

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“Mom, they all went over to Sebastian’s. Looks like it’s just us today,” Eliza explained casually.

Beatrice nodded with a knowing smile. “That just proves how good Caitlin’s cooking is. I want to try it too.”

“Next time, Mom. We’ll have Caitlin make something just for you. Today there’s a crowd over there,” Eliza reassured her.

Beatrice let out a playful sigh. “So I even have to wait in line to taste Caitlin’s food? Who knows when my turn will come!”

Her light-hearted grumble, paired with a mock-pout, made everyone around her chuckle.

Just then, the sound of children’s voices echoed from outside.

“Beatrice! Grandpa, Grandma!”

“Hmm? Are those my little darlings?”

Beatrice's eyes lit up as the kids came running in.

Eliza stepped forward to greet them. "What are you all doing here? Haven't you eaten yet?"

"Not yet, Grandma!" Arthur replied. "We're here to eat with you!"

"Oh? You came just to eat with us?"

"Yeah! Otherwise, it'd be boring for you guys, right?" said one of the kids as they climbed up onto the dining chairs.

Patricia scooted next to Beatrice and beamed. "Beatrice, Patricia and my brothers are here to eat with you. You're not lonely now,

right?"

"Right, right. I'm not lonely at all! Come on, everyone, dig in!"

Beatrice patted their little heads with a loving smile. Her mood lifted instantly, and suddenly, even the food tasted better

Back at the main house of Vanderbilt Manor, the atmosphere was just as lively.

While everyone was enjoying lunch, Hayden let something slip in conversation. He mentioned exploring New York yesterday with Jillian.

Caitlin grinned. “So you and Jillian toured a few famous spots? No wonder you turned down the staff offered to accompany you.”

“Well, Jillian was a great guide. That was a fantastic time—much better than my last trip to the US,” Hayden said with a smile.

“Of course it was different. You had a beautiful lady as your guide,” Sebastian teased knowingly. “You two were chatting pretty closely during the design competition weren’t you?”

Caitlin arched a brow “sounds like my dear uncle might be falling in love”

“That’s what I’m thinking too, Sebastian agreed

Hayden waved his hands, laughing “Come on, don’t jump to conclusions. Nothing’s official we’re just himla bir mos

“That’s a good start, Caitlin mused. “Jillian’s a designer too, right? Maybe I ask if the d be interested in working with fragranc y &

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Dye Studio in Departure City.“.

She said it casually, but if Hayden truly liked Jillian, Caitlin wouldn’t mind playing matchmaker.

As the meal wound down, Sebastian cleared his throat. “Everyone, I’ve got something to show you.”

He reached into his inner suit pocket as though revealing a grand surprise.

“What is it?” All eyes were on him.

Only a few people knew about their marriage registration. Most were still in the dark.

Once he saw that he had everyone’s attention, Sebastian finally pulled out a small red booklet and flashed it proudly.

“A marriage certificate? You two already got remarried?” Molly exclaimed, eyes wide.

She had assumed it would be a while before they tied the knot again.

“Let me see that!” Vincent snatched the booklet and passed it around.

“Congratulations!” Hayden said sincerely after he saw it. “It’s about time—you two finally made it.”

Everyone raised their glasses for a toast to the newlyweds.

“You should do a wedding toast!” someone called out.

“Great idea! Toast! Toast!”

“Ugh, my eyes!” someone groaned as Sebastian wrapped an arm around Caitlin and gave her a joyful kiss. “That was blinding!”

“I’m drowning in this pile of couple cuteness,” someone else chimed in.

Hayden joked, “Wait, was this lunch for my farewell, or just a chance to rub your love in my face?”

The table burst into laughter. It was a perfect ending to a happy meal. Afterward, everyone dispersed, and Sebastian and Caitlin accompanied **Hayden** to the airport to see him off.

Later that afternoon, Caitlin and Sebastian gathered with Zinnia, Tyler, James, and Quincy to finalize preparations for what lay ahead.

According to intel from The Obsidian Order, a number of operatives from Shadow Moon Pavilion had already infiltrated US territory

through secret channels.

Caitlin laid out her analysis “Based on the current pattern, it looks like Zeke has convinced Zorro to shift the Shadow Moon Pavilion’s base of operations to the US if it weren’t for the standoff between Graystone and the royal family I bet for would’ve

come himself

“But since he didn’t, he sent Pierrick instead. That guy is no joke,” Zinnia added

“Right. If Pierrick’s the toughest opponent, then we need a strategy to isolate and weaken him first, Catan said

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t he the **one** I shot last time?”

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“Yes, him,” Caitlin replied. “If Zeke hadn’t held him back, I might not be here right now.”

Zinnia nodded. “Exactly. Mr. Vanderbilt wounded him while protecting Caitlin. I’m sure he hasn’t forgotten that.”

A cold glint passed through Sebastian’s gaze. “Then this time, I’ll make sure he regrets showing up.”

“Alright. Here’s the plan,” Caitlin said firmly.

James, Tyler, and Quincy would be in charge of taking down Pierrick.

Caitlin and Zinnia would lead the operation to rescue the hostages, while Sebastian and his team would engage Shadow Moon Pavilion’s main force.

They all understood that this wasn’t going to be a simple exchange—it was more likely a full-scale showdown between two factions.

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Roles were clearly assigned. The exchange location was set at the foothills of Bear Mountain, the same place where they'd watched the sunrise—a location ideal for setting up ambushes.

Every phase of the plan had been simulated and rehearsed, ensuring that nothing was left to chance.

Caitlin made sure both her phones were powered on and ready, waiting for word from Zeke.

But when her screen lit up with a text from an unknown number, what she read left her stunned.

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Sebastian and Caitlin intertwined arms and drank their toast, eliciting playful cheers from the crowd.

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She kept reading the message over and over, growing more shocked by the second. “This... what...”

“What is it, Caitlin?”

Sebastian leaned closer, curious about what had startled her.

“Look at this message. It was sent a few hours ago.”

Caitlin handed him her phone. After skimming the contents, Sebastian’s expression shifted to one of surprise.

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The message came from an unknown number, claiming to be from Zeke. It said he hadn’t been able to reach her directly, so he had resorted to texting. He warned her not to proceed with the hostage exchange with Pierrick and his team. He promised to join them as soon as possible.

Even more shocking was this: the person currently with Pierrick, posing as Zeke, wasn't the real him. The message urged her to stay alert.

"How is that possible? Can you call him back and check?" Sebastian asked.

"Yeah."

Caitlin immediately returned the call, but the number was unreachable.

"No luck. I can't get through."

Without being able to verify the sender's identity, it was impossible to know if the message was real or fake.

Still, Caitlin couldn't ignore it. She began to think aloud. "If it were fake, who'd go through the trouble of impersonating Zeke just to contact me? But if it's real, then what does that mean?"

Sebastian followed her train of thought. "Maybe Zeke's plan was exposed. Maybe Zorro figured out that Zeke was faking his loyalty and turned the tables—sent a decoy in his place to get the codex."

"Exactly! That's what I'm worried about."

Caillin's expression turned grim. "I knew it wouldn't be that simple. Zorro's too cunning. There's no way he didn't see through Zeke's 'defection.'"

Their original plan had been to lure Zorro to the US and confront him directly. But things had clearly gone off course. Now they were left with Plan B rescue the hostages and ensure Zeke's safety

But if what the message said was true, then even if they succeeded in rescuing the hostages and killing Pierrick, the real Zeke would still be in danger.

Zorro could be keeping him as leverage.

As the pieces fell into place, Caitlin realized things were far more complicated than they had expected. Their current plan would **have** to be paused

"So, what do we do now?" **Zinnia** asked. She wanted to save her family, but not at the cost of Zeke's life.

"We stall," Caitlin replied decisively. "We have to verify Zeke's status before taking further action. As long as they don't get the

hands on the codex, the hostages should remain safe."

Sebastian nodded. "I'll contact Xero, see if he can dig up any intel from inside Graystone."

“Good. That’s our best option right now.”

At this point, all they could do was wait.

Meanwhile, word of Caitlin and Sebastian’s remarriage had already reached Beatrice and the rest of the family. Overjoyed, the elderly matriarch insisted on seeing the marriage certificate with her own eyes to believe it.

Caitlin and Sebastian brought it over to the main house just to show her.

Beatrice beamed with pride. “Excellent! This should’ve happened long ago. Well done!”

She adjusted her reading glasses and squinted at the certificate, her smile growing wider. “Sebastian must’ve done something incredible in his past life to deserve a wife like Caitlin.”

Molly grinned. “Well, Grandma, now you can eat and sleep in peace, right?”

“Absolutely! I couldn’t rest until this was official. Now I can.”

Then, with a gleeful chuckle, Beatrice tucked the certificate into her coat. “Since you’re officially remarried, and I’m this happy, let me hold on to this for safekeeping. Grandma will keep it nice and secure.”

It was obvious she adored Caitlin and was still a little afraid of any future misunderstandings that could lead to another divorce.

“Great idea, Grandma! You should definitely keep it,” Sebastian said, laughing.

Eliza and Raymond took a look at the certificate and shared in the joy.

Raymond added, “Now that the papers are signed, shouldn’t we start planning the wedding?”

“Yeah, when are *you* two thinking of doing it? We should start preparing.”

Eliza clearly wanted to go all out with the celebration, making sure the entire city knew The Vanderbilt Family had gained such a wonderful daughter-in-law.

“Whatever Caitlin wants,” Sebastian said, wrapping an arm around her. “Tomorrow, if she’s up for it”

Caitlin smiled softly. “I’d rather wait until I’ve found my mother. I want her to be there when I get married”

“Of course. We’ll wait as long as it takes,” Eliza said warmly.

Raymond asked gently, “Sebastian, any leads on Caitlin’s mom yet?”

“There’s something. We’re still following up,” he replied.

“Thope you find her soon.” Eliza added with sincerity

On the way back to Vanderbilt Manor, Caitlin and Sebastian followed the sound of piano and found them in the Carriage House

Federico was inside teaching Howard, who **was** focused and attentive, earning frequent praise by

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Not wanting to interrupt, Caitlin and Sebastian waited until Federico noticed them through the bamboo grove. He stepped out to

meet them.

“Hope we’re not disturbing your lesson.” Caitlin said.

“Not at all What’s up?” Federico asked.

“Any updates on the Ashfall lead?”

Federico nodded. “I checked in with the studio yesterday. They’ve been getting a lot of calls—some are real leads, but a lot are scammers trying to cash in. They’re verifying everything before taking action. Don’t worry, I’ll let you know as soon as we have something concrete.”

“Thanks,” Caitlin said with a small smile.

She felt a pang of disappointment

to show it. She reminded herself to be patient—hopefully, they’d find Ashfall soon.

Not wanting to distract Howard from his lesson, she and Sebastian headed back

Just as they returned to Vanderbilt Manor, Caitlin received a new message

“He says he’s landed in New York”

Caitlin looked up at Sebastian, who gave her a look and tilted his chin.

“Well then,” he said. “Call him. Let’s see if he picks up.”

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Caitlin immediately called the number, but after several rings, no one picked up.

After she hung up and waited a moment, another message came through.

[Caitlin, I’ve caught a bad cold and my throat hurts. I can’t talk right now—let’s just stick to messaging.]

Reading that, Caitlin was nearly certain now—it wasn't Zeke.

He was clearly trying to avoid speaking with her, afraid she'd catch on to the impersonation through his voice.

[Got it. Take care of yourself.]

She kept her reply brief, hiding her suspicion.

Not long after, another message came.

[Caitlin, what time and place did you settle on for the exchange?]

“He's asking about the exchange location and time,” Caitlin told Sebastian.

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“Stall him,” Sebastian said. “We still don't have any solid news from Xero. We can't act without knowing for sure what's going on with Zeke.”

“No,” Caitlin shook her head, eyes sharp. “I think we can turn this whole thing around.”

She understood better than anyone how precious time was. And if Zeke was really still in Zorro’s hands, they’d need leverage to get him back.

The imposter Zeke and Pierrick—that was their leverage.

She quickly outlined her idea to Sebastian. After a brief silence, he nodded. “Alright. If that’s your call, we go with it.”

With their plan aligned, Caitlin messaged back the time and location for the exchange.

Private Estate, **US**

Samir and Pierrick had arrived in New York and taken up residence at Zeke’s private estate in the US

Samir communicated with Caitlin, intentionally keeping contact limited to text supposedly for “security reasons, and to prevent Susperion: He received her reply and turned to Pierrick

She confirmed Bear Mountain foothills, tomorrow morning at 9”

Pierrick let out a cold sneer Perfect Get Shadow Moon Parton's captais ready. We'll lay an ambush Tomorrow, we not only like the codes, we capture them all alive."

"Hah, **that's** exactly what I was unking baru laughed

Just then, a satinats entered. "Vice Leader, all squad captains from Shadow Moon Pavilion have arrived"

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"Good."

Samir followed him into the main hall, where over a dozen squad leaders stood waiting.

"Gentlemen, thank you for coming."

"Vice Leader, we await your orders!"

They all saluted in perfect unison, unaware that the man they were addressing wasn't Zeke, but Samir in disguise.

“Excellent. The exchange will take place at Bear Mountain’s base.”

He pulled up the map Caitlin had sent, projecting it onto the wall for everyone to see.

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“This area has ideal terrain for ambush. I want your teams concealed all around the foothills. Once I have the codex, you’ll spring

into action and surround them.

“Do not let Caitlin, Sebastian, or Zinnia escape. If you can capture them, good. If not, eliminate them on the spot. Clear?”

“Yes, sir!” they shouted in unison.

“Good. Go prepare. This mission must not fail.”

“Yes, sir!”

With only about ten hours left before the exchange, James and Tyler quietly approached Zeke's private estate that evening.

Their goal: scout the area and see if there was any chance to free the hostages ahead of schedule.

They lay hidden in the woods nearby, scanning the grounds.

"Breaking in is going *to* be a problem," Tyler whispered.

Through his night-vision goggles, he saw armed guards stationed all around the estate. The place was locked down tight

Even if they got inside, locating and extracting the hostages would be a massive risk

"Let's not spook them," James murmured. "We go **back** for now."

Tyler nodded, and under cover of night, the two quietly slipped away

The woods fell silent again. But elsewhere, a wave of black-clad figures moved like shadows across the terrain, making their wily Loward Bear Mountain's foothills

Without a sound, they vanished into the surrounding forest, disturbing only a flock of rearing birds as they settled into position,

Morning light broke over the horizon, painting Bear Mountain in hues of gold and crimson. The time was nearly 9 sin

Caitlin had changed into practical athletic clothing and sturdy hiking bouts perfect for the team Everyone was Belly geared and ready Every last detad had been checked and rechecked

Zinnia couldn't help but feel nervous Today's operation would deteriuse whether her family lived or died. No one could predict

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what might happen on the ground.

Before departure, Xavi approached her. "I'm coming with you."

"You should stay. Wait for us to return."

It wasn't that she didn't want him there, but she was worried for his safety. Xavi wasn't like James or Tyler—he wasn't trained for this kind of field work.

“How can I sit back and wait while you're out there risking your life?”

Xavi ended up going straight to Caitlin and Sebastian to plead his case.

“Mr. Vanderbilt, Mrs. Vanderbilt, please let me come!”

Sebastian raised a brow. “Didn't we tell you to stay behind?”

“But I want to help! One more person means one more set of hands.”

Sebastian stared at him in disbelief as Xavi tried to play cute—literally.

With a long sigh, Sebastian muttered, “First Yates, now Xavi. What's with everyone and the puppy eyes?”

Caitlin chuckled. “Xavi, fine. You can come. But I'm putting you in charge of Zinnia's safety. Don't leave her side, no matter what.”

“Yes ma’am! Thank you, Mrs. Vanderbilt! You’re the best!”

Xavi nearly danced as he ran off to join Zinnia.

Sebastian shook his head and gave Caitlin a look. “He’s going to be a walking disaster.”

“He won’t mess things up. Zinnia’s going, and if he stayed behind, he’d just sneak out after us anyway. If he gets hurt, that’s on

him.”

Caitlin glanced at her phone—confirmation had arrived. She climbed into the vehicle and gave the order to depart

At the same time, Samir and Pierrick’s convoy was heading toward Bear Mountain as well, bringing the hostages along.

From different directions, the two sides approached the same target

The stage was set. Now, it was time to see how the exchange would play out.

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The vehicles stopped at the foot of the mountain. Everyone but the drivers got out and began the uphill hike.

Caitlin and her team arrived at the designated location just as Samir and his men showed up from the other side.

With less than a hundred meters between them, both sides could clearly size each other up, noting how many people had come.

Pierrick scanned the group across the clearing and immediately spotted Caitlin, Sebastian, and Zinnia standing at the front.

“They brought a lot of people,” he muttered to Samir.

“Cut the chatter,” Samir replied calmly. “It’s time to negotiate.”

Pierrick nodded, then raised his voice. “We brought the hostages! Did you bring what we asked for?”

Caitlin turned to signal James, who stepped forward holding a secure case.

“The ‘Yun’s Aromatic Codex* is right here,” Caitlin said. “As agreed—hostages for the book. One for one.”

Pierrick raised a new demand. “We need to verify that the “Codex* is authentic before any exchange.”

“Fine,” Caitlin agreed, “but we want to verify the hostages, too.”

At her request, Pierrick ordered his men to bring the captives forward.

Three hooded figures were marched to the front. Once there, their hoods were pulled off, revealing their faces.

Zinnia’s eyes instantly welled up. “Dad! Mom! Leo!”

Her parents and younger brother looked up at her, their mouths stuffed with rags so they couldn’t speak. They struggled against their bonds, muffled cries escaping their throats,

Samir waved a hand, and the guards removed the gags.

“Zinnia...” her mother choked out, voice trembling,

Zinnia’s heart ached at the sound. She was about to rush forward when Xavi held her back just in time. She might have blown the entire exchange in a moment of desperation.

Once the hostages were confirmed, it was time to verify the ‘Codex”

James and Tyler walked it to the center, guns aimed all around them. Similarly, Samir approached with a team and a manuscript expert for the inspection.

Everyone was required to wear gloves for the evaluation. The expert used various instruments and tools deemed the pages.

Finally, he nodded “it’s real”

Samir couldn’t hide the satisfaction in his eyes. He gently turned a few pages and confirmed a manuscript.

At night, he said it was time to make the exchange.

His voice was a little different from Zeke’s, but he was the same. It was a relief just to hear the name.

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Caitlin noticed the change, her suspicions further confirmed: this wasn’t the real Zeke.

As the most dangerous part of the operation began—the actual exchange—Quincy led five men forward to receive the hostages.

Pierrick approached with a few team leaders, bringing the supposed captives.

The two sides now stood face-to-face. Tension rippled through the air. Everyone was on edge. One false move, and all hell would

break loose.

Zinnia clutched Xavi's hand, visibly shaking. He gave her a comforting squeeze.

Caitlin and Sebastian watched intently, sweat beading on their foreheads—not just from the heat, but from the stakes.

They moved at the same time: one group taking the hostages, the other reaching for the codex.

“I'll count to three, then we let go,” Tyler said. Both sides nodded.

“1...2... 3... Release!”

James let go of the codex. Pierrick grabbed it instantly, while their side secured the three hostages.

The trade was done—but it didn't last.

Before Pierrick could even savor his prize, James suddenly lunged forward and kicked the case out of his hands.

The codex flew into the air. Tyler leapt up and caught it mid-flight.

“You bastards!” Pierrick growled. He tried to grab it back, but James blocked him, and the two clashed in a flurry of blows.

Samir gave the order. His men immediately drew their weapons.

Gunfire erupted.

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Quincy and the others had already whisked the hostages away. Bullets thudded into the ground behind them, spraying up dirt and

leaves.

Caitlin's side returned fire, diving behind trees for cover. Chaos exploded across the mountain slope.

“Hold your fire!” Samir suddenly shouted. “Stop! Everyone stand down!”

Reluctantly, both sides ceased shooting. Guns remained raised, but no one fired. Even James and Pierrick broke off the scuffle.

James returned to his team, breathing heavily. Pierrick's face twisted with fury

"You cheated!" he roared "Caitlin! Sebastian That was a dirty trick!"

"You walked right into it. Not our fault you tell for it. Sebastian said coldly.

Then Samir started laughing "Of course we expected you to play dirty That's why we never gece you the stages

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But before she could move, the man pretending to be her father pulled a gun and fired.

"Watch out!"

Xavi saw it coming and tackled Zinnia to the ground. The shot missed her, but she screamed as she saw what happened next.

The fake brother pulled out a knife and stabbed Xavi in the back.

"Xavi!"

Zinnia kicked the attacker away and ran to Xavi's side. Quincy and his team rushed in and subdued all three imposters.

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They tore off their latex masks-beneath them were strangers. Not only were they not Zinnia's family, but one of them wasn't even

a woman.

"They're fakes!" Quincy shouted. "We've been duped!"

Zinnia caught Xavi as he collapsed.

"Xavi, stay with me!"

“I’m okay...” he whispered—but then passed out in her arms.

Zinnia clutched him, her heart breaking. He’d taken a hit meant for her.

The hostages weren’t real. Not only had they failed to save anyone—they now had a man down.

Before panic could fully set in, Caitlin shouted, “Since you’ve shown your true colors, this exchange is over! Fall back, now!”

But Samir only laughed.

“Leave? I don’t think so. You’re surrounded!”

The moment he spoke, dark figures burst from the forest on all sides.

Shadow Moon Pavilion’s assassins swarmed in, quickly surrounding Caitlin and her team.

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Chapter 531

Calin and Sebaston’s group was now completely surrounded by Shadows Moon Pavlink forces

distance between them shrinking by the cront.

Samit, no longer bothering to hide his arrogance, let out a wild laugh.

“Ha! What now? Caitlin, I suggest you hand over the codes immediately, or our bullets might just find their way into your

Sebastian stepped in front of Caitlin protectively, keeping his voice steady

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“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You think you have us surrounded? Look again. The outer perimeter those are my people fois me my die. Les es v

outnumbers who.”

At that moment, vague shadows began to appear around the outer circle, Samir’s men noticed more and more figures closing in from unease spread through their ranks.

But Samir remained defiant. “Even if we fight, you’re not guaranteed to win.”

No one wanted to start a firefight while surrounded—it would lead to mutual destruction.

Caitlin raised her voice. “If you try anything, I’ll destroy “Yun’s Aromatic Codex* right here and now. Your boss will never get his hands on it.”

Her hand rested firmly on the codex case. Samir's smug grin twitched. Zorro had been very clear: the codex must be obtained, intact, no matter what

Still, Samir sneered. "Try that, and every one of you dies."

With a sharp wave of his hand, the assassins closed in further, now just three meters from Caitlin's team.

"I give the word, and you're all dead. This is your last chance."

The tension peaked. One wrong move could trigger catastrophe.

But Caitlin didn't back down. Her gaze swept across the Shadow Moon Pavilion soldiers. Then, she raised her voice again.

"Listen up! Squad leaders, all of you—this man in front of you, claiming to be your deputy leader, he's not who you think he is. He's an imposter!"

Her words struck like a thunderclap. All eyes shifted toward Samir, including those of the squad leaders on his own side.

Samir's heart skipped a beat. He tried to maintain composure. "She's lying! I *am* Zeke, your deputy leader! Everyone, follow my orders!"

Caitlin's voice cut in before anyone could respond.

"You say you're Zeke, but your voice doesn't match. I know Zeke better than anyone—his voice, his face, everything. You might fool them with a disguise, but your voice gave you away.

"You're not Zeke. You're a fraud, using his name to steal the codex."

Doubt spread like wildfire. The soldiers looked between each other and back at Samir, uncertain.

Even Pierrick's brows drew tight. He turned to Samir. "Is this true? You're not our deputy leader? Who *are* you?"

"I—of course I am! Don't believe Caitlin. She's manipulative, deceptive—"

Samir kept trying to bluff his way through, but suspicion, once planted, doesn't fade so easily.

"Oh really? If I'm the liar, then why not just rip off his disguise and prove it?" Caitlin added coolly. "Let's see who's really hiding something."

The attention wa moyo egualele în Samir

Planinarrewed his eyes, seeing something was very wrong. Confident Calton's team wouldn't

"Check him. Setty in advance

Two squad leaders stepped forward and grabbed Samir. He struggled

"You tools! You're failing for her lies! She's trying to divide us! i'am' Zeve.*

But it was too late. One of the men spotted something

"There's something off here... he's wearing a mask"

"Rip it off."

Pierrick looked stunned. The idea that someone could impersonate their deputy leader... who had the guts?

The mask peeled away, revealing a familiar face.

“It’s Samir! Zeke’s assistant!”

“What? Why would he impersonate Zeke?”

“Where’s the real Zeke?”

The revelation sent shockwaves through the ranks. Shadow Moon Pavilion’s people began to murmur, some even panicking,

Meanwhile, Zinnia was helping stop Xavi’s bleeding. They had no choice but to wait until the chaos ended to get him to a hospital.

Pierrick looked thunderstruck. “Samir? You–You pretended to be our deputy leader? What the hell is going on? What did you do to Zeke?”

Samir, cornered, tried desperately to spin it.

“Pierrick, listen to me! This was all part of the plan. The leader himself sent me. This was his order!”

“Then why didn’t he tell us?”

If Zorro had briefed them in advance, there wouldn't be this mess. Pierrick wasn't buying it. His concern shifted to something else entirely.

Where was the real Zeke?

Realizing the situation was slipping out of control, Samir decided to lay everything on the table.

“Fine! You want the truth? Zeke isn't Zorro's son. I am! I'm the real heir. That's why my father sent me to handle this personally!*

The entire mountain fell into stunned silence.

Not a soul believed him.

Caitlin seized the moment.

“Did everyone hear that? A mere assistant, now claiming to be Zorro's heir. First he betrays Zeke, then he lies to all of you. And you still want to obey “him“?”

Pierrick stared at Samir, mind racing.

Samir wasn't done. "If you don't believe me, call the leader! He'll vouch for me!"

Pierrick pulled out his phone to try. But they were in the mountains—no signal.

"Can't reach him. So now what?"

"—I'm really his son! I swear it!"

Fear now fully overtook Samir. His gamble had failed. Pretending to be Zeke had become a noose around his neck.

And then, a calm, familiar voice rang out from the woods behind them.

"If you're his son... then who am I?"

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Chapter 532

The moment Caitlin heard that voice, her heart tightened.

Zeke?!

He finally made it!

Everyone turned instinctively toward the voice. The members of Shadow Moon Pavilion were the first to recognize the approaching figure—it was indeed their deputy leader, Zeke.

Whether or not Zeke was truly Zorro's son didn't matter. As long as Zorro hadn't officially disavowed him, Zeke remained the recognized deputy leader of Shadow Moon Pavilion, appointed personally by Zorro. And to these men, that status still held.

Zeke was back.

Thanks to Alicia's help, he had managed to reach the US. Now, revealing himself at this moment was the perfect counterattack against Samir's treachery.

He looked thinner, more worn, but stood tall and commanding. Every step he took toward them exuded strength and authority.

The first thing he did was issue a decisive order.

“Shadow Moon Pavilion, listen up—drop your weapons!”

That voice. That command. That was their true deputy leader.

“But they haven’t lowered their weapons yet!” Pierrick warned, glancing toward Sebastian’s side.

Sebastian raised his hand, and his people lowered their weapons. Only then did Pierrick and his men follow suit. The tense standoff defused.

Zeke passed by Caitlin and Sebastian without a word, giving them only a brief glance before striding straight toward Pierrick’s camp.

He stopped before Samir, who was being held by two guards. Samir was visibly enraged, struggling against their grip.

“You prisoner! How the hell did *you* escape?!”

Zeke didn’t answer. Instead, he drove a brutal punch into Samir’s face. Blood gushed from Samir’s nose and mouth.

Without hesitation, Zeke followed with a hard kick to Samir’s gut, unleashing a flurry of strikes until Samir crumpled under the blows.

Only then did Zeke remove his blood-stained white gloves, tossing them aside. He turned to address everyone.

“This man attacked me, impersonated me, and almost caused a disaster. He’s a traitor, plain and simple!”

The members of Shadow Moon Pavilion were stunned. One *by one*, they turned on Samir with hatred in their eyes.

“I’m not the traitor—you are! You-” Samir tried to speak but was immediately cut off by Pierrick, who landed a punch square on his jaw.

And then it happened—Pierrick, along with the deputy commanders, began to beat him mercilessly.

To them, Samir was nothing but a power-hungry impostor.

By the time they stopped, Samir was collapsed on the ground, blood dripping from his mouth, unable to even lift his head.

Zeke turned to Sebastian and said, “Due to this betrayal within our ranks, today’s exchange couldn’t proceed as planned. I propose we reschedule.”

Sebastian nodded. "Agreed."

Their eyes met in mutual understanding Zeke tuned to his people again

Clear the way. Let them go."

Immediately, Shadow Moon Pavilion forces stepped aside, forming a path Caitlin, Sebastian, and the others retreated safely, leaving the tree fare hostages behind. Xavi, now stabilized, was carried off with them.

Back in the forest clearing, Zelo remained to deal with the aftermath

To secure his authority, he raised his voice to the gathered members.

"From now on, no one is to act without my direct order. Disobedience, doubt, or slander against my position will be punished without mercy."

"Yes, sir! We obey, Deputy Leader!"

One by one, the members of Shadow Moon Pavilion pledged their loyalty again.

Samir, now lying in a pool of blood, watched Zeke reestablish control. Panic flickered in his eyes. He tried to speak, but only coughed up more blood.

Pierrick stepped forward, concern still lingering. “With the exchange canceled, do we still have a chance to get the codex?”

Zeke gave a slight smile. “Why wouldn’t we? We still have the real hostages, don’t we?”

“Yes. Good thing we used decoys today, or we would’ve been completely outplayed.”

Pierrick was proud of their foresight. He didn’t notice the flash of coldness in Zeke’s gaze.

“You’ve done well. When we return, I’ll inform my father—you’ve earned great merit.”

“Thank you for your kind words.”

Zeke added casually, “But until we have the codex, don’t contact my father. He’s busy negotiating with the royal family. No need to bother him until

succeed.”

“Understood.”

With that, Pierrick barked orders. “Take the traitor with us for punishment.”

“Yes, sir!”

The group gathered up the three fake hostages and the barely conscious Samir, then marched out of Bear Mountain. Zeke followed.

At the foot of the mountain.

Caitlin, Sebastian, and the others had already returned to their vehicles. Sebastian immediately arranged for Xavi to be rushed to the hospital, with Zinnia by his side.

The rest of them climbed into the convoy and headed back to the city.

On the road, Sebastian gently took Caitlin’s hand “That was close. Thankfully, Xavi only took a minor hit.”

“All thanks to Zeke, arriving just in time.”

“You predicted he’d come, didn’t you?”

“I did. He sent me another message right before we left—he said he’d landed.”

Chapter 532.

That message was the final push Caitlin needed to go through with the exchange. Everything Zeke had done **had** not been it aid

Once back in the city, Caitlin and Sebastian went straight to the hospital.

Outside the emergency room. Zinnia waited anxiously, clearly distressed,

“How’s he doing?” Caitlin asked gently.

“The doctors are still treating his wounds. We have to wait a bit longer,” Zinnia replied, guilt weighing on her. “If I’d been more alert, this never would e happened.”

“Don’t blame yourself. You’re safe, and that’s what matters. Xavi did what he did because he wanted to. Just take care of him when he wakes **up**

“I will.”

Soon, the doctor emerged from the emergency room, and they rushed over.

“The wound was deep and reached the lung, but we’ve stabilized it. He’ll need rest and monitoring.”

“Thank you, doctor. Thank you so much.”

Not long after, Xavi was wheeled into a recovery room. Zinnia stayed with him. Caitlin and Sebastian left to take care of other urgent matters.

At Zeke’s private estate.

Upon returning, Zeke’s first order was to have Samir locked up.

Samir had never imagined his ambitions would end so abruptly. His rise hadn’t even begun before it crumbled.

He and Zeke had completely switched places. Now it was he who was chained and thrown behind bars.

He refused to accept this. Struggling against his restraints, he shouted after Pierrick.

“You’re all being fooled! Zeke is the real traitor! He’s conspiring with Caitlin and Sebastian! He framed our leader! Zorro saw through him long ago!”

Pierrick stopped, frowning. “Why should I believe you?”

“Call the leader! Talk to him yourself! He’ll tell you everything I said is true!”

Samir was desperate. If someone would just call Zorro, the truth would finally come out...

AD

Comment

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Just as Pierrick hesitated with growing suspicion, Zeke strode in from outside.

“Don’t let him twist your mind. This man is nothing but an arrogant, power hungry traitor who plotted against me in secret. I truly aged him. Believe his lies, and you’ll only fall into his trap!”

Zeke’s words cleared away the last of Pierrick’s doubts. There was no way he could trust someone who had impersonated the deputy leader

“I understand. You deal with him however you see fit.”

With that, Pierrick turned and walked out, leaving Zeke standing before Samir.

Samir glared up at him with hatred. “Zeke! You know what’ll happen if you harm me! Do you think you can bear the consequences? it he won’t let you live!”

“You keep calling Zorro your father, but has he ever acknowledged you publicly? Who can even prove you’re his son?”

Zeke crouched down and lightly slapped Samir’s face a few times.

If anyone was to blame, it was Zorro himself. He thought hiding Samir’s identity would protect him. But now, who would believe a word Samir said?

Zeke had long since won the loyalty of Shadow Moon Pavilion’s forces. That was the result of everything he had done at the Greystone estate.

Zorro had publicly appointed him as the new leader of Shadow Moon Pavilion. Zeke had seized real power.

And Samir? He would always be nothing more than a secret bastard son, hidden away in the dark.

“Zeke! You traitor! You’ve betrayed my father!” Samir roared.

Zeke responded with a sharp slap to his face. “Shut up. Don’t you dare call him your father. You’re not worthy.”

Zeke stood up and called for his men. “Take him away.”

His subordinates stepped forward, taped Samir’s mouth shut, threw a black hood over his head, and dragged him out of the room.

It was a full thirty minutes before Samir saw light again.

The hood was yanked off, revealing a dimly lit underground space. It looked like a lab—but also a dungeon. Strange equipment and surgical instruments lined the walls. It was eerie, chilling.

Samir immediately recognized where he was. He'd followed Zeke for years—he knew this place well.

Terror flooded his body. He tried to get up but was bound like a mummy, unable to move.

“Mmmph-!”

He tried to scream, but only muffled sounds came out.

The door creaked open. Leather shoes tapped on the floor as several men in white lab coats entered. Zeke followed behind them.

Samir strained his neck to look. When he saw the men holding a bone saw, his entire body went cold.

Zeke sat down on a leather chair, motioning for Samir to be strapped to a chair as well. One of the men tore the tape off his mouth.

The two faced each other.

“Do you know why I brought you here?” Zeke asked.

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Samir didn't reply. He only struggled harder, but the guards pushed him down.

"This used to be Zorro's private lab. He had me build it for one purpose to run an organ trafficking ring on the dark web. Do you know how much day money he made with this place?"

Samir shook his head violently, his eyes wide with fear.

"I used to be his tool. Did a lot of evil things for him. But I've decided to walk away from all that still... I owe him one last gift. Think of it as my farewell present to Zorro."

The sweat on Samir's forehead turned ice cold.

Was Zeke planning to use him as that gift?

When he saw the men in white coats approach, he lost control. Fear surged through him like an electric shock.

"No! Zeke... no-Deputy Leader, I was wrong! I admit it! I shouldn't have fought *you* for recognition. I don't want anything now, just please, please let me go!"

“Afraid now? Too late.”

Zeke stood as the guards lifted Samir and slammed him onto the steel table. Both his arms were pinned down.

Zeke walked to the wall and took down a long machete. He checked its edge, then stepped toward Samir.

“No, no, no—please don’t!”

Samir lost it. He wet himself in pure terror, screaming until his voice cracked. He knew how ruthless Zeke could be. But he’d never imagined he’d be on the receiving end of it.

“This is the price of betrayal.”

Zeke raised the machete. With a heavy swing, it crashed down.

Bang!

Samir let out a guttural scream of pain—but then realized... his arms were still intact. The blade had landed next to his elbow, sinking deep into the steel table but not touching him.

The terror alone was enough to break him.

Zeke adjusted his collar, muttering, “You know why I didn’t cut you? Because trash *like you* isn’t worth dirtying my hands.”

To him, Samir wasn’t even a human being. Just a filthy, useless pawn.

Without another word, Zeke stepped back.

“Lock him up. I might still need him later.”

“Yes, sir.”

His men dragged Samir off the table and threw him into a caged holding cell inside the lab.

Zeke had only meant to scare him. He spared his life for a reason—Samir was still a useful bargaining chip, especially if things with Zorro went south. If Zorro ever discovered Zeke’s escape, Alicia could be in danger. Samir might prove useful in that scenario.

Zorro wouldn’t abandon his own son.

Chapter 533

The hostage exchange may have failed, but Zeke's return had completely shifted the tides. His safe arrival alone gave them a massive **advantage**

After returning to the Vanderbilt estate, Caitlin called Ximena and filled her in on everything that had happened.

When Ximena learned that Zeke had survived and made it back safely, she was overwhelmed with gratitude.

"Caitlin, thank you. Thank you so much. As long as Zeke is okay, I can breathe again."

"No need to thank me. But there's still one threat we haven't eliminated—Pierrick. Until he's dealt with, none of us can relax. Let's wait for news."

After ending the call, Caitlin summoned Tyler.

She gave him instructions. He nodded, received his orders, and quickly left the Vanderbilt estate.

Just as Caitlin sat down for a moment and barely took a sip of tea, she spotted Federico rushing in from outside.

“Trinity! Good news! We found Ashfall!”

“You did? Where is he?!”

Caitlin shot up from her seat, heart racing.

If Ashfall had been found, her mother couldn't be far behind.

AD

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Chapter 534

“Don't rush. Let me explain everything,” Federico said as he sat down beside Caillin.

“Ever since we put out the raising person notice, the studio has been flooded with calls from fans and well-meaning strangers from all over. Many of them claimed to have seen someone matching Ashfall's description. After careful vetting by the team, we were finally able to narrow it down I double checked it myself—there's no doubt. It's him.”

“That’s amazing! Finally, some real progress!”

Caitlin’s eyes lit up with excitement as she smiled, visibly relieved. Federico handed her a few photos that had been sent in by a tipster.

“This is what Ashfall looks like now. He’s somewhere around the Rocky Mountains, making a living by painting in the streets.”

In the photos, a rugged-looking man with disheveled hair and a weathered face—yet with a distinct artistic aura—was shown sketching on a cartas by the roadside. A small crowd of tourists and locals watched him work.

“Can you reach him? Or at least the person who sent the tip?”

Caitlin asked eagerly as she handed Federico back the phone,

“I already had the studio get in touch with the source. They just sent me the phone number.”

The message arrived right as Federico finished speaking. He checked the number and said, “Got it. Let me call and ask.”

He dialed the number, but after a short conversation, he hit a snag.

“Trinity, you talk to them.”

“Alright. Give me the phone.”

Caitlin took over the call and spoke to the person directly. After a bit of conversation, the tipster agreed to help her locate Ashfall.

Ten minutes later, the phone rang again. This time, it was Ashfall himself.

“Ashfall! It’s me, Federico!”

“Hey, old friend!”

The two greeted each other warmly. Federico quickly steered the conversation to the reason for his call.

“Do you remember a painting *you* once made called *Despair*? You created it in Country A, right?”

Ashfall paused, trying to recall. “Yeah, I think I remember that one. Why are you asking about it?”

“I’m helping a friend. She needs to know if you remember where the woman in that painting was being held.”

Federico had the phone on speaker. Caitlin listened closely, holding her breath. They all waited in silence for Ashfall’s response.

In the background, they could hear the wind howling through the mountains. If they weren’t listening carefully, his voice would’ve been lost in the noise.

“Hmm... I’m not sure. It’s kind of a blur.”

Ashfall had traveled through so many places over the years—it wasn’t surprising that he couldn’t recall every location.

Caitlin’s expression dimmed with disappointment. Federico noticed and quickly followed up.

“I get it—it’s been a long time. But please, try to remember. It’s really important. The woman you painted could be my friend’s mother. We need **your**

help

Ashfall fell quiet for a moment, then replied, "I might not remember exactly where it was... but if I retrace my steps, I'll find it Fire

Federico's eyes lit up. "You're saying if we bring you back to Country A, you can lead us to that place?"

"Exactly."

It wasn't a perfect answer, but it was the first real hope they'd had in a long time.

"Perfect. Please, I'm begging you—do this for me."

Ashfall agreed, and Federico thanked him profusely. "Stay where you are. I'll send someone to get you. Please don't go wandering off"

After ending the call, Federico turned to Caitlin. "All we need now is to bring him back."

"I'll take care of it. But we'll need someone reliable for the job."

She called for James. When he arrived and heard they had contacted Ashfall, his face lit up.

“I’ll go. I’ll take a team and bring him back as fast as possible.”

“Good. I trust you. Take as many capable people as you need, and catch the earliest flight.”

“Got it.”

Federico handed him the contact info and location. James packed quickly and prepared to leave.

Sebastian, after getting updated, assigned King and others to accompany James on the retrieval mission.

Two hours later, they successfully boarded the earliest flight out.

Once they left, Sebastian sat with Caitlin and briefed her on the latest developments in Country S.

“The international coalition has been pressuring the S Kingdom. Given the lack of conclusive evidence against Greystone, the royal family had no choice but to withdraw their troops. The standoff is officially over.”

Caitlin let out a long sigh. “Zorro’s a master tactician. This round ends in a draw. I just worry what he’ll do once he regroup.”

“No need to worry. Whatever comes next, we’ll be ready.”

“Did you get through *to* Xero? Zeke’s back—we need to make sure Xero doesn’t go *to* Greystone and walk into a trap.”

“I tried, but couldn’t get through. I’ll try again later.”

They both kept their eyes on the shifting political landscape. With the Greystone conflict defused, the royal family and Zorro signed an agreement.

Greystone pledged loyalty to the monarchy, but in exchange, the royal family agreed not to interfere in its internal affairs. In effect, Zorro had carved out a semi-autonomous region for himself.

Zorro soon held a public announcement: Greystone was now an official independent state under the S Kingdom, with internal governance entirely in his

hands.

After a formal audience with the king, Zorro returned to Greystone, only to be hit with a bombshell.

“My lord! Bad news! The deputy leader is missing!”

Zorro's expression darkened. "What?! Wasn't he locked *in* the chamber?"

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"He's gone. During our rounds, we found the two guards locked inside. The deputy leader has vanished,"

Zorro slammed a fist onto the table. "How could this happen? Bring those two guards here now!"

Soon after, the two dazed, neatly unconscious guards were dragged into the room.

Once they saw Zorro, they spilled everything: Alicia had helped Zeke escape,

Zorro listened, then erupted in rage. He drew his blade and cleaved a wooden chair in half.

"That damn girl! She pulled a bait-and-switch right under my nose!"

The timeline added up. Alicia had rescued Zeke two days ago—and he'd been completely unaware.

Zeke could not be allowed to escape the country alive. The consequences would be catastrophic.

“Men! Find Alicia immediately! Track Zeke down! If she refuses to talk, bring her back. I’ll deal with her myself!”

“Yes, sir!”

AD

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Inside the Graystone military base, Xero, in disguise, arrived pretending to be an old classmate seeking out Alicia.

When Alicia saw him, she was visibly surprised.

“Xero? What are you doing here?”

“Now that the border blockade around Graystone has been lifted, even common folks like me can apply for entry, I figured I’d drop by and see how you were doing.”

“The young master of the O’Malley family playing the role of a commoner? Come on, spill it. Why are you really here?”

Alicia knew full well that the O’Malley family and the Gonzales family belonged to rival factions. The two rarely interacted. If Xero had all this way to see her, it had to be serious.

“I’m looking for someone.”

Xero knew Alicia. She might be tough on the outside, but she had a good heart. She wouldn’t turn her back on an old classmate, no matter their political

ties.

“Who is it? Are you moonlighting as an intelligence agent now?” Alicia teased.

“I’m serious.”

He leaned in and lowered his voice.

“Do you know Zeke? The one from Graystone Castle? What’s happened to him?”

Due to the time difference, Sebastian still hadn't been able to reach Xero, so he had no idea that Zeke had already made it to the US. This was his on? shot at learning the truth.

"What, you and Zeke close now?"

"Not exactly. But our boss is."

"Your boss?"

"Sebastian. You've heard of him, right?"

"Of course I have. I should be thanking him—he snagged my biggest rival in love, Caitlin. If I ever meet him in person, I'll be sure to give him a big thank- you." Alicia grinned.

"So, since you know who he is, could you tell me what's happened to Zeke?"

Alicia was just about to explain when one of her officers rushed over and whispered something in her ear. Her expression immediately darkened.

A bad feeling settled in her chest. She could guess what was coming.

She turned to Xero quickly.

“Zeke’s safe. I helped him escape. By now, he’s probably already reached the US. You can check with your boss to confirm.”

“Got it. Thanks. I need to get going.”

As Xero turned to leave, Alicia called after him.

“Hey, Xero! Wait!”

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Chapter 535

“**What** is it?”

“If you’re going to the US and you see Zeke... could you give him this?”

She handed him a small, elegant pocket watch. Xero nodded.

“Sure. I’ll make sure it gets to him.”

“Thanks. Now hurry, get out of here!”

Xero left the military district in a rush.

Moments after his departure, Alicia was already bracing herself. She hadn’t even made it out of the base when soldiers burst out with weapons raised, aiming directly at her.

“What do you think you’re doing, pointing guns at me?!”

Alicia crossed her arms, staring them down.

“Alicia, under orders from the Count, you’re under arrest!” the officer in charge announced.

“On what grounds? What law did I break?”

She didn't flinch, but in her heart, she was already strategizing.

She knew Zorro would lose his mind once he found out the truth. And he definitely wouldn't let her walk away unpunished.

She had a chance to flee—but if she ran now, her family would become targets. She couldn't risk it.

“You helped a high-profile suspect escape. *You'll* answer directly to the Count. Take her!”

The officer gave the order. His men rushed forward and pinned Alicia down, escorting her out through the base gates.

Not far off, Xero had just reached the main road. He called Sebastian to confirm Alicia's story.

He finally got through.

Once Zeke's situation was confirmed, Xero started the engine, ready to leave—but then, in his rearview mirror, he noticed something wrong.

A *convoy* of military vehicles was heading toward Graystone Castle—and Alicia was inside one of them, under guard.

Instinct kicked in. *Xero* turned the car around and began to tail them from a safe distance.

The convoy was en route to Graystone Castle and needed to cross *the* Yorse River—the largest body of water on that path.

The bridge was massive. The waters beneath, fast and roaring.

Xero didn't have clearance to enter the city limits, so he stopped at the checkpoint just before the bridge, watching from afar as the convoy drove onto the structure.

He was trying to piece it all together. Had Zorro discovered Alicia's betrayal and ordered her arrest? Was she now being hauled back to the castle *for* punishment?

He considered reaching out to the Gonzales family—maybe they could help.

Just then, an explosion ripped through the air.

Xero's head snapped up.

The bridge had been bombed.

Flames and smoke erupted in the middle of the span. The convoy Alicia was in was caught right in the center of it.

Three military vehicles plummeted into the river below, engulfed in fire and black smoke.

Xero was frozen for a second, then bolted out of his car, sprinting to the riverside.

He'd seen it happen with his own eyes—and there was nothing he could do.

What had caused the explosion?

Alicia had been inside one of those vehicles.

Now, that vehicle had vanished into the river's depths, only a few scorched pieces floating on the surface.

The guards at the bridge checkpoint immediately called for backup and reported the incident to command.

Zorro received the news soon after. His fury boiled over.

He ordered an immediate rescue mission.

When emergency teams arrived, salvage operations began.

Xero stayed put, unwilling *to* leave, clinging to a sliver of hope that Alicia might still be alive.

Hours passed. They recovered the wreckage, and a few bodies—but Alicia and several officers were still missing.

The search widened downstream.

But as time ticked by, the chances of survival grew slimmer and slimmer.

Maybe Alicia was already gone.

Still, unless a body was found, no one could say for certain.

Xero remained at the scene, anxiously watching the recovery efforts. He updated Sebastian as events unfolded.

Sebastian and Caitlin were both shaken when they got the news.

“Alicia was in the explosion?”

“Yes. Xero saw it happen himself. It’s been hours now and there’s still no sign of her. The chance of survival is extremely low.”

They already knew Zeke owed his life to Alicia’s rescue. And now that Zeke’s escape had been discovered, Alicia had become the inevitable target.

And just like that—disaster had struck.

“How could this happen?” Caitlin asked, stunned. “A/military convoy blown up on a bridge? Could it have been an ambush?”

“That seems likely,” Sebastian said. “But with Alicia still missing, the situation is fragile. The question is... do we tell Zeke?”

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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Chapter 536

Absolutely not!”

Caitlin’s response was instant and firm.

“Knowing Zeke, he’d probably fly straight back to Graystone the moment he finds out. And if that happens, he’ll fall right into Zorra’s hands. If we know exactly what happened, we can’t rule out the possibility that this was orchestrated by Zorro himself”

“Because whether Alicia is alive or dead, she could be used as leverage against him.”

Caitlin knew Zeke too well. Alicia had risked everything to save him. He owed her more than he could ever repay. There was no way he would stand by if she were in danger.

If he rushed back now, the consequences would be devastating.

“Then we wait. We hold off until the rescue operation brings news.”

“Exactly.”

Caitlin and Sebastian had come to an agreement—until they had concrete information about Alicia’s situation, they would keep the truth from Zeka

Private estate.

Zeke used the number Alicia had given him and sent her a message, letting her know he was safe and well.

He waited a long time, but *no* reply came. Restless, he tried calling. But the only thing he got was an automated message: “The number you dialed cannot be reached.”

Unable to get through, Zeke’s mind began to race with uneasy thoughts. Still, he forced himself to stay optimistic.

Maybe she’s in surgery... maybe her phone’s just off.

While he pondered this, a subordinate rushed in.

“Zeke, Pierrick just left the house!”

Zeke’s expression hardened.

“Did he say where he was going?”

“No.”

“Got it.”

A bad feeling crept in. Zeke grabbed his keys and walked out the door.

Night had fallen. The city glittered with lights.

Across town, Ximena stood silently at her floor-to-ceiling window, watching the skyline.

She'd spent the last few days cleaning up her daughter's mess, attending charity events, trying to salvage XEG's public image. At least the scandal with

Zora had finally died down.

Now, her heart ached for her son.

How much longer would she have to wait before beating him call her “Mom“?

Footsteps approached behind her. She assumed it was her assistant, but something felt.. off

She turned and froze.

From the shadows stepped a figure cloaked in menace. The sensation was like the grim reaper reaching for her throat.

“Long time no see, Ms. Harris.”

That voice—like a demon’s whisper. Ximena forced herself to stay calm.

“Of course it’s you. What do you want?”

Pierrick’s cold gaze pierced through her.

“You know why I’m here. Betrayal comes with consequences. You defied the leader’s orders and sided with Caitlin. Opposing the leader comes at a price –and that price is due today.”

Zorro had sent Pierrick to eliminate her. In Zorro’s eyes, Ximena was a pawn that had outlived her usefulness. She wasn’t meant to leave this room alive.

After the initial terror passed, Ximena managed to compose herself.

She gave a soft, bitter chuckle.

“Pierrick, do you really believe you’re fighting for the right cause? You think Zorro is someone worth following? If you were in my shoes, you would’ve betrayed him too.”

“I would never betray the leader.”

His voice was full of conviction.

“And what has he given you in return? The title of mentor? You do realize he’s using you to fulfill his own ambitions, don’t you? Once you’re no longer useful, you’ll end up just *like me*.”

“Save your breath. You won’t twist my mind. I’m here to *do* one thing—end yours.”

Pierrick pulled out his weapon and aimed it directly at her.

Ximena, having made peace with death, didn’t even flinch.

“Then at least grant me one last request. Let me drink one last cup of my own tea.”

She glanced toward the tea set.

“The water’s nearly boiling. Just a few minutes. Humor a dying woman’s final wish.”

Pierrick didn’t answer. But when he didn’t stop her, she took it as consent.

“Thank you. I’ll take that as a yes.”

Ximena calmly walked over to the tea table and began preparing the brew. She moved with grace and precision, performing every step of the tea ceremony as if it were a ritual.

When the tea was ready, she poured two cups. She placed one across from *her*.

“Care for a taste?”

“No.”

She smiled faintly and lifted her own up, sipping the warm tea in silence.

When she was done, she set it down and closed her eyes.

I'm ready. Go ahead.

She had already written her will, dividing her estate between her children. She had no real regrets except one.

She never got to hear her son call her "Mom."

But isn't that life? A little regret makes it whole.

Ximena sat still, awaiting the end, Pierrick raised his weapon and aimed between her brows.

Bang!

Just as he pulled the trigger, another figure burst through the door and tackled him.

The bullet missed its mark, striking Ximena in the shoulder instead of her head.

Both men hit the ground hard. The attacker—Tyler—swiftly kicked Pierrick's gun out of reach. They scrambled to their feet and began fighting inside the

office.

Ximena lay slumped on the couch, blood seeping from her wound, her vision blurring as the pain overwhelmed her.

The room filled with the sound of fists colliding, glass shattering, furniture breaking.

Pierrick rolled, grabbed his weapon again, and turned it on Tyler. Tyler ducked behind a cabinet, returning fire with his own gun.

The two exchanged rounds for several tense minutes until both were out of bullets.

Realizing this fight wouldn't end in his favor, Pierrick spotted an opening and bolted from the office.

What he didn't expect—what he couldn't have imagined—was the figure waiting outside.

Bang!

A bullet slammed into Pierrick's abdomen.

He staggered, shocked, and looked up.

Zeke stood in the hallway, gun raised.”

“Zeke... you...”

Why?

They were supposed to be on the same side.

*Bang. Bang. Bang.”

Zeke didn't hesitate.

Pierrick collapsed to the floor, twitching, his blood pooling beneath him.

Zeke approached, eyes icy, towering over the dying man.

Pierrick's lips trembled. Blood spilled from his mouth.

Zake looked down at him

"You're right. I'm not Zorro's son Samir is. Take that little secret to the grave!

Bang!

A final shot. Right between the eyes.

Tyler ran over.

"Zeke, I've got things under control here. You need to check on Ximena—she might not make it!"

Zeke's heart sank.

He turned and sprinted into the office.

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Chapter 537

The office was a wreck.

Ximena lay unconscious on the sofa, her pale blouse soaked in blood from the wound on her shoulder.

Zeke's chest clenched at the sight—an intense wave of pain crashing into him like a punch to the heart.

That word, long buried in his throat, trembled on the edge of release. His eyes burned.

“Mom...”

It was a broken, choked whisper—one that came too late.

“Mom! Wake up... Please wake up!”

But Ximena didn't stir. The blood loss had driven her into deep shock. No matter how desperately Zeke called out, she didn't respond.

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He checked her pulse and heartbeat—thankfully, both were still there. Without wasting another second, Zeke scooped her up in his arms and rushed out the door.

Time was the enemy now.

He raced through the streets like a madman, pushing his car to its limit, heart pounding with guilt and dread. He should've found her sooner. Should've told her the truth. Should've called her "Mom" long ago.

Now he feared it might be too late.

By the time he burst through the hospital doors, carrying her bloodied body, he was near hysteria.

"Doctor! Someone help me! Help her, please!"

Nurses rushed forward with a stretcher, carefully taking Ximena from his arms. Emergency staff were already preparing the OR as Zeke grabbed the nearest doctor by the collar, his voice raw.

"You have to save her... Please, she's my mother..."

The doctor recognized him.

“Don’t worry, Zeke. We’ll do everything we can.”

Ximena was quickly wheeled into the operating room, Zeke was left outside, trembling with helplessness, hands still covered in her blood.

Meanwhile, Tyler had already informed Caitlin of what happened.

Just as Caitlin had suspected, Pierrick’s secondary mission in the US had been to assassinate Ximena. It was precisely why she had stationed Tyler near XEG in the first place—to intercept him.

If not for Tyler’s intervention, Ximena might’ve been shot in the head and lost before she even reached the hospital.

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The Vanderbilt estate had already settled into sleep, but Sebastian, upon receiving the call, got dressed to head to the hospital.

Caitlin stirred as soon as he moved.

“What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Pierrick made his move. Ximena’s seriously injured—Zeke took her to the hospital.”

Caitlin threw off the covers.

“Let’s go.”

They rushed to the hospital in the dead of night.

Outside the ER, they found Zeke sitting motionless on a bench, his clothes and hands stained with blood. His eyes were hollow, his face stricken with grief.

“Zeke!” Caitlin called.

Only then did he look up, as if just remembering the world around him. He blinked back the sting in his eyes and stood.

“You came...”

“We heard what happened. How is she?”

“Still in surgery.”

Zeke struggled to keep his voice steady.

“Hang in there,” Caitlin said gently. “She’s going to pull through,”

Just then, a nurse rushed past them carrying a unit of blood. Zeke stepped forward and stopped her.

“How is she?”

“She’s in hypovolemic shock. We’re doing everything we can.”

And then the nurse disappeared behind the doors.

None of them could see what was happening inside, but they could imagine it—the frantic work of pulling someone back from the brink of death. Blood transfusions. Bullet extraction. Every second was a battle against time.

Zeke clenched his fists.

“I’m a terrible son... I was so selfish. If she dies like this... I’ll never forgive myself.”

Caitlin and Sebastian exchanged a look, both deeply moved.

Sebastian put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“You can’t think like that. Trust the doctors. Trust your mother.”

“That’s right. Let’s wait a little longer. We’ll get good news.”

Time dragged by. Minutes blurred into hours.

Finally, the ER doors opened and the lead surgeon emerged, removing his mask.

“Doctor!”

“How is my mother?”

Zeke and the others hurried to him.

“She made it,” the doctor said with a tired smile. “We were able to stabilize her. Her vitals are good. She’s going to be okay.”

Relief crashed into Zeke like a tidal wave. His knees almost buckled.

“Thank you... Thank you, doctor. Thank you so much.”

“It’s our job. Get some rest—you all look like you need it.”

Half an hour later, nurses rolled Ximena out of the ER. Zeke rushed to her side.

Seeing her pale face, tears welled in his eyes again. He barely managed to keep himself from breaking down.

They got her settled into a recovery room. Zeke turned to Caitlin and Sebastian.

“Thank you both for staying. It’s getting late—please go rest. I’ll stay here.”

Caitlin nodded.

“You should wash up too.”

“I will. My team’s bringing me fresh clothes. Once they’re here, I’ll clean up.”

With that, Caitlin and Sebastian left, trusting Zeke to keep watch.

But Zeke didn’t go anywhere. He changed quickly, then sat by his mother’s bedside, refusing to leave her side.

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The next morning, Ximena’s assistant arrived with a lawyer and a folder in hand.

“Mr. Preston,” the lawyer said, “this is something Ms. Harris asked me to deliver to you if anything ever happened to her.”

Zeke took the envelope hesitantly. Inside were several documents—and a letter.

The documents were legal. A signed will. Ximena had split her assets into two equal parts: one for Zora, and one for Zeke.

Zeke’s chest tightened as he read. His mother had prepared for death. She had arranged everything.

He opened the letter.

It was written in **Ximena’s** own hand, addressed to him, not as a business partner, not as a stranger—but as her son.

She wrote of her regrets, her love, her hopes for him. She apologized for the years apart. For all the birthdays she missed. For not being there when he needed her most.

And most of all, she wrote about how much she loved him.

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Zeke's tears fell freely now. Silent and unstoppable.

She loved him. Fiercely. Unconditionally. Always.

And in that moment, Zeke finally understood:

He had never been alone.

He had a mother who loved him more than life itself.

Zeke stood at the window, reading the letter over and over, holding it like something sacred.

Behind him, a soft voice broke the silence.

"Ma'am... you're awake?"

Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

Chapter 538

Zeke turned immediately at the sound of the voice and rushed to the bedside.

Ximena slowly came to, her eyelids fluttering open. As her consciousness returned, she realized she was lying in a hospital room. She was still alive—but the moment she shifted slightly, a sharp pain radiated from her shoulder.

Her blurred vision gradually cleared, and several faces came into view: her assistant, the corporate legal advisor, and...

“Ximena’s awake!”

“Mom! You’re awake!”

When she saw that her son Zeke was there too, she instinctively tried to sit up in shock—but the pain quickly knocked her back down.

“Ah...”

Seeing her try to move, Zeke immediately leaned over to steady her. “Don’t move. You’re injured. Just lie down and rest.”

“Zeke...”

She thought she had heard him call her “Mom.” She couldn’t believe it—had she imagined it?

“I thought... thought I’d never see you again...”

“You will. You’re safe now, Mom.”

Zeke gently held her hand. Feeling his warmth, and hearing him call her “Mom” again, Ximena could no longer hold back her emotions. Her lips trembled as tears streamed down her face.

Her assistant and the lawyer quietly stepped out of the room, giving them space.

“You finally acknowledged me, Zeke... my son!”

Ximena had already made peace with dying full of regrets. And yet, against all odds, not only had she survived—she had reunited

with her son.

She was beyond overjoyed.

“Mom, I’m sorry. I should’ve come to *you* sooner. I should’ve never waited this long...”

Mother and son both wept openly, overwhelmed with emotion. Ximena had waited so long for this moment.

God had finally shown her mercy—allowing her to reunite with her son in this lifetime.

After reconnecting, the bond between them grew immediately closer. Zeke gently wiped her tears and reassured her, “It’s all behind us now. We’ll have so many more moments together. Everything we missed out on before—we’ll make up for it. I’ll take good care of you from now on.”

Ximena nodded through her tears, a joyful smile forming on her lips.

Zeke then retrieved the envelope containing the will and placed it by her pillow. “Mom, you should take this back. XEG still needs you at the helm. I’ve got other things I need to take care of. I still owe Father justice.”

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“Whether or not you can avenge your father doesn’t matter as much to me anymore. What matters is that you stay safe.”

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To Ximena, her son’s safety meant more than any vengeance. If getting revenge meant risking Zeke’s life, then no amount of justice

was worth it.

“I understand. Let’s talk about it later. Right now, what’s most important is for you to recover.”

Zeke respected her concern, but his mind was already made up. Taking down Zorro was a shared goal between him, Caitlin, and

the others.

After hearing that Ximena had regained consciousness, Caitlin brought her daughter Patricia to visit the hospital.

“Grandma!”

Patricia ran in clutching a bouquet of flowers. When she heard that her grandmother was sick, she insisted on coming along.

“Patricia!”

Ximena’s face lit up at the sound of her granddaughter’s voice. She looked toward the doorway where the little girl ran in, followed by Caitlin.

“Caitlin!”

Zeke rose to greet them both.

“Where does it hurt, Grandma?” Patricia asked sweetly, standing on tiptoe to peek at her in the bed.

“Nowhere hurts anymore. Seeing you has made me feel all better.”

Ximena gently touched Patricia’s hand and then looked up at Caitlin. “You came.”

She looked as though she couldn’t wait to share her joy, eager to tell Caitlin that she and Zeke had finally reconciled.

“Ximena, surviving something like this—there’s always a blessing waiting on the other side.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“You may be hurt, but finding your son again makes it all worth it, don’t you think?” Caitlin smiled.

“Absolutely. For Zeke, I’d go through it all again.”

Ximena was in good spirits. Reuniting with her son fulfilled a lifelong wish. Remembering the promise she made, she called Caitlin

over,

“Caitlin, come here for a second.”

Caitlin walked up to the bed as **Ximena** reached beneath her pillow and pulled out a document envelope.

“This is a gift for you.”

“A gift for me?”

“Yes. Open it and take a look.”

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Curious, Caitlin took the envelope, pulled out the contents, and her expression shifted to surprise.

“These are... the deed and transfer papers for the Thompson Residence?”

“That’s right. I’ve already signed them. This is the gift I promised you. Actually, it’s not really a gift—it’s more like returning it to its rightful owner.”

It hit Caitlin then—Ximena had once said that if she ever reunited with her son, she’d give Caitlin a gift to show her gratitude. But never had Caitlin imagined the gift would be her grandfather’s former estate.

“Ximena, this is far too generous. You could’ve just sold it to me at a discount.”

She was truly touched that Ximena would be willing to give her an entire estate.

“No, Caitlin. Please accept it. A house means nothing compared to my son. This is my heartfelt thanks. Don’t turn it down.”

Zeke added, “Caitlin, take it. And don’t worry—my mom’s not going to be living there anymore. She’ll be staying with me from now

on.”

Caitlin could no longer refuse. Deeply moved, she nodded. “Alright, then. I’ll accept this gift. Thank you, Ximena. Truly.”

Once Ximena fell asleep, Caitlin took Patricia home. Zeke walked them to the door.

“Zeke...”

Caitlin glanced at him, tempted to bring up the situation with Alicia in S Nation—but stopped herself.

This wasn't the right time. He had just reunited with his mother, and she didn't want to spoil the fragile joy of their reunion. Best to wait until there was news from the river search.

"What is it, Caitlin? Is there something you wanted to say?"

"It's nothing. I was just going to ask about the hostages."

Caitlin smoothly changed the subject.

Zeke replied, "Don't worry. Pierrick's been dealt with. The hostages are safe. I'll arrange for their transport soon."

"Good. Keep me updated. For now, just stay with Ximena."

Caitlin and Patricia returned to The Vanderbilt Family, and though Zeke wanted to stay quietly by his mother's side, peace was short-lived.

The warrant Zorro had issued for Zeke's arrest had been circulated through Shadow Moon Pavilion's internal channels and had reached their operatives in the US.

A loyal aide rushed to inform Zeke immediately.

After making sure the hospital was secure, Zeke left for the private estate to handle the matter himself.

As his vehicle pulled into the estate, Zeke stepped out of the car—only to find himself instantly surrounded by several deputy commanders, all of them pointing their weapons directly at him.

Zeke narrowed his eyes and said coldly, “What do you think you’re doing?”

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Billionaire's Regret: Finding Her

“Vice Commander, we’ve received orders from the Leader. He’s issued a warrant for your immediate arrest. I’m sorry, but we must carry it out.”

The deputy commanders stood in formation, their weapons trained on Zeke. They weren’t acting of their own accord—they were simply following orders.

“Arrest me? On what grounds?” Zeke asked sharply.

The deputies exchanged uncertain glances. “The Leader didn’t specify. We’re just following his instructions.”

“You fools.”

Zeke snapped, his tone icy. “My father ordered the arrest of the imposter—Samir—not me. *You’ve* misunderstood his orders.”

Without flinching in the face of drawn weapons, Zeke took a few steps forward, his voice steady and commanding. “Samir has caused irreparable harm. He impersonated me, tried to seize power, and ignited conflict between the royal family and the citadel. His crimes are unforgivable.

“My father issued those orders because he’s unaware that I’ve already arrived in the US. He’s targeting the impostor—Samir—not

me.”

The deputy commanders hesitated. Realization began to dawn. They had misinterpreted the command.

They lowered their weapons immediately and bowed their heads. “We’re truly sorry, Vice Commander. We misunderstood. Please punish us as you see fit.”

Zeke waved it off. “Forget it. You were doing your duty. There’s no fault in that.”

Then, his tone turned sharp again. “Now hear this—listen carefully.”

“Yes, sir!”

“All of you should know by now that Samir has been captured. He will be dealt with accordingly. Most of Shadow Moon Pavilion’s forces have already been relocated to US territory, and my father has entrusted me with full leadership over this region. From this point forward, you will follow my orders and mine alone. Absolute loyalty. Anyone caught scheming like Samir will be dealt with harshly. Understood?”

Zeke’s goal was clear; consolidate power and bring Shadow Moon Pavilion under his sole command, effectively neutralizing Zorro’s

control.

“Yes, sir!” the deputies responded in unison.

“One more thing, Effective immediately, all intelligence is to be reported directly to me. Nothing is to be sent to Graystone without my authorization. Anyone caught doing so will be treated as a traitor. Do I make myself clear?”

A murmur ran through the ranks until one deputy commander stepped forward with hesitation.

“Vice Commander, there are some rumors coming out of Graystone. They say Samir might be the Leader’s real son... and that...”

“And that what?” Zeke asked coldly, harrowing his eyes.

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The deputy faltered under Zeke’s stare. “They say... you’re not the Leader’s son.”

Zeke’s expression darkened as he closed in on him.

“And you believe that kind of rumor? If I weren’t the Leader’s son, why would he publicly appoint me to command Shadow Moon Pavilion?”

He leaned in, voice low and dangerous. “Do you know what happens to those who doubt the Leader?”

The deputy dropped his gaze, visibly shaken.

Zeke raised his gun and pressed it to the man’s forehead. Realizing the gravity of his mistake, the deputy tried to plead.

“Vice Commander, I was wrong. I shouldn’t have questioned your identity!”

“Being wrong comes with consequences.”

Zeke pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Bang.

The deputy collapsed to the ground, dead before he hit the floor.

The others froze in place, horrified. Fear swept through the room.

Zeke turned around slowly, addressing them all.

“Let this be a lesson. I don’t want to hear another word of doubt about my identity. Anyone who dares to disobey me will share his

fate.”

The deputy commanders stood rigid, terror gripping them.

“We hear and obey, Vice Commander. We swear absolute loyalty!”

Their voices rang out in perfect unison.

Zeke nodded with satisfaction. This was the result he wanted—a show of force to inspire complete obedience. Sometimes, fear was more effective than respect.

“Anything else to report?”

Another deputy spoke up. "Vice Commander, we've lost contact with Mentor Pierrick. What are your orders?"

"Pierrick returned to headquarters ahead of us. All US operations are now under my command."

Zeke provided a calm excuse, though he had no intention of revealing Pierrick's actual fate. The man had vanished—dead and buried. No proof, no trail.

Taking Pierrick out had effectively severed Zorro's right-hand support. Zeke knew Zorro must be losing sleep by now.

Everything was unfolding as Zeke had planned. Securing control over Shadow Moon Pavilion was essential. But his thoughts kept drifting to Alicia.

The moment Zorro issued the arrest order, it meant his escape had been discovered. And once they started digging, Alicia's

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involvement would come to light.

Zeke tried to call her, but her phone was already unreachable.

A sense of dread crept in.

Had something happened to her?

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He immediately summoned his aide and ordered him to get in touch with contacts in Graystone to find out what was going on.

Back in Graystone, two days had passed since the explosion.

The recovery teams had finished their search. They had pulled out the bodies of several military personnel—but Alicia's body was nowhere to be found.

The report made its way to Zorro, who sat with a storm brewing behind his eyes.

“As I thought... that girl is even more cunning than I imagined.”

In his mind, the lack of a body could only mean one thing: Alicia had faked her death and escaped from the explosion site.

He didn't care how she managed it—with her intelligence and resourcefulness, he had no doubt she could pull it off.

“Send men to stake out the Gonzales Family estate. If Alicia shows up there, arrest her immediately.”

“Yes, sir!”

Zorro reasoned that if Alicia had survived, she'd eventually try to return home. All they had to do was wait.

His thoughts then turned to the situation in the US. With no word from Samir or Pierrick, a bad feeling settled in his gut.

By now, Zeke had likely made it to the US—and if so, Samir and Pierrick were probably already in his hands.

Or worse.

“I ordered Zeke’s arrest. What’s the status?”

“Leader, the order was sent, but there’s been no response. We can’t get in touch with Mentor Pierrick, either.”

Zorro’s fists clenched. The realization sank in—Zeke had already seized control of Shadow Moon Pavilion’s US branch. The deputy commanders weren’t following his orders anymore.

He had miscalculated.

He never should’ve let Zeke live when he had the chance.

Now, the only thing, he cared about was protecting his biological son, Samir. And if that meant using Alicia as leverage—so be it.

“Contact the deputy commanders in the US. Tell them to relay a message to Zeke: if he wants Alicia to live, he’ll trade her for

Samir.”

“Yes, sir.”

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The order was sent. Moments later, Zeke received the message.

And now he knew for sure—Alicia had fallen into Zorro’s hands.

He had to return to S Nation to rescue her.

But before he could make any plans, Caitlin and Sebastian showed up at his estate.

Zeke came to the door to greet them. “Caitlin, Sebastian. What brings you here?”

Then he noticed someone else stepping in behind them.

“Xero? What are you doing in the US?”

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Caitlin's expression was heavy as she stepped inside the room. "Zeke, there's something we've kept from you... but it's time you

knew."

"What is it? Just tell me."

Zeke could already tell by her face—it wasn't going to be good news.

"Alicia... something happened to her."

"I know," Zeke replied grimly. "She rescued me and ended up falling into Zorro's hands. He's trying to use her as leverage, wants to

trade her for Samir."

He shared the information he had. But Caitlin shook her head.

“No. You’ve been deceived. Alicia isn’t in Zorro’s custody.”

“What?” Zeke’s voice tightened. “If she’s not with him, then where is she?”“...

“That’s something Xero should explain.”

Caitlin and Sebastian both turned to Xero, who took a breath before recounting everything.

“When the boss asked me to track you down, I went to Graystone’s military base to see my old classmate, Alicia. She told me she had just broken you out.

“I left the base, but not long after, I saw her being arrested by the military. They were transporting her back to Graystone. I followed the convoy by car and then...”

Xero stopped. His chest felt tight, his voice stuck in his throat.

“Then what?” Zeke’s voice grew urgent.

“Then the military vehicles were crossing the Yosse River Bridge... and there was an explosion. The bridge collapsed, and the

vehicles went down with it.”

Zeke staggered back two steps and collapsed onto the couch, disbelief written across his face.

“What? Are you saying... Alicia...”

He couldn't bring himself to say the words. Alicia had been in that convoy. The bridge had exploded. The vehicles had fallen into

the river.

Was she... gone?

A wave of pain crushed his chest, like a hand was squeezing the life out of his heart.

He tried to steady himself. “No... No... That's not possible...”

His eyes turned red, his composure unraveling. His face twisted with anguish, and his hands trembled uncontrollably.

Images of Alicia flooded his mind her laughter, her fire, the way she clung to him so stubbornly...

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And now, they were telling him she was gone. Just like that?

Xero slowly pulled a small pocket watch from his coat, his own heart sinking. "She asked me to give this to you."

Zeke took the pocket watch with trembling hands. As his eyes fell on the engraving, tears welled up in an instant.

Delicate flowers etched into the silver. And a single phrase:

Forget Me Not.

Her final message.

She wanted him to remember her. Not just the words, but everything—her love, her sacrifice.

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This was the girl who had chased him tirelessly, given everything without asking for anything in return, and, in the end, traded her life to save his.

Zeke clutched the watch tightly, his face buried in his hands.

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If not for her death, would he ever have truly realized how much she meant to him?

Too late.

Too late to change anything.

After a long, silent agony, he suddenly looked up, eyes burning red. "I have to go back."

Whether Alicia was dead or not, he had to return. If she was gone... he needed to see it with his own eyes.

Caitlin stepped forward, her voice soft but firm. “Zeke, this happened two days ago. We didn’t tell you right away because we knew how hard it would hit you. They sent recovery teams, but her body was never found. There’s a possibility it was destroyed in the

blast...”

“I don’t care. I have to see for myself.”

Zeke moved toward the door, but Caitlin grabbed his arm.

“Stop. Think, Zeke. Why do you think the military vehicle exploded on that bridge?”

Zeke fell silent, unable to answer.

Caitlin continued. “Listen to me. I know how much Alicia loved you. You were childhood friends—she’s been in love with you for

years.

“Yes, our relationship complicated things for a while. But her feelings for you never changed.

“She risked everything to get you out of 5 Nation. That alone proves how much she loved you.

“And because she loved you, she wouldn’t want you to walk into a trap for her. That explosion—Zeke, I believe it was her plan.”

Zeke’s eyes widened slightly.

“She knew that if she got captured, your loyalty would force you to go back for her. She would never let you fall into Zorro’s hands

because of her.

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“That explosion—it was her way of removing herself from Zorro’s leverage. To protect you.”

Caitlin’s logic was sound.

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Sebastian stepped in. “Zeke, I know it hurts. But if you go back now, you’ll be walking straight into Zorro’s net. He’s already aware of what happened to Samir and Pierrick. He knows you’re coming for him.

“Alicia gave her life to save you. Don’t make that sacrifice meaningless.”

Xero added, “Zorro may even use Alicia’s name as bait. He’ll do anything to lure you back. And he’ll stop at nothing to have you killed.”

Zeke clenched his fists, his grief roiling inside him. But the fog in his mind began to clear.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “Zorro sent a message. He said if I wanted Alicia back, I’d have to trade Samir.”

Now it all made sense.

Alicia was already dead.

Zorro was using the time gap to bait him into a trap.

If Caitlin and the others hadn't come when they did, he might already be en route to the airport.

Alicia had traded her life for his. He couldn't throw it away in a fit of emotion.

"That old bastard..." Zeke growled. "One day, I'll make him pay for everything he's done."

He slammed a fist down on the coffee table. The wood cracked with a deafening sound.

Everyone fell silent. The tension thick in the air.

After a long moment, they sat down again, gathering to discuss their next move.

Sebastian spoke first. "After this stunt, *Zorro* won't be leaving Graystone any time soon. He's going to hold down the fortress. Even though most of Shadow Moon Pavilion has relocated to the US, he still has the military's support. Taking him down won't be easy."

Zeke's eyes narrowed. "Then I'll stay here. I'll use this time to consolidate my control over Shadow Moon Pavilion. The stronger I get, the better my chances of beating him."

“Exactly,” Sebastian said. “When the time comes, we’ll strike together.”

With the room in agreement, Caitlin brought up another matter.

“By”

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Chapter 541

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“I was planning to arrange their transport out, but I haven’t gotten around to it yet. Why don’t *you* take them with you?”

“Alright.”

Zeke gave the order, and soon after, Zinnia’s parents and her twelve-year-old brother were brought into the living room.

They all looked thinner, clearly worn down by their time in captivity. During that period, they had suffered plenty, though thanks to Zeke's orders to lift their confinement and treat them decently, they had avoided physical abuse.

"I'm Trinity, a friend of Zinnia's. I've come to take you with us," Caitlin introduced herself.

Zinnia's mother, Qin, recognized her immediately. They'd met back in S Nation.

"Trinity! Yes, yes, we'll come with you!"

Qin clutched Caitlin's hands excitedly and asked, "Did you see my daughter? Is Zinnia alright?"

"She's fine. She'll be so happy to see you. Let's get going."

With that, Caitlin and Sebastian escorted Zinnia's family away from Zeke's private estate.

At the hospital.

Zinnia stayed by Xavi's bedside until he finally stirred awake.

“You’re awake, Xavi.”

When he tried to move, Zinnia rushed to his side and gently held him down. “You’ve got injuries on your back. Don’t move too

much.”

“Zinnia...”

Seeing he was alive and she was still by his side, Xavi was overwhelmed. He grasped her hand, eyes slightly misty. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine,” Zinnia replied, gratitude filling her heart. “Thank you for protecting me back there. But... you shouldn’t have come. *You* got hurt because of me.”

Seeing him lying there in pain made her chest ache.

“For you? I didn’t think twice. As long as you’re safe, that’s all that matters. It’s my job to protect you.”

Xavi was proud of himself for finally stepping up when it mattered most. He'd taken a hit for her—like a man should.

Their eyes locked for a moment, a soft emotional current passing silently between them.

The moment was broken by Caitlin's call. After listening, Zinnia stood up, her face lighting up.

"You've brought my family back? Thank you.., I'll be right there."

She turned to Xavi and explained, and he nodded. "Go see them. Don't worry about me."

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"I've arranged for someone else to look after you. I'll be back."

She left a nurse to care for him and rushed to DanCa Estate, where Caitlin had brought her family.

As soon as she entered the living room, she saw them—her parents and younger brother, safe and sound.

“Dad! Mom!”

“Zinnia!”

They rushed into each other’s arms, crying uncontrollably. The reunion was deeply moving.

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Caitlin, watching from the side, felt her own eyes sting. She longed to reunite with her own mother—but who knew how long she’d have *to* wait?

After their emotional reunion, Zinnia and her family spent a long time catching up. They repeatedly thanked Caitlin and Sebastian. for everything they had done.

“There’s no need to thank us. Seeing you reunited is thanks enough,” Caitlin said with a warm smile. “For now, don’t go back to S Nation. Stay here until things settle down.”

“Thank you, Caitlin.”

Zinnia didn’t know how to express the depth of her gratitude. Not only had Caitlin rescued her family, but she had also offered them shelter. She owed her more than words could repay.

After settling Zinnia's family in, Caitlin and Sebastian returned to The Vanderbilt Family estate with Xero.

It was Xero's first time visiting Sebastian's home, and the couple welcomed him warmly, grateful for how he had helped rescue them from The O'Malley Family back in S Nation.

Then came good news—Caitlin received a call from her brother James. He had arrived safely and located Ashfall. If everything went well, he'd be back in New York by tomorrow.

Her heart swelled with anticipation. Maybe, finally, she'd get closer to finding her mother.

At the private estate.

After seeing the guests off, Zeke sat alone in silence. He stared at the pocket watch Alicia had left him, lost in thought.

No one could understand the depth of pain he felt in that moment.

“You didn't die in vain. I promise.”

He gently placed the watch in a box and tucked it deep into his drawer.

A subordinate entered. "Commander, all vice leaders are assembled. They're waiting for you to preside over the meeting."

"Let's go. To the base."

All members of Shadow Moon Pavilion who had relocated to the US were now stationed at the newly constructed headquarters.

2/4

18:43 Mon, 25 AU

Zeke arrived to host the organization's first official meeting in the US. At that meeting, he made a bold announcement:

The organization would be renamed-Lightwing**.

The announcement stunned the room.

"Commander, why are we renaming Shadow Moon Pavilion to Lightwing?" one vice leader asked.

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Zeke stood firm. “Because we are no longer aligned with the Graystone headquarters. Lightwing is a new identity, a new direction.”

“Commander, does this mean... you’re breaking away?”

“You can see it that way,” Zeke replied. “Lightwing will have its own mission and code. It is no longer Shadow Moon Pavilion. I will be the leader of this new organization. From today forward, you don’t need to call me vice leader anymore.”

The room was dead silent, everyone reeling from the significance of the shift.

A vice leader in charge of intelligence spoke up. “But headquarters sent word. They want Samir returned to S Nation immediately.

What should we do?”

“We’ll deal with that later,” Zeke said.

He continued, “By establishing Lightwing, I am also abolishing the death contract—an outdated rule from Shadow Moon Pavilion. This organization will no longer bind its members through threats to their lives.

“From now on, loyalty will be earned, not forced. There will be a proper reward and promotion system. Lightwing will grow with fairness and integrity.

“Those who wish to stay and follow me—raise your hands. If you choose to leave, I won’t stop you.’

The room buzzed.

“No more death contracts? Finally—something humane!”

“I’ll follow you, Commander. I’m with Lightwing.”

“Count me in.”

One by one, hands went *up*.

It was clear—just by abolishing the death contract, Zeke had already won their hearts.

The meeting adjourned with Lightwing officially founded. The announcement was to be disseminated swiftly throughout the

ranks.

This marked the formal severing of ties between Zeke and Shadow Moon Pavilion in Graystone.

But Zeke wasn't finished yet.

He had one more surprise in store for Zorro.

18:43 Mon, 25 Aug 7 W