Intern 281

Chapter 281

Dahlia's gaze softened, but her voice carried an unshakable certainty. She reached out, her fingers brushing lightly against Maya's hand, a quiet warmth flickering in her eyes despite the weight of her words. "You are truly Malia's daughter. Your heart… it is both your greatest strength and your deepest vulnerability."

A pause hung in the air, heavy with emotion, before Dahlia continued, her tone steady yet edged with inevitability. "Unfortunately, it doesn't matter, sweetheart. Bloodlines are more than names… more than titles. No matter what name you carry, you are still the eldest daughter of the princess-of their queen, the rightful heir. The crown… passes to you."

Maya's chest tightened, and she shook her head, her voice trembling. "I… I don't want any of

it."

Damien stepped closer, closing the space between them, and wrapped Maya in a protective embrace. She pressed herself into him, the tremor in her body slowly easing under the steady strength of his arms. His heartbeat thumped against her ear, grounding her in a reality that felt impossibly safe amidst the storm of revelations.

She clung against him, trembling, but the raw power radiating from him grounded her. His chest rose and fell with controlled rage, eyes dark and stormy as they locked onto Dahlia. " No one touches her," he growled, low, dangerous, every word vibrating with lethal promise. "I won't allow it. I swear, Maya… I will shred anyone who dares try. Anyone. Do you hear me?"

His gaze snapped to Dahlia, blazing with defiance, every muscle coiled, every inch of him radiating dominance and raw protection. “We will do whatever it takes to keep her safe. To keep her identity hidden. And if anyone-anyone-dares to stand in our way…”

He let the words hang, the air itself seeming to shiver under the weight of the unspoken

threat.

“They will regret it,” he growled, voice low and lethal, eyes locking onto hers like steel. “I swear it.”

Maya trembled in Damien’s arms, her body pressed close as the storm that was him made her feel untouchable, even as the weight of the world threatened to crush them both. His presence was armor, his steady heartbeat a promise of protection against the chaos surrounding them.

Dahlia nodded, her voice calm but sharp, slicing through the charged air. “That’s our only choice. But we must still shield her from the Volkov. Victory will only be ours if all four families stand united.”

She paused, letting the words sink in, her gaze flicking between Damien and the others. “Not because the Volkov are stronger.. but because they play by no rules. Their reach, their ruthlessness… they decide fate by crossing every line. That is what can make or break us.”

Damien’s jaw clenched, every muscle coiled like a predator ready to strike. “We already have the power of three, Mother.”

A faint, knowing smile curved Dahlia's lips. "Yes… that gives us an edge," she admitted, but her eyes sharpened with strategy, glinting like a blade. "Yet you, of all people, know an edge alone does not win wars. If we secure the Takahashis' support, our position won't just strengthen-it will become unshakable."

Ashcroft's voice cut through the tension, deliberate and calm. "The Takahashis are always aloof. They've made it clear-they don't want a part in our fight."

Discussion of alliances and tactics filled the room, voices taut with urgency… until a subtle sound from the door shifted the atmosphere.

Harper, crouched low outside, pressed her ear to the wood, oblivious to the soft footsteps creeping closer behind her.

Then the door moved-a faint creak that barely registered-before the knob turned above her

head.

Before she could react, Harper pitched forward, crashing into the room with a startled cry. "

Ahh!"

Every head snapped toward the doorway, the intrusion shattering the fragile calm like a storm breaking over still water.

Gasps rippled through the room.

Maya stepped forward, concern etched across her features. “Harper?”

In the doorway stood James, hand still on the knob, Lee just behind him. They had approached silently, unseen, and James had simply pushed the door open, fully aware of Harper crouched at the door. The sudden movement sent her sprawling onto the floor, caught red-handed in the act of spying.

James stepped fully into the room, the faintest smirk playing on his lips. “Apologies for the interruption. We noticed Ms. Lin at the door and thought she might need a little help announcing herself.”

Harper’s cheeks burned crimson as she scrambled upright, twisting her fingers nervously. “Ah

hehe… I-I… didn’t mean to… oops! Wrong door… I… I’ll just… go now…”

She started to retreat, but Dahlia’s voice cut sharply through the air. “Harper Lin! Stay right

there!”

Frozen, Harper slowly turned, one hand brushing nervously at the back of her neck. “Ah… ha… hehe… h-hello, Aunt Dahlia,” she stammered, bowing slightly, her face flushed with mortification.

Damien, Ashcroft, and Maya exchanged stunned glances, the tension in the room thick enough to taste.

Ashcroft finally broke the heavy silence, curiosity and disbelief lacing his tone. “Wait… you know her, Aunt Dahlia? How do you even know this… crazy woman?”

Harper’s face flamed a deep red. “Shut your mouth, you psycho!”

Ashcroft threw his hands up, mock-offended, a sly grin tugging at his lips. “Huh! I’m the psycho? Look in the mirror, weirdo!”

Dahlia shook her head, a soft chuckle slipping past her lips despite herself. “Enough, both of you!” Her voice was firm, carrying authority, yet threaded with warmth.

Her gaze softened as it landed on Harper, a flicker of fondness and understanding shining through. “Of course I know her,” she said, voice steady.

Then, her eyes sharpened playfully. “Have you completely lost your manners, Harper? Or are you just going to stand there like a statue?”

Harper hesitated, pouting slightly, before stepping forward. She leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Dahlia's cheek, her voice barely above a whisper. "Aunt Dahlia," she murmured, shyness coloring every word.

Ashcroft blinked, stunned, his mouth slightly open. "How…?"

The silence stretched, heavy but alive, as if the walls themselves were holding their breath, waiting for someone to speak next.

Chapter 282

Dahlia, ever composed, let a faint, amused smile tug at her lips as she leaned back slightly in her chair, watching the younger ones squirm under her gaze. "Well… this is certainly an intere sting reunion," she said, her tone teasing but sharp. "I didn't realize you knew each other."

Ashcroft scoffed, folding his arms with theatrical disdain. "Reunion? Bold choice of word. I know plenty of people-but not all of them matter. Some are just… background noise." His gaze slid pointedly to Harper, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Case in point."

Harper's eyes narrowed, her lips curling into a sweet but deadly smile. "Background noise? Please. If I'm noise, then you're static-loud, annoying, and completely useless."

Dahlia said nothing. She stood gracefully, posture regal, eyes glittering with quiet amusement as she watched the verbal spar like it was a private performance staged solely for her entertainment. There was no censure in her expression-only a curious, calculating delight, as though she were cataloguing each spark between them for later use.

Damien’s gaze swept over them, calm but edged with curiosity. “Ms. Lin works at the company, and she’s Maya’s friend.” His eyes narrowed slightly as he added, “Mother… how do you know her?”

Dahlia’s eyes softened for a fleeting moment before narrowing again, a playful spark igniting in her gaze. “Oh… so you managed to slip into the company too, hmm? Clever girl.”

Harper drew herself up, shoulders stiff, as if willing confidence into her frame-yet the nervous twitch of her hands betrayed her act.

Before Harper could respond, Maya stepped quickly to her side, concern etched deep in her features. She placed a gentle hand on Harper’s arm, her voice soft, layered with worry. Harper… are you okay? You said your stomach was hurting earlier. What are you doing outside? Do you need medicine or something? Is it getting worse?”

Ashcroft leaned back slightly, a sly smirk tugging at his lips. “Oh, I see how it is-poor little Harper, pressed against the door, eavesdropping on the adults’ conversation. Getting your thrills from listening in, are we?” His tone was teasing, but sharp, a jab meant to provoke as

much as amuse.

Harper’s cheeks flamed crimson, her body shrinking slightly as guilt and embarrassment tangled in her expression. She fidgeted, twisting her fingers nervously, unsure where to look.

Maya exhaled sharply, a mixture of frustration and concern in her eyes, and fixed Ashcroft with a pointed gaze. “Nick…”

Ashcroft's grin didn't falter. He leaned back just enough to signal truce, hands raised in mock surrender, but the playful spark in his eyes and the tilt of his mouth betrayed it-he knew he'd scored a small victory, and he was savoring it.

Dahlia finally intervened, her voice calm but commanding, cutting through the tension. "What brought you here, Harper?"

Harper straightened, trying to summon confidence, though her voice wavered slightly. "Work."

Dahlia raised both eyebrows, unconvinced, her gaze sharp.

"Really," Harper added quickly, stumbling over her words, "it's work, Aunt Dahlia. I'm part of the PR team, sent here for… work."

Dahlia's eyes swept the room, taking in every detail. "But the rest of the PR team has already

left."

Harper hesitated, then rushed out, voice small but earnest. "Well… Maya stayed behind, so I did too."

Dahlia inclined her head slightly, a knowing smile softening her features. “Protective of your friend, I see… hmm, I’m glad to hear that.” Her gaze swept the room, then landed sharply on Harper and Ashcroft. “And you two? Why are you squabbling like children? If Harper is Maya’s friend, then I suggest you show some courtesy, Nick.”

Ashcroft scoffed, rolling his eyes with exaggerated disdain. “Pfft! No way! She’s crazy!”

Before Harper could fire back, Damien’s voice cut through the tension, low and deliberate.” They… hooked up last night.”

head The words landed like a thunderclap. Silence fell instantly, thick and heavy, as every turned toward the pair. Harper and Ashcroft froze, faces flaming crimson under the weight of the revelation.

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Dahlia raised a brow, a sly, knowing smile tugging at her lips. “Interesting…”

Her smile widened as she let the words hang, eyes scanning the room like a predator sizing up its prey. “Perfect. Then our problem is solved.”

Damien’s voice snapped, sharp and incredulous. “Mother… what the hell is going on here? What do you mean?”

Dahlia’s gaze twinkled, settling on Harper with amusement. “Well, now we can finally secure the support of the Takahashis.”

Ashcroft straightened, brow furrowed, suspicion and confusion flashing across his face.” The Takahashis? How? And what does that have to do with her?”

Dahlia’s smile turned wicked, almost triumphant. “Because… Harper Lin… is Harper Takahashi.”

The room froze.

Maya’s hand shot to her mouth, eyes wide with disbelief. “Wait… what?”

Damien’s fists clenched at his sides, his mind racing, every muscle taut with barely contained tension. “She’s… what?”

Ashcroft took a half-step back, his usual smirk gone, replaced by genuine shock. “No… no way. That’s impossible.”

Even James and Lee froze near the door. James’s jaw tightened, eyes narrowing as he muttered under his breath, “Now it makes sense…”

Lee remained rooted in place, eyes wide, mouth slightly ajar, his mind racing to reconcile the bubbly, carefree Harper Lin they knew-the one who always laughed, joked, and brought light to the office-with the staggering truth now revealed: she was the daughter of the Takahashi family, one of the five most powerful dynasties.

Kim, standing slightly apart, remained composed. Years of working closely with Dahlia Moretti Blackwood had given her insight into the more subtle machinations of the elite- including the secret meetings and lunches with Harper's mother. Recognition flickered across her eyes; she knew exactly who Harper was.

A heavy silence fell, dense and almost reverent. The revelation crashed over the room like a lightning strike-impossible, undeniable, and utterly transformative.

Clairs

Harper's cheeks flamed crimson, her eyes darting nervously between the stunned faces around her. "LE"

Dahlia raised a hand, slicing through the tension like a blade. Her voice was calm, steady, yet carried an undeniable authority. "Yes. It's true."

Her gaze softened as it landed on Harper, admiration flickering in her eyes. "I understand why you kept your true identity hidden. I really admire you, sweetheart. Working at Blackwood Enterprises… that was a very smart move. Staying off the radar like that-it shows brains and courage. Does your mother know?"

Harper shook her head quickly, a nervous, sheepish smile tugging at her lips. "No… she… she thinks I work for some PR company. She doesn't know which one exactly."

Dahlia's lips curved into a small, impressed smile. "Clever girl… very clever indeed." Her words hung in the air, heavy with approval, the room seeming to hold its breath. Then her gaze sharpened, sweeping over everyone like a strategist assessing her pieces on a board. "And now… with her here, we command the strength of all four families."

Maya reached out, resting a comforting hand on Harper's shoulder. "Harper…"

Harper's face crumpled, panic and guilt flooding her features. Her eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Maya… I… I'm so sorry. Please… forgive me. I didn't mean to lie-I just…"

Before the words could escape fully, Maya closed the distance, pulling Harper into a tight, grounding embrace. "I understand… and thank you. Thank you for everything."

Harper froze, caught off guard by the intensity, her voice barely a whisper. "Maya… I… I-"

Maya slowly pulled back, just enough to meet Harper's eyes, her hands lingering lightly on Harper's shoulders as if to anchor her.

"You're not mad?" Harper's voice trembled, barely audible, her gaze flickering with worry.

Maya's lips curved into a gentle, reassuring smile, her thumb brushing softly over Harper's wrist. "No… these past two days have been… a whirlwind. I've glimpsed a world I never even knew existed. Honestly, I might've run if it weren't for you. You… you helped me see things differently. You made it easier to understand… and to accept."

Harper's chest rose and fell, tears pooling in her eyes as her fingers clutched Maya's hand. " Maya…"

Maya gave her a soft squeeze, a quiet promise passing between them in that touch, grounding them both amidst the chaos surrounding them.

Damien stepped forward, eyes dark and assessing, every inch of him radiating authority. His

gaze locked on Harper, unwavering, his voice low, measured, yet edged with warning.

“Ms. Lin,” he began, his tone calm but sharp, “I need answers. What were your intentions- sneaking into my company, managing to stay hidden for years? Befriending Maya… earning her trust, even inserting yourself into conversations not just anyone has a place in. Tell me- what was your endgame? Care to explain yourself?”

Harper’s cheeks flamed, her throat tightening under the weight of his scrutiny. She turned slightly toward Maya, drawing a quiet breath for courage, then slowly lowered her head in respect and apology.

“I… I’m sorry, Damien,” she murmured, her voice steadying. “I had to stay off the radar. Being one of your employees… it’s the safest place for me. No one would suspect me here, no one would dare look too closely. It’s the only way to stay hidden while still being able to… act whe n necessary.”

Her eyes flicked briefly to Damien, glinting with a mixture of honesty and resolve. “I never meant to deceive anyone… I just needed to protect myself. I just… I just want to live a normal life.”

Maya's hand rested lightly on Harper's shoulder, offering silent support, while Damien's jaw tightened, his mind racing. Behind the storm of suspicion in his eyes flickered the faintest ac knowledgment of her intentions, though the question of trust remained.

Before Damien could respond, Dahlia stepped forward, her presence commanding yet calm. She placed a firm hand on his shoulder, the touch both grounding and authoritative.

"Son," she said, her voice steady, carrying the weight of certainty, "Harper is not our enemy. What she did… it wasn't reckless. It was necessary. And, in truth, it's the smartest move she could've made."

Damien's jaw clenched, the tension in his shoulders slowly easing under her touch, though his dark gaze lingered on Harper, assessing, still wary-but less ready to strike.

Chapter 284

Maya exhaled, her gaze flicking between Harper-crushed, embarrassed, barely holding herself together-and Damien, whose dark eyes still held a flicker of doubt.

She remembered everything Harper had done for her-how she had guided her through truths too heavy to carry alone. How Harper had looked past her scars without flinching, never judging, only encouraging, always pushing her to take that terrifying step forward. How she had made her feel worthy-more than she ever believed she was-and helped her discover a strength she hadn't even known lived inside her.

She drew in a steadying breath, and let her voice carry-calm, but edged with steel.

"Damien… that's unfair."

His head snapped toward her, caught off guard. Maya didn't flinch. She held his gaze, inhaled deeply, and pressed on.

“She’s been your employee for almost four years now. Tell me-was there ever a time she caused trouble? Ever a time she failed you, the company, or anyone around her? She worked hard, gave what was expected, took her role seriously-when she didn’t even need to lift a finger. She cared, Damien. About her job, her colleagues… about your company. And when I walked into the PR department, lost and terrified, she welcomed me. Made me feel safe.”

Her voice softened, but the steel remained.

“I’m sure she had no idea that moment would lead us here-between you and me. But if she had bad intentions, with who she really is… don’t you think she would’ve acted on them a long time ago?”

“Maya…” Damien began, his voice low, strained. “It’s not what I-”

She cut him off, lifting a hand. Her gaze dropped for a breath, her chest rising and falling, then she looked up again.

“Harper is my friend. My only friend. And if it weren’t for her, I would’ve run already. Hidden from everything I didn’t understand. But she stayed with me. She showed me the truth-about you, about this world, about us. In ways I never could’ve imagined. She made me understand.

”

Maya stepped closer, her gaze locked on him, unwavering, fierce. “She’s saved me more times than I can count. I trust her. You should too.”

Another step closed the space between them. She reached for his hand, her touch gentle but

steady, grounding him even as her words carried steel.

“I’m not saying you owe her anything, love. And I’m not dismissing your doubts, or invalidating what you feel.” Maya’s voice softened, quiet conviction threading through each word. “I’m just telling you my truth-what I see, what I feel about her…. about all of this.”

Damien's gaze stayed fixed on her, her words cutting deeper than he expected. For a long beat, he said nothing, letting them sink in.

It was true. These last few days had been a fragile turning point-Maya teetering on the edge, slipping further from his grasp, retreating behind walls he couldn't always break through. But every time she drifted, it wasn't him who reached her. It was Harper.

Harper, with her blunt honesty and quiet steadiness. Harper, who had walked Maya through the shadows he couldn't explain, who had turned fear into understanding. She hadn't manipulated her-she had protected her, guided her, anchored her in a world that should have driven her away.

And Damien realized now… Harper hadn't just been helping Maya. She'd been helping him. Every conversation she had with Maya, every time she nudged her forward instead of letting her run-it gave him another chance. A chance to hold onto her, to bridge a gap he hadn't been able to cross alone.

When Maya returned from Harper's influence, she always came back different-stronger, braver, more willing to face him, to face this world, to face them.

The thought hit him hard, cutting through his suspicion. A slow breath slipped past his lips, the weight in his chest loosening just slightly. And for the first time… he let a fraction of his doubt fall away.

Chapter 285

Damien let out a slow, heavy sigh, tension finally loosening from his frame. He slipped an arm around Maya, drawing her closer, pressing a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I'm sorry, love."

Maya leaned into him, her nod soft but firm, a quiet acknowledgment.

When Damien lifted his gaze to Harper, her eyes were still glassy, her expression caught between shock and awe from the way Maya had stood up for her. He gave her a slow, deliberate nod. "Harper… forgive me for doubting you."

Harper blinked, startled, then quickly shook her head, panic flashing in her movements. “No, no… please, it’s my fault. I should have taken the risk to approach you properly instead of sneaking in the way I did. But… truly, I have no bad intentions. I have no beef with you, or your family. I just…” Her voice cracked as she dipped her head low. “…I just want to be normal.”

For a moment, the room was hushed-until Dahlia’s voice, calm and steady, threaded through the silence.

”

“Harper, sweetheart…” She stepped forward, her expression soft but layered with wisdom. We all want to be normal. But no matter how hard we try, our lives will never be like everyone else’s. We were born into a world of legacy, of duty, of roles that cannot be escaped. Our normal…” She exhaled, a weary smile tugging at her lips. “…is simply different from everyone else’s. And no matter how far we run, destiny has a way of calling us back.”

Her gaze flicked to Damien, her voice lowering, touched with the weight of a mother’s heart. As a parent, I’ve only ever wanted to protect my son. To shield him from carrying the burden of this legacy all on his own. Why do you think your Uncle Dominic and I are still so deeply involved? It’s because parents-true parents-will do whatever it takes to lighten the load for their children. That’s the only way we can give them even a taste of normalcy.”

Her eyes lingered on Damien, softening. “And yet, look at him now. He crossed that line anyway… simply because he fell in love.”

Dahlia shifted her gaze between Harper and Nick, her expression turning almost tender. “It’s the same with you two. Harper-you know how hard it is for your mother to be away from your father and your

brother. She makes that sacrifice for you. And Nick-you chose to embrace the other side of our world, so your parents took the weight of everything else to shield you."

Her tone grew firmer, resonant with quiet truth. "We never wanted our children to bear it all. We carried the weight so that you might live lighter, freer-even if it meant only a sliver of normalcy."

"And you, sweetheart…" Dahlia's gaze softened as it landed on Maya, her tone warm yet heavy with truth. "What Malia did… that was the ultimate sacrifice. Your legacy runs far deeper than anyone else's in this room. The life she chose was never to punish you or your brother-it was to protect you. She may not have lived long enough to carry it through, but perhaps that's why fate intervened. Fate brought you to Damien. And through him, it led you to Nick… and to Harper. These connections, these bonds-they aren't accidents. They're the threads of destiny pulling you toward the life you were always meant to face."

Damien glanced down at Maya, his chest tightening. He felt her in his arms more acutely than ever before-fragile yet strong, chosen yet burdened. His throat worked as he swallowed hard, his usual arrogance stripped away by his mother's words.

Maya's breath caught, her eyes stinging as she tried to hold herself together. Hearing her mother's name on Dahlia's lips sent a wave of grief and longing rushing through her. She clenched Damien's hand tighter, grounding herself, but tears slipped free anyway. Her heart ached, but beneath the ache there was clarity. Maybe… maybe she wasn't as lost as she thought. Maybe her mother had been guiding her all along.

Chapter 286

Harper looked at Maya, eyes glistening, her own grief mirrored in her friend's tears. A soft sob escaped before she could stop it, and she quickly covered her mouth, ashamed of

interrupting. But she couldn't help it-hearing Malia's sacrifice framed this way made her feel

both sorrow and awe.

Nick shifted, his usual composure slipping. He masked it with a low exhale, running a hand over his jaw, but his eyes betrayed the truth: respect, maybe even guilt. Dahlia's words had made something click, and for once, he had no snide remark, no shield of sarcasm to fall back on.

Dahlia let her gaze sweep over each of them-Damien with his guarded strength, Maya trembling yet unbroken in his arms, Harper still shaken but brave, Nick silent and brooding in the corner. Her voice dropped, solemn but steady, the voice of a mother, a matriarch, a woman who had carried the weight of legacy herself.

"Fate has already drawn its lines, my dears. Each of you is bound to this world, whether you asked for it or not. Damien, you cannot shield yourself-or Maya-from what you are. Maya, your mother's love has already set your path in motion, and her sacrifice continues to echo in every choice you make. Harper, you've hidden, you've resisted, yet even in disguise you've carried your role with grace. And Nick…" Her eyes lingered on him, sharp yet tender. "You've chosen to embrace everything, but beyond your blood or your name, your loyalty and genuine friendship is what keeps the bond stronger."

She exhaled, her tone softening into something almost wistful.

"We are children of legacy. Our normal will never be theirs. But together, perhaps… just perhaps, we can carve a version of it that is ours. That is what destiny demands-not that we run, not that we hide, but that we stand in it, side by side, and choose how it will shape us."

Dahlia’s gaze hardened, her voice cutting through the silence with quiet authority.

“We have a war ahead of us. And the only way we stand a chance is if we remain solid-toget her. The Volkovs are not an easy opponent, but united, we can guarantee victory. Remember -this isn’t just about protecting Damien or Maya. This is about protecting our legacies, the very bloodlines that bind us.”

She let her words linger, the gravity in them sinking deep. Then, with a long breath, her tone dipped darker, heavier.

“But don’t mistake the Volkovs as the end. They are only a piece of the puzzle. Defeating them will bring peace, yes-but it will not end the war. The greater threat lies with the

Clans

Lockwoods. They’ve stayed in the shadows, silent… but that silence won’t last. They never stopped searching for Malia. And sooner or later, they will find out.”

Her eyes flicked toward Maya, then Damien, then the others. Her voice lowered, steel wrapped in sorrow.

“And when that time comes-we must be ready.”

A pause settled over the room, heavy but purposeful. Maya’s mind raced, thoughts darting. toward what this meant for their next moves. She glanced at Harper, whose expression had tightened with the

weight of responsibility, and realized the question that had been forming in her heart could no longer wait.

Chapter 287

The room fell into a heavy silence, every word from Dahlia lingering like smoke in the air. Damien's jaw tightened, hands curling into fists at his sides, yet a spark of determination flickered in his eyes.

Harper's gaze dropped, fingers twisting nervously, the weight of what lay ahead pressing down on her like a physical force.

Nick rose, leaning casually against the wall, but the usual smirk was gone, replaced by a rare, measured seriousness. Even Dahlia's sharp gaze softened briefly as she scanned the group, noting the silent understanding forming among them-a quiet vow of unity.

Maya's eyes lingered on Harper, concern and a tentative hope threading through her gaze. She took a careful step forward, her voice soft yet urgent.

"Harper… do you think… you could… convince your father to help us?"

Dahlia shook her head gently, a small, knowing smile tugging at her lips. "She doesn't have to.

"V

Damien's brow furrowed. "What do you mean, Mom? If Harper can convince her father…"

Dahlia’s voice cut through the tension, calm but unwavering.

“She doesn’t have to convince anyone. Harper is the one who decides-that choice is hers

alone.”

The room stilled. Her words hung heavy, like a gavel striking down. A slow, weighted silence followed, as though the air itself acknowledged the truth.

Dahlia exhaled, her gaze fixed on Harper with a mixture of sympathy and respect.

“Their rules are not like ours. The Japanese underworld still follows its traditions-strictly, without question. When the eldest child of the Oyabun turns twenty-five, succession is automatic. No debates, no votes-by blood and tradition, the mantle passes down, whether they want it or not. Bloodline dictates succession. That is the law.”

Maya’s brow furrowed, realization dawning. “That’s why you left.”

Dahlia’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. “Yes. Because she didn’t want the throne. Didn’t want the chains that come with it. So her mother… took her away. Brought her here, to the U.S., months before her twenty-fifth birthday. It was the only way to give her a choice-a chance to decide her own path, instead of the one dictated by blood. No one knew where they went, save for her family and a handful of trusted allies.”

A stunned silence fell over the room, heavy and profound. Each of them processed the weight of Dahlia's words in their own way, the gravity of the moment settling over them like the calm before a storm.

Harper froze, the enormity of Dahlia's revelation pressing down like a tangible weight. Her chest tightened, her eyes glistening as a swirl of relief, fear, and fragile pride washed over her. Her hand instinctively went to her sternum, bracing for the responsibility now resting squarely on her shoulders. Slowly, she lifted her head, meeting each pair of eyes in the room -Damien's guarded, Maya's hopeful, Nick's calculating-and drew a steadying breath.

Harper drew a slow, steadying breath, her voice quiet at first, then firmer with each word. "I never had a normal childhood. From the moment I could walk, I was training. Every lesson, every rule, every test-everything was designed to shape me for one role: to become the next Oyabun. It wasn't discipline; it was preparation. For years, I believed I wanted it. I believed I was ready. I believed it was my destiny."

Her gaze dropped, lashes brushing her cheeks as memories flickered across her expression. Then she lifted her head, eyes sharp and voice steady. "But as the years passed, I saw another world-a life beyond ours. At university, I realized the life I was born into wasn't the only one. There were choices. Freedom. Normalcy. Simple things everyone else took for granted… things I hadn't even dared to imagine for myself."

Her lips pressed into a thin line, a faint, bittersweet smile flickering across her face. "I wanted that. I wanted to live… to be like everyone else my age, even if just for a moment. I tried to make friends, but it wasn't easy. The moment they learned who I was, they either distanced themselves… or pretended to like me because their parents told them to, hoping to gain favors. None of it was real. None of them were real. That's when I learned to be tough. To shut it all out. To stop expecting anything from anyone."

Chapter 288

She drew another breath, steadier this time. “After graduation, I begged my mother. And she… she understood. She agreed to take me away, to give me a chance at something real. That’s why we left-months before my twenty-fifth birthday. My father still stands as the Oyabun in public. But the truth is, he’s only holding the space meant for me, keeping the world together while I tried to figure out who I am.”

Her voice softened, but its edge of resolve remained. “I didn’t leave out of fear. I left to choose. To be me.” She glanced at Damien, her gaze steady. “And that’s why I did what I did- it was the only way I could stay hidden.”

Harper’s eyes flicked to Maya, a bare tremor threading her voice. “And then I met you. Just… normal. Living. Surviving. And I felt this pull-not out of pity, but because, in you, I saw pieces of myself. Keeping your head down, fighting through each day. You’re admirable, Maya. I envy that strength. You gave me something I never had-friendship that was real. Not for my name, not for my family. Just… me.”

Her gaze softened, the smallest smile ghosting across her lips. “And the more I got to know you, the more I felt… ready. Ready to stop running. Ready to accept what I was born to be.”

Maya’s chest tightened, a lump forming in her throat. She reached out, her hand brushing lightly against Harper’s, eyes glistening. “Harper… I… I had no idea. I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Then she shook her head, forcing a small, uncertain smile. “You know what? Just… just forget it. You don’t have to do anything against your will. I’m sure we’ll be fine.” She glanced at Damien, her voice catching slightly. “Right? We… we can still win even if-”

Harper’s hand lifted, halting Maya mid-sentence with a touch that was firm but not unkind. Maya…” Her voice dropped-soft, but threaded with urgency-drawing the entire room into stillness. She stepped

closer until there was barely space between them, her eyes locking onto Maya's with a steady, unblinking intensity.

She exhaled slowly, as if shedding the last of her hesitation, and when she spoke again, her voice was sure, almost commanding. "No. You don't get to leave this to chance. I can't-I won't let you face this without me. I've already made my choice. I'm in this, all the way."

A faint, genuine smile broke across her face, but it didn't dull the weight of her words. "You don't even have to ask, Maya. Because I already decided. I was just waiting for the right moment. In fact…" her voice dipped, a flicker of guilt crossing her expression, "…I may have-"

Her gaze flicked away, hesitation and guilt shadowing her features.

Maya stepped closer, her voice soft but insistent. "What is it, Harper?"

Harper's eyes darted across the room, catching everyone's glances, then she let out a rush of words. "I may have already done something."

Maya's brows shot up, a mixture of curiosity and alarm. "What do you mean? What did you do?"

Harper swallowed, her fingers tightening slightly at her sides, before she met Maya's eyes again-part guilt, part pride, and wholly unapologetic for the choices she had made.

She released Maya's hand, took a step back, and exhaled heavily, as if letting the weight of the secret press down on her fully. Her shoulders slumped slightly, and a small pout tugged at her lips. "Okay… okay, fine! I'll say it!"

Everyone's eyes snapped to Harper, the room leaning in as if breath itself wanted to hear the confession.

She swallowed, fingers worrying at the hem of her sleeve, then forced herself upright. Her cheeks still carried the last glow of embarrassment, but there was steel now under the pink. She bit her lip once, gathered the words, and let them loose.

"Well… you know…" She hesitated, that guilty, sheepish smirk flickering back into place. "I made that asshole Ethan's life miserable."

Silence cracked like ice. Maya's jaw dropped, a hand flying to her mouth. "How? Harper, what did you do?"

Harper drew a slow breath, eyes bright with a strange mixture of mischief and conviction. "I ended his career." Her voice dropped, small but fierce. "I stripped him of everything that mattered-the gigs, the sponsors, the reputation. He's not on any red carpet anymore." She let that hang, then added, half ashamed, half triumphant, "And currently… he's somewhere dark and dirty and stinky, exactly where he deserves to be- waiting for me to come back so I can… um… I can use him as my target, again."

Maya's hand flew to her mouth, eyes wide. "Harper… you didn't!"

She looked at Maya, half-defensive, half-embarrassed. "Well… you know… he's an asshole to you, and my hands are… itchy. I mean, I just wanted to throw some knives, so…"

Damien’s expression hardened, a dangerous amusement creeping into the corner of his mouth. Ashcroft’s smirk wavered, then reappeared, this time edged with impressed disbelief. Dahlia’s face softened into a small, calculating smile-part approval, part motherly appraisal. Harper’s shoulders sagged a fraction as the confession left her. There was no swagger now

-only the exhausted relief of someone who’d crossed a line and, for once, didn’t regret it. “He deserved it,” she said quietly. “He hurt you. He needed to be taken off the board. And… I’m not gonna lie-it was kind of satisfying.”

A quiet voice piped up from the side. Lee, usually reserved, cleared his throat. “Aha! No wonder you were gone for almost three hours yesterday!”

All eyes snapped to him. Lee scratched the back of his neck, letting out a nervous laugh. “Oh hehe… well, yesterday I went looking for Ms. Lin, to see if she wanted to join us for dinner. I knocked on her door, no answer. Went back downstairs, and the receptionist told me Ms. Lin had requested a jet ski. Didn’t think much of it-figured she just wanted to enjoy herself. It wasn’t until almost eight in the evening that she appeared and joined us around the campfire

and, uh…”

Lee shifted uncomfortably, scratching the back of his neck, eyes flicking around the room as if replaying the scene in his head. A small, almost sheepish smile tugged at his lips. “She… she looked different last night,” he admitted. “Overly… energetic, I guess? Like she’d gotten some kind of… release. Really happy, actually. It was… noticeable.”

He let out a nervous chuckle, shrugging as if trying to downplay it, but the admiration-and a hint of awe-lingered in his tone.

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The room remained silent for a beat, everyone processing, some shaking their heads in disbelief, others exchanging incredulous glances. Harper, still flushed, looked down at her hands, trying to shrink into herself-but a small, triumphant spark lingered in her eyes.

Harper shrugged, a small, satisfied smile tugging at her lips. “Yeah… I had a good day.”

Maya’s shock melted slowly into something more complicated: awe, a flash of fear, and an odd, fierce gratitude. “Where… where is he now?”

Harper waved her hand casually, as if it were nothing. “Oh… just a small island not far from here. In a cave.”

Dahlia cleared her throat, eyes narrowing with a mix of curiosity and caution. “And who exactly is this Ethan?”

Harper bounced slightly on her heels, a bright, guilty grin spreading across her face. “Aunt Dahlia… you’re not going to believe this!” she exclaimed, eyes sparkling. “So, his name’s Ethan Miller, he’s an actor-total drama king. Long story short, he came here on Volkov’s orders, trying to get a rise out of Damien.”

She clapped her hands together, excitement lacing every word. “Turns out… Maya went to school with him! He tried to chase her back then, got rejected, and apparently… he’s still hung up on her! Can you believe it?”

Harper leaned in, lowering her voice for effect, though the gleam in her eyes never dimmed.” So, one morning, he saw Maya and Damien all sweet and cozy, and his jealous little ego just exploded! He started saying all these horrible things-calling her names, accusing her of being with Damien for his money, saying disgusting stuff about… well, you get the picture.”

She threw her hands up, laughing through the memory. “So… of course, I had to teach him a lesson!”

Dahlia’s lips curved into a small, approving smile. “Hmm… good girl.”

Her grin widened, cheeks flushed, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Thank you, Aunt Dahlia!” Dahlia’s sharp eyes flicked toward her, curiosity sharpening her gaze. “And… is he still alive?” Harper hesitated, then shrugged, a playful tilt to her head. “Yeah… well… I guess. I mean… he’s still breathing… at least for now.” Her eyes suddenly sparkled, a mischievous idea igniting.” Oh! Wait-let me show you.”

She fumbled for her phone in her back pocket, fingers dancing over the screen, and dialed a

number. After two rings, the call connected, and the screen lit up with the face of a Japanese man, his expression sharp but exaggerated with a grin. He saluted dramatically. “Bosu!” Harper held the phone steadily, a sly smirk tugging at her lips. “How’s my boy toy?” she asked.

Ashcroft’s throat hitched in a small, almost imperceptible cough. He cleared it quickly, pretending nonchalance, but the sharp edge in his eyes betrayed a twinge of jealousy. A faint crease appeared between his brows as he forced a tight-lipped smile, the words “boy toy” clearly hitting a nerve.

The room seemed to shift. All eyes flicked toward him, subtle but unmistakable curiosity- and amusement-spreading across the faces of those present. Dahlia’s lips curved into a sly, knowing smile,

though she masked it with an air of mild disapproval. Maya and Damien exchanged a glance, a quiet, wordless understanding passing between them, followed by tiny, reluctant grins.

Harper rolled her eyes at him, a silent rebuke, then turned back to the phone, her focus sharp and her energy infectious. The room hummed with a quiet tension-curiosity, amusement, and unspoken feelings weaving through the air. Everyone sensed the sparks between them… everyone, that is, except the two at the center of it.

The man on the other end raised a brow. “Bosu! Is everything okay?”

Harper’s lips curved into a mischievous grin. “Yeah… probably just someone’s hemorrhoids flaring up again,” she said, her eyes locking on Ashcroft for a brief, teasing moment. Then, turning back to the phone with mock gravity, she added, “Anyway… how’s my little toy holding up?”

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The man nodded, then swiftly pivoted the camera. The screen revealed Ethan-tied to the wall of a narrow, shadowed cave, arms stretched wide, shirtless, streaks of blood darkening his skin. His chest heaved with ragged breaths, eyes wide with disbelief and raw fear, darting as if searching for an escape that wasn’t there.

The room went silent, the image seared into every gaze. Damien’s jaw tightened, his usual composure flickering under the shock, a dark glint of grudging respect surfacing in his eyes. Maya’s hand flew to her mouth, her pulse hammering in her ears, awe and horror rooting her

to the spot.

Dahlia, sharp eyes unflinching, allowed the tiniest twitch of a smile to break through her otherwise stoic expression, just enough to conceal amusement and maintain authority.

James, Lee, and Kim, standing behind, simply nodded-a quiet, unspoken approval of what they were seeing. Impressed, yet cautious, their eyes lingered on the screen.

Ashcroft, however, felt a different emotion rising. His lips pressed into a thin line, eyes narrowing-not at Ethan, but at Harper-with the faintest trace of jealousy and disbelief. What on earth was she doing with a half-naked man in a cave?

Harper, unfazed, remained unapologetically composed. Her lips curved into a faint, wicked smile, a spark of mischief dancing in her eyes. “Good… exactly where I want him. Keep him comfortable… for now. I’ll be back to check on my little toy later.”

On the other end, the man bowed slightly, his expression respectful. “Understood, Bosu.”

Harper ended the call, slipping the phone back into her pocket with a smooth, almost casual motion. She turned to the room, letting her gaze sweep over them, pride flickering across her features. “Well… there you have it. He’s alive, just… learning a lesson.”

Dahlia arched a brow, a faint, knowing smile tugging at the corners of her lips. Her eyes glinted with a mix of mild amusement and quiet admiration. “You certainly have your own… methods, Harper.”

Harper’s lips curved into a sheepish grin, a mischievous glint still lingering in her eyes. “What can I say… I like my lessons to stick.”

Maya's eyes widened, her breath catching slightly. "You… you actually did that?"

Harper shrugged, a mischievous spark still in her eyes. "Hey… I told you, I'm good with anything sharp."

Maya's lips parted slightly, a faint expression of disbelief tugging at her features. She couldn't quite reconcile the bubbly, lighthearted Harper she knew with the calculated precision of the scene she'd just seen.

Ashcroft, on the other hand, felt a quiet swell of pride. Despite the shocking circumstances, Harper had handled it flawlessly. His smirk returned, slow and knowing, a subtle

acknowledgment of her skill. Damien's gaze lingered on Harper too, half incredulous, half intrigued.

The tension in the room shifted-Harper had just reminded everyone exactly who they were dealing with.

Maya, still processing, shook her head slowly. Her emotions had tempered-calmer than when she first saw Beckett's photo. She understood this world now, accepted its rules, and trusted the people in her inner circle. Here, the rules were simple: cross the line, and face the consequences. And in this circle… cross one, and you cross all.

A small, determined smile tugged at her lips. "Now I'm really interested in learning," she said, her voice light but edged with steel. "I'm still looking forward to those private self-defense lessons from you, by the way." She winked, teasing.

Harper, momentarily caught off guard, threw her head back and laughed-bright, unrestrained, and contagious. “Of course! Absolutely! Wait-do you want to use him as a target too? We can head to the cave later and-”

Her words died as Damien cleared his throat sharply, the sound slicing through the excitement like a warning bell.

Maya glanced at him, cheeks warming with a soft blush. “Uh… maybe we start with… cans? Or something that isn’t breathing?”

Harper froze for a beat, then burst into laughter again, pressing a hand to her mouth to stifle it. “Fine, fine! Safety first!”