

From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)

Chapter 101

[651 words]

The butler slipped out of the game room as fast as he could, worried Laurinda might rope him into staying longer. She was already on her way to emptying out his secret stash of cash.

"Laurinda, there's someone named Baker at the gate asking to see you."

Laurinda paused, bills in hand, frowning as she tried to place the name. Baker? It didn't ring any bells. She couldn't think of any reason the Baker family would want something from her.

"The Baker family? What could they want with me? Maybe they couldn't get to the Austins, so now they're coming after me. Or is Aiken's compensation still dragging on?"

"I'll go check it out," Adolphus offered, frowning as he stood up, clearly concerned. Laurinda reached out and held him back by the wrist. "No, let me handle it." "Are you sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be? If he managed to track me down here, he must really want to see me. And come on, this is my house. No way am I letting someone come in and push me around."

She told Adolphus and Sam to wait in the game room and went out by herself, asking the butler to bring their visitor inside.

Baal followed the butler in, carrying a gift. When his eyes landed on Laurinda, he smiled in that warm, affectionate way older relatives do when they see someone younger.

Laurinda stood up and nodded politely. "How did you find this place, Baal? What brings you here today?"

Her voice was courteous but clearly kept some distance, which only seemed to make Baal's smile grow. He nodded back.

"I heard you'd been hurt, so I wanted to check in and see how you're doing. How's your recovery going? Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you." Laurinda's smile was polite but didn't reach her eyes. She didn't buy his concern for a second. As far as she knew, she had nothing to do with the Baker family. The fact that Baal managed to find her here was more than a little suspicious.

"I'm curious how you even found this place. Hardly anyone knows I live here."

Laurinda didn't bother with small talk. She just asked outright.

Baal didn't seem thrown by her bluntness. He made himself comfortable. "I actually helped your parents with the paperwork when they bought this land. So finding you wasn't hard."

Laurinda blinked in surprise. "Really? How is that possible?"

Even Larson and Beatrice didn't know about this estate. The idea that Baal was involved from the beginning was completely unexpected.

Seeing she didn't quite believe him, Baal handed the gift to the butler and took a seat on the couch like he belonged there.

"It's true. I've known your parents for a long time. In fact, I might be the only one besides you who knows they weren't really Abbott and Florrie."

Laurinda narrowed her eyes, studying him closely. Her parents had never mentioned this man. She'd always assumed she was the only one who knew the truth. The idea that Baal was in on their secret made her uneasy.

"You... are..."

She grew cautious, unsure what his real intentions were for showing up now and telling her all this.

Baal watched her quietly, accepting a cup of tea from the butler and taking a sip.

"This is good tea. Your father loved this blend too. I can't believe it still tastes the same. Laurinda, would you like to hear how I met your parents and what happened back then?"

His tone was kind, almost like he was talking to his own child.

But Laurinda knew he'd never treated Adelaide this gently.

She sat across from him, her eyes sharp as she watched this man who seemed a little too at home.

"Go ahead, Baal. I'm actually pretty curious about how you all met."

Baal met her gaze, searching for any sign of emotion and finding none He nodded in approval. She really was their daughter, calm and controlled in a way most people her age could only dream of

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Chapter 102

[586 words]

"Back then, Abbott and I were working together. The Austin family and the Baker family were just small players in Apex, barely making waves. We were both hungry for something bigger, looking for any chance to break out."

"One day, someone gave us a tip about an opportunity in Verdian. Supposedly, it was the perfect chance to expand our businesses. Abbott and I didn't hesitate. We put everything we had on the line, scraped together all our assets, and got on a ship to Verdian."

"It wasn't until we were out at sea that we realized what was really happening. We hadn't signed up for a business venture. We were being trafficked, taken to work as forced labor, basically as slaves."

"We were young, and we weren't about to just accept it. So, we rallied the others on the ship, tried to lead a revolt."

"But we were way too naive. We didn't stop to think that people running a racket like that would have muscle, or weapons. We lost, badly. They took everything from us. We were beaten within an inch of our lives. Florrie... she was six months pregnant. She died right there. Abbott tried to protect her and almost died himself."

"Right when it felt like all hope was gone, a couple showed up. They hid Abbott and me in a small compartment, kept us away from the people hunting us down."

"The ship was chaos. The man risked his life to find a first-aid kit, but Abbott's injuries were too serious. Even with help, he didn't survive."

"While we were hiding, we found out the couple was on the run too. They needed real identities to get into our country. So Abbott offered them his and his wife's names. All he wanted was for them to look out for the Austin family."

"With the couple's help, we eventually made it home. That's how the couple became Abbott and Bella."

"The Baker family owes everything to the resources they gave us. The Austin family even more so. If they hadn't worried that the Austins couldn't handle such a big empire, they could've easily built a legacy in Cabinda."

"But a few years ago, something happened to them."

Baal paused, regret written all over his face, his eyes shadowed with a sadness he couldn't put into words.

Laurinda listened, realizing his story matched what her parents had told her, except they'd never mentioned Baal at all.

They must have had their reasons for leaving him out.

Laurinda lowered her eyes to the cup of floral tea on the table. Her tone was gentle but steady. "Baal, I'm guessing you didn't come here just to tell me stories from the past. Why don't you just say what you want? I wasn't involved back then, so I can't pretend to understand it all."

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Baal didn't expect an eighteen-year-old to see right through him. He let out a soft laugh, a spark of admiration in his gaze.

"You're right. I'm not here just to catch up. I want to talk about working together. I know you have a hand in what's going on with

Austin family. I want the Authent

Group, and I want its main projects. I don't want to see everything the Austins built handed over to the Gates family."

"Oh? You really do know a lot, Baal. If we're talking about a partnership it all depends on what you

table." ring to

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the

Since he'd been called out, Laurinda dropped any pretense. She had her own plans,

but Baal's visit had caught her attention.

If he had something real to offer, maybe working together wasn't such a bad idea.

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Chapter 103

[614 words]

When it came to sincerity, Baal suddenly looked a little uncomfortable. He'd really misjudged Laurinda. He'd thought she was just an eighteen-year-old girl, clever maybe, but still too young to know how the world really worked.

But after meeting her, he realized how wrong he'd been. Her calm, steady gaze was nothing like the innocence he'd expected. It made him cautious, almost nervous.

He cleared his throat, picked up his glass, and took a sip of water, but still didn't say a word.

From the game room, Sam watched Baal stalling and couldn't help but comment, "He's really dragging this out. Doesn't seem like someone who gets things done."

Adolphus was quietly observing too. He was hearing about Laurinda's parents for the first time. He'd always known Laurinda had no love for the Austin family and assumed she'd just given up after they kicked her out. Now it seemed there was more to the story than he realized.

Laurinda noticed Baal's silence. She tapped her fingers lightly on the table and smiled. "Baal, if you need more time to think, go home and take your time. I'm not in a rush."

Baal got even more embarrassed, realizing she could see right through him. He honestly didn't know how to start. The plan he'd come up with was more than enough for the Laurinda he'd imagined, but for the real Laurinda sitting here now, it wasn't nearly enough. He'd come across as insincere, maybe even disrespectful.

When Baal still didn't move, Laurinda's smile faded and her voice took on a cool edge. "Baal, if there's nothing else, I'll have the butler show you out. I have other guests today. It's not a good time for you to stay for lunch."

The mention of other guests made Baal snap to attention. He shot Laurinda a look, as if blaming her for letting him spill his secrets when there were people around.

Laurinda just smiled back, completely unfazed by his reaction. She didn't care what he thought. In her eyes, Baal was just an outsider. He had no say in her business.

"Please, Baal, let the butler see you out. If you want to talk, set something up with me in advance. I'd rather not discuss things at home."

on

Baal's face tightened. He could tell she was calling him out for dropping by unannounced. He stood up and apologized, "It was rude of me showup like this. Next time, let's make an appointment. Can we exchange contact info to keep in touch?"

"The butler will give you my number. Take care on your way out."

The butler stepped forward and motioned for Baal to follow. Baal hurried out, his earlier confidence completely gone.

Adolphus and Sam walked out from the game room. Sam gave Laurinda a big thumbs up. He suddenly got why Adolphus, who never cared about women, was so drawn to her.

"Do you believe anything Baal said?" Sam asked.

Adolphus reached for Laurinda's hand, checking her palm. He'd noticed earlier how she clenched her fist, and was worried she might have hurt herself again.

"I believe about half of it," Laurinda said. "He thinks he can use my parents to get close to me, to make me give in. He's got another thing coming."

She pulled her hand back and made a gentle fist.

"But working with him isn't out of the question. He wants to take over the Austin Group and if he gets my projects too, that would give the Baker Group enough leverage to compete with the Gates family."

"The Gates family?" Sam echoed.

He thought for a moment. The Gates Group really was one of the companies interested in buying the Austin Group. Foley had even wondered why the Gates Group would bother with it in the first place.

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[573 words]

"Laurinda, I just don't see what's so special about the Austin Group that everyone's fighting over it."

Sam wondered if he'd missed something important when he'd been dealing with their affairs. Not wanting to mess anything up, he spoke up right away.

"There used to be something. But by the time I left the Austin family, all the special assets were already gone."

Laurinda didn't explain what those "special assets" were supposed to be, and since both Adolphus and Sam were sharp, neither of them pressed her for more.

"If you ever need a hand with anything, just let me know," Adolphus said quietly, tapping Laurinda's forehead with his fingertip. He really couldn't stand seeing her frown.

Laurinda caught his finger and pulled his hand down, giving him a playful look. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"To get you to marry me," Adolphus replied, his voice warm with a soft laugh. He wasn't trying to hide what he felt anymore. He wanted Laurinda to see what was in his heart.

"In your dreams. Don't even think about my... inheritance."

Sam burst out laughing at their banter. But then, out of nowhere, he felt a chill and reached out just in time to catch a spoon flying at him. He clutched his chest, pretending to be terrified.

"Sorry, Adolphus, I just couldn't help myself..."

"Go laugh somewhere else."

After lunch, Laurinda kicked back in a rocking chair, scrolling through her phone. "I should head back to school. The citywide exams start tomorrow."

Adolphus, busy peeling an orange, paused and turned to look at her. His face was a mix of concern and something he couldn't quite put into words.

"You sure you want to take those exams with a hand that can't even write properly?"
"What's that supposed to mean? Are you saying I can't do it?"

"Of course not." Adolphus gently fed her a slice of orange. "I'm just worried your hand might make it tough to write."

Laurinda's eyes sparkled as she thought about it, then she sat up with a grin. "You're right. If I do badly this time, just blame i on my hand I should go pack. We can leave for school soon."

She made quick work of the orange, then hopped off the chair and dashed to her room. As she packed, she remembered to grab some gifts for her roommates. Queen had just dropped off a bunch of new O products, and Laurinda wanted to share them.

The butler walked in with some milk tea, surprised to find only Adolphus on the sofa.

"Where's Laurinda?"

"She's packing. She needs to get back to school for the exams."

The butler missed the subtle frustration in Adolphus's voice and just smiled proudly. "Laurinda's always loved learning. Her grades have always been... well, they've been just fine. Just fine."

Adolphus set down the orange, smiling at the butler's loyal Laurinda fan routine.

"Yeah, she's doing pretty well."

Laurinda was one of a kind when it came to playing with her grades like this.

She finished packing fast, and soon Adolphus was driving her to school.

When they arrived, Laurinda glanced at her watch. It was still class time, so instead of heading to her classroom, she went with Adolphus to the infirmary.

As soon as they walked in, Laurinda noticed someone lying in the infusion room. For some reason, he looked familiar.

"Doesn't that guy look familiar?" she asked, turning to Foley, who was busy working.

Foley spun around the moment he heard her voice and greeted them. "Adolphus, Laurinda."

"Yeah. So, what's going on with the guy inside?"

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Chapter 105

[619 words]

Adolphus noticed the person lying inside. This was the first time their infirmary had ever had a patient who needed an IV.

"That's Harden. He fainted during class, so his homeroom teacher brought him here. It's just low blood sugar. A glucose drip should fix him up."

Foley was a med school grad, so this kind of thing was no big deal for him. He caught the look on Laurinda's face, a weird mix of surprise and concern, and asked, "Laurinda, is something wrong?"

"No, just... surprised. I'm not sure what he's doing at our school."

She couldn't figure out what Finn was planning. Laurinda glanced toward the infusion room again. She remembered Bonnie mentioning that Finn had brought Harden to the hospital twice, but she just couldn't see what Finn was after.

Adolphus saw the way Laurinda's brow furrowed and picked up on her mood. "Is he from the Gates family? Have they been bothering you?"

"Yeah, he's Finn's illegitimate son. I don't think him showing up here is normal. But let's just wait and see what he does."

Laurinda didn't feel rushed. Finn was a big player, not someone you could take down without a plan. Especially now, with the Gates Group partnering with Frostfrod, she couldn't afford to make a wrong move.

Adolphus honestly hadn't known Finn had an illegitimate son. He looked over at Foley, who shrank a little under the scrutiny. That was a slip-up in his research.

"I... I'll look into it again," Foley said.

Adolphus picked up Laurinda's backpack and led her into the break room. Laurinda took off her jacket and dropped onto the couch.

Adolphus took her jacket, hung it up, and grabbed a blanket from the cabinet, draping it over her. He poured her a glass of water and gave it to her, then glanced

at her as she leaned back, looking distracted.

"Do you want to get some rest?" he asked gently.

"No, I'm just thinking," Laurinda said.

She was struggling with whether or not to tell Adolphus about the Austin family's core technology. She knew he wasn't simple. She didn't exactly keep her quart up around him, but she wasn't ready to share everything either.

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Adolphus seemed to sense her hesitation. He smiled at her. "Take your time. I'll start on dinner."

"Okay."

Laurinda nodded, lost in thought. She really did need to think about this. No way could she make a decision on impulse.

She stretched out on the couch and closed her eyes, replaying what Baal had told her. She was sure he hadn't lied, but some things just didn't add. up. If her parents had helped Baal so much, why had their families stopped keeping in touch? He hadn't even come to her parents' funeral.

The more she thought about it, the more frustrated she felt. She sat up and called York, asking him to dig deeper into Baal. She was starting to feel like she'd missed something important.

In Baal's office, a few older men sat across from him, dressed in expensive clothes that made it pretty clear they weren't ordinary visitors.

"What brings you gentlemen here?" Baal asked, pouring tea for them. He was polite, but the smile in his eyes was guarded.

One of the men pulled a USB drive

from his pocket and set it on the table. His tone was smug. "It's been years, Baal. Still not ready to work with us? Look at the Gates family

They've already made with

Frostfrod. Don't you want to take things up a notch? You've wanted a partnership with Verdian for eighteen years, haven't you?"

Baal stared at the USB drive, his expression unchanged. Their offer clearly didn't tempt him.

"Eighteen years ago, I was fooled into boarding that ship. That doesn't mean I'm still that naive. I'm not interested in your partnership. You should find someone else."

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Chapter 106

[626 words]

"I've told you a hundred times already. I don't have what you want, so stop wasting your time on me."

Baal watched their faces twist in frustration. He flashed a sly, almost mocking smile that only made them angrier. Without another word, they stomped out of the office.

As soon as the room was clear, Baal's assistant came in and set a folder down on his desk.

"Baal, Finn is celebrating today. He's organized a dinner and wants to invite you."

"Tell him no. I made a promise to myself, I'm never sharing a table with Finn. There's nothing between us but bad blood. That's never going to change."

"Got it. I'll let them know."

Baal signed the document, handed it back to his assistant, and said quietly, "Have someone keep an eye on the Gates family. If they make a move on Laurinda, I want to know right away."

"Understood. I'll take care of it."

The assistant didn't really get why Baal was so invested, but he was a pro, so he didn't ask questions. He just got to work.

With the office quiet again, Baal pulled out an old photo from his drawer. It was a faded picture, just someone's back. He traced it gently with his finger, his voice low and rough. "Don't worry. I'll keep her safe, no matter what."

After talking things over with York, Laurinda finally made up her mind. She'd work with the Baker family. York had broken it down for her-maybe they couldn't tell yet if the Baker family was a friend or foe, but one thing was clear: the Bakers and the Gates were enemies.

Once the Baker family took over the

Austin group

and with Laurinda's

most important projects in the mix they still wouldn't be on the Gates Group's level. But if they played their cards right and took a risk, they might actually stand a chance.

Content

It was the perfect way to get revenge without revealing who they really were. Plus, it was best not to push the Bakers to the other side. Laurinda wasn't afraid of her identity coming out, but she saw no reason to invite more trouble.

Teaming up with the Baker family was definitely the smartest move.

With her decision made, Laurinda felt lighter. She lounged on the sofa, kicking her feet, a smile finally breaking through.

Adolphus walked in and caught sight of her. He couldn't help but smile too as he came over and gently ruffled her hair.

"You look like you're in a good mood. Did you figure things out?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I did. I'm going to let the Baker family buy the Austin Group. And I'll work with them on the core projects. I'm hoping it'll be good for both sides."

Adolphus wasn't surprised. He'd done his homework on the Bakers. Their connections overseas weren't complicated and they didn't pose a threat to Laurinda. It was a solid choice.

"Well, if you're done stressing, come eat. Irvin brought you that spicy chicken you love from the cafeteria. But you have to promise not to go overboard."

The moment she heard "spicy chicken," Laurinda perked up. She jumped off the sofa, slipped on her shoes, and hurried out of the room.

Adolphus watched her leave, warmth in his eyes. He tidied up the blanket she'd left behind and put her electronics neatly into her backpack.

Irvin spotted Laurinda right away and went straight to check her hand. He still beat himself up for not inventing some miracle healing potion back when they were in the

lab.

"Laurinda, let me see your hand.

How's it doing? Adolphus said you can write again, but don't push yourself, okay? You still need to be careful I already called my mom. and asked her to help find you some special scar treatment. Don't worry, we're not going to let you end up with a scar."

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[608 words]

Laurinda opened her hand so Irvin could see. The cut had healed into a soft, pink bump.

Irvin stared at the scar, still haunted by how bad things had been. He also remembered something he'd heard recently.

"After Adah went back to Cabinda, the Charles family shipped him overseas. They told everyone he was going abroad for more schooling, but honestly, it was just exile. That's what all the big families in Cabinda do with kids who embarrass them. They send them far away and call it 'opportunity.'"

While he was talking, Irvin sneaked a look at Adolphus. When he realized Adolphus wasn't paying attention, he let out a silent sigh of relief.

Laurinda noticed the glance and looked at Adolphus too. She bit her lip, surprised to realize that Adolphus had been abandoned by the Lane family as well.

Irvin picked up on the heavy mood and quickly switched topics.

"Your hand looks like it's healing really well. Shirley still doesn't know you're back. She's going to be so happy when she finds out. You have no idea how lost she's been these past few days. Even your roommates keep sighing and hoping you'll come back soon."

He never really understood how girls could be so close, but he could tell their friendship was special and real.

Listening to Irvin ramble about everything that had happened in class, Laurinda felt like she'd missed out on so much. She wished she'd come back to school sooner.

"Wait, Laura's back at school?"

Laurinda was surprised. With everything that went down with the Austin family, Laura should've been busy straightening out the mess. She shouldn't have had time to come back to school... unless she was looking for someone.

That thought made Laurinda glance at Adolphus right as he turned to look at her. Their eyes met, and in that moment, they both understood.

"I'll ask Foley to handle it."

"No, don't. If we make a move without proof, it could get messy. Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself. If she comes for me, she won't get what she wants. I know how to handle people like her."

Laurinda's eyes lit up. Life had been boring lately, and if Laura wanted to cause trouble, she was more than ready.

Adolphus watched her, shaking his head at how eager she looked. He turned to Foley. "Where are those medicine bottles you got from Irvin? Find one that can numb nerves and give it to her, just in case."

Hearing this, Irvin grumbled under his breath, "Such a hypocrite."

Adolphus couldn't help but laugh. He reached out and flicked Irvin on the forehead.

"Don't think I can't hear you just because you're whispering. If you're so unhappy with me, you can always go back to Cabinda. Honestly, I'm tired of looking after you."

Irvin held his head, staring at Adolphus with a pout, clearly upset but not daring to say anything back.

Laurinda watched them as she ate, enjoying the show until she realized she'd eaten too much. Adolphus noticed and handed her a pill to help with digestion. She felt a lot better after that.

Adolphus started worrying about Laurinda @gain. She barely ate, her stomach was weak, her body

couldn't handle strong supp

and she stiffmanaged to get herself into trouble all the time:

Laurinda caught him sighing and guessed what he was thinking. She stood up. "I'm going back to class."

"Let me walk you."

"No need. Irvin and I can go."

Adolphus didn't argue. He handed the fruit he'd packed for her to Irvin.

Irvin took the bag of fruit and Laurinda's backpack, following close behind as they headed to the classroom.

They were almost at the academic building when someone suddenly ran at them, shouting, "Laurinda, I hope you die!"

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Chapter 108

[577 words]

Laurinda saw the shadow coming at her and, without thinking, kicked the guy hard in the stomach. He staggered back a few steps but barely seemed fazed. With a grunt, he tightened his grip on the knife and charged at her again. This time, Irvin looked like he was about to jump in.

Laurinda didn't let him. She grabbed his arm, yanked him back, and used the momentum to leap up, both feet slamming into the attacker's chest. The man was sent flying and didn't get up again.

She let go of Irvin's arm and punched his chest, not so gently this time. Her voice was sharper than she meant. "Are you out of your mind? Do you have any idea how dangerous that was? He had a knife! Go get security and call the police."

Her words snapped Irvin out of his daze. All he'd been thinking about was keeping Laurinda safe. Now, the fear hit him full force. He hesitated, worried about leaving her alone, but it was late and barely anyone was still in the building. No one else would hear what was happening over here.

"Will you be okay by yourself?"

"Of course. Now go."

Irvin took off running. Laurinda turned to the guy on the ground and stomped down hard on his ankle. There was a loud crack and a howl of pain.

Irvin, halfway down the hall, heard the scream and nearly tripped over his own feet. He was suddenly certain Laurinda didn't need any help at all.

Laurinda crouched next to the man, yanked off his mask, and stared at his face. She didn't recognize him. "Who are you? Why are you trying to kill me? Do I even know you?"

The man glared up at her, eyes bloodshot and wild with hatred, like he wanted nothing more than to tear her apart.

"You're not talking? Fine. You brought this on yourself."

She didn't waste any more time. Grabbing his wrist, she twisted until his joint popped out of place. The man's bravado disappeared,

replaced by stunned terror a net

realized just how far Laurinda was willing to go.

"You're a monster... how can you "

He didn't finish. Laurinda popped his jaw out of place and gave him a cold, almost scary smile.

"If you won't talk, then keep your mouth shut forever. Attempted murder means you're going to prison. Hope you enjoy it."

She dusted off her hands and used her foot to nudge the knife close to him. "Now the evidence is all lined up. You didn't hurt me but I'm not letting you get away with this. Is that the ending you wanted?"

The man started drooling, making strange, garbled noises. He tried to say something, but not a single word made sense.

A few moments later, Irvin came back with security, a bunch of students trailing behind. When they saw the twisted, drooling man on the floor, everyone froze. Someone shrieked, "He looks like a zombie!"

Laurinda glanced at the crowd, her nerves finally catching up to her. She stepped back and felt herself bump into a familiar chest. The scent, warm and reassuring, helped her steady herself.

She looked

up at

at the man who was watching her, eyes full of concern. She opened her mouth, but he didn't

give her a chance to speak. He pulled a packet of wet wipes from his pocket and carefully wiped her hands clean, his voice low and comforting. "I'll take care of things here. Do you want to go back to class or head to the nurse's office?"

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[629 words]

"The classroom's fine, really. I'm okay."

"Alright. As long as you're okay."

Adolphus didn't push. He gently wiped her hands clean, then pulled a small packet of medicine from his pocket and slipped it into her hand.

"Let Irvin walk you back. Don't stress yourself out. I'll call if anything comes up."

"Okay. Thanks."

She gripped the medicine, took a few steps away, then suddenly turned back and hugged Adolphus tight. She ignored the surprised noises behind her, burying her face in his chest and nuzzling in like she never wanted to let go.

Adolphus held her close, feeling her body still tense in his arms. He stroked her back softly and whispered, "It's alright. I'm here."

After a few minutes, Laurinda took a deep breath and stepped away from him. She walked toward the classroom, pretending she couldn't hear the whispers following her down the hall.

Irvin trailed behind, quietly carrying her things.

When Laurinda pushed open the classroom door, she was hit with a wave of cheers. "Welcome back, Laurinda! We're so glad you're okay!"

The class president led the celebration. Shirley rushed over, beaming and holding a big bouquet of lilies. "Laurinda! You're finally back! You have no idea how much we've missed you. Even the teachers kept asking when you'd return!"

"We all wanted to visit, but with exams coming up, it's been crazy. We just couldn't make it."

Truth was, it wasn't just about being busy. Everyone knew Laurinda had been kicked out by the Austin family, and they worried that showing up might just make her feel worse. They thought keeping a little distance would be kinder.

Laurinda accepted the flowers from Shirley, her smile genuine for the first time in a while. Looking around at her classmates, all sitting together and cheering her on, she felt the last bit of heaviness in her chest melt away.

"Thank you, everyone. When exams are over, dinner's on me at Aeterna."

A chorus of excitement broke out.

"Laurinda, you're the best!"

"She's so cool!"

"I knew Laurinda was the strongest!"

Irvin stood behind her, watching the room explode with happiness. He couldn't help but notice-Class Three was nothing like the others.

When he'd first transferred, it was obvious that students from other classes didn't like Laurinda. Some looked down on her, some were openly hostile, and some just enjoyed watching her struggle.

But in Class Three, nobody treated her differently. It was like the drama outside their door didn't exist.

Even when Laura and Fabian

announced their relationship and the classroom got a little wild, Irvin

overlone

figured it was just more gossip. But he'd been wrong. They weren't talking about Laurinda behind her back they y were figuring out how to stand up for her. All fifty of them went online, defending her and shutting down anyone who tried to spread rumors.

"What are you staring off into space for? Wondering why we like Laurinda that much?"

The class president stepped up beside Irvin, speaking quietly before he could answer. "Pretty much everyone here has been helped by Laurinda before."

"Our class is special. Most of us get good grades, but our families don't have much money. Kids from richer families used to make fun of us all the time."

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"Laurinda found out and decided to do something about it. She funded a new cafeteria for the school, with the only rule that our classmates paremo got filet pick for the face food stalls. She even covered the rent for the first three years."

"It wasn't just a handout. She made it feel like a real opportunity, not charity By the time three years pass, We'll all have graduated, and maybe our parents won't even be working there anymore."

"Oh, and you know Laurinda's favorite spicy chicken? My mom makes it. Every time Laurinda comes by, my grandma always picks out the best, meatiest pieces for her. My grandma absolutely loves Laurinda."

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Chapter 110

[619 words]

Irvin listened to the class president and glanced at Laurinda. For a moment, it seemed like she was surrounded by light.

He could hardly believe that someone who always acted so indifferent could have this gentle side. Maybe that was just how she was, cool on the outside but warm underneath.

After the welcome ceremony, Shirley and a few other roommates gathered around Laurinda, their faces full of worry as they looked at the scar on her palm.

Laurinda reached out and gently pinched their cheeks, trying to cheer them up instead.

"Come on, don't feel bad for me. I'm already fine, see? If it hadn't been a hassle before, I would have been back at school way earlier. I brought you guys some gifts, too. Focus on your studying for now. When we're back in the dorm, I'll give them to you."

Once she managed to calm them down, Laurinda settled in with a book. It wasn't a textbook, though. It was in the original language, and when Irvin, who was sitting behind her, caught a glimpse of the cover, he couldn't help but stare in disbelief.

He'd seen that exact book on his uncle's bookshelf. According to his uncle, you needed a PhD just to understand it. How on earth was Laurinda reading it so easily? After evening study, Irvin handed Laurinda's bag to Shirley. No one would let Laurinda carry her own things. Even though her hand was healed, everyone insisted she needed to be careful. They refused to risk her getting hurt again.

Laurinda felt a bit helpless at how much they fussed over her, but she didn't fight it. She let them take care of her, making a mental note to remember all their kindness. One day, when she made it big, she'd make sure to bring them along for the ride.

Right then, she decided she'd ask Bonnie to prepare a few extra practice tests for them. It would give them something to do in their spare time.

As they left the academic building, Laurinda immediately spotted Adolphus waiting nearby. Shirley suddenly grabbed her arm, eyes wide with excitement.

"That's him... that's the school doctor! You have no idea, the girls in the dorm are obsessed with him. He hasn't been around for awhile, but now he's here again. He's so good looking. We're so lucky to see him up close."

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Laurinda watched Shirley and the others practically swooning and couldn't help but laugh, nodding in agreement.

"He really is handsome."

Adolphus was truly something else. Laurinda never thought of herself as someone who cared much about looks but with Adolphus, she couldn't help the rush of excitement she felt inside. Watching everyone else swoon over him made her want to hold onto him, maybe even hide him away so nobody else could have him.

When Adolphus noticed her, he walked right over and handed her a container filled with a special soup.

"This is blood bird's nest. It'll help you recover. Make sure you finish it."

Laurinda took it from him, acting like no one else was there. She stepped closer and slipped her hand onto his arm, leading him a little farther from the crowd.

"Is everything sorted out?" she asked quietly.

"Not yet, but we know who's behind it. Remember when Jared and his crew cornered you? One of them, Warner, got his brother involved. After things came to light, Warner's brother was expelled."

"This time, Laura found Warner. The two of them went to his brother again, asking him to kill you. They promised him a million dollars if he could even just hurt you."

"Warner's been caught, but Laura

got away heard she even took off with all of Baily's valuables. Baily was so furious he had another stroke and ended

back in the...

Hospital. He's not doing well."

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