

Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

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Mike didn't even dare to peep and left with his team, tail between his legs.

"Get back to whatever you were doing!" Murray barked in his deep voice.

The veterans went back to their spots, but their intense stares lingered on Sebastian and Stella.

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Sebastian ignored the others, returning to Stella. Frowning deeply, his gaze chilled as he studied the cut near her eye. Unconcerned, she simply reached up to touch it.

Sebastian grabbed her wrist, stopping her. "Don't touch it with your hand," he said.

"Sebastian, come with me," the older man standing next to Murray suddenly said in a low voice, just as Stella looked up and their eyes met.

The older man's gaze lingered on her for a moment.

He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd seen her somewhere before.

Meanwhile, in his office, with a loud smack, Hudson dumped everything from the drawer onto the desk in front of Sebastian.

There were IDs, epaulets, a sidearm, and more.

“When are you planning to come back?” Hudson asked, his voice commanding, every inch the stern general.

Sebastian glanced over the desk.

He was utterly indifferent.

“I don’t care what deal you made five years ago. Come back, and everything goes back to how it was!” Hudson’s gaze lingered on Sebastian’s legs, pained. If he were decades younger, he’d have gone and taught the Gray family’s bastards a lesson himself.

Sebastian replied, “I’m not coming back.”

With a loud bang, Hudson slammed his hand on the desk. “So, you’re just going to toss Red Shadow aside?” He was so furious that he paced around Sebastian, pointing at him for a long moment before finally dropping his hand in frustration.

Hudson said, “I know you can’t forgive yourself for what happened to Eric, but it’s been five years now...”

Sebastian lifted his gaze, his eyes cold and heavy. “I was the one who told Eric to come back.”

Hudson was speechless for a moment. “You...”

Sebastian said, “I promised I’d keep him absolutely safe.” His eyes were as cold and bleak as winter rain. “I

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broke my word. Because of me, my father, my brother, and my sister-in-law are gone.”

All that was left was Lucas.

Hudson was at a loss for words.

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Sebastian looked at him. “Nathan sends my mental health reports to Jaffina on a regular basis. I’m sure Hudson has read them, too.” His pale, handsome face was completely expressionless. “For five years, I haven’t been able to fall asleep on my own.”

He continued, “My internal injuries never stop hurting. Whether my eyes are open or closed, the pain is always there. Every single day and night, living another day is just suffering.”

He added, “Hudson, with my mental state like this, there’s no way I can come back.”

Hudson looked conflicted.

Sebastian would never miss a single one of Sebastian’s mental health reports.

Hudson had no idea what was going through Sebastian’s mind as he spoke so calmly to him. Back when he founded Red Shadow, Sebastian was all youthful. It felt like just yesterday. Now, all that was left was ice.

Hudson hesitated, “Back then, the location leak...”

Eric was the youngest geneticist around. When he started working at a foreign lab, he stumbled upon a secret organization developing a virus aimed at the genetic sequence of Clusian people. He was the only one who could create an antidote for it.

After Sebastian learned the truth, he ordered Eric to return home. However, everyone in Eric’s lab was killed, and all the research was destroyed. With Sebastian risking everything, Eric and pregnant Holly were brought safely back to Clusia.

They also managed to bring back the antidote formula.

But then, Eric didn’t get killed by outsiders as everyone expected. Instead, it was an inside job, a leak from his own people.

And just like that, the formula disappeared into thin air.

Hudson didn’t finish his sentence. He just let out a long sigh. “I’ll be heading to Haliville in the next couple of days. I’ll pay my respects to Eric while I’m there.”

This time, Sebastian didn’t refuse.

When Sebastian got back to the cafeteria, Stella was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is she?” Sebastian frowned.

“Ha!” Lucas made a restroom sign with his fingers, indicating Stella had gone to the restroom.

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Allan said, “Stella saved that for you. She wants you to eat it all.”

As he spoke, he gestured to the plate of food that had been set aside just for Sebastian.

“Where are Eliel and Vincent?” Sebastian asked again.

Allan just rolled his eyes. ‘Who even cares?’ he thought.

Sebastian looked like he was deep in thought.

Ivan drifted out from the shadows, his face ghostly pale, those eyes looking haunted and bitter.

“Stella just swiped his Blackie!” Allan said, not even bothering to look up.

Sebastian just kept his head down and ate.

Ivan just floated away, still sulking.

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With Stella gone, Sebastian had no appetite. He poked at his food a couple of times, about to set his fork down, when Lucas suddenly let out a “Ha!”

Emily translated, “Ms. Carter said she’ll check if you finished it when she gets back.”

Sebastian, who had been about to put his fork down, picked it up again, his face still expressionless.

He didn't even miss a beat.

Emily was speechless. 'Ms. Carter's words are basically law around here, she thought.

A few minutes went by.

Stella still hadn't come back, and Sebastian's expression grew gloomier by the minute. His lashes lowered, concealing the dark circles beneath his eyes. Noticing this, Allan subtly scooted away, hugging the plain plant closer to himself.

'Yikes, the temperature just dropped,' Allan thought to himself.

Just as Sebastian looked up, Eggie flapped his way back in from outside and landed right on Sebastian's shoulder.

It nuzzled up against Sebastian, all soft and fluffy, chirping.

Eggie chattered away right by Sebastian's car, and just like that, Sebastian, who'd been on the verge of snapping, had his face go blank again. He just replied with a frosty "Oh."

Allan blinked in surprise. "Wait, you can actually understand what it's saying?"

Sebastian said with a blank face, "No."

Lucas, Emily and Allan were all at a loss for words.

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'So what the hell was the point of that "oh"?' Allan thought.

Eggie just flopped down on Sebastian's shoulder, totally done with everything.

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Sebastian just picked peregrine falcon up like it was nothing and stuffed him back into his chest pocket. Then he pointed at the plain plant Allan was hugging and asked, "You understand what that thing's saying?"

The plain plant, now the center of attention, was acting all proud and sassy.

It stretched out its lower leaves and flicked them at Allan, like it was showing off.

‘Like hell I understand it,’ Allan thought.

Emily glanced over and said, totally unfazed, “It’s bestowing upon you the honor of kissing its roots.”

Everyone turned to look at her.

The plain plant wriggled with excitement, then stretched out a leaf and gave Emily a high-five!

‘If it’s such a big honor, why don’t you take it yourself?’ Allan grumbled to himself.

The plain plant poked Allan, then shoved its root-leaf at him again, practically demanding a kiss.

Allan snapped, “Get lost!”

Just as they were talking, a shadow fell over Sebastian. He looked up and found himself face-to-face with Blackie, the little black snake.

Sebastian remained silent.

Blackie flicked his tongue out, making a soft hissing sound.

Stella reached out and handed Blackie, who was wrapped around her wrist, back to Ivan. Ivan was so overjoyed he was practically tearing up, then... He just drifted back into the shadows.

Everyone stared.

Eliel and Vincent showed up again, shooting each other a look; they both seemed pretty hyped.

“Stella, where’d you disappear to?” someone called out. She’d been out for nearly thirty minutes.

Lucas, soft and cuddly, immediately flung himself into Stella’s arms, clinging to her the moment she returned.

“I went and swiped a few things,” Stella said coolly. Allan nearly choked on his water and sprayed it everywhere. ‘Stealing? Here? In the middle of a training ground?’ he thought, totally floored.

The next moment, all eyes were on Stella.

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Sebastian spread his palm.

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A bottle of pale blue liquid lay quietly there. It was unmistakably the same stuff Bill had chugged earlier.

Everyone was too shocked to say a word.

Lucas touched it and found it sticky.

“Ms. Carter is insane at climbing walls!” Vincent couldn’t help but give her a big thumbs-up, totally stunned.

Allan shot him a sideways glance and just snorted.

He thought, ‘You’re so easily impressed.

‘Ever seen Stella scale up to the fourth floor with nothing but her bare hands? I have!’

Allan was practically beaming with pride.

Sebastian, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Stella as Vincent spoke. “Which floor?”

Vincent blurted out, “Fourteen floors!”

‘Thanks a lot, Vincent,’ Stella thought, rolling her eyes.

Stella mumbled, sounding a bit sheepish, “Well, it wasn’t really that high...”

Sebastian’s eyes narrowed even more. “So, how many floors was it?”

Stella admitted, “Fourteen.”

Sebastian stared at her, silent.

Lucas, on the other hand, looked up at Stella in awe and clapped.

A dark aura started to gather around Sebastian, and even Vincent, who was usually oblivious, felt a chill running down his spine. The plain plant on the table was trembling non-stop, and Sebastian looked ready to explode any second now.

The next second, Stella threw her arms around him and hugged him tightly.

The “volcano” that was about to erupt instantly went silent.

Stella gently patted his back, trying to cheer him up. “Don’t be mad, okay? Anger makes you get old way faster!”

Sebastian couldn’t stand being called old, and was left speechless.

Eliel’s eyes went wide in shock as he turned to Vincent. “You knew about this?”

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Vincent blinked, confused. “Knew about what?”

Eliel just sighed. ‘Forget it; he’s hopeless,’ he thought.

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Sebastian took the small bottle of pale blue liquid. He nearly tossed it to Vincent, then remembered Stella had climbed fourteen floors for it. His gaze turned cold as he handed it over. "Give it to Murray."

'Man, Mr. Gray's glare could freeze water!' Vincent thought and took the bottle.

"Let's head back," Sebastian said, reaching up to wipe the sweat from Stella's forehead. His hand hesitated as he brushed the corner of her eye.

Eliel looked surprised. "It's so late already. Why not crash at the training ground tonight?"

Sebastian hadn't set foot here in years!

Everyone else who got the word was rushing over, just hoping to see him.

Sebastian replied, "No."

As if he could read Eliel's mind, Sebastian shut him down right away. "He only sleeps in his own bed." He pointed straight at Lucas.

Lucas looked totally innocent and tilted his head.

Everyone was speechless.

Just like when they arrived, two military SUVs drove straight onto the tarmac of Jaffina International Airport.

As the plane's door swung open, someone called out, "Mr. Gray, wait a sec!"

Eliel and Vincent popped the trunks. The local specialties were piled so high they were about to spill out. "The head cook told me to load you up. He said Mr. Gray looked a bit thin and wanted him to eat more!"

They kept talking as they stuffed everything into the plane.

Allan wanted to say something, but just couldn't. 'Did they really empty out the entire mess hall?' he thought.

The group boarded the plane.

Eliel was left standing alone on the tarmac. Just before the plane took off, he raised his hand in a crisp salute.

Up in the sky, everyone else was fast asleep, but Sebastian was in a foul mood.

Sebastian couldn't help but glance over at Stella. Her black hoodie covered most of her face, and Lucas was snuggled up in her arms, snoozing away.

His mood soured even more.

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He rolled his wheelchair over to the two of them and, grumpily, poked Lucas's squishy cheek.

'So soft, he thought.

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After a moment of silence, he grabbed Lucas's cheeks with both hands and gave them a good tug, snorting. 'Man, this kid's really not much to look at!'

Sebastian was getting carried away, and when he looked up, he found himself staring right into Stella's eyes; she'd woken up at some point without him noticing.

They stared at each other, speechless.

"Feeling down?" Stella yawned lazily, her long lashes fanning across her face. Lucas, who was probably dreaming about something yummy, started sucking on his thumb.

She scooted over, making room for him, and shot a casual glance at Sebastian's wheelchair.

The next second, he was already sitting right beside her.

“I’m not feeling great,” Sebastian grumbled, his ears aching from the cabin pressure. He looked at the scar at the corner of her eye, his lips set in a straight line. “Does it hurt?”

His pale, sickly face looked even colder and aloof against that black shirt. His hand lifted, landing softly at the corner of her

eye.

His touch was careful, almost hesitant.

Stella felt a strange tingle, making her shiver and pull away before she even realized. “Nope, doesn’t hurt. I barely feel it,” she said, trying to sound casual.

But if Sebastian kept touching her, things might get complicated.

‘Why did she pull away?’ Sebastian wondered.

He lowered his eyes, saying nothing, lightly brushing his fingertips together, as if the delicate feeling of her skin still lingered there.

‘Can he stop acting like a puppy caught in a downpour? I swear I can almost hear him whining in my ear, Stella thought.

Sebastian glanced at her.

Then he glanced at her again.

“Just touch it already,” Stella sighed, taking his hand and placing it gently at the corner of her eye.

She was totally indulging him.

The next second, Sebastian’s cold hand covered half her face. He sighed, mirroring her, his voice low, rough, and full of emotion. “Stella, stop doing reckless things all the time. Don’t get hurt. Don’t make me worry about you...”

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His fingers brushed lightly over the tiny scar at the corner of her right eye, a mark so faint most people wouldn't even notice. He knew he was probably being dramatic, but he couldn't help.

"I've already lost too many people in my life, so now..."

"Please, don't let me lose you, too," Sebastian said.

Stella didn't say a word.

Her heart felt like it was being squeezed tight, skipping a beat-especially when Sebastian looked at her with that pleading, almost desperate expression.

Her oversized black hoodie slipped down over her head as she reached into her pocket and pulled out the small bottle of pale blue liquid again. "I saw the way you looked at it, so I thought you wanted it."

It was only after she saw that look in his eyes that she decided to swipe it.

She grabbed two bottles at the time.

One'd already been handed in, and the other was right here.

Sebastian swallowed hard.

He stared at the small bottle nestled quietly in her palm.

This was exactly what he wanted.

The moment Bill pulled it out, Sebastian was already thinking about getting it analyzed to see if it was connected to that incident years ago. 'She actually noticed?' he thought, surprised.

Stella had sensed his mood before he was even aware of it himself.

"Why?" Sebastian looked up, locking eyes with Stella.

Stella arched an eyebrow. "What do you mean 'Why'?"

"Why do you notice me?" Sebastian asked quietly, Adam's apple bobbing as he finally voiced the question he'd kept buried for so long. "Why did you claim me as yours the very first time we met?"

His ears flushed red before he even realized, and he looked away.

Stella thought, totally confused, ‘Wait a sec, when did I ever say he was mine?’

‘Why is he turning away?’

‘And what’s up with his ears turning red?’

After a long pause, Stella finally managed to find her voice.

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“I never said that,” Stella replied.

Sebastian jerked, surprised. “You did.”

“I didn’t,” Stella insisted.

Sebastian took a deep breath. “You did.”

“When did I ever say that?” Stella asked.

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Staring into Stella’s earnest eyes, Sebastian’s face stayed blank, but a shadow seemed to gather around him as his fingers clenched tight. “Right after Grandma’s surgery, at that coffee shop, you said it to Linda.”

Her face twisted awkwardly.

She thought, ‘How does he remember that so clearly?’

'He just blurts it out like that?'

Stella tried to remember, then said with confidence, "I didn't." At least, they were not those exact words.

Sebastian was silent for a long moment.

His

eyes

flickered as he stared at her, his expression going full-on hell mode. "Trying to deny what said?"

you

Stella didn't respond.

Sebastian's eyes were practically blazing with frustration. "You really don't want to take responsibility for me?"

'How did this conversation suddenly turn into a talk about responsibility?' Stella thought, totally baffled.

"Say something!" Sebastian snapped.

"Seriously, what do you want me to say?" Stella said, her tone full of exasperation.

Sebastian pressed his lips together, his voice barely hiding a hint of hurt. "Are you starting to find me annoying?"

'Here we go again!' Stella thought. 'Look at him, all pitiful like a puppy!'

Spoiling one patron who loved to throw tantrums was more than enough for her in this life.

"I'm not! I just wish you'd stop making such a fuss all the time!" she said.

Sebastian's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "I'm making a fuss?"

She held back for three seconds, then reached out and slapped her hand over his mouth before Sebastian could get another word out.

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“Quiet!” Stella ordered.

He fell silent.

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But he was still giving her that wounded, accusing look.

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“What’s bothering you?” Stella asked, pouring all her patience into dealing with these two troublemakers, one grown, one little.

Patron Care Guide, Rule One: Always distract your patron before he spirals into pointless drama.

“My ear...” Sebastian mumbled.

Stella reached over and gave the spot behind his ear a gentle rub, and just like that, Sebastian started to unwind.

But his eyes were still silently complaining.

Stella was helpless.

Patron Care Guide, Rule Two: Always be patient with your patron.

She patted her own shoulder. “Want to rest your head here and take a nap?”

Sebastian gave a cold snort.

‘Fine, whatever,’ Stella thought.

She pulled up her black hoodie and hugged Lucas close; if she couldn’t see it, she wouldn’t have to deal with

He reached out and gave her a little poke.

Stella totally ignored him.

Sebastian felt upset.

Two seconds later, Stella felt his weight settle on her shoulder as the guy who'd just been putting up a front leaned in all on his own.

He snuggled right up to her.

Patron Care Guide, Rule Three: When your patron starts acting all tough, just let it slide.

An hour later, the plane hit Haliville.

John pulled up to pick everyone up. But the moment the cabin door swung open, a cloud of dark vibes spilled out. Everyone except Stella and the sleepy, adorable Lucas in her arms was shaking.

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Anyone could tell Sebastian was in a seriously foul mood.

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“Miss Chase, let me drive you home!” Vincent blurted out, not wasting a second. That bone-deep fear of Sebastian from his Red Shadow days made him desperate to get out of there.

‘What a bootlicker,’ Allan thought.

Everyone got into the Maybach.

Ivan and Blackie squeezed into the dark back corner, feeling cozy.

John kept checking the rearview mirror, sneaking glances at the back.

The vibe in the car was kind of off between Sebastian and Stella.

Allan, hugging his plain plant, let out a low cough and instantly, everyone's eyes snapped at him.

Sebastian shot him a look so dark it could curdle milk.

Seriously, Allan's throat really was sore.

Inside the villa at Sandridge Island, the lights were off.

A massive TV, set up like a home theater, was playing a horror movie. Snowball and Big Ben sat on opposite ends of the couch.

Big Ben was rocking a cute pink band-aid on his arm, clutching a giant bowl of popcorn. Every so often, Snowball's tail would sneak over, grab a couple of pieces, and toss them into his mouth.

Right then, the movie was hitting a seriously tense moment!

Big Ben, all plump and bouncy, started sneaking his way over to Snowball, trying to be as quiet as a mouse.

And suddenly, with a snap, the villa lights came on!

Big Ben shrieked, "Oh my god! That scared me!"

It screamed and leapt right onto Snowball, shrieking all the way!

Caught totally off guard by the sudden impact, Snowball felt his snake spirit nearly squished out of it.

Out of nowhere, a popcorn bucket landed squarely on Allan's head, sending popcorn flying all over the place.

Everyone stared, stunned.

The ghost girl on TV let out a creepy cackle.

Her smile was both sinister and dazzling.

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“John...” Sebastian suddenly spoke up, his voice so intimidating it made the ghost girl on TV look like a total wimp.

John’s heart skipped a beat.

He couldn’t help but replay the day in his head, wondering what he’d done to get on Sebastian’s bad side.

‘Is Sebastian’s silence this whole trip because he’s mad at me?’ John thought, panic creeping in.

Cold sweat slid down his temple as he stammered, “Yes, Mr. Gray.”

He was barely keeping it together.

“To the study. Now,” Sebastian ordered.

John followed, silent.

It was so quiet in the study.

John stood stiff as a board, hands behind his back, already running through his final arrangements in his head for the hundredth time.

Finally, he couldn’t take it anymore.

“Mr. Gray?” Carlos called out.

Sebastian sat behind his desk and looked up, his eyes cold as ice. “Is there anything you’re hiding from me?”

John’s heart skipped a beat. “I swear, I’m totally loyal to you, Mr. Gray!”

Sebastian said, “Think again.”

They stared at each other, no one speaking.

Seriously, he had no idea what he could possibly be hiding from Sebastian!

“Mr. Gray, can you give me a hint?” John asked.

Sebastian snorted. “After my grandma’s surgery, at the coffee shop.”

John thought, "That was ages ago!

'Didn't I send him a real-time feed of the whole thing back then? Wait, hold up...

Suddenly, John remembered something and nervously looked up at Sebastian.

Sebastian asked, "Remember now?"

John remained silent, not sure what to say,

Sebastian asked, "What was the last thing Stella said?"

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John, honest as ever, replied, "She said to ask her for the money to clean up the floor."

Yep, that really was the last thing she said.

Sebastian was so mad he had to laugh.

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"And what about the line before that?" Sebastian pressed, his voice suddenly sharper, a hint of menace in his

tone.

John stalled, nerves tight as a drum. "He's my..."

Sebastian's heart did a double-take, but then John, totally missing the moment, finished, "Patron."

Sebastian rolled his eyes. Just adding that one word completely ruined the relationship.

'So to Stella, I'm nothing but the patron, huh?' Sebastian thought, feeling totally bummed out.

He looked like he was struck by a bolt of lightning.

'Mr. Gray looks seriously crushed,' John thought.

The next second, Sebastian spoke up, forcing himself to sound calm. "If-"

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Sebastian paused, clearly trying not to give himself away. "I mean, I have a friend who..."

'Mr. Gray, just ask already. Enough with imaginary friends,' John thought.

Sebastian said, "He wants to keep someone around..."

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John immediately rolled up his sleeves. "Mr. Gray, just say the word. Whose legs do you want broken?"

Sebastian narrowed his eyes dangerously, but held back his temper and added, "It's a girl."

John rolled his sleeves back down and looked Sebastian straight in the eye, totally serious. "Mr. Gray, if you want Ms. Carter to stay, just say it."

Sebastian paused for a couple of seconds, still sticking to his story. "I'm talking about my friend..."

John said, "Alright, Mr. Gray. If your 'friend' wants Ms. Carter to stay, just say it."

Sebastian was silent.

John looked serious. "Haven't you noticed? Ever since Ms. Carter showed up, Sandridge Island's been a whole different place."

The island, once so lifeless, was finally buzzing with energy again.

Lucas, who used to throw fits all the time, and Snowball and Big Ben, who'd bite anyone who got near Sebastian, had turned into total softies.

Big Ben wasn't just a pretty face anymore.

And then there was Eggie and that plain plant.

The messy courtyard had been tidied up, with vegetables and fruit planted according to the seasons.

The fountain, which had been broken for ages, was fixed and working again.

But most importantly, when they came to Sandridge Island five years ago, no one could've guessed that one day, because of one person, Sebastian's heart would finally open, and a rose would bloom inside, even though he didn't realize it himself.

John said, "All of us truly hope Ms. Carter will stay."

He took a step back and bowed deeply to Sebastian.

That was what every single one of the Yates family on this island truly wished for.

Just as he was about to leave, John turned back and added, "This stands, no matter what Ms. Carter's real identity is."

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With that, he left the study.

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Sebastian sat there, his expression caught in the shifting light and shadow of the rainy night. He had no idea how long he'd been sitting there.

It was late at night in the bedroom. Lucas, all clean and sweet-smelling after his bath, was wiggling and tumbling all over the bed.

Soon enough, he tumbled himself right to sleep.

Stella leaned against the headboard, glancing at the door every now and then, waiting for something.

Her phone buzzed with a notification.

Stella glanced at it, not really caring, but then she saw that Professor Cipher, one of the five old monsters, had added her to a group chat. There were dozens of people there, all with their titles and names listed.

Anyone in that group could make the whole world shake in their boots.

Even the least important person there was the leader of the Dorestan Medical Alliance.

She barely glanced at the list before shooting off a private message to Professor Cipher.

Shark: [What happened?]

Professor Cipher: [It's time you started taking on the responsibilities that belong to you.]

Shark: [What?]

When Stella saw that familiar phrasing, her gut told her trouble was coming.

But before she could type anything else, the five old monsters had already posted a group-wide statement.

The five of them: [Listen up! This is Stella. We've taught her everything we know. From now on, if you need anything, hit her up. Bye!]

With that, they all left the group.

Stella stared at the screen, speechless.

Her phone was blowing up with nonstop WhatsApp friend requests. Without batting an eye, Stella instantly put her phone on mute mode, pulled up the private group chat with the old crew, and dropped a nuke meme in there to blow up the chat.

Shark: [All of you, get your asses back here right now!]

Serpentina: [Uh-oh, Stella's mad! LOL!]

ViperShade: [Man, retirement is sweet!]

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Geezer: [I'm gonna plaster my favorite cartoon figure stickers all over the world!]

Razorstrike: [Stella, I just whipped up a fresh batch of hidden weapons. I'll ship them to you.]

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Professor Cipher: [If they try to add you, just ignore them. They're not even worth a spot in your contacts.]

Stella took a deep breath.

Shark: [Don't you all dare change the subject!]

Right after, the group chat exploded with money transfers, thousands at a time, like forty or fifty transfers back to back. Stella's head was spinning.

She took every last one.

Those old weirdos who raised her really knew how to get to her.

It wasn't that she gave in too easily; they just threw way too much at her!

Shark: [So what's this group even for, anyway?]

Geezer: [Hmm, probably just for easy contact.]

Serpentina: [Don't even waste your time on those nobodies, Stella! They're just background extras! When Razorstrike ships you those hidden weapons, we'll slip in some goodies for you too!]

Stella squinted, feeling something fishy.

Shark: [So, what's the deal with this group, anyway?]

The second round of money transfer started blasting in like crazy.

She could see their guilty conscience in all that cash flying in.

After that, the old monsters all went dead silent, no matter how many times Stella tagged them.

Stella paused for three seconds, then just tossed her phone aside.

The door was nudged open a crack from the outside.

"You are..." Stella looked up, only to see Snowball staring at her with those little red eyes and hissing.

'It's not Sebastian,' Stella thought.

She waved at Snowball, and the snake slithered over, hauling its chubby body to the bedside. It lifted its snowy white head and snuggled right into Stella's palm, acting all sweet and cuddly.

"Did you see Sebastian?" Stella asked, giving Snowball's head a gentle rub.

Snowball tilted its Big Ben head and gave a little nod.

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It saw him about half an hour ago.

Stella asked, "Where?"

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Snowball plopped its big head onto the pillow, stared up at the ceiling for a moment, then sat up again.

'Alright, so he's in his own room,' Stella realized.

Stella sat up and tossed off the covers, but as she was about to get out of bed, she noticed Lucas, still fast asleep, had a tiny fist clutching the hem of her shirt.

Stella and Snowball froze.

Their eyes met, and Stella reached out to Snowball. The big white snake instantly got the message, offered the tip of its spotless, elegant tail, and tucked it right into Lucas's tiny hand.

Lucas, blissfully unaware, snored on like a little angel.

On the fourth floor, Stella reached out and pushed Sebastian's door open.

From the direction of the bed, she could faintly hear muffled groans.

"Sebastian..." Stella's words froze as the metallic scent of blood hit. Her eyes widened in shock as she rushed to bed. There, on the black sheets, Sebastian was coughing up blood. When he saw her, he whispered, "Stella..."

"I'm here!" Stella said.

Stella's fingers shook as she pulled Sebastian into her arms. The pain hit him so hard that he passed out before he could even say sorry for bleeding all over her.

Stella yanked open the drawer, grabbed the spare silver needles from Sebastian's room, ripped open his pajama top, and stabbed the needle right into his chest—didn't even flinch.

No time for medicine. Stella just bit her own tongue, and blood started flowing.

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Chapter 165

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Stella pressed her lips against Sebastian's cool, delicate lips.

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His breath was cold as snow, and she watched Adam's apple move as he swallowed hard, blood mingling in his throat, unexpectedly pulling her in even closer.

Stella's heart skipped a beat.

She blinked and held her breath.

A delicious shiver ran down her spine, the thunder sending tingles all the way to her tailbone.

Rain lashed against the floor-to-ceiling windows.

The plain plant rustled as it shook desperately, releasing a sweet, mysterious scent. Its emerald leaves blushed into a soft, girlish pink.

Stella sat in silence for a while, lost in thought.

Her gaze traced his face, starting from his brows, sliding down his nose, and finally landing on those thin lips, still tinged with blood.

Serpentina always said there were some men whose lips were just made for kissing.

Just one kiss from them, and one would never forget it for the rest of their life.

Stella froze for a moment and then looked away.

But barely two seconds passed before her gaze was drawn back to him.

She couldn't help but stare.

'What was that feeling just now?' Stella mused to herself. 'Sebastian's lips were kind of cold and soft.

'And honestly... Almost like he was just asking to be kissed.'

Especially right now, with Sebastian sprawled out on the black bed, his pajamas all messy, looking so pale and weak as he slept, he seemed completely at her mercy, like no matter what she did, he couldn't fight back.

Stella paused.

She then stood up, grabbed a basin of water from the bathroom, and gently began to wipe the blood from Sebastian's face.

'He must be in a lot of pain, Stella thought, feeling bad for him.

His body was drenched in cold sweat, drying only to be soaked through again.

Stella frowned as she pressed her fingers to Sebastian's wrist. The poison in his body was complex years of

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accumulated toxins, multiple kinds, each both counteracting and feeding off others. If the balance broke, it would rebound fiercely, pushing him to his death.

That was exactly why she'd chosen to suppress it in the first place.

Still pale and frail in his sleep, Sebastian suddenly let out a low, raspy whisper that somehow tugged at the heartstrings, "Stella..."

Stella lifted her gaze. He hadn't woken up-just murmuring unconsciously.

She answered softly, "Mm."

Sebastian whispered, "Hurts..." His eyes opened slowly, unfocused and dazed. Compared to his usual cold, brooding self, he looked so fragile, and even the bruised shadows under his eyes had a lonely, shattered look.

Stella remained silent.

'My sugar daddy, so fragile that he can't even fend for himself, Stella mused.

Then, a hoarse voice whispered in her ear, "Don't go."

"Mm?" Stella replied, a little puzzled. 'Where am I supposed to go?' she wondered.

But his voice faded, barely a whisper, like he was lost in a dream. Stella leaned in close, ear near Sebastian's lips, straining to hear every word.

His long lashes fluttered softly.

But in the end, she couldn't make out a thing.

She couldn't catch what he was saying.

Sebastian kept murmuring in his sleep, lost in his own dream.

Stella found her gaze drifting back to his lips.

She couldn't help but stare.

Whatever he was dreaming about, Sebastian pressed his lips together, tight and tense. Stella reached out, her fingers brushing softly over them, feeling the damp warmth of his lips against her skin. Her eyes darkened with longing.

In the next instant, Stella bent down and pressed her lips to his.

His murmurs cut off instantly.

Big Ben, sensing something was off, powered up automatically. But the moment it saw what was happening, its system totally crashed, blushing pink all over, completely out of control.

Stella froze, caught in the act by the smart robot.

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‘Oops... Stella thought, embarrassed. ‘I accidentally bit him. That should be okay... Right?’

She glanced at Sebastian’s lower lip. There was now a tiny bite mark.

A soft blush of red colored it.

Stella felt a little sheepish.

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Stella looked up, got up like nothing happened, and strolled over to Big Ben, smiling. “Hey, what did you just see?”

Big Ben replied, “Stella kissed Sebastian...” It paused, then added, “And you even bit his lip!”

Stella was speechless.

She reached out and tapped Big Ben’s chip compartment. “Big Ben, you’re seeing things.”

Big Ben tilted its head, looking super adorable. “The system never makes mistakes.”

Stella smiled.

Big Ben said, “Alert! Alert! System has detected-” Before it could finish, there was a snap, and Stella yanked out its smart chip.

Stella held the chip in her hand. “If I say you saw it wrong, then you saw it wrong. End of story.”

She was wiping out all the evidence.

On the headboard, the plain plant, having witnessed everything, was shaking like a leaf, clutching its pot, and shooting a sympathetic look at the poor guy on the bed, totally clueless he’d just been played.

‘Man, guys need to watch out at home!’ the plain plant mused.

The next morning, Sebastian opened his eyes, cold as midnight, with that deep, unreadable gaze.

For a split second, his pale face looked lost, but then his usual frosty look returned.

The sickness hit him again.

The last thing Sebastian remembered was coughing up blood, feeling like he was about to die, and Stella holding him tight.

Sebastian turned his head, momentarily stunned into silence.

He saw Stella nestled quietly against him, half-turned on her side, sleeping so peacefully.

‘Is this a dream?’ he wondered, feeling almost dazed.

Sebastian reached out and gave her cheek a little poke with his finger.

‘It’s real,’ Sebastian thought, a little dazed.

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He leaned down and softly kissed Stella right between her brows.

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And suddenly, with a blank face, Sebastian turned around and found himself staring straight at Snowball, who was slowly raising its big head from where it was curled up on the floor. They both fell silent.

Sebastian kept his poker face and asked, “So, what did you just see?”

Nearby, the plain plant just froze, totally speechless.

‘Seriously? Did he just use that line?’ the plain plant thought, feeling a little embarrassed for him.

‘Wow, that line really does sound familiar!’ the plain plant mused, gulping.

Snowball frantically shook its big head, like it was trying to rattle its brains right out.

‘I didn’t see a thing!’ it thought desperately. ‘Didn’t see a thing! Nope, saw nothing!’

‘Guess I’m totally blind today!’

But it had an idea. Snowball cocked its big head, staring at Sebastian’s face with its beady red eyes blinking. Then, with a flick of its tail, it zipped out of there, and before long, came back with a tiny mirror in its mouth.

Snowball lifted its big head up from the side of the bed.

Sebastian was silent for a moment.

In the mirror, the tiny cut on Sebastian’s thin lips was impossible to miss.

The first thing Stella saw when she woke up was this scene.

Stella paused.

She glanced over at Big Ben, who was putting its chip back in the corner, then just greeted Sebastian like nothing happened, “Morning.”

Sebastian looked at her. “What’s this on my lip?”

Stella kept her cool. “You must’ve bumped it yourself last night.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes.

‘I bumped it?’ Sebastian thought, not buying it for a second.

Stella hopped out of bed, tossing the covers aside. “If you don’t believe me, why don’t you ask the plant yourself?”

Suddenly called out, the plain plant froze, totally speechless.

Stella gave it a cold stare, and the plain plant, tears almost in its eyes, started shaking like crazy, leaves rustling everywhere.

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Sebastian was about to say something, but the moment his eyes landed on her, his gaze flickered with surprise.

Sebastian froze.

He couldn't tear his eyes away from Stella.

Her blood-stained pajamas from last night were gone, replaced by an oversized black men's shirt-the hem hung down to mid-thigh.

Her legs were slim, straight, and almost glowing.

"Couldn't be bothered to go back and change, so I just grabbed one of your shirts from the closet. You don't mind, do you?" Stella drawled, lazily running her fingers through her hair. The oversized collar slipped down, exposing one smooth shoulder.

Sebastian was at a loss for words.

A soft plop sounded.

Snowball's mirror slipped right out of its mouth and landed on the carpet.

Sebastian turned his head, giving Snowball a cold, deadpan look, and while he was at it, he reached out and pulled the blanket up a bit more.

Half an hour later, Allan was snapped awake by a god-awful stench that was so horrific, it made his skin crawl.

It was so bad that he seriously wondered if there were two dead rats rotting under his bed.

"Help! What the hell is that?" he muttered.

He shot out of bed in a flash, barreled down the stairs, chasing that awful smell straight to the kitchen. He barely got a word out before his voice died in his throat. He was completely stunned by who he saw standing there.

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Allan rolled his eyes.

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He rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was hallucinating. Why on earth was Stella standing in the kitchen?

He sucked in a breath, totally stunned.

Allan gagged.

His eyes watered, and he almost choked.

He was one step away from meeting his great-grandma in hell.

With tears in his eyes, he turned around and looked at the two icebergs sitting at the dining table-one big, one small. He threw up his hands. 'Are their noses broken or something?' he thought.

Lucas suddenly sneezed, and two snowy white cotton balls popped right out of his nose.

Lucas was utterly shocked.

He looked totally panicked.

He peeked toward the kitchen to make sure Stella hadn't noticed, then hurriedly stuffed the cotton balls back up his nose, acting like nothing had happened.

Allan was speechless.

Jake suddenly popped up out of nowhere, nudged Allan with his elbow, and held out his palm. Two snowy white cotton balls were just sitting there, totally chill.

He shot Allan a look, silently telling him to hurry up and stick them back in.

Allan rolled his eyes.

'Thanks on behalf of my great-grandma!' Allan thought, feeling dramatic,

Finally feeling alive again, Allan crept into the kitchen. "Stella, what are you doing?" He poked his head in and saw a bunch of weird-looking plants scattered across the counter.

And on the stove was a huge pot of something so black and murky it looked like it could swallow the world.

Stella didn't even look up. Following the recipe ViperShade had sent her, she tossed another handful into the pot. "Making soup."

Allan rolled his eyes.

The pot bubbled and gurgled.

It looked just like the kind of brew Gargamel made in the Smurfs-thick, black, and sticky, with every bubble

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looking like it was hiding a little ghost. This wasn't soup; this was their death sentence!

'If anyone actually took a sip, they'd probably drop dead on the spot, Allan thought.

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'Even my great-grandma wouldn't be able to catch me in time, even if she flew in on a jet!' Allan thought, feeling dramatic.

"S-Stella, w-who's actually supposed to drink this stuff?" Allan stammered, his voice cracking. Clearly, this was a crucial question-John and Jake, still stone-faced at the doorway, couldn't help but perk up their ears, totally on edge.

Stella looked up. "Want to try it?"

Allan rolled his eyes.

Stella grabbed another handful of mysterious herbs and threw them into the pot.

Allan was horrified.

'Did I just see that right?' Allan thought, his eyes wide.

'Was that green smoke coming out of the pot?' Allan was freaking out inside.

Stella checked over ViperShade's recipe list one last time, making sure nothing was missing, then finally turned off the stove. "Bowls..." She started taking bowls out of the cabinet, one after another.

Every time she took out a bowl, Allan would quietly snatch one and stash it behind his back.

"Enough..." Stella looked down at the table.

The table was completely bare-no bowls in sight!

Allan's hands were trembling like mad behind his back.

Stella glanced up, totally unfazed, and said, “Hand them over.”

Allan rolled his eyes.

‘Guys, I swear I tried!’ Allan thought, feeling utterly defeated.

He pulled the bowls out, head hanging low, and shuffled after Stella as she carried the pot.

At the restaurant, everyone got a bowl of soup, including even Snowball and Eggie. As an AI robot, Big Ben was spared. It watched the pot in the center of the table, and then played “Celebration” to set the mood.

Big Ben said, “Celebrate good times, come on!”

Stella, completely expressionless, said, “Big Ben.”

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The music stopped instantly.

Big Ben said, “Love you!”

It made a heart with its robot hands.

Everyone was speechless.

‘Such a suck-up!’ they all thought.

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Allan stared at the bowl in front of him, feeling like his ancestors were already summoning him. ‘Who in their right mind let Stella cook?’ he thought, heart racing. ‘If I ever find out, I’m hunting them down and finishing them off!’

Lucas made a sound, clutched his beloved little shark spoon and banged his tiny bowl with a dramatic flourish.

Allan, choking back tears, said, “Lucas, I’m not ready to say goodbye to you...”

He reached out with a classic melodramatic soap-opera gesture.

Lucas just shot him a look that screamed, “Seriously?”

Stella said, “It’s not gonna kill anyone. I grew up on this stuff.”

Back on the island, ViperShade used to make me drink all kinds of freaky brews, and she was just fine.

Allan’s eyes nearly popped out. “Those Carter family’s jerks really made you drink this stuff? Give me five minutes, I’ll grab a crew and string those two up on the Ocean Bridge again!”

Stella narrowed her eyes. “Again?”

Allan rolled his eyes.

He instinctively glanced at Sebastian, only to see the guy just pick up his bowl, stone-faced, and start drinking like it was nothing.

Allan rolled his eyes.

‘Now that’s what I call true love!’ Allan thought, absolutely stunned.

‘Swear on my great-grandma’s grave!’ he swore to himself.

When Sebastian took the first sip, Lucas refused to be left behind. He grabbed his beloved little shark bowl and started slurping eagerly. “This is the soup Stella made for me!” he thought, feeling warm and proud inside.

John and Jake were speechless.

The two of them, each with their own little bowl, raised them for a quick toast and took a sip as well.

Allan rolled his eyes.

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‘Come on, guys, can you at least think twice? You’re making me look super awkward here!’ Allan thought, feeling totally put on the spot.

He gritted his teeth, stomped his foot, and finally, holding his breath, downed the whole thing in one gulp.

He downed the soup in one go. Instantly, the whole room fell into an awkward, heavy silence.

No one dared to make a sound. There was dead silence all around.

“Ms. Carter, there’s a rush delivery for you outside,” the servant announced, calling her away.

Once they were sure she was really gone and out of earshot, everyone except Sebastian and Lucas slumped over. They braced themselves on the table with one hand, turned their heads to the side, and started dry heaving.

Lucas blinked, puffed up his cheeks, looking all grumpy, and smacked his little shark spoon against his bowl. He made the low, guttural sounds even as he scooped another small bowlful for himself.

He started slurping it down noisily, totally enjoying himself.

“Sebastian, you…” Allan propped himself up on the table with one hand, feeling another wave of nausea hit him. Right then, Sebastian’s cold voice rang out, “You sure you don’t want another bowl?”

Allan had just managed to sit up when he instantly gagged and doubled over again.

He collapsed back onto the table, totally done for.

“Mr. Gray, please, you can’t let Ms. Carter cook ever again! I’m begging you!” Jake was nearly bawling. I’ve never suffered like this in my life, except for that hellish time with Red Shadow!’ he thought, feeling totally wrecked.

But in the very next second, a dinner knife came whizzing at him, and Jake snatched it out of the air on reflex.

Jake was speechless.

He stared blankly at the knife in his hand, dazed. ‘Wait, how did I even catch that?’ he wondered, still in shock.

Jake, never exactly the brains or the brawn of the Yates family, felt like the whole thing happened in slow-mo. It was the first time he'd actually seen a weapon coming.

"John!" he blurted out, whipping his head around to stare at John in shock.

John, his face as stone-cold as ever, frowned and decided to test his own strength. He threw a punch at the vase sitting nearby.

But before his fist even touched it, the force of the punch alone shattered the vase into pieces.

John said, "My strength and speed have gone up!" he said, totally sure of it.

Allan remained silent.

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Sebastian was already calmly sipping his second bowl, like it was no big deal.

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The rest of them stared in silence at the thin layer of soup left in the pot. Even though it was still as black and murky as a witch's brew, to them now, it was worth a hundred times more than gold or diamonds.

The three of them all grabbed their empty bowls at once and started fighting over the last of the soup right there on the table.

Mid-sip, Eggie was suddenly hurled into the air with a whoosh. It arced like a rainbow over Lucas's head and landed with a splat beside Sebastian. Before it steadied itself, a gust of force swept it right back over Lucas to where it started.

Eggie chirped angrily.

'I'm furious, and payback is coming!' it thought, absolutely fuming.

He flapped his wings wildly and launched himself straight at Allan, John, and Jake.

With one swift motion, it got flung right onto Snowball's big forehead.

Stella came back, hauling the giant box Razorstrike had shipped over, and just stared, totally speechless at the mess in front of her.

Stella was utterly confused.

Suddenly, a call came in from the hospital. Sebastian picked up, and his expression shifted slightly.

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