

Football 551

Chapter 551 Home

[Date: 12/03/2020 | Time: 09:30 AM | Location: Holiday Inn – Liverpool South, Hotel Buffet]

The restaurant buzzed with the quiet hum of clinking cutlery and low conversation. The scent of brewed coffee mingled with toasted bread and that curious, smoky tinge only the British sausage could possess—something between charcoal and mystery meat.

Rakim sat by one of the tables by the windows overlooking the hotel's gardens. He wore a grey hoodie and sliders, one leg folded under him, a plate of sliced mangos, toast, and two boiled eggs in front of him. He chewed absently, earbuds in, one brow lifted as he watched a TikTok of a gym skit on his phone. Some guy with a noticeable beard could be seen doing press-ups under the title {Male vs Female Motivation at the gym.

"Life as a man is hard, but hard times create strong men. A man must chase pain in order to achieve greatness." His voiceover sounded as he continued doing military-style press-ups, only to abruptly cut towards a fairly good-looking girl in a two-piece gym outfit, showing off her assets. "I don't chase, I deserve everything."

"I deserve nothing! Nobody is coming to save me... I am loved," He could barely understand why he was watching this guy, but his content had just the right amount of humour and stereotype to get one hooked. After the girl completed 12 reps of "I Don't Need a Man," the camera cut back to the man doing Bicep curls. "2009, 20- w'What am I doing, is that it? Is this the power of my bloodline? My family is counting on me; I must push forward!"

Woman: "Did I even go to the gym if I didn't take another selfie?"

Man: "Every time I stop, my enemies get one step closer to the throne, SO I CANNOT GIVE UP; I will not accept anything less than Emperor."

Woman: "Huuuh, that was such a good workout."

Man: "What a shit workout, no cheat meal this week."

"Is this your pre-match ritual now?" Florian Wirtz asked, setting down a plate piled high with hash browns, sausages, and baked beans with a slap. "Motivational thirst traps?"

Rakim smirked, popping out one earbud. "I'm just trying to find my inner emperor."

"Don't even start; I can barely put up with your anime addiction, let alone another vice," Wirtz commented as if he was trying to dodge the plague.

Just then, at a nearby table, Malik Tillman plopped into a seat holding a solitary roll of toilet paper like it was a winning lottery ticket.

"What's that, your security deposit?" Jamie Leweling asked, sipping his orange juice.

Malik grinned. "Nah, I just figured if this gets any worse, I can trade it for steak."

Jamie chuckled, shaking his head. "I don't get why or how this toilet paper craze started. Is there like a great diarrhoea storm that someone forgot to tell us about?"

"Not us, just you guys; my house is stocked with all the essentials. Sophia runs a tight ship." Kai off handedly commented from another table before proceeding to sip his cup of tea.

"Never mind whatever that was, this place is scary. Yesterday, I saw a video of a man buying twelve frozen chickens and smiling like a villain." Jaimie commented after the momentary silence that Havertzs comment had created.

Someone from across the buffet line chimed in dryly, "Man, folks here are acting like some main characters in an apocalypse show."

There were laughs all around as the players and staff blew off steam from yesterday's complications. Most of their worries had subsided after a night's sleep, and the warm camaraderie helped ease the last of the nerves. Just as Florian stabbed into a hash brown with suspicious focus, Peter Bosz strolled in, dressed casually in a cream linen shirt tucked into tailored navy slacks, sleeves rolled to his forearms.

He looked far more casual than the players had ever seen him, and his assistant, Fredrick Bauer, followed him, dressed more smartly in what could only be called office attire. He wore a navy polo, a pair of very chino pants and a silver Rolex watch to match. The man was low-key, with only his watches giving one an indication of his wealth.

Peter cleared his throat gently, the subtle sound enough to draw most of the heads in the restaurant toward him. He waited a beat, allowing the room to settle before speaking. "Alright, boys—good news

for once." His voice cut through the light buzz. "Simon and the folks at the office pulled some serious strings. We've got a private flight back to Cologne. Scheduled departure: 12:00 sharp."

The moment the words landed, the restaurant erupted in relieved, grateful cheer. A round of claps was set off with quite a few folks whistling and forks clanging dramatically against a plate in celebration. Florian slapped the table once, mouth full, and managed a muffled, "Let's go!"

Peter lifted his hand to quiet them with a slight grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Let me finish before you all go ordering champagne, which better be orange juice. "You've got just over two hours. Pack, check out, and be on the coach by 10:45."

He glanced around, making sure everyone was listening. "From Cologne-Bonn, you'll be allowed to leave directly if you've got someone picking you up. Otherwise, we've arranged for a return coach to the KP Centre. Just let us know before takeoff."

Fredrick Bauer stepped in smoothly. "Text your final destination and pick-up info to the team group chat. No exceptions. No 'my phone died' excuses. No message means you're going to KP with us even if someone shows up."

Peter gave a final nod, then motioned toward the buffet. "Eat up, pack up, and don't make me chase anyone down the hallway. You've all earned a proper trip home."

The crowd broke again into relieved chatter. Chairs scraped. Cutlery clinked. Florian raised a sausage like a champagne flute. "To bureaucracy!"

"May it always be in our favour," Rakim muttered, grabbing his now lukewarm toast as he rose from his chair.

Jamie Leweling was already pulling out his phone. "Alright, who's trying to speedrun checkout so we can hit the vending machine one last time?"

Malik tapped the roll of toilet paper. "My gift to the front desk."

"Aren't you guys like millionaires? Surely you can afford duty-free snacks?" Someone asked, instantly silencing the rowdy group. "Oh, I forgot Jamie is one of those morning people who act like they are on a sugar high. I pity the fool who is his roommate."

"Hey, that's me," Diaby chimed in, sounding more listless than he usually did.

"Danm, I didn't even realise you were here; ufft, no wonder you've been quiet; Jamie must have talked your ear off all night," Sven said with a schadenfreude grin. "He tells you about his bee colony and how big his homegrown tomatoes are?"

"URGH!" was the only response the Frenchman gave.

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[Date: 12/03/2020 | Time: 15:30 | Location: Cologne Bonn Airport – Arrivals]

The wheels of the matte black coach hissed to a stop on the airport tarmac, where a modest Gulfstream sat gleaming under the midmorning sun. As players filed off, staff gave each one a pat on the back, ticking names off a manifest. Rakim adjusted his carry-on bags as he descended the stairs, deftly picking up his duffel bag trolley before joining the rest of the squad on the coach.

The mood was relatively quiet, with no one bothering to have actual conversations as they started feeling mental fatigue. To most footballers, they were work friends who were willing to brawl for each other on the field. They cared for one another, but their real lives were when they went home to their families and friends they grew up with.

So, seeing the same faces more than necessary started to irritate them as their real personalities began to slip through. One example is Jamie's talkative side, which had been tempered during training and games. This led to a situation where they had all tacitly agreed to remain silent and temper their intrusive thoughts.

Moments later, the final passenger boarded the couch, and they were whisked away towards the private terminal. Moments later, phones began to buzz with notifications as they finished looking at the nearest relay station beaming up their location. Things at the border control went relatively smoothly as the staff handled sending our bags through the scanners.

Travelling on an official team like this made things easier as the likelihood of someone using a fake passport was zero. The officers were noticeably wearing masks and gloves, a practice that had become more common among them. A couple of photos here and there, and we were ushered to a parking lot that had been reserved for us.

Rakim immediately spotted the mint green beauty resting a few paces from the team bus. He resisted the urge to run over and embrace her, checking for any bumps and bruises. "Alright, lads, that's me. It was fun being stuck with you, but one more second with your ugly mugs, and I might catch something."

Chapter 552 Suspended

[Date: 13/03/2020 | Time: 09:14 AM | Location: Rakim's Villa – Hahnwald, Cologne]

The scent of maple syrup lingered faintly in the open-concept kitchen. Outside, the bamboo trees rustled in the breeze beyond the glass walls, but inside, everything felt still. Rakim sat barefoot at the long granite island, flipping idly through his phone. He wore a white sleeveless undershirt and loose grey joggers, his hair still damp from the shower, and was wrapped in a Pikachu durag.

May was across from him, hunched slightly over her plate of almond pancakes and strawberries, a chipped blue university mug steaming beside her. She picked at her food before setting the fork down and sighing. "They moved all my classes online. Full remote. Until Easter break... maybe longer."

Rakim looked up. "That serious, huh? Have there been any COVID cases in your classes?"

She nodded, twisting her lips. "Yeah. One of our visiting lecturers tested positive. They didn't tell us who, but... it spooked everyone. My end-of-the-year presentation was moved to Zoom, and exams are online now too."

He leaned back slightly, concern flitting across his face. "That serious, huh? But I guess it's not so bad for you since most of the practical work in your marketing course is you doing research to present it, no?"

May nodded, propping her chin on one hand. "Yeah, that part's manageable. But I quite liked the face-to-face part of the presentation as it allowed me to pivot if I felt like something wasn't landing. Plus, don't get me started on how I'll miss my daily dose of espresso and freshly baked mohnschnecke."

Rakim smiled faintly. "Surprised that someone considered a fitness influencer would eat something as sugary as mohnschneckens."

May rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at her lips. "Fitness and Lifestyle influencer, emphasis on lifestyle, plus I work hard to look this good, a pastry here and now to keep me sane is a small trade off. Plus, you need that extra kick when you're in workshops. May rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at her lips."

She swirled a strawberry through the syrup on her plate, then added more quietly, "Reece's pretty upset too. He had visits lined up for four different schools—LSU, Georgia Tech, Oregon, Florida, and UCLA. All cancelled."

Rakim raised his eyebrows. "Damn, I knew that he was having a monster of a senior year, but he must have been balling to get schorly offers from that many D1 offers."

"Yeah, he is ranked in the top ten prospects out of high school in the nation and first in the state," May responded with a proud smile on her face, as their sibling relationship had grown stronger over the years. It had started a jealousy at the sibling relationship both Emma and Jenna had with their younger brothers, but it bloomed naturally as they became their others' cheerleaders in life.

"Well, when you light up IMG Academy for two years in a row and manage to break state records, these things were bound to happen," Rakim replied before proceeding to pull up a video the latter had sent into their friend group chat.

The video showcased Reece spinning out of the pocket in the state final after the opposing blitz had collapsed it. Despite slipping away from the immediate danger, one of the Defensive tackles was quick to lock on to him. The guy quickly closed the distance, head down, ready to spear him, but Reece merely palmed him in the helmet, side-stepping before letting loose a cannonball of a throw.



"Whoooo," The exclamation from the video resounded as Bennet, who had cut across from his man, rose into the air, grabbing the ball out of the air. "Yeah, we definitely have to watch him play in college if he makes it to state," Rakim commented, feeling his blood pumping all over again, even though he had seen that play before.

May smiled wistfully, watching the replay from across the island. "Reece says he still wants to commit soon, maybe next week. The coaches have been FaceTiming and sending him virtual campus tours, but it's not the same, you know?" She twisted her fork between her fingers. "I know he's smart, but... this is a massive decision. Choosing where to live, who to train under—for the next three years, possibly longer."

Rakim set his phone down and rubbed his thumb along the rim of his glass. "He'll land on his feet. All these schools are great, and it's not like he can't transfer. Just tell him to pick a school he wouldn't mind living at"

May nodded, but her gaze dropped to her mug. "Yeah... I guess." She paused for a long beat, then added, "Evely, I mean Mum is, worried about him leaving for a far away school, only thinking about football without considering his education, plus there's the thing with my Dad."

Rakim tilted his head slightly, sensing the shift in her tone. "What thing?"

Her fingers hovered above her plate, then dropped into her lap as she leaned back. "Reece said he's been acting weird lately—Dad, I mean. Glued to the TV, obsessing over the markets. Keeps watching Bloomberg and flipping between CNBC and Fox Business like something huge is about to happen."

Rakim arched a brow. "That's not that new for him, though, right?"

"No, but this feels different. Mum says he's barely sleeping. He started working from home even before the firm told them to. Reece caught him just... staring at his phone like he was about to pass out."

Rakim frowned, sliding his phone aside. "You think it's financial trouble?"

May gave a tired shrug. "I don't know. Would he tell me even if it was? We haven't spoken in months. Not since Christmas—" she cut herself off, then shook her head and pushed her plate forward, no longer hungry. "Let's just forget about it and focus on what we will do with ourselves during this lockdown."

Rakim reached across the island and gently brushed her wrist to comfort her, but didn't bring the topic back up again. "Well, it's been a while since we have streamed together. We could use this chance to create content. I've kinda been neglecting my social a little and wouldn't mind helping you more with your work."

May looked up at him, some of the tension in her shoulders finally loosening. "Yeah... I'd like that. It's been forever since we did video or I schooled you in Madden. We could even do a cooking one, dancing, skits, let me jot some of these ideas down."

Smiling at her excited face, Rakim merely nodded at some of her suggestions and quickly shot down some of the more dangerous ones. He wanted her to be happy, but there is no way he would let anyone apply makeup on him for fun. If he has to suffer through that, he should at least be getting paid for it, like when he shoots an ad for a sponsor.

Just then, his phone buzzed where it lay beside his plate, lighting up with a message in the team group chat from Florian Wirtz: "Turn on Sky Sports News. Right now. 🔥"

Without much thought, he called out to his entertainment system. "Jane, turn on Sky Sports News," he shouted. Following his command, the LED lights around the entertainment system lit up in green colours as the 100-inch mounted Ultra HD TV sprang to life.

On the screen, a well-dressed man looking to be in his late fifties, sitting behind the FA press podium. "In light of the recent COVID-19 health concerns, effective immediately, all English elite football will be suspended until further notice."

The broadcast cut to footage of empty stadiums, sweeping drone shots of iconic arenas now frozen in time—Old Trafford, Anfield, the Emirates—all eerily silent in the morning mist. The Sky Sports ticker scrolled across the bottom with bold red text confirming the news: Premier League, EFL, FA Women's Super League and Championship suspended.

Rakim blinked, absorbing the words in silence. He wasn't really surprised, though, given what had happened to them a day ago. However, the reality of the lockdown started to settle in as he realised that he would once again have to go through the pandemic, hopefully he would survive it this time.

May exhaled softly from across the island, brining him out of his thought. "Damn..."

The studio cut back to the press conference. The FA official continued, "We understand the impact this will have on fans, players, and clubs. However, with the growing threat posed by COVID-19, this is a necessary step. The decision follows extensive consultation with government health officials, clubs, and representatives from across all tiers of English football."

Rakim reached for the remote and muted the sound. "So that's it," he said flatly. "All English leagues... shut down. Just like that."

May looked over at him, concern furrowing her brow. "Do you think Germany will follow?"

He didn't answer immediately. He just stared at the screen, the silence now filled with the faint rustling of trees from the villa garden. He reached again for his phone and opened the official DFB Twitter to check for any updates. Seconds later, after refreshing twice, a new post appeared, quite long at that, but after speed reading, it pretty much said the same as the FA.

DFB suspends all football activities in Germany across all levels until further notice. This Includes The Bundesliga, 2. Bundesliga, and all youth leagues. "After consultation with the Federal Ministry of Health and in light of the escalating spread of COVID-19 across Germany, all matches in professional and amateur leagues are suspended. The health of players, staff, and fans is our highest priority..."

Chapter 553 Torture

[Date: 20/03/2020 | Time: 07:08 AM | Location: Rakim's Villa – Hahnwald, Cologne]

The soft melody of a lo-fi alarm chimed from the marble nightstand, gently pulling Rakim from sleep. The ceiling fan above spun lazily, casting a slow-moving shadow across the warm, minimalist bedroom. Beside him, May stirred under the linen sheets, one arm slipping out from beneath her duvet to silence the alarm with a sleepy swipe.

"Morning already?" she mumbled, voice gravelly with sleep.

Rakim yawned and stretched, joints cracking in protest. "Time doesn't exist anymore, remember? We live in a lawless timeline."

May snorted softly, "I knew I shouldn't have introduced you to the walking dead. For the last time, you're not Rick Grimes, and no, you wouldn't survive an apocalypse with just a bat and a revolver."

Rakim, who had been lying still on his side of the bed, suddenly jumped up in shock. "Blasphemy, I'll let you know that this body is sculpted to survive even nuclear explosions." He retorted, pulling up his pyjama top to showcase his well-sculpted six pack that resembled a Greek statue in its almost picturesque build.

"Put those away, no one wants to see them," May retorted with an eye roll, but her gaze lingered a little longer than she had intended to. "Anyway, let's get up,"

Rakim nodded, following her to the bathroom, and with practised ease, they graciously greeted each other as they got ready. May would hand him the toothpaste as Rakim stepped up with their cups filled with mouthwash. Without saying a word, they spent 3 minutes brushing their teeth, flossing and then rinsing their mouths.

By 07:30, the kitchen buzzed with quiet routine. A fresh pot of ginger-lemon tea steamed gently beside a bowl of cut mango and bananas. Rakim stood shirtless in gym shorts, whisking eggs while nodding along to the beat of a Rodwave song coming from the house's Bluetooth speakers. May, in a baby blue crop top and yoga leggings, moved through a slow sun salutation on the back porch with the sliding glass doors open to ventilate the house, letting in the pale morning light.

Outside, the bamboo trees swayed gently, the breeze causing the wind chimes she had bought and hung all throughout the garden to sing in tune. Their breakfast was quick—scrambled eggs, fruit, and oat

toast. Rakim cleaned the plates while May cleared the cutlery from the table, quickly cleaning after themselves.

A couple of minutes later, they stood in the small home gym that was as big as a normal room, and May had queued up their 20-minute vinyasa routine on the living room TV. "You know what I realised?" Rakim said mid-plank. "I'm more flexible now than when I was training five times a week."

May glanced over, upside down in a downward dog. "That's a lie. Have you seen the way you move around the field? Agility and flexibility are like your best attributes."

"I know, but my dream is to move as free as Ronaldinho when I reach my prime, which will be harder since modern defenders are, on average, better," He complied with a light frown, going into the cobra stretch following the female instructor on the screen.

May followed suit after having finished her warm-ups, not wanting to miss a second of their paid online class. Despite this being on Rakim's mum's gym app, they still paid the extra entrance fee for whatever classes they chose to take part in. Since most of the instructors were either students studying sports science or personal trainers who had worked in the industry for years.

The extra \$10 per live session or the \$20 membership for free classes was worth it. After twenty minutes of getting schooled by both May and the instructor, who seemed to be able to bend their bodies in different positions, he was sweating buckets. Despite being one of the most flexible footballers, he also had strong, active muscles that gave him that explosive speed.

So it came as no surprise when he was humbled by May, who had dedicated her life to yoga and serving others. "Okay," she said between light breaths, "that one nearly killed me."

"Yeah, that was a tough one. Still, thanks for tuning in, guys. I know it's hard to stay motivated to keep up with your gym goals when you feel like your life has come to a pause, so give yourself an extra pat on the back," The instructor said with a light smile within as she took a seat on her yoga matt within her living room. "If you have any questions, this is the time to ask them."

"Stop lying, you two barely broke a sweat, and here I am feeling muscles I have banished to the shadow realm," Rakim complained, barely managing to sit up on his mat.

"Yeah, I can't believe Maya convinced me to do this, it's worse than leg day, no man should be put through this torture." Another man complained, sounding more traumatised than Rakim as his girlfriend's account appeared as a black cat with a speech bubble.

"Me too, brother, I feel like I went through military training all over again, there is a reason they don't make us do this, it's worse than torture." Another guy complained his voice appeared as a speech bubble from a penguin emoji named Peggy.

"Fufuf, Guys, we appreciate seeing more of you in our sessions, just cut yourself some slack, as just like any exercise, there is a learning curve to this." Pamela, the Yoga instructor, stated from the screen with a light, amused chuckle at all the complaints from the different guys whose partners had dragged along.

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[Time: 10:30 AM]

After showers and a quick outfit change—May in a pastel hoodie and Rakim in joggers and a fitted tee—they set up for their live stream. The game room had been converted to incorporate her recording devices, much like they had in the hotel. This time, the setup was more comprehensive, featuring LED lights, two sets of PS4 Pros, an Xbox One X, a gaming computer, and an assortment of arcade games.

They had a lot of time in their week-long lockdown and spent it setting up their game room for when they wanted to create content. Rakim figured that since he couldn't entertain his fans on the field, he might as well do it online. While for May, this was quite literally her job, which he was now actively joining.

Closing the blinds and turning on the LED lights, they both got settled in their chairs, and May logged into her streaming platform. In a matter of seconds, the live countdown was on for her switch account. "Alright, we're live in 3... 2..." May tapped the screen.

"-1! And we're live, y'all," May announced, her face brightening as the viewer count climbed, with more than 400 people joining in a matter of moments.

The chat quickly exploded with greetings, emojis, and spam fire emojis. The LED strips behind them glowed a soft lavender, complementing the neon wall sign that read **May's World** in cursive. Rakim leaned into his mic with a playful grin. "What's up, people, it's been a while, I'm back again with my favourite teammate, hope Lockdown isn't too boring for ya'll. Definitely trying to win that lockdown hall of fame couples badge."

May snorted, sipping from her bubble tea. "Ignore him. Today's stream is super chill. We're reacting to your video submissions and taking some Q&As, a couple of games, maybe even a TikTok or two if someone decides to nail the foot shuffle finally."

"That was one time, and that dance is like half a decade old, don't you know that we get sturdy these days?" Rakim fired back, spinning slightly in his chair. "Oh, we should definitely have a dance challenge later."

May raised a brow, mock-suspicious. "You sure your ankle's ready to get sturdy?"

Rakim flexed his foot dramatically for the camera, lifting it up to frame. "Didn't you see me make a grown man rethink his entire career on my game back. Woman, you know I can do a mean running man,"

Chapter 554 Killing Streak

[Time: 12:02 PM]

The camera angle tightened slightly as May leaned forward, her zipper hanging loosely from her shoulders, gripping her controller tightly. Her manicured fingers flashed over the PS4 controller as her eyes remained locked on her own monitor. Rakim, who had at some point changed into a dark blue Kimono, slouched back in his gaming chair, a lopsided grin on his face that was starting to falter as he did his best to react.

Before he could even react, a flash grenade was thrown into the house, blinding him momentarily. Panicking, he started blasting his rifle, but his character's vision turned red with blood, and he was dead.
[Killing Streak]

"Argh soggy cinemon biscuits!" He exclaimed in frustration, tossing the controller towards the designated pillow section.

In the next second, the replay of the kill appeared on the screen, showing Mays' character Simon "Ghost" Riley. She had thrown in a flash grenade to blind and discombobulate his senses from the outside, jumping in once she had succeeded, only to butcher him with her knife from behind.

"Sixteen to two?" he groaned, letting his head fall back dramatically. "Tell me how this is happening. You're spawn trapping me."

"You're just slow," May chirped sweetly, not taking her eyes off the screen. "Don't blame me because I have faster reflexes. You chose this map, remember?"

user_undeadsniper69: bro getting cooked 🤡RedJohn: she's got that school shooter aim
📺RK10fanpage: Rakim, blink twice if you need a tutorialG0tU4gain: MAY IS HIM 100 🔥

HandInYourJersey: She's got that red dot on him.

RoadKill: I think Bro needs to factory reset

Mary487: @RedJohn; its not too late to seek help

RedJohn: @Mary487; 218 Brook Hollow Drive, Springfield, IL 62704,USA

Mary487: W' W-wait a minute th'thats m'my house.

Ledgers-Joker: Unleash the Carnage

Moderator: @Ledgers-Joker; Wrong Multiverse

[RedJohn] has been banned

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PrimTillProm: I think Rakim lost a bunch of his matcho points right here; didn't he grow up in America, and isn't it like a natural progression to be good at shooter games?

IHaveBlackFriends: What, because he's black?

May leaned back, victory screen glowing behind her like a digital crown. Rakim was still rubbing imaginary dirt off his pride when a donation prompt appeared on the screen. [WompWompBeats has donated \$10: I know bullying Rakim is fun, but Y'all promised a dance break. Here's a mix I cooked just for this.]

May grinned and turned to Rakim. "You said we'd do it. No backing out now."

Rakim narrowed his eyes. "Of course not. After getting my ass handed to me so royally, the least I can do is to 'teach you how to boggie, teach you how to boggie," He retorted, breaking into a light dance on his chair towards the end.

"Oh, please stop, I can barely hold back from barfing," May said, rolling her eyes but smiling despite herself.

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[Time: 12:45 PM | Location: Game Room – Livestream Still Ongoing]

May pulled her headset off and stood, taking off her hoodie to reveal a Dolphin jersey underneath.  
"Alright, chat—y'all heard it. Dance break incoming."

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> \_user\_boogie4life\_: STANKY LEGG TIME LET'S GOOOO 🔥🔥🔥

> \_real\_mvp7\_: This finna be better than TikTok compilations

> \_SnapbackDad96\_: If he don't hit that Harlem Shake properly, we rioting.

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> \_FreddyKrueger8851: What happened to that RedJohn fellow he was pretty funny

[\_FreddyKrueger8851; has been kicked from the stream]

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Rakim stood up too, giving his legs a shake, leaning forward, he pulled up May's Discord server and quickly found the submission from WompWompBeats. Downloading the file, he said, "Jane, cue up the track from WompWompBeats" before moving the chairs out of the way to sand in the open area behind the desks.

May had set up a separate camera to record the dance challenge so they could post a better quality video later. A moment later, a bass-heavy beat dropped—a custom mashup of classic Florida party anthems woven with crisp percussion and 808s. From the sound of it, it was likely a remix of various songs from the Florida area.

"Okay," May said, after finishing her setup, just as the LED lights transitioned to a rainbow pulse. "Ok, don't chicken out on me after all that trash talk."

"Worry about yourself, babe, cause I had the best dance teacher in the world, grown up," He retorted with a confident smile as he did the final stretching of his limbs. "Jane, let's go in 3 seconds."

[3..2..1]

🎵 \*"\*Now watch me hit dat—\*STANKY LEGG\*!"\* 🎵

As soon as the voice echoed over the bass drop, Rakim and May exploded into motion. Rakim hit the \*Stanky Legg\* with exaggerated rhythm, dipping low as May strutted sideways, her leg jerking in perfect time. The LED lights spiralled in time with the beat, flashing neon blues and greens as the camera caught their synchronised moves.

> \*user\_kandywrlD\*: OH NAH THEY ACTUALLY KILLIN THIS 🤪🤪

> \*Got2Groove\*: He hit that joint like his career depended on it

> \*MaySimpsUnite\*: NGL this is sus af

🎵 \*"\*Do the Snake, then the Patch, now go Chicken-head!"\* 🎵

The music shifted with a chopped-and-screwed tempo, and without missing a beat, May tilted her neck and shoulders, popping like she was born for the Chicken-head. Rakim fumbled the start but recovered quickly, transitioning into the Snake—arms rippling like waves.

> \*CallofBooty: How was this even a dance trend?

> \*user\_bouncemasta\*: FLORIDA might need to recall these to the manufacturer.

♪♪ \* "Harlem in the house, now shake that joint!" \* ♪♪

"Time to get silly," Rakim said with a grin, then launched into the \*Harlem Shake\*, flailing with comedic precision before popping into a clean shoulder bounce. May laughed as she spun around him, hands up like she was directing traffic.

The beat \*glitched\*, then \*slowed\*, before an aggressive 808 \*rumbled\* through: ♪♪ \* "RUNNIN MAN MODE—ENGAGE." \* ♪♪

Rakim dropped into the \*Running Man\*, each step sharp and crisp trying to channel his inner Kyrie. May mirrored him perfectly, their bodies moving in mirrored rhythm. The chat spammed emojis and keyboard mash, all enjoying their show.

> \*\_RAKIMREDEEMED\_: BROOO, ON THE COMEBACK ARC??\*

> \*\_user\_runnin4real\*: THIS IS FLORIDA CULTURE UNFILTERED

> \*\_TwerkNation999\*: JOOKINGGGG TIME BAYBEEEE 🕺🕺🕺

♪♪ \* "J-j-j-jook on 'em! Ayyeee!" \* ♪♪



The final beat melted into the grimy bounce of Miami bass, and Rakim hit a whole Jook routine—head dipped low, knees loose, feet sliding with swagger. May followed with clean glides and shoulder flicks, laughing out loud as Rakim added a cheeky body roll at the end.

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[Time: 15:58 PM | Location: Game Room]

A couple of hours later, they paused the stream and continued with their day. They had lunch and proceeded to do their second workout of the day, which was a chalesthenics-focused session. They followed that by spending time in the garden, with May wanting to plant flowers and Rakim watching her do it.

He was banished to do nothing after managing to annoy her enough to shoo him away. Not that he minded, as he quite loved watching how hard she worked to get the proper flower layout. Her nose would scrunch up whenever she didn't like something, only to redig a whole section to fix it.

He wasn't all useless, though, as he prepared lemonade and snacks for her, earning his keep. By the end, Mya had planted various tulips, daffodils, and crocuses, causing the section of the garden to look colourful. After a light dinner, they found themselves back in the gameroom for their evening stream.

Most folks had nothing better to do than consume content, now that they were locked inside their houses. Since that was Mays' career, Rakim took this chance to genuinely interest himself in her world and interact with his fans more. Usually, he'd be on a regulated schedule with early nap times and 5 a.m. wake-up workouts, but if he did that now, he'd go crazy.

Luckily, in their community, the laws on exiting the house were relaxed after 9 pm, allowing them to go on walks in the local park. Although it wasn't anything special with the new 2-meter regulations, they did get to see other people. Though most acted like they were trying to dodge the plague when they saw other people.

The two enjoyed these little walks almost as much as when they FaceTimed their family members. They would have definitely preferred to go home to their families, but that didn't stop them from making the best of the situation. Plus, even if flights were still allowed, neither of them would risk being in a confined plane with random people.

"You want to play a board game?" Rakim asked as he proceeded to walk towards a cupboard in the room.

"Board game, when was the last time we played one of those?" May asked, trying her best to exaggerate her shock for the viewers. "Oh, I remember it was the game night of 2017, Emma bankrupted in Monopoly, you lost to me in Jenga and somehow got suckered into playing pool against Reece."

"I have no recollection of such events. For further inquiries, call your local help centre," he responded with practised ease before opening the cupboard. "This is my very own wardrobe for the board game extravaganza of the century."

Chapter 555 I Like It

"Did your guy appear in a Marvel movie?" May asked with a serious gaze as she looked down at the open images on her gameboard.

"He probably should, but no, would make a mean Ghost Rider or Morbius when they ever get the chance to add him to the MCU," Rakim replied with a light smile, but his answer caused May's hand to flash over her board and start flicking down the little images of celebrities.

She started with one, then two, and eight characters in a row were flicked down, leaving only two standing proudly. The smug smile on her face told everyone watching the stream that Rakim was screwed and she had him dead to rights. "You might as well give up right now, it's a 50/50 chance to prolong your losing streak."

Rakim scratched his jaw, eyes narrowing as he studied the last two celebrity photos left standing on May's board with a light frown. He still had 10 images open, meaning it was a shot in the dark if he were to guess. Still looking at her smug expression, he felt the urge to go for the Hail Mary.

'Hey Eva, you wouldn't happen to want to help me out?' he asked inside his mind, deciding it was better to ask than trust his guesswork to bring it home.

>DrMindYour_Business: He is thinking so hard he might be constipated

>YourMothersGardner: Word to your mother, I can see fusion reaction going off in his head, he is thinking so hard.

>RefereeGordanBrown: That violation was mild, I let you get away with a warning.

>\$YourMum: Boy, if you F&%ck N2\$£# don't shut the F&%ck we all finna have hot and that's on grove street.

{I suppose I could, but last we agreed that you wouldn't rely too heavily on the system's capabilities. Word of advice, this is just like pocket, just with smaller stakes.} Eva responded, sounding rather amused, likely looking forward to his performance.

Sighing at her answer, he focused on the board, kicking his sliders to get more comfortable. He brought his feet up on the chair and proceeded to crouch up on it, overlooking the board. "What are you doing?" May voiced finding his actions odd enough to voice her confusion.

"Don't worry about it, this posture is proven to improve logical thinking ability," Rakim replied with a light smile before stretching his hand out. "You love Taylor too much to pick her, so that's too obvious. It's not Lionel Messi or Ronaldo, they're too famous. It could be Billie Eilish, but you know I know how much you listen to her songs."

In a matter of moments, he had knocked down three of his remaining ten images, all the while maintaining eye contact with May. "It's not Meghan Markle, you still haven't forgiven her for leaving Suits. You said yes to them being athletes, so I knock down Kim and Kylie. Might as well knock down Drake and President Obama because no matter how many pick-up games they do with athletes, they ain't really ballers."

"So you're just going to arbitrarily knock down images based on your guesses," May asked after seeing that he had somehow narrowed it down to just two images.

"Don't worry about it and let me land," he off-handedly responded as he locked down on the remaining two images. "Your person is either Simone Biles or Serena Williams"

May's lips twitched, her fingers intertwining above the table, trying her best to look composed. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't..." she muttered, trying to keep her expression neutral, but Rakim knew her too well to miss the little details.

StreetsNeedAnswers: NAH. He's onto something; maybe I should start sitting like that whenever I'm in trouble. Could potentially improve my waffle success rate by 15%BigBroher420: 15% of 0 is still nothing.
@StreetsNeedAnswers: Hand in your jersey.WigSnatchersUnited: Boy, WTF am I watching? he just locked in and wham.👑xX_PureL_Dealer_Xx: Wait a moment, he may not have connected the dots, let's see if he lands first. 🖐️🖐️

"You know if I get this, you lose, right? May Parker, do you really want to be the one responsible for ending my losing streak? You know what they say about a losing gambler: they're just one victory away from a comeback." Rakim said his light green eyes locked onto her deeper coloured ones, intensifying the moment between them.

"Sure, go ahead, and folks don't listen to this idiot, gambling is never the answer. Once you lose, do the responsible thing and leave the table." May retorted before shooting him an admonishing glare for his comment. "Go ahead and make your move."

Rakim tilted his head, still perched on the chair. "Serena Williams is great and all, as a matter of fact, I think I heard you singing one of her songs from her 2011track in the shower, not even hardcore fans do that." He commented, causing her glare to intensify, warning him to stop talking before she went nuclear.

"Honestly, she would have been my guess if I didn't remember how much you cried and cheered to the Simone Biles Story: Courage to Soar documentary," Rakim stated with an Aha smile like a 70s detective who had suddenly discovered the final villain. May stared at him, jaw tight, but her fingers trembled just slightly on the table. "That... was a good documentary," she said, voice quiet but defensive.

Rakim's grin widened as he slowly raised one hand and pointed toward one of the images, and flicked it down, leaving only one standing. "Is your person Serena Williams?" he asked, causing the smile that had just appeared on May's face to stop in its tracks. It was now more crooked than a hairline at a Turkish barber shop.

May stared at the single remaining image for a few silent seconds—Serena Williams standing tall and powerful in mid-serve. The once-glowing confidence in her posture visibly eroded as chat flooded with emojis, keyboard smashes, and animated GIFs. She sucked her teeth, folded her arms across her chest, and let out an exasperated sigh.

"...Yes," she mumbled in defeat.

Rakim let out a victory shout, springing up from his crouched position like he'd just hit a game-winner at the buzzer as he landed on his feet. "LET'S GOOOOO! Your boy's back, chat! It's about to be a crazy summer, Monopoly, Chess, Jengger am that guy!" He spun once, arms stretched wide, then did a light moonwalk toward the camera.

ComebackKidd: THIS MAN SAID TURKISH BARBER 🤡🤡🤡MaysRevengeArc: No way she fumbled that lead. Her revenge arc is about to be something out of John Wick 3. Everybody is catching a body.👊ManlyMan_: We salute our new general, we shall not stop until Rome.GymnastWarrior101:

SIMONE BILES WAS ROBBED 🤖xX_MindPalace_Xx: That was Sherlock Holmes levels of disrespectful brilliance

"Calm down, it's just a game, it's not like you won the Super Bowl or something?" May commented from the side, clearly annoyed at his antics.

"That's true, but guess what," Rakim responded with a light smile, stopping his antics for a second as he leaned closer to her.

"What?" she said, half curious and half just wanting him to stop.

"We don't give a danm cause we won, cause we won." He exclaimed as he prompted Jane to play "I Like It" by Cardi on his entertainment system and did the JJ awkward dance.

May groaned, flopping back into her chair, hoodie now slung back over her shoulder as she hid her face from the camera. "End the stream. I don't want to be perceived anymore."

Rakim laughed, not caring, as he continued to hit his moves. "I'm a monster of your creation, and now it's game over for everybody who is next? You made me work for it, so I'll give you that."

"Work? Bro, you lucked into a hunch like a cockroach surviving a shoe," she muttered into her sleeve.

"Luck? May, that was high-level cognition combined with unparalleled emotional insight," he said, holding one hand to his temple dramatically. "I read you like an open book straight out of detective Canon."

> *MayFansUnited*: Nah, protect her at all costs

> *xX_WomanDown_Xx*: She finna make him sleep on the couch tonight 🤡

> *RackCityPrime*: Bro just activated Ultra Instinct but not for feelings

> *RevengeArcCookin*: Next stream gon' start with him duct-taped to a chair

>S&MQueen: I'd pay to watch that Where can I sign up

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>NotACop: Anyways, does anyone know her address?

Chapter 556 556 Aftermath

[Lockdown Week 3]

"Urgh, I can't stand this anymore, I need to see other people," A sprawled out May groaned from her end of the sofa, barely mustering enough energy to look up. "(Thawk) Are you listening to me?"

Not minding the pillow that smacked the back of his head, Rakim simply raised his hand, giving her a thumbs up. The living room that would usually be clean without a speck of dust now resembled something closer to the aftermath of a battle. Nerf darts lay strewn about, coloured water balloons splattered the rug colourfully.

However, most notably, the glass coffee table in front of the couch had been shattered. If that wasn't bad enough, bits of spaghetti clung to the walls from their most recent food fight. Topping this battlefield, a signed baseball was stuck in the centre of Rakim's 100-inch TV mounted on the wall.

Rakim finally sat up, eyes roaming the destruction around him. "You know, when you said lockdown would be like a vacation, this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

May rolled her eyes dramatically. "Well, I thought it would be fun and romantic since we are together, but I was wrong. There's only so many Netflix shows we can binge and TikTok dances, before I would get sick of looking at your face..."

He shot up in shock, shaking his head as he looked at the baseball lodged firmly in his precious TV. "That's blasphemy, you love my face."

She shrugged nonchalantly, hiding her smile behind a throw pillow. "It's gotten pretty bland the more I see it. Honestly, at this point, I'm wondering if it was ever really that handsome."

"You take that back right now, or prepare for the consequences." Rakim retorted, subconsciously getting up from his side of the sofa, approaching her slowly.

"What are you doing, get back arghh...hahaha" without being able to resist, she was tickled without mercy, her laughter ringing throughout the house.

Rakim pinned her gently onto the sofa, fingers moving swiftly and mercilessly against her sides. May squealed, kicking her legs out wildly, desperately trying to wiggle free.

"Okay—okay! Your face is beautiful! It's stunning! You're the most handsome man I've ever seen," she gasped between fits of giggles, tears of laughter streaming down her flushed cheeks.

Rakim paused, his lips curling into a smug grin. "See, was that so hard?"

May took a deep, exaggerated breath, eyeing him warily. "You're a menace, you know that?"

"I completely agree, and yet, you adore me," he teased, releasing her and settling back beside her on the sofa.

May pushed the hair from her face, pretending to scowl. "Barely."

They fell into an easy silence, listening to the quiet hum of the air conditioning and the occasional bird chirping outside. May eventually rested her head against his shoulder, her fingers drawing lazy circles on his thigh.

"You think we should clean this mess before your parents' video call again? Last time, your mom almost fainted when she saw that we hadn't cleared the table after breakfast; she might actually lose it if she sees this," she murmured.

"Won't she see this anyway when we upload the next episode of our war series on our YouTube channels?" Rakim commented with a light shrug of his shoulder, only then remembering that her head was resting on one of them. "Though we should still clean up, don't know about you, but I can't relax in a messy environment."

"I'll just tell, Lisa, you're a bad influence, so I guess it's fine." She replied in a matter-of-fact tone, smacking his knee as if she had just thought about it. "You're right through, even in a pandemic, we shouldn't become Pagans ourselves."

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[Week-3, 14:20]

"Ma'am, yes ma'am." Rakim snapped a mock salute, grabbed the broom, and began herding errant Nerf darts into a dustpan like neon-orange sheep. May scooped spaghetti off the wall with a spatula, both humming the Annie Hard Knock Life song.

Fifty sticky, sweaty minutes later, the living room looked magazine-ready as the floors had been hoovered, scrubbed and washed. The carpet had been deep cleaned, after being hoovered and softened with special centre powders. The walls had been scrubbed spotless, and anything that they had broken and couldn't be saved had been thrown in the bin.

The room looked spotless with no hints of the earlier chaos, if not for the signed Barry Bonds baseball stuck in the TV. Rakim had tried to turn it on, and surprisingly, it did if one ignored the buzzing sound and the spider-webbed cracks that made it impossible to make out anything.

Slouching down on a single-seater couch, Rakim stared unflinchingly at the crater. "She was only five months old."

"Quit pouting," May said, wiping her hands on a towel. "One might think you lost something important by the way you act."

"She was important, you wouldn't understand the relationship between a man and his TV." He retorted, resisting the urge to reach for a handkerchief to wipe some imaginary tears.

"Y'know what I don't really care, just cry quietly, please. I'm calling Emma; Jenna's farm life sounds like the exact opposite of this disaster." She ruthlessly responded before fishing out her MacBook Air, placing it on a much smaller wooden coffee table meant for those sitting at the edge to place their coffee mugs.

Since they had destroyed the glass coffee table, she had to make use of it. It barely rang twice before the first person joined the call, and Emma appeared with her light blond hair tied in a messy braid. Next to her, Jenna sat with her long black hair tied in a ponytail with a baby lamb cradled in her lap as she fed it a bottle of milk.

A second later, Olivia joined the call, her petite figure enveloped in an oversized Princeton hoodie. Olivia was the first to speak, the sleeves of her hoodie flopping like extra-long rabbit ears. "Guys, I swear Princeton's dorms were never this empty. You could film a zombie movie in the corridor and nobody would notice."

Olivia's screen juddered as she swung her laptop around to show a silent, fluorescent-lit corridor. "There, see? If a brain-eater popped out, I'd just hand it my last packet of ramen and wish it luck."

Emma laughed so hard that the lamb in Jenna's lap bleated in alarm. "Try waking up at five to actually feed creatures, Liv. Jenna's dad has me shearing sheep by sunrise, then it's straight to the milking shed. I smell like a walking cheese stick."

"Worth it though—look at this fluffball. He thinks Emma's his mum." Jenna held up a fleecy bundle. "Plus, and I quote, it was you who said, since we are here, we should help with work"

"Which is hilarious," May said, propping her chin on her hand. "Em's idea of 'outdoorsy' used to be the Starbucks patio or a walk around the lake."

"I've grown and matured, now I ride dirtbikes with the best of them like budget action hero." Emma stuck out her tongue. "Plus, where are you going? You're not in your room?"

Olivia sighed theatrically. "Unlike you guys, who can go out whenever you want, we have a rota for each floor to use the quad. If you overrun your hour, the staff look at you as if you punched their baby."

May winced. "And here I was complaining about having to wipe spaghetti off the skirting boards."

Rakim, only half-listening, flicked through online catalogues on his phone. "Do you reckon I can squeeze a one-twenty-inch OLED in here? Maybe something curved—"

May elbowed him. "Priorities, blockhead, we are busy bonding over here."

"Is that something to say after you threw a curveball into my pristine TV?" He retorted, annoyance dripping from his tone.

"Yeah, yeah. We all make mistakes. Emma, tell us about your life on the farm. Did you get to milk a Cow yet?" May nonchalantly retorted, unwilling to hear another tirade about that blooming TV.

Emma puffed a loose wisp of hair from her forehead. "Did I get to milk a cow? Girl, I am the cow-shift manager now. Five a.m. sharp—udders in my face, Jenna's dad quoting Yellowstone like it's scripture."

Jenna nodded gravely beside her. "She complained for exactly two mornings, then started racing the farmhand on a dirt bike to see who could open the north paddock first."

Emma grinned. "Loser buys breakfast, which is normally just fresh eggs and whatever pastry Mrs McKinnon left cooling on the sill. Honestly, farm life is sorta fun if you give it a chance."

Olivia snorted. "Cardio? My highlight was sprinting down four flights because some sophomore taped the shared kitchen toaster's 'bagel' button so it wouldn't pop. The whole corridor smelled like cremated cinnamon."

"You think you have it hard? We wake up to birds chirping, work out with some morning Yoga, and make our own breakfast before a round of morning streaming. I feel your struggle." May sighed in exhaustion, feeling like she had just dropped a load on her chest.

"This is bulls\$!t"

Chapter 557 Dignity

[Date: 17/04/2020 | Lockdown Week 4 | Time: 12:08 AM | Location: Victor Parker – Penthouse, NYC]

The penthouse lights barely flickered now, most dimmed or burnt out, casting Victor Parker in a ghostly halo as he sat on the scuffed hardwood of his private study. The glass coffee table had been shattered days ago—its jagged edges still unrepaired, one of them faintly stained with blood from a gash he'd gotten when he'd thrown his phone into it on Tuesday.

The room smelled like old coffee, expensive cologne, mixed with sweat, giving off a stench of desperation. Victor's suit, a once-pristine Brioni navy number, now sagged off his frame like a husk. The jacket had been tossed aside in anger, revealing his wrinkled shirt and vest. Dark coffee blotches down the sleeve, and a jagged tear on the right arm where, in a fit of frenzy, he had punched a hole through his office door.

His collar was open, his tie missing, and his shirt buttons were askew. A messy mix of gauze and bandages was lazily wrapped around his left hand. The 70-inch TV in the corner played CNN on mute, the ticker moving with methodical cruelty across the bottom of the screen: "WeWork rescue deal officially terminated... SoftBank cites 'material adverse changes' amid lockdown uncertainty..."

Victor didn't flinch anymore; he just blinked as he was already numb, on the verge of accepting his fate. His pupils were blown wide, bloodshot and glassy as his gaze flicked over to the screen displaying the Bloomberg terminal. It had been blinking red for 72 hours straight, the charts showing nothing but Collapsing lines.

Margin call warnings were stacked in the bottom left corner like a digital autopsy report. His mouth moved, but no sound came out, as in this situation, his silver tongue was of no use. With trembling fingers, he opened his encrypted satellite laptop, immediately establishing an exclusive line connected to Enzo, their founder and a man from old money.

He tapped in a code, the device blinked blue, and after three rings, the call connected. "Victor," came the smooth Italian-accented voice of Enzo. "You don't look too good, my friend. I know things have been hard, but you should relax a little."

Victor ignored the jab. "I need a temporary swap line—twelve hours, max. Bridge loan collateralised with equity in three REITs. You know the names."



Enzo's laughter rang sharp and mean through the speaker. "You think I'm going to wire you a dollar after what just happened with SoftBank?" He leaned back, puffing a cigar. "You're radioactive, Parker. I told you when we met that I don't entertain rabid dogs; I put them down. You, my friend, have been spiralling for some time now, what you don't think I'd notice because I'm all the way in Geneva."

Victor snapped, voice hoarse and brittle. "You got it wrong, I've got things under control, I'm close to salvaging the situation."

Enzo remained silent for a beat, puffing out a plume of smoke from his cigar as he gazed at Victor, his brown eyes examining the man across the screen. "You were always clever, Victor. But now you reek of fear. And fear makes even clever men stupid. Word of advice from an old friend: exit the field with some dignity."

The line went dead with a mechanical click, leaving only the low hum of the Bloomberg terminal and Victor's shallow breathing. He stared at the black screen for several seconds after Enzo hung up. The silence gnawed at him more than the insult. Dignity? That was a currency he'd run out of months ago.

He didn't move—not immediately. Only after the Bloomberg terminal chirped again did he blink back into motion. Another liquidation warning indicated that the stocks in his hands were losing value. He had been too busy trying to dig himself out of his hole that he didn't have time to read the winds of change in the market.

He stood slowly, knees stiff, every motion haunted. Across the desk, his phone buzzed with back-to-back Zoom call requests from the Atlantis Fund partners. Alexandra Wu, who was currently in Tokyo, was calling for the umpteenth time, probably trying to get answers. Enzo, the sycopath he was, also listened to the call, probably acting as if he knew nothing, as he enjoyed the show.

The man had grown up in a mafia family, managing to survive the succession battle and build his own financial empire as his elder brother ascended to the position of Dom. Despite distancing himself from the family in Milan, he still retained some of the Valentini family's tendency for cruelty. His brand of cruelty was attuned to finance as he enjoyed propping up talented individuals and watching them slowly unravel with their newfound wealth and power.

Victor let the incoming Zoom pings stack until the screen looked like a bullet-holed windshield. He finally killed the laptop camera, switched the mic to mute, and slid into the meeting beneath a cold alias: V.P.-NYC.

Faces materialised in gridded fury. Alexandra Wu-Tokyo, bun tight as a banker's knot. Lorenzo "Enzo" Giordano-Geneva, half-smile behind lazy smoke rings. Two junior partners from London he barely recognised. "Fifteen seconds," Alexandra said, voice flint-sharp. "Convince us not to file a derivative action and freeze your desk."

Victor's pulse hammered. "The deal died—but the chassis is intact. Give me forty-eight hours to reopen the credit window. I've lined up off-market collateral."

Enzo tilted his bourbon. "Name it."

Victor swallowed. "Proprietary—secured equity in an untouched vehicle. You'll get the ISDA docs by dawn." He clicked off the call and left them shouting at his empty tile.

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He crossed the study to the wall safe, keying in the date that was once the happiest moment of his life. 0-7-0-3-1-9-8-2. The date he married his late first wife, who, despite being from a wealthy family, accepted him for who he was. She had supported his career, making sure their family was ok even on her deathbed.

The door clanked open. Inside, among passports and offshore fobs, sat a slim titanium Ledger drive.

Sandra Maria Smith

Inheritance Trust

Est. 2001

Trustee: Victor A. Parker

His own signature, embossed almost two decades ago with his late wife stared back like an accusation. This was different from the regular trust he had set up for their children, which he had used to cover the shortfall of his losses. This was the inheritance Sandra had left for their daughter, and he knew that if he used it, there was no going back.

Victor slumped into the desk chair and jacked the drive into the satellite laptop. A login window bloomed—facial recognition plus thumb-scan. The thumb he offered was wrapped in gauze; the sensor refused him twice before buzzing green.

Balances floated onto the screen: USD 242,811,467.12 in blue-chip treasuries, USD 80,900,000 in liquid cash. It wasn't enough, but it would do to staunch the arterial bleed—if he could pledge it undetected.

He opened a blank PDF credit facility template and began working immediately. Borrower line: Atlantis Fund (Victor A. Parker, Managing Partner). Pledged asset line: MEP FAMILY TRUST — SUBORDINATED LIEN. For the signature block, he copied May's digital autograph, which he had lifted from an old permission form she'd e-signed in high school.

The mouse cursor hovered, and his vision blurred with tears as the memory of May's first step flashed through his mind. She wobbled toward him like a baby deer trying to muster the strength to stay upright. "Daddy, look!"

He routed the document through a dummy DocuSign chain—a shell directorate in the Caymans, an overnight notary in Dubai who owed him two favours—and back to the desk. Total time, seven minutes. He squeezed his eyes until the image shattered, and he gritted his teeth before proceeding.

He watched with bloodshot eyes as the inheritance trust quickly drained the money being transferred to another trust he fully controlled. "Since you want Dignity, you should first show me yours." He muttered to himself as a dark plan started forming in his mind, unwilling to go down alone.

Chapter 558 Victor's Gambit

[Date: 20 April 2020 | Lockdown Week 4 | Time: 12:44 AM | Location: Victor Parker – Penthouse, NYC]

A couple of days later, Victor had finally had a good night's sleep and even managed to catch a long overdue shower. He had been ridden with guilt the next day, but his resolve was affirmed once he got the notification that all the assets in the inheritance trust had been resolved into liquid funds. So, he put all other thoughts behind him as he began planning his next steps, looking for ways to save himself.

He had realised no amount of pleading or begging would help, as no one was coming to save him. Wall Street was inherently a shark pond, and these predators would rather attack an injured shark or simply let the piranhas in the pond devour the scraps. For this reason alone, he had no qualms in taking a shot at Enzo if that meant that his fall would be less tragic.

Ding: The transfer confirmation pinged. A sterile, two-tone chime that should have sounded triumphant only scraped across Victor's nerves. Balance remaining in May's inheritance: \$0.00. New balance in the "Joseph Memorial fund": +\$323,711,467.12

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Victor exhaled, a ragged, wheezing gust that fogged the laptop screen. Barley fretted over the fact that he was using his late brother-in-law's fund, which was meant for charitable donations. He ran a trembling hand through his hair, slicking sweat back from his temples, and opened a secure line to his backroom. It was too late to consider any moral considerations, so he simply began transferring accounts to and from different holdings.

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Darkness shatters like glass as I gasp for air, my lungs clawing for the breath of life. Before I even open my eyes, I can feel a sticky mixture clinging to my skin. 'May was right, I should have dragged myself to the shower no matter how tired I felt,' I find myself thinking as I try hard to drown out the noises that swarm my senses.

It worked after a while as the pain from my brain being rattled awake reduced to an annoying drone. However, that's when a thick, oily scent floods my nervous system as I can almost taste it on the tip of my tongue. Frowning slightly as I try to identify this new scent, a damp but sour metallic scent emerges.

Moving my body slightly, trying to shake these disconcerting sensations, I feel the rough texture of my cot rubbing against my bare back. It somewhat works as the scent becomes less overwhelming, allowing me to adjust to it. 'Wait a minute, Cot? What happened to my Egyptian cashmere and mohair memory phone mattress?'

With fright, a jolt shot through my body as I found myself sitting up right, my eyes struggling to adjust to the different lights as I frantically tried to make sense of my current situation. It took a moment, but I managed to regain focus, and the visual feedback I received caused my world to freeze. The cot underneath me creaked, the metallic legs screeching faintly against the mud-packed ground.

I blink again, and the blurred ceiling begins to focus as I take in the hustle and bustle of my current location. I had somehow not noticed that I was in the middle of a huge medical tent with groaning boys receiving varying injuries, receiving treatment. A buzzing sound drills at the edge of my hearing, and it wasn't the sound of my \$500 AC. It's flies, a swarm of them.

A few flickers crossed my vision, dancing along the walls of the tent and strung up from the ceiling. Only now did I notice that the light in my vision was coming from lanterns. Subconsciously, choking up, my mouth feels drier than I ever remember it being, and my lips feel cracked. Looking around, used bandages and gauze drenched with old blood littered the ground.

I try to swallow, but it's like dragging sandpaper down my throat. This all feels so familiar, but I can't bring myself to believe it to be. I was given a second chance, right? So what is this BS? 'Hey Eva, are you there?' Silence was all that met me as I watched the tent walls flap sluggishly with the humid wind leaking in from the jungle.

'Don't do this to me, please tell me I'm just dreaming,' I thought, more like begged, hoping for it to all be a feverish nightmare. But yet again, my question was met with silence as the beating of my heart intensified, sending a jolt of panic through my system.

The air is so thick with heat, blood, and sweat that it clings to my skin like a second layer. I shift slightly, wincing at the pressure around my abdomen. That's when I notice the bandages — rough, tight, and crusted with dried pus and sweat. My fingers tremble as they trace them, sending a real jolt of pain through my system as memories of the injury flash through my brain.

'That's right, I got shot in the fifth offensive, but that doesn't explain the bandages on my head.' I thought as I remembered my squad being bogged down in a gun fight as we were sent on a suicide mission by General Kofi.

"No one over 16," I subconsciously mumbled out loud, recalling the saying the soldiers here had for the general. It wasn't an outright rule, but kids around fifteen get sent on more challenging missions that usually ended with them dying.

A cough wracked my chest, dry and violent, nothing like the healthy lungs of an athlete that I had gotten used to. The difference was like comparing Intel Xeon processors to the Pentium 4; there was simply no comparison. Right now, he felt much older than he actually was; he was a battered existence of life that had followed the thread of fate.

This version of him hadn't fled the trafficking ring in Cuba, hadn't snuck onto the going Mary, and worst of all, had never tasted the sweet taste of hope. Dread and despair were all this version of him had ever known as he was beaten and indoctrinated into obedience. "How did I even survive that grenade?" I found myself wondering as fragments of the mission returned to me.

We had managed to dispatch an enemy squad, only for one of them in a last act of a f~@k you to drop a grenade. 'Sami', the smiling figure of his senior, flashed me, causing me to remember that he had speared me to the ground, protecting me from the blast.

'Yes, someone eventually found me and I was brought here, but didn't I die from COVID?' I wondered to myself as the last pieces of confusion settled with the final fragments of memories.

"You look like shit," a crisp voice sounded from the side, gripping his attention as the silhouette of an old man entered his vision.

"Dr Kwame?" I subconsciously asked the man's name, which appeared in my mind almost naturally.

He stood a pace away, wearing fatigues two sizes too big and surgical gloves stained with iodine. His chest was bare beneath the flak vest, ribs sharp against dark skin, a mess of tribal scars and bullet holes carved into his body like history books. A dirty cloth mask was tied lazily around his neck, and his eyes were sunken but sharp.

"Oh, Rakim... you're awake, eh? Looks like you managed to beat the fever," he said, approaching with a limp, his wooden foot piercing into the ground. His eyes flicked down to my bandages before returning to my face. "Didn't think you'd make it, not after the way you were burning up last night. Some of these fools were saying the mamba spirit had come for you."

I blinked, trying to focus, but he kept talking, as if filling the air so I wouldn't slip back into the dark. "I don't know much about this 'Covid' thing the radio was talking about, but if that's what had you twisted up, then this"—he gripped the back of my head after removing his glove, measuring my temperature—"this is a good sign."



I said nothing, simply letting him do as he pleased as I pieced together shards of broken memories. His fingers were still on my scalp, cool and coarse, when the floodgates opened.

A kaleidoscope of memory bled into the present—disjointed, violent, sweet. Emma’s giggle. May’s scent on my sheets. Lisa, my mother, cheers at my games and training, and my Dad, who had taught me what it meant to be a man in a world that seemed to redefine that definition. I jerked my head away from Kwame’s hand, breath hitching. The canvas roof above me suddenly loomed like a shroud. Everything tilted, and darkness engulfed me.

#### Chapter 559 Merchant Of Death

I jolted awake, a couple of hours later, just as the morning sun peeked over the horizon. My body felt heavier than lead, as if gravity itself had wrapped chains around my limbs. I blinked hard, the air thick with the coppery scent of blood, diesel, and rotting bandages. Sweat trickled from my temple to the crook of my neck, the jungle heat taking full effect, letting me know I was awake and this was not a dream.

Taking a deep breath, I fought through the pain around my abdomen as I swung my feet off the cot, sitting up for what felt like ages. Ignoring the sounds of snoring and the fact that my bare feet dug into the earth that had been softened by either blood or rain, I forced myself to stand. I needed to see it for myself, as no amount of memories or the pain that coursed through my body could suffice.

Taking a shallow breath, I willed my legs to move, which was much harder than I would like to admit. Then again, considering what I had, no, what this body had been through, it wasn’t that hard to believe. I could smell the last members of a bonfire just behind the flaps of the tents as I neared. I pushed through the tent flaps with the last dregs of willpower, the canvas slapping softly behind me as I emerged into the smoky morning.

The air outside hit differently. It was hotter somehow—denser. Sweat broke across my shoulders immediately, soaking into the coarse fabric wrapped around my torso. The sunrise bled through the

jungle like gold spilt across an oil painting, but nothing about this view was beautiful. The camp appeared to have been hastily assembled with desperation and a hint of rusted ambition.

Shanty tents and patched tarps stretched between termite-bitten posts. Fires had burned low, leaving nothing but embers and skeletal logs. Tin cans, bullet casings, and wet boots littered the ground as teenagers slept next to them, not having the luxury to look for a bed.

In the distance, I heard the shriek of a monkey echo through the jungle, answered by the distant thump of automatic gunfire—somewhere beyond the treeline. My legs buckled, in despair, but I caught myself against a crate marked with faded Cyrillic script—old Russian munitions, probably.

A boy walked past me barefoot, carrying a jerrycan almost his size. He couldn't have been older than ten. He looked at me, eyes sunken and unreadable, before turning his head forward again. That glance that lacked any sign of hope or joy told me everything. This was real.

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It had been two weeks since I awoke from what I can only describe as the cruellest of nightmares. Since I hadn't known joy, getting to experience it genuinely was the equivalent of sipping from a gold chalice. Now I feel hollower than I ever did before, often waking up from vivid dreams of my life with the Rex family, only to wake in this reality.

Every night, the dreams grew more vibrant, unwilling to let me forget in some twisted form of torture. I barely spoke anymore, not because I didn't want to, but because words felt useless. I was barely resisting the urge to end my own life, as dealing with people who had been brainwashed to fight for the lunatics' cause would push me over the edge.

A worn-out Bible that belonged to one of the boys who didn't make it became my only solace. Kwame had slipped it into my grasp after catching me with the barrel of a pistol in my mouth. Strangely, he didn't talk me off the ledge and simply waited for me to come to my own conclusion.

"You lack courage, boy," were his only words as he thrust the bible he had just been about to throw away into my hands. Remembering the nights spent reading verses with Emma and our parents, strangely, kept me calm.

Getting the good book didn't magically fix things; I didn't suddenly become okay with my situation. No, in fact, I became more indignant, but I stopped asking why me and instead started to figure out why not me. Since this life had decided to play the cruellest of jokes with mine and many others' lives, I realised that only I could save myself.

But what I prayed for the most was for god to stop me from doing what I was considering doing, but he never did. As a matter of fact, things seemed to align in my favour as not long after I had healed enough to hold a weapon, I was assigned to a mission to pick up the peace maker. He wasn't some saviour either, as we referred to him as the merchant of death for obvious reasons. Whenever he came to visit, kids died, spilling blood for the man's ambitions.

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"Rakim!" Kosongo's voice cut through the morning humidity like a blade. "Get your gear. We move in ten."

I looked up from the Bible's worn pages where I'd been reading Ecclesiastes—something about a time for war and a time for peace. The irony wasn't lost on me. At seventeen, Kosongo carried himself with

the seriousness of someone who'd never known childhood, his assault rifle slung across his back almost like a seasoned soldier.

"The Peacemaker, what's he like?" I asked, since I had never actually met the guy in person, as I was never assigned to be his meat shield.

"It doesn't matter, just do your job, the others are waiting." Kosongo curtly replied as he adjusted the machete hanging from his waist.

I clenched my jaw, slipped the Bible into the inner pocket of my torn flak vest, and tightened the makeshift belt that kept my cargo pants from falling off my hips. Picking up the battered semi-auto that leaned against my cot, I didn't bother responding as I followed him out to a worn-out Jeep.

The Jeep squatted under a neem tree, its safari-yellow paint long scabbed away by rust and bullet pocks. Ade Kosongos' second in command sat behind the wheel, foot feathering the throttle so the engine throbbed like a sick heartbeat. 14-year-old Abu was already in the cargo bay, swinging his legs and stroking the green tube of his RPG like a pet python.

13-year-old Kwame checked magazine springs with the quick, deft fingers, manoeuvring around his weapon with practised ease. Ade leaned against a front fender, humming a half-remembered pop song while he honed the edge of his knife on a whetstone no larger than a dog tag. Kosongo hopped into the passenger seat as I vaulted into the cargo bay, joining Kwame and Abu.

The Jeep jolted forward, rattling hard enough that my teeth clicked. Red dust kicked up behind us, swallowing the camp as though it had never existed. Roads didn't exist in the jungle, only dirt tracks churned through repeated travels.

Abu filled the silence with nervous chatter. "They say the airstrip used to fly out copper ingots. Now it flies in diamonds and bullets." His knuckles tapped the RPG's warhead like a lucky charm.

Kwame shot him a warning glance. "Save your breath. If things go wrong, we need steady hands."

Ade cut in from the driver's seat, eyes on the rutted path. "Things always go wrong. That's why we're here." He downshifted, engine growling as the Jeep crawled up a steep rise slick with moss.

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Fifteen miles later, as the noon sun reached its apex, the sound of the engine resounded as a muddy jeep broke through a line of trees. It drove onto the dirt path leading to the makeshift landing strip that was intentionally kept far away from the camp. Ade manoeuvred the car to the end of the landing strip, coming to a stop as they waited.

They waited for an hour straight doing routine perimeter scans to pass the time, but luckily, they only had to wait an hour. The buzzing sounds of propellers resounded overhead as a small black and white passenger jet descended on the landing strip.

Chapter 560 Hyundai

The propellers chopped through the thick air, slicing the silence with an ominous rhythm. Dust stirred into the fading light as the black-and-white jet slowed, kicking up a thin cloud that danced around its wheels. They didn't stand at attention as the plane approached, but they felt the tension rise, causing them to become more nervous subconsciously.

Kosongo's hand tightened around the grip of his rifle as the plane slowed to a stop, its propellers slowly losing momentum. "Eyes sharp. Don't embarrass me."

Abu shifted nervously beside me, whispering, "They say the Merchant of Death's entourage never travels light. Good food means danger, so maybe we will finally get to eat our fill."

The ramp lowered with a mechanical hiss, and out stepped a man dressed in a clean, grey suit. His leather dress shoes squeaked with each step that he took in descending the stairs as two goons dressed in black followed after him.

The man's face was pale, with cold blue eyes that scanned the clearing as if sizing up prey. His hair, slicked back with a shine that caught the dying sunlight, gave him the look of a Wall Street predator rather than a warlord's backer. The nickname "Merchant of Death" seemed too fitting for someone so composed, so meticulously groomed amidst this chaos.

Kosongo moved forward with seriousness, approaching the man with a serious gaze. "Sir Michle, welcome. We are ready to move at your command."

Sir Michle offered a smirk that didn't reach his eyes, barely managing to hold back the feeling of disgust as he watched the contingent of kids sent to greet him. He gave a slow, deliberate nod. "Captain

Kosongo," he said, his voice smooth but dripping with condescension. "Let's not lose anymore daylight, load some of the goods I brought for my friend Kofie, and we can be on our way."

Kosongo's jaw tightened, but he held his composure as, despite not being educated, he could pick up on the fact that the man in front of him didn't even consider him a human being. He was just the tool raised by the man's puppet, used to do his bidding, not worthy of respect or care. "Get moving, you useless things." He shouted at his squad in frustration, venting the sense of shame he was feeling.

The boys did not argue with him as they moved to the back loading bay, where the two bodyguards of Michle had started unloading wooden crates. They loaded the goods onto two preprepared cargo jeeps, taking 20 minutes to unload the plane before they hit the road. Not long after, the three jeeps formed a small convoy as they drove back into the jungle.

Kosongo, along with Abu, rode in the front Jeep. Sir Michle rode in the second Jeep with Rakim sitting in the cargo bay, and as the 13-year-old Kwame drove. Ade and the only bodyguard, Sir Michle brought, made up the rear of the convoy.

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The dirt trail shook under the convoy's weight as the jeeps rumbled through the dense jungle. The sun was relentless, baking the red dust that curled like smoke behind us. The air was thick and heavy, filled with the scent of wet earth and gun oil.

In the cargo bay, with my back turned to the two in front, I slipped the small Bible back into my chest pocket. Silently opening the cargo crate, which was surprisingly easy with how much noise this rustbucket made, I got a look at what we were transporting. Inside wasn't what I expected.

Well, there were guns and grenades, but what caught my attention was the military-style satellite phone inside a clear box. It was awfully familiar, almost like I had seen it somewhere, but then it clicked as to where I had seen it. Every time this guy had visited the camp, the general would change his phone as the people behind him were paranoid to an almost pathological level.

Without even thinking about it, I flicked open the straps of the box and pocketed the phone along with two grenades. Despite the phone likely being linked to their system, I recall Uncle Joe teaching us how to perform a factory reset on a similar phone. Even though that was just a dream, the knowledge I learned stuck with me even now.

Following the steps of his memory, he turned the phone on, navigated to its settings, and reset it to its default settings. It took 10 minutes for the phone to turn back on, but he switched out the battery with one of the spare ones in the box, sprinkling a bit of the dirt from his boots inside in an attempt to force the system to work harder. He figured that it's the equivalent of dust entering a PC, forcing it to work 10 times as hard to compensate.

Turning it back on, the first thing I did was switch to the location sharing setting. Typing in the international emergency rescue figures, which was a 10-digit number, I didn't waste time broadcasting both our location and the coordinates of our camp to anyone and everyone. Once that was done, I slipped the phone into the inner pocket of Sir Michael's Duffel bag, closing it as if I had never touched it.

Closing my eyes, I rested, doing my best to drown out the obnoxious voice of Sir Michle, who seemed to think that bragging to child soldiers made him a big man. I could tell that Kwame only cared about the fact that he would get a full meal tonight.

Fifteen minutes later, the path widened into a dusty clearing framed by thick acacia, mahogany, ebony, limba, and wenge trees. That's when I felt an overwhelming sense of danger, reminding me of when I was on the pitch in my dream. Only this time, it felt more dreadful, sending a spine-tingling sense of fear in my every being.

I didn't even have the time to make sense of what this sudden feeling was or where it was coming from when the car behind us exploded into flames. It lit up like a Christmas tree, imitating the brightness of a Hyundai as the two figures riding within were obliterated.

The explosion sent a shockwave that punched through the trees, lifting the rear Jeep into the air like a toy. I barely registered the blast before the concussive force knocked me sideways into the side rail of the cargo bay. Kwame swerved violently to the left, cursing under his breath as shrapnel rained past us like metal hail.

"Contact! Rear's gone!" Kosongo's voice barked through the walkie unit, static crackling from his headset.

"Ambush!" Abu shouted over the radio, before switching to automatic fire as muzzle flashes lit up the tree line on both sides.

Not willing to wait and test whether they could match Luke Cage bullet for bullet, Kwame floored the accelerator, tires screaming as our Jeep jerked forward in an uneven lurch. I lay prone in the back, picking out an assault rifle from the cargo and started firing haphazardly. Through the chaos of our escape, I spotted Ade crawling out of the inferno, half his uniform scorched and torn.

He limped behind a fallen log, laying down wild covering fire as the bodyguard beside him lay twisted like a discarded doll, eyes open and glassy. Sir Michle was shouting something, ducking low in the backseat like the coward he was, arms flailing. "What the bloody hell was that?! Do something, you savages!" And I almost shot him on reflex.

Kwame didn't even bother with him as he continued following the leading car, no longer solely sticking to the road. We quickly gained tails as packs of jeeps swarmed towards us, converging on the road behind us. I was about to open fire on them when Kwame suddenly jerked the car to the right, causing Sir Michle's face to smack against the glass.

Before the man could even complain, an RPG rocket whistled past us, travelling along the position that the leading pursuer had just hit head-on. Einstein was right on his reaction theory as the leading car took out four other vehicles behind it, resembling a Hollywood movie scene of a train being bombarded.

The fireball behind us lit up the treetops like a false sunrise, sending shockwaves through the jungle canopy. Black smoke spiralled into the air, thick and pungent, and the roar of the explosion swallowed the sound of metal twisting and men screaming.

"Shit!" Kwame grunted, narrowly avoiding a tree as he whipped the wheel left, then right. The Jeep fishtailed on the dirt track, skidding into a narrow side path barely wide enough for two men to walk through, let alone drive. But it was our only shot.

"Hold on!" he screamed.