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# **The favela pact**

## **THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL**

When Survival Becomes the Only Option

## THE FAVELA PACT

“As a former flight attendant with 15,000 flying hours and 15 years in the skies, I’ve seen, heard, and experienced moments that linger long after landing. From the confined cabin of an aircraft—where the boundary between the ordinary and the unexplainable feels razor-thin—to the vibrant and mysterious layovers around the globe, every journey holds its own story. While this series is a work of fiction, it draws inspiration from the many faces, places, and whispers I’ve encountered throughout my years of flight.”

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# Chapter 1: Arrival in Rio



THICK WITH JET FUEL and recycled cabin air, the air was heavy inside the jet bridge. Sofia Alvarez adjusted her navy blue scarf, her footsteps, in perfect sync, echoing down the walkway with the click of heels. Around her, other crew members of Flight 362 stifled yawns or stretched discreetly to shake off the fatigue of the 11-hour journey from Los Angeles.

Tom Williams, ever the wit, leaned in and playfully nudged Sofia with a grin. "Think we'll get to meet a samba queen tonight?" he said in his distinctive British accent, which cut through the quiet murmur of the group.

Perhaps she can teach you how to dance," Sofia shot back, her voice raised, though a tiny smile would not be hidden.

The Brazilian flight attendant, a beautiful woman named Gabriela Santos, laughed. "You'll be lucky if they let you into a samba club looking like that, Tom."

"Oi! This is premium British here," Tom said with a grin, tugging on his jacket to straighten an already somewhat rumpled uniform.

Captain Jim Connors walked several paces ahead, turned briefly, and in his baritone voice, he demanded attention. "All right, let's focus. We have got forty-eight hours here-keep it professional when you are outside, folks.

Sofia noticed the way his eyes lingered on Maria Gonzalez, senior flight attendant. A subtle glance, but enough to set her instincts

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tingling. Maria caught it too, her lips tightening briefly before she nodded.

The glass doors of the airport slid apart and out burst the bright chaos of Galeão Airport. Right away, Sofia's senses were assaulted by the swirl of Portuguese announcements, the scent of fresh pão de queijo from a nearby kiosk, the balmy humidity clinging to her skin.

"So," Yara Haddad said, flipping her sleek black hair over one shoulder, "what's the plan? Beach or shopping?"

Maria's voice cut sharply in. "First we get to the hotel, then you can do as you like -within reason."

"Within reason," Yara repeated mockingly, but said no more as Maria fixed her with a stern expression.

Sofia hung back a little, taking it all in. She had always been drawn to the vibrancy of new cities—the promise of adventure, the stories waiting to be uncovered. Yet, there was an edge to Rio de Janeiro she couldn't quite place. It wasn't just the palpable energy; it was the shadows in the corners, the whispers of stories left untold.

She was so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't noticed Lucas Carvalho, standing near the arrivals hall, his eyes-green as emeralds-scanning the crowd. His gaze rested on her for a fraction of a second longer than the others, but he didn't approach. Not yet. As the crew boarded their shuttle to the hotel, Sofia leaned her head against the window, the sprawling city unfolding before her like a tapestry of vivid colors and jagged edges. For a fleeting moment, she thought she saw Lucas again, standing on a street corner, watching. "You okay?" Amara Patel asked softly, lowering herself beside her. "Yeah," Sofia replied, shaking the thought away. "Just tired." But as the shuttle merged into Rio's chaotic traffic, a feeling that someone-or something-was watching them would not let her go.

Sofia Alvarez sat near the window of the crew bus, her fingers absently tracing patterns on the glass. Outside, Rio unfurled in vibrant waves—endless green hills crowned with colorful homes and bustling

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streets alive with movement. The rhythmic beat of samba music hummed faintly, as though the city itself had a pulse.

"You've got that look again," Amara Patel said from the seat beside her, smirking as she tucked her hair behind her ear. "The wide-eyed tourist look."

Sofia smiled, turning away from the window. "Can you blame me? Look at this place. It's nothing like home."

"Don't get too dreamy," Maria Gonzalez called from the front of the bus, her tone sharp but not unkind. "Rio's beautiful, yes, but keep your head on straight. We don't need anyone wandering off into trouble."

"I can't even think about wandering off right now," Tom Williams interrupted from the back of the bus. "Not until I get my hands on some of that grilled heaven I smell in the air."

"You mean like the time you mistook street barbecue in Bangkok for 'gourmet,' and we almost lost you to food poisoning?" Yara Haddad shot back, earning a ripple of laughter.

"Focus, team," Captain Connors's steady baritone cut through the noise. He leaned slightly forward, his broad shoulders dwarfing the narrow aisle. "We're guests here. Let's act like it."

Sofia turned her attention back to the window. Copacabana Beach glimmered on the horizon, golden and endless, yet her gaze kept drifting to the hills dotted with the tightly packed favelas. There was something about them, something alive and untamed, that sparked her curiosity. It wasn't the polished world she was used to, but it called to her all the same.

"Let me guess," Amara said, nudging her. "You're already planning to go exploring, aren't you?"

Sofia's smile widened. "Maybe."

The shuttle hummed softly as it wound its way through Rio's chaotic streets. Sofia pressed her forehead to the cool window, her breath fogging the glass as she watched the city unfold. Palm trees

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framed the busy avenues, their shadows stretching across vendors selling everything from tropical fruits to trinkets. The aroma of roasted corn and sizzling meat wafted in through the vents.

“Smell that?” Gabriela Santos leaned over, her voice tinged with pride. “That’s Rio.”

“Smells like grilled heaven,” Tom said, craning his neck. “Can we stop?”

“You can barely smell your own feet over your cologne,” Yara Haddad fired back, earning a snicker from the back of the shuttle.

“Focus, everyone,” Captain Connors’s deep voice carried over the banter. His broad shoulders dominated the front row, his gaze steady on the road ahead. “This is your first impression of Rio. Make it count.”

As the shuttle passed Copacabana Beach, a collective gasp filled the cabin. The glittering ocean stretched endlessly, its waves crashing against golden sands. Beachgoers lounged under colorful umbrellas, their laughter carried on the breeze. Sofia’s chest tightened. It was beautiful, sure, but her eyes drifted to the hillside favelas. The colors were the same, but the rhythm felt... different. Like a story she wasn’t yet ready to hear.

“You look like you’re in another world,” Amara nudged her. “Everything okay?”

“Just... thinking,” Sofia replied, her fingers brushing the condensation on the window. “Rio’s bigger than I imagined.”

“You’re bigger than you imagine,” Amara said with a wink. Sofia couldn’t help but laugh.

“Is it always this vibrant?” Yara asked Gabriela.

“Vibrant, dangerous, beautiful,” Gabriela replied. “It’s everything, all at once.”

The Hotel Solaris rose like a glass beacon against the backdrop of Copacabana Beach, its reflective panels capturing fragments of sunlight and sea. The shuttle pulled to a stop, and the crew disembarked, their uniforms catching the golden light. Sofia shielded her eyes as she took

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it in—the modern architecture, the bustling lobby, the faint scent of tropical flowers carried on the sea breeze.

Inside, the air was cool and crisp, a stark contrast to the heat outside. The crew milled about, collecting room keys from the polished marble counter while the sound of rolling luggage wheels echoed through the lobby.

“Room 704,” Sofia read off her keycard, tucking it into her jacket pocket.

“You’re next to me,” Amara said. “Guess I’ll be hearing you talk in your sleep again.”

“I do not talk in my sleep.”

“Yeah, you do. Last time it was something about waffles.”

“Sounds like a nightmare,” Sofia shot back, grinning.

Across the lobby, Captain Connors exchanged words with the concierge. His tone was measured, but his expression carried the weight of responsibility. Maria hovered nearby, her arms crossed, her brow furrowed in perpetual concern.

As the crew scattered to their rooms, Sofia lingered, her eyes drawn to the floor-to-ceiling windows. The beach stretched out before her, golden and endless, but her gaze shifted to the hills in the distance. There was something about the favelas, something that tugged at her curiosity. She didn’t realize Lucas Carvalho was watching her from across the room, a knowing smile on his face.

Maria stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the captain’s suite, arms crossed as she gazed out at the shimmering Copacabana waves. The golden light from the setting sun bathed her in a warm glow, but her expression remained stormy. The crew was scattered across the suite, drinks in hand, conversations light and easy. Maria wasn’t in the mood to join in.

Sofia approached cautiously, holding two glasses of sparkling water. She extended one to Maria. “You’re missing the fun.”

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Maria didn't move at first, then took the glass without a word. She sipped, her eyes never leaving the waves. "You're excited about this city."

"Shouldn't I be? It's Rio." Sofia leaned against the window, her tone playful but laced with curiosity. "What's on your mind?"

Maria set her glass on the windowsill. "This city isn't just samba and beaches, Sofia. There's a darker side. I've seen it."

"Maria, we're not kids. We know how to stay out of trouble."

"Trouble doesn't always wait for you to find it." Maria's gaze flicked to the rest of the crew, who were laughing at one of Tom's wild stories. "Just...be careful. You don't know what's out there."

"Neither do you," Sofia said, a faint challenge in her tone.

Maria finally turned, her expression softening just a fraction. "I'm serious, Sofia. Listen to me, alright? Enjoy the city, but don't get too comfortable."

Sofia met her gaze for a long moment before nodding. "I hear you."

Maria nodded back, then moved toward the others, joining the circle with a resigned look. Sofia lingered at the window, her eyes on the bustling streets below, a flicker of doubt creeping into her excitement.

The captain's suite on the top floor of the hotel exuded understated luxury. Floor-to-ceiling windows framed the dazzling shoreline, the waves shimmering under Rio's golden-hour light. A cluster of armchairs surrounded a low glass table, and the air carried a faint citrusy scent from a bowl of fresh fruit placed artfully on the counter.

Tom helped himself to a bottle of chilled water, twisting off the cap with a grin. "So, Jim, is this how the other half lives?"

Connors, loosening his tie, smirked faintly as he poured himself a neat whiskey. "One of the perks of being in charge, Williams. Don't get too comfortable—this is work."

"Sure feels like work," Gabriela murmured, eyeing the endless beach view with mock solemnity.



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Sofia lingered by the window, her thoughts half on the conversation behind her and half lost in the hypnotic rhythm of the waves. Amara joined her, leaning close. “You don’t think Maria’s actually mad, do you?”

“She’s not mad,” Sofia replied, her tone easy. “She’s just Maria.”

The group shifted into easy camaraderie, the stresses of their long-haul flight slowly evaporating. Gabriela told stories of her last layover in Buenos Aires, her arms animated as she described a tango club escapade. Tom added exaggerated flourishes to her tale, earning scattered laughs. Even Maria softened, occasionally interjecting with dry humor.

Connors stood apart, drink in hand, observing his crew with a quiet intensity. His gaze lingered on Maria for a moment longer than necessary before shifting to Sofia, who caught his eye and offered a small, curious smile.

“Tomorrow,” Connors announced, raising his glass, “we’re professionals again. Tonight? Enjoy yourselves.”

Laughter echoed through the suite as Tom launched into a wildly inaccurate impersonation of a Brazilian accent, his hands gesturing extravagantly. Yara nearly choked on her drink as she leaned into Gabriela for support, their shared amusement lighting up the room.

“You’d last two seconds in Rio,” Gabriela said through her laughter. “If that.”

“Rude,” Tom replied, placing a hand over his heart. “I’m clearly a natural. They’d adopt me in no time.”

“Adopt you? They’d charge you double at the samba clubs just to get rid of you,” Yara teased.

Maria, seated in the corner, allowed a reluctant smile to tug at her lips. “You’d be in trouble even without the accent.”

Sofia, sipping her water, took in the easy camaraderie. She hadn’t been part of the crew for long, but nights like these made her feel like

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she belonged. Gabriela's quick wit, Amara's warmth, even Maria's sharp edges—they formed a rhythm she could sink into.

As the conversation shifted to plans for the evening, Gabriela nudged Sofia. "What about you? Big plans?"

Sofia shrugged, her thoughts turning briefly to the streets she'd glimpsed from the shuttle. "No big plans. Just...curious about the city. It feels alive."

Connors, leaning casually against the minibar, spoke up. "Curious is good. Reckless isn't. Rio has its charms, but it doesn't forgive mistakes."

The weight in his words stilled the room for a brief moment. Sofia met his gaze, her expression steady. "Noted, Captain."

Maria slipped out of the captain's suite, the lively chatter and laughter fading as the door clicked shut behind her. The energy in the room had been infectious, the crew letting loose after a long flight, but Maria felt the need to reset. Something about layovers always left her both excited and on edge—a strange mix of anticipation and vigilance that never quite left her.

Her heels echoed softly in the quiet hallway as she made her way to her room. She hadn't had a moment to freshen up since their arrival, and if they were heading out for the night, she wanted to feel more like herself. Inside her room, the cool air from the AC greeted her, and she let out a long breath, leaning against the door for a moment.

Her suitcase lay open on the stand, its contents neatly folded. Digging through the layers, Maria pulled out a dress she'd brought for nights just like this: a sleek, black number with thin straps and a modest hemline that hit just above the knee. Not overly revealing, but enough to make a statement. The dress shimmered faintly under the soft room light, the silky fabric clinging to her curves as she slipped it on.

In front of the mirror, she studied her reflection, adjusting the straps to sit just right on her shoulders. She added a gold cuff bracelet to her wrist and slid on her favorite black stilettos, the pointed toes

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and high heels giving her an edge she always liked to carry. Her dark brown hair, still styled in loose waves from earlier, framed her sharp cheekbones and large eyes, which she accentuated with a quick touch-up of liner and mascara.

Maria rarely went out without purpose, but tonight felt like a chance to unwind—though her instincts reminded her to keep her guard up. She grabbed a leather clutch from the dresser, glancing at her reflection once more. She looked polished, poised, and in control. Exactly how she liked to present herself.

As she stepped back into the hallway, her thoughts returned to the crew in the captain's suite. They were all eager for adventure, Sofia most of all, with her starry-eyed wonder about Rio. Maria smiled faintly, thinking of the younger woman. Sofia reminded her of herself during her early days flying—bright-eyed, eager, and perhaps a bit too trusting.

The energy in the captain's suite would have shifted by now, the conversations likely veering toward plans for the night. Maria resolved to rejoin the others, her head high and her heels clicking with purpose. She would let herself enjoy the night, but she also made a mental note to stay sharp. Something about layovers in unfamiliar cities always carried the potential for surprises, and Maria was never one to be caught off guard.

The captain's suite brimmed with the sound of clinking glasses and overlapping conversations. Tom had commandeered the minibar, pouring questionable cocktails while Yara critiqued his mixology skills. Gabriela perched by the window, recounting tales of her family in São Paulo, her hands animated as she spoke.

Sofia leaned against the back of a plush chair, a glass of sparkling water in her hand. Her eyes drifted across the room, taking in the familiar faces of her crewmates. Despite the lighthearted atmosphere, a restlessness gnawed at her edges. She couldn't shake the feeling that the city had more to offer than this gilded hotel suite.

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The knock at the door was sharp and deliberate, cutting through the noise. Captain Connors strode across the room to answer, his posture stiffening as the door swung open. A man stood there, silhouetted against the hallway light. His presence commanded attention before he even spoke.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," he said, his voice smooth, tinged with the rhythmic lilt of Portuguese. He stepped inside with easy confidence, his dark eyes scanning the room before landing on Sofia.

Gabriela's face lit up. "Lucas! I didn't think you'd come."

"You insisted," Lucas replied with a small smile, his gaze flickering between her and Sofia. He looked like he belonged on a travel magazine cover—sun-kissed skin, unruly hair, and a sharp jawline softened by an easy charm.

Gabriela gestured to the group. "Everyone, this is Lucas Carvalho. Best local guide in Rio. He'll make sure you see the real city."

"Real city?" Maria's tone was sharp, her brow arching. "We're here to relax, not go off the beaten path."

Lucas inclined his head, unfazed. "The beaten path is safe, sure. But it's not Rio." His eyes lingered on Sofia again. "Not the Rio I know."

Tom raised his glass in mock salute. "I like this guy already."

Sofia's heart quickened as she returned Lucas's gaze, curiosity sparking in her chest. There was something about him—a magnetism she couldn't ignore.

Maria's arms were crossed tightly as she watched Lucas from across the room. Her lips pressed into a thin line as he charmed the crew with stories of his city, painting vivid pictures of samba clubs, hidden beaches, and bustling markets. His words flowed effortlessly, pulling the group closer with every anecdote.

Sofia sat on the edge of the sofa, leaning forward to catch every word. She barely noticed Maria's sharp glances in her direction.

"You must have seen a lot, being a guide," Yara said, her tone playful but edged with curiosity. "Any wild stories?"

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Lucas shrugged, his grin widening. “Plenty. Tourists aren’t always the smartest, especially after a few caipirinhas.”

Gabriela laughed. “Sounds familiar.”

Maria cleared her throat, stepping into the circle. “And how long have you been doing this, Lucas?”

He turned to her, his expression unreadable. “Long enough.”

“Long enough for what?” Maria’s voice was steady, but her gaze was piercing.

“To know how to keep people safe,” Lucas replied, his tone light but firm. “Even in the parts of Rio people avoid.”

The room fell quiet for a beat, the tension thickening. Sofia glanced between them, sensing the challenge in Maria’s words.

“Well, we’re lucky to have you,” Captain Connors interjected, breaking the silence. “If Gabriela trusts you, that’s good enough for me.”

Maria didn’t reply, but her expression didn’t soften. She stepped back, her eyes lingering on Lucas as he resumed his stories. Sofia couldn’t help but feel the unspoken warning in Maria’s stance, like a thread of unease weaving through the room.

Lucas caught Sofia’s eye again, his grin returning as if the moment had never happened. “You, though,” he said, his voice lower, almost conspiratorial. “I think you’ll appreciate what Rio has to offer.”

Sofia smiled, though a flicker of doubt crept in. She couldn’t tell if Maria’s suspicion was misplaced—or if Lucas really did have something to hide.

The captain’s suite was alive with the chatter of voices and the clink of glasses. Lucas had settled seamlessly into the group, leaning casually against the windowsill with a drink in hand, his eyes scanning the lively crew. Gabriela and Tom were mid-debate about Rio’s best spots for feijoada, their voices overlapping in friendly banter.

“You’re all far too tense for a city like Rio,” Lucas declared, his rich accent cutting through the conversation. He set his glass down with a confident thud. “Let me teach you something that’ll help you unwind.”

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Maria, perched on the armrest of a couch, raised an eyebrow. “And what’s that?”

“Samba,” Lucas replied, flashing an easy smile. “Nothing captures the spirit of this place more.”

The room filled with groans and laughter.

“Dancing? Really?” Tom feigned horror, holding up his hands. “I’m British. We barely move at weddings.”

Lucas ignored the protests and turned toward Sofia, who stood near the edge of the group, observing. “You,” he said, pointing at her. “You look like you have rhythm. Come on.”

Sofia blinked, startled. “Me? I—”

“Don’t think, just feel,” Lucas said, striding over and taking her hand before she could retreat. The others clapped and cheered, encouraging her forward.

He guided her to an open space in the center of the room. “Samba isn’t about perfection,” he said, his voice low enough that only she could hear. “It’s about letting go.”

Sofia’s heartbeat quickened as Lucas positioned her hands, one resting lightly on his shoulder, the other clasped in his. He began with a simple step, his movements smooth and deliberate, his eyes never leaving hers.

“You see? Just like this,” he murmured, leading her through the basic rhythm. “Small steps. Feel the music.”

The upbeat rhythm of samba played from Gabriela’s phone, filling the room with vibrant energy. Sofia stumbled once, and a nervous laugh escaped her.

Lucas tightened his grip on her hand, steadying her. “Relax. You’re doing fine.”

The warmth of his smile melted her hesitation. Sofia let herself follow his lead, her movements growing more fluid with each step. Around them, the crew erupted into cheers and applause as she spun, her cheeks flushed.

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“Not bad for a beginner,” Lucas said, his tone teasing but sincere. “Maybe you were meant for this.”

Sofia couldn’t help but smile. “Maybe I was.”

“Okay, who’s next?” Lucas called, stepping back and looking at the rest of the group. Gabriela raised her hand enthusiastically, pulling Tom forward despite his protests.

Maria watched from the edge of the room, her expression unreadable. She leaned toward Captain Connors. “He’s charming. Too charming.”

Connors chuckled, sipping his drink. “Relax, Maria. He’s just teaching us to dance.”

Maria shook her head slightly, her gaze lingering on Lucas as he moved on to guide Gabriela. Something about him set her on edge, but she kept her thoughts to herself.

As the lesson continued, Sofia drifted back toward the group, still feeling the lingering warmth of Lucas’s hand in hers. His presence had left a mark, one she wasn’t sure she wanted to shake off.

The hum of laughter and the faint clink of glasses filled the captain’s suite. The evening buzzed with a mix of relief and anticipation as the crew loosened up after their long flight. The open windows framed Rio’s twinkling skyline, the ocean breeze mingling with faint strains of samba from the street below.

Lucas leaned against the edge of the sleek bar, his eyes scanning the room before stopping on Sofia. “You’ve all seen Rio through a tourist’s lens. What if I showed you something real?” His voice carried an undercurrent of challenge, as if daring them to step outside their comfort zones.

Sofia tilted her head, curious. “Real? Like what?”

Lucas’s grin widened. “The samba clubs in the favelas. The kind you don’t find on postcards.”

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Gabriela froze mid-pour, exchanging a sharp glance with Maria. “That’s not exactly the safest place for a group like ours,” Gabriela warned, her tone tight.

“You can trust me,” Lucas replied smoothly. “I know the neighborhood. You’d be perfectly safe.”

Maria, seated in the corner, crossed her arms. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea. We’ve got 48 hours, and no one needs to end up in a hospital—or worse.”

“Come on, Maria,” Yara piped up, her fiery spirit hard to contain. “When’s the last time you did something spontaneous? It sounds exciting.”

“I don’t need to risk my neck for excitement,” Maria shot back, her sharp gaze fixed on Lucas. “And neither does anyone else.”

Lucas held her stare without flinching. “I understand your hesitation. But the favelas aren’t just danger and crime. They’re alive with music, culture, and soul. It’s the real Rio.”

Sofia looked between them, her intrigue outweighing her unease. “It does sound like a once-in-a-lifetime experience,” she said quietly, though her voice carried conviction.

Lucas smiled, his emerald-green eyes locking on hers. “Exactly.”

As the room broke into murmurs of debate, Captain Connors raised a hand to quiet them. “If we’re going, we stick together. No exceptions. And we leave the moment I say so. Clear?”

Maria’s lips pressed into a tight line, but she didn’t argue further. The crew’s excitement began to build as Lucas described the samba scene, painting it with vivid strokes that only deepened Sofia’s curiosity.

The group clustered in loose circles around the suite, voices rising and falling in waves. Maria stood firm by the window, her arms crossed, her stern gaze locked on Lucas.

“I’m not trying to be the bad guy here, but this is reckless,” she said, her voice cutting through the chatter. “You don’t know what you’re walking into.”



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"It's not reckless if we're careful," Sofia interjected, her tone measured. "We'll stay with Lucas. He knows the area."

"Does he?" Maria shot back, her skepticism evident. "Or is he just another slick talker who wants to make a quick buck off naive tourists?"

Lucas stepped forward, his expression calm but earnest. "I understand your concerns, Maria. But I wouldn't suggest this if I thought it was dangerous. I've taken groups before—people who wanted more than beaches and shopping malls. They all left with memories they'll never forget."

Tom chuckled, breaking the tension. "Well, I've always wanted to learn samba. How bad could it be?"

"Bad enough that you might regret it," Maria snapped, her frustration bubbling over. "You're putting everyone at risk for a bit of fun."

Captain Connors, who had been observing quietly, finally spoke up. "We'll be smart about it. No wandering off. No unnecessary risks. If anyone feels unsafe at any point, we leave."

Maria shook her head, clearly unconvinced, but didn't argue further. Instead, she turned to Sofia. "You're okay with this?"

Sofia hesitated for a moment before nodding. "I trust Lucas. And I think it could be amazing."

Maria sighed deeply, her shoulders sinking. "Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you."

The room erupted into excitement as plans began to form. Lucas outlined the route and reassured them of the safety measures he'd take. But as the crew's enthusiasm grew, Maria's unease lingered in the background, her instincts warning her of something no one else seemed to see.

The crew stepped into Rio's night like moths drawn to a flickering flame. The air outside the hotel was balmy, buzzing with the sounds of the city: samba rhythms spilling from open doorways, the hum of passing motorcycles, and distant bursts of laughter. Lucas led the way

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with the ease of a local, his green eyes glinting under the streetlights as he navigated the group through the pulsing nightlife of Copacabana.

“Stay close. The city can swallow you whole if you let it,” he quipped, a casual grin softening the warning.

Captain Connors walked near the rear, keeping an eye on the group. Maria was close by, her sharp eyes darting to every shadow, her unease palpable.

“This feels... safe to you?” she murmured to the captain, her tone low but firm.

“It’s a city, Maria, not a battlefield,” Connors replied with a flicker of amusement. “We’ll be fine.”

Ahead, Sofia matched her steps with Lucas’s, the energy of the city electrifying her. “So, Lucas, where’s this samba club you promised?”

“Patience,” he teased, glancing at her. “First, we take a detour. A hidden gem not far from here. Authentic food. Real music.”

Tom overheard and threw an arm around Yara. “Sounds like a setup for a disaster movie,” he joked. “The British guy gets eaten first.”

Yara snorted. “You’re the comic relief. You’d last half an hour, tops.”

Their laughter was infectious, cutting through Maria’s tension. But as Lucas led them further from the bright avenues into quieter streets, Maria’s voice sharpened.

“We’re straying too far,” she warned. “Shouldn’t we stick to the tourist spots?”

“Relax,” Lucas reassured her without breaking stride. “You’re with me.”

Maria’s jaw tightened, but she kept her thoughts to herself as the group disappeared deeper into Rio’s labyrinth.

The vibrant lights of Copacabana gave way to dimmer, narrower streets lined with graffiti-splashed walls and shuttered shops. The music faded to a distant hum, replaced by the occasional bark of a stray dog or the muffled bass of a nearby party. Lucas moved confidently, greeting a few locals with nods and brief words in Portuguese.

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Maria lagged behind, her unease hardening into suspicion. “This doesn’t feel right,” she muttered to Gabriela, who was closest to her.

Gabriela hesitated. “Lucas knows the city. Maybe it’s just... different?”

“It’s reckless,” Maria snapped, her voice low. “We’re following someone we don’t know into places we don’t understand.”

Ahead, Sofia’s laugh rang out as Lucas leaned closer to tell her something. Maria’s chest tightened. She sped up, drawing level with Connors.

“Jim, listen to me. This is a bad idea,” she said firmly.

Connors tilted his head. “Maria, we can’t exactly call it a night now. Let’s trust the guide for once.”

Lucas stopped at the entrance of a narrow alley lit by a string of flickering bulbs. “Here we are,” he announced, turning to face them. “You wanted real Rio? Welcome.”

The group hesitated, their chatter dimming as they took in the space. The alley opened into a bustling courtyard filled with music and laughter. Samba dancers moved with hypnotic grace, their movements an intoxicating blend of rhythm and freedom. It was alive—raw and captivating.

Sofia stepped forward first, her eyes wide. “This is... incredible.”

Maria lingered at the back, her gaze fixed on Lucas. Something about him felt too smooth, too practiced. She caught the flicker of recognition in a man passing by—a silent nod exchanged between him and Lucas.

Her gut twisted. She wasn’t wrong to worry.

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## Chapter 2: The Night Out



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The bar buzzed with energy. Neon lights reflected off polished wood, casting streaks of color on the grinning faces around them. The air carried the scent of citrus and spilled beer, mingling with laughter and the beat of samba. Captain Connors raised his glass, his grin as wide as a child's on Christmas morning.

"To Rio," he declared, his voice booming above the noise. "And to a damn good crew."

The group cheered, clinking glasses. Sofia swirled her caipirinha, its lime scent cutting through the chaos. She couldn't stop her gaze from drifting to Lucas, seated casually at the corner of the table. His green eyes scanned the room, a sly smirk playing on his lips.

"What's so funny?" Sofia asked, leaning in, her voice soft but teasing.

"Nothing," Lucas replied, his gaze locking onto hers. "Just admiring how you all stick out like sore thumbs. The gringos on parade."

Sofia laughed, the sound blending into the bar's rhythm. "You mean our charm is undeniable?"

Maria, sitting next to her, rolled her eyes. "Or a neon sign for trouble." Her hand clutched her glass, her brow furrowing as she looked around.

"Relax, Maria. This is Rio's heartbeat," Lucas said, gesturing to the packed room. "Everyone's too busy having fun to notice us."

Maria's lips thinned, but she didn't argue. Connors had already begun another story, his arms sweeping theatrically as the group hung on his words. Sofia caught snippets—something about a mid-air mishap in Paris.

Lucas leaned closer to Sofia. "Ever danced samba?"

Her cheeks warmed under his gaze. "Not well."

"Then you're in for a night." His grin promised mischief, and Sofia found herself smiling back despite the flicker of doubt gnawing at her gut.

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Maria noticed the exchange, her eyes narrowing, but before she could speak, Connors' laughter drew everyone's attention, the table erupting in another round of toasts.

The music spilled into the street, a live samba band gathering a crowd under the streetlamps. The rhythm was infectious, each drumbeat pounding through the pavement and into their feet. Lucas pulled Sofia into the throng of dancers, his hand firm around hers.

"You don't get to sit this one out," he shouted over the music.

Sofia hesitated, her body stiff, but Lucas's energy was magnetic. He spun her into a circle, their laughter echoing between them. The crowd whooped as Sofia tripped on the uneven cobblestone, her arms flying out to steady herself.

"Loosen up!" Lucas called, his voice warm, his body fluid as he moved to the beat.

Around them, locals swayed effortlessly, their movements a testament to the city's rhythm. Maria lingered on the edge of the circle, her arms crossed. Gabriela coaxed her with a mock pout.

"You're making us look bad, Maria. Come on!"

Maria relented, stepping reluctantly into the circle. Her movements were sharp, deliberate, but the music worked its magic. Soon, her expression softened, a reluctant smile sneaking onto her face as she spun into Gabriela's outstretched arms.

Connors was in the middle of the fray, his attempts at samba earning roars of laughter from Yara and Tom. The group formed a loose circle, the night's tension forgotten in the blur of music and movement.

Lucas leaned in close to Sofia again, his breath brushing her ear. "See? You're a natural."

Sofia shook her head, laughing. "Not even close."

"Trust me, you're holding your own."

Her laughter melted into the music, the pulse of the drums syncing with her heartbeat. For a moment, she allowed herself to get lost in it—Rio's energy, the group's joy, and Lucas's unwavering attention.

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But on the edge of the crowd, Maria stood still, her arms crossed once again. Her eyes scanned the street, her unease returning as the music played on.

The group had barely settled at a large table when Lucas leaned forward, his elbows resting casually on the polished wood. The bar buzzed with life—waiters weaved between patrons, samba beats thumped softly from a distant speaker, and the faint scent of grilled meat drifted from the kitchen.

“You know,” Lucas began, his voice smooth like a storyteller, “Rio isn’t just about the beaches and parties. There’s a history in every street. Like the one you danced on earlier.”

Gabriela tilted her head. “You mean the samba street?”

Lucas grinned, a dimple flashing on one cheek. “Yes, but it’s called Rua do Resgate for a reason. Centuries ago, slaves who escaped were said to gather there, hiding in plain sight during samba festivals.”

Sofia leaned closer, her curiosity piqued. “And the festivals were...what? A cover for them?”

“Exactly,” Lucas’s green eyes glinted in the dim light. “Music and chaos. A perfect distraction.”

Amara raised an eyebrow. “So, while the city partied, they planned their freedom?”

Lucas nodded. “And sometimes, they were caught. Their footsteps,” he paused for effect, “are said to echo there even now.”

Yara chuckled, rolling her eyes. “You’re really laying it on thick.”

Lucas met her gaze, unflinching. “The streets here, they hold stories. Some are real, some... depend on who’s telling them.”

Sofia’s laugh came softly, but there was something behind her eyes—an unspoken need to hear more. “So, what about you, Lucas? What’s your story?”

“Ah,” he said, reclining slightly. “That’s one for another drink.”

While the crew soaked in Lucas’s tales, Maria sat slightly apart, her gaze sharp as she scanned the bar. The low-hanging lights made her



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bronze skin glow, but there was tension in her posture, a tightness that didn't relax even when the waitress placed a caipirinha in front of her.

She watched Lucas with intent. His effortless charm, the way he drew Sofia's attention without seeming to try—it all felt too practiced.

"Maria?" Captain Connors nudged her with his elbow.

"Hm?" Her lips pressed into a thin line.

"Enjoying the drink?" He tilted his glass toward her.

"Sure," Maria replied, but her eyes flicked back to Lucas. She leaned closer to the captain, her voice low. "Don't you think he's a little too... perfect?"

Connors followed her gaze. Lucas was laughing at something Sofia said, his hand resting lightly on the back of his chair. "He's a guide. They're supposed to be charming."

Maria's fingers tapped against the table. "It's not just that. He dodged Yara's question about the favela earlier. And did you notice how he talked about Rua do Resgate? Like he's lived through it."

Connors shook his head slightly. "You're reading too much into it. Let the kids have their fun."

Her jaw tightened. "Fun gets you killed in a city like this."

Connors sighed but didn't respond. Maria sat back, her gaze locking onto Lucas again. The faintest flicker of unease crept into her chest. Something about him didn't sit right—and it wasn't just the stories.

The night was still young, and the buzz from their first round of caipirinhas lingered in Sofia's veins. Lucas led them through a winding street, his stride confident, as though he knew every brick in the city. Neon lights flickered overhead, spilling colors onto the cobblestone street. The group's laughter bounced off the narrow buildings.

"This place is called Beco Verde," Lucas announced, gesturing to a doorway pulsing with bass-heavy music. "It's quieter than the first bar. Easier to talk."

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Inside, the bar was bathed in soft green light, with mismatched furniture and walls adorned with black-and-white photos of samba legends. The crew scattered, some to the bar, others to a corner booth. Sofia stayed near Lucas, drawn by his easy charm.

“Do you ever sleep?” she teased, watching him interact with the bartender like an old friend.

“Sleep is for tourists,” he replied, his green eyes glinting under the dim light. He placed a hand on the counter. “But you, gringa, seem like you could keep up.”

“Is that a challenge?”

“Maybe.” His smile deepened, and she felt a pull, undeniable and magnetic.

At the booth, Maria leaned closer to Captain Connors, her voice barely audible over the music. “He knows too much about the city.”

Connors tilted his head. “He’s a guide. That’s his job.”

Maria’s expression tightened. “Guides don’t avoid questions about the favelas. He’s hiding something.”

Across the room, Tom lifted his glass. “To not being stuck in the air!” The toast was met with cheers, but Maria’s silence lingered like a shadow.

The group had started to settle, their laughter loosening with each round of drinks. Gabriela was teaching Yara how to pronounce Portuguese phrases, and Amara hummed along to the music. Everything felt safe, normal. Until the man approached their table.

He was older, wiry, with weathered skin and a sharp gaze. His clothes were simple but clean—a sharp contrast to the bar’s chaotic energy. He leaned close to Maria and spoke in Portuguese, his voice low and urgent.

Maria stiffened. “What did he say?” Sofia asked, noticing her expression.

“He warned us.” Maria glanced at Lucas, her eyes narrowing. “Said tourists shouldn’t go where we’re planning.”

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Lucas, standing nearby, turned sharply. “He’s drunk. Don’t listen to him.”

But the man’s stare didn’t waver. He repeated something, slower this time, and Sofia caught the word favela.

Maria stood, her voice firm. “I think we should stay here.”

The captain, leaning back in his chair, waved her off. “Relax, Maria. This is the guide’s show. Besides, we’ve got Lucas to keep us out of trouble.”

Lucas smirked, raising his glass. “Exactly. Trust me, we’ll be fine.”

Maria’s gaze lingered on him for a long moment before she sat back down, but her unease was palpable. Sofia exchanged a glance with her, an unspoken question hanging between them.

The night continued, but the warning had left a crack in their carefree revelry, a crack that would only grow wider.

The flickering neon light above the bar cast a warm glow over Lucas’s face as he leaned closer to Sofia. The crowd’s voices blended with the rhythmic drumming of samba in the background, creating a cocoon of sound that drowned out the rest of the world.

“You ever been to Rio before?” Lucas asked, his green eyes catching the light, making them seem alive.

“First time,” Sofia admitted, swirling the caipirinha in her hand. The tang of lime and sugar hit her tongue as she took a sip. “It’s... overwhelming, in a good way.”

“Overwhelming?” Lucas chuckled. “You haven’t even seen the real Rio yet.”

Sofia raised an eyebrow, her curiosity sparked. “And what’s the ‘real Rio’?”

He gestured vaguely toward the city. “It’s not here, not the glossy tourist spots. It’s deeper, in the places where the music comes alive, where people live with their hearts on fire.”

“That sounds poetic,” she said, her lips curling into a smile.

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Lucas's grin softened. "It's not poetry. It's survival. When you have nothing, you cling to what makes you feel alive."

Her smile faded as his words settled over her. For the first time, she caught a glimpse of something deeper behind his charm—a weight he carried but didn't show. "That's how you grew up?" she ventured carefully.

Lucas nodded, his gaze momentarily dropping. "Favelas teach you to fight for everything—your place, your pride, your safety."

Before she could respond, the music shifted, the tempo rising. Lucas reached out a hand. "Come on. Let me show you something."

Sofia hesitated, then took his hand. It was rough and warm, steady in a way that made her pulse quicken. He led her into the middle of the bar where a small group had started dancing.

"Just follow me," Lucas said, his voice low enough for only her to hear. His arm circled her waist, guiding her through the steps. Sofia felt awkward at first, her movements stiff, but his confidence was infectious. She began to relax, letting the rhythm guide her feet.

For a moment, everything fell away—the bar, the noise, even the crew watching from the sidelines. It was just them, swaying to a beat that seemed to echo something primal and untamed.

The bar's energy began to wane as the crew gathered near the exit. The cool night breeze swept in, carrying the distant hum of Rio's streets. Lucas leaned casually against the doorway, his green eyes scanning the group before resting on Sofia.

"You enjoyed that?" His voice cut through the ambient noise, easy and confident.

"Best night in a long time," Sofia admitted, brushing a stray curl from her face. The faint glow from the streetlights softened her features, making her seem younger, lighter.

"Good," Lucas said, straightening. "Because it's about to get better."

Captain Connors raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued. "Oh? You've got more up your sleeve?"

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Lucas smirked. "Of course. There's a samba club in the favela—not far from here. It's not something you'll find in any guidebook, but it's where the real magic happens."

Amara clasped her hands together, her excitement bubbling over. "A favela samba club? That sounds incredible!"

Maria, standing slightly apart from the group, folded her arms. "In the favelas? Are you serious?"

Lucas turned to her, his expression calm but firm. "I grew up there. I know the streets, the people. You'll be safe with me."

Maria wasn't convinced. "I don't think this is a good idea. It's late. We should just head back."

"But it's the real Rio," Sofia said, stepping in before Lucas could reply. Her voice carried a quiet eagerness that made Maria pause. "Isn't that what we wanted to see?"

Lucas nodded, his gaze unwavering. "Exactly. You came all this way. Don't leave without experiencing it."

Captain Connors weighed the situation, glancing at his crew. "Is it safe?"

Lucas's smile didn't falter. "With me? Safer than crossing the street."

Amara laughed, nudging Tom. "I'm in. Let's do this."

The group's energy shifted, excitement crackling in the air. Even the captain seemed intrigued. Only Maria hung back, her expression tight. "I still don't think—"

"It's one night," Lucas interrupted smoothly. "Trust me."

Maria's gaze darted to Sofia, her lips pressing into a thin line. Sofia gave her an encouraging nod, silently pleading. Finally, Maria sighed, her shoulders sagging. "Fine. But if anything feels off, we're leaving."

Lucas clapped his hands together. "Perfect. Let's grab some taxis."

The crew followed him out onto the street, their voices mingling with the distant hum of samba. Sofia caught up to Lucas, her steps quick. "So, what's it really like?" she asked.

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Lucas glanced at her, his expression softening. “Like nothing you’ve ever seen.”

The streetlights flickered as the group split into pairs, piling into waiting taxis. Maria lingered at the curb, watching Lucas closely as he held the door open for Sofia. Something about him made her uneasy, but the crew’s enthusiasm left her little choice but to follow.

As the cars pulled away, the city’s polished façade began to fade, replaced by winding streets and shadowy alleys. The laughter and chatter inside the taxis softened, replaced by a nervous anticipation that settled heavily in the air.

The taxis crawled up the steep hill into a world that seemed like a parallel universe. The paved streets of Rio’s nightlife transformed into uneven cobblestones. Sofia leaned out slightly, trying to make sense of the cramped alleys and vibrant chaos unfolding outside. Strings of lights dangled between buildings painted in every shade imaginable, while samba beats vibrated through the car, growing louder with every turn.

“Wow,” Gabriela whispered. “It’s like stepping into another world.”

Captain Connors nodded absently, his eyes scanning the alleyways. “Stay close when we get out. No wandering off.”

The cars stopped abruptly at a tight bend. Their driver gestured forward. “This as far as I go,” he said in Portuguese. Lucas opened the door, his movements calm but precise, and helped Sofia out first.

“Don’t let the charm fool you,” Maria muttered to Gabriela, stepping out with a wary glance at Lucas.

Lucas turned and smiled, as if he heard her. “This way,” he gestured, leading them deeper into the maze of the favela.

Sofia stayed close, her heart pounding with a mix of fear and exhilaration. Kids played soccer in the narrow alleys, their laughter punctuated by the sharp calls of vendors selling grilled meat skewers. Yet, shadows loomed in every corner, and the feeling of being watched grew stronger with each step.

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“Is it just me,” Tom said, his usual humor gone, “or is this starting to feel... off?”

Maria answered with a pointed glare. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

Lucas slowed down, motioning toward an open doorway. Inside, the faint strains of a samba band grew louder. The crew followed hesitantly, glancing at one another. Sofia’s breath hitched as she stepped inside, the heat and energy hitting her like a wave.

The club was a kaleidoscope of sound and color. Musicians played furiously on a small stage, sweat glistening on their brows as dancers moved with a rhythm that seemed to pulse through the floorboards. The walls were covered in graffiti, bold colors swirling into scenes of celebration and struggle.

“Welcome to the real Rio,” Lucas said, leaning toward Sofia. His voice was warm, inviting, and a little too close for Maria’s liking.

The crew hesitated for a moment before being swept into the crowd. Gabriela pulled Tom onto the dance floor, her laughter infectious. Yara followed, her sharp heels somehow keeping up with the frenzied beat. Even Captain Connors relaxed slightly, standing by the bar and accepting a drink offered by Lucas.

“Join them,” Lucas whispered to Sofia.

Sofia hesitated, caught between wanting to immerse herself in the moment and feeling Maria’s piercing gaze from across the room.

“This is reckless,” Maria muttered under her breath as she approached the captain. “We’re being watched.”

Captain Connors shrugged. “Relax, Maria. It’s a samba club, not a war zone.”

Maria frowned, her eyes darting toward a group of men in the corner. They were dressed plainly, blending into the crowd, but their posture was stiff, their eyes fixed on the crew.

“They don’t look like they’re here for the music,” Maria said.

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Sofia, oblivious to Maria's rising tension, allowed Lucas to pull her toward the dance floor. His hand rested lightly on her waist, guiding her through a few hesitant steps.

"You're good," Lucas murmured.

"I'm terrible," Sofia replied, laughing. But her smile faltered as her gaze flicked toward the shadowy figures in the corner.

"Who are they?"

Lucas's expression darkened for just a moment before the charm returned. "Locals. Don't worry about them."

Maria didn't miss the exchange. She stepped closer to Captain Connors. "We need to leave. Now."

But the captain waved her off, lost in the rhythm of the club. Meanwhile, one of the men in the corner caught Lucas's eye and tilted his head, a subtle gesture that carried the weight of an unspoken threat.

Lucas's grip on Sofia tightened. "Let's go back to the others," he said softly, his voice lacking the earlier confidence.

The samba band hit a crescendo, but the joy in the music felt almost mocking now. Maria's gut churned as she caught one of the men whispering into his phone, his eyes never leaving the group.

The club pulsed with samba, its rhythm a heartbeat that vibrated through the walls. The crew was spread across the room, Sofia swaying in sync with Lucas, their chemistry palpable. Maria stayed closer to the bar, her sharp gaze scanning the crowd, though she pretended to sip from her drink.

Near the shadowy edges of the club, a group of men leaned against the walls. They weren't dancing. Their eyes, sharp and calculating, tracked the crew with unwavering attention. One of them, a man with a scar running from his eyebrow to his cheek, whispered something to another, who nodded before slipping away into the darkness.

Maria noticed. Her fingers tightened around her glass. "Something's wrong," she muttered, edging closer to the captain, who was engaged in a spirited conversation with Gabriela.



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“Jim,” she said, voice low, “we’re being watched.”

He turned, his relaxed expression hardening. “By who?”

Maria subtly gestured toward the men. “Them. They’re not just here for the music.”

Jim glanced at the group, his jaw tightening. “Keep an eye out, but don’t alarm the others.”

Sofia caught Maria’s expression from across the room. She tilted her head in question, but Maria just shook her head, her lips a tight line. Lucas, noticing Sofia’s distraction, leaned in. “What’s wrong?”

“Maria’s acting strange,” Sofia said.

Lucas’s gaze followed Sofia’s, his smile fading. “Stay close to me,” he said, his tone losing its charm.

The music swelled, masking the tension that crackled beneath the surface, but for Sofia, the vibrant club felt colder now.

Maria stood near the bar, her senses on high alert. The shadows in the room seemed to stretch unnaturally toward the edges, where the men stood, blending into the chaos of the samba club. But it wasn’t their stillness that caught her attention—it was the unmistakable tattoos coiled around their forearms. Black serpents, their tails disappearing under rolled-up sleeves.

Her stomach sank. She’d seen those tattoos before. A news report back home, late at night, a story about organized crime in Rio’s favelas. The serpents marked gang members tied to Eduardo Ferreira, a name that still carried the weight of menace. The report had shown them in grainy footage, rounding up terrified locals in the alleys, their presence a death sentence for those who crossed them.

Maria’s pulse quickened. These weren’t just any men loitering by the wall—they belonged to him.

“Jim,” she said, moving to the captain, her voice low but sharp. “We’ve got a problem.”

He frowned, setting down his drink. “What is it?”

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"Those guys over there. They're Eduardo's," she said, keeping her gaze on them but angling her body toward him.

Jim leaned casually against the bar, his eyes darting to the group. "How do you know?"

"The tattoos. The snakes," Maria said, her voice dropping further. "I saw it in a documentary. They're his men. And they're watching us."

Jim's face hardened. "Keep it quiet. No need to spook anyone."

Maria's breath came in sharp bursts as she scanned the room. Her gaze landed on Sofia, who was smiling at Lucas, oblivious to the tension thickening like smoke. Maria strode toward them, her shoulders tense.

"Sofia," she said tightly, "we need to talk."

Eduardo entered the club like a storm. The energy shifted as people parted to make way for him, the music faltering before surging back, louder and more frenetic. He didn't need to look for his men; they moved to his side as if drawn by an invisible force.

From their corner, Maria tensed. "That's him," she hissed.

Sofia's stomach dropped. "Eduardo?"

Lucas turned, his face unreadable. "We need to leave. Now."

The captain approached, his relaxed demeanor replaced with steel. "What's the issue?"

Maria gestured discreetly toward Eduardo, whose eyes were already sweeping the room. "That's Eduardo. The gang leader."

Jim's expression darkened. "And why is he here?"

"Because of us," Maria said flatly.

Before anyone could react, Eduardo's gaze landed on Lucas, then slid to Sofia. His lips curved into a slow, menacing smile, and he began making his way toward them.

"Move," Lucas snapped, pushing Sofia toward the exit.

"Stay together," Jim ordered, trying to corral the crew, but the crowd shifted, breaking their line of sight.

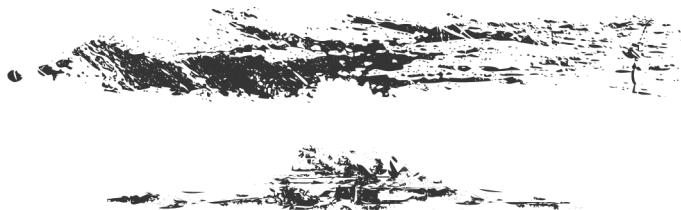
Maria grabbed Sofia's hand, her voice urgent. "Don't look back."

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But Sofia couldn't help it. Eduardo's eyes burned into hers, his smile promising one thing: the night was far from over.

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## Chapter 3: Entering the Favela



THE AIR INSIDE THE favela buzzed with a rhythm entirely its own. Lucas led the crew through a web of narrow alleys, the walls alive with vibrant graffiti. Children darted past, their laughter breaking through the hum of conversation, distant samba drums, and the occasional bark of stray dogs.

Sofia lingered near Lucas, her curiosity ignited. “What’s that?” she asked, gesturing to a mural depicting a woman in a flowing dress surrounded by flames.

“Marielle Franco,” Lucas said, his tone tinged with reverence. “A hero to these streets. They killed her, but her voice still echoes here.”

Sofia’s hazel eyes scanned the mural. “She looks like she could take on the world.”

“She did.” Lucas’s voice softened, and for a moment, the bravado he wore like armor slipped.

Behind them, Maria’s unease was palpable. She stayed close to Captain Connors, her dark eyes darting to every shadow. “This isn’t a tour,” she muttered. “It’s a mistake.”

“You’re tense,” the captain said, his tone light but firm. “We’re sticking together.”

As the group rounded another corner, the alley opened into a small square. Vendors called out, their makeshift stands laden with fresh fruit, grilled meats, and pirated DVDs. Gabriela stopped to exchange

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a few words in rapid Portuguese, her charm earning the group a brief reprieve from the stares.

Yet Maria's unease deepened. She leaned closer to Sofia. "Something's off. Look at the way they're watching us."

Sofia glanced around, catching a pair of dark eyes disappearing behind a curtain. The vibrant chaos suddenly felt suffocating. She whispered, "Do you think we should leave?"

Lucas turned, his easy smile not quite reaching his eyes. "Relax, Sofia. You're safe with me."

Eduardo stood on the balcony of his makeshift fortress, his sharp eyes scanning the square below. The crew was easy to spot, their crisp clothes and hesitant movements a stark contrast to the residents' effortless flow. His lieutenants flanked him, silent and waiting.

He took a long drag of his cigarette, exhaling slowly. "Foreigners," he said, the word laced with disdain. "They don't belong here."

"Lucas is with them," one of his men offered, his tone carefully neutral.

Eduardo's lips curled into a cold smile. "Of course he is. Always playing the guide. Always looking for a way out."

Another man stepped forward, his tattooed arms folded. "You think they're cops?"

Eduardo flicked ash onto the cracked concrete. "No. Too careless for that. But Lucas...he knows better than to bring strangers here without a reason."

His gaze lingered on Sofia, who was now inspecting a handmade bracelet at one of the stalls. Something about her struck a chord—a memory half-formed, a feeling he couldn't place. He tapped the balcony rail, his mind already weaving possibilities.

"Bring me proof," he ordered, turning away. "And watch Lucas. If he slips, I want to know."

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Below, the samba drums picked up their tempo, the square pulsing with life. Eduardo's men melted into the crowd, their presence barely perceptible. But their eyes never left the crew.

Sofia's steps slowed as the crew moved deeper into the favela. The colors, the sounds, the sheer vibrancy of life around her—she couldn't look away. A street artist crouched by the wall, his spray can hissing as a phoenix took shape under his deft hand.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

Lucas turned, his smile genuine this time. "The favelas are more than danger and poverty. They're alive. They're...resilient."

She met his gaze, her curiosity outweighing her caution. "Is this where you grew up?"

Lucas's expression shifted, the charm dimming for a beat. "Close enough," he said. "But it's not the kind of place you leave easily."

Before Sofia could press further, Maria's sharp voice cut through. "We shouldn't linger."

"Relax, Maria." Yara's tone was light, but her stance was defensive. "You're acting like we're walking into a war zone."

"Maybe we are," Maria shot back, her eyes on a figure loitering by a doorway. The man's tattoo—a snake coiled around his wrist—sent a chill down her spine.

Sofia hesitated, caught between Maria's caution and Lucas's confidence. "What's wrong?" she asked, stepping closer to Maria.

Maria's voice dropped to a whisper. "That man...he's one of Eduardo's. I've seen him in news reports."

Lucas stepped between them, his tone smooth. "No need to worry. They're just curious."

But Sofia wasn't convinced, and neither was Maria. The vibrant streets that had felt so alive moments ago now seemed to close in around them.

The narrow alleys of the favela seemed to hum with life, even as the late hour approached. Samba rhythms echoed between the buildings,

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blending with the laughter of children darting under flickering streetlights. The crew paused at the edge of a small plaza where a group of street performers had gathered. A drummer, a guitarist, and a singer commanded the makeshift stage—a patch of cracked concrete surrounded by a lively crowd.

“Now this,” Lucas said, leaning casually against a pole, “is the heart of Rio.”

The crew edged closer, their earlier unease momentarily replaced by fascination. Sofia’s eyes lit up as the singer’s voice soared, a raw, powerful sound that held the crowd captive. She swayed to the rhythm, her hands clasped together as though to keep the music within reach.

“Do they do this every night?” she asked Lucas, her voice barely above the music.

“Most nights,” he replied, his gaze fixed on her rather than the performers. “It’s how they survive. Talent like this should be on a big stage, but here...” He gestured around. “It’s just life.”

Maria hung back, her arms folded tightly across her chest. She scanned the crowd with sharp eyes, noting the small exchanges of cash and glances between shadowy figures at the plaza’s edge. “We shouldn’t stay too long,” she muttered, nudging Captain Connors. “Not everyone here is watching the show.”

The captain raised an eyebrow. “Relax, Maria. We’ve got Lucas.”

“Lucas isn’t bulletproof,” she shot back, but her voice was lost as Tom burst into laughter, trying to mimic one of the dancers.

For a fleeting moment, the crew seemed to forget the danger looming over them. But Maria couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched—not by admirers of the music, but by predators lying in wait.

The air seemed to shift as the crew left the plaza, the carefree notes of samba fading behind them. Lucas led the way, weaving through tight alleys that twisted like veins through the favela. The once-vivid murals seemed to dim under the sparse glow of streetlights.



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Sofia glanced back and froze. Two men, lean and sharp-eyed, lingered at the corner they had just turned. One leaned against a wall, his hand resting on his waistband, while the other appeared to be speaking into a phone.

“Lucas,” she whispered, quickening her steps to close the gap between them. “Are we... being followed?”

Lucas didn’t turn but slowed his pace. “Keep walking,” he murmured. “Don’t look back.”

Her pulse quickened. “Should we—”

“They’re just locals,” Lucas interrupted smoothly. “Curious, maybe. Or looking for an easy mark.”

Maria caught their exchange and pressed closer to the captain. “I told you. This was a mistake.”

Connors shrugged her off, his face impassive, but the faint tightening of his jaw betrayed his growing concern. Yara, noticing the tension, shifted her weight nervously. “Are we... lost?”

Lucas flashed her a disarming smile. “Not at all. Just taking the scenic route.”

But Sofia could see the edge in his movements, the way his fingers twitched as he adjusted the strap of his messenger bag. Whatever he was thinking, he wasn’t sharing it. Behind them, the shadows moved again, and Sofia felt the prickle of unseen eyes on her back.

The crew huddled closer together as Lucas led them into an even narrower alley, the walls on either side so close they could feel the chill of the concrete. Maria tugged on his arm, forcing him to stop.

“What’s the plan here?” she demanded, her voice low but firm. “You keep saying everything’s fine, but it’s not. Those men—”

“They’re no one,” Lucas cut her off, his tone sharp enough to make even Sofia flinch. He glanced over his shoulder, his green eyes scanning the alley’s entrance. “Look, we’re close to the club. Just a little further.”

Maria’s lips tightened into a thin line. “If they’re ‘no one,’ why do you keep looking back?”

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Lucas exhaled heavily, his shoulders dropping slightly. “Because they’re probably Eduardo’s men, and they want to make sure we’re not up to anything... unusual.”

“Unusual?” Tom snorted. “We’re just a bunch of airline crew out for a night of—”

“Shut up, Tom,” Maria snapped, her eyes locked on Lucas. “And what happens if Eduardo decides we are?”

Lucas tilted his head, his expression unreadable. “Then we smile, we play along, and we leave as quietly as we came.”

The group exchanged uneasy glances, but Lucas was already moving again. The shadows shifted behind them once more, but Sofia kept her eyes forward, focusing on the faint rhythm of samba that beckoned them toward the club.

The air inside the samba club hit them like a tidal wave of rhythm and heat. The room was packed, bodies swaying as the drumbeats reverberated through the wooden floors. Vibrant murals of dancers and musicians lined the cracked walls, illuminated by strings of flickering fairy lights. The scent of sweat mixed with the sharp tang of spilled caipirinhas filled the air.

Sofia hesitated at the entrance, her eyes darting to Lucas. He placed a reassuring hand on her lower back, guiding her forward. “You’ll love it. This is Rio,” he murmured, his voice low but firm. His smile was infectious, and Sofia allowed herself to be pulled into the hypnotic energy of the room.

Maria, trailing behind, scanned the crowd with hawk-like precision. Her hand brushed her phone in her pocket, a precaution she couldn’t shake. “Stick together,” she said, her voice sharp over the music. But her words were lost as Yara grabbed her hand, pulling her toward the bar.

Sofia’s gaze shifted to the stage, where a group of musicians played with unrelenting passion. She felt Lucas’s breath near her ear. “Dance?” he asked, motioning to the floor.

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"I'm not sure I know how," she replied, though a nervous laugh escaped her lips.

Lucas took her hand, spinning her effortlessly into the crowd. "Then follow me."

Lucas's grip on Sofia's hand tightened as the club's mood shifted. The music continued, but whispers rippled through the crowd. A man had entered, his presence commanding enough to part the sea of bodies like a shadow over the vibrant chaos.

Eduardo.

Sofia turned instinctively, catching the man's figure. Tall and broad-shouldered, he was flanked by two men who bore the unmistakable air of authority—or menace. His sharp, dark eyes scanned the room, pausing briefly on Lucas.

Maria felt the shift too. Her fingers wrapped tightly around her drink as her jaw clenched. Gabriela noticed her tension. "What's wrong?"

Maria didn't answer immediately. Her gaze remained fixed on Eduardo. "He's trouble," she whispered. "We need to leave."

Gabriela frowned but nodded. "Does Lucas know him?"

Maria's lips pressed into a thin line. "Too well."

Eduardo's eyes landed on the crew, and his mouth curved into a slow, deliberate smile.

Eduardo approached with deliberate steps, his boots clicking against the floorboards in rhythm with the fading drumbeats. The chatter in the room stilled, replaced by a suffocating tension. Lucas released Sofia's hand and stepped forward, meeting Eduardo halfway.

"Bringing friends to my neighborhood?" Eduardo's voice was calm, but the steel behind it was unmistakable. His gaze flicked over the crew, lingering on Sofia before returning to Lucas.

"They're just here to experience Rio. Nothing more," Lucas replied evenly, his stance firm.

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Eduardo's eyes narrowed. "You think I don't know what's happening? Outsiders always come with an agenda."

Sofia's chest tightened as Eduardo's gaze fell on her again. She felt exposed, like a spotlight had been turned on her. Maria edged closer, her voice low and urgent. "We need to go. Now."

But Lucas didn't flinch. "They're with me, Eduardo. Let them enjoy the night."

Eduardo smirked, his amusement dripping with malice. "For your sake, I hope that's true."

The unspoken threat hung in the air, heavy and unavoidable. As Eduardo walked away, Lucas turned back to the group, his face pale but composed. "Stay close," he said, his voice a whisper. "And don't do anything to stand out."

The tension in the club felt like a live wire, every moment stretching painfully as Eduardo's piercing gaze shifted between Lucas and the crew. His men formed a tight ring around them, their hands resting casually on the grips of their weapons, but their eyes promised anything but ease.

Lucas stepped forward, his posture tense but his voice calm, controlled. "Eduardo, this isn't what you think. They're just airline crew, tourists looking for a slice of Rio's nightlife. Nothing more."

Eduardo tilted his head, his lips curling into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "Tourists? In my favela? Guided by you?" He let the words hang, heavy with implication. "Lucas, we both know how much you enjoy entertaining outsiders."

A murmur rippled through the crowd, the rhythm of the samba music faltering for a beat before resuming, louder, as if to drown out the confrontation. Lucas ignored the sweat forming at the nape of his neck. "They're harmless, Eduardo. Just people wanting to experience the real Rio. No threat to you or your business."

Maria's eyes darted to Sofia, urging her silently to stay quiet, to let Lucas handle this. Sofia's hands curled into fists at her sides, her instinct

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to step in warring with the growing sense that Lucas was treading dangerous ground.

Eduardo leaned closer to Lucas, his voice low and cold. “You think I don’t see through you? You bring them here, parading them like trophies. Who sent them? Who are they working for?”

Lucas didn’t flinch, but the set of his jaw betrayed the strain. “No one sent them. Let them go. This isn’t worth your time.”

Eduardo chuckled, stepping back. “Perhaps. But I don’t take chances.” He turned sharply to his men. “Search them.”

As Eduardo’s men began moving toward the group, Sofia felt her pulse spike. She stepped forward before she could think twice, her voice clear and firm. “Stop.”

Eduardo froze mid-step, turning slowly to face her. The room seemed to shrink around them, the samba music fading into a distant thrum. Sofia held his gaze, her hazel eyes burning with defiance. “We’re not spies. We’re not here to cause trouble. We just wanted to dance, to see the city. If that was a mistake, fine. But we don’t deserve this.”

Eduardo’s eyes narrowed, appraising her with a mixture of curiosity and disdain. “And you think I’m supposed to take your word for it?”

“Yes,” Sofia said, her voice unwavering. “Because it’s the truth.”

Maria’s sharp intake of breath cut through the silence, but she didn’t intervene. She watched Sofia with a mixture of pride and dread, knowing the risk she was taking.

Eduardo’s lips twitched, as if suppressing a laugh. He took a slow step toward her, his presence as suffocating as the humid air in the packed club. “You have courage. I’ll give you that. But courage doesn’t mean much when it’s backed by lies.”

Sofia didn’t back down. “Then prove we’re lying. If you’re so sure, show us. But until then, let us go.”

The crowd watched in hushed anticipation, their curiosity turning the standoff into an impromptu spectacle. Eduardo tilted his head

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again, his snake-like smile returning. “You’re braver than you look, garota. But bravery doesn’t buy trust. Let’s see if your story holds.”

Eduardo gestured to his men, who closed the circle tighter around the crew. Maria instinctively placed herself in front of the group, her protective instincts kicking in. Amara grabbed Sofia’s arm, her whispered words laced with panic. “What are you doing? You’re going to get us all killed.”

Sofia didn’t respond, her focus locked on Eduardo as his men began rifling through the crew’s belongings. The air in the club turned heavier, the vibrant energy replaced with an oppressive silence. Even the samba dancers at the edges of the room had stopped, their movements stilled as they watched the drama unfold.

Captain Connors stepped forward, his voice calm but edged with authority. “Enough. Whatever you think we’ve done, we haven’t. My crew is under my responsibility, and I won’t let you treat them like criminals without cause.”

Eduardo turned his gaze to Connors, his expression unreadable. “Responsibility, eh? A noble sentiment. Let’s see how far it gets you.”

One of Eduardo’s men held up a small pouch from Gabriela’s bag, its contents spilling slightly—a handful of pills, innocuous but enough to spark suspicion. Eduardo raised an eyebrow, his smile widening. “Interesting. Care to explain this?”

Gabriela paled, her voice trembling. “They’re my prescriptions. For migraines.”

Eduardo didn’t look convinced. He turned to Lucas, his tone sharp. “You brought them here. Tell me why I shouldn’t assume this is a setup.”

Lucas clenched his fists, stepping between Eduardo and the crew. “Because it’s not. You know me, Eduardo. You know I wouldn’t do that.”

Eduardo studied him for a long moment before smirking. “You’re right. I do know you. And that’s why I don’t trust you.”

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The tension was palpable as Eduardo stepped back, addressing his men. "Take them to the warehouse. Let's see if they're as innocent as they claim."

Eduardo leaned back in his chair, the dim light casting shadows across his angular face. The room buzzed with tension as his gaze swept over the crew. His men stood like statues behind him, armed and unyielding.

"I've made my decision," Eduardo began, his voice measured but lethal. "You'll prove your innocence by working for me. Or," he paused, letting the weight of his words settle, "you won't leave this favela alive."

Sofia's breath hitched. Around her, the crew exchanged frantic glances. Gabriela's hands gripped the edge of her chair, knuckles white. Tom muttered something under his breath, his usually sharp wit silenced by fear.

"Working for you? Doing what?" Captain Connors stepped forward, his frame towering yet hesitant. He wasn't about to cower, but even his usual commanding presence wavered.

Eduardo smirked. "Simple. You're airline staff. You transport things. On your next flight, you'll carry a package for me. No questions. No mistakes."

Maria's voice cut through the silence. "You're asking us to smuggle drugs?" Her tone was sharp, but her eyes betrayed the growing panic beneath.

Eduardo chuckled darkly. "Asking? No. I'm telling."

Lucas, standing a few feet from Eduardo, glanced at Sofia. The unspoken plea in his eyes was unmistakable: Stay calm.

"Why us?" Sofia demanded, her voice trembling yet defiant. "There are a million easier targets."

Eduardo's gaze locked onto hers, sharp as a blade. "Because you're here. Because I can."

The air seemed to thin. No one dared speak, but the unspoken understanding hung heavy: they had no choice.

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“Move,” one of Eduardo’s men barked, the barrel of his gun nudging Tom’s back. The crew stumbled out of the club, their earlier fascination with Rio’s vibrant culture replaced by sheer terror.

Sofia kept her gaze low, her heart pounding as she heard the click of boots on cracked pavement. Around them, the favela buzzed with life—music, laughter, and the occasional shout—but it all felt like a cruel contrast to their grim reality.

Maria walked beside her, whispering, “Stay close. Don’t look at anyone.”

Lucas moved up to Eduardo’s side, his posture stiff. He glanced back briefly, his eyes locking with Sofia’s. In that fleeting moment, she saw guilt and something deeper—determination.

“Where are you taking us?” Captain Connors asked, his voice even despite the gun pointed at his chest.

“To a place where we can talk without interruptions,” Eduardo replied, not bothering to turn. His voice was calm, almost bored, but the danger in it was unmistakable.

As they weaved through narrow alleys, Sofia couldn’t help but notice the walls closing in. Graffiti-covered brick and tangled wires loomed above, a maze that offered no escape.

Gabriela stumbled, her heel catching on a loose cobblestone. A guard grabbed her arm roughly, yanking her upright. “Watch it,” he growled. Sofia instinctively stepped forward, but Maria caught her wrist, shaking her head subtly. Not now.

They finally stopped in front of a rusted metal door. Eduardo nodded, and one of his men pushed it open, revealing a dimly lit corridor. “Inside,” Eduardo commanded.

One by one, they entered, their breaths shallow, their steps hesitant.

The warehouse smelled of oil and damp concrete, the faint hum of a generator punctuating the oppressive silence. Stacks of crates lined



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the walls, their contents unknown but undoubtedly dangerous. A single flickering bulb illuminated the room, casting erratic shadows.

“Welcome,” Eduardo said, spreading his arms as if he were inviting them to a party. “Make yourselves comfortable. This will be your home until we come to an understanding.”

Sofia glanced at the others. Maria’s jaw was tight, her protective instincts clearly on overdrive. Captain Connors was scanning the room, likely plotting an escape even as the odds stacked against them. Tom leaned against a crate, trying to mask his fear with feigned nonchalance.

Lucas lingered near the door, his body tense. Eduardo approached him, placing a hand on his shoulder. “Stay close, my friend. I trust you’ll keep them in line.”

Lucas flinched but nodded. Eduardo turned back to the crew. “Rest up. Think about my offer. Tomorrow, we discuss terms.”

As Eduardo and his men exited, locking the heavy door behind them, the crew finally exhaled.

“What now?” Amara whispered, her voice trembling.

Sofia stepped forward, her fists clenched. “We find a way out. Together.”

Maria nodded, her gaze unwavering. “But we need to be smart. He’s watching, and he’ll expect us to panic.”

In the corner, Lucas shifted uncomfortably, avoiding Sofia’s eyes. She wanted to trust him—needed to—but doubt was creeping in. Still, for now, he was their only link to survival.

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## Chapter 4: Captured



## THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The warehouse loomed like a jagged scar on the edge of the favela, its rusted metal walls catching faint moonlight. The crew was herded in under the watchful glare of Eduardo's men. The air inside reeked of damp concrete and motor oil, making every breath feel heavy. Sofia's heels scraped against the uneven floor as they were marched forward, their shadows stretching across the graffiti-stained walls.

Maria stumbled slightly, but before anyone could help, one of the guards barked, "Keep moving!" His rifle shifted in his hands, a subtle reminder of the power imbalance.

"Where are you taking us?" Captain Connors demanded, his voice steady, but his clenched jaw betrayed his unease.

Eduardo, walking ahead with calculated strides, didn't bother to turn. "You'll find out soon enough," he said, his tone cold and final.

Sofia clutched her arms tightly across her chest, the weight of the night pressing down. She glanced at Lucas, walking at Eduardo's side, his face unreadable. The distance between them felt vast, and for the first time, she wondered if trusting him had been a mistake.

Inside, they were pushed into a wide, dimly lit room filled with crates and barrels stacked haphazardly. A single light bulb swung lazily overhead, casting distorted shadows. Eduardo turned, finally addressing them.

"Welcome to my humble headquarters," he said with a mock bow. "I hope you're comfortable because you'll be staying here until we sort some things out."

Sofia's eyes darted to Lucas, hoping for reassurance, but his gaze remained fixed on the floor. The silence between them was deafening.

Eduardo leaned against one of the crates, his snake tattoo visible as he gestured toward the crew. His presence filled the room, suffocating and unrelenting. He motioned for one of his men to step forward, a clipboard in hand. The sight was oddly out of place, a stark contrast to the armed guards surrounding them.

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“Names,” Eduardo said, his voice low but commanding. “All of them.”

Gabriela opened her mouth to protest, but a sharp glare from Eduardo froze her in place. The man with the clipboard began scribbling as each crew member hesitated before giving their names. When it was Sofia’s turn, Eduardo’s dark eyes locked onto hers.

“Sofia Alvarez,” she said, her voice steady despite the lump in her throat. Eduardo let the silence stretch, his gaze boring into her like he was peeling away layers of her soul.

“What brings a pretty flight attendant like you so deep into my favela?” His words dripped with mockery, but there was an edge of curiosity too.

“She’s got nothing to do with this,” Lucas interjected suddenly, stepping forward. The room tensed as Eduardo’s men adjusted their stances, their weapons rising slightly.

Eduardo smirked, tilting his head. “Protective, aren’t we, Lucas? But you see, I don’t believe in coincidences. A group like this waltzing into my territory, guided by you of all people?” He took a step closer to Lucas, his voice dropping to a whisper. “You’ve got something to explain.”

Sofia couldn’t stay silent any longer. She stepped forward, her heart pounding in her chest, but her voice remained firm.

“We’re just flight crew,” she began, addressing Eduardo directly. “We’re here on a layover. We trusted Lucas to show us around, and clearly, that was a mistake. But we don’t know anything about your operations, and we don’t want to.”

Eduardo’s expression shifted, his smirk fading as he studied her. He walked around her slowly, the echo of his footsteps the only sound in the room. Sofia could feel every pair of eyes on her, but she didn’t flinch.

“Brave,” Eduardo murmured, stopping just behind her. “But bravery often masks something else. Fear. Guilt. Lies.” He circled back

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to face her, his snake tattoo flexing as his hand curled into a fist. "So tell me, Sofia. Which one is it?"

"It's the truth," she said, refusing to break eye contact. She didn't notice her nails digging into her palms until the sting registered. "We just want to leave. That's all."

Eduardo's laugh was sharp, cutting through the tension like a blade. "Leave?" He glanced at his men, who chuckled in response. "Oh no, querida. Nobody leaves until I get what I want."

Lucas shifted uncomfortably beside the guards, his jaw clenched. Sofia caught the motion and felt a spark of anger. If Lucas had brought them here, surely he could do something to fix this.

Eduardo raised a hand, silencing the room once more. "Now, let's find out how much you're really hiding." He turned to his men. "Bring the captain forward. Let's see if his story holds up any better."

As the guards moved toward Captain Connors, Sofia's pulse quickened. She had stepped forward to protect the crew, but now they were in deeper trouble than before.

Lucas stepped forward, his body tense but his voice steady, eyes fixed on Eduardo. The flickering warehouse bulb cast harsh shadows across his face. "Eduardo, they're innocent," Lucas said, his words smooth but edged with urgency. "They're just a group of airline crew, nothing more. You're wasting your time here."

Eduardo tilted his head, the faintest trace of a smirk tugging at his lips. "Wasting time, Lucas? That's a dangerous thing to say in front of people who could be spies." His voice dropped, like a razor dragged over stone. "What is it that you're hiding, amigo?"

Lucas squared his shoulders. "I've brought you nothing but respect, Eduardo. You know that. I vouched for them because they trusted me." He glanced back at Sofia, who clutched her arms, trying to appear calm under the gang leader's calculating gaze. "If you let them go, I'll take full responsibility. You and I, we'll settle this later."

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Eduardo's cold laugh echoed off the rusted walls. "You think I'm stupid, Lucas? To believe this group stumbled into my favela by accident? What's next? They came for samba lessons?" He turned his stare toward Sofia. "Or maybe it's her you're protecting."

Lucas's fists clenched, his face betraying nothing. Sofia shot him a look—grateful, worried, confused. Eduardo caught it and leaned closer to Lucas, his voice a whisper that everyone could hear. "If they're spies, your loyalty is worthless. If they're not, you're a fool. Either way..." Eduardo let the words hang, his snake-like grin widening.

Lucas's jaw tightened. "You know me, Eduardo. I'm no fool."

Eduardo's eyes gleamed with something unreadable. "We'll see."

Eduardo turned sharply, snapping his fingers. Armed men sprang to attention like wolves ready to pounce. "Separate them. Put them in different rooms. I want to hear each of their stories."

"Wait!" Sofia's voice rose above the chaos. "You don't need to do this. We're not hiding anything!"

Eduardo's cold stare pinned her in place. "Not yet. But when people are scared, they start talking."

Two gang members grabbed Sofia by the arms. She flinched, instinctively pulling back, but their grip was steel. Around her, the crew erupted in shouts.

"Get your hands off her!" Captain Connors's voice thundered as he tried to push forward.

Maria twisted violently, slapping away a thug's hand that reached for her. "This is insane!"

"Stop!" Lucas's shout cut through the noise. "Eduardo, this won't help you. What do you think you'll find?"

Eduardo ignored him, gesturing to his men. "Take the American first." Two guards descended on the captain, shoving him toward a rusted door at the far end of the warehouse. Connors met Sofia's gaze briefly, a flash of reassurance in his eyes before he disappeared through the doorway.

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One by one, the crew was dragged in separate directions—Maria's furious protests, Tom's curses in clipped British tones, Amara's trembling silence. Sofia struggled as they pulled her toward a dark corner.

Lucas watched, his face blank but his eyes burning. Eduardo caught the look and smiled. "You'd better hope they stay quiet, Lucas. For your sake."

The room was damp and dark, lit only by the faint light seeping through gaps in the cracked ceiling. Sofia sat huddled against the cold wall, knees drawn to her chest. Across from her, Maria paced the narrow space like a caged lion, muttering in Spanish under her breath.

"This is how they break people," Maria finally said, her voice low but sharp. "Separate us. Make us feel alone."

Sofia looked up. "What do we do?"

Maria stopped pacing, planting her hands on her hips. "We keep our heads. That's what we do." Her dark eyes glinted fiercely as she crouched beside Sofia. "Listen to me. Whatever Eduardo says, whatever he tries to make us believe, we stick together. We don't give him anything he can use against us."

Sofia swallowed hard. "But what if someone—"

"No one will," Maria cut in, her voice softening. "We're stronger than that. All of us. You trust me?"

Sofia nodded slowly. Maria squeezed her shoulder and rose to her feet. "Good. Because right now, we don't have a choice."

The door creaked open suddenly, flooding the room with harsh light. A figure stepped inside—it wasn't Eduardo, but one of his guards, holding a rifle low against his hip.

"Time to move," the man growled in Portuguese.

Maria's expression didn't waver as she moved to stand between Sofia and the guard. "We're not going anywhere until you tell us where the others are."



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The man's lip curled into a snarl, but Maria didn't flinch. Sofia watched in quiet awe, a flicker of hope rising through the fear. Whatever happened next, Maria wasn't going down without a fight.

The warehouse's silence pressed against them like a weight. Huddled together under the flickering bulb, the crew clung to whatever comfort their proximity offered. Eduardo circled them with deliberate slowness, his boots striking the cracked concrete in sharp echoes. His cold, reptilian gaze lingered on each person just long enough to make them squirm.

Tom, knees drawn to his chest, exhaled sharply. "We're just airline crew. This is insane! We're not spies."

Eduardo halted in front of him. "Insane?" His voice was almost playful. "No one comes here by accident, British boy. And no one leaves without paying a price."

Tom flinched, and Maria shot him a glare, silently urging him to hold his tongue. Eduardo noticed.

"What are you hiding?" Eduardo crouched, face mere inches from Tom. "Tell me something useful, and you might get to keep breathing."

Tom's hands trembled. He darted a panicked glance toward Maria, then to Captain Connors. The captain's jaw was locked tight, but his expression screamed don't break. Eduardo reached out, tracing the edge of Tom's collar.

"Enough!" Maria's sharp voice cut through the tension like glass shattering. "You're wasting time."

Eduardo rose, slow and deliberate. His gaze shifted to Maria, amusement playing at the corner of his mouth. "Always the protector, hmm? I wonder how far that loyalty goes."

As he turned his back, Tom collapsed inward, shoulders heaving with silent breaths. But the damage was done. His outburst had cracked the group's fragile resolve, and Eduardo knew it.



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“ENOUGH GAMES.” EDUARDO’S voice filled the warehouse, low and ominous. He gestured, and two armed men moved forward, hauling a battered crate from the shadows. It landed with a dull thud, dust scattering into the air.

The crew stiffened as Eduardo pried the lid off. Inside: bricks of white powder, neatly wrapped in plastic. A sickening hush fell over the group.

“You’ll take this,” Eduardo said, pointing at the drugs. “All of it. Onto your precious flight.”

Sofia recoiled instinctively. “You can’t be serious.”

Eduardo turned, his smile devoid of warmth. “Do I look like a man who jokes?”

Captain Connors stepped forward, shoulders squared. “If you think we’ll—”

Eduardo raised a hand, silencing him. “Think carefully, capitão. One of you dies every time someone refuses. One by one. Until someone says yes.”

A ripple of panic spread through the group. Yara’s breathing hitched. Amara clutched her hands together, knuckles white. Maria looked ready to explode.

“This is madness,” Sofia blurted. “We’re not criminals! We’re flight attendants, for god’s sake.”

Eduardo tilted his head, eyes narrowing on her. “Flight attendants? No, menina. You’re pawns in a much bigger game. And pawns don’t get a choice.”

Silence descended again, suffocating and unbearable. Eduardo tapped the crate’s lid twice and backed away. “You have until morning.”

Captain Connors didn’t move when Eduardo turned his gaze on him. The light caught on the captain’s profile, carving deep shadows into his rugged face. Eduardo’s smile returned, sharp as a blade.

“You, though,” Eduardo drawled. “You’re not just a pilot, are you, capitão?”

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Sofia's head snapped toward Connors. "What's he talking about?"

The captain didn't answer.

Eduardo prowled closer, his voice a conspiratorial whisper. "Air Force. The uniform has changed, but the man hasn't. You've been in places like this before."

"Whatever you think you know, you're wrong," Connors replied, his voice calm but tight.

Eduardo chuckled softly. "Wrong? Or maybe I know more about you than your crew does."

The tension among the group shifted. Tom shot the captain a confused look, while Maria stood stock-still, her eyes narrowing. Sofia's stomach knotted as her trust wavered for the first time.

Eduardo leaned in. "Here's the truth, amigo. Everyone has a price. Even you. So let's see how long you can keep playing the hero."

He turned and disappeared into the darkness, leaving the crew frozen in his wake. For a long moment, no one spoke. Then Yara hissed, "What the hell was that, Captain?"

Connors finally looked at them, his face pale and resolute. "It doesn't matter what he thinks he knows. What matters is we keep it together."

But as Eduardo's footsteps faded, doubt wormed its way into every corner of the group. And Captain Connors, for the first time, wasn't so sure they could.

Eduardo leaned against a stack of crates, his dark eyes narrowed as he studied Lucas. The air in the warehouse felt heavier, as though every breath was laced with suspicion.

"Tell me, Lucas," Eduardo began, his tone casual yet sharp as a knife. "Why should I believe you didn't bring them here to spy on me?"

Lucas straightened, his hands tightening into fists at his sides. "I told you already. They're crew members from an airline. Tourists who got curious."

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“Curious enough to stumble into my favela? At night?” Eduardo pushed off the crates, closing the distance between them. “Or maybe you’ve grown soft. Letting a pretty face cloud your judgment?”

Lucas’s jaw tightened, but he kept his gaze steady. “They don’t know anything about you. I brought them because it was safe. Or so I thought.”

Eduardo chuckled, a low, menacing sound. “Safe? In my territory? You think I’d let outsiders come and go without consequence?”

The room fell silent, except for the faint drip of water from a leaking pipe. The crew huddled together, their eyes darting between Eduardo and Lucas. Sofia, her heart pounding, took a step forward.

“They didn’t know, Eduardo,” she said, her voice firm. “If Lucas made a mistake, it was trusting us. We’re just airline staff, not spies.”

Eduardo’s eyes flicked to her, calculating. “Then prove it,” he said, his voice cold. “Lucas, if your loyalty is real, you’ll deal with her.”

The color drained from Lucas’s face. He hesitated, and the room seemed to hold its breath. Sofia stared at him, a mix of defiance and fear in her gaze.

The room felt suffocating as all eyes turned to Lucas. He stood frozen, his muscles taut like a coiled spring. Eduardo smirked, his hands resting lightly on his belt as if daring Lucas to act.

Sofia stepped forward before Lucas could speak. “Enough,” she said, her voice cutting through the tension. “If you want to test his loyalty, don’t use me.”

Eduardo raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued. “And what would you suggest, garota?”

Sofia held her ground, her hazel eyes locked on his. “You don’t trust him, and I get that. But if you’re as smart as you seem, you’ll see that we’re not the threat here. You’ve already proven your control. What more do you need?”

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The faintest flicker of respect crossed Eduardo's face, though it was gone in an instant. He took a step closer, towering over her. "You have fire. I'll give you that. But words won't save you here."

"They don't have to," Sofia replied, her voice steady. "You're the one in charge. Show us what that means."

Lucas's shoulders relaxed slightly, but the tension remained. Eduardo studied Sofia for a long moment before turning away. "Fine. Let's see if you can survive a little longer."

Sofia exhaled, her heart hammering in her chest, but she refused to let it show. Lucas shot her a look—half gratitude, half warning. She knew this wasn't over.

As Eduardo turned his back to them, the crew exchanged furtive glances. Tom, who had been quietly edging toward the far corner of the room, made his move. His hand darted toward a stack of crates, where he had spotted a rusty crowbar earlier.

The clang of metal hitting the concrete floor was deafening. Eduardo spun around, his expression icy. "What's this?" he asked, his voice dangerously calm.

Tom froze, the crowbar half-hidden behind his leg. "Nothing," he said quickly. "Just... tripped over it."

Eduardo's lips curled into a cruel smile. "Is that so?" He gestured to one of his men, who strode forward and snatched the crowbar from Tom's hand. "You must think I'm stupid."

"Wait," Sofia interjected, stepping between Eduardo and Tom. "It was my idea. He was just—"

Eduardo raised a hand to silence her. "Enough. You think you can outsmart me in my own territory? You've got guts, I'll give you that. But you're testing my patience."

The room seemed to grow colder as Eduardo turned to his men. "Tie him up. Let's see if the rest of you learn from his mistake."

Tom was dragged away, his protests echoing in the warehouse. The remaining crew huddled closer together, their fear palpable. Sofia

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clenched her fists, her mind racing. They couldn't afford another misstep.

Eduardo leaned back against the crates, his gaze sweeping over them. "Anyone else feeling brave?"

The silence that followed was deafening.

Eduardo leaned against a rusty metal pillar, the flickering warehouse bulb casting long, jagged shadows across his angular face. His voice was quiet, measured, but each word sliced through the tense silence like a blade.

"You think I'm a fool?" He tilted his head, his gaze sweeping over the crew. "You come into my favela, walk into my business, and expect me to believe you're just... tourists?"

Tom shifted uncomfortably, his usual composure cracking under the weight of Eduardo's stare. "Look, we didn't know—"

"Quiet," Eduardo cut him off with a raised hand, his eyes narrowing. "Speak when spoken to."

Maria clenched her fists at her sides, her jaw tight. Her defiance flickered for a moment, but even she knew better than to challenge Eduardo head-on. Sofia, standing a step behind, felt the tension radiating from her, a silent message: stay calm, stay together.

Eduardo took a step closer to Sofia, his gaze drilling into her. "And you... the shy one. What secrets are you hiding?" His lips curled into a cold smile. "You're either very brave or very stupid to come here."

Sofia held her ground, her voice steady despite the fear knotting in her stomach. "We're not hiding anything. We came to dance, to experience Rio."

Eduardo chuckled, a low, menacing sound. "Experience Rio? Then consider this your education." He turned abruptly, gesturing to his men. "Lock them up. If they don't start talking by morning... well, we'll see how far their loyalty goes."

The crew exchanged anxious glances as Eduardo's men herded them toward a dark corner of the warehouse. Sofia felt Lucas's brief

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touch on her arm—a wordless reassurance—before he was pulled away. The weight of Eduardo’s warning hung heavy in the air, a suffocating promise of what was to come.

The warehouse was silent except for the distant hum of traffic and the occasional drip of water from the ceiling. The crew huddled together in the damp, cramped space, their voices low and urgent.

Maria’s voice broke the tension first. “Listen to me. We can’t fall apart. That’s exactly what he wants.”

Tom ran a hand through his hair, his frustration bubbling to the surface. “And what do you suggest? Sit here and wait for him to decide which one of us gets shot first?”

“We need a plan,” Yara said, her voice firm. “We can’t just sit here.”

Gabriela nodded, her face pale but resolute. “Lucas knows this place. Maybe he can help us.”

“Lucas is the reason we’re here,” Maria snapped, her tone sharp. “How do we know he’s not working with Eduardo?”

Sofia’s voice cut through the argument, quieter but no less commanding. “He’s not.” All eyes turned to her. “He wouldn’t have warned me... back at the club.”

Maria frowned but said nothing. The crew’s murmurs subsided, their collective focus shifting to the faint hope Sofia’s words offered.

Amara placed a hand on Sofia’s shoulder. “Then we need to trust him. For now.”

The group fell into a tense silence, each member lost in their own thoughts. Sofia closed her eyes, replaying every moment since they’d entered the favela, searching for something—anything—that could help them survive the night. Eduardo’s warning echoed in her mind, a chilling reminder that time was running out.

Footsteps echoed outside the locked room, heavy and deliberate. The crew froze, their whispers silenced as the door creaked open. Eduardo stood in the doorway, flanked by two armed men, his expression unreadable.

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“Morning has come early,” he announced, his voice carrying an unsettling calm. “I’m giving you one last chance. Smuggle my goods, or...”

He let the words hang in the air, the unspoken threat more terrifying than anything he could have said.

Captain Connors stepped forward, his voice steady despite the tension in his frame. “You’re making a mistake. We’re not who you think we are.”

Eduardo’s gaze hardened. “You’re right. I made the mistake of letting you breathe this long.”

The room felt like it was collapsing in on itself, the walls closing in as the crew braced for what was coming. Sofia’s heart pounded in her chest as she locked eyes with Lucas through the doorway. His expression was a mix of determination and despair, a silent plea to hold on.

Eduardo raised a hand, his men stepping forward with their rifles at the ready. “Choose,” he said simply, his voice a knife’s edge. “Comply... or die.”

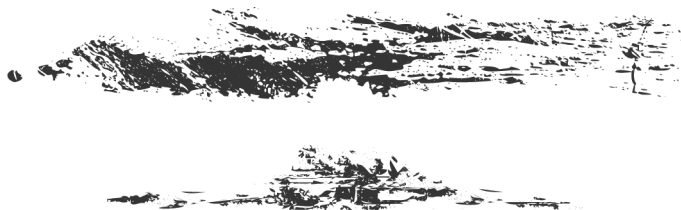
The crew’s silence stretched thin, the weight of the decision pressing down on them. Sofia’s breath caught as she saw the faintest nod from Lucas, a signal that their moment to act was coming. But until then, all they could do was wait—and hope.



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## Chapter 5: Eduardo's Ultimatum



THE WAREHOUSE WAS SUFFOCATING, the air thick with oil, sweat, and tension. Eduardo stood before the crew, his snake tattoo curling ominously as his fingers drummed against the edge of a rusted table. Behind him, crates loomed like silent witnesses, stacked haphazardly under the harsh glow of flickering bulbs.

“Let me make this simple,” Eduardo said, voice low and precise. His gaze cut through them, settling on each face before moving to the next. “You’re going to smuggle something for me. A little favor. You take my goods on your flight, and in return, you get to leave. Alive.”

Tom shifted. “You’re joking. You’re bloody joking.”

Eduardo didn’t flinch. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

Sofia clenched her fists, nausea rising. “We’re not smugglers. We’re flight crew.”

“Not tonight.” Eduardo leaned closer, his shadow swallowing Sofia’s small frame. “Tonight, you’re whatever I need you to be.”

Silence crushed them. Lucas, standing slightly apart, looked down at the cracked concrete floor. His shoulders twitched as if battling invisible chains. Eduardo glanced his way and smiled faintly.

“Your friend Lucas brought you here. He knows how this works.”

Sofia’s eyes darted to Lucas. He didn’t meet her gaze.

“We won’t do it,” Captain Connors said, voice gravelly but firm. “We’re not criminals.”

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Eduardo's smile evaporated. He straightened, his voice cold as steel. "Then you're dead."

"What the hell do you mean smuggle?" Tom's voice cracked, his fists clenched at his sides.

Eduardo's men moved closer, rifles visible, their presence heavy as anchors. Maria stepped forward, her calm veneer slipping as her voice sharpened. "This is madness. You think you can force us into this?"

Eduardo tilted his head, mock amusement flickering. "Force? No, no. I'm offering you a choice."

"A choice?" Yara's voice rose, eyes wide with disbelief. "We're hostages! You've got guns—what kind of choice is this?"

The captain threw a hand up. "Everyone—enough." His tone carried authority, but there was an edge of desperation. He turned back to Eduardo, glaring into the man's dark eyes. "Even if we agreed—how do you expect us to get anything through airport security?"

"You're clever people. You'll find a way." Eduardo's lip curled. "Or you'll pay the price."

The room rippled with raw panic. Gabriela murmured a prayer under her breath, her fingers brushing the chain around her neck. Sofia's gaze landed on Lucas, standing stiff in the corner, his face a mask of conflict. She moved toward him, trembling. "Lucas. Say something."

Lucas looked up, his voice thin. "It's not that simple."

Sofia blinked, anger flaring hot. "What do you mean it's not—what did you do?"

"I tried to keep you safe." His words fell flat.

Eduardo watched, amused by the unraveling. "Do you see now? It's simple: adapt or die."



SOFIA TOOK A STEP FORWARD, her pulse thundering, knees weak, but she didn't stop. "Listen to me, Eduardo."

## THE FAVELA PACT

The room hushed. Eduardo's gaze shifted lazily to her, as if humoring a child. "I'm listening."

She swallowed, gathering her strength. "We're not spies. We didn't come here to hurt you. We're just people doing our jobs—normal people."

Eduardo scoffed softly. "Normal people don't wander into my world."

"It was a mistake. We didn't know." Sofia's voice wavered but didn't break. "You don't need to do this."

Eduardo studied her, his expression unreadable. "Don't tell me what I need."

Her chest tightened, but she pushed on. "If you let us go—if you trust me—we'll leave, and you'll never hear from us again."

A beat of silence, and then Eduardo laughed. The sound was dry and sharp, bouncing off the walls. He stepped forward, slow and deliberate, until he was just inches away. "You think I'm stupid, little girl? Trust you? You come into my favela, and I'm supposed to believe you're harmless?" He leaned down, voice a whisper. "Your words mean nothing."

"Then what do you want from us?" Sofia snapped, anger cutting through her fear.

Eduardo's eyes turned ice-cold. "I want you to prove your loyalty. Take the deal. Or I'll take something else."

The weight of his words settled on her chest like a stone, and Sofia faltered. Behind her, the crew stood frozen, each face pale with dread.

Lucas stood near the edge of the warehouse, his jaw tight, his gaze locked on Eduardo. The gang leader's voice carried through the cold air, measured and venomous.

"You want them to live, Lucas?" Eduardo's lips curled into a sinister smile. "Convince her." He gestured at Sofia, who sat with her back to a rust-streaked crate, her face defiant despite the fear in her eyes.

Lucas's hands balled into fists. "You don't have to do this."

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Eduardo chuckled softly, like a predator toying with prey. “I don’t have to do anything. But I will. If you care about her life, about any of their lives, you’ll make her understand. They smuggle my cargo, or they die. It’s simple.”

Lucas’s shoulders sagged as he turned toward Sofia. He approached slowly, each step a struggle. She met his gaze, searching his face for answers.

“Lucas, don’t,” she whispered.

He knelt beside her, his voice low and urgent. “You don’t know what he’s capable of. You’ve seen the men outside. You’ve seen him. If we don’t do this—”

“Then we’re as good as dead anyway,” Sofia cut him off, her voice sharp. “You know that.”

Lucas’s throat bobbed as he swallowed. “I promised I’d protect you.”

“And you don’t do that by giving him exactly what he wants.”

Their words hung between them, heavy and unresolved. Lucas glanced over his shoulder at Eduardo, who watched with cold amusement, and then back to Sofia. He looked like a man breaking in two.



CAPTAIN CONNORS WATCHED from a distance, his face a mask of hard lines and quiet calculation. The crew sat in small clusters, some whispering, others silent. Fear buzzed through the warehouse like static electricity.

“All right,” Connors finally said, rising to his feet. His voice was low but commanding. “Everyone listen up.” The group turned toward him, clinging to the authority in his tone.

“We need to stay calm and unified. Panicking will only give Eduardo more power.” He swept his gaze across the crew, lingering on

## THE FAVELA PACT

those teetering on the edge of panic. “We’re not smuggling anything. Not yet, not ever. That’s what they want us to think—that there’s no other way. But we’ll find one.”

Maria crossed her arms. “And how do we do that, Captain? This place is locked down tight, and they’ve got enough firepower to—”

“I don’t have all the answers,” Connors cut her off, his voice firm. “But what I do have is you. We’re a team. We’ve trained for crises before. This isn’t any different.”

Tom exhaled sharply. “It’s a little different, Captain.”

Connors ignored him. “They’re trying to break us. If we give in to fear, they win. Stay strong, stay smart, and we’ll find a way out of this.”

His words settled over the group like a fragile shield, thin but necessary. Sofia, still sitting near Lucas, watched the captain carefully. For the first time since Eduardo’s ultimatum, some of the crew sat a little straighter, their eyes less hollow.



THE MURMUR OF VOICES grew louder, the tension boiling over. Tom paced, his face tight with frustration. “He’s going to kill us if we don’t comply. You all heard him.”

“And if we do comply, what then?” Yara shot back, her arms waving. “You think Eduardo’s just going to let us waltz out of here after we smuggle for him? We’ll be buried in some alley before we even make it to the airport.”

Gabriela huddled closer to Maria. “There has to be another way.”

“There isn’t,” Tom snapped. He turned toward Captain Connors. “Tell them, Captain. We don’t have a choice. You’re the one always telling us to be realistic.”

Connors stood rigid. “We always have a choice.”

Tom’s laugh was bitter. “And you’re willing to risk all of our lives for your principles?”

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“Enough!” Maria’s voice cut through the rising chaos. She stepped forward, her eyes blazing. “We stick together. All of us. We don’t let that bastard turn us against each other.”

Tom turned away, his jaw clenching as if holding back words he couldn’t say.

Sofia rose to her feet. “He’s counting on this,” she said softly. “On us falling apart.”

The room stilled. Yara exhaled a slow breath, nodding. “Fine. What’s the plan?”

Captain Connors’s gaze swept the crew. “We hold out. And we wait for our moment.”

The room was quiet again, but the cracks remained—divided loyalties threatening to shatter whatever fragile unity the crew had left.

The warehouse seemed quieter than before, save for Eduardo’s footsteps clicking sharply against the concrete floor. He paced slowly in front of the crew, his snake tattoo shifting ominously with every move of his wrist. The air reeked of sweat, fear, and gasoline—almost stifling.

“I know you,” Eduardo murmured, pointing lazily at Tom. “British charm. Dry humor. But tell me, Tom, what do you really know about your friends here?” He stopped abruptly, his dark gaze pinning Tom like a bug under glass.

Tom straightened, his calm mask faltering just slightly. “We’re just a crew. Nothing special.”

Eduardo smirked. “Nothing special?” He turned toward Gabriela, the Brazilian attendant, crouching in front of her. “You, carioca girl, born and bred. Yet, you follow these foreigners like a lost puppy.”

Gabriela flinched. “They’re my friends.”

“Friends?” Eduardo’s voice turned sharp, dangerous. “Let me tell you something about friends. They are the ones who betray you the fastest.”



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He rose, looming over the group like a shadow. “Every one of you has secrets. Things you want to hide. But I will find them. And when I do, you will turn on each other faster than a starving dog.”

Lucas glanced at Sofia, his jaw tight. Sofia’s fingers curled into fists at her sides as Eduardo’s words dripped poison into the group. She could see the flickers of doubt and mistrust in their eyes. Exactly what he wanted.

The silence that followed Eduardo’s departure was a suffocating blanket. Tom broke it with a bitter laugh. “Friends. He’s trying to break us.”

Lucas, sitting slightly apart, spoke quietly. “Sometimes, he succeeds.”

Everyone turned to him. Maria’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Lucas rubbed his hands over his face, avoiding Sofia’s gaze. “You want the truth? Fine. I know Eduardo. I grew up here. I did... things for him. Ran errands. Made connections.” His voice dropped. “It’s how I survived.”

Sofia stepped forward. “Lucas—”

“I didn’t want this.” Lucas’s voice cracked. “I didn’t want to bring you here. I thought it would be fine. I thought he’d leave you alone.”

“You thought?” Maria’s voice shook with anger. “You’re the reason we’re here?”

Lucas looked up, his emerald eyes pleading. “I didn’t know it would go this far.”

The group erupted. Gabriela cursed in Portuguese. Tom turned his back. Maria spat, “You put us all in danger for what? A favor?”

Sofia’s voice cut through the chaos. “Enough.” She looked at Lucas, her gaze steady. “You’re trying to fix this now. That counts for something.”

Lucas blinked at her, surprised. The others glared, their mistrust bubbling just beneath the surface.

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The group's anger was still simmering when Maria spoke up. Her voice was low, but it carried enough weight to silence everyone.

"There's something you need to know."

All eyes turned to her. She glanced at Eduardo's guards, their shadows stretching across the walls, before continuing. "I didn't want to say anything. But I'm carrying something. Corporate documents. Sensitive ones."

"What kind of documents?" Captain Connors asked sharply.

"Evidence," Maria said, her face grim. "Proof of corruption in one of the biggest companies back home. I was supposed to deliver it quietly. That's why I didn't tell you. But Eduardo—he knows something. If he finds out, we're all dead."

The room fell silent.

Tom ran a hand through his hair. "You're telling me we've got a whistleblower and a gang informant here? Brilliant."

Sofia stared at Maria, processing the new information. Lucas's betrayal had already shaken them, but now Maria's secret raised the stakes even higher.

"We need a plan," Sofia said firmly. "Before Eduardo comes back."

Captain Connors nodded. "We figure this out together. No more secrets."

But as the group exchanged wary glances, Sofia couldn't shake the feeling that Eduardo was right. Trust was already beginning to fracture.

Sofia stood, shoulders back, her voice steady as she addressed the crew. The room felt like it was closing in on them, but she refused to let Eduardo break them apart.

"We are not smuggling anything," she said, cutting through the tension. "That's not who we are, and it's not what we do."

Tom laughed bitterly, shaking his head. "Do you see another option? If we don't, we're dead."

Maria clutched the envelope, her knuckles white. "We're trapped. He has all the power."

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“No.” Sofia’s voice hardened, sharp as a blade. “He has power because we let him. But we still have our minds. If we keep thinking—keep working together—there’s a way out.”

Amara spoke up, her voice small. “He’ll kill us if we fight back.”

Sofia stepped forward, meeting each of their eyes, one by one. “Look around. We have nothing to lose except ourselves. If we give in, he wins. If we stand together, we stand a chance.”

Even Captain Connors raised his head, a flicker of something resembling hope passing through his tired eyes.

Lucas, still sitting apart, whispered, “You don’t understand what he’s capable of.”

Sofia turned on him, her tone unwavering. “Then help us fight him. We’re not giving in.”

The room fell silent, her words settling into the cracks of their broken resolve.

Eduardo returned, his entrance sucking the oxygen from the room. His gaze locked on Captain Connors, a smug smile twisting across his lips.

“Captain,” Eduardo drawled, circling him like a vulture. “The great Captain Connors. You think I don’t know who you are?”

Connors didn’t flinch. “You don’t know anything.”

Eduardo chuckled, the sound low and cold. “Oh, but I do. You served more than flights, didn’t you? Special ops, Air Force—classified missions. You’ve seen worse than this, haven’t you?”

The crew stared at Connors. Maria blinked, her mouth slightly open. Tom’s voice broke the silence. “Is that true, Captain?”

Connors stayed quiet, his jaw tight.

Eduardo leaned in close, his voice a whisper that carried. “A man like you doesn’t scare easy. But tell me—how did those men under your command feel? The ones you lost?”

Connors snapped his head up, fury flashing in his eyes. “Don’t.”

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Eduardo smirked, satisfied. "Guilt is a heavy thing, isn't it? So heavy, you carry it wherever you go. Even to a place like this."

Connors glared at him, fists clenched. Sofia stepped forward, putting herself between Eduardo and the captain. "Leave him alone."

Eduardo's smile vanished. "I'll leave him when I get what I want."

The warehouse quieted after Eduardo left, but his words lingered like smoke. The crew sat scattered across the room, their nerves frayed and their breaths shallow.

Sofia crouched beside Captain Connors. "Are you with us?"

The captain looked up, the weight of his past pressing on his features. Finally, he nodded. "Yeah. I'm with you."

Sofia rose to address the group. "We're getting out of here."

Tom scoffed. "How? They're watching us like hawks."

Maria leaned in, her voice low. "There's a loose window near the back. I saw it earlier."

Lucas glanced at her. "It's probably guarded."

"Probably," Maria admitted. "But we won't get another chance."

Sofia folded her arms, thinking quickly. "We need a distraction."

Amara looked hesitant. "What kind of distraction?"

Captain Connors stood, his movements slow and deliberate. "Something loud. Something Eduardo can't ignore."

Lucas spoke up, his tone grim. "It's risky. If we get caught—"

"We don't have time to be afraid," Sofia said, cutting him off. "If we don't act now, Eduardo wins."

The crew exchanged wary looks, but Sofia's certainty anchored them. One by one, they nodded.

"Tonight," Sofia said, her voice firm. "We take our shot."

Captain Connors cracked his knuckles, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "Let's give Eduardo a fight."

The door slammed open, and Eduardo entered with a renewed coldness in his gaze. Behind him, armed guards fanned out, their expressions empty but alert.

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“Enough talk,” Eduardo said, his voice like a hammer striking an anvil. “You are getting too comfortable, too... confident.”

The crew tensed as the guards spread across the room, stationing themselves by the doors and windows. Lucas looked at Eduardo warily. “What’s this about?”

Eduardo smiled without warmth. “Insurance.” He pointed a finger lazily toward the crew. “You move. You whisper. You plot. My men will deal with it—swiftly.”

“Eduardo, this is insane,” Sofia said, stepping forward, her hands clenched into fists.

Eduardo’s gaze flickered to her. “Insane? No. Careful. You see, you’ve wasted enough of my time. So now, you will have no space, no privacy, and no hope of escape.”

Maria swallowed, glancing toward the back window they’d counted on. A guard had taken position there, rifle in hand.

“This is a mistake,” Captain Connors said, his voice low, but Eduardo ignored him.

Instead, Eduardo smiled, the smug curve of his lips sending a chill through the group. “You have until morning to decide. Don’t test me.”

He turned on his heel and left, the slam of the door echoing through the warehouse. The guards shifted, their silence as menacing as the guns slung across their shoulders.

Sofia exhaled, her voice a whisper. “They’re tightening the noose.”

The warehouse seemed smaller now, suffocating under the weight of Eduardo’s ultimatum. The crew sat in tense silence, staring at the dirt-streaked floor or the guards looming nearby.

“Maybe... maybe we don’t have a choice,” Amara whispered, her voice cracking.

“We do have a choice,” Sofia snapped, louder than intended. Her eyes blazed as she looked around. “Giving in isn’t survival—it’s surrender.”

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Tom shook his head, his face pale. “Smuggling the drugs means we live. That’s what matters.”

Captain Connors broke in, his voice steady. “No one is forcing our hands yet. Don’t let Eduardo control us before he even needs to.”

Lucas leaned back against the wall, his arms crossed. “And what’s your plan, then? Let him kill us?”

Maria spoke up, her voice sharp. “You can’t think like that. We need to decide—together. If we fracture, he wins.”

The room went quiet again, save for the faint footsteps of the guards pacing nearby.

Sofia finally spoke, her voice softer now. “He’s counting on us to break. That’s what men like Eduardo do. They use fear to make you think you’re already beaten.”

Tom sighed, rubbing his face. “And what if we are?”

“We’re not,” Sofia said firmly. “Not yet.”

Captain Connors nodded, his voice grave. “We stick together. That’s the only way we get through this.”

A fragile resolve settled over the group, but the weight of Eduardo’s threat loomed like a storm cloud.

The hours dragged, marked only by the rhythmic ticking of a rusted clock high on the warehouse wall. The guards remained, shadows with guns, unmoving and watchful.

Eduardo returned, this time with a purpose that chilled the room. “Morning approaches,” he announced, arms spread as though he were addressing loyal subjects. “And your time is almost up.”

No one spoke.

Eduardo stepped closer, his boots echoing on the concrete. “So—what will it be? Cooperation? Or consequences?”

Lucas stared at him, his expression unreadable. Sofia stood beside Captain Connors, her shoulders squared. “We’re not smuggling for you,” she said, her words clear, deliberate.

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Eduardo tilted his head, his smirk slow and predatory. “How noble.”

He looked toward his men, then back at the crew. “You have a few more hours. By dawn, I expect an answer. Refuse again, and...” He trailed off, letting silence finish the threat.

One of the guards snorted a laugh, tightening his grip on his rifle. Eduardo grinned, satisfied. “Tick-tock, my friends. Tick. Tock.”

With that, he left again, the metal door clanging shut behind him.

Sofia turned to the group. “We can’t wait any longer. If we’re going to act, it’s now.”

Captain Connors nodded, determination cutting through his weariness. “Let’s make it count.”

Maria glanced toward the window, her voice low. “If we fail...”

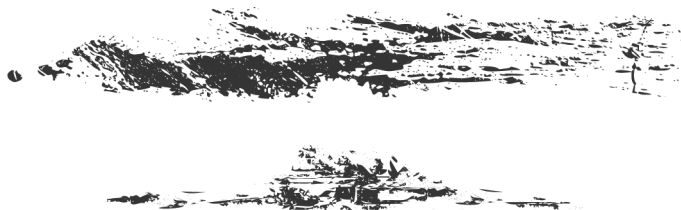
“We won’t,” Sofia interrupted, her eyes steely. “We can’t.”

The ticking clock seemed louder now, each second pulling them closer to dawn and Eduardo’s final decision.

## **THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL**



## Chapter 6: The Escape Plan



THE WAREHOUSE WAS SILENT except for the hum of a flickering bulb overhead. The crew sat huddled in a far corner, shadows stretching like claws across the cold, concrete floor. Maria's voice cut through the quiet, sharp and low.

"We're not dying here," she said, her dark eyes scanning the group. "Everyone has a skill. We use it."

Sofia glanced around. Tired faces. Tense shoulders. Captain Connors leaned against a rusted crate, arms folded, his jaw tight. "What do you suggest, Maria?"

"Distractions. Movement. We keep them guessing." She turned to Tom. "You're good with hands—fixing things, rigging. Use it."

Tom's brows furrowed. "You want me to turn scrap metal into fireworks?"

"Figure it out."

Maria turned next to Gabriela. "You're local. You know how people think here. Can you fake something—get a guard to react?"

Gabriela nodded. "I'll come up with something."

"And me?" Sofia's voice broke through. She wasn't used to speaking up, but there was no time to be small now.

Maria's gaze softened, though only slightly. "You're sharp. Stay close to Lucas. He's our guide."

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At the mention of his name, Lucas pushed himself forward from where he'd been crouching. "I have a map," he said, pulling a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. "It's rough, but it'll get you out."

"Us out," Sofia corrected, her eyes narrowing. Lucas's hesitation was brief, but she caught it.

Captain Connors stepped in, taking the paper. "Maria's right. This is our only shot. We'll move tonight."

The crew exchanged wary looks, but there was no room for doubt. Maria clasped her hands together. "We get through this because we have no other choice."

Lucas spread the map across the floor, its edges torn and smudged with grease. The dim light made it harder to see, but Sofia crouched beside him, studying the winding lines of alleys and crossings.

"This here," Lucas traced a line with his finger, "is the main road. Guards don't patrol here often. But the alleys—" He paused, eyes flicking up to Sofia. "They're a maze."

"Then we need someone who can navigate them." Captain Connors crouched across from them, his voice firm. "You."

Lucas's lips curled into something between a smile and a grimace. "I'll take you as far as I can. But Eduardo isn't stupid. The second he smells anything, he'll lock this place down."

"Then we'll make sure he doesn't," Sofia said, her tone bolder than she felt. "How long until we hit the edge?"

"Thirty minutes if we move quietly. Maybe less."

Sofia's eyes traced the map. The escape routes snaked through the favela like veins, some blocked, others barely wide enough for one person. A thousand places to get caught. A thousand places to hide.

"Once we're out?" Tom's voice drifted in from the group. "What's the next move?"

Lucas's shoulders tensed. "There's a safe house. A contact I trust."

"Trust?" Maria's voice cut through, sharp as a blade. "We trusted you once already."

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Sofia's hand stilled Lucas before he could snap back. "It's our only option," she said softly. "Trust or not."

Lucas's eyes held hers for a beat before he nodded. "Fine. But we move at my pace, quietly."

"Then let's make it count," Captain Connors said, folding the map and tucking it into his jacket. "Everyone ready yourselves."

Tom cracked his knuckles, glancing around the warehouse. "Anyone want to lend me some string, a few cans, and a prayer?"

Yara smirked, tossing him a coil of twine she'd scavenged. "Make it loud, Brit."

Maria watched Tom work while Gabriela slipped toward one of the guards, her face pale but determined. "Oi, ajuda!" she called, doubling over with a sudden moan. Her voice echoed off the warehouse walls, desperation woven through her Portuguese. "Ela está doente! She's sick! Help her!"

The guard frowned, gripping his rifle tightly as he approached, his boots heavy on the cracked concrete. Sofia held her breath, watching as Gabriela swayed and stumbled. At the same moment, Tom finished rigging a makeshift contraption between crates, balancing an oil drum in place with shaking hands.

"Move," Maria hissed.

Tom kicked the twine. The drum toppled, clanging and bouncing as it slammed to the ground. The sound roared through the warehouse like thunder, echoing until every guard's head snapped toward the noise.

"Now," Lucas whispered.

Gabriela dropped her act, running back to the group as the guards shouted, distracted. Lucas led the way, pointing toward the nearest exit as Sofia's pulse thundered in her ears. The first move had worked, but they'd only just begun.

Gabriela leaned against the rusty wall, her breath shallow. A flicker of movement near the door caught her attention. The guard, a wiry

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man with sharp eyes, stood just outside, distracted by the flickering light above.

Gabriela let out a gasp, her knees buckling as she slumped to the ground. The thud echoed through the warehouse.

“Help... please,” she whimpered, clutching her stomach. “I can’t... breathe.”

The guard cursed under his breath and stepped inside. He bent down, poking her shoulder. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Please, I need... air,” Gabriela whispered, her voice quivering.

His scowl deepened. “Don’t move.” He turned to yell for someone outside, and at that moment, Sofia nodded at Maria.

Maria slipped behind him. Silent. Efficient. With a swift motion, she grabbed the heavy rope Sofia had found earlier, looping it around the guard’s neck. The man flailed, his hands clawing at the rope, but Maria held firm. Yara stepped forward, grabbing his legs and pulling him to the ground. His gasps choked into silence.

Gabriela stood, steady and unshaken. “He’s out.”

“Quick. Hide him,” Sofia ordered, already dragging a barrel closer. Maria and Tom hauled the body into the shadows, covering him with a tattered tarp.

Sofia wiped sweat from her brow and glanced at the others. “That was step one.”

Yara exhaled sharply. “Hope the rest goes this smooth.”

Eduardo stood at the far end of the warehouse, his sharp gaze sweeping the room. His fingers tapped a steady rhythm against his belt.

“You look nervous,” Eduardo said, his voice calm but edged with warning. His gaze landed on Sofia, lingering. “Anything you’d like to share?”

Sofia held his stare. “Nothing’s wrong.”

He walked closer, slow and deliberate, stopping inches from her face. “I don’t like strange behavior. And your little crew? Acting very strange.”

## THE FAVELA PACT

Tom, standing in the corner, shifted his weight. Eduardo's dark eyes snapped to him.

"Got something to say, Brit?" Eduardo growled. "Or just bad at standing still?"

"No offense, mate, but being kidnapped doesn't bring out my best side," Tom replied, forcing a grin.

Eduardo's mouth curled into something close to amusement, though his eyes remained cold. "I'd watch that mouth of yours."

Eduardo's men began milling around, their boots echoing ominously across the concrete floor. Sofia clenched her fists, biting back her fear. She glanced at Gabriela, who gave the faintest of nods.

Keep it together, Sofia thought. Eduardo couldn't know what was happening—yet.

Lucas appeared from the shadows, his expression carefully blank. He approached Eduardo, speaking low. "They're scared. That's all."

Eduardo sneered. "They better be."

He looked back at Sofia, his smile fading. "One mistake. That's all it takes."

Lucas pulled Sofia aside, his grip firm on her arm. "You're running out of time," he whispered. "Eduardo's getting suspicious."

Sofia's voice lowered. "Then come with us."

He shook his head, eyes flicking to the armed guards. "No. I stay, I distract him. He won't follow you if I'm here."

"That's suicide, Lucas."

"Better me than all of you." Lucas's face softened, and for a moment, the weight of his decision flickered in his gaze. "I owe you this."

Sofia's throat tightened. "Lucas..."

"Trust me." He pressed the crumpled map into her hand. "Follow the path out of the warehouse. Then take the back alleys—it'll lead you downhill."

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Sofia hesitated, her fingers trembling over the map. “What about Eduardo?”

Lucas grinned faintly, but the smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I’ve been lying to him for years. I know how to make him listen.”

Eduardo’s voice boomed across the room. “Lucas! Where the hell are you?”

Lucas released her arm and stepped back. “Go,” he mouthed.

Sofia turned to the others. “We’re moving. Now.”

As they slipped into the shadows, Sofia glanced back. Lucas stood in plain view, his hands raised as he approached Eduardo. His voice carried across the room, calm and unshaken.

“Eduardo, we need to talk.”

The air inside the warehouse felt dense, as though the walls themselves conspired to trap the crew. A faint flicker from the hanging bulb cast jittery shadows that darted across the concrete like predators. Sofia pressed Lucas’s rough map against her chest, her fingers tracing the sketched exits.

“This way,” she whispered, motioning the group forward.

Tom crouched low as he darted between stacked crates, the soles of his shoes scraping against dust-caked floors. Gabriela followed, her breathing shallow. Captain Connors took the rear, his bulk moving with surprising silence.

At the far end of the room, Eduardo’s men could be heard—low murmurs, the occasional burst of laughter, a chair scraping against concrete. Their carelessness was a gift Sofia wouldn’t waste.

Lucas’s map led them to an old service corridor. Rust streaked down the door frame, and Sofia’s hands trembled as she pushed it open.

“It’s clear,” she whispered. “Keep quiet.”

Maria shot her a sharp look. “How much further?”

Sofia studied the map. “We just need—”

A sudden thud froze everyone in place. A man’s voice echoed from the hallway behind them.

## THE FAVELA PACT

“Who’s there?”

Tom cursed under his breath. Gabriela turned, eyes wide. Connors moved quickly, pressing a finger to his lips before motioning them to move faster.

The group slipped through the corridor, their movements frantic but measured. Sofia’s pulse pounded in her ears as they crept further into the bowels of the warehouse, chasing the dim promise of freedom.

The corridor opened into another cavernous room, its corners shrouded in gloom. Eduardo’s men were close now; the sound of boots approached like a drumbeat counting down their capture.

Sofia held up her hand, stopping the crew in place.

“They’re sweeping the area,” Connors muttered. “We’re running out of time.”

Gabriela pressed herself against the wall, straining to hear. Then—“I see light. Over there.” She pointed to a half-ajar door at the far end of the room, spilling a faint glow into the shadows.

Sofia nodded. “Let’s go. One at a time. Keep low.”

Tom moved first, his frame disappearing like a phantom. Gabriela followed, then Maria, their bodies darting through beams of pale light. Sofia was next, counting her steps, every second feeling stretched thin. Connors brought up the rear, his face hard with focus.

The door loomed larger. Relief pricked at Sofia’s chest—until a voice rang out behind them.

“Hey! Stop!”

A flashlight sliced through the dark, pinning Maria mid-movement. She froze like a cornered animal. Eduardo’s man yelled again, the metallic click of a cocked gun reverberating through the room.

“Run!” Sofia shouted.

Maria sprinted for the door, Connors shoving her through. Tom grabbed a crate and hurled it, the clatter of wood and metal buying

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precious seconds. Sofia dove into the doorway, her shoulder slamming against the frame as Gabriela yanked her inside.

From behind, the guard cursed. Shots rang out, bullets chipping away at the concrete walls. But the group was already running—away from the chaos, deeper into the night.

The alley beyond the warehouse was narrow, the air choked with the smell of mildew and oil. The crew huddled in the shadows, gasping for breath, their faces slick with sweat and fear.

“We can’t keep this up,” Maria said. “They’ll find us.”

Sofia stepped forward, her voice firm but steady. “They won’t. Not if we stay smart.”

Connors nodded, wiping his brow. “What’s the next move?”

Sofia unfurled Lucas’s map again, tracing a path with her finger. “We follow this route—through the alleys, up the hill, and out of the favela.”

Gabriela frowned. “What about Lucas? He’s still in there.”

Sofia’s gaze flickered back toward the warehouse. For a moment, guilt threatened to crush her resolve, but she swallowed it down. “Lucas wanted us to get out. That’s what we’re going to do.”

Tom’s voice cut through the tension. “We’ll make it. We just have to trust her.”

Sofia glanced at the group—faces drawn with fear but still resolute. She nodded, her jaw set. “Let’s move. Stick together, stay quiet. If we split up now, we’re done.”

The group fell in line behind her, moving quickly but carefully. Sofia led the way, navigating the twisting maze of alleys with Lucas’s map clutched tightly in her hand. She didn’t dare let herself look back—there wasn’t time for doubt.

For the first time since their ordeal began, Sofia felt something shift inside her. The timid flight attendant who’d landed in Rio was gone. In her place stood someone who wasn’t just surviving—she was leading.



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The faint sound of a metal door slamming echoed across the warehouse. Sofia froze mid-step, gripping the corner of the crate she was using for cover. A split second later, shouting erupted from Eduardo's men.

"Eles fugiram! Procurem por eles!" The bark of Eduardo's voice cut through the air, furious and sharp. Footsteps pounded on the concrete floors, heavy and frantic, spreading like wildfire through the space.

Sofia turned to the crew crouched behind her. Yara's chest heaved, her lips trembling. "They know. What do we do now?"

"Keep moving," Captain Connors said, his voice a tight whisper, steady despite the chaos. He motioned for Gabriela and Tom to flank the exit while he led from the front. "Stay low. Stick together."

Gunmetal clinks—the sound of weapons being loaded—snapped Sofia into motion. She glanced at Lucas, his face a shadow of conflict. He mouthed Go, gesturing frantically toward the crates piled near the back wall.

Sofia pulled Yara's arm. "Now."

They darted between rows of rusted barrels and pallets stacked with tarps, the industrial space narrowing into darkness. Each footstep felt too loud. Each breath too shallow. Sofia could feel the heaviness of Eduardo's wrath closing in, like a predator just steps behind.

A single flashlight beam slashed through the gloom ahead. "Over there!" a guard shouted, the beam locking onto their movement.

A shot rang out, splintering a wooden crate inches from Sofia's shoulder. She stifled a scream and pulled Yara down. Connors dragged Gabriela into cover.

"Move!" Lucas's voice echoed from somewhere behind, louder now. "Keep going! Don't stop!"

The warehouse was alive with chaos. Shouts. Gunfire. Flashlights flickering. Sofia pressed forward, desperate to escape before the walls closed in completely.

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The moment Sofia burst into the night air, she was blinded. The narrow alley outside the warehouse was a riot of noise—dogs barking, distant music pounding, the hum of powerlines overhead. Sweat clung to her face as she scanned the maze of streets. Behind her, the echoes of Eduardo's men grew closer.

"This way!" Gabriela tugged Sofia's arm, her voice urgent but firm. She pointed toward a gap between two buildings barely wide enough for a person to slip through.

Connors grabbed Tom by the shoulder, shoving him forward. "Go! Fast!"

The crew scattered through the labyrinthine alleys, sneakers scraping over cobblestones, breath ragged. Eduardo's men swarmed the streets behind them, their shouts angry and disjointed, bouncing off the concrete walls.

Sofia's legs burned as she ran, dodging puddles and trash heaps. Gabriela led them, weaving through the chaos with an uncanny sense of direction. Sofia looked back just once—enough to see shadows moving at the alley entrance. The metallic click of a rifle being cocked sent her heart into her throat.

"Split up!" Lucas's voice echoed from behind. He appeared at the corner, his expression raw and desperate. "Go!"

"What?" Sofia shouted back, panting.

"Trust me!" Lucas spun on his heel and sprinted toward a different alley, drawing shouts and a flashlight beam in his wake. A distraction.

Sofia hesitated, her stomach twisting, but Connors grabbed her wrist, his grip iron. "He's buying us time. Let's move!"

They turned a corner into an even narrower alley, the walls closing in like jaws. The sounds of pursuit softened but didn't disappear. Gabriela stopped briefly at an intersection, eyes darting left and right, then pointed straight ahead. "Follow me. I know where we are."

"Are you sure?" Connors asked.

Gabriela didn't answer. She ran, and the rest of them followed.

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The crew emerged into a quieter, darker stretch of the favela. The alleys widened slightly, littered with debris and half-collapsed structures. Gabriela crouched near a graffiti-covered wall, chest heaving, and gestured for the others to gather close.

“Where are we?” Sofia whispered, trying to catch her breath.

Gabriela’s eyes swept the group, her gaze fierce and steady. “We’re near the back entrance to Complexo. Eduardo’s men won’t follow this deep unless they’re desperate.”

“Why?” Tom asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

“This area belongs to another gang.” Gabriela looked toward the tangle of pathways ahead. “But we’re not safe yet. We need to move fast before anyone notices us.”

Connors nodded, crouching beside her. “Do you know a way out of here?”

Gabriela traced a line in the dirt with her finger, drawing the makeshift map in her mind. “If we follow this path,” she murmured, “we’ll hit the old aqueducts. They run toward the edge of the favela. It’s risky but faster.”

“Riskier than this?” Yara muttered.

Gabriela’s gaze locked with Sofia’s. “We don’t have another option.”

Sofia exhaled hard, nodding. “Let’s do it. Everyone, stay close.”

Gabriela led the way again, darting through the maze with practiced steps. Every so often, distant whistles or muffled shouts punctuated the quiet, but the crew pressed forward. They stepped over rubble and ducked through tight corners, Sofia’s pulse pounding in her ears.

Finally, Gabriela stopped at the mouth of a narrow tunnel lined with cracked stone. “This is it,” she said, glancing back. “Once we’re through, we’re close.”

Sofia looked at the darkness stretching before them. “Let’s finish this.”

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The group sprinted down an alley, feet pounding against the cracked pavement. The shouts of Eduardo's men grew louder, closing the distance. Sofia's lungs burned, her vision narrowing as she pushed herself to keep moving.

"This way!" Gabriela called, pointing toward a narrow gap between two buildings.

Yara tripped, falling hard to her knees. Tom yanked her up, urgency in his grip. "Get up! Keep going!"

They squeezed through the gap, stumbling into a broader passage littered with garbage and scrap metal. Eduardo's men were seconds behind.

Captain Connors stopped short, his eyes sweeping the ground. His face darkened. "Go. I'll slow them down."

Sofia turned, horrified. "What? No!"

Connors gripped her shoulder, his expression resolute. "You're the leader now, Sofia. Get them out."

He didn't wait for an argument. He scooped up a rusted metal pole, yanking a crate to block the path behind him. "Move!"

"Connors—" Sofia's voice cracked, but Gabriela pulled her arm, forcing her forward.

They ran. Behind them, a burst of shouting erupted as Connors emerged, swinging the pole like a weapon. Sofia looked back once to see him standing tall, blocking Eduardo's men from giving chase.

"Don't stop!" Gabriela shouted.

Sofia turned forward, her chest tight with anguish. Connors's silhouette disappeared into the darkness, but his voice echoed in her mind: Get them out.

The air grew thicker, damp with the smell of earth and mildew. The tunnel Gabriela led them through opened into a slope of overgrown weeds and crumbling concrete. At the top, moonlight bled across the city skyline.

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“Keep going,” Sofia urged, her voice hoarse. The crew clawed their way up, hands grasping at roots and loose dirt.

Yara collapsed near the top, sobbing. “I can’t... I can’t...”

“You can!” Tom bent down, pulling her up. “Almost there.”

Gabriela was the first to crest the edge, scanning the horizon. “We’re close. I see the main road.”

Sofia scrambled over the ledge, her palms bleeding from cuts. She reached back, helping Yara up. The others followed, panting, bodies trembling from exhaustion. Below, faint echoes of Eduardo’s men still carried through the dark.

Tom dropped onto the grass, laughing breathlessly. “We made it.”

“Not yet,” Gabriela muttered, her eyes scanning the shadows.

Sofia pulled herself up, her face hard with determination. “Get to the road. If we keep moving, they won’t catch us.”

The crew staggered forward, driven by pure survival. The city lights ahead were distant but close enough to fill Sofia with hope. For the first time, the favela’s tight labyrinth seemed behind them.

“Lucas—” Sofia stopped, her head snapping toward the favela. Her chest tightened, her thoughts a whirlwind.

“Keep moving, Sofia,” Gabriela said softly. “You have to.”

Sofia looked ahead, forcing herself to follow.

The crew reached the edge of the favela, stumbling onto the cracked asphalt of the main road. Streetlights flickered, their harsh glow highlighting sweat-drenched faces and torn clothes. Sofia turned back, the favela now a maze of dark alleys and shadows.

“Do you think he made it?” Yara whispered, leaning on Tom for support.

Sofia didn’t answer. Her gaze searched the skyline for any sign of Lucas. The chaos behind them had dulled, the shouting faint now, but her gut twisted.

“We have to go,” Captain Connors’s voice echoed in her memory, resolute. Lucas had said the same thing.

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Gabriela tugged her sleeve gently. “He knew what he was doing, Sofia.”

Sofia clenched her jaw, fighting the lump rising in her throat. She took one last look. “We don’t leave people behind.”

Gabriela nodded. “Sometimes they choose to stay.”

A figure moved far in the distance, silhouetted against the faint light of the favela. Sofia froze, her heart skipping.

“Is that him?” Tom squinted, trying to see.

The figure turned, disappearing back into the maze. Sofia’s breath caught, her shoulders sagging. Lucas had stayed behind. Whether he’d made it out or not—she’d never know.

“Let’s go,” she whispered, her voice hollow but firm.

The group started down the road, each step heavy, the weight of sacrifice pressing on them all. Sofia walked last, her mind still in the shadows, where Lucas had chosen his fate.

## THE FAVELA PACT





## Chapter 7: The Showdown



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The roar of engines cut through the night, headlights piercing the narrow alleys. Eduardo sat rigid in the front seat of a black SUV, his face a mask of cold fury. Through the cracked window, he scanned every shadow. His men trailed behind on motorcycles, tires screeching as they swerved through the tight labyrinth of the favela.

“They’re rats,” Eduardo growled, fingers drumming against his thigh. “But rats always get cornered.”

He leaned forward as the driver veered sharply into another alley, dust and trash scattering under the wheels. Voices crackled over the radio, his men shouting reports.

“They’re heading west, boss! Near the old market.”

Eduardo’s lips curled into a cruel smile. “Cut them off at the bridge. I want them alive.”

Gunfire echoed somewhere ahead, sharp and chaotic. Eduardo gripped the dashboard, his patience wearing thin. The SUV jolted over a broken curb, headlights sweeping across broken walls covered in graffiti.

“Faster!” he barked. “Don’t let them slip.”

In the distance, Eduardo glimpsed silhouettes darting across rooftops—small figures against the moonlit skyline. His pulse quickened. They were close now.

“Block every exit,” he ordered. “No one leaves the favela.”

The vehicle roared forward, Eduardo’s eyes locked on the path ahead. The chase had become personal. There would be no escape.

The crew skidded to a halt at the end of a narrow alley. Sofia’s chest heaved as she turned back. Crumbling walls surrounded them, a dead end looming like a trap.

“Damn it,” Captain Connors muttered, pressing his hand against the wall as though willing it to vanish. “They’ve boxed us in.”

Behind them, the sound of boots echoed like a drumbeat. Eduardo’s men appeared first, spreading out to form a semi-circle, their guns pointed and ready. Then Eduardo himself emerged, stepping into

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the flickering light of a broken streetlamp. He walked with slow, deliberate steps, his cold gaze sweeping over the crew.

"There's nowhere left to run." Eduardo's voice was soft but razor-sharp. He cocked his head at Sofia. "You've made this harder than it needed to be."

Sofia's stomach knotted, but she stepped in front of the others, planting her feet. "It doesn't have to end like this."

Eduardo laughed—a low, mirthless sound. He gestured around the alley. "Look where you are. Does it look like you have options?"

"We're not afraid of you," Maria said from behind Sofia, though her voice trembled slightly.

Eduardo's smile didn't falter, but his tone darkened. "You should be."

The tension thickened, oppressive as the air. Sofia met Eduardo's gaze, her fists clenched at her sides. She knew they were outmatched, but she wouldn't let fear break her.

Sofia stepped forward, her pulse pounding in her ears. Eduardo's men tensed, their weapons shifting slightly, but she held up her hands, palms open.

"Listen to me," she said, her voice steady despite the weight pressing on her chest. "We're not a threat to you. Let them go, and I'll stay."

Eduardo's brow arched, intrigued. He took a step closer, the distance between them shrinking. "And why would I agree to that?"

"Because you don't need all of us," Sofia said firmly. "You've already proven your power. Let the rest go. You win."

Eduardo's smirk sharpened, his dark eyes boring into hers. "You think sacrificing yourself makes you a hero?"

"No," Sofia replied, meeting his gaze without flinching. "But it makes me human. Something you wouldn't understand."

Eduardo's smile faltered for just a second, replaced by a flicker of annoyance. He gestured lazily with his hand, and his men lowered their weapons slightly, though their grip stayed firm.

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“You’ve got nerve,” Eduardo muttered. “But nerve alone doesn’t buy freedom.”

The crew shifted behind Sofia, silent, watching. Captain Connors clenched his jaw, his eyes burning with restrained anger. Maria’s breath hitched, her fear barely hidden.

Sofia’s voice cut through the silence. “Let them go.”

Eduardo stared at her, a predator sizing up prey. His fingers flexed at his side, the air crackling with a tension that could snap at any second.

Eduardo’s gaze locked on Sofia, amusement flickering behind his cold stare. He stepped closer, the echo of his boots filling the alley. The crew tensed, the suffocating silence broken only by shallow breathing.

“You know,” Eduardo began, voice like gravel dragged across stone, “I almost admire your stubbornness.”

Sofia didn’t move. “Let them go. This is between you and me.”

He chuckled, shaking his head. “No, Sofia. It’s bigger than that. You think you know the people you trust?” His eyes flicked toward Lucas’s empty place. “Did Lucas tell you everything?”

The name hit like a punch, and Sofia’s composure cracked for a heartbeat. “What are you talking about?”

Eduardo’s smile widened. “Oh, you don’t know? He was mine long before he was yours.”

The crew shifted uneasily. Maria’s brows knitted, and Captain Connors narrowed his eyes. Sofia swallowed hard, her voice sharp. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Eduardo tilted his head, savoring the moment. “Who do you think helped me track you through the favela? Who do you think led you into this alley?”

The weight of his words crashed over them. Sofia’s mind raced, but she refused to let him see her falter. “Lucas would never—”

“Wouldn’t he?” Eduardo interrupted, a predator circling. “Betrayal is a funny thing, Sofia. Everyone has a price.”

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The doubt lingered in the air like smoke. Eduardo knew it. He smirked. “You see, you don’t even trust your own anymore.”

Captain Connors stepped forward, breaking the spell of Eduardo’s words. His jaw tightened, and his voice boomed like a shot through the alley.

“Enough of your games, Eduardo. You think you can turn us against each other? It won’t work.”

Eduardo’s smug expression flickered. He waved lazily toward his men, their guns still aimed, their fingers twitching. “And what will you do, Captain? Bark orders? You’ve got nothing.”

“We’ve got each other,” Connors said, standing taller. “That’s more than you’ll ever have.”

Maria moved next to Sofia, her voice steady despite the fear etched on her face. “We’re not breaking, Eduardo. You can keep talking, but we’re walking out of here.”

“Brave words,” Eduardo sneered. “Do you really think courage means anything against bullets?”

Tom stepped to the side, arms crossed, glaring at Eduardo’s men. “Bullets don’t mean much if the man holding the gun is afraid.”

Sofia glanced around the group—Maria’s fierce resolve, Connors’s unwavering calm, and Tom’s steady defiance. They were outnumbered, outgunned, and trapped. But in that moment, they looked stronger than ever.

Eduardo’s smile faltered again. The confidence in the crew unsettled him.

“Your bravado doesn’t change a thing,” Eduardo spat.

“Maybe not,” Sofia shot back. “But it reminds you what you’ll never be.”

Eduardo’s jaw twitched, the first crack in his arrogance showing. The crew stood united, no longer shaking, no longer backing down.

Before Eduardo could react, a sharp shout rang out behind his men.

“Hey! Over here!”

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Heads turned. Confusion rippled through the group as Lucas stumbled into the alley, clutching his side, sweat streaming down his face.

“Lucas?” Sofia whispered, stunned.

Eduardo spun, eyes narrowing as anger flared across his features. “You have nerve showing your face.”

Lucas ignored him, pointing wildly down the alleyway. “Your men need help! They’ve been ambushed. They’re falling back.”

Eduardo’s men exchanged uncertain glances, weapons wavering. “What ambush?” one of them muttered.

Lucas staggered closer, panting. “They’re at the bridge—reinforcements. If you don’t move now, they’ll cut you off.”

Eduardo turned, fury twisting his expression. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” Lucas snapped, echoing Eduardo’s earlier tone. He looked at Sofia, his eyes pleading. “Go. Now.”

Eduardo barked an order. “Check it!”

Two of his men broke off, disappearing into the darkness. Eduardo turned back, advancing on Lucas like a storm.

“You’re dead, traitor.”

Lucas didn’t move, holding Eduardo’s furious gaze, buying the crew every precious second.

Sofia hesitated for only a moment before nodding to Connors and Maria. “Move. Now.”

The crew slipped toward the shadows, their escape unfolding as Lucas faced Eduardo alone. His sacrifice, unspoken, loomed heavy in the air.

The tension shattered like glass when the first shot echoed through the alley. Eduardo’s men lunged forward, their guns blazing in controlled bursts. The crew scattered, clambering over trash heaps, ducking behind crates, the chaos closing in.

Sofia grabbed Maria’s arm and yanked her toward an overturned cart. Tom swore as a bullet shattered a nearby window, glass raining

## THE FAVELA PACT

down in sharp, angry shards. Captain Connors pressed his back against a wall, his jaw tight, scanning the fight with the precision of a soldier.

“Stay low! Use the debris for cover!” he barked. His voice cut through the panic, snapping the crew to action.

Yara hurled a rusted metal pipe at one of the gunmen, the clang drawing their fire away. Tom, bleeding from a nick on his temple, lifted a broken chair leg. “You want a fight? Come get one!”

Eduardo’s men moved in tight, their boots echoing like a war drum in the narrow passage. Lucas barreled into one of them, a solid shoulder sending the man sprawling into a pile of crates. He turned to Sofia, panting, “This isn’t gonna hold! Move!”

Sofia’s gaze met Eduardo’s through the smoke and gunfire. He stood at the far end of the alley, his arms crossed, amused. Like a snake watching rats struggle.

A flash of movement broke her stare—Gabriela thrust a broom handle into another attacker’s chest, knocking the wind from him. “We can’t win this,” she gasped. “We need a way out!”

The captain grunted, shoving a barrel to create a blockade. “Keep moving! This is about survival, not winning.”

The fight slowed, though only for a breath. Eduardo’s voice cut through the haze, sharp as a blade. “You’re running out of options, Sofia!”

His words hit her like a gut punch. Sofia stopped short, the smoke stinging her eyes, her lungs burning. She saw Lucas, blood trickling from his forehead, trapped between Eduardo’s men and the crew. His gaze locked on her, unspoken words in his eyes.

“Go!” Lucas roared, his voice raw. “I’ll handle this!”

“No!” Sofia’s chest tightened as chaos raged behind her. Maria screamed for cover, and Yara shoved Tom further into the shadows. Eduardo stepped forward, his gun aimed now, his mouth curling into a cruel smile.

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“You want to save them?” Eduardo taunted, his voice low and confident. “Then stay. Let the others go. One life for ten. Fair trade, no?”

Sofia’s fingers curled into fists, her heart pounding against her ribs. She turned to Lucas, the weight of the choice crashing over her like a wave.

“You can’t save me, Sofia,” Lucas said softly, his voice steady even now. “Save them.”

“Sofia!” Captain Connors’s voice jolted her, but it was the flash of Eduardo’s gun that made the decision for her.

Sofia turned, her voice hoarse. “Go. Now!”

The crew hesitated, but Connors grabbed Maria’s arm. “You heard her. Move!”

As the others fled, Sofia’s eyes met Lucas’s one last time. He smiled faintly, a mix of defiance and peace. Then, he charged at Eduardo’s men, disappearing into the fight.

Lucas’s charge blindsided Eduardo’s men, knocking one into the wall, sending a second crashing into a rusted dumpster. Eduardo’s composure cracked, his cold smile replaced by a snarl. He leveled his gun at Lucas.

“You think you can betray me?” Eduardo’s voice was venomous, the barrel steady.

Lucas staggered but stayed on his feet. “I’d rather die free than live on my knees,” he spat, wiping blood from his lips.

Before Eduardo could fire, Captain Connors burst back into the alley with a sudden war cry, a length of rebar swinging like a battering ram. The impact sent Eduardo’s gun skittering across the pavement.

Sofia’s voice rang out from the shadows. “Lucas, now!”

Lucas lunged, tackling Eduardo with everything he had. They hit the ground hard, fists and fury replacing weapons. Lucas fought like a man with nothing left to lose—each strike, each shout a release of years



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of buried rage. Eduardo struggled beneath him, his strength waning as Lucas pinned him.

“Is this what you wanted?” Lucas’s voice cracked with exhaustion. “Power? Fear?”

Eduardo’s hand fumbled toward his boot, where a second blade glinted in the dim light. Before he could grab it, Sofia emerged from the shadows, her hand steady as she swung a length of broken pipe. The blow landed clean, sending Eduardo sprawling, unconscious.

Lucas staggered to his feet, chest heaving. Sofia caught his arm, steadying him. “We have to go. Now.”

In the distance, Eduardo’s men shouted, the clatter of reinforcements growing closer. Lucas nodded, swaying. “He won’t stay down for long.”

Sofia didn’t look back. “Then we’ll make sure we’re gone before he gets up.”

The crew sprinted through the maze of alleys, their breaths sharp and ragged in the humid air. Gunfire erupted behind them, bullets ricocheting off walls, sending dust and shards of brick into the air. Sofia clutched Gabriela’s hand, pulling her through a narrow passage as Eduardo’s men closed the gap.

“Keep moving!” Captain Connors barked, his voice slicing through the chaos.

Lucas appeared at the front, eyes scanning the labyrinth like a man born in its shadows. “Here—through this way!” He led them toward a crumbling staircase, but Sofia froze at the sound of Eduardo’s men fanning out behind them.

“We won’t make it,” Sofia whispered.

Lucas turned, his expression taut with purpose. “I’ll hold them off.” Sofia’s heart dropped. “No. We stay together.”

Lucas shook his head. “You’ll never outrun them if I don’t.” His green eyes locked onto hers. “Go. Please.”

Captain Connors grabbed Sofia’s arm. “He’s right. Move!”

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Lucas stepped back into the alley, a rusted metal pipe gripped in his hands. The shadows swallowed him as Sofia and the others raced up the stairs. Gunshots cracked below, but Lucas's voice rose above the noise—shouting, fighting, drawing Eduardo's men toward him.

Sofia glanced back, her chest twisting in anguish. She wanted to scream, but she forced herself forward, guided by Gabriela and Connors.

Lucas's sacrifice echoed in her ears as they climbed toward the promise of escape.

The rooftop stretched out before them, littered with broken tiles and debris. Sofia stumbled forward, gasping for breath, while Connors and the rest scanned the horizon. Below, Eduardo's voice roared through the alley like a storm.

"Find them! Bring me their heads!"

His fury shook the walls. Sofia crawled to the edge, looking down. Lucas was gone, consumed by the dark alleyways, but Eduardo stood in the street, his face twisted with rage.

"Search every corner!" Eduardo shouted, his men scattering like hounds on the hunt.

Maria dropped beside Sofia, her voice low and urgent. "We have to keep moving."

"But Lucas—" Sofia's words caught in her throat.

Connors pulled her up, his grip firm. "We can't help him now. We need to survive."

The crew hurried across the rooftop, their movements quiet and deliberate. Eduardo's anger echoed behind them, a constant reminder of the danger. Sofia glanced back once more, her gut twisting. She could see Eduardo pacing like a predator, his presence an unrelenting shadow.

"We'll make him pay for this," Sofia whispered, her voice cold and certain.

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Connors nodded, his jaw clenched. “Let’s focus on getting out alive first.”

The favela stretched endlessly before them, but finally, the rooftops gave way to a steep, winding path leading down. Gabriela led the way, her familiarity with the terrain guiding them through a web of alleys and staircases.

“We’re close,” she whispered. “I know this route.”

The sound of Eduardo’s men faded into the distance. Sofia’s legs burned, but she pushed herself forward, every step carrying the weight of Lucas’s sacrifice. The crew moved in silence, their expressions hardened, their trust unspoken but strong.

At the edge of the favela, the world opened up. City lights glimmered below like scattered diamonds. Sofia stumbled to a halt, her chest heaving. Behind her, the crew gathered, worn and breathless but alive.

“We did it,” Gabriela murmured, tears streaking her dusty face.

Captain Connors turned back to the favela, his expression grim. “He’s not done with us. Eduardo won’t let this go.”

Sofia stared at the horizon, the promise of safety just beyond reach. “We’ll be ready.”

The group moved toward the city, their silence heavy with loss. Sofia glanced back one last time. Somewhere in that tangled labyrinth of alleys, Lucas was still there—his sacrifice etched into every step they took toward freedom.

The crew sat in the dimly lit room, their breaths quiet, almost afraid to disturb the fragile stillness. Sofia stood apart, staring at the window that looked out onto the city, her face pale and hollowed. She’d wiped away the grime and blood, but no amount of water could erase Lucas’s absence.

Maria approached her cautiously, her voice soft. “Sofia... you saved us.”

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Sofia didn't turn. Her fingers traced the window's edge, eyes fixed on a distant glow of streetlights. "Did I?" Her voice was raw. "Lucas is gone because of me."

"Because of Eduardo," Maria corrected. "He chose to help us. You didn't force him."

Sofia's hand clenched against the frame. "I left him."

Captain Connors stepped forward, his broad frame casting a shadow across the room. "He gave you a choice, Sofia. You did what you had to."

She turned sharply, her gaze cutting. "And what if I made the wrong one?"

Connors's jaw tightened, but his voice remained steady. "We all make sacrifices. Lucas knew that better than anyone."

The silence returned, heavier this time. Sofia swallowed hard, her shoulders trembling for the first time. She closed her eyes, and Lucas's face flashed in her mind—his determined expression, his last plea. It was a memory that would haunt her forever.

The crew gathered in the center of the room, a makeshift circle of weary faces. For the first time, no one spoke, their shared exhaustion a language of its own. Gabriela finally broke the silence.

"He didn't have to do that for us," she murmured, her voice shaking.

"He did," Connors replied. "Because he believed we were worth saving."

Tom leaned back against the wall, rubbing his face. "We should've fought harder. Maybe—"

"Stop," Maria interrupted, her voice firm. "Don't dishonor him like that. He gave us a chance. We owe him."

The weight of her words settled over them. Tom nodded reluctantly, his hands falling to his sides. Gabriela looked to Sofia, waiting. Everyone did. Sofia stepped forward, her voice quiet but steady.

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"We're alive because of him. Lucas knew the risks, and he still chose to stand with us." She paused, letting her gaze settle on each of them. "We carry that with us now. We owe it to him to keep going."

A slow murmur of agreement spread through the group. Connors clapped Sofia's shoulder, his eyes solemn. "He'd be proud."

Sofia forced a small nod, though the weight in her chest remained. The crew's unity was hard-won, but Lucas's sacrifice had carved its price into each of them.

The knock on the door came just after midnight. Connors and Tom were on their feet instantly, weapons improvised from scrap metal gripped in their hands. Sofia signaled for silence, her pulse quickening.

Maria opened the door a crack, her expression darkening as she turned back to Sofia. "It's for you."

Sofia stepped forward, heart hammering. A young boy stood in the doorway, no older than twelve. He said nothing, only extended a crumpled envelope. His wide, scared eyes told Sofia all she needed to know.

She took the envelope, her hands steady despite the cold dread coiling in her stomach. The boy turned and vanished into the night.

"What is it?" Connors asked, his voice low.

Sofia unfolded the paper and scanned the words scrawled in ink, each letter dripping with menace:

"This isn't over, Sofia. You may have escaped, but I'll always find you. Tell your crew they're marked. Eduardo."

Her hands trembled slightly as she lowered the note. Connors peered over her shoulder, his face grim.

"What now?" Gabriela asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Sofia's gaze hardened, the fire returning to her eyes. "We prepare. He wants a war? He'll get one."

The crew exchanged looks, their fear laced with determination. Eduardo's shadow loomed, but Sofia's resolve was unshakable. Whatever came next, they'd face it together.

## **THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL**

## Chapter 8: The Aftermath



## THE CREW CONFIDENTIAL

The hotel room was stifling. Curtains drawn tight, only a thin strip of gray light seeped through the edges. Sofia sat cross-legged on the floor, her hands gripped into her knees, eyes empty, staring at the scuffed carpet. Captain Connors slouched in the chair by the door, the lines on his face deeper than before. His head tilted back against the wall, motionless. The silence clung to the room like smoke—heavy, suffocating.

Yara perched on the bed's edge, picking at her fraying sleeve, her knee bouncing rhythmically. Gabriela sat curled in the corner, murmuring prayers under her breath, fingers sliding across a small pendant around her neck.

Maria handed out bottles of water, her expression composed, but the faint tremor in her hand betrayed her calm. No one spoke. No one dared. The city's muted hum pressed in from the outside, muffled as if miles away. Sofia glanced up, her voice cracked but flat.

"Does anyone else feel him here?"

Captain Connors opened his mouth but shut it again. The question didn't need answering.

Tom stood abruptly, his shadow lurching across the room's walls. He paced near the window, his voice tight and sharp.

"We shouldn't have made it out. Not all of us."

The words hung in the air, unwelcome and cold. Gabriela flinched as if struck. "Don't say that."

"Why not?" Tom spun toward her, frustration radiating from him. "We've been playing his game since the moment we walked into that damn favela."

"Stop it!" Maria barked, the sharpness of her tone silencing him. "No one is helping by pointing fingers."

Yara rose, glaring at Tom. "And what would you have done? Sacrifice yourself?"

"Maybe I should've," Tom snapped back, his voice raw.



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Sofia rubbed her temples, shutting her eyes tight against the chaos. “Enough.”

The room stilled, everyone turning toward her. She breathed in slowly, steadied her voice. “We’re alive. For now. That has to mean something.”

But in every pair of eyes around her, Sofia could see it—the fractures spreading, the weight pressing down. The room felt small. Too small.

A sound pierced the stillness.

Ring.

The hotel room phone rattled against its receiver, each shrill tone slicing through the silence like a razor. Everyone froze.

Tom’s pacing halted mid-step. Maria’s hands curled into fists. Gabriela clutched her pendant, lips moving without sound. Yara shot a wide-eyed glance at Sofia, whose back had gone rigid.

The phone stopped.

Captain Connors pushed himself upright, the chair creaking under his weight. His voice was low, controlled.

“Don’t answer it.”

No one moved. Sofia’s gaze stayed locked on the phone, its presence now a looming specter in the room. The silence dragged again, thicker, heavier. Then—

Ring.

The second ring felt louder. It reverberated in Sofia’s chest.

“Connors?” Sofia whispered.

Captain Connors squared his shoulders, his jaw set like stone. “Ignore it,” he said again.

The phone rang on.

The tension tightened like a noose. Sofia’s breaths grew shallow. No one dared step closer. No one dared move at all.

And then it stopped.

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The room remained frozen, every heartbeat thundering in their ears. Sofia could still hear it echoing in her mind, relentless.

The phone sat silent, unmoving. But somehow, they all knew—they weren't alone.

The phone rang again. The shrill tone sliced through the thick silence, echoing off the hotel room walls. Everyone froze, the sound drilling into their nerves. It rang longer this time, loud and insistent, refusing to be ignored. Captain Connors stood, his jaw set, shoulders squared like he was stepping into battle. He reached for the phone, lifting it slowly.

For a moment, his face remained expressionless, but then his eyes darkened. His knuckles whitened around the receiver as Eduardo's smooth, venomous voice oozed through the line.

"You think you're safe?" Eduardo's words hung in the air, calm and deliberate. "You're still mine."

The line went dead with a soft click. Connors stared at the receiver in his hand, frozen for a beat before setting it back into its cradle like it burned him.

"He knows where we are," Connors muttered, his voice tight.

The crew exchanged looks—Maria's lips trembled, Tom's fists clenched at his sides. Gabriela whispered, "How is that even possible?"

Sofia's eyes burned with intensity. "We're not safe here," she said, her voice low but steady. "And he wants us to know it."

Tom pushed himself up from the edge of the bed, pacing like a caged animal. "This is insane! He's screwing with us—again!" His voice cracked on the last word. He turned toward Connors. "We never should've come back here."

Connors rubbed his face with both hands. "You think I don't know that, Tom?"

Maria held her arms close to her chest, her voice firm but strained. "Stop it. Yelling won't help." She turned toward the others. "We need to think, not fall apart."

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“That’s rich coming from you,” Tom shot back, his frustration boiling over.

“Enough!” Sofia’s voice cut through the tension like a whip. She stood, her expression unreadable. “He wants this. Eduardo wants us breaking down, turning on each other. We can’t let him win.”

Her words settled the room into uneasy silence. Gabriela’s soft prayers continued under her breath. Yara muttered, “What does he even want? To watch us go mad?”

Sofia’s gaze remained steady, locked on the others. “Whatever his game is, we don’t play. Not anymore.”

Tom threw up his hands, his face flushed with anger. “I can’t do this. I need air!” He yanked the door open, the sound of its slam vibrating through the room.

The crew flinched collectively. Maria stared at the door, her voice barely above a whisper. “We shouldn’t let him go out alone.”

Sofia shook her head. “Let him. He’ll come back.”

But the door’s silence stretched longer than anyone liked. Gabriela sat on the bed, arms wrapped around her knees, rocking slightly. “Eduardo’s inside our heads,” she whispered, her voice cracking.

Connors sighed, moving to stand near the window. Outside, the city was alive as ever—indifferent to their fear. “We’ll get out of this,” he muttered, almost to himself.

Maria sat beside Sofia, squeezing her hand. “He’s testing us. That’s all this is.”

Sofia nodded absently, her eyes fixed on the door. Tom had been out there too long. She felt the hairs rise on her arms. “Something’s not right.”

The door flung open, and Tom stumbled back in, his face pale as a sheet. The crew jolted upright. He didn’t speak, just held up a small, worn box wrapped in brown paper, trembling in his hands.

“Someone left this outside,” he said, his voice hoarse. He placed the box on the table like it might explode. No one moved.

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“What the hell is that?” Yara’s voice wavered as her eyes darted between Tom and the box.

Sofia stepped forward, slow and deliberate, her face set like stone. “Did you see who left it?”

Tom shook his head. “I swear, I didn’t see anyone. It was just there.”

For a long moment, no one breathed. Then Connors moved toward the table, grabbed a pen from the desk, and used it to lift the lid.

The room seemed to contract as everyone leaned in.

Inside the box, resting on a tattered scrap of paper, was a single bullet. The note beneath it read in jagged, uneven handwriting: “One of you is next.”

Maria gasped and stumbled back, her hand flying to her mouth. Gabriela crossed herself, whispering prayers faster now. Connors stared down at the bullet, his jaw tight, his shoulders rigid.

Sofia didn’t blink, her gaze locked on the bullet. Her voice, when she spoke, was low and cold. “He’s playing games. But this? This is war.”

Maria backed into the corner, clutching her necklace, her voice trembling. “It’s not over. He’ll never stop.”

Connors gripped the edge of the table, the muscles in his forearms taut. “This is a message. He’s telling us he can reach us anywhere.”

Tom collapsed onto the bed, his hands covering his face. “What does he even want? We did what he said. We got out!”

Yara shook her head, her voice sharp with panic. “We’re not out! Don’t you get it? He’s hunting us. He’s here.”

Gabriela’s whisper cracked through the noise, her face pale. “What do we do now?”

Sofia straightened, her eyes narrowing as she looked at each of them. “We don’t fall apart. That’s what he wants.”

“He already has us,” Yara snapped, her voice high and tight. “We’re sitting ducks.”

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Sofia stepped closer to the table, her hands balling into fists at her sides. “He’s not in this room. He’s not in our heads. You hear me?” Her voice dropped lower, colder. “We fight. We survive.”

The others stared at her, some nodding faintly, others too paralyzed to react. Connors turned to the phone, his voice gruff but steady. “We’re calling the police. Now.”

As Connors dialed, Sofia moved to the window, pulling the curtain back just enough to peer outside. The street looked deceptively ordinary—cars rolling by, people laughing at a café across the road—but it all felt wrong, like a trap she couldn’t see yet.

Yara’s voice broke the silence. “What do you think the police can even do? This is his city.”

Sofia turned back, her face unreadable. “They can get us out of here.”

Tom looked up, his expression hollow. “And then what? He’s still out there.”

Sofia stepped toward the table, her voice calm but filled with steel. “We don’t let him win. That’s what we do.”

Maria whispered, “And how do we do that, Sofia? How?”

Sofia met her gaze, her voice sharp, unwavering. “By staying alive. By keeping each other alive.” She glanced at the others, holding their gazes one by one. “Eduardo wants us broken. He wants us scared and scattered. But we’re still here, together. That’s how we beat him.”

Connors hung up the phone, his face grim. “Police are on their way. They’ll escort us out.”

Gabriela exhaled shakily. Tom stared at the bullet again, his jaw clenching. Sofia stood tall, her voice cutting through the room like a blade.

“He wants us to believe we’re his. But we’re not. Not anymore.”

Captain Connors moved with rigid purpose as he grabbed the phone, punching in the number for the police. The others watched him in tense silence.

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“Room 216,” he said when someone picked up. “We have a situation. A serious threat.”

Sofia stayed by the window, arms folded tightly across her chest, watching the empty street below.

“They’re sending someone,” Connors said, placing the receiver back in its cradle. His voice was flat, but the tremor in his hands gave him away.

Tom scoffed. “The police? Eduardo probably owns half of them.”

“We don’t have a choice,” Connors snapped, his voice low and sharp. “You think I like this? I don’t. But we need to get out of here alive.”

Maria glanced toward the bullet still sitting in the box. “Do you think it’s a warning... or a promise?”

Yara shook her head, hugging herself as if to keep the fear from leaking out. “Does it matter?”

Sofia turned away from the window, her gaze firm. “It’s a test. He’s watching us to see what we’ll do next. So, we show him we’re not afraid.”

“Speak for yourself,” Tom muttered.

Sofia’s voice turned ice-cold. “Get it together. We’re not giving him what he wants.”

The knock at the door came ten minutes later, and every single crew member jumped. Connors strode to the door, his movements tense, and peered through the peephole before unlocking it.

Two police officers stood outside, uniforms crisp but faces unreadable. One of them, a tall man with a hard stare, stepped inside first. “You reported a threat?”

Connors gestured to the table. “This was left outside our door. We’re being hunted.”

The taller officer frowned and lifted the box, studying the bullet and the note inside. The second officer, shorter and younger, shot a glance toward the crew huddled together in the center of the room.

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"We'll take care of this," the tall officer said, his voice gruff. "For now, we'll escort you to the airport. You'll be safer there."

Yara muttered under her breath, "Safer. Right."

Sofia's gaze lingered on the officers, her suspicion rising. "How did you know to send two officers? We didn't say how many we needed."

The shorter officer stiffened. "Standard procedure for threats like this, ma'am."

Sofia didn't answer, but her jaw tightened as she watched them pack up the bullet and note. Connors stepped closer to her, speaking just low enough for her to hear.

"We don't have a choice. If they're with Eduardo, we'll deal with it then."

The crew packed their things quickly, the weight of the bullet and the note still heavy in the room. Every zip of a suitcase and click of a latch felt unnaturally loud.

Yara sat on the bed, clutching her bag against her chest. "What if they're working for him? What if this is a setup?"

Maria shot her a look. "Stop. You're not helping."

"I'm not wrong, though!" Yara's voice cracked, her fear spilling out. "How can we trust anyone? Eduardo's everywhere."

Sofia shoved her clothes into her bag with sharp, deliberate movements. "We can't trust anyone but ourselves. That's how we survive this."

Gabriela paused at the door, her voice soft but certain. "God is watching over us. He won't let us fall."

Tom laughed bitterly from where he leaned against the wall. "Yeah? Where was God when Eduardo sent a bullet to our door?"

"Enough," Sofia snapped, her voice slicing through the room. She zipped her bag and straightened, leveling her gaze at the crew. "We move together. We don't split up, no matter what."

Connors nodded as he pulled his coat on. "Once we're at the airport, we regroup. Focus on getting out of here alive."

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Sofia paused at the window one last time. The street still looked normal, but she could feel him. Eduardo was out there, watching, waiting.

“Let’s go,” she said, turning toward the door, her voice steady. “We’re not playing his game anymore.”

The hotel hallway felt endless, the crew’s footsteps muffled on the worn carpet. Two officers walked ahead, backs stiff and hands close to their belts, while Connors trailed behind, watching their every move. Sofia walked in the center of the group, her shoulders squared, her gaze darting toward every open door and shadowed corner.

Yara clung to Maria’s arm, whispering as they passed the elevator. “It’s too quiet. Too easy.”

“Keep walking,” Maria muttered, her voice low but firm.

Sofia ignored their exchange, her focus locked on the exit doors ahead. The street outside buzzed with life—cars honking, vendors shouting—but it felt fake, like a backdrop masking something darker.

As the officers led them outside, Sofia flinched at every noise: a car door slamming, a motorcycle revving. She scanned the crowd, certain she’d spot Eduardo’s men watching them.

Connors moved up beside her, his voice a harsh whisper. “They’re rushing us.”

“I know,” Sofia replied, her tone tight. She couldn’t shake the feeling of invisible eyes burrowing into her back.

They reached the waiting police car. Connors hesitated. “We’ll be packed in like cattle. Too easy to target us.”

Sofia turned to face him, her expression unwavering. “It doesn’t matter. We get to the airport. Together.”

The officers opened the doors, their blank stares giving nothing away. Sofia climbed in first, forcing herself not to look back as the others followed.



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The airport terminal should have felt like safety—an escape. Instead, it buzzed with suffocating tension. The fluorescent lights cast harsh shadows across faces, every stranger a possible threat.

Connors argued with the security desk, his voice gruff but controlled. “No. We stay together. No splitting up for security checks.”

“Sir, it’s procedure—”

“I don’t care about your procedure!” Connors growled, drawing stares from nearby passengers. “We’re not separating.”

Sofia stood at the window, staring across the tarmac. Planes moved in slow, deliberate lines, their paths so predictable—unlike their own. She felt Tom move up beside her.

“Safe yet?” he asked, his voice hollow.

“No,” Sofia said, her reflection cold against the glass. “Not yet.”

Maria tugged Yara toward a bench, forcing her to sit. “Keep breathing. We’ll be gone soon.”

Yara clutched her bag. “He’s watching. I know he’s watching.”

A sharp, metallic clang made them all jump—a luggage cart tipping over nearby. Sofia spun around, her heart pounding. The officers escorting them barely glanced up.

“They’re not even looking,” Tom muttered, his fists clenched.

Sofia turned to Connors, who had just finished barking orders to the security guard. “Let’s move,” he said, his face pale but set.

They began the slow walk to their gate, every step a mix of dread and determination. Sofia stayed close to the others, their small cluster a fragile wall against the chaos around them.

At the gate, the crew huddled near the terminal doors, their faces etched with exhaustion and suspicion. Passengers milled around them, oblivious to the silent war waging in their minds.

Sofia turned to face the group, her voice cutting through the white noise of the airport. “Listen to me. He wants us scared—running, breaking apart.”

Tom scoffed, slumping into a chair. “Well, it’s working.”

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“No,” Sofia shot back, stepping closer. “We’re here. Alive. That’s something.” She looked at each of them—Connors, Maria, Gabriela, Yara, Tom. “He doesn’t get to win. Not this time.”

Connors nodded, his face finally softening. “She’s right. He didn’t break us.”

Tom rubbed his face, then exhaled, defeated. “What now?”

Sofia’s gaze hardened, a steely calm taking hold. “We don’t stop. He won’t. Neither will we.”

The boarding call echoed over the speakers. Sofia picked up her bag, her hands steady for the first time since the note arrived. One by one, the others followed suit.

As they boarded the plane, Sofia sat by the window, her grip firm on the armrest. Her jaw set in quiet defiance. She knew Eduardo wasn’t done—but neither was she.

Back in Rio, Eduardo leaned back in his chair, a glass of whiskey swirling in his hand. The faint glow of his phone screen illuminated his face.

A single image stared back at him—the crew boarding their plane. His lips curled into a slow, deliberate smile.

“This is far from over,” he whispered into the empty room.

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THE END



