

## Chapter 500 The Innocent Need Not Fear

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In the CEO's office of the Universe Group, Loraine finished all her work and sank into the plush office chair. Weariness and drowsiness wrapped around her like a warm blanket, gently luring her into a blissful moment of rest.

As she began to surrender to slumber, the intrusive vibration and ring of the phone on her desk jolted her back to reality.

Loraine's eyes blinked open, and she tenderly soothed the area between her eyebrows. She got up and grabbed her phone. It was Klein.

As soon as she answered, Klein's urgent voice filled the line. "Miss Torres, please see what's trending online. It's a disaster."

Taken aback, Loraine quickly navigated to her social media.

As the page loaded, a flood of direct messages met her, the relentless blinking of the notification icon adding to her unease.

Her eyebrows knitted in frustration. As she prepared to open the messages, her eyes caught sight of a trending post on her feed.

The post implicated her.

Keely wrote, "@Loraine, your public mockery at the advisory





meeting caused my teacher a hypertensive crisis. You should consider saying sorry to him."

Loraine ventured into the comments section, finding it awash with public support for Keely and harsh criticism towards her.

Navigating to Keely's profile, Loraine saw the insincere grievance posted there.

The complaint not only remained, but was also pinned at the top of Keely's feed.

Even without knowledge of Marco's interaction with Keely, Loraine felt a deep distaste for Keely's remarks.

Loraine was forced to accept that those unaware of the truth were easily swayed by Keely's persuasive words.

A sneer played on Loraine's lips. Keely's pretentious behavior was too much to bear. Just as she was about to fire back, the page updated, and a fresh comment surged to the top, overshadowing the rest.

Marco had shared and commented on the post from Bryant Group's official account. "If Professor Zizka's health truly suffered as a result of anger, Bryant Group and Universe Group will accept full responsibility. However, Professor Zizka needs to first apologize for his baseless plagiarism accusations. Miss Haywood, the Internet is not a lawless land. Think carefully before you post."

Marco's resolute support for Loraine sparked a flurry of excitement among the onlookers.

"Mr. Bryant, you claim that Loraine didn't plagiarize. Do you have proof? Professor Zizka is a renowned architect. Would he need to defame a junior?"



Marco, typically reserved, responded patiently to the question.

"I trust Loraine completely."

Reading Marco's response left Loraine with a whirlwind of emotions.

As everyone on the Internet turned against her, Marco stood by her, offering his unwavering support.

She had intended to release her drafts once she had gathered all her information, but Keely's post prompted her to act immediately.

Soon, she compiled all her design drafts, photographed them, and shared them online.

Each draft corner bore a timestamp, meticulously capturing her thoughts and ideas. The varying degrees of faded handwriting also revealed the specific moments when each piece had been penned. The first one was finished when she first married into the Bryant family three years ago.

Loraine pinned her evidence at the top, addressing Leopold.

"Here are all my designs. Professor Zizka, as a professional, should recognize their authenticity. I have refrained from responding in recent days, for I am a firm believer in the notion that the innocent need not fear, for they have nothing to hide. However, when someone purposely slanders me, I find it intolerable and must present evidence to establish my innocence."

The evidence sparked a whirlwind of confusion among netizens, not knowing who to trust.

"Even as a layman, it's clear Loraine's designs are professional. Honestly, Professor Zizka accused Loraine of plagiarism without proof. We can't just take his word because he's an expert!"

Voices of reason began to defend Loraine.

Nonetheless, many held Leopold's opinions as gospel, inciting heated debate among the netizens.

"Professor Zizka is of such high caliber and reputation. Why would he have any reason to smear Loraine? Yes, the Torres family is wealthy, but Loraine is, at best, a newcomer in the world of architectural design. Professor Zizka wouldn't stoop that low!"

The online bickering intensified, opinions clashing fiercely. But amidst the uproar, Leopold was dumbstruck by Loraine's evidence.

He scrutinized Loraine's drafts, his composure slipping away.

His accusation of plagiarism against Loraine was based on identical designs presented to him by his student, Keely, designs he held in high regard.

It was this particular work that greatly enhanced Leopold's admiration for Keely's exceptional talent.

However, on close inspection, he found Keely's drafts mirrored Loraine's, down to the style.

It was clear the two designs originated from the same mind. So, who was the deceiver?

Despite his inclination to trust Keely, Loraine's numerous



originals contrasted with Keely's single hard copy left him feeling uneasy.

His heart heavy, he dialed Keely. He needed to confront her personally.



## Chapter 501 The Drafts Were Stolen

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After receiving the call from Leopold, Keely was very uneasy as she made her way to the hotel.

She never expected that Loraine would keep all those drafts. Damn! Shouldn't they have been thrown away after the design was completed?

She tried hard to calm herself down, but her brain couldn't stop spinning in a desperate effort to figure out a way to deal with the situation.

When she finally arrived at Leopold's room, she saw him sporting a look that was far from happy. The moment he saw her, he pointed at his computer screen and demanded, "Keely, what's going on?"

Keely went pale immediately. She pinched her hands hard, forcing tears to her eyes. "Professor Zizka, I really don't know what happened. But I think it must be Loraine who stole my manuscript," she said in a pitiful tone.

"She stole your manuscript?" Leopold asked in shock.

Keely nodded, and quickly added another excuse, "I've been ill for a long time and have been treated abroad. My study and career have been badly affected as a result. Fortunately, Marco took good care of me. But... since he was being pressured by his family, he had no choice but to marry Loraine. But immediately she became his wife, she made him distance himself from me."



Keely paused to wipe the nonexistent tears from her eyes before continuing, "Later, I recovered and returned home. Just so he could take care of me conveniently, Marco took me to the Bryant family. I knew he was married, but even though I was saddened by it, I always maintained a sense of propriety. But I never expected that Loraine would be so jealous of me and even target me."

"What a petty, jealous woman! Was that when she stole your manuscript?" Leopold asked.

Keely lowered her head, not daring to admit or deny it. This temporary lie of hers was clumsy and full of loopholes. She was scared that the more she talked, the more mistakes she would make.

When she said nothing, Leopold continued, "Loraine has gone too far! She not only took away the man you loved while you were undergoing treatment, she also stole the results of your painstaking efforts! Such a woman is really envious and narrow-minded. No wonder she has constantly been against you!"

Seeing how passionate he was, Keely replied in a weak tone, "I'm used to such a treatment from her. It's nothing new. Don't bother yourself too much about it."

"Don't be scared, Keely," Leopold assured her. "You are my student now. I'll never allow Loraine to pick on you ever again!"

He'd hardly finished the statement when the hotel receptionist called the phone in the room. Leopold picked up the phone and answered it.

"Professor Zizka, Mr. Moore is here to see you," the receptionist said.

Leopold wondered why Klein was coming to him at such a time.

Due to how much Klein protected Loraine, Leopold's impression of him was not savory. But since Klein was a member of the government, he had no choice but to agree to meet him.

Meanwhile, Klein kept glancing at his watch from time to time as he sat impatiently at the restaurant of the hotel.

He had never expected that the public opinion would take such a turn. If Loraine and Leopold didn't get along, it would not be helpful to the airport project.

That was why he came to Leopold today in the hope that he could get him to reconcile with Loraine.

Soon, Leopold appeared and Klein greeted him with a smile. After exchanging pleasantries, he finally told him why he had come.

"Professor Zizka, I'd like to make it clear to you again that Loraine is certainly not that kind of person, but I know you won't listen. I came here specifically to tell you the pros and cons of the whole thing, hoping that you'll be able to weigh them and make your decisions. The White Cloud Airport project is being jointly developed by Universe Group and Bryant Group. If things go on like this, how would this project continue? We both know that if Universe Group and Bryant Group decide not to invest in it anymore, your project will not be able to proceed," Klein pointed out, using the usual lobbying tactics that politicians loved to employ.

"What's that supposed to mean? Are you threatening me?" Leopold growled angrily.



Seeing how livid Leopold was, Klein poured him a glass of water and smile apologetically. "Look, Professor, Loraine has already released the original drafts to prove that she didn't plagiarize anyone's work, which means that this whole thing is a big misunderstanding. So, you need to put aside your prejudices and reconcile with Loraine. And everyone will be happy!"

Klein thought this would be enough to convince Leopold, but to his surprise, the opposite was the result.

"Mr. Moore, there's nothing I hate more than being bullied by people with political power!" Leopold retorted angrily, "Let me make it very clear to you that as long as Loraine remains there, I'll never partner with Universe Group! And as for the investment, the Bryant Group will help out, won't it?"

Klein was taken aback by this straightforward rejection.



## Chapter 502 A

### Preconceived Fixed Idea

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Leopold's fury caused his features to twitch uncontrollably. He had shown mercy to Loraine, never explicitly pointing the finger at her as the plagiarist.

However, he hadn't believed that Loraine had managed to find someone from the government department to come and threaten him with investment.

Leopold snorted dismissively, rose from his seat, and stated icily, "Mr. Moore, Loraine is not a topic of discussion for us. Kindly take your leave."

Klein protested in a panic, "Professor Zizka, hold on..."

Once Leopold exited, Klein scrunched his brows. Why did his well-intentioned actions feel so wrong?

Meanwhile, Leopold stormed back to his room and promptly called Keely over.

"Keely, bring me your final design and the original sketch. It's time to unveil Loraine's duplicity! She pushed me to this, not knowing what's good for her. She cannot blame me for the unpleasant outcome."

Keely paled. The finished draft she had given to Leopold was something she had stolen. How could she possibly possess the original manuscript?

After a moment's hesitation, she mumbled meekly,

"Professor Zizka, I seem to have left my original manuscript overseas. Could we make do with a copy?"

Keely's admission made Leopold scowl, making her even more anxious.

Leopold shot her a disappointed glance, reprimanding, "Such recklessness! How could you overlook something of such significance?"

Keely didn't retort. She hung her head, murmuring apologies, relief washing over her.

It appeared Leopold still trusted her.

As long as she had Leopold's backing, Loraine's evidence wouldn't matter much. Given Leopold's position as an industry leader, merely stating that Loraine was a plagiarist would be enough for some people to believe without question.

Leopold, while not doubting Keely, showed signs of discontent. He shook his head, sighing, and then reluctantly asked for the copy.

Following that, he shared it online, chastising Loraine severely.

"@Loraine, you've snatched someone's design ideas and now you're shamelessly sharing them as proof. How disappointing! I've given you numerous chances, but your actions have left me with no choice but to withdraw my forgiveness."

He publicly confronted Loraine, saying, "Loraine, you've shamelessly replicated my student Keely's work, and your audacity is tarnishing the field of architecture! I won't remain silent while someone like you, who plagiarizes,



Though Leopold's evidence was merely a copy, his authoritative standing swung public sentiment back in Keely's favor.

"So, it's true! Professor Zizka's student's work was plagiarized! No wonder he is so incensed!"

"Is this Keely's design? She is indeed gifted. No surprise Professor Zizka took her under his wing. Regrettably, Loraine shamelessly plagiarized such a remarkable piece of work!"

"Loraine thinks she can get away with copying just because Keely isn't renowned yet, and her family has influence. She even tried to deny her theft. She must've thought she could use her power to oppress others. But she never expected to cross paths with someone like Professor Zizka. His integrity in the field is widely recognized."

The netizens rallied behind Keely. They appreciated Leopold's keen eye for talent and his refusal to suppress real talent due to the might of the Torres family.

Keely, witnessing the online narrative swing her way, breathed a silent sigh of relief.

She took advantage of the situation to intensify the conflict. She fabricated rumors about her relationship with Marco, paying off marketing channels to portray them as a couple and Loraine as the intruder.

Consequently, the netizens became even more outraged.

"Wait, there's more! Loraine didn't just plagiarize Keely's work but also stole her lover? Oh my goodness! Loraine's





Yet, some netizens held onto reason, remarking, "Hold on, aren't Loraine and Marco married? Can we truly say she interfered?"

Sadly, such rational comments were quickly drowned in a sea of curses. "Keely knew Marco first. Who knows how Loraine ended up marrying into the Bryant family? Let's not forget she's from the powerful Torres family!"

In the midst of all this uproar, each individual felt justified in their views, convinced they were fair and just.

Meanwhile, Loraine, upon viewing Leopold's so-called evidence, was seized by a surge of anger.

Wasn't this her own design? And merely a copy at that.

How ludicrous that a world-class master would use this to accuse her of plagiarism! What a humorous situation!

Yet, how did Leopold possess her design drafts?

Loraine composed herself, racking her brain.

She had taken great care of the original design manuscript, considering it her sole source of solace within the Bryant family since her marriage. However, it appeared that she had also made printed copies for the purpose of comparing and revising them.

But she should have thrown those copies into the trash can after she finished revising.

Did Keely manage to steal a copy?

Recalling Leopold's peculiar reaction upon first viewing her



work, it dawned upon Loraine.

That must be it!

If Keely showed Leopold the design in advance, claiming it as her own, then it was no surprise that Leopold believed she had copied Keely.

Loraine found it absurd that Leopold expected her to apologize to Keely based on Keely's sole claim.

Did Keely even merit an apology from her?



## Chapter 503 Handwriting Identification

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Suddenly, Loraine's phone began to ring.

A wave of surprise washed over her as Marco's name appeared on the caller ID. After a moment of contemplation, she made up her mind and decided to answer the call.

From the other side came a resolute male voice, "Loraine, I've seen the internet frenzy. Rest assured, I've dug up the truth. Check your email. I've forwarded everything to you."

As if on cue, a new email alert blinked on her computer screen.

It was from Marco. Curious, Loraine clicked open the mail. To her astonishment, it contained the design drafts she had uploaded online, along with handwriting analyses of both her usual script and Keely's draft.

The identification result conclusively proved that both drafts were created by a single individual, leaving no doubt that it was indeed Loraine behind them.

Marco, still on the call, announced, "Loraine, sharing this evidence can prove Keely plagiarized your work. She and Professor Zizka conspired against you. Her becoming Professor Zizka's student seems a little suspicious now."

Taken aback by Marco's findings, Loraine asked, "Are you certain you want me to share this?"

"Why wouldn't I?" questioned Marco.

After all, his intention was to vindicate Loraine and expose Keely's deceit.

With a cold undertone in her voice, Loraine pointed out, "If I reveal this, Keely's career is over, and Professor Zizka won't be able to protect her."

Unmoved, Marco replied, "She brought it upon herself. I had already given her an opportunity."

Without any further hesitation, Loraine confidently clicked the post button.

On the other side.

In a luxurious five-star hotel, Keely was browsing the internet news, basking in self-satisfaction. Suddenly, her face blanched as she read Loraine's new statement.

Loraine had not merely responded to the rumors but had posted the handwriting analyses, causing an internet sensation.

Initially, some netizens didn't understand the implications, but soon a comprehensive explanation emerged.

"Here are the handwriting evaluations of the two design drafts. It is evident that both drafts were crafted by Loraine."

"What do you mean? Does this mean Loraine is the real author of all designs?"

"What? So, it's Keely who copied Loraine, not the other way around? Why would Leopold back Keely, then?"

"Turns out Loraine is the victim of plagiarism here.

Hopefully, netizens will think twice before jumping to conclusions next time."

In the midst of all this, Leopold also stumbled upon the handwriting analyses Loraine had shared.

A surge of anger coursed through him as he adjusted his glasses.

As a highly regarded figure in the design industry, he was known for his abilities and integrity. But now he realized he had been deceived and had unintentionally caused harm to a promising apprentice.

As he remembered the favoritism shown to Keely and the ordeal he had put Loraine through, a deep sense of remorse washed over him. Furious, he barged into Keely's room, report in hand, and demanded, "Keely! Explain this!"

Keely, guilt-ridden and packing hurriedly, went pale and stammered, "Professor Zizka, I can explain..."

Leopold's eyes narrowed as he glared at her, and he forcefully flung the report right at her face.

"With such compelling evidence, what's left to explain? How could you lie about not having the original drafts, only the copy? Turns out it was Loraine's work! I'm disappointed, Keely! Leave! I can't bear to look at you!"

Despite Keely's attempts to defend herself, Leopold drove her out. She fled the room, covering her face.

Left alone, Leopold collapsed to the floor, clutching his chest. After what felt like an eternity, he composed himself.

He picked up the drafts one by one, read them once more, and heaved a sigh.

To his astonishment, it became apparent that the designs he had been admiring were solely the creations of Loraine. The person truly deserving of his admiration was Loraine.

Yet, he had unjustly defamed her, even disregarding the presentation she had meticulously prepared.

Now, as he carefully studied Loraine's exposed drafts, he realized the extent of his blunder.

Had he paid attention, he would have realized that Loraine's revised drafts had superior designs compared to the stolen version presented by Keely.

While Keely had deceived him, he had also been culpable for blindly trusting her, resulting in this debacle.

However, Leopold was not the kind to shield his own reputation at the cost of the truth. Recognizing his mistake, he swiftly dialed Klein.

"Mr. Moore, I've decided to call a press conference. I need to apologize to Loraine publicly and rectify my blunders."





## Chapter 504 An Invitation From Leopold

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Upon hearing the news from Klein over the phone, Loraine couldn't help but express doubt.

"Professor Zizka will apologize to me?"

Since her initial encounter with Leopold, she had perceived him as someone who always held himself in high regard. Even if he was in the wrong, at most, he might consider himself duped, but apologize?

Noticing her disbelief, Klein immediately defended Leopold.

"Loraine, Professor Zizka never intended to single you out. He was tricked by Keely! While abroad, he encountered numerous impoverished individuals who lacked the means to showcase their talents, so he frequently assisted such students in achieving their architectural dreams. When Keely plagiarized your designs, he thought he was nurturing a budding talent, thus he made an exception and accepted her as a student despite her criminal record. Now, knowing the truth, he feels deep remorse and wishes to apologize sincerely."

Loraine was taken aback upon hearing this.

She knew of Leopold's esteemed reputation within the industry. Alongside his talent, he was known for his exceptional ethics and generosity towards the younger generation, making his voice influential in the architectural design sphere.

However, their initial interactions had cast a shadow over her perceptions of Leopold.

Yet now, he was ready to acknowledge his mistake and offer an apology. In this light, Loraine found herself unable to hold a grudge against him.

Loraine didn't think it was necessary for a much-revered figure like Leopold to issue a public apology.

"Mr. Moore, please convey to Professor Zizka that I accept his apology. There is no need for a press conference, an online statement would suffice."

After agreeing to her request, Klein ended the call. However, by the afternoon, he contacted Loraine again. "Professor Zizka insists on holding a press conference to apologize. He deeply regrets the situation and believes anything less won't sufficiently express his sincerity."

Loraine was about to refuse once more when it struck her that this could provide a platform to advance the White Cloud Airport project. "Alright. We can utilize the press conference to promote the airport development plan and announce it concurrently. This will also provide a fitting conclusion to this entire episode."

"No problem!"

The plagiarism controversy linked to the White Cloud Airport project had garnered significant attention. Hence, as soon as the press conference was announced, it triggered an intense online and offline debate.

The venue was packed with reporters on the day of the press conference.

Dressed in a long, elegant shawl dress, Loraine made an impressive appearance, immediately drawing all eyes towards her.

Leopold showed no sign of embarrassment. At the onset, he bowed deeply, almost ninety degrees, to Loraine.

"I am truly sorry for having accused Loraine without thorough investigation. It goes against my academic principles and has also caused significant distress to Loraine. I deeply regret my actions."

Loraine promptly rose to her feet, returned the bow and said candidly, "Professor Zizka, the blame isn't solely yours. Your willingness to apologize publicly reflects your magnanimity. I accept your apology and I forgive you."

The audience broke into enthusiastic applause. Both Leopold's integrity and Loraine's graciousness and civility received widespread praise.

Klein too lauded their actions on stage. With a smile, he announced, "On this remarkable day, under this spotlight, we not only witnessed the reconciliation between Miss Torres and Professor Zizka but also have exciting news to share. The White Cloud Airport in Vagow is set to be revamped. The government intends to invite the Universe Group, the Bryant Group, and Professor Zizka to collaborate on the redevelopment of the White Cloud Airport!"

The crowd erupted in cheers. They'd been expecting this news, so it wasn't a surprise. What truly astounded them were the words that followed from Leopold.

Leopold extended one hand to Loraine, grabbed the microphone with the other, and said, "Miss Torres, your design is exceptional and I admire it greatly. If you are



willing, I hope you will join my team as chief designer."

This revelation not only startled Loraine but left the entire audience in shock.

Typically, even if a master of Leopold's stature admired a newcomer, he might at most take him or her under his wing.

Though Loraine was not a novice and had her share of achievements, she was not well known in the industry. Thus, Leopold's proposition of her becoming his team's chief designer was unexpected.

In the midst of exclamations, Loraine remained silent for a long while, causing a tinge of disappointment in Leopold. He sighed, "Loraine, do you still harbor resentment against me for my past actions?"


Loraine shook her head as she clarified, "No, I deeply appreciate your offer, but I don't believe I've attained the proficiency required to lead a world-class design team... Additionally, I have the Universe Group to manage, and I'm afraid I can't devote my full attention to the team."

A sudden realization dawned upon Leopold. Expressing regret, he suggested, "I was not very considerate. What if, instead, you joined my team as a guest designer?"

Guest designers aren't required to commit full-time and can garner valuable knowledge. This time, Loraine didn't decline and readily agreed, "It would be an honor!"

Following the press conference, the event made headlines, and related videos began circulating online, instigating heated discussions amongst netizens.

When Keely watched the video of Loraine shaking hands

 +120 Points at most  
with Leopold, witnessing their reconciliation and Loraine  
being appointed as a guest designer, she seethed with rage.

This honor should have been hers!



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## Chapter 505 Add Insult To Injury

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Right when Keely was on the brink of losing her cool, her phone rang.

The moment Keely answered, Marina wasted no time and asked, "Keely, what did you tell us back then? Why did Loraine become more popular now? Why is your teacher favoring her? My mother and I plotted against Loraine to take the airport project away from her and offer it to the Bryant Group, making my grandma elated. But now, all our plans are down the drain. What's your game plan?"

Keely's forehead furrowed in irritation. Marina's constant complaining and lack of understanding were grating on her nerves.

She was all set to let loose a stinging retort. Why should she care if Marina was trying to win over Liza?

But then a thought struck her, and she held her tongue.

In the difficult situation she was currently in, allies were scarce and hard to come by. Marina, despite her naivety, could serve as a valuable asset.

Furthermore, both Marina and Laura had a link to the Bryant family, a connection she might need to exploit in order to get closer to Marco.

With this in mind, Keely adopted a friendly demeanor and reassured Marina, "Don't worry, Marina. I'll visit the Bryants



' house to collaborate on a strategy with you."

These words comforted Marina, and she nodded, slightly dazed.

After disconnecting the call, a thrilled Marina clasped Laura's arm, saying, "Mom, relax. Keely assured she'd come by and assist us."

Laura shot her a disapproving look and snapped, "What's the point if she does show up? If your brother learns of her presence, we're in for a world of trouble!"

Even though Marco had been away for a while, Laura knew there was no guarantee that news of Keely's visit wouldn't reach him.

If Marco discovered that they had been conspiring with Keely against Loraine...

Just the thought made Laura shudder. Life was tough enough as it was. Another issue cropping up could very well make things even worse.

Just then, Liza descended the stairs with her usual poise. She frowned at the sight of Laura and Marina chatting away on the couch. "Laura, why aren't you preparing dinner? Trying to starve me, are you?"

In a bid to teach Laura and Marina a lesson, Liza had been throwing her weight around, assigning them odd jobs. She had Laura, used to a life of luxury, do kitchen duties and had Marina run errands.

Laura's face grew gloomy at this, but she dared not retort to Liza. With a reluctant sigh, she made her way towards the kitchen.

Marina's heart pounded as she quietly turned to slip away unnoticed.

"Marina!" Liza's voice halted her. "Come over here and give my legs a good massage."

Teeth gritted, Marina held her tongue.

Why should she, a Bryant, be subjected to such treatment?

Just because she'd let it slip that Marco was illegitimate, didn't mean she was any less of a Bryant.

But Liza, crafty as she was, had kept her and Laura under her thumb, and seemed to derive pleasure from making their lives difficult.

Regardless of her simmering resentment, Marina knew better than to defy Liza. She settled down beside Liza and began massaging her shoulders and legs.

Having worked Liza's legs for a while, Marina's hands began to throb. She pressed her lips together and glanced around absentmindedly.

To Marina's surprise, she looked up and witnessed Marco entering through the door.

Caught off guard, she blurted, "What brings you here?"

Marco ignored her, his face devoid of expression. He hung up his suit jacket and remained silent.

Liza's interest was piqued as she turned and saw Marco. A wave of joy washed over her. Slapping Marina's face, she reprimanded, "Why should your brother need a reason to come home?"

Despite the chaos Marina had created with her revelation about Marco's origins, Liza still hoped for harmony within the family. At least on the surface.

Upon Marco's return, Liza assumed he had reconsidered his actions and regained composure. With a smile, she promptly summoned Laura from the kitchen and spoke up.

"It's been ages since we last gathered. Marco, your mother and Marina have been keeping a low profile and not stirring up any trouble. Your mother has even taken up cooking and has whipped up something special. Why don't you stay for dinner?"

Liza remained oblivious to the serious expression on Marco's face since his arrival, while Laura instantly grew flustered as soon as she laid eyes on him.

Disregarding Liza's attempts to please him, Marco cast a cold glance at Laura and Marina, his voice deep and menacing. "Did you two employ the individuals spreading rumors about Loraine online?"

