

## Shadows 391

Chapter 391 Judgment The man did not miss a beat . He betrayed his own daughter without batting an eyelid . " Rebecca , you've seen what happens to the ones who break this family . " Two options lie ahead of you . " You do it yourself , or I'll do it for you ." He opened the small box sitting in front of the family shrine . Inside was a knife sharp enough to slice bone . He raised it to the flame until the steel turned red like fire . " You broke three rules . First , you lost to the enemy . Second , you let the video get out . Third , you dragged the Bells into shame .

" By our law , I have to cut off three of your fingers . " Since you're my granddaughter , I'll let you pick which ones . " Abram held the knife out in front of her . " Grandpa , I ... I can't ... I just can't ... " Rebecca's face twisted as tears and snot smeared together . If she had known it would come to this , she never would have stood up for Kyla . She never would have gone after Tilda . Now she was broken . " If you won't do it yourself ..." Abram pulled out a handkerchief . Before Rebecca could move , his arm came down . Her left pinkie was gone before she realized it .

For half a breath she froze , then the pain tore through her body like fire and filled her veins with panic and heat . Her scream shook the chapel walls . She clutched her bleeding hand and rolled on the floor , writhing in agony . Jarrett was already curled in the corner with his palms pressed to his ears . He couldn't make himself watch the bloodshed . Preston and Daphne flinched hard and turned their faces away . Ryan and Nathan never looked away . Tilda kept her eyes on Abram too , silent as stone .

" Can't believe Abram would do this to his own granddaughter , " she whispered . The Bells aren't any different from the Jensons . One shatters the body , the other crushes the mind . She understood it then . This was their philosophy . To the Bells , the worst sin is letting the enemy make a fool of you while you wear their name . " That's why this punishment has lasted for generations . If you're weak , if you drag them down , they take your strength away . " Her voice dropped . " It makes sense in a twisted way .

And since your family accepts it , who am I to say anything about it ? " Families like the Bells stood tall even in the world's eyes . No soft hand could guard something that massive . Mercy would only bury them . Only savage lessons could keep them alive . " That's why you made it through , Jude . You must have suffered more than anyone knows . " Her words slid into Jude's chest like a clean breath of air , breaking through years of darkness . His eyes locked on her face , and a fire rippled inside him . For a moment he wanted nothing more than to pull her close .

To the world , Jude was born to rule and inherit DY Group . They praised him , revered him , and called it respect . But behind every smile he felt nothing but disgust . They never knew the sneers , the pain , and the despair he had swallowed to stand here . They only knew him as the heir . They never knew he carried the blame for his mother's death . They never knew his father had turned silent and cold after the woman he loved was gone . His father never struck him , never cursed him , but he never gave him love either . His grandmother had raised him .

In that brutal house , she had been his only warmth . She had kept him human when the world tried to make him a monster . But she died when he was ten , and then Abram's grip closed around him . Abram never saw a grandson . He saw talent . He saw the heir . From that moment , Jude's life was carved into stone . If not for his grandmother shielding him while she lived , Abram would have thrown him into the fire even sooner . She had begged that he live like a normal boy . She had begged for fewer scars .

But when she died , no one could stop Abram . From ten to twenty , Jude was forged in fire . Abram's training was merciless , a torment no ordinary person could have survived . Jude bore it all . He bore it for the two women who had loved him and died because of him . Now , inside this chapel , he looked at Tilda , and realization struck his mind . In the middle of his endless night , she was the only light that had ever touched him .

Chapter 392 Salvation Only Tilda could make Jude's blood burn hot in his veins . ¥ Only she could calm the storms that ripped through his nights and dragged him toward madness . Everyone else saw only his victories . They thought he was untouchable . She , however , saw the shadows that clung to him and the pain he buried deep within . Tilda kept her eyes on the floor below . Rebecca's screams kept tearing through the room . At first the cries felt satisfying , but the sound stretched on too long and scraped against her nerves until her stomach churned .

She felt Jude's stare burning at her side . She turned and frowned . " What are you looking at me for ? Is there something on my face ? " She ran her hand across her cheek just in case . " Tilly , I love you . " The words slammed into her so hard she nearly choked . Jude , why did you just throw a confession like that out of nowhere ? " His cousin was literally losing her fingers right beneath them . The timing was insane . " I wanted to say it , so I did . " His voice dropped .

" Besides my grandma , no one ever asked me about the cruel things I went through ." Jude lowered his eyes to hide the storm in them . He knew this was the wrong time , but he had to let her see . He had to let her know how much he loved her . Tilda just looked at him . This was the man who stood like a king before the world . Only with her did he show his cracks . He was like a beast that had crushed countless enemies and carried the weight of war . But when he went back to his den , alone , he licked wounds that never healed .

Those were the wounds that cut through him every night . Now he was laying those wounds bare for her to see . She pressed her lips together and reached for his hand . A shock jolted through him like a live wire . Their Engers slowly locked together . No matter what comes , I'm here with you . No matter what you've endured , you're still standing , and you're right here with me . " Her voice carried like a song , steady and gentle . And one more thing , " she whispered . You've never had me in your life until now . " But I don't plan on letting you go for the rest of my life .

Tally , you're never getting rid of me ." His grip tightened , his eyes blazed , and his voice was warm like music humming in the air . She smiled with a spark in her eyes . " Then prove it . " Upstairs , they were wrapped in closeness . Down below , Rebecca felt none of it . There was no bond of shared sorrow . When she realized she had no way out , she raised the blade and sliced off two of her own fingers . % Without medicine to numb her , the pain ripped through until her eyes rolled back and her body dropped limp Daphne's heart split apart .

She rushed forward to stop the bleeding , but Ryan's grip locked her in place . Ryan looked at Abram . Father , the punishment's done . Has your fury calmed down now ? " " Ryan , don't mock me . I once led the family to hold our ground in Slosa . Something this small couldn't shake me . " The Bells have grown tall and wide . With so many branches and children , there will always be rotten fruit . " When that happens , you cut it off . A few rotten pieces won't topple a tree that has stood for centuries .

" Abram's tone was even , his eyes impossible to read . Ryan bowed his head . " Yes , Father . I shouldn't have stepped out of line ." " Grandpa , given Rebecca ... has taken her punishment , perhaps we should ... let her get treated now . " Jarrett forced the words out , his eyes fixed on her pale skin . If she lost more blood , she would die . In the chapel , only their quiet branch dared to speak up . When Jarrett spoke , Nathan followed at once . " Yes , Grandpa , please let her get treated ." " Abram , please . She knows she was wrong . She's paid her price .

Please let her see a doctor . " Daphne collapsed to her knees . Her cries broke into the silence as she begged . Preston bit down on his lip . Ryan's stare kept him frozen , so he begged only with his eyes . " Leave the fingers here . And call a doctor for her . " Abram's words sliced through the air . And when she heals up , send her overseas . Without my order , she is never to return . " Daphne's face drained of color . " What ? Dad , you're sending her away ? You're keeping her out of Cetherland forever ? " " What is this ? Are you saying you'll disobey me ? "

Chapter 393 Fear Abram's eyes cut toward Daphne . That single glance dropped her into a frozen pit that left her shaking and too scared to breathe . " I ... I ... I wouldn't dare ... Ryan clenched his fists . He wanted to scream at his wife . If Abram turned on their side of the family because of her , he would

make sure she paid for it . Does she really think she can do anything just because she's lived a life of luxury for a while ? Perhaps she should try living as someone hated by everyone , then . Jude was already a nightmare to deal with . Abram was worse .

He was a man no one could read . Even as his son , Ryan felt nothing but raw fear in his presence . " If Rebecca proves herself overseas and shows me something worth respect , then she can come back . " If she can't hold her own dignity , then this family has no place for her . I won't drag her back just to let her be used against us again . " " I understand ." The guests broke apart in silence . Rebecca was carried away to the doctor . Abram ordered the butler to clean every trace of blood , and the severed fingers were tossed into the trash like they had never mattered .

Tilda pressed her lips together . " No wonder he was the previous head of the Bells . He's so cold , so detached , like he only cares about worth and nothing else . " " This is who Abram is , " Jude said . His voice was low , his eyes far away . " Jude , I'm not against the rules your grandfather laid out to survive , but don't you feel ... sorry for the guy ? " In this house , Abram earned nothing but fear and hollow respect . Every smile thrown his way was fake . Not one person meant it , not even his own children or grandchildren .

" You can feel sorry for anyone else in the world . Just ... not him . Pity is not the kind of emotion you associate with him . + 62% " He thrives on this . For some men , family honor is all there is . Anyone who stains it disrespects his whole existence . " Jude's tone was flat . He had grown up under Abram's shadow . He knew the man's truth better than anyone . " You're right . I don't know why I suddenly felt soft . Maybe because I know my own life isn't much better .

" But your grandfather is so ruthless , it feels like tonight is going to be a death trap for me . " Tilda pressed her mouth tight . Jude's lips curved into the faintest smile . " Now you're afraid ? " " A little , but I wouldn't be here if I wasn't sure of myself . " Abram acted exactly how I thought he would . And even if the world falls apart , I know you'll protect me ." She gave him a look full of trust . " To stand as your knight is my greatest honor ." His words carried the weight of a vow , a promise to guard her as long as he lived . If she stayed , he would never leave her side .

Jude finally had the strength to protect the woman he loved . No one would ever harm her again . No one . A soft knock came at the door . " Mr. Jude , Ms. Tilda , may I come in ? " It was the butler who had guided them there .. Jude spoke quietly . 11 " That man has served the Bells for 60 years . His name is Lucas Landton , and he grew up with my grandfather . " There's something strong in him . Even without

the Bells , he could have built an empire of his own ." Tilda trusted her instincts . She felt that same weight in him .

A man like that was never meant to stay hidden . " If Lucas chose to stay , it's because of both loyalty and personal gain . " " You're right . His family has risen high by serving my grandfather . " Lucas could have found success on his own , but it would never match what he gained here . " Jude knew that for sure . Whether he was truly loyal to Abram was something only those two understood . Jude wasn't going to waste thought on it . " Come in . " Lucas pushed the door open and gave a short bow to both Jude and Tilda .

Then his gaze rested on her . " Ms. Tilda , Mr. Bell asks to see you . He wants you now . " " Alright . " It was no surprise . Abram had not called her here only to watch Rebecca bleed .

Chapter 394 Meeting Abram kept silent and let Tilda walk away without a word . That suited her just fine . She had wanted a moment with him . His words and his style could reveal more than anyone guessed . " Mr. Jude , Mr. Bell wishes to speak with Ms. Tilda alone . " He asks that you wait here ." Lucas cut in quickly , as if he already knew what Jude would say . Jude's eyes narrowed and glimmered with danger . " My grandfather knows I won't just agree to that . " " Then he can only ask Ms. Tilda to leave " He may arrange another private meeting later . " Jude's jaw tightened .

His eyes sparked with quiet rage . He knew this was a threat . Tilda slid her hand against his arm . " Jude , let me see him . " " Tilly ... " " Trust me . I'll be fine . " Her brows lifted with steady faith . Then , she faced Lucas with calm poise . " Please , lead the way . " Lucas's eyes flashed with surprise . " Alright ." He had met countless people , yet he saw this composure was true . It came from deep pride and certainty . Tilda trusted her own strength .

She believed she could step into fire and still walk out whole .

With only a few words , she kept Jude from striking back . Abram's judgment of her had been right . Lucas led Tilda through twisting halls until they entered a garden with a fountain . A table held trays of pastries and the fragrance of fresh tea . " Please sit , Ms. Tilda . Mr. Bell will arrive soon . " Lucas bowed and stepped aside . Tilda sat with her arms folded and gazed over the flowers like she owned them . Her face showed no fear . Abram appeared with his hands behind his back and strolled toward her . " Ms. Tilda . " Hello , Her tone was firm . She did not rise or offer him respect .

" No need for formality . Make yourself at home . Help yourself to anything you wish . " Abram smiled as he pulled out a chair and studied her with eyes cold as steel . She lifted her cup and sipped as if nothing touched her . 1." This is good . Whittard of Chelsea 1886 ? You recognize it ? The method is theirs , but Lucas grew it himself . " Abram's chuckle was soft . " My late wife and I loved his tea . His leaves are finer than the brand's best . " " Tilda tasted it and found the truth . The flavor was bold and full , richer than any label . " Ms.

Tilda , you're calmer than I thought . Most would worry if the food was tampered with . " His voice was smooth and kind , yet heavy with control . It did not match the man who had ordered his granddaughter's fingers broken . " If you wanted me dead , you wouldn't bother with poison ." She touched her nose with a small smile . " And even if you tried , I'd know . I have some tricks up my sleeve Years of work with medicine had sharpened her sense of smell . And working with herbs all the time helped too . No drink or pastry could fool her .

But of course , she did not tell Abram about that . She knew Abram had not brought her here to kill her . At least not tonight . This was not yet a trap . Rebecca's pain was only a curtain . The true purpose was tied to Jude . 曰 " You only take action against this family when you're sure of yourself , considering how you ... went after one of us . " Abram lifted his cup and drank slowly . A breath of contempt slipped from his lips . " Ms. Tilda ... Should I call you that , or should I just call you Tilda ? " " Call me whatever makes you happy ." " You don't carry hate for me .

You came here for Jude ? "

Chapter 395 Straight to the Point Tilda went straight to the point . Talking in circles with Abram wasn't her way She had no taste for games . Abram lifted his cup and drank again . He didn't hurry with his reply . Tilda stayed quiet . She waited , steady as stone , more patient than him . " Talda , do you think the people carry values here in this family ? " Values of their own ? " Abram finally spoke . She thought for a breath before she answered the question . Yes . Everyone does . " Take Rebecca , for example . In your eyes , she's only a step for Jude to climb higher .

" And she's not the only one . " Anyone who fights him for power has worth . " Their use is to test if Jude can carry the Bells ' name ." Those words from most people would sound cruel . But out of Abram's mouth they rang true . " You make it sound heartless . Rebecca is still my granddaughter . " What I did cut me deep ." " You didn't look cut when you ordered her fingers taken . " You acted fast . " The room grew heavy . Abram had never met a girl who dared throw his own acts in his face . He stared at her , then laughter broke loose from him . " Tilda , your nerve is rare .

" No wonder you managed to fool my granddaughter and lure my grandson's heart , and now you're sitting here talking to me without fear . " You're remarkable . " " I'll take that as praise , " she said , calm

and steady . Even when his gaze flashed sharp and dangerous , she didn't waver . Others would have folded . She held her ground . " I'm old now . My hunger for blood has faded . I don't care for it anymore . " But punishment must stay punishment ." His tone dropped , dark and firm .

" Tilda , if we stood where your family does , then maybe I could honor family ties . " But we don't get that . " The moment we slack , hands wait to drag us down and bury us ." He squeezed his cup tighter . "You think I went too far with Rebecca . That's only because you never saw me at my height . I already spared her . I gave her a chance to return and prove herself . " Tilda's eyes sharpened . " Abram , I know you went digging into my past , so hear me . I have no tie to the Jensions . Their fate is nothing to me . She would not let that link hang on her name .

She loathed the sound of it . Abram nodded with care . " Then you must know the real reason I asked you here ." His stare searched her . " This is the first time I've seen Jude cling to a woman like this . The head of the Bells will marry and raise children to keep the bloodline alive . " I could not shape him to think like I do , but his talent is greater than I dreamed . As long as he breathes , the Bells will stand . " His eyes cut sharp . " Tilda , though we meet for the first time , I see it in you . You're deep , you're steady , you're fit to be Jude's wife .

He drew a small box from his pocket and set it before her . His eyes pressed her to take it . " My worth is not for you to decide , " she said coldly as she rose . " And whether I become Jude's wife or not is up to me . I make the choice . You don't rule our lives ." She did not take the box , Her words cut clear. " I know what you want . But Jude and I are still young . We don't need to lock our fate now . That would betray us both . " One more thing , Abram . I will never throw away my own life for anyone again .

My dreams and my path belong to me . Even if Jude and I get married , I still go by Tilda , not Jude's wife . " She turned and walked away without a glance back . She knew what Abram wanted . If she wanted to marry Jude , it meant she must live as his puppet . She didn't know how Jude's grandmother had endured in this house . But she would never take that path . Lucas rushed forward as she tried to leave . " Ms. Tilda- " Her eyes went cold . " Do not stop me , Lucas . Unless you wish to see a bloody scene . " Lucas froze , his voice swallowed by silence .

Chapter 396 Released " Let her walk . " Abram's voice cut through the air . He raised his teacup and drank with ease . " Tilda , come by when you want . If you sit for tea , I'll always make room for you ." Tilda gave no reply . She simply turned and left on her own . Abram burst out laughing . " That girl's got fire . Lucas , she's just like my wife when we got married . " Lucas's eyes softened . In his mind a woman appeared in a yellow dress dotted with flowers , glowing like the sun , her smile radiant . He nodded . " She does . But Mr. Bell , are you really letting Ms.

Tilda walk away ? " " She won't listen to me now . And Jude has already chosen her . You don't expect me , his grandfather , to chase after her . " Abram's snort cracked the silence . A task without a reward was never something he would do . Lucas opened his mouth , but the words never came out . " Lucas , we've been through half a lifetime together . Why hold back ? " Sit down . Speak up . We've got all these pastries , and they won't eat themselves ." Without strangers around , Abram seemed different . His face shed years , and the wild spark of his youth flickered again .

He no longer looked like the ruthless man who once lifted a blade against his own blood . " But Mr. Bell , Jude carries the future of the Bells . The choice of who would be his partner is imperative , and you should guard that choice . " Lucas finally spoke. It was not what a butler should tell his master . Even with their bond , a line still stood between them . Lucas knew he had stepped over it . " If it were anyone else , I would worry . But with Jude , I don't . " Abram's tone was light , almost casual . " Mr. Bell , you ...

" Why do you think I gave Jude the Bells and DY Group so long ago ? If I could still handle it , I would have kept it . " That boy outpaces me . I've lived longer , yet he surpasses me in skill . The only thing missing is that he hasn't learned how to cut down his own kin . " Abram spoke of cruelty the way someone might speak of rain . His voice stayed calm , unshaken . Another family would never even think such thoughts . In the Bells , it was life . To rule , you needed steel . Mercy only led to ruin . No one turned away from the lure of the Bells ' empire .

Lucas pressed his lips tight . He knew the truth . Fifty years . For fifty years he had walked beside Abram . At first , Abram fought against spilling his siblings ' blood . But over time ... He grew cold . In the Bells , power came with a price . To inherit power , you walked a road stained red . There was no way out . Turning away meant death . And his rivals were never known for their forgiving nature . Power dulled the heart and left only ice . " Lucas , you've been with me long enough to see it . I'm tired . I don't want to shed more blood .

If I'd thought it through , I would have left Rebecca's trial to Jude . I'm retired , so why do I have to keep reaching back in ? I'd rather call my brother , pack a bag , and visit the places my wife dreamed of but never reached . Jude will win Tilda over . If he can't handle one woman , then he can't handle the Bells . " L " I see ." Lucas let out a soft sigh . It all circled back to her . The lady of the house . No one ever guessed . Not even at the end . Not even the lady herself How deep had she lived in Abram's heart ?

Even Abram himself could not answer . Jude walked Tilda back to her place . " Tilly , my grandfather ... didn't lay a hand on you , did he ? " His voice was careful . In his eyes , cold shadows grew . If Abram had tried to touch her ... " He didn't . He only laid out the truth of the Bells . And your grandfather does care . Not only because you're his grandson , but because you are the one who will carry the Bells forward . " Tilda's voice was soft . To Abram , Jude was more than blood . He was the future of the Bells .

Chapter 397 Talk to Jude When it came to everything else , Abram could let go , but he could never let go of Jude . Whether it was love or duty that weighed more , only Abram knew . " Tilly ... " Jude never thought Tilda would ask something like that . It shook him . 4." Jude , I need to know something . Before your grandmother passed , when she was the wife of the man running the Bells , was she happy ? " Before she stepped out , Tilda unbuckled her seatbelt and fixed her eyes on him . Jude pressed his lips together and searched through the faded picture of her graceful face .

" She wasn't . But she still chose to stay by my grandfather's side . " " She loved Abram ? " " Yes . She loved him . But he never loved her the same way back . " Jude sometimes saw it in his grandmother's eyes when she looked at Abram . There was devotion . But at other times , there was sorrow . If she had never met him , her life could have been different .. It could have been happier . She would not have been trapped inside the Bells ' walls , living each day in rivalry and deceit . She would not have had to fake smiles at banquets while watching the man she loved toy with other women .

The jealousy would not have eaten her alive day after day with no cure to ease it . That truth would always stay locked away . What you could never have always tickled your curiosity . Those who had your love feared nothing . Love itself was a game where the one who fell first always bowed down and lost . At that moment , Tilda reached out and touched Jude's face . Her warm palm brushed his cool cheek . The spark between them burned bright . Jude froze and turned to her . " I was only asking a question .

Don't go looking all serious ." Her gentle smile softened the frost in his eyes . " Tilly , promise me . No matter what happens , no matter what anyone says , you have to hold on to your own truth . Be yourself . Be the free spirit you were always meant to be , got it ? I love you for that . For being wild and free . Do you get that ? " Jude caught the hand against his cheek . His grip was steady . His gaze was fire . " I'll never clip my wings for anyone again . I'm Tilda . I'll keep shining until the end . I'll never fade . Jude , if you love me , then love me this way .

Love me as someone who won't ever be caged ." Her lips lifted in a small smile . Today at the Bells ' estate , she saw Abram's cold heart . But she and Jude would never become Abram and his broken wife . They had their own lives to live . Their happiness would not be chained by ghosts from the past . " Yes . " Jude could not stop himself . He leaned in slowly . When he saw Tilda didn't pull away , his lips touched

her cheek in a kiss so light it felt like a secret . It was like tasting something forbidden and addictive . One kiss could not satisfy him .

From her cheek , his lips slid to hers . A kiss of devotion . A kiss full of fire . At the same time , Daphne sat by Rebecca's hospital bed . Her daughter lay pale and still , drained of blood . Hate surged in Daphne's eyes like a storm breaking free . Tilda .

Unforgivable . It's all your fault my daughter ended up broken and tattered ! 4.The rage Ryan had buried now rose again from the ashes . Preston walked into the room . " Mom , you need to get some rest . Let me watch over Rebecca ." " Preston , where is your father ?

" " He's still at the estate cleaning up . I think he's setting things up to send Rebecca overseas . " Hearing that , Daphne broke down . She covered her face and sobbed until her voice cracked apart . " Does he have to be so cruel and so quick ? Rebecca's already broken enough as she is ! He's supposed to be her father ! Weak and incompetent as she is , she is still our daughter . For nine long months , I carried her in my body ! I gave my life to bring her here . She is a part of me . " " Mom , please . Don't tear yourself apart . I'm sure Dad feels broken too . But we can't fight this .

Grandfather already gave the order . We don't even have the right to resist . Everything we have today belongs to the Bells . " Preston's chest burned with grief . But the end had been written from the start .

Chapter 398 Sorrow Abram had given Rebecca a chance to return to Cetherland . But that chance was nothing she could ever reach . Rebecca would sooner create a time machine than get that chance . Return was nigh impossible . Daphne went quiet . Her eyes sank low , and no one could guess what she was thinking . Preston let out a long breath and stepped close to touch her shoulder . " Mom , I know you're worried about Rebecca . But you don't have to . Even if she leaves the country , we can still call her and even fly over to see her .

" As long as we keep sending her money , she'll live well wherever she is . I know what you said just now came from how upset you are. Don't let Dad hear it , or you're going to get hurt . " You're her brother , Preston . Do it for your sister ! Avenge her ! " Daphne's eyes snapped up , and she gripped his arm with both hands . Her stare was sharp with the promise of blood . 1 ... " Preston froze where he stood . Yes . Revenge . He should want it . Tilda had dragged him through the dirt time and time again . She had torn apart his bond with Kyla .

She had attacked Rebecca , filmed that vile video , crushed three of her fingers , thrown her out of Cetherland , and left her with no way to return . No one had more reason to kill Tilda than Preston . Yet something inside him twisted . When Daphne clung to him and begged for revenge , his mind filled with the image of Tilda . She stood radiant and fierce . She was a world champion, shining under the lights as a queen adored by crowds .

That was the vision that struck him . He was refusing to take revenge on Tilda . His whole being was screaming no .

The pull inside him was undeniable . No , no , no , no , no , no . Kyla's the one I love , not Tilda ! She's my childhood crush , and now she remains my love ! That much is true ! There is no way I will fall for Tilda . Daphne saw his silence and snapped at him . " Preston , what's happening with you ? Even without your sister's case , Tilda is still our enemy ! She's the Jensons ' enemy ! " " Mom ... we'll talk about this later . Right now , Rebecca needs us first . " Silence took place . Daphne stared at him like she no longer knew him .

In that instant , something broke open in her mind . It was the one fear that had haunted her . That Preston might be pulled toward Tilda because she was the true daughter of the Jensons and tied to them through marriage . And if Tilda was luring him because she wanted to get a taste of the Bells ' power ... Now the ground was sliding out from under Daphne's control . That night , Tilda walked out of the shower and reached for her phone when it buzzed . " Mr. Parker , what's going on ? " " Queen , listen . Your squad killed it on the Endralsia rescue . " The brass are thrilled .

" They want to give you medals , and more than that , they want you signed on with the national cyber task force . " He had hinted before , but she never thought it would come this soon . Tilda pressed her lips tight . " Queen , we're in no rush for an answer . I get that you'll think it over . Talk it out with your crew . If you join up , the state will guard your safety and protect your info at the highest level . Maybe you don't care about that as the dark web's top hacker . But here's the real deal . You'd gain access to the government's backup data vault for missions .

" Manfred had hit her weak spot .

That offer had weight . She could slip into countless databases on her own , given her skills as a top hacker . But the servers of a government were sealed like steel with no cracks to pry open . There were no holes for her to find , either . If she had access to that vault , she could uncover what no outsider could ever touch . Even she felt the burn of curiosity . With that vault , secrets of the world would no longer be sealed away . Still ... " I'll tell my crew about it . " " Good . I'll wait on your answer .

" After the call , Tilda opened the Comet chat and tagged everyone . ot79 " Drop what you're doing and meet me at the base tomorrow at three in the afternoon . I have big news . Don't miss it . " " Roger that ! " The next day at three sharp , Tilda walked into the Comet base . Jarrett , Theo , Zach , and Astrid were

already waiting , whispering about what she had to announce . When they saw her , they straightened and greeted her together . " Queen ! "

Chapter 399 News Jarrett took a step closer . " Queen , do we have another mission for the squad ? " His fists curled like he was itching to swing , and his face lit with fire . The others looked just as hungry for action . Their victory at Hotel Morloss had left them buzzing with reckless confidence . That was exactly what Tilda had been waiting for . Six months of brutal training had sharpened their raw talent into steel . All they'd needed was one win to spark the fire in their blood . " This time it isn't a mission .

It's something else ." Tilda repeated every word Manfred had passed down to her . By the time she , the team was staring at her in disbelief . " Queen , you mean if we sign on , we don't just get the government's word ? We get access to the national data . vault too ? " Lucian's voice cracked with awe . " That's Cetherland's master database ! " " For a hacker , that's like walking into a library built by gods . It's packed with secrets the outside world will never touch ! " Astrid and Jarrett burst out in shouts .

Even Zach , the quiet one , had his face glowing with heat . For codebreakers who lived to dig up hidden truths , the lure was too sharp to resist . " At the start , we'd only see surface files . Clearance problem . But every mission would unlock more . And we'd officially be part of the state . There's a catch . If Comet signs , we stop being free . We'd belong to the government . " Tilda's words hit like a stone sinking into deep water . The four fell silent . Joining meant serving as soldiers behind screens . It meant touching the forbidden vault . The pull was heavy .

But the cost was freedom . People once swore freedom was worth more than life and love . That was why Comet had stayed independent . They served their country , but only on their own terms . They wanted freedom . " God , this choice is tearing me apart ! My head feels like it's about to explode ! " Lucian dropped into a squat and ripped at his perfect hair until it stuck out in a wild mess . " Same here ! " I'm greedy . I want both . " " I can't make sense of it either . Queen , you decide for us . We'll follow you .

" Their eyes burned with trust as they locked on her . Tilda pressed her lips together , then gave a sharp nod . " If you're leaving it to me , then ... I have an idea . Hear me out ." 4.They were in Hetsa the next day . Manfred had answered Tilda's call the night before . She told him she would bring her squad to Lab Seven to meet him and his commanders face to face . He cleared it with command and gave her the green light . River led Comet into a stark meeting room , where they would gather . " Sit Manfred himself poured tea for Tilda and her squad .

The Comets gaped at the vast facility around them . To them , places like this only existed on movie screens . They never thought they'd stand inside one . Iris scanners swept their faces , red beams traced their bodies , and machines hummed with the newest tech . Only Tilda sat calm and steady . " Mr. Parker , where's my senior ? "

" He's buried in the lab . The project hit a breaking point . He hasn't stepped out in days . " " I see . Mr. Parker , if you need anything from me , just say so . " " Queen , you're too generous . At this point , it's out of my hands .

We all answer to the professor . " Manfred never spoke Dane's name out loud . He trusted Tilda with his full weight . But this was his first look at the four she brought with her . She swore they were solid , and if anything broke down , she would take the blame herself . Caution was still wise . The subject of Dane slipped away , and Manfred leaned forward , lacing his fingers as his tone grew firm . " Now ... tell me your conditions , Queen . " " Our condition is simple . My squad and I hate chains . We want the freedom to move .

So if you want us in the national cyber force , it's easy . As captain , I need full command . No one interferes with how we run . " " I ... " Manfred's brows pinched tight , then eased as he let out a long breath . " If it were mine alone to decide , I'd trust you , Queen . I'd give you every ounce of freedom I could . "

Chapter 400 Conditions 4." I know you'd never turn your back on this country . Your loyalty runs deeper than anyone else's . It's carved into who you are . And only if you lead this squad with full freedom can they unleash everything they have and fight for the nation's gain . But what I say doesn't decide it . The higher - ups admire you , but admiration isn't must . " " Thank you for your faith , Mr. Parker . That's why I came here with my squad in person , to put our terms on the table . " So please honor what we agreed on last night .

Let me speak with the one who has the real authority " " Alright . He's wanted to see you as well . \* Manfred rose and walked to the computer at the front of the room . After a short was , he received permission . " The barber up agreed . " You'll get your meeting , but only your squad is allowed in . I'll step out . One more thing ... when you see tum , don't be too shocked " The words hung in the air as Manfred left . Tids sat with a knot of confusion . Why would I be shocked ? There was no way it was someone she knew , " The fred's live , Queen " Jarrett's voice carried across the room .

Tide fixed her eyes on the screen as a figure sharpened into view . When bus face came clear , she froze . Manfred's warning now made sense . The man looked impossibly young He had the face of a boy , but his hair was slicked back with the polish of an older man . Each strand store , blank laced with streaks of white . He wore a black suit too sharp for the youth in his features , and his tall frame stood close to six feet . Tilda pushed down her surprise . " It's an honor to finally meet the one they call the dark web's top hacker , Queen . Both you and your squad .

Tm the director of Cetherland's Cyber Security Information Center . " Call me King . " Jarrett and the others twitched at the corners of their mouths . Hackers used codenames all the time . They shouldn't have cared . But this young man of clear power is calling himself King ... It stood directly against Queen . It wasn't a silly pairing from pop culture . If it was intentional , it was smoke before the fire . It was a challenge . Tilda held his gaze on the screen . " Alright , King . Mr. Parker told you my terms . What's your answer ?

" " Queen , you know that asking for full freedom without limits is nearly impossible inside a national body . " " Even though Mr. Parker stands behind you , and even though we know what you and your squad gave to Lab Seven and the nation , the risk remains . If one of you chose betrayal , the access we handed over could be the blade that cuts us down . Promises hold no weight . We have to act with reason . " King's voice carried calm power . Even in refusal , his tone didn't wound . Losing a squad this strong would be a waste . Yet their strength meant danger as well .

If they broke trust , the damage would be too great to bear . " I get it , King . I didn't expect much from this negotiation anyway . But I need one truth to be heard . Comet will never betray this country . Our purpose , the reason the five of us came together , is to defend it and drive out the leeches who try to eat it alive . " Even if we're never official , we'll keep moving . We'll use what we have to make every choice that lifts this nation higher . I'm sorry for taking your time . " Tilda stood tall in her words . Her squad squared their shoulders with pride .

Her voice carried their resolve . She thought the meeting was done and reached to call Manfred back to shut down the feed . If the answer was no , then it's better to end it and find Dane and maybe help move the lithography work forward . " Aw , man , you don't have to be so uptight . I think Queen makes a damn good point . The Hotel Morloss crisis only ended because of her squad . Don't tell me you're jealous of her skill and trying to block her . " The words came with a playful edge .

Another man stepped into view , and he was almost a mirror of King .