

# Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

## Chapter 21

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After a while, Stella rested her chin in her hand, her expression thoughtful. “No,” she said finally. “Not really.”

She suddenly glanced up at one of the villa windows, her eyes narrowing slightly as if she had felt someone watching her.

Lucas wrote something on his board and held it up. It read, [Uncle Sebastian is grumpy, but he’s nice.]

Beside the words, he’d drawn a grumpy little cartoon character that looked just like Sebastian.

Lucas even acted it out, clawing the air with a soft growl.

The sight made Stella laugh.

His earnest defense of Sebastian was so sweet that for a moment, Stella wanted to hug him and never let go.

“Lucas,” she asked softly, “why don’t you speak?”

He clearly understood her and could write well enough. She saw no physical reason he couldn’t talk. That left only one likely explanation.

[Don’t want to,] he wrote, adding a sad little face.

At that, his small face paled, and his shoulders slumped.

Sensing his mood, Snowball lifted its large head onto the table and coiled itself into a loose bow, nudging Lucas gently. Its practiced gesture tugged at Stella's heart.

Snowball was a sweetheart, but the giant bow it had tied itself into was a true disaster.

Lucas, hugging Snowball, soon dissolved into happy giggles.

Watching them, Stella allowed herself a small smile. She slid the last two components into her laptop and pressed the power

button.

The sleek, custom-built machine came to life instantly, its screen brightening in just a few seconds.

Her slender fingers moved over the keyboard, and moments later, the official forum for Nova Legends filled the screen.

The video was already there, of course. The comment thread beneath it was exploding.

[Classic simp behavior. Zero reward.]

[Starfall, check your DMs. I've got a deal for you.]

[Official reminder! Arrogant Wind & Hazelight's wedding is tonight, 8 PM, Destiny Isle.]

[This is a new low.]

Stella scrolled through the reactions with detached amusement. A faint, proud smile touched her lips, the kind that belonged to someone who lived by her own rules and looked stunning doing it.

She created a new account. The cursor blinked in the empty username field. Without hesitation, she typed in the name RealStarfall.

[Destiny Isle, 8 PM tonight. Come watch a certain couple get what's coming to them.] At the end, she left her in-game name "RealStarfall" for all to see.

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After typing the last word, she hit enter.

The game's online forum erupted instantly.

[No way! It's actually her. The real Starfall is back and she's not messing around.]

[How dare you show up again, Starfall? Our Lunar Guild isn't just for show.]

[Our Lunar Guild... Seriously? This is so dramatic! I'm dying over here.]

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Having gotten the reaction she wanted, Stella didn't bother reading further. Closing the forum page, she glanced at her game download, still only 39% done.

Almost on autopilot, she opened a new browser window.

A familiar black-and-white banking interface appeared on her screen. It was the website for Dorestan Bank.

It was the world's most discreet private bank, renowned for its impenetrable security.

The bank had earned its reputation years earlier, after a team of top hackers spent an entire week trying to breach its system. The attempt failed, and every hacker involved was traced, arrested, and jailed.

The Dorestan Bank and Dorestan Exchange were both private entities, headquartered in Dorestan and employing hundreds of thousands worldwide.

It was commonly believed that the figures behind them wielded control over close to sixty percent of the world's wealth.

Stella stared coldly at the login screen, her fingers tapping the keys with unconscious precision.

The password was accepted, and the page loaded immediately.

Stella fell into a brief, stunned silence as the information on the screen came into view.

She was looking at a private account registered under the codename "Shark." The balance displayed a figure so large that it took her a moment to comprehend. The sum of money in it was staggering, well into the trillions.

The sudden, sharp beep of her custom security alarm cut through the silence, Her eyebrows lifted in recognition, and a fierce, competitive heat that had been lying dormant inside her suddenly sparked to life.

Her fingers became a blur across the keyboard, the screen erupting into a dizzying waterfall of code.

A stark, black chat window materialized on her screen with a simple question written in a foreign language. [Who are you?]

A wild grin touched Stella's lips as she typed a two-word reply in a matching foreign language. [Your Daddy.] The simple reply made the other end fall silent.

A single name finally appeared in return. [You're Shark.]

It was the second time she'd seen that name today. A slow, defiant smile spread across her face as her hands stilled.

The messages switched to Clusian, flooding in nonstop.

[So you are alive. Why haven't you contacted us?]

[Why is your IP in Clusia?]

[Talk to me, damn it!]

\*\* Stella rested her chin in her palm feeling the other person's anger even through the screen. Her striking features remained

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cool and clear as she let out a soft, amused laugh.

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The words meant nothing to her, but the furious tone was unmistakable. She decided to answer anyway. [Five seconds,] she typed back, as a kind of warning.

[What? Oh, shit. A virus!] came the instant, panicked reply.

The countdown ended, and the connection was terminated.

A satisfied, slightly wicked smile curved Stella's lips. With the quiet pleasure of a successful hunt in her eyes, she gave a final little wave to her screen and dismissed the whole episode.

With the game now launching, Stella leaned back in her chair and stretched, waiting for it to load.

Her eyes drifted toward the garden, where Snowball was draped over a low tree branch, basking in the late sun. She caught it mid-yawn, its jaws stretched wide.

Snowball seemed almost embarrassed to be caught.

It shifted slightly, uncoiling just enough to show Lucas curled asleep against its side.

Lucas's thumb was tucked in his mouth, and he gave a soft, sleepy suck now and then.

He snuggled his soft little face against Snowball's large head, the picture of innocent sweetness.

Patches of sunlight fell through the canopy of leaves. Stella raised a hand against the gentle glare, savoring a moment of simple peace she hadn't experienced in a long time.

After dinner, as night fell, Allan insisted on taking Lucas out for a walk with Snowball.

"Mr. Gray, could I use your study?" Stella asked. There was a low, restless energy in her voice, a clear sign she was preparing for the night's virtual confrontation.

Sebastian's expression remained impassive as he replied, "Follow me."

They stepped into the private elevator, one after the other.

Holding her laptop, Stella soon realized the elevator was not stopping at the floor for the study.

It continued upward, straight to the loft at the very top of the villa.

When the elevator doors slid open, the smart lights turned on automatically, revealing a dedicated esports lounge.

The room was decorated in a sleek, high-end black-and-white scheme that spoke of its owner's refined but modern taste.

Several top-of-the-line gaming PCs were arranged around the room, each paired with sleek, custom-made black mechanical keyboards.

"Take your pick," Sebastian offered.

For a moment, Stella just stared. The combined value of the setups in front of her was astronomical.

She moved to the nearest station and pressed the power button. The system awoke in a heartbeat.

A slow, roguish smile spread across her face, and her eyes glinted with untamed delight.

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Sebastian's wheelchair stopped by the island desk, and he poured himself a glass of red wine. His black shirt was unbuttoned at the collar, sleeves shoved to his elbows. With the light behind him, his striking features were cast in shadow, making his expression unreadable.

"Mr. Gray, you're not leaving?" Stella spun her gaming chair to face him, a playful smirk on her lips. Her legs stretched out, long and slender.

Sebastian took a sip, his Adam's apple moving as he swallowed. "Just play your game. Don't worry about me." His voice was deep and icy as always, his tone was impossible to read, and he radiated a powerful, intimidating presence.

Stella just shrugged and turned back, launching Nova Legends on her desktop.

[System: Hello, player. The server is currently at maximum capacity. Please wait patiently. Your queue number is 892, and your estimated wait time is 40 minutes.]

Stella stared and was totally speechless.

‘A server crash? It’s only 7:30, she thought.

She had no clue that, after all the hype on short video platforms and her own provocative forum reply earlier, a tidal wave of new accounts and streamers had flooded the login queues since 4 PM.

Everyone was waiting for 8 PM to see how the fangirl drama, which had blown up the Internet, would end.

Stella drummed her fingers on the desk, impatience and chill written all over her face.

“Mr. Gray,” she said without looking back, the screen’s glow making her eyes look wild, “don’t tell anyone.” As she spoke, her fingers were a blur on the keys, moving so fast that it was almost unreal.

The instant she hit the spacebar, the huge monitor went pitch black. Then, lines of code zipped by in a flash. Two seconds later, Starfall was in the game—no waiting, no queue.

Sebastian watched her quietly, his pale face giving nothing away. Only after she was in did he silently power up another rig. With her back to him, Stella didn’t notice a thing.

Starfall appeared in her basic starter gear, right where she’d logged off last time. The server instantly exploded.

Someone shouted: [Starfall just logged in! Everyone, she’s here.]

Every streaming channel went berserk, messages scrolling too fast to read.

Firework, a Lunar Guild member, spoke: [Starfall, you really had the guts to show up? 500 gold coins as a bounty for anyone who drops her coordinates. Our guild is gonna hunt you down every time you show your face, Starfall.]

Stella stood perfectly still, checking her inventory. As expected, it was totally empty. A slow, dangerous smile curved her lips.

Starfall used to be ranked tenth across the server, but after the account got hacked, it was wiped clean and back to square one. In anyone else's hands, it was basically trash now, but Stella wasn't anyone else.

She fired the bounty right back: [5,000 gold bounty for Firework's coordinates,]

Meanwhile, Arrogant Wind and Hazelight's lavish wedding was still being prepared. Server-wide fireworks cost 200 dollars each, and from 7:30 until the ceremony ended, almost 30 thousand would be spent.

That wasn't all. Anyone who sent their blessings would receive 666 gold coins from Arrogant Wind.

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[Arrogant Wind: Today, anyone who dares disrupt my wedding with Hazelight will be hunted server-wide, 20,000 gold bounty, kill on sight.]

The exclusive text flash effect for the server's second-ranked player lit up the screen, the warning clearly aimed at Stella.

[Hazelight: My dear sister, I really don't want you to make a fool of yourself anymore.]

[Hazelight: Just go home. Mom and Dad are looking for you. Stop hanging out with those unsavory people.]

Her words reeked of fake sweetness. Then the world chat buzzed with speculation.

[Wait, what? Starfall is Hazelight's sister in real life?]

[Yep. She ran away from home after the failed love confession. And she just got expelled from school for mixing with her deadbeat crew and skipping class all the time.]

The whole server went nuts. Nobody expected things to go down like this.

Stella smirked lazily at her screen, but her eyes were deep and unreadable. It was obvious she was in deep trouble.

Just as the world chat was going wild, a system announcement silenced everyone.

[System: The winds and moons keep their promises, and the dawn frost bites. Nova Legends, unite. The number one player, Moondust, has returned.]

A special effect even flashier than Arrogant Wind's lit up every server in Nova Legends, announcing Moondust's return.

Moondust, the number one player, ID 00001, who was gone for seven years, was back.

The world chat went dead silent for a full five seconds. Meanwhile, streamers were already screaming their heads off in their channels, totally losing it.

Moondust was the timeless legend of Nova Legends. No matter how flashy Arrogant Wind tried to be, he was nothing but a wannabe compared to the real deal.

Moondust was also the only player in the entire game with a mythical cross-server mount. It was a white phoenix that everyone had dreamed of and hadn't been seen in seven years.

Now, that phoenix was soaring high above Nova Legends with its master. Its cry echoed across the map.

[I finally got to see the legend Moondust live in-game. He's insanely cool.]

[Man, it's been five years. Five whole years! Finally, the number one player is back online.]

[I wish Moondust could marry me. Oh my! It's really him. Why is he even here? Did he come for Arrogant Wind and Hazelight's wedding?]

The moment that last comment hit the chat, Hazel couldn't sit still. Her eyes were locked on the screen where Moondust was riding his white phoenix.

The "No. 1 Player" badge floated above his head, and his gear was pure endgame, glowing with that icy, untouchable aura.

With the top player back, number two didn't even matter anymore.

Hazel's heart was racing, and her mind started spinning. Today, all eyes in Nova Legends are on my wedding with Arrogant Wind. I've already asked him, and he swore he didn't know Moondust at all.

'So now, Moondust's focus is only on me. Is he really here for me?'

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The number one legend showed up after seven years just to snatch her right out of number two's hands. Just thinking about it made Hazel's blood run wild with excitement.

Hazel wasn't the only one thinking that. The Lunar Guild members were sending Hazelight messages, all asking if she actually knew Moondust, and whether or not he'd come back just for her.

The more people asked, the more sure Hazel was that Moondust, the number one legend on the server, had returned for her.

Through her screen, Stella stared at the huge white phoenix circling overhead. She had no idea who Moondust was, and honestly, she didn't get why everyone else was losing their minds. None of this drama mattered to her at all, though.

But suddenly, Moondust, perched atop his legendary white phoenix, reached out his hand.

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Hazel's heart nearly leapt out of her chest. Without a second thought, she had Hazelight stride boldly forward, reaching out to Moondust, completely ignoring the fact that she was still decked out in the game's top-tier wedding dress.

[Arrogant Wind: Hazelight, what are you doing?]

Before he could say more, Moondust made the white phoenix fly right over Hazelight, not even sparing her a glance. His hand finally came to a halt in front of someone nobody expected.

Stella raised an eyebrow at the hand reaching out to her. 'Did he get the wrong person?' she wondered.

She nudged Starfall to the side with her keyboard, but the hand followed, still hovering right in front of her.

Moondust was showing everyone online, loud and clear, that he hadn't made a mistake. After seven years away, he was back for Starfall, and only her. The world chat went dead silent in the sheer drama of it.

[Moondust: Starfall, get on.]

Even through the screen, everyone could feel the chill in those words.

Anyone still clinging to hope was left stunned. It was common knowledge that Moondust's white phoenix never let anyone else ride with him.

"Stella!" Hazel screamed at her monitor, face flushed with humiliation. She could feel the laughter from the entire server. Stella had just stolen all her spotlight..

The glow from the screen lit up the mischievous smirk on Stella's lips. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, the faint blue veins on the back of her hand visible.

'So the server's number one player, Moondust, is here to back me up? Now that's interesting, Stella thought.

A question from the Lunar Guild suddenly popped up in the world chat.

[Moondust, aren't you here for Hazelight?]

Hazel didn't say a word, but she was practically holding her breath, waiting for an answer. She just couldn't believe Moondust would possibly pick Stella over someone as gorgeous as her.

[Moondust: Ridiculous.]

It was just one word, but it was more insulting than saying he didn't even know her.

The one asking him replied: [So what if you're a legend? Does that mean you get to put people down?]

Classic pretentious girl routine. She was acting all righteous, but Stella could tell that she just wanted Moondust to notice her.

The next second, Starfall, who hadn't moved an inch, reached out and grabbed Moondust's hand. In one slick motion, she was already sitting atop the one and only white phoenix in all of Nova Legends.

The phoenix screeched, its silvery glow wrapping around its entire body. As it soared back into the sky, scattering ethereal light particles over Destiny Isle. Moondust's frosty elegance made Arrogant Wind's expensive, gaudy decorations look cheap and pathetic.

The world chat blew up with old-timers who'd been here since day one.

[No way! Not even in my wildest dreams did I think I'd see this happen.]

[Who even is the Lunar Guild? Still trying to clout-chase the top dog, huh?]

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[Ever wonder why Moondust's ID is 00001? Rumor has it that he's one of the three founders of Nova Group.]

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The newbies freaked out. Maybe they didn't know Moondust, but everyone knew Nova Group. That was basically its own country.

[For real, is nobody gonna talk about how Moondust just came back after seven years just for Starfall and is totally embarrassing Arrogant Wind and Hazelight right now?]

[Seriously, after meeting a legend like Moondust, who'd ever bother with Arrogant Wind?]

While the world chat was going absolutely wild, the ones at the center of the drama had already landed gracefully on Destiny Isle, standing face-to-face with Arrogant Wind and Hazelight, both still decked out in their flashy wedding gear.

Meanwhile, up in the villa's gaming room, Stella's phone was getting spammed with calls. Every single one was from Hazel, who was clearly furious.

Stella didn't even glance at her phone. She hung up with the kind of lazy indifference that was her trademark.

Suddenly, a blood-red system announcement blazed across the sky above Destiny Isle.

[System: A vow of vengeance. Starfall challenged Arrogant Wind to a forced duel. Will Arrogant Wind accept or decline?]

The world chat went silent again. Starfall, still in her plain white starter gear, actually had the nerve to challenge Arrogant Wind, the server's number two. Almost everyone thought she had lost her mind.

In a forced duel, the loser faced brutal penalties: lost levels, random loss of top gear, and a red name for a whole week. The last one was basically open season for anyone on the server to come after the loser,

Starfall, with her trashed account, is going up against Arrogant Wind, the server's number two? It was just asking for trouble in everyone's eyes.

Stella typed in a cold, lazy manner. [Starfall: Arrogant Wind, you and Hazelight had the nerve to get someone to hack my account, but now you're chickening out?]

[Arrogant Wind: Starfall, today's my big day. I don't want any bloodshed.]

Arrogant Wind was every bit as cocky as his name suggested, his words full of disdain for Starfall, like dueling a starter account was just beneath him.

[System: Warning! Moondust, the server's number one, is about to trigger the annihilation mode. Everyone in the area will be forced into red name PvP mode. Get ready for chaos, Nova Legends players.]

Every top-ranked player on the server turned pale. They were just here for the hype, hoping to catch some wedding drama. They never expected to get dragged into this disaster.

[Hey, I'm new here. Can someone explain what annihilation mode is?]

[Uh, newbie here, too. Can someone fill me in?]

[Basically, everyone on the server gets thrown into red name PvP combat. Doesn't matter your level or gear. The top player can trigger it once a year, and when they do, it's pure carnage every single time.]

[I'm scared. Can I log out?]

[Sure, give it a shot.]

Yeah, no, that wasn't happening.

[Moondust: Arrogant Wind, either you accept Starfall's challenge, or I trigger the annihilation mode. Pick one.]

His words were icy and merciless, putting Arrogant Wind right on the spot with no way out.

Stella sat at her computer, eyes half-lidded as she lazily tapped her fingers on the desk. 'Moondust is ruthless, she thought

[Arrogant Wind, if you're a real man, quit stalling and take the challenge. Don't get the rest of us caught up in your drama.]

[Arrogant Wind, stop acting like a coward and show yourself.]

Everyone had that instinct to side with the top dog, so nobody dared call out Moondust for wanting to activate the annihilation mode. All the hate got dumped on Arrogant Wind instead.

Live streams of Nova Legends were smashing viewership records across every gaming platform. Hashtags like [Nova Legends], [Starfall and Moondust], and [Number One Player] started trending.

[Arrogant Wind: You asked for this.]

[System: Arrogant Wind has accepted Starfall's forced duel challenge.]

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[Starfall: Arrogant Wind, trust me, this is the dumbest move you'll ever make.]

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Stella lazily typed, her words cold and ruthless. Her arrogance practically jumped off the screen, making everyone feel the chill.

[Arrogant Wind: Moondust, if Starfall loses, I want your white phoenix, and you must delete your account for good.]

Arrogant Wind's eyes flashed with malice. He was used to throwing cash around, and he'd always had it out for Moondust, the top player he'd only ever heard about yet never seen.

He thought, I paid someone to wreck Starfall's account. A trash account like that? Not even worth worrying about now. But if I can use this chance to finally get rid of Moondust, that annoying guy, I'll be the real winner here.'

[Moondust: Deal.]

Still a single word, and everyone could feel the cold, aloof pride coming through the screen.

[Damn, what's really up between Moondust and Starfall? Why did he just agree?]

[Wow, this is blowing up on Twitter!]

[Hazelight's probably raging so hard that her mouth's crooked. It was supposed to be her wedding, but now everyone's ignoring it.]

That was right. Hazel was fuming. 'Stella actually had the nerve to ignore my calls. That damn bitch!' she thought.

Today was supposed to be her big day, and Stella had ruined everything. 'Why didn't those kidnappers just finish her off? Pathetic losers!' Hazel cursed inwardly.

In the attic, Sebastian swirled his wine glass, a cold smirk curling at his lips. The prayer beads on his wrist clicked softly. His eyes glinted with a blood-tinged chill, barely concealing the dangerous aura simmering beneath.

[Oh no! Starfall's gonna lose for sure. Her account's totally wrecked.]

[Time to bet! I'm all in on Arrogant Wind.]

[Rooting for Starfall, but honestly, my money's on Arrogant Wind.]

With nearly everyone backing Arrogant Wind, there was zero suspense about who'd come out on top.

But then, out of nowhere, Moondust dropped a bombshell: [Moondust: All in.]

Starfall's betting bar, which had been stuck at zero, suddenly started spiking like crazy. Everyone was left speechless. Moondust's bet was so massive that it instantly leveled the odds across the whole server. 'Just how loaded is this guy?' someone wondered.

[Everyone says Arrogant Wind's rich, but compared to Moondust, he's nothing.]

Stella let out a lazy chuckle. 'Moondust's actually kind of interesting,' she thought.

It was soon eight o'clock, the time that was supposed to be Arrogant Wind and Hazelight's grand wedding. Now it was the hour for a forced duel between Arrogant Wind and Starfall.

Tens of millions were watching live across all the major streaming platforms, and even Nova Group's official Twitter account posted a mysterious message.

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[Nova Group: Moondust, we've been waiting for you for seven years.]

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Inside the game, Starfall and Arrogant Wind faced off on the duel platform. Arrogant Wind was wearing gear sparkling with gems, while Starfall was just rocking a basic white starter outfit. Anyone could tell how the duel was going to end.

[Arrogant Wind, hurry up and crush that trash. Hazelight's waiting for you.]

[Just one-shot her!]

[Go for it, Arrogant Wind!]

While the Lunar Guild cheered him up, Arrogant Wind struck a pose with his custom-crafted god-tier weapon. He mused, 'I'll only give Starfall three seconds before crushing her completely.

The whole server was watching, breathless, as the forced duel between Arrogant Wind and Starfall officially began.

At her computer, Stella's smirk faded, her eyes shifting from laid-back to icy cold in a heartbeat.

Her fingers flew across the keyboard at lightning speed. On screen, her character unleashed a killer chain combo. Arrogant Wind didn't even get a chance to react before his health bar dropped by more than half.

What was even scarier was that he couldn't make sense of Starfall's moves at all. In the blink of an eye, he was knocked flat, his screen graying out.

A top-tier weapon dropped, and Starfall nonchalantly pocketed it. Meanwhile, Arrogant Wind got hit with a system demotion, dropping from second place on the server straight down to sixth.

[What the hell just happened?]

[Holy shit! That was insane.]

[No way! That's gotta be hacks. Starfall must've cheated.]

[GM0025637: Dear user, our system has detected no signs of cheating. Have a nice day!]

People were so stunned that they couldn't even type. Even a GM stepped in and confirmed there were no hacks. Starfall actually took down Arrogant Wind with a trash account.

[Arrogant Wind: Again.]

Forced duels used a best-two-out-of-three format, but with every loss, the loser would drop even more gear, and the system would hit them with even nastier penalties.

In the second round, Arrogant Wind was on high alert from the get-go, managing to block a few of Starfall's attacks. But that top-tier weapon he'd just dropped was practically burning his eyes, a painful reminder of his loss.

Stella's fingers flew across the luxury keyboard, moving so fast that they turned into a blur. Arrogant Wind, already frustrated, totally lost his cool.

Stella let out a lazy yawn, and the result of the second round was a no-brainer. Three pieces of top-tier gear dropped to the ground, plus tens of thousands of gold coins and some premium healing items.

[Starfall: Well, nothing special.]

Every word she said oozed lazy arrogance. Meanwhile, everyone who'd bet against her felt their stomachs drop. Thanks to the odds, this round alone was enough to clean them out.

[Arrogant Wind: Again!]

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He'd already fallen out of the top ten. The Lunar Guild's cheers had died, and even the other onlookers were so blown away by the insane comeback that the chat basically froze.

A trash account versus one full of top-tier gear... Everyone thought it was a guaranteed loss for Starfall. But she flipped the whole match on its head with nothing but sick movement and pro-level plays.

Honestly, there was no need for a third round. Everyone already knew how the duel would end. Three seconds in, Arrogant Wind went down hard.

The world chat was full of speechless and helpless players.

Once the forced duel wrapped up, the system auto-settled all the bets. Everyone except Moondust got totally cleaned out down to their last gold coin. Some folks started crunching numbers, and Moondust's haul was just off the charts.

Arrogant Wind didn't even bother to get up before logging off, leaving Hazelight standing there in her wedding dress, utterly humiliated.

Starfall hopped off the platform and swaggered over to Moondust, her whole vibe radiating pure badass energy.

[Starfall: Wanna get married?]

Behind Stella, the soft clack of Sebastian's prayer beads paused for two seconds and then resumed as usual.

[Moondust: Yes.]

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Stella slouched back in her gaming chair and stretched, her slender arms exposed. She took off her noise-canceling headphones and spun her chair around, frozen when she met Sebastian's gaze.

Sebastian sat where the light and shadows met. His strikingly handsome face was so pale and sickly, yet impossible to look away from. He was half in darkness, as if he belonged there.

His eyes were like bottomless pools, and there was a dangerous, almost predatory aura about him.

Stella blinked in surprise. "Mr. Gray, you're still here?"

Sebastian didn't answer. His long fingers toyed with the black prayer beads on his wrist, the beads clicking softly. The screen in front of him was dark.

"Come here," he said, extending his hand with the prayer beads, palm up, exuding an air of total command.

Stella looked at Sebastian's outstretched hand. For some reason, it felt just like she was back in the game. Without thinking, she placed her hand in his.

Sebastian's large hand slowly closed around hers, his touch still icy cold.

He'd just gotten a message about Gray Manor. "You're coming with me to Gray Manor tomorrow," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument.

It was just a simple sentence, but Stella immediately sensed the darkness in his words, like the stillness before a violent storm. "Mr. Gray, are you angry?" she asked quietly.

Sebastian fell silent again, his gaze cold enough to send chills down someone's spine. Beneath that calm surface, a storm was raging, but the way he held her wrist was still gentle.

Stella's phone rang, shattering the quiet. The caller ID flashed Hazel's name. This time, worried Stella might still ignore her, Hazel even sent a message first.

Something fishy was going on. Stella casually tapped the answer button, not really bothered.

"Stella..." Hazel's voice came through. She was clearly gritting her teeth in anger, but still forced a smile. That only made Stella more curious about what kind of tricks Hazel was up to.

Stella idly played with the black prayer beads on Sebastian's wrist. "Did my blessing meet your expectations?" she asked. The beads, carved with scriptures, encircled his slender wrist with a subtle, almost taboo quality.

Hazel went silent for a couple of seconds. "Stella, there's been a misunderstanding between us. Can we meet tomorrow night?" Her tone was nothing like yesterday's arrogance. This time, she actually sounded a bit meek.

"Sure," Stella replied without hesitation.

Hazel clearly hadn't expected Stella to agree so easily. All the lines she'd prepared in her head went out the window before she could even start.

"See you then," Hazel said, her expression almost twisting in frustration as she forced herself to swallow her anger. But before she could press Stella about Moondust, Stella had already hung up.

Hazel angrily slammed her phone onto the bed. 'Let Stella be cocky for one more day. Tomorrow night, someone will take care of her, she thought. She smirked coldly and then sent a message to Arrogant Wind on WhatsApp.

Hazel: [She agreed. Tomorrow night, it's all on you.]

12:12 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

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As soon as she sent the message, the Lunar Guild's group chat blew up with notifications.

One of the messages said: [Hazelight, go check the forum announcement.]

55 vouchers.

Hazel scrambled to log into the Nova Legends forum, spotting a fresh system announcement pinned right at the top. It was posted just a minute ago.

[Punishment Notice: Arrogant Wind and Hazelight have been found to have abnormal data, using a third-party software to steal account information from Starfall.]

Hazel's mind went blank. Both her account and Arrogant Wind's had just been banned by the system. Gritting her teeth, she, hissed, "Stella!"

\*\*\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Stella said, “If I get into trouble tomorrow, Mr. Gray, you’ll cover for me, right?” Her lashes lowered, hiding the edge in her eyes. Her voice was cool and teasing, the last word trailing off like a hook, daring Sebastian to bite.

Sebastian’s fingers stilled on his beads. He knew full well she was acting like that on purpose, but his eyes grew even darker. “Just don’t go too far.”

“I’ll do my best not to leave any bodies behind,” Stella replied with a cold, mischievous smirk.

Sebastian reached out and tapped her lightly between the brows, his face unreadable. “I’m telling you not to get hurt.”

His gaze was deep and impossible to read, but for a split second, Stella caught a flicker of something she couldn’t name. She instinctively covered her forehead, and, after a moment, nodded.

The door suddenly swung open, and Lucas, fresh from his bath and smelling clean, spotted Stella. His eyes lit up, and he dashed over, latching onto her leg with a big hug.

He tilted his head up, blinking his sparkling eyes at her. His gaze read, “I’ve been looking for you forever, Stella. I wanna sleep with you tonight.”

“Lucas!” Sebastian’s strikingly handsome face was frosty. But Lucas just glanced at him and then hugged Stella even tighter, puffing his cheeks out. The defiance was adorable.

“Mr. Gray, I’ll take Lucas downstairs,” Stella said, reaching out to take Lucas’s hand. She wanted to check on how he was doing anyway.

Just as they reached the door, Lucas turned and stuck his tongue out. ‘See? Stella likes me best,’ he thought proudly.

\*\*\*\*\*

Late at night, Sebastian stared at the ceiling, his face brooding and pale. Dressed in black pajamas, he looked every bit the demon himself, cold and menacing.

The chill around him was so palpable that even Snowball, coiled on the floor, peeked open an eye.

Unable to sleep, Sebastian sat up, his icy gaze landing on Snowball. The big python shuddered, debating whether to keep faking sleep or just play dead for real.

The electric wheelchair moved through the darkness. As soon as Sebastian disappeared out the bedroom door, Snowball instantly sprawled out, limp as a noodle. It had been terrified.

The door to the children's bedroom slid open without a sound. On the oversized bed, Stella lay quietly asleep, cradling Lucas in her arms.

A faint, sweet fragrance lingered on her skin from her bath, and as soon as Sebastian caught a whiff of it, the tension

12:12 Tue, Jan 13 G GR

## Chapter 25

throbbing at his temples began to melt away. Even the icy edge in his gaze thawed, just a little.

65 vouchers

A while later, Stella, half-asleep, breathed in that familiar, oppressive scent of dark wood, which flooded her senses and left no room for anything else. She had a peaceful night's sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

The next morning in the dining room, Lucas puffed out his cheeks in protest, holding his tablet high above his head. To show just how mad he was, he'd even drawn a cute and small version of himself with flames shooting out of its head.

On the tablet was: [I saw it!]. What he meant was that he had seen Sebastian sleeping next to Stella this morning.

Sebastian sat calmly at breakfast. He finally looked better, less pale, after catching up on some much-needed sleep.

"So?" Sebastian's eyes were deep and unfazed. He wasn't the least bit ashamed about sharing Stella's bed last night.

Lucas wrote, much angrier, [I'm gonna tell Stella you're a bad guy.]

Sebastian sneered, icy and arrogant, not about to let his five-year-old nephew off easily. “Oh yeah? Then I’ll tell her you still

wet the bed.”

Lucas was stunned, like his whole world had just come crashing down. Tears brimmed in his eyes, and he looked ready to cry any second.

“What are you two talking about?” Stella strolled into the dining room, rocking a crisp white shirt and jeans. Her makeup-free face was deceptively sweet, with a hint of rebellious coolness that made her stand out.

“We were just discussing-” Sebastian shot Lucas a lazy glance and replied.

## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 26**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 26 -

### **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 26**

Chapter 26.

Chapter 26

[Good morning, Stella.] Lucas raised his tablet high, looking all pitiful as he interrupted Sebastian, surrendering to the “big

boss.”

“Morning,” Stella said, pulling out a chair and sitting down next to Lucas. She wondered if she was just imagining it, but Sebastian actually seemed to be in a pretty good mood.

“Mr. Gray, the car is ready.” John said, slipping into the room in his black suit, his usual sharpness amplified. Jake followed right behind, also in formal attire. Both of them looked way more intense than usual.

“You guys are heading out?” Allan yawned, shuffling down the stairs in a garish silk robe, a sleep mask pushed up on his head. He looked wrecked from jet lag.

“What did you do last night? You look way too refreshed,” Allan said to Sebastian, pulling out a chair next to Sebastian and propping his chin on his hand. He even gave Stella a lazy wave.

Lucas’s cheeks puffed out like a blowfish again.

“We’re going to Gray Manor,” Sebastian said, expressionless as he wiped his lips with a napkin. His gaze was dark and dangerous, and even the black prayer beads on his wrist seemed charged with a quiet threat.

“Gray Manor?” Allan’s sleepy eyes instantly cleared, his whole demeanor turning serious. “Lucas is going, too?”

Allan looked at Lucas with concern. Lucas looked obviously reluctant, clearly wanting nothing to do with Gray Manor. He burrowed into Stella’s arms, shaking his head violently.

Stella just arched her brow. Her mind drifted back to when she’d saved Annette at the hospital. Lucas’s reaction didn’t surprise her. But then something else caught her attention.

Sebastian had said they were “going” to Gray Manor, not “returning.” She mused, ‘An interesting, deliberate choice of words. He clearly doesn’t see Gray Manor as home anymore. What did those people do to get on his bad side this time?’

“You really won’t come?” Sebastian asked, expressionless as he met Lucas’s gaze.

Lucas just kept shaking his head.

“Then you’ll stay home with Allan,” Sebastian said.

Lucas’s head-shaking slowed, and his face went a bit blank with hesitation. After a moment, he pointed at Stella, meaning he wanted to be with her.

“I promised your uncle last night to go to Gray Manor with him,” Stella said, lazily raising her hand, delivering the devastating news.

As expected, Lucas went stiff, looking like his world was crashing down.

[Fine, I’ll go.] Lucas shakily raised his tablet. Honestly, even a trip to Gray Manor sounded better to him than being stuck

with Allan.

“Whoa, Lucas, you’re breaking my heart here,” Allan said, clutching his chest and putting on the full dramatic act.

But no matter how much Allan wailed, Lucas wasn’t budging. So Allan shot a “friendly” look at Snowball, who was lazily coiled around the big houseplant.

Snowball instantly went full statue mode, totally committed to playing dead.

After breakfast, the group headed out of the villa, leaving Allan and Snowball to hold down the fort.

1/3

Outside the villa, eleven Mercedes-Benzes were lined up one after another. Their black, bulletproof windows were impenetrable to light, creating an intimidating visual feast. With VR7-level security, nothing was getting through those.

“Mr. Gray” John said as he opened the door of the middle car.

Sebastian, Stella, and Lucas climbed in. As soon as the door closed, it completely shut out the outside noise. Lucas was still looking all gloomy

So, are you planning to stir things up at Gray Manor? Stella drawled, her tone lazy and unbothered. The loose collar of her white shift revealed a hint of collarbone, and her long hair spilled smoothly over her shoulder as she tilted her head.

Sebastian was dressed in a custom black suit, looking like ice from the deepest ocean trenches, utterly devoid of human warmth.

“Just teaching them what the Gray family’s rules really mean,” he said, his voice cold enough to freeze bones.

Lucas rested his chin in his hands, his feet swinging in the air. He looked totally down in the dumps. He loved being with Stella, but just the thought of seeing those people made him want to disappear.

Meanwhile, in the walk-in closet of Annette’s bedroom at Gray Manor, Linda stood there, her greedy eyes fixed on the complete sets of emerald jewelry in the collection. Each piece was a priceless, one-of-a-kind treasure.

After all these years, this was her very first time setting foot in here, or even in Gray Manor at all. Sebastian had once laid down a hard rule: “There can only be one matriarch in the Gray family.”

And that matriarch was Annette, the one Carlos had married fair and square, and the same woman who was still lying in the hospital after barely escaping death.

At that thought, a nasty look flashed in Linda's eyes, and she spat on the floor. She thought bitterly, 'If Annette had any sense, she would've stepped aside when Carlos brought Sophia back.

Then maybe we wouldn't have been stuck living outside all this time, barred from Gray Manor.

Her eyes gleamed with greed as she grabbed an exquisite emerald necklace off the shelf, planning to take it downstairs for Sophia

Downstairs, Sophia, with silver hair, in a tailored dress, sat gracefully in the living room, looking like she owned the place. Richard and Lauren, both nursing fingers that Sebastian's men had broken one by one, stood dutifully at her side.

"Sophia," Linda called out, hurrying down the stairs and making a big show of trying to put the emerald necklace around Sophia's neck.

"Linda, that belongs to Annette," Sophia said, shaking her head, but she didn't bother to stop Linda from putting it on her anyway.

"It'll all be yours soon enough," Linda said, inwardly rolling her eyes at her mother-in-law's obvious act, but keeping her tone sweet as honey.

Sophia just gave a faint, unreadable smile, saying nothing.

Because Richard and Lauren got hurt, Carlos was feeling guilty and finally caved last night, letting the whole family move into Gray Manor.

Worried that if they waited, something else would go wrong, they'd arranged to move their things first thing in the morning.

Carlos came down the stairs in his loungewear, leaning on his carved cane. Right beside him was a little boy, about five. constantly reminding Carlos to watch his step.

2/3

Chapter 20

The kid was all smiles and manners, but you could tell he was way too sharp for his age. He was Ryan, Richard and Linda's grandson.

The anxiety from Carlos's impulsive decision last night was fading fast. Gray Manor hadn't seen this much action since that terrible incident years ago. For once, it actually felt like home again.

"You're here," Carlos said, looking over at Sophia. Today, she'd chosen a different, old-fashioned scent instead of her usual perfume, which instantly brought him back to the first time they had met.

It life hadn't thrown them so many curveballs, she would've been the one he married.

"I was just worried you'd be waiting." Sophia said softly, her soothing, understanding manner showing as she helped Carlos settle into his seat.

Linda, standing off to the side, couldn't help but purse her lips. No wonder Annette can't compete with Linda. With smooth talk like that, any guy would be hung up on her for life, she thought.

Just listen to her. She doesn't say, "I was anxious," but "I was worried you'd be waiting." That's some next-level art of speaking.' Linda scoffed to herself.

While everyone was still basking in the warm family atmosphere, the butler suddenly rushed in, his face pale with fear. "M- Mr. Gray is here. He's brought a lot of people with him, and they're almost at the gates."

Everyone's smiles froze on their faces.

3/3

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## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 27**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 27 -

# Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams – 27

## Chapter 27

“Quick! Block the gates, and don’t let them in.” Richard, still nursing his old wounds together with Lauren, was the first to

freak out.

The butler looked miserable at his words. ‘Stop Mr. Gray? As if we could, he thought, wanting to say something but holding back. He glanced at Carlos, waiting for him to make the call.

Carlos, his grip tight on his cane, looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, just waved his hand, silently agreeing with Richard. The butler slunk off to pass on the orders, looking defeated.

No one noticed as five-year-old Ryan quietly snuck out to the backyard. There, a massive iron cage stood, holding two full- grown mastiffs, both fierce and drooling with hunger.

The black-furred mastiff’s were built like lions, each as tall as a grown man when they stood up. Ryan had raised them himself, and they only ever listened to him.

Now, after three days without food, the dogs were at their most terrifying. If set free, they would attack anyone in sight.

“Go find something to eat,” Ryan said with an innocent smile as he opened the cage. That pure, childlike grin was enough to send chills down anyone’s spine.

The two ferocious mastiff’s circled their little master twice before bolting off into the distance. Ryan silently waved in the direction they disappeared.

At 5:58, the ornate iron gates of Gray Manor were shut tight, showing no sign of opening. The security guards had already vanished, hiding away for fear of getting caught up in whatever was about to happen.

Eleven black, heavily modified Mercedes-Benz cars sat quietly at the entrance. Sunlight hit the blacked-out windows and seemed to die there.

In the lead car, Sebastian sat perfectly still. His eyes were rimmed with a sickly red, and the intricate patterns at the collar of his black shirt glinted with a predatory gleam.

The air inside the car was thick with tension. Sebastian's fingers idly twirled his black prayer beads. Normally, such a gesture would be seen as a sign of peace, but Stella knew it looked more like a countdown now.

At 8:59, the engine of the lead car suddenly roared to life, each time louder than before, like a warning to everyone inside.

Right at 9:00, with a loud bang, the bulletproof car crashed straight into the tightly shut, ornate gates of Gray Manor.

When the first hit didn't do the trick, the driver threw it in reverse and slammed into the gates again. The gates started to bend and buckle under the repeated hits. Soon, with a thunderous crash, the gates finally came crashing down.

The lead car, shoving the broken gates ahead of it, moved forward with ruthless speed, opening the way for the rest. One after another, the cars rolled into Gray Manor without anything stopping them.

Soon, the main villa of Gray Manor came into view. Suitcases were still stacked by the entrance, left completely unattended, but not a soul was in sight.

The cars rolled to a stop. All the car doors, except for Sebastian's swung open in unison. Men in black suits emerged, faces set in stone. Each one was over six feet tall, looking like they belonged on a runway.

Jake came over to open Sebastian's door. As he bent down, the grip of a handgun peeked from his waist holster.

"Beretta 92FS," Stella noted, her voice a cool, knowing murmur. Jake shot her a surprised look, but the next second, her smile vanished from her flawless face.

Stella's eyes

hardened after she sniffed the air. "Lend me that for a sec," she said to Jake, though her gaze was fixed on

1/3

Sebastian.

'Seriously? This is a gun, Jake mused and was about to protest, but Sebastian's cool, unpredictable voice interrupted, "Give it

to her."

Jake pulled the gun from his waistband and handed it over, baffled.

With a cold, focused look, Stella expertly ejected the magazine, checked it, and reloaded it in one smooth motion.

Her actions were flawless, so quick and precise that Jake could only stare in disbelief; she was even more professional than

he was.

“Lucas, stay in the car for now,” Stella said casually, slipping a pair of noise-canceling headphones over his ears. Lucas blinked, looking a little lost, but he nodded obediently anyway. He was so cute that it could melt anyone’s heart.

With a little guy this soft and precious, if anyone even thought about messing with him, she’d make them wish they hadn’t.

As the car door shut. Stella placed a casual hand on the back of Sebastian’s wheelchair. “Mr. Gray,” she called out, her voice relaxed and unhurried.

“Don’t be scared,” she whispered, leaning in close to his ear. Her loose white shirt slipped open at the collar, showing off a tiny mole on her collarbone. Her gaze was icy, with a hint of mischief.

Sebastian stared back at Stella, his eyes deep and impossible to read.

Just then, from the shadows came a menacing, heavy panting sound.

Sebastian’s men were all trained pros, their danger senses on high alert. They quickly tracked down the source, but even these seasoned operatives felt a chill run down their spines when they saw what they were up against.

Not far away, two massive dogs fixated on Sebastian with murderous, bloodthirsty eyes. Their black fur bristled, making them look like monsters hell-bent on tearing him apart.

These were guardian mastiffs, bred for one purpose-protection. Their loyalty was absolute, and their killing power was compared to that of a lion or tiger.

Stella found it bitterly ironic. This was Gray Manor, yet the guardian dogs were against a Gray.

With savage snarls, the starving dogs launched themselves forward. All at once, Sebastian’s men whipped out their guns and trained them on the dogs.

But the shot wasn't from any of them. John and the others instinctively turned toward the sound.

Stella stood beside the wheelchair, gun held steady in one hand. Her beautiful face was calm, but her eyes were cold and deadly. The casual confidence in her stance was more frightening than any shout.

The mastiff that got shot crashed to the ground, still thrashing in wild agony. The other one skidded to a halt, circling its packmate, driven into a frenzy by hunger and the smell of blood

Stella walked toward the two mastiffs, her expression cold and steely. John was about to say something, but Sebastian shot him a chilling look that shut him up instantly.

The closer Stella got, the more the mastiffs' hostility and agitation increased. And the warning growls rumbling from their throats grew even more menacing.

Eyes fixed on her, they were ready to rip her to shreds at any moment. Everyone watching couldn't help but worry about

her.

Stella stopped in her tracks, her eyes sweeping over the mastiffs, cold and utterly devoid of emotion. A silent, chilling aura of

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Chapter 27

dominance spread from her, freezing the air around her.

It was almost impossible to believe that this kind of pressure was coming from an eighteen-year-old girl, so commanding and cold, so fierce and sharp-edged.

She slowly raised her hand toward the barely-alive mastiff, which was still growling with defiance.

A few drops of blood splattered onto Stella's white shirt. Her eyes were cold and unfathomable, and a razor-sharp smile Touched her lips. The second mastiff's ferocious bravado was shattered. A high-pitched whine escaped it. It tucked its tail, crouching low to the ground.

inside the villa, everyone from the Gray family who witnessed it felt a chill run down their spines.

3/3

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## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 28**

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 28 -

### **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 28**

Chapter 28

“Open the door,” Stella said, twirling the weapon smoothly in her hand, looking up with lazy, icy indifference.

Behind her, Sebastian raised his hand, his face cold as ice. Instantly, his men strung the bloodied mastiff up on a tree right outside the villa’s door.

Normally, with his ruthless streak, Sebastian would have someone skin it or take it apart bone by bone, but today, he showed mercy and left the body whole.

His gaze rested on Stella’s back, dark and unreadable.

The front door of Gray Manor stayed firmly shut. Without blinking, Stella fired at the big windows on the first floor. The glass cracked into spiderwebs and then exploded with a loud crackle, shards raining down onto the floor.

Just as she aimed for the second floor, a loud click sounded. The front door of Gray Manor swung open from inside.

“Stop!” Carlos’s voice thundered, his eyes sharp and commanding as he locked onto Stella. Leaning on his cane, he stepped outside, supported by Sophia.

Richard and the others cowered behind him. The servants instinctively split to either side, their faces pale with shock at the scene unfolding before them.

“Quite the crowd,” Stella sneered, her voice thick with sarcasm. Her sinister energy threatened to spill over. “Honestly, I thought this place was dead.”

Her eyes were icy-cold as she sized up every face-familiar or not, old or new. Wherever her gaze landed, people broke out in goosebumps.

“This is our family matter. What business do you have here?” Carlos’s wrinkled face was carved with fury, but his anger didn’t even register with Stella.

“Who gives a damn about your family drama?” Stella smirked, her beautiful features twisted in scorn and icy indifference. “But if you mess with Mr. Gray, that’s where I draw the line.”

She casually walked back to stand behind Sebastian, resting one hand on the armrest of his wheelchair. Her tone was flippant, chilly, and deliberately provoking. “Mr. Gray is fragile and can’t handle any stress. Hope you understand.”

The Gray family members standing on the villa steps looked as if they’d just swallowed something foul. ‘Sebastian? Fragile? Can’t handle stress? And now we’re supposed to show him sympathy? How shameless can those two be?’ Richard thought.

Sebastian let out a couple of muffled coughs, his already pale face taking on an even more sickly hue.

“Who owns the mastiffs?” Stella asked. As soon as she heard Sebastian cough, she spun the pistol again with a slick, practiced flick. She looked casual, but the move promised cold, precise payback.

No one spoke.

Linda instinctively shielded Ryan behind her. The second those mastiffs showed up, she knew they were the ones he raised.

The dogs always caused trouble and picked fights. They loved nothing more than raw bones and meat, totally wild and impossible to control. They'd even killed a bunch of the neighbors' pet dogs before.

"Mr. Gray, you know how loyal mastiffs are. Why not let the other one loose and see who it runs to?" Stella said lazily. 'Seriously, do they think staying quiet is enough to dodge responsibility?' she thought.

Sebastian's slender fingers turned a black prayer bead, his lips curving into a faint, brooding smile.

1/3

Chapter 28

55 vouchers

To Sebastian, the Grays gathered before him were utterly beneath his notice. Their petty schemes didn't even register. But right now, for once, he found himself oddly patient, curiously savoring the strange novelty of being protected.

Sebastian gave John a subtle signal, and the surviving mastiff, scared out of its mind, immediately bolted, sniffing frantically

for Ryan.

Ryan's face went ghostly pale as he darted behind Carlos. "Great-Grandpa, I swear, I have no idea how they got out."

The five-year-old was shaking like a leaf, nothing like the cocky kid he'd been in the backyard just moments ago. Seeing him like this, no one could bring themselves to blame a child, especially not a little guy his age.

Ryan was genuinely scared out of his wits, especially with that bloody mess of a mastiff still hanging from the tree.

"Sebastian, that's enough," Carlos snapped. He'd long since given up trying to fix things with this grandson he could never control.

But for Sebastian to show up at Gray Manor and throw his weight around like this, Carlos wondered if Sebastian thought he was out of the picture now.

“Ryan, go apologize to your uncle and tell him you didn’t mean Carlos ordered, his eyes sharp with a warning that screamed he’d had enough as he stared down Sebastian.

At his words, Ryan immediately grabbed the leash of the other mastiff and toddled over to Sebastian, his face full of innocent confusion, as if nothing that had just happened had anything to do with him.

“Uncle Sebastian, please forgive me,” Ryan said, standing a few steps away from Sebastian, his voice dripping with apology. But Stella saw clearly that a flash of pure malice crossed the boy’s face.

“He’s just putting on an act, Stella thought, her expression turning frosty, coldness radiating off her.

She hated nothing more than the idea that “the weaker side is always right.” She mused, ‘If I hadn’t sensed something was off ahead of time, if Lucas had hopped out of the car with us, if those mastiffs had hurt Sebastian and Lucas...

“They think a simple “sorry” would magically fix everything, huh

In the next instant, Ryan faked a look of panic and let the leash slip from his hand. The mastiff, already seething with hate for its dead packmate, lunged straight at Sebastian with a vicious snarl, jaws gaping wide.

Carlos gasped and lurched forward, but instead of helping Sebastian, he grabbed Ryan and whisked him away. Meanwhile, Stella, her expression icy and determined, spun without hesitation and threw herself over Sebastian, shielding him.

Just as it looked like blood was about to be spilled, for a split second, everything froze.

“John, take care of it,” Sebastian said, his voice low and steady, not a hint of emotion. His face didn’t even twitch.

“Yes, Mr. Gray,” John replied, his expression icy. He ripped the combat knife out of the mastiff’s skull and, right in front of Ryan, dragged the massive body away single-handedly, leaving along, wet smear on the ground.

He thought, ‘Don’t think I missed the way that little brat signaled the dog to attack.

“It’s over,” Sebastian said, lifting his hand adorned with prayer beads and giving Stella’s slender back a gentle pat. The beads clinked softly, and his voice was calm and reassuring.

Stella got to her feet, her face so cold that it could freeze hell over. Her stunning, makeup-free face was dark and stormy. A cold, fierce rage simmered just beneath the surface.

“If a kid has no manners, it’s the adults who failed their job,” Stella said, her voice icy and sharp.

Her frosty gaze landed on Ryan, but to her surprise, the five-year-old, hiding behind Carlos, shot her a bratty, taunting grin.

2/3

Chapter 28

45 vouchers

Then, in a flash, his face switched to pure innocence. Two seconds later, big tears started rolling down his cheeks. It was like watching a performance.

“Great-Grandpa, Great-Grandina, I’m scared. Uncle Sebastian iso scary.” Ryan reached out his hands to Carlos and Sophia, begging for a hug, as if they were family, while Sebastian and Lucas were just the outsiders.

Are you done crying?” Sebastian asked, one hand braced on the armrest of his wheelchair. At some point, he’d slipped off

black prayer beads and was now turning them slowly in his palm.

He fixed Carlos with a stare, so sharp that it felt like a blade pressed right to his throat.

3/3

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# Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel

## Chapter 29

Read Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 29 -

## Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 29

Chapter 29

Almost on reflex, Carlos reached out and clamped a hand over Ryan's mouth, cutting off his crying in an instant.

But Sebastian just gave a cold smile, his strikingly handsome face shadowed and intense. His eyes were like bottomless, icy pools, so dark and deep that it felt suffocating just to meet his gaze.

"Sebastian," Sophia called out softly. But before she could say more, Sebastian's chilling, predatory stare swept over her, as if she were nothing more than an ant beneath his notice, utterly insignificant.

Sophia clenched her jaw, falling silent and standing by Carlos's side.

Just then, Stella heard a few knocks on the car window behind her.

When the window was rolled down, there was Lucas, still obediently wearing his noise-canceling headphones. When he saw Stella looking at him, he anxiously gestured at his neck with his hands and then pointed at Sophia.

Stella's eyes narrowed as she glanced over. "That emerald necklace?" she wondered. Then, she saw Sebastian's hand, prayer beads still wrapped around his fingers, make a slight gesture.

John strode right up to Sophia, his face like ice. He looked like he'd kill someone without blinking, and every step made people instinctively shrink back.

Sophia's face went ghostly pale as she watched John, his hand still stained with the mastiff's blood, rip the necklace right off her neck. Then he spun around and handed it straight over to Sebastian.

"It's dirty," Sebastian said coldly. It was unclear whether he meant the necklace or the house itself.

But he still took the necklace from John. His gaze returned to the people before him, cold and unreadable, like a storm about to break.

Under the terrified gazes of everyone present, Sebastian crushed the emerald beads between his fingers, one after another. It looked as effortless as crumbling a cracker.

For a split second, it was impossible to tell whether he wanted to crush the necklace only or actually their skulls.

“I thought I made myself perfectly clear,” Sebastian said, his expression dark and almost unhinged, the air around him heavy with menace.

His eyes swept over Gray Manor, as if tracing the memories that still haunted the grounds. Yet in a blink, the present rushed back, leaving nothing but a deep, hollow ache.

“There can only be one matriarch in the Gray family, and they are not allowed to set foot here,” he said. His voice was cold enough to freeze marrow.

“Who do you think you are, making rules here? This is my home. I’ll let in whoever I damn well please,” Carlos snapped. He knew that he was in the wrong when it came to the women, but his grandson’s defiance stoked his rage.

“Dad, don’t get upset,” Richard jumped in, trying to play the dutiful son. Lauren rushed to play her part, too. The whole display of father-children harmony was cloying to watch.

“Not only am I letting them move in, but I’m also handing over Gray Group shares to Richard and Lauren,” Carlos announced.

The surprise was so sudden that Richard and Lauren lost control of their expressions, barely suppressing grins.

Carlos drew in a long breath, his tone laced with threat. “Sebastian, your legs have been injured for ages. It’s time you give up the CEO seat at Gray Group.”

1/3

Since the incident, Sebastian had been calling the shots at Gray Group, and Carlos figured that was his leverage, the one thing he could use to keep Sebastian in check.

“You sure about that?” Sebastian’s lips curled with mockery.

Stella saw it clear as day. He was still hiding a trump card, just biding his time to strike at these people when they least expected it.

“I am. Wait for the board to call a meeting.” Carlos refused to back down. He hadn’t wanted things to get this ugly, but it was Sebastian who forced his hand.

“Pack my grandma’s stuff,” Sebastian said coldly.

At his words, some of his men rushed upstairs. In no time, all of Annette’s personal belongings were boxed up and hauled out, one after another.

Richard and Lauren shot each other a look, both barely holding back grins. ‘Is he actually giving us Gray Manor?’ they thought.

“Sebastian, what the hell are you doing?” Carlos blurted out, totally thrown off by Sebastian’s sudden move.

“Put Annette’s stuff down!” Carlos slammed his cane on the floor, but nobody paid him any mind. He was so furious that his face went ghostly pale, and he nearly passed out right there..

“If it were you, how would you deal with something dirty?” Sebastian suddenly turned to Stella, his eyes cold and shadowy.

“You mean people or the house?” Stella asked offhandedly. Not missing the excited looks on the faces of the people across from her, she clicked her tongue in annoyance, looking tough as ever.

“What if it’s the people? What if it’s the house?” Sebastian looked intrigued, toying idly with the prayer beads. Even though he was in a wheelchair, his aura of authority was terrifying.

“People? Kill them. House? Burn it down,” Stella replied, sounding so casual, but the words chilled the blood of everyone who heard.

Is she crazy or what? Honestly, nobody around Sebastian is ever normal, Linda thought, her fingers shaking. She knew all too well that Sebastian was the kind of guy who’d actually do something like that.

“Murder’s against the law, you know. Don’t be so violent at your age,” Sebastian said coolly, his thin lips barely moving.

Stella was speechless for once. Coming from Sebastian, the statement was almost unconvincing, especially with those two blood-soaked mastiffs still dangling from the tree outside.

“But honestly, there’s no reason to keep this house,” Sebastian said, his gaze growing even colder and darker. His presence alone seemed to thin the air, making it hard to breathe.

Those words made Carlos’s eyes narrow in alarm. But the others were too caught up in the joy of finally moving into Gray Manor and acquiring Gray Group shares to realize that the storm that was about to hit.

Their smiles didn’t last long because suddenly, the heavy stench of gasoline filled the air. Everyone froze, faces going pale.

No one saw when it happened, but now Sebastian was holding a silver-platinum lighter. The flame illuminated the cold, bloodshot madness in his eyes. With a casual flick of his wrist, he tossed it.

Fire erupted through Gray Manor. Screams of pure terror pierced the air as the Gray family’s villa transformed into a living hell within moments.

“My stuff! I didn’t get my stuff out,” Linda wailed hysterically, collapsing. All of their stuff was still inside, including her new jewelry, designer bags, and clothes. Everything was being consumed by the flames.

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‘Sebastian is a complete madman. He’s going to hell. He won’t die well, she cursed inwardly, consumed by fury and despair.

“Gorgeous,” Stella breathed, awe flickering in her eyes. A faint, chilling smile touched her refined features—a mix of rogue charm and danger. The heat made her white shirt billow softly, and she looked stunningly, untouchably beautiful.

Sebastian watched her silently, taking in every detail. His gaze flicked to the blood spatter on her shirt, and a slight crease formed between his brows.

Unlike the adults who were sobbing and wailing. Ryan, cradled in Carlos’s arms, just stared at Sebastian. Even though he was only five, the look in his eyes was unmistakable: pure malice.

He wanted Sebastian dead. A poisonous seed of hatred was already sprouting deep inside Ryan's heart.

In his eyes, only with Sebastian gone could everything of the Gray family truly return to his great-grandmother, grandfather, and father. Sebastian was the obstacle that had to be removed.

No one knew that Ryan, even at just five years old, was an excellent hacker. He'd already used his skills to secure numerous advantages for his family.

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## **Paid To Care, Destined To Conquer Novel Chapter 30**

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### **Echoes Of Forgotten Dreams - 30**

Chapter 30

Ryan's vicious stare didn't escape Stella's notice.

She lowered her eyes, letting her long lashes hide her emotions. Then she shot him a lazy, careless smile, making no effort to hide the bloodthirsty aura that was even stronger than Sebastian's. She stared right back at Ryan, her defiance completely unleashed.

Everyone had an instinct for danger, even a five-year-old. Ryan quickly looked away.

“He let the mastiffs out on purpose,” Stella drawled, sounding absolutely certain.

Sebastian’s expression remained blank, as if he’d known all along Jake’s jaw dropped, however. ‘Seriously? The kid’s only five. How can a five-year-old be that twisted?’ he thought.

Suddenly, Richard shouted, “Dad! Oh no!”

Staring at the raging fire that was destroying his lifelong home, Carlos clutched his chest, gasped for air, and fell backward. Chaos erupted once more.

That very day, news spread like wildfire through high society: Carlos had gone against Sebastian’s orders and brought his secret family back to Gray Manor, only for Sebastian to burn it all to the ground.

Carlos was so furious that he had a heart attack right then and there and was rushed to the hospital. Coincidentally, it was the same hospital where Annette was staying. The dramatic turn of events became the hottest gossip in their circles.

On the way back, Lucas was obviously sulking.

“We’re just letting them go like that?” Stella said, leaning her head on her hand, looking casual as ever. But she had a feeling that Sebastian’s real game was just beginning.

“For some people, death is the end. For me, it’s not,” Sebastian said, his face unreadable and his eyes dark. The prayer beads were back on his wrist, and he was back to his usual cold, arrogant self. His words were flat yet icy.

Lucas kept looking up, scribbling and erasing on his tablet, a little storm cloud over his head. [Is it because of me that Great- Grandpa doesn’t like Uncle Sebastian?] he wrote, followed by a drawing of a crying boy.

“No.” Sebastian said, his voice unusually gentle. He reached out his cold hand and gave Lucas’s head a soft pat.

Lucas kept his head down, but silent tears began to streak down his soft cheeks, one after another.

His heartbroken little face made the already chilled car interior feel utterly freezing.

Stella reached out and pulled the sobbing kid into her arms. He was just small, shaking all over as he cried, his face buried in her neck, his hands clutching her white shirt like he was afraid she'd disappear.

He cried himself to exhaustion and finally fell asleep in her arms peaceful and trusting as a kitten.

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On Sandridge Island, Snowball was hanging straight as a board from a tree, playing dead. Meanwhile, Allan, dressed in floral swim trunks, chattered nonstop.

Snowball was exhausted and just wanted to drop dead. It hoped Allan could pick on someone else.

Suddenly, Snowball noticed something and lifted its head from the tree. Sure enough, it spotted the group getting out of the

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car. In an instant, Snowball came back to life and slithered down the tree with renewed energy.

“My little sweetheart!” Allan called out, whipping off his sunglasses and bounding happily toward where the car had just pulled up.

The next second, his handsome face turned stormy. “Who made Lucas cry?”

When he saw Lucas in Stella's arms, his eyes swollen from crying, Allan's playful vibe disappeared in a flash. A fierce, protective energy radiated from him, and he looked ready to tear someone apart.

Lucas, who hadn't really slept well, was jolted awake by Allan's loud voice. Lucas rubbed his eyes, still looking listless. Snowball's heart ached for him.

“Who was it? Tell me,” Allan demanded, looking at Sebastian. “Whoever made Lucas cry is asking for trouble. I'm gonna skin them alive, Allan thought.

Lucas tugged at Stella's sleeve, his eyes reading, “Dirty. I want a bath.”

“I'll take him.” Sebastian said, his voice calm and steady as he reached out to Stella. Lucas tilted his head, his hands still clinging tightly to Stella's neck, his big eyes full of hesitation.

“You’re a boy,” Sebastian reminded him. That finally made Lucas give in, though he still clung to Stella stubbornly.

Allan glanced from Sebastian to Stella. “Lucas wants Stella to wait outside during his bath.”

Lucas, who usually ignored Allan, nodded repeatedly without hesitation this time, his eyes sparkling with hopeful, irresistible light. Allan was utterly charmed.

Stella was left speechless, staring at the scene in front of her: one big guy, one little one, and a giant python all watched her with identical “please, please, please” looks.

Snowball even rested his large head on her shoulder, nuzzling her earnestly in imitation of some TV drama.

“Mr. Gray, you don’t mind, right?” Stella asked. ‘Me just waiting outside while they take a bath? This is kinda weird, she thought.

“No,” Sebastian replied, his eyes deep and impossible to read. His answer immediately set off Allan’s warning bells, and he shot Stella a deeply meaningful look.

Everyone knew Sebastian was a peculiar man, full of quirks. Even before the incident back then, he was always the weirdest one out of the three, and afterward, he only got worse.

His notorious cleanliness and aversion to women totally matched those black prayer beads he always wore, like he was living above all the usual temptations. But Stella seemed to be the exception.

In the bedroom, Stella stood outside the bathroom with her hands in her pockets. Her white shirt made her look all sweet and innocent, her long hair flowing down her back like silk.

With her usual dangerous edge softened, she projected an unexpected sense of calm.

The sound of running water stopped, and the bathroom door opened. A crisp scent of body wash drifted out. “Stella,” Sebastian called, his voice low and a bit hoarse.

Stella turned lazily toward the sound, but then paused mid-movement, caught off guard.

Sebastian's black shirt was drenched, clinging to him, making him even more eye-catching than if he wore nothing. Meanwhile, Lucas was swaddled securely in a towel, his face soft and adorably innocent.

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## Chapter 30

Stella reached out and took Lucas. He was still a little gloomy, clutching a little yellow rubber duck. He let her dress him obediently and then tilted his head up to give her a coaxing, hopeful smile.

"Lucas," Stella said, gently pinching his little mouth into a shape like the duck's flat bill. "You know, sometimes, it doesn't matter if other people like you."

Lucas sat quietly on Sebastian's big black bed, looking like a cute delicate porcelain doll. After a moment's hesitation, he started doodling on his tablet.

He held up the tablet, showing a cartoon of a little boy looking sad and dejected, after being shooed away by everyone everywhere he went.

Stella said gently, "You're our little lucky star, definitely not a jins

As soon as Lucas heard that, his spirit lifted immediately, his eyes regaining their brilliant sparkle. He was adorable beyond words.

Sebastian emerged from the bathroom just in time to catch this warm moment.

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