

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

Chapter 131

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Chapter 131

Victor and Levi said in unison, "You know her?"

They were left speechless.

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After a brief silence, both old men raised their hands and pointed at Stella.

Victor said, "Is she the student you were talking about?"

Levi said, "So she's the kid with the attitude you were talking about?"

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Stella, suddenly the center of attention as both of them pointed at her, was at a loss for words.

Luckily, the awkward moment didn't last long. Conrad and Celia came overloaded with gifts. Henry, the guard, frowned as soon as he saw all those fancy supplements and luxury goods.

"Mr. Quinn..." Conrad immediately stepped forward to greet Victor, but Celia's expression soured as soon as she spotted Stella.

She just realized the person who let her in earlier was working for Victor.

Celia thought, 'Hold up, Stella actually knows Mr. Quinn?

'So when I was showing off to her last night, did I just look like a total fool in her eyes?'

Celia tightened her lips, shooting Stella an even icier look.

“Henry, get rid of those things!” Victor ordered.

Henry had called it. Conrad and Celia showed up uninvited, arms full of pricey gifts, hitting every one of Victor’s sore spots. No wonder Victor didn’t bother to show any courtesy.

Conrad and Celia were left dumbfounded.

With a cold expression, Henry didn’t hesitate for a second. He strode over and tossed their gifts out of the courtyard without a second thought.

Victor fixed Conrad with a sharp look. “Spare me your cleverness.”

Conrad, who was used to being fawned over everywhere, hadn’t been embarrassed like this in ages. His face darkened. “Mr. Quinn, all I need is your signature on that recommendation letter-” It was obvious why he was here.

“Show them out!” Victor cut him off, his voice low and commanding.

“Why isn’t her stuff getting tossed out?” Celia finally snapped, her voice thick with sarcasm as she jabbed a finger at the little basket in Stella’s hand.

‘Seriously, what makes her gift so special? Aren’t we all just bringing presents?’ Celia thought.

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Stella was left speechless.

All

eyes were on her now.

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“Oh, this?” Stella replied coolly, lifting the cover off her basket. The moment everyone saw inside, they froze. Inside were bunches of freshly picked green peppers, their aroma instantly filling the air.

Celia was left dumbfounded.

She thought, ‘Who the heck brings this as a gift?’

Celia just couldn’t wrap her head around it.

But Victor’s eyes lit up. He couldn’t help himself. He walked right over, plucked a small cluster of pepper straight from the basket, and started munching right there in front of everyone.

Instantly, that hot and fresh aroma burst across his taste buds.

“That’s it! That’s the flavor!” Victor burst out in a regional accent, laughing heartily. Even the tension in the room eased up as he looked at Conrad and the others. This fresh pepper taste was something he’d been dreaming about for half his life.

Celia was completely floored. ‘The great Mr. Quinn, the legendary nuclear physicist, actually got swayed by a basket of fresh peppers? Who’d believe it if they heard?’ she thought, still in shock.

Victor snatched the little basket from Stella and handed it to Henry, his face alive with excitement. “Go, tell the kitchen to add more dishes to the menu!

“Just make it spicy! Make all the meat that I like. Load up on the chili, and stir-fry it with hot oil!”

Levi couldn’t help but snort proudly to himself as he watched Conrad and Celia standing there, totally dumbfounded.

Back when they were shipped off to the desert for research, living in obscurity for decades, Victor survived all those years thanks to a handful of hometown peppers he brought with him.

Levi scoffed inwardly, ‘They don’t know a damn thing!

‘If your gift doesn’t actually mean something to the person, what’s the point?

‘Isn’t this so much more heartfelt than those pricey supplements they blew tens of thousands on?’

“Henry,” Victor said, switching gears. Henry brought out the stack of gift boxes Conrad had sent earlier. Just trying to get Victor’s signature for his CoreOne Chip 1.0 so he could grab more government cash.

“Take your stuff and go. I’m not signing that recommendation letter!” Victor said firmly.

Victor’s tone was firm and unwavering. Seeing this, Conrad dropped all pretense. The refined look on his face vanished, replaced by a cold, menacing expression. He sneered at Victor, “Mr. Quinn, don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

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Henry stepped in front of Victor, his gaze dark and unyielding as he stared down the visibly rattled Conrad. “Are you threatening Mr. Quinn?”

But Conrad didn’t even spare him a glance. He just looked right past Henry, his eyes locked on Victor.

“Mr. Quinn, I’ll be waiting for you to come begging me!” Conrad sneered.

With that, Conrad kicked the gift boxes aside with a cocky swagger and turned to leave.

Celia shot Stella a glare, then stomped after Conrad, clearly not happy about leaving at all.

As soon as Conrad got in the car, he punched the window, his eyes glowering with rage.

Celia didn’t even dare to breathe.

Conrad let out a cold laugh.

Soon, he calmed down and held out his hand to his assistant. “Hand it over.”

The assistant was startled, instinctively glancing at Celia.

Celia, lost in her own thoughts, didn't notice a thing.

"Give it to me!" Conrad snapped. The assistant didn't dare hesitate and handed over several small black bottles.

Conrad took the bottles and unscrewed one of them.

Celia glanced over, and the next second, she cried out, "Worms!" But when she caught Conrad's cold, menacing stare, she quickly slapped both hands over her mouth.

"You saw something you weren't supposed to today. From now on, we're on the same boat," Conrad said and smirked darkly.

With a twisted smile, Conrad crushed one of the black, thread-like worms inside the bottle.

Blood, deep red, immediately stained his fingers.

Celia didn't dare make a sound, cold sweat trickling down her back.

'What are those worms, really?' Celia thought.

She watched, frozen, as Conrad's hand reached for another bottle.

Inside the private courtyard, Victor said, "His ambition is getting bigger and bigger." Victor's expression was grim. Since their last meeting six months ago, he could clearly feel that Conrad's ego was swelling out of

control.

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For someone in scientific research, that's never a good sign.

Stella's mind was on something else entirely.

She caught the loaded look Conrad gave Victor before heading out. It spoke volumes.

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“Grandpa...” As Stella was lost in thought, a little girl burst out of the house in a fluffy pink princess dress, her voice soft and babyish.

But the instant Stella laid eyes on her, her gaze sharpened, a look of alarm flashing across her face.

The little girl’s dress was stained and blotched with blood.

“Cindy!” Victor gasped, utterly shocked.

“Grandpa, Daddy is coughing up blood!” Cindy sobbed, fat tears rolling down her cheeks.

Victor instinctively moved to rush over, but Stella’s cold and commanding voice stopped everyone in their tracks. “Nobody moves!”

The next second, Cindy suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then, blood started trickling from her eyes, nose, and ears. And right after, a few black, thread-like worms squirmed out of her mouth.

“Don’t go near her!” Stella barked, her face hardening, a flash of streetwise grit and cold fury in her eyes as she stared at those creepy black worms. She snatched out her phone and dialed Sebastian without missing a beat.

The call went through in a flash.

Stella took a sharp breath. “Sebastian, grab that plant by your bed and bring Eggie to Mr. Quinn’s place. And get Landen, too.”

She shot a glance at the little girl collapsing on the floor, her voice dropping to a tense, urgent whisper. “Move fast!”

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“Don’t touch it!” Stella snapped, hanging up the phone and grabbing Henry’s hand just as he was about to reach for the little girl.

Henry looked anxious. “Ms. Carter!”

Stella shot him a look, then calmly rolled up her sleeve, revealing her skin with faint blue veins visible beneath. “Watch closely.”

She reached out her hand, expressionless. The black worm seemed to sense her presence, arching its body and burrowing straight into the vein under her skin. Even as it bit down, Stella’s face remained completely calm.

The crowd was stunned into silence.

They could only watch as the black worm that had crawled out of the little girl’s body latched onto the vein in Stella’s arm, suddenly swelling up until it was as thick as a pinky finger.

In the very next moment, that leech-like worm began to writhe violently, trembling as it dropped off Stella’s arm and hit the floor, dissolving into a puddle of black sludge right before everyone’s eyes.

“If you’d touched it just now, it would’ve burrowed right into your veins and drained all your blood,” Stella said coldly, wiping the blood off her arm without a hint of emotion, then cradled the little girl in her arms.

“But you...” Victor’s face darkened. He was worried about his granddaughter, but he couldn’t just stand by and watch someone else get hurt.

Stella didn’t pay him any attention, heading straight for the house with the little girl in her arms.

Inside, it was pure chaos.

Screams rang out from upstairs and downstairs. “It’s on the second floor,” Victor called, rushing after Stella, whose face was icy and unreadable as she headed up. Soon enough, she ran into Victor’s daughter again.

“Dad, help!”

Victor’s daughter was still as loud and obnoxious as ever. Without a flicker of emotion, Stella set the little girl down next to her father, who was out cold and bleeding from every opening.

Then, Stella didn’t hesitate. She chopped the woman and knocked her out cold.

She took her down, fast and rough.

The others were left speechless.

“Annoying as hell,” Stella grumbled, her amber eyes practically blazing with irritation. The place went dead silent, and even Henry didn’t dare breathe too loudly.

Getting them to a hospital wouldn’t do any good right now.

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The only thing they could do was put their faith in her.

Stella sat by the bed, unmoving, and her gaze was heavy and unreadable.

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She thought, ‘Sebastian and Landen wouldn’t arrive for at least half an hour, but these two are hanging by a thread. If they kept bleeding out, they wouldn’t last another minute.

Stella’s shirt was stained with blood. Her cold gaze swept over the room, lingering for a moment.

“Hand me the knife,” she said.

There was a letter opener lying quietly on the coffee table. Henry quickly handed it to her, with no hesitation.

“W-What do you need the knife for?” Levi stammered, his voice shaky. He was still in shock from everything that had happened, looking completely dazed.

Victor and Henry were wondering the same thing.

Stella couldn't be bothered to answer. She measured the knife against her wrist, paused, then moved it to her index finger.

“W-Wait, kid-” Levi stammered.

Before he could finish, Stella, expressionless, sliced her finger. A bead of blood welled up, and without a hint of hesitation, she let it drip straight into the little girl's and her father's mouths.

Henry and Victory were stunned.

“I'm gonna faint,” Levi mumbled, and with that, he collapsed right into Henry's arms.

Henry was left speechless.

Miraculously, the instant Stella's blood touched their lips, the little girl and Victor's son-in-law stopped coughing up blood. Both of them went out cold, but for now, they looked safe.

Stella casually pressed her bleeding finger to her lips, looking at everyone. “Don't tell anyone about this.”

She gave a cold, wicked smile, her bloodstained lips hauntingly beautiful.

Henry raised his hand without a second thought, his voice righteous and resolute. “I swear on my honor, not a single word of what happened today will leave this room.”

“Count me in,” Victor said, his gaze somber. He knew just how much trouble this would bring Stella if word ever got out.

“Me, too...” Levi mumbled, slowly coming to and lifting his head weakly.

Stella didn't say a word. She looked like a harmless little girl, but anyone who tried to mess with her would be in for a rude awakening. She radiated a chilling, lethal aura, and messing with her was just asking for trouble.

She lazily looked away, her gaze drifting to some distant point, eyes lowered with shadows pooling beneath

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them. No one could tell what she was thinking. Stella asked, “What was Conrad talking about with that signature?”

Suddenly, Stella’s voice sounded right next to Victor’s ear.

Victor hesitated for a couple of seconds. Technically, all this was classified, not something he could just spill. “It’s a recommendation letter for the CoreOne Chip 1.0. He wants to use it for military projects,” he replied finally.

“Why is your signature so important?” Stella asked, lifting her gaze. No one noticed that the blood on her fingertip, which should’ve dried ages ago, was still bright red and glistening.

This time, Victor was silent for even longer. “Because as long as I don’t sign, his patented project will always be nothing but a gimmick. He won’t be able to cash in on it.”

Stella let out a cold, mocking laugh, her whole demeanor icy.

‘It all comes down to money,’ she thought.

“Did the others already sign?” Stella leaned back against the wooden table, her fingers drumming out a steady, intimidating beat.

To Henry, it was like being back in Red Shadow boot camp, facing down those instructors who could make you freeze with just a look.

He instinctively straightened his back, cold sweat running down his spine.

Victor answered with difficulty, “Yes.”

“A recommendation letter needs at least five expert signatures. You’d better check on others. See how they’ve been doing lately,” Stella said.

Her tone was as casual as if she were chatting about the weather, but the meaning behind her words was enough to make anyone’s heart skip a beat.

Victor was left speechless.

Henry quickly looked into it and found out the truth.

Turns out, before the other experts signed, their families all started having health problems. Some minor, some serious. But as soon as they signed, every single one of those issues just vanished.

All of this was officially recorded by the military medical department.

What was truly chilling was that every single one of them had the exact same symptoms. They all suddenly vomitted large amounts of blood for no apparent reason.

“So it’s my turn now,” Victor said, his brows sharp and eyes burning. The tension in the room was so thick that nobody dared to breathe. Even an idiot could see what was up.

“I’ll go meet Mr. Gray at the gate,” Henry blurted, fists clenched so tight his knuckles turned white. He started

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to get up, but Victor stopped him with a firm hand on his shoulder.

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Victor shot Stella a look. “Sebastian can walk in and out of any military zone, even the main compound, whenever he wants.”

Henry was left speechless.

This was news to Henry. He’d never heard that before.

“He’s here,” Stella said offhandedly, her tone cool and casual. Nobody believed her at first, but the second the screech of brakes echoed from downstairs, everyone was left dumbfounded.

“Hey, slow down, you brat! My old bones can’t keep up...” Landen grumbled and complained, shuffling along behind them. John had yanked him straight out of Herbal Haven and tossed him into the car.

Stella got up, pulled open the window, and locked eyes with Sebastian as he stepped out of the car.

She leaned against the window, lazily waving at him.

The sunlight was a bit too bright, so Stella squinted, her long hair falling around her face.

Downstairs, when Sebastian saw the blood on her clothes, his face, which was already cold and detached, instantly turned even frostier, as a winter storm had just hit.

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‘Is she hurt?’ Sebastian wondered.

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Even the plain plant sitting on Sebastian's lap seemed to sense the scary vibe in the air and nervously tucked its head in.

Eggie chirped.

Eggie popped its fuzzy little head out of Sebastian's chest pocket, sniffing around like it just caught a whiff of something tasty.

It cocked its head to the side, curious.

Landen, already freaked out by the pool of blood on the floor, looked up and almost had a heart attack. "Dr. Miracle, are you hurt?"

"Come up first," Stella said lazily. Unlike everyone else in the room, she kept her cool from start to finish.

Soon, Sebastian and the others made their way upstairs.

The whole room reeked of blood.

Sebastian didn't even look at anyone else. He went straight to Stella, took her arm, and checked her over with icy precision.

His perfect face was so cold, it felt like the temperature dropped. Nobody in the room dared to even breathe.

Stella quickly said, "It's not my blood."

The refreshing, cool scent of tea leaves on Sebastian helped mask the bloody smell in the room. Stella thought it was wonderful, so she buried her face in his neck and took a deep breath.

Sebastian was momentarily stunned.

Everyone else was speechless with shock.

Sebastian coughed quietly and murmured, "Wait till we get home for that."

Everyone else was left speechless.

Just then, Victor's daughter snapped awake. "Dad, worms! There are worms in my nose and mouth! Help!" After a brief moment of confusion, she descended into hysterical screaming.

Stella was left speechless.

She gave her a frosty look, brow just starting to furrow, when Sebastian's voice cut through the chaos. "John."

John, stone-faced, walked up behind Victor's daughter and, without a word, delivered a swift karate chop to the back of her neck, knocking her out cold and restoring peace to the room.

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Sebastian grumbled, "Too noisy."

Everyone else was left speechless.

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Henry thought, 'Man, this is way too familiar. Didn't this just happen a little while ago?'

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Sebastian reached up and gently brushed Stella's lips, which looked especially striking with that smear of blood.

His deep eyes never left hers, and the vibe was downright suggestive to everyone watching. But in the very next second, he suddenly presented a plain plant to her, holding it out with one hand.

Sebastian said, "I brought it."

Stella was left speechless.

The plain plant was now wilted and yellowed, its head drooping pitifully.

Stella stared at Sebastian with a blank face, while he just looked back at her, all innocent, as if nothing had happened.

Stella nodded at the plain plant, hinting for Sebastian to say something nice.

Sebastian was left speechless.

Stella raised an eyebrow.

Sebastian shook his head.

Stella said, "Say something nice about it."

Sebastian's cold-as-ice face showed a trace of awkwardness.

Stella said, "Compliment it!"

Sebastian said, "You're beautiful."

The plain plant, which had been all wilted and yellow, suddenly sprang to life. Its leaves were fresh and as if they'd just popped out. It all happened in just a second.

Everyone else was stunned into silence.

green,

Stella took the plain plant from Sebastian, looking totally satisfied. She didn't even glance at Victor's daughter sprawled on the floor. Just stepped over her without a second thought and walked straight to bed.

As if something just occurred to her, she turned back to Sebastian and spotted Eggie peeking out from his chest pocket.

She curled her fingers to her lips and whistled. The peregrine falcon instantly flapped over and landed on her shoulder.

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“Good boy,” Stella said, nuzzling it affectionately. Then she placed the plain plant between Victor’s son-in-law and the little girl.

“Dr. Miracle, what is this?” Landen asked, leaning in for a closer look at the plain plant. He couldn’t help but be curious. He had never seen anything like that before.

“Just a plant,” Stella replied, keeping it short and casual.

Landen said, “Yeah, I can see it’s a plant. I mean, what’s its name?”

Stella was left speechless.

Then, she said, “It’s called ‘plant’.”

Landen just stared at her, lost for words.

Stella did not say anything.

The two just stared at each other, both thinking, ‘So, its name is literally just plant.’

The plain plant on the bed seemed to understand, shaking its leaves wildly in protest. It looked like it was about to wilt in defiance, ready to die for its dignity.

Stella, completely unfazed, immediately corrected herself. “Or you can call it the most beautiful plant.”

Everyone else was left speechless.

Only John stayed stone-faced from start to finish, totally unfazed.

The plain plant twisted its whole stalk toward Landen, and Landen thought, ‘I must be going crazy. Why does it feel like this plant is actually waiting for me to say something?’

Stella locked eyes with Landen. “Call it.”

Landen stammered, “The most beautiful plant in the world.”

The plain plant shook itself vigorously, as if it were laughing with joy. At the same time, a unique, deeply soothing aroma spread through the room, calming everyone to their very core.

Everyone who'd been tense began to completely unwind, some even feeling an irresistible urge to drift off to sleep.

Sebastian wasn't among them.

Meanwhile, the guy and the little girl, who'd been out cold, suddenly started twitching all over. Henry was about to rush over, but the moment he saw what was happening, chills shot down his spine.

Thread-like black worms began crawling out of their noses and mouths, wriggling onto the bed.

One after another, they kept coming, piling up.

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At first, it was just a few, but soon there were dozens, then hundreds, crawling out in droves. Everyone in the room stared in wide-eyed horror, their skin crawling and souls practically getting a full-on shock treatment.

Stella, meanwhile, was cool as a cucumber. The peregrine falcon on her shoulder looked way more hyped than she was.

The peregrine falcon thought, 'Food!

'Oh man, it smells amazing!'

Drool was literally dripping from the peregrine falcon's beak.

"Bloodworms?" Sebastian said, his voice cold and flat right next to Stella.

Victor's eyes went wide. "You know what those are?"

Sebastian glanced at the spectacle on the bed. "Bloodworms. Toxic bugs from Malikai. They're bloodthirsty and won't leave their host until they've drained every last drop."

Victor was left dumbfounded.

Sebastian looked up at Victor. “But they can’t survive alone; they need someone to control them.”

Levi’s eyes

flew open, then shut again, and he passed out cold.

‘That scared the life out of me!’ Levi thought.

Stella raised her hand and gave the peregrine falcon a gentle flick. “Dinner time.”

As soon as she said it, Eggie couldn’t wait any longer. It flapped its short, chubby wings and landed on the bed, pecking at the Bloodworms here and there.

It was like it had just walked into an all-you-can-eat buffet. Eggie was having the time of its life!

Everyone just stared in silence.

On the bed, the plain plant was happily shaking its leaves, and the soothing scent kept getting stronger and stronger. The elders couldn’t help but yawn, and even the iron-willed Henry and John found themselves nodding off.

The plain plant seemed to cheer, ‘It’s getting pumped!

‘It’s getting restless!’

The plain plant just kept shaking.

Some time later, the whole room was filled with the sound of snoring.

SnORES echoed from every corner, with Levi, who’d been the first to hit the floor, leading the chorus with his thunderous rumbling. The rest were sprawled out on couches and the floor, limbs everywhere, totally dead to

the world.

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Stella turned her head, totally unfazed, and met Sebastian’s even more composed gaze.

Stella did not say anything.

Sebastian, his face a blank slate, was just as unfazed. “So this is what it does?”

Sebastian thought, ‘That ugly potted plant?’

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Stella was left speechless.

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She looked around at everyone knocked out cold, then glanced at Sebastian, finally confirming he was totally immune to the plain plant.

She just shrugged as her answer.

With only the two of them still awake, Sebastian was totally unfazed. “These don’t work on me.”

Stella said, “Well, that’s pretty obvious.”

Chirp. Eggie, with his little wings perked up, gobbled up the buffet one after another.

The plain plant got even wilder, releasing its fragrance without a care for anyone else.

‘Man, I’m looking even prettier today!’ the plain plant thought.

Sebastian rolled the black prayer beads between his long fingers, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he finally said, “I can only sleep when I’m with you.”

Stella was left speechless.

Sebastian turned his face away, letting it fall into shadow. His expressionless face was pale and sickly. From Stella’s angle, his long lashes drooped, giving him a rare, fragile look.

Stella asked, “So, are you going to sleep with me tonight?”

Sebastian immediately turned to her, meeting her gaze. “Is that okay?”

“Am I going to bother you?” He asked after a pause.

Stella was left speechless.

If he didn’t look so desperate, Stella might’ve actually believed he was worried about bothering her.

Stella said, “Yes.”

She saw the light in Sebastian’s eyes dim, turning into a bottomless black hole, and his whole vibe was suddenly hazy and distant.

Stella let out a soft sigh. “But with you, Sebastian, it’s different.”

Sebastian was momentarily stunned.

His heart, once hollow, was just letting the wind whistle through, so numb it couldn’t even sense the changing seasons. At that moment, it felt like it finally remembered how to beat again.

The snoring was the only noise here.

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“Did

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you ever notice? I never lock my door,” Stella said offhandedly, her gaze drifting to the little peregrine falcon, whose belly was already round and stuffed.

Sebastian felt silent.

Sebastian’s hand on the wheelchair shifted.

“Tonight, should I come find you?” Sebastian coughed quietly, his voice low as he spoke.

But in his head, Sebastian was already obsessing over which pajamas would be best for tonight.

He wondered, ‘Should I go with the black one?’

‘Or maybe the other black one?’

‘Or maybe that black one?’

After Eggie had gobbled up every last black worm on the bed, he sniffed out the next snack and fluttered straight over to Victor’s daughter, who was knocked out on the floor.

It was ready to keep the feast going, munching away like a happy little king.

Stella absentmindedly rubbed her nose, mumbling a quick “oh.”

In the next moment, Sebastian’s brows knitted as he reached out and took her hand.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

Stella was left speechless.

“Oh, this... It’ll heal soon-” Her words stopped short as something warm and wet grazed her fingertips, sending a shiver of electricity straight to her heart.

She turned her head and saw Sebastian take her finger into his mouth, his lips closing around it.

Stella said, “Sebastian...

“I haven’t washed my hands.”

Sebastian was left speechless.

After cleaning the blood from her finger with his mouth, Sebastian never showed a hint of emotion. He made up his mind to ban Lucas from ice cream tonight.

‘Clearly, listening to a five-year-old is a terrible idea,’ he thought.

“You’re no fun,” Sebastian muttered under his breath.

Stella had already moved to the window and opened it, not catching what he said. “What was that?” She glanced back, asking again.

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Sebastian just replied, “Nothing.”

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As the window opened, fresh air rushed in, quickly diluting the overpowering scent of the plain plant inside.

The crowd still slept.

Stella stared in silence at Levi.

She was totally deadpan.

Stella thought, ‘Is he for real with that snoring?’

‘It seriously sounded like a whole construction crew was working overtime in here!’

“Alright, everyone, wake up,” Stella said, once she figured it was about time. She grabbed the flowerpot and stuffed it back into Sebastian’s arms.

Seeing the plain plant still trembling like mad, Sebastian snorted. “Man, you’re ugly!”

The plain plant thought, ‘What the hell!

“Take that word ‘ugly’ and get it out of the plant kingdom!

‘Fine, I’ll just drop dead right here!’

Thud! It withered and turned yellow!

Sebastian looked up, raised the plant toward Stella as if he was expecting a gold star, and his face was still totally blank. “Smell’s gone.”

Stella was left speechless.

The plain plant thought, ‘Damn it!’

The old guys started to wake up, groggy and confused.

“How did I end up asleep?” Landen muttered, rubbing his head, and was still dazed. The last thing he remembered was a swarm of black worms crawling out of people on the bed, and then he passed out.

“Cindy.” Victor instinctively looked over at his granddaughter lying on the bed.

Cindy and his son-in-law, who had been covered in blood before, now had color back in their faces, no longer looking half-dead. Just as Victor let out a sigh of relief, a thunderous, earth-shattering belch echoed through the room.

Victor was speechless.

Everyone whipped their heads around.

Eggie, feeling bashful, covered his beak with his chubby little wings. He’d eaten so much. His belly was round like a ball, and he just couldn’t hold it anymore. He collapsed onto the floor with a thud.

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Eggie thought, 'I'm stuffed!

'One feast like this and I'm good for a whole year!

'I'm so stoked right now!

'This is the absolute peak of my bird life!'

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"You take it from here," Stella said, shooting a look at Landen, who was just waking up. She couldn't help thinking, 'I came here for a meal, so why am I still hungry at this hour?'

Eggie struggled to follow after Stella, but after just a couple of steps, he collapsed again with a dramatic thud.

Eggie chirped.

'Someone save the peregrine falcon!' Eggie begged for help.

Stella bent down, scooped Eggie up, and popped him right back into Sebastian's front pocket.

Sebastian was left speechless.

Her movements were almost automatic.

But Sebastian, still stone-faced, reached in and helped Eggie get settled into the coziest spot in his pocket.

At the same time, Victor's phone suddenly rang.

"Mr. Quinn," Henry said, his face turning grim. The caller ID flashed Conrad's name. 'Pretty obvious what he wants at this hour,' Henry thought.

Victor instinctively glanced over at Stella.

"Why are you looking at me? Just pick up!" Stella said, her gaze lazy and voice totally chill. Truth is, she was actually curious what Conrad wanted.

"Pick up," Victor told Henry, who wasted no time and hit the speaker.

Conrad's voice on the other end was dripping with smugness. "Mr. Quinn, is your house a total mess yet?" Even through the phone, they could practically feel his cocky attitude.

On the other end, Conrad was gripping a little black bottle, his usual gentlemanly acting nowhere to be seen. "Mr. Quinn, all I need is your signature. Don't make this harder than it needs to be."

"So you're admitting you did all this?" Victor's voice was unnaturally calm.

Conrad snickered. "Mr. Quinn, I have no idea what you're talking about. However, your time is almost up..." He pretended not to know a thing.

Victor gave Henry a nod, and Henry handed him the phone with a respectful gesture.

Victor loosened his collar, which had been tight all this time. "Conrad, you absolute piece of..." The old guy

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with lungs of steel unleashed a nonstop barrage of curses that could make a sailor blush, barely even stopping for air.

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On the other end, Conrad was so dumbfounded by the scolding that he couldn't even get a word out.

Meanwhile, everyone watching the live call on this side was just speechless.

After a while, just like that, Victor went back to being the picture of a refined old gentleman after hanging up the phone directly and throwing the phone to Henry.

Stella, lounging lazily against the wall, gave him a thumbs-up.

Victor smiled back at her.

Everyone was speechless.

Landen, meanwhile, was even more curious about the plain plant Sebastian was holding. Obsessed with herbs, his eyes practically sparkled as he stared at the sad-looking, half-dead plain plant.

Noticing Landen's intense gaze, Sebastian just hugged the plain plant closer, his face totally blank.

Landen asked, "Is this a legendary beauty among plants?"

As if it had heard its name called, the plain plant perked up, quivering with excitement.

Sebastian just deadpanned, "Ugly."

'Seriously?' the plant raged inside.

The plain plant drooped in despair.

Landen's eyes

lit

The plain plant instantly perked up, quivering with anticipation.

Sebastian said deadpan, "Ugly."

The plain plant drooped in despair.

Landen leaned in, practically shouting, “The most gorgeous plant ever!”

The plain plant instantly perked up, quivering with anticipation.

Sebastian replied deadpan, “Ugly.”

The plain plant drooped in despair.

Landen pressed his face right up to the plain plant. “Legendary...”

Suddenly, the plain plant, which had been drooping lifelessly, exploded with energy and shot up several feet, smacking Landen across the face twice with its leaves. Then, just as dramatically, it collapsed back into the

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pot, playing dead again.

Everyone was left speechless.

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Landen clutched his face, tears brimming in his eyes. He pointed at Sebastian, voice trembling as he demanded the plain plant, “Why didn’t you hit him?!”

The wilted, yellow leaves twisted in Sebastian’s direction. Sebastian was sitting there in his wheelchair, cold as ice, radiating ‘don’t mess with me’ vibes.

The plain plant was left speechless.

Then it whipped its leaf around and gave Landen another slap.

It thought, ‘So what if I only pick on the weak?’

‘Did I take anything from you or something?’

Everyone was speechless.

Victor coughed awkwardly and instinctively turned to Stella. “So, what do we do now?”

He thought, 'I vented my frustration and felt pretty good about it. But if I tried to tell anyone, who would believe me? Besides, we do not have any direct evidence that Conrad is the culprit.'

Everyone turned their eyes to Stella.

Stella wondered, 'Why are you all staring at me?'

'Weren't you just inviting me here for dinner?'

"If you don't sign, you're the one holding all the cards. So what's the problem?" Stella said lazily, not even bothering to look concerned.

Victor was speechless.

'Honestly, she's right. What can I even say to that?' He thought.

Victor asked, "So, is Conrad gonna use this to mess with people again?"

Stella was left speechless.

She replied, "Do you really think a dog can ever quit eating garbage?"

Everyone was speechless.

'That was weirdly on point, they thought.'

"The CoreOne Chip 1.0 has had the higher-ups watching it like hawks from the very start. Conrad really didn't need to pull any crazy stunts," Levi, director of the Kinetic University Tech Research Institute, said, looking genuinely confused.

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Levi thought, 'Once the chip went public, people would be scrambling to get in on the action. Why would he even need to get involved personally?'

Stella didn't respond, just shot a lazy glance upward.

Under her cool stare, Levi's voice faded to a whisper. "Unless..."

Victor suddenly blurted out, "Unless there's something wrong with the chip itself!"

Stella let out a sigh. 'Man, this team is a handful. At least they finally managed to get there on their own, she thought.

She said, "This way won't work. He'll just have a backup plan ready."

'Seriously, when do we eat?' Stella wondered.

Noticing everyone's confused stares, Sebastian, with an icy face, slapped Landen's sneaky hand reaching for the plain plant. "The Gray family."

Everyone was speechless.

Victor shot Sebastian a thoughtful look. "The Gray family had a project that was basically a guaranteed win, but it got shut down out of nowhere when they discovered that ancient tomb.

"Now they're scrambling to recover their losses. If they get a chance to team up with Conrad, they'll probably go all in..."

Sebastian's eyes were dark and stormy, and his face looked like a block of ice. He didn't give a damn about the hint in Victor's words.

Victor hesitated, words stuck in his throat. If things really were as he feared, the Gray Group was about to get wiped out. And the real culprit was Sebastian.

Victor glanced at Sebastian.

But Sebastian just flashed him a thin, chilling, almost predatory smile, his eyes shadowed and menacing, gone in a heartbeat.

Victor was speechless.

'That's his own family, but Sebastian would tear it all down without even blinking,' Victor thought.

John, who'd been MIA for half the day, slipped back to Sebastian's side with a bag in hand. Sebastian passed it to Stella. "Go clean up. Once you're done, we eat."

He could see she was getting antsy.

The bag had a fresh set of clothes inside.

The blood on her was seriously messing up the vibe.

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“Get her a room,” Sebastian said, his tone as cold as ever. Only when he looked at Stella did his eyes soften a little.

Victor was speechless.

Victor wondered, ‘Am I just being too sensitive?’

‘There’s something kind of ambiguous about the way Sebastian looks at that girl’

Victor instinctively glanced at Landen, only to see him sneaking his hand toward the plain plant again. Of course, Sebastian, face still icy, swatted his hand away without even looking.

Victor was speechless.

As soon as Stella left, Landen, the herb maniac, literally jumped three feet in the air. “Why can’t I just touch

it?!”

Sebastian instantly went back to his frosty, ‘stay the hell away’ mode now that Stella was gone. “No,” he replied.

Landen just lost for words.

“Sebastian,” Stella called, poking her head back in through the door.

Sebastian gave a low reply and turned to look at her.

“Don’t mess with the old guys while I’m gone,” Stella tossed out, then ducked away again.

Sebastian was left speechless.

He slowly turned his head, eyes like a stormy abyss, dark, cold, and hellish, as he stared down Landen.

Landen felt utterly helpless.

He could actually hear himself swallow.

Landen stammered, “M-Mr. Gray, can we just talk this out...”

And then his words just died in his throat.

Landen just lost for words.

He glanced down at the plain plant in his arms, then looked up at Sebastian with a mix of dread and resignation. Sebastian barely parted his lips, coolly saying, “One minute.”

Landen wondered, ‘Wait. What?’

Sebastian started the countdown, glancing at his watch: “59, 58, 57...”

Landen only just realized Sebastian was actually counting down.

They were left speechless.

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His voice was pure steel, and no room for negotiation, just raw, icy authority.

Landen stammered, “Uh...”

Sebastian’s eyes got even colder as he dragged the plain plant over to his side.

The plain plant, which had been all wilted and yellow, instantly sprang to life.

It started flexing, acting all tough just because Sebastian was backing it up.

The three older guys were left speechless.

‘Okay, chill, no need to flex that hard,’ they thought.

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Sebastian slid the boneless fish over to Stella, then nodded at the plain plant, his eyes locked onto her face.

Stella was left speechless.

She had to admit, the way she spoiled Lucas worked just as well on Sebastian. No wonder they were uncle and nephew. Those two were seriously two peas in a pod.

“I gave that to Sebastian. It’s one of a kind,” Stella said calmly to Landen, not even blinking at Sebastian’s intimidating stare.

Landen was speechless, watching as Sebastian gave him a thin, satisfied smile. ‘Did he just scoff at me?’ Landen thought.

Landen said, “Pretty boy!”

Sebastian was left speechless.

His eyes narrowed dangerously, like a storm about to break loose, making people want to run for cover.

Landen instantly regretted it.

‘How did I get so brainless that I dared talk to Mr. Gray like that?’ Landen thought.

Just when everyone thought Sebastian was about to snap, Stella lazily reached out and gave his chin a casual squeeze. “Pretty, huh? Let me check. Yeah, pretty fair.” She let go, then shrugged.

Everyone else was left speechless.

The storm fizzled out in an instant. Sebastian lowered his eyes, then shot Landen a cold look. “Shameless old

man.”

Landen just lost for words.

Totally at a loss for words!

Suddenly, Levi’s phone rang shrilly. He set down his fork and answered it. “What did you say?” He’d barely listened for a moment before his expression changed completely.

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Stella shot a glance in Levi’s direction, a few loose strands of hair falling across her cheek. Sebastian didn’t even bother to look up. He was coldly toying with her slender fingers, completely tuned out to the world.

Levi’s voice caught, then rose sharply. “What about the translator? You can’t get in touch with them?!”

Levi looked like he was about to blow a gasket.

After what felt like ages, Levi finally hung up.

“Levi, what’s up?” Victor asked, his brow furrowing.

Levi replied, “The translator Conrad was supposed to get in touch with isn’t answering!”

“The online procurement meeting starts in an hour. How the hell are we supposed to pull this off?” His hands were shaking so badly he had to pop a few fast-acting heart pills just to steady himself.

On his phone, the procurement docs were still sitting there, completely untranslated.

Victor grabbed Levi’s phone. “What did they even send? I don’t know them at all.”

Landen craned his neck for a look. “Why are there random punctuation marks mixed in with the text? What is this supposed to be?”

Stella barely glanced at it and didn't even bother to comment.

"I'll have Henry reach out to some students from the School of Foreign Languages," Victor said.

He knew that any procurement handled by the Kinetic University Tech Research Institute was tied to major national projects. One wrong move and the whole thing would blow up in their faces.

He always knew Conrad was shady, but this was low even for him. Messing with something this important was just plain nasty.

"There's no way we'll make it. There are way too many technical terms, and we still have to communicate online later..." Levi said.

The more he said, the more he felt that it was impossible. But he still forced himself to think of a solution.

Victor and Landen just lost for words.

If it were anything else, they might've been able to help, but with this, they were totally out of depth.

Stella calmly grabbed a napkin, wiped her mouth, and said, "Let me see."

She reached over, took the phone from Victor, her fingers flying as she scrolled through the sitting next to her, just lifted his eyelids with zero emotion.

Just like that, the two of them were done reading.

pages. Sebastian,

Levi had tried everything he could think of, but nothing worked. He was about ready to lose it when suddenly, Stella got up, all casual, and blocked his view.

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"Come on, I'll get you back to the hotel," Stella said offhandedly.

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It took Levi a second to realize she was talking to him. Just as he was about to answer, Stella checked her watch. “It’s forty minutes from here to the hotel. You’ll make it in time for the online procurement meeting.

“And trust me, John drives like a maniac,” she paused, then added.

Levi was just stunned.

‘Even if I make it, so what? We still don’t have a translator. That meeting’s gonna be a train wreck. And of course, it’s an international conference. No way to change the time. We’re totally screwed,’ Levi thought.

Victor looked up at Stella, who was as calm as ever, and suddenly had a flash of inspiration. “Levi, let Stella take you back to the hotel. Who knows, maybe something miraculous will happen.”

Levi was left speechless.

‘Miracle my ass. Like that’s ever gonna happen to me,’ Levi thought.

Stella just glanced at Victor, her face unreadable.

Victor mouthed three words to her, silent but urgent, “Help us out.”

Stella was left speechless.

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The sad blues were playing.

Stella was left speechless.

She glanced at Levi with a deadpan face.

She thought, ‘The old man had been sulking in the corner ever since they got in, looking like a wilted plant with a gloomy storm cloud hovering over his head, thunder and lightning crackling for extra drama.

‘His whole body practically screamed one thing: he is shutting down.’

Their eyes met.

The blues played in the background, adding to the tragic vibe.

Levi’s eyes shimmered with unshed tears as he gazed at her, looking as miserable as humanly possible.

Stella didn’t bat an eye and just said flatly, “Turn off the music.”

The music cut off abruptly.

Levi turned off the background music and couldn’t help but grumble, “Cold-blooded.”

Stella didn’t even bother to look at him.

Sebastian was leaning against Stella’s shoulder, eyes closed, his lashes ridiculously long for a guy. He looked a little under the weather, and his flawless face now had that fragile, sickly beauty you only see in dramas.

Still, he clung to that plain plant.

Out of nowhere, Sebastian sat up, turning to Stella. His lips were pale. When he was silent, he was all icy and unapproachable. But as soon as he spoke, the vibe changed around him.

“It hurts,” Sebastian muttered, clutching his stomach, his dark eyes locked on her, almost pleading.

Levi was left speechless.

‘What the hell are you expecting?’ Levi thought.

Levi snorted and said, “Hey, ever heard this saying?”

Stella lazily glanced up at him. “Which one?”

Levi snorted. “You can’t pamper a man. Baby him once, and he’ll be useless!”

Sebastian gave Levi a cold, dead-eyed look from across the car, a faint red at the corners of his eyes. His stare

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was so icy and emotionless, it felt like it could turn Levi’s blood to ice.

Levi was speechless.

Levi thought, ‘Look at that, threatening an old man!’

‘No respect for your elders at all!’

Stella shot Levi a lazy, defiant eyebrow. “Because I feel like it.”

Stella thought, ‘He’s the one footing the bill. I’ll spoil him however I want.

‘If I want to pamper him, I will.’

Sebastian’s lashes fluttered, looking totally docile, as if he’d do whatever she said.

Levi was left speechless.

Levi thought, ‘Did he just flash me a provocative smile?’

‘Damn, this guy’s got two faces?’

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Sebastian grabbed Stella's hand and pressed it to his stomach, his black shirt separating her touch from his skin.

Her pale hand against his black shirt made for a pretty dramatic contrast.

Stella was left speechless.

Stella met Sebastian's gaze.

Stella said, "Where exactly are you putting my hand?"

Sebastian replied, "Stomach."

Stella was left speechless.

If her palm hadn't landed on something so firm and tight, she might've bought it. 'Isn't this just his abs?' she thought.

Levi snorted. "Stomach, my ass!"

Stella raised an elegant brow and shifted her hand to where his actual stomach was. Sebastian peeked up at her, sighed dramatically, and even sounded a bit disappointed.

Stella and Levi were left speechless.

John, who'd seen it all before, silently slid up the privacy divider from the driver's seat.

He was doing his best to make himself invisible.

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Sebastian leaned back against Stella's shoulder, her warm palm soothing his stomach. He closed his eyes, feeling drowsy again.

Levi suddenly let out a sigh. "Hey, I don't think I ever properly introduced myself.

“My name is Levi, and I’m the director of the Kinetic University Tech Research Institute in Jaffina.” He glanced at Stella, a hint of regret in his eyes. He really wished he could take her to Jaffina.

He paused for a moment and added, “But after today, I probably won’t be anymore.”

Just thinking about the online procurement event made the storm cloud over Levi’s head crackle with lightning again.

Stella was left speechless.

Her hand froze mid-move.

She looked up and gave the old man a good, long look as he kept sighing.

Suddenly, it clicked. No wonder his voice sounded so familiar when she answered the call last night.

“Oh,” Stella replied, her voice flat and calm. “That won’t happen.”

Levi blinked and wondered, ‘Won’t what?’

But before he could ask, Stella had already lazily looked away, clearly not planning to say another word to him.

‘Poor old guy,’ Levi thought.

Before long, they arrived at the hotel.

The place was owned by Nova Group, and the stylized Nova logo at the entrance was impossible to miss.

In the hotel lobby, Levi came face-to-face with Conrad and his team as they returned.

“Levi, the online procurement event is about to start,” Conrad said, glancing at his watch with a fake look of concern. “Hope nothing goes wrong.” He gave a sly, almost triumphant smile, looking like he was sure Levi was finished this time.

Everyone except Celia, who looked completely clueless, was snickering behind him.

Wherever there were people, there was a power struggle, and the research institute was no different. Factional infighting had been around forever. If Levi showed any weakness, Conrad's faction would be quick to take

over.

Levi said, "You-"

Suddenly, an icy, unapologetic female voice interrupted, "Patek Philippe Celestial..."

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Everyone turned to look.

Stella walked in, casually rocking a black gown, her dark, piercing gaze making everyone's heart skip a beat.

Celia didn't even have time to wonder why Stella had changed outfits because in the very next second, she spotted Sebastian.

"Mr. Gray?" Celia gasped, stunned.

What nobody else noticed was that the hotel staff all froze for a split second when they heard "Mr. Gray". As if someone had pressed pause on reality. Then, just as quickly, they went right back to what they were doing.

The receptionist immediately called the higher-ups.

'Crap, this is bad!' the receptionist thought.

John wheeled Sebastian in, the plain plant sitting on the black blanket draped over his legs.

"A watch worth over 1 million on Dr. Kramer's wrist. No wonder it's so eye-catching," Stella said, tapping her own wrist. Her skin was so pale it almost sparkled, making Conrad swallow nervously.

Sebastian sat in his black wheelchair, expressionless, idly rolling his black prayer beads between his fingers. His gaze landed on Conrad, cold as ice, not a hint of humanity in his eyes.

Levi was the first to blurt out, “What? That watch is over 1 million?” The number floored him.

The elevator chimed and slid open.

The hotel execs rushed out, still catching their breath from the call. They didn’t even have time to pull themselves together before they locked eyes with a cold, warning stare that froze them on the spot.

The hotel executives didn’t dare to say a word.

Seriously, they didn’t dare move.

Sebastian gave a subtle signal with his hand, and John instantly picked up on it, heading straight for the hotel

execs.

“Stella, right? I really admire you,” Conrad said, totally ignoring Levi, his eyes practically glued to Stella. He thought, ‘She is drop-dead gorgeous, and those eyes are like little hooks, reeling people in and making their hearts itch.

But Stella just gave a careless chuckle. “Is your admiration supposed to be worth something, Dr. Kramer?”

Conrad was left speechless.

Stella’s straight-up disregard made Conrad’s face cloud over, but before he could fire back, Stella wiped all emotion from her face, her eyes going cold and bottomless. “So, Dr. Kramer, what about your dignity?”

Celia’s heart gave a sudden jolt.

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Even Levi felt a chill creep up the back of his neck when he heard Stella say that.

The elevator doors slid open.

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Conrad's assistant came rushing out, looking totally frazzled, dragging seven or eight suitcases behind, which were all their team's stuff.

"Dr. Kramer, we just got kicked out of the hotel!" the assistant rushed over, fuming.

Conrad couldn't believe his ears. "What did you just say?"

But the hotel staff didn't even look their way. They just dumped all seven or eight suitcases right outside, not caring at all.

Conrad's whole team stood there in stunned silence.

The

guests in the lobby couldn't help staring, their eyes fixed on Conrad's group as they murmured and gossiped among themselves.

Conrad thought, 'It is utter disgrace!'

All these years, Conrad had always been admired and respected wherever he went. He had never suffered such public humiliation.

"I'm Conrad! Get your manager out here! I want to see your manager!" Conrad shouted. He was losing his mind, all that usual dignity gone, and he was barking like a mad dog, totally out of control.

The hotel execs strode over with their staff, all wearing those perfect professional smiles. "Mr. Kramer."

"Explain! I want an explanation!" Conrad snarled, practically grinding his teeth. 'How could they trash my reputation like this in front of everyone? If this gets back to Jaffina, what will people think of me?' He raged inside.

The hotel execs kept up their polite smiles, but their eyes slid right past Conrad and locked onto Stella.

Conrad's team followed the hotel execs' eyes, and all turned to stare at Stella.

Celia demanded angrily, “Was it you? Did you pull strings with Allan?”

Stella was left speechless.

She thought, ‘Honestly, whether they bring it or not, Conrad getting kicked out has absolutely nothing to do with me.

“Ms. Carter speaks for our boss,” the hotel exec announced, and before Stella could say a word, he and his entire staff bowed at a full ninety degrees, showing her absolute respect.

Stella was left speechless.

The whole place went dead silent.

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“And I regret to inform you, Mr. Kramer,” the hotel exec said and kept that polite smile, “from now on, you and your entire team are blacklisted in every hotel in Haliville.

“Once you step out, not a single place will let you through their doors.”

Conrad and his team members were left speechless.

“That includes you, too, Mr. Kramer,” the hotel exec didn’t miss a beat, flashing that professional smile.

Just twisting the knife, making sure Conrad was about to blow a gasket.

Conrad’s face turned ashen, his usual refined look twisted with rage. He glared at the hotel execs, voice dripping with menace. “You’ll regret this!”

The hotel exec kept that infuriating smile, not bothering to reply.

John melted back into place behind Sebastian, barely making a sound.

Suddenly, he stopped dead in his tracks.

He looked up, locking eyes with Stella, whose gaze was thoughtful and unreadable.

John was shocked.

He didn't move his muscles.

Huge beads of cold sweat rolled down his back.

Only when Stella finally looked away did John let out a silent sigh of relief.

Levi, who'd witnessed the whole scene, was left completely dumbfounded. Before he could even say a word, the hotel execs strode over, in full view of Conrad, and said, "Levi, we've upgraded your standard room to the presidential suite, free of charge.

"Please accept your key card."

The exec offered it with both hands, all respect.

Levi was speechless.

"We're leaving!" Conrad snapped, his fury twisting into a bitter and mocking laugh. He thought, 'Let's see if Haliville's hotels really dare to shut me out!

"The humiliation I suffered today? I'll pay it back a hundred, a thousand times over!"

The whole farce finally ended with Conrad and his crew storming out.

Levi, still dazed, clutched his room key and stumbled into the elevator. John was just about to wheel Sebastian in, but Stella lazily put out her hand to stop him.

"We'll take the next one."

John was shocked.

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After exchanging a glance with Sebastian, John silently closed the elevator doors and went upstairs with Levi.

The next elevator arrived in no time.

Stella wheeled Sebastian inside, and barely a few seconds after they started moving, she reached out and hit the emergency stop button. With a loud clunk, the elevator ground to a halt right in the middle.

Sebastian looked up from his wheelchair, locking eyes with Stella in silence.

He braced himself, expecting her to start asking questions.

The emergency call light lit up, and a voice came through, "Guest, is there something wrong-" Before they could finish, Stella just coolly shut it off.

Sebastian's eyes followed her.

Suddenly, Stella leaned in, planting her hands on either side of his wheelchair, boxing him in right in front of her.

Sebastian was left speechless.

Their eyes locked.

Stella said, "The Gray family's sure-win project just got axed, and now they're desperate to recover. They'll be even more eager to cling to Conrad.

"Now that he has been kicked out of the hotel with nowhere to go, do you think the Gray family will take him under their wing?"

Sebastian's breath hitched, his eyes lingering on her strikingly pale, flawless face. "They will."

They were so close, their breaths mingling in the air between them.

Stella's long lashes lowered, that dark, unhinged allure flickering back into her eyes.

She tilted her head, her pale lips brushing Sebastian's ear as she whispered, "So, do you want to take back Gray Group, or do you want to destroy it for good?"

Sebastian's Adam's apple bobbed.

Stella's slender fingers grazed the back of his neck, her touch light and teasing. Her eyes locked onto his face in the elevator's shiny metal wall, drinking in that pale, dangerously gorgeous look that could drive anyone

crazy.

She was waiting for his answer.

Sebastian started to say, "I thought you'd ask me about earlier-"

But Stella's fingers slid over his neck again, just enough to make him shiver.

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She let out a soft laugh. "Answer me."

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"Stella..." Sebastian murmured, something electric building fast between them, the air growing thick with

tension.

"Answer me," Stella said, drawing out each word, but when it came to Sebastian, she always had endless patience.

After a long pause, Sebastian's face stayed blank. "Destroy it."

"Got it," Stella said, chuckling softly. Just then, the sound of maintenance workers talking drifted in from outside the elevator. Their private moment was about to end.

But Stella didn't bother to move.

The sharp aftershave he wore got under her skin, making her heart flutter. It was a distinctive and oddly appealing scent, which reminded her of Sebastian. He might seem cold and untouchable, but he always played by his own rules.

She thought, ‘Kind of cute, actually.’

“They’re about to come in,” Sebastian said coolly. If anyone listened closely, they would hear the tension in Sebastian’s voice.

Stella just replied with a lazy “I see.”

She heard the sound of someone prying open the elevator doors.

The next second, Sebastian’s whole body went rigid, his long fingers gripping the wheelchair handles so tightly that his knuckles turned white. Even his pupils contracted in an instant.

Just like he had done to her in Victor’s courtyard before, Stella leaned in and placed a gentle kiss on the back of his neck.

“Just returning the favor,” she whispered.

The elevator doors slid open.

The maintenance worker, the floor manager, and John, who’d just gotten the news, watched as the elevator doors slowly slid open. Inside, Stella stood next to Sebastian in her black dress, as if nothing had happened at

all.

John was speechless.

But his gut told him something was definitely off.

“Not coming in?” Stella shot John a casual glance, her tone nonchalant.

John was left speechless.

He stepped into the elevator, turning his back to them. Then, like a lightbulb flicking on, he suddenly realized

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what was weird.

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The black blanket that usually covered Sebastian's legs below the knees now covered somewhere else.

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It was a private place people really shouldn't talk about.

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John thought, 'So, did something happen between Mr. Gray and Ms. Carter while the elevator was out?

'A good subordinate knows when to act like they're blind, deaf, and dead.'

John silently gave himself a mental high-five for his professionalism.

The elevator went straight to the top floor.

The presidential suite was in total chaos. With less than ten minutes before the online procurement meeting, the translator's sudden walkout had been a huge setback for Levi and his team.

"It's less than ten minutes, there's no way we'll make it," one assistant said.

"Dozens of pages, all packed with technical jargon. How are we supposed to handle the online meeting?" Another one said.

Everyone was pessimistic about the meeting, and as time slipped away, nobody had a clue what to do.

They were basically in full-on despair mode, just letting things fall apart.

Levi said, "I'll take responsibility for this. Once we're back, I'll file my resignation with the higher-ups."

He'd already resolved to shoulder all the blame himself.

"Levi!" The assistants were visibly upset. They all knew Conrad was sabotaging them, putting his own interests ahead of the country. 'Why should we just take this hit lying down?' they thought.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Sorry to interrupt, but there are still a few minutes left. You guys really not even gonna try?" Stella stood there, arms crossed, leaning lazily against the door. No one knew how long she'd been eavesdropping.

Everyone was speechless.

'Who is she?' they wondered.

"Hey, kid..." Levi was caught off guard as Stella sauntered in, looking completely relaxed, with John pushing a poker-faced Sebastian behind her. The whole crew made quite an entrance,

Stella kept her cool. "Wanna bet? You got the guts?"

Levi stammered, "...Bet on what?"

Stella replied, "Let's bet. After today, will you still be sitting pretty as the director of Kinetic University Tech

Research Institute?”

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Levi was left speechless.

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Levi was totally thrown off by her aura and couldn't get a word out for a while. But Stella had already wiped all expression from her face, grabbed a pencil from the table, and unhurriedly twisted up her long hair.

Her delicate jawline was on full display.

In an instant, her badass aura exploded. Her gorgeous face was totally blank. He said, “Let's get started.”

Levi and his team were left speechless.

Two minutes later, several laptops were spread out on the table, and Levi just stared, dumbfounded, as Stella switched into work mode, her fingers flying over the keys. She was typing out all the product details they'd need today, straight from memory.

She was ridiculously fast!

She didn't even look down at the keyboard.

Levi was totally floored. “Wait, you actually memorized all that?” He couldn't help thinking, ‘Didn't she just glance at Victor's files for a second?’

By now, Stella's screen was covered in lines of text. As soon as she finished a page, the printer beside her churned out another. “You guys get your stuff ready. Meeting starts right on the dot.”

She didn't even glance up, and her commanding voice sent chills down everyone's spine.

The team, which had been floundering just moments ago, snapped into action. After all, it's not like things could get any worse.

Levi was left speechless.

He watched in disbelief as Stella shrunk dozens of pages down to a punchy summary, highlighting the essentials and tagging each device by priority. Compared to this, their old translations looked like a total mess.

Meanwhile, Sebastian sat nearby with the plain plant resting on his lap, his eyes locked on Stella's profile as she worked, his gaze a little darker than usual.

John felt silent.

Even as a bystander, John felt his cheeks flush just from catching that look on Sebastian's face.

He thought, 'So what the hell did Mr. Gray and Ms. Carter get up to in that elevator?'

'Should I tell them there are security cameras in there?'

'Should I go wipe the footage right now?'

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Sebastian's cold, slender fingers gently stroked the plain plant, making it perk right up, completely lost in ecstasy.

'This feels so good,' the plant thought.

“The signal is coming in,” the assistant warned Levi and the others. They were using the hotel’s conference system, with a massive LED screen standing tall in the presidential suite. Everyone was on edge, hearts pounding in their chests.

Stella hit the space bar, finishing up..

At the same time, the freshly reorganized files landed in everyone’s hands, down to the very second!

The big screen lit up!

The multi-national online procurement meeting officially kicked off.

The international delegates started with some polite small talk.

Levi, having just blitzed through the new files and finally feeling ready, settled in with a serious look on his face. His signature suit made him look all business, no trace of the earlier meltdown.

With her part done, Stella spun her pen with a bored look, her face expressionless as she stared at the conference screen.

As she glanced at the delegates, her deep amber eyes narrowed slightly, a hint of calculation flickering in them.

From a spot out of the camera’s view, she gave Levi’s assistant a discreet signal, tapping her ear, and shot Levi a look that clearly said, ‘Don’t move. The assistant quickly muted the mic, and the connection went silent for

a moment.

The next second, Stella and Sebastian said in unison, “They’re about to jack up the price!”

Levi was left speechless.

Glued to the camera, Levi finally understood exactly how Victor felt earlier. He was silently swearing up a storm inside.

Levi thought, ‘It’s gotta be Conrad!

‘He must’ve secretly leaked what we are willing to pay. If those companies decide to drive the prices up on purpose, this whole online procurement meeting is toast!’

The folks on the other end caught on fast, kept chatting away, all smiles, while signaling to Levi that his mic was still off.

Levi was left speechless.

Maybe it was just the hotel air-conditioning cranked up too high, but cold sweat broke out all over Levi's back.

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As soon as his assistant switched the mic back on, he felt like he was about to have an out-of-body experience. On the outside, he was cool as ice, negotiating with the delegates, but inside, he was screaming.

He thought, 'They have the exclusive hookup for this equipment, no substitutes anywhere on the market. Our budget is already maxed out, and if they held firm and wouldn't drop the price, what can I do?'

Sure enough, after the usual formalities, the equipment company came out swinging, demanding a 20% price

hike.

That kind of jump was basically highway robbery!

Levi's crew went at them one after another, arguing till they were practically red in the face, but the other side just held firm at that 20% mark, no matter what.

Nobody said a word.

The online procurement meeting just ground to a halt.

Everyone on Levi's side instinctively glanced at Stella, but she just kept twirling her pen, sprawled out on the couch, looking totally chill. Nobody had a clue what was going on in her head.

Her pretty face was shrouded in shadow, fading in and out of the light.

Suddenly, Stella gave a quick smile and motioned for Levi to swap seats with her.

Levi didn't even blink. He got up right away. The company rep on the other side, who'd been full of himself, stared in shock as some girl he'd never even heard of took his spot.

She looked young, but she had serious boss vibes. Unhurried, she sat down in a sleek black Dior dress from the latest collection, her skin pale as snow, drop-dead gorgeous.

The company reps thought, 'Swapping out the lead negotiator halfway is breaking every rule in the book.'

The company reps were stunned for a moment, clearly not happy about it. But what Stella did next left them speechless!

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Without even glancing at it, Stella ripped the new price list the company reps had just faxed over right before his eyes, her face icy and completely emotionless.

The company reps could only stare in stunned silence.

Levi and his team were frozen, not daring to make a sound.

Stella said, “Now, it’s my turn to set the terms!”

Levi thought, ‘It’s over.

‘This deal is completely dead.’

The leading company rep let out a sarcastic laugh. “What do you mean by that?”

“We don’t agree,” Stella replied flawlessly in a foreign language, and her tone was clear and firm, way more assertive than Levi had ever been.

Shredded paper littered the floor.

With that, Stella leaned back as she didn’t have a care in the world. Her aura was so intense it cut right through the screen, making everyone in the online meeting tense up.

“Not only do we disagree, but we’re demanding a 20% cut off the original price,” Stella said.

As soon as Stella said that, everyone fell silent.

After a moment, a mocking laugh echoed through the screen. “Keep dreaming!” They didn’t even try to hide how smug they were.

Stella twirled her pen with icy indifference, letting them laugh all they wanted. She was completely unfazed. Her expression stayed stone-cold from start to finish.

She said, “If you’re done laughing, why don’t we discuss how your company tried to save 1.5 million on maintenance and ended up causing a deep-sea oil spill?”

As soon as she finished, the fancy spin of her pen came to a halt. Stella shot the company rep a smirk, watching as his face fell and his expression changed dramatically.

Levi and his team were completely outmatched, left speechless by Stella’s dominance.

“Nonsense! This is pure nonsense! This is slander! I’m taking you to the international court!” The company rep was clearly losing his cool, even resorting to the few Clusian words he could muster.

Stella snorted with a cold laugh, raising an eyebrow in disdain. “Whether it’s slander or not, your company knows exactly what’s going on.

“I’m seriously questioning whether your products’ origin has already been contaminated by the oil spill. Now

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it’s us in Clusia who have to worry. If we buy your equipment, are we risking irreversible damage?”

The leading company rep was left speechless.

His face went from pale to green, a real spectacle.

But Stella wasn’t done yet. She propped her chin on her hand, looking at him with lazy indifference. “And by the way, your company is still trying to keep the oil spill under wraps, aren’t you? If I let your country’s media in on this....

“I wonder if the environmental and animal rights folks in your country might go wild and end up causing your company some irreversible damage?” She spoke with total composure, not a single flaw in her delivery.

Levi and his team were left speechless.

Levi couldn’t believe his eyes as he stared at Stella. ‘We haven’t heard a single rumor about this back in Clusia. Where did Stella get this info?’ He thought.

He instinctively glanced over at Sebastian.

Sebastian was left speechless.

He couldn’t care less whether they bought it or not.

The leading company rep was sweating bullets, clearly starting to panic. He thought, ‘How the hell did Clusia get wind of this? And if they already know, why are they even negotiating and exposing their bottom price?’

‘So, this is their “wolf in sheep’s clothing” act?’

He tugged at his tie and wiped the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief. “I need to check with my superiors.”

Stella said coolly, “Three minutes. That’s all you get.”

The leading company rep was totally stunned. “Three minutes isn’t enough!” All that swagger from before was gone in an instant.

Stella chuckled, icy and unbothered. “Whether it’s enough or not isn’t my problem. When the time’s up, if you don’t give me an answer I like, this video goes straight to your country’s environmental and animal rights organizations.”

She slowly raised her phone, turning it so he could see it right on camera.

“Or maybe my finger slips and it gets sent somewhere else, who knows,” she said, eyebrow raised.

That last line was a threat, clear as day. The guy on the other end jumped up so fast he knocked his chair over, the crash echoing through the room and sending a shockwave through everyone watching.

Everyone was speechless.

Levi stared at Stella, his face blank as she started the three-minute countdown. In his mind, he muttered,

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“Kid...” Stella just lazily turned her head and looked back at him.

Their eyes locked.

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Levi, the old man in his traditional suit, had totally forgotten whatever he was about to say since his mind was a complete blank.

Less than a minute later, the rep’s face reappeared on the screen, looking flustered. “Our boss says the most we can do is a 10% cut!” They were still trying to play hardball.

Stella didn't even blink. "30%."

The company representative was left speechless.

After a beat, Stella let out a chilly laugh. "40%."

Panicking, the rep blurted out, "God! 20%! No more haggling!"

He thought, 'Swear to God. We've never faced an opponent this tough before!'

Levi and his team were left speechless.

Everyone on the team was totally blank. They thought, 'How did they just score a 20% discount off the original price without lifting a finger?'

'Is this what a legendary free win looks like?'

'And the best part? They are making a killing at this price!'

'This isn't just a free win. This was lying down and ascending straight to heaven!'

'So what the hell just happened?'

Stella watched the rep, who was sweating bullets and looking totally flustered. She tossed her pen onto the table and smirked coolly. "Wouldn't it have been easier to just be straightforward from the start?"

The company representative was left speechless.

He thought, 'What could I possibly say?'

'Would I even dare say anything?'

As if something just occurred to her, Stella's gaze turned icy as she looked up. "Oh, and one more thing. Who contacted you and told you about Clusia's total budget for this deal?"

"Don't even try to play dumb," she cut him off, seeing the rep about to make an excuse.

The company representative was left speechless.

After a long pause, he finally blurted out a name. Right then, Levi said through gritted teeth, "Conrad's

assistant!”

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Stella turned and caught Sebastian’s eye across the room. “Sebastian, I can’t stand traitors,” she said. She thought, ‘Especially those who can’t tell right from wrong when it really matters!’

Sebastian idly ran his cold fingers over the plain plant, his eyes dark and brooding. “Coincidence. So do L

In the corner, John was on the phone.

His face was stone-cold and unyielding, knuckles tense. He looked ready to throw a punch.

“Talk is cheap. Send over the email thread as proof,” Stella said, still as cool as ever, as if she had no idea how much of a shockwave she’d just sent through Levi and his team.

Less than five minutes later, the email was already in their inbox.

The company rep looked like he’d just been dragged out of a pool, totally defeated and desperate to end the negotiation. After all these years dealing with Clusians, he’d never been this humiliated.

‘This girl is young, but she has a heart of stone!’ he thought.

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“Here’s the new quote. Take a look,” the other side’s representative said, sounding utterly defeated. This war had been completely one-sided, and they had lost everything, to the point where there was nothing left to lose.

The fax machine buzzed to life.

Levi, finally finding something useful to do, hurried over and handed the freshly faxed documents to Stella with both hands, his eyes practically sparkling.

Stella was speechless.

She took the documents with a blank expression and went through them line by line.

“No issues on my end,” Stella said. “See if there’s anything else you want to hash out with them.”

After a moment, Stella passed the agreement to Levi.

Levi gave it a quick once-over, his eyes widening in disbelief.

The other side was clearly rattled by the warning. Not only had they dropped the price by 20 percent as agreed, but they had also upgraded the outdated equipment to the latest model, free of charge.

They’d just hit the jackpot!

Levi stammered, “N-no, that’s all.” Pushing for more would only tempt fate.

Stella clapped her hands lazily. “Anyone else got questions?” She glanced at the camera, her tone cool as she addressed the representatives on the other end.

They would not dare ask a single thing.

Stella stood up, poured herself a glass of water, and let Levi take over the rest of the negotiation. Leaning against the wall, she sipped her drink slowly, staying well within the camera’s view.

She radiated authority without even trying.

The representatives of the other companies were completely speechless.

What was supposed to be an entire afternoon of haggling over the online procurement meeting, or possibly an all-night standoff, was wrapped up in a record-breaking half hour. Once the connection was cut, Levi’s entire team sat there in stunned silence.

Both Levi and his team were speechless.

Everyone looked shell-shocked.

‘Wait, who am I again?’

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‘Where am I?’

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‘What the hell just happened?’

“Levi, let Stella take you back to the hotel. Who knows, maybe something miraculous will happen.” Victor’s voice echoed in their mind, and everyone was lost in thought.

Thinking about what Victor had said earlier, Levi looked at Stella with a complicated expression.

'A miracle really did happen!'

Levi stammered, "S-Stella..." As he saw her completely unfazed, cool as ice from start to finish, something fierce and proud stirred deep in his chest.

They had been forced to swallow their pride by foreign companies for far too long. Even when they were the ones paying, they still had to act humble and accommodating.

It had been forever since they'd tasted victory like this.

Stella set her glass down with a click. "Looks like you'll be keeping your seat as dean for a while longer." She reached up and pulled the pencil from her hair, letting her long, silky hair spill down her back. She looked absolutely stunning.

Levi was so moved he nearly tore up. "Stella..."

He stepped toward her instinctively, arms opening for a hug.

But the very next second, smack! A leaf flew out of nowhere and slapped Levi square in the face.

Levi was speechless.

He stared blankly at the plain plant that had suddenly shot up between him and Stella.

The plant sprang up to nearly several feet tall, standing there stiffly, almost as if it had its hands on its hips. When Levi looked at it, the plant began shaking its leaves at him, like it was chewing him out.

Levi blurted out, "Is it cursing me out?"

Stella was speechless.

"Trust me, you really don't want to know, Stella thought.

Sebastian scooped up the plain plant and placed it back on his lap. His face was perfectly blank as he reached out and covered Stella's hand with his cold one, saying, "Let's go home."

His eyes were dark and intense.

Levi blurted out, "Stella, stay for dinner before you go!"

“Let’s go home,” Sebastian repeated, veins standing out on the back of his hand. He kept his grip gentle this time, but inside, he was clearly irritated that Stella wasn’t focused on him.

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Levi, stubborn as ever, shot back, “Stay for dinner!”

Stella was speechless.

‘Naive, you two acted like kids barely more than three years old,’ Stella thought.

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Sebastian’s expression darkened, his presence turning so cold that it felt like the temperature in the presidential suite dropped several degrees. His gaze locked onto Levi, sharp and intimidating.

He said nothing, but the pressure was overwhelming.

Levi was speechless.

Levi’s knees went weak, but there was no way he was backing down and bruising his pride.

‘Can someone please bail me out here?’ Levi thought desperately.

“Alright,” Stella said, as if she had read his mind. She stepped between them and used her free hand to ruffle the back of Levi’s neck. “Easy. Don’t get worked up.”

Both Levi and his team were speechless.

They stared in disbelief as Stella spoke to the icy Sebastian in the tone one might use to calm a child.

In less than a second, the man in the wheelchair who had been terrifying moments earlier muttered a reluctant “okay”, and the chill around him vanished completely.

Just as Stella tried to pull her hand away, Sebastian grabbed it and placed it right back on the nape of his neck. “Still mad here,” he muttered.

'Guess you'll have to keep soothing me if you want me to forgive you,' he thought.

His gaze lingered on her, heavy with emotion.

Anyone with eyes could see the longing in them.

Both Levi and his team were speechless.

'Th-this... what is even happening...

Levi pointed a trembling finger at Sebastian and thought, 'Isn't this peak shamelessness?'

Sebastian shot Levi a cold, lifeless glare, nothing like the obedient, puppy-like look he had given Stella moments earlier. Everyone was completely stunned.

Sebastian was speechless too.

His icy gaze softened, eyes half-closed, looking so content it was almost like he might start purring any

second.

Levi stared at Stella in disbelief. She was actually petting him.

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Levi was speechless. 'Fine, just keep indulging him.

'Go ahead, keep babying him.

'Sooner or later, he'll be spoiled rotten, like a pampered puppy!'

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"We're heading back," Stella said coolly once she was certain Sebastian had calmed down. Sebastian glanced up at her. He said nothing, but his mood was clearly lifted.

Then Sebastian turned to Levi and let out a cold, dismissive huff.

Levi was speechless.

He thought, 'Is he showing off?

'Is he trying to provoke me?

"This damned man!"

Levi took a deep breath, finally managing to calm down and say to Stella, "Thank you."

Stella gave a casual wave goodbye, and then wheeled Sebastian out of the presidential suite.

She handled everything and disappeared, no fanfare, no credit, leaving behind nothing but legend.

Only then did Levi's assistant snap back to reality. "Levi, who... who is she, anyway?"

'She just did us a massive favor, and we don't even know her name. Isn't that kind of messed up?' the assistant thought.

Levi was speechless.

After thinking it over, Levi let out a sigh. "Don't worry about who she is. Just remember this: from today on, she's my little beloved."

Levi's team was speechless.

On the way back, Eggie was chirping. It had finished digesting and now poked its head out of Sebastian's chest pocket, looking all fuzzy and adorable.

Sebastian promptly shoved him right back into the pocket.

Eggie kept chirping.

Stella was speechless.

Sebastian had not taken his eyes off Stella since they got into the car, not even for a second.

"Are you done staring yet?" Stella sighed, lazily turning her head to meet his gaze.

“Not yet,” Sebastian said.

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Stella responded with a lazy, “Yeah.”

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“Don’t you dare go to the Lane family’s party tomorrow night!” Blake blurted out.

Stella was speechless.

She had nearly forgotten about it.

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Blake practically yelled into the phone. “That party is a total trap! The Lane family’s heir is a complete sleazebag!” As the top Chad in Haliville, Blake always had solid intel.

Under Lucas’s hopeful gaze, Stella took a bite of watermelon. “So, did you get the invitation?”

“Stella! Are you even listening?” Blake snapped. “That party tomorrow night is basically a bride selection for the Lane family’s heir! Bride selection, do you even understand what that means?” Blake was on the verge of losing it.

He could not bring himself to spill all the disgusting details. He was genuinely worried about polluting Stella’s

ears.

“So, did you get the invitation or not?” Stella asked again, sounding utterly uninterested.

Blake was spiraling while Stella remained completely indifferent.

“Yeah, yeah, I got it,” Blake said. Getting an invite was child’s play for him.

“Dress properly tomorrow,” Stella said, rubbing her forehead. She suddenly remembered Blake’s wine-red floral shirt paired with shorts from their first meeting. “Do not show up in any of your usual clown outfits.”

Blake felt deeply insulted. He pouted into the phone. “Then you’d better dress ugly tomorrow, Stella. Like, as ugly as humanly possible, got it?” He was practically begging, his nerves wound tight.

‘Stella’s so gorgeous. What if the Lane family tries to go after her?’ Blake thought, anxiety gnawing at him.

‘No, wait. There’s no way they wouldn’t pick her!’ Panic surged.

Stella was speechless.

‘Just hang up already, Stella thought, thoroughly done with the conversation.

Staring at his phone as the dial tone echoed, Blake immediately began calling his Chad buddies. No matter what, he was determined to keep Stella’s reputation spotless at the party tomorrow night.

‘Protecting Stella is every Chad’s sacred duty!’ Blake thought, fired up.

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Night fell.

Perched high in the tree, Snowball curled into a big, fluffy white ball and suddenly felt a chill.

He lazily cracked one eye open.

The next moment, he locked eyes with a pair of cold, unfathomable eyes.

Snowball froze.

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His body jolted, scales nearly standing on end. ‘When did that damned Sebastian sneak up on me?’ he cursed inwardly.

Man and snake stared at each other in total silence.

To Snowball, Sebastian, sitting in his wheelchair, looked exactly like some terrifying final boss villain, radiating such a freezing presence that it felt like the entire room had turned into an icy tundra.

“Tonight, you’re bunking with Lucas,” Sebastian said, his voice low and sinister.

Snowball actually heard himself swallow with a gulp.

Sebastian, oozing a dark, oppressive aura, asked, “Did you hear me?”

Snowball nodded his big, round head twice, extra obedient.

The electric wheelchair hummed as Sebastian rolled away, and the instant he disappeared through the doorway, Snowball collapsed, going completely limp on the tree branch.

‘What’s the point of being a snake anymore...’ Snowball thought, utterly defeated.

Downstairs, Allan was scrolling through short videos, cracking up at something on his screen.

Stella was speechless.

With Celia gone, everyone was completely relaxed, Lucas lay sprawled at the table, stacking blocks while his little feet swung back and forth, giggling happily from time to time. His fluffy head smelled faintly sweet.

Sebastian suddenly appeared beside Stella, expression blank, fixing her with a cold, silent stare.

Stella was speechless.

Just as she was about to turn her head, Allan blurted out, “Damn, guys, isn’t this that person?” He shot up from the couch, looking exactly like that viral meme of a grandpa staring at his phone on the subway.

Lucas looked up,

confused.

It was a three-and-a-half-minute video, and the part Allan was talking about lasted only a single second. She

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had just happened to get caught on camera by accident.

After watching it, Sebastian only grunted. "Yeah, that's her."

Even if it was just for one second, Stella, however, looked lost in thought.

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Allan felt physically nauseous. "I've never seen her act so damn cringy before." Just imagining a woman in her forties or fifties playing shy and cutesy like that made his stomach... turn.

Stella stayed silent, her fingers sliding smoothly across the screen.

A moment later, she clipped that single second and did some quick editing. The man's face reflected in the glass was revealed.

Allan stared in shock. "Who the hell is that guy?"

Stella leaned back against the couch, her eyes icy with a hint of reckless amusement. "Brantley," she said, a thin smile tugging at her lips. "Technically, my father, but we're not related by blood."

Allan rolled his eyes.

Allan was completely blindsided.

"Are you... sure?" Allan stammered. 'Wait, so that woman's hooking up with Stella's dad?' he thought.

Stella arched an eyebrow, which was answer enough. Even with all that explosive drama, her expression remained perfectly calm. She stood up lazily, waved a hand, and headed upstairs.

“Sebastian...” Allan called instinctively.

He glanced over, only to see Sebastian staring at Stella’s retreating figure, his eyes so dark that nothing could be read from them.

Allan rolled his eyes.

‘Man, that stare... Allan thought.

Lucas knocked over his block tower with a loud clatter, then toddled after Stella. He barely made it two steps before stopping.

He looked down, confused.

Somehow, Snowball had slithered down and wrapped himself around Lucas’s waist with the tip of his tail.

Snowball felt somewhat guilty.

He did not even dare glance in Sebastian’s direction.

‘Being a snake is rough, but there’s no way I’m saying a word...’ Snowball thought, utterly defeated.

Lucas and Snowball locked eyes.

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“Huh?” Lucas blinked, completely puzzled.

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There was a knock on the door.

Stella had just changed into her pajamas when she turned and wandered over to the door. When she opened it, Sebastian sat outside in his wheelchair, hugging his pillow and gazing up at her quietly.

In the end, he had sneakily chosen a black pajama top with subtle dark patterns along the collar. After his shower, his hair hung loose and slightly messy, half covering his eyes. For once, he actually looked soft and almost innocent.

Stella stepped aside. "Come in."

The electric wheelchair hummed softly as Sebastian rolled inside, and the door closed behind him.

The room fell silent.

"Want some water?" Stella finally asked. She casually poured herself a glass and glanced back. Sebastian was already by the bed. He shook his head and placed his pillow right next to hers.

Stella held the glass in one hand, her amber eyes resting on him as she quietly took in every small movement. A subtle tacit understanding lingered in the air.

With a click, she set the empty glass back down on the table.

Stella walked to the bed and turned off the main lights, leaving only the warm, dim glow of the bedside lamp.

She pulled back the covers and slid under them.

Sebastian immediately moved closer.

Her senses were instantly overwhelmed by the intense, almost unhealthy masculine scent clinging to him. His presence was powerful enough to feel suffocating. Stella sighed softly, opened her eyes, and turned toward the warmth beside her.

Sebastian was already watching her.

His strikingly handsome face was half-hidden in shadow, his gaze locked on hers.

His eyes were dark and unreadable.

The bluish shadows beneath them gave him a fragile, almost sickly allure that was hard to put into words.

"Close your eyes," Stella said lazily. She reached out and gently brushed her fingers over his perfect brows. His side profile looked like something carved straight from a sculptor's dream.

Sebastian obeyed without a word, closing his eyes. A beat later, he whispered, "Hold me."

Stella froze for a split second.

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Then, as if nothing had happened, she returned to her usual calm.

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She slowly wrapped her pale arms around him, letting him press close and bury his face in the hollow of her neck. He clung to her like she was the only thing keeping him together.

At 6'4", Sebastian made Stella look almost fragile in his arms.

"Have you ever let anyone else hold you like this?" Stella asked quietly, her tone unreadable. Her hand rested on the back of his neck, gently stroking it. "Like Celia?"

Sebastian's eyes snapped open. Just hearing that name filled him with disgust. Because it was Stella asking, that disgust twisted into a sharp, unfair ache.

The next second, she heard a "hiss".

Stella felt his teeth sink lightly into her neck, more punishment than pain.

"Celia is Holly's sister," Sebastian rasped, his voice thick. The veins in his neck stood out as he fought to hold himself together. He nuzzled into her neck, his chest vibrating with each word.

His arm slid around her waist and pulled her closer, refusing to let go.

"Holly is my sister-in-law," he muttered.

Stella was speechless.

He sounded wounded, like a puppy that had been wrongly scolded. Even when upset, the worst he could manage was a gentle bite-his

of sulking.

‘Honestly, it is...’ Stella thought.

way

‘He’s just too adorable for his own good!’

A mischievous spark flickered through her. She hummed lazily, her fingers still tracing the back of his neck. Only when Sebastian’s body went rigid and he let out a low, restrained groan did she finally stop.

Yeah, he was definitely getting worked up.

Only then did Stella speak, her tone calm and indifferent. “It’s late. Go to sleep.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

‘She’s doing this on purpose, he grumbled inwardly. ‘No way this isn’t intentional. She’s totally messing with

me.’

“And...” Stella drawled, eyes still closed, sounding as lazy as ever. “Scoot over. Something’s poking me.”

Sebastian fell silent.

It was the next morning when Stella woke up feeling like she was being suffocated by a tangle of vines.

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When she opened her eyes, she realized Sebastian had her completely tangled in his long arms and legs, holding her from behind like a child refusing to let go of his favorite toy.

Thankfully, Sebastian was always cool to the touch, so she was not sweating.

Stella stayed still, trying to pry his arm off her waist, but the moment she slipped free even a little, he tightened his hold.

Stella was speechless.

‘Seriously, he’s like glue,’ she thought.

The bedroom door creaked ajar.

Lucas peeked in, looking like a sleepy cherub straight out of a picture book. His eyes were barely open, his face soft and squishy from sleep.

He wore cartoon shark pajamas and clutched the plush tail as he tiptoed in, soft, pale, and marshmallow-like. When he saw Uncle Sebastian hugging Stella tightly, jealousy puffed him up instantly. He plopped onto the floor, propped his cheeks in his hands, and pouted.

‘Meanie!’ Lucas puffed out his cheeks even more, sulking to himself.

The second he noticed Stella was awake, his eyes lit up.

“Hey!” he chirped.

‘So bad!’ he huffed, pointing at Sebastian.

‘Uncle Sebastian, you’re the worst!’

Just as he was about to tattle, Stella pressed a finger to her lips.

Lucas nodded obediently.

After thinking for a second, he tilted his head and reached out both arms, clearly asking for a hug.

‘This is going to be tough,’ Stella thought.

Seeing him on the verge of tears, Stella lifted the blanket and motioned for him to climb up. Lucas climbed onto the bed, his little butt sticking up, and burrowed into her arms, all soft and snuggly.

After letting out a soft, sleepy baby yawn, he snuggled up even closer, sucking his thumb, and drifted right back to sleep.

Stella was speechless.

“They’re both just as clingy,’ she thought, a little helpless.

Ever since that incident years ago, Sebastian had not slept this well, with no single nightmare, no twisted thoughts but just peace.

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Sebastian opened his eyes.

If that little foot hadn’t smacked me in the face, this would be perfect, he muttered.

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He glanced at Lucas, now wedged between him and Stella. Without a word, he gently moved his foot away. When his gaze fell on Stella’s sleeping face, his heart skipped. ‘How can she look so peaceful...

The white curtains fluttered in the breeze. Sunlight spilled through the gaps, bathing her in soft, creamy light. Her delicate face looked even more angelic, like she was glowing with a dreamlike warmth.

For a moment, Sebastian could not tell dream from reality.

“Stella...” His voice came out rough, his eyes deep as the sea. Then they suddenly lit up with something warm. He lifted his large hand and gently settled it into her hair, his fingers threading through her silky strands.

He wished she could stay here with him, on this island, for the rest of their lives.

He wanted to wake up every single morning and see her right there, the very first thing his eyes landed on.

It was just her.

Realizing this, Sebastian’s eyes darkened even further. ‘So what I really want... isn’t to be her guardian, or her “dad.” What I want is...’

Lucas’s little foot smacked Sebastian in the face again with a thud. Sebastian felt impatient.

‘I’m her man!’ Sebastian declared to himself, possessive and certain.

Allan was holding a pink leash decorated with small yarn flowers, having just taken Snowball out for a walk. As Celia came back in, her legs nearly giving out beneath her, Allan shot her a mischievous, loaded grin.

Snowball, who had been about to collapse from exhaustion a second earlier, spotted Celia and instantly zipped up the tree without sparing her a glance.

‘Gross!’ Snowball thought, completely disgusted.

“A-Allan,” Celia mumbled, looking guilty as she glanced away and fidgeted with her collar. Then, as if she had just remembered something, she blurted out, “Allan, risking Conrad’s wrath just for Stella? That’s really not

smart!”

Allan smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes. “Oh? Not smart, huh?

“You kicked Dr. Conrad out of the hotel, then used Nova Group’s influence to make sure no hotel in Haliville would take him in?

“I busted my ass trying to help you and Mr. Gray get on Conrad’s good side! With that chip in his hands, getting Mr. Gray back in charge of Gray Group would be a piece of cake!”

As she ranted, several bright pink hickeys peeked out from her collar, completely ruining her serious tone.

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partnering with Conrad’s team, and Gray Group is pouring money into pushing out Conrad’s smart robots.”

Sebastian’s face looked cold enough to freeze the room, as if it would never thaw. His long fingers rolled the black prayer beads one by one, with no trace of warmth in his expression.

“They can’t even get the chips working, and they still want to sell smart robots?” Allan snorted. ‘Honestly, Big Ben could outperform their entire lineup with one finger,’ he thought.

After saying that, Allan shot another glance at Stella's bedroom door.

'Wait, did Sebastian actually stay in Stella's room last night?' Allan's thoughts went haywire.

His gossip radar went into overdrive.

'No wonder Sebastian kept giving Stella that smoldering look when she went upstairs yesterday,' he thought.

'It all makes sense now.

"Oh, right, almost forgot," Allan said, snapping his fingers. "Those three girls showed up."

Sebastian's fingers stilled, his tone as cold as ever. "Which three girls?"
Sebastian's fingers stilled, his tone cold as ever. "Which three girls?"

'Honestly, he only ever keeps Stella in mind. Everyone else doesn't even register, Allan thought.

"Hazel, Lila, and Wendy," Allan said. "Those three tried to pull something and got locked up for five days. They were released today."

He paused for a moment and then continued. "And tonight, at the Lane family's party, Stella's sister and her cousin are both definitely on the guest list."

AD

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