

"Beware!" Vinson's immediate reflex action was to cover Arielle's head with his bare arm. Unfortunately, his arm got hit by the debris and was severely injured.

Terrified by the gory sight, Arielle quickly checked on him.

Before she could have a look at it, he withdrew his arm.

"You..."

He interrupted her, "I'm fine. Quick, keep trying and see if it works."

Though worried sick, Arielle kept quiet and tried to focus her attention on the computer. Frowning, she returned to her seat.

Debris and residual flames kept falling from the floor above. Soon, the entire room was on fire before they realized it.

At that critical moment, Arielle could not be distracted. *I must hurry up before the room gets burnt down. By then, the computers will be completely destroyed. Consequently, the glass door will remain shut forever.*

*Thump!* Another big piece of concrete dropped and hit the chair not too far from Arielle.

Biting her lips, she ignored it and continued typing away on the keyboard.

She was determined to hack into the attacker's terminal and open that dreaded door.

*Even if it's not for me, I must do my very best and fight till the end for all the innocent lives still trapped in this building. After all, I'm not alone.*

She took a quick peek at Vinson, who was covering her head with a block of wood, then channeled her attention back to the complicated operation.

With grit and full concentration, Arielle managed to break the attacker's firewall within five minutes.

At the same moment, fire had started devouring the room.

Vinson walked to the window and pulled down all the curtains forcefully. He stepped on them to extinguish the parts which were on fire. Then, he used them to douse the fire on other areas of the room.

However, it was more like a never-ending story. The earlier explosion on the floor above had caused tiny flames to keep falling into their room. Sweating profusely, Vinson was just not able to stamp out all the flames before they grow again.

Persistently, he wiped away the sweat that blurred his vision and kept fighting the fire.

Just in the nick of time...

Arielle managed to break through another firewall

and began searching for the attacker's terminal.

The latter was so devious. A few similar codes were set up to mask the actual location of the terminal. Arielle fell into their traps a few times and made several mistakes.

At this point in time, the fire started burning out of control.

"Arielle, we've got not much time left to spare. If we don't leave in five minutes, this building is going to collapse!" Vinson warned while putting out the flames.

Covered with ashes, his handsome face could hardly be recognized.

Even so, he was still alluding an extremely strong aura. Looking decisive, intimidating, and hostile, he stood firm like a mountain, ready to battle with the fire until the very end.

Arielle said, gritting her teeth, "Ten minutes, give me another ten minutes! I'll sure be able to find it."

Meanwhile, a piece of burning wood suddenly fell from the top.

"Watch out!" Vinson attempted to leap to her side, but he was too late.

Fortunately, Arielle was fast to react. She rose to her feet, leaned sideways, and performed a fierce spinning kick which successfully broke the block into two.

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"You're not hurt, are you?" Fretting, Vinson held her hand as soon as he got to her side. "We can't stay here any longer. We have to leave immediately."

"No! I'll be done in a jiffy, just give me ten more minutes!"



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Arielle and Vinson locked eyes. Her unwavering gaze communicated her firm stance whereas his stern gaze reflected the blaze surrounding them.

The two looked like they were battling in silence.

In the end, Vinson could not bear it and gave in. Turning his head away, he agreed. "Fine, ten minutes. I'll give you ten more minutes."

Without any further delay, he removed his jacket and put it on Arielle. Afterwards, he went back to the corner where the flames were burning and continued to fight it.

*Even if I'll die here eventually, I'll strive for that ten minutes for Arielle.*

"Ahem... Ahem..." Arielle coughed while covering up her nose. Speedily, she returned to her previous position and searched for the terminal that was controlling the smart door.

The conflagration consuming the premises did not spark even a hint of fear in her. Focused, she was adamant in her quest.

*Come on, just a little bit faster. I can't let Vinson down, I must bring him out of here.*

In the midst of it all, the concerned Vinson would still keep an eye on Arielle. Sitting upright, the bright light of the fire reflected on her fair skin, giving her a layer of radiant glow. *What a breathtaking side profile!*

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As his gaze grew to be more intense, he willfully turned away and carried on with fire fighting.

He had made an attempt to open up the windows, but they were all sealed.

The worst thing was that the windows were made out of the same material as the glass door, which would not crack nor break.

*It seems like someone has it all planned out. Someone wants me dead.*

Vinson had been tricked several times by the mastermind behind all these evil deeds. He knew that the other party was insidious, but he did not expect him to be so vicious, to the extent of sacrificing so many innocent souls just to get him killed.

*This is absolutely ruthless and cruel!*

Meanwhile, on a private island in the west coast, where winter spanned all year round...

Covered in a silver fox coat, a man with regal dignity sat in a dark room. His eyes were fixated on the burning woods in the fireplace.

Picking a lit firewood up with his slender fingers, he chucked it into the blaze accurately.

*Let it burn, let it burn fiercely...*

The man curled his thin lips slyly, showcasing his angular jaw line.

Right then, the door opened abruptly and interrupted the tranquility in the room.

The man furrowed his brows and stared into the direction of the door.

The light beaming through the door aperture shone on the man, revealing the lower half of his stunning face.

"What is it?" the man spoke with an Ustranation accent.

The person who barged in said breathlessly, "Finally, I found you! I already said you'd be here at the old house, but Gerald insisted that you've gone hunting with the wolves. I've wasted so much time..."

Impatiently, the man tapped the floor twice with his foot. "Get to the point."

"Oh, yes! Gerald would like you to make a trip there. He says that the server has been hacked. The IP of the intruder shows the location of Southall Group, which is where our people ambushed..."

The man stood up at once and left the room rapidly like a gust of wind, leaving behind his footprints on the snow.

"Duke, wait for me!" Putting on his hat, his subordinate chased after him.


A few minutes later, the duke arrived at a medieval


castle.


He headed straight into the basement and entered the very last room.

The moment he stepped in, a wave of instant noodles aroma hit him in the face.

He lowered his eye and saw the cup of instant noodles on the floor and an unkempt blonde.

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The duke strode across and asked coldly, "What happened?"

Cringing, Gerald cried in disbelief, "My carefully designed firewall and programming codes were cracked..."

"Get to the point," the Duke demanded. "I don't care about the process, I just want to know the results."

Gerald stammered, "Re... Results? They will be able to track us within two... two minutes."

The Duke was perturbed by his statement.

He knew that Vinson had many talents around him, officially and in secret. He even had Carter, who was an adept at everything related to technology.

Hence, he picked Southall Group as the location to launch his attack. He terminated all of their communication signals to cut off any contact between Vinson and Carter.

*There shouldn't be an issue since Carter isn't in the big picture. What went wrong? Does Vinson have other professionals around him whom I don't know?*

Gerald explained, "Duke, we have a decision to make. Their intention is obvious, they want to take control of the systems. If we grant them access, they won't have the time to track our location. If we don't, they'll be able to locate us in no time. Consequently, we won't be able to stay in the dark

anymore. Once we're exposed, it's harder for us to fight them..."

The duke fell silent.

*Once we give them full control, this plan will be ruined. Should I make this easy for Vinson?*

He was very reluctant.

To him, the current plan was the most ideal one as it took place at the right place and the best time when Vinson was fully unaware of the trap ahead of him. He wondered if he could score another opportunity in the future to deceive Vinson and pin him down.

Clenching his fists in anger, his bulging veins shown.

Clicking on the keyboard, Gerald urged, "Duke, you've got to make a call now. They're getting insanely fast. I can't even rebuild the firewall quickly enough to stop them from getting through. Oh no, I can't hold it any longer. They are going to nail us in no time!"

"Duke!" Frantically, Gerald stood up and yelled in a high-pitched voice.

Gritting his teeth, the Duke uttered, "Give it to them."

Relieved, Gerald pressed the key...

Across the coast, the third explosion just

happened at Southall Group.

*Bomb!* A loud crash sounded from upstairs.

Thankfully, it occurred far away from the first floor. Thus, it did not impact the security room directly.

However, the ceiling which was already crumbling shook vigorously due to the tremor. Losing its pivot, it was collapsing gradually.

"It's too late!" Vinson grabbed Arielle's hand and shouted, "Let's go now, it's going to fall in ten seconds!"

Motionless, Arielle stared at the screen. "I'm almost there. Soon, I'll succeed."

"Forget it! Leave now!"

Right then, a large concrete steel fell off the ceiling from the opposite corner across the room.

Comically enough, the windows stood rooted on its fixtures, as stable as rock, without a single crack.

Arielle pushed him away and yelled, "You go first, let me try once more!"

She wanted to take a risk without dragging him down with her.

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"Damn it!" Vinson cursed under his breath. He decided to ignore Arielle's words and take matters into his own hands. Then, he picked her up from the chair and walked towards the exit.

"Let go of me!" Arielle struggled. Give me five more seconds! Just five seconds!"

"It's too late for that now!" Vinson carried her as he ran.

Yet, a white box popped out on the computer screen and it had "Software deleted" written in English.

Arielle's eyes lit up. "We've regained access to control!"

Vinson stopped in his tracks as soon as he saw the screen too.

Arielle quickly scrambled out of his arms and ran towards the computer. She began to type rapidly across the keyboard.

A second later, the computer prompted an instruction that said, "The door is open."

"It's open!" she exclaimed excitedly.

Her excitement did not last long before the ceiling began to collapse.

It all happened so quickly, even Vinson didn't see it coming.

Fortunately, Arielle was quick on her foot to avoid the ceiling from crushing on her. She somersaulted and threw herself on Vinson.

Vinson was instantly pulled into reality as he grabbed her and dragged her out of the room.

The ceiling collapsed to the ground the moment they stepped out of the place. It turned into ruins in the sea of fire and dust.

Consequently, Arielle could hear the sound of the door on the lower floor of the building opened.

Many people shouted in joy, "It's opened! It's finally opened! Run!"

Arielle let out a sigh as he locked eyes with Arielle. "I told you, there was no chance for us to die in here." He smiled in relief.

Vinson looked deep into her eyes and replied, "Yeah. I guess I owe you another one."

*Great, now I owe her yet another one for saving my life again.*

She nodded, "Don't forget to wire me the money."

*I am never going to crack a "marry me" joke anymore. Or else, he's going to say crap like I was hinting at him or something.*

Vinson, on the other hand, nodded solemnly. "I got it. I'll give you whatever's left in my account once we get out of here."

Arielle was stunned as she could not tell if he was joking or did he mean it.

*Do you want to give me all your money? Well, I certainly can't take that!*

"Let's go." She ignored him to avoid further misunderstanding as she walked towards the stairway that led to the safety tunnel.

However, she suddenly thought of something as she reached the stairway.

*Oh yeah, I haven't opened the secret compartment in the CEO's office! I'm sure there wouldn't be anyone up there. So, if I go over right now, I can find what I want without being spotted.*

She halted in her tracks and turned to Vinson.  
"You go ahead, I'll meet up with you very soon."

He frowned and stared at her suspiciously. "What else do you need to do? The door's opened."

"I have left something on the top floor and I have to get it back. Go, I'll meet you in five minutes."

Vinson disagreed and dragged her by the arm towards the safety tunnel. "Absolutely not! I'm not going without you. No one can guarantee if this building might blow up again. What if the entire building collapses? You have to go with me now!"

Arielle tightened her grip onto the door of the safety tunnel as the other hand tried to break free from Vinson's grip. "I'm not going anywhere until I

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get it! This is very important to me and this is my last chance!"

Before Vinson could persuade her any further, she quickly took a step backward and closed the door. She then locked the door behind her.



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"Arielle, come back here! Are you out of your mind?" Vinson banged the door forcefully.

"Leave now! Don't worry. I'll meet you as soon as I retrieve what I want. I promise you that I won't die in here."

With that, she ignored Vinson's screams and sprinted towards the top floor.

The entire building was filled with thick smoke from the fire.

It wasn't for long before the fire-rescue department and the police arrived.

Vinson was found by a group of firefighters.

"Sir, I need you to leave with us immediately. We have to evacuate as there may be another explosion!"

He rejected them and said, "No! My friend is still up there!"

A firefighter looked at him, wide-eyed. "What? You mean there's someone up there?"

At the same time, another firefighter appeared.

"Captain, I have bad news! According to some witnesses, there's a bunch of kids stuck at the top floor!"

"What?" The captain adjusted his helmet and said to Vinson. "Sir, I need you to leave with them right now! I will bring your friend back to you."

"No, I'm coming with you. Get someone to pry open the door!"

"Sir, I can't let you take the risk. It's too dangerous. Hey, someone get him out of here!"

Then, a few fire fighters dragged him towards the exit.

At this moment, there was a fourth explosion.

The commotion of the explosion shook the entire building.

"Captain, the building might crumble any time and we don't know if there would be another explosion. Should we retreat?"

The captain hesitated when he heard those words.

It was a split decision to head up or head out.

In the meantime, the female employees thought that their children were evacuated by the caretaker when the explosion happened.

To their dismay, the 'specialized staff' only cared for herself and had left the children behind. They were furious and shocked when they heard the news. With that, they turned and ran towards the building.

However, they were stopped by the firefighters before they could even reach the entrance.

"The building's going to collapse any moment. You

can't go up there!"

"Let us in, please! Our children are still inside the building! Please, I beg you!"

"Please save our children! I can't lose her." She sobbed.

"Get out of my way! I need to get in there!"

The scene was a mess and filled with cries of helplessness and car sirens.

At the moment, Arielle was out of breath when she reached the top floor of the building.

The air was coated with thick smoke and the oxygen levels were running dangerously low.

She tore a piece of cloth from her top and drenched it with water. Then, she lowered her body as she approached the office.

Suddenly, she stopped walking when she heard a loud cry.

*Who's crying? Perhaps someone was still on the top floor? I thought everyone has left the building.*

She thought it was her imagination. However, she realized it was real and more than one person was crying.

*What's going on here?*

She followed the direction of the sound and

arrived at the kids playroom.

She opened the door and found a bunch of children in the room while the 'specialized staff' was nowhere to be seen.

"Damn it!" She gritted her teeth.

*I always knew the fellow didn't have the heart to take care of children, but how could she abandoned them when the building exploded. What a monster! Forget it, now's not that time to point fingers.*

She walked up to them and said, "Hey kid, could you lead the other kids to safety? Just take the stairs and get to the bottom. There's a fire going on so you can't stay here anymore."

"Mommy, I want my mommy..." the child whimpered.



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Arielle tried to convince them patiently. "Your mom's waiting for you at the bottom. You'll all see your moms as soon as you reach the exit."

The older ones began to calm down when they heard her words. Then, they helped a few children on their feet and ushered them towards the exit.

However, a few children were too young and could barely walk. Consequently, the older ones had a difficult time managing every child with their hands full.

She initially wanted to go to the CEO's office but hesitated when she saw what happened.

*I'm pretty sure there's something that I want hiding in the secret compartment, but these kids... their lives matter too...*

The ground beneath her shook even more vigorously when she was in a dilemma. Arielle knew that the building would collapse at any moment.

She took one look at CEO's office that was wide open. She made up her mind and carried two babies and ran towards the exit.

As soon as she walked out of the door, she heard a loud voice ringing through the stairway.

Arielle's eyes gleamed in surprise, "Vinson? What're you doing here?"

He looked at her and replied, "I told you, I'm not

letting you die here! Give me the child!"

Arielle quickly handed him the child and was ready to head back to the room to get the remaining children. "Wait, aren't you going to get what you left behind?" Vinson called out.

Arielle stopped and turned back to him, "I think you'll need my help. It's going to be a little challenging for you to lead them all by yourself..."

"But, you said that that thing was very important to you, right? We don't have much time now. It'd be too late for you to come back up once we've sent the children to safety. Go and get it and catch up with us."

"But..."

"No buts! Just go!" he urged.

*He's right. I wouldn't make it if I followed them to the bottom and make my way up again. This is my last chance. If I don't do it now, my questions might remain unanswered forever.*

She frowned at the choice given to her as she struggled to make a decision.

Finally, she made up her mind and strode to the office.

*It's a great opportunity that I just can't miss. I've been plotted against a few times as soon as I returned to the country in secret. I did all this to get to the bottom of the truth.*

*I can't hesitate anymore!*

She hastened her steps and arrived at the CEO's office.

Vinson stared at Arielle's figure for a brief moment before leading the children down the stairs. The older children walked at the front while Vinson led a group of young children of six with two in his hands.

Suddenly, another explosion occurred on the floor Vinson and the children were at.

"Ahh!" they screamed.

The oldest children who had been the calmest were instantly overcome with fear when they heard the explosion.

"Mom!" An older child wailed. He panicked and ran towards the exploded floor, leaving behind the younger children.

"Hey, kid! Come back!" Vinson yelled.

The explosion had just happened moments ago, so the ground beneath them might break away anytime.

Yet, the child quickly disappeared before Vinson could stop him.

He wanted to chase after him desperately, but he was tied down by two children in his hands and many other panicky children around him.

*I could go after him, but what would these kids do if I did? They're way too young to be able to take care of themselves.*



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"Damn it!" Vinson cursed as he was stuck in a dilemma.

The air was surrounded with smoke from the burning objects in the building and the temperature had risen to an unbearable level.

*Huh, what do I do now? Do I leave that child?*

Vinson glanced at the crying babies and decided to head downstairs.

*These kids might die if I choose to save that one guy. I have no other option.*

Just as Vinson took a couple of steps down the stairs, he heard a trail of footsteps behind him.

He turned and saw Arielle running towards him. "Are the kids alright?" she asked worriedly.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" he asked in astonishment.

Arielle shook her head silently, "I was worried you wouldn't be able to handle things alone when I heard the explosion. So, I decided to circle back."

"Then, what about the stuff you wanted?" He frowned.

Arielle opened her mouth but didn't know what to say.

*Human life was far more important than the things in life. If I dumped these kids to search for the item,*

*I would be no different than the murderer who killed my mother.*

Vinson knew what was on her mind judging from her expression. "You're such an idiot!" He glanced at her.

Arielle rolled her eyes at him as she carried a wailing child in her hand. "No one was hurt from the explosion, right?"

Then, Vinson thought of the kid that ran off by himself. "No, but one of the kids ran off by himself." He shook his head.

"What?" Arielle was shocked.

Vinson shoved the baby into her arms while taking a few steps down and said, "You take the children down first and I'll catch up with you once I find him!"

"Vinson!" Arielle hugged the child tightly. "Your life belongs to me! So don't you dare die until I say so!"

Vinson was stunned for a second as his lips curled into a grin. "Don't worry. No one can take my life but you," he reassured.

He turned and ran into the floor that was on fire as soon as he said so. Arielle had no choice but to watch his figure vanish in the thick smoke. She could not help but feel a weird feeling creeping up to her.

It was as if a seed was planted in her heart and now it was slowly sprouting...

"Miss, I want my mom..." A child who held the edge of her shirt cried out.

Arielle was immediately pulled back into reality and said, "Okay, I'll take you to your mom now!"

She wasted no time as she carried two children in her arms and led the group of children to safety.

Going down ten flights of stairs would be a piece of cake if it was Arielle alone. Yet, she had so many children with her while carrying two in her arms. As a result, she felt so weak and exhausted.

Moreover, she had inhaled the smoke in the air, causing her to cough which slowed down the pace.

She had no strength left in her when they reached the lobby on the first floor.

Meanwhile, the group of female employees was pleading for the firefighters to save their children.

"Please save my child! Please, she's only six months!"

"My son! He's still in there! Please, let me in!"


"I won't want to live anymore if anything happens to my child!" someone cried.


"Let go of me! If you won't save them, let us do it!"




Let me go now!"

The scene was gradually becoming chaotic as the firefighters could not contain the panicked female employees.

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The firefighters glanced at one another and back at the parents. They understood how important their children meant to them.

One of the firefighters stood out and said, "Captain, let us in! It's my job to bring every person to safety and I'd feel better of myself even if I could only save only one child!"

The captain's eyes were scarlet as he shouted, "It is the commander's order for all of you to stay put! Now, help me stop these parents from rushing in. I will not allow any of them to risk their lives like this!"

The firefighter was indignant. "Captain! There are approximately a dozen lives stuck up there. Besides, they're kids! How could you be so cold-hearted?"

The captain replied emotionlessly, "You're right. I am cold-hearted. That's why I didn't allow you to enter the building."

"What do you mean?" the firefighter asked.

The captain wore his helmet and answered, "Don't you get it? I've been here all this while and I didn't enter the building. So if the commander asks, you know what to say. Got it?"

The firefighter's eyes were instantly filled with tears, "Captain, are planning to go on your own?"

"The building's about to collapse any time and I can't watch you risk your lives. So, I've decided

that if death was going to take someone away today, it'd be me. Standby, everyone! I'm going to the toilet!"

Then, he rushed into the building as he said those words.

On the other hand, Arielle was completely exhausted. She was merely ten meters away from the hall, yet she couldn't move another inch.

Her breathing had become very difficult for she had inhaled too much smoke. Consequently, her vision started to blur.

She knew she was at her limit. Then, her feet gave away as she fell forward.

However, she instinctively rolled over as she knew she had carried two children in her arms. Her head was first to come into contact with the ground as she fell.

"Miss!" The older children rushed to her side.

"I can't take another step. So, could you please take these kids to their mothers? Just walk another ten meters and you'll see the door. Your moms are waiting for you there," Arielle croaked.

A few children shook their heads and cried, "No, I want you to go with us..."

A child even tried to help her to her feet. Nonetheless, the child had very little strength to support Arielle's weight. So, she fell to the ground

once more.

She shook her head and said weakly, "There's no time left. You go first and call for help. Alright?"

The children nodded, teary-eyed as they grabbed the two babies from Arielle and rushed towards the exit.

Arielle exhausted her last bit of energy to watch them run out of the door and sighed in relief.

She was relieved that the children were away from danger, but her vision had worsened at the same time. She could not help herself but gave away to darkness as her eyes closed.

Before she lost consciousness, she vaguely saw a man in a fire-fighting suit rushing towards her.

"Miss, can you hear me? Wake up!"

Arielle did not respond to the captain's words but he noticed she was still breathing. Hence, he immediately carried Arielle on his back and made their way out.

Running while carrying someone on their backs was an easy task due to their years of training. Thus, both he and Arielle got out of the building in no time.

The children had finally reunited with their parents, and the sound of crying was heard.

Iris rushed to Arielle's side and cried, "Ms. Sannie,

is she alright? Is she still alive?"

"Yes, she's alive! Water! I need water over here!"



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