

## Standing before Love Chapter 692

Matthias felt disappointed after hearing Heather's question. It turned out that to Heather, his love for her wasn't genuine. Since Heather thought of him as such, there was nothing else he would like to say either.

"Heather, it seems that I've overestimated myself," Matthias said with a cold smile. He had overestimated Heather's feelings toward him.

Should he have known that Heather's feelings toward him were merely mediocre, he wouldn't have kept having wishful thoughts. Staring at Heather, Matthias felt like he barely knew her.

Heather remained silent as she could perceive the disappointment in Matthias' gaze. In fact, she was extremely disappointed in herself too. She felt as if she had been messing up her own life since a long time ago.

"If you insist that Leon will be able to bring you happiness, I wish you all the best in the future." Matthias solemnly gave up. Since Heather had already driven him into a corner, there was no point for him to continue persisting anymore.

There was a slight change in Heather's expression, but it quickly faded. Rendered speechless, she, too, thought it was sarcastic after hearing Matthias' words. Seeing Matthias leave, Heather felt like she was never going to see him again. The door was closed with a bang before Matthias disappeared from her sight.

While walking along the corridor, Matthias bumped into Leon and gave him a cold stare. He knew Leon had nothing to do with this matter, and he had no right to blame him for this.

On the other hand, Leon forgot to greet him as he was taken aback by Matthias' cold eye contact. As they brushed past each other, Leon felt uneasy being stared at by Matthias. When he turned around to look at Matthias, the latter was walking in the opposite direction in wide strides, and it was daunting to look at his upright figure.

This must've got to do with Heather. Leon opened the ward door carefully to find that Heather had already gotten out of the bed, so he quickly walked up to her as he was worried that she was throwing a tantrum again.

“Why did you get up, Heather?” Leon felt as if Heather didn’t acknowledge herself as a patient, so no wonder Matthias had to ‘educate’ her earlier on.

“I’m feeling much better. So why can’t I get up?” Heather refuted. She was in a bad mood currently, so she naturally wouldn’t speak kindly.

“A patient should stay in the bed and have more rest, Heather,” Leon said in dissatisfaction. At this moment, he wished Matthias was around because he was the only one who could control Heather.

“Who says a patient should always stay in bed. Patients need to do adequate exercises too. You can get even sicker by lying in bed the whole day,” Heather continued to rebuke Leon, having known some basic medical knowledge.

“Fine, fine. Whatever you say.” Leon didn’t intend to continue arguing with her.

Sure enough, Heather had a dominant personality but not Leon, so he would rather let Heather do as she pleased. From this perspective, Leon had always been doing a better job than Matthias because the latter would only insist on whatever he thought was right and would never compromise.

“What were you doing outside? What took you so long to come back?” Heather directed the topic toward Leon. She had been waiting for him to come back in and resolve the awkward situation, but he had been running away all the time.

“Nothing.” Leon smiled guiltily. Truth was, he was too bored in the corridor earlier, so he accosted one of the good-looking nurses. Leon liked pretty girls and he would never deliberately shy away from them. That was who he was, but this didn’t hinder him from having a secret crush on Heather.

“I want to be discharged as soon as possible. Please help me rush the doctor.” If it wasn’t that Heather was feeling weak, she would have gone to talk to the doctor on her own.

“Heather, the doctor has said that you can only be discharged after the examination reports are released.” This time, Leon didn’t go along with Heather. He couldn’t possibly allow her to be this willful.

“I don’t want to go for examinations anymore. The basic ones we did yesterday are enough. The examinations arranged by the doctor for today are

unnecessary.” Heather didn’t want to waste more time in the hospital as she still had a lot of matters to attend to.

“You have to listen to the doctor, Heather,” Leon insisted. It was better to have Matthias around under the current situation because Leon was so used to submitting to Heather he couldn’t bring himself to go against her at all.

“You guys are annoying,” Heather said subconsciously as she was reminded of Matthias. She felt her heart squeezed. She thought Matthias would insist on staying just now, but little did she expect that he would just simply turn away and leave. The more Heather thought Matthias had not loved her as much as she had imagined, the more agonized she was.

Despite already making up her mind to marry Leon, deep down, she was actually hoping for something else. No matter what it was, she was yearning for Matthias to fight for her. Just then, she recalled the day when Matthias was at Myra’s wedding, she could tell a lot of emotions were hidden in his eyes.

That day, Heather thought that Matthias would do something—in the end, he didn’t. At this thought, she realized Matthias wasn’t that courageous either when it came to relationships. He turned into a coward at the most crucial point of time. Heather thought Matthias would change this time, but it seemed like she had overestimated Matthias and his feelings toward her.

“Heather, did you chase Matthias away?” Leon asked in curiosity while taking the opportunity to change the topic.

However, Heather became even more agitated when she heard that. “He left on his own,” she enunciated each word slowly. Truth was, she was still disappointed at Matthias’ reaction just now.

“Heather, Matthias is actually a nice person. It’s unfair to him for you to hurt him repeatedly like this,” Leon said in all fairness. Although he would occasionally deem Matthias as a love rival, he had a good impression of him most of the time.

“Is this why you refuse to marry me?” Now that there were only ones in the room, Heather brought up the topic from yesterday again.

Leon looked at Heather in resignation. “Take a seat first, Heather. Let’s sit down and talk.” He felt rather weird to keep standing.

With that, Heather sat on the bed while Leon sat on the seat which Matthias previously sat on. Facing each other, both of them were able to observe each other's expressions clearly.

"Heather, to marry you in this lifetime is my greatest wish of all. However, I do not wish to see you compromise. Everyone could tell that you're in love with Matthias. You should only marry someone whom you love." It was very rare for Leon to be this serious. Unlike his usual cheeky manner, he said these words sincerely.

What he said was a principle that everyone understood. Heather had always taken marriage seriously but she had no choice this time around.

"Loving someone doesn't mean that you must marry them," Heather said nonchalantly. "There's a saying that women should marry the one who loves her more." Of course Heather couldn't tell Leon the true reason. Nonetheless, she couldn't possibly tell him that he was the one whom she actually loved either because such a lie was too obvious.

"Heather, that saying existed because women were regarded as a vulnerable group. Do you think you're an incapable and vulnerable woman?" Leon refuted Heather reasonably this time. He wouldn't buy those nonsense sayings. Just because everyone believed so didn't mean that it was right.

"I am, and I yearn to obtain happiness. Marriage and love are different. I can't possibly chase after love all the time because only marriage is the ultimate attribution for a woman." Heather attempted to use the old cliché to persuade herself.

"I don't believe this is something you would say, Heather." Looking at Heather, Leon felt like she was a stranger.

"Perhaps you just don't understand me." Heather smiled faintly, thinking that maintaining formalities while living a life with Leon in the future didn't seem that bad after all.

"Heather, I'm not sure why exactly you said these to me, but I can tell you firmly that I love you, so I hope you can go love who you love too. Besides, I won't be able to provide you the happiness you're seeking for. You'll only be truly happy being together with someone you love." Leon rejected her resolutely. Last night, he was still tossing and turning in the bed as he couldn't make up his mind, but today, his decision was a firm no.

Heather stared at Leon in disbelief as this outcome was out of her expectation and plans. It turned out that loving someone didn't mean that one wouldn't draw the line. In fact, Heather had witnessed Leon's bottom line today.

"Even you are rejecting me." Heather was disheartened. It seemed like she didn't understand Leon enough.

"Heather, your proposal is indeed tempting, but you've mistaken one thing—when we enter into a marriage, I won't be the one giving you happiness but in contrast, you'll be the one giving me happiness. You have to know that if the happiness that I offer you is not something that you want, it can end up being a burden to you." Leon understood love clearly. If two people were forcing themselves to settle for each other, the party who didn't love his or her partner would suffer more.

Leon was rather certain that Heather wouldn't fall for him in this lifetime, so he knew he wouldn't be able to provide her happiness in their marriage. As such, he wouldn't agree to marry her because he didn't wish to become the one that brought agony to her in the future.

Heather was stirred up after hearing Leon's words. It turned out that she indeed didn't understand the essence of love. What Matthias said before this was true. She was too stupid, and her decision would only cause agony to all three of them.

"Perhaps you're right." Heather was persuaded by Leon. She shouldn't display her filial piety toward Robert in such a way. She could have done it in many other different ways.

This time, Heather wanted to take the shortcut, which looked tempting at first, but it came with a big price—costing her future. There was no shortcut to success, as one should reap what he or she sowed.

"I'm glad that you've thought it through, Heather. Please stop bringing up the proposal. I'm afraid I won't be able to resist the temptation." Leon smiled brightly. He was nearly persuaded by Heather.

He had just pushed his happiness away that was presented right in front of him. As long as he agreed to marry Heather, he would be the happiest man in the world from then. However, he couldn't be this selfish to build his happiness at the cost of her suffering. Sometimes, he reckoned Heather

would have these ridiculous thoughts because she hadn't stumbled and learned a lesson before.

Nevertheless, Leon couldn't bear to let Heather experience it. He'd rather her not experience the sufferings, so he had been staying by her side and carefully protecting her, hoping that she would be happier.

"Will you get engaged with me then?" Heather wore a cunning smile. Since Leon had already made himself clear, an engagement didn't sound like a bad idea.

"Not again, Heather." Leon was speechless at her relentlessness.

"Don't reject me so readily yet. Hear me out." Heather was much more relieved at this moment. Since she still had some doubts toward Matthias, she would take it as giving a trial to him this time.

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Not knowing what Heather was up to this time, Leon looked at her doubtfully and had a hunch that she was up to no good. Heather didn't want to continue hiding things from Leon, so she told him the whole story while he stared at her in a daze as he listened to her explanation.

"Heather, I can't believe you'll actually do such a thing." Leon couldn't understand her at all. Despite the close relationship between Heather and Robert, she shouldn't use her marriage as a means to fulfill her filial obligations.

"I don't want Grandpa to die with regrets." Heather thought about the past. Although she had contributed a lot to the Langstons, what Robert had given her was even more.

The more she thought about it, the more guilty she felt. Robert was already on the brink of death, and yet she hadn't properly repaid his kindness.

"Heather, since you care for your grandfather so much, why don't you go and find some renowned doctors? Maybe some of them will be able to save him." Leon just couldn't comprehend Heather's thoughts.

This could be due to cultural differences; just like how Leon couldn't understand Heather, the same goes for Heather as she couldn't comprehend Leon's family values.

"Grandpa's private doctor is one of the top doctors in the world. I have no idea where to find a more skillful doctor than him," Heather mumbled in despair.

Robert had always cared a lot about his health. He didn't mind spending a hefty sum just to hire the most outstanding doctors in the world. He had paid great attention to his health throughout the years but the result was less than satisfactory.

In fact, Heather was aware of Robert's health condition all this while. To think about it, it wasn't surprising that his condition was deteriorating. Robert had once said that he had overworked himself when he was young, and hence he was aging rapidly.

"Heather, I believe you'd understand this more than me. Different fields require different specialists. Even if Old Master Langston's doctor is the top in the world, it's impossible for him to be a specialist in every single field. There must be other doctors who are more skillful than him in certain aspects," Leon continued advising Heather. He was actually an optimistic person when it came to certain situations.

Seeing how hard Leon was trying to persuade her, Heather wore a bright smile. She understood that Leon had a point, but she just wanted to try her best at times like these—one would never know if they never tried.

"Are you willing to search for famous doctors with me?" In the past, Heather preferred doing things by herself, but now, she actually enjoyed being accompanied.

"Since I'm always free, of course!" Leon nodded non-stop. He was indeed a dedicated back-burner. In fact, he seemed to be addicted to being a back-burner. He had just given up the opportunity to become Heather's partner, yet he gladly agreed to all sorts of requests from her.

"Are you planning to leave again?" Leon felt uneasy being stared at by Heather's sharp eyes. Once again, she had seen through him.

Leon scratched his head. "You know me. I can't stay at a place for more than 3 months." This was such a lame excuse that even Leon despised himself inwardly.

"Take the opportunity to go around the world with me then." Heather found an objective for herself again. Moreover, it was a perfect reason to leave Bradford City.

Leon nodded. After all, it would be nice to leave Bradford City at this moment. Whenever he was reminded that his whole family had moved to Bradford City, he didn't feel like staying in the city at all.

"But..." Leon still had concerns. He felt guilty whenever he thought of Matthias. Until now, he could remember the last gaze Matthias darted at him, and he thought Heather should at least be more considerate toward Matthias' feelings.

"What?" Heather looked at Leon in puzzlement as she didn't understand what he meant. It didn't sound like a favorable turning point.

"Heather, do you really not plan to give Matthias an explanation?" Leon just couldn't understand why Heather would want to treat Matthias like this. If he was in Matthias' shoes, he wouldn't be able to handle it.

Looking at Leon, Heather had no idea how to explain to him. Indeed, outsiders might think she was being too much, but she had her own opinions and secrets that she was keen on keeping to herself.

"If it's true love, the right person will stick to the end." Heather didn't wish to explain more to Leon, so she made an ambiguous remark.

Leon was rendered speechless as he stared at Heather. He didn't want to refute after hearing what she said but he just thought she was overly optimistic.

"Heather, I think there's no harm to at least drop Matthias some hints," Leon continued advising Heather kindheartedly. There was nothing he could do with Heather, so he could only persuade her gently from the side.

Heather darted a glance at Leon impatiently. Why does he keep putting in a good word for Matthias as if what he said before this was merely empty talk? Does he really see Matthias as his love rival?

Nevertheless, Leon stopped speaking after seeing Heather's attitude. He didn't understand why Heather had to keep seeking trouble for herself. Back then, he had ruined the possibility between him and Heather, so he didn't hope Heather would do the same for her and Matthias.

"Leon, things between Matthias and I are not as simple as it seems. Not everyone can love freely," Heather said in resignation.

Robert had long eyed the Locke Family. In fact, he had shown Heather some information regarding the Lockes. Until today, no one knew the motive of Matthias coming to Bradford City, so Heather didn't wish to become intimate with her family's rival. The love story between Romeo and Juliet was lamentable; despite Heather's affection for Matthias, she had to be concerned about their families' relationship.

"Heather, freedom is self-given. It's not offered by others or the environment." Leon still thought Heather wasn't courageous enough and hoped to break her out of her bubble.

However, Heather simply lay on the bed because Leon was starting to nag a lot and she didn't want to listen to his lectures. Everyone understood the principles, but how many could actually work it out? Currently, Heather only wished to find a way to cure Robert.

It's about time for Heather's body examination, Leon took a look at the time and thought to himself. The service in the hospital was pretty decent as a houseman had come to remind them about the examinations before it was time.

"Professor Mason asked me to escort you to the examination room." Looking youthful and vigorous, the houseman seemed to be in his twenties. He took glances at Heather from time to time but was too shy to look at Leon because he was so handsome that other men would feel embarrassed in front of him.

The examination procedure was much easier with the houseman's assistance. Heather was vexed when she saw the long queue outside the examination room. But of course, she could skip the queue; that was exactly why the houseman escorted them here. Although she had cut the queue, the other patients didn't complain after seeing her and Leon.

A good-looking appearance was surely advantageous to one. Leon stayed beside Heather while she was doing her check-ups. Initially, the doctor

wanted to ask Leon to leave the room, but he felt embarrassed to speak up after seeing Leon's appearance.

Besides, Heather didn't mind it, so the doctor in charge of the examination bit his tongue. It didn't take long to complete a few examinations. After the examination, Heather walked side by side with Leon as if she had already recovered.

"I bet Matthias exhorted them to carry out these many examinations," Heather complained softly to Leon. She didn't even feel like being cooperative anymore.

"Even if it's true, Matthias did so for your own good, Heather. It has been some time since you did a full body checkup," Leon said. On the other hand, Heather was dumbfounded at how he firmly sided with Matthias.

"Why do you keep sticking up for Matthias? You must be fond of him instead of me," Heather humphed crabily. Even his gaze changed when he spoke of Matthias.

Heather just couldn't understand why Leon would treat Matthias that way. They were love rivals, yet Leon got along with Matthias well. To think about it, Matthias didn't treat Leon the same way. His courtesy was tinged with hostility.

"You better not doubt my sexual orientation, Heather," Leon quickly defended himself. He knew Heather was suspecting that he was bisexual.

"Am I wrong?" Heather had once seen Leon being intimate with another guy. At that time, she wasn't able to accept it, but nowadays, bisexuality was rather common.

"The incident last time is really a misunderstanding. Please stop imagining things. I'm only interested in women," Leon said in a serious manner while wondering if Heather was actually listening to his explanation.

"Bisexuals are quite common, so you don't have to feel embarrassed about your sexual orientation. I think everyone's sexual orientation should be respected," Heather said justly.

The houseman who was walking in front of them was shocked upon hearing their conversation as if he had discovered an incredible secret.

“Heather, do you think I’m the kind of person who would feel embarrassed about it? It was a misunderstanding from the start, but you keep forcing me to admit it. How am I supposed to do so?” Leon had to emphasize this matter again. Maybe some of his behaviors after that day had made Heather misunderstood him even more.

“I thought what you said the other day was your declaration of being bisexual.” Recalling Leon’s ambiguous statement at that time, Heather thought he was specifically admitting that love was not about nationality, gender, and age.

“Oh dear, please stop right there. I was hinting that I have a crush on you. You’re overthinking!” Leon even had an impulse to strangle Heather. What was even worse, there was an outsider walking in front of them.

“Fine,” Heather said sulkily. Initially, she wanted to tease Leon but did not expect that he would be so serious about this matter. As such, she didn’t think it was appropriate to continue teasing him on this matter anymore.

Nevertheless, Heather was very surprised at Leon’s response. She had indeed thought that Leon was bisexual, but now it seemed like he was genuinely straight and she had misunderstood him.

“How many more examinations are there?” Leon asked the houseman who was leading them as he had already accompanied Heather for several check-ups today.

“There are only two left and we’ll be done soon.” The houseman looked shy like a young boy and had not turned around at all throughout the journey.

Meanwhile, Heather was relieved hearing that. She had taken a blood test early in the morning and didn’t have an appetite during breakfast, so she was very tired. It was draining to undergo these examinations, and she only wished to lie in bed for some rest at this moment.

“What’s your plan after getting discharged, Heather?” Leon asked all of a sudden. He wondered if she had any since the examination results would soon be released.

“I don’t feel like going back to the Langston Residence. Why don’t you take me in for a few days?” Heather felt it was meaningless to go home because Robert wouldn’t allow her to see him, so she’d rather wander outside.

Leon gladly agreed. He was extremely bored staying alone in the huge mansion, so he was delighted at the thought of having Heather accompany him.

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Having gone through the check-up, Heather and Leon returned to the hospital room. They could do nothing else but wait for the laboratory report, and the boredom that ensued led them both to start scrolling through their respective phones. Heather, in particular, did not look like she had come to terms with being a patient.

“Hey, since you’re bored, why don’t you join me for a round of video games?” Leon suggested in an effort to persuade Heather to play video games.

“I don’t like League of Legends,” she replied. She had never shown much interest in the video games he played.

“No, no, we aren’t playing League of Legends; we’re playing Honor of Kings. Are you interested?” Leon quipped cheerily, as he had recently become a fan of Honor of Kings.

Heather narrowed her eyes at him. She truly had little to no interest in video games, but it seemed as though he was rather persistent, so she decided to try her hand at a round or two for the fun of it. In reality, he was angling to pull her into the realm of video gaming with hopes that she might see the value of it.

However, his efforts were futile. Adamantly maintaining the view that video games were a waste of her time, she bit out with emphasis, “As far as I’m concerned, video games are a waste of time and money.”

“But it will be time well-spent because of all the fun!” he argued passionately. He could see himself setting up a gaming workshop in order to develop a video game based on his own preferences.

“Look, it’s clear that both of us have very different views on this matter. Don’t try to force yours upon me, and I won’t try to dissuade you from playing your precious video games,” she said plainly, sounding so sensible that Leon allowed her to put a swift end to this debate.

He lowered his head with the manner of a child who had lost an argument and carried on gaming. He had to accede to Heather's obstinate refusal to venture into video games. At the sight of his defeatist demeanor, she smiled. There were times when he was just like a kid, and she was starting to see him as family—like a little brother she never had.

Being cooped up in a hospital room left Heather with an abundance of free time. She spent a better part of it staring up at the ceiling, given that she had nothing to do but daydream. Catching sight of this, Leon tried to persuade her for another round as he pointed out, "It's a waste of time to daydream, too, Heather. You might as well pick up a bit of gaming while we wait."

She blinked slowly and corrected him, "I'm actually pretty comfortable spacing out like this. Thanks, but no thanks, I don't think I'd start gaming anytime soon." As she turned down his offer once more, she wondered briefly how he could be so patient and insistent on this matter.

He fell into yet another bout of disgruntled silence, growing irritated by her blatant refusal to indulge in video games. Does she really have no interest in gaming at all?

With that question in mind, he began to think about what she often did in her spare time, and concluded that she was a monotonous person. She showed no interest in all the things that trended among young adults, and instead emulated an old soul.

"Have you never done anything that isn't a waste of time, Heather?" he asked, refusing to believe otherwise as he maneuvered his avatar through the game.

"I have," she answered bluntly. "Which is why I try to stay away from doing such things, and gaming happens to be one of them." She could not stress enough that she was impassive toward gaming, and the thought of it being a waste of time only bolstered such a lack of interest.

As far as she was concerned, achievements attained in a fictional setting were significantly different from those attained in the real world. If she had to have anything to do with gaming at all, she would much rather invest in a couple of game production companies than waste time traipsing around a fictional world. The former venture was a more profitable one, after all.

“What if video gaming is a job requirement? Would you consider it then?” Leon put forth the question in all seriousness, seeing as he had plans to have Heather invest in his gaming workshop.

“Well, I’ve not been confronted with such a job requirement before.” She paused in thought. Indeed, the sphere of her job scope would never intersect with that of video games, and she figured it was pointless for her to give an answer to a hypothetical scenario.

“What if I were to set up a gaming workshop for the fun of it? Would you consider investing in my venture?” he pressed on, and this time he was brazenly presenting his proposal. He thought it was about time he set himself to do something useful since he had no goals for the time being.

“I highly doubt if my complete lack of prowess for gaming would do my partner any good,” Heather countered coolly and rationally, thereby making it clear that she was not keen on the idea of a gaming workshop.

“Wow, that’s harsh, Heather,” he said in mock disappointment. Just then, he brought up the matter of starting an enterprise. “You know, we still have to set up our company after this.”

Upon hearing this, she grew reticent. She admittedly did not have enough confidence to set up a company in such calamitous times, and the commercial scene in Bradford City was far too unpredictable for her to know how things might turn out. With all the uncertainty that played into the picture, it might be necessary for her to delay her plans for a start-up.

“Are you really planning to hold off on the launch of the business, Heather?” Seeing as he wasn’t able to leave Bradford City anytime soon, Leon thought he might work on the plans he had agreed with Heather previously.

“I don’t know. There’s a lot on my plate at the moment, and I don’t even know if I have the energy to set up my own company,” she explained tiredly as she thought about all the things she still had to face after this. She was frustrated, and she wasn’t sure of her next move either. She had felt so lost before.

“It’s okay to push the plans back; it’s not as if we have to set up the company right away,” he consoled her, knowing that her hands were tied. After all, he knew better than most about the troubles that plagued her.

“We still have the Saffords to think about. They’ve put all their trust and expectations in me, and it would be unfair to them if we kept delaying our plans. It would only wear out their faith and patience at some point.” Heather had been the one who looked for the Saffords and convinced them to jump on the bandwagon in the first place, but as things were, she was afraid that she might be forced to go back on her word, which was something she loathed doing.

“Don’t worry, I’ll smooth things over with them,” Leon answered confidently. Now that I think about it, I haven’t seen Paige for a while. I wonder how she’s doing.

With a sigh of resignation, Heather replied, “If we keep dragging this out, I don’t even know if I could keep my own faith.” She had been riddled with self-doubt recently, and on her worst days, she questioned if she was truly cut out to be a businesswoman.

In the business world, the only things that decided one’s standing were success and failure. There was no grey area in between where Heather could get back on her feet and figure things out. She had no intentions of becoming a failing entrepreneur; she wanted to be a winner in that field.

However, it seemed as if she was straying further and further away from her goal. Success was starting to look like a faraway dream, and she was growing unhappy with herself. I know I can do better, she thought sourly.

“What’s up with you, Heather? You’ve been acting all gloomy lately. Come on, you should be more upbeat. You’re Heather Langston for God’s sake! You were iconic on campus, and everyone wanted to be like you. You shouldn’t think less of yourself,” Leon cheered presently. He could tell how dejected and unsure she was of herself these days. If this carried on, it would only be a matter of time before she spiraled into depression.

Presently, Heather stretched out like a starfish on the bed and mused woefully, “Oh, how meaningless life has become!” She had no qualms about dwelling in sadness, not when she had Leon next to her.

Meanwhile, Matthias had been simmering in anger ever since his return from the hospital and was currently burying himself in work at Locke Group. Having seen the sullen expression on his face, Lara started to worry. Her gaze flickered over to him from time to time. However, he paid no attention to her and was only concerned with the mountainous pile of work at hand.

Lara had gone into his office for multiple reasons just so she could get him to take notice of her, but her baiting was futile; he did not even spare her a glance, and she wasn't sure what Heather had done to render him so furious either.

"President Locke, here are last month's spreadsheets for your perusal and approval," Lara informed dutifully. She had come up with various ways to start a conversation, but after running through them in her head, she decided that the only way to get a response out of Matthias was to bring up something work-relevant.

However, he only nodded and reached out for the spreadsheets. He did not speak to her, nor did he even bother to dismiss her.

It didn't take a genius to know that Heather was behind his moody countenance and erratic demeanor. While Lara did not have the slightest idea as to what that woman had done, she figured it had to be something dramatic.

Her skin prickled with suspicion, Lara finally resorted to asking Nikolai to console the sullen man inside the presidential office. She knew her place, and Nikolai was the closest person to Matthias, which meant he had a better chance of getting him to talk.

When Nikolai heard her suggestion, he frowned skeptically and said in a somber tone, "President Locke is currently swamped with work, so I don't think it's a good time for me to barge in and initiate a heart-to-heart talk with him." It was the wisest thing he could do to turn her down; otherwise, he would end up being roasted on a spit by Matthias.

"You're his cousin, and it's only right that you show some concern for him. He's in a bad mood right now, and I don't even know what Heather said to him. Just offer him a couple of words of solace and try to get him out of his funk. If we just let him carry on like this, it would only bring down the whole atmosphere of the workplace," Lara explained gravely, looking serious. She sounded so sensible that Nikolai found himself acceding to her request, but if he had to be honest, he was terrified of being in the same room with Matthias when the latter was having mood swings.

Lara, on the other hand, shoved Nikolai into the presidential office, and when he turned to see that the door had slammed shut behind him, he grew grim. I've been tricked by her again!

Presently, Matthias glanced up at him without addressing him, and Nikolai had never felt more invisible than this moment as he grew uneasy at the former's stony silence.

He swallowed and quietly sauntered up to Matthias, and when he saw the spreadsheets sprawled out on the desk, he realized that this might be a bad time to interrupt the man's work. He was seized with the sudden urge to bolt out the door; he didn't want to become the target of Matthias' inexplicable rage.

After glancing at the documents Matthias was reviewing, Nikolai shuffled over to the couch that had been upholstered on one side of the office. This is a safe spot, he told himself. I'm just going to sit here quietly now since it's too late for me to back out of this.

Matthias, on the other hand, was no fool. He knew what Nikolai was trying to do, but he couldn't care less about such petty tactics. Work was the only thing that could clear the clamor in his mind right now.

He checked through the spreadsheets quickly, and tossed them aside after making sure that they were accurate. Nikolai saw this as a window for him to cut through the tension and immediately rushed forward to the desk.

He skidded to a stop in front of Matthias and stared at him as though he could telepathically talk to him. However, Matthias was not one to crack under pressure. He did not even look up from the rest of his documents. This only made Nikolai feel more awkward than he already was.

"You look like you're having a productive day, Matthias!" Nikolai broke the silence with a cheerful remark, then winced at how stupid he sounded.

Matthias merely lowered his head as he buried himself with work. He did not even bother looking up to acknowledge Nikolai's presence. The latter didn't want to give up so easily, so he decided that he needed to persevere before he could get the gloomy president to warm up.

"I wonder how's Heather, Matthias. Do you think she's recovering well?" he asked deliberately, knowing that Matthias had dropped by the hospital to visit Heather earlier.

It was only after hearing Heather's name that Matthias raised a brow and looked up. A dark fire could be seen burning in his eyes and it intimidated

Nikolai. Bristling with fear, the younger man thought, I must have said something wrong.

After a long pause, Matthias finally said in an icy voice, "Save the leisure talk for outside office hours." His warning tone was enough to make Nikolai want to bury himself in a hole somewhere.

With his heart thumping wildly in his chest, Nikolai thought it would be safer for him to retreat. He didn't want to become the fish in the barrel when Matthias decided to draw his gun.

"I'm sorry, President Locke. I'll get back to work right away," he said courteously, his words coming out in a flurry as he dashed out of the presidential office. He knew that he had to leave before Matthias turned him into livestock in a slaughterhouse.

## Standing before Love Chapter 695

It took one look from Matthias to send Nikolai running. There was always a murderous gleam in his eyes whenever he was in one of his moods. If looks could kill, then Matthias could be a mercenary if he weren't already a businessman.

Now that he was left alone in his office once more, Matthias dived back into work. He knew that Nikolai and Lara only wanted to make sure he was alright, but he simply could not be bothered with their kindness right now.

His heart twisted bitterly at the thought of Heather becoming someone else's woman. He was sure that he was on par with, if not better, than the likes of Leon, so why did she choose to be with the latter instead?

He knew that it was not in Heather's nature to be impulsive, which meant she had put a lot of thought into this before finally making a decision. This only added more weight to Matthias' mind, and the more he dwelled on this, the worse he felt. He couldn't come to terms with the fact that she had fallen for someone else.

It had only been days before when he was engaged in flirtatious banter with her, so why did she settle on Leon all of a sudden? Matthias had done everything to win her over, but he ended up failing his endeavors. He didn't even manage to become her boyfriend. How could she so easily decide that

Leon is the one for her? This question alone was enough to make Matthias suspend his entire belief system.

Presently, he glanced down at the documents in his hand and found that he was no longer driven by work. The tiny words that strung together on the countless pages only made his head spin, and right now, he badly needed an outlet for all the pent-up frustration within him.

He felt rotten, as though he had just lost grip on the meaning of life. He wasn't able to just walk up to Heather and demand an explanation from her. In fact, there was nothing he could do at this juncture, and he had never felt quite as helpless as he did now.

He didn't even want to think about what Heather might be doing. Leon was with her in the hospital, and with the modicum of privacy presented to them by the hospital room, it was likely that they were all over each other.

Matthias hated to imagine such nonsensical scenarios. He wanted to make his way over to the hospital, but he figured it was too humiliating for him to show up like that. He wished he could install some micro bodycam on Heather so that he could see what she was doing. He was so desperate to see her that he might go insane.

He was even beginning to regret having left the hospital in a fit of rage. He had never been one to manage his emotions, so it came as no surprise that he was pushing himself toward a nervous breakdown.

What am I supposed to do now? He had never had to ask himself something like this before—he had never felt so hopeless. Even Myra's wedding hadn't added so much insult to his injury, but now, he thought he might very well go crazy if Heather really did end up marrying Leon.

When two people fell in love, the dynamic between them naturally fused into one, heavily centered around torture. Heather did not see Matthias as a safe harbor at which she could finally dock. With a weary soul, she experimented in various ways to prove this, but in the process of doing so, she had no idea how much hurt she was causing him.

The conflict that tore through Matthias was a mirror image of hers as well. He had kept too much to himself, and things would not have been quite so tumultuous if he had been more forthcoming with her. Alas, he was habitually

secretive, leaving Heather to guess at the truth instead of telling it to her outright.

No longer able to stand the tension and frustration that settled within his office, he pushed all the documents off his desk onto the floor. He needed to find neutral ground, where he could recollect his thoughts and regain his composure. He was no longer in the mood to continue on with his work.

It wasn't long before he pulled the door open and stormed out of his office. Having done so, he told Lara in a commanding tone, "I'm heading out. Go into my office and clean it up for me."

With that, he walked out of the building. Staying at Locke Group would only build on his frustration, and a breath of fresh air might help to clear his mind.

It had been quite a while since his arrival in Bradford City, but it was only at the present moment that he realized he had never explored the vibrant local scene. Evan, on the other hand, was an incorrigible hedonist who had probably already made a home for himself in all the best clubs the city had to offer. Matthias rarely ventured into places like those, but he had to admit that an occasional visit would help unwind him.

When Evan came out to greet Matthias, it was with a look of disbelief. He was skeptical and suspicious as he eyed the latter. He wondered what had prompted him to initiate a trip to a clubhouse.

"Out of curiosity, President Locke, has something really good happened, or are you just in a bad mood?" Evan asked inquisitively, but judging from the way Matthias' lips were pressed into a grim line, it was obvious the man was downcast.

"I told you to bring me somewhere I can unwind," Matthias began sullenly. "So why are you still asking me stupid questions?" It was clear that Evan had noticed his foul mood, and asking him about it was akin to mockery.

"I just don't think you'd enjoy yourself in a club, President Locke," Evan explained. They had visited a clubhouse on a previous occasion, but Matthias was far too uptight to appreciate the novelty of it, and it was hard to imagine that this time would be any different.

"Are you done?" Matthias barked impatiently, then stormed ahead so that he could stop listening to Evan's unnecessary lecture.

However, Evan caught up to him and pointed out, “You have a girlfriend now. Aren’t you worried that Miss Langston might see you at the club and throw you in the doghouse?” The teasing tone of his voice only succeeded in stoking Matthias’ anger.

Matthias stopped in his tracks and turned ominously to throw a dangerous look at Evan, who felt a chill run down his spine. He blinked innocently at the former, and it was only then that he realized he had slipped up.

“Do not mention Heather’s name in front of me.” Matthias bit out harshly through gritted teeth. He was feeling bad enough as it was, and he only wanted to find an emotional outlet through which he could release all his pent-up bitter resentment. He most certainly did not want to concern himself with anything related to Heather.

“Okay, okay,” Evan agreed placatingly. He immediately deduced that Matthias had gotten into a lover’s spat with Heather, and it looked like it did not end well. He could finally understand why Matthias was behaving so erratically.

Evan’s idea of Matthias was a tolerant and chivalrous gentleman who had intensive guidance, which would mean that the fight wasn’t a small matter. Heather must have crossed the line to make Matthias so angry, Evan thought grimly.

He was suddenly seized with the urge to unearth the details of the fight. He wondered if he could get Matthias to down a couple of powerful shots of alcohol, seeing as it would be easier to make him spill the beans once his inhibitions were lowered. However, Matthias could hold his drinks exceptionally well, so there was a chance that this plan might go awry. I might be the first one to get drunk before I could hear his side of the story.

Walking into a clubhouse in broad daylight seemed to take the fun out of the situation. As far as preferences went, Evan liked it when he could bask in the robust nightclub culture, ‘night’ being the operative word. The clubhouse was practically devoid of life at this hour, and he couldn’t help but resent Matthias for feeling gloomy in the middle of the day.

Nonetheless, he brought Matthias over to one of his favorite haunts. He might be a responsible butler who worked 24/7, but he still made time for leisure indulgence.

Given that his butler's duties revolved around taking care of Matthias' needs, he would give himself a break whenever the latter was away from home or out late for after-work drinks. There were even times when he would wait for Matthias to fall asleep at night before partaking in his usual vices.

That said, he made sure that he would be at Matthias' beck and call, and his schedule was tailored to accommodate the latter's. He was a butler who knew how to do his job, and he had been taking excellent care of Matthias' personal life.

Evan had odd sleeping hours, but that didn't stop him from having a robust lifestyle. He was used to staying up late and waking up before the crack of dawn, which meant he relied heavily on two- or three-hour naps during the day to make up for his lack of sleep at night.

When he wasn't tied up with butler duties, he was a vagabond. He had a rather decorated nightlife, and he had fun hanging out with his friends during the day as well.

He was a man who truly appreciated a good time, which made him the polar opposite of Matthias. There were times when he would warn the latter not to let work take up his precious days of youth, claiming that it would do him some good to relax every once in a while.

Presently, he walked up to Matthias and said, "There aren't many clubhouses that operate at this hour, President Locke." It was true; it was rare for clubhouses to open twenty-four hours like a convenient store.

Being a connoisseur when it came to nightclubs, Evan knew that the best joints only operated for short hours, but Matthias didn't seem like he was looking for excitement. With that in mind, he began to think about what Matthias did at night, and he came to the conclusion that the man rarely ever had time for himself. After-work dinners were probably the only time when Matthias could socialize in an informal setting.

Not long after, Evan brought Matthias to an establishment known as Caliph Nightclub. There was something off about the name of the place, but it was only after Matthias had stepped foot into the club that he fully registered the gravity of the situation. The scene before him was entirely different from what he had expected of a clubhouse, and at the sight of it, he turned to glare at Evan mutinously.

Then, he spun on his heels to leave, but Evan caught up to him and pulled him to a stop. "Drinking is an excellent way to unwind, President Locke, and you could always play a game of poker or something. There are other pub games you could try out as well." Caliph Nightclub was a local favorite for poker fans, and Evan had only brought Matthias here because he enjoyed a good game of poker himself.

"I just want to have some mindless fun," Matthias snapped. What he meant was that he would like to down a row of shots mindlessly as he did not want to spend the rest of his day trying out pub games and poker, both of which required the use of tactical thinking.

Evan took on a more persuasive tone as he countered, "What makes you think poker isn't mindless fun? It's more about luck, President Locke. Why don't you sit down for a game with me?"

If Evan had not been so earnest, Matthias might have thought he was trying to dupe him. However, seeing as they were already here, he figured there was no harm in a friendly game of poker, though it was not the sort of fun he had had in mind.

"A two-person poker game?" Matthias wondered aloud.

Upon hearing this, Evan chuckled. "You'll understand in a bit." There was a lewd edge to his chuckling that made Matthias uneasy all of a sudden.

Before he could ask further questions, he heard Evan say to the cashier with natural ease, "I'd like to book the Caliph Room with two masters of poker for company."

Matthias frowned at this. He had no idea what Evan was doing, but he shrugged it off, and it wasn't long before the mystery was solved.

One of the attendants led them into the Caliph Room, and Matthias felt as though they had stepped through the portal to a world that was distinct from the stuffy scene downstairs. When Matthias first entered the club, he thought he had walked into a retirement home, given there were old men huddling together over a game of cards and chess.

But as soon as the door to the Caliph Room swung open, he was greeted by the overwhelming atmosphere that was commonly associated with a vivacious

nightclub. As Matthias strolled into this hidden cavern, he began to approve of Evan's choice.

Evan, on the other hand, had taken a liking to the over-the-top decorations and the old-school track lights that basked the room in jarring neon colors. There was something particularly laid-back and deviant about the almost disco-inspired surrounding for which he had developed an acquired taste.

"The whole scene downstairs is just a cover, President Locke. This place is more than it seems," Evan explained as he wiggled his brows meaningfully. Sure enough, a couple of sultry female voices spoke up from the other side of the door, saying, "Master, we have arrived."

Matthias narrowed his eyes at this out-of-the-blue interjection, while Evan merely chuckled like the cat that ate the canary as he rose to open the door. Following this, two scantily-clad young ladies entered the room, and Matthias thought their dedication to their line of work was admirable, seeing as they barely had enough clothing on them to keep warm in the middle of winter.

Then, he noticed the tails that the women were sporting, and he immediately turned to shoot Evan an incredulous look. So this is his twisted fetish? Who could have thought he has such a specific taste?

"You haven't come by to see us, Master," one of the beauties purred seductively.

These two women were gorgeous in their own ways, and despite their tacky outfits, they still boasted pretty faces. Their make-up was done tastefully enough to flatter their delicate features, and if they weren't working at a club right now, Matthias would have easily mistaken them for attractive office girls.

One of the women was taller, and she looked to be about five foot six in height; the other one was petite, and she didn't look like she was taller than five foot two. It was clear to see that they were both charming in different ways—where one had an impassive and sultry edge, and the other was endearing and unassuming.

Suddenly, Matthias' eyes trailed downward, and he cursed, Damn it, why are they barefooted?

## Standing before Love Chapter 696

The already fidgety Matthias became even more fretful when he saw the sight, as he didn't have this kind of fetish. Gazing at the ladies, whose skin had reddened from the coldness, he wondered who had come up with this idea. Nevertheless, he didn't have the heart to chase them away, as he wasn't so stone-hearted.

"Evan, I need an explanation from you." Matthias stared at him with a dark expression. He wanted to know why Evan took him here.

While enjoying the company of a beautiful lady, Evan replied to him, "It's all made-to-order. Just like playing a game, you can choose whoever you prefer to play poker with you. Since you've said you want to get drunk, I've told them to prepare a box of wine for us. There are all sorts of flavors, so I'm sure you'll be happy with it." Evan flashed a grin at him.

After he finished speaking, someone was heard knocking on the door from outside. Evan looked at the door and uttered, "Come in."

Following that, a burly man stepped into the room with a box of wine in his hands and placed it in front of them. "Boss, these are the wines you've ordered."

"Evan, are you messing with me?" Matthias suppressed his fury, as he had the urge to kill him.

"President, you've really misunderstood me. Since you're here to unwind, don't you want to try something new?" Evan's life goal was to have fun whenever possible.

The woman with a cute voice wanted to chime in, but Evan stopped her from doing so with his gaze. The other tall woman was much calmer, as she just stayed at the side like an outsider.

Matthias didn't want to flare up in this kind of place, so he just went along with Evan and tried to find out what the latter meant by something new. Seeing that Matthias was convinced, Evan then went on to introduce the two beautiful ladies to him.

“President, the woman in my embrace is Jasmine, and the other one is Ether.” Evan had never tried to touch Ether because he wanted Matthias to take note of her.

It was a coincidence that Ether’s name sounded somewhat similar to Heather’s. Moreover, her height, body shape, and temperament resembled those of Heather as well, so Matthias might be interested in her.

In the past, Evan had tried to come up with all sorts of ways to make Matthias lose his virginity. However, since Heather’s appearance, he had stopped having this kind of thought. Nevertheless, he understood that all men had sexual needs. Seeing how Matthias suppressed his desire in front of Heather, he reckoned that Matthias needed a woman to alleviate his suffering.

“Let’s begin.” Matthias didn’t want to waste any more time. He wasn’t interested in finding out their names, as it was apparent that these were just their aliases.

Evan directly took a seat across from Matthias and made Ether sit on the left of Matthias. If Matthias was interested in Ether, it would be quite obvious when they played poker later.

Meanwhile, Jasmine kept stealing glances at Matthias. She knew that Evan was a rich customer, but after she heard him calling Matthias ‘President’, she reckoned that Matthias must be a big shot. So, she directly took a seat on Matthias’ right. When they played poker later, she would try to win Matthias over. She must seize the chance and make sure that Matthias would take note of her.

All three of them had their own ulterior motives, while Matthias only focused on playing poker. Even Ether, who was beside Matthias, wanted to hook up with him. She knew that wealthy men were not interested in women who were too proactive, which was why she pretended to be aloof. She was fed up with the work here and the destitute state she was in. While working here, she had been trying to look for her Prince Charming. She had done her best to save her virginity so that she could get married to a wealthy man one day.

On the other hand, Matthias wasn’t familiar with the rules of poker. Although he had seen other people play the game before, he had never personally tried it. Just like Heather, he was a workaholic himself, so he wouldn’t do anything that he deemed a waste of time.

Evan knew that Matthias wasn't familiar with the game. Since they were here to have fun, the rules didn't really matter. To liven up the atmosphere, Evan said to them, "There are no rules today. Just reveal your hand whenever possible. The loser will not only lose money but also have to drink."

Matthias found Evan to be ridiculous. Nevertheless, it seemed that Evan was trying to make it easy for him by eliminating the rules. After all, he was a rookie in poker.

However, Matthias wasn't aware that there was a special rule in this place. These people, who played poker with their customers, could get the money from their customers if they won, but if they lost, they didn't have to give the customers any money.

Therefore, some customers would come up with terrible ideas to mess with them. Drinking wine was considered a milder punishment. When faced with horrible customers, they'd rather fork out money from their own wallets than be punished by those people.

Perhaps the Goddess of Luck was in favor of poker rookies, so Matthias was extremely lucky on this day. These bottles of wine were meant for Matthias, but he had never even had a taste of it, while the others had already finished three bottles.

"President, you're really lucky today. Why don't we change our seats?" Evan almost wanted to throw up, as he was a light drinker.

Seeing that Evan indeed couldn't take it anymore, Matthias looked at him with a faint smile. "You're the one who bought the wine, so you're supposed to drink more of it." He didn't have the intention of letting Evan off. As he was in a terrible mood, he was more than happy to see someone else suffer.

Evan thought that his sacrifice was immense this time. He reckoned that he would suffer from alcohol poisoning soon and be sent to the hospital. All sorts of thoughts flashed across his mind, and he had even come up with a will in his head. Nevertheless, he still kept losing the game. It seemed his skills were useless when luck was on the other person's side. Now, he just wanted to eat his words. If he knew that Matthias was so lucky, he wouldn't have boasted shamelessly and made it easy for him, as Matthias was the biggest winner now.

After Matthias managed to win many rounds, he no longer felt crestfallen. It seemed that Evan was right to say that playing poker could help him set his mind at ease. It was a better way to unwind than drinking.

Meanwhile, the two ladies were basically ignored by Matthias. He was so focused on the cards in his hands that he didn't even spare them a glance.

"President, let's take a break now." Evan needed a rest. Matthias was too engrossed in the game. Earlier, he had said that he didn't want to play a game that required brainpower.

After that, Evan left with Jasmine, leaving Ether and Matthias in the room. Ether realized that it was a good chance for her as she kept stealing glances at Matthias. She was trying to come up with ways to chat him up since she realized that he wouldn't take the initiative to talk to her.

Bored, Matthias fished out his phone and took a look at the latest developments of the stock market in Bradfort City. He seemed to have forgotten that there was a woman beside her.

Silently, Ether tried to get closer to him. With the short distance between them, she could even take a whiff of the pleasant fragrance that was wafting from his body. She wanted to get even closer to him, as the chance was right before her eyes.

Matthias seemed to have seen through her intention, so he shot her a glance. Seeing that, she immediately stopped approaching him and hung her head low with a reddened face.

Seeing how bashful she was, Matthias felt slightly embarrassed. Nevertheless, since she wasn't Heather, he couldn't be expected to be gentle to her. After that, both of them fell silent. Countless pick-up lines had flashed across Ether's mind, but she just couldn't muster enough courage to speak to him.

Just then, the door was pushed open from outside. Matthias heaved a sigh of relief as Evan's return had saved him from the embarrassment.

Seeing how Matthias behaved, Evan knew that while he wasn't around, the two of them wouldn't have made any meaningful progress. He wanted to make Matthias happy, but he was too naive. Besides Heather, no one else could make Matthias happy.

After the reshuffle, luck was no longer on Matthias' side. Evan and Jasmine worked closely together to make Matthias keep losing, while Ether was still calm and collected on the side. She suddenly understood the difference between Matthias and her. It was then she realized that he wasn't the Prince Charming she had been waiting for.

Without any hesitation, Matthias gulped down the bottles of wine one by one. He was born to be a heavy drinker, as he would never get drunk no matter how much he drank. Even if all the wines were mixed together, he still wouldn't get wasted.

However, he didn't want to stay clear-headed. His vision started becoming blurred, but he still thought that he wouldn't get inebriated so easily. Perhaps one would get intoxicated easily when he was in a bad mood. Matthias chugged down the last bottle of vodka.

After that, he realized that his stomach was churning. He did drink a lot in the past, but he had never drunk as much as this time. The dizziness he felt made him realize that this was how getting drunk felt.

"There's no more." Already intoxicated, Matthias looked at the empty bottles that were scattered everywhere.

"It's fine. I'll get the boss to send us one more box of wine." Evan knew that Matthias was a heavy drinker, so the wine they had just finished was too little for him.

"Alright." Matthias put on a satisfied smile.

Matthias wasn't a stunningly handsome man at first glance, but it would take some time for anyone to appreciate that he was actually quite good-looking. Seeing the smile on his face, Ether was enchanted.

A man must be quite crestfallen to have chugged down so much wine in one go. Ether speculated that it had something to do with a woman. The reason he was oblivious to a woman's seduction must be that there was already someone in his heart.

Ether analyzed the situation in a rational manner, but she still felt unresigned. The chance was right before her eyes, but she just couldn't grasp it.

Seeing through Ether's intention, Evan put on a smile and thought whether he should give her a hand. However, given Matthias' temperament, he would probably kill Evan after he sobered up.

Evan thought that Matthias had tried too hard to suppress his nature. The suppression, both spiritual and physical, made him incapable of relieving his suffering.

"Heather," Matthias suddenly called out, which caused Ether to feel her chest tightening.

Evan knew that Matthias was missing Heather. He regarded himself to be a casanova, but he still couldn't enchant a woman like Heather. Perhaps Matthias and Heather are not destined to be together.

He didn't know how to console Matthias. He even thought that he didn't deserve to be his friend, as he couldn't help him relieve his suffering.

"Heather," Matthias called out again in a clear manner. "Am I such a failure?" He stared fixedly at Ether. At this moment, he couldn't make out who the woman in front of him really was.

## Standing before Love Chapter 697

In order to prevent Matthias from doing anything embarrassing, Evan quickly lugged him away. Meanwhile, Ether appeared reluctant to see him go. Seeing that, Evan was displeased, as he didn't expect that Matthias could win her heart so easily. He had heard that Ether was an icy beauty, and she had hardly taken a liking to any man. Therefore, it had never crossed his mind that she'd fall for Matthias.

Unfortunately, she was Ether, and not Heather, after all. Matthias loved Heather and no one else. Evan shot a pitiful glance at Ether, who had just lost her love crush. At that instant, he recalled the woman he had fallen in love with at first glance in the past. The person who fell in love first in any relationship was destined to get hurt. Love was the unfairest thing in this world, as it wasn't an exchange of equal values. Perhaps one might think that they had given all they had, but to the other party, it was nothing more than trouble.

Evan supported Matthias' weight with difficulty. Although Matthias looked thin, he was quite heavy when he was drunk. Evan recalled reading from a book

that a drunk person's weight was two times heavier than when they were sober. Now, he could totally relate to what he had read. He was a frail man himself, so it took him a lot of effort to bring Matthias back to his home. If it weren't because Matthias was still somewhat conscious, both of them would have slept over in Caliph Nightclub.

Looking around this familiar place, Matthias shook his head. "Is this my home?" He appeared doubtful, as everything around him was both familiar and strange to him.

"Mr. President, this is your room." Evan directly threw him onto the bed as he was exhausted.

At that instant, Matthias felt the world around him spinning. Martial artists could never get drunk. He always remembered that because no one knew what would happen if a martial artist got intoxicated, so he had never allowed himself to get drunk.

However, he had accidentally become inebriated on this day. Moreover, the sunlight outside was dazzling, so he wasn't sure whether it was daytime or nighttime now. Upon getting out of the bed in a wobbly manner, he stared fixedly at Evan and put on a faint smile. He looked vastly different from his usual self.

"Evan, I'm not drunk." Matthias insisted that he was sober. He was walking in a staggering manner now, so it was apparent that he was far from sober.

"President, it's late now. You should get some sleep." As Evan spoke, he pressed a button on a remote control, after which the room turned dim, as though they had fallen into complete darkness.

"I don't want to sleep. I need wine." Matthias was already befuddled. However, he still wanted more wine to continue drinking.

It was the first time Evan dealt with Matthias when the latter was drunk as he looked at him with a headache. Nevertheless, he had no better way to handle him.

Inside the dark room, Matthias searched around with his hands. Then, he fell into Evan's embrace and caressed his face.

“Heather, don’t leave me, and don’t get married to another man.” Matthias finally uttered the truth after he got intoxicated, while Evan listened to him in shock.

He found it hard to believe that things had come to such an irreversible point. Although Heather was willful, she couldn’t possibly have agreed to marry someone else on a whim. Initially, he thought that it wouldn’t take long before they would make up again. However, it seemed that he was mistaken, as they were indeed going separate ways.

“Heather, what else do you want me to do? Why do you doubt my love for you?” Matthias asked sorrowfully. He had the urge to pry open her head and see what was on her mind.

“I have never doubted your love. Sleep now, will you?” Evan was coaxing him like a mother trying to put her son to sleep.

“I don’t want to sleep. I only want you.” Matthias was behaving like a kid who couldn’t get his candy. He couldn’t stop himself from missing Heather.

“Alright, alright. I’m yours.” Evan squeezed out the words. It was quite nauseating to say such things, but he had to put up with it for Matthias’ sake.

“You’re lying. You don’t need me anymore. You doubt my love for you. You don’t love me anymore. You’ve fallen in love with someone else,” Matthias uttered in an interrogative manner. He wanted Heather to come back to him, but it was practically impossible.

“No. You’re the one I love.” Evan quickly got into character and persuaded himself that he was Heather. Otherwise, he couldn’t have said those things.

Nevertheless, Matthias pushed him away. “No, you’re not Heather. You’re lying to me.”

It was said that force was mutual. Due to the fact that Matthias had exerted too much force earlier, he had also fallen to the ground. Evan got to his feet and looked down at him in the darkness as he was torn between tears and laughter. Now, it seemed that Matthias needed consolation from a woman.

Evan was considering whether he should call Ether to come over, as he really couldn’t deal with Matthias anymore. Furthermore, Matthias had said that

Heather was going to get married to someone else, so he should probably change his target.

After getting out of the room, Evan was still apprehensive, for he reckoned what he was about to do would make Matthias enraged when the latter sobered up. Matthias wasn't just his best friend, but also his boss, so he wasn't sure whether he should make this kind of decision on Matthias' behalf.

After giving it a thought, he decided to take the risk. Even if Matthias wanted to fire him afterward, he would accept his fate. He didn't want Matthias to be troubled by his love affairs again, as he just wanted him to be happy.

Following that, he dialed the number of Caliph Nightclub. "I'm looking for your boss. Tell him to speak to me," he demanded.

Fortunately, the other party didn't dawdle and called out to his boss. Over the phone, Evan said to the boss, "I want Ether to come over to my place."

The boss recognized his voice and knew that the latter was an important customer, but it wasn't right to let their workers accompany their customers outside the nightclub. In a dilemma, the boss replied, "I'm sure you know our rules. This is basically against it."

Evan uttered lightly, "Just tell me the price." A matter couldn't be considered a problem if it could be solved with money.

The boss fell into a tight spot. It was true that businessmen were after profit, but once the rules were broken, it would be difficult for them to run their business.

"Why don't you tell Ether to speak to me? I'll invite her to the villa as a friend, and it's up to her whether she'll agree to it." Evan believed that Ether would agree to it as he recalled her gaze before they left.

"Alright, then." The boss then told Ether to come over.

Over the phone, Evan uttered to her, "Ether, my president needs someone to keep him company now. Are you willing to come over?" He directly told her his intention, as he believed that she knew what to do.

"Okay." Ether only replied to him with one word, and the problem was solved.

Evan put on a satisfied smile and decided to let Ether deal with Matthias. As a man, it was inappropriate for him to do such a thing. Moreover, Heather was all Matthias thought about now. Given Ether's similar body shape and temperament to those of Heather, she could probably pass as the latter. Now, Evan hoped that Matthias would embrace Ether and vent out all his longing.

He could never do such a thing, as it was quite weird for him to make out with another man. In order to save his reputation, he thought it'd be better to tell Ether to come over. Moreover, she didn't look like a loose woman, so she probably wouldn't seize the chance to take away Matthias' virginity.

With this thought in mind, Evan put on a wicked smile, as he had been waiting for the day when Matthias lost his virginity. Matthias was almost thirty, but he was still a virgin. Anyone would have thought that he might be practicing some kind of martial arts that required him to stay as a virgin.

Soon, Ether arrived at the villa, and Evan personally welcomed her in. Without any small talk, they got straight to the main point.

"I'm sorry for making you come over." Evan thought that he should explain to her what happened.

"How is he now?" Ether was worried about Matthias. It was the first time she saw someone being able to chug down so much wine in one go. He had even mixed different kinds of wine together, so she was worried that he might be suffering from alcohol poisoning. Now, she couldn't wait to see him.

"Don't worry. My president is a heavy drinker, and he had never gotten drunk before prior to this. The reason he's even intoxicated today is that he's in a bad mood. I'll briefly tell you what happened. The woman my president loves is going to marry someone else, and that woman's body shape and temperament are similar to yours. So, I hope that you'll give him some consolation," Evan said in a solemn manner, thinking that there was nothing wrong with what he had just uttered.

Unexpectedly, Ether started blushing upon hearing that. She hung her head low and questioned in a small voice, "What do you think I am?" She thought that Evan had regarded her as a slut and wanted her to bed Matthias.

"Hey, please don't get me wrong! I just want you to console him with words. It's not what you think!" Evan quickly waved his hands. "My president is an

upright man, so he'll never do anything inappropriate to you." Now, he was more worried that Ether might do something to his friend.

Ether nodded, as she had seen how restrained Matthias was. It was the first time she saw such an upright man. For some reason, she felt her heart throbbing at the sight of his serious-looking face. Perhaps it was because Matthias was different from other men, so she was hoping to meet him again. However, she didn't expect that the chance would come so soon.

Then, Evan brought her to Matthias' room and said to her in a hushed voice, "I've added some special effects in the room, so it's pitch dark now. Can you see in the dark?"

After Evan teased her, she felt less anxious now. "There's no problem," she replied in a serious manner.

"Good luck, then," Evan said with a grin and opened the door. It was indeed very dark inside the room. He then pushed her into the room and lightly closed the door. Seeing how dark it was around her, she was less nervous instead. At the same time, she could hear Matthias breathe.

"Heather," he called out.

This time, Ether could hear clearly that the woman he loved was called Heather. Her name was indeed similar to hers. Then, she recalled what Evan had said and realized that she was just a replacement. Despite that, she didn't think it was a humiliation for her. That was because she could see Matthias again, so she was pretty joyful. Perhaps she had fallen in love with him at first sight without her realizing it.

She only found out about Matthias' name just now. Although she had no idea how Heather would call him, at this moment, she just wanted to call him Matthias.

## Standing before Love Chapter 698

Ether contained her anxiety and muttered, "Matthias."

Matthias heard a woman calling for him in a confused state. He couldn't tell who it was, yet he hoped it was Heather. For some reason, he still had some sense of rationality despite being intoxicated. In fact, he had a feeling that the person calling his name wasn't the woman he loved. After all, Matthias still

remembered that Heather was currently at the hospital. He desperately wanted to visit her, but he had no courage to do so.

After fumbling around for a bit, Ether eventually got to Matthias. In the dark room, she felt the need to take the initiative this time to do what she once desired to.

When Matthias previously walked away from her, she thought that was the end for the both of them. From then on, she regretted being a coward and for not taking the opportunity when they were both alone.

“It’s me, Ether.” Nonetheless, she couldn’t bring herself to lie since she was Ether and not Heather. At that moment, she was truly envious of that woman—she had Matthias’ unconditional love, after all.

“Heather? Is that you?” he asked, not having an ‘Ether’ in his mind. He only knew and loved Heather.

“Yes. I’ve come to see you,” she answered calmly. Since Evan had not provided her with much information on Heather, she didn’t know how to pose as the other woman.

“It’s too dark in here. I can’t see you.” Despite trying his best to look for Heather, Matthias couldn’t see anything even though he was eager to catch sight of the woman’s face.

“I can see you.” Now that she finally stood face-to-face with him, Ether simply peered at him as she longed for his attention.

Matthias opened his eyes wide, but it didn’t help much in terms of sight. It was pitch-black in front of him, and he couldn’t even feel the warmth of the person there.

Meanwhile, Ether timidly extended her hand to touch him. However, she couldn’t help but wonder if she was being too greedy by hoping to initiate some skinship with him.

Suddenly, a pair of warm hands placed themselves on Matthias’ arms. He felt that something wasn’t right, for Heather’s palms were just like her personality—freezing cold.

“It’s me, Heather.” Ether had no other choice but to deceive him, so she became the woman Matthias loved.

“Heather.” As if he had really seen her, he instantly went for a hug, pulling her firmly into his embrace. After resting his chin on her forehead, he smugly muttered, “This must be a dream, right? It’s so unreal to have you in my arms.”

At that moment, Ether was indulging in the cosiness of Matthias’ arms, and she had no intention of pulling away. She never expected Matthias’ passion for Heather to be so miserable and excruciating to this state. Nonetheless, she feared that she’d drown in his snuggle, so she unconsciously pushed him away and removed herself from his beguiling embrace. She continued to pose as Heather and painfully apologized, “I’m sorry for hurting you this bad.”

“Don’t apologize to me—I’m willing to go through hell for your sake. How could you ever doubt my feelings for you, though? I love you so much, but what did I do to deserve your suspicion? You’re even getting married to Leon.” Matthias spoke like a kid who had been wrongly punished. Since he needed another comforting hug, he shoved Ether against his chest once more.

When she heard that, she couldn’t help feeling unjust for Matthias. “I’m sorry, Matthias. I never realized the pain I’ve caused you.” He really loves this Heather, so why would she mistreat him this way?

From Ether’s perspective, Matthias was merely troubled by his one-sided romance. However, she had no idea about the complex experiences Heather and Matthias shared. Since she was clueless about what really happened between them, she was depressed after seeing the man’s state.

“I’m not scared of being hurt. I’m only scared that you’ll leave me,” he answered while hugging her so tightly. In fact, it was almost as though he wanted to engulf the woman into his body.

How he wished to be able to merge with Heather! If that was the case, she would never leave him. In truth, there were even times when he was desperate enough to feel jealous of the body parts that comprised Heather’s figure.

He was so desirous that he was willing to become a mole on her body—he could be her eyes, her ears, or even her nose. Above all, he longed to be

something she would die without. Although he was extremely resistant to split up with her, he could no longer pursue her.

Despite reaching the point of no return with Heather, Matthias refused to put down his pride and beg for forgiveness. He never anticipated falling so deep in love that he had become so pathetic to crawl out of it. Even with every single cell of his brain, he couldn't figure out what it was about himself that she loathed so much.

With Heather not revealing anything to him, he got frustrated trying to work out what was wrong with himself. Thinking that everything could be solved by talking, he couldn't make out why she had to make things this difficult for him.

"Heather, if we were to start over, we wouldn't be in such a mess, would we?" As he looked at Ether, he voiced a question he wished to know the answer to. In his mind, he was continuously contemplating if it was indeed his failing start with her that led to such turmoil. Meanwhile, he never once considered his family a factor to the ruin.

"We're not in a mess, Matthias. I love you, and you love me. We'll stay together for eternity," Ether tenderly comforted the devastated Matthias.

"Together for eternity..." Matthias mumbled in dismay as he couldn't believe that such words were coming from Heather herself. I must be dreaming... This is all a dream!

"Yes, I will love you forever until death do us part." Since she had no experience in dating, Ether could only spit some cliché lines.

"I'll love you forever too." Matthias wanted to love her and spoil her for the rest of their lives.

Up until now, everything he had done was for the sake of Heather's future. Knowing there were barriers between the two of them, he would work even harder to secure a future with her.

After calming Matthias down, Ether helped him to bed while he grabbed her hand, not wanting to let her go. She wordlessly sat beside him at an arm's length to keep her distance, but Matthias soon dragged her into his arms.

As such, that was her first time sleeping with a man. Since she was overpowered by Matthias, she found it hard to breathe. Meanwhile, the man

wrapped his arms around Ether with overwhelming strength, showing the intensity of his affection for her through the vigor he put in his arms.

Right then, Ether was in ecstasy and agony at the same time—she felt happy since she got to snuggle with the man she liked, but she was in agony because she had been mistaken for another woman by the very same man.

While she was in his embrace, she wished that time could stop so that she'd be able to stay this way forever and feel the warmth of his body. Thanks to her excellent night vision, she could somewhat make out Matthias' silhouette. Then, she forcefully pulled out her hand and brushed her finger across his face.

“You're very good-looking, Matthias.” Ether was amazed by her crush, and she found him more appealing the more she ogled at him. How in the world could anyone look this good?

Before she realized it, she had already fallen asleep. When Matthias eventually woke up, she was still sleeping as well. He woke up to a room filled with darkness and a hangover, having no idea whether it was day or night.

As he felt some weight on his chest, Matthias heard a feminine groan when he tried to get up. It seemed like he'd heard this voice before, so he hastily sat straight up and searched for the remote control.

Since he couldn't remember where he had placed it, he nervously switched the bedside lamp on and discovered a sleeping Ether, who also jolted wide awake after being seen.

As he scanned his own outfit, Matthias couldn't recall changing into his pajamas—there wasn't even a minor trace of memory. Meanwhile, Ether donned a red dress and appeared rather alluring under the shade of the lamp.

He patted his head and clutched his collars, not being able to remember a single thing. Matthias remained speechless for a while, and he finally figured who had called Ether over after putting some thought into it.

“I'm sorry, I...” Matthias didn't know whether he had done anything inappropriate.

“You didn't do anything,” Ether muttered with a blush. Other than being hugged to sleep, nothing happened between the two. In fact, she was rather

eager to surrender herself to him, but there was no telling if he would want that to happen.

“Evan had you over, right?” he asked, almost certain that it was the brat’s doing.

As she lowered her head, Ether made a guilty face. Meanwhile, the man beside her hadn’t a single clue how horrifying his face was. With such an intimidating expression, no one would dare to look into his eyes. Likewise, Ether was currently shocked to her core.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized like a child who had made a mistake.

“It’s not your fault; it’s just one of Evan’s pranks.” Matthias didn’t know how to explain it to her, and he felt that he couldn’t justify his actions either.

When she raised her head and exhibited an expression that was about to burst into tears, Matthias felt even more awkward. With that, he was troubled by the complicated nature of women, for he wondered why she was crying even though he had done nothing to her.

Although he wanted to fly into a rage, he had no way of venting his anger—certainly not toward Ether when he knew that Evan was the one pulling the strings. No matter how he thought about it, he had hugged the woman to sleep and taken advantage of her.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come.” Since she had never expected him to be this furious, she lowered her head in embarrassment.

Meanwhile, Matthias stared at her in frustration since he was bad at consoling women. Other than putting himself down to comfort Heather, he couldn’t do the same with anyone else.

“I’m really sorry...” As she apologized non-stop, Ether got up in a panic. When he saw how pitiable she was, he felt slightly sorry.

Under the lamp light where he could barely see her, she definitely possessed some minor resemblance to Heather. When he noticed that, he figured that was probably the reason why Evan sent her over.

Hence, that was more of a reason for him not to get mad at Ether. Instead, Evan should be the one to be blamed for making such a decision. Matthias

was not one to bring problems upon himself, let alone woman issues. Since Evan had the audacity to send a woman to bed with him, there was no way he would let this pass easily.

“I’ll take my leave now,” said Ether. She was utterly distressed with her head lowered and tears in her eyes.

Unlike the gentle Matthias she had slept with, the man in front of her right now was completely different. Feeling extremely shameful by this, she decided not to linger around and immediately left.

After pulling the door open, Ether quickly rushed out. Meanwhile, Evan, who was supervising his subordinates’ clean-up in the living room, remained a casual face. In fact, it seemed like he wasn’t worried about what was coming his way.

Without even putting on her shoes, Ether covered her face as she left the room. When she got to the living room, Evan looked at her in confusion. He approached the woman and was about to ask her what happened when she sped up her pace and completely ignored the butler.

## Standing before Love Chapter 699

Matthias attempted to chase after Ether moments later, but she was already far gone. With his pajamas on and a messy hair, he looked rather chaotic.

After giving Evan a threatening glance, he then ordered, “Bring her back. She hasn’t even put her shoes on.” After all, Matthias felt that he was also at fault and could not just let Ether go without apologizing.

However, Evan thought it was better not to chase after her. From his understanding of Matthias, the man didn’t like to owe anyone. Although he didn’t like being intimate with women, there was still a sense of chivalry in him.

With Ether’s departure this time, it would make Matthias even more guilty. In other words, it would secure a follow-up meeting for the two of them.

Evan was obviously reluctant to go after her, so he said to Matthias, “She’s far gone, sir. There’s no way we can catch up to her.”

Since he didn't want to go out the house with his pajamas on, he could only gaze at Evan and perturbedly uttered, "I really hate it when you make such decisions on your own. Clean up the mess you've made."

Although his words were rather amiable, his tone was nowhere near friendly as it carried a strong, threatening vibe to it.

"What else could I have done, sir? If only you're able to see how scary you look whenever you're drunk... You kept crying for Heather, but how could I have brought her to you? As such, I had no choice but to bring Ether to you instead," he answered boldly. Since things had already gone south, he was prepared to accept whatever atrocities that cast upon him.

"Shut up." Matthias grew more infuriated as Evan was pushing his limits.

Since he knew that he had triumphed over his boss, Evan looked at Matthias smilingly without sensing the hint of danger from the latter.

"There's plenty of fish in the sea, so why dwell on just one, sir?" said Evan as he tried to advise the other man. If what Matthias said was true about Heather marrying someone else, there was no point in waiting for her.

"Shut up. You're fired," said Matthias. It was rare of him to spit such cruel words.

However, Evan merely grinned upon hearing that. He hadn't expected things to transpire this way, for Matthias even suggested firing him. Right then, his grin turned into a sarcastic smirk. Unlike the Matthias he once knew, the person before his eyes had certainly lost his ambitions and assertiveness ever since knowing Heather.

"Look at what the woman has turned you into, Matthias. Do you realize how embarrassing you've become?" Previously, Evan expected Heather to bring joy and happiness into Matthias' life, but that wasn't the case at all. On the contrary, all he received from her was pain and demise.

Because of her, Matthias became more and more unhinged—he was even willing to ruin his future. Naturally, Evan couldn't bear to see him gradually turn into another person for Heather's sake.

Matthias had once proposed to Evan about expanding his business worldwide, and the latter had high expectations and hopes for him. However,

Heather had become the only thing on his mind right now, and all the plans about going global had been thrown out of the window.

“It’s none of your business,” Matthias answered as he shot Evan a malicious gaze. Since they were always synergistic, no one could remember the last time they had a fight.

Now that they were arguing because of Heather, Evan felt deeply disappointed.

Indeed, love is lethal.

Anyone who fell under love’s spell would be so blinded that they could only think of the person they adored, effectively ignoring their friendships and blood ties.

With that, Evan turned back to leave. If his departure failed to wake Matthias up, perhaps there was really no more hope for him!

At this very moment, Evan felt especially remorseful for becoming Matthias’ wingman in his pursuit of Heather, and he blamed himself for allowing his boss to say those affectionate words to her.

The very things he couldn’t do himself were exactly what he pushed Matthias to do. Why did he have to turn him into a love saint?

Now that he thought about it, everything was ridiculous. After all, there were so many obligations Matthias had apart from his love life. Since he possessed the potential of becoming an influential businessman, Matthias shouldn’t be wasting so much time and effort on Heather.

Besides, it didn’t feel like Heather was right for him; given how she was tormenting him, even Evan wanted to cry out for him.

As he watched Evan’s decisive turn, Matthias suspected that he had been planning to leave him earlier. Since he knew that Evan had his own expectations for him, he was fully aware that a big part of his success was due to Evan’s assistance.

However, his impulsiveness from earlier had caused him to say such absurd words to the latter. Although he was somewhat regretful about it, Matthias would not beg for him to stay. Nonetheless, Evan’s departure wasn’t entirely

bad because he would have to leave either way—Matthias would soon become an ordinary man, after all. Naturally, an ordinary man did not require a butler.

As he turned his head around, Matthias couldn't tell whether Evan had turned back to look at him. Regardless, the latter's departure had been pushed forward, and that contributed to the progress of his plans.

Sadly, Heather was a key factor to his ultimate goal, but she was no longer with him. Now that she had chosen somebody else, he didn't know what else he could utilize to strive for Heather's return. If he didn't fight for her, would she really get married to Leon?

Since he was afraid that his fear would turn into reality, he didn't dare to ponder about it any further. He initially had no clue whether he was on the right path, but now, it seemed like he was going the wrong way based on how everything was crumbling down.

If I can't even keep the woman I love, what's the point of having more plans? Matthias couldn't stop thinking about the woman.

Perhaps he should have lowered his head and put down that despicable pride of his. He thought about all the possibilities in his head, yet he did not take any action to bring her back.

With Evan's departure, the mansion suddenly felt like an empty hall. He stared at his servants as they continued on with their tasks, looking as though nothing ever happened.

Before this mess, he always believed that the earth would stop rotating without him, but he eventually realized it stopped for no one as time went by. Around him were the faces of the servants, each of them unfamiliar to him. As he observed them, it felt like it was his first time meeting them.

Matthias walked back to his room and locked himself in. Warmth and passion belonged to others, whereas he only experienced coldness.

Moreover, he felt that it wouldn't be a terrible idea if he could just stay in his room all day. After all, he had always wanted to try being a couch potato for once.

However, he never got the chance to experience that due to the never-ending pile of work he had. Despite being a busy man of the upper class, the only person he had was himself.

He became truly alone once Evan left him, and he felt really uneasy because of that. All these years, he had viewed Evan as a crucial part to his life. Nevertheless, the two were bound to split up. Even the end of a relationship between a couple was inevitable, so who could say it wasn't the same for friendships?

At that moment, Matthias coldly grinned upon realizing that he'd lost both his relationship and friendship. Despite that, he knew he had to collect his jumble of thoughts and head to the Locke Group to be the director he was.

Given the hectic activities awaiting him at the Locke Group, Matthias didn't have time to dwell on his sob stories since he was the director of the company. On the contrary, there were even times when he had to function like a robot.

As sprinkles of water fell upon his body, he was eased by the warmth of the water. After allowing his body some comfort, Matthias suspected that his emotions would eventually fade away.

He was aware that a businessman's purpose was to be a money-making machine, and Matthias smirked as he forgot what his true purpose was.

Even if he were to turn the Locke Group into an international success, what then? What he truly desired was to be a human made of blood and flesh, not a mindless machine. Needless to say, he found himself in a dilemma.

Meanwhile, he had given himself a very short haircut—it was so short that he could simultaneously wash his face and hair. With a buzzcut as such, he didn't even have to use a hairdryer.

Matthias then changed into his elegant black suit and headed to the company. After all, the more he procrastinated, the more unfinished work he would have to deal with later on.

By 10.00AM, he showed up at the Locke Group. Nikolai saw his fresh look and was about to approach him for a talk, but his fear of Matthias' glare stopped him from doing so.

On the other hand, Lara boldly approached Matthias and greeted, “Good morning, President Locke!” In fact, she welcomed him warmly as though nothing had happened.

She didn’t even care where he had been yesterday and gave Matthias a sweet smile, to which the latter forced out a slight grin in return.

“Come with me, Lara.” After observing her subtle gestures, Matthias had something he wanted to clarify with her.

When she looked at his stern face, Lara couldn’t tell what he had to say to her. However, she put immense effort in her job every day and was probably the next person after Matthias who was most familiar with the Locke Group.

Matthias entered his office and saw the pile of documents on his desk, but he was already far used to it. Nonetheless, he felt rather suffocated by his job after being welcomed by his endless amount of tasks.

“Close the door,” he said as he reminded Lara, seeming as though he had a serious issue to talk about.

She promptly closed the door and stared at Matthias anxiously.

“I’ve arranged your documents in order, President Locke. You just have to start from the left,” she said. Although she was an exceptional secretary, Matthias had enough of her petty actions in the dark.

“How long have you been working for me, Lara?” Upon hearing Matthias’ sudden question, she was slightly taken aback.

“About three to five years? I don’t really remember,” she casually replied. Despite claiming that, she actually remembered how long she had been in the company—she just didn’t want to reveal it.

Naturally, she wouldn’t let anyone in on her dirty little secret of crushing on him, let alone the man himself.

“In that case, you should know what I detest the most, which is being deceived.” As his face grew more and more strict, Lara became nervous.

Upon hearing that, she felt a little guilty. Moreover, she realized that she should have expected him to be sharp enough to notice her suspicious movements.

“I’m sorry.” Lara had no intention of denying her actions. Since he already knew about it, there was no point hiding it anymore!

“I’m not here for your apology nor your explanation. Instead, I’m here to fire you. Any objections?” Since he wanted to leave her some bits of pride, he held back his words.

“No, President Locke. I’m very grateful.” When she raised her head, her face was wet with tears. It was great, for no one would be burdened any longer.

## Standing before Love Chapter 700

With that, Matthias watched as Lara turned around and left. Deep down, he knew Lara bore no ill intent and was well aware that she was being taken advantage of. However, he didn’t know why she would act this way and fall in love with him so painstakingly.

There were many secrets he noticed yet didn’t know well about, but he chose not to look into it because the truth behind such things were often too trivial for him to put his mind into.

When Nikolai saw Lara walking out of Matthias’ office with her face full of tears, he was instantly reminded of the time she had just started working for their boss.

When he saw how her tears fell so profusely, he hurried over to comfort her, certain that Matthias must have rebuked her.

“Did the president scold you, Lara?” Nikolai was clueless about what happened inside earlier, and he just wanted to cheer her up.

“No, he didn’t.” Despite her attempt to hold back her tears, they wouldn’t stop dripping down. Perhaps she wasn’t as strong as she imagined herself to be.

“Why are you sobbing so much then, you crybaby?” asked Nikolai in a calm voice, attempting to distract Lara from her sadness.

“That’s because I’m leaving. From now on, you’ll be the only secretary and assistant. You’re now responsible for everything, happy?” Lara responded with a chuckle as she beamed and wept at the same time—it was hideous.

“What? Don’t say that!” Nikolai was dismayed. Naturally, he didn’t believe that she was actually leaving.

“I’m serious. Anyway, I’ll be going. Be well, Nikolai,” she said. As she patted his shoulder like a senile woman, she realized that she felt rather attached to him.

While she stared at his face, she noticed that his appearance sort of resembled Matthias’. In fact, they even had similar qualities.

Perhaps Nikolai isn’t that bad... Lara thought to herself as she looked at him with tears streaming down her face.

Meanwhile, Nikolai panicked instantly since he didn’t know how to console her. Moreover, he couldn’t tell if Lara had resigned on her own initiative or if Matthias had fired her.

When she saw how nervous he was, Lara felt slightly comforted by it. She proceeded to ask, “Can you give me a hug? This might be our last time seeing each other.”

It was only before her departure did she understand that what she felt toward Matthias was merely infatuation, and she had been slowly noticing Nikolai’s subtleties.

Not only that, she even felt a tinge of adoration for the latter. Thanks to Matthias’ words, she was finally relieved from her secret crush of many years.

Perhaps she had truly failed in winning him over. After adoring him for so long, all she received was her crush’s disdain. As such, the more she thought about it, the harder she cried. Meanwhile, Nikolai grew flustered since he felt rather embarrassed when getting close to a female, let alone going in for an embrace.

“Don’t cry.” He held her tight in his arms. Since he had also gotten used to her presence, the man had also grown attached to her.

Since he assumed that they were going to work under Matthias' wings for a long time, he could feel the emptiness in his heart when Lara announced her leave.

After embracing each other for quite some time, they were rather unwilling to let each other go. Words like colleagues, friends, and lovers could no longer describe what they felt about each other.

Following that, Lara looked at the items that were neatly arranged on her desk. The sight of it was rather pleasant, but she had no intention of bringing any of those objects with her because she wanted to leave as she came. She had come empty-handed, so there was no point in taking these things along with her.

"I'm not taking any of these, Nikolai. If the president finds them irritating, please discard them on my behalf. I came into the company empty-handed, and I intend to leave that way," she said while wiping her tears. She then urged herself to be stronger, unlike the young girl who constantly wept when she first joined the Locke Group. How embarrassing of her!

Back then, she would always cry after being reprimanded by Matthias. As she reminisced about her time in the company, she felt like her career was a dream. However, it felt rather pitiful that she had been awakened from it.

"There must be some kind of misunderstanding. I'll try talking to him." No matter how stupid Nikolai was, he could tell it was Matthias who fired Lara.

"There isn't, and nothing is meant to stay forever. I'll be leaving now. Good luck." Although she still had much to say to him, she eventually stopped herself from saying those words.

After having betrayed and deceived Matthias, she had lost her right to care about him. Although she had predicted this to happen, she never imagined that he'd show her tenderness at the final moment, allowing her to retain her last bit of honor.

The harder it was to obtain someone's heart, the deeper Lara would fall for that person. Knowing that, she couldn't help thinking she was a masochist. Moreover, she even remembered that she used to complain to Nikolai about how problematic and ambiguous Matthias was, but little did she know, she fell for him for the very same reason.

And so, she had admired him for a long time. There were many instances where she'd go back on her own words, and she would hate herself for it. Even Nikolai had figured out her feelings for Matthias, but the latter remained unwavering as ever. Needless to say, it was a disastrous romance.

As Nikolai watched Lara taking every step further, he knew that the woman was wiping her tears off with her sleeves. After all, she was but a young lady.

All these years, he had been observing Lara's behavior in front of Matthias; he could tell that she had feelings for him. As such, he couldn't help but wonder if her feelings toward Matthias had been the reason he fired her.

No way. Nikolai felt compelled to barge into Matthias' office so that he could demand an explanation from the latter—never in his life had he been so bold. Back when he had a little interest in Heather, he was always secretive and cowardly about it, but for some reason, he was able to muster up the courage to speak up for Lara.

When Nikolai entered Matthias' office, the latter raised his head indifferently with not even the slightest bit of surprise in his face. In fact, he was aware of the relationship between both his assistants and always wondered when the opportunity for them to realize their importance toward each other would come.

“Why did you fire Lara, President Locke?” Nikolai interrogated aggressively.

“That's what she told you.” As if he hadn't heard the former's question, Matthias simply lowered his head and went through the documents on his desk.

“No, but there's no way she would suggest her resignation, so you must have done so,” Nikolai replied furiously as he couldn't fathom Matthias' motive behind his decision.

“Yes, I did fire her.” Matthias spoke as if he was talking about a trivial matter.

“Are you that heartless, Matthias? Why would you discharge your secretary who's been loyal to you all this while?” Nikolai found Matthias's decision absurd, wondering what it was that Lara had done that deserved such treatment from him.

Although Matthias wished to reveal the truth to Nikolai, he was worried that the latter would develop feelings of repugnance toward her once he knew the full story. Thus, Matthias decided to play the bad guy.

“I no longer need her, and it’s as simple as that. Besides, she’s learned a lot since joining the company, so it’s more of a win-win situation. What has heartlessness got to do with it?” Matthias answered faintly, knowing that the more emotionless he sounded, the more furious Nikolai would become.

“If that’s really the case, then fire me as well!” Feeling vexed, Nikolai glared at his director as he had lost his patience for a parley. Since his own boss was being so ridiculous, he might as well double down on it!

“That’s very childish of you. Why are you venting your anger on me just because of a woman?” Matthias questioned Nikolai, noticing a tinge of admiration the latter had for Lara.

Moreover, there was a chance that it was actually a two-way thing. Although he wasn’t entirely certain about it, his intuition was that letting Lara go would be beneficial for everyone.

“She’s merely an insignificant woman in your life, isn’t she?” As he grew even more irritated, Nikolai was baffled by Matthias’ persisting apathy and couldn’t help but wonder if he was truly a reptile.

“What about it?” Matthias shot him a confused look. When he saw how frustrated the man was, Matthias was made certain that Nikolai sincerely liked Lara.

After all, Nikolai had always been a timid man in front of him, and no one understood that more than Matthias.

“Do you know how much effort she’s put into her job? Do you know how much pain she has gone through by admiring you?” Feeling that Lara’s discharge was unjustifiable, Nikolai felt as though the feelings Lara had accumulated these years were all in vain.

“I’m aware of her efforts, but that’s only the basic requirement of every employee. As for her feelings toward me, I have no clue about that and nor am I affected by it.” Matthias brutally spat every single word without any expression.

“Are you really not human, Matthias? Do you not have emotions? Look at how loving Heather pained you! Out of everyone else, you should be the one who’s able to comprehend the agony of having a secret crush on somebody, right?” Nikolai was thoroughly disappointed, and he was surprised by the fact that his president was so much more indifferent than he had expected. At that moment, it was as if Matthias was a complete stranger to him.

“My love for Heather was no secret, so I can’t possibly understand what it’s like to admire someone in the dark.” As Matthias voiced the words that were against his own feelings, he started to grasp the feelings Lara had for him.

If it weren’t for the repeated mistakes Lara had made, Matthias wouldn’t have been so cruel. Moreover, love wasn’t something to be forced. Who could blame him for her continuous errors?

Since Matthias’ decision was final, he couldn’t even convince himself to give Lara another chance. The best thing he could do for the lady who had been covertly fancying him was to put her far away from him.

“Fine, you’re right. Very well then, Matthias. If that’s the case, fire me as well then, okay?” Nikolai had visibly gotten more enraged. Although he had originally intended to talk Matthias into bringing Lara back, it seemed like the boss was final with his judgment.

Hence, he decided to accompany Lara in her unemployment. Suddenly, Nikolai had an outburst of tenacity to defy Matthias.

“If you think that you can’t continue without Lara, you’re welcome to join her any time.” Having said that, Matthias hoped that Nikolai could heed the hint in his words.

“Fine. I’ll leave right now.” As he spoke, he took out his phone.

With that, he quickly dialed Lara’s number and said, “Slow down, Lara. Wait for me. I’ve been fired as well.”

When she heard that, Lara was stupefied. She had been dwelling on her agony at first, but now that it seemed like Nikolai had done something stupid, she suddenly had a change of heart. As she approached the parking lot, she was hesitating between going to find Nikolai or waiting for him there.

“Are you mad, Nikolai?” she rebuked angrily, evidently against the idea of him joining her.

“I’m not. In fact, my mind is clearer than ever. I just can’t bear to continue working for a heartless man,” Nikolai claimed as he leered at Matthias. It was as if he was exhausting his entire life’s courage all at once.

“Don’t be stupid, Nikolai! Calm down, all right? My dismissal has nothing to do with the president, you dumbass!” Lara was frustrated, for she didn’t know how to explain everything to him.

## Standing before Love 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.