

## **From Ashes of Scandal to His Embrace (Laurinda)**

c 351

[ 614 words ]

Laurinda arched her brow, surprised to find herself in the middle of some unexpected drama. Honestly, it was kind of entertaining.

Adolphus noticed the look on her face and could tell exactly what she was thinking. He let out a soft laugh. "You're not going to see much of a show. Sam knows when to stop. He won't upset Cathleen."

When Laurinda's interest started to fade, Adolphus smiled at her with obvious affection and gently took her hand. "It's freezing out here. Let's head inside."

"Laurinda! You're finally here!" Irvin's face lit up the moment he spotted her. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting. I've got something for you."

He made his way toward Laurinda, but before he could reach her, Adolphus casually stepped in, holding out an arm to block his path.

Irvin frowned, confused. "Adolphus, what are you doing?"

"Whatever you want to say can wait until after dinner."

Without paying any attention to Irvin's frustration, Adolphus slipped his arm around Laurinda and guided her into the main hall. As they passed by Earl, he offered a simple congratulations.

Outside, Carla and Quentin finished parking. They walked over together, chatting about how the parking lot looked like a luxury car show. It was obvious that everyone invited tonight was someone important.

Earl hadn't expected Quentin to show up. Taking Cathleen with him, he walked over to say hello.

"Quentin. Carla."

Cathleen greeted them softly, "Quentin, Carla."

"You're here too? Let's all go in together."

Carla grinned, responding to Earl, then naturally slid over to Cathleen's side. The two of them linked hands and walked upstairs together, laughing and chatting like old friends.

Earl and Quentin followed a few steps behind, walking side by side. Earl let out a quiet laugh. "Honestly, I didn't expect you to show up with my uncle tonight."

"We bumped into each other at the police station, and he invited us along. I didn't expect to see you here, either."

Earl just smiled at Quentin's teasing, his expression thoughtful. "My mom can be relentless. She heard my uncle was hosting something and insisted I come meet everyone."

Quentin nodded. "It's good to meet people, especially in our circle. You're the only son so the family responsibilities are going to land on you sooner or later. Expanding your network now will help, trust me."

He meant every word. Plenty of people dreamed about joining Adolphus's circle. Getting an invitation like this didn't happen every day.

Quentin gave Earl's shoulder a friendly pat, hoping he'd let go of whatever he was holding inside. The Lane family's future would be in his uncle's hands, and smart people knew how to adapt.

Upstairs, Orville was already opening the banquet hall doors for Adolphus and Laurinda, practically tripping over himself to be helpful. The room was already full of people. As soon as Adolphus walked in, everyone came over to greet him.

Adolphus introduced Laurinda, and she was met with warm, enthusiastic hellos from every direction.

Over by the entrance, Sam looked around and saw almost everyone had arrived. He asked Orville to let the kitchen know it was time to start serving. It was getting late, and people could eat and chat at the same time.

Irvin managed to snag the seat right next to Laurinda. He handed her a small tube of scar cream, his eyes shining with excitement.

"This is the newest formula from the research institute. My aunt tested it a bunch of times. It really works. You should try it."

Laurinda slipped the cream into her pocket and leaned in to quietly tell Irvin about Adah.

Irvin's eyes went wide. "She's really gone?"

Laurinda nodded. "Yeah, she's gone."

Irvin looked like he wanted to set off fireworks. He let out a breath, grinning. "Serves her right. Karma always catches up, doesn't it?"

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[ 683 words ]

"Want to grab a drink tonight?"

Irvin was practically glowing. He could barely hide his excitement, and honestly, he was so pleased with himself that he wanted to drag Laurinda out to celebrate right then and there.

Laurinda just shook her head. "No, you should use the time to prep for your competition. Once you nail that early admission spot, the research institute will be waiting. There's still plenty for you to do."

Irvin stared at her, a little stunned by how ruthless she sounded. He'd only ever done those little research projects for fun. If it became his job, he wasn't even sure he'd like it anymore.

"Laurinda, you know you'd make a great slave driver, right?"

Laurinda raised an eyebrow and didn't bother to deny it. "I'm only pushing you because I want you to do well. Come on, you've got this."

Around them, people kept sneaking glances at Laurinda. Most of them had come just to get close to Adolphus, but Laurinda was clearly catching their interest too. Ever since those wild rumors started spreading around Cabinda, she'd become even more of a mystery.

Even though the gossip had died down, it still left a mark on Laurinda's reputation.

Finally, someone couldn't help themselves and spoke up, sounding casual but clearly fishing for information. "Laurinda and Irvin look pretty close, don't they?" Adolphus was chatting with Sam but caught the comment. He glanced over at Laurinda and Irvin, his voice steady as he answered, "Laurinda and Irvin are classmates."

"Oh, really? I heard Irvin transferred to Apex High for his senior year. Does that mean Laurinda's still in high school too?"

Adolphus didn't seem bothered at all by the question. He nodded. "Yeah, she's already got a special admission offer from Cabinda University. She'll start next September."

His tone was calm and matter-of-fact, but everyone picked up on the warning hidden in his words. Adolphus clearly didn't appreciate their nosiness.

After that, no one else dared to say anything, even if they wanted to. People had already been kicked out of the group for less, and everyone knew they had to watch their words if they wanted to stay.

After dinner, the group started talking about hitting up a club. Adolphus looked to Laurinda, waiting for her opinion.

Laurinda didn't want to be the killjoy, so she nodded. "Sure, let's go for a bit."

Irvin's face lit up when he heard Laurinda agree. He hurried to grab her bag, beating Adolphus to it and looking just a little too eager.

Cathleen watched her brother in surprise, wondering when he'd become so attentive. She was his sister, and even she had never gotten that kind of treatment.

Earl noticed too and leaned over to Cathleen, asking quietly, "What's up with your brother?"

Cathleen shook her head. "I honestly have no idea. All I know is, he's super invested when it comes to Laurinda."

Sam stood up and caught sight of Cathleen and Earl talking together, Cathleen smiling in a way she'd never smiled at him. The realization hit him all at once, leaving his chest tight and a little hollow.

He'd never thought that letting go would really mean losing her for good.

Egan came over,

draping an arm

around Sam's shoulder and speaking quietly, "You and her were never right for each other. With Earl, she's genuinely happy. You can see, she's finally living for herself. All you can do now is wish her the best."

Sam tried to smile, but it came out a little bitter. He nodded, because what else could he do? What was lost was lost, and all that was left was to let her go.

"Yeah. I get it."

“Good. Tonight, we'll drink as much as you want. Tomorrow's a new day.”

At the hotel entrance, Carla said her goodbyes to Laurinda. "Aunt Laurinda, Quentin and I are heading home. The baby's still little, and we can't be gone too long."

Laurinda smiled. “Of course. Let's meet up again soon. I'll probably be in Cabinda for a few more days anyway.”

So much had happened lately, she didn't have plans to head back to Apex just yet. It'd be better to settle things with the Charles family before she ever thought about going home.

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## Chapter 353

[ 603 words ]

The group left Villa Sera and made their way straight to Azure Heights, another property owned by the Williams family.

Laurinda sat next to Adolphus. She grabbed a beer from the table and popped the cap off against the edge like she'd done it a thousand times. The people around her laughed at how smooth she was, and someone even gave her a thumbs-up.

Before she could take a sip, Adolphus took the bottle right out of her hand and replaced it with a carton of milk. "You're still taking your meds. No alcohol for you..."

Irvin leaned over, grinning as he watched. "Adolphus, you're such an old man. Live a little."

Adolphus turned to Irvin with a half-smile, an eyebrow raised. "Want to take another trip to Flame Training Base?"

Irvin's face went pale. "No way. I'm sorry, man. I swear I've learned my lesson!"

Just hearing the name Flame Training Base made Irvin's knees go weak. The year Adolphus had been his instructor was something he never wanted to remember.

Laurinda watched Irvin beg for mercy, a smile tugging at her lips. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted someone slipping past the door outside. She leaned closer to Adolphus and said quietly, "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Okay. Stay safe."

Adolphus could tell she probably wasn't actually going to the bathroom, but he didn't stop her. Azure Heights was a step up from other clubs, with security that actually did their job. She'd be fine.

Outside, Laurinda immediately spotted a familiar figure and hurried over. "Wan An, what are you doing here?"

The woman waiting by the door lit up when she saw Laurinda. She grabbed her hand and pulled her into a side stairwell. "I thought I saw you come in, so I followed to check. I can't believe it's really you! When did you get to Cabinda?"

"I've been here a few days. What about you? Here for work or just hanging out?"

Wan An's job was always a little mysterious, and Laurinda hadn't seen her in ages. She honestly had no clue why she'd turn up here of all places.

"Just a small job. I overheard something that might interest you. I was going to reach out, but then you showed up."

As she talked, Wan An slipped a memory card into Laurinda's hand. "This should come in handy."

Laurinda tucked the card into her pocket, frowning a little. She grabbed Wan An's arm and lowered her voice. "Are you getting involved with the Charles family?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm working as

a hostess at Azure Heights right now. Last night, I happened to serve Pearce's private room and overheard their conversation, but I didn't realize who they were but then I figured out some of the guys were from Stonehaven. I recorded the whole thing."

"I haven't listened to it yet, but it's got information about Stonehaven. I thought you'd want it. Since you're here I can just hand it over instead of tracking you down later."

Laurinda listened and couldn't help worrying. "Are you sure you're safe here?"

Wan An smiled, totally at ease. "Come on, you know me. I haven't done anything risky in ages. These little jobs are just for fun now."

She gave Laurinda a relaxed, playful look. "Anyway, I should get back to work."

Then her expression turned cheeky. "By the way, Azure Heights really

lives us to its fame the mate

models here are out of this world Want me to introduce you to a few?"

Laurinda laughed at her friend's teasing. "You keep talking like that... Does Jack know?"

As soon as Laurinda mentioned Jack, Wan An's smile faded for a moment. Something sad flickered in her beautiful eyes.

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## **- Chapter 354**

### **Chapter 354**

[ 606 words ]

"Don't talk about him. It just puts me in a bad mood. I'm leaving. Have fun on your own."

Before Laurinda could say a word, Wan An slipped away down the emergency stairs. Laurinda watched her go, lifting an eyebrow. Those two, Wan An and Jack, always seemed locked in their own private tug-of-war. Laurinda wondered just how long their strange game would last.

She stepped out from behind the stairwell, headed for the restroom, and didn't come back to the private room until a few minutes later.

By the time she returned, Adolphus was surrounded by a group of people, caught up in some lively discussion.

Laurinda had barely taken her seat when a woman strode over, balancing a cocktail in one hand. Her expression was sharp with pride.

"Laurinda, you're young, but you sure know how to play the game. Even Adolphus fell for your tricks."

Laurinda glanced down at the dice on the table, a faint smile tugging at her lips. No one noticed the flash of coldness in her eyes.

The woman took Laurinda's silence as a sign of weakness. Any nerves she'd felt disappeared. To her, Laurinda was just another harmless little lamb. She'd clearly overestimated her.

Getting bold, the woman shoved Laurinda's shoulder and sneered, "A wild bird from the sticks, thinking she can turn into a swan. Now you've tasted some of the city's glamour, are you dazzled? Did you ever stop to wonder if you really belong here? Or if you deserve to be at Adolphus's side?"

"Laurinda, here's some advice. Go back to wherever you came from. Adolphus is out of your league."

"Out of my league? And what, you think he's in yours? Seriously, did you forget to check the mirror before you left home? With that face, how could you ever compete with me?"

Laurinda lifted her head, her gaze fierce and unyielding. The woman tried to reply but the words caught in her throat, silenced by Laurinda's glare.

"You..."

"What about me? Instead of wasting your breath on me, why not go tell Adolphus how you feel? You say I've got tricks, so why not try some of your own and see if he even notices you? Why be bitter with me? It's apt like he'd be yours if I wasn't around."

Laurinda's words cut deep. Marin's face twisted with anger, though under all that foundation, it was hard to tell.

"We're all women here, fighting for what we want. If you can't keep up, don't blame me for getting ahead. Or do you want my help? I could give you a chance, let you ask Adolphus yourself if you've got what it takes."

Before Marin could react, Laurinda stood up and called out, "Adolphus, this lady has something she wants to say to you!"

Marin didn't even have time to stop her. All eyes turned toward them, and Marin looked like she wanted to disappear under the table.

The crowd around Adolphus looked up, surprised to hear someone call him by his name so casually. In this circle, hardly anyone dared to be so familiar. But then they saw it was and their surprise faded

Laurinda

away. Everyone knew how Adolphus felt about her. Of course she called him by his name.

Adolphus stood, parted the crowd, and walked straight over to Laurinda. He slid into the seat next to her, slipped his arm around her waist, and asked gently, "What's going on?"

"It's not about me. She wants to ask you if she stands a chance with you."

Laurinda's words were blunt and clear. The second she finished, the whole room went dead silent. Someone even turned off the background music, and for a moment you could hear nothing but the sound of people breathing.

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## Chapter 355

[ 720 words ]

Adolphus glanced at the woman fidgeting beside them, then turned away just as quickly. His arm around Laurinda tightened a bit, pulling her closer until she was snug against him.

He spat out one frosty word. "Ugly."

Laurinda watched the woman freeze, a hint of a smile curling on her lips. Her words came out smooth and sharp, each one landing like a slap.

"Hey, don't be so quick to brush off this lovely lady. Sure, maybe looks aren't her strong suit, but she's got a heart of gold, right? Otherwise, she wouldn't have been so thoughtful as to tell me to get lost and go back to wherever I came from."

She tossed her hair and added, "Oh, and let's not forget, she even complimented me. Said I must have some serious skills to win Adolphus over."

Laurinda's eyes sparkled as she smiled, but anyone could see the storm brewing in Adolphus's expression.

The woman started shaking, her body trembling so much it was impossible to hide. She tried to protest, but not a single word made it out.

Laurinda didn't let up. She gave the woman a little push, just as hard as she'd been shoved earlier.

"What's wrong, big sis? Cat got your tongue? I'm handing you the floor, you should really make the most of it. This is your moment. I was honestly curious to see what tricks you've got up your sleeve."

Marin, caught off guard, stumbled and landed hard on the floor. Laurinda looked down at her, then let out a soft laugh.

"What's this? Are you really that delicate? When you shoved me, I didn't fall. You're not trying to play the victim, are you? I'm warning you, I don't have a dime to my name. I'm just a broke girl from nowhere important."

She tilted her head, pretending to think. "Wait, let's use your words. I'm a wild chicken from some tiny mountain village, right?"

As Laurinda finished, a wave of gasps rippled from the crowd behind her. She turned, frowning at them.

"Seriously, you all need to quiet down. You're killing the mood. If she messes up her big moment, it's going to be your fault."

Sam and Egan were standing at the back, grinning as they watched the chaos unfold. Anyone picking a fight with Laurinda was asking for trouble.

Sam nudged Egan with his elbow, leaning in to whisper, "Aren't you going to step in and help your cousin?"

Egan snorted. "Please. With a cousin

like her, who needs enemies? She's clueless, and I am not getting dragged into her mess. I don't even know where she gets the nerve to go up against Laurinda."

Sam laughed. "What tricks? Maybe she means gossiping like some cranky old neighbor."

Adolphus narrowed his eyes at

Marin, who was still sitting on the

familiar, but

floor. Her face looked once he

he couldn't quite place her Once he figured it out, he'd make sure she found herself in a real mountain village, tending to wild chickens for real.

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"Come on, big sis, why so quiet now? Weren't you just giving me advice a second ago? I even brought the man out for you. Make it quick, I'm getting bored."

"I didn't... I didn't say anything... I swear I didn't..."

Marin stammered, the fear obvious in her voice. She'd known Adolphus since they were kids and she knew exactly how ruthless he could be.

But he jealousy of Laurinda wagen

too

much to control She couldn't stand how Laurinda had all of Adolphus's, affection.

Laurinda clicked her tongue, looking at Marin with exaggerated disappointment.

"See, this is what I mean. I handed you an opportunity, and not only do you not take it, you can't even own up to what you did. Moments like this don't come around twice."

With her sweet, innocent face and that killer smile, Laurinda left everyone in the crowd at a loss for words. Every sentence cut deep, leaving Marin no way to

recover.

Adolphus finally lost his patience. He pointed at Marin, his voice sharp. "Who is she?"

Someone in the crowd called out, "Marin."

He raised an eyebrow. "From the White family?"

Adolphus gave Marin another look, and realization finally flickered in his eyes. "Egan, stop hiding and get over here. How long are you going to play invisible?"

Sam burst out laughing as he watched Egan slip away. "Adolphus, Egan's already gone. He said he doesn't know any Marin." Nothing was funnier than seeing his buddy make a run for it.

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## Chapter 356

[ 671 words ]

"He ran off? Then pass on a message for me. Tell him to let his uncle know he needs to lease a mountain and send his daughter over there to raise wild chickens."

Most people in the room had no idea what Adolphus meant, but Sam got it right away and jumped in.

"Sure thing. I'll call him now and make sure he gets on it."

Sam darted out of the room, almost bouncing, like his good mood had suddenly come back.

As the door closed, Adolphus stood up from the sofa and looked around at everyone. His voice was calm but serious. "About the rumors going around... just because I haven't said anything doesn't mean I'm clueless. If I didn't know what was going on, there wouldn't be so many people kicked out of our circle."

He glanced at each of them. "Since everyone's here, let's clear the air. I'm only saying this once. If I hear anyone talking bad about Laurinda again, don't blame me for cutting you off."

"Laurinda and Sam have nothing going on. I'm the one who chased after her. Her background doesn't matter to me. The only thing that matters is her. I love her, and I won't let anyone talk trash about her."

Earl watched Adolphus, a satisfied smile spreading across his face. Laurinda really had good taste. She picked the best guy in the room.

If it were him, he doubted he'd ever have the guts to say something like that. He could barely stand up to his own mom, let alone the world.

Adolphus picked up Laurinda's jacket, helped her into it, and bent down to zip it up for her. He was so gentle and careful that everyone just stared, kind of shocked. No one doubted for a second that he'd begged her to be with him.

"We're heading out. You guys have fun."

Adolphus took Laurinda's hand and started for the door. Irvin hurried over, handed him Laurinda's backpack, and got a look from Adolphus before he took it and led Laurinda out.

Once the two of them left, the whole party felt pointless. People started saying their goodbyes and left one after another.

Only a few of Marin's friends stayed behind. They wanted to go too, but since their families were close, they felt awkward about leaving her alone.

"What did Adolphus mean by that just now? What's with the mountain?"

"He said something about chickens, right? He's not really going to make Marin raise chickens on a mountain, is he?"

"I think he is. I told you not to mess with that girl. You could see how much Adolphus cared about her during dinner, but you wouldn't listen. Well, look how it turned out..."

"Enough. Shut up and leave."

Marin pushed away the friend who

tried to help her. Her head was spinning. She hated Laurinda, but she hated herself even more

for

being so tongue-tied. Every time she saw Adolphus, she just froze. She should have stood up for herself.

The girl she pushed away got angry. After catching her balance, she marched back over and shoved Marin hard. Marin went down, landing on the floor with a thud.

"You deserve it. Go raise chickens on a mountain. It's bad enough you've got no taste, but you don't even have a brain. Adolphus has a

matter what. And you still had to go

girlfriend—he'd never pick you, either. Never

make trouble for

trouble for his girlfriend.

Seriously, do you even know your own worth? You're not even a tenth of what she is."

With that, the girl grabbed her jacket and walked out, not looking back. She was done with Marin. She'd

have to tell her dad to end things on that note.

with the White family as soon as possible. With someone like Marm around, the Whites' could go bankrupt any day.

Meanwhile, in the car, Adolphus couldn't take his eyes off Laurinda as she played a game on her phone. He wrapped his arms around her waist, leaned his head on her shoulder, and kissed her cheek.

"Are you upset?"

"She's not worth my energy," Laurinda replied, taking out an enemy with a perfect headshot.

Adolphus grinned. "You're ruthless."

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[ 588 words ]

Laurinda gave Adolphus a sideways look. "Why are you acting so weird?"

"Weird? I think you're the one who's upset."

Adolphus held onto Laurinda's arm a little tighter. He remembered what he'd arranged with the president of Cabinda University and lowered his voice. "I got that special admission spot at Cabinda University for you. Are you going back to school next semester?"

Laurinda thought about her plans and shook her head. "I still need to return to Apex. I won't be going back to school for now. There are other things I have to take care of."

"When are you heading back to Apex, then?"

"No rush. I want to stop by your place tomorrow. I'm already in Cabinda, so I should at least visit your family."

She made a mental note of her schedule. Tomorrow she'd go to the Lane family's house, then spend the next few days at the research institute. It would probably be a while before she could leave Cabinda.

"Tomorrow? My family won't be home. They're meeting some old friends for a get-together. If you go over, you won't see them. Why not wait until they're back?"

Adolphus hesitated for a second, then leaned closer to Laurinda. "How about I take you to Frostford for a little trip?"

Laurinda caught on to what he was doing. She put her phone down, turned in his arms, and cupped his face in her hands, squinting at him. "You're always trying to take me to Frostford. Tell me, who's really there?"

Adolphus just smiled, not backing down from her gaze. "I just want you to have some fun. The weather's perfect in Frostford right now. It's the best time for a vacation."

Laurinda let go of his face and turned away, leaning against him. She shook her head. "Not now. I have other things to deal with. If your parents aren't home, I'll just go to the research institute tomorrow. If you have things to do, don't worry about me. I'll be fine in Cabinda, promise."

She was pretty sure Adolphus had something to handle in Frostford and wanted her out of the way. She really didn't want to go. Too many people there held grudges against her.

Adolphus realized he wasn't going to

change her mind. He gave a going to

helpless laugh and let go of the idea. She had her own life and plans. He could only respect that.

"I'll be back in about a week. I'll leave Foley with you."

"No need. Take him with you. I can handle myself here in Cabinda. With Kinsey here, who's going to mess with me?"

Mentioning trouble made Laurinda think of Candida. She still hadn't figured out what Candida's problem was or why she was so hostile.

"Candida? I don't remember ever crossing her. Why does she hate me so much?"

Laurinda was sensitive to other people's feelings. She didn't care about their opinions, but she could always sense open hostility.

"Candida? She's just clueless. She used to be best friends with Adah. Where do you think her attitude comes from? And her boyfriend was the one spreading rumors about you and Sam Edison and the guys beat him up and landed him in the hospital."

Adolphus's eyes took on a cold edge as he mentioned it.

He'd thought as long as Derek kept Candida in check, he wouldn't have to step in.

But things had clearly gone too far.

"Forget about her. I've taken care of it. Candida won't be out for at least fifteen days."

Laurinda was surprised. She'd figured Adolphus would let Candida go after she apologized, but he was actually keeping her there.

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[ 590 words ]

"Is your sister going to make a fuss with you?"

"She's got enough trouble of her own, so I doubt it. Candida will apologize to you publicly tomorrow. I told you, I won't let anyone treat you unfairly."

Adolphus tucked a loose strand of Laurinda's hair behind her ear. Just the thought of her being wronged in Cabinda felt like a failure on his part.

As soon as Laurinda got home, she hurried into her room and started looking for anything that could read a memory card. After searching everywhere and finding nothing, she just put the card away for now. She'd have to pick up a card reader tomorrow.

She was about to go look for Adolphus, when her phone rang. It was Shirley. Apparently, Shirley had seen Laurinda's latest post and noticed she was in Cabinda. She sounded super excited and invited Laurinda to go shopping with her the next day.

Laurinda turned her down gently, explaining she had to take Adolphus to the airport. Shirley sounded a little let down but didn't push. She just said they could go out together another time, whenever Laurinda was free. That time, Laurinda agreed. Laurinda stepped out of her room and glanced around. No sign of Adolphus in the living room. Just then, Foley came in, carrying all the stuff she'd bought earlier. Laurinda asked, "Where's Adolphus?"

"Probably in the closet, packing his things."

"He's really in a hurry, huh?"

"Yeah, he's got a flight tomorrow morning." Foley set the shopping bags on the coffee table and smiled at her. "Laurinda, if you don't need anything else, I'll head out."

"Okay, thanks."

After walking Foley to the door, Laurinda came back and found the matching rings she'd bought. She took a deep breath and went to the walk-in closet to find Adolphus.

He looked up as soon as he heard the door, spotting Laurinda walking in with a mysterious look on her face. He raised his eyebrows. "What's going on?"

Laurinda stopped in front of him, opened her hand, and showed him the ring. "Look. Do you like it?"

Adolphus stared at the ring, clearly

surprised, and his eyes lit up. It was

obvious how much the gift meant to him especially since it was a ring

When he didn't say anything, Laurinda grinned and teased, "What, my little ring doesn't live up to your standards?"

"That's not it. I'm just really happy. Put it on me."

He held out his hand, clearly enjoying the moment.

Laurinda took his hand and moved to slide the ring onto his index finger, but he suddenly pulled his hand back.

"What's wrong?" she asked, looking up at him. "Didn't you want me to put it on you?"

"I did, but not on my index finger. I've already earned the title of boyfriend, haven't? Isn't it only right for my

promise ring to go on my ring

finger?

He stuck out his ring finger. Laurinda hesitated, not sure if she should.

"What's wrong? I thought you gave me the title. Are you backing out now?"

Adolphus leaned down so they were eye to eye, a hint of impatience on his face. "You're not regretting it, are you?"

"Of course not! I just..."

"That's what I thought. It belongs right here."

Without letting her finish, Adolphus took her hand and guided the ring onto his ring finger himself.

He looked at the ring, grinning like he'd just won the lottery. He was clearly over the moon.

"I'm keeping this as your token. And you'd better remember, from now on, you're mine too."

Before Laurinda could react,

Adolphus slipped his arm around her

waist, pulled her close, and kissed

her so deeply she barely had time to

catch her breath.

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[ 739 words ]

Laurinda nestled quietly against Adolphus's chest. He looked so content, a soft smile on his face as he reached for her hand. "Where's your ring? Let me put it on you."

She had seen his stubborn side before, so this time she didn't hesitate. Laurinda placed the ring in his palm and offered her hand. Their fingers laced together, and as he slid the ring onto her finger, some of the heaviness of their upcoming goodbye seemed to fade. Seeing the ring there, a simple circle of promise, reminded him again that Laurinda's heart belonged to him.

Outside, the sky was just starting to turn pale. Laurinda was still groggy when Adolphus scooped her up and carried her to the bathroom. He helped her wash up, and once she was more awake, helped her get dressed.

When they were ready, he lifted her into a chair at the dining table. Breakfast was already set out, warm and inviting. Laurinda took the bun Adolphus handed her and bit into it, finally feeling herself wake up. She glanced at him, confused.

"Why are we up so early? I thought we weren't leaving for the airport until ten."

He just smiled. "We're making a stop first. I want you to meet someone before we go."

Adolphus didn't say who it was. Instead, he slid a bowl of congee in front of her and spoke with that gentle tone she was starting to love. "Eat your congee, too."

Laurinda eyed him, half-amused at his secretive act. She squinted at him, took the spoon, and dug in without another word. When they'd both finished eating, they headed out together.

As they stepped outside, Laurinda looked up at the gray, sleepy sky. She hoped Adolphus really did have someone important for her to meet. If not, she thought, she might actually be annoyed.

They drove for a long time, winding through side streets and out toward the edge of the city. Eventually, they stopped at a narrow alley in a quiet suburb.

By now, the sun was up and the world was in full swing. People were out walking, picking up breakfast, hurrying to work on scooters. An old man strolled nearby, carrying a birdcage.

Laurinda's eyes landed on the old man. She stared at him, then back at Adolphus. Was it possible? The man she'd been searching for all these years... Adolphus had found him.

"How did you know about him?" she asked softly.

"I saw his photo in your album. I asked around, had some people keep an eye out. We only got the news about him at three this morning. As soon as I heard, I brought you here. Do you want to go over and say hi?"

Laurinda didn't move. She just stood there, staring. Adolphus looked puzzled. He thought she'd rush over, since she'd been looking for this man for so long.

Laurinda shook her head, a gentle smile tugging at her lips as her eyes grew glassy.

"It's enough to know he's alive. I'm glad to see he's doing well. He looks like he enjoys this life. Let's let him stay like this."

Seeing him again was already more

than she'd hoped for. Laurinda

believed he must have had his

reasons for staying away all these

years. She wanted to respect that, to let him have his peace.

"Let's go back," she said quietly.

"Alright."

Adolphus lifted her hood and tucked it over her head, then took her hand and turned to leave.

Just then, a raspy voice called out behind them. "You're here already. Aren't you going to come in for a cup of tea?"

Laurinda froze at the sound of that familiar voice. Her nose stung and she couldn't bring herself to look back, afraid her emotions would spill over.

The three of them sat together in a small tea room. Laurinda stared at Goodwin across the table, her eyes still red. She didn't say anything too afraid her voice would crack and she'd start crying.

"You're all grown up now. When did you become such a crybaby? You never cried, not even when I scolded you."

Laurinda lowered her head, fighting to hold herself together. The words she wanted to say caught in her throat.

Goodwin seemed to understand. He answered the questions she couldn't ask.

"That explosion happened so

suddenly. Only Kendrick, Penn, and I made it out: Penn passed away last year. No one knows where Kendrick is. As for me, I've just been livin' quietly here, keepin' to myself. I didn't dare ask about you or reach

out, in case I brought trouble to your door."

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## Chapter 360

[ 556 words ]

"Laurinda, I know you've been looking for me. I just... I couldn't face you. Your father trusted me with that experiment, with the whole team, and I let everyone down."

"It wasn't your fault. Someone on the team betrayed us. As soon as I got the call, I rushed to help, but I was too late."

"When I got there, the lab was gone. Just a huge crater. I couldn't even get the bodies out, couldn't give them a proper burial."

Guilt twisted inside Laurinda. She could have stopped the experiment. She had the power, but she'd hesitated. She knew how important the project could be if it worked, so she let the researchers make the call. Because of that, so many people never made it out.

"This isn't on you. You tried to move us, even tried to end the project. We pushed back, and that's why things ended up like this. Laurinda, you said someone was bought off. Do you... do you have someone in mind?"

Goodwin's tired eyes fixed on Laurinda. The moment she mentioned a traitor, he'd already guessed the answer, but he just couldn't bring himself to believe it.

"No," Laurinda said softly, shaking her head. She didn't want to think it could be him. She couldn't believe he'd betray everyone, especially the people who treated him like family.

Goodwin understood just by looking at her. He let out a heavy sigh, full of pain.

"I don't want to believe it either. I'm sure the truth will come out, sooner or later. After we escaped, I was in a coma for a while. When I finally woke up, Penn told me the data he'd risked everything to protect was gone. And Andie disappeared with it."

Goodwin's voice was rough and

broken. He couldn't stand the thought that the apprentice he'd raised might have done something so terrible, or that he'd have to face the families of those who died.

"I'll get to the bottom of this. I just can't believe Kendrick would do something like that. You should come with me. If Adolphus could find you, it means you're not safe here anymore."

Goodwin glanced at Adolphus, managing a small laugh. "He's already got people watching over me. How could I not be safe? Laurinda, you really don't have to worry."

Adolphus hadn't expected Goodwin to catch on so quickly. He'd only just sent his team after getting the tip, but Goodwin had already noticed.

"What are you talking about? When my dad made me your apprentice, I promised I'd take care of you when you got old. I keep my promises. Come home with me. I'll bring you back to Apex, okay?"

Under the table, Adolphus squeezed Laurinda's hand. Since Goodwin hadn't answered, Adolphus stepped in. "If you don't want to put yourself or Laurinda at risk, there's another way. We leave the country. I'll take you to Frostford. I swear you'll be safe there."

Laurinda stared at Adolphus, shocked. "You want to take Goodwin away?"

"That's right. I don't know exactly what this research project is, but I do know it's not safe here anymore. While I was looking for Goodwin, I realized there were several groups all searching for him. That's why I rushed you over as soon as I did, only a matter of time before they find him."

Laurinda's face grew serious as she looked at Goodwin. "Goodwin, do you trust us?"

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[ 628 words ]

"Don't talk nonsense. If I can't trust you, who else could I trust? Let's go with his plan. If word gets out that I'm alive, too many people will come after me. I'd rather leave. Laurinda, I just want you to be safe."

Adolphus moved fast. Less than an hour later, Goodwin was in the car with them, headed for the airport.

Laurinda went with them all the way to the terminal. Adolphus had Foley take

Goodwin ahead to board, but he held onto Laurinda's hand at the gate, his voice low and serious.

"If something comes up while I'm gone from Cabinda, call Sam. Did you save his number?"

Laurinda saw the worry in his eyes, so she stood on tiptoe and pressed a kiss to his lips, cutting him off before he could start in again.

When she pulled back, she raised her eyebrows at him. "You really don't need to fuss over me. I'm heading into the lab this afternoon. By the time I finish up, you'll probably already be back. Don't worry, I'll look after myself."

Adolphus knew she hated when he hovered. He cupped the back of her head, pulling her into a hug, his voice muffled. "I wish I could just take you with me."

"Next time. I'll go with you next time." Laurinda wrapped her arms around his waist. She didn't want to be apart either, but she had things to take care of.

"Go on, board your plane. I'll message you when I can, and you can video call me whenever."

"Okay. I'll miss you."

Adolphus pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then let go and walked toward the gate.

Laurinda stayed there, watching until he disappeared from sight, then finally turned to leave.

As she left the terminal, she felt someone trailing her. She slipped aside, headed toward the restrooms, and hid behind a staff door.

A few moments later, a tall, slim figure hurried past, looking for her. Laurinda peeked out, recognizing him. She smiled to herself. She hadn't even had to go looking for him—he'd come right to her.

"Were you looking for me?"

Laurinda stepped out, watching as the man searched around.

Kenny spun at the sound of her voice, his face lighting up with surprise and happiness. He'd figured she'd notice him, but he hadn't expected her to actually wait. Did that mean she wanted to see him too?

"Laurinda." Kenny stared at her,

struck by how much more beautiful she was now. A strange nervousness bubbled up—after all this time apart he couldn't hide the joy in his eyes. "It's been a while

Laurinda caught his happy look and frowned, leaning against the doorframe with

lazy indifference. "So, what are you doing here?"

"I... I came to bring you a New Year's present."

"You? Doing something nice?"

Laurinda didn't buy it, not for a second. She raised a brow, a teasing smile on her lips.

"You're here because of the Charles family, right? Did Baily send you? Kenny, are you sure you want to get involved in this? You know how ar fam I want the Charles family gone. No one's going to stop me."

Kenny's heart skipped a beat. He didn't know how much Laurinda understood about the Charles family and Stonehaven, but she'd guessed his motive anyway. He was here for the Charles family, but it had nothing to do with Baily.

"Laurinda, I..."

He tried to explain, but when he met her cool, steady gaze, the words just wouldn't come out. He couldn't say what he needed to say.

Laurinda could already guess what he was thinking. She closed her eyes, took a slow breath, and let it out.

"Looks like we're never going to end up on the same side. I'll give you one last chance. If you leave now, I'll pretend I never saw you. If you don't, then don't blame me for what happens next."

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[ 581 words ]

"Laurinda, we could work together, you know. Just like we did back at the training camp."

Kenny reached out his hand, hopeful. He never wanted to be on the opposite side of Laurinda, but somehow, that's where they ended up.

"Work together? So you can stab me in the back?"

Laurinda let out a cold laugh. She wasn't that naive girl anymore. She valued her life way too much to give anyone the chance to hurt her.

"Are you really not leaving?" Laurinda held his gaze, not blinking. Kenny was too clever for his own good. Letting him stay around would only cause her more trouble.

"I can't go, Laurinda. You have your mission, and I have mine. I hope you get that."

"Yeah, well, screw your understanding. If you won't leave, I'll make you."

Laurinda pulled a knife from her pocket and charged straight at him.

Kenny didn't move. When the blade went in, he just closed his eyes. If you looked close enough, you'd see a faint smile on his lips.

Laurinda yanked the knife free and leaned in, whispering in his ear, "I gave you a chance."

Kenny sat down hard, staring at the blood on his hand. He let out a low grunt. Same old Laurinda—she never held back.

When she got back to Lunaria Lakeside, her phone started ringing as soon as she opened the door. Jack was on the other end, sounding anxious.

"Laurinda, did you hear about Kenny? He's in Cabinda. He got attacked."

"I know. I did it."

Laurinda's voice was totally calm, not a hint of emotion.

Jack went silent, like he wasn't sure he heard her right. He had to ask again.

"What did you say?"

"I said, I'm the one who hurt Kenny."

This time, Jack got it. His mind went blank. He'd just been worried about Kenny messing things up for Laurinda in Cabinda, but turns out she'd made the first move.

When Jack didn't say anything, Laurinda tossed her phone onto the bathroom counter and asked, "How's that investigation going? Did you find Grant?"

"Huh?" Jack snapped out of it. "No sign of Grant yet, but we did get something on Fabian. One of the bosses inside helped him out He's still recovering. Want me to handle it?" sŵnovels

"Someone saved him? Then send someone to break his legs again. I don't want him walking away from this in one piece..."

Just thinking about what the Gates family had done made Laurinda

restless. She was done with both the

Charles family and the Gates family. Since they couldn't find Grant, there was no point waiting for him.

"Alright, I'll set it up. Laurinda, about Kenny..."

Jack wanted to ask how Kenny was doing, but he was scared of pushing Laurinda too far. He hovered, not sure what to say.

Of course Laurinda knew what he was getting at. She let out a soft laugh. As much as she hated Kenny, she wasn't planning on killing him. She still needed him to run Stonehaven.

All things considered, he was more useful than anyone else right now.

"He's not going to die. At worst, the wound will take a while to heal. He'll be fine once he's back in Stonehaven and gets proper treatment."

Jack finally relaxed. As long as Kenny was alive, that was good enough. If he had to suffer a little, well, he deserved it.

"Did he tell you why he came? Want me to come over?"

Laurinda remembered the lame excuse Kenny had given her and rolled her eyes.

"He said he was here to give me a New Year's gift. Do you really think I'd fall for that?"

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[ 678 words ]

"Jack, I ran into Wan'an in Cabinda."

"Wan'an? What's she doing in Cabinda?" Jack almost shouted her name before catching himself. He realized he sounded way too emotional, so he tried again. "Why is she there?"

Laurinda hesitated. "She's... working as a bar girl..."

She didn't even get to finish before Jack ended the call.

Laurinda wiped her hands and couldn't help but laugh a little at Jack's reaction. He was always so ready to get involved with her and Kenny's business, but honestly, he should probably focus on his own mess before worrying about anyone else.

She grabbed her phone and headed into her walk-in closet. After picking out some comfy loungewear, she went to the bathroom, ready to soak in a long, relaxing bath.

By the time she finished her hot bath, all the tension and restlessness had melted away. She sat down at her desk, pulled up her delivery app, and ordered a card reader. She was finally ready to take a look at the memory card Wan'an had handed her.

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On the plane, Goodwin kept staring at Adolphus, who was busy with his work. After a while, just as Adolphus looked up, ready to ask what was going on, Goodwin finally spoke.

"Can I trust you?"

Adolphus set his tablet aside and sat up, looking at Goodwin with a serious, almost respectful expression. "I know you only left because you were worried Laurinda might be in danger. But now that you're here with me, you don't really have a choice. You have to trust me, right?"

Goodwin shook his head, a strange smile on his face. Adolphus frowned, sensing that Goodwin was hiding something.

Goodwin watched his reaction, his hands tightening on his lap. He was weighing whether to take a chance. Honestly, there was no one left he could trust except maybe Adolphus.

"No, that's not why I'm asking," Goodwin said quietly. "I'm not worried about my own safety. I should have been dead a long time ago. Life and death don't mean much to me anymore. And if hadn't leaked my location on purpose do you really think you would have found me?"

Adolphus didn't argue. When he first got word about Goodwin, he'd known something was off. Just like Goodwin said, he'd made it easy to be found.

"So what are you trying to say, Goodwin?"

Adolphus didn't bother with small talk. He wasn't interested in whatever secrets Goodwin was carrying. The only reason he was helping him leave the country was because he didn't want Laurinda to suffer losing someone else important to her.

"I want your help building a lab," Goodwin said. "I'll need ten reliable physics researchers too. I want to finish the experiment I never got to complete."

His whole face shifted. For a long time, Goodwin had been running from this, too scared to step back into a lab after that explosion. It had haunted him ever since.

But Penn's last words had cleared his head. If he was still alive, he owed it to everyone who believed in him to see the project through.

"You want to restart that experiment?"

Goodwin nodded. "Yes. I was too much of a coward before, always trying to escape. Now I finally get it. I still remember how excited Laurinda

was when she handed me the

project. He's gone now, but I wa

gone now, but I want

the project he cared about to have a

real result."

"Don't worry, I'm not asking for a free ride," Goodwin added, his voice steadier. "Before Laurinda left, she gave me a mine. I can use that to pay for the lab and the team."

Adolphus saw th

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the determination in

Goodwin's eyes and didn't hesitate. "Alright. I can make that happen. Setting up a lab will take a little time, though until I'm ready, your job is to go to a wellness center and focus on getting your health back. Don't let Laurinda worry. I want you to live a long and healthy life."

Goodwin looked genuinely surprised. He'd expected Adolphus to jump at the chance

to set up the lab right away. So many people wanted his project, he couldn't quite believe Adolphus was really just doing this for Laurinda.

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[ 579 words ]

"Aren't you even a little curious about the project I'm working on?"

"Not really. All I care about is the promise I made to Laurinda. She asked me to look after your health, and honestly, nothing matters more to me than making sure you're okay."

Goodwin blinked, caught off guard by Adolphus's answer. He'd gotten so used to people prying into his projects that he'd forgotten what it was like for someone not to care.

"So Laurinda really means a lot to you?"

"Of course. There's nothing more important."

Just thinking about Laurinda her smile, the way she looked at him-brought a gentle warmth to Adolphus's face. He didn't care if people called him whipped or hopelessly in love. The only thing he wanted in this life was for Laurinda to be safe and happy.

\*\*\*

Laurinda sat in silence after listening to the audio from the memory card. There wasn't much concrete information, but it confirmed one thing. Stonehaven had already started reaching into Cabinda through the Charles family.

They looked down on everyone else, acting all high and mighty, yet they were eager to suck money out of the mainland for their own benefit. The hypocrisy was disgusting.

The doorbell rang, snapping Laurinda out of her thoughts. She left her study and walked to the entryway. When she looked at the video screen, she was surprised to see Kinsey and Locke standing together. That was a rare sight.

She hit the unlock button and let them in.

As soon as she opened the door, Locke glanced around the living room. He frowned when he didn't see Adolphus.

"Where's Adolphus?"

"He went out. He won't be back anytime soon."

Locke didn't seem surprised. He slipped off his shoes, motioned for Kinsey to do the same, and made himself comfortable on the sofa, to was on the sofa, acting as if this was his own place.

Kinsey hesitated near the doorway, watching Locke settle in so casually. Anyone else would at least pretend to be a guest, but not Locke.

Laurinda came out with the tea and noticed Kinsey still standing awkwardly by the door. "Kinsey, why are you just standing there?" she asked, confused.

"It's nothing," Kinsey replied, hurrying over to sit by the sofa. He pulled a folder from his pocket and handed it to Laurinda.

"This is the autopsy report for Aggie and Lawrence. All their usable organs are gone even their corneas Bagor's basement wasn't where it happened. The siblings were already dead when someone moved them

there."

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Laurinda skimmed the report. Everything matched what Kinsey had just told her. She handed the folder back.

"So what does Bagot say about all this?"

Since Bagot's place wasn't the original crime scene and he'd been arrested before Aggie and Lawrence died, she figured he'd deny it had anything to do with him.

"That's actually why I'm here. I need your help tracking down whoever's running this organ trafficking ring. It's urgent."

Kinsey looked at her, hope written all over his face. He couldn't think of anyone better than Laurinda when it came to following digital trails.

Laurinda met

met his gaze,

understanding the pressure he was under. They'd never pin this on

Bagot without real evidence. Shenet

nodded. "Alright. Let me get my things and I'll go with you to the station."

She turned to Locke, doubting he was here for the same reason.

"Locke, were you looking for Adolphus?"

"Not exactly. If he's not here, you'll do. I want that miniature handgun."

Kinsey's eyes widened at the mention of the gun. He clearly remembered Locke's confident promise and couldn't believe he'd been lying about it this whole time...

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[ 627 words ]

"Locke... what are you...?"

Kinsey looked at Locke, his face a mess of emotions. Locke just grinned, like he knew something no one else did. "Why so nervous? Seriously, who's going to find out if we don't say anything? Just keep it quiet, that's all I need from you."

Laurinda caught on to their little game right away. She took out the handgun and handed it over to Locke.

"Alright, I'll hold on to this for now. And next time, don't use the same model. As for Aggie and what happened that night, it's closed. She lost control and fell from the cliff. No one else is involved."

Laurinda was honestly shocked. She hadn't expected things to wrap up so quickly. She thought this would be something she'd have to deal with for ages.

"That's it? It's over already?"

"Of course. Just remember, nothing happened that night. And you don't have to worry about Candida anymore, either. Felix has already said no one is allowed to bail her out. About the apology and compensation, the others wanted to hear what you thought. Originally, they were thinking of having Candida post a public apology video, but they're worried it could hurt your reputation. What do you want to do?"

Locke stopped just as he was about to leave, waiting for Laurinda to answer. Whatever she wanted, he'd make it happen.

Laurinda hadn't expected Felix to get involved, but this outcome was honestly perfect. A public apology was pointless, she didn't want the attention, and there was no need to waste everyone's time.

"No apology. And forget about compensation. I did hit her, after all. Let her stay in there and think about what she's done."

Locke was surprised at how chill Laurinda was about it, but he still thought Candida should learn her lesson.

"If you really don't want anything, then at least let the police make a public statement online. People should take responsibility for what they do. I'll handle it, and I promise your name won't come up."

"Alright, I'll go with whatever you arrange, Locke." Laurinda was honestly fine with it. This was probably the best way things could have ended.

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Meanwhile, at the police station, Candida was feeling pretty smug about not having to apologize. She just knew Laurinda wouldn't dare make her do it. After all, Laurinda was just her uncle's girlfriend. That was nothing compared to being an actual niece by blood.

She was sure she'd be out in no time. Her parents would never let her suffer in a place like this.

Once she got out, she planned to find Laurinda and pay her back for every slap. Candida Lane was nobody's punching bag.

But hours passed, and instead of getting released, Candida got handed a transfer order to the detention center.

Her whole world came crashing down. She couldn't believe no one from her family had come to bail her out. She was the Lane family's

granddaughter. How could this

happen? If she got a criminal record,

people would laugh at her for the rest of the

rest of her life. And she'd heard

horror stories about detention

centers. There was no way she was going.

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Candida lost it, screaming and fighting until two female officers had to drag her out.

Just as she was being shoved into the car, she saw Laurinda getting out of another vehicle. Candida fought to break free, yelling, "Laurinda, I get it, okay? I was.

Wrong

Please, just let me go! I'll apologize, just let me go!"

Laurinda didn't even bat an eye. The officer with her just signaled for the others to take Candida away faster.

For the next few days, Laurinda barely heard a word from the outside world. She and the team in the Criminal Investigation Division worked nonstop, barely getting any sleep.

Finally, they tracked the organ traffickers all the way to the border between Frostfrod and Northland.

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## Chapter 366

[ 593 words ]

Kinsey's eyes were fixed on the report, his face tight with worry. When he finally looked up at Laurinda, she looked completely drained. He hesitated, searching for the right words. "The Mafia runs that area. Our people can't get in. We'll have to come up with something else."

Laurinda was already well aware of the risks. She'd come to Kinsey hoping for another solution, not wanting to reveal what she was really capable of.

But now it was clear waiting wouldn't help. She was out of time. She needed to act fast.

"I'll handle it myself."

"You? Didn't I already tell you to stay away from places like that?" Kinsey jumped up, his voice rising. The memory of Laurinda's last injury still haunted him. He regretted letting her do anything so dangerous in the first place.

"This time is different. I'll let Ken know ahead of time."

Kinsey still looked stubborn, so Laurinda let out a sigh. "Kinsey, we can't let the Charles family get another chance. We can't afford to hesitate now."

Kinsey understood. The organ trafficking case was the most important evidence to take down Bagot. With Aileen suddenly changing her story, things were looking up for the Charles family. If they didn't find new proof soon, the family really might escape justice.

"But you..."

"I'll come back safe. I can't bring anyone official, so I'll take my own people."

Hearing that, Kinsey's face only grew more serious. He knew exactly what Laurinda was walking into.

"Whatever happens, just promise me you'll come back in one piece."

"I promise. I'm not going to let anything happen to me this time. I'll be fine."

Laurinda gave him a confident smile. She was determined to uncover the truth about the organ trafficking. She wasn't going to let the Charles family walk away from this.

"I'm heading home to get some rest. These last few days have wiped me out. I'll contact you once I have those people."

She got up to leave, and when Kinsey tried to say more, Laurinda just waved him off. She was too tired to listen to his worries.

After leaving headquarters, Laurinda grabbed a taxi back to Lunaria Lakeside. She took a hot bath, then messaged Renata. By the time.

Laurinda woke from a quiet

nap,

Renata had already texted-her people were waiting at the airport.

Laurinda rolled out of bed, threw on some clothes, tossed her hair into a messy bun, grabbed a couple of outfits, and rushed out the door.

She had barely stepped out of the cab at the airport when her phone started ringing. It was a video call from Adolphus. Seeing his name a smile spread across her face. He'd finally popped back up after disappearing for three days.

Laurinda perched on the rail outside the terminal and picked up. Adolphus frowned

the moment he saw her background. He knew exactly where she was.

"Where are you headed?"

"Back to Apex. What about you? How much longer are you stuck there?"

Adolphus glanced out at the runway, his brow creasing. "Probably another week. Why are you suddenly going back to Apex? I thought you were helping with something."

He watched her closely, concern in his eyes. He'd barely had time for her lately and worried something had happened.

"It's all sorted. Winter break's over, and since you're not coming back yet, I might as well go to class for a few days. Take care of your work. Don't stress about me."

Laurinda sounded upbeat. Adolphus checked the time and realized the semester was starting. He'd wanted to take her out and have some fun but things had gotten so busy so suddenly he hadn't even had a chance to be with her.

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[ 574 words ]

"You should head back to Apex first. I'll come find you when I'm done here."

"Alright. I'll be waiting for you in Apex."

Laurinda blew him a kiss, her playful look instantly lifting Adolphus's mood. For a second, all he wanted was to hold her tight and never let go.

"Adolphus, we need you!" Foley's voice echoed suddenly from outside.

Adolphus gave Laurinda one last look, not wanting to leave. She just grinned at him and said, "Go on, get your work done. Just text me when you're finished."

"I will. I'll be back as soon as I can."

As soon as the call ended, Laurinda's sweet expression disappeared, replaced by a cold, distant look that made it clear no one should mess with her.

Foley spotted Adolphus coming out of the lounge and hurried over. "Everything's set. The shipment won't arrive until early tomorrow morning. Orlando's already found the other group, and they're getting ready to make their move."

This wasn't their first time running a job like this, but this shipment was huge. With three groups in the mix, no one could afford to slip up. Even at their best, there was no guarantee they could control how things played out.

"Tell everyone to stay alert. Take care of any loose ends and watch the exit. Be ready for anything."

"Understood."

Foley rushed off. Adolphus checked the time on his phone, stared at Laurinda's photo for a moment, then tucked his phone away and headed toward the surveillance room.

Laurinda stepped into the VIP lounge. Renata and two others sitting in the corner stood up together as she walked in.

She nodded at them, took a seat on the sofa, and turned to Renata. "Did you get in touch with the base near Polaris? We'll fly straight there. Have Gerald send someone to pick us up. I don't want any surprises

"It's all set. But I heard the airfield is half-shut down right now. Some big shot is picking up a shipment, and two other groups are eyeing it too. Sounds like there's going to be trouble.

Laurinda didn't really care about other people's messes. As long as no one came after her stuff, she wasn't interested. She'd gotten herself into enough trouble before and had plenty of enemies out there. These days she just wanted

to

keep

a low profile, lay low, and recover. When she turned twenty, she would go back to Stonehaven and settle things once and for all.

"Tell everyone to be careful. When's our flight? I haven't eaten yet, and I'm starving."

Renata checked the time. "We've got time. Let's eat first, then head straight to the plane."

"Perfect. Let's eat together. I really can't deal with airplane food."

Laurinda grabbed her bag, and the four of them headed out. On the way to the restaurant, Renata stuck close and lowered her voice, already diving into gossip mode.

"Did you hear about Jack showing up to see Vesper?"

Lately, Laurinda had gotten a taste for gossip too. She leaned in, eyes shining, eager to hear the latest.

Seeing Laurinda's interest, Renata got even more excited and started spilling everything she knew, not missing a single detail.

Laurinda's eyes grew wide as she listened. Jack was way more daring than she'd imagined. She always thought he melted in front of Vesper.

"So, what happened to Vesper after that?"

"No idea. Jack basically dragged her off, and she hasn't shown up since."

After placing her order, Laurinda pulled out her phone and sent Jack a quick message, asking how Vesper was doing.

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## Chapter 368

[ 571 words ]

In the end, Jack just sent Laurinda a bunch of dots, not even bothering to explain. Laurinda set her phone down in front of Renata, and the two of them shared a look. "Told you. Jack was always going to make a move like this. Honestly, it's for the best. Vesper can't keep dodging him forever."

"Exactly. If Jack waited any longer, Vesper would be gone and all he'd have left is regret."

Thinking about it, Laurinda found herself reminded of what happened with Sam and Cathleen, and how Earl had swooped in out of nowhere. She never saw that coming.

Earl really was the quiet type, but when he did something, it was always unexpected.

\*\*\*

As Earl stepped out of the hospital room, he sneezed. He rubbed his nose, suddenly convinced someone must be talking about him.

The head nurse nearby offered him a tissue. He hesitated for a second, about to turn her down, but she spoke first.

"What's this? You avoiding me so much you won't even take a tissue now?"

Earl glanced at her, catching the smile on her face. He couldn't help but smile back a little as he took the tissue and murmured, "Thanks."

"No problem. I saw your announcement online. I know I made things awkward for you before. It won't happen again. I just hope we can keep things professional."

Earl nodded, his face unreadable, keeping his usual distance. "Looking forward to working together," he replied before walking away.

The head nurse watched him go, feeling oddly relieved. Maybe he'd never really noticed her at all and she'd just been fooling herself this whole time.

\*\*\*

At the boarding gate, Laurinda and Renata spotted a group of men in black suits. A couple of them were carrying a stretcher with a pale guy lying on it.

Renata recognized him right away. She grabbed Laurinda's hand, barely able to keep her voice down. "Laurinda, that's Kenny."

Laurinda had already noticed the man leading the group and guessed who was on the stretcher. She couldn't believe Kenny was still hanging in there after all these days.

She made a mental note to ask Irvin later if his medicine was really as effective as he claimed.

The boarding call echoed through the terminal. Laurinda picked up her bag and headed for the gate, walking right past the stretcher without even glancing at it.

Kenny watched her walk away, his eyes turning red. Under his breath, he whispered, "You really don't care if I live or die, do you?"

Onboard, Laurinda asked the flight attendant for a blanket, pulled it over herself, and was out like a light in minutes. She hadn't slept properly in ages and was completely wiped out.

When the plane landed, Renata woke her gently. Laurinda, still half-asleep, shrugged on her puffy jacket and followed Renata off the plane.

They'd barely set foot on the tarmac when gunshots sounded from the southwest corner. Laurinda's eyebrows shot up as she muttered, "We just got here and things are already wild. Any idea what they're fighting over?"

Renata looked in the direction of the noise and shook her head.

"No clue. I heard some of it's lab supplies, but I don't know which lab. Want to go see what's happening?"

She was clearly tempted. Missing out on the action felt like missing out on something big.

Laurinda shot her a look. "You really want to go over there? Can't you hear how chaotic it is? Bullets don't care who you are. Are you trying to get yourself killed?"

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## Chapter 369

[ 550 words ]

Renata just shrugged, totally unfazed. "Sure, bullets don't have eyes, but I do. I'm honestly just curious about what could be so special that everyone's fighting over it. What if it's something your lab could use?"

Laurinda snorted and shot Renata and the two guys with her a look. "You really think the four of us could get a cut? That's pretty naive."

She didn't bother arguing. Laurinda kept moving, but then suddenly, she caught sight of someone familiar in the distance. Her whole vibe changed in an instant. She tossed her backpack at Renata and took off, heading straight for the gunfire.

Renata called after her, "Laurinda, didn't you say you weren't going? Where are you even going now?"

But Laurinda was already gone, swallowed up by the night before Renata could finish.

Gunshots echoed ahead, pushing Laurinda to move faster. She scaled the partition by the airstrip, her tall frame moving with sharp, effortless precision.

Meanwhile, Adolphus, Egan, and Foley had just finished dealing with one group and were hurrying back to the cargo bay when another bunch showed up from the shadows.

Out of nowhere, Foley lunged in front of Adolphus. The bullet that was meant for Adolphus slammed right into Foley's shoulder.

"Sniper!" Egan yelled, catching Foley before he could fall, his eyes scanning the area. "Adolphus, watch it!"

Adolphus's face was ice cold, his entire presence radiating danger. He whipped out his pistol and fired two shots straight at the other side's leader, aiming for the knees.

He was so quick, the guy didn't have a chance to react. He dropped, legs useless, collapsing on the spot.

Gunfire filled the air again. Both sides were tense and ready to go at it.

Laurinda reached the cargo bay just in time to see Foley take a bullet for Adolphus. She listened to the gunfire and instantly figured out where the sniper was hiding. Without a sound, she darted to the right, moving like a Shadow:

Up on the warehouse roof, the sniper was ready. "I've got him lined up. I can take his legs out too," he said, relaying his message to the guy who was already down.

That shot from Adolphus's new gun had done real damage. The guy writhed in pain but managed to spit out, "Take his arms out first."

"Fine, both arms. I want to see if the Frostford crew will still come after us when we're done with him the sniper smirked, adjusting his aim. He locked onto Adolphus's shoulder, finger tightening on the trigger.

Right then, a dark blur flashed across his line of sight. Suddenly, he couldn't move. There was a cold gun barrel pressed against his forehead.

"Touch my people and you're dead. Understand?" The familiar voice was right at his ear. The sniper's eyes went wide with terror. He knew that voice too well. It was their worst nightmare.

"Shut up," Laurinda snapped,  
standing up and slamming her foot  
into the guy's chest He choked,  
blood spurting from his mouth eyes"

bulging as he stared at her. He

couldn't believe Laurinda was

actually here. How?

She looked down at him, her eyes dark and icy. "Did Kenny send you?"

He clutched his chest, pain making it impossible to talk. He couldn't even move his head.

Laurinda crouched down in front of him, eyes steady and cold. She jabbed his cheek with her gun. "So, whose arms did you say you were going to break?"

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## Chapter 370

[ 609 words ]

Laurinda looked at the silent man, her patience already worn thin. She pressed the muzzle of her gun right against his shoulder. Without a second thought, she pulled the trigger-once, then again. Two sharp shots rang out. Blood bloomed through his shirt, spreading fast.

The bullets had hit bone. He couldn't speak, but the pain ripped a long, broken groan from his throat. He looked like he was about to pass out.

Laurinda watched him for a moment, then wiped her gun clean on his clothes, not bothering to hide her disgust. "Looks like you're done holding a gun for the rest of your life. I wonder if Kenny's really brave enough to come after me for losing his so-called genius sniper."

Terror flashed in the man's eyes. His mouth worked open and closed, but no sound came out.

She barely glanced his way again. Slinging the heavy sniper rifle from the roof over her shoulder, Laurinda climbed down the ladder on the far side, already hunting for her next vantage point.

\*\*\*

Inside the cargo terminal, chaos reigned. Half the lab equipment was trashed. Adolphus gripped a P90, eyes wild, moving through the fight like he barely noticed the bullets flying around him.

Suddenly, the sharp crack of a sniper shot rang out from above. Then another. Men started dropping, blood spreading under them.

"Stop! Wait! You're hitting our own guys!" someone screamed.

The wounded man, his arms slung over the shoulders of two of his crew, ducked into cover and yelled into his headset, "I said you're shooting the wrong people!"

Adolphus looked up and realized something had gone off the rails. He barked at his team, "Get down, find cover!"

He pressed his back to a shipping container, grabbed Egan by the arm, and demanded, his breath ragged, "Did you bring a sniper?"

Egan shook his head, eyes wide. "No

way, I cleared the area myself. I didn't think they'd come with this

many people, and I never set a

sniper:

phus, saw their tattoos

Same crew from the last job we hit."

Adolphus's face darkened. He squinted up at the spot where the shots were coming from. For a second, he thought he saw someone familiar. Maybe his mind was just playing tricks on him.

The gunfire slowed, then faded away. Most of their enemies were down, clutching their shoulders, out of the fight but still breathing.

Whoever the sniper was, their aim was deliberate only the shoulders, never fatal, but enough to stop anyone from picking up a weapon again.

A hush fell over the warehouse. Then a shadow stepped out from the gloom Laurinda appeared, sniper rifle slung casually over one shoulder walking forward te she owned the place. Her stride was slow, confident. Every eye in the room locked on her.

Under the harsh warehouse lights, her face was clear, every delicate feature visible.

Her arrival was so sudden that for a second, nobody moved.

The wounded leader stared, panic twisting his face. "Laurinda... How... How is she here?" he whispered, voice trembling.

The two men supporting him recognized her, too. Sweat broke out on their foreheads. In an instant, they understood why their sniper had suddenly turned on them.

All three of them went pale.

Laurinda's presence changed everything. The wild, noisy chaos turned to dead silence. Egan stared at her, then nudged Adolphus and whispered, "It's Laurinda."

People who didn't know her just gawked, stunned by the sight of this woman, cool and collected with a massive sniper rifle resting on her shoulder. She made it look easy, almost effortless.

Foley pressed a hand to his

wounded shoulder, scowling as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. What was Laurinda doing here? And why was she carrying a sniper rifle like it was nothing?

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## Chapter 371

[ 642 words ]

Adolphus knew he wasn't imagining things. He glanced at the guns everyone was holding, then walked straight to her side.

His voice was cold, barely above a whisper. "Weren't you supposed to be in Apex?"

He'd called her, double-checked her travel plans. How did she end up here out of nowhere?

"Did you come looking for me? Do you even know where you are? Do you realize how dangerous it is? Bullets don't care who you are. What if you got hurt?"

She barely had time to react before he pulled the sniper rifle from her shoulder, handed it to Egan, and wrapped her in a tight hug.

The moment he was sure it was her, Adolphus felt fear for the first time. He honestly couldn't handle the idea of anything happening to Laurinda.

His crew quickly stepped in, forming a protective ring around them, guns at the ready, eyes locked on the other side.

Laurinda was pressed against his chest, feeling the slight tremble in his arms as he held her. The cold edge in her eyes softened just a little. Her voice was rough. "Would you believe me if I said I was just passing by?"

Adolphus let out a quiet, frustrated laugh. He loosened his grip and set his hands on her shoulders, gently pushing her back so he could look her in the eye.

"You're telling me your flight from Cabinda to Apex just happened to go through here?"

Laurinda met his gaze, saw the teasing glint in his eyes, and felt a little embarrassed. She rubbed her nose.

"Oh, come on, that's not important. I'll explain later."

"You shouldn't have come." He didn't push her for more. There was more resignation than anger in his voice. He really didn't want her tangled up in this.

Laurinda didn't answer. She turned to look at the three men off in the distance, her eyes landing on the one with ruined legs. Her stare was icy cold.

The injured man met her look and felt his throat tighten, like something was squeezing the air out of him. He sucked in a sharp breath, body stiff, and for a second, even the pain in his legs seemed to disappear. All he could think was that he wasn't going to leave here alive.

Adolphus didn't get what she was looking at. He turned to Egan. "Take her and Foley back to base first."

Egan nodded. "Laurinda, come on. Let's go."

"Wait. I've got something to handle."

Laurinda didn't move. There was a stormy, restless look in her eyes, something dark and unsettled.

The three men across from her didn't dare meet her gaze. They were terrified she'd kill them if she got even a little annoyed.

None of them ever thought Laurinda would actually show up here. Wasn't she supposed to be in Cabinda? How did she end up here? Didn't the Deacon go to Cabinda to find her?

The guy helping the injured man couldn't stop his legs from shaking under Laurinda's stare. He leaned in and whispered, "We should run."

"Are you stupid? You really think we

could get away? Never mind my

legs, even if I could walk, we'd never outrun her with that rifle. Think.

Figure out how we can get her to

us go." Content Belongs to

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With that, the injured man plastered on a pitiful grin, shoved away the guys holding him up, and dropped to his knees, ignoring the pain.

Right now, nothing mattered more than getting Laurinda to forgive him.

"Laurinda, we messed up. We shouldn't have come here to make trouble."

"Oh? Messed up? Make trouble?"

Laurinda laughed, bright and sharp, like she'd just heard the world's best joke. She definitely didn't believe they were just here to stir up a little trouble.

"Yeah, we were just angry our shipment got hijacked, so we came to make some noise. If we'd known they were your friends, Laurinda, we never would have dared. We were reckless, out of line. Please, do whatever you want with us."

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## Chapter 372

[ 623 words ]

As soon as the man finished talking, everyone behind him dropped to their knees. With their boss admitting he was wrong, what else could these guys do but follow along?

Foley and Egan stared, completely stunned. Who would've guessed Laurinda was somehow mixed up with these people?

Egan leaned in close to Adolphus and whispered, "Adolphus, that shipment worth hundreds of millions... was it Laurinda's?"

Adolphus just shot Egan a look and kept quiet, standing right behind Laurinda, clearly waiting to see what move she'd make next.

Laurinda glanced at the blood soaking through the man's pants. The icy sharpness in her eyes faded just a bit.

"Use the cargo on your plane to pay me back," she said.

"Laurinda, we can't! That cargo belongs to the Austin Family... this...."

"Then you can pay with your lives instead."

The man fell silent instantly. He was terrified of pushing Laurinda any further. If she snapped, they'd all be dead, and the cargo would still be gone.

After a long pause, he finally ordered his people, "Get the goods from the plane for Laurinda."

His men didn't hesitate for a second. Someone took off running right away.

Once they were gone, the man looked up at Laurinda, putting on his best fake smile. "Laurinda, does that mean we can have Nightingale back?"

"Sure. Take all your people and get out. I don't want anyone left behind."

With Laurinda's permission, the man quickly sent someone to bring Nightingale back from the top of the warehouse.

It didn't take long. Nightingale was carried back, limp and bloody, with his hands hanging uselessly at his sides.

The man's heart skipped a beat. He hadn't expected Laurinda to be so cruel, just destroying someone like Nightingale without blinking.

A sniper that good, ruined in an instant. Laurinda was just... brutal.

Egan and the others were equally shocked. Seeing someone like Nightingale taken out so completely made a chill run down their spines.

"Laurinda, how could you..."

"Why not?" Laurinda shot back. "Didn't he shoot one of my people? I'm just returning the favor, twice over. That's fair, isn't it?"

She glanced at Foley, who straightened up and showed off the wound on his shoulder, making it clear who'd been hurt.

The man looked like he wanted to argue, but someone next to him tugged at his sleeve and whispered "Don't say anything. If you keep talking, we might never get out of here."

That shut him up real fast. He knew Laurinda's reputation. She never played by the rules, and if she lost her temper, anything could happen.

Laurinda watched them, then nodded, satisfied.

Soon, a member of Night Magpies came back carrying a small black case. Laurinda reached for it, but Adolphus stopped her with a quick warning.

"Don't touch it. Could be a trick."

Laurinda listened and stepped back. "Put it down. Open it," she told Night Magpies.

Doing as she said, he put the case on the ground and popped it open. Inside, it was packed full of diamonds, each one about two carats.

"Well, that's a pretty decent apology," Laurinda said, grinning. "I'll accept. Just make sure you watch how you explain this when you get back to anyone tries to make trouble for me. Over this, don't blame me for coming after you instead. You can all go now."

Laurinda waved them off, and the whole group rushed out, dragging their wounded with them. They moved so fast, it was like they were fleeing a fire.

Once they were gone, everything went quiet. Adolphus's people, most of them shot up to some degree, finally relaxed and started checking their wounds.

Laurinda crouched down, eyes lingering on the box of diamonds Adolphus knelt next to her, reaching out to gently tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear content belongs fo FindNovel.net

"So," he asked softly, "are you finally going to tell me why you're here?"

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## Chapter 373

[ 635 words ]

The tension melted from Laurinda's face and she gave him a hopeful, almost sheepish smile. She couldn't help but feel a little guilty for tricking him into coming back to Apex earlier.

She figured there was no point hiding the truth now. She might even need

Adolphus's help before this was over. "I'm working with Kinsey on an organ

trafficking case," she admitted. "We traced the operation's main base to this area, so I came to check it out."

"When I left the hangar, I saw Garry running and remembered the gunshots from before, so I followed after him."

"Then I spotted you in the warehouse. I heard a sniper rifle, so I took care of the shooter first. Figured I'd give you some backup while I was at it."

Laurinda's lips curled into a sly smile. She couldn't deny she'd done it on purpose. The second she realized those guys were working for Kenny, she made a deliberate choice to step in.

It was a message and a warning all at once. She wanted Kenny to know Adolphus was under her protection. If he ever tried something again, he'd have to think twice. Some people just weren't his to mess with.

"Don't do that again."

"Huh?" Laurinda blinked at Adolphus, confused. "Don't do what again?"

He looked at her, his eyes cool but his expression softening. Seeing her now, with that innocent look, was nothing like the icy, dangerous aura she'd had just moments ago. Adolphus let out a long sigh, his tough front slipping away.

"I mean it. Next time something like this happens, don't go charging in. Just keep yourself safe, okay?"

"And stop lying to me. I can't believe I actually thought you'd just go back to Apex like you said."

"I can't promise that," Laurinda said. She took a step closer and, without waiting for a response, wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed her head to his chest.

Her words came out muffled, but firm. "I can't just ignore it if you're in danger. If it happens again, I'll do the same thing."

Adolphus hugged her tighter, swallowing hard as he tried to keep his voice steady. "But what am I supposed to do if you get hurt?"

Laurinda just shrugged. "I'm not worried. It's not the first time I've been in trouble." She gave a little shake of her head. She'd survived worse. Plenty of people wanted her dead, but she was still here.

"But I am worried." Adolphus gently lifted her chin, making her look up at him.

"Laurinda, when I saw you here, I wasn't happy or relieved. I was terrified. I couldn't stop thinking. about what could go wrong. Like I said before bullets don care who they hit. just want you to be safe.

Laurinda stepped back, slipping out of his embrace. Her soft, sweet face grew serious again. She took his hand and pressed it to her chest, letting him feel her heartbeat.

"Can you feel that? My heart goes crazy because of you. When I saw Foley take that bullet for you, I was scared out of my mind. I kept thinking, what if it had been you? know I can help protect you, that I can handle myself. I wasn't just being reckless."

"I want you to understand something. When you're worried about me, I'm worried about you, too. I know you want to protect me. But I want to protect you just as much."

Adolphus felt his emotions catch in his throat. Hearing her say she worried about him, too, sent warmth flooding through him. He pulled her close again.

"The truth is... I could have dodged that shot."

Laurinda looked up at him, her gaze steady. "Maybe you could've dodged that one. But what about the next? You said it yourself, bullets don't care. In the middle of all that chaos how can you be sure? What if something happened to you?"

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## Chapter 374

[ 585 words ]

"I know how important your hands are for a surgeon. I can't let you take any risks, not for me."

Laurinda pushed Adolphus away, her cool fingers wrapping around his collar as she stared him down.

"If you can't trust me, then you'd better get used to it. Trouble is only going to get worse for us, and if you keep shutting me out, I'll start handling things on my own,

without telling you."

"No, absolutely not."

Adolphus' heart twisted. Just imagining her facing danger alone made him feel sick. There was no way he could let her do that.

"I'll be ready next time. I'll make sure you don't even have a chance to step in."

Renata was leaning against the door, watching the whole scene with a smirk. She nudged Egan with her elbow, teasing, "Looks like Laurinda's got Adolphus totally under control."

Egan stayed slouched beside her, arms crossed, eyeing Renata's cheeky grin. "Are you even old enough to be here?"

Renata rolled her eyes, instantly defensive. "Seriously? You think I'm underage? I'm twenty. Do I look like a kid to you?"

She started to dig through her pockets, ready to pull out her passport and prove it. Just because she had a baby face, people always assumed she was younger than she was.

Egan laughed, watching her get all riled up. She was a firecracker, no doubt about it. He hadn't even said much and she was already about to blow.

Laurinda and Adolphus finally finished talking and came out together, just in time to see Renata fuming and Egan trying not to laugh.

Laurinda was exhausted and just wanted to go home and collapse. She turned to Adolphus. "I'm heading out. Call me when you're done here."

"Alright. As soon as I finish up, I'll come find you. If anything comes up, just call me."  
"Yeah, I will. See you."

They'd already agreed to split up and meet later, whoever finished first would look for the other.

Laurinda stopped beside Renata and spoke quietly, "Where's our ride?"

Renata perked up, turning around. "Waiting at the exit. You coming with us? Not leaving with your boyfriend?"

Laurinda glanced back at Adolphus. "We're here for work, not a date. Of course I'm going with you. Let's go get some rest, we've got a busy day tomorrow."

She waved goodbye to Adolphus and Egan, then grabbed Renata's arm and headed out.

Egan watched them go and noticed Adolphus didn't try to stop her. He straightened and moved closer, lowering his voice. "Did you piss Laurinda off?"

Adolphus shot him a look, almost amused. "Would I dare? She's got her own business. You clean up here. Take the lab materials to Goodwin, pack up the fest

9

get a

truck for everything else, and make sure that case of diamonds goes in my car."

Egan nodded and hurried off to get everything sorted, his thoughts spinning. He'd never realized Laurinda was so intense. The

memory of that sniper, left in net

was still stucki

brutal state was st

such,

in tais

mind.

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He started to wonder who Laurinda really was. Why were those guys so terrified of her? What was her connection to that shipment worth billions? Was someone going to come for it later?

The more he thought about it, the more confused he felt. His head was starting to ache.

Night Falcon was carried off the tarmac and rushed to the nearest hospital.

He hadn't even made it to surgery before news spread that Laurinda had shown up at the hospital. Every muscle in his body tensed. Lying on the gurney, he didn't dare move an inch. What did that crazy woman want this time?

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## Chapter 375

[ 622 words ]

Laurinda had no idea her reputation was enough to scare people out of their wits. She was just following a lead, pretending to be a concerned family member as she tracked down the head of the organ transplant department to ask about the whole process.

Night Magpies came barreling into Night Falcon's hospital room, almost tripping over his own words. "Laurinda's here... asking about organ transplants. I heard something about her uncle's kidneys failing. You don't think she's planning to make us donate, do you?"

Night Falcon's face went pale. That was exactly the kind of thing Laurinda would pull. He squeezed Night Magpies's hand, panic rising in his voice.

"I don't care about my leg surgery anymore. I'll just tough it out until we get back to Stonehaven."

"But the doctor said if you don't get treated now, your legs might be done for!" Night Magpies looked genuinely worried. Surgery was scheduled in an hour. Was bailing now really the best plan?

"My legs are already shot. I'm not about to lose a kidney too. If I refuse, she'll probably kill me. And if I'm not a match, what do you think she'll do? Come after you next. Laurinda doesn't play by anyone's rules."

Night Magpies instinctively rubbed his lower back. She really was capable of anything. His anxiety shot through the roof. Suddenly, Night Falcon's legs were the least of his problems.

"I'm going to handle the discharge. We're getting out of here."

"Forget the paperwork. Just run for it. If she catches wind we're trying to leave, we'll never make it. Go grab a wheelchair. We'll sneak out."

They didn't waste a second. Less than ten minutes later, when a nurse came by to discuss the surgery, the room was empty. She rushed off to alert the doctor.

Meanwhile, Laurinda stepped out of the transplant department and caught sight of two familiar figures hurrying away. She smiled to herself. So they were still hanging around. Too scared to head back to Stonehaven, huh?

Laurinda's investigation into the organ trafficking ring had dragged on for half a month, but she'd hit a dead end. No new leads. No clue what to do next.

Adolphus showed up after finishing things at the base. He took one look at Laurinda slumped over and felt a pang of worry.

"Let me handle it. I'll get someone to dig deeper."

Just like that, Laurinda perked up. How did she forget? Adolphus had connections with the criminal investigation team. Letting him help wouldn't count as leaking info.

"Wait... Do you have some kind of unofficial position with them?"

Adolphus looked puzzled by the question but didn't deny it. He nodded. "I had to go undercover for a while, so they gave me a special status. Why?"

"Nothing." Laurinda's face broke into a genuine smile, her energy coming back all at once.

"Okay, I'm handing this over to you. Here's everything I've found so far. The trail just... ends here."

She spread out all her files for him. Adolphus sat down, going through every detail. By the time he finished, Laurinda had fallen asleep with her head on the table. fo  
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He stood up, walked over quietly, and gently picked her up. Carrying her to the bedroom, he tucked her in and pulled the blanket over her.

Once Laurinda was settled,

Adolphus left the room with the files in hand. He was pretty familiar with the area around Frostfrod and already had a few ideas about where to start looking.

When Laurinda woke up, it was already dark outside. She felt groggy and a bit dazed, not used to sleeping so deeply. It took her a moment to get her bearings.

The door creaked open and Adolphus peeked in, spotting her lost in thought. He crossed the room, wrapped his arms around her, and held her close.

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[ 613 words ]

"Still half asleep?"

Laurinda shook her head. "Just a little out of it."

"There's a fireworks show tonight. Want to go out for a walk? You haven't had a real break in ages. The timing's perfect, and we can grab dinner before it starts."

Laurinda leaned into Adolphus, caught his wrist, and glanced at the time. Seeing they had a while, she nodded. "Alright. Give me a sec, I need to use the bathroom."

"I'll carry you."

Before Laurinda could protest, Adolphus scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom. She blushed, gave his shoulder a light smack, and said with a little pout, "You're ridiculous. Go wait outside."

When they were ready, they left the house and walked hand in hand down the busy street, blending into the city's energy.

Laurinda took in the lights and the crowds, her eyes full of curiosity. Adolphus noticed. "What do you think? Do you like it here?"

Laurinda shook her head without hesitation. "Not exactly. I wouldn't say I like it, but it does feel kind of new for me. First time wandering these streets, I guess it's just the novelty. Come on, let's check out the mall."

The huge shopping center immediately caught her eye. She squeezed Adolphus's hand and led him in, both of them surrounded by walls of luxury brands.

"This really is the fashion capital. I've never seen so many designer stores packed together like this. It's almost like they're giving stuff away."

"See anything you like? We can go in and check it out."

"Sure."

Laurinda pulled him into Chrome Hearts. She always had a soft spot for their clothes and accessories.

Adolphus followed behind, letting the sales associate know to wrap up anything Laurinda showed interest in.

Laurinda didn't hold back. She knew Adolphus could afford it, so she accepted his gifts without any guilt.

Once she'd picked out a good haul, she stopped in front of a set of matching outfits, holding onto Adolphus's hand. She pointed at the mannequins and raised her brows at him.

"Should we try these on?"

Adolphus saw the excitement lighting up her face and nodded, a fond smile tugging at his lips. "Of course."

Laurinda asked a sales assistant for their sizes. They each went to a fitting room to change.

When they came out and stood together in front of the mirror, they couldn't help but laugh. Neither of them expected to do something so corny.

Adolphus pulled Laurinda into his arms, snapped a mirror selfie, and posted it to his social feed without missing a beat.

Laurinda watched him, half amused and half helpless. "You're really just going to post that? You're not even going to edit it?"

Adolphus looked at their photo, completely satisfied. He shot her a confident look and chuckled. "With faces like ours, do we really need filters?"

He tilted the phone toward her, letting her get a good look. "Seriously, I don't think it needs any editing. Do you?"

Laurinda glanced at the photo. Both of them had that natural, cool-toned skin and striking features. Honestly, he was right. There was nothing to fix. Not their fault they looked that good.

After they paid, Adolphus gave their address to the sales associate for delivery. They wandered through a few more stores but didn't see anything else they liked, so they left the luxury section and headed toward the restaurants.

Wearing their matching outfits, they caught plenty of looks along the way. It was hard not to notice a couple like them—he was

handsome, she was beautiful, and

together they were impossible to ignore.

During dinner, the sound of

fireworks started in the distance. Laurinda sat on the rooftop terrace, chiropped on one hand, watching the bursts of color light up the sky. With her other hand, she gently turned Adolphus's face toward her.

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[ 627 words ]

"Wait, you didn't set up this whole fireworks show, did you?"

How else could everything line up so perfectly? Their dinner spot just happened to be the best seat in the house for the display.

"I knew you'd see right through me."

Adolphus put down his knife and fork, reached for her hand, and glanced at their matching rings. He pulled her up, guiding her to the edge of the rooftop, then wrapped his arms around her from behind.

"This fireworks show is my gift to you. I actually wanted to do it on Christmas Eve, but things didn't go as planned, so it's a little late. I hope you like it."

Laurinda gazed up at the colorful bursts lighting up the night sky, her eyes wide with wonder. She really did love it. Even the heaviness she'd been carrying in her heart seemed to disappear with every explosion. All she felt now was this warm, overwhelming happiness.

Not far away, Renata and Egan stood by the fireworks control panel. Renata didn't bother hiding her mood. She looked completely put out, resentment written all over her

face. She just couldn't figure out why Egan had to drag her along to witness someone else's romance. Couldn't he endure the lovey-dovey scene by himself?

Egan noticed her sulking and chuckled quietly. "I brought you out to see the fireworks. Why are you still so grumpy?"

Renata shot him a glare. "Fireworks are for couples, you know? What's a single person supposed to do here? I could've spent this time catching up on sleep."

She'd barely gotten any rest lately. Laurinda had been working around the clock, tracking down leads on that organ trafficking ring, and Renata had been right there with her, pulling all-nighters.

Now, finally, she had a day off, and Egan had dragged her outside. How could she be happy about it? Sure, the fireworks were gorgeous, but her sleep was more important.

Egan saw she honestly wasn't interested, so he gently took her arm and led her away.

"Alright, since fireworks aren't your thing, let's go get some real food."

\*\*\*

When the fireworks ended, Laurinda wrapped her arms around Adolphus's neck, stood on tiptoe, and kissed him, their breaths mingling in the cool night air.

\*\*\*

A few days later, Adolphus walked into Laurinda's apartment with a brown paper bag. Laurinda was

sitting at the table

carefully

examining several jade pendants

she'd just received.

She looked up, grinning as soon as she saw him. "Come here, I've got something for you."

Adolphus couldn't help but smile at her excitement. He set the bag down and sat beside her.

"What is it?"

Laurinda beamed, placing a jade pendant in front of him like she was presenting a treasure. "Look, I made this from that top-quality imperial green jade I got."

The jade had a rich, deep color and a glossy, almost oily finish. It felt heavy and smooth in the palm-absolutely flawless.

"Do you like it? I designed this dragon pendant myself. The design was a bit tricky, so I found a famous master carver to help."

Adolphus held the pendant, turning it over in his hand, taking in all the intricate details-the lifelike dragon's head the delicate scales. He really did like it. Smiling, he handed it back totaurinda and turned around.

"Help me put it on?"

Laurinda fastened the pendant around his neck, then pulled him back to face her. She looked at the

guardian dragon resting on his

chest, secretly hoping it would keep him safe.

"It looks perfect on you."

"I think so too. Thank you."

Adolphus slid his arm around her waist and pulled her onto his lap, pressing a soft kiss to her lips.

"Stop, behave yourself, Renata's still at home," Laurinda laughed, nudging him away with a playful push.

Adolphus let her go, finally noticing all the other jade pendants scattered on the table. He raised his eyebrows. "Are these more gifts?"

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## Chapter 378

[ 523 words ]

"Yeah, some of these are for Carla's group. We'll bring them over when we're back in Cabinda. The rest will have to wait until we get to Apex."

Adolphus eyed the stack of zodiac pendants, looking confused. "Why'd you make so many that look the same?"

"They're for my roommates. Kind of a back-to-school gift."

Laurinda tucked all six simple pendants into one box. The design wasn't fancy, but she knew her roommates would appreciate the thought.

Once she finished packing everything up, she glanced at Adolphus and noticed the folder he'd been holding since he walked in.

"Did you get any news?"

"I did. There's an auction tonight, and I managed to get us passes. Want to come with me and see what's going on?"

Honestly, Adolphus would've preferred not to bring Laurinda along, but he needed her skills. That's why he was asking for her opinion now.

As he spoke, he got up, grabbed the folder, and handed it to her.

Laurinda's face turned serious the moment she took it. You could see she didn't really want any part of this.

"Can we trace the organizers?"

"No way to find anything about them. All we can do tonight is look for a few leads, but there's no guarantee any of it will connect to what you're investigating."

Laurinda flipped through the papers, her hands tense. When she finished, she smacked the stack onto the table, unable to hide her anger. She just couldn't believe how bold these people were. Auctioning off human organs, acting like life was worthless.

"I don't want to go. I'm worried I'll lose it and blow the whole place up."

Laurinda didn't see herself as some kind of hero, but anyone with a heart would be disgusted by this. Just

istmade her so angry.

reading that hist

she could barely think straight. How

could people be so cruel?

Adolphus sat down and pulled Laurinda into his arms, settling her on his lap.

"We can't do anything reckless right

now. The auction hasn't even

started. If we scare them off, they'll just move somewhere else and keep doing the same thing. Catching them then would be almost impossible. I've already called the local detectives and Interpol. The plan is to get everyone in one go after the auction ends."

Laurinda got what he meant. She frowned and asked, "So what do you need me to do?"

"I need to use FarrVector's newest system. If we can track their data, maybe we can catch every last one of them."

That gave Laurinda an idea. The new FarrVector tracker was powerful. As long as a device had been used even if it went offline they could still use satellites to trace its location history.

"You don't need me inside the venue. Before the auction starts, I can slip a tracking program into their computer system. That should give us a list of everyone involved."

"What time does it start?"

"Seven tonight."

Adolphus filled her in on the time and place. Laurinda checked the clock.

"There's still time for me to write the code. I'll hack into their system before the auction even begins. Leave it to me."

Without a second thought, Laurinda opened her laptop and started typing furiously, her fingers moving so fast the screen could barely keep up.

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## Chapter 379

[ 633 words ]

Three hours later, Adolphus left Laurinda's apartment with his men. Laurinda stayed behind, sitting at her computer, watching the empty auction hall on the surveillance feed. The place looked so empty it sent a chill down her spine. She couldn't say why, but something about that hall just felt creepy.

She was lost in thought when her phone rang. Private number. She knew exactly who it was.

This time, Laurinda didn't ignore the call. She grabbed her phone, stepped out onto the balcony, and picked up. The second she answered, a furious voice exploded on the line.

"Laurinda, have you lost all respect for The Austin Family? Bring back what you stole. Don't think I can't do anything just because you have the Holy Card. You're still one of us!"

Laurinda let out a lazy laugh, her tone teasing and cool. "If I'm not mistaken, didn't Jackson already bring the real Austin heiress home? What's wrong, Baily? Laura not living up to your expectations?"

On the other end, Baily's hand shook as he gripped his phone. He couldn't figure out how Laurinda knew. Laura had only just arrived, and Laurinda already had the news. Did she have someone inside The Austin Family working for her?

Laurinda didn't wait for him to answer. "Don't bother looking for spies, and don't waste your time asking how I found out about Laura's arrival in Stonehaven. Here's what you need to remember. The Austin Family doesn't get to decide who becomes Lord, but the Lord decides the Austin Family's fate."

"Baily, are you really still hoping Laura can take my place as Lord? Oh, and I forgot to mention, Laura's biological mother is still with me. Don't test me. If you push me too far... do you really want to be the one accused of tainting the Stonehaven bloodline?"

Before Baily could respond, the call cut off. Laurinda stared at her phone, her eyes ice cold. Couldn't even keep his cool for a minute.

Baily looked down at his shattered phone, breath coming in quick, angry bursts. He never expected Laurinda to have such a card up her sleeve. No wonder she let Laura come back to Stonehaven so easily.

Messing with the Stonehaven

bloodline was a serious crime. Even

as the head of the Austin Family, Baily couldn't just do whatever he wanted. He'd thought bringing Laura back would keep Laurinda in check but now it felt more like he'd brought home a ticking time bomb.

Laura's return had made too much noise. There was no way to send her back. He'd trapped himself, with nowhere left to go.

Just then, Kenny walked into the Austin residence. He took one look at Baily's furious face and didn't bother with pleasantries. He went straight to the sofa and sat down.

"Baily, why are you so angry? Shouldn't you be happy the real Laurinda's finally home?"

Baily glared at Kenny, his words sharp. "You didn't stop me from bringing Laura back. Did you know Laurinda was holding something over her? Was that your plan all along?"

Kenny sat up straighter, pouring himself a cup of tea with effortless grace. He sipped, a hint of a smile on his lips and laughter in his eyes.

"You're giving me too much credit, Baily. You know better than anyone what my relationship with Laurinda is like I want to marry her-I need your help for tha Why would rever

feam up with her behind your back?"

Kenny clearly wasn't interested in talking about Laura. He had something else on his mind.

"Nice move, Baily. While I was laid

up, you sent my guys to Frostfrod to

Sent Now you've!

out twice. Don't you think it's time to for the trouble you caused?"

Kenny clapped his hands. His assistant walked in, carrying a folder. He handed it to Kenny, who glanced through the papers, still smiling, then set the list down in front of Baily.

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## Chapter 380

[ 626 words ]

"Baily, take a look at these. This is the bill for medical treatment and funerals for the people who carried out your orders. There's also some compensation for the ones who were injured. Please check everything, and if it all looks right, sign here so we can pay them."

Baily, who was still fuming from his fight with Laurinda, almost lost his balance when he heard Kenny's words. He pointed at Kenny and stammered, struggling to get his words out. Finally, he managed to say, "Laurinda still has my goods. Unless you get them back for me, I'm not paying anyone."

"You're sure you won't pay, Baily?"

Kenny's eyes turned cold. Baily looked at him and felt a wave of uneasiness. Kenny was changing. He was getting harder and harder to predict. It made Baily's nerves jump.

"I'm sure. I'm not paying. They failed their mission. I have no reason to cover their mistakes."

Baily's tone was sharp and stubborn. He hadn't even gone after those people for screwing up, and now Kenny dared to come here asking for money. Did he think Baily was a joke?

If he paid up now, everyone in Stonehaven would be laughing behind his back by tomorrow. Baily refused to let that happen.

"Alright. If you're not willing to take responsibility, then I'll let them sue you. When that happens, don't blame me for not protecting you."

Kenny stood up, not giving Baily a chance to change his mind. He left the Austin family's living room with his assistant right behind him.

Baily slumped onto the sofa, feeling lost. He didn't get it. Why did it seem like everyone was turning on him all of a sudden?

\*\*\*

Kenny stepped outside into the night air. His phone buzzed in his pocket. He glanced at the screen and saw a new photo. Laurinda, curled up in Adolphus's arms, was watching fireworks. Her smile was dazzling, pure happiness lighting up her face.

Kenny stared at the picture, his eyes burning. He couldn't stand seeing Laurinda that happy in someone else's arms. He made up his mind. He was going to get her back, no matter what.

His hand pressed against the wound on his side. It still hadn't healed. He couldn't figure out why Laurinda had been so ruthless, or what she had put on that blade to make his injury drag on and on.

The wound wasn't fatal, but it had put him through hell. The constant pain was almost enough to drive him crazy.

"Kenny, let's get in the car," his assistant said quietly, seeing him standing there, lost in thought. This was the Austin family's turf. It wasn't safe to linger.

Kenny snapped out of it, nodded, and quickly deleted the photo from his phone. He walked away, his mind made up.

He wasn't going to wait around

anymore. He needed Laurinda back. If she wouldn't come back willingly, he'd drag her back himself. If Laurinda refused to listen, then he'd keep her locked up until she did.

\*\*\*

Back in her apartment, Laurinda sneezed while watching the security feed. On her screen, Adolphus looked worried. "Did you catch a cold from being out in the rain last night?"

Laurinda rolled her eyes at the

reminder. "Of course not. I just feel like someone's cursing me right now. Probably that old guy whose goods took. He actually wants me

to return them. So naive. But honestly, he's loaded. He tried to offer me a thousand top tier diamonds at once. That kind of money is just..."

Laurinda stopped mid-sentence and jumped out of her chair. Something wasn't adding up. The Austin family didn't deal in jewelry, so why would they be trading diamonds?

Then it hit her. The diamonds weren't just gems. They were being used as money. But what exactly was the Austin family up to in Frostfrod? Was it possible.....

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## Chapter 381

[ 670 words ]

Adolphus watched Laurinda's anxious face, completely lost as to what had her so worked up. He kept his voice soft, trying to soothe her. "Just take a breath, okay? Tell me what's going on. I can help you figure it out. If you need someone to look into things, I know Frostfrod inside and out. It'll be easier for me to investigate than for you."

Laurinda took a deep breath, forcing herself to calm down. She looked at Adolphus, her dark eyes flickering with something he couldn't quite read. She didn't dare say her suspicions out loud, terrified that her gut feeling might be right.

"Where are you? I want to go to the auction."

She had changed her mind. Earlier, she'd thought the people involved were too cruel, and she'd wanted nothing to do with the event. But now, she felt like she had to go. She needed to see the auction staff for herself. What if she recognized someone? It might help her figure out if The Austin Family was mixed up in all this.

Adolphus didn't expect her sudden change. He glanced at the big, closed doors in the distance, then checked the time. "Give me ten minutes," he told her. "I'll have Garry come pick you up. It's a long way from where you are, but Garry can get you here fast."

Laurinda nodded without hesitation. She ended the video call, then immediately dialed York.

He answered right away. Before he could even greet her, Laurinda jumped in. "I think the organ trafficking ring is connected to Baily, or maybe The Austin Family."

York shot up from his chair, fully grasping what her words meant. She could hear the chair crash to the floor on the other end of the line.

"You can't be serious. That's illegal everywhere, even in Stonehaven. Baily wouldn't risk everything, would he? Is he trying to take down the entire Austin Family with him?"

York really didn't want to believe Baily could do something so horrifying. Stonehaven, or Korvath as some called it, had always valued life above all else. How could something like organ trafficking happen there?

"I don't want to believe it either. But the second dab in Stonehaven belongs to The Austin Family. You know how many human

experiments he's done. What

you

think my parents can from Korvath all those years ago. Did you forget about Jasper? He's been unhinged for a long time."

Laurinda's voice was cold, distant. She hated digging up those memories. Still, it was exactly those experiences that made her so certain. She needed to know the truth, no matter what.

York fell silent. The more he thought about it from Laurinda's perspective, the more sense it made. The Austin Family's tab had always been involved in experiments on people. Organ trafficking was something they could definitely pull off

"What do you need me to do?"

"Get someone to track every member of The Austin Family. Find out who's had any contact with people from Frostfrod. And... keep an eye on my uncle."

Laurinda didn't spell it out, but York got the message. She'd already put the pieces together.

"Okay, I'll get on it right away. But if... and I mean if... we find out The Austin Family really is behind this, what are you planning to do?"

York knew how Laurinda felt about The Austin Family, but they were powerful, deeply rooted in Stonehaven. They'd used Laurinda's and her father's influence to cozy up to other families too. Going up against them wouldn't be easy.

Laurinda heard the worry in his voice and let out a cold laugh.

"If they're really the ones behind the organ trade, then everyone involved is done for. When they're gone, nobody's going to stick their neck out for the dead. I don't believe anyone would pick a fight with me over someone who's already lost everything."

"As for the rest, don't stress. There are plenty of people in The Austin Family. We'll just help put a new head in place. Whoever takes over won't want to see the entire family go down for mistakes they didn't make."

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## Chapter 382

[ 630 words ]

Laurinda already knew exactly what she needed to do. If Baily was really tangled up in organ trafficking, then she'd make sure he got a taste of his own medicine. He'd walk the same path he'd forced her father down, and that would be justice enough for her.

She didn't care about the consequences. The way she saw it, she was already holding back by not tearing Stonehaven apart, so what was the point of second-guessing herself now?

She gave York a few last instructions, then went to change her clothes. By the time she stepped out of the bedroom, Garry was already waiting for her. She pulled on a mask and headed out the door with him.

Standing on the rooftop, Laurinda watched as a small helicopter landed and finally understood what Adolphus meant earlier. If they were pulling out a helicopter, things were definitely urgent.

The moment the helicopter touched down, she hopped out and spotted Adolphus waiting nearby. She rushed over and wrapped her arms around him.

"Why are you waiting for me out here? Hasn't the auction started yet?"

"Not yet," Adolphus said. "They sent a message—some kind of equipment issue. It's been pushed back an hour. If we go now, we'll get there right on time."

He squeezed her hand and helped her into the car, checking his watch to make sure they still had a little cushion.

The auction was strict about entry. There was only a fifteen-minute window to get inside. If you were late, it didn't matter who you were or what ticket you held. You weren't getting in.

When their car pulled up outside the venue, Laurinda glanced at all the luxury cars lined up at the curb. She couldn't help a bitter laugh. "I get that people want to survive, but if it means sacrificing someone else, it's just... disgusting and sad."

Adolphus squeezed her hand again as they got out. There was a heaviness in his voice. "The ones really to blame are the traffickers. Let's go. We should head in."

He led her into the building. Laurinda kept her mask and hat on, her eyes darting beneath the brim as she scanned the staff moving around. She didn't see anyone familiar, but her brows drew together in concern.

They'd barely settled into their seats before a staff member came by to collect their phones and other devices, making sure nobody could leak information about what happened inside.

Laurinda and Adolphus looked at each other. It was an oversight, but there was nothing to do except hand over their phones.

Once the staff member walked away, Adolphus leaned in close and spoke in a low voice. "I'm worried our plan might fall apart tonight."

Laurinda shook her head. "It won't. Renata's got it covered. I already gave her everything she needs."

Laurinda had thought ahead. The

second she decided to meet

Adolphus, she'd handed off all the follow-up steps to Renata. Before

Laurinda even walked into the venue,

Renata had hacked into the

auction's network. By now, the job should be done.

Adolphus looked at her, confused. If Renata could handle things remotely, why did Laurinda need to be here in person, especially when she hated everything about this place?

"If you could have done it from home, why bother coming at all?"

Laurinda adjusted the brim of her hat, widening her view of the room as she spoke softly. "Because I need to know for sure."

She studied every single face in the room, double-checking that she didn't recognize anyone. She stayed alert, instincts buzzing. Something told her this night would give her answers. Maybe not the ones she expected, but she'd find something. She was sure of it.

Adolphus watched her, not really getting what she was looking for, but he didn't ask. He just sat quietly beside her and followed her lead, scanning the crowd in silence.

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## Chapter 383

[ 596 words ]

The auction started fast. On the big screen, each organ appeared along with the donor's details. Families who had already been matched to a patient began to bid, pushing prices higher and higher. To them, these weren't just organs. They were the last hope, a shot at life.

Laurinda felt sick to her stomach. For her, life and death should follow the natural order, not become a business. You should wait for a willing donor, not buy your way out. Turning human lives into a profit was something she believed would bring down its own punishment.

Two hours crawled by until the auction ended. Laurinda managed to keep herself from causing a scene, gripping her seat and waiting it out.

As the staff handed their phones back, Laurinda caught a glimpse of someone in the corner. That face looked just like the man from the surveillance video, the one who'd driven Aggie and Lawrence back to the villa.

She leaned close to Adolphus and whispered, "Have your people ready. I'm going after someone."

Before Adolphus could say a word, Laurinda was gone, moving fast and determined.

Adolphus quickly realized what was happening. He grabbed his phone, started dialing, and rushed after her. By the time he made it outside, Laurinda had already disappeared.

He spotted messy footprints on the ledge outside a window. Without hesitating, Adolphus climbed out and dropped down from the third floor.

The moment he hit the ground, gunshots echoed nearby.

He ran toward the sound and soon saw Laurinda standing with a gun in her hand. Not far away, a man lay on the ground.

Adolphus's team closed in. Two of them hurried forward and dragged the man, who'd been shot in the leg, toward them.

"Adolphus, it's just his leg. He'll live," one of the men reported.

Adolphus gently took the gun from Laurinda and tucked it behind his back. He checked her over, lowering his voice. "Who is he?"

"One of the organ traffickers who escaped. After Aggie and Lawrence were killed, he was the one who brought them back."

Adolphus's expression turned cold. He ordered, "Get him to the hospital. Don't let him die. He's important."

Once the man was taken away, Laurinda looked back at the auction building. Her voice was heavy. "Have the police arrived? Were we able to save those ten people?"

Adolphus nodded, holding her icy hand and pulling her into his arms.

"They've already gone in. I'll check later if anyone got away. What do you want to do with the guy you just caught? Interrogate him here or bring him back home?"

Laurinda shook her head, thinking it

through. "Let's see how things look

first. If possible, I want to catch everyone at once. If his partners got away we have to take him back. Right now, the most important thing is collecting evidence and getting rid of The Charles Family for good."

Ever since Kenny showed up at home, Laurinda had made up her mind she wasn't going to give The Charles Family any chance to recover. She wouldn't leave any loose ends.

Adolphus led Laurinda to the car, and together, they headed straight for the hospital.

Once there, one of Adolphus's men told them the suspect was in surgery and would be out in about an hour.

They sat together on a bench in the

hallway. Suddenly, Adolphus's phone

rang and he

he'd be right

Back and stepped away to answer it.

When he returned, his face was

grim.

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Laurinda saw the look on his face and felt a chill. "What happened? Did he escape?"

Adolphus shook his head. "No. He had a bomb on him. He blew himself up. A lot of key data was destroyed. Two officers died, too."

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## Chapter 384

[ 596 words ]

When Laurinda heard the news, her hands tightened into fists in her lap. These people were truly reckless.

Adolphus reached over and wrapped her hand in his, his voice gentle and calm. "Let me arrange for you and everyone from the operating room to go home. Things have gotten out of control here. If you stay, it could get dangerous."

Laurinda lifted her eyes, meeting his gaze. She knew anyone who could run an organ trafficking ring this big had serious connections behind them.

"Shouldn't we wait for him to wake up first? Interrogate him?" she asked quietly.

"It won't help. After the explosion, the rest of them are probably already on the run. But catching one is better than nothing. As long as we have what we need to bring down The Charles Family, that's enough for now."

Adolphus reached up and ruffled her hair, his voice soft and soothing, as if he was worried she'd take it too hard.

"This has turned into a huge mess. Someone else will keep digging into it. Frostfrod's government is putting together a special task force. We'll hear something soon, I'm sure. People like us shouldn't get involved any further."

Laurinda understood. Their identities really did make things complicated. The risk just wasn't worth it. It was safer to keep their distance.

But that didn't mean they couldn't keep looking into things in their own way, quietly and behind the scenes.

After thinking it over, Laurinda decided to trust Adolphus's plan and leave.

"Alright. I'll have Renata pack up her gear and get everyone ready to go. Are you coming with me?" she asked, glancing at him.

She wasn't sure if Adolphus was done with his work here. She knew he'd stayed with her these last few days just to keep her safe.

"I might be a day or two behind," he replied. "I'll send Foley with you."

"Okay. I'll wait for you in Cabinda. Let me call Renata."

While Laurinda called Renata, Adolphus took care of his own arrangements. Not long after they

returned together. As soon as the

man from the operating room was stable, the group headed straight for the airport.

At the gate, Adolphus leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Laurinda's lips. His voice was as warm as ever. "Wait for me in Cabinda. I'll be back before you know it."

"I will. I'll wait for you to come home," Laurinda whispered, slipping her arms around his waist and pressing her face into his chest, breathing in his scent, not wanting to let go.

"Promise me you'll stay safe," she murmured.

"I promise. I'll come back safe and sound. And I'll bring your trophy back with me."

Adolphus watched as Laurinda and Foley left. The moment she disappeared from sight, the softness in his expression vanished, replaced by sharp determination. Without looking back, he strode out of the airport.

\*\*\*

When Laurinda stepped off the plane, she spotted Kinsey waiting at a private exit. Kinsey hurried over, only relaxing once she'd seen Laurinda was safe.

"You're finally back. I've been on edge every single day since you left, terrified I'd get some awful news."

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh at

her obvious worry. "You always overthink things. It really wasn't as dangerous over there as you imagined. I only caught one person, but we'll interrogate him as soon as possible. The Charles Family can't be allowed to get away with this."

"I know. I didn't waste time while you were gone, either. I've managed to collect all the evidence on Bagot and already filed charges. Pearce is trickier though can't find anything on him. Not even a hint in the

company's accounts. He's good at covering his tracks."

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## Chapter 385

[ 652 words ]

Laurinda replayed Kinsey's words in her mind as she walked outside, then reached over to give his shoulder a reassuring pat.

"Kinsey, I just need you to find out who ordered the attack on Aggie and Lawrence. Leave the rest to me."

Kinsey nodded, his response quick and steady. "Alright. Don't worry, I'll get to the bottom of it soon. You should go home and get some rest. If anything comes up, I'll let you know right away."

On the drive back, Laurinda found herself thinking about how much time had passed since she'd left the country. It had already been over a month. The James Family's new project should be ready by now, she figured. Otherwise, all the late nights and technical support she'd invested would go to waste.

When she got home, there was no time for rest. She told Foley to take care of his injuries, then grabbed Renata and headed straight for The James Group.

They had just stepped into the building when Galen came hurrying out of the elevator. The second he spotted Laurinda, he broke into a sprint, moving so fast that even the usually unflappable receptionists stared in shock. They'd never seen Galen lose his cool like that.

"Who is she?" one of them whispered.

"No idea. She looks pretty young. Maybe Galen's sister?"

"That can't be it. He doesn't have any family left. And I've never seen him get this excited about anyone, not even Mr. Group. Could she be his girlfriend?"

"That seems unlikely. There's a pretty big age gap. Galen's pushing thirty, and she looks barely twenty. I don't buy it. Look, just watch..."

The group continued to gossip in low voices as Galen led Laurinda and Renata into the elevator. His respectful, almost formal attitude didn't fit any of their wild theories.

Finally, someone lowered her voice. "What if she's the mysterious investor? I heard The James Group only made it back into Cabinda because of some secret backer."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, exchanging glances. Then they all started laughing, unable to take the idea seriously. Sure the young

woman had a strong presence

but

her being the legendary investor? No way.

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In his office, Galen ushered Laurinda in and immediately turned to make her some tea. Before he could get too far, Laurinda stopped him.

"No need for all that," she said. "I'm here to talk about the new product launch and those big projects with The Charles Family."

Galen picked up on her serious tone right away. He put away the tea set, grabbed a bottle of chocolate milk for her, and handed over a folder from his desk. Then he started giving her a detailed update.

Laurinda listened, flipping through the papers as he spoke. When he finished, she set the folder down on the coffee table.

"We'll hold the product launch in three days. Once that's done, get ready to move on The Charles Group. I'll have Northland's team come over to help you."

"Understood. I'll make sure The Charles Family pays back everything they owe to The James Family, and I'll see your plan through to the end."

There was a spark in Galen's eyes. He knew he owed Laurinda for his return to Cabinda, and he realized even Adolphus's involvement had been set up by her. He couldn't afford to mess this up.

"I'll be waiting for good news,"

Laurinda said with a small smile. "But be careful. The Charles Group is just the family. There are other players involved. Don't let anyone take advantage of the chaos."

Galen didn't need the warning. He already understood how complicated The

Charles Family was. He raised an eyebrow, looking a little smug.

"Lacy and I have already set things

up. The Charles Family is in real trouble right now. Their cash flow's a mess, and last night they got hit by hackers. I heard they lost almost ten billion in market value in just twenty minutes. Now they're desperate for funding, and Lacy is already in talks with them about a new project."

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## **- Chapter 386**

### **Chapter 386**

[ 638 words ]

"Once the product launch is over, Lacy will find an excuse to break things off with The Charles Group and sign with us instead. Everyone who's been sitting on the fence will follow her lead. When that happens, The Charles Group won't even know what hit them. They'll be completely out of the game."

Galen's eyes flashed with something dark and intense.

That was exactly how Pearce had destroyed the James family years ago, leaving them in ruins. Now, Galen was determined to make the Charles family pay in the same way.

Renata noticed how fired up Galen looked and gave his shoulder a gentle pat.

"This is your moment. You can do this for your family."

Laurinda had expected Renata to say something comforting, but she was basically encouraging Galen to go all in. Laurinda suddenly remembered what Adolphus had said about Egan ending up in the hospital after drinking with her. Maybe this was just how Renata was.

"Galen, don't lose your head. No matter what, I want you to stay sharp until the very end. Don't let revenge blind you. Pearce and the Charles family aren't ordinary opponents. You can't let all your hard work go to waste."

Laurinda had known Galen for three years now, and from the very beginning, she'd seen how much he wanted to return to Cabinda and get justice for the James family.

She'd always believed in his potential and backed him up, giving him the space to do what he needed to do.

Galen hadn't let her down. His AI butler robots were a massive hit worldwide. People still couldn't get their hands on one, even now.

But no matter how much success he found, he never stopped searching for a way back to Cabinda. The need for revenge was always with him.

It wasn't until Adolphus approached Laurinda that she saw her chance. She used Adolphus's influence in Cabinda to help Galen return.

They took advantage of the

moment, stirred up some buzz, and put the James family back in the public eye. It got everyone talking about Galer and created hype for the James Group's new product, giving them a leg up on the competition.

"I know what's at stake. No one wants this more than I do. Laurinda, I won't let you down. Just wait-I'll bring you good news."

Laurinda trusted Galen completely. She'd said everything she needed to say and stood up from the couch.

"Focus on getting ready. I'm heading out."

She said her goodbyes, then left with Renata. This time, she didn't let Galen walk her out. She'd overheard the front desk staff gossiping earlier and didn't want to give them more to talk about.

Once they left the James Group

parking lot, it was just about

dinnertime. Laurinda had eaten way too much steak and pasta in Frostfrod. She was craving something homemade and real. She sent Renata her location.

"I'm taking you out for something amazing."

"Really? A feast?" Renata's eyes sparkled. She looked like the ultimate foodie.

Laurinda wasn't the only one sick of steak and pasta. Renata couldn't stomach another bite either.

Renata had actually come back a day earlier than Laurinda. The first thing she'd done was hit up the street food stalls and treat herself, finally giving her poor, neglected stomach a break.

"That's right. I'm taking you to a private kitchen. Just follow the GPS. I've got a headache, so I'm going to close my eyes for a bit. Wake me up when we get there."

Laurinda pulled a blanket from the back seat settled in, and shut her eyes. She started running through her next steps in her mind, thinking about how she could take down the Charles family even faster.

She hadn't even managed to doze off when her phone buzzed. She checked the screen. It was a set of coordinates from Wan An. Laurinda sent back a question mark, but there was no reply for a long time.

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## Chapter 387

[ 493 words ]

Laurinda felt a knot in her stomach. She tossed off her blanket and sat up, grabbing her phone to call Jack. No answer.

"Let's skip dinner. We're going home," she said.

Renata didn't ask questions. She saw the worry on Laurinda's face, turned the car around, and drove straight back to Lunaria Lakeside.

As soon as they got inside, Laurinda opened her laptop. She entered the coordinates Wan An had sent, watching as a red dot popped up on the map.

She pointed at the screen. "Take your team and check this spot. I'll see if I can track Jack and Wan An. Something's definitely wrong."

Before Renata could answer, the door swung open. Foley stepped in and looked a little sheepish. "Sorry, Laurinda. I didn't mean to overhear, I just came to see if you wanted anything to eat. If you need, I can have some of my people go with Renata. I know Cabinda pretty well."

Laurinda didn't even blink at Foley's confession. She was too focused to care. "No need. Renata's team is local. They'll keep her safe. I need you here. There's something else I want you to help with."

She didn't wait for him to object. Renata headed out, and Laurinda turned her attention back to her laptop, fingers moving fast. She tracked Jack and Wan An's signals until, suddenly, they overlapped in the same place.

"Foley, can you check where this is?"

He leaned over her shoulder, eyes narrowing at the screen. "That's a wild patch of forest. Is something wrong with your friends?"

Laurinda nodded. "Can you take me there?"

"I can, but honestly, the two of us aren't enough. Give me ten minutes to call for backup."

Foley stepped out to make some calls. He came back in less than five minutes, phone in hand. "Laurinda, it's Adolphus."

Laurinda shot him a look, already guessing the situation. She took the phone and pressed it to her ear, her voice low and tense. "Hello."

Adolphus didn't waste time. He

could hear she was upset. "Send the location to Foley. I'll have the team from

Flame Training Base help with the search. You stay home and wait for updates, alright?"

She was ready to argue, but Adolphus kept going. "Flame Training Base has

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search and rescue gear militar dogs, drones, thermal imaging. They'll be faster than you could ever be. There are medics too, so they can help right away."

"You just got back to Cabinda. You're not in shape for this. I know you want to help, but that's rough country Walking is hard enough. there. Please, let them handle it and wait at home. Trust me, okay?"

He sounded so calm, so gentle. Slowly, Laurinda's panic faded. She knew he was right. "Okay. I'll wait for news here."

Adolphus sounded relieved. "Hand over the location to Foley. He'll coordinate with the team. They're ready to go."

"Got it. I'm hanging up now."

Laurinda ended the call and quickly installed a tracking app on Foley's phone. "You can see their locations with this. Please be careful out there."

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## Chapter 388

[ 599 words ]

Laurinda glanced at Foley, a little embarrassed. She hadn't forgotten that he was still recovering from his injuries.

Foley seemed surprised by her concern but quickly shook it off, his expression returning to normal. He gave a reassuring shake of his head.

"I'll be careful. Just stay here and wait for updates, Laurinda. Someone will bring you dinner soon."

"Alright. Don't worry about me. I promised I wouldn't leave, and I won't."

Foley hurried out, leaving Laurinda alone with her thoughts. She sat down at her computer, eyes fixed on the screen, watching the two unmoving dots, one red and one green, and wondering what was happening to them.

Renata moved fast, leading her team straight to the coordinates. When they got close, she realized the location was an old sanatorium. But when she checked the map, there was no trace of the place.

A building that didn't show up on any map could only mean trouble. It had to be either top secret or completely illegal.

She told her team to find a place to hide, then took an electromagnetic jammer out of her backpack and blocked all signals in and around the building.

Inside the sanatorium, alarms started blaring as soon as the surveillance room picked up the signal disruption.

The place erupted into chaos. Renata took the chance to climb over the wall, moving quickly and quietly, and slipped into a random patient room.

When she saw what was inside, she stopped in her tracks, stunned. She never imagined she'd end up in a place like this.

Her worst fears were confirmed. Renata knew she couldn't stay a second longer. She had to get out and share what she'd discovered.

Just as she was about to leave, footsteps echoed from the hallway. There was no way out now. She ducked into a hiding spot, holding her breath.

Back at home, Laurinda's eyes were glued to her computer screen, waiting for Renata's signal to pop back up.

Renata's dot had been gone for twenty minutes. Anxiety twisted in Laurinda's chest. Her fingers drummed on the table, the pace picking up as her nerves frayed. Renata was skilled. If she'd been silent for this long, something had to be wrong.

Forty minutes passed. Laurinda couldn't wait any longer. She stood up, grabbed her phone, and was about to rush out the door.

Right then, her phone rang. Renata's name flashed on the screen.

"Laurinda, I found the organ harvesting site. Call the police, quick—"

The line went dead before Renata could finish. Laurinda's heart jumped. She didn't hesitate, immediately calling Kinsey.

Kinsey was in an interrogation room when he picked up. As Laurinda explained, he felt a chill run down his spine. He almost couldn't believe something like this was happening. in Cabinda.

"Send me the location. I'll report it right away."

Laurinda didn't waste time. She sent the coordinates to Kinsey and grabbed her coat, ready to bolt out the door.

But as soon as she opened it, she spotted two men waiting by the elevator. She didn't need to ask. Adolphus must have sent them to protect her.

"I need to go out for a bit," she said.

"Laurinda, we noticed some suspicious vehicles near the building when we arrived. We think someone might be watching you. Adolphus asked us to keep you safe. Please, trust us Let us handle anything you need. It's not safe for you to go out right now."

Laurinda lowered her head, hands clenched tightly at her sides.

She couldn't lose her cool. If she was really being watched, rushing out to find Renata would only tip off whoever was after them. She had to stay put, no matter how much she wanted to help.

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[ 595 words ]

"I'm heading out for dinner. I'll go to Kendrick's bistro, if that's alright."

The two men exchanged a glance and immediately understood what she meant. They nodded.

"Of course. Zero One will drive you," one of them said.

Zero One stepped forward and introduced himself. "Hi Laurinda, I'm Zero One. That's Zero Six. I'll take you to the bistro. He'll stay here and keep an eye out in case anyone else is lurking around."

Laurinda slipped into her puffer coat and left with Zero One. As soon as their car pulled away from the building, another car started following them. Zero One noticed right away.

"They're tailing us."

Laurinda checked the rearview mirror, barely sparing the trailing car a look. Her voice was calm, almost bored. "Just ignore them. Drive to the bistro."

They stopped outside Kendrick's. Laurinda got out, walked in, and spotted Kendrick, who looked a bit surprised to see her alone.

"You're by yourself? Where's Adolphus?"

"He's out, running errands," Laurinda replied.

She followed Kendrick inside. As they passed the window, she glanced outside and spotted the car that had followed her, parked by the curb.

Once they were in a private room, Kendrick handed her a menu and tapped the tabletop. "Take your time. What do you want to eat?"

Laurinda studied the menu for a moment, then pointed to two dishes. "These will do."

"Alright. Just wait a bit, it'll be ready soon."

After Kendrick left, Laurinda sat by herself at the table, pulled out her phone, and opened the tracking app. She stared at the screen—still no sign of Renata's signal. She had no idea what was happening on Renata's end or why she'd been cut off for so long.

Just as Laurinda was starting to lose patience, a little red dot popped back onto the screen. It was moving fast.

Renata had finally managed to escape the sanatorium, clutching some crucial files. She ran nonstop not daring to pause until she reached an empty, deserted mountain. Only then did she finally stop and immediately call Laurinda.

Laurinda had been waiting for her call, so she picked up right away. Before Renata could say anything, Laurinda jumped in her voice full of concern. "Are you alright? going on?"

What

"I got out. And I have some really important documents. I don't even know where I am right now. You have my location, right? Can you send someone to pick me up. I'm being chased."

Hearing that, Laurinda's expression turned serious. Her brow furrowed.

"I told you to take more people with you, didn't I?"

"The team's still stuck in the signal-blocked area. I can't reach them at all."

Laurinda checked Renata's location on her phone and took a deep breath. "Find a place to hide. I'm coming to get you."

"Okay. Please hurry. The files I'm carrying are huge. They're chasing me like crazy."

Laurinda hung up and stood up just as Kendrick walked in with her food, Seraphina trailing behind.

Seraphina lit up when she saw Laurinda and rushed over, but Laurinda stopped her before she could say a word.

"I have something urgent to take care of. I need to leave right now. We'll talk when I'm back."

Seraphina saw the look on Laurinda's face and realized this wasn't the time to ask questions. She nodded. "Alright. Do you need any help?"

"Yes, actually. I need your car."

Seraphina didn't hesitate. She grabbed her car keys from her bag and pressed them into Laurinda's hand, her voice full of worry. "Be careful, okay?"

"Thank you."

Laurinda nodded, slipped on a mask, and hurried out of the bistro. Before anyone outside could react, she got in the car, started the engine, and sped off down the street.

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## Chapter 390

[ 719 words ]

Zero One froze for a moment when he spotted Laurinda speeding away in Seraphina's car. He glanced at the two vehicles parked by the curb, not daring to make a move. He didn't want to risk drawing attention from the people lurking

nearby.

Still, worry for Laurinda gnawed at him. Stuck between staying put and running after her, he finally called Adolphus.

At that moment, Adolphus was on his way to the airport, frustration simmering beneath his calm exterior. He regretted not going back with Laurinda. He'd stayed behind in Frostfrod, hoping to collect more evidence, but trouble had found them at home anyway.

"What happened?" Adolphus asked, his voice clipped.

"Sir, Laurinda left on her own. I'm staying here, just in case. I don't want to lead those people to her."

Adolphus paused, tension tightening his features. He looked even more serious than usual.

"You keep them distracted. I'll find out what she's up to."

His voice was low and steady, but it made Zero One's heart skip a beat. Zero One lowered his own voice and added, "Sir, Laurinda's driving really fast. If you call her now, it might put her in danger."

Adolphus didn't respond. He ended the call and picked up his pace toward the airfield. The worry in his chest only grew, and he wished he could just appear by Laurinda's side in an instant.

He hesitated for a second, then decided not to call Laurinda directly. Instead, he told Zero Nine to track Seraphina's car and send a team after Laurinda, hoping she'd stay safe.

Laurinda's foot was heavy on the gas. Every second counted, and she couldn't shake the fear that any delay might put Renata in more danger.

After an hour, she pulled over near the mountains where Renata's signal was coming from. The road turned into a winding, rocky trail-no way her car could make it any further. She grabbed the gun from her backpack and tucked it into the back of her waistband. She left her long down coat in the car, moving quickly and quietly as she set off into the forest.

The undergrowth was thick and the air cold, but Laurinda didn't slow down. As she got closer to Renata's location, she picked up the faint sound of movement nearby. She darted to a big tree, climbed in seconds, and crouched on a sturdy branch. Below her, more than twenty men in security uniforms moved through the trees.

They were all built, clearly no strangers to a fight. Laurinda sized them up and knew she couldn't take them all at once.

Her hand tightened around her gun,

instinctively

but she wouldn't use it unless she had no other choice. A gunshot would give her away in an instant. She had no idea if these guys had backup on the way, either. If more

showed up even her gun not

save her.

Laurinda stayed hidden in the tree, eyes on a red dot glowing on her phone's map. Renata was close—really close. Laurinda quickly typed a message to her.

They're right near you. Stay hidden and don't move.

Renata, pressed against the cold stone inside a small cave, saw Laurinda's message pop up. Relief flooded her. Laurinda was nearby. Just knowing that steadied her nerves, and the panic she'd been fighting finally eased.

"Is that woman even human? How does she run so fast?" one of the men below grumbled. "Someone get in touch with the boss. Tell them to bring the thermal imaging gear. I don't believe we can't find her."

One of the men hurried away, and the rest kept complaining. They'd been searching for over an hour and still had nothing.

"Don't just stand around. Keep looking," the leader barked. "It's almost dark. This time, spread out. Cover more ground. We need to find that woman before the sun goes down. If it gets completely dark, she'll have an even better chance of slipping away."

Laurinda's heart raced as she heard them mention thermal imaging. She couldn't afford to wait any longer. Quietly, she put her gun away and pulled out the dagger she kept hidden.

Once the group started spreading out, Laurinda slid down the tree trunk and moved with the shadows, following the faint glow of their flashlights.

She kept her grip tight on the dagger and moved silently behind one of the men. With one swift, precise motion, she took him down, giving him no chance to react.

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## Chapter 391

[ 610 words ]

Laurinda took out more than twenty men without making a sound. Afterward, she slumped against a tree, trying to catch her breath. She could feel it-her stamina just wasn't what it used to be. Just that little bit of action had drained almost all her energy.

She didn't waste a second. Pulling out her phone, she shot Renata a quick message, asking to share their locations.

As soon as Renata accepted, she crawled out of the cave she'd been hiding in. Ten minutes later, they finally found each other.

Renata's nose was sharp. The second Laurinda got close, she caught the smell of blood on her and grew tense. "Are you hurt?"

Laurinda shook her head. "No, it's not mine. It's from the guys who were after you. I'm fine. But we can't hang around. We need to get off this mountain, fast. More are coming, and they've got thermal sensors."

Neither of them really knew the mountain well, but Laurinda led Renata down the path she'd used to climb up. They were almost at the bottom when car headlights suddenly cut through the trees, catching them right in the open.

The guy who'd run off to get backup spotted Renata right away. He spat out his betel nut and swore.

"Damn it, that little brat's got backup. After hiding all this time, she finally shows up."

Renata quickly shoved a USB drive into Laurinda's hand, squeezing her fingers tight. Her voice shook with urgency. "You need to get out of here. I'll distract them."

Laurinda caught her arm before she could run. Calm as ever, she slipped the USB into her pocket and looked straight at the men charging at them, her face cold and steady.

"Why are you running? We've seen this before. If you can't handle this, maybe you need to go back and get rebuilt."

She passed a pistol to Renata, giving her shoulder a quick pat. "Didn't you say you were a sharpshooter? Now's your chance."

Laurinda gripped her knife and rushed straight at the men. Her moves were fast, brutal, every strike deadly. In a flash, she was tangled up in a fight with more than thirty guys.

Renata didn't hesitate. The moment Laurinda charged, she fired shot after shot, her aim steady, every bullet dropping a target.

Together, they made quick work of

the crowd. When it was over, Laurinda stood in the middle of the clearing, blood smudged across her face her eyes sharp and cold her presence almost overwhelming

Renata collapsed to the ground, exhausted but grinning up at Laurinda. "Told you I was a sharpshooter. I can take them down one by one..."

Before she could finish, her eyes widened shock. Not far away, one of the men who'd been lying on the ground suddenly staggered up, qua raised, and fired straight at

Laurinda's back.

"Laurinda, down!"

Two gunshots rang out at the same time. Laurinda was so worn out that her reaction was a split second too slow. By the time she registered what was happening, the bullet had already slammed into her back.

Renata, almost frantic, fired again and again at the shooter, then sprinted to

Laurinda, catching her as she nearly collapsed.

"Laurinda, where are you hurt?"

"Don't move me. It hurts. We can't stay here. My car's down the hill. Come on, help me get there so we can get out."

Renata froze, afraid to touch her the wrong way. She helped Laurinda onto her back and started making her way down the mountain, moving as quickly as she could.

They'd already taken care of everyone searching for them, so no one else came after them. Renata managed to get Laurinda down the mountain without any trouble.

At the bottom, she carried Laurinda a little farther until they finally found Laurinda's car.

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## Chapter 392

[ 538 words ]

Renata gently settled Laurinda in the back seat, quickly pressing down on her wound to slow the bleeding, then buckled her in. She rushed over to the driver's side, climbed in, and slammed the gas pedal, racing out onto the street.

Laurinda lay sprawled across the back seat, her mind swimming. She felt her phone buzzing in her pocket, but she just didn't have the strength to fish it out.

On the way to the hospital, Renata called York. The moment York heard Renata's shaky, tearful voice, he knew something was really wrong.

"Take a breath. Tell me what happened. Start from the beginning."

"York, Laurinda's been shot. Please, you have to help me find someone in Cabinda. She needs surgery right away."

For a second, York's mind went blank. Laurinda? Of all people? He forced himself to focus. "Take her to Cabinda University Hospital. I'll get someone there to meet you. Go, now."

He tried to calm Renata, but before he could hang up, Laurinda's weak voice came through the phone.

"Call Sam..... or Irvin. They know people."

Laurinda had thought about asking Renata to contact the Lane Family, but realized Renata probably didn't have their number. Sam and Irvin would know what to do. If they found out she was hurt, they'd make sure she got the best care, no question.

York answered right away, not wasting a second. He ended the call and started dialing Sam as he rushed outside.

Sam picked up, ready to chat, but as soon as he heard York's news, he froze. "You're saying Laurinda's hurt?"

"Yeah. I don't know all the details. I've got someone taking her to Cabinda University Hospital. I'm heading to the airport now. Please, set things up for her."

Sam hung up, still trying to process what he'd just heard. Before he could move, someone tapped him on the shoulder and spoke quietly.

"Laurinda's hurt? You mean Adolphus's girlfriend?"

"Yeah. I have to go. You guys..."

"I'll go with you."

"No, it's better if I go alone. Too many people will just get in the way."

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Sam waved off everyone's offers to join him. He didn't know how bad Laurinda's injuries were, and it wouldn't help to show up with a crowd. From the way York had sounded it was serious. Sam didn't want to think about what might have happened. He just needed to move.

He grabbed his coat and hurried out. In the lobby, he ran into Orville, who was just coming in. Orville called

out, "Weren't you guys having dinner? Why'd it end so soon?"

Sam knew Orville could be trusted. He tossed him the car keys. "I've been drinking.

Can you drive me to Cabinda University Hospital?"

Orville nodded and didn't ask any questions. He took the keys and they hurried out together.

On the drive, Sam called every

doctor he could think of. He even

managed to get several department heads from Cabinda University Hospital to come back in and wait for them.

Orville parked the car in the hospital lot. As they got out, he finally worked up the courage to ask, "Sam, who's in the hospital? What's going on?"

"It's Laurinda. She's been hurt. I don't know all the details yet. Adolphus isn't in Cabinda."

Orville stumbled, shocked. He'd considered a lot of possibilities, but never once had he imagined it would be Laurinda...

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## Chapter 393

[ 608 words ]

Sam and his friend rushed to the ER entrance, where Jed and Irvin were already waiting. As soon as he saw Jed, Sam greeted him quietly.

"Sorry to make you come out so late..."

Jed waved him off. "Don't apologize. Laurinda is like family to me. I wouldn't be able to relax unless I was here myself."

Sam nodded, understanding exactly what Jed meant. He noticed Irvin glued to his phone and asked, "Can you track Laurinda's location?"

Irvin answered without looking up. "Yeah, we share locations. She's about a mile away now. I already asked my uncle to clear a path for the ambulance."

Sam let out a breath and shook his head, realizing he'd completely forgotten about Cabinda's crazy traffic. Thank goodness Irvin was on top of things.

Just then, a big G-Wagon pulled up to the ER's side entrance. A team of doctors, all experts, rushed out. Nurses at the front rolled out a gurney, moving fast but gentle as they carefully lifted Laurinda from the backseat. A doctor checked her quickly before they wheeled her straight into surgery.

Off to the side, Sam noticed Renata huddled in the corner. He didn't have the heart to ask her what happened. From a nurse, he overheard that Laurinda had been shot.

The surgery dragged on for more than four hours. By the time it ended, everyone who cared had shown up.

Seraphina sat next to Kendrick, her voice soft and full of guilt. "If I'd known something like this would happen, I never would have let her go alone."

Kendrick rubbed her shoulder, speaking quietly. "The doctor said the surgery went really well. Laurinda's strong. She's going to be okay."

Just then, the elevator doors opened and a tall, cold-looking man stepped out. He was surrounded by a few men in black suits and several doctors in white coats- Laurinda's medical team. One of the doctors was updating Adolphus as they walked. Adolphus, clutching Laurinda's file, headed straight for the ICU.

Trailing behind them, Egan

immediately spotted Renata in the corner. She looked lost, like a doll someone had forgotten. He walked

over, helped her up, and saw be

puffy her eyes were from crying Without a word, he scooped her into his arms and started toward the elevator.

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York came back from the payment desk and saw Egan carrying Renata away. He hurried over and grabbed Egan's arm, whispering, "Where are you taking her?"

"I'm taking her home to get some rest. She's not doing well."

York knew Egan and had to admit he was right. Renata shouldn't be here in her condition.

Just as York was about to agree, Renata snapped out of her daze and tried to fight her way out of Egan's arms. "I need to stay with Laurinda. I can't leave her."

Egan couldn't hold onto her, so he set her down. The second she tried to run back, he gently chopped the back of her neck, and Renata slumped unconscious in his arms.

York stared, completely baffled. "What was that for?"

"She needs rest. I'll take care of her."

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Three days later, Laurinda finally woke up. As her eyes fluttered open, the first thing she saw was a pair of deep caring eyes and a faceso handsome it almost didn't look real.

Still groggy, she whispered, "Am I dreaming? Did I just wake up to a male model?"

Adolphus, who had been waiting by

her side for days, narrowed his eyes, clearly not amused that she didn't recognize him right away. He leaned closer his voice low and rough from worry. Take a good look: Don't you know who I am?"

Laurinda stared at Adolphus, noticing the tired red veins in his eyes. She couldn't

help but smile. "Adolphus, you really do look like a model."

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## Chapter 394

[ 577 words ]

"You've been out cold for three days, and now you're all smooth-talking? Besides the pain, is there anywhere else you feel off?"

Adolphus couldn't help but laugh at Laurinda's joke. He shifted her gently, helping her move just enough so she could get comfortable on the bed.

"Dizzy..."

Laurinda really was dizzy. The whole world felt fuzzy, and she hated that powerless feeling, like she was just floating, unable to grab onto anything solid.

Adolphus put his fingers on her wrist to check her pulse. When she mentioned the dizziness, his brow tightened.

"You barely had any energy left, and now you've lost even more. Honestly, it's a miracle you're not worse. When you got to the hospital, you'd lost so much blood your whole body was cold."

Laurinda saw the frustration in his face and reached out, wrapping her hand around his.

"Don't make it sound so dramatic. I was still aware during the surgery. It wasn't as bad as you say. Renata patched me up before we even left for the hospital."

Since she had the strength to talk back, Adolphus finally relaxed a little. He gently pinched her cheek, his voice soft and teasing. "So, do I need to sing your praises now?"

"Wouldn't hurt."

Laurinda pressed her cheek into his palm, soaking up the warmth. In her heart, she thought, It's good to still be here.

Adolphus barely dared to touch her, afraid he might hurt her, but he let her lean into his hand. Feeling the heat of her skin, he finally let himself breathe, the tension draining away.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. They just stayed like that, quietly taking comfort from each other, both feeling at peace.

A doctor finally walked in to check on her. Adolphus pulled his hand away and helped with the exam.

The doctor checked Laurinda's wound and frowned again. The spot was tricky and could tear easily.

"If Laurinda keeps recovering like this, she should be able to go home and rest in less than a week."

He glanced at Adolphus as he spoke. Everyone knew about Adolphus's reputation as a surgical master, so the doctors always chose their words carefully around him.

"We'll do whatever you recommend."

Adolphus pulled the blanket up over Laurinda and walked the doctor to the door. Not long after, he came back with a thermos.

"You can eat a little now. I had the housekeeper make you some liver porridge."

The second Laurinda heard "liver porridge, she lost all interest in food. She'd had to drink that stuff for ages before, and just hearing the words was enough to

kee

want to gag.

"I want something Kendrick cooked."

"Not right now. When you're out of the hospital, we'll have him over to make you whatever you want."

Adolphus could see she was just trying to get out of eating the porridge. He wasn't going to let her off the hook. Right now, this was what her body needed.

Laurinda realized she wasn't going to win this one, so she just let him help her wash up and feed her the porridge.

Halfway through, she started to feel a little better. Her mind cleared, and memories from before she got hurt started coming back.

"How's Renata?"

"She's fine She had a fever, but she's already better. York is here too, but he can't come see you yet. Once you're moved to a regular room, they'll both stop by."

Knowing Renata was okay and York had come, Laurinda felt a weight lift off her chest. She knew how Renata could be, always blaming herself and overthinking.

"How's the nursing home doing?"

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## Chapter 395

[ 630 words ]

Laurinda hadn't even had the chance to ask Renata about the nursing home before she got hurt. Everything happened so fast.

"That place wasn't a nursing home at all. It was actually an organ harvesting facility. Everyone involved has been arrested, and all the evidence is in. This time, Bagot and Pearce don't have any way out," Adolphus said, not waiting for Laurinda to ask. He

knew exactly what she was worried about and wanted to save her the trouble of talking too much.

"The James Family's new product launch went really well. And with the scandal involving the Charles brothers, the Charles Family's stocks have completely tanked. They're being liquidated right now. The Charles Family is done for."

He kept going, sensing Laurinda wanted to know more. "The Gates Family got caught up in it too. Frostford's business partners pulled out. Finn tried to protect himself by switching the official owner of the Gates Group to Harden. Now Harden's been arrested, and Finn ran off overseas."

Laurinda was shocked at how things turned out for the Gates Family. She couldn't believe Finn could be that heartless, just dumping all the problems on Harden like that.

Harden got what he'd been after, but in the end, it was just a mess... nothing worth having.

Laurinda realized she'd missed a lot while she was away from Apex. Adolphus's explanation was too brief and left her with so many questions. Adolphus saw the look in her eyes and cut her off gently.

"I'll tell you everything in detail once you're feeling better. For now, you shouldn't worry about all this. Oh, and Jack and his girlfriend have been found. They're in this hospital too."

"Jack's girlfriend accidentally overheard someone talking about the facility's location. She got taken, and when Jack went after her, he got caught too. They were buried alive, but the team from Flame Training Base got there just in time. They're both safe now."

Adolphus didn't go into the details of the rescue, which had been dangerous, but the important thing was that Jack and his girlfriend were safe.

Knowing everyone was okay, Laurinda finally relaxed. She finished a bit more of her liver porridge and drifted off to sleep.

Once she was sleeping soundly, Adolphus quietly left the room.

Renata had been waiting outside. The moment she saw Adolphus come out, she jumped up, rushing over anxiously. "Laurinda... is she alright?"

"She can eat, and she's in good spirits. You don't have to worry," Adolphus reassured her.

Now that Laurinda was awake,

Laurinda

Adolphus felt calmer too. He'd been angry about Laurinda's injury, but he never blamed Renata for

a for any of it. If

it hadn't been for the information Renata had risked so much to bring back, the Charles Family wouldn't have gone down so quickly.

"She'll be moved to a regular room soon, and then you can see her. For now, you should go freshen up. If she sees you like this, she'll just worry even more."

Adolphus looked at Renata, noticing how tired and messy she seemed, and spoke kindly.

Egan had tried to take Renata home to rest and clean up, but the moment she woke up, she ran straight back to the hospital. Egan couldn't stop her, so in the end, he just let her stay and wait for news.

Renata glanced at her clothes and nodded, feeling a little embarrassed. She definitely needed to get herself together. She'd been so worried

about Laurinda that she hadn't even thought about her own appearance.

"I'll go to a hotel nearby and clean up. Is there anything you need me to bring back?" she asked.

"No, that's alright. Laurinda's family is coming soon. You should go home and get some real rest."

When Renata heard that Adolphus's family would be arriving, she knew she should step back for now. "Okay, I'll come back tonight to switch with you."

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[ 616 words ]

"Okay, just come over tonight."

As soon as Renata thought about seeing Laurinda, she practically skipped away, her mood so much lighter. In a blink, she was gone.

Adolphus noticed how quickly she vanished and arched an eyebrow. Now he understood how she'd managed to escape from such a dangerous place before.

Egan came back, looking around the hallway but not spotting Renata anywhere. He walked up to Adolphus with a food container in hand and asked, "Where's Renata?"

"She heard Laurinda woke up, so she went back to her hotel to rest. What's going on with The Charles Group? Did you find anything off?"

"She left fast. The Charles Group is tangled up with a lot of overseas connections. Some files show they're tight with Stonehaven, but no matter what we do, Pearce refuses to admit anything about their business together. It's still a mess."

Adolphus sat down on the bench, a little smile playing on his lips. "If he won't talk, that's fine. We're not the ones who should be stressed right now. It's those rats hiding in the shadows. Is Aileen's sentence official yet?"

"Yeah, she got life in prison. But when she found out Pearce was the reason both her kids ended up like that, she just lost it. She's gone completely mad."

Adolphus wasn't surprised that Aileen snapped. What caught him off guard was that she actually seemed to care about her children.

"I'll leave The Charles Family situation to you and Galen. Once you've tied up all the loose ends, have Galen take over The Charles Group. However The Charles Family took from The James Family, let Galen take it back the same way. That's only fair."

Egan listened to all this, clearly wanting to say something but hesitating. Adolphus noticed and narrowed his eyes. "What? Just spit it out."

Egan took a breath, deciding not to hold back. "Adolphus, I found out something. Galen and Laurinda have known each other for years."

Adolphus looked up, his smile growing even wider.

"You think Laurinda's been using me?"

"I wouldn't say that. I just noticed at the product launch-Galen's new project got technical support from Laurinda ! checked into it and found out they've been in touch for three years."

Adolphus arched his brow, understanding exactly what Egan meant.

"I knew about them the day I brought Galen back to Cabinda. Neither of them ever tried to hide it. Laurinda isn't using me, Egan. I want to do things for her. Whatever she wants, I'll

I'll give it to her. If can't figure out a way."

"Honestly, it's an honor just to do something for her."

Egan listened to this and realized Adolphus was completely lovestruck, way beyond saving.

Well, he had to admit it, he was convinced.

\*\*\*

After another week in the hospital, Laurinda was finally ready to go home. She sat in her wheelchair, waiting for Adolphus to bring her medicine, while Seraphina pushed her along and kept fussing.

"Why are you heading back to Apex right after being discharged? Wouldn't it be better to stay in Cabinda for a while? We could all take care of you."

Seraphina really didn't want Laurinda to leave. She was sure Adolphus wouldn't look after her well enough.

Laurinda leaned back in her wheelchair, looking up at Seraphina, who was clearly reluctant to let her go. She flashed a bright, reassuring smile.

"I'll be back soon, promise. And if you miss me, you can always come visit me in Apex. I've been gone so long already, my family's starting to worry."

Laurinda had already talked it over

with Adolphus before deciding to

return to Apex. With The Charles Group fattening apart and more people getting arrested Adolphus was worried someone desperate might try something. So, he figured the safest place for Laurinda to recover was back home in Apex.

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## Chapter 397

[ 567 words ]

Adolphus came back carrying the medicine. He handed it to Seraphina, took over the wheelchair, and pushed Laurinda outside.

When they got to the parking lot, Adolphus gently lifted Laurinda into the car. He took the medicine bag from Seraphina, noticed her lingering gaze, and grinned. "If you really can't let us go, why don't you just come with us?" he teased.

Seraphina shook her head right away, her cheeks a little pink. "I've got things to handle here, so I'll stay. You two go ahead."

Laurinda shot Seraphina a knowing look. She couldn't help but tease, "Then let's wait for Kendrick to bring you to Apex for a visit when he's free."

Seraphina blushed even more at that, a shy smile on her lips. Any reluctance she felt disappeared. "Alright, enough. You'll miss your flight if you don't hurry."

"We're going, we're going," Adolphus replied with a laugh.

As the car pulled away, Laurinda leaned against the window and waved to Seraphina. The car slipped away in the direction of the airport.

\*\*\*

The plane landed in Apex, and as soon as they stepped out of the airport, Laurinda spotted Balaam, Fidelia, and the butler waiting for them.

From her wheelchair, Laurinda glanced up at Adolphus. Her brow creased. "Did you tell them I got hurt?"

Adolphus looked down and saw the little pout on her face. He chuckled softly. "It wasn't me. Bonnie heard about your injury and made such a fuss about going to Cabinda that everyone found out when she started arguing with Harrell."

Laurinda rubbed her forehead with her good hand. She didn't even want to imagine what kind of scolding was coming. They were probably about to talk her ear off.

"My head already hurts..."

Adolphus smiled at her, warmth in his eyes. "They just care about you. Don't worry, I'll try to run interference for you."

He wheeled Laurinda forward. As soon as Fidelia spotted them, she rushed over, eyes red from worrying.

"How could you be so careless? You were only in Cabinda a few days and managed to get hurt! How are you feeling? If you were injured, you should've stayed there and rested. Why did you have to rush back?"

Fidelia reached out but didn't dare touch Laurinda, her worry obvious. She hadn't slept since she found out Laurinda was hurt, afraid something serious might happen.

"I'm really fine," Laurinda said, giving Fidelia a warm, reassuring smile. She barely moved, not wanting to make anyone more nervous.

Balaam stepped forward and gently checked Laurinda's wrist without a word.

"It's not too bad. You're weak, but you'll recover soon. Come on, let's go home first," he said after a moment.

Everyone relaxed a little, relieved that Laurinda wasn't seriously injured. Together, they left the airport.

\*\*\*

News of Laurinda's return had barely spread before Baal hurried over. Adolphus sat in the living room, frowning slightly as Baal entered with the butler.

"Baal, it's pretty late. What brings you here?" Adolphus asked.

Baal didn't really know Adolphus and assumed he was just like York, so he didn't bother being polite to see Laurinda. Please ask her to come out. Tell her it's urgent."

he

Adolphus's voice was cool, and he cut off the butler before he could say

anything. "Sorry, Baal, Laurinda is

already resting if it's important,

it's important

come back tomorrow."

He had never liked Baal, and seeing him show up at this hour only made him more annoyed.

Baal's face darkened at being turned away. He scowled and tried to look

intimidating, clearly not used to being refused.

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## Chapter 398

[ 577 words ]

"I told you to go get Laurinda, so just go already. I really have something important to tell her. It's about the Gates family. I've got news about Finn."

The second Adolphus heard Finn's name, he looked even less interested, if that was possible. He was stretched out on the sofa, watching Baal with a lazy, almost bored expression.

"Whatever is going on with the Gates family, it has nothing to do with Laurinda. And Finn? He's got even less to do with her. I remember Laurinda saying you two are just business partners. If this isn't work related, please stop dropping by. Even if it is work, you can just talk to the project manager. There's really no need for you to show up here."

Before Baal could even respond, Adolphus turned to the butler behind him, his voice calm and flat. "Butler, please show our guest out."

Baal's face twisted in anger. He glared at Adolphus and snapped, "Who do you think you are? Since when do you get to decide for Laurinda? I said I want to see her. If I don't see her today, I'm not—"

He didn't even get to finish. Six bodyguards walked in, all business. They didn't need instructions. They just picked Baal up and started carrying him out the door.

The butler stood there, stunned, looking back and forth between Adolphus and the scene at the door. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept quiet. Everyone in the house knew Adolphus was Laurinda's choice, and that meant he spoke for her.

Adolphus got up and handed the butler a glass of milk, the perfect temperature. "Josh, can you take this milk up to Laurinda for me? I'm going to check what's happening outside."

Josh nodded, took the glass, and headed upstairs. He gently knocked on Laurinda's bedroom door.

"Laurinda, I brought your milk."

Laurinda was sprawled on her bed, reading a novel. She heard Josh and told him to come in.

She took the milk from him and glanced up. "Did I hear someone downstairs just now?"

Her room was well insulated, so she'd only caught bits and pieces of the noise. She couldn't tell who it was, but it was obvious there was some kind of commotion.

"It was Baal," Josh explained. "He wanted to see you. Adolphus told him you were resting, but Baal wouldn't listen and started arguing. So. Adolphus's guys threw him out"

Laurinda couldn't help but laugh softly at that. She finished her milk and handed the empty glass back to Josh, making it clear she had no intention of getting involved.

Josh hesitated for a second, surprised she wasn't fazed. "So you're not going to see Baal either?"

Laurinda set her tablet aside and looked up at him, half-smiling. "Is there any reason I should?"

She studied Josh for a moment, curious if he thought differently. "Do you think I should see him?"

Josh picked up on her meaning and realized she must have her reasons, but he still looked a bit unsure. "I thought you and Baal were business partners. York mentioned that the Austin family's assets got merged into the Baker family and our cooperation's been going well. Shouldn't we keep that relationship going?"

Laurinda shook her head, a small smile on her lips. "Healthy

relationships are worth maintaining. But it was never healthy to begin with, there's really nothing to maintain."

Especially after what she'd learned about Baal's feelings for her mother, Laurinda was sure. She couldn't deal with him anymore, not without feeling uncomfortable.

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## Chapter 399

[ 620 words ]

"Baal might be a partner, but our relationship is all about using each other. When this is over, there's no reason for us to ever cross paths again."

The butler didn't know much about business, but after hearing Laurinda, he got the message. He understood exactly how he was supposed to treat Baal from now on.

"So, if Baal shows up at the door again, I just don't let him in?"

"He won't be back."

Laurinda gave a soft laugh. She knew exactly how Adolphus handled things. If Baal wasn't allowed in today, Adolphus would make sure he never came around again.

Baal was dragged out by six men and dumped right next to his car parked on the street. He glared furiously as Adolphus pedaled up on his bike, arriving late and looking completely unfazed. Baal's voice was sharp and accusing. "Do you even know what you're doing?"

Adolphus stayed on his bicycle, one foot on the ground. He reached into his pocket for a pack of cigarettes, slid one out, and lit up. After a long drag, he exhaled slowly, watching the smoke drift away. He waved off the other men, signaling for them to go.

Now it was just the two of them. Adolphus's eyes turned cold as he fixed his gaze on Baal. His voice was calm and clear. "Don't come here again. Next time, it won't just be you getting tossed out."

"Who do you think you are? What gives you the right to make decisions for

Laurinda? I've known her parents for years. I promised them I'd take care of her. You"

"You promised her parents? Did you forget what Laurinda's father told you? Didn't he warn you to keep your distance from his wife and daughter?"

Baal's eyes widened, shock flickering across his face. He never expected Adolphus to know about that conversation.

"How... How do you know about that?"

"Who I am doesn't matter. Don't bother asking how I found out. You wanted

Laurinda's mother for yourself. Was her father wrong to keep you away from his wife and child?"

Adolphus's words hit home. "Do you really not get it, even now? Think about why Laurinda's father never mentioned you to her. Even when he knew The Austin Family was nothing but trouble, he never wanted her to turn to you for help. He was protectin

her from you. He didn't

even want the two of you to have

any contact."

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Baal went pale, the truth hitting him harder than he wanted to admit. Adolphus saw it all. Baal's voice shook as he tried to deny it.

"That's not true... You're making things up."

"Am I? Only you know what you really felt for Laurinda's mother. But remember this. The only reason you even have any contact with Laurinda Laur!! is because you both have a common enemy. Otherwise, you'd never have gotten close to her."

Adolphus crushed out his cigarette between his fingers, pushed down the bike's kickstand, and got off. He stood right in front of Baal, his presence impossible to ignore.

"Let me give you some advice. Don't

act like some elder in front of Laurinda, Don't use 'taking care of

her' as an excuse to get close. You

really don't want her finding ou about the things you've been hiching, do you?"

Baal met Adolphus's dark eyes and felt completely exposed. This time, he didn't argue. He lowered his head, silent for a long moment before finally speaking.

"I get it. I know what I have to do."

"You'd better mean it. You can see yourself out."

Adolphus waited until Baal's car pulled away before he hopped back on his bike and headed home.

After washing up and changing into something comfortable, he walked into Laurinda's room. She was still awake. He sat down beside her, gently tilted her chin, and kissed her softly on the lips.

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[ 610 words ]

"Still not asleep? Waiting for me or something?"

Laurinda brushed Adolphus's hand away and shifted back, putting space between them.

"Oh, come on. Don't mess around. What did Baal want?"

At the mention of Baal, Adolphus's whole vibe changed. He sat up straighter, suddenly all business. "He says he knows where Finn is. I've already sent people to check. The Frostfords aren't going to let Finn go. No matter where he runs, they'll hunt him down and drag him back."

Laurinda frowned, an idea forming in her mind. There was only one reason Baal would come to her about Finn, and that was...

"Finn's probably in Stonehaven."

Adolphus stared at her, caught off guard. "What?"

He hadn't even considered that Finn could end up in Stonehaven. There was an unspoken rule there-outsiders weren't allowed in.

"You really think he could get into Stonehaven?"

"I'm almost sure he's there. Baal coming to me in a panic? That only happens if Finn's somewhere Baal can't reach. Stonehaven's the only place like that. He needs my help."

Adolphus's brow creased with worry. He never imagined Finn could make it into Stonehaven. "If that's true... it's not good for us. Trouble like this just keeps coming back."

Laurinda leaned against the headboard, one leg tucked beneath her, looking totally relaxed. She raised an eyebrow and let out a soft, amused laugh. "Why wouldn't it be

good? He ran right into my territory and thinks he can just walk out? That would make me look useless. The real game is just getting started."

"So what are you planning?"

"It needs to be fun, obviously."

Laurinda tugged him by the collar, pulling him close, her lips brushing his ear as she whispered her plan.

When she finished, Adolphus's serious look faded and a slow smile spread across his face. He tapped her nose playfully. "You're impossible."

With that settled, Laurinda yawned, suddenly tired. "I'm exhausted. Want to split the bed with me?"

She looked so mischievous that Adolphus couldn't help but smile, his eyes soft with affection.

"You're still hurt. If I sleep with you I'll want to hold you, and I'm scared I'll hurt you. I'll stay in the next room. If you need anything, just call

hear you.

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He wanted to be with her, but he knew he wouldn't be able to resist pulling her into his arms. With her injuries, it was safer to sleep apart.

"Alright, you better get some sleep too. I'm really tired. I'm going to crash."

"Yeah. Sleep well."

Adolphus tucked the blanket around her. He didn't leave until she was fast asleep, then quietly slipped out and headed to the room next door.

\*\*\*

Laurinda spent another two weeks at home, letting her injuries heal. Meanwhile, the news was everywhere the Charles Family's bankruptcy was splashed across every major platform.

But the biggest thing in Apex was the Gates Group getting bought out. Everyone expected the Baker Group to take over, but it was the Bill Group from Cabinda instead.

No one saw that coming. The Bill Family moving into Apex? It was a total shock.

Laurinda read the headlines, set her tablet down, took a bite of her fried breadstick, and said with a calm voice, "I want to see Harden."

Adolphus paused, his spoon of porridge halfway to his mouth. He looked up, confusion in his eyes. "Why do you want to see him?"

"I want to get him out. Maybe send

him to play in the pro leagues. He's

got talent, and honestly, what happened at the Gates Family wasn't really his fault. He doesn't deserve to go down for it."

Adolphus watched her carefully, not buying her explanation. He knew Laurinda too well. She wasn't the type to stick her neck out for someone just out of pity. There had to be more to her plan.

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