

The Ashes 691

Chapter 691

Lauren said with a playful smile, "Of course not! If anyone's doing the bullying, it'll be me bullying Dr. Lloyd!"

Francesca rolled her eyes and said, "Lame. Then why did you drag me over here? Just to flaunt your sweet, lovey-dovey moments and make me jealous?"

Lauren gave her a mock glare. "Francesca, we've known each other for years. When have I ever done something disloyal to you?"

Francesca thought for a moment and realized she was right. With a laugh, she said, "Okay, fine. What is it then? You've got that mischievous smile, so spill it already!"

Lauren stared at her intently, so long that Francesca started to feel uncomfortable. Finally, Lauren asked, "Fran, tell me the truth... do you like Andrew?"

Francesca gasped, eyes wide as she quickly lowered her head. "I-I don't know what you're talking about. Of course not! I mean... obviously not!"

Lauren huffed in exasperation. "Fran, do you really think you can fool me? I know you like the back of my hand, so stop with the awkward cover-up. I've seen it for a while now-you like Andrew. And guess what? I don't mind. Not even a little bit."

Francesca's head snapped up in shock. "What? Lauren... you really don't mind?"

Lauren gave a cold laugh. "Why would I mind? Don't you remember when we were kids, we made a pact? We promised that no matter what happened, we'd never break each other's hearts and that we'd stay best friends forever."

Francesca felt a wave of emotion hit her. Her eyes turned misty as she nodded. "Of course, I remember. I still remember how you stood up for me when those kids bullied me. And I remember you sneaking over to my house to get patched up after that accident because you were scared to tell your mom." "Exactly," Lauren replied with a smile. "We've always had each other's backs. Best friends forever, remember? And best friends share everything-even the good stuff."

Francesca blushed and laughed, "Share everything, huh? Well, if Andrew's part of that 'good stuff,' then I guess he's just a 'thing' to you now-a bad one, at that!"

Lauren chuckled softly. "Fran, you like Andrew, and honestly, I'm happy for you. We're best friends, and we've always been selfless with each other."

"So, when I said you should go for it with Dr. Lloyd, I wasn't joking. If you feel something there, then go for it! You've got my blessing, okay?"

Francesca's heart raced, and her

face turned hot. She hesitated, then muttered, "Okay... fine. I admit it. I do like Andrew. I mean, how could I

not? He's the kind of infuriating et

charming guy who gets under your skin. But you're actually encouraging me to... you know... do that with him? Lauren, are you really that open-minded?"

Lauren gritted her teeth and said, "I'm not that open-minded, you idiot! If it were any other woman sniffing around my man, I'd burn her world to the ground

ground and chase her out of his

life forever. But you're my best friend. Of course, I want you to be happy."

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"Besides... there's another reason." Her voice softened as she continued. "Right now, I can't... cross that line with him."

Lauren's cheeks turned pink as she trailed off, her sudden shyness making her look just as flustered as Francesca.

Francesca stared at her, completely dumbfounded. "Lauren, we're both adults. We're the same age! What do you mean you 'can't'? It's not like you have a medical condition."

Lauren rolled up her sleeve,

revealing a delicate, pale wrist with a

striking red mark. With a sigh, she

said, "See this? My mom had it. applied by a spiritual practitioner. The moment I lose my virginity, it'll vanish, and she'll know."

hell."

She added, "And when that happens, my mom will go ballistic. She'll blame Dr. Lloyd and make his life Francesca's eyes narrowed in frustration. "Seriously? How could she be so harsh? You're an adult. This isn't some old-fashioned world anymore. And Andrew's perfect for you-why can't she just accept that?"

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Lauren sighed and said, "At the end of the day, it all comes down to my family's alliance with the Driscoll family in Blumedale. Anyway, Fran, I can't sleep with Dr. Lloyd right now. But you don't have that restriction, so you can go ahead and give him what he needs."

Francesca bit her lip, looking embarrassed. "Forget it. How could I take Andrew before you do? I'd rather wait for you... maybe we can figure it out together."

Lauren's face turned bright red as she squirmed in her seat. "What? If we do it together, wouldn't that mean all three of us in bed? Like... a threesome?"

Francesca's cheeks flushed even deeper. "I-I don't know either."

She took a shaky breath and added, "But Lauren, since you've been so good to me, I should be honest, too. I need to tell you something... or else I'll feel guilty."

Lauren covered her mouth, stifling a laugh. "Don't tell me... you've already slept with Dr. Lloyd?" Francesca's face turned ghostly pale. Her eyes filled with guilt as she whispered, "Y-You guessed it. It was an accident, though! I was drugged with that... Enthralling Essence. If Andrew hadn't... balanced my energy, I would've died. So, don't blame him. If you're angry, blame me... he was just trying to save my life."

Lauren shook her head with a sly smile. "I'm not mad at you or my Dr. Lloyd. In fact, Fran, I just have one question..."

"How was it?" she asked, eyes glinting. "Did you feel that... tremble? That electric rush through your whole body?"

Francesca's hands twisted together nervously as she opened her mouth a few times, unsure how to respond. Finally, she stamped her foot and blurted out, "Ugh, I can't explain it! It was just..."

"Just what?" Lauren giggled.

"Just... amazing. It felt so good," Francesca admitted. "When you're finally free from your mom's control, you need to try it with Andrew!"

Lauren chuckled. "Oh, I will! And when I do, the two of us will work together to drain him dry!"

"Lauren, what's wrong with us? Ever since Andrew showed up, we've both turned into total flirts. It's so embarrassing!"

"No, Fran," Lauren said with a smirk.

"You've turned into a shameless flirt. You sneaked a taste before me,

didn't you? I bet Andrew's squeezed I

your soft little curves more times

than you can count. Hmph, I want a turn too!"

Andrew stood near the front desk, raising a brow when he heard the familiar giggles coming from around the corner. He shook his head, half-amused.

He said to Nyla, "Nyla, take the next few days off. Go home and get some proper rest before coming back."

Nyla shifted awkwardly. "But I'm fine now. I want to be here and work."

Andrew shot her a sharp look. "No. Go home and rest. Your salary won't be affected, and you'll still get your bonus. Don't worry about that."

"Alright... I'll listen to you," Nyla mumbled, her tone reluctant. Then, after glancing toward the hallway, she leaned in and whispered, "Dr. Lloyd do you want to know what Ms. Rhodes and Dr. Aicker are talking about over there?"

Andrew raised an eyebrow. "You know?"

Nyla stifled a giggle. "Come on, Dr. Lloyd. We're all women-we can usually guess these things." "Then tell me," Andrew said, his curiosity piqued.

"Listen to their giggles. That kind of squealing can only mean one thing... they're talking about guys," Nyla said with a mischievous grin. "Trust me, when girls get excited like that

they're usually swapping stories about... well... intimate stuff"

Andrew hesitated, glancing toward the hallway again.

MS

Could Nyla be right? Were Lauren and Francesca really sitting there, laughing and gossiping about him?

Before long, Lauren and the proud, pouty Francesca stepped out from around the corner. Both of their faces were flushed pink, and Andrew could not help but wonder what they had been whispering about. Francesca cast a shy, lingering glance at Andrew, her eyes shimmering with a soft, embarrassed sparkle. "Well, Nyla, you be sure to rest up, okay? I'll visit you again soon."

Then, she turned to Andrew, gave a small wave, and said, "Andrew, I'm heading back to the hospital. Bye!"

With that, she swished her ponytail and walked off, leaving Andrew to watch her retreating figure. He shifted his gaze toward Lauren and asked, "What were you two gossiping about back there?"

Lauren giggled. "Oh? Do you really want to know? Lean in."

Andrew bent down slightly, and Lauren cupped her hand beside his ear, whispering, "I was telling Fran to go ahead and give herself to you... so you can enjoy yourself."

Andrew's expression froze as black lines practically formed across his forehead. "Excuse me, Ms. Rhodes? If anyone's supposed to 'give' me anything, shouldn't it be you?"

Lauren pouted playfully. "Well... I can't right now. It's complicated. But I already told Fran that if you need anything, she's ready to step in."

Andrew groaned, rubbing his temple. "You two really think I'm that desperate?"

Lauren crossed her arms and smirked. "Oh really? If you're not desperate, then why did you already have a wild night with Fran?"

Andrew's stomach sank. He immediately realized that Francesca must have told Lauren everything about what happened at the Aicker residence that night.

"If I told you that nothing actually happened between us, would you believe me?" he asked, spreading his hands in surrender.

Lauren's eyes widened in surprise. "I trust you wouldn't lie to me, but Fran was so sure you two... you know... did it."

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. "Dr. Lloyd, you're not planning to just... use her and then walk away, are you?"

Andrew let out a long sigh. "It's not what you think. Come on, I'll explain it on the way."

He opened the car door, and Lauren hopped in. They drove toward Glorious Pharmaceuticals, where Stephen had called earlier, warning that someone was causing trouble and asking Andrew to come by and handle it.

Andrew was unsure who it was this time. However, if someone wanted to cause him problems, he was not about to back down.

Lauren sat there with her jaw hanging open. "Wait... so you're saying you didn't actually take Eran that night? You just... used an alternative method?"

Her cheeks turned crimson as she held up her index and middle finger in a suggestive gesture. Andrew's jaw tightened, and his eye twitched slightly. "What else did you think happened?"

"So, as I said, nothing really happened between me and Fran. Not the way you two imagined." Lauren slapped her thigh and groaned. "Andrew, you idiot! You had the perfect opportunity! Why didn't you just... go for it?"

Andrew's face twitched again.

bet

"You're absolutely right. I should've just thrown caution to the wind and gone all in with Francesca that night. Totally regret it now."

Lauren burst out laughing. "You're such a bad liar. I know you better than that. You're too much of a gentleman."

"But this complicates things," she added, growing more serious. "You didn't sleep with her, but Fran thinks you did. What are you going to do?"

Andrew shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road. "Easy. I'll just tell her the truth. It's not like it's a big deal." Lauren immediately shook her head. "No way. You can't tell her."

Andrew frowned. "Why not? What's the big deal?"

Lauren gave an exasperated laugh. "Seriously? Why else? That girl's already head over heels for you."

Chapter 694 She told me everything, Lauren said with a sly smile.

She was really happy about what you supposedly did to her.

But if she finds out it never actually happened, she'll definitely feel disappointed.

Andrew's eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Hold on a second.

The way you're talking ... it almost sounds like you're trying to sell me off to your best friend.

You wouldn't actually do that... would you? Lauren burst into laughter.

Wouldn't? I already did! Frans all yours whenever you want.

I won't mind.

But, she added with a teasing grin, you better make sure you treat us both equally.

No playing favorites! Andrew slammed on the brakes in front of Glorious Pharmaceuticals and turned to Lauren.

Glad youre both having fun ... but has anyone thought about what this will de to my health? Lauren doubled over, laughing so hard she nearly choked

Andrew sat there for a moment, sighing with a mixture of amusement and dread.

He wondered if he was really supposed to take responsibility for Francesca too.

The thought weighed heavily on him.

It was not like he was oblivious to her feelings he had sensed her growing affection for a while now.

Nonetheless, despite their chemistry, they had never crossed that final line.

Now, with Lauren practically pushing them together, it seemed inevitable.

Still, Andrew was not one to force things.

Some moments were better left to unfold naturally.

Mr.

Lloyd! Ms.

Rhodes ! Welcome, welcome! Stephen himself appeared at the entrance, personally coming to greet them.

His tone was polite, but his expression was strained.

Andrew and Lauren got out of the car, waving off the formalities.

Mr.

Brunner, no need to be so courteous.

Lets get straight to the point, Andrew said as they headed inside.

Upstairs, Stephen instructed someone to prepare tea while he sat down across from them, flashing an uneasy smile. Mr.

Lloyd, heres the situation, Stephen began, clearing his throat.

Im somewhat of an acquaintance with Raymond Chapman, the owner of Dream Paradise.

His club got trashed the other night... which, from what I understand, was because he crossed you.

Honestly, he brought it on himself.

But Raymond isnt taking it well, Stephen added with a grimace.

He contacted me earlier and said hes planning to come after you.

Andrew arched a brow.

Come after me? Id love to hear what exactly he thinks hes going to do.

Stephen let out a cold laugh.

This Raymond likes to throw his weight around because of his connections with the provincial government.

I tried to talk him down, but hes stubborn.

Hes demanding that you go to the Jayrodale Grand Hotel for what hes calling a Reckoning Toast.

Apparently, he wants you to accept three symbolic strikes and pay compensation for the damages to Dream Paradise.

He added Otherwise, he says hell

get the Wright family from the state capital involved ... and theyll officially declare war on you.

Andrew leaned back, his expression calm.

The Wright family from the capital? Never heard of them.

What makes them so special? Before Stephen could respond, Lauren chimed in, her voice suddenly serious. The Wright family from Blumedale? Theyre one of the most influential households in the capital.

They have a private security force and connections across various industries.

Theyre just a step below the Driscoll family.

But if were talking about power here in Jayrodale, she continued with a meaningful glance at Andrew, the Wrights could easily overpower the Weller family, the Aickers, and even my own Rhodes family.

Stephen nodded in agreement.

Exactly.

The Wright family has resources and influence that run deep.

And Raymond? Hes a master at cozying up to people with power.

One of the Wright familys young heirs spent three months partying at Dream Paradise, Stephen continued with a grimace. Word is, the guy slept with every top hostess there, one after another.

By the time he left, he was so satisfied with Raymonds ... hospitality ... that he promised support him in any way he could.

Since then, Raymonds been sending regular tribute to the Wright family.

And now he thinks that makes him untouchable.

Chapter 695 Andrew let out a cold laugh.

So, Raymonds dence comes from the Wright family? Wrin Stephen gave a firm nod. Exactly.

Without the familys backing, Raymond wouldnt even be qualified to shine your shoes, let alone set up the ridiculous Reckoning To Andrews eyes glinted with curiosity.

Mr.

Brunner, enlighten me what exactly is that supposed to mean? Stephen straightened in his chair and explained, The Reckoning Toast is an old tradition in certain circles.

Its essentially a public apology disguised as a show of respect.

If two sides have a conflict but dont want an all out war, or if one side wants to back down without losing face, theyll arrange a Reckoning Toast.

Youd pour a glass of wine, offer it to Raymond, and apologize while acknowledging his supposed grievance.

He explained, If he takes the glass and drinks, it means he accepts the apology, and the matter is settled.

But if he refuses or smashes the glass, thats a declaration of war.

It means the conflict will only escalate from there.

Andrews lips curled into a faint, mocking smile .

And what do you think I should do, Mr.

Brunner? Should I humor him with a drink or just ignore the whole thing? Stephens smile turned awkward.

Well

...

given Raymonds ties to the Wright family, hes feeling pretty bold right now.

If you want to avoid trouble and steer clear of a conflict with the capital, Id suggest going to the Jayrodale Grand Hotel. Andrew arched a brow.

So, what youre really saying is that I should bow my head, offer him a drink, and let this slide ? Stephens face paled slightly as he shook his hands frantically.

Of course not! Mr.

Lloyd, youre leagues above that fool.

He doesnt deserve a second of your time.

But the Wright familys influence runs deep, and its never wise to provoke powerful forces without reason.

I just dont want you to invite unnecessary trouble.

Lauren,

who had been quietly listening, scoffed.

I dont care if Raymond has the Wright family behind him.

Were not going to apologize to that slimeball.

Dream Paradise got trashed because of his sons stupidity.

He brought it on himself, and frankly, he deserved it.

PL Stephen sighed, rubbing his temples.

Ms.

Rhodes, I get what youre saying, and youre not wrong. But we still have to consider the bigger picture here.

That spoiled brat from the Wright family the one who spent months at Dream Paradise with a different girl every night has already arrived in Jayrodale.

As soon as he saw the damage, he went ballistic.

Laurens expression shifted, her brows knitting together.

That must be Winston Wright.

Ugh, that useless parasite.

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So hes here in Jayrodale now? Andrew leaned back and exhaled slowly, completely unfazed.

The Wright family, Raymond ... I honestly dont care.

Theyre not worth my time

.

He shifted his gaze back to Stephen.

with our joint project? Stephens face up with relief at the change

Ox; ws the production going

dos line

of topic.

Oh, everythings going according to plan.

We followed your formula and started production as instructed.

But if I can be candid, Mr.

Lloyd, I think we might be overproducing .

This is a brand new product, and flooding the market could backfire.

If sales flop, well take a huge hit.

Andrew smiled faintly.

Dont worry.

Itll sell out.

In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if we can't keep up with demand.

Stephen hesitated but ultimately nodded.

He had not known Andrew long, but

he had seen enough to realize that this

man was not someone you

questioned without reason

In Jayrodale's tangled web of power and influence, Andrew was already a force to be reckoned with .

Alright, Andrew said, standing and stretching his shoulders.

That's settled then.

Lauren, let's go .

Chapter 696 Stephen hesitated for a moment before forcing out a strained smile. Mr.

Lloyd, the Reckoning Toast at the Jayrodale Grand Hotel officially started today.

Raymond plans to host it for three days straight, inviting all the major players in Jayrodale to witness it.

He explained, If, by the end of the third day, you haven't shown up, it will be taken as a refusal to apologize.

At that point, Raymond, backed by the Wright family, might decide to make a move against you.

Please, think this through.

Andrews eyes darkened with indifference .

Ill go on the third day and settle it then.

But until then, I dont have the time or the interest to entertain them.

Stephen quickly nodded.

Of course,

Lloyd.

Mr.

Ill pass the message along to Raymond.

Andrew gave a casual wave.

Do whatever you think is best.

He turned and left the office with Lauren beside him.

Dr.

Lloyd, Lauren said softly, glancing at him with concern, I really think you should take the Wright family seriously.

She knew his personality he was the kind of man who never bent under pressure.

However, she feared his stubbornness might draw the wrong kind of attention.

Andrews jaw tightened

What happened to Dream Paradise was entirely the Chapman familys fault.

By any logic, theyre the ones who should be apologizing, not me .

If the Wright family chooses to ignore the facts and bully me into submission, then I have no choice but to fight back. Lauren gave a small nod.

Alright.

I respect your decision.

But you should know... Winston is a lunatic.

A spoiled, psychotic brat.

If he loses his temper, things could get messy.

Andrew scoffed.

If hes smart, hell keep his tantrums to himself.

But if he decides to come after me, hell regret it.

Lunatic or not, Ill make him kneel and beg for mercy.

When they arrived at the Rhodes Corporation building, Marcus came rushing toward them with a tense expression. Mr.

Lloyd, things are getting out of hand.

Raymonds pushing hard to hold you responsible and hes even brought in some big shot from the capital .

He wrung his hands anxiously, glancing at Andrew with genuine concern.

Andrew chuckled, his eyes glinting with a dangerous calm.

Relax.

I already know about it.

Ill handle it.

Marcus mouth opened, but no words came out.

He had worked with Andrew long enough to know the man never backed down.

Still, this situation was different.

Mr.

Lloyd, maybe... maybe we should rethink this, Marcus finally said.

Im distantly related to Raymond.

I could go apologize on your behalf and offer to cover the damages at Dream Paradise.

He continued, If you come with me d say a f

we can

kind words, maybe

things escalate. Content

e can smooth this over

Andrew laughed, though there was no humor in it.

First, Stephen tries to talk me into bowing my head.

belongs to

Now you? He leaned in slightly, his tone sharp but steady.

We were the ones who got provoked, Mr.

Chapman.

And when we pushed back, now they want us to apologize? What kind of world would that be? If we just roll over what happens next? People like Raymond would keep running wild, while decent people live in fear.

Im not about to let that happen.

Marcus sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

Youre absolutely right, Mr.

Lloyd.

I get it, really.

But... sometimes, taking one step back can help you avoid an even bigger fight.

He added Why not just swallow a bit of pride, apologize, and move on

? lose

is not like youd actually move on

anything.

Andrews smile faded.

His voice turned icy.

Im not in the habit of apologizing when Ive done nothing wrong.

With a resigned sigh, Marcus said nothing more.

He knew that once Andrew made up his mind, there was no talking him out of it.

Chapter 697 News of Raymond hosting the Reckoning Toast at the Jayrodale Grand Hotel spread like wildfire.

In no time, the entire city was buzzing with speculation and heated discussions.

Someone commented, Seriously? Who in their right mind would dare mess with Dream Paradise? Youd have to be either insane or have a death wish

Once a Reckoning Toast is set, you either show up, drink, and apologize, or you wait for Mr.

Chapman Senior to go ballistic and take you down.

Theres no third option! Another said, Lately, this guy Andrew has been making a bit of a name for himself in Jayrodale.

A lowlife nobody from the bottom of the barrel, and now he thinks he can take on Mr.

Chapman Senior? This is pure suicide! Well, you cant say that for sure.

Word is, Andrews gotten close with the Rhodes family and has ties to that legendary Dr.

Aicker.

Even Harvey, the head of the Weller family, couldnt put him down.

If he and Raymond really go at it, who knows how itll turn out? Yeah, right! Who knows how itll turn out? My ass! Raymonds got the full backing of the Wright family.

He could squash that kid a hundred times over.

Just wait and see this cocky little bastard is about to get wiped out! Most of the citys elites rich families, businessmen, and high society figures were watching with amusement, waiting for the inevitable fallout .

Almost no one believed Andrew had a chance.

Meanwhile, Raymonds momentum was growing stronger by the day.

At the Jayrodale Grand Hotel, he was throwing lavish feasts, hosting 100 tables every night and offering unlimited food and drinks to all his guests

The whole point was to flaunt his power and dominance.

Everyone who showed up treated him with admiration, flattery, and respect.

nome, dal The message was clear if Andrew dared to come, he would have to kneel and toast his apology.

If he did not show up, even better.

Once the three day deadline passed, Raymond would personally step in and erase him for good. Stephen wasted no time.

The moment he heard about the situation, he went straight to Raymond .

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Raymond, as your senior, I have to ask do you really need to blow this up so much? Raymond was just as heavyset as his son, Sean However, unlike Sean, his size was on a whole other level his massive gut bulged forward, and his thick, meaty face carried a permanent scowl.

Hmph! Save your breath.

That bastard Andrew trashed Dream Paradise thats a direct slap to my face! He continued, A tree needs its bark, and a man needs his dignity.

I have a reputation in Jayrodale, and Im not just some nobody.

He wrecked my club, beat up my son, and then didnt even have the guts to say a word afterward .

What does that make me? Some

sewer rat he can just step on ?

Theres no way in hell Im letting that

slide! If back down now, I might as well call myself his bitch! He snorted heavily, his face twisting into a vicious glare.

Stephen frowned.

Raymond, dont forget this whole thing started because your useless son went looking for trouble first.

If Sean hadnt gone too far and bullied the guy Mr.

Lloyd wouldnt have trashed your

club in the first place! Raymond leaned back into his black leather sofa f flanked by bodyguards in dark sunglasses.

Hearing Stephens words, he sneered.

Stephen, you used to be someone to reckon with.

But now? Youve gone soft.

Youve lost that fire, that dominance ! And lets say, for arguments sake, Sean really did mess with Andrew first.

So what? He continued, I dont give a damn! In Jayrodale, the Chapman family steps on people not the other way around! Nobody, and I mean nobody, gets to challenge us and walk away! Stephen smirked coldly.

Raymond, theres a lot you dont understand.

Chapter 698 Stephen said calmly, Its not that Ive lost my edge or nerve.

Its just that sometimes, you need to read the room and know when to pick your battles.

He continued, Theres a saying A wise man adapts to the times.

No matter how strong you are, when a true powerhouse shows up, you still have to bow your head if you want to survive. Raymond waved him off with an irritated snort.

Cut the crap.

What youre really saying is that youre scared of Andrew, right? Youve already given in to him.

Either way, doesnt matter.

My stance is crystal clear.

If that kid shows up, kneels, toasts me, and pays for all the damages, Ill be merciful and let him walk away with his life. But if he dares not to show, then tough luck.

Ill make sure he learns exactly what regret feels like.

Stephens expression darkened, and he let out a cold chuckle .

Getting Mr.

Lloyd to kneel and toast you? Thats never going to happen.

I cant say much more, but Im telling you youre underestimating him .

Once his full strength is revealed, youll regret the decision you made today.

Raymond snorted dismissively.

His strength? Do you mean Natasha and Dylan ? Those two underground networks?
Please .

Sean mentioned that even Rodney from Madblade Martial Academy showed up that night.

Sure, normally, those three groups might be tricky to deal with.

But guess what? My time has come.

Everyone gets their shot at the top, and now its my turn.

His eyes glimmered with arrogance as he reclined lazily, radiating unshakable confidence.

Stephens eyelid twitched as a sudden thought struck him.

He hesitated, then asked, Wait... did the Wright family promise to back you ? Raymond smirked triumphantly.

He took a slow sip of his tea, savoring the moment, then answered, of course.

No point hiding it now.

Mr.

Winston Wright came to Jayrodale hoping to enjoy himself at Dream Paradise.

But thanks to Andrews little stunt, he didnt get the experience he wanted.

Hes pissed.

If I hadnt calmed him down, that

And kid would already be lying at

of the river with

shattered limbs.

Stephens heart sank.

He had suspected Raymond had powerful backing, but hearing it confirmed still left him unsettled. With Winston in his corner, Raymond had every reason to act this boldly.

If Andrew did not tread carefully, he really could get crushed this time.

Raymond, just so you know, Mr.

Lloyd said hell come to the

bet

Jayrodale Grand Hotel likely within the next day or two, Stephen finally said delivering the message hed come for.

Raymond threw his head back and laughed.

Ha! I knew it ! spineless little coward.

I was wondering if he really had the balls to stand me up.

Turns out once he heard whos backing me, hes decided to crawl over here and beg for forgiveness! Stephens jaw tightened in frustration.

Raymond, Mr.

Lloyd coming here doesnt mean hes coming to grovel.

You shouldnt be so quick to mock him.

Raymond snorted with disdain.

Please.

If he had guts, he wouldnt come at all and would just wait for me to hunt him down.

But now that hes coming, doesnt that prove hes scared? Hes already caved.

Hes nothing but a coward whos letting my presence crush him into submission.

Stephen clenched his teeth and said nothing more.

With the Wright familys influence looming in the background, there was no point arguing further. Well, Stephen, I think were done here

Dont let me keep you, Raymond said dismissively, motioning toward the door with a lazy wave. His lips curled into a sneer as he added, Pass along my message to that little punk .

If he comes in, kneels, toasts me, and begs for mercy, Ill go easy on him.

But if he tries to act tough, I wont stop until hes completely destroyed.

Chapter 699

Stephen left without saying a word, his face dark and grim.

Raymond sneered as he watched him go. "Spineless coward. You cave the moment someone shows a bit of strength. That's the difference between you and me, Stephen. You're weak, and I've always been a man of action. Success takes guts and relentless effort. Only those who push through, no matter the odds, can create a bright future."

Feeling rather pleased with his own words, Raymond stood up and pushed open the door behind him.

The room inside was a lavish, neon-lit paradise, packed with state-of-the-art entertainment systems. A dozen women, barely dressed and practically flaunting their bodies, circled around a scrawny young man, giggling and playfully teasing him.

"Come on, Mr. Wright, have a drink with me. Let's share a glass, hmm?"

"How about you take me on a date tonight? I promise to make you feel like you're on cloud nine."

"Mr. Wright, you're so bad... always grabbing my chest. But if you want, there are plenty of other places you can touch too."

These women had all been top performers at Dream Paradise before its destruction-gorgeous, charming, and shamelessly eager to please.

The young man they were entertaining was Winston Wright, the youngest son of the Wright family from the capital. And in his presence, these women were practically crawling at his feet.

Winston looked bored, though. He leaned back on the couch, swirling a glass of whiskey in one hand while his other casually groped whichever body part was closest.

Raymond approached with a grin and waved the women away. "Mr. Wright, I just need a moment. I promise, within half a day, that Andrew punk will crawl in here, begging on his knees. Once he's here, you'll have a nice little show to enjoy. It should liven things up."

Winston shoved a woman's head down toward his lap and sighed. "Raymond, your Dream Paradise is gone. Where's the fun supposed to come from now? This whole trip's been a bust."

Raymond gave a nervous laugh. "Don't worry, Mr. Wright. I've already reached out to bring back those actresses from Eastonia who were supposed to leave town. I paid extra to make sure they'd be here tonight."

Winston's eyes lit up, and a sleazy grin spread across his face. "Oh? You mean the real deal? You got those girls back? Man, you get me Raymond. Unlike these amateurs. All makeup and fake giggles but no real skills. Ugh. Those Eastonian girls, though... that sweet little moan? Sends chills right down my spine."

Seeing Winston's excitement, Raymond felt relieved and pressed on. "Mr. Wright, just so you know,

I've already set up the Reckoning et

Toast at the Jayrodale Grand Hotel. Andrew might have a bit of muscle behind him, so I'll still need you to oversee things when the time

comes."

Winston waved a hand dismissively. "Andrew? That cockroach? Relax. As long as I'm enjoying myself, nobody in Jayrodale can touch you." Raymond's face lit up with joy. "Thank you, Mr. Wright! That's exactly what I was hoping to hear."

Two days passed in the blink of an eye. Andrew had spent the time helping Lauren handle the medical business. The first shipment from Glorious Pharmaceuticals was set to hit the market within three days, and the team was optimistic about the potential results.

Meanwhile, Bane had developed three new medications, which Rhodes Corporation's Pharmaceutical Division rushed into production. Within days, the products were already on pharmacy shelves across the region.

Tiana and Michael were thrilled, watching everything come together better than expected.

"Michael and Bane, thank you both for your hard work," Tiana said with a smile. "With these new products, we can finally breathe life back into the Pharmaceutical Division."

Michael puffed out his chest. "Don't worry. Bane is a master of his craft—a true legend. I'm confident this will not only restore the division but also put the Weller family under some serious pressure."

Bane gave a modest shrug. "To be honest, these medications are nothing groundbreaking. They're decent but hardly remarkable."

Tiana nodded, "I get what you mean."

We were working on a tight deadline, so it's understandable that we couldn't aim too high this time. But even so, your expertise has already made a difference. In such a short time, you've delivered results. That's exactly why Rhodes Corporation is lucky to have you on board."

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Bane waved a hand dismissively. "Let me make one thing clear-I'm not helping Rhodes Corporation's Pharmaceutical Division out of pure goodwill. I expect to get what I want when the time comes. I trust you won't be stingy when that moment arrives."

Tiana chuckled softly. "Don't worry. You'll have access to all the resources and funds you need."

The meeting room was filled with Rhodes Corporation executives. Besides Bane and Michael, Andrew, Lauren, and Marcus were also present.

However, the three of them sat on the sidelines, largely ignored. Nobody came over to chat or engage with them.

Meanwhile, Michael stood at the center of attention, surrounded by a crowd of managers, all enthusiastically congratulating him.

They were not there just for idle flattery-they were hedging their bets. After all, the ongoing power struggle between Michael and Lauren would decide who got the CEO seat.

Judging by the current situation, Michael seemed like a guaranteed winner. And in corporate politics, knowing which way the wind blew was a survival skill these managers had mastered.

Michael smiled modestly, but his gaze swept toward Andrew and Lauren with a mocking glint.

"Lauren, Mr. Lloyd... you two look a bit down," he said with a fake smile. "What's wrong? Did Mr. Lloyd's magic formulas not turn out as expected?"

Lauren's expression remained cold. "Our products are just fine. They'll be hitting the market soon. You don't need to worry about us." Michael laughed condescendingly. "Lauren, you're being way too impatient. Sure, Glorious Pharmaceuticals is backing you, but the heart of a product lies in its quality and performance. If Mr. Lloyd's formulas turn out to be garbage, then launching them will only burn through resources and drain your energy for nothing."

Marcus frowned. "Mr. Rhodes, you don't even know what our products are. Isn't it a bit arrogant to make assumptions like that?"

Michael sneered. "Why would I waste time learning about your products? Tell me, Mr. Chapman, would you care what the janitor on the street is having for lunch? Of course not. Because the gap between you two is too vast to bother."

Marcus' face turned red with anger-Michael's words were beyond insulting.

"Mr. Chapman," Andrew said suddenly, his voice calm but sharp, "would you waste your breath arguing with a dog."

Michael's expression darkened instantly. His lips twisted into a snarl. "Andrew, you just don't know when to quit. Fine. Let's see how far your so-called miracle products go. I'll enjoy watching you crash and burn."

Andrew smirked. "Michael, do you remember what I told you before? I said I'd strip away that smug mask and bring you back to reality. Don't forget that. And from where I'm standing, your products are the real garbage."

Bane snorted. "Kid, big talk like that can make your tongue snap in half. If my products are garbage, then yours are less than trash."

Andrew's gaze shifted to Bane, filled

with disdain. Bane, you whipped up three formulas in record time. What do you think you are? The legendary founder of the Advanced Medical Institute? You might have everyone else here fooled, but I see through your tricks."

Bane's face hardened. His voice dropped to an icy growl. "What the hell are you implying? Are you questioning my medical expertise?"

Andrew shrugged. "I'm not

questioning it—I'm outright

dismissing it. Your formulas are

nothing but a haphazard mix of tonic herbs thrown together under

pressure. Sure, they might give people a quick boost—stuff a bunch of Root of Resilience, Emberhorn Stag, and Sunberry Bush into someone, and they'll feel like a furnace for a few hours. But real medicine is about more than a

temporary high. It's about

consistent, reliable results."

affordability, accessibility, and

The room fell into stunned silence. Many of the executives looked pale, suddenly uncertain about the products they had been so eager to praise.

Marcus clapped his hands, nodding with approval. "Well said, Mr. Lloyd! That's what you call integrity and vision!"

Even Tiana glanced at Andrew with surprise. She thought, "This kid... maybe he actually knew what he was talking about."