



An Arranged Virgin for the Bratva (Zolotov Bratva #10)

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Category: Urban

Description: I'm forced to marry our Bratva ally...but I hate him.

He's much older than me and the muscled kind of brute that oozes Bratva.

He says he's forcing me to be his bride to secure our families' alliance.

But really, he's obsessed and wants to claim me and my innocence for himself...

My overprotective family tried to keep me imprisoned and innocent.

Now my new husband is the one to keep me small.

When he finds out that I'm on a secret mission, he almost blows up.

But then he cuts me a deal: He lets me continue if I give him anything he wants in return...

He insists on training me to make me ready for what's to come.

He teaches me about power play, making my body respond in shameful ways.

In return he demands that I sleep in his bed, helpless against his strokes.

In return he claims my innocent body until it's his and his alone.

Should I give my everything to my brutal husband?

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I stride into my older brother's office, my footsteps echoing off the polished hardwood floors. I knock twice and enter without waiting for a response.

I've had a long day and can't wait to have the rest of the evening to myself. There's a new business plan I need to create projections for, and then I need to talk to our bank in Russia about cutting our exchange rate for larger transactions. Abram looks up from a stack of papers from behind his oak desk, his cloud-grey eyes locking onto mine.

"Vladimir," he says, his tone clipped.

"I'm done for the day, Brother. If you need me, you can reach me at home."

I'm about to walk out when I hear him growl. "I trust you remember your obligation this evening."

I clench my jaw and turn around to face him, honestly having forgotten about the charity gala.

"It's tonight?"

"Yes. Ivan sent your ticket over."

"Your ticket, you mean," I cluck my tongue. Ever since Abram got married, he's needed more personal time to devote to his wife, Zara. While I'm happy for them, the fact is that I'm the one who needs to step up for Abram. More responsibility around this place unfortunately comes with showing your face around town.

We left Russia to come to New York almost a year ago. Since then, I have truly tried to keep to myself because I perform best when I can focus on our empire wholeheartedly. After work, I've spent most evenings holed up in my study.

But I've hardly had time to myself since Abram got married. I've stepped up, and leading a powerful Bratva family comes with the territory of not just managing the business but also keeping a check on all those around you.

Half our work, according to Abram, is keeping alliances in place. They can, after all, shift anytime. Friends can turn into foes and vice-versa in the blink of an eye.

"Must I really go tonight? It's a charity gala, for god's sake. Couldn't I send a generous check on our behalf, instead?"

Abram's eyes narrow. "It's not just about socializing and showing your generosity, Vlad. These events are crucial for our business relationships. The Zolotovs stay relevant only as long as people remember we exist."

"Then send someone else," I snap. "Mark or Denis, perhaps." I offer up our younger brothers. "I have more important things to do than play nice with a bunch of stuffy elites."

My brother rises from his chair, his imposing frame casting a shadow across the room. "You know that's not an option anymore. We're fresh blood here and don't have as many allies as we did back in Russia. We need to present a united front. I can't do this alone."

I feel a twinge of guilt at the weariness in his voice. Our brother has done more than his fair share of sacrifice for our family to succeed. Sometimes, I tend to forget that in my quest for solitude. Besides, I know deep down that Abram is right. Our world has changed, and I can no longer hide in the shadows.

"Fine," I growl. "I'll go to the damn gala. But don't expect me to enjoy it."

Abram's shoulders relax slightly. "That's all I ask, Brother. Who knows, you might even surprise yourself."

I snort, already dreading the evening ahead. I stride out of Abram's office, my jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth. The weight of expectation settles on my shoulders like a lead coat. Damn these social obligations. I'm a man of action, not empty words and fake smiles.

But, it is what it is.

The weekend arrives too quickly, and I yet again find myself in the backseat of a sleek black car, hurtling toward anywhere but home.

Tonight, it's Nikolai Orlov's mansion. The leather seat creaks as I shift, adjusting my tie for the hundredth time.

"You look like you're headed to your own execution," I mutter to myself, running a hand through my hair.

The driver clears his throat. "We're almost there, Mr. Zolotov."

I grunt in acknowledgment, my stomach tightening as the mansion comes into view. It's a behemoth of stone and glass, screaming new money and power—the kind of place that makes me itch for a quick exit, even if it is my sister's home.

In fact, my cousin Anoushka is also married into the Orlov clan. And still, I haven't met most of their siblings. I quickly run their names through their head, dreading the

fact that I might get them wrong. I already know Nikolai and Dima, with them being my brothers-in-law. But it's the younger ones, Fedor, Sofia, Natalia, and Artyom whom I'll have to put a face to.

"Fuck," I breathe, closing my eyes for a moment. "Get it together, Vladimir. It's just a family dinner."

But it's not just dinner, is it? It's my debut as the rising face of the Zolotov family. A role I never wanted and am not sure I can play.

The car slows to a stop, and I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what's to come.

"Time to face the wolves," I mutter, pushing the door open and stepping into the cool evening air.

The gravel crunches under my feet as I step out, my eyes drawn upward to the imposing facade of the Orlov mansion.

"Quite the place," I mutter, shoving my hands in my pockets as I approach the grand entrance. My sister and her husband just moved in here, and it's the first time I'm stepping foot on the premises.

I walk through the double doors of the entrance only to find the beaming faces of my brothers, Denis and Mark.

"Well, well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence!" Denis crows, slapping me on the back.

Mark chimes in, a mischievous glint in his eye. "We were taking bets on whether

you'd actually show up or if we'd find you holed up in your apartment with a bottle of vodka."

I scowl, shrugging off Denis's hand. "Hilarious. I'm here, aren't I?"

"And dressed for a party, too," Mark adds, tugging at my lapel. "Will wonders never cease?"

I bat his hand away, fighting the urge to loosen my tie. "Keep it up, and I'll show you just how 'proper' I can be."

Denis laughs, throwing an arm around my shoulders. "Come on, Brother. No need to bare your teeth. We're just happy to see you out of your cave."

"Yeah, well, don't get used to it," I grumble, but I can feel the tension in my shoulders easing slightly. Their familiar banter, as annoying as it can be, is a welcome distraction from the anxiety churning in my gut regarding all the time I'm wasting playing nice when I could be working.

As they lead me further into the mansion's glittering interior, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, I can survive this night after all.

"Well, well, I thought I heard the sound of grumbling," a melodic voice cuts through our banter. I turn to see Lara, my sister, approaching with a playful smirk on her face.

I roll my eyes but can't help the slight upturn of my lips. "Funny. I thought I heard the sound of meddling."

Lara laughs, linking her arm through mine. "Someone has to keep you in line, Vlad. Now come on, I want you to meet my family."

I bristle at her words of choice. Even though I know we're still her family, sometimes, I forget she has a whole other life and forget we're not her only family.

While she drags me across the room, I catch sight of our cousins Boris, Damien, and Lev grinning like idiots, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"Lara, I don't need—" I start, but she cuts me off.

"Hush. It's time you met everyone properly." She pulls me to a stop right next to her husband, Dima, who I quickly shake hands with, and introduces me first to a tall and lean man. "Vlad, this is Fedor Orlov. Fedor, my brother Vladimir."

Fedor's face breaks into a smile as he extends his hand. "Vladimir! It's great to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

I shake his hand, my grip firm. "Likewise," I reply, my tone neutral. "Though I hope not everything you've heard is true."

Fedor chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "Only the good parts, I assure you. Here, let me introduce you to my younger siblings, Artyom and Natalia."

He gestures to a cheerful young woman with dark blonde hair and a younger man with an easygoing demeanor.

I nod to each of them in turn, my posture stiff. "Pleasure," I say, the word feeling foreign on my tongue.

Natalia smiles warmly, so wide that her lips could reach her ears. "The pleasure is ours, Vladimir. We've been looking forward to meeting Lara's mysterious brother."

"Mysterious?" I arch an eyebrow. "I prefer 'private'."

Artyom grins. "Private, mysterious, potato, pot-ahto. Either way, it's nice to finally put a face to the name."

I force a polite smile, acutely aware of Lara's eyes on me. "Well, now you have. I hope I haven't disappointed."

"Not at all," Dima says, clapping me on the shoulder. "In fact, I hope we'll be seeing more of you. Family is important, after all. We'd also love to introduce you to our sister, Sofia. But..." He scans the room. "I simply don't know where she is."

"She's blonde, tall, and a total ice queen." Fedor grins, waving his hands to indicate her height. "You'll see her somewhere, biting someone's head off, probably."

"Fedor!" Natalia playfully whacks him on the arm while the rest of the crew holds back their laughter.

"Wait, I think I see her." Artyom looks behind me.

I bristle, not bothering to turn around, fighting the urge to run off without another word. "Don't worry about it," I reply, my mind already searching for an escape route. "She must be busy. I'll see her around later. If you'll excuse me, I think I see Ivan."

I make my excuses and slip away from the Orlov's enthusiastic hospitality, seeking refuge at the bar on the far side of the room. I weave through the crowded space, dodging mingling guests and raucous clusters of family. A few call out greetings or raise their glasses, but I keep my eyes averted and my responses clipped.

At last I reach the relative peace of the bar. As I wait for the bartender, I lean back against the counter and observe the lively party. Laughter and warmth fill the grand room, yet I feel disconnected, an outsider peering in through frosted glass.

"Vodka, neat," I tell the bartender when he finally makes his way over. I lean back against the counter again.

"You're blocking the cherries," I hear a husky voice from my right. I look, and the woman standing beside me steals the breath from my lungs. Her slender figure is sheathed in an elegant black dress, contouring subtle curves. Blonde hair cascades down her back in a sleek curtain, contrasting vividly with her dress. She's all high cheekbones and rosy red lips. As she lifts an elegant hand adorned with diamonds to point at the cherries, I catch a glimpse of her emerald green eyes, contrasting sharply with the black of her dress.

"Excuse me?" I find myself saying, utterly forgetting what she said.

"The cherries." She rolls her eyes at me.

I quickly move to let her reach, and just then, the server returns with my drink. I accept it, and turn back to the woman, who is now lecturing the server on how she specifically requested no sugar syrup in her cocktail.

Blonde, tall, ice-cold, and biting off a head. Something tells me she's an Orlov.

Sofia Orlov, to be exact.

I feel an inexplicable pull toward her, my feet carrying me closer to her before I can process the sudden quickening of my pulse.

I sidle up to the bar, careful to maintain a respectful distance. "Water, iced," I tell the bartender, my voice gruffer than intended.

The woman beside me doesn't turn, but I catch her glancing at me from the corner of her eye. Her gaze flickers to the drink in my hand before coolly turning back to

survey the scene.

As she turns, I catch a trace of her scent—cool and floral like a frost-kissed garden.

"I don't believe we've met," I say bluntly. Subtlety has never been my strong suit.

She arches one delicate brow. "We haven't."

I note she doesn't offer her name. This is a first. Usually, when I strike up a conversation, I have the woman's number in hand within minutes. Her casual dismissal only serves to pique my interest further. I'm used to women falling at my feet, enticed by either the hundred thousand dollar watch I wear on my wrist or my name, should they have it. But she simply stands there, unimpressed and untouchable.

I lean against the bar, studying her profile as she takes a sip of her drink. "Not a fan of small talk, are you?"

She shrugs nonchalantly, her indifference a stark contrast to the usual flirtatious encounters I'm accustomed to. "Small talk tends to bore me. If this is your attempt at it, you should probably stop now."

"So, what would you rather discuss? Nuclear war?" I bite back.

"Sure." She turns to face me now, and I see a glimmer of curiosity in her eyes. But then I think I could have imagined it, from how coolly she looks at me. "But I doubt you'd have much to add on that topic."

"Didn't someone tell you it's rude to make assumptions?" My lip curves into a small smile.

"Well... do you?" she shrugs.

“Do I what?” I ask, instantly.

She rolls her eyes at me. “Know much about nuclear war?”

Suddenly, I feel like a fool. God. What is it with this woman rendering me so utterly forgetful? It’s like I’m so lost in how enchanting she is that I forget half the questions she asks me.

“Not really,” I say.

“Then I guess I wasn’t rude,” she says bluntly.

"Fair enough," I concede, inclining my head slightly. "I prefer honesty anyway."

“Good to know,” she says, and the next I know, she picks up her glass and is about to walk away.

No way am I letting that happen.

“Hey,” I say out, a little too loud. She throws her head back over her shoulder, watching me with a raised eyebrow. “What’s your name?”

“Sofia,” she says without skipping a beat.

My heart roars in my heart. There, at last. I have her name. It’s also an additional moment of joy to realize I’d been right to read who she was all along.

“Sofia Orlov,” I say, toying with her a little. But, to my surprise, what I wished for to be an opening for her to get a little curious regarding how I know her full name and extend the conversation, is shut down just as fast.

She turns to face me fully, and I feel the full force of her gaze. "Well, isn't that interesting? You're venturing into society after doing his homework. How... prepared of you."

I feel a flicker of irritation at her words, but something about her sharp wit intrigues me. "There's nothing wrong with a little homework," I say bluntly, taking a sip of my vodka. "It helps me stay ahead."

Sofia's eyebrow arches elegantly. "How studious of you," she replies, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "And what else have you learned so far, Vladimir?"

I study her for a moment, noting the tension in her shoulders despite her outward composure. "That you're used to keeping people at arm's length," I state matter-of-factly. "It's easier than letting them in, isn't it?"

A flash of surprise crosses her face, quickly replaced by a cold smile. "My, aren't you perceptive?" she quips. "Next, you'll be telling me my favorite color and what I had for breakfast."

I can't help but chuckle at her sharp retort. "Someone once told me it's rude to presume," I say, a hint of amusement in my voice. "Though I imagine it wasn't vodka for breakfast, despite the family business." After all, Nikolai's nightclubs are the source of endless Vodka for all the Russian elites.

For a split second, I see a genuine smile tug at the corners of her mouth before she schools her features back into cool indifference. The brief glimpse of warmth ignites something in me—a desire to see more of the real Sofia beneath the icy exterior.

But then, it ends all too soon.

Sofia turns away abruptly, her pin-straight blonde hair swishing as she moves. "Enjoy

the party, Vladimir," she says over her shoulder, her voice a mix of dismissal and boredom.

I watch her retreating form, unable to tear my eyes away. The sway of her hips, the graceful set of her shoulders—everything about her is captivating. My mind races, replaying our brief interaction. There's more to Sofia Orlov than meets the eye, and I'm determined to unravel the mystery.

"You're not getting away that easily," I mutter under my breath, downing the rest of my drink. The burn of vodka does nothing to quell the fire she's ignited within me.

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I stride away from the bar, my heels clicking against the polished marble floor. The weight of Vladimir's gaze burns into my back, and my heart flutters at that knowledge.

But I try to calm my racing heart. I can't afford to be distracted, not tonight. Not when this is my one chance to stay inconspicuous and spy on the Zolotovs.

We might be in an alliance, but that doesn't mean I trust the whole lot. My plan to stay on the sidelines and catch glimpses of conversations would have stayed on track...if not for him.

"Focus, Sofia," I mutter under my breath, weaving through the crowd of glittering socialites and boisterous men. You're not here to flirt with mysterious strangers.

My heart races traitorously, betraying my cool exterior. I spot the restroom sign and make a beeline for it, desperate for a moment alone to collect myself.

The bathroom is mercifully empty. I lean against the counter, studying my reflection in the ornate mirror. My green eyes are wide, a flush creeping up my neck. I look... affected. Dammit.

"Pull yourself together," I hiss, fumbling in my clutch for my lipstick. The familiar routine of reapplying my makeup steadies my nerves. "He's just a man. An infuriatingly handsome, intense man, but still just a man."

As I smooth the deep red across my lips, I can't help but replay our encounter at the bar. The way his black eyes had locked onto mine and seemed to see right through

my carefully constructed facade. The low timbre of his voice as he offered me his name.

Why can't I get that stranger out of my mind? There was something about him that drew me in, though. Where I'm accustomed to people either fawning over her or backing down at my coldness, Vladimir stood his ground without forcing his presence. He refused to be completely dismissed, and that made him all the more intriguing.

But all that means nothing. Chances are, I'll never see Vladimir again.

"Ugh!" I slam my lipstick down, glaring at my reflection. I'm here for a mission, remember? Yet a traitorous part of me wonders what it would be like to let my guard down.

Nope. Not happening. Men like that are nothing but trouble, and I've got more than enough of that already.

I straighten my spine and smooth down my dress. With one final, critical glance at my appearance, I turn to face the door. It's time to get back out there and do what I came here to do. No more distractions. No more mysterious strangers with eyes like midnight.

I stride out of the bathroom, my heels clicking purposefully against the polished floor. The cacophony of the party washes over me, but I remain focused, my eyes scanning the crowd with laser precision.

"Where are you, Fedor?" I mutter under my breath, searching for my brother's familiar dark blonde hair.

My gaze darts from face to face, cataloging potential allies and threats with the efficiency born of years in this world.

A waiter approaches with a tray of drinks. "Champagne, Miss?"

"No, thank you," I reply coolly, barely sparing him a glance. My plan is to find Fedor and find out if anything interesting happened amidst the Zolotov clan tonight. He thinks I'm paranoid not to trust the Zolotovs, but I keep him close, seeing how his outgoing nature often gets people to open up to him.

And when they do, it's only a matter of minutes before something interesting comes my way.

Finally, I spot him near the piano, talking to an elderly lady.

As I make my way toward him, I can't help but feel a prickle of awareness along my spine. Is someone watching me?

I turn around, and a familiar figure suddenly materializes in my peripheral vision. Vladimir. My heart rate quickens involuntarily, and I clench my jaw, irritated at my body's betrayal. I keep my gaze fixed ahead, determined not to acknowledge him.

"You left these behind," his deep voice rumbles, closer than I expected.

I turn, my eyebrow arched in practiced disdain. Vladimir stands before me, holding out a small crystal dish. The cherries I'd abandoned at the bar gleam mockingly under the chandeliers.

"How thoughtful," I drawl, my tone dripping with sarcasm. "But I'm not particularly fond of fruit that's been manhandled."

Vladimir's lips quirk slightly, amusement dancing in his dark eyes. "A shame. They looked lonely without you."

I roll my eyes, fighting the warmth threatening to bloom in my chest. "I'm sure they'll survive the heartbreak."

"Perhaps," he says, his gaze intensifying. "But will you?"

The charged atmosphere between us crackles, and I struggle to maintain my icy composure. "I think I'll manage just fine without a handful of cherries, Mr...?"

"Vladimir," he corrects, his voice a low growl that sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine.

I lift my chin, meeting his gaze defiantly. "Was there something else you needed, Vladimir? Or did you simply miss my charming company?"

"You think you're charming, huh?" He grins in my direction. The way his eyes crinkle sets my heart racing, gets my hands clammy. And the way my knees threaten to give way sends my anxiety sky-rocketing.

"What I am is busy," I say, without sparing him a second glance. It's better if I get the hell away from him as fast as I can before I find myself distracted.

I turn away abruptly, my heart pounding as I resume my path toward Fedor. Vladimir's presence lingers like a shadow, and I clench my fists, furious at my inability to shake off his effect. Each step feels like a battle against an invisible current pulling me back.

Get it together, Sofia.

I find Fedor near the grand piano, his eyes slightly wide, flicking between me and then past me. I don't need to turn around to know what—or rather who—has caught his attention.

"Sofia," Fedor greets, his tone neutral but his gaze questioning. "Was that Vladimir Zolotov making conversation with you?"

"Zolotov?" I ask, near-freezing.

"Yes. He's second-in-charge to Abram. So what was he talking to you about anyway?" Fedor asks, his voice tinged with excitement for gossip.

Okay. I did not know that. Of all the people in the world, little did I expect to spend my evening with a Zolotov man. Don't get me wrong. I love my sisters-in-law, but they're more Orlov now.

I force a smile, keeping my voice light. "Nothing important. He seemed quite concerned about some abandoned fruit."

Fedor's eyebrows shoot up. "Really? That's... unexpected. Vladimir rarely engages with anyone at these events. In fact, I'm surprised he's here at all, and speaking to you, of all people."

"Oh?" I feign disinterest, though my curiosity burns. "Is he not a social butterfly?"

Fedor snorts. "Hardly. He's practically a hermit—a brilliant businessman, but he avoids the spotlight like the plague. Some say he hasn't been seen at a party since he set foot in New York."

I process this information, my mind racing. "How fascinating," I say dryly. "Perhaps he developed a sudden passion for family gatherings and cherry-saving."

Fedor gives me a look that says he's not buying my nonchalance. "Just be careful, Sestrenka. Vladimir Zolotov isn't known for taking no for an answer."

I meet my brother's gaze, allowing a hint of steel to enter my voice. "I can handle myself, Fedor. You know that."

Fedor leans in, lowering his voice. "Speaking of handling yourself, have you made any... progress tonight?"

My heart rate quickens, but I maintain my icy composure. "Let's just say I'm laying the groundwork. These things take time, Brother dear."

"Of course." He nods, his eyes darting around the room. "But remember, we're on a tight schedule. The Yuri deal—"

I cut him off with a sharp look. "I'm well aware of our deadlines. Trust me, I haven't lost sight of why we're really here."

Even as I say the words, I feel a pang of guilt. Vladimir's intense gaze flashes through my mind, and I push the image away forcefully. I can't afford distractions, no matter how intriguing. Fedor is the only one who still doesn't trust the Zolotovs wholly. I can't risk him thinking I've gone soft.

He studies me for a moment. "Just don't let anything—or anyone—interfere with our plans to learn all we can about them. We've worked too hard to get this far."

I roll my eyes, injecting as much disdain into my voice as possible. "Please. You know me better than that. I'm not some lovesick schoolgirl to be swayed by a pair of dark eyes and a brooding demeanor."

"Good," Fedor says, but I catch a hint of doubt in his expression. "Because Vladimir

Zolotov could complicate things in ways we can't afford right now."

I straighten my spine, meeting my brother's gaze with steely determination. "Oh, don't get ahead of yourself. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have somewhere to be."

I weave through the crowd, careful to avoid any lingering gazes or attempts at conversation. My steps are measured, unhurried. Nothing to see here, just another party guest stepping out for some air.

As I near the exit, a familiar silhouette catches my eye. Vladimir. He's leaning against a pillar, those dark eyes scanning the room. For a heart-stopping moment, I think he's going to intercept me. But he remains still, watching.

I slip past him, feeling the weight of his gaze on my back. My pulse quickens, but I don't break stride.

Once outside, the cool night air hits my face. I inhale deeply, trying to clear my head. I wait until the valet arrives with my car, taking off before saying any goodbyes.

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I pace my office, unable to shake the memory of Sofia. I run a frustrated hand through my hair, replaying the aloof tilt of her chin, the cool look in her green eyes as she brushed past me without a word. I run a hand through my hair, tugging at the roots as if I could somehow pull the image of her indifference from my thoughts.

"Dammit," I mutter, pivoting on my heel to retrace my steps. The plush carpet muffles my footfalls but does nothing to quiet the storm in my head.

I've dealt with disinterest before. Hell, I'm the one who cultivated it, perfected it. But something about Sofia's icy demeanor has gotten under my skin in a way I can't shake. It's like she's immune to me, and that is as novel a situation as one can get. She's so different from the simpering women who usually fall over themselves for my attention.

I'm surprised by this pull toward her, by the urge to unravel the mystery of her remoteness. I wonder why she's so intent on keeping the world at a distance.

Something tells me she doesn't know it herself. I know I didn't imagine her flustered look when I told her I think she finds it easier to keep people at arm's length than to let them in.

There was a flicker of hope in her eyes, like someone finally understood her.

But still, she maintained that cold exterior.

Giving up on wearing a path in my floor, I drop heavily into the chair behind my desk. My phone sits innocently on the polished wood surface, and I snatch it up,

unlocking it with more force than necessary.

The photos Lara sent from the gathering fill the screen. My eyes are immediately drawn to Sofia, standing apart from the crowd. Even in the stillness of the image, her poise is evident. Back straight, chin lifted, those green eyes sharp enough to cut.

"What is it about you?" I murmur, zooming in on her face. The corners of her mouth are turned down slightly, a subtle display of displeasure that shouldn't fascinate me as much as it does.

I lean back in my chair, the leather creaking as I shift. "You're not the first woman to play hard to get, Sofia Orlov," I say to the empty room, my voice gruff. "So why can't I get you out of my head?"

The silence offers no answers, and I find myself scrolling through more photos from the event. In each one, Sofia maintains that air of detached elegance. It's infuriating. It's intriguing.

I toss the phone onto the desk with a clatter. "This is ridiculous," I growl, standing abruptly. "You're Vladimir Zolotov. You don't chase after ice princesses."

But even as I say it, I know it's a lie. The memory of her sarcastic quips, delivered with a razor-sharp smile, sends an unexpected thrill through me. It's been a long time since anyone has challenged me like that.

I move to the window, staring out at the city below. My reflection stares back at me, black eyes narrowed in thought. "What are you hiding behind that frosty exterior, Sofia?" I muse. "And why do I suddenly want to find out?"

I run a hand through my hair, frustrated by my own uncharacteristic fascination. "This isn't like you, Vladimir," I mutter to myself, turning away from the window.

"Since when do you care about getting to know a woman beyond the surface?"

But the urge to unravel Sofia's mysteries persists, gnawing at me like an itch I can't scratch. I find myself grabbing my keys, my feet carrying me toward the door before I can think better of it. It's something I've never done, so unlike me, but ever since she disappeared from the party like a ghost, I've been wondering what she's up to.

On the way to my car, I call my intel team, demanding a location for Sofia Orlov. Even though I had never laid eyes on her before the party, my team knows every member of our alliance. It's their job to keep a tab on each one, to come to me should something sketchy surface. She's never come to my radar before, and now, she's the only one I want on it.

An hour later, I'm parked across the street from a dimly lit bar, my hands gripping the steering wheel as I watch Sofia through the grimy windows. She's seated at a corner table, surrounded by a group of rough-looking men. The tension in my shoulders ratchets up a notch.

"What the hell are you doing here, Sofia?" I growl under my breath, leaning forward to get a better view.

Her face is composed, that familiar icy mask firmly in place. But there's something in the set of her shoulders, a barely perceptible tension that speaks volumes to my trained eye.

One of the men leans in, his tattooed hand gesturing emphatically. Sofia's response is surprisingly warm, her mouth opening into a laugh.

"Careful, Printsessa," I murmur, my jaw clenching. "You're playing with fire."

I watch as she navigates the conversation with practiced ease, her ability to hold

attention evident even from this distance. Just then, another man comes up to the table. I watch as he pulls out three guns and hands them to the man with the tattooed arm, who pays for the delivery in cash.

“What the hell?” I think to myself, my pulse rising so fast I can feel my veins throb. Sofia laughs and picks up a gun, playfully pretending to fire it, and one of the men takes it from her hand and pockets it, handing her a shot instead.

She pouts flirtatiously and downs the drink. Where the hell is that ice-cold treatment I got, huh? Why is she being so damn friendly with this wretched group of thugs?

"Who are you really, Sofia Orlov?" I ask the empty car, my curiosity burning hotter than ever. "And what kind of trouble are you mixed up in?"

My knuckles turn white as I grip the steering wheel tighter, a wave of unexpected anger washing over me. One of the men, a burly guy with a neck tattoo, leans in close to Sofia. Too close. His meaty hand brushes against her arm, and I feel a growl building in my chest. He glides it down and places it around her waist. I see the way he looks at her—like she’s a piece of meat he plans to have.

My protective instincts flare up, surprising me with their intensity. I've never felt this... possessive before. Not over anyone.

Sofia's response is cool, her body language subtly shifting away from the man's touch. But I can see the flash of rage in her eyes, a crack in that playful facade she has on.

"Damn it," I mutter, my hand hovering over the door handle. Every fiber of my being wants to storm in there, to put myself between Sofia and these thugs. But I hold back, knowing that revealing myself now could make things worse.

She'd never trust me again. And right now, it's her trust I want most. I need it—to know why she's running with this grimy crew.

As I drive home, my mind races with thoughts of Sofia. The danger she's clearly involved in. The secrets she's keeping. I park in my driveway, but I can't bring myself to go inside just yet.

"I have to do something," I say to the empty night air, running a hand through my hair. I think of my siblings, of the lengths they've gone to protect their family and alliances.

At this moment, Sofia needs protection. For herself, and from any trouble she may bring our way. A plan begins to form in my mind, bold and potentially reckless.

I pace the length of my living room, my mind churning with possibilities, each step bringing me closer to a decision that could change everything. My plan is bold, unexpected—exactly what's needed to keep Sofia safe and strengthen both our families' positions.

Nikolai and Dima won't expect this, I think to myself, a hint of a smirk tugging at my lips.

Without hesitation, I pull out my phone and dial a number I rarely use. It rings twice before a gruff voice answers.

"Zolotov. What do you want?"

"Nikolai," I reply, my voice steady. "We need to talk. You, me, and Dima. It's about the future of our families."

There's a pause, then a chuckle. "Intriguing. Tomorrow, noon, our office."

"I'll be there," I confirm, ending the call.

As I prepare for bed, my mind is eerily calm. I know this is an insane step, yet why does it feel like the right one?

The next morning, I dress with precision, each movement deliberate. Dark suit, crisp white shirt, deep-blue tie. Armor for the battle ahead. I need to look perfect, to play the part of being worthy.

As I adjust my cufflinks, I catch my own gaze in the mirror. Sofia is fearless, I think to myself. So fearless, she could bring chaos to her doorstep and ours. I'm doing this for our families and, more importantly, to keep her safe. I'm certain her brothers don't know what kind of company she's been keeping.

The drive to the Orlov brothers' office is silent, my focus razor-sharp. I park, take a deep breath, and step out into the cool air. My strides are confident as I enter the building, nodding to the security guard who knows better than to stop me.

In the elevator, I allow myself a small smile. By the time I leave this building, everything will have changed.

I step into the Orlov brothers' office, the tension palpable in the air. The room is bright, with heavy curtains drawn apart to let in the midday sun. Nikolai and Dima sit behind a massive mahogany desk, their faces impassive. I take the seat across from them, my posture relaxed but alert.

"Vladimir," Nikolai begins, his voice gruff. "What's so important you needed to drag

yourself here?"

I meet his gaze steadily. "I have a proposal that will benefit both our families."

Dima leans forward, his eyes narrowing. "And what might that be?"

"A marriage alliance," I state bluntly. "Between myself and Sofia."

The brothers exchange a look of surprise, then skepticism. Nikolai's lip curls slightly.

"And why would we consider such an arrangement?"

I lean forward, my elbows on my knees. "Think about it. Our territories side by side, our resources combined. We'd be unstoppable. You're both married to my sisters, and I would be married to yours. It sends a strong message to those who might try to find cracks in our alliance. That we are, truly, unbreakable."

"Sofia isn't a bargaining chip," Dima growls, his protective instincts flaring.

"No, she's not," I agree, my voice firm. "She's a strong, capable woman who deserves respect and protection. I can offer both, along with the advantages to our families."

I stand, pacing the room as I continue my argument. "Imagine the power we could wield together. The Zolotov and Orlov names united. Our enemies wouldn't dare move against us."

My passion is evident in every word, every gesture. This isn't just about power or alliances anymore. It's about Sofia, about protecting her from whatever dangers she's mixed up in. But I can't reveal that knowledge, not yet.

"I'm serious about this," I finish making my point, my voice low and determined. "I wouldn't have come here if I wasn't. Give me this chance, and I promise you won't

regret it."

I watch as Nikolai and Dima exchange a loaded glance. The skepticism in their eyes begins to waver, replaced by a flicker of consideration.

Nikolai leans back, stroking his chin. "You make some compelling arguments, Zolotov. I can't deny the potential benefits of what you propose."

"It could strengthen our position in the south," Dima adds, his voice gruff but thoughtful. "And expand our reach into new territories."

My heart races, but I keep my expression neutral. I hadn't expected them to warm to the idea so quickly.

"But what about Sofia?" Nikolai asks, his brow furrowed. "She's not exactly... approachable."

I can't help but smirk. "I've noticed. She's ice cold for sure."

"You say that now," Dima chuckles, "but wait until you're on the receiving end of her sharp tongue."

I straighten, my voice firm. "I can handle it. I respect her strength."

Nikolai nods slowly. "Very well, Vladimir. We're open to this arrangement."

I dip my head in acquiescence. Relief washes over me. They've accepted the idea. I might have a chance to protect Sofia after all.

"Don't get your hopes up," Dima warns. "Our sister isn't easily swayed."

I meet his gaze steadily. "I wouldn't want her any other way."

As they continue discussing potential terms, I allow myself a moment of quiet satisfaction. This alliance could be the key to keeping Sofia safe from whatever danger she's involved in. And perhaps, in time, I might even crack that icy shell of hers.

I stride out of the Orlov brothers' office, my footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. A sense of accomplishment courses through me, mingling with an unfamiliar anticipation. The hard part is over, but now comes the real challenge: Sofia.

"Mr. Zolotov," a voice calls out. It's Nikolai's assistant. "Your car is ready."

I nod curtly. "Thank you."

As I make my way to the exit, my mind races with thoughts of how to approach Sofia. Her reaction will be unpredictable at best, hostile at worst. I can almost hear her sarcastic tone already: "An arranged marriage? How quaint, Mr. Zolotov. Did we time travel back to the 1800s?"

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" I murmur to the imaginary Sofia in my mind, a smile playing on my lips. The thing is, whatever danger she's putting herself in is now my responsibility to keep her safe from, even if she fights me every step of the way.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

I trace my fingers along the worn pages of my favorite novel, losing myself in the familiar words. The library's silence wraps around me like a comforting blanket, allowing my mind to wander far from everyday responsibilities.

The creak of the heavy oak door shatters my peace. My shoulders tense instinctively as I watch Nikolai and Dima enter with hesitant footsteps. Guilt is etched across their faces.

My eyes narrow. "Surely, you haven't come to join me in literary pursuits."

Nikolai clears his throat, exchanging a nervous glance with Dima. The pit in my stomach grows. Whatever they've come to tell me, it can't be good.

With a decisive snap, I close my book and fix them with an icy stare. "Out with it," I demand, arching an eyebrow. "What have you done now that requires my intervention?"

Dima shifts his weight from foot to foot, looking everywhere but at me. "Sofia, we... there's something we need to discuss."

I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. "I'm listening," I say, my voice deceptively calm. "Though I have a feeling I'm not going to like what I hear."

Nikolai and Dima exchange another nervous glance, and I feel my patience wearing thin. "It's okay. Take your time. We've got an entire lifetime to waste."

Finally, Nikolai takes a deep breath and speaks.

"Sofia, we've... arranged a marriage for you."

"You've done WHAT?" I scream, jumping up so fast that the chair rattles behind me, the sound echoing my fury. My brothers' faces swim in and out of focus as my mind struggles to comprehend what they just said.

They both look startled, offering no more information.

"Now, what the hell were you saying about an arranged marriage?" I demand, my voice as cold as a Siberian winter. My hands clench into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms.

Nikolai recovers first, his face smoothing into a placating expression. "Sofia, please, let us explain—"

"Explain?" I spit the word out like poison. "Explain how you're selling me off like cattle to the highest bidder?"

My chest heaves as I glare at them, daring them to justify this betrayal.

The library suddenly feels claustrophobic, closing in around me. I fight the urge to flee, to escape this nightmare.

"It's not like that," Dima interjects, his tone gentle. "This union is strategically important for our family's interests."

A harsh laugh escapes me. "Oh, of course. How silly of me to forget that my happiness is irrelevant compared to a good business deal."

Nikolai stands, his imposing frame tensed. "Sofia, be reasonable. Vladimir Zolotov is a powerful ally. This marriage will secure our position and keep us safe."

For a moment, I'm certain I've misheard. My eyes widen, and I feel the blood drain from my face. Vladimir Zolotov? The man who had his eye on me the whole time during our party? He's handsome, sure. But he's also a decade older than me! And I can't forget that he's a Zolotov. As the reality of their words sinks in, white-hot fury gives in to shock.

"You're joking, right?" I hiss, my voice low and dangerous. My fingers dig into the arms of my chair as I struggle to maintain my composure.

"It's for the good of the family," Dima interjects weakly. "The alliance will strengthen our position—we're still weaker than we'd like to be."

"The good of the family?" I spit out, my control finally snapping. I stand abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor with a harsh screech. "And what about my good? Did that even cross your minds for a second?"

I advance on them, my green eyes flashing with rage. "You had no right to make this decision for me. I'm not some pawn to be traded!"

"Sofia, please," Nikolai pleads, holding up his hands in a placating gesture. "If you'd just listen—"

"Listen?" I laugh, the sound bitter and cold. "I think I've heard quite enough. You've made it abundantly clear where your priorities lie, and it's certainly not with my happiness or autonomy."

I'm trembling now, a mix of anger and disbelief coursing through my veins. How dare they? After everything I've done for this family, all the sacrifices I've made, this is how they repay me?

"I won't do it," I declare, my voice steely with determination. "Find another way to

secure your precious alliance. I refuse to be sold off like chattel to a man I barely know."

With that, I turn on my heel and stride toward the door, my head held high. I may be trapped in this world of power and politics, but I'll be damned if I let them strip away my autonomy without a fight.

As I reach for the doorknob, Nikolai's voice stops me. "Sofia, please. At least meet with Vladimir. Give him a chance."

I pause, my hand hovering over the cold metal. Part of me wants to refuse outright, to slam the door and never look back. But the dutiful sister in me, the one who's always put family first, hesitates.

Without turning around, I say, "Fine. One meeting. But don't expect me to play nice."

I yank the door open and step out, leaving my brothers to deal with the aftermath of their decisions. How could they do this to me? My own brothers, treating me like a bargaining chip.

As I reach my room, I slam the door shut, leaning against it and closing my eyes. The absurdity of the situation hits me, and I let out a humorless laugh. An arranged marriage. To Vladimir Zolotov, of all people.

His face comes to my mind. Those broad shoulders, that intense gaze. Sure, he got my heart racing. But I've had plenty of men do that, and I never given them the time of day.

He's also a recluse. Arrogant. And a Zolotov.

My brothers are fools if they think I'll simply acquiesce to their plans. They may be

stubborn, but they've clearly forgotten how unyielding I can be. I push off the door, pacing my room as my mind races.

No, I won't let them dictate my future. My brothers may think they've won this round, but they've forgotten one crucial fact: I'm Sofia Orlov, and I'll find a way to make sure Vladimir Zolotov refuses to marry me.

I have to convince Vladimir it's a bad idea. And there's only one way to ensure that happens.

I snatch my phone from the nightstand, my fingers flying over the keys as I compose a message. "Mr. Zolotov, I believe we have a matter to discuss. Meet me at Noir tomorrow at 2 PM—Sofia Orlov"

I stride into the restaurant, my heels clicking against the polished marble floor. The *maître d'* recognizes me instantly, his eyes widening as he hurries to escort me to the reserved table.

"This way, Miss Orlov," he murmurs, leading me through the dimly lit dining room. "Your party is already here."

My heart begins to race at the thought of seeing Vladimir. I was hoping I'd reach first and have enough time to settle my nerves.

We're almost at the table when the crowd parts, revealing Vladimir looking straight in my direction. His broad shoulders and muscular frame cut an imposing figure, his black eyes locked onto mine with an intensity that sends an involuntary shiver down my spine. I pause, ever so briefly, as time seems to stand still. I find myself reaching for a strand of hair, tucking it behind my ear.

Shit. I can't let him see me rattled.

I put on a mask of cool indifference and reach for my chair, sitting before he can even stand to greet me. I ignore him, needing to stay in control, and look at the ma'tre d'. "A chianti, please."

I turn to find Vladimir staring at me, his black eyes peering into mine. I sit up, posture rigid and straight. He breaks into the most charming smile, setting my heart to race, but I force my face to remain impassive. I won't give Vladimir Zolotov the satisfaction of seeing me nervous.

"Sofia," he says at last. "I'm so glad you could make it."

I hesitate for a moment, my pride warring with social niceties. Finally, I convince myself to stick to the plan.

"Let's skip the pleasantries," I say, my tone sharp. "I'm here to discuss this... arrangement."

Vladimir's lips quirk into the barest hint of a smile, and I can't help but feel he's enjoying this far too much. As he motions at me to continue speaking, I resist the urge to fidget under his scrutiny.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the confrontation. "This marriage is a terrible idea," I begin, my words clipped and precise. "Surely, a man of your... standing understands the value of freedom and independence."

Vladimir remains silent, that infuriating smirk still playing on his lips. I press on, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Or perhaps you're so eager to shackle yourself to a stranger that you've forgotten the joys of autonomy?"

I pause, expecting him to interject, but he merely raises an eyebrow, his gaze never leaving mine. The intensity of his stare is unnerving, but I refuse to be cowed.

"We're living in the 21st century," I continue, my tone growing increasingly sardonic. "Arranged marriages are relics of the past. Surely, we can find a more... civilized way to strengthen our families' ties? My brothers are half-wits, you know? You don't have to listen to their foolish ideas. Besides, our ties are strong already. Dima is married to your sister, who we love very much. Surely, we don't need another marriage. I simply don't know what they were thinking."

Vladimir leans back in his chair, his posture relaxed, but his eyes still burning with that unsettling intensity. "Are you quite finished?" he asks, his voice low and measured.

I blink, thrown off by his calm demeanor. "I—"

"Because," he continues, cutting me off, "I believe there's something you should know."

My eyes narrow suspiciously. "And what might that be?"

Vladimir's smirk widens into a full-blown smile, sending another involuntary shiver down my spine. "This marriage," he says slowly, savoring each word, "was my idea."

My carefully constructed arguments crumble in an instant, my eyes widening in shock. "What?" I manage to choke out, my entire plan shattering.

"The marriage," he continues, his gaze unwavering. "I proposed it to your brothers."

My mind reels, struggling to process this unexpected twist. I feel my cheeks flush with a mix of anger and embarrassment, my carefully prepared arguments crumbling

around me.

Rage flares within me, hot and all-consuming. My hands clench into fists under the table as I lean forward, my voice rising with each word. "You orchestrated this whole charade, didn't you? Is that why you were bothering me at that party?"

"I wasn't aware that I was bothering you." He tries to hold back a smile, which infuriates me even more.

"What's your endgame here, Zolotov? Power? Money? Or is this just some sick game to you?" I spit the words at him, no longer caring about the scandalized looks from nearby diners.

He leans in, matching my posture, his voice low and controlled. "If you'd calm down for a moment, Sofia, I could explain—"

"Calm down?" I interrupt, my laugh bitter and sharp. "You've just admitted to manipulating my brothers—my family—and you expect me to be calm?"

His eyes darken, and a mixture of anger and concern passes over his face, the first crack in his composed facade. "This union benefits both our families. If you'd listen—"

But I'm too incensed to hear reason. My mind races with the implications, the betrayal cutting deep. "I won't be a pawn in whatever your end game is, Vladimir. I refuse to—"

"It's not about power," he interjects, his voice gaining an edge. "It's about protection."

I scoff, crossing my arms. "Protection? From what, exactly?"

Vladimir's gaze sweeps the restaurant before settling back on me. "There are forces at work that you don't understand, Sofia. This marriage ensures your safety, your family's safety, and mine."

His words should give me pause, but my anger blinds me to any logic. "I can protect myself," I hiss, even as a small part of me wonders what threats he could be alluding to.

"I'm sure you can," he says. "But you do have to marry eventually, don't you? Better me than some loser who might bring you down and cut out your family."

I push my chair back abruptly, the harsh scrape of wood against marble echoing through the restaurant. My hands tremble with barely contained rage as I stand, towering over Vladimir in my heels. "How dare you? You're making judgments without even knowing me. Do you think I'd ever choose to marry someone who wants anything less than the best for me and my family?"

"Do you think anyone has better-vested interests than me? My sister is married to your brother, god damn it. I care more about the Orlov security than you know!" he argues back, rendering me speechless for just a moment.

With emotions boiling over, the tension crackles in the air between us. I search his eyes for any sign of falsehood, but all I find is unwavering determination. My anger slowly begins to ebb, replaced by a gnawing uncertainty. Could there be truth in his words?

I take a step back, my resolve wavering as conflicting thoughts swirl in my mind. Vladimir watches me closely, his own features betraying nothing but sincerity.

Or, he could be playing us all. The cynic in me wins.

"You know what, Vladimir?" I snarl. "You can take your protection and your manipulations and shove them where the sun doesn't shine."

I grab my bag, prepared to walk out, only to find him reaching out and holding my wrist. I turn to see him looking up at me with such concern that it bothers me.

"Sofia, please," he says, releasing my hand now that he has my attention. I caress my skin, which still tingles from his touch. "Just think about what I said. If you want a marriage that puts you and your family first, I might just be the best bet."

My breath catches in my throat at his unexpected plea, my anger momentarily overshadowed by the vulnerability in his eyes. For a man reputed for his unyielding strength and authority, there is an almost desperate edge to his tone that I can't ignore.

I pull away from him, my expression guarded as I study his face. "I don't trust you, Vladimir," I admit, my voice softer now, edged with resignation. "But I always put family first."

And then, I walk out.

I step out of the restaurant. My breath comes in short, angry bursts, and I lean against the cool brick of the building, trying to regain my composure. The quiet of the street does nothing to calm my nerves after our heated encounter.

I simply don't know what happened in there. I went in adamant on breaking this charade off. How the hell did I exit agreeing to this marriage?

For family, I tell myself. As the adrenaline fades, a horrifying realization crashes over me. This arranged marriage... it could ruin everything.

My family's safety depends on me infiltrating the gangsters threatening us. For months, I've been studying threats against us, and there's a rising group wanting to cut us down. The secret mission I've been meticulously planning for months now seems to be hanging by a thread. How can I possibly infiltrate the gang when I'm to be married to a Zolotov?

I can't exactly abandon my mission to make this threat go away. Going to my brothers isn't an option. They'd resort to violence and escalate the whole thing. But, by befriending them, I could convince the gang to let their vengeance slide.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

"Think, Sofia," I mutter to myself. "There has to be a way to make this work."

Perhaps this marriage doesn't have to change anything. I'll play the dutiful wife by day and continue my work while Vladimir is away.

A plan begins to form in my mind, pieces falling into place like a complex puzzle. Vladimir may think he's won, but he has no idea who he's dealing with. I allow a small, sardonic smile to curve my lips.

"Two can play at this game, Mr. Zolotov," I murmur, my fingertips tracing the spot the sensation of his hand still lingers on. "You want a wife? I'll give you one. But on my terms."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

Abram's hands smooth down my lapels, his touch trying to make up for the father we lost years ago. "Today, you make our family stronger. I must admit, I'm proud of you, Vlad, for having made this wise choice."

I stand still as stone, allowing him to fuss over my appearance. If only he knew the real reason behind my decision. Sofia's face flashes in my mind—those piercing green eyes, the elegant curve of her neck. My jaw clenches. I'm not doing this for the family. I'm doing it to keep her safe, to make her mine.

Would that pride remain if I admitted my true motives? Probably not.

"There," Abram says, stepping back to admire his handiwork. "You look every bit the powerful Bratva prince."

"Thank you," I reply, my voice low and controlled. The words taste like ash in my mouth. It's hard keeping a secret from my brother.

The chapel doors swing open. Heart pounding, I take my place at the altar, with Abram standing behind me. I turn to face the ornate doors at the end of the aisle. My heart pounds beneath my crisp white shirt. Any moment now, she'll walk through those doors. My bride. My obsession.

The string quartet begins to play a haunting melody that makes everyone crane their necks. My eyes remain fixed on the entrance, searching for any sign of movement. The anticipation is almost unbearable. I force myself to breathe slowly, to maintain my composure.

Where is she? Has she run? The thought sends a jolt of panic through me. No, Sofia is too dutiful for that. Too proud.

I shift my weight, hyper-aware of the hundreds of eyes upon me. Bratva families from all over the country are here to witness this holy union.

The music swells, and my breath catches in my throat. This is it. She's coming. The heavy doors swing open, and there she is. Sofia. My bride.

Guests rise, faces craning in anticipation.

She glides down the aisle on Nikolai's arm, a vision in white. Her dress is a masterpiece of lace and silk, hugging her slender figure before flaring out at the hips. The bodice is adorned with intricate beadwork that catches the light, making her shimmer with every step.

I can't tear my eyes away from her face. Her green eyes are bright, challenging, framed by long lashes. Her blonde hair is swept up in an elegant updo, tendrils framing her face. She's the picture of grace and beauty, but I notice the slight hesitation in her step, the way her fingers tighten on Nikolai's arm.

My chest tightens. I want to go to her, to sweep her into my arms and carry her toward a certain future promising joy. But I remain rooted to the spot, struggling to maintain my composure.

As she draws nearer, I can see the tension in her jaw, the slight tremor in her hand. She's scared, I realize. Beneath that icy exterior, she's terrified.

"You look beautiful," I murmur as she takes her place beside me.

Her eyes meet mine, a flash of defiance in their depths. "Save your compliments," she

whispers back. "This changes nothing between us."

I lean in closer, my voice low and intense. "It changes everything, Sofia. You're mine now."

A shiver runs through her, and for a moment, I see a crack in her armor. But then it's gone, replaced by that familiar cold disdain.

"Only on paper," she hisses.

I smirk, drinking in the fire in her eyes. "We'll see about that."

The low murmur of voices fades as the officiant begins to speak, and we both stand in attention.

I barely hear the words, my focus entirely on Sofia. She stands rigidly beside me, her eyes fixed straight ahead.

"Do you, Vladimir Zolotov, take Sofia Orlov to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

My voice is low and steady as I respond, "I do."

Sofia's turn comes, and I feel her tension radiating off her in waves. Her "I do" is barely more than a whisper, but it echoes in my ears like a thunderclap.

"You may now kiss the bride."

I turn to face her, my heart pounding. Her green eyes meet mine, a mix of defiance and fear swirling in their depths. I lean in slowly, giving her time to prepare herself. My lips brush against hers, soft and chaste. It takes every ounce of my self-control to keep the kiss brief and respectful, to not deepen it and show her exactly what she

does to me. She never offers more, her mouth remains closed the whole, brief time.

As I pull back, I hear her sharp intake of breath. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" I murmur, my voice rough with restrained desire.

Sofia's eyes narrow. "Don't get used to it," she hisses.

I can't help but smirk.

The reception hall buzzes with life. Champagne flows freely, clinking glasses and boisterous laughter filling the air. I scan the room, my eyes inevitably drawn to Sofia. She stands across the room, a vision in white, her posture rigid as she converses with some of our guests.

"Quite the party, isn't it?" Boris sidles up to me, a glass of vodka in hand.

I nod, my gaze still fixed on Sofia. "It's... lively."

"You should be mingling, Vladimir. It's your wedding day, after all."

I turn to him, arching an eyebrow. "I'm observing. There's value in that, too."

Boris chuckles. "Always the strategist. Well, don't observe for too long. Your bride looks like she could use a rescue."

I follow his gaze back to Sofia. A group of older women corners her, their excited chatter visibly grating on her nerves. Her smile is polite, but I can see the tension in her shoulders and the way her fingers grip her champagne flute a little too tightly.

"If you'll excuse me," I murmur to Boris, already moving toward Sofia.

As I approach, I catch snippets of their conversation. "...and when can we expect little ones?" one of the women says, causing Sofia's smile to freeze in place.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse us," I interject smoothly, placing a hand on the small of Sofia's back. "I need to borrow my wife for a moment."

Sofia's back stiffens under my touch, but she allows me to guide her away. Once we're out of earshot, she steps away from me, her eyes flashing. "I didn't need your help."

"No?" I counter, keeping my voice low. "You looked ready to pour that champagne over their heads."

A flicker of amusement crosses her face before it's quickly suppressed. "I would have restrained myself. Unlike some, I know how to behave in public."

I lean in closer, my voice a low rumble. "And how do you behave in private, I wonder?"

Sofia's cheeks flush, but her gaze remains steely. "You won't find out."

"We'll see about that," I murmur, my determination only growing in the face of her resistance. This ice queen will melt for me, even if it takes all night. All year. All our lives.

Just then, the opening chords of a waltz fill the air, and I extend my hand to Sofia. "Dance with me," I say, my tone leaving no room for argument.

She hesitates, her green eyes narrowing. "Is that an order, Vladimir?"

"Consider it a request from your husband," I reply, allowing a hint of charm to soften my blunt words. "Besides, I see those aunts still vying for your attention."

The alternative being too painful, Sofia immediately places her hand in mine, her touch cool and light. I make a mental note to thank those ladies later as I lead her to the dance floor, pulling her close as we begin to move. Her body is tense against mine, but I can feel the underlying softness beneath her rigid posture.

"You truly look beautiful tonight," I murmur, my lips close to her ear.

She scoffs softly. "I always look beautiful."

I burst out laughing, and spin her out, bringing her back toward me, my hand on her lower back. She maintains an unimpressed expression, but I see the way her chest heaves.

"It's a lovely night, isn't it? And I heard your sisters threw you quite the hen party last night."

Sofia's eyes meet mine, a challenge in their depths. "This is a business arrangement, nothing more. We don't have to make conversation like we're a real thing."

"Is that so?" I let my hand slide lower down her back, feeling her sharp intake of breath. "Because I feel there's potential for much more between us. It would be a waste to live a life together as strangers, would it not?"

A crack appears in her facade—a slight widening of her eyes, a quickening of her pulse that I can feel beneath my fingers. She swallows hard, her voice slightly breathless when she speaks. "You're delusional."

But I can see the internal struggle playing out behind her eyes. The way her body

unconsciously leans into mine, even as her words push me away. The chemistry between us is undeniable, crackling in the air like electricity.

"Am I?" I press, my voice low and intense. "Tell me you don't feel this, Sofia. Tell me, and I'll never mention it again."

The world around us fades away as I hold her gaze. The music slows, or maybe it's just my perception of time stretching out like molasses. Sofia's breath catches, her lips parting slightly. I'm acutely aware of every point where our bodies touch—my hand on the small of her back, her fingers gripping my shoulder, our chests nearly brushing with each breath.

I lean in, drawn by an invisible force. Her eyelids flutter, and for a moment, I think she might meet me halfway. The air between us is charged, heavy with possibility. I can almost taste her lips, feel the softness of them against mine.

But at the last second, Sofia turns her head. Her cheek brushes against mine, sending a jolt through my body.

"This marriage is on paper only, Vladimir," she whispers, her voice trembling slightly. "Don't forget that."

She steps back, breaking our embrace. The loss of contact is like a physical ache. Sofia's eyes are guarded once more, her posture in control as she smooths down her dress.

"I agreed to this union for my family's sake," she says, her tone clipped. "Nothing more. Don't mistake duty for desire."

I clench my jaw, frustration warring with admiration for her resolve. "You can tell yourself that all you want, Sofia. But we both know there's more here than just duty."

She meets my gaze, her green eyes flashing with defiance. "Believe what you want. It doesn't change anything."

I watch Sofia retreat, her strands of hair swaying with each determined step. My hands clench at my sides, itching to pull her back into my arms. The desire to chase after her, to finish what we started, burns through my veins. But I can't. Not here, not now, with both our families watching our every move.

I don't want to cause a scene, even though every fiber of my being is urging me to claim her.

As the party continues around us, I keep Sofia in my periphery. She mingles effortlessly, all graceful movements and polite smiles. But I see the way her eyes dart to me when she thinks I'm not looking, and how much of an effort she makes to ignore me when she knows I am.

"You're staring," Nikolai, Sofia's brother, remarks as he sidles up to me.

I take a swig of vodka. "Am I?"

He chuckles. "My sister's a tough nut to crack. But if anyone can do it, it's you, Zolotov."

I nod, my resolve solidifying. "She may think this is just a paper marriage, but I intend to make it real. Very real."

Nikolai claps me on the shoulder. "Good luck, Brother. You'll need it."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

I bid goodbye to the last of my family and scan the dwindling wedding reception, nerves twisting my stomach into knots. Married. To Vladimir Zolotov. I toy with the heavy diamond on my finger, my eyes drifting to Vladimir across the living room, his commanding presence drawing attention even as he bids goodbye to a group of men.

My heart flutters traitorously, and I clench my jaw, willing myself to regain control.

"Get it together, Sofia," I mutter under my breath. "This changes nothing."

But even as I try to convince myself, the memory of our near-kiss earlier on the dance floor sends a shiver down my spine. I can still feel the ghost of his breath on my lips, the intensity in his dark eyes...

But it can never happen again. He might have got his way with this wedding, but that doesn't mean I'm prepared to give him a marriage.

"There's the blushing bride!" A booming voice snaps me out of my reverie, and I turn to see Vladimir's younger brother, Denis, approaching with a grin, alongside Lara, both carrying fresh drinks.

I force a smile, grateful for the distraction. "Denis, Lara. Enjoying the party?"

Lara raises an eyebrow. "The question is, are you? You look like you're plotting an escape."

My sister-in-law's perceptiveness unnerves me, but I maintain my cool demeanor. "Just taking a moment to breathe. It's been quite a day."

Denis chuckles. "Wait until you see what the rest of your life's going to be like. Our brother may be a man of few words, but he's full of surprises."

My pulse quickens. "Oh?" I ask, curious to know if I can learn more about my husband and, by extension, the Zolotovs. "Why? Does Vladimir live an exciting life?"

"Now, now," Lara interjects, shooting Denis a warning look. "Stop scaring her. Though I will say, Sofia, it's going to be a wild ride."

I file away that nugget of information, determined to use every scrap of knowledge to my advantage. "The Zolotovs seem fond of secrets," I remark, keeping my tone light, wishing they'd tell me more about Vladimir.

Denis's eyes narrow slightly. "Family trait, I suppose. But you're one of us now, aren't you?"

Before I can respond, I feel a presence at my back, a warm hand settling on my waist. Vladimir's deep voice rumbles near my ear. "Trying to corrupt my wife already?"

I stiffen instinctively but force myself to relax into his touch. It's all part of the act, I remind myself.

Lara laughs. "We wouldn't dream of it, Brother. Just welcoming Sofia properly."

I turn slightly, meeting Vladimir's intense gaze. His eyes search mine, and for a moment, I wonder if he can see through my carefully constructed facade.

"Well," I say, injecting a hint of playfulness into my voice, "I suppose I'll have plenty of time to unravel the Zolotov mysteries, won't I?"

Vladimir's lip quirks in the barest hint of a smile. "Indeed you will, my angel."

The endearment, 'my angel,' sends an unexpected warmth through me. I push it aside, focusing instead on taking a step away from him. This marriage may be a means to an end, but I refuse to lose sight of my true purpose.

As Vladimir's siblings launch into a debate about the merits of various honeymoon destinations, I allow myself to observe my new husband. Abram and Mark join in, too.

"It's our last drink of the night, and then, we're out of here," Abram tells me. Mark gives me a wink in solidarity.

I watch Vladimir's quiet strength, the way his family gravitates around him—it's clear why he commands such respect in their world.

Lara sidles up to me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "So, sister dear, ready for your first Zolotov family brunch, whenever it happens? It's quite the event."

I arch an eyebrow, my guard still firmly in place. "Oh? And what should I expect? Bear wrestling? Vodka chugging contests?"

The siblings burst into laughter, and I feel Vladimir's chest rumble against my back. It's... not an unpleasant sensation.

"Nothing so barbaric," Lara chimes in, grinning. "Though I wouldn't put it past Mark after a few drinks."

"Hey!" Mark protests, but there's no heat in it.

I observe their easy banter, a pang of longing hitting me unexpectedly. I suddenly

miss my own family, realizing how Vladimir's is just the same. Together, there's no shop talk. It's plain old fun.

"You'll fit right in, Sofia," Lara says, squeezing my arm. "Just bring your wit and maybe some aspirin for the inevitable hangover."

As their laughter fades and goodbyes are exchanged, a heavy silence falls between Vladimir and me. Suddenly, I realize we're all alone in his house.

It's late. It's time for bed.

And my knees nearly buck over with nerves.

I turn around slowly to find Vladimir watching me with a small smile on his lips. This, I realize, is my husband. And from now on, I will be living with him.

Shit. The idea of sharing a bedroom with a man I hardly know constricts my chest. I square my shoulders, deciding to set some boundaries before the night progresses any further.

My heart races, but I refuse to let it show.

"Vladimir," I begin, my voice steady despite my inner turmoil. "We need to discuss the terms of our... arrangement."

Vladimir's eyebrow ticks up slightly, but he remains silent, waiting for me to continue. His stillness is unnerving, but I press on.

"First, I maintain my independence. I come and go as I please, no questions asked. Second, separate bedrooms. This is a marriage of convenience, nothing more. And third, I expect to be involved in any decisions that affect my life or my family's."

I hold his gaze, refusing to flinch under the weight of his scrutiny. For a moment, tension crackles between us, and I brace myself for an argument.

To my surprise, Vladimir's lips quirk into what might almost be a smile. "Agreed," he says simply.

I blink, thrown off balance. "Just like that?"

He shrugs, his broad shoulders shifting under his tailored suit. "Your terms are reasonable. I have no desire to cage you, Sofia. But understand this—your safety is non-negotiable. If I believe you're in danger, I will act."

His words send an unexpected shiver down my spine. I nod, processing this unexpected turn of events. "Fair enough," I concede.

As the implications of our agreement settle over me, I feel a weight lift from my shoulders. Perhaps this arrangement won't be the prison sentence I'd feared. I allow myself a small smile, meeting Vladimir's intense gaze.

"Well then, Husband," I say, a hint of my usual sarcasm creeping back into my voice, "shall we toast to our unconventional union?"

Vladimir's eyes gleam with something I can't quite decipher. "Indeed we shall, Wife," he rumbles, reaching for two abandoned champagne flutes.

As we clink glasses, I find myself reevaluating my new husband. He's still an enigma, dangerous and unpredictable. But perhaps, just perhaps, there's room for me to carve out a life of my own within the confines of this marriage. It's a small spark of hope, fragile but undeniably present.

I sip my champagne, my mind already racing with possibilities. This is just the

beginning, I realize. The real challenge lies ahead—navigating the treacherous waters of the Zolotov family while keeping my own secrets safe. They, and my own brothers, must never find out what I'm up to with the gangsters plotting to bring the Orlovs down. But for now, I allow myself this moment of cautious optimism.

My heart pounds as I slip out the back door of the Zolotov mansion, the cool night air kissing my skin. It's been three days since my wedding, and Vladimir's absence tonight presents the perfect opportunity. I've observed his hours over the past few days. He leaves for work early and returns late. There's no reason I'd get caught tonight. I simply have to be back around midnight. I straighten my designer dress and slide into the waiting taxi, giving the driver the address to the nightclub.

As the city lights blur past, I run through my mental checklist. My cover story is airtight, my nerves steel-clad.

The pulsing beat of Club Rivera greets me as I step out onto the sidewalk. I take a deep breath and enter.

Inside, the air is thick with smoke and pheromones. I scan the VIP section, my gaze landing on my target—Alexei Volkov, a street thug known for his loose lips after a few drinks. He also runs odd jobs on the Crimson Crew, the gang I'm spying on.

I hike up my dress just a little and saunter over, all calculated grace and practiced charm. "This seat taken?" I purr, gesturing to the empty space beside him.

Alexei's eyes rake over me appreciatively. "For you, Kira? Never."

I settle in, flashing him a coy smile. "Don't you look like a man who knows how to show a girl a good time."

He chuckles, signaling for the waiter. "You have no idea, Kira. Tell me, what are you drinking tonight?"

I lean in, lowering my voice conspiratorially. "Whatever a guy like you wants to treat a girl like me to."

Alexei's grin widens. "A girl like you deserves the best." He slides a hand up my thigh. Instinctively, I tense up. But I can't let my discomfort show through. He needs to think I'm harmless, and I need him to want to impress me. Only then can I get information out on the Crimson Crew.

So, instead, I laugh and pull back. "Now," I say, flicking my hair over my shoulder. "What about that drink?"

"A bottle of your finest champagne," he orders from the waiter, his eyes glued completely on me.

Our drinks arrive, and I lean in closer, our faces mere inches apart. "So," I bite my lower lip. "Tell me if you did something bad this weekend."

"Well, I don't mean to brag." He flexes his muscles, as expected, slurring a little. "But we did steal a shipment this week."

"Oh really?" I look impressed, eyes-widening. "From that...Oltov group?"

"The Orlovs, yeah." He nods enthusiastically.

What an idiot. He's lapping it all up and giving me all I need.

"What about you?" he asks, leaning in closer with a glint in his eye and downing his drink. "You got any plans after?"

I laugh, a tinkling sound that belies the intensity of my focus. "Oh, maybe," I breathe, my fingers tracing patterns on his arm. "But first, why don't you tell me about that other shipment coming in next week? I hear it's quite... valuable."

Alexei's hand once again slides onto my thigh, his touch making my skin crawl beneath the silky fabric of my dress. His hand glides up higher, and I force myself to remain still, my smile unwavering as I lean in closer, feigning interest.

"Ah, you're a curious little thing, aren't you?" he slurs, his breath hot against my ear. "That shipment... it's big. Bigger than you can imagine. But I shouldn't say more."

His fingers creep higher, and I fight the urge to recoil. My heart races, but I keep my voice steady. "Oh, come on," I tease, trailing a finger down his chest. "Surely you can tell me a little more. I can keep a secret."

Alexei's grip tightens, and I realize I've pushed too far. His eyes narrow suspiciously. "Why do you care? Let's just have some fun, Sweetheart."

I laugh, the sound brittle even to my own ears. "Of course we're having fun. I just find you... intriguing," I lie, desperately searching for an escape route.

Just then, he slides his hand around my waist, pulling me closer, nearly onto his lap. I quickly push him away and stand. Immediately, I note the anger in his eyes.

Fuck.

"I just need to use the washroom," I smile and giggle, stepping away from him just a little. "I'll be right back."

I walk away, ready to bolt. He's so drunk, I could just tell him I said goodbye and he won't even remember the half of it. I think I've got all I could out of him tonight, and

from this point on, I need to focus on making sure he keeps his hands away from me.

I turn the corner and pull out my phone, ready to book a cab, when my eyes lock on a familiar, imposing figure across the room. Vladimir. His presence hits me like a physical blow, dark eyes blazing with fury as they zero in on me. The crowd seems to part before him as he strides forward, radiating barely contained rage.

My breath catches in my throat. How did he find me? What have I done?

As Vladimir approaches, his jaw clenched and fists balled at his sides, I feel a chill of genuine fear—not of him, exactly, but of the consequences of my deception. For the first time since this marriage began, I realize I may have severely underestimated my new husband.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

The pounding bass reverberates through my chest as I scan the dimly lit nightclub, searching for one face among the sea of writhing bodies. My breath catches when I finally spot her.

Sofia. And some bastard has his hands all over her, trying to pull her onto his lap.

I clench my fists, ready to claw out his guts.

Just then, Sofia pushes him away, an uncomfortable laugh escaping her lips as she extracts herself from his grasp. My fists clench at my sides, surprise and anger warring inside me. What the hell is she doing here? And who the hell is that?

I watch as she smooths down her dress, her movements fluid and graceful despite the awkwardness of the situation. Even from across the room, I can see the shift in her demeanor. The forced amusement melts away, replaced by a collected, charming giggle.

She takes a step away from the man, her chin lifted in that proud tilt. My eyes follow her every move as she walks away from him in a hurry, drinking in the sight of her. The way the strobing lights catch on her pin-straight blonde hair, the elegant line of her neck as she turns.

And then, as if feeling the weight of my gaze, she freezes. Our eyes lock across the crowded dance floor, and I see the moment recognition hits. Her green eyes widen in what appears to be panic and guilt. "Damn it, Sofia," I mutter under my breath, already moving toward her. "What are you playing at?"

I push through the throng of sweaty bodies, my eyes never leaving Sofia's face. The pulsing beat of the music thrums through my chest, but it's nothing compared to the thundering of my heart. Frustration and urgency fuel my steps as I shove past gyrating dancers and drunken revelers.

"Move," I growl, barely aware of the words leaving my mouth. My protective instincts are in overdrive, every fiber of my being focused on reaching her.

Sofia's eyes widen as I approach, her body tensing like a deer caught in headlights. But she doesn't run. Of course not. That would be too easy.

I finally break through the last wall of bodies separating us. The scent of her perfume hits me, a delicate contrast to the overwhelming smell of alcohol and sweat permeating the club.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demand, my voice raised to be heard over the pounding music. "Why did you leave the mansion without telling anyone?"

Sofia's chin lifts, her green eyes flashing with that familiar icy defiance. "I wasn't aware I needed your permission to go out, Vlad," she retorts, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

I clench my jaw, torn between admiration for her spirit and frustration at her recklessness. "This isn't about permission, Sofia. It's about safety. Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for you to be here alone?"

She rolls her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm hardly alone. And I can take care of myself."

"Really?" I growl, leaning in closer. "Is that why you were sitting on some stranger's lap?"

A flicker of something—embarrassment? Anger?—passes across her face before it's quickly masked. "It's not what it looks like," she snaps. "And are you fucking spying on me?"

I struggle to keep my temper in check, reminding myself that losing it won't help the situation. But God, this woman tests my patience like no other.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for her reaction. "I tracked your phone," I admit, watching her face carefully. "I thought you might have been kidnapped."

Sofia's eyes widen, shock quickly replaced by indignation. "You did what?" she hisses, her voice low and dangerous. "How dare you invade my privacy like that!"

Her anger is palpable, radiating off her in waves. I can't help but admire the fire in her eyes, even as I brace myself for the tirade I know is coming.

"Your privacy?" My voice goes up a notch. "What about your audacity? You're married to me, god damn it, and here you are, sneaking away to some sleazy nightclub with some strange man?"

She pauses, lowering her eyes. I see the guilt crossing her face in the way she avoids my gaze. Then, she looks up and sighs. "I'm simply here to unwind, I swear. I only just met him."

As I struggle to form a response, I notice her eyes suddenly dart past me, scanning the crowd. The anger in her expression gives way to something else—panic.

"Sofia?" I ask, my protective instincts flaring. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't answer, but I follow her gaze to see the man she was with earlier, pushing through the crowd, clearly searching for her. Sofia's breath catches, and I feel her

tense beside me.

"We need to go," she says urgently, all pretense of nonchalance gone. "Now, Vlad."

I'm torn between demanding answers and getting her to safety. But one look at the genuine fear in her eyes makes my decision for me. Whatever's going on, it's clear she doesn't want to be found by that man.

"Alright," I nod, her security becoming my number one priority. "Let's get you out of here."

Without a word, I wrap my fingers around her wrist and guide her through the writing crowd. The whole time, her eyes dart frantically as she searches for an escape.

"In here," I hiss, pulling her toward a door marked 'Employees Only'. We burst into what appears to be a supply closet, and I slam the door shut behind us.

The space is cramped, barely large enough for the two of us. Shelves laden with cleaning supplies press in from all sides, and the smell of bleach hangs heavy in the air. I can feel the heat radiating off Sofia's body, her chest rising and falling rapidly as she catches her breath.

"Sofia," I growl, my patience wearing thin. "Who was that man? Why were you with him?"

Her green eyes meet mine in the dim light, defiance warring with something else—fear? Uncertainty? She opens her mouth, then closes it again, her brow furrowing as she seems to debate with herself.

"It's... complicated," she finally says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I lean in closer, our faces mere inches apart. "Then uncomplicate it for me," I demand, my tone brooking no argument.

Sofia's eyes flash, that familiar icy demeanor sliding back into place. "He was just some guy, Vlad. No one important," she snaps, but I can hear the slight tremor in her voice.

"I don't buy that," I retort, frustration building. "I find you in a seedy club, practically in some stranger's lap, and now you're running scared. What am I supposed to think?"

She flinches at my words, and for a moment, I see a crack in her carefully constructed facade. "You wouldn't understand," she murmurs, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Frustration wells up inside me. I reach out and gently hold her chin, forcing her to look into my eyes. Her lips part and her eyes widen as I step an inch closer, leaning in until I feel her body pressed against mine.

"Try me," I insist, my voice low and intense. "I can't protect you if you won't let me in, Sofia."

"Protect me?" she asks, her voice trailing off toward the end. A strange look crosses her face, one of disbelief, as though she can't comprehend why I'd want to do something like that.

"Yes. Protect you. I don't care that you went to a nightclub, Sofia. My only worry is that you could get hurt. You're my responsibility now, can't you see that? I have to know why you were hiding."

Sofia's breath hitches, her chest rising and falling rapidly. I can see the pulse point in her neck fluttering, betraying her nervousness despite her icy exterior.

"I'm not hiding," she murmurs, but there's a tremor in her voice that tells me otherwise.

"Liar," I growl, my frustration reaching its peak. It's impossible to be in this confined space with her without wanting more. The longer we talk, the more my resolve weakens.

She continues to look at me, her breath uneven. Her lower lip quivers, like she's caught in a situation she doesn't have an out from.

"Hey," I whisper, suddenly worried. I reach over and push a strand of her hair behind her ear. "Shh, just relax."

Sofia's eyes widen at the unexpected gesture, her breath hitching as our faces remain inches apart. It's a rare moment of vulnerability, and it catches me off guard.

As my thumb brushes against her cheek, Sofia lets out a shaky exhale, her gaze flickering between my eyes and lips. The air crackles with such tension, and I feel every cell in me come alive.

The next thing I know, I'm slowly inching closer. She gets on her toes, meeting me halfway, and the next thing I know, I have my lips against hers. I groan as she nibbles at my lower lip softly, and I reach out to hold her by the waist. I feel her tremble, and the blood gushes to my head at the softness of her lips against mine.

The whole time, her hands stay by her side. I wonder if she's not actually interested, and I consider pulling away—but then she parts her lips for me.

Fuck me.

My tongue slides into her mouth with fierce passion, and she kisses me back, but

something in her manner seems like she's holding back. Slowly, I caress her back, putting an end to the kiss, and pull back.

A flash of disappointment crosses her face, but her body is rigid. Strange. She was responsive during the kiss, but there are mixed signals.

Almost like she didn't know what to do with herself during it.

"Hey," I ask softly, reaching out for her cheek. "Are you okay?"

She nods, doe-eyed, and places her hand over mine, gently leaning into me.

I think back to what just happened. Her inexperience was evident in the hesitant way she moved her lips against mine, the slight trembling of her shoulders as she kept her hands by her side. And now? She's leaning into my caress with such comfort.

It's endearing and maddening all at once. My mind races, torn between desire and suspicion. Is this genuine? Or is it another one of her calculated moves?

Sofia pulls back at last, her emerald eyes wide and searching. I see vulnerability there and for a moment, I allow myself to hope that this is real, that she's finally letting me in.

But then a loud banging on the door shatters the moment.

"Sofia! Are you in there?" A man's voice, rough and impatient, calls out.

Sofia freezes in my arms, her face draining of color. The panic in her eyes is unmistakable as she whispers, "It's him."

My protective instincts flare to life. "Who is he, Sofia? What does he want?"

She shakes her head frantically, pressing a finger to my lips. "Please, Vlad. We need to get out of here. Now."

I scan the small room quickly, my eyes landing on a narrow window near the ceiling. Without hesitation, I stride toward it, my decision made. "This way," I whisper urgently, already working to unlatch the window.

Sofia's eyes widen. "Are you serious? We can't—"

"We can, and we will," I interrupt, pushing the window open. The cool night air rushes in, a stark contrast to the stuffy heat of the supply room. "I'll boost you up."

She hesitates for a moment. It's a side of Sofia I've never seen before.

"Trust me," I say softly, holding out my hand.

Sofia's green eyes meet mine, conflict evident in their depths. Then, with a barely perceptible nod, she places her hand in mine.

I lift her easily, marveling at how light she feels. As she scrambles through the window, I can't help but admire her grace, even in this awkward situation.

"Vlad," she hisses from outside, "hurry!"

The pounding on the door grows more insistent. I hoist myself up and out, landing beside Sofia in what appears to be a narrow alley behind the club.

"Are you alright?" I ask, scanning her for any signs of injury.

She nods, then lets out a shaky laugh. "I can't believe we just did that. I feel like I'm in some ridiculous action movie."

I can't help but smile at her unexpected humor. "Well, consider me your dashing co-star. Now, let's get you home before the villains catch up."

As we hurry down the alley, I keep a protective arm around Sofia's waist. She doesn't pull away, and I can feel the slight trembling of her body against mine.

"Sofia," I begin, my voice low and serious, "when we get back, we need to talk about what's really going on."

She tenses beside me but doesn't argue. "Vlad, please," she whispers, her voice barely audible over the distant thrum of the nightclub's music. "Just... not here. Not now. They can't see me with you."

They? A memory comes back from when I caught her with those thugs in that bar. Could this have something to do with the crew she's been running around with?

I nod, tightening my hold on her as we emerge onto a bustling street. "Let's get you home safe first. Then we'll figure out the rest."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

My heels click sharply against the hardwood floor as I walk into the living room, confusion pulsing through me. I hurl my purse onto the leather couch, letting out a frustrated growl. How could this night have gone so terribly wrong?

I sit and survey the room, and my mind struggles to make sense of it all. The club, the drinks, that man...it was supposed to be simple.

The sound of ice cubes clinking pulls me back to the present. Vlad stands at the bar cart, face etched in grim determination as he pours two glasses of whiskey. His movements are slow, deliberate, and controlled—the complete opposite of my spinning emotions.

He picks up the glasses, eyes burning into mine. "We need to talk." His voice is firm but not harsh.

I cross my arms, lips pressed in a thin line. What could I possibly have to say? But I know there's no avoiding this conversation. Not when Vlad looks at me with such intensity.

The events of the evening play on repeat in my head. It's not just that I got caught. I watch Vlad as he walks up to me.

He holds out a glass. "Drink. It will help steady your nerves."

I hesitate, then take it, his skin grazing against my palm. A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of what just happened between us. My lips still tingle from when he kissed me, and every time he looks at me, I'm reminded of how he sent shivers

down my spine, how he made me want more, how he turned me on.

But as much as I crave his touch, I can't let myself succumb to it. I've never been in this situation before, where my body betrays my mind, and Vlad kissing me turned all my plans upside down. I lost control. The longer I'm near him, the more I fear I might lose even more.

I push these thoughts away, instead focusing on steadying my breathing. I can't give him the satisfaction of seeing how rattled I am, of seeing the effect he has on me.

"Now talk. What happened tonight?" His tone is firm yet not unkind. Protective, but with an edge of frustration.

"You tell me?" I say, without thinking. "You're the one keeping tabs on me."

He sighs, setting his glass on the side table. "Sofia, you know it's not like that. What I saw tonight... raised concerns. If anything happens to you, I..." he trails off, not finishing the sentence.

There's a momentary pause, and I feel every fiber of my being throb. He'd what? Why does he care about what happens to me? Is it that he fears my brothers? But the way he looks at me, so worried sick, tells me it's something more, and that's a territory of conversation I'm not quite prepared for yet. Not when my traitorous heart is trying to explain to my head what the hell went down when he kissed me the way he did?

I take a sip, letting the burn ground me. I know there's no avoiding this conversation because he's been asking the same questions over and over again. And now, I know that he'll be keeping tabs on me. If I don't come out with the truth myself, he'll find the answers one way or another. And the consequences may be far more dire when that happens.

“I just needed to do something, alright?” I say, at last. I know it’s not enough, but it’s a start.

“You needed to do something?” He raises an eyebrow incredulously. “Damn it, Sofia! I saw how he looked at you, how he touched you. What were you thinking getting involved with him?”

His protective tone grates on my nerves, but there's an edge to his voice I can't ignore. Is that... jealousy? I push the thought away.

"I was thinking that I'm a grown woman who can make her own decisions," I retort, my green eyes flashing defiantly. "Or did you forget that when you agreed to this arranged marriage?"

Vlad's jaw tightens, and I can see him struggling to keep his composure. "This isn't about our arrangement. This is about your safety, about our families' safety. You can't just—”

"Can't just what?" I interrupt, my voice sharp. "Live my life? Make my own choices? News flash, Vlad—you don't own me."

The tension between us crackles, electric and dangerous. I know I'm pushing him, but I can't back down now. Not when I had already stoked the fire.

“True. I don’t own you. But I did marry you, and whatever it is you’re up to, can come to bite me in the ass. So I deserve to know what trouble you’ve brought into our lives.”

I sigh and bring my head to my hand, rubbing my forehead. There’s no pushing this away. The truth has to come out.

"Fine. You want to know? I'm on a mission," I look up, my voice steady despite the vulnerability I feel. "That man you saw me with? He's connected to a gangster group called the Crimson Crew. I'm gathering intel on their operations."

Vlad's eyes widen, shock evident on his face. "What? Sofia, are you insane? Do you have any idea how dangerous—"

"Of course I know," I cut him off, my tone icy. "I'm not some foolish child playing spy games."

Vlad's brows furrow, trying to understand.

"I've been planning this for months," I say, pacing the room. "Every interaction, every 'accidental' meeting—it's all been calculated. I'm close to uncovering something big, something that could change everything for us."

Vlad leans forward, his elbows on his knees. "How the hell did you get embroiled in this?"

"I was at a bar a few months ago. It was quiet. I overheard some guys talking about bringing down the Orlovs, and when people talk like that, there's only one family they can mean."

"Yours." He nods decidedly.

"Mine," I whisper. "I pretended to be someone else, cozied up to them. Over the past few months, I figured they want to bring down my brothers. They steal shipments, and they blow up warehouses. Sometimes, I convince them otherwise. Sometimes, they keep me in the dark. But it's only when I seem interested, play around, party a little, that they open up to me."

Vlad listens intently, his gaze never leaving my face. I can see the storm of emotions swirling in his eyes—concern, anger, disbelief. But there's something else there, too—a glimmer of respect shining through the tumult.

“So you’re saying you infiltrated the Crimson Crew all on your own?” Vlad’s voice is laced with both admiration and dismay.

“Something like that,” I shrug. “And that’s why the man tonight couldn’t see me with you. He might recognize you. To him, I’m just Kira.”

“Bloody hell.” Vladimir’s eyes nearly pop out of his head. “And you never went to your brothers with this information?”

“I couldn’t,” she shrugs. “They’d wage war. And wars in our world can kill. I just thought I’d make this problem go away in a level-headed manner.”

Vladimir contemplates my strategy. “And what exactly do you hope to achieve with this... mission of yours?”

I meet his gaze head-on. "Leverage, Vlad. The kind that ensures our families' safety and prosperity for generations to come."

He runs a hand through his hair, conflict evident in his eyes. "Christ, Sofia. You're playing a dangerous game here. If they find out—"

"They won't," I interject, my voice firm. "I know what I'm doing. Besides, this isn't just about me," I hold Vlad's gaze, chin tilted up defiantly. "It's about securing a future where our families don't have to constantly watch their backs."

Vlad's jaw clenches, his eyes searching mine. "And you think you can pull this off alone? Sofia, do you have any idea how dangerous this whole thing is?"

"I'm not naive, Vlad," I snap, my voice icy. "I've grown up in this world, same as you. I know the risks."

He stands abruptly, pacing the length of the room. I watch him, noting the tension in his shoulders, the way his hands clench and unclench at his sides. My heart races. I've laid all my cards on the table, and now everything hinges on his reaction.

"It's insane," he mutters, running a hand through his hair. "Absolutely fucking insane."

I remain silent, letting him process. After what feels like an eternity, he turns back to me, his expression a mix of frustration and grudging admiration.

"You're either incredibly brave or incredibly foolish," he says, shaking his head. "Maybe both."

I can't help the small smirk that tugs at my lips. "I prefer to think of it as strategic."

Vlad's eyes narrow, and he takes a step toward me. "Strategic or not, it's too dangerous. I can't let you do this." His voice drops, low and menacing. "I'll tell your brothers if I have to, Sofia. They need to know what you're risking."

My heart lurches, but I keep my face impassive. I've anticipated this, prepared for it. I meet his gaze unflinchingly, my voice steady as I counter, "And what do you think that will accomplish, Vlad? Besides them thinking you're not capable of handling your wife's affairs? That you don't wish to take care of me?"

I stand now, walking up to him, closing the distance between us. "Think about it. If you tell them, they'll try to stop me. They'll interfere, and that will only draw more attention to our families. If they get in trouble, so could the Zolotovs, given our alliance. More risk, more danger. And don't forget, they'll wonder what the hell you

were doing all this time to let me get into this situation. They'll stop trusting you and our marriage."

I pause, letting my words sink in. Then, with a calmness that surprises even me, I propose, "I have a better solution. A deal, if you will." I tilt my head, a hint of challenge in my eyes. "You keep my secret, and I ensure the safety of both our families. No one else needs to know; no one else needs to be put at risk. I'll come to you if there's any sign of serious trouble, and in exchange..." I add, "I'll give you anything you want."

"Anything?" he asks incredulously.

"Anything," I say firmly. "I'll owe you."

Vlad's eyebrows shoot up, disbelief etched across his features. "You can't be serious."

"I'm deadly serious," I reply, my resolve unwavering. "This way, we control the situation and protect everyone we care about."

Vlad pauses, his dark eyes searching mine. I can almost see the gears turning in his head, weighing the risks against the potential rewards. The silence stretches between us, taut as a wire.

"I don't know, Sof," he says, at last, looking at me with haunted eyes. "I simply don't know."

And then, to my horror, he sighs and walks out without saying another word, rendering what I thought was my compelling argument to the graveyard.

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I storm out of the drawing room, my footsteps echoing through the vast halls of the mansion. Sofia's words reverberate in my mind, a relentless reminder of the questionable path she's chosen. My fists tighten and release as I march to my bedroom, trying to shake the unease coiled in my gut.

"Damn it," I mutter, slamming the door shut behind me. The sharp sound mirrors the turmoil within.

I pace the room, my reflection catching in the ornate mirror. Dark eyes stare back, filled with conflict. Sofia's mission... it's madness. Pure, unadulterated madness. And yet...

"She's capable," I grudgingly admit to the empty room. "More than capable."

I drop onto the bed, draping an arm over my eyes. Sleep refuses to come as my thoughts churn. Sofia—her piercing green eyes, the determined line of her jaw—dominates my mind. The sheets tangle around me as I toss and turn.

"I should stop her," I growl, sitting up abruptly. "It's too dangerous."

But even as I say it, I know it's a lie. The truth? I'm intrigued, fascinated by her resolve, her cunning. It's been a long time since anyone has challenged me like this.

I flop back down, staring at the ceiling. "She could get herself killed."

The thought sends a jolt of panic through me. I've only known Sofia for a short time, but the idea of harm coming to her is... unsettling. More than it should be. Sofia

Orlov has wormed her way under my skin in ways I don't know how to handle.

I roll over, punching my pillow in frustration. "Let her do it," I mutter. "Let her prove herself."

The words taste like ash in my mouth, but I know they're true. Sofia deserves the chance to show what she's made of. And if things go south... well, I'll be there to pick up the pieces.

As dawn breaks, I've still not made my decision.

I sit up, running a hand through my disheveled hair. "This is going to be a tough day," I mutter, a wry smile tugging at my lips despite my exhaustion. I can only imagine how pissed she must be.

I push open the heavy oak doors of the breakfast room, the scent of freshly brewed coffee hitting me instantly. My eyes, still heavy from a restless night, immediately lock onto Sofia. She's already seated at the far end of the long table, her posture impeccable, her face a mask of cool indifference.

"Good morning," I grunt, making my way to the sideboard.

Sofia doesn't respond, doesn't even look up from the newspaper spread before her. Her light blonde hair cascades over one shoulder, catching the morning sunlight streaming through the windows.

Oh yeah, she's pissed alright.

I pour myself a cup of coffee, the familiar routine grounding me. "Sleep well?" I ask,

unable to keep the edge from my voice as I take a seat across from her.

She finally decides to look at me, those green eyes as cold as Siberian ice. "Perfectly, thank you," she replies, her tone clipped and dismissive.

I lean back, studying her. Not a hair out of place, her appearance as composed as ever. It's commendable how put-together she looks when I feel like I've been dragged backward through a hedge.

"Any plans for today?" I probe, trying to gauge her mood.

Sofia takes a deliberate sip of her tea. "Nothing that concerns you, Vladimir."

I feel my jaw clench. "Everything that happens in this house concerns me."

"Is that so?" she counters, one perfectly shaped eyebrow arching. "I wasn't aware I needed to run my daily schedule by you."

The sarcasm in her voice grates on my already frayed nerves, and I don't fight back.

I open my mouth to change the topic, but she cuts me off with a sharp look. "If you'll excuse me, I have matters to attend to."

With that, she rises gracefully from her chair, leaving me staring after her, frustrated beyond belief.

I watch Sofia glide out of the room, her pin-straight blonde hair swaying with each step. The moment she's gone, I push back from the table, my chair scraping against the floor. Her dismissive attitude has left me with a burning need to act, to do something.

While all I want is to get close to her, it's going to be impossible if she keeps me at arm's length. Her deal comes back to mind. If I let her proceed as per her plan, she'd give me anything in return.

What if I asked to be involved in every step? What if I made her promise to come to me at the first sign of trouble? Could that help us get closer?

Or am I sending her into the viper's nest all because I want to get closer to her?

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, striding toward my office. I need to give her an answer, and I need to do it now—before she moves from dismissing me to ignoring me entirely.

Once inside, I shut the door firmly behind me and head straight for my computer. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I delve into the murky world of street gangs. The gangsters Sofia mentioned—I need to know everything about them.

Hours pass as I sift through information, cross-referencing names and dates. My eyes sting from staring at the screen, but I push on. Finally, a picture emerges.

The Crimson Crew isn't just some small-time thugs—they're players with connections that run deep. And they're gunning for the Orlovs.

My eyes narrow as I piece together the implications. These gangsters aren't just after money or influence—they want territory. Orlov territory. Fights over running the streets? They're the worst kind. And Sofia's walking right into their crosshairs.

"Damn it," I growl, slamming my fist on the desk. The urge to protect her surges through me, primal and fierce. But I can't just lock her away. She'd never forgive me, and worse, I'd lose any chance of earning her trust.

I lean back, fingers steeped under my chin. "Think, Vladimir. There has to be a way."

The risks of letting her continue are high, but the potential payoff... If she succeeds, it could cripple our enemies and strengthen both our positions.

And if I support her, maybe she'll finally see me as an ally, not just another obstacle.

My head pounds from the endless circling of thoughts. I need coffee.

The rich aroma hits me as soon as I enter the kitchen, momentarily grounding me. I inhale deeply, feeling some of the tension leave my shoulders.

As I pour the steaming liquid into my mug, the familiar routine gives me a moment of clarity. I can't stop Sofia, but I can prepare. Gather intel, set up contingencies, and be ready to step in if things go south.

I take a sip, the bitter warmth spreading through me. It's a risk, but one worth taking. For Sofia. For us.

I turn, coffee in hand, and there she is. Sofia glides into the kitchen, her pin-straight blonde hair cascading over her shoulders like liquid gold. Her green eyes flick to me, then away, dismissive as ever. The chill in her gaze could freeze hell itself.

"Good afternoon, Sofia," I say, my voice gruff from not having spoken for a while.

She barely acknowledges me with a curt nod, reaching for her own mug. The silence stretches between us, taut as a wire.

Little does she know, I've reached my decision.

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My steps falter as I stride into the kitchen, frustration simmering beneath my skin. There he is, Vladimir Zolotov, the bane of my existence, casually leaning against the counter as if he's got nothing to worry about. His broad shoulders fill out his crisp white shirt, and he sips his coffee with infuriating nonchalance. My jaw clenches. How dare he act so calm, given he's keeping me hanging for an answer?

I force myself to move, each step deliberate as I approach the coffee pot. The rich aroma fills my nostrils, but it does little to soothe my frayed nerves. My hands tremble slightly as I pour, and I silently curse my body's betrayal. I won't give him the satisfaction of seeing how he affects me.

The silence stretches between us, thick and oppressive. I can feel his dark eyes on me, observing, always observing. It makes my skin prickle, and I resist the urge to fidget with my hair or smooth down my blouse.

Just as I'm about to retreat with my coffee, his deep voice cuts through the quiet. "Good afternoon, Sofia."

I freeze, my back still turned to him. My mind races, debating whether to acknowledge him or maintain my icy facade. In the end, I opt for cool indifference, taking a sip of my coffee before turning to face him.

"Is it?" I reply, my tone dripping with sarcasm. "I hadn't noticed."

He smiles, catching me off guard.

"I've made a decision," he states, his voice low and steady.

Despite my best efforts, curiosity piques within me. I raise an eyebrow, silently prompting him to continue. My heart, traitor that it is, begins to quicken its pace.

Vladimir sets his cup down with a soft clink, his dark eyes never leaving mine. "I'll let you carry on with your mission and won't tell anyone about it," he says, and for a moment, I allow myself to feel a flicker of hope. But, of course, there's a catch. There's always a catch with him.

"On one condition," he continues, his tone brooking no argument. "You come to me at the first sign of trouble. No exceptions. And you keep me informed of every move you make."

I can't help the scoff that escapes my lips. "You expect me to report to you like some kind of subordinate?"

"I expect you to prioritize your safety," Vladimir counters, his voice growing harder. "This isn't a game, Sofia. The people you're dealing with are dangerous. If you're doing this, then we're in it together. You have to promise me that."

I bite back a retort, knowing deep down that he's right. But admitting that would mean showing weakness, and that's something I can't afford. Not with him.

"And how do I know I can trust you?" I challenge, crossing my arms over my chest.

Vladimir's expression softens almost imperceptibly. "You don't. But right now, I'm your best option."

My mind races, weighing Vladimir's offer against the very real risk of my brothers discovering my plans. The thought of their reaction sends a chill down my spine. I can already see Nikolai's thunderous expression, hear Dima's disappointed sigh. They'd threaten to bar me in a room or something. But the alternative...

I meet Vladimir's steady gaze, my chin tilting up defiantly. "Fine," I say, the word tasting bitter on my tongue. "Your terms are... acceptable. Together," I force the words out, hating how they make me feel beholden to him. "It's preferable to being locked away like some fragile doll, I suppose."

Vladimir's lips quirk into what might almost be a smile. "Glad we could come to an agreement, Sofia."

I roll my eyes but find myself nodding. "Thank you," I manage, my voice a mix of reluctant gratitude and lingering wariness. "I... appreciate your help."

The next morning, I ask the housekeeper where Vlad might be.

"He's in the living room, Mrs. Zolotov," she tells me.

I pause, taking in the moment. No matter how many times I've heard it, being called Mrs. Zolotov shocks me to my core. Once again, I remember I am married to Vladimir Zolotov.

I enter the living room, and it's a pretty sight: a beautiful arched roof, sunlight slanting through the windows that hits the furniture at different angles.

Vladimir looks up from his laptop, eyebrow raised.

Here goes nothing. He wants updates? Fine. I'll give them to him—anything to keep our little secret.

"I'm thinking of meeting that guy again. The one from the club," I announce, my tone leaving no room for argument. "Tonight."

Vladimir's expression darkens. "Sofia—"

I cut him off, already anticipating a protest. "You said you'd help, not dictate my every move. I need to do this."

Vladimir rises abruptly, his imposing figure blocking my path. "You're not ready," he states, his voice a low rumble of disapproval. "Going in unprepared is a death wish. He could get violent. It's only a matter of time before someone finds out who you are. You're married to me, and there are photos of us out there from the wedding."

I bristle, my hands clenching at my sides. "I guess that's just a risk I'm willing to take."

His dark eyes bore into mine, unrelenting. "This isn't about calculated risk; it's about the strategy to make sure you don't fail. You need training."

"Training?" I scoff, crossing my arms. "And I suppose you're offering to be my personal instructor?"

Vladimir nods, his expression serious. "Exactly. Fighting techniques, disguise skills, understanding power dynamics, and subtle changes in behavior. These are crucial."

My pride stings at the implication that I need his help. I'm tempted to refuse outright, to prove I can do this on my own. But a small voice of reason whispers in the back of my mind, reminding me of the stakes.

I chew my lower lip, considering. "And how long would this... training take?"

"As long as necessary," Vladimir replies, his tone leaving no room for argument.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair. The logical part of me knows he's right, but

admitting it feels like swallowing glass.

"Fine," I finally concede, my voice tight. "But this doesn't mean I'm incapable."

Vladimir's expression softens slightly. "No one said you were, Sofia. This is about giving you every advantage."

I nod curtly, still not entirely comfortable with the arrangement. "When do we start?"

"Now," Vladimir says, a hint of a challenge in his eyes. "Unless you're not up for it?"

I narrow my eyes at him, rising to the bait despite myself. "Oh, I'm ready. Let's see what you've got, old man."

I stand in the center of Vladimir's study, watching him with a mixture of skepticism and curiosity. He moves with practiced ease, his hands deftly applying makeup to his face. Within minutes, his sharp features soften, age lines appear, and his skin tone changes subtly.

"The key is in the details," Vladimir explains, his voice gruff but patient. "A slight change in posture, a different way of walking. These can make you unrecognizable."

I lean against his desk, arms crossed. "And how exactly did you become an expert in disguises? Didn't realize the Bratva offered cosmetology classes."

Vladimir chuckles, holding back a laugh. "Years of infiltrating rival territories with my brothers."

My eyebrow arches. "Really? I find that hard to believe."

He turns to face me, looking decades older than he did moments ago. "It's true. We once spent three months posing as dock workers in St. Petersburg to uncover a traitor."

Despite myself, I'm intrigued. "What happened?"

"We caught him," Vladimir says simply, reaching for a wig. "But not before I learned how crucial a convincing disguise can be."

I watch as he adjusts the gray-streaked hair over his own. "And your brothers? They were as adept at this as you?"

A smile passes over Vladimir's face. "They have their strengths. Mark is our tech expert, and Abram is our strategist. I'm the chameleon."

"Chameleon, huh?" I find my heart tugging to learn more.

"I was young," he admits, "when I learned to observe more than I speak. The more you observe, the more people confuse you to be their friend."

I find myself absorbed in Vladimir's words, a side of him I never expected to see. It's strange to think of this man, with all his intensity and aloofness, as someone who used to lurk in shadows, transforming himself into whoever the situation demanded. There's a vulnerability in the way he speaks about himself, giving me a glimpse into his strengths, which, in the wrong hands, can become a weakness.

He trusts me, and that makes me feel weirdly warm and fuzzy. Afraid I might slip up in a moment of weakness and let him see me soft, I gesture to the array of supplies. "So, are you going to teach me or just reminisce all day?"

"Straight to business, always, aren't you?" he says gruffly, and motions at me to join

him in front of the mirror.

We work in companionable silence for a while, Vladimir guiding my hands as I attempt my own disguise. His touch is firm but gentle, and I find myself relaxing in the unexpected camaraderie. At last, I look at my reflection, unable to recognize myself.

"Not bad," I admit, my usual icy tone softening slightly. "I suppose you do know what you're doing."

Vladimir's eyes meet mine in the mirror, a hint of amusement in their depths. "High praise indeed, coming from you."

I roll my eyes, but there's no real bite to it. "Don't let it go to your head. I still think this whole arrangement is ridiculous."

He turns to face me, now looking like a weathered old man. "And yet, here you are."

"Here I am," I agree quietly, surprising myself with the lack of hostility in my voice.

We clean and pack up in silence. "Thank you," I say, at last, acknowledging what must be acknowledged. After all, he has given me his precious time, all to let me run things the way I want. It's more than anyone's ever done for me before.

I'm about to bid goodbye when Vladimir's expression grows serious. He clears his throat. "Sofia, there's something we need to discuss."

I tense immediately, guard rising. "What is it?"

"Remember the promise you made in exchange for my help? That you'd give me anything in return?" he asks, his voice low and steady.

I nod warily. "Of course. What about it?"

Vladimir's gaze is unwavering. "I have my first condition. Starting tonight, you'll be sleeping in my room."

His words hit me like a bucket of ice water. I blink, certain I've misheard. "Excuse me?" I manage, my voice a mix of disbelief and nerves.

Vladimir remains unruffled, his eyes locked on mine. "You heard me correctly, Sofia. You are my wife, and it's time we play our roles before the staff begin to talk."

My mind races, thoughts tumbling over each other. Sharing a room? With him? The implications send a shiver down my spine—part apprehension, part something else I refuse to name.

"That's... that's completely inappropriate," I stammer, struggling to maintain my usual composure. "Surely you can't be serious."

"I'm entirely serious," he replies, his tone leaving no room for argument. "It's non-negotiable."

I open my mouth to protest further, but the words die on my tongue. I did agree to his terms, didn't I? And without his help... I clench my jaw, hating the realization that washes over me. I need him.

"Fine," I say finally, my voice clipped. "But if you think this means anything beyond what it is—a practical arrangement—you're sorely mistaken."

Vladimir's lips quirk in the barest hint of a smile. "Wouldn't dream of it."

As I turn away, my heart hammers in my chest. What have I gotten myself into? This

man, this infuriating, enigmatic man, has upended my carefully constructed world in a matter of days. And now... now we'll be sharing a room.

I take a steadying breath, squaring my shoulders. This is just another challenge, I tell myself. Another obstacle to overcome in pursuit of my goal. I can handle Vladimir Sokolov. I have to.

But as I glance back at him, catching the intensity in his gaze, a flush creeps down my neck, and I find myself thinking back to our kiss.

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I stand by the window, my gaze fixed on Sofia as she hovers uncertainly near the bed. The thin straps of her shirt leave her shoulders bare, drawing my eyes to the graceful curve of her shoulders. God. In this moment of vulnerability, she's gorgeous beyond belief. But I don't want to make her feel uncomfortable.

My jaw clenches as I force myself to look away from her long, shapely legs glimmering beneath those satin shorts.

Sofia's green eyes dart around the room, avoiding mine. "So this is where you sleep," she says, her tone dripping with sarcasm as she picks up a fluffy cushion. "I expected more... I don't know, leather?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Disappointed?"

A hint of a smirk plays at her lips. "Immensely."

She climbs into bed, pressing herself against the far edge as if afraid I might bite. I suppress a smile at her obvious discomfort. Part of me wants to reassure her, but I know better than to coddle this ice princess.

I slide under the covers on my side, maintaining a respectful distance. "You can relax. I won't touch you."

Sofia scoffs. "As if I was worried about that."

"Weren't you?" I can't resist needling her a bit.

She turns to glare at me, green eyes flashing. "You may be used to women throwing themselves at you, Vladimir, but I'm not impressed by muscles and a brooding stare."

I chuckle softly. "Good. Because I'm not trying to impress you."

Sofia rolls onto her side, putting her back to me. "Then we understand each other perfectly."

As silence falls between us, I find myself hyper-aware of her presence—the soft sound of her breathing, the faint scent of her shampoo. My body urges me to close the distance between us, to pull her against me and bury my face in her hair. But I remain still, respecting the boundaries she's set.

This arrangement may have started as an arranged transaction, but I'm beginning to realize it could become far more complicated than I anticipated. Sofia Orlov is a force to be reckoned with, and I have a feeling she'll be testing my self-control in ways I never expected.

When she tosses to face me, trying to get comfortable, I observe she's wide awake.

I clear my throat, breaking the tense silence. It's better than staring at one another awkwardly. "Your mission. Tell me about it."

Sofia stiffens, her back still turned to me. "What about it?"

"Why go it alone?" I probe, my tone direct. "It's not exactly a smart move."

She gives me a death stare. "And what would you know about smart moves, Vladimir? You're not the one with four overbearing brothers breathing down your neck."

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued by her flash of anger. "Enlighten me."

"They treat me and Natalia like we're made of glass," she spits out, sitting up. The moonlight catches her blonde hair, giving her an almost ethereal glow. "Natalia hasn't truly questioned it, for if she could have it her way, she'd forget all about the Bratva. She's always craved normal, whatever that is. But I've always wanted to be a part of it and it's absurd for them to treat me as if I can't handle myself in our world."

"Can you?" I challenge, propping myself up on one elbow.

Sofia's laugh is sharp, cutting. "I've been reading since I could walk. I know six ways to kill a man without using a weapon. But to them, I'm still little Sofie who needs protecting."

I observe her carefully, noting the fire in her eyes, the set of her jaw. "And this mission is your way of proving them wrong?"

"It's my way of doing what needs to be done," she retorts, her voice icy. "Someone has to step up, and if my brothers are too busy coddling me to see the threat, I'll handle it myself. Besides, they don't understand that sheltering us won't keep us safe."

I feel a grudging respect growing for this woman. "It won't?"

She shakes her head. "They won't always be around, will they?" she whispers. "Natalia could get picked up off-campus. Someone could break in. There are a million ways we could get hurt because of their actions, and the only way to protect us is to keep us informed. But, they never understood that."

There's a wistfulness in her tone that tugs at my heart. The woman in her simply wants to be understood, and the truth is, she makes complete sense.

“You’re right,” I say softly.

I watch as surprise flickers across Sofia's face, her icy demeanor thawing slightly. "You... approve?" she asks, skepticism lacing her voice.

"I get where you’re coming from," I reply, holding her gaze. "It takes guts to go against your family, especially in our world. But more than that, it takes skill to survive. There’s no reason why you shouldn’t be trained like your brothers."

Sofia's posture relaxes marginally. "I have the skill," she asserts, chin raised defiantly.

I nod, acknowledging her claim. "Then show me. Prove it's not just bravado."

A ghost of a smile plays on her lips. "Is that a challenge, Vladimir?"

"Consider it an offer," I say, my voice softening. "To help, not hinder. If you're determined to learn all about your world, you should be prepared."

Sofia studies me, her green eyes searching my face. "Why would you help me?"

I shrug, feeling oddly exposed under her scrutiny. "Because I'd rather see you succeed than fail. And because I know what it's like to have something to prove."

The silence stretches between us, charged with a new understanding. Finally, Sofia nods with a soft smile playing on her lips, a smile that lights up every feature of her beautiful voice. "Alright," she whispers at last. "I might just take you up on that."

Sunlight streams through the gaps in the curtains, rousing me from sleep. I blink, momentarily disoriented, before my eyes land on Sofia's sleeping form beside me.

She's curled on her side, facing away from me, her blonde hair splayed across the pillow.

In sleep, her face is relaxed, free from the guarded expression she wears when awake. I find myself captivated by the gentle rise and fall of her breathing, the way the morning light catches the curve of her cheek.

A strange warmth spreads through my chest. It's disconcerting, this softness I feel watching her. I'm more of a don't let them get too close kind of guy, but Sofia... she's already slipping past my defenses.

I resist the urge to reach out and brush a strand of hair from her face. Instead, I lie still, savoring this moment of peace before the day begins. Before she wakes and the walls go back up between us.

Sofia stirs, mumbling something incoherent. I quickly avert my gaze, not wanting her to catch me staring. But as she stretches and her eyes flutter open, I can't help but steal another glance.

Our eyes meet, and for a brief moment, I see vulnerability in her gaze before her usual icy mask slides into place.

"Good morning," I say, my voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," she says, rubbing away the sleep from her eyes.

I clear my throat, pushing myself up to sit against the headboard. "We start your training today," I announce without preamble, my tone matter-of-fact.

Sofia blinks, surprise flitting across her features before she schools her expression. "Training?" she echoes, her voice still husky from sleep.

"Yes. If you're going to survive in this world, you need to be prepared." I watch her closely, gauging her reaction. "As you said, I won't always be there to protect you."

She bristles at that, her green eyes flashing. "I don't need your protection," she snaps, sitting up and tossing her hair over her shoulder.

I can't help but smirk at her defiance. "Well, your brothers won't be there either. Meet me in the gym in thirty minutes."

Without waiting for a response, I swing my legs over the side of the bed and stand. As I head for the door, I feel her gaze burning into my back.

Thirty minutes later, I'm in the gym, twisting my hands as I wait for Sofia. The sound of the door opening makes me look up. She enters, her chin held high, dressed in form-fitting workout clothes that hug her curves.

I swallow hard, forcing my gaze back to my hands. "Ready?" I ask, my voice gruffer than I intended.

Sofia approaches the ring, her steps echoing in the quiet space. "As I'll ever be," she retorts, her tone icy but with an undercurrent of... is that excitement?

I toss her a pair of gloves. "Put these on. We'll start with the basics."

The sound of Velcro ripping fills the air as we both tighten our gloves. I step into the ring, gesturing for her to follow. As she does, I can't help but notice the determined set of her jaw and the fire in her eyes.

This isn't just about training for her, I realize. It's about proving herself—to me, to her

brothers, to the world.

I feel a spark of admiration, quickly followed by a surge of protectiveness. I'll make her strong, I vow silently.

But as she takes her stance across from me, her gaze locked on mine, I can't shake the feeling that I might be the one in danger here.

I demonstrate a basic jab, my fist cutting through the air. "Like this," I say, keeping my voice neutral. "Now you try."

Sofia mirrors my movement, her form surprisingly good for a beginner. Her blonde hair, tied back in a tight ponytail, swings with each punch.

"Not bad," I grunt, circling her slowly. "Again. Faster this time."

She complies, her green eyes narrowing in concentration. The sharp sound of her fist hitting the air echoes in the gym.

"You're tensing up too much," I observe, moving closer. "Relax your shoulders."

Without thinking, I place my hands on her shoulders, feeling the heat of her skin through the thin fabric of her top. Sofia stiffens at my touch but doesn't pull away.

"Like this," I murmur, gently easing the tension from her muscles.

Our eyes lock, and for a moment, the air between us feels charged. I clear my throat, stepping back. "Now, let's work on your defense."

We continue training, the rhythm of our movements punctuated by the sound of our breathing. Sofia's determination is evident in every line of her body, her focus unwavering despite the sweat beading on her brow.

"Time to put it all together," I announce, raising my hands. "Try to take me down."

Sofia's eyes flash with challenge. She lunges forward, her movements quick but predictable. I dodge easily, catching her wrist and using her momentum to flip her onto her back.

In an instant, I'm on top of her, pinning her to the mat. Our faces are inches apart, and I can feel the rapid rise and fall of her chest against mine.

"You left yourself open," I say, my voice low and husky.

Sofia's eyes blaze up at me, a mix of frustration and something else I can't quite name. The heat between us is palpable, electric.

"Again," she demands, her voice breathless but determined.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. This training session has become far more dangerous than I anticipated.

As I help Sofia to her feet, my hand lingers on her arm a moment too long. I can't ignore the warmth of her skin, the slight tremble in her muscles from exertion. My protective instincts war with a growing desire I hadn't anticipated.

"Ready?" I ask, my voice gruffer than intended.

Sofia nods, her green eyes narrowed in concentration. "Always."

We circle each other, the tension palpable. I'm hyper-aware of every movement, every breath. When she strikes, I'm caught off guard by her speed.

Before I can react, Sofia hooks her leg behind mine, throwing me off balance. In a fluid motion, she leverages her weight, and suddenly, I'm the one on my back, staring up at her triumphant face.

"Looks like I'm a quick learner," she says, a hint of a smile breaking through her usually icy demeanor.

I'm acutely aware of her body straddling mine, her hands pinning my wrists to the mat. Her blonde hair, escaped from its ponytail, frames her flushed face. For a moment, her carefully constructed walls seem to crumble, revealing a glimpse of the passionate woman beneath.

"You certainly are," I manage to say, my voice husky. "But don't get cocky. You still have a lot to learn."

Sofia's smile widens, a challenge glinting in her eyes. "Then teach me, Vladimir."

The way she says my name sends a shiver down my spine. I've never been more conflicted in my life.

And then, I push her up with brute strength, until she's straddling me, and we're both sitting upright, chest-to-chest, staring into each other's eyes.

"Again," she whispers. I force myself to pry my gaze away from her lips.

Sofia's expression shifts, her momentary openness replaced by a steely determination. She leans in closer, her breath hot against my ear. "I want to learn about power play," she demands, her voice low and unyielding.

I freeze, caught off guard by her directness. "Power play?"

She pulls back, green eyes locking onto mine. "Yes. If I'm going to survive in this world, I need to understand all aspects of control and manipulation."

I release her abruptly, forcing Sofia to readjust her position. She's still in my lap, and the proximity is maddening. "It's not a game, Sofia," I warn, my tone grave. "Power can corrupt, destroy."

"I'm not naive," she retorts, her words laced with that familiar icy sarcasm. "I've seen what power does. That's why I need to master it."

I study her face, searching for any sign of hesitation. There is none. Just fierce determination and a hint of something else—vulnerability, perhaps? It's gone before I can be sure.

"Fine," I concede, my voice gruff. "But we do this my way. Slowly. Carefully."

A triumphant smirk plays at the corners of her mouth. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

As Sofia climbs off me and extends a hand to help me up, I'm struck by the realization that I've severely underestimated her. She's not just a damsel in need of protection. She's a force to be reckoned with, raw potential waiting to be harnessed.

"Same time tomorrow?" she asks, gathering her things.

I nod, unable to tear my gaze away from her. "Be ready. It only gets harder from here."

Sofia pauses at the door, throwing a glance over her shoulder. "I'm counting on it,"

she says, her voice a mix of challenge and promise.

As I watch her leave, I know one thing for certain—life with Sofia Orlov will never be dull.

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"You can't be serious," I scoff, my tone dripping with derision. "Seduction as a survival skill? What's next, Vlad—pole dancing classes for self-defense?"

I cross my arms, my green eyes locking on his unflappable expression. That maddening calm only fuels my frustration.

"It's about power dynamics, Sofia," he replies evenly, his voice a low, deliberate drawl. "And wielding them to your advantage."

I roll my eyes. "Oh, how enlightening. I'm sure fluttering my lashes will save me in a fight."

A muscle tightens in his jaw, betraying the impact of my taunt. He steps closer, his gaze darkening. "It's not about theatrics. It's about reading people, controlling the room. Seduction isn't just physical—it's psychological. And if you don't master it, someone will use it against you."

He leans down, both hands braced on the chair's armrests. His scent—a maddening mix of spice and musk—envelops me. I hold my breath, caught in the pull of his proximity. My pulse quickens despite myself.

I pause, my fluttering heart making me feel every rib. When I talk, my voice comes out hoarser than I intend it to. "And I suppose you're the expert who's going to teach me?"

"I am," Vlad replies, his eyes darkening. "Because I've played these games, and know when to keep a woman sent by enemies at arm's length. Now, I need to make

sure no man gets close enough to hurt you.”

The possessive edge in his voice sends a jolt of electricity through me. I push it down, focusing on this lesson instead.

"Fine," I say coolly, accepting this challenge. "If you insist on this ridiculous lesson, let's get it over with. Show me what you've got."

I don't know why I decide to go ahead with this insane plan. Maybe it's his arrogance or my desperation to prove him wrong, to show that no man can affect me. Either way, the words spill out before I can stop them.

“Alright then,” he says and steps back. Suddenly, the room feels too big without him inches away from me. “Let's start with what happened that night in the club.”

Vlad's eyes narrow, a flicker of something—anger? Concern?—passing over his features. "You shouldn't have had to be in that situation. Your technique was sloppy, leaving you vulnerable."

His criticism stings, igniting a fire in my chest. I stand and take a step closer. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize there was a proper etiquette for fending off unwanted advances. Please enlighten me on the finer points of rejection."

"This isn't a joke, Sofia," Vlad growls, closing the distance between us. The air crackles with tension, and I fight the urge to step back before I lose myself in this game. "Your safety is at stake."

“What would you have had me do?” I ask, defiantly.

His breath brushes my ear. “You let him dictate the terms. What you should have done...” His voice drops, sending shivers along my spine. "...is lead him on. Make

him think he was winning until it was too late. A small slapping away of his hand with a laugh, the perfectly timed roll of an eye. Let him think you're a tease, a gift to be unraveled... over time. He would be petrified of making a move before you do."

The air when he speaks rustles against my neck, and I take a sharp breath, my legs trembling from the proximity. I close my eyes and bite my lower lip, trying to ground myself, trying to remind myself that I cannot seriously be affected by his words, by him.

But as Vlad continues to speak in that low, authoritative tone, my mind becomes a jumbled mess of confusion and desire. I fight the overwhelming urge to turn around, to see the expression on his face as he whispers these dangerous ideas in my ear.

"I think it's time for a practical lesson," he murmurs, his breath warm against my skin.

My eyes snap open at his words, my heart pounding erratically in my chest. Practical lesson? I whirl around to face him, a defiant spark igniting within me.

"And who's going to be the lucky target of this lesson?" I challenge, my voice surprisingly steady despite the wildfire blazing inside me.

Vlad's gaze darkens with something unreadable before a faint smirk tugs at the corner of his lips. "You."

Before I can react, he takes a step closer, towering over me with an intensity that steals the air from my lungs. Every fiber of my being screams to retreat, to put distance between us, but a stubborn pride keeps me rooted in place. I tilt my chin up, meeting his gaze head-on, refusing to show any sign of weakness.

My heart pounds traitorously in my chest, but I force my voice to remain steady. "I guarantee you'll find me completely immune to your charms."

Vlad's eyes darken, a predatory gleam flickering in their depths. He takes a calculated step forward, his voice dropping to a low, velvety timbre that sends an involuntary shiver down my spine.

"Immune, are you?" he murmurs, his gaze never leaving mine. "We'll see about that, moya ledi ."

I brace myself, expecting a direct approach, but Vlad surprises me. He circles slowly, like a wolf stalking its prey. "Tell me, Sofia," he says conversationally, "what do you desire most in this world?"

My mind races, searching for the trap in his words. "That's none of your business," I snap, trying to maintain my icy facade.

He chuckles, the sound rich and warm. "Oh, but it is. Everything about you is my business now." His fingers ghost along my arm, barely touching yet leaving a trail of fire in their wake. "Your hopes, your fears, your deepest longings—I want to know them all."

I swallow hard, my throat suddenly dry. "You're wasting your time," I manage to say, but my voice lacks its usual bite.

Vlad leans in, his breath hot against my ear. "Am I? Your pulse says otherwise, Dorogaya ."

My traitorous heart hammers in my chest, and I silently curse its betrayal. I force myself to take a steady breath, desperately clinging to my rapidly crumbling composure. This is just a game, I remind myself fiercely. He's trying to prove a point, nothing more.

But as Vlad's hand comes to rest lightly on the small of my back, guiding me to face

him, I find my carefully constructed walls beginning to crack. His touch is gentle, almost reverent.

"You're trembling," he observes softly, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

"I'm not," I lie, even as I feel a telltale quiver run through my body. I meet his gaze defiantly, determined not to let him see how much he's affecting me.

I take a deep breath, steadying myself. "Nice try," I say, my voice miraculously even despite the storm raging inside me. "But you'll have to do better than that to break through my ice, Vlad."

My heart races, but I manage to keep my expression neutral, arching an eyebrow at him in a silent challenge. A flicker of triumph courses through me as I realize I've passed his little test. I've resisted his seduction, proving that I'm not as easily swayed as he thought.

But as I wait for his acknowledgment, for some sign that he's impressed by my resilience, I'm met with nothing but stony silence. Vlad's face is a mask of neutrality, his dark eyes revealing nothing as they sweep over me.

The triumph I felt moments ago sours into irritation. "Well?" I demand, unable to keep the edge from my voice. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

Vlad's expression doesn't change. "About what, exactly?" he asks, his tone maddeningly calm.

I feel my eyes narrow, offense rising in my chest. "About the fact that I just proved you wrong," I snap. "I passed your little test. I didn't give in."

He tilts his head slightly, regarding me with an unreadable look. "And you think that

deserves praise?"

The casual dismissal in his voice ignites a fire in my veins. "Why aren't you impressed?" I hiss, taking a step closer to him. "I just showed you that I can handle myself."

Vlad's lips quirk in what might be amusement, but his eyes remain serious. "Is that what you think this was about, Sofia? You being able to avoid advances?"

His words hit me like a slap, and I feel my cheeks flush with heat. "What else would it be about?" I retort, my voice dripping with icy sarcasm. "Enlighten me, oh wise one."

Vlad takes a step closer, his body now mere inches from mine. The proximity sends an unwelcome shiver down my spine, but I refuse to back down.

"You're not ready," he says, his tone firm yet challenging. "What you just demonstrated was basic resistance. In our world, that's not enough."

I clench my fists at my sides, frustration building inside me like a pressure cooker. "And what would be enough?" I spit out, my green eyes locked on his dark ones.

He doesn't flinch. "The ability to turn the tables. To not just resist, but to manipulate the situation to your advantage."

As much as I hate to admit it, his words spark something in my mind. A plan begins to form, fueled by my determination to prove him wrong.

"Fine," I say, my voice steadying as I gather my resolve. "You want to see me turn the tables? Let's make this interesting."

Vlad raises an eyebrow, a flicker of intrigue crossing his face. "I'm listening."

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to propose. "The bar. Tonight. You and me. We'll see if I can seduce you. If I succeed, I win."

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I feel a shift in the air between us. The challenge hangs there, electric and dangerous. What the hell did I just do?

A slow smile spreads across Vlad's face, a hint of amusement playing at the corners of his lips. His dark eyes glimmer with something that sends a shiver down my spine—intrigue, challenge, maybe even approval.

"Well, well," he says, his voice a low rumble that seems to vibrate through my chest. "It seems the ice princess has some fire after all."

I watch as he shifts his stance, his broad shoulders relaxing slightly. He takes a step closer, and I force myself to stand my ground, even as my heart rate kicks up a notch.

"Very well, Sofia," he continues, his gaze never leaving mine. "I accept your challenge. Tonight, we'll see what you're truly capable of."

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I step into the dimly lit bar we chose for tonight's test, my eyes sweeping the room with practiced efficiency. No familiar faces. Good. I choose a secluded corner booth, sliding onto the worn leather seat as I order my usual vodka neat.

The amber liquid burns a familiar path down my throat as I take a sip, my mind already drifting to thoughts of Sofia. I smile as I imagine how exactly tonight might unfold. It'll be fun to see her attempts at seduction. Little does she know this whole plan serves no purpose.

Consider me seduced from the moment I first laid eyes on her.

The door swings open with a creak, drawing my attention. A striking brunette saunters in, wearing a tight golden sequined dress that is not only cut dangerously low but gathers tight at her small waist and ends just below the knees. It leaves little to the imagination, and yet, oh so much. She's wearing bangles and long earrings, and her hair is swept over on one side, highlighting a perfect cheekbone on the other.

I see heads turn. My gaze lingers, appreciating the sway of her hips in those glittery high heels and the confidence in her stride. In another life, I would have certainly been interested.

But now, I've got eyes for just one.

I scan the room again, searching for a glimpse of pin-straight blonde hair or flashing green eyes. Nothing. Where is she? Punctuality has always been one of Sofia's strengths. Her tardiness is... unsettling.

My fingers drum against the sticky tabletop as I check my watch for the third time in as many minutes. The ice in my glass clinks as I take another sip, the burn doing little to ease the tension coiling in my gut.

"Come on, Sofia," I growl under my breath. "Where are you?"

Has something happened? Should I be worried? The protective instinct that's been growing since I met her flares to life, urging me to action.

Or maybe, a tiny voice says. This is her move. By making me wait, she's getting me eager, weakening me for when I finally see her. If that's the case, she's already winning the game.

Impressive move, I think to myself.

The brunette glides toward the bar and curves her body over it, extending one slim arm to call for the attention of the waiter. She then settles onto the stool beside me and extends her legs out before her, gracefully locking one ankle over the other and I catch a whiff of her perfume—a heady, intoxicating scent that's both familiar and new.

"Vodka, neat," she orders, her voice low and husky.

My heart lurches. That voice. I'd know it anywhere, even if it's pitched differently tonight. I turn my body toward her, unable to hide my shock as I take in the sight before me.

"Sofia?" I breathe, my eyes widening as I struggle to reconcile the person in front of me with the woman I married.

She turns to face me and gives me a wink, a smirk playing on ruby-red lips that I've

never seen so boldly painted. "Hello, Vladimir," she purrs, her green eyes sparkling with mischief beneath the dark wig.

I fight to regain my composure, plastering on a teasing smirk to mask my surprise. "Well, well. Aren't you full of surprises?" I drawl, letting my gaze roam over her disguise. "I have to say, I'm impressed. I wouldn't have recognized you."

Sofia leans in, her breath warm against my ear as she whispers, "What gave me away, handsome?"

I struggle to maintain my usual aloof demeanor as Sofia's boldness catches me off guard. I clench my fist, resisting the urge to reach out and touch her, to confirm that this seductive creature is really my Sofia.

"Your voice," I manage, my voice rougher than I'd like. "Though I have to wonder why you felt the need for such... elaborate measures."

"Elaborate measures?" she counters, arching an eyebrow. "I thought you'd appreciate a woman who knows how to blend in. Isn't that what you taught me?"

The way she says taught is slow, tantalizing, suggestive, and lights a fire in my blood.

"Oh," I murmur, leaning in until my lips brush against her ear. I feel her shiver and wonder if my touch truly affects her or if it's all a part of her game. "I could teach you a lot more. But playing with fire might get you burned."

She tilts her head back slightly, a challenging glint in her eyes as she meets my gaze. "Maybe I like the heat," she retorts softly, her fingers grazing my hand, which rests on the bar.

The touch sends a jolt through me, and I have to resist the urge to grab her hand and

pull her closer. Instead, I see her lift her glass to her lips, innocently sipping on her vodka.

Did she mean to graze my hand, or was it an accident?

Damn it, she's playing me, and she's playing me fucking well.

I watch her out of the corner of my eye, feeling the air between us crackle with unspoken tension. Sofia pretends to be engrossed in her vodka, but I see the small smile playing at the corners of her lips, and I know she's aware of the effect she has on me.

"Just be careful, Sofia," I warn in a low voice, leaning even closer and grabbing her stool until it swivels and she has no choice but to turn and fully face me, our bodies almost touching. "Playing with me might lead you places you're not ready to go."

She stares me right in the eye, puckering her lips around her straw, sucking hard. A groan escapes me.

And she fucking smiles, looking pleased as hell. "And where might those places be, Vlad? Should I be afraid?" Her voice is laced with a teasing edge that ignites something primal in me.

My hand twitches with the urge to touch her, but I clench it into a fist against the bar. I find it hard to use words, to think, to remain calm.

Oh, she has me wrapped around her finger, alright.

Sofia leans closer now, her hand on my thigh, slowly inching up. "Or better yet, perhaps you should show me—if you can think you can handle it."

I can't take it anymore. The tension, her proximity, the challenge in her eyes—it's all too much. Without thinking, I grab her wrist, my large hand easily encircling it. "Come with me," I growl, my voice rough with desire.

I don't wait for her response, pulling her through the crowded bar. My eyes scan for a secluded spot, finally landing on a door marked 'Storage' in the back corner.

I push the door open and pull her inside, slamming it shut with one hand which now rests against the door, cornering her in, while I still hold her wrist with my other.

The storage room is dimly lit, shelves stacked with liquor bottles casting long shadows. The air is thick with the scent of alcohol and dust. I release Sofia's wrist, turning to face her in the confined space. Sofia's eyes gleam in the low light, and I see her chest heave, her eyes darting between mine.

We both watch each other, the tension seeping off our skin, the desire evident in my smoldering gaze and her flushed cheeks.

"And now?" she whispers, her gaze locked on mine. "What happens now, Vladimir?"

I struggle to catch my breath. A nagging thought intrudes, souring the sweetness of the moment. My eyes narrow as I study Sofia's yearning face, her parted lips.

"I don't fucking know," I growl. "You tell me," I begin, unable to hold back the sudden bite of jealousy in my tone. "Is this how you plan to handle all your negotiations? Ending up with strange men in dark corners?"

Sofia's eyes flash, a hint of her usual iciness returning. "What are you implying, Vladimir?"

I hold back a groan, conflicted between a desire and possessiveness I've never felt

before. "I'm asking if this is your standard power play, if other men get you into spaces as private as this."

For a moment, Sofia looks like she might slap me. Then, something in her expression softens. She walks closer and reaches up, her cool fingers tracing my jawline.

"No," she says firmly, her gaze locked on mine. "This isn't a game anymore, Vladimir. I've never... responded like this to anyone else. Only you."

Her words hit me like a physical force, stirring something deep within my chest. I search her face for any hint of deception but find only sincerity in those green eyes.

"Why me?" I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Sofia's lips curve into a small, genuine smile—so different from her usual smirks. "I wish I knew," she admits. "But there's something about you, Vladimir. Something that makes me want to let my guard down. Maybe it's the simple fact that around you, I don't feel the need to be someone I'm not."

I can't hold back any longer. My restraint, doubts, fears—everything snaps like a frayed rope, and I reach for her waist and clutch her tight, jerking her toward me.

She looks up at me with wide eyes, surprised, and then breaks into a teasing smile. She grabs my lapel and pulls me closer. "I won, didn't I?"

Fuck me. I know she's only teasing. We're way over the games. I can feel it in the way she responds to me, her body near threading into mine.

And so I do the obvious thing. I slam my lips against her.

The world outside fades away, leaving only us in this dimly lit sanctuary. My hands

slide down to her back, feeling the warmth of her skin through the thin fabric of her dress. The silky material only heightens my desire to touch her bare flesh.

"Sofia," I breathe against her lips, unable to form coherent thoughts beyond her name.

To my surprise and delight, Sofia responds with equal fervor. Her fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer. So different, so responsive.

The gentle tug sends a shiver down my spine. I press her against the shelf, our bodies molding together as if they were made for each other.

The intensity of our connection catches me off guard. I've kissed women before, but never like this, never with this all-consuming fire that threatens to burn me alive. I can feel Sofia trembling against me, and I wonder if she feels it too—this undeniable bond forming between us.

"Vladimir," she gasps as we break for air. Her green eyes, usually so icy, now burn with a heat that matches my own. "I didn't expect..."

I cup her face in my hands, my thumbs brushing her flushed cheeks. "Neither did I," I admit, my voice rough with desire. "But I can't fight this anymore, Sofia. Tell me you feel it, too."

Her response is to pull me back into another searing kiss, her body arching into mine. It's all the answer I need.

This kiss is different—deeper, hotter, and charged with a newfound intensity. My hands roam her body with purpose, exploring every curve and contour as if committing them to memory.

"God, Sofia," I growl against her mouth, my fingers digging into the soft flesh of her

ass. "You're intoxicating."

She arches into me, a soft moan escaping her lips. "Less talking, please," she breathes.

I chuckle into her mouth and trace the curve of her breast through her dress, feeling her nipple harden under my touch. The thin fabric is a maddening barrier, and I'm overwhelmed by the urge to tear it away.

"Is this okay?" I ask, my voice rough with desire.

Sofia nods, her eyes dark with want. "Yes," she whispers. "Please, don't stop."

My hand slides down her side, bunching up the hem of her tight dress and sliding it up her quivering thighs. I trace the edge of her panties, feeling the heat radiating from her core. As I slip my fingers beneath the fabric, I'm struck by how incredibly wet she is.

She gasps into my mouth, her hands now digging into my back as she pulls me closer. I gently massage her clit, before sliding my finger through her length, stopping at her entrance.

"Part your legs," I command.

She complies instantly, spreading her legs wider for me. Slowly, I edge in a finger, but she's tight. Tighter than should be, and I encounter an unexpected resistance.

I frown. She's wet, yet she still tenses in my arms. I go half an inch further, and she's way too tight. A small gasp escapes her lips.

A doubt overcomes me, and I pull back slightly, searching her face. "Sofia," I say

softly, "are you...?"

She bites her lip and closes her eyes, ignoring my question. "Just carry on, will you?" she demands.

I chuckle deep in my throat. Maybe I'm imagining things. If she was a virgin, she'd tell me, wouldn't she? Obviously, I'm new to her, and she's probably just tense and finding her rhythm with me.

"I'll take care of you, alright," I whisper in her ear.

With gentle determination, I resume my exploration, carefully gauging Sofia's reactions. To ease her into this, I nuzzle her neck, giving her soft, slow kisses. I feel her muscles relax, and her body goes slightly limp against the door.

My finger moves in slow, deliberate circles, finding its way inside. She moans when I'm wholly inside, and I continue making small circles, building her pleasure gradually. Her breathing quickens, her body arching into my touch.

"That's it," I murmur, watching her face intently. "Let go for me, Sofia."

"Mm-hmm," she mumbles, her arms thrown around my neck, pulling me closer. I give her neck a small, soft nibble and curve my finger into a C, hitting the top of her pussy.

"Oh my god." Her nails dig into the back of my neck and she throws her head back, eyes closed. I feel her clench her thighs as I tap against her sweet spot, and her breath hitches.

"You're so fucking tight," I groan, my whole body shaking with desire. And then, seeing how receptive she is, I slip in another finger, feeling her slick, wet heat

envelop me.

Her eyes fly open, a mix of shock and pleasure in their depths.

"Oh my god!" she moans, clutching at me as I begin to pump my fingers into her in earnest, filling her with pleasure.

I finger her faster.

"Fuck," she gasps, her fingers digging into my shoulders. "I feel... I don't know... Don't stop, please. Don't stop."

"It's okay," I reassure her, increasing the pressure slightly. "Just feel."

"Vladimir," she gasps, my name a fervent prayer on her lips.

Hearing her say it like that, with such need, makes me burn hotter. I want to mark her, brand her as mine. I want the whole world to know she belongs to me.

My hands slide lower, grasping her backside and hauling her tighter against my finger. We both groan at the exquisite contact, and she mewls now, her breaths coming in short pants.

"That's it, Baby," I say, as I feel her muscles begin to clench around me. "You're going to cum."

"Mm-hmm," she mumbles, her eyes squeezed tight. And then, I feel her knees give way. I grab her ass with my free hand, holding her up, and curve my fingers ever so slightly, now beating faster, harder, against her G-spot.

And then, her green eyes slam open in surprise with my name on her lips as her

orgasm crashes over her, her pussy convulsing around my fingers. I look into her eyes, lose myself in them, as I see pure pleasure, confusion, lust, and surrender seeping through her.

Her entire body begins to tremble, and I hold her tight, leaving my fingers in her until the last waves of her orgasm wash over her.

As she comes down from her high, still quivering, I slowly remove my fingers from her, still holding her close, knowing her knees could buck.

"You're incredible," I whisper, brushing a strand of blonde hair from her flushed face before giving her a soft, quick kiss.

Sofia looks up at me with a soft vulnerability. "I never knew it would be that good," she whispers.

I stop, the blood gushing to my head. The little doubt I had earlier comes back with a vengeance. "You never knew it would be that good?" I ask, with a frown on my face.

"No." She blushes. "Or I might have tried being with a man earlier," she says in her usual sassy way.

"Sofia," I growl, clutching her arm, forcing her to look at me. "Are you saying you've never been with a man?"

She shakes her head, the perfect picture of innocence. "Maybe a kiss or two, but that's about it," she admits. "Why, is that a problem?"

My world crashes around me, I swear. And to think she shut me down when I was trying to ask if she's a virgin. Had I known, even a little, that this was her very first time, I wouldn't have chosen this godforsaken bar.

She's not just a one-night stand, after all. Suddenly, I'm no longer in the mood to be here.

I grab her hand and walk toward the door. "We're going home now," I tell her, ignoring all her protests.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

The sleek black car slices through the night, its silence deafening. I stare out the window, streetlights blurring past, my fingers fidgeting with the hem of my dress. Vlad's jaw is clenched, his knuckles white on the steering wheel. The tension between us is suffocating.

And I'm utterly confused as to why. His fingers were literally inside me moments ago. And now? He seems angry.

"I don't understand," I mutter, more to myself than to him. "Why are you so angry?"

Vlad's eyes flick to me incredulously, like he can't believe I'm asking this question, then back to the road. He doesn't answer.

I sigh, leaning my head against the cool glass. The memory of our encounter at the bar burns through me—his hands on my skin, his lips on mine. How can he act like this now? Like I'm nothing more than an inconvenience?

Fine, I think to myself. Two can play this toxic, silent game.

We pull up to the house, and I'm out of the car before it fully stops. My heels click against the pavement as I stride to the front door, not bothering to wait for Vlad. Inside, I kick off my shoes, relishing the feeling of carpet beneath my feet.

I need to change, get comfortable, and calm the hell down before we end up in an argument. All I know is that I don't deserve the silent treatment without at least knowing why he's pissed.

In our bedroom, I peel off the tight dress, letting it pool at my feet. I grab an oversized t-shirt from the drawer, pulling it over my head. The soft cotton against my skin is a comfort I didn't realize I needed.

I stand in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection. With trembling fingers, I remove my wig, setting it gently on the vanity. My natural light blonde hair falls in waves around my shoulders.

"There you are, Sofia," I whisper to my reflection, running a hand through my hair. "The real you."

Feeling calmer, I decide to go and try to have another conversation with Vlad. To ask what changed between then and now. I had a beautiful moment with him, and he's ruining it with his sour mood.

I find Vlad in the living room, lounging in an armchair, a tumbler of amber liquid in his hand. His eyes flick to me, then back to the fire crackling in the hearth. The silence between us is thick, suffocating.

"Are we going to talk about it?" I ask, my voice sharp as ice.

Vlad takes a slow sip of his drink. "About what, dear wife?"

I clench my fists, willing myself to stay calm. "About your reaction at the bar. About..." I hesitate, then forge ahead. "How cold you've been since we hooked up."

His jaw tightens. "What's there to discuss? You lied to me."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. "I—what?" I near screech.

He looks into my eyes, eyebrows raised in indignation. "You're a virgin, and you lied

to me about it.”

"I didn't lie," I snap. "You never asked clearly. There's a difference."

Vlad stands abruptly, towering over me. "Difference or not, I shouldn't have had to ask. Had I known..."

“You’d have what?” I don’t let him finish his sentence. “Got me on a bed of roses?”

“Sofia,” he growls. “It’s more than that. I would have—”

He’s not yet finished when the front door bursts open, a cacophony of voices filling the air.

"Sofi! Where's our favorite sister?" Fedor's booming voice echoes through the house.

“Oh, she’s your favorite now, is she?” I hear my younger sister Natalia’s playful jab at our brother.

I freeze, my eyes locked with Vlad's. The argument forgotten, we both turn toward the commotion.

"In here," I call out, forcing a smile as my four brothers and one sister tumble into the living room. What the hell are they doing here?

Nikolai, all six-foot-something of him, sweeps me into a bear hug. "Surprise! How's married life treating you, little sister? We thought we'd drop by."

“More like we wanted to check if Vlad is still sane, being around you,” Natalia chuckles in the background, earning a laugh from Vladimir.

I roll my eyes at them and pat Nikolai's back awkwardly. "Nikolai, I'm doing great! Now, put me down before you break something."

Dima, ever the observant one, raises an eyebrow at the tension in the room. "Everything okay here? We're not interrupting anything, are we?"

"Of course not," Vlad interjects smoothly, stepping forward to shake hands with my brothers. "We were just discussing our upcoming weekend. Besides, I hope you all know you're welcome here anytime," he says, his voice warm but with an undercurrent of authority. "Sofia and I love having you over, don't we, Darling?"

I nod, plastering on a smile. "Of course, it's always a pleasure."

Vlad's hand finds mine, intertwining our fingers. To anyone watching, we must look like the picture-perfect couple. But I can feel the tension in his grip, the slight tremor that betrays his true emotions.

"You two are so cute together," Natalia gushes. "How did you manage to tame our ice queen, Vlad?"

I stiffen at her words, but Vlad just chuckles. "Oh, I wouldn't say I've tamed her. Sofia's fire is what drew me to her in the first place."

His words, though meant to maintain our facade, stir something within me. I catch his eye, and for a moment, I see a flicker of genuine emotions there.

I catch Artyom, the youngest, rolling his eyes at Vlad's open admiration of me. "Boring. Hey, Sofi, got any food? I'm starving."

"You're always starving," I retort, grateful for the distraction. "Come on, let's see what we can rustle up in the kitchen."

As we move toward the door, I glance back at Vlad. His face is a mask of calm, but I can see the storm brewing in his eyes. This conversation isn't over, not by a long shot.

I lead my siblings into the kitchen, my mind racing. The tension between Vlad and me lingers like a ghost, but I push it aside, focusing on the task at hand.

I whip up a cheese platter with Natalia's help, and we all sit around the cozy dining table.

"Vodka for everyone?" I ask, reaching for the bottle. My voice sounds strained even to my own ears.

"You know us so well, Sis." Fedor grins, halfway to get the glasses already.

As I pour the drinks, I can't help but feel a strange mix of emotions. Awkwardness at the interruption, mixed with nostalgia for this familial warmth I've missed.

"So, how's the newlywed life treating you?" Artyom asks, his tone teasing. "Vlad keeping you satisfied?"

I nearly choke on my drink. "That's none of your business, little brother," I snap, my cheeks burning.

Natalia laughs, slapping Artyom on the back. "Leave her alone, you pest. Our Sofi's thrilled, can't you see?"

"Am I?" I mutter under my breath, thinking of Vlad's earlier anger.

"What was that?" Dima asks, his sharp eyes narrowing.

I force a smile. "Nothing. Just thinking about how much I've missed you idiots."

As we settle into our second round of drinks, I can feel the initial awkwardness start to thaw. Vlad sits beside me, his presence both comforting and unnerving.

"Remember that time Sofia tried to sneak out to that party?" Natalia starts, her chocolate brown eyes twinkling with mischief.

I groan, hiding my face in my hands. "Please, not this story again."

"No," Vlad asks, grinning from ear to ear. To my surprise, he reaches out and takes my hand. "Tell me all about it. I'd love to know all the antics my wife has pulled."

I look at him in surprise, wondering how he can keep it so together when he's clearly mad at me. In this moment, I realize something about my husband. Hell, or high water, in public, he'd always have my back. A small warm fuzz forms in my chest as my siblings launch into the tale of my ill-fated attempt to sneak out and end up grounded for weeks. The teasing and laughter wash over me, a balm to my soul.

But as Fedor launches into the tale, complete with dramatic reenactments, I find myself relaxing. The familiar banter, the shared memories—it feels like home.

"And then," Natalia chimes in, "she trips over her own feet and faceplants right in front of her favorite actor!"

We all burst into laughter, even Vlad chuckling beside me. I feel a warmth spread through my chest, a sense of belonging I haven't felt in a long time.

"Well, at least I didn't set the kitchen on fire trying to impress a girl," I retort, nudging Fedor with my foot.

As the night wears on, the atmosphere shifts from tense to comfortable. I find myself leaning into Vlad's side, our earlier argument momentarily forgotten in the glow of

familial love.

"I've missed this," I admit softly, more to myself than anyone else.

Vlad's arm tightens around me, and for a moment, I let myself believe that everything might just work out.

As the night winds down, my siblings start gathering their things. A bittersweet feeling washes over me. "Do you really have to go?" I ask, hating how vulnerable I sound.

Nikolai pulls me into a hug. "We'll be back soon, promise. Try not to miss us too much."

I roll my eyes, but I can't hide my smile. "As if that's possible."

Watching them leave, I'm struck by a conflicting surge of emotions. The evening has filled a void I didn't even realize was there, reminding me of the family I've been distanced from. Yet, as the door closes behind them, the reality of my situation with Vlad comes rushing back.

I turn to face Vlad, my jaw set and eyes narrowed. "Now that the charade is over, shall we get back to our previous discussion?" I ask, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

But Vlad surprises me. Instead of the anger I expect, his face softens. "Sofia," he says, his deep voice unusually gentle. "You were... impressive tonight."

I blink, caught off guard. "What?"

"The way you handled yourself was amazing. You cast aside the anger between us and were so serene and content, all for your family, " he continues, taking a step closer. "It's not just that your siblings didn't suspect a thing, but that you put them first. You were incredible!"

I cross my arms, unsure how to respond to this unexpected praise. "Well, I've had plenty of practice hiding my true feelings," I say coolly.

Vlad nods, a hint of understanding in his eyes. "That skill will serve you well in this world, Sofia. The ability to keep your composure, to present a convincing facade—it's invaluable."

"Do you really mean that?" I ask, taken aback by the unexpected compliment.

He pauses, considering his words carefully. "I do, and it's more than that. The skills you demonstrated tonight—they're crucial for survival in this mission you're on. The truth is, I think you're ready."

I pause, taking in his words. "I'm ready?" I ask in a monotone voice, still in disbelief that this day could come.

"You are." He nods curtly. "More than you know."

I feel a shift in the air between us, subtle but undeniable. "I suppose I have a wonderful teacher," I say, my tone softening despite myself.

Vlad's lips quirk into a small smile. "We learn from each other, I think."

I feel a strange flutter in my chest at Vlad's words, a mixture of pride and confusion swirling within me. My fingers twitch at my sides, wanting to reach out but unsure if I should. I settle for a nod, my eyes never leaving his.

Vlad's gaze softens further, and I find myself drawn to the warmth in his dark eyes. It's the polar opposite of the anger I saw earlier.

"We should rest," Vlad says suddenly, breaking the moment. "Tomorrow, go on the real mission."

I arch an eyebrow, my impatience for tomorrow rising instinctively. "And what exactly would that entail?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "For now, it means sleep. We both need to be sharp. Then, we reconvene in the morning."

I consider arguing, pressing for more information, but exhaustion is creeping in at the edges of my consciousness. Against my better judgment, I nod. Together, we walk to his bedroom, anger forgotten.

Once inside, Vlad follows and closes the door behind him, his presence looming behind me. The air feels charged, thick with unspoken words and lingering tension.

"Which side do you prefer?" Vlad asks, his voice unexpectedly gentle.

I turn, eyeing him skeptically. "You're actually planning on deciding sides?"

He shrugs. "We're married, aren't we? Might as well act the part and have a permanent side."

I roll my eyes but can't help the flutter in my stomach. "Fine. I'll take the left."

We settle into bed, the rustle of sheets the only sound breaking the silence. I lie rigid, hyper-aware of Vlad's warmth beside me. Despite everything, there's a comfort in his proximity that I can't deny.

"Sofia," Vlad murmurs, his breath tickling my ear. "Relax. I won't bite."

I scoff but turn to face him. I find him watching me, his eyes peering into mine. For a while, the entire world fades away.

So much has happened tonight, but looking into his eyes brings me back to just one moment. When he held me tight in his arms, his fingers exploring parts of me that no one else had. The way he made me feel comes rushing back, and without a second thought, I put out my hand and gently caress the back of his hand.

A glimmer of surprise crosses his eyes, but then Vlad reaches out, hesitating for a moment before gently brushing a strand of hair from my face.

I feel myself leaning into his touch. As we settle into a more comfortable position, Vlad's arm drapes over my waist, pulling me closer. I should resist, but I find myself melting into his embrace.

As sleep begins to claim me, I can't help but reflect on the complexity of our situation. This man, who hours ago had me trembling with anger, now holds me with a tenderness I never expected.

My last coherent thought before drifting off is a promise to myself: I will remain strong, I will stay focused, and I will not let Vlad Petrov become my weakness. But even as I think it, a small part of me wonders if it might already be too late.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, the rhythm matching my racing heartbeat. The clock on the dashboard moves at an agonizingly slow pace. 11:58 PM. Two minutes until Sofia's scheduled exit.

My eyes dart between the building's entrance and the surrounding streets, searching for any sign of danger. The night is quiet, too quiet for my liking. I exhale slowly, trying to calm my nerves.

Through the tinted windows of the speakeasy, I catch a glimpse of Sofia's unmistakable blonde hair. She's talking to one of the Crimson Crew members, Alexei Volkov—the same bastard who dared lay his hands on her that night at the club—her body language completely transformed. Gone is the cool, collected woman I know. In her place stands Kira, all bubbly smiles and exaggerated gestures.

"Oh my gosh, you're like, so funny!" I hear her high-pitched giggle through the bug we planted earlier. The sound grates on my nerves, so unlike Sofia's usual dry wit. On the one hand, I hate seeing her dumb herself down, pretending she's all looks, no brains. On the other, I can't help but feel proud of how she plays the game so damn well.

The burly man laughs. "You're not so bad yourself, Sweetheart." To my horror, he slides an arm around her waist. Sofia pretends to be shocked and shoos it away, playfully wagging a finger at him and flicking her hair over her shoulder.

Well, she's learned fast how to keep him on his toes.

I grit my teeth at how freely she laughs, reminding myself it's all an act. Sofia knows

what she's doing. She's strong, capable. But that doesn't stop the protective urge surging through me.

Sofia leans in conspiratorially. "So, when are you gonna show me where all the action happens? I bet it's super exciting!"

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. She's fishing for information, walking a dangerous line. One wrong move, and her cover could be blown.

"All in good time, Darlin'," the man replies, his voice a low rumble. "Gotta make sure you can be trusted first."

Sofia pouts and I can almost hear the eye roll in her voice. "Don't you trust me by now? I thought we were friends! I'm just so bored."

I check the clock again. 12:01 AM. She should be wrapping up soon. My foot hovers over the gas pedal, ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"Patience, Kira," the man chuckles. "Good things come to those who wait."

"Fine," Sofia sighs dramatically and goes in for a hug. "I guess I'll just have to keep imagining all the cool stuff you guys do. Anyway, I should probably get going. It's way past my bedtime, but promise me we'll hang out soon?"

I grit my teeth as I watch her trip on her heel. She pulls back, grabbing at his lapel for support. He places his arms around her waist, holding her close and lingering a little too long.

"Anytime, Darling," he says, beaming at her, staring into her eyes. My eyes. "You know I like the occasional wild night out."

“Oh, I’m wild, alright.” Kira pulls away from his grip and gives him a wink and a quick air kiss on the cheek before turning around to walk toward the exit.

My muscles tense as I watch the door, waiting for her to emerge. The seconds stretch into eternity.

Finally, Sofia steps out into the night, her face a mask of vapid cheerfulness until she's sure she's out of sight. Then, like a switch being flipped, her features settle back into their usual cool composure.

As she approaches the car, I scan the area one last time, alert for any potential threats. Only when she's safely inside do I allow myself to relax slightly.

"Well?" I ask, unable to keep the tension from my voice.

Sofia's lips curl into a small, triumphant smile. She reaches into her pocket, producing a small, inconspicuous device.

"Got it planted right on his jacket lapel," she says, a hint of pride in her voice. "He didn't suspect a thing."

I can't help but feel a surge of admiration. "How'd you manage that?"

Sofia's green eyes glint with mischief. "Oh, you know. Just a little flirting, a strategically placed hand around his neck under the pretense of a goodbye hug..." She mimics the action, her fingers barely grazing my own shoulder. Even through my jacket, I feel a jolt at her touch.

"And then," she continues, "I pretended to lose my balance. Grabbed his lapel to 'steady' myself." She makes air quotes with her fingers, her usual sarcasm seeping back into her voice.

I grip the steering wheel tighter, pushing down a flare of jealousy. "Oh, so that's what that hug was," I manage to say.

Sofia doesn't miss a beat and rolls her eyes. "Please. As if I'd actually be interested in that neanderthal. It's called acting, Vlad."

As we approach a red light, I take the opportunity to scan our surroundings again. Force of habit. "No tail?" Sofia asks, her own gaze sweeping the area.

"Doesn't look like it," I reply, but I remain vigilant. Sofia might be ice, but I'm the shield that ensures she stays unmelted.

The light turns green, and as we accelerate, I feel a weight lift off my chest. Another successful mission. Another step closer to Sofia's goal.

Our goal.

But as I glance at Sofia, her face illuminated by passing streetlights, I realize that maybe, just maybe, we're also a step closer to each other.

"So, where are we going?" she asks, breaking the silence.

"Somewhere private," I reply, my voice low. "We need to listen to that bug without any interruptions."

Sofia nods, her fingers drumming an erratic beat on her thigh. It's a rare display of nerves from her, but I understand. Tonight's been quite the breakthrough, and neither of us can wait to reap the rewards.

"You did well in there," I say, trying to distract myself.

Sofia's lips curl into a smirk. "Of course I did."

Now, it's my turn to roll my eyes. She laughs when she sees me do it.

Finally, I pull into a secluded parking lot surrounded by trees. The engine dies, leaving us in silence.

"Ready?" I ask, reaching for the listening device.

Sofia leans in close, her shoulder brushing mine. A small heat spreads down my arm, and I'm left disappointed when she adjusts herself to give us some space. "Let's do this," she whispers.

I activate the bug, and suddenly, the car is filled with muffled voices. We both lean in, straining to catch every word. Sofia's breath is warm against my cheek, her proximity both distracting and electrifying.

"Did you hear that?" she hisses, grabbing my arm. I'm hyperaware of her touch, forcing myself to breathe slowly, to focus and not get lost in the sensation of her. "They mentioned something about a hideout!"

Suddenly, Sofia's eyes widen. "The warehouse on 5th and Main," she whispers, her voice trembling with excitement. "That's their main hideout! Bingo!"

This is it—the breakthrough we've been waiting for. My mind races with possibilities, plans already forming.

"We've got them," I say, unable to keep the grin off my face. "Sofia, you're brilliant."

To my surprise, Sofia's calm composure cracks completely. Her green eyes light up, a genuine smile spreading across her face. It's a transformation that takes my breath

away.

"We did it," she breathes, her voice filled with a warmth I've never heard before. "Vlad, we actually did it!"

"We did, and I swear I'm going to get my guys to infiltrate every last hideout they own. I'm going to fuck them bastards in way they never thought possible," I say, "and we're going to rid ourselves of them for good."

The determination in my voice seems to ignite something within Sofia, and I see surprise flicker across her face.

Before I can say anything else, Sofia throws her arms around me in a spontaneous hug. I freeze for a moment, shocked by this sudden display of affection from the usually distant woman. Then, slowly, I wrap my arms around her, savoring the unexpected closeness.

"Thank you, Vlad," she murmurs against my ear, her breath warm on my skin. "I couldn't have done this without you."

There's a softness in her tone that catches me off guard, and I feel something shift between us, something that makes me feel tethered to her. "Always," I respond, my voice rougher than I intended. "We're in this together, Sofia."

"Together," she echoes, and I swear I hear her smile. "I think I'm starting to like the sound of that."

She pulls back slightly, her eyes meeting mine.

Sofia's gaze lingers on mine, her green eyes sparkling like emeralds. We look into each other's eyes for so damn long that I can count the speckles of brown in hers. The

air in the car slowly turns charged, electric. Before I can process what's happening, she leans in, and my heart races as I close the distance, meeting her lips in a kiss that's both tentative and urgent.

I'm frozen for a split second, my mind reeling at this unexpected turn. Then instinct takes over, and I'm kissing raw, one hand cupping her face while the other pulls her closer. She tastes like mint and adrenaline, and I can feel her heart racing against my chest.

I take one hand and push back my seat before reaching for her waist. I hold her tight, my fingers digging in, and help her over to my seat, where she now sits, straddling me, her lips still on mine.

I groan, clutching her hair and pulling her closer, one hand now resting on her ass.

When we finally break apart, both breathless, Sofia's cheeks are flushed. "I... I've been wanting to do that for a while," she admits, a hint of her usual sass creeping into her voice. "Don't let it go to your head, Vlad."

I chuckle, still dazed. "Wouldn't dream of it, princess."

Our lips meet again, more heated this time. Sofia's hands roam over my chest, her touch setting my skin on fire even through my shirt. She bites my lower lip and fiddles with my belt. I hear a soft thud on the floor as it's discarded. I hear the zipper of my trousers come loose, and I hold her waist to keep her up as I lift myself off the chair. She pulls down my trousers, my boxers, and her eyes widen slightly as she takes in the length of my already hard cock.

And then, I feel her hesitate slightly, her eyes flickering between my cock and my eyes.

I cup her cheeks in my hands, forcing her to look into my eyes. "What is it, Sof?" I ask, gently. "We don't have to do anything you're not comfortable with."

She pulls back, biting her lip in a way that's both adorable and sexy. "Vlad," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. "I... I want to make you feel good, but I'm not sure..." She trails off, a vulnerability in her eyes I've never seen before. "Could you... guide me? Show me how to... you know."

I swallow hard, my heart pounding. This isn't the confident, sexy Sofia I'm used to. This is a side of her I never expected to see, curious and uncertain all at once. It's intoxicating.

"Are you sure?" I ask, searching her face.

Sofia nods, determination mixing with the shyness in her expression. "I'm sure. Teach me?"

I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart. Sofia's trust in me is both exhilarating and terrifying. I want to protect her, to make sure she feels safe and respected every step of the way.

"Okay," I say softly, taking her hand in mine. "We'll go slow. If you want to stop at any point, just say the word."

I guide her hand to my lap, my touch gentle but firm. "Start by just touching gently," I instruct, my voice low and husky. "Feel the shape; get comfortable with it."

Sofia's fingers trace tentatively along my length, her touch feather-light. I can't help the small groan that escapes me. Her eyes widen slightly at my reaction.

"That's good," I encourage her. "You can apply a little more pressure if you want."

As she explores, I explain the basics, guiding her hand when needed. I'm hyper-aware of every change in her expression, every catch in her breath.

"Like this?" she asks, her voice breathy as she strokes more firmly.

"Perfect," I manage to say, fighting to keep my composure, even though the blood gushes straight to my cock, making me feel a thousand degrees of thrill.

Sofia's eyes meet mine, a spark of mischief returning. The next thing I know, her hand is gliding up and down my shaft. I'm powerless to resist her, my breath hitching as pleasure coils through me.

"Good girl," I murmur. My eyes drift shut and my hands clutch the edges of my seat. Sofia's other hand finds its way to my chest, her fingers splaying out against my hard muscles.

"Is this okay?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Yes," I breathe, "Perfect."

I watch with heavy-lidded eyes as she increases her rhythm, her gaze locked onto mine. She crouches lower to get comfortable, her curves spilling out of that dress, and the vision—of her licking her lips in pleasure, her hand on my cock, her body for my taking... it's all too much.

I feel my cock throb. She gasps, her expression softening. "Vlad, I... I want more. I want you."

My heart skips a beat. Part of me wants nothing more than to give in to her request, to lose myself in her completely. But a stronger part knows it's not the right time or place.

"Sofia," I say gently, cupping her face with my hand. "You have no idea how much I want that too. But not like this, not here. Not where we're on edge, where we can be seen."

Even though I don't want this pleasure to end, I gently stop her and make her sit up properly. With my hands on her hip while she straddles me, I look into her eyes, hyper-aware of how I feel her heat through her clothes. But now is not the time to be selfish.

I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear and give her a soft kiss. "Your first time should be somewhere comfortable, something private. How about we pick this up back home?"

I see a flicker of disappointment in her eyes, quickly replaced by understanding and... is that gratitude?

"You're right," she says softly, leaning into my touch. "Thank you, Vlad. For being patient, for... caring."

I pull her close, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "Always."

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

The door slams behind us with an air of finality. Vlad's hand lingers on my lower back, guiding me further into the house, our urgent footsteps echoing in the silence. The charged air hums between us, our hurried breaths mingling as the outside world fades away.

On the way, one of Vlad's men tries vying for his attention about something that happened at work.

"Not now," Vlad growls, taking my hand and striding up the stairs. We head straight for his bedroom, my heart fluttering every step of the way.

He opens it, lets me pass, and follows, kicking the door shut behind him with a decisive thud.

His eyes blaze into mine, scorching in their intensity. Strong hands cup my face, thumbs brushing across my cheekbones. I wet my lips nervously as he leans in.

"Are you certain this is what you want?" His voice is a low rumble.

My pulse flutters. "Yes."

I inhale sharply as Vlad presses closer, his breath hot on my neck. "Sofia," he murmurs, voice husky.

A shiver runs through me. I want to maintain my cool, to not seem fazed, but heat pools in my core and I feel nervous beyond belief. "What are you waiting for?" I manage to say, aiming for sassy but my voice comes out breathy.

His mouth claims mine with demanding ferocity, his hands still cupping my cheeks. He's kissing me so hard that I stumble back against the wall, and I swear I've never been kissed with such passion. I cling to him as though I want to etch myself to his skin, heat flooding my veins, threatening to consume me. He kisses me until I'm dizzy, drunk on his taste, his scent.

When we finally break for air, his gaze bores into me. "No going back after this."

A shiver races down my spine at the promise in those words. I lift my chin. "Good."

His answering smile is wicked and triumphant. And then his lips find mine again, and I stop thinking entirely.

Vlad's hands are everywhere as he backs me toward the bed, his touch both reverent and possessive. My knees hit the mattress, and I sink down onto the soft covers. My breath hitches as he hovers over me, his eyes roaming my face, my body, my curves.

"Nervous?" he asks, his voice low and husky.

I lift my chin defiantly. "Hardly," I retort, but my voice wavers slightly.

A knowing smile tugs at his lips. "It's okay to be," he murmurs, following me down. "I'll take care of you."

His weight presses me further into the bed as his mouth trails hot, open-mouthed kisses down my throat.

"You are so beautiful," he murmurs against my skin.

"Vlad," I breathe, my fingers tangling in his hair.

He takes his time, savoring each moment as if committing it to memory. The slow pace is maddening, stoking the fire building within me.

His hands slide down to the hem of my blouse, pausing there. "May I?" he asks, seeking permission.

I nod, not trusting my voice.

He carefully lifts the fabric, his fingertips grazing my skin as he removes it. The cool air hits my exposed flesh, causing goosebumps to erupt.

"Beautiful," Vlad whispers reverently, his gaze roaming my body.

The whispered praise sends heat pooling low in my belly. His fingers dance along my ribcage, leaving trails of fire in their wake as they move to unhook my bra. I arch my back to assist him, my usual composure slipping away with each passing second.

I gasp as he cups my bare breasts, thumbs grazing over the tightened peaks. Vlad's lips descend to my breast, placing a kiss on my nipple that sends shockwaves through my body. He continues to suckle on me. My back arches off the bed, pressing closer. His stubble rasps deliciously against my sensitive skin and I am lost, awash in sensation.

A soft gasp escapes me, my fingers tightening in his hair.

"Still not nervous?" he teases, looking up at me with a mixture of desire and affection that makes my heart stutter.

"Shut up," I manage to say, but there's no bite to my words. For once, I let my guard down, allowing myself to be swept away by the moment.

Vlad's lips curve into a smile against my skin as he trails kisses down my belly. His hands cup my breasts, thumbs brushing over my nipples that make me lose all control of my body, control that slips away with each touch.

"You're trembling," he murmurs, his breath hot against my navel. It's an observation, not a question. He can see, feel, and hear how turned on I am. I don't respond, knowing there are no words to express what he is making me feel.

He reaches the waistband of my skirt, fingers skimming along the skin just above it. I hold my breath, trembling with anticipation. His fingers find the zipper. I'm writhing beneath him now, craving more of his touch.

The skirt loosens around my hips. I lift my hips to help him slide the skirt off. Vlad's eyes are molten as he slides it down my legs, discarding it on the floor.

I'm left in just my lace panties now, laid bare before him. His heated gaze travels over me, and I flush, suddenly shy.

His hands ghost over my inner thighs, and I can't suppress a soft moan. "Vlad," I breathe, surprising myself with the need in my voice.

His hands grasp my knees, nudging them apart. I comply readily, too aroused to feel embarrassed.

Vlad trails his fingers up my inner thighs, and I shiver, pleasure coiling tight. When he finally brushes over the damp lace, I cry out.

"I need to taste you," he growls.

Before I can respond, he's dragging my panties down my legs. Then his mouth is on me, and coherent thought becomes impossible. His tongue strokes over my slick

folds, and I shudder, fingers tangling in his hair to pull him closer.

My hips buck involuntarily, and I hear myself whimper.

"That's it," Vlad murmurs against me. "Let go, Sofia. I've got you."

The next thing I know, I feel his finger sliding inside me, stretching me in preparation for what's to come. My eyes clench shut as I struggle to contain my moans, but the sensation is too overwhelming.

His tongue now flicks against my clit, and he curves his finger, adding another. He circles inside me, making me feel at every angle, and I clench my legs, wanting to feel more.

His fingers hit the upper walls within, and suddenly, I lurch off the bed as a jolt of electricity passes through me. This pleasure, it's a form I've never felt before. I fear it, for if it gets any better, I feel like I actually might cease to exist.

He fingers me harder, his tongue moving faster. I fall back down on the bed, and he places his hand on my stomach to keep me down, getting fiercer, hotter, wilder...

I'm breathing heavily, clinging to the sheets as my body thrashes in pleasure. He continues his relentless teasing, and I moan loudly, my hips lifting toward his mouth and against his fingers.

The next thing I know, I feel a heat beginning to grow within me, which seems to be the very center of the universe. The heat spirals outward, growing stronger and reaching every corner of my existence. Every sensation heightens, and every nerve ending is alive with a furious tide.

"Vlad!" I cry out his name. My eyes close shut and my entire body begins to tremble.

Suddenly, I'm overflown, and I lurch off the bed with a groan, losing all sense of skin and bone. The world goes dark, and all I see are stars, my breath heaving, my muscles becoming water, and I fall back down.

Vlad stays between my legs, his fingers gently massaging me until the last of my orgasm passes.

At last, the world comes back. When I open my eyes, I see him looking up at me with wonder, a thin sheen of sweat trickling on his forehead.

I grab him by the lapel and bring him up to me, kissing him gently before begging for more.

He lifts his head, a teasing smile playing on his lips. "More?"

I grip his shoulders, nails digging in slightly. "You know what I mean," I say with hunger.

"Do I?" Vlad chuckles, nipping at my collarbone. "I think I'd like to hear you say it."

I narrow my eyes at him, but the effect is likely ruined by my flushed cheeks and heavy breathing.

His eyes darken at my expression, pure, unadulterated desire. "As you wish," he concedes, sitting back on his heels.

I watch, mesmerized, as Vlad begins to undress. There's no hesitation in his movements, just fluid confidence as he reveals tanned skin and taut muscles. My breath catches as he stands to remove his pants, and I can't help but stare.

"Like what you see?" he asks, a hint of amusement in his voice.

I swallow hard.

Vlad laughs, a deep, rich sound that sends shivers down my spine. He reaches for something in the drawer of the nightstand—a condom, I realize—before he positions himself above me.

His expression softens as he brushes a strand of hair from my face. "Are you sure about this, Sofia?"

I nod, surprised by the tenderness in his touch. "Yes," I whisper. "I want this. I want you."

I hold my breath as Vlad positions himself at my entrance. His eyes lock with mine, intense and searching.

"Tell me if you need me to stop," he murmurs, his voice strained with restraint.

I nod, unable to form words as he slowly pushes inside. The stretch is intense, a burning sensation that's equal parts pleasure and pain. I gasp, my fingers digging into his shoulders.

"Breathe, my love," Vlad whispers, kissing my forehead. "I've got you."

His words, surprisingly gentle, help me relax. As he sinks deeper, a low moan escapes him. "God, Sofia. You feel incredible."

The fullness is overwhelming. I've never felt so connected to another person. "Vlad," I breathe, my voice trembling.

He stills, giving me time to adjust. "Are you okay?"

I nod, surprised by the vulnerability in his eyes. "Yes. Please... move."

Vlad starts with slow, shallow thrusts. His lips find mine in a deep kiss as he gradually increases his pace. One hand kneads my breast, thumb circling my nipple.

"More," I plead, arching into him. "Faster."

He obliges, his hips snapping forward with more force. The initial discomfort fades, replaced by waves of pleasure.

"Like this?" Vlad growls, his control slipping.

"Yes," I gasp. "Don't stop."

Our bodies move together, finding a rhythm. I'm lost in sensation, in the feeling of Vlad surrounding me, filling me. It's more intense than I ever imagined.

"Sofia," he groans. "You're perfect. So beautiful."

He feasts on me like a man starved, rotating and pounding until I am moaning continuously, my hips rocking mindlessly against his mouth. The pleasure crests higher and higher.

I close my eyes, and my nails rake down his back, and he lunges deeper, if that even was possible.

"Oh my god," I mewl, clutching him as close as I possibly can. He nuzzles into my neck, his cock hitting that perfect spot.

I thrust my hips against his, my back arching off the bed.

“Fuck,” he growls. “You’re incredible. This is incredible.”

His words, combined with the friction of our bodies, push me closer to the edge. I cling to him, overwhelmed by the connection between us.

"Vlad, I'm close," I whimper, surprised by my own boldness.

He kisses me fiercely. "Let go. I've got you."

A tingling warmth builds low in my belly, spreading outward. I gasp as it intensifies, my body tensing. "Oh god, Vlad... I'm—"

The sensation explodes, radiating through me in pulsing waves. My back arches, fingers digging into Vlad's shoulders as I cry out. Every nerve feels electrified.

"That's it, beautiful," Vlad growls, his thrusts becoming erratic. "I'm close, too. Fuck, Sofia..."

His cock throbs inside me, and I feel him swell even larger. With a guttural moan, he buries himself deep. "I'm cumming," he gasps against my neck.

We cling to each other, trembling and breathless as our shared climax washes over us. For a moment, the world narrows to just us—our racing hearts, our mingled breaths.

As the intensity fades, Vlad carefully withdraws, disposing of the condom before gathering me into his arms. I curl against his chest, feeling strangely vulnerable.

"Are you alright?" he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my temple.

I nod, not trusting my voice. The enormity of what just happened is sinking in.

"Talk to me, Sofia," Vlad says softly, a hint of worry in his tone.

I take a shaky breath. "I'm fine. It's just... a lot."

His arms tighten around me. "I know. Thank you for trusting me with this."

Something in his voice makes me look up. There's an unexpected softness in his eyes.

"Can I ask you something?" I venture, curiosity overcoming my usual reserve.

Vlad nods. "Anything."

"Have you... done this often?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

He's quiet for a moment. "Not as often as you might think," he finally says. "And never like this."

"What do you mean?"

Vlad sighs, running a hand through his hair. "I've had partners, yes. But it was always... just a one-night thing. I've never slept with a woman more than once."

His words stir something deep within me, a conflicting mix of warmth and jealousy. I try to mask it, but Vlad sees right through me.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his thumb tracing my cheekbone.

I bite my lip, hating how vulnerable I feel. "It's nothing."

"Sofia," he says, his voice low and insistent. "Talk to me."

I take a deep breath, steeling myself. "I just... I can't help but wonder about those other women. Were they prettier? More experienced?"

Vlad's eyes soften. He pulls me even closer, gently kissing my forehead. "If I can be so bold as to say," he admits, staring deep into my eyes, "this is the first time it's meant something."

His honesty catches me off guard. I search his face, looking for any sign of deception, but find only raw vulnerability.

"Why me?" I whisper.

"Because you're different, Sofia," he says, cupping my cheek. "You challenge me. You're not afraid to stand up to me. And somehow, that makes me want to be better."

"But—"

He silences me with a kiss, deep and possessive. When he pulls back, his gaze is intense. "I'm yours, Sofia. Completely. Do you understand?"

I nod, a small smile tugging at my lips despite myself. "I understand."

And then, limbs entangled, we fall into deep sleep. That night, I don't dream. It's a safe sleep, a secure sleep, one where nothing can possibly go wrong.

The week that follows is... unexpected. Vlad and I fall into a rhythm I never thought possible. Mornings start with shared coffee and playful banter.

"You're burning the eggs again," I tease one day, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Vlad shoots me a mock glare. "I'd like to see you do better, princess."

I raise an eyebrow, accepting the challenge. Soon, we're laughing as I demonstrate my superior egg-flipping skills.

Our evenings are filled with quiet moments. Sometimes, we read in companionable silence; other times, Vlad teaches me chess, his patience surprising me. More than once, he carries me up to the bedroom. Every night, we make love until way past midnight.

"Checkmate," I announce triumphantly on our third night.

Vlad's eyes narrow. "You've been holding out on me, haven't you?"

I shrug, unable to hide my smirk. "A girl's got to have some secrets."

He pulls me into his lap, nuzzling my neck. "I look forward to uncovering every single one."

As the days pass, I find myself opening up more, sharing stories of my childhood and my hopes for the future. Vlad listens intently, his fingers often intertwined with mine.

"I never thought I'd have this," I admit one night as we lay in bed.

Vlad props himself up on an elbow, studying my face. "Have what?"

I gesture vaguely between us. "This... connection. I always thought I was too much for most men. Intimidating, cold."

He brushes a strand of hair from my face. "You don't have to be anything but yourself with me, Sofia. I want all of you—the ice queen and the woman beneath."

His words warm me from the inside out, and I pull him down for a kiss, marveling at how quickly this man has become my safe harbor.

I'm lounging on the couch in Vlad's study, my legs draped over his lap as he types away on his laptop. The rhythmic click of keys is oddly soothing, but curiosity gets the better of me.

"Any news?" I ask, trying to keep my voice casual.

Vlad's fingers pause, and he looks up at me, his steel-gray eyes intense. "As a matter of fact, yes. My men have made significant progress infiltrating the Crimson Crew."

I sit up straighter, my heart racing. "Tell me everything."

He closes his laptop, giving me his full attention. "We've managed to place six of our most trusted operatives within their ranks. They've already uncovered some valuable information about their operations and hierarchy. They've weeded out the bad guys. Threatened the lower ranks, who turned on the higher in fear. We have removed three men in command who are threats to the Orlovs, and it's been done in such a way that it can't be traced back to us."

"That's... impressive," I admit, a mix of relief and satisfaction coursing through me. "I didn't expect results so quickly."

Vlad's hand finds my knee, his touch warm and reassuring. "I told you I'd take this seriously, Sofia. Your goals are my goals now."

I swallow hard, surprised by the lump forming in my throat. "Thank you," I whisper, covering his hand with mine.

His eyes soften. "You don't have to thank me. We're in this together."

One slow afternoon, while Vlad is away at work, I decide to make a list of changes I'd like to make to the house.

As I'm searching for a pen in Vlad's office to jot down some ideas, I can't help but reflect on how much has changed. My fingers brush against a folder tucked away in the first drawer I open, and I look down without thinking.

My brows furrow as I see my name scrawled across the top. "What the..." I mutter, flipping it open. My eyes widen as I scan the contents, my heart dropping to my stomach.

There, laid out as I open the folder, are photos of me with some of the Crimson Crew, taken the night of our family party. The night when I snuck out.

The night before Vlad reached out to my brothers, asking for my hand in marriage.

Suddenly, I feel a cold, clammy sensation envelop me. My breathing hitches, my hands trembling as I try to process what I'm seeing. Vlad knew about my plans before our marriage arrangement was even on the table.

What does this mean? Did he marry me to stop me from pursuing my goals with the Crimson Crew? To control and manipulate me?

To ensure he intervenes and stops me from pulling down the Crimson Crew? To mess up my plans.

My chest constricts, anger boiling in my veins like molten iron.

How could he do this to me? I felt like we were finally getting to know each other, opening up and sharing our deepest selves. And now, I realize he's been keeping things from me all along—things that not only betray my trust but also threaten the security of my family.

A bitter, twisted flame ignites in the pit of my stomach as I realize that I only thought I knew him. He's been running on a different agenda altogether.

I slam the folder shut, hurling it back into the drawer with vicious force, the betrayal seeping deep into my soul.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

The gleam of diamonds catches my eye as I glance up from the scattered papers on my desk. Beyond my office, rows of display cases stretch across the floor—a pristine showcase of our legitimate business. But that's only part of the story. The real lifeblood of our operation flows beneath the surface, hidden in plain sight.

Here's how it works: we source the diamonds directly from our mines, controlling the entire supply chain. A portion of these stones is priced and sold legitimately—cash transactions that never leave a trace. Because we own the mines, no one questions the occasional "missing" stones, and those pieces find their way to the black market. Clean cash, no questions asked.

But the true brilliance lies in the other side of the scheme. For our more "sophisticated" dealings, we sell diamonds at wildly inflated prices to select partners—those who owe us for services rendered outside the law. These inflated invoices provide a perfect cover. The money paid, though disguised as legitimate business revenue, is essentially payment for illicit deals. It lands in our accounts as clean as a polished gem, untraceable to its darker origins.

That's the magic of a diamond. Its worth is defined not by its brilliance but by the value we choose to assign it. And in this game, value is everything.

I lean back in my leather chair, allowing myself a rare moment of satisfaction. Everything is falling into place—the chain of our brand-new jewelry stores, our more illicit ventures, and, most importantly, my relationship with Sofia.

A smirk tugs at my lips as I think of her. My beautiful, ice-cold wife, who's slowly starting to thaw. The past week has been... surprisingly pleasant. No arguments, no

cold shoulders. Just a tremendous warming between us that makes something unfamiliar stir in my chest.

The sharp staccato of heels on marble snaps me from my reverie. I look up, tensing instinctively at the abrupt intrusion. But it's Sofia who bursts through my office door, her green eyes flashing with an anger I haven't seen in weeks.

"Sofia?" I say, rising to my feet. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't answer immediately, her gaze sweeping over me with arctic disdain. I drink in the sight of her—pin-straight blonde hair falling past her shoulders, the elegant cut of her dress hugging her slim frame. Even furious, she's breathtaking.

"Don't 'Sofia' me," she finally snaps, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Playing dumb doesn't suit you, Vladimir."

Oh, so she's back to using my full name. Now I know she's pissed.

I frown, genuinely confused. "I'm not playing anything. What's going on?"

She laughs a sharp, humorless sound that sets my teeth on edge. "Oh, that's rich. As if you don't know exactly what you've done."

I move around my desk, approaching her cautiously. The urge to reach out and touch her wars with my instinct for self-preservation. An angry Sofia is a dangerous Sofia.

"Whatever it is," I say carefully, "I'm sure we can talk it out. Why don't you tell me what's bothering you?"

Her eyes narrow, and for a moment, I think she might actually strike me. Instead, she takes a deep breath, her fingers clenching at her sides. "You really want to play this

game? Fine. Let's talk about how you've been interfering with my plans behind my back."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask, utterly confused.

"My plans with the Crimson Crew," Sofia hisses, her green eyes flashing with betrayal. "The ones you swore you'd support when I said I want to infiltrate it. How mad you were at first! How shocked you were! Not once did you tell me you knew I was involved with them. I saw the photos, Vlad, of me in their midst before we got married. Ring any bells?"

My stomach drops. Shit. I'd hoped to have more time before this conversation, to explain how it all went down. I never knew who they were back then.

"Sofia, I can explain—" I start, but she cuts me off with a razor-sharp laugh.

"Oh, I'm sure you can. You always have an explanation, don't you? A reason why you know better than everyone else?" Her words drip with venom, each one finding its mark.

I take a step toward her, frustration and admiration warring within me. Even furious, she's magnificent—a force of nature barely contained in human form.

"If you'd just listen for a moment—"

"Listen?" she interrupts, her voice rising. "Like you listened when I told you how important this was to me? When I asked you to trust me for once? What a fool I was, when now I know you were trying to jeopardize my plans all along. That's why you married me, didn't you?"

I clench my jaw, struggling to keep my own temper in check at the unfair accusation.

"That's not what happened, and you know it. That night—"

"I'm not going to believe a word you say!" Sofia snaps back.

Just as I open my mouth to respond, my phone buzzes insistently in my pocket. I ignore it, focused entirely on the angry woman before me.

"Sofia, please," I try again, "I was only trying to—"

The buzzing intensifies, a specific pattern that sends a chill down my spine. It's the emergency Bratva alert—something that can't be ignored, no matter how much I want to.

I curse under my breath, torn between duty and the desperate need to make things right with Sofia. Her eyes narrow, sensing the shift in my attention.

"What is it?" she demands, her tone still icy but tinged with curiosity.

I meet her gaze, my expression shifting from frustration to urgency. "There's an emergency I need to handle. Bratva business." I hesitate, torn between my responsibilities and my need to protect her. "Sofia, I promise we'll continue this conversation later. For now, I need you to go home where it's safe."

Her green eyes flash dangerously. "Don't you dare try to tell me what to do, Vlad. I'm not some helpless—"

"I know you're not," I interject, my voice softening despite the tension. "But this situation could be volatile."

Sofia's jaw clenches, her anger still palpable. For a moment, I think she might argue further, but then she gives a curt, dismissive nod. "Fine," she says, her voice as cold

as a Siberian winter. "Go play your little gangster games. I'm sure they're far more important than anything I have to say."

The sarcasm in her tone cuts deep, but I don't have time to address it. "We're not done," I insist, even as she turns away from me. "This conversation isn't over, Sofia."

She doesn't respond, already striding toward the door, her heels clicking sharply against the polished floor. As she reaches the threshold, she pauses, glancing back over her shoulder. For a split second, I see something vulnerable beneath her icy exterior—hurt, maybe even fear. But it's gone in an instant, replaced by that mask of cool indifference.

"Isn't it?" she asks quietly, and then she's gone, leaving me with a growing sense of unfinished business and a fierce determination to make things right between us.

I stare at the empty doorway, my fists clenched at my sides. "Damn it," I mutter, already plotting how to fix this mess once the current crisis is handled. One way or another, I'll make her understand. I have to.

I rush out of the office, my mind racing between Sofia's anger and the urgent Bratva matter at hand. My brothers have already gathered in our secure meeting room when I burst through the door.

"What's the situation?" I demand, scanning their tense faces.

Abram, ever the strategist, speaks first. "One of our shipments has been intercepted. We believe it's the Petrov clan."

"Fuck," I growl, slamming my fist on the table. "How much did we lose?"

Denis, his eyes hard, answers, "Two million in product, at least. But that's not the worst of it. They took Yuri."

My blood runs cold. Yuri's one of our most loyal. If he talks...

"We need to move. Now," Abram commands, his voice leaving no room for argument. "Mark, I want you on surveillance. Vlad, gather a strike team. Denis, you're with me."

As we spring into action, Sofia's face flashes in my mind. I push the image away, focusing on the task at hand. There's no room for distraction when lives are on the line.

Hours later, exhausted but victorious and with Yuri and the shipment secure, I finally return home. The house is eerily quiet as I step inside.

"Sofia?" I call out, my voice echoing through the empty rooms. No response.

I climb the stairs, taking them two at a time. "Sofia, we need to talk," I try again, pushing open our bedroom door. The room is untouched, the bed still made from this morning.

A knot forms in my stomach as I move from room to room, each one as silent and empty as the last. "Sofia!" I shout, my worry growing with each passing second.

Where the hell is she?

I yank open her closet door, and my heart sinks. The shelves are half-empty, and her favorite designer dresses are missing. Her suitcase is gone. I run a hand through my hair, pacing the room as the realization hits me like a punch to the gut.

She's left.

"Fuck," I mutter, guilt and regret washing over me. I should've explained how I have those photos. I should've made her understand. Now she's out there, alone and angry, thinking the worst of me.

I pull out my phone, my thumb hovering over her brothers' contact. They need to know, but the thought of admitting I've lost their sister makes my jaw clench. Just as I'm about to hit call, my phone buzzes in my hand. Lara's name flashes on the screen.

I answer, bracing myself. "Lara, what—"

"What the hell did you do, Vlad?" My sister's voice cuts through, sharp and accusing. "Sofia shows up at Dima and my door looking like she's been through a war, and she won't say a word about what happened between you two."

My free hand curls into a fist. "Is she okay? Where—"

"Oh no, you don't get to ask questions," Lara snaps. "You're going to tell me exactly what happened, and it better be good, or I swear to God, Vlad..."

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my voice steady. "It's a misunderstanding, Lara. I need to talk to her, to explain—"

"Explain what? She's here with her suitcases, and she's pretty damn upset. Dima is in over his head with worry! Vlad," she says, her voice softening. "I don't think she plans on coming back home."

Her words hit home, and I close my eyes, leaning against the wall.

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I pace the length of my room, my mind in constant turmoil. The guest room in Dima and Lara's mansion was supposed to be a try at freedom, yet why am I fighting for air?

My mind keeps circling back to Vladimir. His absence gnaws at me, an unexpected void I can't seem to fill. I thought being away from him would help me clear my thoughts, but how can it when it is he I think of at the turn of a thought?

I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms. "Damn you, Zolotov," I mutter, my voice icy even to my own ears.

I halt by the window, staring out at the manicured gardens below. The perfectly trimmed hedges mock me with their order and control—completely unlike my life, which has spiraled into chaos since meeting Vladimir.

"Get it together, Sofia," I chide myself. "He's just a man. A frustrating, infuriating, oddly compelling man..."

I shake my head, trying to dislodge thoughts of his intense black eyes, how he smiled at me in bed, and how tender his touch was. And then, I think of how he betrayed me.

What I need to do instead is put my energy into something productive, like my mission. With Vladimir no longer an ally and a proven barrier, I now need to find a way to undertake it myself.

My stomach twists as I consider my options and realize that without Vladimir, I'm at a loss. I don't have any of the resources he does, and I feel like I'm back at square

one.

I could try to find a way to stay connected with the gang from here. "But if word gets back to my siblings..."

The thought of my brothers and sisters discovering my secret mission sends a chill down my spine. Their disappointment, their anger, their fear—it would be unbearable. I've always been the dutiful one, the one they could trust. To betray that image...

"No," I decide, my voice firm. "I can't risk it. Not yet."

I sink onto the edge of the bed, my usual poise deserting me as I bury my face in my hands. For a moment, I allow myself to feel the weight of it all—the mission, the lies, the unexpected complication of Vladimir Zolotov.

"Pull yourself together," I whisper fiercely. "You're Sofia Orlov. You don't need anyone's help."

But as I lift my head, catching sight of my reflection in the ornate mirror across the room, I can't quite banish the flicker of uncertainty in my eyes. For the first time in years, I feel truly alone.

Just then, a soft knock interrupts my spiraling thoughts. The door creaks open, and Lara's concerned face appears.

"Sofia? Are you alright?" she asks, stepping into the room.

I quickly compose myself, straightening my posture and smoothing my expression. "Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Lara's eyes narrow, unconvinced. She approaches, sitting beside me on the bed. "You've been holed up in here for hours. Dima's worried."

I can't help but tense at the mention of Dima. "There's nothing to worry about," I say, my tone cooler than intended.

"Hey," Lara says softly, placing a hand on my arm. "I know my husband can be... persistent. But I promise I'll keep him from prying. Whatever's going on, you can tell us when you're ready. I've told him to leave you be for now."

Her kindness catches me off guard, and I feel my carefully constructed walls wavering. "Thank you," I manage, my voice barely above a whisper.

As Lara leaves, closing the door gently behind her, I'm left alone with my thoughts once more. They inevitably drift to Vladimir.

He's clearly lost interest in explaining, I think to myself firmly, pacing again. If he cared, he would have reached out by now. Chances are, he's happy it's ended the way it has. At least now, he's succeeded in hindering my attempt to bring down the Crimson Crew.

The sting of betrayal twists in my chest, sharper than I'd like to admit. I'd let my guard down and allowed myself to see him as more than just a means to an end. How foolish.

The next morning, a sudden commotion in the hallway shatters my peace as I sip coffee and read the paper in the drawing room. The door bursts open, and my siblings flood into the room, Dima included, their faces a mix of concern and anger.

"Sofia!" Nikolai, my usually calm oldest brother, practically shouts. "What the hell is going on?"

I freeze, my heart racing. "What are you talking about?"

Natalia, ever the protective sister, steps forward, her brown eyes flashing. "Don't play dumb. We know you've left Vladimir's house. What happened between you two?"

"I don't owe you an explanation," I snap. It's a defense mechanism, one I've perfected over the years.

Artyom, always the peacemaker, tries to intervene. "Sofi, we're just worried. You came here without any warning, and Dima is worried sick."

I shoot Dima a glare. Dima shrugs, but the concern doesn't leave his face.

"Did he do something?" Fedor growls. "Cause I'll fuck him up, I swear."

"Or are you having a lovers' spat?" Natalia demands stubbornly, stepping in front of me with her arms crossed, staring up at me with an inquisitive gaze.

I open my mouth to retort, but Lara's voice cuts through the tension. "What's all this commotion about?"

She steps into the room, her presence immediately commanding attention. My siblings turn to her, words tumbling out in a chaotic rush.

"Sofia's hiding something—"

"We think she might be in trouble—"

"She won't tell us anything—"

Lara holds up a hand, silencing them. "Oh, for heaven's sake. Is that what all this fuss is about?"

She turns to me, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Sofia, Darling, did you not tell them about Dima having to cancel on your vacation?"

I blink, momentarily stunned by her quick thinking. "I... no, I just don't want to involve anyone in my mess."

Lara tuts, shaking her head. "Well, you know your siblings. I'm sorry, Sofia. I know how you were looking forward to it all month."

My siblings deflate visibly, looking both relieved and embarrassed. Natalia is the first to speak. "A vacation? That's what all this secrecy has been about?"

I nod, latching onto Lara's lifeline. "Yes. I wanted it to be perfect. But you know how Dima is. Always choosing work."

Dima runs a hand through his hair, sheepishly glancing between his wife and me. "We feel like idiots now. Sorry, Sofi."

As they file out, muttering apologies, I catch Lara's eye. The gratitude I feel is overwhelming, and for once, I let it show on my face. She winks, a silent promise passing between us. In that moment, I realize I might have found an unexpected ally.

As the door closes behind my siblings, Lara gently takes my arm and guides me to sit on the edge of the couch. The silence between us is heavy, pregnant with unspoken questions. I fidget with the hem of my shirt under the weight of her concerned gaze.

"Sofia," Lara says softly, her voice warm and inviting. "What's really going on?"

I take a shaky breath, my walls crumbling. I need to tell someone, and from how non-judgmental and helpful Lara has been, she seems to be the safest bet. Besides, something tells me that if I come out with the truth that has been burdening me, she'll be the last person to lock me in a room under the pretense of keeping me safe. "I... I don't know where to start."

"How about with Vladimir?" she suggests, and I flinch at the name.

"Vladimir," I repeat, my voice barely above a whisper. "He's... complicated."

Lara chuckles. "That's an understatement if I've ever heard one. But what happened between you two?"

I close my eyes, memories of our wedding flooding my mind. Little did I know he'd ever break through my barriers, only to betray me at last.

"Well, it started at a bar one night..." I begin the story of how I overheard the Crimson Crew speaking about bringing down the Orlovs.

As I recount my struggles and my mission to Lara, it's like a dam has been broken, and all my pent-up emotions come flooding out. Lara listens intently, her expression a mix of shock and sympathy.

"So you were trying to protect your family by infiltrating the Crimson Crew?" she summarizes when I take a deep breath, nodding at her question.

"Yes," I confirm, feeling a weight lifting off my shoulders as I finally share my burden.

My hands tremble as I continue. "When he caught me one night after we got married with one of the guys from the Crew, he was furious. He couldn't believe it! But in time, we came up with a plan, Vladimir and I, to infiltrate the Crimson Crew. But..." I trail off, the betrayal still raw.

"But what, Sofia?"

I look up at her, my green eyes swimming with confusion and hurt. "He knew. He knew all along who I was, what I was doing, even before we got married. And he played along like this is some brand-new discovery. And he never said a word. I just don't understand why he'd lie about this, keep it to himself..."

Lara's eyes flash with anger, her jaw clenching as she processes my words. "That bastard," she mutters, shaking her head. "I can't believe Vlad would do this to you."

I watch her closely, surprised by the intensity of her reaction. "You're angry with him?"

"Of course I am," she says, her voice softening as she looks at me. "But... I also understand why he did it."

I raise an eyebrow, my voice cool. "Oh? Do enlighten me."

Lara sighs, running a hand through her hair. "Sofia, I've known my brother all his life. He's not the type to fall for someone easily, but when he does..." She trails off, her eyes meeting mine. "The way he looks at you, it's different. It's like you've awakened something in him."

I scoff, trying to ignore the way my heart quickens at her words. "That doesn't excuse his lies."

"No, it doesn't," Lara agrees. "But it might explain them. Vlad's protective to a fault. If he knew about your mission, he probably thought he was shielding you from danger."

I roll my eyes but can't quite suppress the warmth blooming in my chest. "I don't need his protection."

Lara's face softens with understanding. "Oh, Sofia."

"I thought I was in control," I say, my voice cracking. "I thought I was the one pulling the strings. But he... he's been ten steps ahead this whole time, and I don't know what his endgame is here."

"And how does that make you feel?" Lara probes gently.

I laugh bitterly. "Angry. Confused. And... and something else I can't quite name. Betrayed, maybe?" I pause, struggling to find the words. "When he's not around, it's like there's this... void. And I hate it. I hate that I miss him. But I shouldn't, especially when he's against my family's best interests."

Lara takes my hand, squeezing it reassuringly. "It sounds like you care for him despite everything."

I shake my head vehemently. "I can't. It's too dangerous."

"Sometimes," Lara says softly, "the heart doesn't care about danger."

I look at her, vulnerability etched across my face. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Lara smiles knowingly. "Listen to your heart, Sofia."

Hours later, I'm lying in bed, tossing and turning as Lara's words echo in my mind. The room is pitch black, the silence oppressive. I toss and turn, unable to shake the feeling of unease that's settled over me.

The room feels empty without Vlad.

Suddenly, a floorboard creaks. My body goes rigid, every nerve on high alert. I strain my ears, listening intently. There it is again—the unmistakable sound of a footstep. I'm about to sit up when suddenly, a large, calloused hand clamps over my mouth, and panic explodes through me. My eyes fly open, but in the darkness, I can't make out my attacker's face. My instincts kick in, and I lash out, my elbow connecting with something solid.

A grunt of pain, distinctly masculine, only fuels my determination. I thrash wildly, my heart pounding so hard I can feel it in my throat. My fingers claw at the hand covering my mouth, desperate to break free.

"Sofia, stop!" A familiar voice hisses urgently. "It's me. It's Vladimir."

I freeze, shock temporarily overriding my fear. Vladimir? Here? My mind races, trying to process this unexpected turn of events.

"I'm going to remove my hand," he whispers, his breath warm against my ear. "But you have to promise to stay quiet. Can you do that?"

I nod, still too stunned to form words. As promised, he slowly withdraws his hand, and I gulp in air, my chest heaving.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I demand in a fierce whisper, my initial shock

giving way to anger. "You can't just break into my room in the middle of the night!"

"I had no choice," Vladimir replies, his voice low and urgent.

My eyes are adjusting to the darkness now, and I can make out the outline of his broad shoulders and the intensity in his dark eyes. Despite my anger, I feel a traitorous flutter in my stomach.

"And this couldn't wait until morning?" I hiss, sitting up and pulling the blanket tighter around me.

"No," he says simply, his gaze never leaving mine. "Sofia, I know you're angry with me, and you have every right to be. But we really need to talk. Please come with me ... "

Vladimir's jaw clenches, his eyes flickering with a mix of frustration and... is that desperation?

My mind whirls with possibilities. I want to pepper him with questions and demand answers, but something in his expression gives me pause.

"Fine," I say, my voice icy, and step out of bed. "But this better be good."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

I guide Sofia through the shadows of Lara and Dima's expansive estate, my movements swift and precise. My hand rests lightly on the small of her back as we slip between hedgerows and statuary, trying to stay undiscovered by the guards.

The last thing I need right now is a confrontation with Dima. I just need to speak to my wife in private, without any interference.

Sofia walks beside me, not bothering to look in my direction. Just then, up ahead, we see a flashlight. Night patrol.

"Fuck," I whisper, grabbing her by the waist and pushing her against the wall, concealing her with my body. I duck my head low, hoping my black jacket and dark hair will camouflage with the shadows.

We stand like that, pressed against one another, and I'm aware of every point of contact. Sofia's eyes are wide as she looks behind me at the lights, but from how her chest heaves and cheeks flush, I know she feels the same thrumming in her heart that I do.

"It's clear," she says, a little while later, but a little too soon. A pang of disappointment passes me as I release her from where she's caged between my body and the wall.

We continue walking. Sofia's tension is palpable, her slim frame rigid under my touch.

"Easy," I murmur, barely audible. "We're almost there."

Her green eyes flash with annoyance, but she remains silent as I guide her along the gravel path. The crunch of stones under our feet seems deafening in the still night air. I scan constantly for any sign of movement from the house.

At last, we reach a small, unmanned gate. "Through here," I say, placing my hand on her lower back and ushering her through.

Finally, we reach my waiting car. I open the passenger door for Sofia, who slides in with feline grace. As soon as I slip behind the wheel, she turns to me, her eyes furious.

She waves her hands and, to my shock, begins to yell at me. "I can't believe you woke me up in the middle of the night in the manner you did! Seriously, Vlad? You crept up on me like a serial killer. Was the hand around my mouth really necessary? All you needed was a knife to make a point. Unbelievable! After lying to me, you kidnap me? Congratulations on your successful kidnapping, Vlad. I'm sure the Bratva will be thrilled!"

It takes every ounce of self-control I have to keep my voice steady and point out the obvious without laughing. "This isn't a kidnapping, Sofia. You agreed to come with me."

However, in my mind, I also know how difficult the past few days have been. More than once, I have thought to come over and put an end to this maddening distance, to bring her back home. And honestly? If she hadn't come willingly tonight, I might have just considered kidnapping her.

As I sit beside her, my mind races with possibilities. I'm acutely aware that this could all go horribly wrong. If Sofia truly wanted to leave, I'd let her go—I'm not a monster. But the thought of her slipping away again, of losing this chance to make things right, fills me with a desperation I've never known before.

But still, I don't want her to feel caged. I want her to know she always has options when it comes to us. "You know, I had to do it this way. I was afraid Dima would try to kill me after everything, so I couldn't exactly walk in through the door as though nothing happened."

A tense silence fills the car. Sofia mumbles something under her breath, her words barely audible over the hum of the engine.

"What was that?" I ask, curiosity piqued.

She turns her head, pinning me with those piercing green eyes. "I said, Dima doesn't even know I'm gone. He has no idea about any of this."

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "You didn't tell him?"

Sofia's lips curl into a smirk. "Contrary to what you might believe, Vlad, I don't need to go crying to my brother at the first hint of trouble."

I can't help but feel a surge of admiration for her ability to keep things between us, even though the differences between us are glaringly evident to everyone around. "That's... unexpected."

She shrugs, a gesture so nonchalant it belies the gravity of our situation. "I've learned to keep my cards close to my chest. It's served me well so far."

I nod, processing this new information. "Fair enough. But we're not out of the woods yet. Buckle up, Sofia. We've got a long drive ahead of us."

As I say this, I reach across her to grab her seatbelt, my hand brushing against her arm. The contact sends a jolt through me, and I can't help but linger for a moment. Sofia tenses but doesn't pull away.

"I can manage my own seatbelt, thank you," she says, her voice icy but with an undercurrent I can't quite place. Desire? Yearning? Sorrow?

As I put the car in drive, Sofia turns to me, her expression unreadable in the dim light. "And where exactly are you taking me, oh great kidnapper?"

"Somewhere safe," I answer, focused on the road ahead. "Somewhere we can talk without interruption."

"How romantic," she mutters, her voice laced with sarcasm. But beneath the ice, I detect a hint of curiosity. It's enough to give me hope that maybe, just maybe, I haven't completely lost her yet.

Now, the car drives through winding roads. The whole time, my palms are sweaty on the steering wheel, and I can feel my heart racing. It's not just the unfortunate circumstances of our situation—it's her proximity, the scent of her perfume filling the car, the memory of how it felt to hold her.

I guide the car smoothly onto the private airstrip, the headlights illuminating a sleek Gulfstream G650 waiting on the tarmac. My heart quickens at the sight. Everything is falling into place, just as I've meticulously planned.

"A private jet?" Sofia's voice breaks the silence, a hint of surprise in her voice.

I nod, pulling up beside the plane. "I wanted tonight to ... mean something."

Sofia says nothing.

As we exit the car, I notice Sofia's eyes darting around, taking in every detail. Her

analytical mind is always working, even now. I lead her toward the aircraft, my hand hovering near the small of her back, not quite touching.

"After you," I gesture to the steps.

Inside, I watch Sofia's reaction carefully as she takes in the cabin. I've arranged everything perfectly—a table set for an intimate dinner, crystal glasses catching the soft lighting. To the side, carefully wrapped packages await her attention.

"What's all this?" Sofia asks, her tone guarded but curious.

I move past her, picking up a small velvet box. "I thought you might like some comforts for the journey. This one's special."

I open it to reveal a delicate emerald necklace I chose specifically to match her striking green eyes. "I remembered how much you admired it in that little shop."

Sofia's gaze flickers between the necklace and my face, her expression unreadable. I can see the wheels turning in her mind, weighing my gesture against her distrust.

To help her ease into it, I pour her some champagne—she takes a sip, thank god—before handing her another box.

She opens it, her eyes reflecting the diamonds within, strung on a tennis necklace. A carat apiece, thirty-six pointer. She looks up at me inquiringly.

"It reminds me of ice," I smile down at her. "A little bit like you, until one gets to know you."

And then, I reach out and unwrap the largest box, pulling out the softest fur coat. I lean over while she stands there, frozen like a deer in the headlights, and place it

around her shoulders. "This coat reminded me of the real you. Not the ice, not the cold. It's soft and cozy, warm like your soul."

Silence stretches on before us, my heart hammering in my chest. She looks unimpressed, and I'm beginning to fear this might have been overkill. But still, a voice in my head fights back for me. I did the best I could. She deserves the best I could.

Sofia's eyes narrow, cutting through the carefully crafted atmosphere I've created.

"Is this what you think I want? Pretty trinkets and expensive dinners?" She gestures around the opulent cabin with a sharp wave of her hand. "You can't buy your way back into my good graces, Vlad."

I feel my chest tighten at her words, the sting of rejection hitting harder than I'd anticipated. "Sofia, that's not—"

"Not what?" she interrupts, her voice dripping with icy sarcasm. "Not an attempt to manipulate me? To make me forget everything that's happened?"

I step back from her, my hands suddenly feeling empty and useless. "I just wanted to show you that I care," I say, hating how vulnerable I sound.

Sofia's laugh is bitter, cutting through me like a knife. "Care? You have a funny way of showing it, considering how you haven't called once since I left. You were too busy then to explain, and I'm sorry if I can't forgive you according to your schedule!"

I run a hand through my hair, frustration and fear warring inside me. The thought of losing her for good makes my stomach churn. If I don't get this right, it could be the end.

So, with everything I have, I cast aside all my fears, my doubts, and my pretenses, and lay out the desperate truth—no matter how pathetic it might seem.

I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what I'm about to say. "The truth is, I didn't contact you after you left because I was ashamed," I confess, my voice barely above a whisper. "I knew I fucked up and wanted to prove myself worthy of you first. To show you that you and your dreams and your hopes and your entire existence are anything but a game to me."

Sofia's eyebrows raise slightly, a crack in the walls she has up. "Worthy? You're Vladimir Zolotov. Since when do you need to prove yourself to anyone?"

I lean forward, my elbows on my knees, hands clasped tightly. "Since I realized how terribly I hurt you. How much I'd taken for granted." My eyes never leave hers as I continue, "I couldn't bear to approach you half-heartedly. I needed to be sure I put in all the effort I could. I wanted this..." I motion at the plane, "...to be perfect."

I watch as Sofia processes my words, her green eyes flickering with conflicting emotions. Her fingers twitch in front of her as she holds her hands together, as if she's fighting the urge to reach out.

I continue, needing to express my feelings. "I don't know who I am without you, Sofia. But I know I can't stay away any longer. Every day without you has been... unbearable."

Sofia's breath catches, and I see a flash of vulnerability in her eyes before she looks away, her jaw clenching. "That doesn't erase what happened," she murmurs, but there's less ice in her tone now.

"I know," I reply, resisting the urge to take her hand. "But I'm hoping it's a start. A chance to make things right."

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

I stare at Vlad, my skin burning with a mix of confusion, anger, and yearning. If only we could make things right. If only we could go back to the past.

But it seems like something out of a novel, where he's been working against me from the onset.

"How can we possibly make this right?" I ask, trying to keep the pain away from my voice. "When your plan all along was to marry me to control me and my mission with the Crimson Crew? To prevent me from taking care of my family?" My voice cracks at the end, every vulnerability laid bare, the betrayal I feel seeping into the air.

Vlad's dark eyes widen, a flicker of hurt passing across his chiseled features. I press on, relentless.

"I saw the photos, Vlad. It was by accident that I found them in your desk. The surveillance you had on me before we ever got married—from the day after our family party. Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

My hands clench at my sides, nails digging into my palms. I want to lash out, to make him feel as trapped and betrayed as I do. But I maintain my composure, my face a mask of cool disdain. He's lost the privilege of learning what I feel.

Vlad takes a deep breath, his broad shoulders rising and falling. When he speaks, his voice is low, almost pleading.

"Sofia, you've misunderstood. Those photos... they were only taken that once. I just needed a record of those thugs, should they ever harm you. My intention was not to

work against you.”

I scoff, crossing my arms over my chest. "Oh, please. You expect me to believe that? You, Vladimir Zolotov, spied on me just one time?"

He takes a step toward me, and I instinctively step back. The hurt in his eyes deepens, but I can't bring myself to care. I've spent too long building these walls to let them crumble now.

"It's the truth," he insists. "I would never—"

"Never what?" I interrupt, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "Never spy on a woman? Never try to manipulate her into marrying you for some agenda you harbor?"

I watch as Vlad's jaw clenches, his hands flexing at his sides. Part of me wants him to lash out, to confirm my suspicions. But he doesn't. Instead, he looks at me with an intensity that makes my heart flutter traitorously in my chest.

"I'm not the enemy here, Sofia," he says softly.

For a moment, I almost believe him. Almost. But I can't afford to let my guard down, not when so much harm has already been done.

Vlad runs a hand through his dark hair, his eyes never leaving mine. "Sofia, I have never had any cause to bring harm to your family," he says, his voice steady yet earnest. "Those photos... they were taken out of concern for your safety, nothing more."

I scoff, crossing my arms tightly across my chest. "My safety?"

My gaze remains unwavering, challenging him to give me a satisfactory answer. I've

spent years perfecting this mask, and I won't let his words break me now, no matter how sincere he sounds.

Vlad takes a deep breath, his broad shoulders rising and falling. "Sofia, from the moment I met you, I—"

He steps closer, and I can smell his cologne—a mix of sandalwood and something uniquely him. It's intoxicating, but I force myself to focus.

"The truth?" Vlad's voice drops, intense and raw. "That night after the party, you left without a word, and I couldn't shake you from my mind. There was a mystery about you I needed to unravel. My men watch over our family and alliances—you were part of that through my sister and your brother. At first, it was curiosity, but then I saw a woman who was clearly involved in something dangerous. I didn't know what, but I couldn't stand by and do nothing. I was worried you'd get in trouble and bring it to our doorstep."

My breath catches in my throat at his words, the vulnerability and honesty in his eyes making it harder to maintain the I-don't-give-a-fuck vibe I'm going for. The anger I've carried for so long feels like a heavy cloak, one that suddenly becomes too burdensome to bear.

"I... I didn't know, Vlad." The words slip out before I can stop them, the walls around my heart cracking under the weight of his confession. "I thought you were working against me."

Vlad's eyes soften, a vulnerability I've never seen before etching itself across his features. "Sofia. I would never think of working against you. Why would I? Your brother is family to us."

His words catch me off guard, and I feel my carefully constructed walls begin to

waver.

"Listen," he continues, his voice low and earnest. "When I saw you with these dangerous guys, I wanted to protect you. At the same time, I didn't want to close any doors on what we could share. I had two choices to keep you safe. I could either go to your brothers with information of your involvement with these thugs, which would have meant you'd never speak to me again. Or, I could watch over you. The only way I saw to do that was to ask for your hand."

I feel my resolve weakening, the warmth of his words seeping through the cracks in my armor. My eyes search his face for any sign of deception, but I find only sincerity.

"I..." I start, then pause, unsure of what to say. For once in my life, I'm at a loss for words. The usual sassy retort I'd usually have ready dies on my lips.

Inside, a war rages. The part of me that's been hurt, that's learned to keep everyone at arm's length, screams to push him away. But another part, a part I've kept buried for so long, yearns to believe him.

"I swear it's the truth, Sof," Vlad tries to convince me still, taking another step closer. "I know you don't trust easily, Sofia. But I'm asking you to try."

I take a deep breath, my posture relaxing slightly. "You're right," I admit softly. "I don't trust easily. But... maybe I've been too quick to judge you."

Vlad's eyes light up with a mix of relief and sheer, unbridled joy. He runs a hand through his dark hair, his voice taking on a more earnest tone. "I want you to know, Sofia, that I didn't just sit idly by while we were apart. I continued your work."

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"The Crimson Crew, the gangsters you were after," he explains, his voice low and intense. "My man and I dismantled their entire operation. I used my connections, my resources. I made sure they couldn't hurt anyone else we care about, especially not the Orlovs."

I feel my jaw drop slightly, my mind reeling. "You... you did that?"

Vlad nods, his gaze never leaving mine. "Every last one of them is either behind bars or out of business or been run out of town. I couldn't let your mission go unfinished."

I cross my arms, shock overlapping my senses. All this time, I thought he didn't care. But he was out there, finishing my work, keeping my family safe. I feel a lump start to form in my throat, a small sliver of guilt defending him against my harsh judgment.

"Why would you do that?" My voice cracks as I try to hold back the wave of sentiments raging over me.

"Because it mattered to you," he says simply. "And that made it matter to me. Because you're family, and your family is mine to protect."

I uncross my arms, my hands falling to my sides. The anger that's been fueling me is completely dissipated, replaced by a complicated flurry of emotions—admiration, gratitude, and remorse, all mixed together. "I don't know what to say," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

Vlad takes another step closer, close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from him. "You don't have to say anything. I just want you to understand that I'm on your side, Sofia. Always."

I look up at him, really look at him for the first time—not as an enemy, not as a

threat, but as someone who might actually care about me. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks, and I feel my walls crumbling.

"I... I think I'm starting to," I say softly, and a small tear comes to my mind.

Vlad's eyes light up at my words, then droop at the sight of my tears. He's by my side within seconds, enveloping me in his strong arms as I nestle my face into his neck. His smell comforts me and his arms ground me.

"Don't think I've forgiven you just yet," I quip, just to lighten the mood, and he laughs, pulling back. I wipe away my tears, and he has a small smile on his lips.

"There's one more thing," he says mischievously. "I've bought this private plane. It's yours to use whenever you want, wherever you want to go. Here's the paperwork."

He hands me the envelope.

Opening it, I find the documents for the private plane he mentioned, along with a set of keys.

My gaze flicks from the papers to him, a myriad of unspoken questions reflecting in my eyes.

"I don't understand," I whisper, looking up at him in shock. "Why would you do this?"

Vlad nods, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Because I care for you, Sofia, more than you know. I want you to have the freedom to go wherever your heart desires, with no restrictions. I want you to be free to choose your own path. I never want you to feel trapped or controlled."

I'm taken aback by his gesture, by the thoughtfulness behind it. It's not something I expected from him, not after everything that has transpired between us. And yet, here he is, offering me not just protection but also a sense of liberation.

The realization hits me like a tidal wave. All this time, I've been so focused on seeing him as the enemy, on keeping my walls up, that I've completely missed what was right in front of me. Vlad cares. He actually cares.

I feel the ice around my heart starting to melt, replaced by a warmth I haven't allowed myself to feel for a man ever. "Vlad, I..." I trail off, not quite sure how to express the conflicting emotions swirling inside me.

He doesn't push; he just stands there patiently, waiting for me to process everything. And in that moment, I see him not as the man working against me, but as a man who's laid his heart bare before me.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice barely audible as if afraid that speaking too loudly would shatter this fragile moment we're sharing.

I take a step closer to Vlad, my voice softening as I meet his gaze. "I... I appreciate everything you've done. For me, for my family, for my desire to dismantle the Crimson Crew." My heart leaps at the understanding that this could, in fact, be the fresh start Vlad so desires. I so desire. "Maybe we can... move forward together?"

Vlad's eyes light up, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "I'd like that very much, Sofia."

The air between us shifts, charged with a new energy. I find myself drawn to him, my heart racing as I close the distance. "I've been so wrong about you," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper.

He reaches out, his hand hovering near my cheek, asking permission. I nod slightly, and his warm palm cups my face. "We both made assumptions," he murmurs. "But now we have a chance to start over."

I lean into his touch, surprised by how natural it feels. Our eyes lock, and I see our life flashing by in his eyes: a future, a real, solid future together. It's as if I'm truly seeing Vlad for the first time—as someone I owe my loyalty to.

"I never thought I'd say this," I breathe, a hint of my usual sass returning, "but I'm glad I was wrong about you, Vlad."

His thumb caresses my cheek, sending shivers down my spine. "And I'm grateful for the chance to prove myself to you, my love."

In this moment, with the walls between us crumbling, I realize that what we have is deeper than mere attraction. It's steeped in trust and security I never expected to find.

I take a step back, breaking the intensity of the moment with a playful smirk. "Well, Mr. Bratva, if we're going to do this..." I gesture between us, "I have one condition."

Vlad's eyebrow quirks up, curiosity dancing in his eyes. "Oh? And what might that be, Crimson?"

I roll my eyes at the novel pet name but can't suppress the smile tugging at my lips. "Our next date? I choose the location."

"Is that so?" Vlad's lips twitch with amusement.

"Mhmm," I nod, crossing my arms. "And it won't be anything like..." I wave my hand at our opulent surroundings, "all this. No private jets, no five-star restaurants. I'm thinking more along the lines of a greasy spoon diner or maybe a run-down

arcade."

Vlad's rich laughter fills the room. "You drive a hard bargain, Sofia. But I accept."

"Good," I say, unable to keep the warmth from my voice. "Because I have a feeling you could use a little less caviar and a little more pizza in your life."

He reaches for my hand, intertwining our fingers. "As long as I'm with you, Crimson, I'll go anywhere."

I feel a blush creeping up my neck and quickly quip, "Even if it means trading in your designer suit for jeans and a t-shirt?"

"For you? I'd wear a clown costume if it made you happy."

I can't help but laugh at the mental image, and take his hand in mine. "Now that, I'd pay to see."

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"Well," I say, clearing my throat, "I have to admit, you've outdone yourself. This is... quite the surprise."

"Good surprise, I hope?" There's a touch of vulnerability in her question that catches me off guard.

I reach out, gently squeezing her shoulder. "The very best kind. Thank you, Sofia."

I can't help but tease Sofia as we enter our lavish villa, its floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panoramic view of the turquoise lagoon. "And here I thought you didn't like fancy."

Sofia arches an eyebrow, her green eyes glinting with amusement. "Oh? I like fancy, as long as it's not a charade. The air kisses, whose diamond is bigger than the next, all that bullshit, you know?"

I chuckle, dropping our bags. "I didn't peg you for the anti-establishment, Sof."

"Well," she retorts, a smirk playing on her lips, "even ice queens need to thaw occasionally and let loose away from prying eyes. Don't worry, I'll try not to let it go to my head."

I find myself grinning from ear to ear. "I'll believe it when I see it."

As we settle in, a realization dawns on me. Here, thousands of miles from New York,

from the Bratva, from all our responsibilities, we're just... us. No one knows who we are. No expectations, no reputations to uphold.

And finally, I understand why she chose this place. No one to recognize us here, no duties to fulfil. We could take a break from being us and just be together.

Maybe this trip will reveal more surprises than just the destination.

The next few days become a blur of sun-soaked memories. I find myself loosening up in ways I never have before, surprised by how easily Sofia and I fall into a rhythm together.

One evening, we're swaying to the beat of a live band on the beach. Sofia's body moves gracefully against mine, her green eyes sparkling in the soft glow of tiki torches. I'm mesmerized by the way the sea breeze plays with her light blonde hair.

"You're not half bad at this," I tease, spinning her around.

She raises an eyebrow. "Careful, Vlad. That almost sounded like a compliment."

The following afternoon finds us snorkeling in crystal-clear waters. Sofia's lithe form glides effortlessly through the water, and I can't help but admire her grace. When we surface, she's grinning, a rare sight that takes my breath away more than the dive did.

"Did you see that sea turtle?" she asks, excitement coloring her usually cool tone.

I nod, captivated more by her genuine smile than any marine life.

Later, as we lounge by the pool, Sofia suddenly sits up, a mischievous glint in her

eye.

"I have an idea," she says, leaning closer. "How about we play a little game tonight?"

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. "What kind of game?"

"Let's pretend to be strangers," she suggests. "We'll dress up, use fake names, meet at the bar. Hit each other up."

The idea is absurd yet oddly appealing. "You want to roleplay as strangers? In disguise?"

Sofia nods, her eyes dancing with anticipation. "Why not? We're already pretending to be normal people on vacation. Might as well take it a step further and go back to that night we first got together."

I consider it for a moment. The thought of Sofia in disguise, pretending not to know me, sends an unexpected thrill through me. It reminds me of back when I took her to the closet, the thrill of it still seeps through me. "Alright," I agree, surprised by my own eagerness. "Let's do it."

Her smile widens, and I feel a flutter in my chest. "Perfect. Meet me at the Oceanview Bar at nine. And Vlad?" She leans in close, her breath tickling my ear. "Don't be late."

As she saunters away, I'm left wondering what I've gotten myself into—and why I'm so excited about it.

I stand in front of the mirror, adjusting the blond wig on my head. It feels strange to

see a different man staring back at me. The blue contact lenses completely transform my usually dark gaze. I've swapped my usual attire for a garish Hawaiian shirt and khaki shorts—the perfect tourist disguise.

"This is ridiculous," I mutter to myself, but I can't help the smirk tugging at my lips.

I hear Sofia's laughter from the bathroom. "That's the point, Darling. Now, no peeking!"

The anticipation builds as I wait, curious to see her transformation. When she finally emerges, my breath catches. She's donned a short brunette bob, her green eyes now a deep brown. A slinky red dress hugs her curves, making her almost unrecognizable.

"Well?" she asks, twirling slowly. "Will I pass as a stranger?"

I clear my throat, suddenly dry. "Definitely. You look... different."

She rolls her eyes, but I catch the pleased smile she tries to hide. "Such a way with words, Vlad. Now remember, we don't know each other. I'm Natasha, the bored housewife on vacation."

"And I'm... Adam," I decide, cringing at the name. "Tourist from New York."

Sofia—no, Natasha—grins. "Perfect. Let the game begin."

At the bar, I settle onto a stool, ordering a vodka neat. My eyes scan the room, searching for her. When she enters, the entire atmosphere shifts. She moves with a confidence that draws every eye in the room.

I watch as she approaches, her hips swaying. She takes the seat next to me, flashing a coy smile.

"This seat taken?" she purrs, her voice pitched lower than usual.

I shake my head, playing along. "Not at all. Can I buy you a drink... miss?"

"Natasha," she offers, extending her hand. "And I'd love a martini, dirty."

As I order her drink, I lean closer. "I'm Adam. What brings a beautiful woman like you here alone?"

She sighs dramatically. "Oh, you know how it is. My husband's always working, and I needed to get away. And you?"

I try really not to chuckle at the dramatic hand motion that comes with her exasperation. But, I let out a snort.

I see her throw a scathing look my way and suddenly feel so damn free. So damn at ease. This is fun.

"Just a man on vacation, looking for adventure," I pick up the conversation, surprised by how easily the lies flow.

Natasha leans in, her fingers brushing my arm. "Well, Adam, you might just be in luck. I'm in the mood for some... excitement tonight."

The air between us crackles with tension. I'm torn between staying in character and pulling her close, kissing those tempting lips. Instead, I play it cool.

"Is that so?" I murmur, letting my gaze linger on her mouth. "What kind of excitement did you have in mind?"

The tension between us builds as she leans in closer, her breath hot against my ear.

"Why don't I show you?" she whispers, her hand sliding up my thigh.

My heart races, the line between our roles and reality blurring. I turn to face her, our lips mere inches apart. "Careful what you wish for," I growl, my voice low and husky.

She bites her lip, green eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm not afraid of a little danger."

Unable to resist any longer, I cup her face in my hands and crush my lips against hers. The kiss is electric, passionate, and filled with an hour of pent-up desire. Her lips part, inviting me deeper, and I lose myself in her taste.

When we finally break apart, breathless, I see the same fire burning in her eyes that I feel coursing through my veins. Without a word, she nods. I stand and offer her my hand.

She takes my hand, intertwining our fingers. "Lead the way, Adam," she purrs, a hint of her usual sass returning.

We hurry through the bar, barely containing our urgency. As soon as we're out of sight, I pull her close, claiming her lips once more. We stumble toward our room, hands roaming, kisses heated and desperate.

"God, Sofia," I groan against her neck, forgetting our aliases in my passion.

She laughs breathlessly. "Shh, it's Natasha, remember?"

I grin, nipping at her earlobe. "Right now, I don't care what name you're using. I just need you."

I fumble with the keycard, barely able to focus as Sofia trails kisses along my jawline. The moment we're inside, I kick the door shut with a resounding bang. In one fluid motion, I slam Sofia against the wall, pinning her there with my body, her hands raised above her head. I can't help but let my gaze roam over her body, her breasts spilling out from her low-cut dress.

"You've been driving me crazy all night," I growl, capturing her lips in an approving kiss.

She matches my intensity, pulling her hands away from my clutch, her fingers tangling in my hair. "Good," she breathes against my mouth. "That was the plan."

I pull back slightly, taking in her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes. Even now, there's a challenge in her gaze that sets me on fire. She licks her lips, and her eyes are drawn down toward my cock.

A thrill goes down my spine at seeing how badly she wants this... me.

"You move fast, Natasha," I say, my hands unable to resist roaming her body, etching her curves into memory.

She tugs at my shirt impatiently. "Less talking, more undressing, Adam."

I chuckle. "So demanding. What happened to that icy exterior, hmm?"

Sofia's eyes flash with a mix of desire and vulnerability. "You melted it," she admits softly.

My heart swells at her words. I pause, cupping her face gently. "You're incredible, you know that?"

For a moment, her sassy facade drops completely. "So are you," she whispers, pulling me for a tender kiss.

In the heat of the moment, I grab her ass, lifting her up against the wall. Her legs instinctively wrap around my waist, pulling me closer. I kiss her furiously, pouring all my pent-up desire into it. She kisses me back like a fierce tigress.

"Hold on tight," I murmur, now carrying her toward the bed.

Sofia's laugh turns into a gasp as I squeeze her ass. "Always so bossy," she teases, but her breathless tone betrays her arousal.

I slam Sofia onto the bed, her golden hair fanning out across the pillows. My heart races as I stand beside the bed, hovering over her, my fingers fumbling with the buttons of my shirt in my haste.

Sofia gets on her knees and meets me near the edge of the bed. She's a vision, all creamy skin and gentle curves as she shimmies out of her dress. At last, she's there before me, in nothing but a gorgeous half-cupped black lace bra and matching black thong.

My cock throbs. I reach for my belt, but I'm so enamored by the dizzying sight of her that I'm slower than she'd like.

"Let me," Sofia purrs, her nimble fingers making quick work of my belt, throwing it across the room. I growl, impatient, and rip my undershirt off over my head. Sofia's eyes widen, a pleased smirk playing on her lips. "Eager, are we?"

"You have no idea," I rasp, drinking in the sight of her. She then proceeds to slide down my shorts, and finally, her hands linger on the elastic of my boxers for a brief second before she whips me free. I watch as she gets on her knees on the bed, looking

up at me.

The next thing I know, she has my cock in her hand. She begins to stroke me, her eyes glued to mine, a pure temptress if I ever saw one. I tangle my fingers in her hair, feeling the strands slip through my grip. She licks her lips while her gaze flicks between my cock and eyes, begging for permission.

"You want it?" I ask gruffly, no longer in control.

"Mm-hmm," she nods. She parts her mouth and I jam my cock in her mouth, feeling the warmth envelop me. I groan as she swirls her tongue around it, getting me even harder for her. Moving my hips in time with her, I begin to get turned on even more.

My hands roam her body, tracing the dip of her waist and the swell of her breasts. "Fuck, Sofia. You're so sexy," I murmur, my voice husky with desire.

She arches into my touch, a soft moan escaping her as she takes me deeper into her throat, my tip hitting the back of it. "Fuck," I growl, in sheer disbelief for how good this is.

Too good not to be shared.

In an instant, I weave my hands through her hair and pull her away from me. She looks up, confused.

I take her by the hand and bring her to a sitting position. Kneeling between her thighs, I grab one of her hands and guide it to my cock. Her eyes flash with playful surprise as she gets the hint, stroking me firmly while looking straight into my eyes.

With my free hand, I start undoing the little tie of her black lace bra, watching as it comes undone slowly, exposing her beautiful, full breasts, which rise and fall rapidly,

out of breath and anticipation, her nipples taut. I gently feel their softness, their warmth, before trailing my fingers lower, teasing her most sensitive spots. "Like this?" I ask, circling her clit with my thumb.

Sofia gasps, her hips bucking. "Yes, just like that," she breathes.

As I continue my ministrations, her hand wraps around my length, stroking firmly. The dual sensation of pleasuring her while she touches me is almost overwhelming.

"Christ, Sofia," I groan, my head falling forward onto her shoulder. "You're driving me crazy."

She chuckles, a sound of pure satisfaction. "Good. That's exactly where I want you."

I can't wait any longer. She's dripping on my fingers, ready for more.

"Stop," I growl desperately, and she doesn't need to be asked twice. She pushes herself flat on the bed, and I jump on top of her, my body hovering above.

I position myself between Sofia's thighs, the tip of my cock brushing against her wet entrance.

Sofia's response is to wrap her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. "Get on with it, will you," she breathes.

With a groan, I push into her, slowly at first, savoring the feeling of her tight heat enveloping me. Sofia's breath hitches, her nails digging into my shoulders.

"You feel incredible," I murmur, starting to move in a steady rhythm.

Sofia meets me thrust for thrust, her body arching beneath mine. "Harder," she

demands, her voice husky with desire.

I oblige, my hips slamming into her with unyielding force. We're no longer gentle lovers but ravenous animals clawing for release.

"God, Vlad!" Sofia cries out, her fingers digging into my back as if she could pull me deeper inside her. "Faster!"

I oblige, picking up the pace, driving into her with increasing intensity. The room fills with the sounds of our passion—skin against skin, breathless moans, and creaking beds.

I see, feel, sense, and hear her with every fiber of my being. Her skin, so soft to the touch. Her smell, so delicate. Her mewls and whimpers... so damn sexy.

Just as I'm about to lose myself completely, Sofia surprises me. With a graceful move, she flips us over, straddling my hips. The sudden shift leaves me breathless, staring up at her in awe.

"My turn," she purrs, a mischievous glint in her eye as she takes my cock in her hand, gliding it into her in one swell swoop.

I'm transfixed by the sight of her above me—her blonde hair cascading down her back, her lithe body moving with fluid grace, her breasts carved to delight. My hands find her hips, guiding her movements, but she's clearly in control now.

"God, Sofia," I groan, completely entranced by her beauty and the pleasure she's giving me. "You're amazing."

She rides my cock up and down. Her hips whirl, her muscles flexing in a display of sheer power and control. My hands grip her tight ass, feeling her tease me further and

further with every thrust. I can't take this anymore.

I reach down to touch her where we're connected, feeling the wetness spread out. I touch her there, rubbing and teasing her clit, and she shivers in response.

And then, she slides off, ramming herself down my cock.

“Fuck,” I scream, on the edge of fulfilling my primal instinct.

"Like that?" she breathes. Her face is flushed a deep red; her breaths are fast and shallow.

She does it again, my temptress.

I nod.

Each time she impales herself on me, I feel like I'm the luckiest man alive.

She begins to circle my cock in her, driving me absolutely mad. Faster and faster she goes, her pace erratic and wild. The sensations are overwhelming, my hold on her hips the only thing grounding me in this whirlwind of sensation.

I can feel the heat building inside me as her movements become more erratic. "Sofia," I groan, desperate for release. "I'm going to—"

"Vlad," she moans at the same time, her voice breaking as her climax approaches. "I—"

"Come with me," she hisses, her eyes locked on mine. "Now!"

I close my eyes, feeling my own release building, our bodies moving in perfect sync.

I feel her pussy begin to convulse, and her mewls grow louder.

With a final push, she slides down to the root of my cock and holds herself still, waiting for me to join her. I look into her green eyes and give one last thrust into her depths.

"Sofia," I growl out her name like a prayer, and then it's over. With a roar, I spill deep inside her, shuddering with the force of my orgasm.

Sofia digs her nails into my chest, and I can feel her tighten in waves around my throbbing cock. Slowly, our breathing returns to normal.

Gently, she lifts off me. I pull her into my arms, breathless and spent, the sweat glimmering off both our bodies.

For a moment, we lie there in silence, the air thick with the aftermath of our passion. I turn my head to look at her, taking in her flushed cheeks and tousled hair.

"That was..." I trail off, searching for the right word.

Sofia turns to face me, a rare smile playing on her lips. "Unexpected?"

I chuckle, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her face. "Incredible," I correct her.

"Just don't tell my husband, Adam." She gives me a wink.

"I wouldn't dare, Natasha," I laugh, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

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I step into the grandiose hotel lobby, my eyes widening at the opulence surrounding this place—crystal chandeliers, marble floors, and the soft hum of excitement in the air. Vlad's hand rests on the small of my back, guiding me forward.

"Welcome to my world, Sofia," he murmurs, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down my spine.

I arch an eyebrow, fighting the urge to lean into his touch. "Your world? I thought I was already living in it."

Vlad's lips quirk into a half-smile. "This is different. I want you to be a part of everything—no secrets, no barriers."

The statement catches me off guard. My brothers had always kept me at arm's length from their business dealings, treating me like a delicate flower that needed protection. But Vlad... he sees me differently.

And that means the world to me. Finally, I feel as though someone understands what it is I yearn for in this life. A chance to learn something new, to prove myself.

As we weave through the bustling lobby, I notice how people part like the Red Sea before Vlad. Hushed whispers and respectful nods follow in our wake. It's both thrilling and intimidating.

"So, are you going to give me the grand tour?" I ask, injecting a hint of sass into my voice to mask my genuine curiosity.

Vlad's eyes gleam with amusement. "Eager, are we? Very well, Myshka . What would you like to know?"

I bite my lip, considering. "How about we start with the basics? Like how this glitzy establishment fits into your... shall we say, less than legal activities?"

He leans in close, his breath warm against my ear as he speaks in a hushed tone. "The hotel and casino serve as fronts for money laundering. It's a complex operation. We bring in the cash we need to convert into white and show it as losses by patrons in the books. We can slide it into our accounts, no questions asked."

I nod, absorbing the information, thrilled to finally be privy to these secrets.

"And what other businesses do we have?" I ask, my voice a mix of determination and curiosity.

"Real estate. We buy the most luxurious properties, part cash, part white. Then, we leverage it to get loans, all white. That's how we build legitimate businesses. We've also got our diamond mines and the jewelry stores, which are a new acquisition. Apart from that..."

I listen intently, a small smile on my lips. This whole world is like a sparkling gem waiting to be discovered. As we continue our tour, I find myself oddly at ease in this world. It's a far cry from the sheltered life my brothers had crafted for me, and yet... it feels right. Like I'm finally where I belong.

We step onto the casino floor, and I'm immediately engulfed by a cacophony of sounds—the melodic chiming of slot machines, the excited chatter of patrons, and the constant shuffle of cards. The air is thick with anticipation and the faint scent of expensive cologne.

Vlad's hand remains steady on my lower back as he leans in close. "Pay attention, Sofia. This is where the real magic happens."

I arch an eyebrow. "Magic? I didn't take you for the superstitious type, Vlad."

He chuckles a low rumble that sends a shiver down my spine. "The only luck here is the one we create, Myshka ."

As we weave through the maze of gaming tables, Vlad points out key areas. "The high-roller room," he murmurs, nodding toward a secluded area. "That's where the big fish come to play... and where we reel them in."

I absorb every detail, my mind racing with possibilities. "And the cage?" I ask, eyeing the heavily guarded area where stacks of chips and cash are visible.

"The heart of our operation," Vlad confirms. "Every transaction passes through there."

We move to a quieter corner, where a group of well-dressed individuals awaits us. Vlad's posture straightens imperceptibly. "Sofia, meet some of our most trusted employees."

I paste on my most charming smile, extending my hand to each in turn. "A pleasure," I say, my tone warm but measured. I can feel Vlad's eyes on me, gauging my reaction.

A balding man in an expensive suit steps forward. "Mrs. Zolotov, we've heard so much about you. It's an honor to finally meet the woman who's captured our boss's heart."

I laugh, the sound light and practiced. "Oh, I wouldn't say captured. Perhaps...

negotiated a temporary ceasefire?"

The group chuckles, and I catch a glimpse of something that might be pride in Vlad's eyes. Good. Let him see I'm more than just a pretty face.

As the introductions continue, I find myself slipping easily into the role of the boss's wife.

As we move away from the group, Vlad's demeanor shifts. His jaw tightens, eyes narrowing as he spots a man in a crisp suit approaching us. I recognize him as one of the managers we met earlier.

"Ivanof," Vlad's voice cuts through the air like a knife. "I hear there was an issue with last night's shipment."

I watch, fascinated, as the manager's face pales. "Mr. Zolotov, I can explain—"

"Save it," Vlad interrupts, his tone ice-cold. "You had one job. One. And you failed spectacularly."

I feel a shiver run down my spine. This is a side of Vlad I haven't seen before—ruthless, uncompromising. It should frighten me, but instead, I find myself... intrigued.

"It won't happen again, Sir," Ivanof stammers.

"You're right, it won't," Vlad agrees. "Because if it does, you'll be looking for a new job. Understood?"

The manager nods frantically before scurrying away. I arch an eyebrow at Vlad. "Harsh," I comment, trying to keep my voice neutral.

He turns to me, his expression softening slightly. "Sometimes, it's necessary. In this business, Sofia, weakness can be fatal."

I nod, impressed by his decisiveness. It's a quality I've always admired, even if I've rarely seen it in action.

As we continue our tour, we pass a security checkpoint. Vlad pauses, his attention caught by one of the guards.

"Oleg," he calls out. "How's your daughter doing? She was sick last week, wasn't she?"

The guard's face lights up with surprise and gratitude. "Much better, Sir. Thank you for asking. The medicine you sent over really helped."

I blink, taken aback by this sudden display of kindness. Vlad's eyes are warm, showing genuine concern as he listens to Oleg's update on his family.

"I'm glad to hear it," Vlad says sincerely. "If you need anything else, don't hesitate to ask."

As we walk away, I can't help but study Vlad's profile. "That was... unexpected," I murmur.

He glances at me, a small smile playing on his lips. "What? Did you think I was all teeth and claws, Sofia?"

I shrug, trying to maintain my cool facade. "Can you blame me after how I saw you make that manager tremble?"

Vlad chuckles, the sound low and rich.

Just then, we approach a young waiter carefully balancing a tray of champagne flutes. Vlad's face breaks into a rare, genuine smile. "My friend! I heard the good news. Congratulations on becoming a father."

The waiter's eyes light up, his posture straightening with pride. "Thank you, Sir. It's been quite the adventure already."

I find myself oddly moved by the exchange. "A boy or a girl?" I ask, surprising even myself with my interest.

He beams at me. "A little girl, Ma'am. We named her Anya."

"Anya," I repeat, tasting the name on my tongue. "That's beautiful. I'm sure she'll grow up to be as hardworking as her father."

Vlad's hand finds the small of my back, a warm, steady presence. "And as kind as her mother, I hope," he adds, his voice low and approving.

As we move away, leaving behind a glowing waiter, Vlad leans in close. "That was nicely done, Sofia. You have a talent for this."

I arch an eyebrow, my voice dripping with sarcasm. "For what? Basic human interaction?"

He chuckles, the sound rumbling through me. "For making people feel valued."

I feel a warmth spreading through me, joy at making him feel proud.

As we approach the security control room, a thought strikes me. I pause, my eyes scanning the monitors lining the walls.

"You know," I say, my voice carefully neutral, "you could improve efficiency by reconfiguring these camera angles. There's significant overlap in some areas, leaving others vulnerable."

Vlad turns to me, surprise flickering across his face. "Oh?" he prompts, his tone curious.

I nod, pointing to specific screens. "See here and here? Adjust these, and you'd have a clearer view of the back entrance without compromising coverage of the main floor."

For a moment, Vlad is silent. Then, to my astonishment, a rare smile breaks across his face. "Impressive, Sof. I'll have the team implement that immediately."

I shrug, trying to suppress the warmth blooming in my chest at his approval. "Just an observation."

Suddenly, a commotion erupts on one of the screens. A man at the blackjack table is shouting, his face red with anger. Vlad's demeanor shifts instantly, his body tensing as he barks orders into his earpiece.

"Potential situation at table seven. Security, converge but do not engage until my signal."

I watch, mesmerized, as Vlad strides purposefully toward the disturbance. His presence alone seems to calm the chaos, the angry man faltering as Vlad approaches.

"Sir." Vlad's voice is low, authoritative. "Is there a problem we can assist you with?"

The man sputters, gesturing wildly. "This dealer... he's cheating! I know it!"

I narrow my eyes, assessing the situation. "Vlad," I murmur, stepping closer. "Look at

his left hand. He's palming something."

Vlad's gaze flicks to me, then back to the man. Without missing a beat, he nods to his security team. "Check his sleeves and pockets. Thoroughly."

As they pat down the irate customer, I can't help but feel a thrill of satisfaction. Vlad leans in, his breath warm against my ear. "Sharp eyes, Sofia."

I allow myself a small smirk. "Someone has to give you a run for their money, don't they?"

Soon after, we sit at the bar, sipping on champagne. Vlad turns to me, "Sofia, we've covered a lot of ground tonight. What are your thoughts on the operation?"

His voice is soft, hesitant, as though he's seeking something. Approval, maybe? It humbles me to see he cares what I think.

I take a moment, considering my words carefully. My brothers always kept me at arm's length from their business, but Vlad's openness ignites a spark of excitement within me.

"It's impressive," I say, my voice steady and confident. "The way you've integrated legitimate business with... other ventures. But I noticed a few areas where efficiency could be improved."

Vlad raises an eyebrow, intrigued. "Go on."

"Your bartenders," I explain, gesturing toward the busy bar. "They're wasting time with unnecessary movements. A reorganization of their workspace could reduce

manpower by one per station."

A ghost of a smile plays on Vlad's lips. "Anything else?"

I straighten my shoulders, meeting his gaze. "The high-roller room. It's too isolated. You're missing opportunities to entice more players. Perhaps a more visible location, with one-way glass for privacy?"

Vlad nods slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. "Perceptive. I'll have my team look into both suggestions."

We fall into a comfortable silence, moving to stand side by side overlooking the bustling casino floor. The cacophony of slot machines and excited chatter fills the air, but I find myself focused on Vlad's steady presence beside me.

For the first time in years, I feel a sense of purpose washing over me. Here, in this world of glitz and shadow, I belong. Not as a pretty ornament or a bargaining chip, but as a partner. An equal.

I glance at Vlad, catching him watching me with an unreadable expression. "What?" I ask, curious to see what's on his mind.

He shakes his head, a rare, genuine smile gracing his features. "Nothing, really. I'm just thinking that perhaps this our teamwork functions better than either of us anticipated."

I feel a warmth bloom in my chest, unfamiliar yet not unwelcome. "Don't get ahead of yourself," I retort, but there's no real bite to my words. "We still have a long way to go."

Vlad chuckles, the sound low and rich. "Indeed we do, Sofia. Indeed we do."

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The cool night air hits us as Sofia and I step out of the casino's glittering entrance. Her skin glows under the light, and there is not a single strand of hair out of place on her head. I can't help but admire how she carries herself with such grace and poise.

"Did you enjoy yourself tonight?" I ask, guiding her toward our waiting car with a light touch on her lower back.

Sofia turns those piercing green eyes on me, a hint of a smile playing at her lips. "Very much so," she replies, her voice cool and composed as always. "Though I must say, some of your associates could use lessons in subtlety."

I chuckle, remembering how they pulled our legs about marriage, opening the car door for her. "You handled them beautifully. I'm proud of you, Sofia. You fit right in."

As we settle into the plush leather backseat, I catch a glimpse of her raised eyebrow. "Did you expect anything less, Vlad?" she quips, smoothing her dress. "I am an Orlov, after all."

"Indeed you are," I murmur, unable to keep the admiration from my voice. This woman continues to surprise me at every turn.

The car pulls away from the curb, the lights of the casino fading behind us. I'm just starting to relax when my phone buzzes insistently in my pocket. Frowning, I fish it out, noting the late hour.

"Speak," I answer, my tone clipped.

As I listen to the frantic voice on the other end, I feel my expression darken. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Sofia watching me intently, her earlier playfulness replaced by keen observation.

"I understand. We're on our way," I growl into the phone, ending the call with more force than necessary.

"Trouble?" Sofia asks, her voice deceptively casual.

I meet her gaze, seeing the sharp intelligence there. Despite my instinct to shield her, I know she deserves the truth. "There's been an incident at the diamond factory," I explain, already feeling the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders.

"What sort of incident?" she asks immediately.

"Some machinery malfunctioned. A few men are hurt, and the morale is low. People are afraid to work."

"Oh no." She clutches her heart, worry crossing her eyes. "Are the men alright?"

"I'm not sure. It seems we have a busy night ahead of us. Abram's out of town, but I should gather Denis and Mark immediately." I pause, considering my next words carefully. "You should return to the mansion. It'll be late—"

"I'm coming with you," Sofia interrupts, her green eyes flashing with determination. The icy mask she often wears slips into place, but there's a fire behind it now.

"Sofia," I begin, ready to argue, but she cuts me off again.

"No, Vlad. If I'm to be your wife, I need to understand every aspect of this life. Including the troubles we might have to deal with. After all, you might not always be

around." Her chin lifts defiantly, and I feel a grudging admiration for her strength.

I weigh the risks in my mind, studying her resolute expression. The smart move would be to keep her safe, away from whatever chaos awaits us. And yet...

"You're right," I concede, surprised by my own words. "But you stay close to me at all times, understood?"

A hint of triumph flickers in Sofia's eyes. "Of course, Darling," she says, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "I wouldn't dream of wandering off in a potentially explosive situation."

I can't help but chuckle despite the gravity of the situation. "Your enthusiasm for danger is concerning, Crimson."

Sofia's lips quirk into a small smile. "One of us has to keep things interesting."

As we speed toward the factory, I find myself grateful for her presence. Sofia Orlov may be a complication in my life, but she's quickly becoming one I can't imagine being without.

We reach the factory and exit the car. Her face is a mask of cool determination, but I catch the slight tremble in her hands as she smooths her dress.

"First time at a crisis scene?" I ask, my voice gruff.

Sofia's green eyes flick to me, a hint of defiance in them. "I've handled my share of family emergencies, Vlad. This is just... a different scale."

I nod, impressed by her composure. "Stay close when we enter. Things might be chaotic."

"I'm not a child," she retorts swiftly.

When we walk in through the doors, the scene that greets us is one of chaos. Two men lie on the floor, clutching their injured hands, blood pooling around them. Workers in various stages of panic and distress mill around while the foreman tries to maintain some semblance of order. The screeching of machinery adds to the cacophony, creating an atmosphere of urgency and tension.

Sofia's eyes widen at the sight, her initial composure wavering for a moment before she squares her shoulders. I see her take a deep breath, steeling herself for what lies ahead.

"Vlad, we need to help them," she says firmly. Before I can tell her another word, she screams at the foreman. "Call the ambulance!"

I watch, impressed, as Sofia takes charge in a surprising display of leadership. Her voice cuts through the chaos like a knife as she directs workers to give the injured men some space. She asks if anyone has any experience with first aid treatment.

A man raises his hand.

"Come with me." She curls her finger at him and rushes toward the injured men. She quickly assesses their injuries, her hands gentle but sure as she starts first aid under the guidance of the helper.

As she works, her focus is unwavering, and her movements are efficient and practiced. The injured men begin to calm under her care, their pained cries turning into soft murmurs of gratitude. The workers around us start to relax as well, reassured

by Sofia's steady presence.

I move closer to Sofia, standing beside her as she finishes bandaging one of the men's hands. She looks up at me fiercely. "He doesn't have insurance," she tells me.

"Don't worry," I say, without skipping a beat. "We'll cover it."

She nods in gratitude and reaffirms the employee, who sighs with relief.

"Nikita!" I bark, spotting my foreman and walking in his direction. Sofia's handling the injured men. Because of her help, I can focus on what happened here tonight. "Report."

The stocky man hurries over to meet me halfway, sweat beading on his brow. "Boss, the polishing and faceting machine malfunctioned. The automatic safety lever didn't go off, and the machine wasn't secured well."

I nod grimly at his explanation, feeling the weight of responsibility settling heavy on my shoulders. The workers' safety is my concern, and this incident was a glaring failure in our protocols.

"We need a thorough investigation into the equipment," I tell him, tone firm. "This can't happen again and no one is to use the machines until the auditors come in."

"Noted, Boss," he tells me.

"And the ambulance is on the way?"

He opens his phone. "Another ten minutes or so."

"Good," I nod. "Get the men to slowly start their way home. There's no point for

them to mill around.”

With that, I turn back to Sofia. She looks up inquiringly from her spot on the floor, where she sits holding the victim’s good hand. I’m about to tell her that the ambulance will be here soon when a deafening crash echoes through the factory. Heads whip around, searching for the source. Then I see it—thick, black smoke billowing from the eastern wing.

"Fire!" someone shouts.

My heart leaps into my throat. "Sofia!" I call out, already moving toward her. The acrid smell of burning plastic fills the air.

As chaos erupts around us, my only thought is getting her to safety. I reach for her arm, but she's already moving—not toward the exit, but deeper into the factory.

"There are still people inside!" she shouts over her shoulder at me in the midst of the growing panic. “I can’t carry them out, but you can with the help of the others. I’m going to go warn the rest. I swear I’ll be out in five minutes.”

“Sofia, no! Wait!” I scream, but she doesn’t hear me.

I curse under my breath, torn between admiration and frustration. This woman will be the death of me. I hate to see her run into the danger.

I stay behind for just under a minute to order the evacuation of the injured. And then, I head in the direction Sofia went to find her and make sure she gets out.

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The acrid stench of smoke assaults my nostrils as I burst through the factory doors of the eastern wing, my eyes watering from the thick haze. Flames dance along the walls, casting eerie shadows across panicked faces. I steel myself, pushing aside the fear threatening to overwhelm me.

"Everyone, listen up!" I shout, my voice cutting through the chaos. "Head for the nearest exit immediately. Stay low and move quickly!"

Workers scramble around me, their eyes wide with terror. I grab the arm of a young woman frozen in place, her face ashen.

"Move, now," I command, my tone leaving no room for argument. She nods shakily and stumbles toward the door.

The heat presses against my skin, suffocating in its intensity. Sweat trickles down my spine, but I force myself to remain focused. These people need a leader, and I'll be damned if I let them down.

"This way!" I call out, gesturing toward the emergency exit. "Single file, don't push!"

As I guide the stream of workers, I spot a man collapsed on the floor, clutching his leg. Without hesitation, I dart to his side.

"Can you walk?" I ask, my voice softening slightly as I assess his injury.

He grimaces, shaking his head. "I-I don't think so."

"Well, that's unfortunate," I mutter, my lips quirking into a wry smile. "Looks like you're getting a free ride out of here."

I loop his arm over my shoulder, grunting as I haul him to his feet. He's heavier than he looks, but I refuse to let it show.

"Hang on," I instruct, leading him toward the exit. "And try not to enjoy this too much. I don't make a habit of rescuing damsels in distress."

He lets out a pained chuckle as we stumble forward. "Wouldn't dream of it, Miss."

As I usher the last group toward safety, my eyes scan the smoky haze. Something's not right. The hairs on the back of my neck stand up, a warning I've learned never to ignore.

"Keep moving!" I bark at the stragglers, my voice sharp enough to cut through their panic. "The exit's right there. Don't make me carry you out myself."

They hurry past, coughing and stumbling. I turn, ready to follow, when a flicker of movement catches my eye. My heart lurches, recognition hitting me like a punch to the gut.

That silhouette. I'd know it anywhere.

"Impossible," I whisper.

He moves like a ghost through the smoke, familiar and yet so foreign. It can't be him. It shouldn't be him. But my instincts scream otherwise.

"Hey!" I shout, my voice carrying a hint of desperation I despise. "Stop right there! The exit is this way!"

He doesn't listen.

I hesitate, torn between getting the hell out of here and the burning need to follow him.

The smoke thickens, threatening to swallow his retreating form. I know I should let him go. But what if it's someone else who needs my help?

I spin around, my eyes locking on a senior employee. "Get these people out," I command, my tone leaving no room for argument. "I need to check something."

He nods, his weathered face etched with concern. "Be careful, Miss. This place could come down any minute."

"I always am," I retort, already moving. My long legs eat up the distance as I dart after the mysterious figure, my heart pounding a frantic rhythm against my ribs.

The factory floor is a maze of twisted metal and billowing smoke. I weave through it all, my eyes never leaving the shadowy form ahead. He moves with a practiced ease that only confirms my suspicions. This is no panicked worker. This is someone who knows exactly what they're doing.

"Stop!" I shout again, knowing it's futile. My voice is swallowed by the crackling flames and groaning metal.

My lungs burn with every breath, but I push on. I can't let him slip away. Not if it is who I think he is.

"He always did like to play games," I mutter under my breath, ducking under a fallen beam.

As I round a corner, I catch a glimpse of his face in profile. My suspicions crystallize into cold, hard certainty. It's him, alright.

Suddenly, the fire seems too convenient, too well-timed. My eyes narrow as suspicion coils in my gut.

The chase leads us out of the inferno, and I see him exit through a door. Without a thought, I follow, certain I can't let him get away.

I'm hit with a burst of fresh air and find myself in a narrow alley. The roar of the fire fades, replaced by the pounding of my heart and the echo of our footsteps. I corner him against a brick wall, my breath coming in sharp gasps.

"Nowhere left to run," I say, my voice cutting through the night air. "Now, what the hell are you doing here?"

He turns slowly, and I now realize my instincts were right all along. Alexei Volkov, the man I once deceived, is now standing before me with eyes that burn hotter than the fire we just escaped.

"Kira," he drawls, his voice a mix of venom and amusement. "Still playing the hero, I see. Or should I say, Sofia Orlov?"

I straighten my spine, refusing to be intimidated by his towering presence. "And you're still lurking in shadows, causing destruction. Some things never change."

Alexei's lips curl into a sneer. "Oh, but things have changed, haven't they? You're not the innocent little girl I remember."

"And you're not the powerful gangster you used to be," I retort, my green eyes narrowing. "Now, tell me why you're here."

He takes a step closer, and I fight the urge to back away. "Maybe I just wanted to see how you've grown up, Sofia."

I clench my fists. "Cut the act, Alexei. What do you want?"

Alexei's jaw clenches, and I can see the bitterness etched into every line of his face. "You want to know what I want, Sofia? I want back everything your husband took from me."

His words hit me like a physical blow, but I keep my expression neutral. "Is that why you're here? Revenge?"

"You have no idea what I've been through," he snarls, taking another step closer. I can smell smoke and cologne on him, a heady mix that makes my head spin. "Your husband's little power play cost me everything. I might have been low in the ranks, but the superiors were so damn pissed that they traced everything back to me. Now? Everything's gone. My status, my respect, my future."

I listen, my mind racing. Is he here to hurt Vladimir? To hurt me? I need to stay calm, to make sure he does nothing to Vladimir.

"That's quite the sob story, Alexei," I say, injecting as much ice into my tone as possible. "But you made your own choices. We did what we had to—to protect our family."

His eyes flash dangerously. "You have no idea what really happened, little girl."

I square my shoulders, lifting my chin defiantly. "Then enlighten me. Or are you just

here to whine about the past?"

Alexei's hand shoots out, gripping my arm. It's not painful, but it's firm enough to remind me of the danger I'm in. "Watch your mouth, Sofia. You're not as untouchable as you think."

I recall my training, ready to break his hold if necessary. But for now, I meet his gaze steadily. "Neither are you, Alexei. Times have changed. I'm not the same girl you knew."

His grip loosens slightly, and I see a flicker of something—curiosity?—in his eyes. "No," he murmurs, "you're certainly not."

The tension crackles between us, ready to rage war. I decide to make the first move, my fists flying with practiced precision. My right hook aims for his jaw, but Alexei's reflexes are lightning-fast. He dodges, catching my wrist mid-swing.

"Is that the best you've got, princess?" he taunts, a smirk playing on his lips.

I grit my teeth, twisting to break his hold. "I'm just getting started."

My knee comes up, aiming for his gut, but Alexei anticipates it. He sidesteps, using my momentum to spin me around. Suddenly, I'm pressed against the alley wall, his body uncomfortably close to mine.

"You've learned some new tricks," he murmurs, his breath hot on my ear. "But you're still green, Sofia."

I struggle against his grip, my heart pounding. "Let go of me, you asshole!"

"Now, now," Alexei chuckles darkly. "Is that any way to talk to an old friend?"

His strength is overwhelming, his experience evident in every calculated move. My confidence begins to waver as I realize how outmatched I am. The world starts to blur at the edges, whether from fear or lack of oxygen, I'm not sure.

"I'm... not your friend," I gasp out, still fighting against his iron grip.

Alexei leans in closer, his voice a low rumble. "No, you're not. But you could be so much more, Sofia. If you'd just stop fighting me."

My vision swims, but I refuse to give in. "Never," I hiss, even as my strength begins to fade.

"We'll see about that," Alexei whispers, his tone almost gentle now. "We have all the time in the world to change your mind."

As the world starts to dim around me, a part of me wonders if there's more to Alexei's vendetta than I initially thought. But I can't dwell on it now. I need to focus on staying conscious, on finding a way out of this mess.

With one last surge of desperation, I thrash against Alexei's unyielding hold, my nails clawing at his arms. "I won't... let you win," I snarl, but my voice comes out weaker than I intend.

"Oh, Sofia," Alexei murmurs, his lips brushing my ear. "You've already lost."

My vision blurs, black spots dancing at the edges. I feel myself slipping, my body growing heavy in his arms.

"No," I whisper, more to myself than to him. "I can't... I have to..."

"Shh," Alexei soothes, and he sweeps me into his arms. "Just let go, Kira."

As consciousness fades and I feel him carrying me away, my thoughts turn to my family—to the mission I swore to complete. I see my sister's face, hear my brother's laughter, see Vladimir chuckle at a joke I crack. Please, I think, my heart aching. Let them be safe.

The alley grows silent, the world fading to black. My last sensation is Alexei's arms around me. And then, I slip into darkness.

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The acrid smell of smoke stings my nostrils as I scan the chaos outside the factory. Workers mill about, their faces etched with fear and confusion. I force a reassuring smile, clasp shoulders and offering words of comfort.

"Everyone's safe; that's what matters," I say, my voice steady despite the worry gnawing at my gut.

My eyes dart to the exit of the eastern wing, where I last saw Sofia. I had followed her mere moments later but couldn't find her.

Someone told me they'd seen her leave. Where is she, though? Everyone else is accounted for. The thought pounds in my head with each rapid beat of my heart.

"Vlad!" Denis calls out, striding toward me with Mark close behind. "We heard about the fire and came as soon as we could."

But it's the expressions on their faces, grim and worried, that send a chill down my spine.

"What is it?" I demand, my hands clenching into fists at my sides.

Mark's eyes flick to the nearby workers before he lowers his voice. "I just got a call from our guys. The investigating team found traces of accelerant near the origin point in the eastern wing. This wasn't an accident."

My blood runs cold. "Intentional? You're certain?"

Denis nods, his jaw tight. "Multiple ignition points, strategically placed. Someone wanted this place to burn."

The implications hit me like a punch to the gut. If this was deliberate, then Sofia... My protective instincts surge, nearly overwhelming in their intensity.

"Sofia," I growl, my eyes scanning the crowd with renewed urgency. "Has anyone seen her?"

The silence that follows is deafening. My frustration mounts as worried glances are exchanged, but no answers are forthcoming.

I pivot, my mind racing as I survey the chaos around us. "Denis, Mark, gather the others. We need a command center, now."

They nod sharply and disperse without question. My leadership instincts kick in, pushing aside the gnawing fear for Sofia. I can't let emotion cloud my judgment, not when she needs me most.

Within minutes, my brothers and a handful of our most trusted men converge around me.

"Listen up," I bark, my voice cutting through the background noise of the firefighters in action. "We're setting up a field tent with full surveillance capabilities. I want eyes on every inch of this factory, past and present. Show every fireman a photo of Sofia. Make sure they're looking for her. Tell whoever is able to walk around outside, see if they can find her."

Yuri, always quick on the uptake, interjects, "I can have our tech team patch in remotely. We'll have access to all CCTV footage."

I nod approvingly. "Make it happen. The rest of you secure the perimeter. No one in or out without my say-so. The only exception is if someone is severely injured and leaving via an ambulance."

As the men disperse to their tasks, I can't help but think of Sofia. I suck in a deep breath, the pain feeling like a stab in the chest. I clench my fists and dig my nails into my skin. I need to not feel. The thought of her in danger...

"We'll find her, Vlad," Denis says quietly, reading the tension in my shoulders.

I meet his eyes, allowing a moment of vulnerability. "We have to. If anything's happened to her..."

The words hang unfinished, but the fierce protectiveness in my tone speaks volumes.

Half an hour later, the makeshift command center buzzes with tense energy. Fingers fly over keyboards, voices murmur urgently, and the glow of multiple screens bathes us all in an eerie blue light. I stand behind the tech team, my hands gripping the back of a chair so tightly my knuckles have gone white. Every second that ticks by without a sign of Sofia feels like an eternity.

"Anything?" I growl, my patience wearing thin.

One of the techs glances up at me, his face pale. "We're combing through the footage as fast as we can, Sir. The east wing cameras were damaged in the fire, but we're piecing together what we can from—"

"There!" Another tech interrupts, pointing at his screen. "I've got movement in the back alley, time stamp matches our window."

I lean in, my heart pounding. The grainy footage shows a familiar figure—Sofia, her

blonde hair unmistakable even in the poor quality of the video. She's moving with purpose, her tall, slim frame tense with determination.

I frown. What the hell is she doing back there?

But then I see him. Alexei Volkov, emerging from the shadows like a nightmare made flesh.

"Sofia, no," I breathe, watching helplessly as she confronts him. Her stance is defiant, and I can almost hear the sarcasm in her voice as she faces off against an enemy with the most cause to hurt us.

The confrontation is brief and brutal. Volkov moves with a speed that belies his bulk, and Sofia—for all her spirit—is no match for him physically. I watch in horror as he overpowers her defense and attack strategies, her limp form cradled almost gently in his arms as he carries her away.

"Track that vehicle!" I roar, pointing at the black SUV that pulls up moments later. "I want satellite imagery, traffic cam footage, anything! We are not losing them!"

Yuri nods curtly, barking out orders to the tech team as they scramble to bring up satellite feeds and enhance the grainy images of Volkov's vehicle.

As for me? I can't think straight. My mind races with scenarios of what Alexei could do to Sofia. The fear clenches at my gut, a cold dread that sucks the life out of me.

In this moment, I know that life would cease to exist without her. In such a short time, she's already become my world. My family.

She's the woman I love, god damn it.

"She's strong, Vlad," Denis says quietly beside me, a hand resting on my shoulder in a rare show of brotherly comfort.

My jaw tenses as I watch the screen, willing Sofia to be okay. "She shouldn't have been there in the first place. Damn it, she's too impulsive."

Rage burns hot in my veins—at Volkov for daring to touch her, at Sofia for her reckless bravery. But beneath it all, fear coils like a cold snake around my heart.

"Damn it, Sofia," I mutter, running a hand through my hair. "Why couldn't you just stay put?"

Denis squeezes my shoulder and Mark comes and stands next to us in solidarity.

Mark catches my eye, his expression grim. "Brother, we'll find her. Sofia's tough."

I nod, trying to draw strength from his words. "She is. But she's also in over her head."

My hand moves instinctively to my phone. "I should call Abram, get the full weight of the Bratva behind this. Ivan, Mikhail, Sergei—they have resources that beat ours," I tell my brothers.

My finger hovers over the screen, but something in Denis and Mark's expression holds me back.

"Vlad," Mark's voice cuts through my indecision. He steps forward with Denis at his side. "Let us handle this. We've got contacts, skills—we can track them down faster than any official channels."

I take a deep breath, my mind racing. Can I really entrust Sofia's safety to these two?

My instinct to protect her wars with the memory of her icy glares and her stubborn insistence on proving herself.

I think of how hard she fought to be deemed worthy, and how she surpassed even the best of the best. Now, my brothers stand where she once did.

It's a strange turn of events. How Sofia, even when gone, is turning me to be a better man.

I eye them warily. "You're sure about this?"

Denis nods firmly. "We're your best shot at getting to Sofia quickly and quietly. Trust us."

"Alright," I say, pocketing my phone. "Let's hear it."

Denis steps forward, his eyes gleaming with a predatory intelligence I've never fully appreciated before. "We start with Volkov's known associates. I've got a contact in the port authority who owes me a favor. If Volkov's trying to move Sofia out of the city, we'll know and block those routes."

Mark nods, already pulling out his phone. "I'll activate our network of street informants. Someone will have seen something through the CCTV blind spots, and for the right price, they'll talk."

I listen, impressed despite myself. Their plan is methodical, leveraging connections I didn't even know they had. As they continue, outlining backup strategies and contingencies, I feel a grudging respect growing.

"And if we locate them?" I interject, needing to hear the endgame.

Denis's smile is cold. "Then we go in hard and fast. I've got a personal team on standby I've been experimenting with—ex-military, very discreet. We'll make sure Volkov pays."

I nod slowly, picturing Sofia's face—how afraid she must be, how brave a front she must be putting on. "Get your guys on it. We move in fifteen minutes."

The tent buzzes with activity as our men spring into action. Denis hunches over a laptop, fingers flying across the keyboard as he taps into the street surveillance network. Mark barks orders into his phone, coordinating with his street contacts. I pace the length of the tent, overseeing it all, my mind racing.

"We need thermal imaging equipment," I call out. "And make sure everyone's armed. Volkov's not getting away this time."

A young tech approaches, tablet in hand. "Sir, we've mapped out potential routes based on the footage we got from the street cameras. Given traffic patterns and—"

"Good," I cut him off, scanning the data. "Cross-reference this with known Volkov and Crimson Crew properties. He'll want somewhere familiar, defensible."

As I turn, I think back to a moment earlier today—this morning when she put on a sequined jacket for a run. It was the most ridiculous jacket. How I'd laughed. Now, my throat tightens at the memory of her sarcastic quip this morning: "Worried I'll outshine you, old man?" Her voice echoes in my mind. God, what I wouldn't give to hear that snarky little tone right now.

"Brother?" Mark's voice pulls me back. "We're ready to move."

I nod sharply, pushing down the fear threatening to overwhelm me. "Let's go."

Stepping out of the tent, the cool night air hits my face. Our team falls in behind me, a dozen of our most trusted men, armed and ready. The weight of my pistol at my hip is reassuring.

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A dull throb pulses through my temples as I blink awake, consciousness seeping in like a slow dawn. The room swims into focus—stark concrete walls, a single bulb swinging overhead. Panic claws at my throat as I try to move, only to find my wrists bound tightly behind me.

"What the—" I mutter, my normally composed voice cracking.

That's when I hear it—Alexei's low rumble from somewhere behind me. My blood runs cold as memories come flooding back. The ambush. The struggle. Blackness.

"Yes, everything's on schedule," Alexei says smugly. "I've got the Orlov bitch trussed up nice and tight. She'll be ready for delivery within the hour."

Delivery? My mind races, piecing together the implications. The Crimson Crew. Of course. Those ruthless bastards want their revenge.

And what better revenge than to get ahold of the infiltrator?

Suddenly, cold, seeping fear washes over me. For a brief second, I freeze, thinking of Vlad. I'm in here, with no idea of what's happening out there. If they've found me, what if they...

No. The thought of Vlad being in danger scares the hell out of me. Besides, chances are, he's surrounded by his men. He's safe—or so I pray.

At the same time, a small voice in my head begins to worry in self-preservation. No one knows where I am. No one will be able to find me.

In this moment, I realize I'm truly alone for the first time. My brothers, Vlad—I can depend on no rescue, for it might be hours before they trace me. And by then, Alexei could have me moved.

I can't afford to wait. The Adrenaline overcomes the panic. My stomach twists with dread, but I force myself to stay calm and think. As Alexei paces, still chattering away, I test my bindings. There has to be a way out of this. There always is.

My eyes dart around the dimly lit room, searching for anything I can use. There—a jagged edge on the rickety wooden table behind me. I inch my chair backward, careful not to make a sound. Alexei's still engrossed in his call, his back to me. Perfect.

I grit my teeth as I drag my bound wrists across the splintered wood, feeling the rope fray. My heart pounds so loudly I'm sure Alexei will hear it, but I can't stop now. Not when freedom is so close.

Almost there, I think, willing my hands to steady as I work the last stubborn threads. Finally, with a muffled snap, the rope gives way. I have to stifle a gasp of relief.

Keeping my hands behind my back, I survey the room again. The door's only a few meters away, but the floorboards look ancient. One wrong step and I'm done for.

Alexei's voice drones on in the background. "Yes, yes. We'll make the exchange tonight. Don't worry, she's not going anywhere."

I almost snort. Shows what he knows.

Slowly, carefully, I rise from the chair. My legs are wobbly, but I force them to cooperate. One step. Two.

I'm mere steps from the door when a floorboard lets out a traitorous groan. Alexei whirls around, his eyes widening as he takes in my unbound state.

"You little bitch!" he snarls, lunging toward me with surprising speed.

I dive to the side, narrowly avoiding his grab as adrenaline courses through me. I can't let him catch me now, not when freedom is inches away. Besides, I've already learned that I can't fight him.

I'm petrified, and I know my only option is to run as fast as I can.

"Stop, Sofia!" he bellows, chasing after me, running as fast as he can.

But I'm faster. I open the door and sprint down the corridor, heart pounding in my ears, desperation lending strength to my limbs. The hallway stretches on endlessly, lined with closed doors and ominous shadows. My mind races—where do I go? How do I get out?

"Bitch!" he screams after me.

I can't help talk back, even though my heart is in my throat. "Careful, Alexei. Your hospitality is slipping," I scream over my shoulder.

His face contorts with rage as he continues chasing. "I'll teach you to respect—"

I see a door labeled exit, and I run toward it. I'm almost there—just a few more steps. Once outside, I can hail down a car, hide behind a tree, and buy some time.

Just when I'm near it, the door explodes inward with a deafening crack. Three figures burst into the room, their presence electric. My eyes lock onto Vlad, his face a mask of cold fury. On either side stand Denis and Mark.

“V...Vlad?” I whisper. The emotions of the day overcome every sense of self-preservation; I no longer have to worry. They’re here, the brothers who never fail to come through.

Vlad looks over me from head to toe, checking to see if I’m harmed. His eyes then turn to look behind me.

"Get away from her," Vlad growls, his voice low and dangerous. I look over my shoulder to see Alexei pale as a ghost.

Alexei freezes, his eyes darting between Vlad and me. "This isn't what it looks—"

“Denis, Mark, keep Sofia,” Vlad says without taking his eyes off Alexei. The next thing I know, Denis and Mark are by my side, each of them asking to see if I’m alright.

I nod, unable to form words, my eyes glued to the scene unfolding before us.

"You didn't think I'd let you get away that easily, did you?" Vlad growls, fury pulsing off him in waves as he walks toward Alexei.

“Listen, I swear, I wasn’t going to hurt—” Alexei starts to plead, but Vlad cuts him off with a cold sneer.

"Shut up!" he barks, his hand tightening into a fist. "You had no right to take her. You have no idea what you've put her through."

A muscle in Alexei's jaw twitches as he clenches his teeth, but he says nothing. His defeat is palpable, and it only fuels Vlad's anger further.

"Now," Vlad continues, his voice low and menacing, "I will decide what happens to

you. You won't see the light of day again."

Beside me, I hear Denis whisper in my ear. "Look away, Sof."

I shake my head. I realize now that wanting to be a part of this world means wanting to see it all. I watch as Vlad pulls out his gun. Alexei whimpers on the ground like the coward he is, and Vlad walks over to him, lowering the barrel.

"Your last words will be my choice, not yours." With a cold determination, Vlad fires.

Alexei's body jerks violently, his life extinguished in an instant. The impact is bone-jarring, and I feel a shiver run down my spine. Vlad stands over Alexei's body, his expression unreadable, but something burns in his eyes. He looks back at us and nods once, dismissing this unsavory business with finality.

I quickly look away as Denis had instructed, feeling sick and shaken. This is not what I wanted, but seeing Vlad's fierce determination to protect me fills me with an overwhelming sense of safety and love. In this moment, I realize I finally belong in the Bratva.

"Sofia," Vlad says moments later, walking up to me, his eyes softening as they meet mine. "Are you hurt?"

I don't want to worry him, but my legs shake. "I'm fine," I manage, hating how small my voice sounds. "Just peachy. Nothing like a little kidnapping to liven up one's day."

Vlad's lips twitch, almost like he wants to smile, but concern wins out. He steps

closer, his hand hovering near my arm. "It's over now. You're safe."

I nod, surprised by how much I want to lean into his touch. I see no reason not to, and allow him to wrap an arm around my waist.

Meanwhile, Denis, Mark, and the rest of the men spring into action. Someone secures the body while Mark scans the room for any remaining evidence, his eyes sharp.

"Clear the area," Denis orders, his voice clipped. "Leave no trace."

I watch, impressed, as they methodically sweep the room. Denis pockets Alexei's phone to hack it and manage any other threats.

"Efficient, aren't they?" I muse, trying to keep my voice steady. "I suppose this isn't their first rodeo."

Vlad's eyes never leave me as he replies, "We take care of our own."

His words send an unexpected warmth through my chest. I've always prided myself on my independence, but right now, being part of "our own" doesn't sound so bad.

Vlad steps closer, his eyes scanning me for injuries. "Are you sure you're alright?" His hand reaches out, hesitating before gently touching my arm. The contact sends a jolt through me.

I swallow hard, but seeing him worried worries me. I try to ease the distress we're both feeling. "I'm fine, really. Just a bruised ego and a newfound distaste for rope burn."

His eyes darken at my words. "I shouldn't have let you out of my sight," he murmurs, his voice rough with emotion.

I raise an eyebrow, summoning what's left of my sass. "Let me? I wasn't aware I needed your permission, Vlad."

He chuckles softly, the sound warming me from the inside out. "You're right. No one tells Sofia Zolotov what to do."

My heart races as I realize he called Sofia Zolotov , not Orlov. I watch his face, smiling as I understand he didn't even register the difference.

His thumb traces small circles on my arm, soothing and electrifying at the same time. "But I promise you, I won't let anything like this happen again."

I want to bristle at his protectiveness, to remind him that I can take care of myself. But the genuine concern in his eyes, the gentle strength of his touch... it makes me want to believe him.

"I'll hold you to that," I whisper, allowing him to lead me to the car while the rest of the guys handle things here.

The drive home is a blur of city lights. Vlad's arm stays firmly around my shoulders, a warm shield against the night's chill and my own lingering fears. I find myself nestling closer, finding peace I never thought I could.

"You know," I murmur, breaking the comfortable silence, "I never thought I'd understand why you always checking in on me from the moment we got married, but I'm actually grateful for your overbearing tendencies right now."

Vlad's chest rumbles with a low chuckle. "Careful, Crimson. I might get used to your gratitude."

I roll my eyes but can't help giving a small smile. "Don't push your luck!"

As we pull up to the house, Vlad's grip on me tightens slightly. "Home sweet home," he says softly, his eyes searching mine. "Ready?"

I nod, steeling myself. "As I'll ever be."

Inside, Vlad guides me straight to the bedroom, his hand a constant presence on the small of my back. The familiar surroundings should be comforting, but I can't shake the lingering unease.

"You need rest," Vlad says, his voice gentle but firm. He pulls back the covers and helps me into bed, his movements surprisingly tender.

As he tucks the blankets around me, I catch a glimpse of raw vulnerability in his eyes. It's so unexpected, so unlike the stoic Bratva leader I've come to know, that it takes my breath away.

"Vlad," I whisper, reaching out to touch his face. "I'm okay. Really."

He leans into my touch, his eyes closing briefly. "I know," he says, his voice rough. "But seeing you in danger... I've never been so terrified in my life, Sofia."

The admission hangs heavy between us, charged with unspoken emotions. I swallow hard, trying to find the right words. "I... I didn't think you cared that much."

Vlad's eyes snap open, intense and burning. "Of course I care," he says fiercely. "More than I should. More than I ever thought possible."

My heart races, a mix of fear and something dangerously close to hope. "Vlad, I—"

“Sofia, please,” he cuts me off. For a second, he closes his eyes, his face crunched in anguish. That look on his face tears at my heart, and I instinctively reach out, caressing his cheek.

“What is it, Vlad?” I ask, praying to take away his pain.

“Tonight.” He opens his eyes. “I thought I might have lost you for good. And I swear it was the darkest moment of my life. Everything good seemed to lose meaning. Every hope, every prayer became useless. The future seemed unimaginable. Sof, I truly don’t remember what life was before you came into it. I truly don’t think I could live without you by my side.”

He takes my hand and presses it to his cheek, raw, unadulterated affection flowing through. I feel my heart race at his words, not for the novelty of it, but because...

“I feel the same way, Vlad,” I whisper. His eyes widen, he sits a little straighter and his face breaks into a smile that could light a million homes.

“You know,” he says, a mix of mischief and guilt crossing his face. “In the spirit of honesty, I do have a confession to make.”

“You’re an alien?”

He snorts, getting into bed and taking me in his arms. “Unfortunately, no. But since the family gathering, I have been hooked on you, Sofia. From the moment I saw you, this stunning, fiery woman who wouldn’t give me the time of the day... I was captivated. You were a mystery, an equal. Someone who could keep me on edge.”

I blink, processing his words. "So the mission...?"

"It was a way to get closer to you," he admits, shame coloring his voice. "I'm sorry,

Sofia. I should have been honest from the start. I knew about it, but I never married you to jeopardize it. In fact, I used it to get close to you, to get you into my bed."

I stare at him for a moment, a flurry of emotions swirling inside me. His admission leaves me feeling both stunned and weirdly touched. Maybe I shouldn't have been so surprised; after all, he's Vladimir Zolotov. He's a strange man, but he's my strange man.

"I don't... I don't know what to say."

The truth is, I don't know whether to laugh or whack him for the audacity of it all. But more importantly, I don't feel the need to do either. None of what brought us here matters. All that matters is that we're in this together, safe and happy in each other's arms.

Vlad reaches for my hand, his touch hesitant. "Say you forgive me. Say you feel even a fraction of what I feel for you."

I look at him, this man who's turned my world upside down. "I don't think I have anything to forgive," I say, surprising myself with the truth.

I feel it before I say it in the way he makes my toes curl up, the way he makes me feel safe, the way I sleep better in his bed than I ever did in my own, the way I no longer look over my shoulder. The way he makes me belong.

"You don't?" he asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

I nod, surprising myself with the certainty I feel. "You're the only one who truly understands me, Vlad. Your quiet strength, your ability to love even when we disagree... your undying loyalty. It's everything I never knew I needed."

Vlad's hand tightens around mine. "Sofia, I—"

"Let me finish," I interrupt, needing him to know the depths of what it is I feel. "I've spent so long being the dutiful sister, the girl with a mask. But with you, I can just be... me."

A smile tugs at the corners of Vlad's lips. "And who is that?"

I lean in closer, my breath mingling with his. "Someone who's no longer afraid to say... I love you."

The moment the words leave my mouth, Vlad's eyes light up like stars. He cups my face gently, his thumb tracing my cheekbone.

"I love you too, my fierce, beautiful Sofia," he murmurs.

And with that, our lips meet in a kiss that speaks more than any words ever could. It's the kiss of a thousand sunsets, and it fills me with an unmatched warmth, a feeling of homecoming like nothing I've ever experienced before.

I part my lips, and he tastes like the sweetest fruit. Vlad's hands start to move down my body, his fingers dancing along my collarbone, sending chills down my spine. He's always been so good at reading my body language, even though we're worlds apart. But now, in this moment, there's a deep understanding between us.

"Let me show you how much I love you," he whispers in my ear before trailing a line of kisses down my neck.

"You don't have to show me, Vlad," I whisper, throwing my neck back. "I already know."

“And we have a lifetime to explore the depths of it,” he says, his fingers now trailing up my arms, leaving a line of fire in their wake. His fingers slide to the hem of my shirt, grazing the under of my belly, and with a gentle tug, he lifts it over my head, exposing my body to the cool air. His eyes linger on the curve of my neck and the rise of my breasts.

"You're more beautiful than even I imagined," he says, his voice husky with desire. He slowly trails a line down my cleavage, down to my belly, down to my trousers.

I lie there, entranced, as he takes his time undoing my trousers. He makes his way down, and I arch my hips up for him to slide them off.

Slowly, he kisses my leg. He moves inch by inch, all the way from my knee up to my inner thigh. His hands slide gently, teasingly up my sides, sending shivers through my entire body, leaving me aching for more. His breath is hot as he reaches the apex of my thighs. He slides his fingers in through the elastic of my panties, slowly pulling them down and discarding them on the floor before positioning himself between my legs.

"Vlad," I whisper, rising from the bed and resting on my elbows, tugging at his shirt. My voice rises in pitch with each passing second. "Please..."

He sits on his haunches and lets out a low growl as he pulls off his shirt in haste. I watch every dip and muscle on his broad, chiseled chest, still unable to believe that he's mine.

Within seconds, his trousers are off, too, and he positions himself above me.

I can't help but bury my face in his chest, inhaling the musky yet comforting scent of him. It is a scent that is only his, a scent that wraps around me and keeps me close. I never thought someone could make me feel like this, so safe and secure.

"Sofia, I need you," he says, his voice strained with desire. His large hands catch my hips, lifting me to his throbbing length. I whimper at the contact, my body urging for more.

"Then take me," I breathe, wrapping my legs around his waist and pulling him closer to me. With one swift motion, he pushes into me, filling me up in ways I never thought possible.

I gasp at the sensation of him inside me, my body clinging to him tightly. His gaze locks with mine, and I see the raw hunger in his eyes.

From the vantage point he has, he takes in my naked form, his cock circling within. His hands trace patterns from my throat to my breasts and to the curves of my ribs. The warmth from his body seeks out mine, melding us together like the perfect puzzle pieces.

He sits back a little, positioning his cock deeper in me. I let out a soft cry that turns into a moan as the pleasure starts to seep over me. He's moving at the same pace, hitting the same spots, and my mind is on nothing but him and this moment.

"God," he moans, looking down at where I'm splayed out. "You're beautiful."

His hands reach for my hair, and he closes his eyes as he clutches onto me, his powerful hips rhythmically thrusting into me, each movement sending shockwaves of pleasure coursing through my entire body.

I'm feeling more... alive. More... awake.

I want and need more.

I lift up my hips until I feel stuffed and slide my legs around his ass, my hands

clutching at his back.

“Oh god, Sofia.” He falls on me, his weight a delicious sensation, and he nuzzles his mouth in my neck, pumping his cock in me.

“That’s it, Baby,” I tell him. “Just like that.”

The feeling of him inside me, so deep and yet still able to cause such intense pleasure—it's something I never want to end.

Vlad's breathing quickens as he continues his rhythmic movements, each thrust sending a jolt of pleasure through us both.

"You're mine," he growls, nipping at my neck, thrusting deeper into me with renewed passion.

“I’m yours,” I moan, throwing back my head and closing my eyes. The pounding of our hearts, the mewls of pleasure, the slick wetness of our bodies—it’s all too much to handle.

Each thrust brings us closer to the brink, his cock sliding in and out against my sensitive nerves, sending me on the brink of no return.

“Vlad,” I moan as I feel the need to erupt. “Vlad...”

I feel a small fire burn in my core, ready to blow. I clench my thighs tighter around his ass and meet the frenzy of his hips.

"Sofia," he groans, "I'm close, Baby."

My heart is pounding, the rush of blood in my ears a cacophonous symphony. "Me

too," I whisper, my voice barely audible.

"Sof...ia," he groans, his breathing heavy and ragged. He thrusts harder into me, and I let out a strangled cry as I feel it start, the sensation cresting like a wave and then crashing over me. My body shudders as I give in to it, my back arching off the bed as I ride out the waves of pleasure coursing through me.

I see a million stars against a night sky.

He rolls his hips into me one last time and stays there. I feel him throb within me, my body responding to his the same way his does to mine.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:59 pm

6 months after

The crystal chandelier casts a warm glow over the ballroom as I take another sip of my whiskey, nodding along to Peter's animated retelling of his latest business venture. From the corner of my eye, I scan the room. Over a dozen beautiful waitresses serve, smile, pour and fetch. And I have eyes for just one.

I wonder what disguise she'd be in tonight.

"...and that's how we managed to secure the contract," he finishes with a self-satisfied grin.

I force a polite smile. "Impressive work, Peter. The profits should be substantial."

As he launches into another story, I can't help but marvel at how different this feels from just a year ago. Back then, I would have been skulking in the shadows, avoiding small talk like the plague. But now...

My eyes scan the room instinctively, searching for a glimpse of golden hair. Sofia. The woman who turned my world upside down. The one who got me to where I am today.

Just then, I notice a petite woman weaving her way through the crowd. As she moves through the room in that blouse and tight skirt, a cast of admirers follows in her wake like leaves caught in a spring breeze. Men turn to watch her, their gazes lingering on her slender form and the subtle curve of her lips as she flashes them a coy smile.

But, she pays them no further mind when one of them waves a hundred dollar bill in her direction. That coy smile turns cold and she walks right past them to approach a distinguished elderly gentleman seated at a corner table.

The man's eyes brighten as the waitress pours him a drink. She speaks sweetly, listens attentively to his words, nods at all the right moments and leaves when someone joins him.

I admire her kindness. But realize soon enough that I'm distracted again. Now, where the hell is Sofia?

"To be honest, though, I never thought I'd see the day when Vlad Zolotov willingly attended a social gathering," Peter chuckles, pulling me from my reverie.

I shrug. "Times change. People change."

"And what brought about this miraculous transformation?" he probes, eyebrows raised.

Before I can answer, a commotion erupts beside us. That same petite waitress with chestnut curls stumbles, nearly spilling her tray of champagne flutes. I frown, in disbelief. I had just witnessed her grace. How could that same woman be so accident prone all of a sudden?

I watch her with narrowed eyes, taking a step back from Peter.

"Oh! I'm so terribly sorry," she gushes, her cheeks flushing as she rights herself. Her eyes, a startling shade of green, lock onto Peter. "How clumsy of me. I hope I didn't get anything on your lovely suit, Sir."

Peter's usual composure crumbles as he stammers, "N-no harm done, Miss. These things happen."

I watch, fascinated, as the waitress bats her eyelashes over deep blue eyes and giggles. She sets down the tray on the table beside us and turns her back to us. She takes a moment longer than needed before turning back to face us with a handful of paper napkins, far more than are needed. Her fingers brush against Peter's coat to help him get clean.

"It's alright, Miss." Peter blushes. "I can do it." He tries, reaching for her hand.

"No, Sir. Please. A handsome man like you in a handsome suit like that. I really must insist."

I watch her hands while Peter watches her face, his eyes trailing down her neckbone. There, between the napkins, I see a flash of something small and black.

Sofia?

I hold back a chuckle as I watch Peter blush, letting her finish dabbing the coat. Only except, I know she's doing a lot more than helping him clean up. Once done, she bats her lashes at him and passes him a fresh glass of champagne. The typically unflappable man is practically tripping over his words. "Th...thank you, Miss."

"You're welcome," she purrs. "I do hope you're enjoying the party. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

As Peter fumbles for a response, I hide my smirk behind my glass. Who would have thought the fearsome Bratva Pakhan could be reduced to a blushing schoolboy by a pretty face and a coy smile?

She hands Peter a glass of champagne and picks up her tray. She walks right up to me and looks up at me. I watch, enthralled, as she bites her lower lip and slowly slides her gaze up from my chest to my eyes. "And you, Sir? Anything I can get you?"

I bend lower, and mutter under my breath. “Oh, trust me. You can give me a lot, but none of that would be appropriate around here.”

I see her lips part slightly and her eyes flash with a challenging thrill. “You shouldn’t go talking like that, Sir. Some might consider it harassment.”

And then, to my surprise, she winks and turns around, walking away from me.

I give her a few seconds in a head start. All this time, she’s been serving right beneath my nose, while I’ve been wondering where Sofia is? I swear, my wife gets better and better with each passing day.

I excuse myself from Peter, who barely notices my departure, still flustered by the charming waitress. My eyes follow her retreating form as she weaves through the crowd. Without drawing attention, I make my way to a secluded alcove near the back of the ballroom.

The waitress is already there, her back to me. As I approach, she turns, and I’m met with those unfamiliar blue eyes—her contact lenses. Sofia’s natural blonde hair—no longer hidden behind the chestnut wig—spills over her shoulders as she removes the hairpiece.

"Quite the performance, my love," I murmur, reaching out to tuck a stray strand behind her ear.

Sofia’s eyes sparkle with excitement. "Vlad, I did it!" she whispers, her voice tinged with pride. "The bug is planted. That fool Peter didn't suspect a thing."

“To be honest,” I admit. “I didn’t either.”

“Oh, I know,” she flicks her hair over her shoulder with pride. “I was watching you scan the room for a good portion of the last hour. Honestly? It was entertaining.”

“Oh, you,” I growl, grabbing her by the waist and bringing her closer to my body. God, she’s a sexy beast in that uniform.

"You were magnificent," I praise, my chest swelling with admiration. "Peter didn't stand a chance against your charms."

She grins, a rare display of unbridled joy. "He was putty in my hands. Can you believe he's one of our biggest rivals? The way he stammered, you'd think he'd never spoken to a woman before."

I laugh, but a part of me tenses at the thought of other men falling for Sofia's act. "Just remember who you come home to at the end of the night," I growl playfully, pulling her even closer.

Sofia rolls her eyes, but I catch the hint of a smile tugging at her lips. "As if I could forget, you brute," she retorts, her tone softening despite the sarcastic edge.

I run my fingers along the edge of her waitress uniform, feeling the cheap polyester beneath my touch. "You know, these little missions of ours are becoming quite the habit," I muse, my voice low. "Who would've thought the Ice Queen and the Recluse would make such an effective team?"

She leans into me, her warmth seeping through the thin fabric. "Certainly not me," she admits. "But I must say, I'm starting to enjoy our covert operations. It's... exhilarating."

I nod, understanding completely. "It's a rush, isn't it? The danger, the secrecy. And knowing we're protecting our families in the process."

Sofia's eyes darken slightly, a reminder of the weight we both carry. "Yes, that's the most important part," she agrees solemnly.

I can't help but tease her, hoping to lighten the mood. "Though I must say, this outfit is an unexpected bonus," I growl, my hands trailing down her sides. "You're driving me wild, woman."

She quirks an eyebrow, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Oh? And here I thought you preferred me in designer gowns, not polyester uniforms."

I lean in close, my breath hot against her ear. "I prefer you in anything... or nothing at all."

Sofia's breath hitches, and I feel a surge of satisfaction that I can still affect her the way she does me. She pulls back slightly, her green eyes meeting mine with an intensity that makes my heart race.

"Vlad," she whispers, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "I don't think I say this enough, but... I love you. Truly."

The words hit me like a freight train, as though she's saying it for the first time, even though I've heard it every single day. "I love you too," I say, cupping her face in my hands, my thumbs tracing her cheekbones. "More than I ever thought possible."

A rare, genuine smile lights up her face, and I'm struck by how beautiful she is in this moment. Not just physically but also in her vulnerability, her trust in me.

"Well," she says, her usual sass returning, "now that we've gotten that out of the way, what do you say we find somewhere a bit more... private?"

I grin, already scanning the room for an exit. "I thought you'd never ask, my love."

With a quick glance to ensure no one's watching, I take her hand and lead her toward a secluded hallway. The thrill of our mission, combined with the excitement of our shared confession, has my blood pumping. As we slip away from the party, I can't

help but think how much my life has changed since Sofia entered it

And how grateful I am for every moment.

THE END