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In the end, he had no choice but to watch Tessa leave in a cab. Despite this, he still drove behind her cab as he was worried about her. But, of course, Tessa wasn't aware of this at all. Once she got back to the villa, she was just about to head upstairs when she received a video call from Nicholas. "Why are you home so late?"

Nicholas saw Tessa with her violin case still hanging from her shoulder-she looked like she had just gotten home. He frowned when he saw this. However, she didn't bother to hide the truth from him. "When I performed at the restaurant earlier, I bumped into Mr. Louis's nephew. I bought him a cup of coffee to thank him for finding the materials needed to fix my violin."

Nicholas didn't overthink much upon hearing her explanation, but he was curious... "Since when did you get to know Mr. Louis's nephew?"

"Did I not tell you about him?" Tessa was surprised. Only then did she realize that she had been too excited when she first got her violin fixed that she had completely forgotten to tell Nicholas about Angus, so she repeated the story to him. "That was how I met him," she explained.

When she finished talking, she gave him a suspicious glance. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"Do I look jealous?" he responded with a question of his own. Although he wasn't fond of the idea of her spending time alone with another man, he would never admit to such things. So instead, he shifted the topic to remind Tessa about returning home late at night. "You should come home a little earlier. You're a girl living on your own it's dangerous for you to be out at this hour."

"Don't worry. I'll be a little more careful. You don't have to worry about me." Tessa felt a warm feeling in her heart as she knew that Nicholas was just concerned for her. At the same time, she decided that she would head home a little earlier in the future so that he wouldn't have to worry about her.

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Nicholas wasn't aware of her thought processes, and he couldn't help but nag at her for a while more-he thought she sounded like she was brushing this matter off. Tessa chuckled when she noticed how worried he seemed. "I realized that you've been nagging me much more, Nicholas. I don't recall you being like that in the past."

She rested her chin on her palm as she beamed at him. He maintained a poker face as he spoke. "I wouldn't bother to say anything if you were anyone else." He gazed at her seriously.

She stuck her tongue out in response to the man's stern glare. "Alright, alright. I know you're saying this for my own good. It's all my fault, alright?" She had to coax him for a while more before his gaze softened a little.

The couple chatted for a while more before Nicholas got Tessa to end the call and get some rest. After they got off the call, Nicholas sat in his office with a severe look on his face. Although she had managed to change the topic earlier, he was still concerned about the fact that she had returned home at such a late hour. He was even more worried since her performances were usually during the nighttime.

He contemplated this matter for a while before calling Edward into his office. "What can I do for you, President Sawyer?" Edward spoke in a respectful tone from where he stood at the entrance of the office as he patiently waited for his orders.

Nicholas looked up and shot Edward a glare before speaking in an icy tone. "I want you to arrange for someone to head to Vienna. I want someone to look out for her secretly."

"Yes, sir!" Edward excused himself after receiving his orders.

The next day, Hathaway called Tessa into her office after Tessa arrived at practice. "How have your performances at the restaurant been so far?"

Tessa smiled in response. "It has been going pretty well."

"You're still as humble as ever," Hathaway teased. "Even though I haven't been to the restaurant you're performing at, I've heard many people recommending it to me in the past few days."

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A rather bashful look surfaced on Tessa's face when she heard the other woman's words. Nevertheless, she felt like her skills were finally being validated.

"How do you feel after performing in the restaurant for so many days?" Hathaway continued to

ask.

"My feelings?" Tessa thought about it for a moment before responding. "I think I'm starting to get used to being in locations with many people, and I am getting more familiar with performing on stage."

Hathaway nodded-she thought that this sounded like an improvement. Tessa had always performed well on stage but still lacked some maturity in her performances.

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Tessa could only improve because Hathaway had been flexible enough to allow her to perform outside. They talked about music theory for a while before changing topics to the second orchestra team. "I've already told the shareholders about the second team, and they are all very supportive of it. But..."

Hathaway paused for a moment-she had a conflicted expression. Tessa thought that something had happened, so she checked in with Hathaway. "But...?"

"There have been some changes since I last told you about this." Hathaway glanced at Tessa apologetically. "I previously told you that I wanted you to be the lead violinist of the second team and that I wanted you to guide them. However, some shareholders didn't agree to this."

Tessa couldn't deny the fact that she was disappointed upon hearing this news. However, she quickly regulated her emotions before smiling at Hathaway. "It's fine. The shareholders have the right to express their opinions."

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"Indeed. They think that I'm being unfair toward the others," Hathaway said with a nod. Tessa didn't know what to say after that, Objectively speaking, it was rather unfair to the rest of the orchestra team. Tessa thought about it for a moment before speaking, "Regardless of the outcome, I trust you, Miss Hathaway."

Hathaway's gaze softened upon hearing Tessa's last few words. She could tell that Tessa genuinely trusted her. "I'm glad to hear that you trust me. I've already discussed things with the shareholders. The most capable member will get to take the lead for the second team, and we have come up with a plan to host a competition that will decide who gets this role."

Tessa thought that this sounded like a good idea. "Miss Hathaway, can you tell me when the competition is happening and what rules it will consist of?"

"We're still in the process of finalizing the dates and the rules. Once we're done discussing this, we'll post the announcement on the orchestra's billboard," Hathaway explained. Tessa nodded without asking about anything else. Hathaway raised an eyebrow when she saw how calm Tessa looked. "Don't you have any opinions about this competition?" she asked.

Tessa glanced at Hathaway before realizing what Hathaway was referring to. "I think it's a good idea to host this competition. This way, everyone gets a fair chance to compete against one another. But, of course, I still believe that I'll be able to win the competition. My ultimate goal has always been to become the lead violinist, after all."

Hathaway's gaze was filled with satisfaction as she looked at the confident girl before her eyes, and she had always admired how courageous Tessa was. "Do you know why I agreed with the shareholders to host this competition for the lead violinist? It's because I trust that you'll be able to win. When that happens, no one else can say that I was biased for giving you this role."

Tessa and Hathaway chatted in the office for a while more before they headed off to practice. Little did they know that Kathleen was the one who had pushed for this competition to happen. Hathaway Philharmonic's shareholders were made up of seniors who had watched Kathleen grow into a woman, so they were extremely close to Kathleen.

When Kathleen found out that her mother was about to create a second orchestra team and that

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her mother had chosen Tessa as the lead violinist, she decided that she would have to step in to stop Tessa from getting the role.

That night, Kathleen found herself in a bar on one of the well-known recreational streets. Kathleen had brought a few of the best violinists 'out for a beer, and these violinists knew that Kathleen and Tessa were not on good terms.

In particular, a gorgeous woman called Cindy believed that she had the chance to obtain the lead role in the second orchestra. However, the moment Tessa showed up, Cindy felt like her ranks had dropped in the team. Kathleen glanced at Cindy with a sinister look in her eyes. It was clear from the look in her blue eyes that she was plotting against Tessa.

The few of them chit-chatted for a while, and Kathleen casually spoke up later in the night. "I heard that you guys had increased your training intensity for the sake of the upcoming competition. You know you guys can always ask me for guidance if you need it."

The rest of the people were puzzled upon hearing this. After all, Kathleen had never offered to guide others in the past. However, Cindy rejected Kathleen's order in a confident tone. "I'm not worried about the competition at all. I'm sure that I'll get first place."

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Kathleen smiled before she intentionally praised the other woman. "I'm rooting for you too." The rest of the orchestra members also began to show their support for Cindy. "Cindy is the most skilled among us-she's sure to win the competition," one uttered.

"When that happens, you will be the lead violinist of the second orchestra team. You'll have to look out for us then, Cindy." The rest of the members knew themselves well enough to know that Cindy was both more experienced and skilled than them.

Cindy was pic

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was pleased to hear their words and vowed to look out for everyone after becoming the concertmaster. A look of disdain flashed across Kathleen's eyes when she saw the few of them laughing and chatting. But for the sake of her plan, she forced herself to be patient with them. "Actually, this whole competition wasn't supposed to exist at first. It was only hosted because my mother requested for Tessa to be the concertmaster of Group Two. The other shareholders had initially chosen Cindy to take up this role."

The few members who had been laughing felt their smiles freeze on their faces upon hearing this. Even Cindy's expression turned sour, and she stared at Kathleen before questioning her. "What's going on here?"

Kathleen didn't bother to hide anything; however, she did exaggerate the story of how her mother tried to fight for Tessa to be the lead violinist. "I agree that Tessa is a good player, but I

think you're just as good as her. Furthermore, you're way more experienced than her, so I think you'd suit Group Two better. The whole competition only exists because my mother is biased toward Tessa. It's really a waste of everyone's time."

"It seems like Miss Hathaway is truly biased," someone commented.

"She is! She usually doesn't allow us to perform outside, but those rules didn't apply to Tessa at all." The other members began to protest, heating up the discussion they had. Cindy felt more enraged upon hearing their words. "Who does Tessa think she is? During this competition, I will show her what it means to respect her seniors!"

Tessa should just wait for her turn, right? Does she think that everyone else has to step aside just because she is Miss Hathaway's protégé? Cindy thought.

Tessa wasn't aware of what happened at the bar at all. The next morning, she brought her violin case to practice as usual. "Good morning!" She smiled and greeted the members around her. However, many of them ignored her and pretended as if she didn't exist. Her smile stiffened when she realized that no one was responding to her. She gazed at her surroundings and pressed her lips together before walking to the practice room when she saw that everyone was ignoring her. While she made her way there, she wondered why the members showed such a massive change in attitude toward her.

Could all of them be distancing away from me because they all see me as a threat in the competition? If that's the case, these people are way too scary. But, on the other hand,

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it's just a competition-is it worth it to hurt someone else's feelings over such a matter? she wondered.

Mona came over to speak to Tessa during their lunch break. She edged close to Tessa's ear before whispering to her. "Did you realize that everyone is acting a little oddly today?"

"I did." Tessa nodded and told Mona her thoughts. "I think they're going overboard by doing such a thing," she commented. Mona agreed with her sentiment. "The competitions within the team aren't usually so intense," Mona commented. She held onto her chin as she tried to figure out what was happening.

Tessa decided to look past this matter when she saw Mona struggling to comprehend the situation. "Regardless of the reason, I guess this isn't entirely bad news. But, since the competition is so strong. it'll put everyone under more pressure. I kind of like this feeling-it forces everyone to improve."

"Is that so?" Mona stared at Tessa with a look of surprise on her face. However, Tessa only raised an eyebrow before speaking in a confident and firm tone. "Why not? I feel confident about my abilities, anyway. So, no matter how powerful my opponents are, I'm sure I'll be able to overpower them and win this competition!"

Mona was stunned when she saw the self-assured woman speaking with a glow on her face. Mona was dazed for a moment before she praised the other woman. "You have such a great attitude, Tessa. I believe you can win the competition and obtain the spot as the concertmaster too!"

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"I hope your words will come true!" Tessa's grin widened when she saw Mona cheering for her.

The two girls chatted for a while more before Mona headed off for practice. That night. Tessa arrived home a little later than usual because she slightly extended her training hours, so it was nearly 9.00PM by the time she arrived home and freshened up.

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She had just finished showering when Nicholas video-called her. His gaze darkened when he saw the girl whose cheeks were still flushed from the warm bath she had taken. At that moment, he truly wished he had told her to stay in the country with him back then. He missed her so badly that he could feel it in his bones.

However, he tried his best to suppress the emotions he felt as he addressed her in a somewhat husky voice. "Why are you home so late today?"

"I extended my practice hours, so I'll probably be home at this hour from now on." Tessa didn't realize the odd look on the man's face and she began blabbering about her current situation. "I'm afraid I won't have much time to chat with you in the upcoming weeks," she told him.

"It's fine. You can just call me when you're free or tired of practicing. Call me if you feel like you need to relax for a little." Nicholas was extremely understanding and supportive of her as he knew that she was preparing for the competition.

Furthermore, even if she didn't have the time to contact him, at least he had a bodyguard keeping an eye over her. The bodyguard could report about her condition anytime he wanted to check up on her, but it was obvious that she wasn't aware of the arrangement he had made.

A sweet smile formed on her face when she saw how understanding Nicholas was. "We may spend a little less time together during this period, but I want you to know that I'm going to miss you a lot," she murmured softly and gently.

"I'm going to miss you too," he said while giving her a loving gaze. Although they were separated by their phone screens, they could still feel the love from one another right then.

For the next few days, Tessa went through intensive practices every day. She even changed her performance schedule at the restaurant to only perform once every two days. Wilbur was aware that Tessa was competing for the principal violinist role in Hathaway's new orchestra group, so he tried his best to accommodate her timing. She was extremely thankful for Wilbur's kind gestures, and she told herself that she would have to repay him someday.

Tessa was always the last to leave practice during that period of time. As a result, she lost a lot of weight as her schedule was jam packed.

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One afternoon, Mona dropped by to visit Tessa after her meal and found Tessa practicing in the studio. "Aren't you working yourself a little too hard, Tessa?" Mona sighed as she walked over to check on the girl. "Have you had your lunch?"

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"I'm about to have it soon," Tessa replied with a smile.

Mona made a playful comment when she saw how skinny Tessa's face had become. Treel ashamed of myself whenever I see how hard you're working."

"I don't have a choice. I've given up on too many things for the sake of my dreams. I really want to achieve something as soon as possible." Tessa lowered her gaze to have her thick lashes concealing the emotions in her eyes. I left my brother, and I gave up on all the time I could have spent with Nicholas just for the sake of my dreams. I've already given up so much-how could I not work hard now? I have to achieve something to feel proud of myself, right?

Mona could tell that there had to be some backstory in Tessa's life when she heard the rather blue tone in Tessa's voice.

"Still, you must take care of your health even when working hard. The weather has been turning cold, so it's really easy to fall sick during this period," Mona reminded her kindly.

"I'll take good care of myself. Don't worry about me." Tessa smiled in response as she could tell that Mona genuinely cared for her.

On the other hand, Nicholas had already gone for three days without speaking to Tessa. By the third night, he decided to video-call her as he missed her too much. "Good morning, Nicholas." Tessa greeted him through the video call.

However, he immediately noticed the drained look on Tessa's face. They had only chatted for a while before she fell asleep with the phone still in her hands; his gaze landed on the girl's evidently skinnier face as he frowned while thinking about something.

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Although Nicholas had always supported Tessa in chasing her dreams, he didn't want her to neglect her health for the sake of her dreams. So, he longingly gazed at her face in the video call and waited for a while before finally ending the call.

A while later, Gregory walked over to Nicholas with a gloomy look on his face. The young boy had no idea that his father had just spoken to Tessa on the phone. "Daddy," Gregory mumbled.

"What is it?" Nicholas asked.

"When are we going to see Miss Tessa?" Gregory pouted his lips while looking at his father. The young boy hadn't spoken to Tessa in days and missed her a lot. Nicholas felt rather emotional when he looked into his son's hopeful gaze. But he eventually calmed himself down before responding in a flat tone. "I'm afraid I don't have the time for that recently."

Nicholas wasn't lying entirely-he had been facing several issues after canceling his partnership with the Stones, and he had to work hard to resolve them. On top of that, he knew that he would only cause Tessa more stress if they were to visit her during her competition period.

Gregory wasn't aware of any of this. So, when the young boy heard that he wouldn't get to meet Tessa, he was extremely disappointed. "But I really miss her," he muttered, hanging his head low. Nicholas felt somewhat guilty when he saw the young boy's expression. "I'll bring you to see her once I'm done with all my work here," Nicholas offered.

The young boy seemed a little more excited after that. His eyes twinkled as he glanced at the documents on his father's desk while urging his father to work. "You should hurry up and get started with your tasks! I'll stop disturbing you now!" Gregory immediately jogged out of the study after that.

After leaving the country, Hayley took a transit to arrive in Vienna. She dealt with her accommodation before getting someone to search for Tessa. She received the information she needed in less than a day, but she felt like she was about to burst out in anger when she saw the information she received.

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Hayley hadn't expected Nicholas to purchase some property in Vienna just for the sake of Tessa. "Tessa, you b*tch! Who do you think you are?! Huh?" Hayley threw the documents on the ground before stomping on them. Among the papers was a picture of Tessa walking into a grand manor. "I'm about to make life really hard for you, you b*tch! If I can't get the man I want, you aren't going to get him either!"

Hayley gritted her teeth as she was filled with shame and hatred. Although she had the urge to murder Tessa right there and then, she managed to calm herself down. She knew that she didn't have much of a chance to attack Tessa just yet.

Meanwhile, Tessa didn't know about anything that was going on. She brought her violin case over

to the orchestra practice. To her surprise, she bumped into Kathleen, whom she hadn't seen in a few days. "You're here, Tessa." Kathleen amicably greeted Tessa, and she even slipped her arm around Tessa's as she spoke. Unfortunately, her body stiffened in response to Kathleen's friendliness as she couldn't get used to it just yet.

However, Tessa realized how she couldn't seem to pull her arm away from Kathleen after giving it a few tries. In the end, Tessa had no choice but to address Kathleen directly. "Can you let go of me? I don't like it when people other than my family come so close to me."

Kathleen's smile froze briefly as a threatening glare flashed across her eyes. However, she only responded with a dejected look on her face. "Do you still have something against me, Tessa? I just wanted to get closer to you," she whined.

Tessa could feel her hair standing on end when she saw the way Kathleen acted. The members around them began to discuss among themselves when they saw this happening. "Isn't Tessa going overboard with her words? It seems like Kathleen is really changing her ways, yet Tessa seems to be caught up in the past. Isn't Tessa a little too petty?" one asked.

"I guess she's too sensitive," someone muttered.

Mona felt the need to stand up for Tessa when she heard the other members talking smack about

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Tessa. "You guys make it sound so easy? Why don't you try going through what Tessa had to go through? I'd like to see if you guys can forgive Kathleen then," Mona said.

The rest of the members were speechless after that, but a few continued to wear displeased looks on their faces.

Mona wanted to say more, but Tessa stopped her just in time as her eyes glinted when she observed Kathleen, who was right in front of her. It doesn't matter if Kathleen has genuinely turned over a new leaf or if she's just faking it. Since she likes acting so much, I guess I'll have to play along with her.

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"Kathleen, I just told you that I'm not used to being physically close with people outside my family. I don't have anything against you, and I've left the past in the past. If you wish to make that argument, then would it be right for me to think that you're the one who has been bothered by it all along?" Tessa asked.

Kathleen was stunned as she hadn't expected Tessa to escape so easily. "It seems like I must have misunderstood you, Tessa." Kathleen narrowed her eyes a little as she let out a laugh. In contrast, Tessa frowned when she heard those words. "Do you have anything else to say? I would like to head off to practice if there's nothing else..." Tessa was all out of patience when it came to Kathleen.

"I just heard about the orchestra competition's rules, and I think you'll do a great job. Good luck!" Kathleen pretended not to hear the impatience in Tessa's voice, and she cheered on Tessa instead. Tessa felt goosebumps forming on her skin when she saw the sincere look on Kathleen's face. Is she really the Kathleen that I used to know?

Although Tessa felt really uneasy, she didn't show those emotions on her face as she replied graciously, "Thank you. I'll work hard." Then, she turned around after nodding goodbye.

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The smile remained on Kathleen's face even as she watched Tessa leave. However, there was a cold and sinister look in Kathleen's eyes. She gritted her teeth as she thought, Do you think you're going to get the role as the concertmaster, Tessa? In your dreams! I'll never let you have it your way!

The very next morning, the orchestra's management team released the competition's rundown to everyone. All of the orchestra members gathered at the announcement board. "The orchestra will hire five of the most outstanding musicians in the industry as judges of the competition. These people will be the ones picking the concertmaster in order to ensure that everything is fair and square. As of now, the judges are Guntram Muller, Boris Smirnoff, Edgar Traynor, and Elijah Efron," Hathaway announced.

"Oh gosh, I can't believe you managed to hire Mr. Muller as one of the judges, Miss Hathaway." Guntram was one of the most widely recognized musicians—he was an all-rounded musician.

"Hold on. There are only four judges here. Where's the fifth?" a member piped up.

"Could the fifth one be Scott?" someone asked.

"I think it's possible. Scott is really close to Miss

Hathaway, and he's a skilled musician as well. So, I bet that there's a high chance of him being the last judge."

Many of the orchestra members noted agreeably. After that, they continued to look at the announcement. They realized that the date of the competition was set at the start of the following month. Everyone felt extra pressured by the thought of it. It was only a few weeks until the competition day. Soon enough, all of the members who had been surrounding the announcement board returned to their practice rooms. They didn't have much time, after all—they had to cherish every moment that they had to practice. Tessa could sense the tension in the air, making her train even harder than before.

When afternoon came, Scott showed up and jogged over to the rest of the orchestra team. He was tall and lanky—every part of his appearance screamed elegance. All the members hurried over to welcome him when they saw him arrive. "There you are, Mr. Brooks. It's been a while."

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"Can you tell us if you've agreed to be one of the judges for our competition?" someone asked out of curiosity.

However, Scott only smiled without making any comments. The few members decided to stop asking about the competition since they didn't have an answer to it. A while after that, Scott followed Tessa to her practice room. However, she wasn't aware of his presence as she was extremely focused on her violin.

Scott didn't bother to disturb her, either—he simply stood by the front door quietly. Tessa was dressed in a simple dress, and the smooth skin on her face made her look good even though she didn't apply any foundation. Scott was utterly mesmerized by her looks, and a mixture of emotions seemed to fill his gaze as he stared at her. Finally, after a while, Tessa finished playing an entire song, and he raised his hands to applaud her.

Tessa turned to eye the man puzzledly when she heard his voice. "When did you come over, Mr. Brooks?" she asked.

"I just arrived a while ago. I saw you practicing, so I didn't want to bother you," he explained. Then, with a smile on his face, he walked over to Tessa. "I realized that you're really serious during your recent practices. Have you been stressed out over this matter?"

"I guess so." Tessa couldn't deny it.

"You'll have to work hard, then. I'm not going to give you an easy way out," Scott teased.

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"I'll work hard and won't need you to go easy on me." Tessa was confident in herself. Nevertheless, she had to rely on her own efforts to obtain the role of the concertmaster. When Scott saw the assured look on the girl's face, his gaze darkened as a hint of bitterness surfaced in it. However, he quickly looked away before responding to her words. "I'm not going to make it easy for you, but as a friend, I can do you a favor," he offered.

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"Forget it. I'm not facing any issues recently, anyway." Tessa rejected him once more. Since she had decided to rely on her own abilities, she decided that she wouldn't accept anyone's help. Moreover, she didn't want others to spread nasty rumors about her when she actually won the competition fair and square. Perhaps Scott could tell what was going on in Tessa's mind as he no longer insisted on doing her a favor after that. Instead, he changed the topic to talk about the fun stuff he had encountered in other countries recently.

Both Tessa and Scott chatted happily in the studio. The atmosphere inside was harmonious, but a dark aura came from outside the room as Kathleen glared at them resentfully. She had received the news the moment Scott arrived at the orchestra's practice location. However, after her previous experience at the detention center, she felt too embarrassed to meet him, so she hid away from him. Yet, she felt extremely jealous when he saw her chatting with Tessa.

Perhaps Kathleen's glare had given off a rather noticeable aura for Tessa and Scott both turned around to look in her direction simultaneously. "Kathleen?" they both said synchronously; there was even the same note of confusion in their voices. A flustered look surfaced on Kathleen's face as she instinctively thought of hiding away. But before she could do anything, Scott's pleasant voice traveled into her ear.

"It's been a while, Kathleen." He pressed his lips into a smile as he walked toward her. Kathleen's feet wouldn't seem to budge when she saw the handsome man strolling in her direction. In the end, she had no choice but to put on a smile. "It has been a while."

Scott didn't seem to realize anything odd about Kathleen. "How have you been?"

"I've been well," she replied with a smile.

Scott nodded. Right then, he recalled the things that Kathleen had done in the past. "I heard about what happened previously. You didn't have to go against Miss Reinhart. She's a nice person—you'll recognize her good traits after getting to know her a little better," he suggested. Kathleen couldn't help but clench her fists in response to his words. She lowered her gaze in order for her eyelashes to conceal the vicious look in her eyes.

Scott didn't realize anything at all as he continued talking about Tessa. "You shouldn't make things hard for Miss Hathaway either. Right now, she's caught between her daughter and her protege."

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When she heard his words, Kathleen felt like she was about to erupt with jealousy and rage as she thought Scott was just trying to protect Tessa.

Kathleen balled her fists and dug her fingernails into her palms, but she couldn't feel the pain. Even though she desperately wanted to kill Tessa at that moment, she still forced a smile onto her face. "Don't worry. I've already learned from my mistakes, and I've already apologized to her. She has forgiven me as well."

Scott wasn't suspicious of her words at all. Instead, he let out a smile of relief. "That's what I'm talking about!"

Kathleen's heart ached when she saw how he responded to her lie. "I bet you didn't know this, but Tessa and I are good friends now," she continued. Scott was somewhat surprised at this point. But before he could say anything else, Kathleen's soft voice sounded in his ears.

"I was a little too stubborn in the past, Scott. You're not going to hate me for that, are you?"

He curled his lips into a smile when he saw the concern on Kathleen's face. "Since you've learned from your mistakes, why should I hate you?" he asked.

Kathleen could tell that the man wasn't just trying to brush her off, so she spread her lips into a bright smile. "I'm glad that you don't hate me," she said merrily. Then, they chatted for a while more before she left for practice.

That evening, after Tessa was done practicing, Scott walked over to her. "Would you allow me the honor of buying you dinner tonight, Miss Reinhart?"

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"I wouldn't want to have a meal with you during this period. I am afraid of being misunderstood—others might say that I bribed the judge." Tessa declined his offer. Scott's eyes dimmed for a moment. "Well, it's okay, then."

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Tessa didn't hear the change in his tone. Instead, she smiled as she made another suggestion. "I can invite you out for dinner after the competition ends." Scott was taken aback for a moment, and the dim look in his eyes lit up again. "I'll wait for your good news, then," he said, smiling.

After she left the orchestra, she went directly back to the villa. It was rare for her to return home this early. So, after she washed up, she took the initiative to video call Nicholas. Soon enough, Nicholas's handsome and charming facial features appeared on the screen.

"What are you up to?" Tessa gazed at him affectionately as if she intended to make up for the lack of love that she had given him in the past two days.

Nicholas returned the affectionate gaze. "I just arrived at the company," he remarked. Tessa nodded as she held her mobile phone and turned to find a comfortable posture. Then, in a soft voice, she told him that the competition rules had been released by the orchestra that day. "Everyone in the orchestra seems really stressed out now."

"What about you? Do you feel stressed?" Nicholas took this opportunity to question her.

Tessa responded honestly. "It's a little stressful. The judges that Miss Hathaway invited this time are well- renowned musicians in the industry, but I believe I will win in the end."

The corners of his lips tugged into a genuine smile when he saw confidence blooming in the girl's eyes. Then, he nodded slightly before speaking in a soothing tone. "There will always be hurdles in life. Going abroad is your first step toward your dreams, and this upcoming competition is your second step. I'm sure everyone recognizes the effort you've put into this, and I'm sure you will succeed in the end."

Tessa felt like the tension in her heart seemed to have dissipated after hearing the man's words. Then, just before she could say anything, Nicholas suddenly changed his tone. "But I am very dissatisfied with one thing now," he stated.

"What's the matter?" Tessa felt her heart rate increase when she looked at the man's serious expression. I didn't do anything to make him angry, did I?

Nicholas looked deeply into Tessa's eyes while speaking in a tender and concerned tone. "You're getting skinny."

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Tessa was startled for a moment before feeling a gush of sweetness pouring out of her heart. "I'm fine." She coaxed him gently. However, he vehemently disagreed, "You don't look like you're fine. Although I support your dreams, you shouldn't make me worry about you, okay?"

"Okay, I promise I'll take good care of myself!" Tessa promised him wholeheartedly.

Early the following day, Tessa went downstairs after washing up, where she found a strange woman who wasn't the housekeeper. "Please enjoy your meal, Miss Reinhart." After the woman gave Tessa her breakfast, she respectfully retreated from the room.

Tessa eyed the housekeeper suspiciously. Then, without waiting for her to ask, the housekeeper took the initiative to explain the situation. "Miss Reinhart, this is the nutritionist that the young master hired. She mainly takes care of your diet and daily life." After she heard this piece of information, Tessa felt like her chest was stuffed with marshmallows. It was all warm and sweet inside. All of this caused her to feel as though she was bursting with motivation to do her best today.

At the same time, in Dynasty Gardens, Gregory's mind was running all over the place as he hadn't seen nor spoken with Tessa for several days. So, when he saw his father coming home, he couldn't help but pester him. "Daddy, I want to see Miss Tessa. I really miss her. Can we visit her, please?"

Gregory was holding Nicholas's thighs, and his eyes, which were like black gems, already had tears. As though he would immediately start crying if Nicholas didn't agree to his suggestion. Unfortunately, Nicholas pressed his thin lips together as he furrowed his brows. He, too, wanted to see Tessa, but now simply wasn't the right time to do it. So, although he couldn't bear to do it, he still stuck firmly on his decision to reject Gregory. "No, Aunt Tessa is very busy now. We'd only disturb her if we went there now."

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When Gregory heard his father rejecting him again, he could no longer hold back the tears in his eyes.

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"No crying." Nicholas didn't have the habit of comforting anyone apart from Tessa, and he didn't even do it to his own son. All he could do was order Gregory not to cry. However, when those words slipped out of his mouth, Gregory cried even harder than before. "I want Miss Tessa. I want Miss Tessa!" The young boy sobbed as he stared at Nicholas, looking especially pitiful with his swollen and red eyes.

Both father and son glared at one another for a while before Nicholas let out a sigh and bent down to carry Gregory over to the couch. He sat the young boy down before speaking in the gentlest tone he could manage. "Aunt Tessa has been preparing for a really important competition recently, and she's really busy now. We'd be making things harder for her if we visited her now."

Gregory was disappointed to hear this and stuck his lower lip out in a pout. However, he was also sensible enough to stop crying. He pouted for a long while before he finally spoke with a shaky voice. "Since Miss Tessa is studying music there, I want to go there to study too. I want to work hard with Miss Tessa."

Nicholas was shocked to hear this. He would have never expected his son to utter such words. However, he quickly made sense of it when he thought of Tessa and Gregory's tight relationship. "You'll have to work really hard, then. Your Aunt Tessa is a really impressive woman," he said.

"I will!" Gregory gave his father an exaggerated nod. The young boy wore a serious look on his face.

Nicholas tugged his lips into a smile when he saw how serious his son looked. "If that's what you want, then perhaps I can bring you over to meet her after she's done with this competition of hers," Nicholas promised with a smile on his face.

Gregory's eyes lit up immediately. "I always knew you were the best, Daddy!"

The next morning, Nicholas had breakfast with Gregory before he rushed to the company. He had only sat in his office for a while when Edward knocked on the door and walked in. "President Sawyer, I have sorted out the follow-up data needed to terminate our partnership with Stone Enterprise. Since we were the ones who called for termination, we were required to compensate for their losses. I've already proceeded with that."

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Nicholas didn't express much of an opinion as he listened to Edward's reports. Instead, he sat on his executive chair, dressed in a handmade black suit over a white shirt that he buttoned all the way up. His outfit, along with his flawless features, made him seem both dangerous and mesmerizing. The sunlight from the floor-to-ceiling window in his office scattered all over his figure, enhancing his aura as a powerful man who couldn't go unnoticed.

"Go on," he urged Edward to continue with the report. Nicholas didn't seem to care about the little amount of money he had spent on compensating the Stones. "Also, the shareholders seem to be protesting the loss we've faced while compensating the Stones. They're throwing a fuss over this issue," Edward stated.

Nicholas's gaze darkened when he heard this. A threatening look flashed across his eyes. "You can just ignore them. The shareholder meeting is tomorrow, and I'll make all of them shut up by then."

Edward gazed at the domineering president before him while he secretly muttered a prayer for all the shareholders who were attending the meeting the next day. After that, Edward continued to provide reports about other tasks. Once he was done, he turned around to leave the room. However, he hesitated for a moment as he recalled something that he wasn't sure if he wanted to report.

Nicholas quickly noticed the uncertain look on Edward's face. "What is it?" Nicholas asked with a frown. Edward immediately explained himself when he saw the impatient look on his boss's face. "Well, I happened to hear that Hayley has left the country. Should I get someone to investigate this?"

"No." Nicholas rejected the idea without thinking twice. He had made things clear that day, so he was sure that no one in the Stone Family would have the guts to get on his bad side again. Furthermore, he wasn't interested in knowing about Hayley's whereabouts.

Even though Hayley hadn't done anything to Tessa, she had been eyeing Tessa's every move. She knew that Tessa was planning to join the orchestra's competition in order to get herself the role of the lead violinist. When Hayley first heard about this, she nearly fell to the ground from laughing too hard.

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"She wants to chase after her dreams, huh? Well, let me be the one to ruin her dreams! I'll destroy her! I'd like to see how she can snatch my man away from me after this!" Hayley hissed.

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Hayley scoffed to herself with an evil and determined look on her face. After all, she was someone who had been pampered as a child—if she ever wanted anything, someone would make sure that she got what she wanted. Unfortunately, as she grew up in an environment that encouraged her twisted behavior, it shaped her into someone rash and extreme—she would choose to destroy the things that came in the way of what she wanted.

She hated Tessa the most as Tessa was the reason she had been shamed so severely. Tessa was the reason Nicholas hated her so much! How could she not despise Tessa?!

Tessa didn't know about any of this as she was too focused on her training, especially after Miss Hathaway announced the competition date. She lost even more weight during this period, and Mona was worried about seeing her friend like that. But no matter how much Mona tried to convince her, she would only nod along to whatever Mona said before returning to her own training methods. It drove Mona absolutely nuts as she didn't know what to do with her.

One day, even Hathaway decided that she had had enough of this. She ordered Tessa to pay a visit to her office. "Is anything the matter, Miss Hathaway?" Tessa sat on the couch while eyeing Hathaway puzzledly. "It's the weekend tomorrow. I want to give you a day off," Hathaway offered.

But Tessa only shook her head. "Thank you for your offer, but I don't feel like resting now." In fact, she couldn't bring herself to rest when the competition was around the corner. To Tessa's surprise, Hathaway responded in an unyielding tone. "No. You need to rest. I'm not having a discussion with you—I'm giving you orders. You need to rest tomorrow."

Tessa froze. "Why?" she asked instinctively.

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"Did you ask me why? Look at how you've neglected your well-being in the past few days! If this continues, you're going to collapse before the competition," Hathaway said in exasperation. "I know you want to obtain good results during the competition, but you need to have good health and a good mindset to be in your best condition, right? Do you think you're in good condition now?"

Tessa was speechless in the face of Hathaway's questions, and a bashful look spread across her face. Tessa was aware that she had been pushing herself a little too hard, so she finally decided to take Hathaway's advice to get some rest and recalibrate her mindset.

Tessa didn't go to practice the next day as it was her day off. Instead, after she had her breakfast, she gave Gregory a call. The young boy was extremely excited when he received a call from her. "You finally called me, Miss Tessa! I missed you so, so much!" the boy cried in joy.

"I missed you too, Gregory," she replied while gazing at him with a smile that reached all the way to her eyes. They chatted for a while more before he had to go to bed. After the call was over, she held onto her phone and proceeded to call Nicholas instead. When Nicholas heard that Hathaway had forced her to take a day off, he thought that Hathaway was a pretty reliable teacher.

Both of them exchanged sweet nothings for a while more before Tessa urged Nicholas to get some rest. During the afternoon, Tessa headed directly to the restaurant where she performed.

Wilbur felt the urge to speak up when he saw how skinny the girl had become. "It's good to work hard, but you shouldn't overdo it. It's not worth it." Tessa knew that Wilbur cared for her, so she nodded with a smile. "You're right. That's why I got a day off today." They chatted for a while more before she started her performance.

She played a light-hearted melody that received a huge round of applause. "Thank you!" She bowed and brought her violin back to the dressing room after that. She was on the way back to the dressing room when she heard someone calling for her. "Miss Reinhart."

Tessa turned around to find Angus walking over. "Mr. Angus," she greeted with a slight smile. Angus nodded before making an unexpected comment. "Did you have something on your mind while you were playing just now? The way you played the violin today sounded forced."

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"Forced?" Tessa frowned in confusion. "Why would you say that, Mr. Angus?"

"You used to play more naturally and emotionally that sounded mesmerizing to the ears. But this time, it seems like your violin-playing sounds rather stiff and mechanical," he said.

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