

Sweet Wife 291

Chapter 291 Something Else Going On

But as bad as she got, she couldn't be this untrustworthy.

The old lady had given her this set of jewelry before, saying that it was saved up for her as a dowry. Since she wasn't getting married, she just gave it to her outright.

The sentimental value of these jewels was apparent.

Louis looked at him and moved his lips slightly, as if to say something.

Still, he held it in.

Faye was Archie's aunt by blood, after all. And because Archie's parents had passed early on, she'd taken great care of him from childhood. So even if they realized something was wrong with her, it wouldn't do to say it too directly.

Natalia understood how Louis was thinking.

The only difference was, she suddenly remembered a few days ago, when Faye had suddenly come to Pinewood Manor and brought up the matter of the antiques.

"Archie, do you remember how, four days ago, Aunt Faye came to the mansion and threw a tantrum that I shouldn't have switched out her antiques?"

Archie nodded. "I remember. Why?"

"I always felt it was a bit strange. Aunt Faye never used to care about this sort of thing, so why did she suddenly run over and ask about those antiques? Do you think she'd wanted to take those antiques back in the first place and didn't want to ask, so she threw a tantrum to provoke me into returning them and only held off when you came back..."

Archie frowned.

Louis didn't know what had gone down that day, but he was a smart person. Just from Natalia's few words, he'd gotten a basic grasp of the situation.

He shot Archie a meaningful look.

Archie fell silent for a while and muttered, "I've already sent Brian to investigate. He should turn up some results in a couple days. No matter what it is, this set of jewelry shouldn't have ended up in a place like this. When we're done investigating, I'll ask Aunt Faye about it directly."

Natalia nodded.

Seeing that, Louis patted him on the shoulder.

"Don't overthink it, either. The McCarthy family is in a spot right now where it's easy to get things blown out of proportion, but you're not at the point where everyone's a potential enemy. Investigate it first, then we'll see."

Archie nodded.

The group left with their worries gnawing at them.

Archie took Louis back to his research facility first before driving back with Natalia.

However, the moment they arrived home, he received a call from Brian.

"I've turned up something in the investigation you tasked me with, Mr. McCarthy."

Archie paused, his expression darkening.

"Speak."

Brian told him his findings.

Seeing Archie's face sink lower and lower, Natalia walked over, worried, and grasped his hand.

After a while, he said, "I've got it. Send people to keep an eye on things and don't move without my order."

Brian complied on the other end, and Archie hung up.

Natalia hurriedly asked, "Have you found anything? What's happened?"

Archie scoffed.

He didn't say it directly, instead simply looking at her.

"Come with me somewhere tomorrow, and you'll find out."

"..."

...

The next day, Natalia took a holiday from shooting and went out with Archie.

The two sat in the car with Brian driving. Nancy was on there too as they walked towards the rock prospecting center.

Before they left, when Archie told her the address, Natalia had already guessed the gist of it.

She was still somewhat surprised.

The McCarthy family had a strict upbringing. To have been able to develop so far, other than the abilities and talents of the family members themselves, self-discipline was also very important.

Every generation of McCarthy was forbidden from getting involved in sex, gambling, and drugs. Especially gambling, which was explicitly forbidden.

Rock prospecting couldn't really count as gambling, but there was that same element of luck there.

If Faye really had taken that set of jewelry to auction, that proved that she was at her wits end.

Having gotten herself to this stage over prospecting, then it was basically gambling.

The group drove for half an hour or so and arrived at the scene.

There was a big gathering of prospectors here today. They stopped the car and headed to the door, already finding plenty of people had arrived.

There was a sea of heads inside, and shoulders brushed against shoulders. Everyone wore heavy, or curious, or excited expressions.

The group strolled inwards.

Inside was the lobby for prospectors, where all sorts of freshly mined stones were on display. With luck, if there was good ore inside one of them, an investment here could catapult someone straight into a fortune.

With bad luck, though, some people lost everything here in one night.

Because of that, rock prospecting was even more exciting than cards.

"Here to pick rocks? Haven't seen you here before. First time?"

The moment they went in, someone came up to them.

Natalia was wearing a low-rim baseball cap, so she wasn't afraid of getting recognized.

She looked at the person who'd approached them. He was bald, with a big belly, his face flashing with enthused excitement, like a wolf eyeing a fat chunk of meat. It was inexplicably discomfiting to look at him.

Brian blocked off in front of them and said, "Just looking around."

The newcomer rubbed his hands and smiled, "Of course. Then feel free to look around. If you don't understand anything, feel free to ask at the counter."

He said, and pointed to a counter not far away.

Natalia looked at it, chuckling.

Didn't think they'd have such well-developed service.

She nodded and murmured, "Thank you."

The man left and didn't pay them any more mind.

The group of four toured the place. There were rocks of differing size on display, all tagged with numbers.

There were sizable crowds in front of each rock, pointing and commenting on the rocks over their potential value.

If they saw ones that they liked, they could buy it up right there.

There were options to cut the rock here or to take it away and have your own people cut into the ore.

Natalia murmured, voice low, "Do you think we can find Aunt Faye here?"

Archie's voice was low and cold.

"This is a large-scale prospecting operation. I hear a batch of ore's been freshly mined a while ago. If she's really gotten deep into prospecting like we think, she'll definitely come."

Natalia nodded.

Faye looked ill-mannered, but since she was from the McCarthy family, she wasn't easy to deal with.

Even though Natalia and Archie had found something wrong with her, if they didn't catch her in the act, she might not admit it.

So the two could only come here directly today.

They walked around the place and didn't see Faye yet. They did come across a few people who dragged them over to look at ores, though.

Some were workers, others were passionate customers.

A few of them were dressed well and behaved even better. Obviously, they weren't regular people. They started chatting.

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Chapter 292 The Prospecting Scene

Archie naturally ignored them, but Natalia didn't want to draw attention and ruin her cover, so she politely engaged.

At that moment, Nancy whispered, "She's here."

Natalia's gut clenched and she looked over. At the doorway, a lavishly dressed lady walked inside, accompanied by a man.

The woman was in a woolen coat and clutching a limited-edition handbag. Her hair was impeccable, and she emanated sophistication and elegance.

Still, though, she wore a glum face as she walked inside, listening to the man next to her.

Halfway there, she stopped, looked towards the man, and said a few angry words.

Because they were too far away, Natalia couldn't hear her clearly.

The two didn't look happy, though, so it couldn't be anything pleasant.

She murmured towards Archie, "Should we go over now?"

Archie's expression sharpened slightly. "Wait. Let's see where this goes."

Natalia nodded.

After the two argued for a few minutes, they stopped. The man turned to leave while Faye stayed there. The meeting hadn't gone well, apparently.

Natalia chuckled, "Looks like they've got a strange connection with each other. Have you seen him before?"

Archie shook his head.

Natalia thought about it, then gave Brian an order.

"Follow that man out. Investigate his background and history."

Brian nodded and went outside.

The three continued to stand there. After a while, it seemed Faye had calmed down and started walking back inside.

The trio followed. After a while, she'd found the bald man who'd come up to them earlier and given him a whole pack of cash.

Archie's face darkened.

Faye was dealing with him.

"Here's a hundred thousand. It's not a lot, but it's all I can take out right now. You promised me I wouldn't net a loss, but look at me now! I don't care, you have to make it all back! Otherwise, I won't let you go!"

The man stroked the cash in his hands and grinned, "Why so angry, Miss McCarthy? Prospecting is about luck in the first place. Besides, I've always introduced ores that turned out to be valuable, haven't I? You were just too greedy and wanted a big sweepstakes. What could I have done about that?"

Mentioning that, Faye's temper flared.

"Didn't you encourage me back then? Saying that it was all expertly examined with precious stones inside, and that buying up enough could make me a shareholder here. I believed you, so how could you shirk your relationship now?"

The man chuckled. "Fine, I'll skip those useless platitudes. The past is the past. But Miss McCarthy, one hundred thousand isn't going to net you anything here, you know? Want to sweeten the pot?"

Faye snapped, "You know full well I don't have the money!"

The man tutted and shook his head.

"You're joking. As a lady of the McCarthy family with your brother and his wife both dead, at least half of the McCarthy property has to be in your pocket now, right? I don't believe you really don't have any money."

Faye's face changed right then and there.

She glared at him and snarled, "I'm warning you. My business is my business. Don't bring up my brother or his wife!"

The man shook his head.

“Fine, my bad. But a hundred thousand isn’t even going to get you a rock the size of your finger. If you don’t have the money, then come here next time. How’s that?”

Faye insisted, “Why should I come next time? How much money did I spend on you already? Has to be about several hundred million already. Now you’re telling me my money’s no good? And don’t I have a share here? Why can’t I buy up these rocks at a cheaper price?”

The man rubbed his head as if it hurt, sighing.

“Look, the shares only come out at the end of the season or the end of the year. How am I supposed to give you your cut if you ask for it out of nowhere?”

“I don’t care, but I’m taking these rocks today!”

As the two went back and forth, someone called from behind – “Aunt Faye!”

Faye jumped, turned around, and saw Natalia there, arm in arm with Archie, with Nancy standing by their side.

Her face changed and she went white.

“A-Archie, Natalia, what are you doing here?”

Natalia smiled. “Archie and I both have break today and heard there was a prospecting gathering over here, so we came to take a look. We didn’t think we’d meet you here, Aunt. Are you here to prospect, too?”

Faye’s face was a little pale as she shook her head.

“No, I’m not.”

“Oh? That can’t be, I just saw you give him money. I thought you’d already taken a shine to some ores and was getting ready to buy it up!”

Natalia’s words seemed casual but struck home with lethal accuracy.

Faye was close to tears.

“Ohoho, we’re high school friends who recently met up. He’s pressed for money right now and borrowed some from me. I’m just here to lend it to him.”

She said, taking a small step back, afraid she’d get dragged closer to him.

Natalia nodded.

“Ah, I see.”

Meanwhile, Brian had already finished investigating who the man was, and sent it to Archie’s phone.

Archie looked at the phone, then chuckled coldly.

“And since when have you had a schoolmate from Tapir, Aunt?”

Everyone froze.

Faye stood rooted to the spot, not sure how to explain.

Archie looked at the man, then back to Faye.

“An ore merchant of Tapir who owns three mines in Tacitus. Made a living off those mines, then developed this prospecting business in Egitin a few years back, raking in the big bucks. You only knew him from last year, Aunt. He set his sights on you because you spent a lot the first time you came around, so he got together with his friends to start scamming you. They promised you a cut of the shares with a two hundred million investment, and blinded by greed, you believed him. Then you actually got addicted to prospecting and didn’t just lose the basic two hundred million starter but landed yourself in debt. You’re coming here with this little bit of money to turn things around? Trying to pull a winner winner chicken dinner, are we?”

Faye hadn’t imagined that Archie could have acted so quickly, finding out everything after just stepping foot inside.

Having him reveal the truth in front of so many people, Faye couldn’t exactly keep her façade.

She scowled at Archie. “What are you babbling about? I-I didn’t lose that much. I was just bored and spent some time here as a hobby. It’s not as serious as you said.”

Chapter 293 Every Step Was Wrong

As she spoke, her eyes flickered, clearly ill at ease.

Archie didn’t debate with her. After all, they’d found her out and caught her at the scene.

Faye was his senior, so it wouldn’t do to go too far in public.

So he simply said, “I’ll leave this to Grandma to deal with, so please prepare yourself!”

With that, he took Natalia’s hand and turned to leave.

Hearing that he was going to tell the McCarthy elders, Faye started panicking.

She hurried over to block off their path.

“Wait, don’t go!”

She chased them all the way outside and finally stopped them. Archie frowned and didn’t speak, waiting for the shoe to drop.

Faye panted from the exertion for a while before she recovered her breath.

She babbled, “You can’t tell your Grandpa and Grandma, Archie. I’m begging you; you have to hide this for me. If they found out, I’m a dead woman.”

Archie muttered, “You should have thought of them finding out before you did this.”

Faye was close to tears.

“No, if you don’t say anything and I don’t say anything and neither of them say anything, how would they find out?”

Archie scoffed.

“Oh? Is that right? You even took the jewels Grandma gave you and sold them, and you’re so sure they won’t find out at all?”

Faye’s face changed and turned deathly white.

After a few seconds, her lips moved.

“You – you know about that too?”

Archie kept his expression cold and didn’t answer.

Natalia explained, “I went to an auction with Archie yesterday and saw that set of jewelry by accident. But don’t worry. Archie’s already bought it up, so word won’t get to Grandpa and Grandma just yet. But I feel that you should still explain to Archie what happened and how you had to resort to this. Otherwise, if it does get out one day, we can’t hide it for you even if we wanted to.”

Faye heaved a sigh of relief and nodded.

“Right. I should tell you. Except for you, I don’t know who to turn to for help now.”

There were too many people coming and going in the area to speak.

Finally, Faye suggested a café in a nice area nearby, so they moved the conversation there.

This was about McCarthy internal affairs and it’d be awkward if Nancy took part, so she sat down on the first floor and had some coffee.

Faye, Natalia and Archie sat down in a compartment on the second floor.

After sitting down, Natalia ordered coffee for all three of them before focusing on the topic.

“It’s not that we can’t help you, Aunt, but please don’t hide anything from us and tell us the truth. That way, we can consider how to help you.”

At a time like this, Faye didn’t speak to Natalia with her previous sense of arrogance.

Knowing that she needed their help, she set down her status and sighed. “It’s a long story. We need to go back to a year ago.”

A year ago, Faye had gotten in an argument with the old lady. She wouldn’t say what it had been over, and Natalia and Archie didn’t ask.

At that time, Archie had headed to Julio, so Faye moved back to the old household to stay with the old lady and the old man.

Not long after she moved in, though, she’d moved away again because they’d argued.

Not many people knew about that. Even Archie didn’t know.

After moving out of the house, in her anger, Ariana cut off her financial support.

For whatever reason, the old lady wanted to get her to admit her own wrongs. But Faye was too proud, and refused to back down.

Not only that, she thought of some rapid-fire ways to make money, swearing to prove to Ariana that even outside the McCarthy family, she could do well and make a living for herself.

First, she went and started investing in the stock market. As a lady of the McCarthy household, most people considered her status and introduced plenty of good stocks to her, and she made a killing.

Then she got into business.

But her background was in art. Her family's business might have been top of the nation, but she'd never experienced that side of things herself.

She lost all her investments in the end.

Afraid of getting laughed at, she became even more determined to make money.

So, by sheer coincidence, she'd come across Forrest.

Forrest was the man they'd seen in the prospecting center.

The man was a successful Tapir merchant. He'd tried to court Ariana when they'd first known each other, but Ariana hadn't agreed.

Because of that, Faye had felt that since he'd chased her skirts before, he wouldn't lie to her.

In the beginning, Forrest had in fact guided her into getting some good quality ores and making a tidy little profit.

Then Faye started getting dissatisfied with the situation. Sensing her thoughts, Forrest suggested that she go for the big take.

So one time, Faye bought up half of the entire place's ores, but didn't turn up even a handful of good stones.

That was a huge blow.

But the sunk-cost fallacy kicked in, and the more she failed, the harder she tried to make it all back.

With Forrest encouraging her, Faye tried several times to strike it big, buying up over dozens of pieces each time.

The more she put in, though, the more she lost. She ended up investing up to several hundred million without seeing a single good chunk of ore, ending up with an almost complete net loss.

She couldn't take it. She also didn't understand why it wasn't working anymore when she started out getting good ores every time.

It wasn't that she'd never suspected that Forrest was lying to her, but she'd picked the ores every time. Even if he wanted to scam her, he couldn't.

She didn't understand. And now that she'd gone all in, if she gave up now, she couldn't explain it away.

It had been a year since then, but the spat between her and Ariana still hadn't fully faded, Faye thought to try one more time and stop if she lost, but then she struck gold.

So, with capital, she tried several more times.

That repeated until she ran out of money. She started borrowing from the people around her and pawning off her valuables all to feed to the prospecting center.

Today, she'd already realized that people in the McCarthy family were catching on, so she'd wanted to get Forrest to give her a few good pieces to make something of it so she could muddle things over.

She didn't think she'd meet Archie and gang.

Hearing her description, Archie and Natalia were both left speechless.

Natalia didn't understand how a family of elites had given birth to someone this simple and impulsive.❏

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Chapter 294 Deal With It Quickly

She didn't mean to look down on her, but the scam was so obvious that she could see something was wrong as an outsider. Faye, though, actually believed that Forrest would help her.

And she'd brought money here to get him to give her more ores.

She just didn't have a brain!

She thought it all internally and didn't say it out loud, but also knew that Archie was probably thinking the same thing.

Archie's expression wasn't pretty at the moment, but hearing how things had gone down, at least he knew the basics.

So he muttered, "How much did you give him?"

Faye looked at him timidly and stammered, "About... s-seven to eight hundred million, I guess!"

Natalia had no words.

Well, this was what it meant to be dumb and rich!

Archie didn't have a reply, either.

He thought about it, and asked on, "So, you were there at Pinewood Manor making trouble for Natalia because you wanted to take those antiques back and sell them? Then invest in that Forrest fellow again?"

Faye looked a bit awkward.

"I-I was just planning on borrowing it for a while. When I've struck it rich, couldn't I just give it all back?"

"Ha..."

Archie and Natalia obviously didn't believe that.

Faye pleaded, "Come on, Archie, I've told you everything. Can't you just keep it hidden for now and not tell your Grandpa and Grandma? I really don't want them to know."

Archie rumbled, "Then have you thought about how to deal with things now?"

Faye blinked.

She still didn't understand what he meant by dealing with things.

Natalia reminded kindly, "This man clearly just thinks poorly of you and is trying to scam you out of your money. You can't have gone without realizing it even now?"

Faye was even more stunned now.

"That... can't be right! I got into prospecting myself, and I was worried he'd lie to me, so I always picked the ores myself and didn't let him get involved. With so many pieces of ore inside, how would he know which one I would pick?"

Natalia chuckled.

Voice low, Archie said, "That's simple. You just switch out all the rocks in there for low-quality or regular stones. If other people can't get good ores, you can't either. Wouldn't that work?"

Faye's face went slack.

Then she attempted, "That can't be, I saw people strike solid gold right next to the ore I bought!"

Solid gold?

That was quite something!

Natalia smiled, "That's easy, too. If you just put a piece of ore that's already confirmed to be good quality there, then get someone to pretend to be a customer and buy it, then excavate it there, that's that. The gold and the money goes back to their own pockets, so it's not tough to pull off."

Faye wore an expression of disbelief.

"T-That's impossible! How could it be like this?"

"There's no such thing as impossible."

Archie burst her last bubble of hope. "It's just one of the simplest scams in the city. So simple even Anne wouldn't have fallen for it. I didn't think you'd step in it and step this deep in it, too. Really, compared to blaming them for their cutthroat business, you really should blame yourself for being too stupid."

Faye started screeching right away.

"How can you say that about me, Archie? I'm your aunt!"

"It's precisely because you're my aunt that I'm reminding you to deal with this quickly. Otherwise, something big might happen down the line. Of course, if you need to deal with it, you'll definitely alert Grandpa and Grandma. Even I can't move without their notice on Eqtin territory."

Hearing that, Faye slumped.

She stayed quiet for a while, then with great hesitation, asked, "Do we have to tell them?"

Archie nodded.

"We have to."

"But..." She hesitated for a while, then scratched her head irritably.

"If I went back like this, I'd lose so much face. Your Grandpa and Grandma would scold me to death. What would be left of my reputation?"

Natalia laughed.

"Aunt Faye, I don't know why you argued with Grandma, but you're family. Family doesn't hold grudges, right? Besides, Grandma was treating you pretty well back home last time. She doesn't seem mad at you. Are you sure you're not overthinking it?"

Faye looked at her impatiently.

"You don't get it."

Archie's expression darkened.

"It's up to you whether you want to come clean or not. I won't stop you or force you. But you have two days. In two days, if you want to confess, I'll take you to see Grandma. If you don't you'll deal with the blowback yourself. The McCarthy family and I myself won't help you even a little bit more."

With that, he took Natalia with him and stood.

Natalia felt a bit of pity, but since they'd gotten this far, there wasn't much else to say. She left alongside Archie.

On the way back, she asked him a bit worriedly, "Are you really not going to help her if she stays quiet about it?"

Face wooden, Archie replied, "I'm not."

"Why's that?"

"She might be my aunt, but she's also an adult. Adults are responsible for their own actions. It's not that I'm unwilling to help her. But if she continues to demand that the rest of the family stays uninvolved, then she has to take responsibility for her own choices."

Natalia sighed.

"I feel like she's standing her ground for some other reason. Not just her sulking against Grandma, like she says."

Archie looked at her.

Then he rubbed her forehead.

Natalia jolted.

Turning, she looked into the man's gentle, moving eyes.

"Aunt Faye was never too good to you, so why be so considerate of her? Your forehead will get wrinkles if you keep frowning like that."

Natalia had to laugh.

She held Archie's hand, smiling, "What are you saying? It's her business if she's good to me or not. I don't ask that everyone likes me. I'm concerned about her because she's your family. I just don't want to leave any regrets."

Archie's heart wrenched.

Leave no regrets indeed!

It was a simple phrase. Easy to say, much less easy to accomplish.

Archie didn't say anything else. He held her hand tight as the car continued onwards to Pinewood Manor.

Two days later, Faye gave Archie a call, saying she was willing to talk with the old lady.

Archie knew that she'd given way probably because she was at the end of her rope.

Faye might have been a McCarthy lady, but because she'd been born a daughter, she didn't get involved in business and devoted herself to art. She never entered the innermost power circles of the McCarthy family.

Plus with her unreliable personality, her reputation outside wasn't the best. So even though she had noble status, people might have made way for her on small, regular subjects, but when it got big, they usually didn't take her side.☐

Chapter 295 Coming Clean

Archie had basically expected Faye to give way.

After he agreed, they set a time down to go to the old household together at night.

Natalia would go back first to prepare the old lady and soften the blow a little.

That night, the three headed towards the McCarthy household.

Ariana heard what had happened and naturally blew her top.

Even before Faye arrived, she'd taken her temper out in the house, even breaking a few of her teacups.

Natalia mediated, "It's good that Aunt Faye told us about this earlier. It's not too late to turn back, so don't get mad, Grandma. It was a gamble in the heat of the moment, and we can't make things worse out of our own temper. It's more important to calm down and deal with it."

The old lady sighed.

"I know. Don't worry. I'm just blowing off some steam here. What could I do with her, anyway? Send her over after I mull here for a while and I won't yell at her."

Promises were promises, but by the time Faye got here, the old lady couldn't hold it in and yelled at her anyway.

Faye knew she didn't have a leg to stand on, so she stood there and took it quietly.

Done yelling, Ariana's wrath faded a bit, so she started sorting through the start and finish of what had happened.

It was really quite simple.

Anyone with regular intelligence could tell that Faye was getting scammed.

The knot came in where she didn't know herself and didn't leave any evidence. She'd gone over and spent her money of her own volition.

Unless they used unconventional methods, it would be hard to prove she was being scammed.

The McCarthy family might have had a lot of tools, but this was an abnormal period. And because being big also meant being a big target, they couldn't move recklessly.

If Forrest could get a scene this big in Egitin, he had to have someone at his back. From the information Brian had turned up, it showed he had connections to the Bissels, so it was possible they were backing him.

Nobody could afford carelessness when it involved the McCarthy and Bissel families.

Archie thought about it. "I can send someone to deal with it, but you had better not appear in Egitin for now, Aunt. Just in case more complications happen."

Faye objected right away.

"Are you trying to exile me, Archie? I'm not going anywhere; I'm staying in Egitin!"

Ariana barked, "Quit it! Now's the time to clean up your mess! You think anyone would be willing to take it off your hands?"

At the old lady's roar, Faye lost her nerve.

After a while, she said grudgingly, "Then I want to go to Othua."

"No!"

The old lady snarled, looking at her coldly.

"Don't even think about it! I'll reserve tickets tomorrow to send you over to your aunt in Lessia. I'll send people to watch over you, so don't even think about running around! Before this is done, you're not going anywhere."

Faye started shrieking with discontent.

"I'm in my thirties now, Mom, not three. Are you putting me on curfew like a child?"

Ariana scoffed.

"Your intellect is about the same as a three-year-old's anyway."

"..."

With the old lady having made that decision, nobody could change it.

Finally, the family meeting was ended at Ariana's order.

Archie and Natalia were of course going back to Pinewood Manor.

Worried that Faye would start some more nonsense, Ariana didn't let her leave and had her stay the night before flying away first thing in the morning."

As they headed out the door, Faye suddenly stopped Natalia.

She looked at Archie and smiled, "I've got some things I want to say to Natalia. Can we have a moment?"

Archie frowned and looked at Natalia.

Natalia nodded to show she was fine.

"Wait for me in the car! I'll be right over."

Only then did Archie nod and leave.

When he left, Faye's smiling expression instantly collapsed.

"Happy with yourself, Natalia? Pleased? Now that you've gotten me out of Eqitin, no one's going to be watching out for you or keeping you at bay now. You can toy around with Archie as much as you want and bend him to your will, eh?"

Natalia frowned, but after a while, her brow loosened.

She looked at Faye a little coldly, a mocking light in her eyes.

"You stopped me just to say all that, Aunt?"

Faye thrust her chest out.

"What? I can't? Don't think I'm unaware of your little machinations. You look like you want to help me when really you just want me to embarrass myself! Well, that's great, I've lost all face in front of the rest of the family now and the old man and old lady are disappointed in me, so they won't listen to me from now on. Are you happy now?!"

Natalia shook her head.

"I've never had any thoughts like that."

"Heh, who do you think you're fooling? At the end of the day, you didn't like that I wasn't okay with you and Archie being together, right? Must have been uncomfortable seeing me favor Selena's matchup

with Archie, huh? Then did you know that Selena and Archie used to be lovers and grew up close together? What's the meaning to you butting in between them now?"

Natalia took a deep breath.

She was about done with this.

Some things bore saying once.

But after repeating it time and time again, anyone's patience would wear too thin to listen to another word.

She looked at Faye and said lowly, "Since you're going this far, Aunt, then I have a question of my own. If they were so close, why did Archie marry me and not her?"

Faye was struck dumb.

Natalia sneered.

"I really don't understand, Aunt – why do you dislike me so much? Ever since the beginning, I've never shown any ill intentions against you. Anywhere I might have been impolite to you was because you provoked me. I know you've been good to Archie and you took care of him for all those years his parents weren't here. I won't deny the relationship between you. But you should understand that the one who'll walk with him to the end of his life is not you, but me. No matter how deep a relationship runs, if it meets with long periods of disappointment and friction, it'll eventually lose its luster. I don't want you to regret things after you've lost everything you once had with him. So a word of advice, dear Aunt. If you want to enjoy the latter half of your life, please rein it in and take care of yourself! After all, the family is Archie's in the future, and as his wife, I'm the true matriarch of the McCarthy family."

As she finished, Faye's face contorted with so much rage she almost fainted the next second. Only then did Natalia call over a servant.

"Aunt Faye's not feeling too well. Please escort her back to rest."???

Chapter 296 Treated Unfairly

The servant looked at Faye, then over at Natalia.

It was really obvious that the atmosphere between the two of them wasn't quite right, but it wouldn't do to ask.

With a respectful "yes", they went over to prop Faye up.

Faye's anger was brimming. Looking at Natalia's calm and cold face, the phrase "I'm the true matriarch of the McCarthy family" reverberated throughout her skull.

She wanted to pounce up and rip her to shreds!

Finally, she took a deep breath and forcefully suppressed all her indignation and rage.

"Fine. You've got guts saying that to my face. Fine, we'll see! Here's some advice from me too, Natalia. You can replace a wife, but not an aunt! I saw Archie grow from when he was small. No matter how

much he likes you now, it's just for the moment. Nothing lasts forever, so just wait! One day, I'll chase you out of the McCarthy family!"

With that, she took the servant's hand and stormed off.

The moment she left, Natalia felt the air in front of her clear.

She lifted her head to look at the sky, then took a deep breath, her temper almost erupting from her throat.

After a while, she stilled her temper.

She turned and strode out.

When they got in the car, Archie could see that her face wasn't quite right and frowned.

He set down the magazine he'd been reading while he waited, leant over and asked, "What? What did she say to you?"

"Nothing."

It wasn't that she didn't want to tell him Faye's words, but she didn't think it was necessary.

At the end of the day, she believed in Archie. It didn't make a difference if they spoke or not.

She took a deep breath and commanded Brain, "Drive!"

Brian nodded, started the car, and drove out slowly.

Archie examined her closely in silence.

He'd always had a good eye and sharp observation skills. He couldn't have missed the emotions she was bottling up.

The woman's sunken face and redness in the eyes clearly told him that she'd been treated unfairly.

Obviously, Faye had said something ugly again.

Archie's face darkened.

He took out his phone and growled, "I'm calling her about it now!"

Natalia saw it and her eyes widened as she reached out to stop him.

"No."

Archie frowned.

Natalia paused, adjusted her own emotions, and said, "She doesn't like me to begin with and thinks I'm using this opportunity to kick her out of the McCarthy family. This was just a misunderstanding. If you call her now, no matter what you say, she'll think I'm using you to get to her again. That will only deepen the misunderstanding, and nothing will end up getting solved. So there's no need to call her."

Archie scoffed. "But she treated you wrong."

Natalia forced a smile.

"Not really. I don't really care, so it doesn't matter."

She turned to look outside the window, towards the quiet, lonely road.

Archie's heart ached as he grabbed her hands and pulled her into his embrace.

"I'm sorry, Natalia. I'm putting you through all this."

Natalia chuckled.

"How do you mean?"

"You don't want me to get caught between you and Aunt Faye, so you're not standing up to her. I know. But you're my wife, Natalia. If you're treated unfairly, I won't be happy either. Aunt Faye's got a stubborn personality. It used to be fine, but if she turns it on you, I won't sit by idly."

Faye was older than them, sure, but that didn't mean that Natalia had to grin and bear it.

Natalia snuggled up against his waist, felt the concern in his tone, and sighed.

"I'm really fine. Don't worry. I just don't want to start any more trouble. Besides, it was just a few jabs. No one's really been bullying me. Your wife's not so weak that anyone can walk all over her."

On that, Archie agreed.

He released her and kissed her forehead.

"You're so nice, Natalia."

The two went back to Pinewood Manor.

The next day, Ariana arranged for Faye to leave Eqitin.

Archie sent Brian to investigate the gambling scene, and found that there was plenty to do with the Bissel family behind the scenes.

That Forrest was clearly a pawn that the Bissels had tossed out to hook Faye.

It wasn't that the Bissels held a particular grudge against the McCarthy family.

Only, the Bissel family had developed a great deal these past few years. There was only room for one to stand at the top, so to take that spot, of course the Bissels had to come down hard on the McCarthys.

But the McCarthy family weren't going to stand idly by.

In just a few days, the police shut down Forrest's entire operation on the basis of fraud and other crimes.

And so that incident came to an end for the moment.

Meanwhile, Victoria was about to give birth.

Natalia had promised not to go, but she was still worried.

After all, without considering that mystery of a man there, Victoria had no friends or family by her side. Fortunately, it had gone better than she imagined, and Victoria gave birth smoothly to a 3.4 kilogram baby boy.

She named him Joy, wishing for his happiness throughout his life.

As his godmother, Natalia was of course overjoyed herself. She forced Victoria to go on video chat with the child for a while right that day.

Looking at the soft and pink little muffin on the screen, she felt her heart melt.

Victoria chuckled, "If you like children that much, why don't you try for one with Archie?"

Natalia paused, thought about it, and said, "There's no rush."

She'd refused to make a baby with Archie because, first of all, she'd always been filming, and didn't want to slow down her work.

Secondly, she was considering Anne as well.

Anne wasn't like normal children and hadn't grown up with a mother. Every time she saw Natalia, she stuck to her like glue.

She could feel how much Anne desired motherly love and how insecure she was inside.

So she couldn't be sure how it would affect Anne if she got pregnant at a time like this.

Bearing that in mind, Natalia sighed.

She didn't know why Archie had kept this child with methods like this. Was there some secret behind it?

Still, she was only thinking about it and couldn't have asked him outright.

She looked towards Victoria and asked, "When are you coming back?"

Nobody outside knew that Victoria was giving birth in secret.

She had no intention of giving up her status as an actress, so she would make her return sooner or later.

Chapter 297 Putting on a Party

Victoria thought about it. "I'll come back after I rest up for a month."

Natalia blinked. "That soon?"

"Yeah."

Victoria seemed to have something on her mind, but she didn't tell Natalia about it. She simply smiled. "When I'm back, I'll come meet up with you."

Natalia nodded. "Okay. I'll pick you up, then."

"Sure."

The two hung up.

A month later, Victoria really came back from Othua.

As promised, Natalia went to pick her up that day.

She had a child around her, so she kept things as low profile as possible to keep herself from getting snapped by tabloids.

Natalia picked her up, got in the car, and looked her over carefully.

Thankfully, Victoria looked like she was doing perfectly fine. Except for having gained a little weight from her pregnancy, she didn't look too different.

Natalia breathed a sigh of relief.

She hugged Victoria.

"You're finally back. I missed you so much."

Victoria laughed. "If Archie were to hear that, he'd get jealous."

Natalia laughed too and smirked, "Forget him."

Victoria settled down right in Eqitin without going back to Julio.

Natalia had found her a place beforehand; a quaint little mansion not far away from Pinewood Manor.

The house had originally been owned by Archie, but then Archie had given several dozens of his real estate property all to Natalia, so they all belonged to her now.

After settling down mother and son, Natalia let her rest up for a couple of days before throwing a welcome back party for her.

Victoria knew that Natalia only did all that because she was worried that she wouldn't fit in.

So she didn't refuse her good intentions and agreed right away.

Two days later, Natalia sent own invitations and called Max and company all over to go sing and eat at night.

When they arrived at the karaoke bar, everyone else had already arrived as well.

Anne had break today, so Natalia brought her in too.

They got off the car and saw Victoria at the doorway.

She'd been waiting there specifically for them. Recognizing her, Anne ran up and give her a fierce hug, smiling sweetly. "Auntie Victoria."

Victoria was so happy her mouth couldn't close properly.

She returned Anne's hug and examined her. "Good girl, Anne. You've grown prettier again. Let's see if you've gotten any taller."

She took a step back and chuckled, "My, looks like you have."

Archie led Natalia up. Victoria looked at the two of them and laughed, "It's been a while, Archie. Looks like you've been living well. You've got a glow about you. What, your married life's going well?"

Natalia smiled awkwardly and glared at her.

Before Archie could reply, she said, "It's fine. What can you do, right?"

Victoria smirked, "Well, of course I can congratulate you for finding true love."

Natalia winked at her. "Speaking like you don't have someone. I'm telling you, your true love's here tonight too."

Victoria jolted, and before she could react, a car engine sounded from behind.

Then she saw Louis' car rolling over.

She started, going pale.

Natalia had actually only just known that Charlie was coming over.

Coincidentally, she'd known Charlie long ago and paid special attention to him because Victoria liked him.

Besides, they'd been to the same high school.

Unexpectedly, Charlie was the grandson of old lady Stevenson.

Back then, when Mr. Peck had gotten divorced, his wife had only just found out that she was pregnant.

So she'd taken the child and raised him to adulthood. Later on, only when she was sick did she tell Charlie about his own background and identity.

Now that old lady Stevenson had found Charlie, the Stevensons respected his wishes and didn't have him change his name back, only hoping that he could accept his family.

After all, they'd tried hard to look for him, but his mother had hidden their tracks. No matter how much effort they put in, they couldn't be blamed for not finding them.

Since Charlie was old lady Stevenson's grandson and old lady Stevenson was close to Ariana, Charlie naturally had the right to take his place in this noble generation of Eqitin.

Besides, he'd known Max from long ago and they were still great friends, so it wasn't awkward for them to have fun together.

However, seeing the man before her, Victoria froze to the spot.

Natalia noticed something was wrong and said concernedly, "Are you all right, Victoria?"

Victoria reacted and shook her head.

Damnit, she should have known he'd be here!

Now that the Stevensons were back in the country, of course he'd follow them here!

Seeing she was pale, Natalia asked, "Are you feeling ill? Want me to go back with you?"

"No need."

Natalia had gone to all the trouble of organizing this party to welcome her and introduce these friends to her anyway.

As the person it was all centered around, she couldn't leave. It'd be too impolite.

Victoria calmed herself and said, "I'm fine. Let's go in."

"Okay."

Natalia took her and led her in. Fortunately, Charlie only shot a look at her and didn't do anything else.

The group went into the compartment and Natalia introduced everyone. It wasn't just Max, but even Laura had come here.

Natalia knew that Victoria had argued with her father and didn't want to go back to Julio, so she'd probably stay in Equin for a long while.

She didn't have too many friends here. As best buds, Natalia wanted to stay by her side as often as she could, but sometimes she didn't have that much time.

Victoria was done giving birth, but not done recovering. She still needed friends around she could talk to.

Natalia introduced all of them and Victoria greeted everyone with a friendly smile.

Because there were so many people there and Natalia liked the hustle and bustle, she decided to throw a barbecue.

Coincidentally, after they got into the meal and Natalia scooted out to go to the restroom, she ran into Wanda.

Wanda was in a faintly colored one-piece dress today. She looked energetic and fresh. Compared to the maturity and reliability she displayed before, she looked younger here, more like a student.

Natalia was a bit surprised. She didn't think she'd see her here today.

She didn't have anything against Wanda, so she asked casually, "You're eating here, too?"

Wanda smiled awkwardly. "Yeah, but the person I'm supposed to meet can't come, so I'm leaving."

Natalia blinked, looked at her, sharply noticed the loneliness in her eyes, and blurted, "Then how about we eat together? There's plenty of people here and it's a party."

She bit her tongue the instant those words left her mouth.

Chapter 298 Carrying the Team

She didn't know Wanda too well and didn't hold anything against her. She didn't even dislike her.

But she was Selena's cousin. With Selena setting her sights on Archie constantly, wasn't she just asking for it inviting her cousin to come eat with them?

Thankfully, Wanda looked like a bright girl, and she'd probably not take the offer, right?

Wanda's eyes lit up and she took the offer.

"All right, thanks, I'll come."

"..."

She led Wanda awkwardly into their compartment.

Seeing her, everyone was caught off-guard.

But Max and Stephen and the others were all people persons, and besides, they didn't have too much of an opinion on Selena herself.

Wanda might have been a Kawn and Selena's cousin.

But in reality, Wanda's father was about as branched in the branch family as you could get. He was in Eqitin as well, but only handled small business. It was no comparison to direct Kawn family members at all.

In a situation like this, Wanda wasn't involved in the family power struggle like Selena.

So they didn't have anything against her. Besides, she was kind, pretty, and even seemed cute as they interacted, so she fit in just fine.

Louis was the last person here. Because something had happened at the hospital, he'd needed to deal with it. With his occupation, nobody minded.

Seeing him come in, Natalia hurriedly called for an additional set of utensils. Louis was wearing a camel coat and a scarf, looking particularly like a mild-mannered intellectual today.

Wanda had been digging in, and the barbeque was to her taste, so she'd eaten with a bit wolfishness.

The moment she stuffed a chunk of meat into her mouth, she saw him walk in and her eyes widened as she blushed. The meat got stuck in her throat and wouldn't go either way, so she started coughing loudly.

Louis had obviously seen her as well. He blinked and blurted, "What are you doing here, Wanda?"

Wanda took a drink of water to wash the meat down, berating herself over having him see her in such a state.

Then she stood and greeted him with an embarrassed smile.

"Hi, sir."

Everyone was taken aback.

"Sir? You know each other?"

Louis chuckled and explained, "Oh, it's nothing. I've got a lab of my own now, right? She came for an interview a while ago and she's my assistant now."

That explained things.

Wanda was a medical student. Everyone knew that, but they didn't think it'd be this much of a coincidence.

With that connection to Louis, everyone drew even closer with Wanda.

A server came by to set a chair down for Louis and the atmosphere resumed. Everyone chatted and laughed as they ate, while Wanda buried herself into her meal, her face bright red. She didn't even dare raise her head.

After the meal, Max started whining that he wanted to play a game.

He was a game nut, and everyone was free, so they agreed.

A group of them crowded around the sofa and took out their phones.

Charlie didn't play this game, so he didn't partake, but Victoria did.

So Victoria, Natalia, Laura, Max and Louis formed a team.

Archie sat next to Natalia and acted as her strategist. Worried that everyone would end up playing too late into the night, she had Brian send Anne back first.

Natalia had selected a warrior class, while Laura had gone with an assassin.

The moment the game started, Laura said, "Max, wait in the bush over there and we'll ambush them. They'll be coming for our buff. You can't let them take my buff."

Max was naturally going along with it.

He walked over to the bush, saw that no one was there and slacked off a little. Then an assassin appeared out of nowhere and caught him with his pants down.

Max couldn't dodge in time and died after a few hits. His priest let out a death screech.

He blinked and only then knew to react as he yelled, "Hell! I got ambushed! Caught me slipping, huh?"

Laura shot him a look and rolled her eyes.

Honestly! Wasn't he planning to ambush someone as well? And even she'd seen there'd been someone there and he hadn't. Wasn't he just handing his head up on a platter just waltzing over there?

She shook her head, exasperated. "Don't rush, man."

Max was a bit dissatisfied. The moment he revived, he walked out, explaining, "I'm telling you, don't underestimate me, I'm great at this game!"

The moment he said that, the death scream of a hero played.

Max's priest had been killed again.

He widened his eyes and looked at the screen in disbelief. The next second...

"Double kill!"

Natalia had been in full flow state as she blitzed in and took two at once.

Max started, then slapped his leg. "Damnit! You're a pro at this, Natalia!"

Natalia smiled faintly. "It wasn't much."

Victoria couldn't hold it in and laughed, "You're smurfing. If you don't carry, you're really just losing."

Right now, the archer she was playing and Louis' support had already sealed off the bottom route and run to the center to assist.

As she cleared mobs, she explained to Max, "I'm telling you, she's the only twenty-star player in our friend group. A proper shark."

As she finished, she heard Louis say, "Careful."

A figure rushed out of the bush. To protect Victoria, Louis threw himself in the way. By the time they could react, Louis had been killed.

Victoria blinked, a little embarrassed.

"Uh, sorry, doctor. I was too busy chatting."

Louis said mildly, "It's fine."

The match ended soon. As a smurf account, Natalia had carried the whole team easily.

When they were done, she turned to Archie, "Do you want to play? It's fun."

Archie shook his head. "I'm fine watching you play."

Max was done, though. "Man, it's boring just sitting there. Come on, let's make a lobby. 3v4 or 3v3, how's it sound?"

Natalia sat up straight. "Sure. Who dares wins, bring it."

Max chuckled, "Then I'll ask if old Charlie wants to come!"

With that, he ran outside.

Right now, Charlie was talking on the balcony.

He'd just hung up when Max arrived. Seeing him come out, he was a bit surprised.

Chapter 299 I'm the Father

He tilted his head. "What's up?"

Max walked over, chortling. "Who are you calling? Running out like that?"

Charlie didn't answer. He looked him in the eyes with a deep abyssal gaze without speaking.

Max wasn't afraid of anything, much less Charlie's looks.

He leant over and snickered, "I just heard a couple of phrases. Something about a woman. Tsk tsk tsk, don't think I can't tell, bro. You knew that Miss Kawn from before didn't you? What? Old flame?"

Charlie's gaze cooled by a few more degrees.

Max shook his head and tutted.

"Fine, don't tell me. But as your bro, I need to remind you that that Miss Kawn seemed to have recently given birth. Looks like she's taken. Careful she doesn't play you for a fool."

Charlie smirked.

A bit of mockery seemed to enter his eyes.

"I know."

"What?"

"I said I know."

Max widened his eyes at him like he'd just seen a ghost.

"You know and you still like her?"

Charlie suddenly frowned.

"Who says I like her?"

Max leered.

"Come on! Don't think I couldn't tell. Your eyes were on her all the time when you were eating and you didn't look away once. You think all of us onlookers are blind?"

"..."

Charlie stayed silent and didn't speak.

As Max was about to try to nudge him again, he suddenly opened his mouth. "Yeah, I was looking at her, but not because I like her."

Max blinked. "Then why?"

"Because I'm the father."

"..."

Charlie might as well have brought the house down on top of Max with that simple sentence.

After a while, he snapped back to reality and seemed to understand something.

He raised his head and looked at disbelief towards the man opposite him. Charlie remained perfectly calm, as if he hadn't said those words himself.

Even scarier, his gaze towards Max showed a bit of threat.

Max hurriedly shut up and took an expression that said “I don’t know nothing and I ain’t seen nothing, back up”.

He paused, then said, “Well... Natalia and gang are having a lobby fight, are you coming?”

Charlie didn’t play games and didn’t know what he was talking about, asking, “What lobby fight?”

“Oh, it’s a game that’s really popular right now. If you’re coming, we’ll save you a spot.”

Charlie thought about it and didn’t refuse this time.

“Fine. I’ll come.”

So the two walked back in.

Charlie had the game downloaded soon enough. To match up their numbers, Wanda and Archie had been dragged in too. With the numbers set, they started matching teams.

Because Charlie and Wanda hadn’t played before, they were split up to be fair.

The final matchups were – Archie, Natalia, Louis, Victoria and Wanda on one team.

As for the other side, Charlie, Laura, Stephen and Max were on the other team.

With their preparations ready, the match began.

The moment it began, Max went and got himself oneshot by Victoria.

Taking first blood, Victoria started cackling. Max’s expression wasn’t pretty, but he had his reputation to consider, so he just grunted, “It’s fine. I’m a gentleman and I won’t go all out against a lady.”

Natalia bit her lip and grinned without saying anything.

Max revived. The moment he revived, he bragged, “Just wait, Miss Kawn, I’ll have my revenge.”

And then right after that Archie’s assassin emerged from the bush and killed him.

Max sat there, face turning purple. He was not okay.

Victoria and Wanda started snickering around him. He sat there, looked at his body on the ground onscreen, and said nothing for a while.

Then he frowned, shook his phone, and muttered, “Eh? What’s with the internet? Natalia, this place you booked has horrible wifi! I’m offline – oh, Archie, you didn’t kill me, right? You shouldn’t take advantage of people like this. My net’s down.”

Natalia couldn’t hold it in. “Oh, shut up!”

Max said resentfully, “I didn’t mean to choke like that, Natalia, it’s really just my internet.”

Laura couldn’t keep from chiming in and smirked, “Please. If you’re feeding just admit you’re feeding. Don’t blame the internet. The internet’s innocent, you know.”

Seeing her poke holes like that, Max was getting sulky.

After a while, he mumbled, "But the network's bad. I was the number one archer on the national server back in the day."

Then another scream rang out and he'd died again.

Wanda had chipped him to death while playing support.

This time, he didn't even have an excuse. He just stared dully at the screen.

Wanda didn't really know what was going on and felt a bit embarrassed, so she looked at him and awkwardly murmured, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to kill you."

"..."

If you didn't mean it and still killed me, what if you actually meant it?

Didn't this actually hurt more?

The next second, Natalia had squirreled out of the bush to cut off Stephen, but he'd run away too quickly. To guard him, Charlie sacrificed himself.

Natalia chuckled, "Sorry about that, Master Peck."

Charlie remarked, "It's fine. After all, with a certain someone here, there's no way we can win."

Max almost spat blood at that.

"Hey, hey, hey, that's going too far. You're all ganging up on me now, are you?"

Charlie shot him a look. "Who else is there to gang up on now that you're feeding like this?"

"Oi! That's going too far. Looks like I'll really have to try hard now and show you what I'm made of."

Archie was still playing his assassin to the side. "Okay, fine. If you lose, go out and streak around the place three times."

Natalia snickered. "That's okay with me."

At that moment, Laura suddenly yelped, "Ahh-! Cover me!"

But it was too late. With a screech, her hero fell at the hands of Archie.

Laura sighed and shook her head.

The following few times, she either got killed by Archie or Natalia. In fact, Natalia's warrior killed her twice.

Eyes reddening, Laura stared at the screen and snarled, "All right, looks like you want me to ult you, then!"

Louis smiled. "It's just a game, Miss Davies. No need to take it that seriously."

He said that, but he didn't let up himself and charged all the way to their objective.❓

President's Sweet Wife

Chapter 300 I Might Like Her

Laura didn't dare keep on talking and hurried back to guard the objective, almost getting killed a few times. Finally losing her temper, she turned to a tanking Max and said, "What are you even doing? You're a tank, so you go in front, got it?"

Max, who was apparently just feeding all around today, mumbled, "Got it."

Then he got surrounded and died.

With him dead, Laura died too.

Looking at the friendly objective getting further and further away, Laura stood up and roared, "Can I kill my teammate? I want to kill my teammate."

Natalia chuckled. "Not in the game, but I'll permit you to do it in real life."

Max's face turned a bit ugly. He chuckled his phone down and stood. "I'm done."

With that, he turned and walked outside.

The moment he left, the people inside looked at each other, not knowing what was going on.

Natalia looked at Archie, then coughed and tried to smooth things over. "Uh... it's just a game, so don't take it so seriously, okay?"

With that, she stared pointedly at Laura, meaning for her to go check on Max.

But Laura simply treated it like she hadn't seen anything and ignored her.

Natalia was getting a bit antsy.

Seeing that, Louis smiled awkwardly. "It's fine. He'll be back after a smoke. Come on, let's go on."

Laura didn't refuse his invitation and started another match.

Natalia nudged Archie and muttered, "Go check on him. This is a party, we shouldn't get upset."

Archie frowned, then nodded.

On the balcony, Max stood there, smoking.

Northern winters were particularly cold, and at this time of year, one could feel the frost on the wind standing on the balcony. Max narrowed his eyes, looking up at the endless starry night, the cigarette in his hands making rings that dissipated into the void.

Archie kept his brow knotted as he walked over and patted his shoulder. "What's up? It's just a game but you're actually mad."

Max frowned and didn't reply.

Archie was in a bit of disbelief as he chuckled, "Don't tell me that you're taking a few barbs from the gals seriously, big man."

Max frowned deeper at that as he finally explained, "It's not that."

"What is it, then?"

Max paused and turned to look at him, a complicated expression in his eyes.

That was the first time Archie had ever seen his face like this.

He looked back peaceably, and there was silence for a while until Max looked away irritably and muttered, "I'm just a bit annoyed."

Archie started, then laughed.

"Annoyed about what? Miss Kawn?"

"No," Max denied it hastily, then thought about it and shook his head. "I don't know. It might sound funny, but I just feel like she's treating me differently compared to when we were small. Bah. Anyway, I'm just annoyed."

Archie nodded to show he understood. "I see. So you're sulking, then?"

"No. Damn it! I'll give it to you straight, Archie. I think... I might like her a little bit. Uh, does it count as liking her?"

Max turned around and looked confusedly at Archie, his well-defined eyebrows scrunching together, looking lost.

"She always teases me, makes me the brunt of her jokes, doesn't show me any favors, but that suits me just fine. That makes me seem like a masochist, doesn't it!"

Archie laughed.

Then he nodded. "Yeah, kinda."

"Archie!"

Archie grinned, shook his head, and patted him on the shoulder. "It's not for me to say. Think about it yourself. No matter how much other people talk about it, it's just their feelings in the end. You still need to experience your own emotions for yourself. No rush. Take your time and think it through, and you'll know what it is you want."

Max nodded, as if he somewhat understood.

Archie cocked an eyebrow. "So you can come back in now?"

Max nodded and pointed at his cigarette. "I'll head back inside after I'm done smoking."

Only then did Archie leave.

He went back inside and saw Natalia squinting at him. Walking over, he teased, "Having eye problems?"

Natalia lulled briefly, then glared at him.

She turned to see if anyone was paying attention, then pulled him to the side and asked, "Well? Is Max really mad?"

Archie raised an eyebrow at her. "Are us men really that small-minded to you?"

Natalia grunted and pursed her lips. "Depends. That stuff about men holding up the world is all nonsense, though."

Archie narrowed his eyes. "That sounds like... you're dissatisfied with me."

He leant close. Sparks flew between them. Natalia jolted, then took a step back and waved, laughing it off.

"No, no, you're overthinking it. If there's no problems, I'll go look at them."

She slipped away hurriedly. Archie looked at her retreat and shook his head, chuckling.

Getting back to the hotel, Natalia saw Victoria and Laura still gaming.

Max leaving partway didn't seem to affect their mood at all.

She understood Victoria being like that. After all, the girl was sensitive at times, but most of the time, she looked like she didn't care too much. But Laura...

She sneaked over and looked at her from the side. Her head was bent. Even though her eyes were on the screen, she wasn't moving right, and her mind was obviously on something else.

Even Victoria had to remind her from time to time. "Watch out, Laura, assassin behind you."

"Laura, follow me, don't fall behind!"

"What are you hesitating for? Hurry up and pile in on the boss!"

"..."

Laura was a bit out of sorts. She made a noncommittal sound and followed Victoria onwards, but her motions and expression all looked like she was completely unfocused.

Natalia didn't say anything as she grinned, getting a good sense of the big picture. She left without disturbing them.

Walking to the doorway, she didn't see Louis or Wanda, so she was a bit surprised.

She ran into Stephen outside and asked, "Where's Wanda and the doctor?"

Stephen was a bit unsure as well. He thought for a while and said, "I didn't see Louis, but Miss Kawn seemed to have followed a server to the flower room to see the flowers they've freshly planted here."

Natalia nodded. "Okay, I've got it."

This restaurant was a high-end place under Archie's name. It wasn't run for profit and only took a few customers within their circles.

So rather than a restaurant, one could call it another Pinewood Manor.