracted from the work at hand even as she conversed with Myra. Intermittently, she would ask Myra for clarification, seeing as she was still largely unfamiliar with the various aspects of Stark Group. Nonetheless, given her natural ability to comprehend and absorb new information, her work was not hindered in the process. Heather was able to make accurate judgments after listening to Myra’s description. Her decisiveness made her more efficient than Myra when it came to managing certain things at work. “For a person who has just taken over Stark Group, you’re far too soft to command any real respect from your subordinates. There are probably those who don’t recognize you as the head of the company at all,” Heather chided, though not in an unkind way.

As far as she was concerned, Myra was not cut out for the battlefield that was the commercial world. She was far too tolerant with others and gave many second chances to those who did not deserve them. Judging from how morally bankrupt society was these days, it would not benefit her to be generous with others. Conversely, there were more shameless and greedy folks who would take people like Myra for granted. Heather sometimes wished that Myra could be a little more ruthless, but when she finally saw exactly how brutal the latter could be, she began to wish differently.

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Heather woke up early during her first day at work. It had been a while since she had done that. Langston Group operated according to regular office hours nine to five, so she wanted to get there early to finish the project. That way, she could leave the company as soon as possible.

Because Heather and Matthias had come into close collaboration, she figured she could secure Matthias's help. Considering his relationship with Blake, the latter might just listen to him.

She never knew Matthias could come in handy at a time like this. Nonetheless, she had her own agenda. As a person who worked in the field of business, she had her own methods.

After all, using people, being used by people, as well as using each other, were common phenomena among individuals like them.

With the passage of time, Heather had gradually come to shed her anxiety regarding her methods, as she realized she would inevitably have to step over someone else if she was aiming for the top.

When she got to the company, Blake was still dining at home. As he sat there at the dining table, Robert made a point to give praise to Heather. “She seems pretty earnest on her first day at work. As her brother, you need to put in the effort to lead her.” Despite the smile that Robert was wearing, he had a threatening gaze in his eyes when he looked at Blake.

Although Blake was aware that Robert was warning him against giving Heather a hard time, he was going to do as he pleased while in the company, as he would already be out of Robert’s reach by then. “Don’t you worry, Grandpa. I will make sure to teach her everything I know.”

Even though the tension in Blake and Robert’s relationship seemed to have subsided, they were the only ones who knew it was actually getting worse. Anything that Heather did was fine with Robert, and that would subsequently irk Blake, once again setting off his hatred toward Robert and Heather.

With Robert siding with Heather, it was impossible for Blake to reconcile with Robert.

Nonetheless, it was also Blake who got himself into that situation in the first place. If it weren’t for his overeagerness to succeed in his endeavors, he never would’ve gotten into a deadlock with Robert.

When Blake finally got to the company, Heather was already in her office. Apparently, she didn’t feel the need to restrict herself, as if the company was already hers. It wasn’t until Blake knocked on the glass door of her office that she lifted her head. Prior to that, she was focused on going through the documents in front of her. She seemed to radiate a unique charm when she was engrossed in work; a charm that could even cast a spell on Blake in spite of his antagonistic attitude toward her. At the same time, he also got

increasingly jealous of her, as he seemed even more dull in contrast to her natural charm.

“You’re finally here, Blake.” Heather wore a faint smile. Since she was in the company, she

was determined to put up a convincing facade. Despite her relationship with Blake in

private, he was her superior in the company. Therefore, she had to greet him amicably,

which was only appropriate considering their work relationship.

With all eyes on them while they were in a space with optimum transparency, Heather didn’t

want to step out of line for fear of jeopardizing her own social standing. She made sure to

keep up appearances in order to leave a good impression of herself with the other

employees.

Blake was also aware of that aspect, so he pretended to care for Heather on the surface.

Besides, his direct participation wasn’t required to make Heather’s life difficult. He could

simply delegate the task to his subordinates, which could also effectively shift the blame

away from himself.

Therefore, the two of them contended behind everyone else while maintaining an act on the

surface as caring siblings. Wearing a smirk, Blake said, “Heather, how are you adapting to

your position?” He arched his brow at her. Even though he didn’t like her, it wasn’t to the

point that he would do something to put the company in a crisis.

In order to give Heather a hard time without ruining the project, he would make Heather

prove herself in the following days. The thought of being able to teach her a lesson was

exhilarating. In fact, he was planning to get in touch with the person who was in charge of

the project.

If Heather was able to complete the project without a hitch despite the multiple setbacks, he

would take it as proof of her capabilities. If she couldn't, then it would be time for him to prove that he was far more superior than her.

At that time, Heather had yet to see through Blake's intentions. While she was in charge of the project, Blake was also checking in on it behind her back. After spending some time on small talk, Blake left the place, and Heather sniggered while watching his retreating figure.

He made himself so obvious. I suppose a rocky road lies ahead of me. She was fiddling with a felt-tipped pen when she recalled having a fountain pen that she hadn't used for some time, which was probably tucked away in a corner at home. Leon also

had a similar pen. He's coming soon. The thought of it soothed her greatly. She already got into work mode when she was in Stark Group last night, so she wasn't all that stressed when she started working on the project. Having studied about the project beforehand, she was now looking through the details.

Although the whole thing looked alright at first glance, she discovered that there were actually a lot of hidden problems. Suddenly, she let out a yawn. She was already tired even though she had only been working for a short time, which proved just how strenuous the project was.

Spending all day studying the project would be tiring, so she figured it was time to relax.

Opening the glass door, she then decided to take a stroll in the premises of the company.

After all, she wasn't expecting Blake to give her a tour.

I'm grateful enough that Blake didn't give me more trouble. As usual, Heather wore a smile.

Since it was her first day at work, she thought it would be important to showcase her friendliness, which was, regardless of her intent, being recognized by most people as more of a show of her indifference.

The aloof smile she wore was striking enough to indicate to those who were paying attention that nobody should cross her. When Blake, who was working in his office, received a report from his assistant regarding Heather's whereabouts, he smirked. That's just how she is.

After a quick round, Heather already got a grasp of the state that the company was in. She even managed to deduce who was loyal to Blake, as those lackeys would abhor the person whom their master hated as well.

There was a hostile air about them that came from nowhere even though it was her first time meeting those people. Therefore, it signified that these were the people who sided with Blake to treat her as an enemy.

She made sure to glare at them for a tad bit longer so that her gaze could pierce them right into their hearts, all the while maintaining a contemptuous smile. Who do they even think they are to display their hostility in public?

After making her first impression, she decided to call for a meeting. Blake didn't appoint an assistant for her, so there were a lot of tasks that she couldn't handle because she was unfamiliar with the workings of the company. Therefore, she picked out a man whom she deemed as decent to be her temporary assistant.

The man she summoned looked at her shyly. There were only the two of them in the office, but Heather didn't care how the other employees perceived her. He seemed like a bit of a pushover. With my charm, it would be easier to get through to men. A woman might turn me down without hesitation. After all, it is easier for women to turn down other women, whereas men would defer to me more easily.

"Director Heather, don't we need to report this to Director Blake?" The man was blushing

already; he was on the verge of being completely persuaded by Heather. “I will be temporarily taking charge of the project in the northern suburbs. From what I heard, you have been working diligently on that project, so I think you will be a suitable candidate as my assistant.” Heather made sure to keep her tone formal. Although that man seemed docile enough, Heather noticed an ambitious streak in his eyes. Thus, she was certain he would take the opportunity that was presented to him. “I’m afraid—” There was still a shred of hesitancy in him. She cut him off directly. “Bilbo, you don’t have to worry about Director Blake. I will inform him personally about this.” Seeing that Bilbo was worried about Blake’s opinion of him made it apparent that the entire company was aware that she had beef with Blake. While staring at Heather’s pretty face, Bilbo Lawson agreed to her request unwittingly. As ambitious as he was, he was aware of the feud between Blake and Heather, and that the company ultimately belonged to Blake. Theoretically speaking, he shouldn’t have agreed to work as Heather’s assistant, but her eyes were too enchanting. He couldn’t even maintain eye contact with her as his heart rate would skyrocket. With Heather’s overwhelming charms, a young man like him could hardly turn down her offer. “I’ll summon everyone who is involved in the project for a meeting in the meeting room.” Bilbo sounded resolute in his response. In return, Heather smiled knowingly while giving him a nod. He is smart. I wonder what he is capable of. It might be a good idea to bring him with me to my own company in the future. With that in mind, her smile broadened. Now that Blake got me into his company, I can’t work under him just like that. If I find employees with potential, it might be a good idea to hire them for myself.

Having found herself a turning point, Heather was feeling less gloomy, and her mood had lightened up considerably. With an aim in mind, she felt more motivated to work. However, she realized she would be doing Robert a disservice, but she figured she could make it up to him by treating him better in their daily life together in order to rid her of her sense of guilt.

Although the crazy idea of hiring someone from her family's company was exhilarating, she wouldn't mention it to anyone yet, considering that it was her first day at work.

After suppressing her excitement, she tidied up the documents on her desk. She had decided to flex a little during the meeting later. Since it was her first day stepping into the position, a lot of people wouldn't trust her, so she figured she should dominate them by showing them her skills.

When Heather entered the meeting room, she garnered everybody's attention. By that point, she wasn't even wearing a smile anymore. Instead, her face had reverted to its usual stoic expression.

As soon as she got in, everyone in the room tensed up. Bilbo came to her aid right away, and she watched him with satisfaction. From the looks of it, Bilbo was the first person whom she had gotten under her wing.

Meanwhile, there were others who were still observing the situation, as well as two of them who were on full alert. When she checked on those who were looking at her carefully, she noticed they were among Blakes's loyal subordinates.

Things will surely get interesting in the future. Never a coward, her first response to a challenge was always to face it head on. No matter the difficulties, she was certain she could overcome them.

“I’m not familiar with you all. Although I do have some info on you, I suppose reading whatever that is written on here makes no difference.” Heather had a stern look on her that made her look like a school teacher. “I dislike things that are unnecessarily bombastic, so you’d better offer me a short introduction of yourselves that I will be satisfied with.” Her domineering attitude got everybody strung up, as nobody knew what she would do next.

Soon enough, the languid atmosphere was taken over by one that was indescribably tense;

Heather’s presence had managed to unnerve everyone.

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Silence hung heavy in the air of the meeting room. Upon witnessing such a reaction from everybody else, Heather gave them a faint smile that immediately thawed out the chilly look on her face. Lighting up the enclosed space in everybody’s heart, her smile was as bright as the sun. It was so enticing that those people could hardly avert their gaze from her.

“Allow me to start by introducing myself. My name is Heather Langston.

Heather, otherwise

known as *Calluna vulgaris*, derived its name from the Greek word ‘*kallunein*’, which means to

beautify, or sweep clean. Incidentally, I came with the intention to improve things by purging

those that are unnecessary.” As she spoke, she glanced at the two people. All eight of her

team members present in the room knew what she meant to imply during her self

introduction.

“When I was studying in Italy, I had been managing the Langston Group’s branch company in

Europe. Today is my first day in the headquarters of Langston Group. To be frank, the

headquarters is no match for the branch company. As you would have already known,

Langston Group is currently focused on its operations in Europe.” Heather’s straightforward attitude was almost nerve wracking, especially for Blake’s subordinates. The flabbergasted look on their faces elicited from her a satisfied smile. “This is also why Director Blake has been travelling to Europe. However, as a family who have our roots in Bradford City, of course the Langstons would like to improve our century-old company.” The ups and downs in Heather’s words left them hanging. It was as if they were on a roller-coaster ride, and Heather might surprise them with anything at the next instant.

“I have a doctorate in economics in which I achieved outstanding performances in both its theoretical and practical aspects.” The look she wore when she was nonchalantly praising herself was somewhat adorable.

By then, Blake’s subordinates smiled awkwardly when they realized Heather shouldn’t be trifled with. Instead of them giving her a hard time in the future, it was likely that the opposite would be true, as she was obviously not a pushover. Although they already heard of Heather’s various deeds, it wasn’t until they had met her in person that they knew the rumors weren’t, in fact, an exaggeration.

“I dislike it when people give me trouble, and my orders must be carried out with perfection. If I delegate a task to you, it’s because I believe you will be able to accomplish it, so make sure that you do not half-arse it.” Heather swept her eyes across the room. She wasn’t kidding at all, as she had always been exceptionally strict when it came to her employee’s performance.

There was utter silence in the room when everybody was mulling over what Heather just told them. Every line she said hit home, so nobody dared take her lightly. It was apparent

that it would be an uphill climb from then on.

“Who’s next?” Heather arched her brow while gazing at Bilbo. Since she was obviously

cueing him, Bilbo offered to go next. Following the format which she used, he introduced

himself in a straightforward manner to show his support toward her.

Heather was satisfied by his introduction. After that, everybody introduced themselves in

their own unique ways. Throughout the process, she was happy that she was able to know

more about her team members.

“Next on, let us cut to the chase.” Forty minutes had passed by then. From the looks of it, all

eight of them acknowledged that the first meeting would take a long time.

However, Heather

gave them a task after giving them a brief explanation using the PPT that she had made just

now.

“You should come up with your own opinions regarding the project.

Tomorrow, each of you

will be handing me a proposal about this. Nobody is to discuss this among yourselves.” She

had a stoic look on her face that left them feeling all strung up. “It’s just like how lecturers

don’t like to receive two similar theses. When this happens to be the case, my lecturer would

have the students rewrite them.” She was smirking when she spoke, and her words sounded

threatening.

“By the way, I mean it when I say I want all eight of your proposals tomorrow. Even if your

proposal got rejected, you will still be required to hand in another one that would satisfy me

by tomorrow.” She gave them an ultimatum, as she was adamant that the team should think

hard about the project, and that everybody should contribute to the project instead of

constantly relying on other people’s wisdom.

To her, the company had no need for employees who would make no contribution toward

the company. In that regard, she was even more merciless than Blake.

Although Langston

Group was a distinguished company that only accepted elites, it was overstaffed nonetheless.

When she was managing the branch company in Europe, she had laid off quite a number of

employees. After all, it wasn't a good thing to have too many people holding a similar

position. Having too many employees would only lead to office politics that would affect

their performance. Instead of having that, she would rather offer a higher salary to one

person so that he could do his best while on the job. Eight people was a little excessive for

the team. From her point of view, four or five would be enough, so she wouldn't hesitate to

kick whoever that didn't perform well out of the team.

When the meeting was over, everybody felt relieved, as Heather had given them quite a lot of

pressure. Bilbo was even feeling fortunate that he had accepted her offer earlier, or else she

wouldn't have let him off the hook that easily.

They had a two hour lunch break after that, so they were actually working for only six hours

per day. Langston Group was relaxed in that regard, which was another reason people

fought to get into the company. Since the company wasn't putting a lot of focus on their

headquarters, there wasn't a lot to do while working there.

Nonetheless, as a family that had a reputation to keep up, the Langstons wouldn't allow the

headquarters of their company to look too shoddy, so they made sure to have as many

employees as other companies.

That was one of the aspects that annoyed Heather, and she couldn't understand Blake's

reasons for not changing what happened either. She acknowledged his capabilities and

ambition, but he was a bit of a wild card, for she never knew what he was up to.

Heather didn't have a lot of power over the company, so all she could do at that point was focus on completing the project with outstanding results. She wouldn't be crossing paths with Langston Group in the future anyway, so she decided to focus on her own company instead.

Actually, she had complicated feelings toward Langston Group, which perhaps stemmed from her anger toward its lackadaisical policies. Unfortunately, she would never inherit the company, and Blake would never do as she wished either.

When she got back to her office, she saw one unread message in her phone that she left on

the table. When she opened it, she realized it was a message from Matthias. A genuine

smile crept onto her face; she never expected to see Matthias behave so childishly, for the

message he sent read, 'You never accept my friend requests on social media. I won't do this

a fourth time.'

After logging into her Facebook account that didn't have a lot of friends to begin with, she

accepted Matthias' friend request in resignation after checking it out. She would be tied to

him for a long time in the future after all. Then, she massaged the back of her neck. The

hectic work schedule in the morning gave her a stiff neck. Right after she accepted

Matthias' friend request, he immediately sent her a few messages.

'Let's have lunch together. I have already arrived at the lobby of your company.' The rest of

the message consisted of emojis. Judging from that, he seemed bored. In fact, he might

have a lot of time on his hands, which made her wonder if there wasn't a lot of work in

Locke Group.

‘Why don’t you come up to fetch me?’ She had signed a contract with Matthias, so it meant that they were—according to the terms—a couple. Thus, she figured doing something couples would do wouldn’t seem out of place.

‘Alright, my darling.’ Matthias even added a smiley emoji at the end of his text.

Why does he sound like a big boy? Heather thought in resignation, but she figured she would get used to the bizarreness of it in no time.

However, there were a lot of coincidences in the world. Right before lunch, Blake came for

Heather. “Let me show you to the staff canteen.” There was a brilliant smile on his face.

In Langston Group, only the higher-ups and the Langstons themselves were entitled to a private dining room. Therefore, the fact that Blake wanted to bring her to the staff canteen

was a humiliation in itself. Not only was he doing it in her face, but he was also effectively showing the staff Heather’s status in the company.

When she was thinking of a way to respond to that, there was a knock on the door. Both of

the Langstons glanced in the direction of the door to see Matthias standing by it. Heather’s

eyes lit up as soon as she saw him. He sure got here in time! she thought.

“Come on in.” She

made a deliberate effort to show affection toward Matthias.

“Heather, can we leave now?” Matthias also responded to her endearingly.

Although Heather

wasn’t quite used to it, she didn’t let it show. By that point, Blake was dumbfounded as he

turned to look at both of them. He had no idea how the two sworn enemies became so

close to each other.

“Two more minutes. Just wait for a moment.” Heather checked her watch.

Then, she

explained to Blake, “Matthias came to fetch me, as we will be celebrating my first day at

work during lunch.” By that, she was implying that she wouldn’t be going to the staff canteen with Blake.

When Blake glanced at Matthias, the latter nodded with a smile. “That’s right. Her first day at work in Langston Group is an occasion that is worth a celebration. Why don’t you come with us, Blake?” Matthias was being all affectionate even toward Blake.

Annoyed by that, Heather glared at Matthias. He went overboard with that. Even though

we’re a couple, we only started dating for a while. With how he’s behaving, he’s making it seem like I’m determined to marry him.

“What’s going on with you two?” Blake pointed at the both of them in confusion.

“Blake, haven’t you been trying to introduce Matthias to me? You should feel happy for us

now that we’ve naturally gotten together.” Heather sounded nonchalant as she witnessed

the multiple expressions that alternated on Blake’s face.

“Yeah. I appreciate that you have put in some good words for me.” Matthias went along with

it. Since he was tied together with Heather, he would undoubtedly side with her in public.

“So are you two a couple now?” Blake was still in disbelief. The fact that his wish had come

true came as a surprise to him. Yet, something felt decidedly off about it. After all, what he

wanted wasn’t for Matthias to be protective over Heather. It would be unfair if the heavens

were to give her a boyfriend who loved her. Blake was actually aiming to have them wear

each other out.

“Yup! I hope you can keep this a secret. After all the drama that took place between us, we

would like to keep our relationship out of public sight.” With how sincere Heather sounded,

no one would know that she was only faking it.

On the other hand, Matthias also added, “That’s right. Our relationship should be kept a

secret for the time being. When the time comes, we will make it public.” By saying that, he was indirectly telling Blake to keep things to himself.

Irrked that his plan had backfired unexpectedly, Blake wore a discontented expression, but he

was still feigning a cheerful attitude as he said, “If that is the case, well...

Congratulations!

You are a great match for each other. I will not be spreading this, so you have nothing to

worry about. Make sure to rejoice in your relationship.”

Blake managed to fake his way through that. Just like that, the three of them were all

wearing masks in each other’s presence.

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Relief washed over Heather when she finally left the company. When she realized there

would be plenty of other occasions that would require her to put on a mask, she couldn’t

help but feel a little deflated.

On the other hand, Matthias seemed relatively unfazed, as if what happened was nothing at

all. When Heather stole glances at him, she noticed he seemed rather cute. She couldn’t

help but be reminded of how he looked when he was a teenager, during which he seemed

malnourished. After a few years, he had become a man with a sturdy build, and it gave her

an odd feeling that she couldn’t explain. It was as if he had become an entirely different

person altogether.

“What would you like to eat?” Matthias inquired in a gentlemanly manner.

“Thai cuisine,” Heather replied offhandedly. After a morning’s work, she didn’t have much

appetite.

Then, she followed behind Matthias without a care in where they were actually going. He

seemed familiar with the place. In fact, he might be even more familiar with the place than

her, for he didn't need a map to find the Thai restaurant that was a ten-minute drive away from the company. While glancing at him curiously, she wanted to ask him about that, but she eventually decided against it because the question sounded a little silly. Matthias picked out a private room in the restaurant. After pulling out a chair for Heather, he pushed the menu toward her as if they were a real couple. "You seem to be in a bad mood," he stated cautiously. There seemed to be a major feud between Heather and Blake, as they appeared to be constantly at each other's throats. "Is it that obvious?" Heather was checking out the menu while she spoke in a flat tone. "I can discern it from your voice." Just like that, Matthias stared at Heather. There was something exceptional about her that day, as he could hardly look away from her. Now that she had kept away her usually sharp attitude at work, she appeared to be rather cute, which made him want to approach her even more. "What prompted you to come to my office just now?" Ignoring his question, she changed the topic diplomatically in an attempt to act naturally while spending time with Matthias. Aside from her feud with Blake, she wasn't too worried about her work life. It was just that she had a bad feeling about being targeted as soon as she got into Langston Group. "Isn't that just normal between couples?" Matthias chuckled, seemingly content with the role he was playing. "Aren't you going to dance around it a little?" Similarly, Heather also let out a chuckle. She only ever did that while in Myra's presence. It was unusual that Matthias was able to amuse her as well. Seeing that her mood had lightened up, Matthias went on to say, "I wasn't expecting things to go so smoothly." In fact, he was surprised that Heather would sign that contract at all.

“I don’t like to hold a grudge. Instead, I would much rather offer someone an olive branch.”

With her head tilted, Heather gazed at Matthias while wearing an innocent look. Ultimately, he didn’t know her well enough.

Nonetheless, he gave her a faint nod. “Why don’t we have some drinks to celebrate the fact

that we have come to a truce?” He was suddenly overcome with the urge to drink. Drinking

with Heather had always been enjoyable.

“The restaurant might not have quality wine.” Heather was particular when it came to wine.

Not only did she enjoy drinking wine, but she enjoyed quality wine. In fact, all the wine she

drank was expensive.

“Why don’t I come fetch you tonight? We can drink at my house then,” Matthias suggested.

“Do you need some company because today is a special day?” Heather revealed an

understanding smile; she knew that he needed someone to spend time with after being

alone for so long.

Upon being exposed by Heather, Matthias revealed a wicked smile. So she knew what I was

thinking all along. In recent years, he had been focusing on building his career, so he didn’t

spend much time around women. Although a lot of women expressed interest in him, he

didn’t reciprocate their feelings.

Besides, his heart belonged to Myra, so he wouldn’t even spare a glance at other women. It

was just that he wanted to be close to Heather that day. He didn’t want to spend the

occasion alone, and for some reason, he just wanted to be close to Heather.

“Lovers come together during Valentine’s Day,” Matthias muttered to himself.

“When

everybody is getting together, I also feel like spending the day with someone.”

If it weren’t for the fact that Myra had sent Heather a Valentine’s greeting via text that

morning, she wouldn't have realized it was Valentine's Day. Compared to Myra, who had her fair share of romance with Tony, Heather was feeling somewhat lonely, especially since it was Valentine's Day. Matthias was her nominal boyfriend after all, so she was slightly swayed by the idea of drinking with Matthias; it was nice to drink with him. "It will depend on your sincerity." Heather's reply was ambiguous. Back when she was living abroad, she had gotten a lot of invitations during Valentine's Day, but she accepted none of them. Since Valentine's was also considered a traditional festival in Solaria, she wished to take such invitations seriously.

Matthias nodded. "I will do my best to impress you, so I hope you will accept my invitation, my dear lady." His cheeky tone almost gave her the impression that they were really in love with each other.

There was some more time after lunch, so Heather and Matthias took a stroll before going back to the company. A stroll after a meal could improve one's health, as well as help with digestion.

"Do you still hate me?" Heather didn't mince her words with Matthias, as she had a feeling that he still hated her.

"Of course. Such deep-seated hatred won't dissipate that easily." He told her the truth. After all, she wasn't someone who could be deceived by flattery.

"You're such a weird person. You keep on pestering me despite your hatred toward me.

Could it be that you actually fancy me?" Heather cracked a joke. Ever since young, she had a lot of suitors. By comparison, Myra seemed dull in her presence. Perhaps Matthias was the only one who had his eyes on Myra while ignoring Heather instead.

Back then, Heather still had some inexplicable feelings toward Matthias, which probably

stemmed from her disappointment over the fact that he didn't even spare her a glance. She seemed to have no appeal toward him.

"Maybe I do like you." Perhaps because Matthias wanted so much to get closer to Heather, he was being honest with his words. "You're a charming woman. As a normal man, I couldn't possibly be immune to your charms." Just like a professional sweet-talker, he sounded alluring.

Heather wore a smirk. "Men like to conquer, so they treat me like the mountains that they want to climb and conquer. In fact, there aren't a lot of people who like me for real. Speaking of which, I sometimes feel like I'm a failure too." Matthias's reply didn't sit well with her.

She was thinking that Matthias was different, but it turned out that he was the same as other men. The only difference was that he only had eyes for Myra. Their honeyed words weren't proof of Heather's attractiveness, but a reflection of their own vanity. They were always on the go to conquer more women, and the best woman would forever be the next woman they were out to conquer.

"This is just how men are. Are you expecting a fairytale romance?" He spoke as if he were engaged in a debate with Heather, with both of them holding opposing views regarding a certain topic.

"No. I don't care for fairytale romances. Princes fall for beautiful princesses, so the only catch is that the people they fall for must be exceptionally beautiful." No longer a young girl, Heather didn't long for that kind of romance. "It's as if beauty and kindness is all there is to women. Yet, those who possess both don't usually find their prince-charming. Instead, they had to deal with all sorts of scoundrels." She hit the nail on the head with that line.

Matthias stopped in his tracks to look at her from behind, then he bid her goodbye.

“Langston Group is just in front, so I won’t be going there. See you tonight.”

Upon hearing that, Heather continued to walk forward without even looking back. “If you

manage to charm me.” She didn’t give him a definitive reply. It was never easy to get to her.

She was that close to seeing him in a new light just because they were role-playing as a

couple. Although they were supposed to put on a show for the public, Heather also had no

intention to settle down for him.

“I still have half a day, which is enough.” Matthias was feeling confident in his abilities.

Meanwhile, Heather had left him behind. While staring at her retreating figure, he was

smiling with much certainty. All of a sudden, he was looking forward to the coming night. He

didn’t even feel like returning to his company. Instead, he planned to use his time to pick up

a few techniques for dating.

I’ve never felt this eager toward any date prior to this. After that, he went to his car with

plans to go to Stark Group. It had been a while since he last saw Myra, so he was very eager

to see her.

Tony Hart must have prepared a lot of surprises for her. The thought of it triggered feelings

of jealousy. He was jealous that Tony was the one who could surprise Myra, as well as the

fact that he was the one who could be with her.

When Matthias arrived at Stark Group, Myra already left on a date with Tony, so he came for

naught. He was planning to use work as an excuse to check on Myra, but alas, he was one

step too late.

Meanwhile, Myra was in the northern suburbs. Suddenly, she sneezed, and that made her

wonder if someone might be missing her. Tony quickly removed his jacket to hand it to her.

In a gentle tone, he reminded, “It’s windy here, so be careful that you don’t catch a cold.”

Tony’s warmth lingered on the jacket that he handed her, which warmed both her body and her heart. She was busy with work that day as usual, but she was dragged away by Tony, so both of them ended up skipping work.

“Is there something novel that you would like to show me?” Myra asked expectantly.

“It’s just a bit further. We will have to go there on foot.” Tony didn’t offer her a direct reply.

Having spent tremendous effort preparing for the surprise, he didn’t want to risk spoiling anything to her.

There was much curiosity on Myra’s face when she stared at Tony. Although Myra never looked forward to Valentine’s Day, Tony seemed to jump at any opportunity for a celebration.

The more time she spent with him, the more she realized he was a romantic man. He was always coming up with ways to entertain her, which was really sweet of him. As they walked forward, Tony was holding onto Myra’s hand tightly. He was planning to show her something different. In order to create that special thing, he had been spending a lot of time working hard on it in secret. After a long wait, he finally found the perfect opportunity to show it to Myra. Although the construction wasn’t completed yet, the basic structures were already in place, which he believed was enough to surprise Myra.

“Tony, why don’t we travel the world after some time?” Myra had been planning to do so for some time. In fact, it wasn’t the first time she mentioned it.