

The Ace at the Apex

Chapter 200 Humor My Curiosity

Javier was not offended. He knew that Dana had misunderstood him. "Please, don't mistake my intention, ma'am. Mr. Gander's directing is renowned for projecting the scale and depth of his stories, which is why I'm hoping he could be the one to helm Gurs."

Javier's compliment was every bit as heartfelt as his tone, but Dana was done listening to sweet nothings and empty praises. She already had her fill of duplicity to last her a lifetime.

She waved at his words. "How about something more concrete, hmm? You're sincere in asking Mr. Gander for your movie, right? Well, Old Gander's current pay is 2.3 million dollars, sir. Would you like to pay all of that in full?" She pointed at the check. "You can take that away while you're at it. Come back to me when you've got the amount."

Well, that just made things.. a little more difficult now, right?

"Um, ma'am?" Javier began, a little embarrassed. "I can only offer 3 million dollars. I can't give more than that."

Dana felt her breath hitching on her throat. She moved the cup away from the check and studied it, realizing that it had always been 3 million dollars all along. For some reason, she had mistaken the currency as another famous international currency-which was why '3 million' in the latter seemed less than it really was.

She gawked at the check, stunned. "You... You're really going to pay Old Gander in full...just so he'd say yes to directing your movie?"

Javier nodded "Yep. I told you, I'm sincere in my request and I'll prove it."

Dana's heart skipped a beat. Well, that was some tremendous amount of sincerity! Who in the world would invest so much money on a prospective movie that did not even have a script yet?!

"With all due respect, sir, you're...not doing this for money-laundering purposes, right?" she asked gingerly. "Gander and I have always stayed out of those kinds of things."

Javier laughed. "Of course not, Dana. Don't worry. Should at any point Mr. Gander feels that something is off during filming-be it fraudulent activities or anything that screams suspicion like his funding being lower than what I promised-he is free to quit right away. We can even sign an agreement stating that should he quit halfway, he doesn't need to return the amount I've paid him. In other words, no matter what happens during production, Mr. Gander's 3 million dollars is his to keep."

Dana was aghast. "But what if we were to dupe you?"

Javier waved. "I'm not worried, ma'am. One thing's for sure: Mr. Gander's reputation is worth more than this, while you, Dana, are a famous actress in your own right. I doubt a paltry amount of money is even enough to lure respectable people like the two of you into disappointing your own conscience."

Dana finally understood. This young man was serious about his intentions. Otherwise, he would not have wanted to sign an agreement that favored Old Gander so heavily. Still, something about the

proposal still puzzled her. Why shoot for an Osborn movie now, when the selection for candidates was still several months away? He did not even have a script ready, so what was he trying to gain?

She was just about to ask when her phone rang. She flashed Javier a curt nod and reached out to grab it. And that was when a part of her skirt's hem got stuck at the corner of the table.

It should not have happened! The table had smooth, rounded corners that should not have been able to be entangled with her skirt. But she had the bad luck of wearing a ruffled bottom today, and somehow one of the folds had hooked onto the table like a lasso...

Her hem was still firmly tangled with the table corner when she reached forward

Riiiiiiip!

Two lean and supple legs were promptly exposed to the eyes of their lucky beholder. Even more noteworthy was how high up this new tear was on her thighs. One would have looked at it and declared it a bold, open-slit dress the likes of cosplayers.

Dana was embarrassed to hell and back. She furiously slapped her hands over her exposed legs, stammering, "This was an accident!"

As her cheeks flushed red, she grabbed her phone and quickly left the table, vanishing into her bedroom. She could not stop thinking about her humiliating predicament. God, that was so embarrassing! A woman in her mid-forties, flashing her skin to a young stranger like that?

God! The level of humiliation!

Unbeknownst to Dana, Javier was in no mood to think any indecent thoughts about her. Sure, Dana was gorgeous and seriously sexy, but his mind was more occupied with how to persuade Mr. Gander into saying yes

He had reason to worry. As of now, all Javier had to bring to the table was money. He had nothing else to offer for the project, which could easily misconstrue him as some rich*ss who thinks that having the funds makes him the boss. "The boss demands entertainment from you!" would probably be the unfortunate implication.

That would be a deathly blow to Javier's success. Artsy types like Mr. Gander almost always held a rather uncompromising sense of pride within themselves-especially those who made it in name, fame, and prestige. The more Javier thought about it, the more he decided he should talk to Mr. Gander directly: Failing to do so might cost him his success.

While Javier was still thinking about it, Dana emerged from her room in a pair of washed-out blue denim jeans. Javier had to admit -she had an amazing figure. The fact that she was over 40 did nothing to hamper her allure! This was especially true when her skinny jeans hugged the slim, slender contours of her legs, accentuating her charm.

Javier sized her up a few times before praising, "You're very shapely, ma'am."

It was hardly the most off-color compliment anyone could give under normal circumstances, but coming so soon after the accident?

Javier regretted his words almost as soon as he heard them escape his mouth. And just as expected, Dana's cheeks flushed red, one might think she was bleeding. The woman had interpreted Javier's comment as a remark on her earlier exposed legs...

Fortunately for them both, neither side's embarrassment lasted long. Dana was quick to change the topic, explaining, "Old Gander called. Said his talk with the Department of Culture is over, and he's coming home as we speak. I told him about you and your proposal, and he thinks he should talk to you directly. You'll have to wait for a bit longer, sir. Thank you for your patience."

Javier smiled and nodded before turning to other topics for their chat. As it went on, Dana suddenly mentioned marriage and relationships before asking Javier if he was already taken.

Javier told her not yet before adding, "Are you thinking about introducing someone to me, ma'am?"

Dana chuckled. "For a strapping, talented heartthrob like yourself? Please, that's quite a lark."

Javier gave some chuckles of courtesy and displayed some humble posturing. "Well, marriage isn't the most urgent thing to me right now. But just thinking about it-an amicable, loving matrimony like the one between you and Mr. Gander...I'm jealous!"

Javier intended to flatter the woman. To stroke her ego and get her to put in a good word with her husband later. To his wildest surprise, the smile on Dana's face stiffened into something that almost resembled resentment. "It takes more than amity and love for a happy life, you know. Happiness also comes from...ah, that's neither here nor there. I forgot myself and said some nonsense!" She waved, terminating wherever the topic was headed toward, and proceeded to talk about something else altogether.

Javier could not help but wonder. From the sound of it, Dana and Mr. Gander's marriage was not as loving and great as it seemed. And yet, from the looks of it, these two had always been quite the lovebirds, and Javier had never heard of any scandal from Mr. Gander's side.

Half an hour later, the director Javier had been waiting for arrived. The chat between him and Dana came to a stop.

Mr. Gander took his seat, turned to Javier, and went straight to the chase. "Humor my curiosity, boy. Why are you so gung-ho in getting that Osborn, huh? What's with the urgency and this no-matter-the-cost zeal?" Javier was unsure how to even answer that.

Chapter 201 All Aboard!

Javier could not possibly have told them the truth. No, his secret was not the problem. The problem was that no one would believe something so...preposterous. Therefore, he gave them an answer he had invented just for this occasion. "I was talking to a friend of mine from abroad, and he said we Chineans can't make good movies. He thinks all we make are copycat movies and hacks meant to rake in money. It pissed me off, so I want to defend our filmmakers. I want to make a movie worthy of international awards and show it to these foreigners so they will know that there's nothing we Chineans cannot do! We can be the best at anything we try!"

Javier's confidence made up for his teensy-weensy lack of faith...

Better not think of Chinese soccer if he wanted to maintain this façade of certainty!

For better or worse, Mr. Gander had not thought of the state of their national soccer team at all. He smacked his hand down on the table with a loud peal, exclaiming, "That's the spirit we need and deserve, boy!"

The two of them began to talk about the movie. They talked about the script and Mr. Ackerman's incident, which seemed to have shocked Mr. Gander. "I know Old Man Ackerman. We were the best of chumps when we were younger. He always told me we should work together on a picture, but he just went off the grid in the past few years, so I couldn't get a hold of him. Honestly, if you hadn't told me, I wouldn't have known something this big had happened to him!"

Javier was quite surprised himself. He had not expected Old Man Ackerman to be friends with Mr. Gander at all. Still, it was a good thing. Someone who knew Old Man Ackerman was someone who could play him convincingly.

Javier explained the plot in finer detail. A moment later, Mr. Gander was on board. "Sold! I'm sold! The plot is brilliant. I'm saying this as both a director and a friend. You got me. I'll write a script based on the plot!"

A director doubling as a screenwriter was not unheard of. In fact, it was more of a norm than one might have expected. Still, when it came to fleshing out characters and emotional layers, Javier thought a screenplay by the renowned Saoirse Rand would do better. Mr. Gander, in comparison, had always been more adept at telling stories through the lens.

He shared his thoughts with Mr. Gander. Instead of being vexed, Mr. Gander nodded in approval. "You are absolutely right! I got a little carried away, heh. You're right, there are professional screenwriters in the industry, and I've read her screenplays before. She's quite the virtuoso! Three-dimensional characterization is abundant in her work... She's definitely an amazing scriptwriter. The story is guaranteed to be a masterpiece if we leave it in her hands."

This was a shot of confidence in Javier's heart.

Mr. Gander had more ideas than that too. "I love your story and idea. The fact that the Osborn Award is not a Chinese award doesn't excuse Chinese from joining the competition, amirite? We must let our culture shine on the international stage! I suggest we do not send our story to the panel for a review so soon, even if I'm sure you have a direct line to them. Too many cooks will spoil the food, and everyone has their own favorite version of Hamlet. You know how subjective aesthetics and cinematographic appreciation are, don't you?"

"Instead of letting them alter our style and splice different tastes into a Frankenstein monster, why don't we make the movie and let them get used to our own flair? We might not be able to make everyone happy, but we're the happiest when we get to be ourselves!"

Javier thought Mr. Gander was right. Every single judge on the panel would have their own take and preferences, so taking all of those into account would make the story a chimeric mess. Even if foreign judges ended up loving it, why would one squander all of their money to make something they did not actually like?

After some thought, Javier decided to do what Mr. Gander said and eschewed sending their screenplay to the Osborn panel. A good movie would always have its own unique soul, after all!

The two then moved on to setting a time for their showing.

"I'm gonna leave this check over here," Javier said. "My people will come to you with a contract to sign very soon."

Mr. Gander shot a glance at the three-million-dollar cheque on the table and turned to Dana. "Have you ever seen a young man with as much gusto before?"

Dana shook her head. "Just one. And I'm looking at him,"

Mr. Gander turned back to Javier and gave him a loud, heavy pat. "Time for us to get to work, my man. We're gonna make a great movie for these foreigners, and they'll know...that we Chineseans can make cinematic masterpieces too!"

Javier nodded, looking just as solemn. "Agreed!" Their palms were clasped around each other as they shook hands. Their partnership had just begun.

To celebrate the occasion, Mr. Gander made Javier stay over for lunch, insisting that they should have a round of wine. Javier initially wanted to sit this one out, but the director was nothing if not effusively enthusiastic. "Ah, drinking at home must feel pretty awkward, right? I'm happy to drink in any establishment out there!"

Javier had to say yes then. The director's passion made saying no nearly impossible.

Dana became the cook of the hour, as she whipped up lunch for them in the family's kitchen. Then, Javier, Dana, and Mr. Gander took their seats around the dining table and chowed down. It was a lively lunch made merrier by the presence of booze, although if Javier had to pick out the one thing he felt the iffiest about, it would be Mr. Gander's drinking. His preferred intake did seem a little too much-he had a cup that was at least 130ml and filled with 52% ABV Chinesean vodka-and yet he insisted on setting an example and expected Javier to join him.

It was not tough to follow Mr. Gander's "example of not finishing the cup till the bottom was up. Nonetheless, Javier did his best...

Unfortunately, as soon as he finished his cup and was ready to eat, Mr. Gander took another shot. This was enough to make Dana cry in alarm, "S-Stop, Old Gander! You gotta slow down! I know this new partnership is a cause for celebration, but everything in moderation, Old Gander!"

Mr. Gander was happy to quell her panic with a chuckle. "I'm trying to get myself hammered first, girl.. Then, it'll be his turn! Haha!"

Fine. There was no way Javier could skip this one then

He finished his drink and was more than eager to eat again. To his shock, he had hardly eaten for more than two minutes when the older man was ready for a third shot.

"A toast to trinity!" he exclaimed.

'A toast to trinity?' What was that supposed to mean?

Before Javier could properly decipher his meaning, Mr. Gander finished the third shot in one gulp. Had Javier not been the one to fill his cup, he would have seriously wondered if Mr. Gander had been messing with him by drinking plain water.

Dana's expression was apologetic. "Oh, I'm sorry. That's, uh... That's Old Gander for you. Once he decides you're his mate, he starts giving no damn about health limits. Don't get pressured into finishing your drink in one go, okay?"

Javier was grateful to Dana for kindly offering him a way out, but he ultimately refused to do anything but what Mr. Gander did. The director was approaching his sixties for crying out loud! If he could finish three shots of Chinese vodka like that, then what could Javier's excuse be?

He drank the third shot in one go.

It was a pretty nauseating experience. Javier swore a fire was burning his entrails, but at least he could muffle the damage with some food.

It was Javier's turn to make a toast. He had just filled his partner's cup when Mr. Gander's head smacked against the table and did not perk up again, jolting Javier into a panic. The director had not just...drunk himself to a cerebral hemorrhage, had he?!

He inspected Mr. Gander's expression. He looked fine, and there was not even a wrinkle of distress on his face.

This was not him faking being drunk, right? Because that would be a pretty lowbrow thing for Old Gander to do. After hitting Javier with a triple threat, he could not just bow out of Javier's turn by pretending to fall asleep!

Chapter 202 I Might Have A Cure

Javier was sure Mr. Gander was faking it. He had to be, right? How could he be drunk so soon? He was raising his cup in the air with the zest of a Viking! Then, a few minutes later, he was slumped on the table, seemingly knocked out so fast that it felt like someone had fast-forwarded the whole thing.

Dana scratched the back of her head haplessly. "Aaaaaaand he's out."

Javier was taken aback. "Wait, what?!"

"Happens all the time when he has booze in one hand and a friend with the same vibe next to him," she explained helplessly. "Everyone calls him Three Strikes Out, you know. The first two shots are meant to mortify his partner, but if those don't work, he'll have one more shot and-well, get himself royally drunk."

"Don't believe me? Well, come over here, young man. Take a look yourself. He's gonna throw up a champagne shower," Dana added. She beckoned to Javier to help her carry Mr. Gander to the bathroom, where he could throw up to his heart's content.

Javier was still rather skeptical about it. Could one get so hammered after three mere cups, especially as drunk as Mr. Gander was? That alcohol intake could not have been enough to make the older man sick! Still, since that was what Dana had said, he had little reason not to lend her a hand.

With the woman positioned by his head and Javier on the other end, the two of them lifted Mr. Gander up and carried him to the bathroom. Dana held the older man while he kneeled before the porcelain throne with his head hanging low, like a criminal repenting for his folly. Javier almost laughed out loud

He turned his eyes away from the two of them and noticed a box of blue tablets on the floor. The text on it was written entirely in Hildegardian, and Javier was sure that it had slipped out of Mr. Gander's pocket during the move.

He started wondering if the older man had been masking some sort of serious illness. Bending down, he picked it up and scanned the box.

Dana suddenly reached out and snatched the box from him before bashfully burying it deep into her pocket. "It's, uh, just some special flu medicine. Old Gander had the flu, so he brought these pills back home from abroad."

Javier hummed in reply and did not object. He might not have read the label thoroughly, but he had seen just enough keywords to clue him in on the nature of that illness-keywords like "sex" and "impotency."

It was easy to string these words together and work out just how different this illness was from the common flu. Now, Dana's rather helpless confession prior to this made sense. There was more to a happy marriage than amiability between two people. These two were good friends but a less-than-desirable couple.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gander's champagne shower had begun. He had started to throw up, spewing a spout into the toilet bowl, his eyes and nose watering and running just as hard. Dana patted his back in commiseration, chiding him. "Gosh, you should have controlled yourself, okay? You need to take care of yourself."

Standing idly while gawking at this performance made Javier feel a little self-conscious, so he quickly fetched a cup of warm water for the older man to wash his mouth after all that vomiting. By the time he was back, though, Mr. Gander had fallen asleep with his arms around the toilet bowl.

Dana was kneeling next to him, tissues in hand, wiping the remnants of the vomit all over his face. There was not a single sign of disgust on her features.

And that, Javier was sure, was the hallmark of a lucky man. He had managed to find himself a lovely, caring wife with a matronly touch, after all, and no one had ever said that was an easy feat. In fact, Dana Gander was more than just pleasant to look at. There was a beautiful soul nestled within her equally bewitching figure, and Javier had to admit that time had only made her age like fine wine.

She was alluring. Simply alluring, which was enough to start a fire within Javier...

While this thought was taking shape in his mind, Dana suddenly turned to him and asked for the warm water, blissfully grateful for the young man's considerate gesture. What an attentive lad he was to know that her husband would need some water.

After the two of them carried Mr. Gander to his bedroom, they went back to lunch despite Javier's initial intention to excuse himself. Her husband had enthusiastically invited Javier to a meal, only to black out

completely after a few shots of booze. Now, his poor guest had to work to help the older man out. Dana could not help but feel too embarrassed and guilty to let Javier go without at least finishing his meal.

She insisted that Javier should stay. And he did.

Aside from Mr. Gander-who was still unconscious in his room-there was no one else in the house. The housekeeper had applied

for a day off today, which was why Dana had to take care of all the kitchen duties.

Their lunch ended with idle small talk that just fizzed out after a while. It had been hard for Dana and Javier to talk in a more relaxed environment after the awkward incident back in the living room.

Therefore, after some thought, Javier decided to just be candid

“No offense, but I’m afraid I can’t resist being frank with you. You are one hell of a beauty, Dana. You really captured my attention there, so I was distracted and I just...I acted on impulse. Sorry.”

Dana had not expected Javier to bring that incident up with such unflinching candor. Her face flushed, her cheeks turning bright pink, like a seventeen-year-old ingenue.

One would think that a woman her age should be long past such displays of bashfulness, and yet it was strangely becoming of her. It actually enhanced her already bewitching charm.

“It’s...a thing of the past now, okay?” she murmured in an undertone. “I very much hope you don’t bring that up again.”

“Well then, pardon me again, because there’s, uh, something I do want to talk about. Please, just don’t...Uh, don’t misunderstand me, okay? I’m telling you this in good faith,” Javier replied gingerly. “I...I think I might have a solution to the problem.”

Dana was bemused, but she was willing to trust Javier. Thus, she beckoned to him to continue.

“I can read Hildegardan, Dana. I could tell what pills those were.”

Dana’s face took a sharp dive into the brightest red color. She looked as though her most intimate secret and taboo knowledge had been discovered. Before she could give him a proper reply, though, Javier stepped into the space and added, “See, I have a relative who’s suffering from the same thing. His was self-inflicted for the most part. He had hard, rough sex way too many times, so after a few surgeries, he’s now...uh, depowered. He could only do the bare minimum.

“But! The doctor informed us that if a man is simply born this way, then it’s curable.”

Dana understood Javier instantly. “It’s congenital!” she blurted, springing on the tail of his suggestion. “It wasn’t because he didn’t hold it in his pants much when he was younger!”

Embarrassment caught up to her belatedly. Here she was, letting something so private and intimate slip in front of a guy she had just met. And yet, part of her thought that this was vital for her husband and herself. It was the same part that was now thickening her skin against this growing embarrassment. “He He has been almost impotent since we were dating. He could only last for a few minutes, a-a-and that... Well, that included the time he spent undressing himself...”

“He’s famous, you see? He’s too recognizable to visit a local hospital for this, so all he can do is look for doctors abroad and put his faith in local alternative medicine. Of course, they didn’t work. All those visits and medicine later, and he still can’t keep it up. We had to get someone to help us purchase pills in Hildegard that are only good at making him hard for that purpose, but they don’t really cure the underlying problem, you know? I told him he should lay off the pills, but he wouldn’t listen...

“Even with those pills, he could only last for about four or five minutes tops,” she murmured before suddenly whipping her face in Javier’s direction. Her eyes were blazing with hope one might reserve for seeing their savior. “If you know a doctor who could help with his predicament-anyone at all-please tell me. I’ll do anything in exchange, anything! I’ll accept any condition, any request!”

Chapter 203 Powerful Backing

She would do anything for him-anything at all. It took her saying those words aloud to alert her of the inherently...problematic nature of her outburst. All Javier needed to do right now was seize this chance to ask her for sexual favors.

Luckily for her, Javier proved to be the opposite of an opportunist.’

“Really, Dana, all you need to do for me to help you is ask. You don’t have to make it sound so...uh, grandiose?”

This was far from the most optimal adjective to describe her outburst, but Javier was happy to quickly move on and tell her what he knew. “There’s a famous private hospital in Eyck Land, the capital city of Blanda. A famous doctor by the name of Tunsik possesses ancient court knowledge handed down from the Holy Roman imperial court that, when combined with modern medical advancement, seems to achieve stellar results. Word has it that he cured a lot of patients who suffered from a congenital form of impotency-”

Before Javier could finish, though, a morose look shadowed Dana’s graceful features. “You don’t have to continue, Javier. I know Tungsik. We tried to ask for his help back then, but he refused. For some reason, he just wouldn’t care for anyone who was affiliated with the entertainment industry. It didn’t matter who they were!”

Her claim reminded Javier of a piece of entertainment gossip. “I think I heard about him when I was a kid. Apparently, Tunsik used to date this celebrity from Sammius, but the relationship tanked so hard that it basically left a deep-seated wound in him. From then on, he vowed to never care for anyone who works in the movie industry.”

“Wait, so that’s true? I thought it was just a joke!” Dana exclaimed helplessly, shaking her head. “I’ve actually never heard of this before. But now that you mentioned it, it does seem to make sense...”

Her eyes suddenly lit up. “Wow, you know a lot!”

It was always a good sign when someone knew a lot. It was implied that Javier must have a very wide web of connections in many places in society. The fact that he knew something like this despite being so young pointed to a very, very powerful background. Maybe he had the power and influence to get Tunsik to help.

Moved, she grabbed Javier’s hands. “Can you please help us? Please?”

Once again, she realized that what she was doing was rather inappropriate, but she was beyond giving a damn by this point. "I've been in deep agony for years! Years!" she added, her voice strained. "You just can't tell anyone about these issues, and my husband is nothing but kind and loving to me. I can't even muster the heart to betray him by having an affair! Do you know how hard it is to live like this? Everyone loves talking about how...how pristine I look. How supple my skin is, how well I age, how I beat young women who are supposed to have time on their side. But I know who I am, Javier. My face and figure are both a testament to his wealth more than anything else. I only look like this because I have the money to stay this way!

"But what's the point in all of this? No matter how beautiful or sexy I am, my sex life is still pitifully inferior to the sex life of a farmer and his wife! So please, I'm begging you right now. If you could talk to Dr. Tunsik for us and make him help...I'd do anything for you! I really would! ...If that's what you want, I'll be happy to please you too."

Dana felt flames of shame flaring up within her chest. She almost wished she'd burn to death just for saying these things out loud. How embarrassing was it for a woman in her forties to beg a man in his twenties while offering herself in exchange for his help?

But time was not on her side. A decade later, she would go through menopause. All the things associated with a woman's youth, including her period, would then stop. She figured her chance at having a sex life was basically over. She was never going to experience the bliss granted to every normal woman around her.

Her desperation was real-real enough to compel her to beg Javier with seemingly no shame, all so she could possibly get Javier to help

Javier studied the desperation in her eyes and signaled for her to let go. When she did, he pulled out his phone and placed it in front of his face. Once his retinal scan was complete, the phone let out a soft click and unlocked itself.

Dana was in awe. She knew there were phones that used facial recognition because they were pretty ubiquitous in the market, but that? That was nothing like it. She caught glints of red reflecting off Javier's pupils, so it had to be a retinal scan. If a smartphone had an unlocking mechanism like that, it made Dana wonder how hi-tech it must be.

It didn't take Javier long to find Tunsik's contact info on the black market list. Then, he sent the man an email and placed the phone down.

"I don't know if I'm important enough to make him say yes, honestly. If I am, he will say yes. But hey, even if he declines, I can always find someone else with even more power and influence to make him agree. So, yeah! Don't worry about this, Dana."

Had Javier given her the same promise before, she would have subjected him to pure, unadulterated skepticism. But after seeing

how much Javier knew, as well as observing his phone's retinal scanning function, Dana's faith in him had become absolute. She had never been a member of the common mass, after all. She had enough wealth, status, and connections to recognize influence and prestige. She knew that there was a small but powerful band of elites she should never offend.

“Tell me. Are you supported by a powerful family? Like the Rothschilds?” she asked tentatively.

After spending half a day with her, Javier was convinced that Dana was no gossipy chatterbox with a loose mouth. The only reason she was asking was because she needed confirmation. She needed solace, a guarantee that could renew her courage and faith. If Javier’s family was a powerful, elite one, that could be the guarantee she wanted.

She needed it to placate her anxiety while she waited for Dr. Tungsik’s call.

With that thought in mind, Javier decided to confirm it with a nod. “I guess you could say so.”

His answer was a shot of confidence that went straight into her veins. He was backed by a prominent family after all! Maybe they wielded less power than the Rothschilds, but a fraction of a superpower was still a superpower in its own right.

Little did Dana know that she had misinterpreted Javier’s answer completely. What Javier meant was that the Rothschilds could “probably” be considered a powerful family on par with his own. In all honesty, even the Soroyos would not deign to interact with a figurehead prominent family like the Rothschilds.

Of course, Javier did not need to divulge the details of the ultra-rich and powerful. Dana did not need to know either. She already felt mollified enough, as her husband had hope now. The last decade of her youth would flourish into spring.

Before she could fill her cup with wine and toast Javier for his help, her phone suddenly rang. To her surprise, it was a foreign number.

At first, Dana thought it must be a telemarketer promoting a real estate scheme for expats or something like that again. Upon further inspection, though, she realized the number came from Blanda.

She could not believe her eyes. Gingerly, she answered the call just to prove herself wrong.

A recognizable voice, unlike the frigid undertone Dana had heard last time, spoke to her. “Hello, honorable madam. I’m Dr. Tungsik. I’m calling to offer you and your husband my sincerest apologies. It has been my greatest honor to be offered a chance to cure your husband’s illness, and yet in a moment of ill judgment, I chose to decline. It is an unforgivable sin for a doctor to refuse treating a patient, I know, but I’m hoping that you will allow me to redeem myself by serving your husband with my skills. Hopefully, that will be enough to earn your forgiveness. Please give me your address if you’re willing to give me another chance. My assistant has already bought tickets to Medb. Barring any unforeseeable incidents, I should be able to operate on your husband tomorrow.”

Tungsik was extra eager to please. This was a complete one-eighty from the frigid way he had treated her the last time they had met.

All of this was the work of the man Tungsik mentioned last.

“Most honorable madam, should you and your husband find my previous folly too egregious to forgive, then please at least pass my message on to your best friend, Mr. Kersey. Tell him that I’m subservient to him and my fealty is unquestionable. I’m very willing to be his servant and kneel and kiss his toes to show him my sincerest loyalty.”

Dana was mortified. Tungsik was a man of prominent status! Now, he was ready to act like some medieval slave and recognize Javier as his master? Javier Kersey was truly powerful!

Chapter 204 A Wonderful Mistake

Tungsik's phone call dispelled the last ounce of Dana's anxiety. She hurriedly replied, "Mr. Tungsik, you need not come! We'll be coming to you instead, kind sir. It's, uh, no trouble at all."

She was evidently unaccustomed to Tungsik's overt politeness, which caused her to use the same highfalutin manner of speaking that he was.

However, her reciprocated decorum only made Tungsik reel in unease and shock. Since this woman was Javier's friend, her position must be incredibly eminent. "P-Please, most honorable madam! Please don't. If you go to the trouble to come to me, it will imply that you don't accept my apology!" he said in a quivering voice. "And it will cause me a lot of distress, indeed..."

Tungsik's 180-degree attitude change was just too bizarre to get used to. He was so gushy and eager to please that Dana could not get acclimated to it. Ultimately, she gave the doctor her house address before thanking him. .

To her shock, Tungsik answered, "No, no! I am the one who is absolutely grateful to you, honorable madam! Being granted the opportunity to serve you is my greatest honor!"

The call ended, but the emotional roller-coaster Dana was experiencing was far from over. The Ganders had exhausted themselves while begging for treatment to no avail, and yet all it had taken was one email from Javier. He was the one who had called her this time, as well as the one who had taken a sharp swerve and switched to the extreme opposite of his erstwhile manner.

Dana would have never imagined seeing something like that, but today, the impossible became reality.

She found herself wanting to express her gratitude to Javier.

She could compensate the young man with cash, but Javier's wealth and class would render whatever meager amount she could offer insignificant. She had told him she would do whatever he asked her to, whatever his request might be, but as it turned out, there was nothing she could do for him. He never needed any help, and even if he did, it was going to be something beyond her abilities.

Dana thought about returning the young man's favor with sex. Yes, she felt a tinge of shame upon thinking about it, but it just seemed like the only way she had to thank him for saving her from their year-long strife. Of course, she ultimately balked at the idea because she was sure Javier would not need it. A powerful man like this would attract a throng of young, beautiful women who were ready to satisfy him.

Why would he be even remotely interested in someone whose youth was slipping away?

Strapped for any way to express her gratitude, Dana grabbed her wine cup and clinked it against his. "Thank you. Thank you!"

The only thing she had left to thank him with was a full glass of wine.

She finished it and felt contrite, thinking a single toast was insufficient. She quickly filled the glasses again despite Javier's attempt to stop her.

Left with no choice, he drank along, adding more booze into his already souped-up system. By the end of the toasts, he had drunk at least 175ml worth of Chinese vodka. Combined with how many shots he had taken to get there, even Javier was starting to feel groggy. He could not handle a sip more of that strong stuff at this point.

Fortunately for him, Dana was no heavyweight either. She was rocking from side to side in a manner even more uncontrolled than Javier's. She had to be led back to her bedroom, and since he was the only one who could help her walk, he rose and took her hand.

As a drunk man was wont to do, Javier missed. Instead of taking her hand, he found himself touching Dana's bosom.

The older woman looked up at him wordlessly. There was fog in her gaze, and her pair of dreamlike, half-lidded eyes were sizing him up with seductive ambivalence.

It aroused him. A spark was ignited in his head, and the alcohol in his bloodstream became fuel. Dana was drop-dead gorgeous. She was bewitchingly voluptuous, and she was driving him mad.

Javier's lips landed on the woman's, and his hands-which now had a mind of their own-began to slide down, caressing her supple skin...

Dana Gander could hardly open her eyes after sex. Sure, alcohol contributed a lot to her eyes' heaviness, but euphoria contributed even more

She had never felt such bliss before. He was heaven, and she was his intoxicated, enraptured angel. Even as some of her senses returned to Earth, she found her hands unwilling to let go of Javier. Her fingers had locked themselves around him.

Dana knew she had wronged her husband, but gosh-she could not muster the heart to let Javier leave! She even wished she could stay this euphoric forever and ever. How blissful would that be?

Javier himself had sobered up enough from the booze to regain clarity and observe his surroundings. He scanned the living room before his eyes landed on Dana's seductive curves.

Okay. Things had gotten really, really awkward.

Honestly? Dana's garden was a goddamn paradise. Nothing about her age made her inferior to women in their twenties. In fact, Javier would argue that it was precisely her age that had bestowed her with an extra-delicious blend of grace and sex appeal. Hell, he was enchanted.

Still, Javier admitted to wronging Mr. Gander by accidentally being with her. The director was a good man who deserved no ill, and yet Javier had had sex with his wife while they were under the influence.

He tried to put some distance between himself and Dana, but the woman-whose cheeks were flushed-tightened her arms.

Then, she mewled and said she wanted more...

Javier left MI. Gander's residence on foot, strolling on the boardwalk. A fog was still wrapped around his head, and his steps were light and a little feeble. He had to wonder if it was the liquor's remaining effect or just the result of his two conquests.

He spied a few cafes beside him and strolled into one. After ordering a cold drink, he took a seat next to the window.

His drink was quickly served. Javier chewed on the straw, seeming absent-minded as he drank. After a sip, though, he had a feeling that something was right outside the floor-to-ceiling window.

He could see beyond the tempered glass, so he cast his searching eyes far.

There was a pauper in stitched-up rags standing before the window, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips as he pointed his long sleeve at the window.

Half-hidden inside the opening of the sleeve was a black muzzle, followed by a silencer attached to his gun.

Chapter 205 Who Could That Mad Lad Possibly Be?

Javier knew he was doomed the moment his eyes caught the outline of the muzzle.

He had managed to snipe a glance at his right previously and noticed a three-year-old toddler sitting parallel to him. In other words, even if Javier was perfectly capable of dodging the shot-which he was-someone would still end up dead. The pauper's shot would be enough to kill the toddler.

Javier did not know who the kid was, but it did not matter. Right now, in a split second, he balked at any attempt to dodge. He would not be able to live with himself if a three-year-old died because he wanted to live.

He decided to change position and assumed another angle. From the perspective of a casual observer, it looked like he was shifting his weight very quickly. His final position was one that allowed his most vital spots to be shielded away from the attacker's trajectory so that he would not be killed by one fatal shot.

The pauper, though, did not look deterred. In fact, it almost seemed like he'd be happy to pump more bullets into Javier until he no longer moved if his first shot failed.

Javier considered the pauper's finger, which was wrapped around the trigger.

He suddenly felt less anxious.

He wondered if he would have any regrets should he die today. There'd be none.

That sly old fox would help him take care of his widows-Jade, Ciel, and Chessie-so they would all be fine. The only pain they would suffer was grief, but even that would fade with time. A few years later, they should all be able to move on.

That would be a good thing. He would rather not have them grieve for too long. And a new, healthy relationship might just be the last remedy they needed to help them out of their sorrow

'Plaaaaang!'

As Javier was lost in his pre-mortem imaginary scenarios, a loud racket exploded from the pauper's head.

He jolted. That was it. He had been shot!

Or not. He saw a shower of broken pottery shards burst from the top of the pauper's head and realized he was not going to fall today.

The pauper's eyes rolled into the back of his skull before he fell forward.

Javier could not believe his luck. What kind of windfall was that? One second, he had been close to death, then the next second, Mr. Pauper-Assassin had suddenly been hit by a fallen flower pot and lost consciousness! Was this an act of divine intervention? Was some higher power up there determined not to let him die?

Javier was not going to speculate on his own any longer. He leaped to his feet and strode outside with the intention of hauling that pauper away. He had barely stepped out of the door when someone jumped down from god-knows-how-many floors with a whoosh. The man cushioned the impact of his fall with a well-practiced roll and leaped to his feet before approaching the unconscious pauper with the same nimbleness. "Bro! Bruuuuuuh! You okay? Oh, Christ, don't tell me I killed this son of a bitch with a flowerpot! Come on, boss, lend me a hand here! I need to get this guy in the car and get him to the hospital!"

Javier was shocked to see who he was. Never in his wildest dreams had he thought it would be Herschel Lord.

Of course, now was not the time to play catch up. The men began working together to bring the unconscious pauper into the car. Javier stayed inside the car afterward, unfastening his belt to tie the pauper's hands as though he was poultry about to be butchered.

Naturally, Herschel took the driver's seat, though not before tossing Javier a cigarette.

He lit it. "So, how did you end up back here? Thought you were leading the band way back in Hyliveskia."

Herschel had been complaining about how uninteresting his life was for a while before shouting about having fun in Hyliveskia. After listening to his rants one too many times, Javier had granted him his wish and sent him away. Who knew he would come back so soon?

He was still wondering about it himself when Herschel answered, "Nah, someone took away my position."

Javier froze. "Wait, who? What kind of bigshot could come in and replace you as the leader of a band of 3,000 men?"

"Kenzo?"

Javier's mouth slammed shut.

According to Herschel's account, Mackenzie had taken control over the soldiers under the lofty reasoning that he wanted to use

them for grander designs. Herschel's mission, for now, was to return home and keep an eye on Javier as his driver-slash-bodyguard.

Javier was speechless. He was pretty sure this was not Mackenzie's intention at all. It must have been that sly old fox. Zephiel was probably worried that, with an armed force at Javier's disposal, the latter could go anywhere he liked and wreak havoc. It was a band of 3,000 battle-hardened veterans being backed by Javier's enormous wealth at the very least. That was no small number one should overlook.

All Javier needed was the desire to arm his soldiers to the teeth, and he would have a destructive power in his hands. That sly old fox must have been worried about this potential destruction since he had decided to take the soldiers away from him.

Well, fine by him. The old fox could keep them for himself. The soldiers had always subsisted on his family's wealth anyway, while Javier's investigation goal had already been achieved. Having someone else to manage them for him was not that bad of a call.

The only regret that resulted from this exchange was that Herschel was missing out on this fun. "Aww, that's too bad. You finally got to act like a commander, and now you're back to being my driver-slash-bodyguard before you really enjoyed yourself."

Herschel looked just as helpless. "I know, right?! I told Kenzo, man. 'You gotta let me be the second-in-command or something.' I said, 'At least let me be the captain!' I can't be below Levi and Gabby, you know what I'm saying?" He ranted. "But what did I get? Well, Kenzo kicked me all the way back home to be your bodyguard again!"

Javier puffed some smoke out and snickered. "Aww, feeling wronged?"

Herschel waved "Naaaah. I know Kenzo is doing this for my own good. You're the top gun, boss. Me staying by your side means I'm the right-hand man of a future king, right? The royal knight at arms with a bright-*ss future, amirite?"

"But I have to admit...I personally like being in the war better. That's the kind of place where I feel most liberated."

Javier understood exactly what Herschel was thinking. He meant what he said.

"That's a thing of the future, yeah? For now, Mackenzie has a job for you, and that is being my driver. So do your job well, alright? Hey, if it weren't for you, I would have been a goner today! I gotta thank you for this."

"Please, I knew you'd be fine. You were just worried for that kid."

Javier stiffened. "Whoa. You were watching me really closely, weren't you? Am I under surveillance?"

Herschel laughed dryly. "Oh, we met early this noon, boss. You managed to destroy one of your very own drones."

Javier reeled back in realization. He had thought the people stalking him were Lloyd's men, but as it turned out, it had really been Herschel and his new pals. He had brought two members with him, he said. One of them was a runner, and the other was a pro behind the wheel.

Of course, these were their side-skills. Their main prowess lay in their combat and espionage skills, including their ability to throw people off their scent. In other words, Herschel had formed a security detail for Javier.

“Really? You formed a team to protect me?” Javier intoned. “Did you have to? It feels like we’re forming a band.”

“Oh, yeah, we have to,” Herschel replied matter-of-factly. “Kenzo’s upfront about it. Says you’re gonna be his superior in the future, so your protection and safety are of utmost importance. And he’s right, you know. This incident proved that you need that level of protection

“Still, I have to commend you for being so crafty, boss. Those two are really good at stalking their target, but you ended up confusing them enough to throw them off anyway.”

The only effect Herschel’s praise had was making Javier feel an urge to kick him in the balls. Mackenzie must have figured Javier out pretty well since he knew he would be his “future superior.” After all, the old sly fox would never tell Mackenzie this.

Honestly, the craftiest of them all was the sly old fox himself. He knew everything and was capable of obstructing anything he liked. An old man that crafty would never let a secret like this out.

Either way, his slightly expanded security detail was now part of his life, so he might as well let them stay. Honestly, today’s incident proved that without Herschel’s timely save, Javier would have been history already.

With that thought in mind, he turned to glance at the fake pauper. It was the perfect disguise. People often forgot they were there, and even the police often missed them during their investigations. Who would want to spend their time interacting with a vagrant begging for food and money?

That was why it would have been easy for a hitman to escape that way after his job was done.

Too bad this pauper had not managed to flee. Now, he had to tell Javier the truth. Javier could not wait to be amazed by the real identity of the mad lad who had hired a hitman to kill him.

Chapter 206 Not Even You

Herschel stepped on the pedal of his van. The car sped through the asphalt until it finally stopped outside an abandoned warehouse in the outskirts of town.

He disembarked, meeting two of his underlings who had been standing by. They proved to be people Javier knew marginally-“Running Man” and “Gran Turismo Racer”-both of whom Javier had the pleasure of meeting this morning.

After greeting Javier in the most respectful manner, the two of them hauled the fake pauper into the warehouse while Javier stayed outside, lighting another cigarette and chatting idly with Herschel.

Ten or more minutes passed. Running Man emerged from the warehouse with a newly-extracted name. Harold Dunn

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Javier remembered Harold. He was that rascal he had given a little “physical education” when they had met. It was intended to be a deterrent and a small punishment for his impudence; a painful lesson that nonetheless required about a hundred days of rest and physiotherapy to recover. Who could have known Harold would see this as backing him into a madman’s corner? Well, he certainly did not

appreciate being “deterred” now, did he? Because his response was to send Javier to his grave!

“What should we do about Harold Dunn and the pauper, boss?” Running Man asked.

While Javier said nothing, Herschel replied in his stead, “Our boss has always liked returning sentiments back in kind. You get me?”

Running Man nodded. “Sure do.”

Javier and Herschel returned to the van and drove away, though not before overhearing the sounds of gunshots escaping from the warehouse as the car pulled away.

The pauper must have seen his end coming. His fate had been sealed the moment he had chosen to be a hitman.

That night, Lloyd Young took his usual seat behind his square-shaped table and dined on his characteristically humble servings. He might have changed the menu of his dinner, but everything else in the routine stayed the same, including his monkish ritual of eating slowly, stately, and steadily. His secretary briefed him on his company affairs before turning to other things outside the purview of his company. “There are eyes on Javier’s affairs, as per my arrangement, and the latest information from late afternoon is that someone reportedly tried to assassinate Javier. Before the hitman succeeded, though, he was knocked out cold by a flowerpot accidentally plunging down on him from high above.” Lloyd grinned. “Accidentally.” His secretary sure had a way with words. This term was so grossly downplayed that it sounded funny. How many coincidences would one have to stack on top of one another before a flowerpot managed to land right on Javier’s attacker’s head?

Still, he remained silent, adhering to his solemn dining habits.

Then, his secretary received a call and strode away to hear better. Face wrought with some shades of disquietude, the secretary reported, “Mr. Young, this just came in: Harold Dunn died by falling off a building. Manslaughter, they say. The suspect, who has been detained by the authorities, turned out to be his own father.”

Lloyd stiffened ever-so-slightly, even though he was not surprised to hear about his death. It was only natural to expect that from someone who had hired a hitman to kill another person. Had Lloyd been the one on the receiving end of an attempted assassination, he would have hit back in kind.

What puzzled him was why Harold had not died by accident, but by his own father’s hand.

“According to our intel, Harold showed signs of sexually violating his young stepmother when she came to visit him in the hospital. His father saw it when it happened, causing the older man to fight with his son. Then, among the melee and chaos, his father accidentally flipped Harold off the floor, and Dunn was gone.”

Lloyd finally set his fork down.

He had always adhered to his silent etiquette, and now, he was not going to break a rule he had steadfastly held onto for years because of Javier Kersey.

Instead, he decided to stop having dinner altogether, breaking another rule that he belatedly realized he had broken after a while. He did not finish his meal as he should have.

When the housekeeper came to pick up his plates, Lloyd instructed her after having a sip of his tea, “Keep my untouched steak. Reheat it tomorrow morning for breakfast. I’d rather it does not go to waste.”

He then turned back to his secretary. “Do you really think that’s what happened?”

Frankly, the secretary thought it was plausible. But the fact that Lloyd was asking him so directly meant

that he had to vocalize his reasoning. "It's...hard to be sure, sir. He's capable of it, no doubt about that. Everyone in our circle knows he drugged his stepmom during that birthday bash."

Lloyd broke another one of his personal principles as his finger curled around his fourth cigarette in a row. "Well, well, well. Even my secretary thinks so, doesn't he? Give a dog a bad name and hang him, huh?"

A man with an ill name was half-hanged, because even when he was innocent or law-abiding, he'd already decided to be neither, and no one could reliably argue otherwise.

"If this was Javier's doing, sir, don't you think we should... I don't know, not attract his ire? He's a completely different beast than us, we're legitimate; we're on the side of the law. But him? He's...a gangster."

What kind of man would spur a secretary to advise his boss to retreat?

A savage, that was what. A cutthroat savage, at that

A savage was also the biggest reason why Lloyd kept breaking his rules tonight. He was weighing his intel against his enemy, deciding anew whether he should continue doing what they had been doing.

Lloyd was not afraid of the blood this feud might draw. He had been a serviceman, so he had seen his fair share of blood and savagery, enough to be acclimated to violence. But this was bigger than him. He had to take into account his family's safety too. He was worried that Javier's impunity and methods would extend beyond honorable bounds.

As he stifled the embers of his cigarette with the ash in his ashtray, he made a decision. "Kersey is at least a man who respects boundaries. If we stay in our lane, he won't cross his own," Lloyd said. "He thinks it's easy to finish me off, but as long as our skirmish stays on the surface, I don't think we'll lose."

It was more of a pep-talk meant for himself than a fact. Lloyd had never been scared of anyone with criminal backing prior to this. He had his own army in the seedy underworld. But this time, it was different. He had to define the extent of his battle against Javier.

The fact that Lloyd had to limit his battle on his home ground implied that he might have lost.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Lloyd had to bite the bullet and admit that he might be a little wary of Javier. The attack against his movie, as well as Carmen's trip to the authorities, had given Lloyd a glimpse into the extent of Javier's retaliatory power.

It took him only half a day to do all of those things. And now, in the span of half a day after Harold had sent his hitman, Javier had sent Harold to his Maker.

Success is measured not only by results, but also by the speed of obtaining said results. Lloyd had put himself in Javier's shoes and concluded that even he might not have acted as fast and decisively as his rival. 1

Taking a deep breath to mask what little trepidation he was experiencing, Lloyd asked, "Anything else?"

"Yes. Our intel has come to the fore-Saoirse Rand, VP of Skyward Group, has resigned. Javier went to see her before her resignation, you see, and she left because of him. She was looking for a scriptwriter in preparation for a movie.

"Reivaj Advertising has also established another company, Reivaj Media. It's spent quite the fortune looking for rising stars in the business whose contracts are about to expire too, so it's safe to say they are looking to break into the film industry. One has to wonder if they are specifically showing off to us.

"I've done my research on Reivaj Group as a whole, sir. The CEO is Chad Floyd McCool. The CFO is Mary Jane Gould. The figurehead chairwoman is Jade Odell, who's also Javier's girlfriend. The real man behind the curtain, of course, is Javier Kersey himself. And now, with Saoirse Rand joining their ranks..."

The secretary trailed off, seemingly trying to find the best word to summarize his findings, before

adding, "They are not to be trifled with."

Lloyd massaged his temples. His secretary was right. Chad McCool, Mary Jane Gould, Saoirse Rand-all of them were powerhouses of their own industries. Lloyd would have loved to spend a high price to recruit even one of them to act as the number-two in his company. Unfortunately for him, all three of them were somehow happy being Javier's subjects.

That made Reivaj a legion of praetors, and fighting them would be no easy feat. The silver lining, though, was that Medb had always been Lloyd's home ground. His company's strength had always been in the film industry. Javier's attempt to extend his grubby, covetous fingers here was a clarion call for war Lloyd could not ignore. He would see to it that Javier's dream to conquer the film industry ended up in shambles and ashes.

"They want to attract A-listers and big names, don't they? We'll crush that dream. We'll make sure their conquest ends right here in Medb!" Lloyd declared.

"Yes, sir!"

The secretary then left. Lloyd stood before the window, his eyes cast far ahead into the blinking, bustling lights of metropolitan Medb.

"No one could possibly beat me in a fair competition above the underworld, Javier," he said to himself.

"Not even you." **Chapter 207 Trap, Set**

Javier spent two days at Saoirse's place. At no point did the lady herself consent to him doing so, but Javier was nothing if not shameless and boorish. In the end, she had no choice but to resign herself to her fate.

Fortunately for her, despite any electrifying sparks between them, nothing out-of-line ever happened. The lack of "accidents" was what helped Saoirse relent.

On the third day at noon, Javier went to see Chad, who had flown all the way to Medb. With him taking over the leadership position, Reivaj Media was successfully founded without a hitch. The fact that he had helped find the director, scriptwriter, actors, and actresses had relieved Chad from a lot of trouble.

With Chad in tow, Javier went directly to see Mr. Gander. The director might have become chummy with him, but a contract had to be signed anyway.

No sooner had he entered the room than Mr. Gander leaped out to hold Javier's hands for an excited shake. He would not let him go. His eyes were misty.

Chad was ready to shake hands with the director, but the overt effusiveness oozing out of Mr. Gander as he addressed Javier made him balk in surprise. What had happened?

Javier, though, knew exactly why this was happening. It must have something to do with Dr. Tungsik...

His suspicion was proven to be true. After welcoming Chad and telling him to take a seat, Mr. Gander made up a reason and led Javier to his study... alone.

"I have to thank you, Mr. Kersey! Seriously! I don't even know how to describe this...My lover told me that you recognized my issue since you saw the tablet that fell out of my pocket, and I just... I was embarrassed, okay? I was embarrassed at first because my private issue was exposed under the sun like

that! But it turns out you knew Di. Tungsik personally! You even talked him into treating me, and I just...I'm so happy! I'm so touched!

"I don't know how else to thank you for this, Mr. Kersey. So here, take this check. I'll direct this movie for free!"

It was obvious just how moved Mr. Gander was. He meant what he said. He was waving the check Javier had given him and trying to hand it back to him.

Javier waved dismissively. "C'mon, Mr. Gander. Chums or not, getting Di. Tungsik to help you was very easy. It was barely an inconvenience. But directing a movie takes both heart and soul! You keep this check, man. It's fine. If you have to feel like you owe me, then just do your best and help me win that Osborn Award!"

Mr. Gander was utterly enthralled by Javier's saintly charm. The patriotism in this noble man was off the charts! There was nothing in this enterprise for him. He only cared so much because his foreign friend thought Chinese movies were terrible. Just like that, this young patriot had spent a fortune and dedicated a whole lot of dogged persistence into making the perfect movie for the Osborn Awards to tell the world Chinese could make great, artsy movies too. He was not doing this for profit or any ulterior motive!

Javier's uber-heroic patriotism made Mr. Gander feel bad and just a little small, as though he was standing in the shadow of a demigod giant...

The two of them kept chatting a bit more before Mr. Gander returned to the living room to meet Chad, who then signed a contract with him as the representative of Reivaj Media.

As a contract had more legal-binding clauses and details than a simple letter of assurance, Mr. Gander took some time combing the content with a fine-toothed comb.

A long while later, Chad and Mr. Gander had the contract signed and ready. The deal was sealed with a celebratory handshake.

Great. One step closer to the Osborn Award.

"Speaking of which, Mr. Gander, do you know any of those influencer film stars? Personally, I don't like that bunch, but even I have to admit that these are the kind of people who will help a new company with PR find its place in the market as soon as possible."

Hearing his request for help, Mr. Gander answered Javier's call enthusiastically. "No problem, Mr. Kersey! Just leave it to me! Why, two days ago, I just heard about one of those people whose contract is coming to an end real soon! I'll help you contact them."

He instantly pulled out his phone and began to call that movie star. After making sure that the star was, as he remembered, nearing the end of their contract, Javier turned to the director and asked, "Is it okay if you help with the negotiation too?"

Mr. Gander nodded without missing a beat and beckoned for Chad to follow him.

The two of them left, and Dana Gander descended the stairs, her hips swinging just a bit too much and her cheeks flushing pink.

That's Old Gander for you," she remarked. "He can't help being hoodwinked by you, can he? He really wanted to spend some quality, steamy time with me, and you just had to trick him into going to talk to a film star or something."

Javier waved "Oh, there's no trickery here, ma'am. I sincerely need help recruiting a rising hot star," he replied. "Mr. Gander has to be there for the talk because only he has that much influence, you know? He's the only one who can grab their attention." A

Dana was a little perplexed. "Shouldn't things like these be done discreetly? The more discreet, the better? What if our competitor finds out..."

Dana trailed off, but Javier understood anyway. She was worried that Reivaj's competitor would ruin this attempt.

But then again, that was exactly what Javier was hoping! He was goading his competitor so they'd make their move. Otherwise, what was the point of this setup?

Rising to his feet, Javier forcefully swept the older woman up from her feet and brought her to her room. "Here's my secret: I'm doing this on purpose! I want everyone to know! Just like I set this up so Old Gander would leave us alone...Dang, you're hot!"

Dana's cheeks were burning. She was a woman in her forties, so listening to such a brazen compliment made her cheeks feel a little too hot. And yet, at the same time, deep inside her, she felt...aroused.

What Javier had said was proof of her enduring feminine charm.

As she was too engulfed in the sound of her flustered little heart pounding against her chest to react, Javier lunged at her with the voracious appetite of a wolf...

Chapter 208 You Really Thought Things Through

Chad could not believe just how much influence a famous director could possess.

Mr. Gander brought him to meet a young rising star who, by chance, was in Medb for a scheduled program. The star was just a little haughty when he first saw Chad, but as soon as Mr. Gander was in the room, he changed. His face was oozing with respect,

It was easy to tell why. An actor's job was to act, but if they had the fortune to be recommended or offered a role by an acclaimed director, that alone spoke volumes about their acting track record. They would earn bragging rights and tell the world that their talent and skill had been acknowledged too.

It was why the young star had been so excited upon hearing about signing a contract with Reivaj Media, which would be working with Mr. Gander to produce an Osborn-worthy movie. His attitude toward Chad underwent a one-eighty as he enthusiastically brought up his contract nearing its end.

The young man thought that, should he join Reivaj Media, he would become the lead actor in the director's latest masterpiece. It had only been two hours since Chad and Mr. Gander had come to see the young star, but they'd already managed to talk him into joining them. All that was left was the contract.

While the two of them were on their way home, Chad praised the director. "A director of your caliber can really work miracles, Mr. Gander! I really thought all I would be able to achieve was leave my number for his consideration after pitching the project and introducing myself. Who knew that our secret weapon would be you! As soon as you appeared, that young'un said yes straight away! This is all you, Mr. Gander!"

The director waved, laughing. "Please, this is nothing. In my honest opinion, he should have come with you right now to sign his new contract instead of waiting for you to meet him again with the contract next time! Now that...that is his oversight."

Well, if Chad was allowed to be frank, he thought the former scenario would be a little too overboard for his taste. But that was not the time for anything other than flattery.

Halfway through their journey, Mr. Gander received a call from the same actor they had just talked to. Happy for a chance to showboat how much influence and charm he had within the movie business, Mr. Gander put his phone on loudspeaker for Chad to hear. "Hello, Gander speaking."

"Yes, hello, Mr. Gander! Uh, please help me pass a message along to Mr. McCool. Tell him I'm sorry. I just got a personal call from M 1. Lloyd Young a while ago. He heard about my expiring contract and was ready to give me a contract with his company. As you must already know, Mr. Young's company is a house of talent and acclaim, so... Well, he even promised me that he would make a teen romance movie perfectly tailored to me so I'd play the lead role."

Mr. Gander was stunned. He had wanted to use this as an opportunity to showcase his influential prowess before Chad, but now? Well, he might as well have tripped himself up and ripped his pants. It was humiliating!

He was incensed. But before he could even say anything, the young man hung up as soon as he finished his apology, leaving Mr. Gander with a face red from rage. The only reason he held his outburst in was because Chad was sitting right next to him, watching him.

He forced out a laugh. "Don't worry. There are a lot of these up and rising younglings in the market. We just need to keep scouting."

Chad chuckled and nodded in assent, even though he was secretly not the least bit bothered.

He had started this scouting trip thinking Javier's intention to sign these young, more-influencer-than-actor stars was sincere. It took Lloyd brazenly poaching their scouted talent for him to understand Javier's ulterior motive.

Chad should have known. When Javier had told him to research their enemy, Chad had never felt like Javier wanted to hold those young actors against Lloyd at all. That meant-if Chad's conjecture was correct-that Javier had never wanted these young actors. All he'd wanted was to trick Lloyd into signing contracts with them en masse, like a scattering of bait. The point was to deplete Lloyd's funds slowly by making him unsustainably sign contracts with these actors until his money collapsed in its own vacuum.

Just thinking about the way Javier schemed made Chad exclaim to himself, 'Goddamn it, boss! You'd give the Devil a run for his money!

The rest of the talent-scouting process was just as much of a fiasco. It did not matter who Mr. Gander met. Every actor started out beaming and promising to join them, and a phone call later, they would apologize for choosing to work with Lloyd instead. The duo had managed to meet two young actors and two equally young actresses, and all of them ended up being poached by their rival.

Mr. Gander's ire had reached a boiling point, and he was very damn close to using colorful language, but Chad simply grinned cavalierly, as if the setbacks did not bother him at all. It was a perplexing response for one to have, and Mr. Gander began to suspect Javier's motive.

He expressed his confusion to Chad, hopeful to be privy to their plans. Instead of telling him, all Chad did was laugh and wave him away, "Oh, it's nothing."

It was at that moment that Mr. Gander finally realized the extent of his standing. He might possess a voice, a presence, and some influence in the movie business, but in this case, he was just a tool worth slightly more than a buck. When it came to strategies and decisions, he was given no say or even the right to know what was in his corporate sponsors' minds.

Mr. Gander returned home to his wife. He wasted no time confiding in her about his experience, including the simmering exasperation that was left in his mouth. "Maybe that Javier fella never really saw me as anything more than a pawn, you know? Even that McCool guy wouldn't tell me," he grunted.

Sensing her husband was upset, Dana assured him. "Javier has been very kind to us since the beginning, dear. A handsome pay for your directing work, incredible working conditions, and benefits! He helped us talk to Dr. Tungsik about your problem. We should be grateful."

"Besides..." she added "You're a director, not a businessman. Why should we interfere with the business side of things? Even if they indulge you and share all the details and their devilish side, when things turn south in the future, would you rather be forced to

care?

He thought about it for a moment before assenting. "Touché. You've really thought this through."

He held onto his wife's hand, his eyes traveling up her fingers and arms up to her rosy, seductively glowing cheeks. "Honey? Is it just me, or do you look different lately?" he wondered aloud "You look...really good! Like you've just turned younger! And more sprightly too, just like when you and I first got together. What happened?"

His question made her panic, but a competent actress like her did not lack the skill to mask her feelings and put on a front. With the bashful demeanor of a young woman, she punched his arm lightly, mumbling, "I'm excited about your recovery, that's what happened...And I wish it happened now!"

The director reeled back in realization before excitement filled him. He threw his arms around Dana tightly, giddy in his own anticipation. "Just you wait-once this devil's curse gets fixed, I'm gonna punish you so hard, you naughty girl!" Javier had dinner with Chad that night before visiting his bar. Of course, the point was not to relax and let his hair down. They were there to see Edelgard Weiss. They met in one of the VIP reservation rooms, where Edelgard signed her contract with Reivaj Media with Luca by her side.

Her curiosity about their upcoming Osborn-contesting movie was evident afterward. Once she heard that Javier had finished coming up with the script and had hired Mr. Gander to direct the film, Edelgard expressed her surprise.

She had only talked about it with him a few days ago! How quickly had he acted? He had founded his media company and made real progress, planning for the movie within this short period. Any other company would have spent at least a month on the business side of the equation.

Javier was so fast and efficient. It was unbelievable just how great he was.

The conversation moved on to the plot. Edelgard began to explore the script, and Javier gave her a basic rundown before telling her, "The original plan was to have you be the female lead. But the script turned from a rough idea to a real story and became a story focused primarily on the male lead, so you've been cast as his daughter. Of course, based on what I know, the daughter is central to the story and second only to the male lead."

Edelgard waved dismissively. "It's alright. I wouldn't mind even if it was a cameo."

Javier was relieved to hear it. The conversation went on until his eyes drifted to the dance floor below. There, to his surprise, a familiar figure appeared in his line of sight.

Chapter 209 Caught a Phony By Accident!

Since beating up Gigi in the nightclub on that fateful night, Javier had decided to never cross paths with her ever again. Of course, he'd had to break that promise to himself when Running Man and Gran Turismo Racer had tailed him, as he had met the young woman by happenstance and borrowed her Maserati.

Even then, Javier had had no intention of meeting Gigi ever again. That was why when she'd asked him for his contact details, he had declined without any hesitation. A woman who did not even have stark feminine features would make him lose interest immediately. Besides, the way Gigi had carried herself the first time he had met her had all but ensured she would never feel him u

Nevertheless, Javier got to his feet and looked over the fence before casting his eyes down on the dance floor. There, raving with her hair wildly swinging and thrashing in the middle of the crowd, was Gigi Snowden, who appeared strangely possessed.

She was feral, and her figure-hugging t-shirt had already been pulled off of her. She was now waving it around and shrieking. It did not bother her that she was left with only her black bra on before going totally topless. She was lost in her feral madness.

It seemed almost as if she had taken something hard, and now the only way to shake it out of her system was by raving like a lunatic.

Javier waved at Luca in the room before pointing at Gigi.

He did not need to explain. Luca had spent the bulk of his life in scenes like this one, and he himself had given hard drugs a couple of tries out of sheer curiosity when he was young. He had sobered up for years now, but experience was enough to tell him Gigi was in the thralls of a high.

“You know what to do, right?” Luca heard Javier’s inquiry and immediately nodded as hard as he could. “Yes, of course, Javier! I’ll get to the bottom of this!”

*If you fail, though, you’ll be out of my company. You’ll be free to follow whoever you like.”

Luca felt a chill coursing up his spine. Javier had told him before when he had passed the bar to Luca. A bit of sex and gambling was fine, but he would not tolerate the presence of drugs. It was understandable for young patrons to come here to throw away their usual inhibitions, and some amount of sex and gambling were part of that. No one would want to visit a bar if all they could do was play bingo and waltz.

But drugs? Drugs were intolerable. Zephiel had instilled in his family’s minds the dangers of drugs, calling them the enemy of mankind, even equating them to a potential ender of culture and civilization. Anyone who did drugs would be expelled by the family, no questions asked.

The Kerseys were staunchly anti-drug, and naturally, they extended the same prohibition to their companies and property.

Under the threat of Javier’s frigid glare, Luca quickly got to work along with a few of his people, reining Gigi and her friends off the floor and bringing them back to Javier’s private room.

Javier considered the young woman’s unseeing, out-of-focus eyes and her spasm-like shaking before throwing a punch hard enough to knock her out cold.

No one had expected Javier to solve the issue with outright violence, so the room was visibly stunned. Even Herschel, who had tailed Javier to have some fun could not help but mutter with pity, “Come on! She’s just a cute little sweetheart!”

Javier looked over his shoulder at him. “Please, if this were you, you’d be leaving this place in a box.”

Herschel fell silent. He could hear Javier’s threat behind his remark: If he ever tried drugs, Javier would kill him straight away.

Apprehended alongside Gigi was a young man about 18 or 19 called Jean-Eric Richman. He was apparently one of the young woman’s companions and he spoke with a distinct twang found only in Republic City, a renowned economical and financial hub in the nation. One would guess he was the son of a business tycoon there, and judging from the outfit and accessories he was wearing, he looked comfortably wealthy.

Unfortunately, his wealth contributed very much to his uppity attitude. “Who tha’ hell are you buckaroos? Is anyone gonna explaint o me why we’re being detained over here? Hello? We’re just a bunch of lawful citizens doing lawful things, so I don’t think y’all have any right to detain us, man. Where’s the manager? Wait, no, where’s the head authoritah around here?”

Javier was not in the mood to listen to him yammering, so he waved. Herschel immediately frisked him and pulled out every document on him.

Jean-Eric had not just brought his usual documents but also a pack of pink pills. There was little doubt that Gigi’s strange behavior was a direct result of these pills. Crushing the pills in his fist, Herschel grazed a minute amount with his finger and tasted it.

He nodded. "Low-grade meth."

During his time as a soldier, Herschel had interacted with drug dealers on a half-frequent basis. It was why he was pretty good at identifying drugs and could tell what these were. Low-grade meth, along with the small fragments left after making crystal meth, were ingredients for all kinds of recreational drugs, like ecstasy and MDMA, though the effects were the same. It was a central nervous system stimulant at its core, capable of getting the users high and make them hallucinate and feel sexually aroused.

Herschel dodged Jean-Eric's attempt to snatch the pills back and grinned at him. "Oh, you're going to jail for this no matter who you are and where you're from, brat. That's just the way this country rolls-the law's the law."

Jean-Eric smirked and took a seat on the couch. He crossed his legs smugly. "Muh pops is a politician on top of a renowned businessman, plebs. All senators have to be on their toes when they talk to my old man! So, who tha' hell are y'all again? That's some balls you have to talk back to me like this. You gotta be very careful 'cause if you anger me...you can kiss your *sses goodbye."

Luca approached them and whispered in Javier's ears. "This kid's a frequent patron of the bar, Javier, so I know a bit about him. He's the son of a Republic City tycoon. It ain't a lie that he has a powerful and rich background. I don't know, if this gets to the Republic City business circle,"

Javier turned to look at him. "Then what? What gives these Republic City merchants the right to mess around and do whatever they like? Since when are Republic City merchants allowed to play with hard drugs in bars and night clubs? Lussy, Lussy, Lussy. You really are wearing that title with pride!"

He ignored Luca and took a big step forward, hooking his foot around Jean-Eric's and trawling him off the couch. He then slipped and rolled down.

Javier grabbed a stool he found next to him and began beating the young man with it.

Jean-Eric's ex-haughty toadies were terrified. None of them made a sound, especially after seeing Jean-Eric's bloody head.

Then, to their even wilder surprise, they heard the young man beginning to beg. "Sh*t, sh*t! Stop! Stop, please! Ah was wrong, ah shouldn't have done this! Lord Almighty, my head's gonna split! Don't go beatin' me all the way to Heaven!"

This was a completely different accent from the one found in Republic City. In fact, his accent was so thick that it was unmistakable that the young man came from a backwater redneck region after all. Hearing it made Javier laugh and cry, "Well, I'll b e damned! Looks like I caught a phony with a chair! Can't believe I beat your hometown out of you!"

Jean-Eric kept nodding. "Ya got me, sir, ya got me! Ah am coming clean! Please stop in the name of the Lord's mercy...Ah pretended to be a Republic City citizen around here to feel mighty, okay? Please stop, ah know ah am wrong now!"

As it turned out, Javier's beating had inadvertently exposed the young man's background. He was not from Republic City at all, and the truth kept coming after that. He was not rich, nor was his name really Jean-Eric Richman. He was just a normal university student who had borrowed a lot of money in an effort to gain a trust fund kid's favor and have sex with a rich man's daughter. Then, Javier had ruined

the ploy when he'd had his men capture him before he could get any girl interested. Now, he had been exposed.

To be fair, Javier had thought the young man had some form of skills. Had he not accidentally intervened tonight, this guy would have hoodwinked all these trust fund kids to hell and back.

Luca suddenly lunged and swung at Jean-Eric, who shrieked in pain, as hard as he could.

Luca was livid. He had just told Javier that he had investigated this man thoroughly and could swear he was the son of a Republic City tycoon!

And now, all of a sudden, he was speaking in this infuriating backwater accent like some rural bumpkin! Forget about the rich this guy was just a working-class man's spawn! Luca was completely humiliated. God, he looked like an idiot!