

"Sorry..." Elodie felt her eyes sting with unexpected tears.

Alexander's irritation was palpable, but he couldn't stand to see Elodie like this. "What are you apologizing for? If anyone deserves an apology, it's the land itself for you monopolizing the wild vegetable patch for three years. Go say sorry to Mother Earth, not me."

Elodie couldn't help but feel a mixture of laughter and tears.

Honestly, Alexander had known she'd come.

Esmeralda, with her loose lips, had already spilled everything to him.

"You're not late," Alexander said, letting out a long sigh as he looked up at the ceiling. "As long as you've figured things out, it's never too late to start over."

With your talent, what company wouldn't want you? VistaLink Technologies only truly shines because you're part of it."

Elodie's abilities had once earned her a special recruitment straight into the research institute.

She should never have been left to wither in obscurity.

For years, everyone had admired the jaw-dropping U.N2 drone, crediting the invention to him. People lined up at VistaLink's doors, desperate to get in because of the U.N2. But in truth, it was Elodie who had reached those heights at just twenty years old—a benchmark nobody has surpassed even now.

She'd given others years to catch up, but no one had managed to outpace her groundbreaking ideas and tech from back then.

"You're really okay with me joining VistaLink?" Elodie could barely express what she was feeling.

Alexander snorted. "Esmeralda already agreed, all on her own, to bring you on as a partner with your tech. I'm just curious to see what kind of leap forward you'll bring to VistaLink. Be there Monday morning!"

He was always tough on the outside, but Elodie knew his heart was soft.

She broke into a genuine smile, maybe the first real one she'd had in ages. "Thank you, Alex."

Alexander just gave a gruff huff and turned to mingle with the others.

A heavy weight finally lifted from Elodie's chest.

Suddenly, the world seemed brighter, her exhaustion replaced by a surge of energy.

She stood and made her way over to examine one of the new drones on display.

Up ahead, a wave of commotion swept through the crowd.

She looked over and saw Jarrod and Sylvie arriving, accompanied by Maurice and Joseph.

Jarrod's presence alone sent a ripple through the room-people were abuzz, hoping for a chance to introduce themselves.

Elodie noticed the way Jarrod protectively kept Sylvie close to his side. She looked away, deciding not to pay them any more attention.

She turned her focus fully to the ingenious design of the drone in front of her.

Naturally, Joseph and Maurice had spotted Elodie too. When they saw that Jarrod didn't so much as glance her way, both men finally relaxed.

This woman, Elodie, was something else.

How had she managed to score an invitation to this event?

She must have gone to ridiculous lengths just to be seen by Jarrod.

Elodie, meanwhile, was lost in the clever engineering before her. By the time she looked up, Maurice and Joseph were already standing in front of her, Jarrod and Sylvie heading in their direction.

Maurice sneered, "You're just a housewife who knows how to do laundry and cook what are you doing poking around here? Do you have any idea how expensive these things are? If you break one, do you really think you could pay for it with your little pocket change?"

Unbelievable. A country bumpkin pretending to be some kind of elite?

Joseph gave Elodie a smirk that wasn't quite a smile.

Even if last time at the billiards club was a misunderstanding, what about now?

There's no way Elodie could actually understand drones.

Even if she wanted to pretend, couldn't she at least pick something believable?

"Ms. Thorne, did you really think snagging an invitation would mean anything?" Maurice sighed theatrically. "Sylvie is the real deal a PhD from Pinecrest Institute of Technology. Maybe you should take notes."

Pretending to care about drones, just to catch Jarrod's attention? Pathetic.

Just then, Jarrod and Sylvie arrived and caught the tail end of Maurice's words. Sylvie was calm, not giving away any emotion.

She understood Maurice's implication-he was accusing Elodie of copying her.

Jarrod, on the other hand, just glanced at Elodie with an inscrutable expression. "Small world."

His tone was casual, almost indifferent.

But Elodie heard something deeper in his words.

Did he misunderstand her intentions, just like Maurice and the rest?

Clearly, Jarrod had no intention of interacting with her in public, wary of fueling any rumors about their relationship. He didn't give her a chance to explain-just offered that one dismissive remark, then led Sylvie toward the competition area.

Maurice, passing Elodie, added, "Why not come watch Sylvie pilot the drone? You should at least know what real skill looks like."

Joseph just shoved his hands in his pockets, too bored to bother with Elodie any further.

Across the room, Sylvie took the stage.

The whole crowd erupted in applause.

Sylvie curled her lips in a small, confident smile and arched an eyebrow at Jarrod

on the stage. He answered her with a subtle smile of his own.

Their little exchange, so exclusive and intimate, only fueled the excitement in the

room.