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Natalie pursed her lips. "Of course I am. The other three designers are superb and are more than capable of winning the competition. To tell you the truth, I am not at all certain if I stand a chance."

Sally sighed. "I feel the same. Though models don't share the rivalry that you designers do, we actually compete in secret to assist our designers in winning. We would share the glory if our designers won. It would undoubtedly be an honor and would benefit our careers immensely. That is why..."

She wiped her brow and continued somewhat sheepishly, "That is why they have such an imposing stage presence in order to bring out the best in the designs. Despite making it to a runway of an international competition with lots of training as an amateur, I am still far beneath the skill level of veteran models. I just want to let you know that I may not be able to help you in that regard, Nat. If you want to win this thing, it's going to be all down to your design."

As the creativity of the designers was the deciding factor of the competition instead of the performance of the models, the veteran models could still lose if the designs they donned were subpar.

Natalie understood Sally's guilt.

Hence, she took the latter by the hand. "Don't feel like you've let me down. It's already an amazing achievement to have come this far. Even if we get eliminated at this point, I feel like we have already accomplished something worthwhile. Being the winner only gives us a little more fame and reward, that's all."

Stakeholders within the fashion industry had their eyes on the designers who had made it to the final few rounds of the competition to scout for new talent.

As the new generation of designers, they would have achieved fame within the industry through exposure from such a high-profile competition.

At that point, Natalie's name was already synonymous with Mina's. When Natalie eventually made the official announcement that Mina was actually her, the combined prestige of both names would lift Natalie to unprecedented heights within the industry.

At that point, her influence within the industry would be even higher than the winner of the competition.

Right then, Natalie's phone rang.

Smiling upon seeing the caller ID, she picked up immediately. "Hello, Lina."

"You still remember me, Nat," came Lina's delighted voice.

Natalie nodded. "Of course I do. We are partners for the upcoming competition, aren't we?"

Before the international competition, she had become acquainted with Lina, and they made it to the finals before partnering up with one another.

The design of dresses was not the only thing the international competition was about as the design of accessories was being judged at the same time. During the semi-finals, the designers of dresses and accessories would be working together.

They were tasked to creatively match the dress design with that of jewelry, footwear, and hats.

Lina was going to be Natalie's partner in the upcoming semi-finals.

"I was originally worried that I would not be able to make it to the semi-finals, but here I am! I don't know what's going on this year, Nat. The competition is fierce." Lina sighed over the phone.

Natalie nodded. "I know, it's the same here. We just have to be cautious and give the upcoming competition our best shot."

“You’re right,” Lina agreed. After a pause, she asked again, “By the way, what is your model like? She will be walking the runway with our designs. I would like to know if your model is up for the task.”

In Lina’s prior jewelry design competition, the creations of the designers were shown off on racks instead of being worn by models.

It’s different this time. My designs will be worn by a model.

Natalie gazed at Sally, who looked back at her in confusion. “Don’t worry, Lina,” Natalie said with a smile. “She is more than up for it. You’d like her. She is a little like Joyce.”

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“That’s fantastic,” replied Lina, feeling at ease upon hearing her partner’s assertion. “I’ve got to run, Nat. I’m still packing my bags. Pick me up at the airport tomorrow, will you?”

“I’ll be there,” Natalie promised.

After hanging up, Sally pulled her friend by the arm. “Who was it, Nat? It sounded like you guys were talking about me.”

Natalie took a sip of milk. “Lina Cohen, one of the most promising jewelry designers in the world. The next stage of the competition requires us to work with jewelry designers, and Lina happens to be my partner. I’ve mentioned it to you before during the opening ceremony, remember?”

Sally smacked her forehead. “It’s a good thing you reminded me. Am I her model too for the next stage?”

“That’s right.” Natalie nodded.

Sally smiled like she had a toothache. "I'm feeling the pressure now."

"I understand, but it's a good thing for you too. After this competition, you would have a place in the jewelry design industry and not just limited to modeling for dresses or photoshoots for fashion magazines anymore." Natalie patted Sally's hand.

Sally blinked. "Do you mean to say that I would be a high-profile model after this?"

"That's right. You're almost there."

Sally took a deep breath. "Understood. I'll give it my all for our sake. Even if I'm not as good as the veterans, at least I've tried."

Natalie was pleased with her friend's determination.

The following day, the two of them left for the airport to receive Lina after leaving the children in the villa.

Fortunately for them, they caught sight of Lina arriving through the passageway without too long of a wait.

"Nat!" Lina squealed as she tossed her luggage aside to hug Natalie.

At the sensation of something soft cushioning against her midriff, Lina pulled away from her embrace and looked down.

"You're pregnant?" she exclaimed at the sight of Natalie's belly.

"I am." Natalie stroked her baby bump as she nodded.

"My God, it's only been six months since we last met. That would mean the baby is six or seven months along, right?" Lina touched Natalie's belly gently.

"Exactly six months," Natalie replied with a smile. "It was conceived after you left J City."

“That’s fantastic news! I’ve seen Connor and Sharon, and they’re adorable. I’m sure this one will be just as cute.”

Natalie felt delighted upon hearing praise about her children. “Thank you for the kind words. By the way, let me introduce you to my model, Ms. Sally Oswald.” She pointed at Sally.

Sally, who caught Lina’s luggage earlier, loosened her grip on it.

As she was not included in the conversation earlier, she had bent over to pick it up.

Lina’s eyes glinted with excitement at the sight of Sally. “So you are Nat’s model? I saw you from a distance when I was coming out. Your neck and limbs are very slender. Has anyone told you that? She’s an excellent choice indeed, Nat. I believe that she will do my designs justice.”

Natalie winked at Sally before responding, “You’re right. Sally is born to be a model. I told you that you’d like her.”

“Oh, you have no idea.” Lina nodded vigorously.

At that, she pulled Sally by the hand. “After the international competition, I will be having an exhibition of my own designs. I would love for you to model for me.”

“Model for you?” Sally repeated in disbelief.

What fantastic luck! I’d just come to pick up a designer from the airport, and right away, I’m offered a gig!

“What’s wrong? Wouldn’t you like to?” Lina frowned.

Sally shook her head at once. “Of course I would love to! I just haven’t found my tongue in my excitement.”

Lina smiled. “Excellent. You’ll be coming with me right after the international competition, then.”

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Sally looked over at Natalie.

Natalie nodded in response.

Only then did Sally say, "All right, Ms. Cohen."

"Just call me Lina," she replied as she patted Sally on the shoulder.

Sally noticed that Lina was nothing like the other famous designers she knew. She did not look down on people. On the contrary, Lina was very friendly and, most importantly, she was very fond of Sally.

Because of this, Sally gradually loosened up. With a heavy nod, she answered, "Okay, Lina."

Seeing the two get along, Natalie smiled. "Okay, you two. Let's get going. We shouldn't dilly dally here."

"Yes, let's go," Lina agreed.

The three of them exited the airport and headed to the parking lot.

As soon as they entered the elevator, two hidden figures stepped out from the lounge on the second floor. They stood by the railings and stared down at the three women who were walking away.

"Are we still not allowed to leave this city?" asked the petite woman in frustration.

The taller man beside her narrowed his eyes. "Shane has blocked off all exits. Plus, he has the governor's support. There's no way for us to leave."

"I don't want to be here anymore. People search for us high and low every day. We are nothing more than mice scurrying on the street. I am tired of living like this. If this goes on, we will eventually get caught. We need to get out of here as soon as possible." Jacqueline pounded her fist on the railing.

Sean snorted coldly. "Do you think I'm staying here by choice?"

"Aren't you? After all, Natalie is here," Jacqueline replied mockingly.

Hearing this, Sean shot her a glare.

Jacqueline instantly realized that she had angered him. With her head lowered, she muttered reluctantly, "Sorry."

"You should be glad you didn't say much. Otherwise, I might have flung you off this floor," Sean said flatly. After that, he turned to head back to the lounge.

Jacqueline looked down from the railing. Although it was only one floor's distance, it was still at least a dozen meters tall.

Her body was already weak. If he threw her down, she would most definitely not survive.

Thinking of this, Jacqueline paled. Hatred bubbled inside her. She took a deep breath and suppressed her emotions. Then she quickly turned to catch up to Sean.

"Sean, do you have any idea how we can get out of here?" she asked as she ran up to him.

Sean lowered his gaze to meet hers. "Of course I do, but it's not the right time yet."

"So we still need to wait even more?" Jacqueline was clearly not happy with his answer. She bit her lip. "If we keep dragging things on like this, we're really going to get caught. If we can't use the main exits, then let's stow away on a boat or use a helicopter or something."

“Shane already knows you’re no longer in J City. It’s not hard for him to realize that you will try to sneak out of the city. Do you really think they won’t carry out searches on the ships?”

“I...” Jacqueline coughed lightly. She could not argue with his logic.

Clenching her fists, she knew that there was only one option left. “What about a helicopter?”

“No can do. There are patrols being carried out in the sky every day. Even private flights will need to be searched,” Sean replied calmly.

Jacqueline stomped her feet. “Ugh. Nothing works! We’re really going to be stuck here forever.”

“I already told you to just give it some time. I have a plan,” Sean said as he narrowed his eyes.

Jacqueline rubbed her face harshly. “I guess that’s the only choice I have. Do you plan on bringing Natalie along when we eventually leave?”

“No rush. I will bring her, but not now.” Sean briefly rubbed the front pocket on his chest with a mysterious gaze.

Seeing this, Jacqueline shot him an odd look. What could be in that pocket? Why is he always touching it?

Either way, she knew that it had to be something very important to him.

There had to be a way for her to find out. If she did, maybe she could even use it to blackmail him.

Thinking of this, Jacqueline lowered her head. She did not want him to see through her.

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Meanwhile, Natalie and the others had returned to the villa. Soon after, Shane called.

Natalie was sitting by the window and looking outside when she received his call.

“Is your partner there?” Shane asked.

Natalie nodded. “Yeah.”

She was not surprised that he already knew. After all, she had bodyguards with her at all times. She knew that they would report everything back to him.

“Are you confident about the upcoming competition?” Shane asked as he organized some documents.

Natalie sighed. “To be honest, not really. The designers who have got this far are all really talented. It won’t be easy to rise above all of them, but I will try my best.”

“I believe in you.” Shane nodded slightly. “Oh, by the way, I’ll come over tomorrow.”

“What are you coming over for? It’s not the weekend tomorrow.” Natalie blinked curiously.

“After the quarter-finals, it will be the final showdown. I want to be there for you for the last two rounds.”

Natalie felt touched to hear this, but she still rejected him. “You don’t have to. I know there are only two rounds left, but each round takes super long. One round can last up to two weeks.”

This was due to the fact that the outfits had to be paired with jewelry.

If it was just plain clothing, each round would probably take a week.

However, with the addition of jewelry, one week was nowhere near enough time. The manufacturing of jewelry took much longer than clothing.

Hence, if Shane wanted to accompany her, he would have to stay for at least a month.

How could he abandon his company for an entire month?

Shane already knew what she was thinking. With a slight chuckle, he replied, "Don't worry. I've assigned someone to take charge for the time being. Once the competition is over, I'll go back."

"Are you sure?"

Shane nodded. "Of course. Every large-scale company has trained employees who can take over. In case there is an accident or some emergency, things will remain stable. Trust me."

"Since you've said so, I guess there is no reason for me to say no." Natalie grinned.

To be honest, she was quite looking forward to him staying with her throughout the competition.

All this while, it was usually her two children who kept her company. He was never around. She would be lying if she said that it never bothered her.

Now, he was going to be there too.

"I'll give you a call tomorrow when I'm there. I still have some documents to deal with now before I hand them over to my temporary replacement," Shane stated.

"Okay. You go ahead and do what you need to. Don't stay up too late."

After that, she hung up the call. As she set down her cell phone, someone knocked on her door.

"Come in." Natalie looked at the door.

The door swung open, and her two children came barging in.

“Mommy, were you on the phone?” Connor asked.

Natalie nodded. “Yes, with your daddy.”

The two children’s eyes lit up.

Sharon pursed her small lips. “How come you never let me talk to him? I miss Daddy. I want to talk to him too.”

“Sorry, Darling.” Natalie picked Sharon up and set her on the windowsill. “How about this? I’ll let you meet Daddy tomorrow.”

Hearing this, Connor raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying that Daddy will be coming tomorrow?”

“Yes, that’s right. He’ll be here to watch Mommy compete.” Natalie patted him lightly on the head.

Sharon was overjoyed as she clapped her hands in excitement. “Woo-hoo! We’ll get to see Daddy again. Finally, our family can be reunited.”

“That’s right.” Natalie looked at the two of them with a gentle smile on her face.

“Right, why did you guys suddenly come in? Is there something you need?” Natalie asked.

“We have a secret to tell you. I saw Uncle Sean today,” Connor replied.

Natalie’s expression instantly turned solemn. “What? You saw him?”

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“Mm-hmm.” Connor nodded.

Natalie picked him up and stared at him. "Where did you see him?"

"At the airport. I've been looking through the security footage of the city to try and find him. I've had no luck so far. Unexpectedly, this morning, I saw him. It wasn't just him either. Jacqueline was there too," Connor said seriously.

Although overseas countries were not as advanced as here, there were still a fair amount of security cameras installed all around. Most high-traffic places had them.

Sean could hide, but he had to come out at some point. That was why Connor had thought of hacking into the security footage to take a look. He wondered if he could catch a glimpse of Sean. Yet for a month or so, he found nothing.

Just as he thought Sean had really gone into hiding forever, he finally saw him on the security footage at the airport.

"Jacqueline too!" Hearing that name, Natalie gripped her fists.

As expected, she was no longer in J City. Sean had sneaked her over to his side.

"Baby, what were they doing at the airport?" Natalie asked as she grabbed Connor's shoulders.

With a frown, he answered, "They wanted to leave. Uncle Sean got his men to investigate if Daddy had loosened security. Fortunately, Daddy didn't, so they weren't able to get out."

"In other words, they're still in the city, right?" Natalie narrowed her eyes.

Connor nodded. "Yes. But I lost track of them after that. After they came out of the lounge, they went to the parking lot. From there, they left through the side door. There aren't any security cameras there, so I don't know where they went. I checked other security cameras but found nothing. I'm sorry, Mommy. I lost them."

Looking at his guilt-ridden expression, Natalie rubbed his head. "Baby, don't say that. It's not your fault. Sometimes the enemy is just too sly."

"But I had the chance to lock him down," Connor muttered as he twiddled his fingers.

Natalie laughed. "It's no big deal. You lost them this time, but you can keep looking. I'm sure we'll get another chance to find them."

Connor quickly cheered up and gave a firm nod. "Okay, Mommy. I'll draw up a code that will automatically locate them through the security footage now. As soon as they show up, I will be notified immediately."

With that, he flew out of Natalie's room.

Sharon looked at Natalie, then at Connor's back. Ultimately, she decided to follow her brother. "Connor, wait for me."

Watching the two of them leave in a hurry, Natalie shook her head with a smile.

The next day, Shane came over to watch Natalie compete.

When Natalie got to the clubhouse that was hosting the competition, she realized that the judges had been changed. The panel now consisted of several world-class designers. One of them was her mentor, Mercede Mackenzie.

Natalie already knew that Mercede would attend the quarter-finals. Hence, she was more than happy to see her.

"Ms. Mackenzie." Before the start of the competition, Natalie went over to greet her and gave her a warm hug. "How are you?"

"I'm good." Mercede smiled graciously. Then she looked down at Natalie's stomach. "How far along are you?"

Natalie rubbed her belly and responded gleefully, "Six months now."

Mercede chuckled out loud. "Six months. How wonderful! I'm glad it doesn't get in the way of the competition."

"Yes, indeed." Suddenly, Natalie thought of something. "Oh, by the way, when did you get here? Why didn't you contact me? I could have come to pick you up."

"There's no need for that. The organizer has arranged transportation for us. That's why I didn't bother telling you." Mercede waved her hand dismissively.

"Whereabouts are you staying?" Natalie asked.

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"The organizer booked our hotel rooms for us," replied Mercede.

Natalie was relieved. "That's nice."

"So, tell me. What are your thoughts about the upcoming competition?"

Hearing that question, Natalie's smile fell. She poured out all the issues she had faced thus far.

Listening to her, Mercede tried to offer as many helpful suggestions as she could.

As the competition was starting, the two finally ended their catch-up session.

Admittedly, with a mentor guiding the way, Natalie felt much more at ease. She was no longer as lost as before. For the coming competition, she felt more confident.

“Nat, over here.” Just as Natalie entered the competition hall, she heard Lina’s voice. Looking over, she saw that Lina was already seated in front of their table. Lina was smiling and waving at her.

Natalie returned a smile. While supporting her stomach, she waddled over.

Just as she was passing through two tables, a leg suddenly appeared in front of her.

Natalie did not notice it at all, so she tripped and was about to fall face-first to the ground.

“Nat!” Lina’s face paled as she called out.

Natalie did not respond. She looked down with a face full of horror. Her hands gripped tightly around her stomach.

She was pregnant. If she fell down, she might lose her baby or be forced to give birth early.

Babies born earlier were typically weaker. Their chances of survival would thus be lowered severely.

Even as the mother, she would be greatly injured.

Either way, everyone in the hall was stunned by this scene. Lina immediately stood up and ran over to catch Natalie.

However, she was too far away. Even if she ran as fast as she could, she would not be able to get there in time.

Just as Natalie was about to come into contact with the floor, a hand appeared out of nowhere and grabbed onto her, helping her up.

After regaining her footing, Natalie held onto the corner of a table. With deep breaths, she tried to calm herself down.

That was close. I could have lost my child.

Her face was drained of color, and her hands were trembling. What happened had left her slightly traumatized.

“Nat, are you okay?” Lina asked worriedly after finally reaching her side.

Natalie opened her mouth to speak, but she was so scared that no words came out.

At this moment, the front door of the hall was kicked open. Soon after, the loud sound of a set of footsteps could be heard, followed by two smaller ones.

“Mommy.” The two children looked at Natalie and quickly hurried over. They wrapped their arms around her leg at the same time. “Are you okay?”

Natalie looked down to see their moist red eyes. She knew that they were frightened by what just happened. Feeling bad, she caressed them lightly on their heads.

“I’m fine...” Natalie replied hoarsely. Then she looked up at the man walking over.

He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tight.

Natalie could feel that his heartbeat was much faster than usual. He must have been severely impacted by what he had just witnessed as well.

“Sorry for making you worry, Darling,” Natalie whispered as she returned his hug.

The man loosened his grip and cupped her face. “I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Natalie forced a smile. “I’m perfectly fine. Good thing Tina caught me.”

She looked over at the foreign woman sitting at the table to her left.

It was this woman who had acted just in time to catch her. Otherwise, she would have been in an ambulance by now.

Shane looked at Tina. He bowed in gratitude and said, "Thank you for saving my wife and my child."

The two kids followed suit and bowed as well. "Thank you for saving our mommy and our siblings."

Tina had no idea who Shane was. However, she had seen him walking together with the organizer before. Not only that, she noticed that the organizer was unusually polite to him. From that, she knew that this man was no ordinary man.

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This was the first time anyone had bowed to her so respectfully. Instantly, she froze. She quickly waved her hand and said, "N-No problem. I just did what anyone would have done."

"No matter what, you have saved my wife and child. I will remember your kindness. If you ever run into any problems, feel free to contact my assistant. I will try my best to help you." As he spoke, Shane handed Silas' name card over.

Sometimes he did not feel like giving out his personal name card when he was doing business. In situations like that, he would give out Silas'.

Hence, he always carried Silas' name cards with him.

Tina accepted it. Seeing the name "Thompson Group" written on it, she had a huge realization. She now knew who he was. She never expected that one of the participants was the wife of the owner of Thompson Group.

"Hey, aren't you going to apologize to Nat?" Suddenly, Lina's voice rang out. Her tone was tinted with rage.

Natalie and Shane looked over to the right. Lina was staring at a male designer.

Natalie's eyes darkened. "Darling, he was the one who stretched out his leg earlier and made me trip."

She was not trying to be petty. This was just the truth.

Hearing that, Shane finally understood why Natalie would trip out of the blue.

Although it was possible that she was just clumsy, it was unlikely. Her shoes were specially made to be anti-slip. There was no way she would trip on flat ground. It made sense that someone else had caused the incident.

"Why did you try to hurt my wife?" Shane stepped forward and stood in front of the male designer.

In comparison, Shane was actually shorter and skinnier than the designer.

However, his aura was much more overpowering.

The kind of temperament Shane had was not something that regular people could ever have.

Although the male designer was taller than Shane by half a head, he still appeared much smaller in the eyes of the crowd.

"I-I didn't do it on purpose," the man mumbled.

Behind Natalie, disdain flashed through Tina's eyes for a brief moment. Because it was so fleeting, no one noticed it.

"What do you mean by that? The walkway is so narrow. Two people can barely make it through at the same time. Nat was walking in front of you. There's no way you didn't see her. If you saw her, why didn't you retract your leg? Why did you stretch it out? It's so obvious that you did it on purpose," Lina scolded loudly.

The male designer shook his head hurriedly. "N-No. I swear it was an accident. I was caught up in my own thoughts with my head lowered. I didn't notice anyone come my way at all. Please believe me, Natalie."

He looked at Natalie pleadingly.

Natalie pursed her lips and did not answer. She seemed to be mulling something over.

Suddenly, Shane asked, "Are there security cameras here?"

"Yes." Tina nodded. "However, the angles don't capture the walkway. There's no way to prove if he had extended his foot out on purpose."

"Well, that's unhelpful." Lina furrowed her brows.

The man lowered his head. He smiled but only for a brief second before returning to his regular expression.

"What are you all up to?" Just then, a group of people came in from outside.

It was the organizer and several of the renowned judges.

Natalie looked down at her watch. Then, she looked at Shane and said, "Darling, the competition is about to start. Why don't you bring the children back to the lounge for now? We'll continue this conversation another time."

Shane hummed in agreement. He shot the male designer a warning look and left with the two children.

Natalie looked at Lina. "We'd better get into position."

"Yeah." Lina nodded and glared at the man. "Don't think this is over. If we find out you did this on purpose, your career will be over. Hmph!"

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Leaving that threat behind, Lina followed Natalie.

The male designer sat down nervously, his hand holding a pencil trembling slightly.

Thinking of the possibility of his design career coming to an end, he was terrified.

He was starting to regret what he had done to Natalie.

Good thing the cameras can't capture my feet. There's no way they'll be able to prove that I did it on purpose.

This thought made him much more relieved as he calmed himself down.

The competition officially began. The organizer went on stage and announced that the theme for this round was galaxies.

Since the clothing had to be paired with jewelry, all the designs would have to be quite formal. That was the only way to make the two aspects pair better together.

Therefore, Natalie's job was to design an outfit that was galaxy-themed. Meanwhile, Lina had to design and manufacture galaxy-themed jewelry.

Every jewelry designer had a different way of doing things. For example, they all used different jewels. Hence, the organizer did not limit the designers to what materials to use. The designers were free to request whatever jewels they needed and the organizer would gather the funds to purchase them.

The catch was that after the jewelry was manufactured and the competition was over, it would all belong to the organizer. The designer was only allowed to keep the title of having made it.

This was a good thing, of course, for designers. After all, they did not need to fork out any money.

At their table, Natalie switched on her laptop and started searching for images relating to galaxies.

The photos were all gorgeous. They had an aura of mystery as well. There was no doubt that the patterns would look very beautiful on clothing.

Just as Natalie was absorbed in flipping through the images, she heard a sigh from beside her.

“What’s wrong?” Natalie stopped scrolling and cocked her head over.

Lina lay on the table in defeat. “This theme is really very challenging for us jewelry designers.”

“How so?” Natalie raised an eyebrow.

Lina raised her head and rested her chin on her hand. “Think about it. What jewels on Earth look like stars in the galaxy? Galaxy patterns are erratic and flawed. What rich person would buy a flawed-looking jewel?”

“You got a point.” Natalie nodded.

It was indeed a problem.

Most jewelry was made of jade, diamonds, crystals, or gems.

Jade was mostly green with a few rarer colors. Diamonds were mostly white. There was definitely more variety when it came to crystals. However, they were typically more pure-looking, so they were not suitable either.

As for gems, they were not at a high enough range to be considered in haute couture fashion. Hence, they were totally not in the running at all.

“Nat, what should I do?” Lina was at a loss. “The quarter-finals are a different league after all. It’s a tough challenge for me to face.”

“I mean, you aren’t the only one facing this issue. All the other jewelry designers are probably having a hard time too.” Natalie looked around at all the faces of the other jewelry designers. Clearly, they were suffering from the same concern.

“You’re right.” When Lina saw that everyone else was struggling like herself, her eyes lit up. “I feel much better now.”

Natalie shook her head helplessly before continuing to scroll through her images.

An image popped up onto her screen, and she suddenly had an idea. “Lina, take a look at this.”

She lightly elbowed Lina to get her attention.

“What is it?” Lina leaned over.

Natalie pointed at the image and said, “This is a picture taken by an astronaut on the moon. When we look up to the sky from Earth, it’s filled with stars. However, looking down from the moon, it’s nothing but darkness. I think this gives you a vague idea of what jewel to pick. You can go with obsidian or black diamond. Basically anything that is pitch black.”

Hearing this suggestion, Lina instantly cheered up. “You make a good point. Anyway, black is the color of the background of any galaxy. I’m sure the outfits you design will contain a multitude of colors to recreate the mysterious atmosphere in space. In that case, black jewelry will be perfect to complement it without overshadowing the look. I know exactly what to do!”

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Lina clapped her hands in delight before she flipped open the laptop in front of her and began her research into obsidians and black diamonds.

In the end, she settled for obsidian.

Between the two, though obsidian was far less valuable a commodity, the rarity of black diamonds meant that there was a considerably diminished market demand for it.

That was why the organizers could not possibly green light a request for black diamonds. Steep prices aside, they might not actually be able to acquire any.

Another reason was the intrinsic translucency which was the characteristic of black diamonds. By comparison, the intensity and purity of the blackness in obsidian made it even more ideal for implementation in designs that could fulfill the requirements of the galaxy theme. Obsidian also offered greater ease in complementing outfits.

Hence, Lina submitted her request form accordingly, which quickly received approval.

Following that, Lina held Natalie by the hands. "Accompany me down to the jewelry market tomorrow, won't you, Nat?"

"Of course I will," Natalie assented.

Per the nature of their partnership, her own gowns would not be able to receive a high score if there were issues with the accessories, hence she could not be nonchalant about it.

After the conclusion of their discussions which included plans for upcoming designs, they prepared to depart from the clubhouse.

The requirements for the next round of the competition would not be the same as it was before, which required everything to be completed within the clubhouse itself. Designers were allowed to work from home or any other public venue over the course of two weeks and needed only to deliver their finished projects on time.

That was what the other designers had in mind as well. Hence, they got up and left as soon as they submitted their own requests.

Side by side, Natalie and Lina made their way along the corridor in the direction of the dressing room but did not get very far before someone called out to them.

When they glanced behind, they saw that it was Tina.

“Hey, how’s it going?” Natalie greeted her genially.

Overall, she had a good impression of Tina. Not simply because she had saved her just now, but more importantly, how the woman treated people day-to-day. It seemed that Tina got on well with almost everyone.

“There is something that I have to speak with you about,” Tina said as she clutched the design notes to her chest.

Natalie exchanged looks with Lina before she turned back to regard Tina warmly. “What is it?”

Tina did not offer an immediate response. Instead, she glanced nervously to her left and right as though she was hiding from someone.

That led Natalie to narrow her eyes.

“We can’t talk here. Let’s head off to the side.” Tina lifted a finger toward the emergency stairwell.

Natalie nodded in assent as she had few concerns with the bodyguards watching her six.

After the three of them made their way inside, Tina stopped and about-turned to regard Natalie. “You have to be careful from now on.”

“What do you mean?” Lina tilted her head in puzzlement.

Natalie’s brows creased into a taut furrow. “Is there something that I should know?”

Tina nodded and appeared quite somber. “A strange person looked me up yesterday and told me to move against you in the final round to enhance my own chances of winning.”

“What?” Lina’s eyes widened. “Is that true? Who was it, and did you agree to it?”

The flabbergasted Tina shot her a look.

Natalie twitched her lips at that as well. “Don’t be silly, Lina. Tina wouldn’t have come to us with this and taken the trouble to warn me if she did.”

“That’s right.” Tina nodded. “I train under a renowned teacher and come from a family of illustrious designers, so I definitely can’t agree to something like this. As important as winning is, a designer’s integrity is even more vital. Once corrupted, one could never produce good work.”

“I totally agree.” Natalie looked at the woman appreciatively.

Tina then continued, “Initially, I thought I was the only one who was approached, but at breakfast this morning, Georgia told me that someone had made a similar overture to her for the finals. Being quite alike in temperament as myself, she couldn’t agree to it either.”

“I know both Georgia and yourself to be from stellar backgrounds. Your families would be dragged down if either of you was to found implicated in something like this.” Natalie nodded.

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That drew a grateful smile from Tina. "I'm glad that you understand. But since Georginia and myself have both been approached, I suspect that we might not be the only ones. Whoever that was clearly out to get you. Even though we said no, we can't be sure about how the others responded. Jayson didn't turn it down though, and what happened before was the last piece of evidence."

Jayson's that designer who tried to trip me just now.

Natalie's blood ran cold.

Lina, too, was in a righteous fit. "So, that guy really did it on purpose, Nat. We can't just let him off the hook."

"I know that, but right now, we don't have any compelling evidence to prove our case, so we can't take any action against him," said Natalie as she bit her lip.

At this moment, Tina's phone chimed.

She pulled it out and took one look at it. "Georginia's inviting me to go drinking tonight. All right, Natalie. I think I've pretty much said everything. You should watch your back from here on out."

With that, she patted Natalie on the shoulder and strolled past her.

Natalie's fingers tightened against themselves as what she learned weighed heavily on her mind.

Who's the one behind this? Is it Sean? Or Jacqueline?

"Nat? Hello?" Lina waved a hand in front of her.

That brought Natalie back to the present. "Uh, I'm fine."

"I think you should go get some rest. Mr. Shane's still waiting for you. Perhaps if you tell him about this, he might be able to do something about it," Lina suggested chirpily.

Natalie nodded. "You may be right. Let's go."

When the duo returned to the dressing room, Sally was already there.

With the gown and accessories yet to be completed, she found herself with plenty of spare time on her hands. Hence, she had stuck around to help Natalie and Shane babysit the two kids.

As Sharon was a girl, there were some things that were not convenient for Shane to assist with, thus those tasks were left up to Sally.

"Nat." Sally was playing with the children but quickly looked up to greet them when she heard the door open.

Natalie grunted. "We're back."

"Mommy." The children dropped the toys in their hands and ran over to hug both of her legs.

Natalie patted them on the head. She then noticed that there were two people missing from the dressing room. "Where's Shane and Mr. Campbell?"

"Silas has gone to get the children some snacks, and Mr. Shane went out to field a call. It seemed to be work-related," replied Sally.

Natalie nodded in acknowledgment and led the children over to the couch.

At the same time, Lina and Sally sat together so that Lina could take some measurements for Sally's neck and fingers.

The door to the dressing room opened once more shortly after, and in stepped Shane's towering figure.

"Daddy," cried the children as they waved excitedly at him.

Shane nodded back at them before he shifted his gaze onto Natalie. "How long have you been back?"

“Only just. I heard from Sal that there might be some trouble at the company. If it’s urgent, then you probably should fly back to attend to it,” Natalie said in concern, as she did not want him to neglect matters at the group on her account.

Were this situation to persist, even with his position as majority shareholder and chairman whose words carried the most weight, the old guard on the board of directors would nonetheless have a lot to say about it.

Though she knew that he did not fear them, that did not mean that he should completely disregard them, for if the old guard were to come together, they would be more than capable of giving him a hard time. That was a development that she would rather not see.

“It’s nothing urgent. Coming to the end of the year, there’s the annual stock-taking that needed to be done and a couple of decisions over the benefits of the hundreds of thousands of employees that needed to be authorized,” Shane said while he settled himself down next to her.

Natalie exhaled after she heard that. “I see. Then I’m relieved.”

“Mr. Shane.” They were joined by the Cheshire Cat Sally. “On top of being your assistant’s girlfriend, I’m kind of like an employee of Thompson Group, no? So, would I be getting a year-end bonus?”

Natalie was tickled by her words. She nudged at the man next to her. “Yeah, will Sal be getting anything?”