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Damien's lips twitched, the faintest smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth, disbelief-and maybe a hint of admiration-shining through. Maya rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her grin, amusement and relief warring across her features.

Ashcroft leaned casually against the wall, one eyebrow raised, lips tugging into a half-smirk. There was a faint glint in his eyes-a mixture of amusement and reluctant admiration, the kind that comes from seeing someone exceed your expectations in their own unpredictable

way.

The room echoed with quiet laughter, the earlier tension softening, replaced by the warmth of camaraderie-and the silent acknowledgment that in this circle, everyone had a role… and Harper was not someone to underestimate.

Dahlia's eyes softened as she observed them, a quiet admiration for the bonds this generation had forged. These were connections not born of obligation, but of fate-paths that destiny had intertwined. She shook her head gently, then her sharp gaze sliced through the levity.

"Alright, take it easy. Don't forget your manners. We are not barbarians, okay? Harper… try not to be too mischievous-you're still a lady."

A brief pause allowed the room to settle into hushed attentiveness. Then, fixing her gaze on Nick and Harper, she gestured between them with a knowing tilt of her head.

“And you two… how exactly are you planning to resolve your… issues?”

Harper and Nick both froze, heat rushing to their cheeks.

Dahlia’s eyes lingered on Harper, sharp and unyielding. “And you, dear… how do you intend to tell your father about Nicholas?”

Harper’s hands twisted nervously at her sides, a faint, guilty tremor in her voice betraying the calm she tried to project. Nick shifted uncomfortably, a thin line of awkwardness pressing across his lips.

Harper let out a nervous laugh, her voice catching mid-chuckle. “Uhh… haha, um… Aunt Dahlia, there’s… um… nothing to tell. What happened… happened. It was a one-night thing. Chi chi-oya doesn’t need to know anything.”

Dahlia tilted her head, a faint, knowing smirk tugging at her lips. Her eyes sparkled with a mix of amusement and calculated curiosity. “Hmm… bold, but sensible. Yet remember-secrets have a way of surfacing when least expected.”

Ashcroft straightened, forcing an air of composure as he crossed his arms. His voice came out cool, steady-almost too steady. “Look… it’s no big deal,” he said, voice even, controlled.” We’re both adults. What happened… it was consensual. A mistake, nothing more-just the heat of the moment. It won’t happen again.”

Harper's smile wavered for just a heartbeat, a flicker of hurt crossing her eyes, but she quickly covered it with her signature bubbly energy. "That's right! Let's just pretend it never happened-no big deal!" Her voice was bright, almost painfully so, like sunlight forcing its way through a stormy sky.

Her chest tightened with something she couldn't name. Why did it sting to hear Ashcroft call it a mistake? She should've felt relieved. Instead, there was only a hollow ache beneath her smile-one she wasn't ready to face.

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The silence that followed was thick, weighted with words left unsaid. Damien and Maya exchanged a subtle glance, the kind that spoke volumes without words-silent understanding threading between them.

Dahlia raised a single eyebrow, her sharp gaze never leaving the two of them. Her lips twitched with amusement, but her mind was alert, calculating. She had lived long enough, seen enough people hide truths behind masks. She could tell when something-or someone- wasn't being fully honest.

Then, with deliberate timing, she dropped the bombshell. "So… does that mean you're finally going to face Hiro?"

Harper froze, her jaw slackening, eyes widening in stunned disbelief. She hadn't expected Dahlia to bring that up. The words struck like a jolt, leaving her momentarily speechless.

Ashcroft blinked, just slightly taken aback. The mention of another man's name struck a chord he hadn't expected. "Who's… Hiro?" he asked, his voice carrying a trace of unease, the faintest crack slipping through his usually controlled composure.

Dahlia allowed herself a small, hidden smile, pleased that her strategy had worked flawlessly. She hadn't expected Ashcroft's reaction to be so immediate-or so revealing-but it confirmed her instincts.

"Like I said," she continued, voice calm but measured, "their traditions aren't just about succession. Alliances matter. Bloodlines must remain pure, and the Oyabun's heir is expected to marry within the inner circle. For Harper, that means she's already been matched."

Ashcroft's brows furrowed, his voice breaking the silence. "Matched?"

Dahlia let the word linger, savoring the tension it stirred. Then, with calculated precision, she dropped the name. "Yes, to Hiro Takamura. He is the eldest son of the Wakagashira-the second-in-command, the kumicho's right-hand man. Their families ensure the next generation. is secured by tradition, loyalty, and power. The match isn't optional. It's duty. Obligation. Expectation."

Ashcroft's jaw tightened, eyes narrowing as he absorbed the weight of it.

Dahlia's gaze lingered on him, savoring the moment, then she pressed on. "Harper and Hiro grew up together. I've met him on several occasions-polite, intelligent, loyal… and I must say, he's good-looking. And more importantly, he genuinely cares for Harper."

Maya's eyes flicked between Dahlia and Harper, a slow realization dawning. A mischievous

spark lit her expression.

Her tone turned playful, sing-song almost. “Wait… that name sounds familiar… Oh, right! Harper-wasn’t he the guy you were on the phone with the other day?”

Harper’s eyes snapped to her, wide and warning, silently begging her to drop it.

But Maya pressed on, relentless. “Remember? The day Damien and I left? When I came out of the bathroom, you were by the balcony, talking to someone. I snuck up behind you, and he actually saw me first. Said ‘hi, so I said hi back. You were in such a hurry to hang up, but you told me he was your childhood best friend. That was him, wasn’t it?”

Harper’s cheeks tinged pink, her gaze lowering as she mumbled, almost too softly, “Yeah…”

Maya’s grin widened, devilish and teasing. She leaned closer to Dahlia, eyebrow arched. “Oh, you’re right, Aunt Dahlia… he is good-looking.”

Damien stiffened beside her, heat crawling up his neck. His jaw clenched, eyes darkening, and before he could stop himself, he slipped an arm around Maya’s waist, tugging her firmly against him. His voice was low, edged with something dangerous.

“He’s good-looking, huh?”

Maya blinked at him, then chuckled softly, tilting her head up to meet his gaze. “Damien… don’t tell me you’re jealous. He’s technically Harper’s future husband.”

The words hit harder than she realized.

Across the room, Ashcroft's expression hardened, his composure cracking just slightly. The phrase Harper's future husband cut sharper than he cared to admit. He crossed his arms, lips pressing into a thin, dismissive line-but the flare in his eyes betrayed him: jealousy, raw and unwilling.

Harper's fingers twitched at her sides, cheeks warming, caught between mortification and the urge to laugh it off, while Dahlia sat back in satisfaction. Her lips curved in a sly, knowing smile, eyes glittering with victory. The pieces were moving exactly as she wanted.

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Then she continued smoothly, "Future husband is accurate. However, it's not completely set

in stone."

Maya tilted her head, curiosity sparking. "What do you mean, Aunt Dahlia?"

Dahlia's gaze swept the room, her tone cool and calculated. "Unlike the Lockwoods, whose bloodline is strictly confined to royals, the Takahashi traditions aren't about keeping everything within a single family. Their focus is on preserving a strong, undiluted bloodline- but that doesn't exclude outsiders. That's why they don't restrict themselves to just their own. In fact, the four other families are considered part of their inner circle."

She paused, letting the weight of her words settle before continuing. "Harper may be matched to Hiro. But… if she were to fall in love with someone else-someone capable of matching her family in status and power-the match could be reconsidered. Tradition binds them, yes, but strength and alliances carry more weight than blood alone."

James cleared his throat, stepping forward with a sly grin. “That said… obviously the boss is already taken. And anyone from the Volkov bloodline? Definitely bad news. And… well… Mr. Ashcroft here is adamant there’s no connection between him and Ms. Lin, so that’s also a no-go. So… is there anyone else who could even be a potential match?”

Harper blinked, caught off guard, her cheeks warming. She waved her hands, trying to soften the bluntness. “Oh, come on, you’re making it sound so… bad. I mean… honestly, Hiro isn’t that terrible. Actually… he’d be a good husband.” She gave a small, awkward shrug, forcing a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

Ashcroft’s throat worked, as if swallowing down words he refused to voice. A flicker of something dangerous crossed his features, barely contained-a mix of jealousy, possessiveness, and unspoken warning that made the air around him tense.

Damien’s eyes flicked to Ashcroft, catching the subtle tightening of his jaw and the narrowing of his eyes. Knowing his friend well enough to read between the lines, a sly grin spread across Damien’s face. “You know what, Harper?” he said, voice teasing, almost conspiratorial. “Maybe you can invite this Hiro over one day… and we can all go out on a little

double date.”

The words hung in the air like a spark. Ashcroft’s eyes widened ever so slightly, a flush creeping up his neck. The dangerous flicker in his expression intensified, barely restrained, while Harper froze mid-shrug, caught between amusement and mortification.

Maya’s eyes lit up instantly, her grin mischievous as she leaned forward. “Oohhh, that’s a

good idea! I want to meet him too!” Her voice bubbled with excitement, though the sly glance she shot Damien made it clear she fully understood the chaos she was stirring.

Harper’s cheeks warmed, her fingers fidgeting nervously, while Ashcroft’s jaw tightened further, the faintest edge of possessive irritation threading through his expression. Damien’s grin widened, quietly reveling in the moment he’d created.

The room buzzed with a mix of tension, teasing, and barely contained laughter-everyone sensing the sparks flying between them, but only a few fully aware of the game unfolding.

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, his patience thinning, before he finally spoke-his voice clipped, edged with controlled exasperation. “Alright, that’s enough.” The words cut through the playful chatter like a blade. “We should be focusing on bigger, more important things ahead of us-not wasting time on useless marriage alliances, planning double dates, or… traditional

bullshits.”

He flicked his wrist, glancing at his watch with calculated nonchalance. “Oh, would you look at that-it’s almost seven. No wonder I’m starving. I’d say it’s about time we all grabbed something to eat, don’t you think?”

The room shifted. Damien smirked faintly, clearly catching the sharp edge beneath Ashcroft’s words, while Maya pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh at how transparent he was being. Harper rolled her eyes but exhaled in relief, silently grateful the spotlight had moved away from her.

“James,” Damien said smoothly, as if to punctuate the change of subject, “take care of dinner preparations.”

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“What? Did I say something wrong?” Maya’s voice was light, teasing, but her eyes sharpened as she

studied Harper’s reaction.

Harper’s eyes practically bulged, her fingers clutching the edge of the couch as if it were a lifeline. She shot upright, a mix of scandalized disbelief and exasperation written across her face. “He is! Maya, Hiro is… he’s incredible-loyal, smart, kind-literally everything any parent would dream of for their daughter. And-” she shuddered, pressing a hand to her chest, voice dropping to a frantic whisper, “not to mention… hot. Like… dangerously hot.”

Her gaze darted around, wild and panicked, as if confessing a forbidden truth. “But… he’s also my best friend! We grew up together!”

She leaned back, throwing her hands in the air, eyes wide, lips trembling, the very picture of

Harper-level dramatics.

Harper’s words tumbled out in a flurry, her hands fluttering as she tried to explain. She didn’t notice Ashcroft standing a short distance away, his posture deceptively relaxed, but his gaze sharp, catching only fragments-the part where she said, “he’s amazing-loyal, kind, smart-literally everything any parent could dream of for their daughter. And, not to mention… hot. Like… dangerously

hot!”

Something tightened in his chest. A flicker of irritation, quick and unfamiliar, crossed his expression. He wasn’t sure why her praise of Hiro struck such a nerve, only that it did.

Stepping forward with deliberate casualness, Ashcroft let a slow, sharp smirk play at his lips. “Ha,” he said, voice smooth, dripping with amused challenge. “With standards like yours, I’d be careful. By your glowing description, that Hiro guy might just turn out to be a zero after all.”

Damien, catching the brief flare in Ashcroft’s eyes, smirked knowingly. Harper froze mid-gesture, eyes widening in shock, sensing a tension she couldn’t yet name. Maya, silent but gleeful, fought back a laugh at how transparently Ashcroft had reacted.

“Ha! What do you know?” Harper snapped, voice bright but laced with sharp humor. She waved a hand at him, playful yet firm. “If my standards are questionable, how about you? Mind your own business, will you? Last I checked, we’re not close. So…. scoot!” She punctuated it with a sharp glance and a roll of her eyes before turning her attention back to Maya.

Her gaze softened, drifting into the distance as a wistful shadow crossed her expression. “I want to be with someone I love, you know? I may be a hardheaded bitch, a rebellious daughter, all of that –but I’m still like any other woman in this world. I want to fall in love. I want to be loved… the real

way.”

She trailed off, lips parting as if caught in a fleeting daydream, imagining it for just a heartbeat. Then she shook her head violently, growling in frustration. “Ugh, no. No, no, no!”

Maya leaned closer, brow furrowed. “No what?”

Harper’s eyes darted around conspiratorially before she leaned in, lowering her voice to a near-whisper. “I can’t… I just can’t imagine… having sex with him. It would be… ugh, so awkward. He’s like my brother! The thought alone-” she shivered, scrunching her nose in exaggerated disgust, “gross. Totally gross!”

Maya clapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide, but a laugh slipped out anyway. “Oh my god, Harper-you’re impossible!” She nudged her friend’s shoulder, grinning. “You make it sound like some horror movie.”

Harper groaned, flinging her head back against the couch with theatrical despair. “Because it is! Can you even picture it? Me and Hiro? Ew. No. Thank. You.”

From across the room, Ashcroft’s gaze flickered, a subtle crease forming between his brows. He didn’t move, didn’t speak-but the faintest tightening of his jaw betrayed a spark of something he couldn’t quite name. Damien, standing just a step away, caught the flare and smirked knowingly, amusement curling at the corners of his mouth.

“Hey, Nick,” Damien said, voice teasing, leaning slightly toward him, “why don’t you just marry Harper instead? Keep the circle tight, huh?”

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Harper’s eyes went wide, and she threw her hands up in dramatic horror. “No way!”

Ashcroft, stiff and rigid beside her, echoed the sentiment instantly, voice low and clipped. “No way.

”

Damien’s smirk widened, the kind that promised trouble, clearly reveling in the chaos he’d stirred.

In one fluid motion, he lifted the glass of amber liquid, drained it in a single, smooth swallow, and set the glass down with a soft clink that echoed in the room like a punctuation mark.

“Well,” he drawled, eyes flicking between Ashcroft and Harper, “looks like you two have a little… unfinished business to figure out. Besides… you’ve already hooked up, haven’t you? Might as well

make it official.”

Both Harper and Ashcroft froze, faces contorted in horror, words failing them. Damien’s grin only grew wider, sharp and teasing, a predator savoring the moment before the strike.

As Damien moved closer to Maya, Ashcroft’s voice sliced through the air-sharp, controlled, mock-threatening. “Don’t get too cocky! Don’t forget about the Hamilton Prince!”

Damien's smirk deepened, eyes glinting with mischievous fire. He leaned just slightly toward Ashcroft, voice smooth and playful. "He can try… but my queen already has her kingdom to reign. She doesn't need anyone else's. She already has mine."

Harper's eyes went wide, then she grinned, throwing her hands up in dramatic flair. "Damn! That's smooth! Ahh!! I'm a fan!! DAYA forever!!" She paused, a lightbulb flickering in her eyes. "Wait… what if I just try to seduce the Hamilton Prince, huh?"

Ashcroft's eyes snapped to her, dark and incredulous, every line in his face taut with tension. What's wrong with you? You can't keep tossing yourself at every man who crosses your path!"

Harper froze, caught completely off guard, her mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water.

Damien let out a low whistle, stepping back, eyes dancing with amusement.

"Ooh… I smell jealousy."

He extended his hand to Maya. She chuckled, shaking her head, and let him lead her toward the bedroom. The door clicked softly shut, leaving Harper and Ashcroft in a charged silence.

Harper slumped back into the couch, fingers twisting in her lap, cheeks flushed. Every glance between her and Ashcroft seemed loaded, the room vibrating with tension-as if the air itself were waiting for the next move.

Ashcroft didn’t move. But his hands curled into fists at his sides. Every muscle in his jaw was taut, every line on his face sharp. He didn’t speak, but the air around him buzzed with unspoken

irritation-an intensity Harper almost-but not quite-noticed.

Harper let out a sharp exhale, finally breaking the heavy silence. She slapped her hands down on her lap with exaggerated flair. “Well… that’s my cue! I’m outta here!”

She pushed herself up, the couch groaning beneath her, and began striding toward the door, determination in every step. Relief and mischief mingled in her movements, as if she could literally escape the tension radiating from Ashcroft.

But before she could reach the hallway, a sharp, commanding voice cut through the room like a

knife:

“Harper Lin! We need to talk!”

Harper froze mid-step, her heart skipping a beat. Slowly, she turned, eyes wide, alert, a faint tremor of panic flickering across her features. Then, squaring her shoulders, she plastered on her defiant,

rebellious front.

“Uhhh… no, we don’t! You’re on your own! I’m going to pay my… boy toy a visit and release some steam! So… see ya!”

Before Ashcroft could even process her words, she spun on her heel and strode toward the door. The click of it shutting behind her echoed like a gunshot in the suddenly silent room.

Ashcroft stood rooted for a heartbeat, jaw tightening, eyes blazing. Fuming. How dare she turn her back on me? And what did she mean by “release some steam” with her… boy toy? Hell no.

Without another thought, he stormed from the room, each step measured and fast, determined to catch her before she got too far. The chase had begun.

Meanwhile, behind closed doors, the chaos outside faded into nothingness. Maya leaned back against the door with a soft laugh, the echo of Harper and Ashcroft’s commotion still buzzing faintly in her mind.

Damien loomed in front of her, close enough that his presence filled the space, his smirk slow and lazy while his eyes burned sharp, devouring her as if nothing beyond these walls mattered.

Maya whispered, her lips curving as she tilted her head up toward him. “Are they gone?”

Damien’s gaze lingered on her mouth, his voice a low murmur, smooth as velvet, as he braced one hand against the door beside her head. “Forget them,” he breathed, eyes gleaming with heat and wicked

amusement. “They’re too busy chasing their own disasters. Right now…” his lips curved into a dangerous smile, “…how about we release some steam too, hm?”

Maya straightened, blinking in confusion, her brows furrowing. “What steam?”

Damien’s smirk deepened. In one fluid motion, his arm slid around her waist, pulling her flush

against him. She barely had time to gasp before he dipped his head, his lips grazing the shell of her

ear. His breath was hot, searing against her skin, sending a shiver racing down her spine.

“The kind,” he whispered, voice rough silk, “that leaves you breathless and begging for more.”

A nervous laugh tumbled past her lips, though the spark in her eyes gave her away. “Stop that…” she whispered, cheeks warming as pink crept across them. “Your mom is just in the other room- she might hear you. It’s… embarrassing.”

Damien’s lips curved into a wicked smirk, his voice low and heated, meant only for her. He brushed his mouth just above her cheek. “Good,” he whispered. “Let her hear… let her know I’m working overtime… making sure she gets her grandkids… soon.”

His smirk deepened, eyes darkening with intent as he leaned closer, the heat between them pulsed, almost tangible. His lips trailed down her neck in soft, teasing kisses, each one leaving a

shiver in its wake.

Maya tilted her head, giving him more room, her breath catching with every gentle press of his mouth. A soft, involuntary moan slipped past her lips, making Damien's grin widen.

With a subtle, commanding shove, Damien guided them toward the bed, hands firm yet impossibly gentle on her waist. Their lips remained locked, breaths mingling, hearts hammering in unison, the world shrinking to the heat between them. His kisses drifted lower, teasing, daring… and then-

A sharp, insistent knock at the door ripped through the room, slicing the tension like a blade. Their bodies froze, breaths hitching, and Maya's eyes shot to Damien's, wide with a mix of panic and frustration. The world outside returned, but inside, the fire between them raged, unbroken and unbearably unfinished.

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"Sir… Ms. Maya," James's voice carried through, measured but insistent, slicing through the air. "

Dinner is served, and Madam awaits your presence."

Maya froze, a flush creeping up her neck as her eyes widened in mortified panic. She pressed a hand to her lips, stifling a laugh that threatened to ruin the moment entirely.

Damien's eyes darkened, lips curving into a slow, amused smirk. He pulled back just slightly, tilting his head toward her, his voice a low growl edged with teasing. "Looks like we've been summoned, my queen. But don't worry… this isn't over."

Maya's shoulders shook as she let out a breathy laugh, still catching her composure, while Damien's hand lingered possessively at her waist as they reluctantly separated from the bed, the heat between them still humming in the air.

They straightened themselves quickly-Damien tugging at his shirt with that effortless arrogance, while Maya smoothed her dress, desperately trying to chase the pink from her cheeks.

When Damien opened the door, James stood waiting with his usual composure, though the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth betrayed that he'd heard more than he let on.

"We'll be right there," Damien said smoothly.

James nodded, retreating down the hall. Damien glanced back into the room just in time to catch Maya approaching, her voice low. "Let's go."

He only hummed in response, closing the door behind them. His hand found its familiar place at the small of her back, guiding her with a subtle, possessive touch. Maya's pulse still raced, her skin tingling where his fingers pressed firmly, insistently, as they made their way to the dining room.

Dahlia was already seated when they arrived, poised like a queen at the head of the table. The chandelier above gleamed against the polished silverware, every detail perfect-except for the sharpness in her gaze as it flicked from Damien to Maya.

“You’re late,” she said coolly, her voice carrying the soft bite of disapproval.

Damien smirked faintly, unbothered, pulling out a chair for Maya before lowering himself beside her. “Forgive us, Mother,” he drawled. “We were… occupied.”

Maya nearly choked, heat rushing to her face.

Dahlia’s eyes lingered on her for a heartbeat too long-sharp, assessing, but a hidden warmth flickered behind them. A faint, delicate smile threatened at the corner of her lips, quickly masked as she lifted her wine glass with flawless grace. “Occupied, indeed,” she said smoothly, her voice

calm, though inside, a tiny thrill made her heart skip-a secret flutter she was determined not to

show.

Then her attention shifted. “Where’s Harper and Nicholas?”

Kim, standing nearby, stepped forward. “We saw Ms. Lin heading toward the dock earlier, Madam,

with Mr. Ashcroft not far behind.”

Dahlia raised an eyebrow, tilting her glass thoughtfully. “The dock? What are those two after now?”

Damien cut in casually, his tone laced with amusement. “Maybe figuring out their unfinished

business.”

Dahlia smirked, setting her glass down with a soft click. “If that’s the case, let’s not wait. We’ll

begin.”

Dinner was served, the three of them eating in relative quiet until Dahlia finally broke it. Her tone shifted, softer, though no less commanding.

“Son,” she began, “I spoke to your father. I’ve already filled him in on what happened.” Her gaze slid deliberately to Maya.

“Maya, sweetheart,” Dahlia said gently, her voice threaded with a maternal warmth that echoed the bond she once shared with Maya’s mother. “Dominic would love to meet you and Jaime. We’d be so happy to welcome you both to the house when we return. And if it’s easier, we can stop by and pick Jaime up ourselves.”

Maya blinked, momentarily caught off guard. Her eyes shifted between Damien and Dahlia, but when they met Dahlia’s, she felt the sincerity and warmth radiating from her words. A small, hesitant smile tugged at her lips, and she gave a quiet nod. “Um… yeah… that should be fine.” Damien shifted slightly toward her, his gaze soft and steady, a quiet intensity in his eyes. Beneath the table, his hand found

hers, fingers brushing in a subtle, possessive touch. “I’ll have Monroe bring Jaime to the manor,” he said, voice calm but firm, every word leaving no room for doubt.

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He gave her hand a reassuring squeeze, then added, with a teasing confidence that made her heart skip, “Besides… it’s about time the family meets my bride.”

Maya’s breath caught, her cheeks warming as her pulse quickened. She looked up at him, eyes wide, caught somewhere between shock, delight, and disbelief. The weight of his words, the sincerity in his gaze, wrapped around her like a spark she hadn’t expected-but one she couldn’t

deny.

For a moment, the noise of the dining room, the clink of silverware, and even Dahlia’s gentle smile all blurred into the background. There was only Damien, and the unspoken promise in that single, potent declaration.

Dahlia’s eyes glistened, a tender warmth softening her usually sharp features. “Oh… your dad and I can’t wait, and I’m sure your grandparents will be very happy,” she said, her voice thick with

emotion.

A soft, knowing chuckle followed, her lips curving into a gentle smile. “Although I should warn you, sweetheart… Damien’s grandparents can be… a tad relentless,” she said, her eyes twinkling with mischief. “Ever since he turned twenty, the venerable Blackwoods have been dreaming about great-grandchildren. You’d better steel yourself-there’s no shortage of enthusiasm coming your way from those old, proud souls.”

Maya blinked, caught between amusement and nervousness, while Damien's hand remained over hers, grounding her, his smirk teasing but protective. The warmth in Dahlia's words settled over her, a reassuring blanket of family acceptance-and a reminder of the lively chaos that awaited.

The dinner flowed effortlessly after that. Dahlia shared stories from her younger days-tales of mischief, laughter, and hard-earned lessons that seemed to dance between nostalgia and wisdom. Maya hung on every word, captivated, seeing a side of her mother she had never imagined before. Each anecdote felt like a glimpse into the woman behind the legend, and with every story, Maya felt herself drawing closer, the connection deepening in a way that was both tender and profound.

As the evening drew to a close, the soft glow of the chandelier casting gentle shadows across the room, they agreed it was time to call it a night. Dahlia, ever reluctant to leave, lingered a little longer, her warmth and energy filling the space. It took a few reassurances from Damien-gentle but firm-that Maya would be safe and that they would see each other again the next day before she finally relented.

With a soft, reluctant sigh, Dahlia let herself be guided toward the door, her eyes lingering on Maya with quiet fondness before she finally stepped away.

The suite fell into a hushed calm, leaving the couple to their own privacy. The warmth of the evening-and the laughter and stories shared over dinner-settled over Maya like a gentle,

comforting blanket, wrapping the room in an intimate, almost sacred quiet.

On the other side of the island, the atmosphere was the stark opposite of the quiet intimacy

The cave swallowed sound and spat it back, the cries of a man in agony ricocheting through the darkness, multiplied until it sounded like an orchestra of suffering. The air was damp, metallic with the sharp sting of blood, every shadow clawing at the walls.

Ethan writhed against his restraints, chest heaving, face drained of color from the torment he'd endured. Each ragged gasp scraped the silence like the breath of a dying man. Harper's eyes narrowed. With a flick of her wrist, the shuriken flew-merciless, precise-cutting through the

darkness and finding its mark.

But her focus wasn't truly on him-not entirely. Her jaw was set, her chest rising and falling in quick, angry bursts. It wasn't the exposure of her identity that had her blood boiling. It was Nicholas

Ashcroft.

The audacity of him-the way his words earlier had cut deeper than she cared to admit. They struck a chord she didn't want touched, rattling her control, sparking something raw and

unwanted.

She had stormed here with every intention of letting it out on her "boy toy," a distraction to smother the storm raging inside her. She wanted to bury the sting, to drown in a moment that wasn't tangled up with him.

But fate-or maybe damnation-wasn’t on her side.

Her peace was short-lived, shattered by the muffled clash of fists and grunts echoing from the

cave’s entrance.

Harper froze, her shuriken poised mid-air, irritation flashing in her eyes. She knew that sound too well-her bodigãdo was the one on the losing end.

As she expected, the noise ebbed, swallowed by the cave’s darkness. But silence didn’t follow. No. Something else came instead. A shift in the air. A weight. A presence. Heavy. Relentless.

Unyielding.

Her jaw tightened, fingers flexing around her weapon. She didn’t need to turn around to know.

Ashcroft.

He had followed her.

And as his shadow stretched long across the cave floor, creeping toward her, Harper's lips curled

into a bitter, frustrated smirk.

"Of course," she muttered under her breath, crossing her arms in defiance. "Can't even have one

damn moment to myself, can I?"

Her bodigãdo stumbled into view, one arm clutching his stomach, his face tight with pain. His knees hit the stone floor, breath coming in short, sharp gasps.

"Bosu!" he rasped, bowing deeply despite his trembling frame. "Gomen'nasai! Kare wa tsuyokute watashi o attō shimashita… Watashi wa anata o shitsubō sa semashita. Dō ka watashi no inochi o

ubatte kudasai. Watashi wa ikiru ni ataimasen!"

(He's strong-he overpowered me. I failed you. Please take my life. I don't deserve to live.)

Harper's shuriken lowered a fraction. Her eyes softened for just a heartbeat at the sight of him kneeling, broken but still begging for her judgment. She exhaled sharply and flicked her hand dismissively.

“Nah,” she said, voice cool but not unkind. “I’m not gonna kill you. You’re fine. Don’t be so dramatic.”

Her bodyguard blinked, shoulders trembling. For a heartbeat he froze, caught between fear and disbelief, then lowered his forehead toward the floor once more-this time in relief. “Bosu…” he breathed, voice cracking, “arigatō…” His grip on his stomach loosened, the tension in his body softening into a strange mixture of gratitude and shame.

“Didn’t think you had a soft bone,” Ashcroft drawled as he stepped fully into the cave, his stride unhurried, his presence filling the space. His smirk curved sharp in the dim light. “It suits you.”

Harper groaned, rolling her eyes so hard it nearly hurt. She turned to face him, arms crossed, her irritation sparking brighter than the torchlight.

“Why are you here?!” she snapped, her voice cutting through the cave like a whip, irritation sparking brighter than the torchlight, a pulse of frustration she couldn’t hide.

Chapter 298

Content Warning: Graphic violence and mature themes. Reader discretion advised.

“Why are you here?!” Harper snapped, her voice sharp enough to slice through the cave’s heavy

silence. Her irritation burned brighter than the torchlight, every word edged with defiance.

Ashcroft's smirk only widened as he stepped closer, his tall frame cloaked in shadow. The flicker of firelight caught the sharp angles of his face, his eyes gleaming with that maddening mixture of arrogance and intrigue.

"Why?" His tone was a taunt, smooth and deliberate. "Because I said we need to talk, and

apparently… His gaze dipped briefly to Ethan, still bound and writhing in pain. "…you'd rather avoid me and go play with your little 'boy toy' instead."

Harper's jaw locked, her fingers curling tight around her shuriken as a sharp, mocking laugh slipped past her lips. "Oh, I didn't know you had issues with comprehension," she sneered. "I thought I made myself perfectly clear-we don't need to talk. And I sure as hell didn't ask you to follow me." Her voice dropped, low and razor-edged. "In fact, I'd be a lot happier if you stayed the

hell out of my way."

Her bodigãdo, still kneeling, flinched at the sparks flying between them. He risked a glance up, his brows knitting in confusion as Harper and Ashcroft traded barbed words that sounded a little too much like… flirting?

His lips parted, then closed again, clearly at a loss. After a beat, he coughed awkwardly into his hand, eyes darting anywhere but at the two of them.

Whatever this was, it didn't feel like a fight anymore-and he suddenly felt like the unwanted third wheel in a scene he definitely hadn't signed up for.

Ashcroft ignored the bodyguard completely, his focus locked solely on Harper. He advanced with slow, deliberate steps, dauntless, until the air between them grew tighter, more suffocating than the cave walls themselves. His voice dipped low, a growl sharpened with mockery. “Funny,” he murmured, eyes glinting. “For someone who doesn’t want me here, you look… unsettled.”

Harper’s eyes flared, but her smirk curved with venom as she lifted her chin. “Unsettled? Please. You’re mistaking fury for perilous.”

A dark chuckle rumbled from his chest. He leaned in, close enough that his breath teased the edge of her ear, his words silk laced with danger. “No, babe. I know the difference.”

Her heart betrayed her – thundering against her ribs, too loud, too wild – but she forced her face into one of mocking calm. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “Don’t flatter yourself, Underworl

d Prince. You’re nothing but a thorn I haven’t had the time to pull out yet.”

Then, matching his taunt, she leaned in until her lips brushed the shell of his ear and hissed, low

and dangerous, “Call me ‘babe’ again and my shuriken will find a new target.”

She shoved at his chest, hands flat and hard – meant to put distance between them. Instead of sliding away, his hands closed over hers, steel locking them in place.

The cave pulsed with silence, thick with unspoken tension. Ethan groaned faintly in the background, but neither Harper nor Ashcroft moved, locked in a dangerous dance of wills, every

breath a clash, every heartbeat a challenge.

Ashcroft tilted closer, his smirk carved in confidence. “Keep telling yourself that,” he murmured, voice a velvet threat. “But sooner or later, you’ll stop running from me.”

Harper scoffed, rolling her eyes as she shoved him back with deliberate force. “Don’t hold your

breath.”

But the heat racing through her veins betrayed her, the staccato rhythm of her pulse thundering like a secret she refused to let him hear.

Ashcroft’s smirk never left his face. He snapped once, sharp as a gunshot, and two of his men materialized from the cave’s throat like shadows answering a summons. Harper blinked, thrown for a fraction of a second. “What-what’s the meaning of this?” she demanded.

Chapter 299

Ashcroft’s eyes stayed locked on her, a cold amusement buried under the heat. “I figured you already had your fun,” he said, voice smooth, “so I’m here to help you clean up.”

Ashcroft's next words came out hard, metallic. "Get rid of him. Make sure he never surfaces again. Chop him up, feed him to the sharks."

The two men echoed in perfect, horrible unison: "Copy, boss."

As the two men closed in on Ethan, the harsh reality hit Harper like a jolt. She stepped forward, eyes flashing, voice sharp with frustration. "Wait-what are you doing? I'm not done with him!" Ashcroft's tone was smooth, almost businesslike, as if discussing mundane errands. "You are. Besides, we leave tomorrow. Might as well take out the trash before sunrise-then everyone can enjoy a good night sleep."

For a moment Harper's defiance flickered against whatever hard calculus flashed behind his eyes. She thought, fought the betrayal of the moment-then let out a theatrical, exasperated sigh and pouted like a spoiled heiress. "Ugh. Fine. Okay. Take him away."

Ethan-half-bleeding, half-broken-thrashed at his bonds with everything he had left. "You animals! You can't-stay away from me! Help! Somebody-" His voice tore off into the cave, hoarse and raw.

Harper turned her head, letting out a sharp, mocking laugh that belied the uneasy twist in her stomach. "Ha! You really think anyone's going to hear you? What a fool. And just in case you missed the memo-you're already a dead man. Consider yourself lucky I didn't slice out your filthy tongue for insulting my friend."

Then, as if remembering a minor chore, she snapped to her bodyguard. "Anko-get up and pull my shurikens out. I don't want to touch his disgusting, bloody body. You do it."

Anko didn’t hesitate. He pushed himself to his feet, his face carved into a mask of focused determination. Moving toward Ethan with the precision of a well-oiled machine, his every step carried the weight of unwavering loyalty. His hands remained steady as he gripped the first shuriken, yanking it free with a sickening shlick. Flesh tore with it, a wet sound that echoed through

the cave.

Ethan’s scream ripped the air apart, raw and jagged, bouncing off the stone walls like a chorus of the damned.

“Ughhh-no! AHHHHH! Stop! Please!” he gasped, straining against his chains, his body writhing violently, the restraints biting deeper into his blood-slicked skin.

Anko’s expression didn’t flicker. He worked with the same mechanical precision, blade after blade,

his movements cold and efficient. “Jitto shiteru. Hold still,” he muttered flatly, as though Ethan’s

agony were nothing more than background noise.

Each pull brought another gush of blood, dripping onto the stone floor in thick rivulets, the metallic tang choking the air. The cave reeked of iron and fear, Ethan’s cries reverberating until they

became part of the darkness itself.

“You… monsters!” Ethan’s voice cracked, high-pitched and trembling. “I’ll kill you! I’ll kill all of you!”

Anko didn’t bother to answer. He gripped the final shuriken, wrenched it free with a brutal twist, and straightened smoothly. Without a single glance at the man writhing beneath him, he wiped his hands clean and turned to Harper.

“Subete kanryō shimashita,” he reported calmly, as if completing nothing more than a simple task.

Ethan sagged against his restraints, trembling, gasping for air, drowning in his own blood and fury. Harper wrinkled her nose as Anko laid the retrieved shuriken before her. The blades glistened wet, blood dripping in slow, sticky trails, with ragged chunks of Ethan’s flesh still clinging stubbornly to the steel. She recoiled, lips curling in exaggerated disgust.

“Eewww!!” Harper squealed, shaking her hands dramatically like bugs were crawling over her skin. Her nose scrunched in exaggerated disgust. “Gross! They’ve got his nasty meat stuck on them. They’re dirty now! Ugh, forget it-throw them away. I don’t want them anymore. Just get me a new

set, okay?”

Chapter 300

Anko bowed low, his voice even and respectful. “Hai, Bosu.”

Ethan, trembling, choking on his own breath, forced out broken words between spasms of pain.” Y-you bitch… I’ll… I’ll make you pay for this…”

Before Harper could even open her mouth, Ashcroft moved. He picked up a kunai resting on a boulder, his eyes never leaving Ethan. With calm precision, he drove the blade deep into Ethan's

side.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!" Ethan's scream ripped through the cave, raw and piercing.

Ashcroft's voice was low, dangerous. "You fucking talk too much." He twisted the kunai viciously, shoving it deeper, earning another strangled cry. Blood poured from Ethan's mouth, his body

convulsing.

Leaning down, Ashcroft's lips brushed Ethan's ear. His whisper was lethal. "You don't get to call her

a bitch. The only bitch here… is you." With a cruel twist, the kunai ripped further inside. Ethan's body jerked once, then slumped, consciousness fleeing him.

Ashcroft yanked the blade free and straightened, not sparing Ethan another glance. He looked to

his men, his tone brisk. "Clean this up."

“Yes, boss!” they barked, rushing forward. Chains rattled as they unshackled Ethan’s limp body,

hauling him toward the cave entrance.

As they passed, Ashcroft added coldly, “Take his tongue. Add it to my collection.”

Harper gagged dramatically, rolling her eyes. “Ewww! You seriously have the weirdest fetish with

body parts. So gross.”

Then she turned to Anko, her voice light and sing-song, almost mocking the horror around them.”

Anko, go with them. Make sure the sharks enjoy every single bite of him, okay?”

Anko bowed again, sharp and loyal. “Hai, bosu.”

As he moved to follow Ashcroft’s men out of the cave, Harper shot Ashcroft a glare, her tone teasing but edged. “Hey, you! Your men better be nice to Anko. I still need him.”

Ashcroft smirked, the corner of his mouth curving darkly. “You heard her.”

“Copy!” his men echoed.

Anko gave a final nod and trailed after them into the night, leaving Harper and Ashcroft alone in the blood-soaked cave.

The silence that followed was deafening, broken only by the slow drip of blood hitting stone. The air was heavy, metallic, clinging to the skin like a second layer. Harper shifted her weight, her disgust giving way to something sharper-awareness.

Ashcroft hadn’t moved. He stood there, half in shadow, half in firelight, his gaze fixed on her as though he hadn’t even noticed the carnage. Or worse, as though the carnage had only heightened his interest.

She huffed, folding her arms across her chest. “What?” she snapped, though her pulse betrayed her sharpness, quickening under the weight of his stare.

Ashcroft’s smirk curved, slow and deliberate, as he stepped closer. “Nothing,” he said softly. “Just…

admiring the mess you make.”

Harper rolled her eyes, throwing her hands up. “Whatever, weirdo!”

He chuckled under his breath, eyes never leaving hers, his voice low and certain. “Finally… just you

and me. How about that talk, huh?”

Harper’s smirk faltered, her pulse betraying her as she forced a scoff. She swallowed, hiding her racing heart behind a sharp glare.

Still, she couldn’t ignore his presence-the kind of danger that thrilled as much as it terrified.