

Nothing Matters, except YOU & Me Chapter 701

As far as she could remember, Nikolai was always a bashful one; she had never seen him so fearless, but was that a good thing? Despite feeling a little touched, she thought that it wasn't right for him to behave as such right now.

Nikolai immediately hung up on her, and Lara didn't know if she should leave or wait for him right now. She tried phoning him again but he didn't pick up the call, and that made her somewhat anxious.

The waiting process seemed like an eternity, and the minutes Lara spent waiting for him felt like years instead. Nikolai was still nowhere to be found, but looking for him wasn't a choice since she was afraid she might miss him.

Eventually, Lara headed to the elevator and waited for the man. If he were to look for her at the underground parking lot, he would have to reach there by the elevator. Hence, she patiently anticipated his arrival.

The display indicated that the elevator had reached the third floor, which meant that it was only a matter of seconds before the elevator shaft would reach the second basement where Lara was anxiously waiting for Nikolai.

She stared at the indicator, wondering if the man was on it. As it descended from the 2nd floor to the 1st, it felt as though the elevator doors would open up any second now.

One of the elevators opened with a ding, but it wasn't the one she had been waiting for. Lara grew frustrated upon that, for it was the most nervous she had ever been.

In fact, it felt as though she was back to her first day at the company; she was a newbie, and she didn't know where to put her eyes when she first met Matthias.

The doors of the elevator she had been anticipating finally opened shortly after, but she was disappointed with the absence of Nikolai. That particular elevator was reserved for the board of directors, but both Lara and Nikolai often used it to avoid the crowded public elevator.

Much to her surprise, Nikolai wasn't on it. As she grinned helplessly, she couldn't tell which elevator he'd be coming out of.

Another set of elevator doors opened within seconds, and Lara glanced inside curiously.

Sadly, there was still no sign of Nikolai. By right, he should have been down here quite some time ago. With that, she racked her brains while trying to figure out which route he'd taken.

When she recalled how Nikolai would often render her speechless, Lara grew more frustrated that she completely forgot about her sadness—all she could think about was him.

Moreover, she felt even more perturbed when she thought about his relationship with Matthias.

Although Lara was rather dissatisfied with the latter, she just wanted him to be well despite everything. When she saw how he had lost both of his trusty aids in one day, she felt compelled to ask Nikolai to return. After all, she knew how important he was to Matthias.

Although Nikolai was probably a strand of hair to the Locke Group, he was very important to Matthias! Since a long time ago, Lara had noticed how Matthias would entrust his greatest wishes with Nikolai. Thus, he couldn't afford to lose the latter. At the very least, now was not the time for his departure.

Perhaps Nikolai was also aware of how awkward Matthias' current position was in Locke

Group. It was at such times that Matthias was left with no one to trust. After all, Nikolai was probably the only person in the entire company whom Matthias believed in the most. Now that he was leaving, Lara felt utterly sorry for her boss.

While she was lost in thought, Nikolai walked out of the elevator. He looked visibly stunned, for he couldn't recall what he had just said to Matthias. Never would he have expected himself to be so 'heroic' in front of the Locke Group's president. Just then, he walked past Lara. If she hadn't regained her senses, they would've missed each other.

"Nikolai." She rushed up to him.

When he heard that, the man turned around stiffly.

"Lara." He was surprised to see her appearing from behind.

"You're really the biggest idiot in the world, Nikolai!" the woman rebuked without holding back.

Since she had already cried her eyes out, she didn't have any energy left to get infuriated.

She hadn't been such a softie in a long while. When he saw that, Nikolai felt a trace of ache

in his heart, thinking what he said to Matthias wasn't that much after all.

"I'm sorry. I was being reckless." He had no idea why he even apologized.

"Why can't you see it? Not only is he your cousin, he also made you grow as a person. How could you just abandon him like that? Who's the heartless one now?"

She painstakingly

lectured Nikolai for his rash actions, for she felt obliged to awaken his senses.

If it weren't for her greed, such a thing wouldn't have happened. Since she still cared about

her own image in front of Nikolai, she didn't dare to reveal the truth while convincing him to return.

At the same time, she knew all this mess was rooted from her selfishness, though she didn't want her true colors—her cunningness and cowardice—to be known to the man in front of her.

"I can't stand his attitude, and I don't want to continue working for such an evil man." Nikolai thought of himself as the protagonist in a story, but he was blind to the mess he had unintentionally caused.

"How long have you been working for him? You should be trusting his qualities by now! Why are you associating him with such words?" She couldn't help but defend Matthias. If she couldn't even blame Matthias herself, how could she allow someone else to do the same?

"Tell me, then. Why did he fire you for no good reason? After your effort all these years, does he not see it? How could he even bear to fire you? What a monster!" Nikolai defended her.

"That's because I was wrong." Although she didn't want the misunderstanding to persist, she couldn't bring herself to explain everything in detail. Then, Lara made a depressed look, and it was not until a while later that she calmly raised her head. "Look, I did something unforgivable. In fact, getting fired was mercy, not punishment."

As he gazed at her in disbelief, Nikolai hadn't understood the message in her words, thinking they were all nonsensical.

"Enlighten me, then. What did you do wrong? What is it that is so unforgivable?" he asked, wanting to see things clearly.

If Lara couldn't answer him, it would mean that she was defending Matthias—that was what Nikolai thought, at the very least. In fact, he was aware of the whole secret admiration that

had been going on, but looking at how despicable he was just pained him.

“Don’t ask any further. Right now, you’re mistakenly blaming him. The fault is mine, and I do

not wish it to get in the way of the two of you,” she explained as she stared into his eyes,

feeling guilty if what she said became reality.

“You’re still defending him! Do you even have a sense of pride?” Nikolai grew more

frustrated at Lara. Why would the woman, who always had such a sharp tongue, become

such a scaredy cat? Why was she saying words that went against her own will when it came

to anything that pertained to Matthias?

When she heard that, Lara was slightly irked. Since she hadn’t expected him to be so

arrogant, she didn’t know how to proceed with the conversation.

“Indeed, I don’t have a sense of pride. In your eyes, I’m just a shameless sell-out who wants

to grab the attention of the director, right?” As she looked into his eyes, she was aggravated

by Nikolai’s invasive comments.

Meanwhile, Nikolai felt discomfited by her glare, and he had no idea why his concern for

Lara had been turned into mockery. Despite having realized his mistake, he couldn’t figure

out why everything had turned this sour.

“I’m sorry, I was triggered. I shouldn’t have said those things about you, but never have I ever

once thought you that way. Don’t be mad at me. I’ll admit that I was going overboard,”

Nikolai hastily apologized. As if he had returned to his original self, the tenderness and

friendliness he once possessed surged in his eyes.

Seeing that, Lara could no longer rebuke him. After all, she was the one at fault. Besides, it

was only because of her that he treated Matthias this way. Deep down, she knew that

Nikolai had nothing but respect for Matthias and she was wrong to have sabotaged their brotherhood.

“No, you should be apologizing to the president.” Lara hoped that Nikolai would let this slide along with the anger he had toward Matthias.

He had initially calmed himself down, but Nikolai became discontented when he heard that.

As he glanced at Lara, he felt a gush of dissatisfaction in his heart.

“I’ve no reason to apologize to him. I did nothing wrong.” Nikolai wanted to halt the argument about the matter as he had no idea what was going on in her mind.

“You’re really persistent, aren’t you?” Lara said as she could see that he didn’t want to dwell on the discussion any longer.

Tactful as she was, Lara felt that it was meaningless to debate any further. Furthermore, she was aware that she was easily irritated right now. Thus, it was better for her to calm down before making any more decisions.

“It looks like you didn’t drive to work today.” Lara went off on a tangent. If it weren’t for her reminder, Nikolai would have forgotten about not driving. Thanks to that, he realized he had nowhere to go.

“Yeah,” he replied calmly. It seemed like as long as his conflict with Matthias wasn’t mentioned, he wouldn’t be enraged.

“Follow me, then. I’ll bring you somewhere nice.” There was a secret garden she kept to herself where she would relieve her stress whenever she was perturbed. The sight and fragrance of the flowers and plants never failed to ease her tension. Having no other choice, Nikolai agreed and followed after her. Seeing how his mood had changed, he felt somewhat odd.

As they were walking, he observed Lara as the latter paced in front of him. Judging by her

swaying posture, her figure looked quite stunning even though she was wrapped in a working outfit. In fact, she probably looked even livelier than that. Just then, Lara pulled the car door open and entered from the passenger's side. Meanwhile, Nikolai took over driving duty and hopped into the driver's seat instead. From the side, Lara appeared rather glamorous as opposed to her front view where she seemed amiable, though that wasn't necessarily the case. Most accurately depicting her true qualities was her side view, and he favored it very much. From her outline to her silhouette, everything from the side captivated him.

"To be honest, Lara, your face is really alluring," Nikolai suddenly blurted out. Perhaps Lara wasn't the uncompetitive woman he had imagined her to be. "What?" She was baffled by his sudden praise. "I'm complimenting you. You look prettier from the side than from the front." Nikolai proceeded to make himself comfortable on the seat, looking as though he had never been this relaxed for a long time. "What are you on about? Is this your first day seeing me?" Lara proceeded to peek at Nikolai, feeling that his somewhat youthful face didn't match his mature age. "Yeah. I've always thought that you've grown into a strong, impeccable woman, but after seeing how you cried earlier, it seems like you're still a little girl after all." Nikolai turned his face to her before giving Lara a tender smile. At that moment, her heart skipped a bit. She quickly turned to the windshield, too bashful to look at the man beside her. As the sunlight fell on half of Nikolai's face, he was rather pleasant to look at—even his smile flaunted the mightiness of a prince.

It had been a long time since Lara had been described as a little girl, but she didn't let her reaction show. Nikolai probably had no idea that his casual remark was making her heart race like crazy. He had always been a dim little boy in Lara's eyes; she knew that she was no match for Matthias, and she understood that there was a certain distance between her and Nikolai as well.

All of a sudden, Lara felt a little miserable—was there no other man left for her in this world? Why did she have to waste her time on this pair of cousins? At that moment, Lara couldn't help but criticize herself for her poor choices.

"You're the one who's acting like a little boy, Nikolai. It feels like you'll never grow up," Lara replied. Her words stunned him momentarily, and he had the urge to refute her claims.

"Are you saying that I'm still a child?" Nikolai seemed quite unhappy with her opinion, for he had clearly improved tremendously in the past few years. Thus, he was unsatisfied to hear that from her.

Lara could make out the discontentment in his tone, so she didn't linger on the topic and brushed it off with a smile. On the other hand, Nikolai stared at Lara in confusion; for the very first time, he was reconsidering who he was in this woman's eyes. Even though Lara had moved on from the topic, Nikolai still couldn't let it go. He said again, "Have you always thought of me as someone who's super childish?" He didn't realize that Lara was praising him, and he thought that it was an insult.

"No." Lara wasn't sure why Nikolai was exceptionally impulsive today, so much that a sentence as simple as that could trigger him immensely. It was pretty unbelievable indeed.

“I’m sorry, I was being too emotional.” Nikolai saw the shift in Lara’s expression and knew at once that it wasn’t a good time to keep prodding on. Otherwise, the two of them might end up in a quarrel again. Nikolai was always like this—even though he was stubborn at times, he knew just when to stop. His sharp attitude immediately put out Lara’s flames of frustration. “Stop apologizing to me. You’ll make me feel guilty.” Lara didn’t want to hear his apology, for it made her feel like she was constantly bullying him. “All right, let’s not talk about this anymore.” Nikolai didn’t know why they were being so fussy with each other today. In fact, their meaningless bickering made them seem a little dumb. Lara nodded. Both of them had just become unemployed, so there was no need to hurt each other with words. Thus, she turned and stared at the road ahead. Right now, her heart was still racing from Nikolai’s earlier words, and she wondered if he was feeling the same. Their car ride wasn’t a long one, but Lara was a little exhausted from it as her emotions were running wild inside. For a split second, she even had doubts if she’d actually fallen for Nikolai. Am I really falling for another man? she asked herself. If that wasn’t the case, why was she seeing him in a different light all of a sudden? Perhaps Lara couldn’t bring herself to admit that she had unknowingly developed feelings for Nikolai after working together with him for some time. These two were blind as a bat when it came to such matters, for they were still inexperienced in dealing with romantic relationships. Meanwhile, Nikolai couldn’t stop stealing peeks at Lara from the driver’s seat. He didn’t understand why either, and he simply wanted to look at her for no good reason—even a glance or two wasn’t enough.

An unfamiliar possessive feeling rose up in his chest all of a sudden. Nikolai thought that he was going crazy, and he just noticed that Lara had such a beautiful side profile. The unanticipated speeding up of his heart made him restless all of a sudden like an anxious little boy. "Just turn left over here." Lara smiled at Nikolai, wanting to give him the prettiest smile she had.

The moment one noticed a change in their friendship, they would end up being more conscious of their appearance. Lara recalled countless times in the past where Nikolai had seen her sluggish state, and feelings of embarrassment washed over her. Most of the time, fuel needed to be lit in order to trigger a romantic relationship; a sudden epiphany could make two people realize their importance in each other's hearts. Matthias, who had been a long-time observer, gave them such an opportunity to spark their relationship. After all, Nikolai's overly impulsive moment led them to expose their feelings for each other. Even though Matthias had to endure a round of his cousin's vicious scolding, he wasn't mad about it. In fact, he was even a little grateful. Love was blind, and it could even be destructive at times. Along with that, it could also complete a person. Matthias didn't know if he was ruined in the hands of Heather or if she had completed him, though. Whatever it was, he hoped that love could bring Lara and Nikolai happiness. Meanwhile, Matthias was stuck in an endless loop of day-to-day working life. He stopped for a moment and thought about his future—now that he had lost both his most trusted

assistants, he was sure that tomorrow would be a boring day. To be honest, he was already quite bored as of now. Matthias studied the CCTV footage on his monitor, but he couldn't spot Lara nor Nikolai. He was truly not qualified to be a businessman—how could he make such a choice? If he really were to lose Lara and Nikolai at a time like this, it'd greatly affect his plans for the future. In truth, he had become like this all because of love. Needless to say, emotions were a businessman's biggest enemy. Matthias rose from his seat and stared at his reflection on the glass window, looking awfully haggard at that moment. "Look at you—you look nothing like a corporate big shot," he muttered to himself. He didn't know if he was doing the right thing, but since he had already done it, he might as well carry on without leaving any regrets. He would return to his villa after getting off work, but his life would still be as dull as ever. Now that Evan was no longer serving him, there would be less fun at home—in fact, the house would even lack a certain liveliness to it.

Matthias was truly all alone. From now on, he could only fight his battles by himself; he'd even lost his beloved Heather. Perhaps this isn't so bad, though. Just then, a devilish smile crept up on his face. He recalled his mother's words of the past. "You have a long way ahead of you, Matthias. You'll meet someone you love and who loves you back; she'll complete you and also ruin you. When that happens, don't repeat my mistake." Indeed, his mother had been ruined by love. Matthias thought about his own family history, and it probably wouldn't take long for him to meet the same fate as well. After all, he knew

that he would live a life of destruction ever since he was a little boy; even if he didn't meet Heather, he would've stepped on this path of no return anyway. "I'll make them pay their price, Mom. I'll avenge you for sure," Matthias said as he stared fixedly at his own reflection in the window. He looked a lot like his mother, and it seemed as though he could see her standing before him. His mother never wanted him to drown in hate, but considering his young age when those things had happened to him, how could he not? His mother simply wanted Matthias to learn to accept the past and live his own life. Unfortunately, he still chose the path of destruction in the end—he didn't want to fulfill anyone else's wishes. At that moment, the Locke Group was already hanging by a thread since Matthias' various tactics had garnered a lot of negative attention from the public. Moreover, he even openly challenged the Hart Family. As a result, the Locke Family successfully became an unwanted guest in Bradford City. Matthias had worked hard to move all of the Locke Group's forces here, and all of that was for this day to come. He was unsure of what else the head of the family had up his sleeves, but he would definitely make the Locke Group suffer huge losses this time. Matthias was waiting for the right moment to strike while trying to get to the bottom of the Locke Group's hidden forces. At the same time, he was constantly provoking many influential parties in Bradford. Essentially, Matthias was taking one step at a time to force the Locke Group into a dead end, and he was never loyal to the company to begin with. Back then, there was a long period of time where he wanted to become an international business tycoon through the Locke Group's name; it wasn't until he met Heather did he

remember his original goal.

If Matthias were to grow the Locke Group and become a successful businessman in the process, he would've brought glory to his name. However, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself. The Lockes had killed his mother; Matthias wanted them to pay for what they did, and there was no better price to pay than the Locke Group itself. As soon as the company fell, those good-for-nothings from the Locke Family would experience what it was like to live in hell. Naturally, Matthias couldn't wait for that day to come.

He used to be brainwashed by the typical businessman mindset until Heather stirred his emotions once again, reminding him that he was capable of feeling things. He often felt like he was staring at himself when he looked at the woman—they weren't purely businesspeople. In fact, not even Tony was considered a true businessman.

Their judgement would often be affected by their feelings; if they had to make a choice between emotions and profit, they would even unhesitantly pick the former over the other.

Nevertheless, Matthias didn't feel like it was a weakness at all. He was willing to accept this side of himself; the world had many other business tycoons to deal with, so the fact that he wasn't one wouldn't make a difference.

However, the more he wished to fulfill his wish of destroying the Locke Group, the more he had to pretend to care about the company. He had to express his concern more than anyone else in order to trick them.

In the end, he even had to trick himself. Thus, from Heather's point of view, there was a huge

possibility that Matthias would pick the Locke Group over her. At that moment, Matthias suddenly realized something—he finally understood that Heather’s scornful attitude toward him back then was directed toward the Locke Group. Nonetheless, now that he was in a dire situation, Matthias didn’t have a choice anymore. He didn’t even have the courage to stand before Heather to tell her the whole truth. He had driven away his most trusted companions, and he had lost Heather as well. Everything he was doing was according to the Locke Family’s wishes. Although he was a step closer to gaining their trust, he didn’t know if he should be mourning or celebrating. Troubled by his thoughts, he pushed away the stack of documents on his desk, but even so, he couldn’t calm his disturbed state of mind. Just then, he suddenly remembered about Ether who had left his villa in a hurry—he still owed her an explanation.

Since he wasn’t in the mood to work, he decided to visit her. Matthias didn’t want to owe anyone anything, especially when it was a woman. He recalled that the woman’s body was a little cold to the touch; for a split second, his mind brought him back to the night where he and Heather had cuddled to sleep. Matthias suddenly felt like a lowly idiot and a failure. The unanticipated reminder made his reason for visiting Ether seem so ridiculous. Did he intend to explain things to her, or did he simply want to search for a sign of Heather on that woman’s body in desperation? Whatever it was, Matthias left the presidential office and headed straight to the Caliph Nightclub. He didn’t know how he was going to apologize to Ether, but perhaps he could

make her leave the club forever. After all, Ether wasn't suitable to be mingling around in a place that served to entertain men. Indeed, it was in a man's nature to free a damsel in distress, and Matthias was no exception. Even though he wasn't very close to that woman, he didn't want her to keep working at a place like that. From an outsider's perspective, it might seem like Matthias was always surrounded by beautiful women. In reality, he couldn't be bothered by those women around him. If not for professional purposes, he never made contact with women in private. Nevertheless, what he had with Ether was an unforeseen connection; it was the first time Matthias wasn't as irked by a woman like her. Still, he was vaguely aware that he was simply using her as a source of emotional support. With nobody around him at the moment, Matthias needed a friend; more accurately, he needed someone to listen to him. As such, he naturally thought of Ether, the woman who would appear in front of him from time to time. He didn't think he was an exceptionally noble person, and he didn't feel like she was lowly either. Matthias no longer felt like suppressing his feelings. Since he finally had something he wanted to do, he was going to do it. He was even considering giving Ether a new identity; after all, life was too short not to go crazy once in a while!

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The car sped along the highway. As it passed through a tunnel, Heather's face appeared vaguely before Matthias's eyes. Matthias hated such a hallucination, so he sped up the car and quickly passed through the tunnel. The lights inside made him feel very uncomfortable,

and he felt sick as scenes about Heather kept popping up in his mind. He tried his best to shake off such a state of mind since there were many other things he needed to accomplish. Hence, he couldn't be completely under Heather's control since now wasn't the right time to be wrapped up in a relationship. There wasn't much distance left between Matthias and Caliph Nightclub after he passed through the tunnel, and he tried his best to recognize the signs around him as Caliph Nightclub was hidden among them. As his car slowly drove in, he found the nightclub with his sharp eyes. Then, he parked his car in front of it with a half-smile. Who would've thought this was such a place by looking from the outside? The place looked ordinary, and it was a pretty good disguise. He stopped his car and gracefully got out of it with his face devoid of expression. Then, he pushed open the door to the nightclub right away. The front desk receptionists were still the same people as before, and they recognized him because he had an outstanding air about him. With a face so stony that no one could guess what was on his mind, he told the front desk receptionists about the reason for his visit. However, they looked at him with troubled expressions because the request he made was against the rules. "Tell your boss to come out and meet me." Matthias could tell that they were in a difficult situation. Indeed, it was useless to talk to the small fries about such things. He didn't like making things difficult for ordinary people, and he even often took care of their feelings. Sometimes, he felt he was incredibly gentle, yet he was unwilling to show such tenderness to profit-seeking businesspeople in the business world—he felt that he had a lasting hatred for the rich in his bones.

Since it was Matthias, the nightclub's owner came out without any hesitation. Matthias looked at the owner and asked him, "Can we find somewhere quiet to discuss things?" He had always been well-mannered, and the owner naturally had no reason to turn him down when his features softened. The owner then led Matthias to his private space; he lived at the nightclub most of the time because the place often had emergencies he needed to personally deal with. "Please have a seat, Director Locke." The owner had a shy smile on his face. Only then did Matthias get to see the owner's face clearly. They merely came across each other last time, and only this time did Matthias find that the nightclub's owner's face showed signs of aging together with pure shyness similar to a high schooler's. Such a discovery surprised him, for few middle-aged people could retain such shyness. What a strange person he is, he thought to himself. "Is Ether here?" he asked straightforwardly. Meanwhile, the owner looked at Matthias in a troubled manner. "You probably don't know this, but she's already quit her job." No wonder the front desk receptionists had that look on their faces, Matthias thought to himself. It seemed like they were unaware of Ether's resignation and merely thought that Ether wasn't here today for some personal reasons. "She quit her job?" he asked in bafflement. Indeed, this answer caught him by surprise. However, the owner was very surprised too, for he thought Ether quit her job so easily because she had become acquainted with Matthias. After all, he knew Ether's family situation very well, and she needed this high-paying job. However, it seemed that he had

misunderstood her.

As he looked at the strained expression on the owner's face, Matthias asked again, "I need

her address." He believed the owner knew where she lived.

The latter looked at him; when he saw how serious Matthias appeared to be, he guessed

what had happened between him and Ether. This was a profound mystery, but he readily

gave Ether's address to Matthias—the man had an aura about him that made him look

commanding even though he didn't look angry, so the owner didn't dare to lie to him.

Besides, he thought Matthias could even help her out.

Unlike other owners who bore no conscience, this nightclub owner still maintained his

morals. Matthias discovered this after several rounds of conversation, though he wasn't

interested to know too much about the story behind it. He gave the owner a nod and said

politely, "Thank you." Naturally, it gave people a sense of kindness.

The owner smiled a smile of gratification as he watched Matthias leave this small space of

a few square meters. Perhaps because he was used to seeing those garishly and frivolously

dressed dandies, he couldn't help feeling a little excited at the sight of an exception like

Matthias.

Meanwhile, Matthias looked at the small note in his hand with Ether's address written on it.

As he stood in front of the car, he hesitated for a bit. He had gone beyond reason by

suddenly rushing to the clubhouse, so he thought he must have gone crazy since he wanted

to go to Ether's house as well. Upon thinking of her resignation, he had to connect it with

himself. Would Ether have quit her job so quickly if it weren't for him?

He then looked at the envelope he was holding, which was some form of compensation that

the owner wanted to give Ether. In other words, the owner entrusted him with the task of delivering this to Ether during his visit. It seems like I already have a reason to go to Ether's house, he thought to himself with a relieved expression. In reality, he could easily find out Ether's bank account number and transfer the money to her directly by remittance. In an instant, a reason that necessitated the visit became far-fetched. Matthias got into his car as he was considering this. He wasn't prepared to actually meet Ether, not to mention that Ether hadn't prepared herself for this either. Such a scene had been portrayed too many times in novels and TV dramas, but Matthias didn't think he was the prince who fell in love with Cinderella. Therefore, his reasoning made him unable to start up his car and go to Ether's house. Still, he couldn't throw away the note he was clutching in his hand, though he had tossed the envelope containing the money onto the passenger seat. Deep down inside, he was in an unusual dilemma. He slowly started up his car, and he had to be on the road no matter what choice he would make. Meanwhile, Nikolai and Lara had stopped in a field in the countryside and were regretting that they didn't drive a cross-country vehicle over. "The wilderness?" Nikolai asked while looking at Lara in bafflement. He didn't expect Lara's secret garden to look like this. "What's the problem? Do you not like it?" Lara stared fixedly at him. She couldn't guarantee his safety if he dared to give any wrong answers.

Nikolai could tell the threat in Lara's eyes, so he waved his hand. "No, I like this place very much." Even the smile on his lips became hypocritical.

“It seems that you don’t like this place. I regret sharing my secret garden with you,” Lara said in annoyance.

It was winter, and flowers had withered in Lara’s secret garden. Only some wildflowers that could survive hardships were scattered here and there, and even the thick growths of grass were in low spirits. The place was overgrown with dead greenery, and it looked as though they could be destroyed by wildfire at any time. Lara felt somewhat sad as she looked at her secret garden. As it turned out, she hadn’t been here for a long time, and the garden had withered.

Upon seeing Lara’s sad eyes, Nikolai felt embarrassed instead; he felt the need to comfort her. “Cheer up, Lara. This place is really beautiful.” He instantly felt he lacked the ability to describe things, and he disliked himself inwardly for that.

“Really?” Lara cast Nikolai a disdainful look as she didn’t find what was beautiful about this place. She almost forgot that she had not been here for half a year; this was not because

she had nothing to be sad over, but merely because she was unusually busy. “You know that

I was born and raised in Bradford City, Nikolai. I visit Bradford City every year, but do you know how happy I was when President Locke said he wanted to develop a business in

Bradford City and moved the Locke Group’s headquarters here?” She closed her eyes. This

way, she would be much closer to her secret garden and could often come here. However,

things hadn’t gone according to plan. Despite such a close distance, she had never been

here even once. Lara was thoroughly disappointed with herself. When she moved back to

Bradford City at that time, she thought she was back to her home ground. Unfortunately, she

was wrong. Not only did she lose Matthias here, she also lost those past joys.

“I remember that. You chuckled like a cat that sneakily caught a fish back then, but I never saw you chuckling like that again afterward.” Nikolai reminisced about the past with Lara.

Before arriving in Bradford City, they had been an unbeatable trio. It seemed like they shouldn't have come here, and Nikolai knew that the changes in their relationship had been caused by the woman named Heather. He would never deny Heather's charm, but he still regretted the changes in their relationship very much.

“Have you decided what to do in the future, Nikolai?” Lara asked him. She didn't know where her new starting point was.

“Perhaps we can team up and start a business,” Nikolai suggested jokingly. This wasn't the first time he had such thoughts; he thought about this possibility during the days when he had a secret crush on Heather, but he didn't think of being together with Lara back then.

“It sounds like a nice idea.” Lara laughed, but tears accidentally streamed down her cheeks.

“Why don't we imagine how we'd divide up the labor and work together in the future right now?” This was better than what Nikolai had imagined, for he still had Lara keeping him company at the very least. He became increasingly doubtful of his capabilities after working under Matthias for a long time. He didn't know where his limits were, nor did he know if he'd be able to make some achievements after leaving Matthias. Starting a business was the best way to prove oneself. As Nikolai looked at Lara beside him at this moment, he strengthened his resolve even further.

“Why should we discuss something boring like work in my secret garden?” Lara disagreed with him. She had just regained her freedom, so why would she trap herself in the workplace again?

“Okay, let’s talk about something interesting then,” Nikolai suggested. In reality, he didn’t know what was interesting.

“In that case, we might as well travel together.” The days in Bradford City made Lara feel very oppressed. In particular, she felt as though she was living on the edge of a blade recently, so traveling might be able to get her to relax temporarily.

“In that case, may I ask where you would like to travel, Miss Locke?” Nikolai hadn’t

backpacked for a long time, so the idea of traveling together sounded really nice to him.

Lara was seriously considering the idea of traveling. “We need to find a place where we both

like. Why don’t we reduce the scope first? The entire world is too big of a scope.”

“In that case, we’ll just travel within Solaria,” said Nikolai, suggesting an area that sounded much smaller compared to the globe.

“Great. Let’s visit the south then.” Lara smiled innocently, for she liked that place.

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As the young pair continued to chatter, the secret garden would be disturbed...

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As the cold breeze brushed against Lara, she shrank her neck upon feeling the chilly sensation. When Nikolai saw that, he took off his coat and put it over her.

“The weather’s so weird! Maybe we shouldn’t stay too long out here.”

Having given up his coat, Nikolai was prone to the assault of the cold.

“Yeah.” Although she was reluctant to leave, it wouldn’t be wise to stay out any longer.

“If you like it here, we can come over anytime we want, Lara.” Nikolai saw her reluctance and smiled at the woman, offering to keep her company the next time they came.

Since having company was indeed welcomed, Lara nodded her head in agreement, feeling Nikolai was getting more and more pleasant. Now that she had the opportunity to assiduously observe him, she realized that he was rather outstanding. In fact, she wondered why she had never seen him in such a light before.

“Don’t stare at me like that. You’re making me self-conscious.” Nikolai got curious about what she was peering at and touched his own face. There’s nothing on my face!

Lara shook her head and laughed. “What’s with that? Are you afraid that I’d fall for you?”

Upon hearing her charming laugh, Nikolai’s heart started to palpitate uncontrollably.

Nonetheless, he regained his composure and hastily defended by saying, “No! Of course not!” Feeling as though she was toying with him, he couldn’t look her straight in the eyes.

“Let’s go!” The moment Lara smiled, Nikolai felt like his entire world had brightened up.

Although he wanted to hold her hand, he didn’t have the courage to do so—he withdrew his arm before he could fully extend it. Just like how he didn’t dare to admit his feelings for

Heather openly, he couldn’t bear any indecent thoughts toward Lara, and he disdained himself for being so cowardly.

However, he was not the only coward—Matthias was the same, for he was troubled by his inability to make a rational decision. As he clutched the note in his hand, he suspected that

he had truly gone insane for being so indecisive.

Despite having a clear answer in his heart, he couldn't find a reason to convince himself.

Perhaps that was the reason why he had been living so dully all this while.

Not wanting things to continue this way, he quickly turned his car around. Since he wished to see Ether and no one could stop him from doing so, why would he burden himself with more doubts?

As the car sped forward, Matthias tossed away every single thought of Heather in his mind, refusing to be such a pathetic man. Judging by Heather's character, she would surely abhor someone with such a petty mindset; only a man who could afford to stand by her side deserved to be with her.

Nonetheless, he wasn't aware that every single movement of his was being observed by a certain someone, and him going for Ether was precisely what the person wanted.

The anonymous person was dying to stir up more drama between Heather and Matthias, for it would make everything much more fun. After getting someone to follow Matthias in secret, it seemed like it had been a fruitful decision. When Heather sees these pictures...

The person smirked subtly, eager to sabotage the couple's relationship. Bradford City is getting more and more interesting right now!

Meanwhile, Matthias was immersed in his own world. He had always been sensitive to being trailed, but he failed to notice the stalker this time.

Since Ether feared that her family would find out about her rather shameful job, she worked far away from home. Although they were needy, her elders were educated enough to disallow her from partaking in such a disgraceful line of work.

After driving for more than 30 minutes, Matthias finally arrived at Ether's home and parked

his car at a spacious spot. To be exact, he had arrived at the suburbs of Bradford City—one

that was impoverished rather than renovated and breathtaking.

Needless to say, it was a joke to the people residing in the city.

After getting out of his car, Matthias adjusted his collars. Such a place was one he rarely visited. Back when he was still under his mother's care, they weren't poor enough to live in a poorly developed area, so he was quite unfamiliar with the situation in front of him.

As he stared at the disorganized apartments, Matthias was visibly speechless. In fact, trying to figure out which block Ether lived in was a perplexing puzzle. Instead of unnecessarily racking his brains, he thought it would be more efficient to ask the people nearby. When he saw a mother-daughter duo walking his way, he went over and asked them for directions.

"Good day," Matthias politely greeted.

As it was a rarity for a fine man like such to appear in that area, the mother and her daughter were simultaneously captivated by Matthias' appearance. They were so baffled that they even forgot what to say to him, but the mother tactfully regained her senses first.

"Good day to you too." She grinned in a bashful manner, stunned by his handsomeness.

"Could you perhaps point me to block 21?" Since the buildings weren't numbered in order, Matthias was visibly confused. Indeed, it was a pain in the bum to navigate oneself in such a complex area.

"We happen to live there as well! Why don't you come with us?" The mischievous little girl offered assistance as she ogled at Matthias, for she was charmed by the man's idol-like appeal!

At that, Matthias revealed a smirk as he nodded. How could he not realize that it was his manliness that triggered the duo's enthusiasm? Since the path was rather bewildering, it would have taken him a long time to locate block 21. Fortunately, he had bumped into the mother-daughter duo. As he followed them, Matthias kept quiet along the way, looking amiable yet prideful at the same time. The girl thought of various pick-up lines to use on him as they led Matthias to the block, but she swallowed her words since she didn't know what to say to him. After all, the outstanding

man behind her was so intimidating that she couldn't bear it, and she became rather clumsy in his presence.

Soon enough, they were almost at their destination. The girl became nervous, but she knew that she shouldn't be fantasizing about such scenarios since she could never be on Matthias' level. In the end, she remained silent as the latter took his leave.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I shall take my leave now," Matthias said as he walked toward the elevator, clueless to the fact that he had unintentionally wavered the youthful heart of a young girl.

From what he remembered, Ether lived in unit 703. Soon enough, he located the unit and knocked on the door.

After some time, an old woman opened the door. She gazed at Matthias' unfamiliar face while the latter merely revealed a courteous smile.

"Good day, madam. I'm here for Ether." It was not until he blurted the sentence did he remember that he hadn't gotten Ether's real name.

As things got awkward, the old woman expectedly glowered at him and asked, "Who's

Ether?”

Instantly, Matthias regretted not having asked the clubhouse owner for Ether’s real name.

How should he explain himself to the old woman now?

Fortunately, when he heard Ether’s voice from inside the house, he tactfully claimed, “I’m

here for your granddaughter, madam. I heard her speaking just now.”

The old woman glowered at him cautiously, thinking that he was probably one of the

scoundrels in the area given his odd words.

Evidently, the old woman wasn’t easy to deal with. As they stared at each other, a series of

footsteps neared them.

“Who is it, Nana?” As Ether’s voice got closer, she eventually showed herself and was

surprised to see Matthias at her door. There was even a tinge of pleasure on her face, for

she never expected him to find her place.

When he saw her, the man smiled slightly as she subconsciously yelled, “Why are you here,

Director Locke?”

“I’m here to tell you that I reject your resignation.” His beam suddenly turned into a sly grin.

Upon listening to their conversation, the old lady realized what was happening. She

assumed that Matthias was Ether’s superior, so she immediately welcomed him in with

utmost enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, the young girl’s heart fluttered since she hadn’t expected those words,

wondering if Matthias had a little change of heart toward her.

As he sat straight up on Ether’s home couch, he swept his eyes around the room, estimating

the unit to be about a hundred square feet; such a tiny unit was able to contain four

separate rooms.

Evidently, the space in the house was truly limited and the structure of the family was rather

complicated since both of Ether's paternal and maternal grandmothers were there. Since it was still working hours, her parents weren't home; school hadn't ended yet, so the kids were absent as well. Right now, only Ether and her grandmothers were home. The two senile ladies chatted animatedly with Matthias about their homely matters, and the latter would respond politely. Throughout the entire time, Ether couldn't find an opportunity to interrupt the conversation. When his eyes met hers occasionally, both of them were visibly helpless. Since she didn't want her elders to bother the man any further, Ether came up with an excuse to take Matthias out of the house. Although she was still dwelling on the pleasure that she received from his visit, she felt somewhat embarrassed after calming herself down. Undoubtedly, Ether was conscious of how impoverished her home and family were—that was why she was reluctant to let him overstay. Besides, she felt that she looked rather old-fashioned with her house clothes on. I look hideous right now!

However, Matthias never saw her that way. In fact, he preferred her current appearance since it reminded him of Heather. Even though they were far off in terms of looks and temperament, he could surprisingly detect Heather's scent on Ether. As they walked along the alley, Ether lowered her head as she was too bashful to look at the man beside her, fearing that he'd judge her. Although she wanted to run away from him so that he wouldn't see her ungodly appearance, she couldn't withdraw herself from his charm. "I'm sorry for coming without notice," Matthias gently uttered, briefly comforting her trembling heart.

“How did you know about my resignation?” With her head even lowered, she was simultaneously stupefied yet honored by his sudden apology. “I went to the club.” His tender timbre intoxicated her. It was only then that Matthias had gotten to know her true name, Natalia Wright. It had nothing to do with ‘Ether’, though. “You went to the club...” Natalia was too embarrassed to continue, for she felt that she’d appear rather narcissistic. “I went to look for you,” he answered directly, knowing what she meant to say. “About last time, I hope you don’t take it to heart. You didn’t do anything wrong that night.” Natalia assumed that he was still dwelling on that night’s incident. Matthias wanted to deny her words as he stared at her, but he couldn’t say anything despite opening his mouth. Was he supposed to tell her that he decided to come and see her on a whim?!

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For a moment, neither of them spoke. Natalia could sense Matthias’ discomfort, and she began thinking about how she should ease the current awkwardness here upon seeing this. “Let’s sit down and have a good chat, Director Locke,” she then suggested, knowing that Matthias would not be leaving any time soon. When he noticed how Natalia voluntarily shifted the conversation away, the words that were stuck in his throat didn’t seem important anymore. Instantly, he let out a breath. He had no idea if Natalia had picked up on his thoughts, but he felt at ease right now. Matthias didn’t feel pressured around Natalia, and he didn’t need to think about filtering his

words. In fact, he quite liked this carefree feeling. If love weighed people down, was there

any real need to continue?

“Okay,” Matthias immediately agreed. Things couldn’t get any better than this.

Similarly, Natalia also hoped that he would stay a little longer. She knew that there was a

KFC nearby which was on the cleaner side. This area was awful, and there weren’t many

nice shops around here. Hence, her inferiority complex kicked in once again.

In the meantime, Matthias spaced out as he stared at Natalia’s back while he followed her,

for the woman looked far too much like Heather from behind. His lips curved up faintly, and

he couldn’t help but feel a little glad at the sense of familiarity.

When he realized that he had been constantly searching for traces of Heather in her,

Matthias felt immensely guilty toward Natalia. After all, he truly couldn’t stop himself from those actions.

Just then, they had reached the aforementioned KFC. Business didn’t seem to be going well

for this particular outlet, for there were only a handful of people inside there. Natalia felt that

it would be weird to just sit down without ordering anything, so she got a sundae.

Naturally, Matthias had no interest in fast food. Natalia didn’t ask him what he would like to

eat either, for she knew that people with deep pockets would not eat this kind of food at all.

“There aren’t any other decent places nearby, so...” Natalia said awkwardly as she felt

embarrassed. Matthias had personally come to see her, but she could only bring him to

KFC.

“It’s okay. It’s nice inside here,” Matthias said with a smile.

It certainly was nicer than the outdoors, for it was freezing outside. The heating in this KFC had been cranked up a comfortable level, so it felt cozy and warm inside. Matthias wasn't a picky person. Natalia was surprised by this, for she could tell that Matthias' words weren't false assurances. Who would have thought that a CEO would be so down-to-earth? "Is there anything you want to ask me since you've come all the way here, Director Locke?" Natalia switched up her phrasing. She had to get Matthias to say something, or her conscience would be weighed down. "I've already asked you my question." Matthias eyed the sundae sitting before Natalia. The temperature inside the KFC outlet was a little on the higher side, and the sundae would probably melt completely in a short while. Natalia wracked her brains to recall what Matthias had said earlier. He did seem to have asked her something just now, and it was why she had resigned. Natalia couldn't give a satisfactory answer to that question at all, feeling that she'd sabotaged herself. She had just clawed her way back up from a pit, but she was slipping and falling back into it again. Natalia gave an awkward laugh, seemingly unwilling to continue that topic. Matthias didn't mind it though—he didn't have any say over anyone's resignations, after all.

"Director Locke," she said. However, she didn't know why she had to call his name. She needed to find some other line of conversation to talk about, for she couldn't stand this awkward atmosphere. She recalled how she had run out of Matthias' home in despair previously, but when she

looked at him now, all those negative emotions completely disappeared. Even Natalia herself found it strange; she had only ever met Matthias a few times, but she felt an inexplicable bond with him. Moreover, she didn't mind even if she got her feelings hurt by him. If Matthias hadn't come to look for her this time of his own volition, Natalia would probably never know just how tolerant she could be toward others.

"Ether." Matthias was more used to addressing Natalia this way. However, it was her first time hating the name 'Ether'. She had only called herself that because she liked how it sounded, but she didn't want to hear that name coming from Matthias' mouth. After all, she knew that Matthias fancied someone named 'Heather'.

Now that she had made that connection, Natalia couldn't stop herself from continuing down that rabbit hole. In any case, she never wanted to hear the name 'Ether' anymore.

Matthias picked up on the unnatural look on Natalia's face. Before he could figure out what was going on, he heard Natalia speak up. "You can call me Natalia or something else, but please don't ever address me that way ever again, Director Locke." Upon hearing that, Matthias wondered if Natalia didn't want to hear anything related to her time at the club because she thought that working there had been humiliating.

"I'm sorry." Matthias never easily apologized back then, but now, apologies came from him easily. Perhaps it was because he had been around Heather for a long time.

"You don't have to keep apologizing to me. You're making me feel bad this way." Natalia thought about the distance between herself and Matthias. They were in two completely different worlds, and the more she thought about it, the less she could stomach Matthias' apology.

“All right,” Matthias answered helplessly. He knew that Natalia had a fragile sense of pride, and he had to protect her carefully precisely because of that.

The two of them were awkward around each other, and they didn't know what to talk about. As such, the duo simply stared at each other. Natalia couldn't think of a conversation topic that would work with him, and Matthias had no idea how to talk to her. They simply sat there stiffly inside the KFC, and Natalia didn't even finish her sundae. Since she had no appetite to eat it, she simply chucked the sundae into the bin. Their eyes would meet from time to time, but they darted away just as quickly. Evidently, the pair were stiff with each other. Matthias didn't like this atmosphere, and he thought about how he should ease the awkwardness between them. Meanwhile, Natalia psyched herself up internally. She couldn't miss this rare opportunity, so she should at least say something to him. In reality, Natalia had been attempting to leave a good impression on Matthias all this time, but things kept playing out differently than she hoped. As such, she felt that she had lost all her confidence in front of him. Eventually, Matthias pulled out an envelope from his pocket. It was thick and filled to the brim with something. He handed the envelope over to Natalia and said, “Your boss asked me to give this to you.” It had been tough for Matthias to think of something to talk about. He had never been so awkward with Heather before. In truth, he also beat himself over this. Why couldn't he think of something to say when he was with Natalia? On one hand, Matthias didn't want to say anything that would get Natalia worked up, and on the other hand, he

didn't know anything about her at all. He didn't know what to talk about with a stranger.

"This envelope..." Natalia was a little hesitant, but in the end, she took the envelope that Matthias had brought.

Natalia knew her financial situation very well; since there was money being given to her, she wouldn't turn it down. If it wasn't for the severe lack of money, Natalia would probably have continued to be in school as the top-scorer of her year.

Ever since she was little, her grades had been exceptional. However, as her parents got older, the family couldn't afford to pay off their bills. Since she was their eldest daughter, Natalia had no other choice. However, she couldn't find any decent jobs with only a high school diploma and having given up on attending the best university in Bradford City. When her family fell sick, she was in utter despair since she had no other alternatives. Natalia had

gone through so much turmoil when she brought herself to step into that industry, but when she saw how much money she could easily earn, she ended up sinking further.

If she hadn't met Matthias, Natalia figured that she probably still wouldn't have made the decision to leave the nightclub. Her situation at home had clearly improved, and she didn't need to continue earning money that way. However, Natalia was reluctant to part with a job that brought in money so easily.

It was Matthias who made Natalia get reacquainted with herself, and he was the one who made her pride and shame return to her. In other words, he was like a ray of light in the darkness as he shone down on her. Now that this ray of light was sitting in front of her,

Natalia felt uneasy as her heart raced. She used to never believe in love, nor did she believe in love at first sight. But now, her heart was telling her that love was right by her side.

“Do you have any plans later?” Matthias took the plunge and extended an invitation to Natalia.

The latter looked at him blankly. She didn’t understand Matthias’ intentions; she just felt inferior, and she didn’t dare to believe what Matthias was saying between the lines.

“I’ll just be heading home to spend time with my grandmothers,” Natalia answered honestly.

“In that case, do you mind spending time with me instead?” He had no idea how else he could phrase this so that it wouldn’t sound so intimate.

It felt as though pure friendship didn’t exist between men and women, and such intimate situations could arise by accident. Matthias could look Heather honestly in the eye and tell her clearly that he loved her.

However, when he was with Natalia, Matthias felt that whatever he said wasn’t right. He had never talked to a girl like this in a one-to-one setting. Although he had been alone with Lara before, they mostly talked about work or just like how friends would do. When he was with Natalia, Matthias could clearly sense the intimate air between them. He was troubled over this, and he had no idea how he should treat her. He was like a middle school kid when it came to romantic matters, and he was at a complete loss. All this time, he assumed that he was in love with Myra, but he ended up falling for Heather instead. What was he doing now?

Matthias side-eyed himself. He was now with a woman in a public space, saying things that

couldn't sound any more suggestive. It seemed that hitting on ladies was an innate skill, and

Matthias didn't need to practice it much to become a master at this.

"Where would you like to go after this?" Natalia naturally wanted to go with him after hearing

such a frank invitation, but she knew that a lady should show some restraint.

"The State Science Center." The places that Matthias' went to unwind had always been

unusual. He wanted to take a look at the latest technology.

.....

Natalia was taken aback by his answer, but where they were going wasn't important as long

as Matthias was with her...

"Okay," Natalia whispered. A blush crept up her cheeks, for this was simply too

embarrassing.

A pleased smile made its way onto Matthias' face. He knew about his charms, and he also

knew that he was being despicable like this.