Intern 331

Chapter 331

“Oh, they’re doing well,” he began, voice casual but edged with that familiar flair. “Still the same good ol’ them… though, maybe a little worse now.” He shook his head, letting out a soft, amused

chuckle.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, a hint of curiosity in her voice. “What do you mean?”

Nick leaned back slightly, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Well… they heard about Damien’s love

life,” he said, letting the words hang for effect. “And now they’ve got me on my case even more than before. Can you imagine?”

The table let out a ripple of easy, genuine laughter. Eleanor shook her head, a fond smile tugging at

her lips. “You’re such a brat, Nicholas,” Eleanor said, wagging a finger playfully, though her smile

betrayed her amusement.

Moments later, James and Lee arrived, the faint chill of the evening clinging to them. They bowed their heads politely toward the matriarchs.

“Good evening, Ma’am. Sir,” James greeted with quiet respect.

“Sorry we’re late,” James added, straightening. “Had to make sure everything was squared away.”

Lee nodded. “All the luggage has been loaded into the back of the vehicle.”

Charles waved a dismissive hand, his tone half stern, half amused. “Well, come join us. Pull up a chair and have a meal while it’s still warm.”

“Thank you, sir, but-” James started.

“No buts!” Charles cut in with a grin, the warmth in his voice unmistakable. “Sit down before I change my mind.”

The two men exchanged a helpless glance, then small smiles, before quietly taking the empty

seats beside Monroe.

Dinner flowed with an effortless rhythm. Between bites of roasted lamb and sips of fine wine,

Dahlia and Dominic traded memories of Malia and Julian from their university days-mischievous stories that drew bursts of laughter and knowing sighs.

“Your dad,” Dominic said, shaking his head, “was the biggest nerd on campus. I swear, he’d take his laptop to the cafeteria and forget to eat because he was too busy coding something ridiculous.”

Jaime chuckled, eyes lighting up with pride. “Really? I love building things too-especially Al

systems and automation.”

Dominic’s brows shot up, delighted. “Ha! So it does run in the blood.”

Jaime grinned, his excitement spilling over. “Yes, sir! In fact, I’m looking forward to getting my operation done and going back to regular school. Damien said once I’m well, I can join the mentors hip program at his company.”

The words seemed to hang in the air for a moment.

Dominic blinked, feigning innocence, a sly smile tugging at his lips. “Mentorship program? Since when do we have a mentorship program?” His eyes flicked to Damien, playful and knowing. “Hmm

and you didn’t think to mention this to your old man, huh?”

The room fell into a hush. James froze, his fork suspended halfway to his mouth. Dahlia’s gaze met Eleanor’s-a flicker of surprise and understanding passing silently between them. Across the table, Maya turned to Damien-not with anger, but with quiet curiosity. Whatever this was, it had

everyone’s attention.

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The table stilled. Even the clinking of silverware seemed to pause. James froze mid-bite, fork

suspended in the air. Dahlia’s gaze met Eleanor’s, a flash of surprise passing between them.

Maya’s eyes narrowed at Damien, quiet but sharp, waiting for his next move.

Across the table, Ashcroft couldn’t resist. He let out a low whistle, lifting his wine glass. “Busted.”

Damien exhaled, took a careful sip of wine, and set the glass down. He wiped his mouth with a

napkin. “Umm… yes, it’s-uh-it’s new.”

Maya arched a brow. “Did you just make that up for Jaime?”

Damien met her gaze, sighed, then cracked a small, sheepish smile. “You could say that… but it’s re al. I just hadn’t announced it yet. But now… I guess this is as good a time as any. The program

exists.”

The table froze for a heartbeat. James stayed mid-fork, Eleanor blinked, Dahlia’s lips parted, Maya’s curiosity sharpened. Jaime’s fork hovered, eyes wide with pride.

Dominic’s lips curved into a slow, knowing smile. “Well, I’ll be damned. That’s my boy-creating something new and pretending it’s old. Pure Blackwood, that’s who you are. We do what we do for

the people we love.”

He glanced at Dahlia, a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. “Right, darling?”

Dahlia rolled her eyes but couldn't hide the smile tugging at her lips. "Oh, please. We're too old for that."

Dominic leaned back, laughter rumbling. "Speak for yourself, woman. I'm still in my prime."

Laughter erupted around the table-soft, warm, and effortless. Maya's lips twitched into a small smile. Jaime's chuckle grew fuller, his pride shining through.

James, Monroe and Lee exchanged amused glances, smiling before quietly tucking back into their meals. Charles let a small grin tug at his lips, Eleanor shook her head gently, eyes sparkling.

Jaime looked embarrassed but met Damien's eyes with quiet resolve. "Thank you," he said softly.

Damien smiled, lifting his glass. "Anything for you, bud."

Then Jaime turned to Maya, his chest puffing a little, eyes shining with emotion. "I'll make you proud, May."

Maya's throat tightened, her smile trembling. "You already have, Jaime."

Dominic leaned forward, voice low but rich with warmth. "Now that," he said, his gaze sweeping over the table, "is what family's all about-love, chaos, and watching the next generation find their fire."

Ashcroft lifted his glass with a teasing grin. "To the world's fastest 'new' program launch," he declared.

The table erupted once more-glasses clinking, laughter spilling like music through the room. It was easy, unforced, the kind of warmth that only family and a touch of mischief could bring.

Even Damien couldn't help but laugh this time. Beneath the table, Maya reached for his hand, her fingers slipping into his. When he looked at her, the world seemed to quiet around them.

"Thank you, love," she whispered, her voice barely louder than a breath.

He squeezed her hand gently, a soft smile touching his lips. “Always.”

Charles, who’d been quietly observing with a spark of curiosity in his eyes, leaned forward. “You play chess, young man?”

Jaime nodded modestly. “Yes, sir. My dad taught me when I was little. I still play sometimes to clear my head. And Monroe and I always play after dinner when May’s away.”

Charles’s grin spread wide, his eyes glinting with delight. “Excellent. Then you’ll be my new opponent. My son refuses to play because he claims I cheat.”

Dominic nearly choked on his wine, coughing out a laugh. “That’s because you do cheat, old man!”

Charles pointed a fork in mock offense. “You just can’t accept defeat!”

The table burst into laughter once more-warm, full, and unrestrained. Even Ashcroft, usually the composed one, let a quiet smile curve his lips as he lifted his glass in silent amusement.

For the first time in a long while, the Blackwood manor didn’t feel heavy with memories or loss. Instead, it was alive-with laughter, with love, with the sound of generations healing together.

It wasn’t just dinner-it was a homecoming. A promise that even in the shadow of grief, joy could

bloom again.

Maya and Damien exchanged a quick, knowing glance-just a flicker of warmth that said

everything words didn't have to. Across the table, Jaime's laughter rang out, light and genuine, and

for a brief moment, the room felt peaceful.

The conversation flowed easily after that-playful teasing, casual updates, a toast to their return. Between the laughter, though, came quieter truths. They spoke of their mother, of the bloodline that bound them, of the history that carried both power and danger.

Jaime listened in silence, taking it all in with surprising calm. No panic. No questions born of fear. Just quiet understanding and a steady, mature nod every now and then. It was as if he'd already accepted that his life-their lives-were anything but ordinary.

Dominic was the one who shifted the tone again, his voice steady but edged with concern. "By the way," he began, folding his hands on the table, "do you have a schedule for Jaime's operation?"

Damien straightened slightly. "We've talked about it," he said. "Switzerland seems like the best option. Excellent specialists, full discretion… and it's neutral ground. Safe."

But Dahlia's response came instantly, firm and certain. "No."

The word hung in the air, sharp enough to cut through the calm.

"Switzerland may be neutral," she continued, her tone low, "but neutrality ends when bloodlines

enter the picture."

Damien frowned, tension creasing his brow. "What do you mean, Mom?"

Dahlia exchanged a look with Charles-one that carried years of unspoken knowledge-before finally exhaling. "It's Lockwood territory. Taking Jaime there is too risky. If they find out who he is- or even catch a glimpse of Maya-it'll be over. They'll know."

A heavy silence followed. Maya's stomach tightened, the weight of Dahlia's words sinking in. "Then

where-" she started softly, but before the question could fully leave her lips-

A sudden vibration broke through the stillness.

Maya glanced down at the table. Her phone buzzed again, screen lighting up with a name that made her pulse spike.

Harper.

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Damien caught Maya's eye and gave a small nod. "Put her on speaker."

Maya inhaled, steadying herself. She forced her shoulders to relax, masking the worry still etched on her face. With a flick, she pressed the phone to speaker and held it on the table. The soft hum

of the device filled the dining hall.

"Hey, you!!" Harper's voice came bright through the speaker, threaded with a faint rasp of exhaustion. "Ugh, I just got off the plane. My legs feel like jelly, but I'm alive!"

The room's attention shifted instantly. Ashcroft froze mid-sip, his eyes narrowing slightly as the voice registered. The corner of his mouth twitched – he tried to mask it with casual interest, but his gaze lingered on the phone a beat too long.

"How's everything?" Maya asked softly.

"Oh, I just landed," Harper said, slightly breathless. Then her tone lightened as her eyes roamed around the screen. "Are you… at dinner? Oh no, did I interrupt? Good evening, everyone!"

Jaime perked up. “Hi, Harper!”

Harper laughed warmly, voice carrying easily over the speaker. “Heyyy, Jaime, my man! Looking good, bud!”

Charles’s booming laugh followed. “Ahh! So this is Takahashi’s daughter now, huh? Last time I saw you, you were still in diapers!”

Harper’s cheeks turned pink. “Ahh-hello, old Mr. Blackwood, old Mrs. Blackwood, Aunt Dahlia,

Uncle Charles!”

The elders nodded and smiled warmly.

Maya shook her head, lips curving faintly. “No, it’s fine. How’s everything there?”

“I don’t know yet,” Harper admitted lightly, then glanced at the phone again. “What’s going on? You

sound tense.”

Maya's eyes flicked across the table, then back to the speaker. "It's…. about Jaime's surgery. It's not

safe here, we thought about Switzerland, but we just learned that it isn't an option either."

Harper's tone shifted immediately, firm and sharp. "Well, yeah! That's Lockwood territory. The moment you step foot there, they'll know who you are."

The room went silent.

"Harper… how did you-" Maya began.

"Know?" Harper interrupted with a small laugh. "Let's just say… I may or may not have been

eavesdropping." Her tone shifted briskly. "Doesn't matter. What's the plan?"

Maya exhaled, shoulders sinking slightly. "We don't know yet. Aunt Dahlia just told us right before

you called."

A pause, then Harper's tone cut through, sharp and commanding.

“Then bring him here.”

Every head turned toward the phone. Damien’s brows lifted. “Japan?”

“Yes,” Harper said firmly. “Japan has world-class cardiologists-minimally invasive procedures,

advanced facilities, everything Jaime will need. And most importantly,” her voice dropped slightly,

steel beneath calm, “Volkov has no reach here. Neither do the Lockwoods. This is Takahashi

territory-they wouldn’t dare cross that line.”

She added lightly, though her tone carried quiet command. “Once Hiro’s recovered, I’ll have him personally arrange everything-security, hospital, accommodations. Jaime will be safe.”

Across the table, Ashcroft’s jaw tightened. His fingers curled around his wine glass, knuckles blanching as his eyes flicked toward Maya’s phone-the source of that too-familiar voice. A low, humorless laugh escaped him. “Of course he will,” he muttered, each word edged just enough to slice through the soft warmth lingering in the air.

He swirled his wine with deliberate calm, the motion too steady, too measured to be casual. The

mention of Hiro had lit something raw behind his eyes-jealousy, irritation, maybe something

darker-but he hid it behind that crooked smirk, the kind that dared anyone to call him out.

Maya glanced at him briefly, her eyes softening with quiet understanding. She didn't call him out,

didn't tease-just saw him.

Across the table, Damien leaned back, a smirk flickering. He didn't say a word, but the glint in his eyes said enough. He hid a grin behind his glass, the motion lazy, amused. He knew that look in Ashcroft's eyes too well-territorial, reluctant, hopelessly human.

Harper's voice crackled lightly through the speaker again, oblivious to the subtle tension on the other end. "So, what do you say? Can you make it here by the end of the week?"

The words hung in the air. Maya's eyes widened, a flicker of worry tightening her chest-but beneath it, a spark of hope glimmered. Could they really make it in time? Jaime's gaze met hers, wide and uncertain, yet tinged with quiet determination.

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Silence stretched between them, heavy and fragile.

Damien leaned forward, elbows resting on the table, eyes flicking from the phone to Maya. “That’s actually… not a bad idea,” he admitted slowly. “I never considered Japan before-not with our history with the Takahashis. But now…” He trailed off, the thought unfinished but heavy in the air.

On the other end, Harper exhaled, guilt lacing her voice. “Okay, okay, I get it,” she said quickly. “But hey-here I am, right? No more secrets. You know who I am, and we’re allies. You can trust me.”

A teasing lilt entered her tone as she added, “Besides, I still work for you, boss.” She winked, flashing a sheepish grin that softened the edge of her confession.

Jaime’s eyes widened as the pieces clicked together. “Wait-hold on! What does Harper have to do with the Takahashis?” He froze for a beat, realization dawning like a lightbulb. “No way… you mean

… Harper is Harper Takahashi?!”

Maya nodded once, a faint, knowing curve tugging at her lips. “Yes… she is. But… wait-you know

about the Takahashis?”

Jaime blinked, incredulous, as if she’d just asked whether he knew what the internet was. “Are you kidding me? Of course I do! Cyber intelligence, blackmail, information brokering, corporate espionage-they’re legends!”

Maya's brows lifted, a mix of disbelief and amusement flickering across her features. "Okay, smart guy-but how do you even-?"

Jaime cut her off with a casual shrug, eyes bright. "Know?" He grinned, a hint of mischief in his

tone. "I love reading, May. Always have."

Maya blinked, caught off guard. Her mouth fell open slightly, incredulous. "I… don't think that's something you can just 'read' anywhere," she said, voice half-laughing, half-stunned.

Damien leaned back in his chair, eyes narrowing slightly, a slow smile tugging at his lips. There was

a spark of genuine admiration in his gaze.

Dominic let out a low, approving laugh, leaning back in his chair. "Well, I'll be damned," he said, a

warm twinkle dancing in his eyes. "This kid's got brains, instincts… the whole package. Not that I'm

surprised-good genes run in the family. Your father was the same."

He lifted his glass slowly, almost reverently, letting the amber liquid catch the light as if toasting the very heavens. “Cheers, buddy. Your children… truly remarkable. I daresay, we’re fortunate-very lucky future in-laws!” His eyes then landed on Dahlia, wide with pride, and he added with a teasing flourish, “Isn’t that right, darling?”

The two older matriarchs followed suit. Eleanor spoke first, her voice smooth but warm: “Malia and Julian were impressive individually. I didn’t expect anything less from their offspring.”

Charles leaned back, a teasing glint in his eye, his gaze landing on his grandson Damien. “Ahhh, now grandson… you better work overtime! A Blackwood and a Lockwood in the same bloodline- our grandchildren are going to be unstoppable. I can hardly wait.”

Eleanor smacked his arm gently. “Hush, you old man. Don’t pressure the children.” Her eyes softened, then shifted to a faraway, almost self-reflective look. She cleared her throat and dabbed the side of her lips with her napkin. “Well… we must admit, we’re getting old. Who knows how much time we have left? Let’s just hope we still have the strength to enjoy our great-grandchildren when the time comes.”

Charles's eyes widened at the subtle reminder, caught between amusement and resignation. He understood Eleanor's intention-it was her way, a gentle psychological nudge wrapped in candid reflection. A soft, shared smile passed between them, rich with years of understanding, love, and the unspoken acknowledgment of the fleeting passage of time.

Damien and Maya exchanged a glance, sensing both the warmth and the weight of the moment.

Leaning closer, Damien whispered, a playful glint in his eyes, "Oh, don't worry-I'm working overtime." He winked at Maya before taking a careful sip of wine, the faint curve of his lips betraying a smile. Maya's cheeks flushed slightly, a warmth spreading through her as she caught

the subtle charm in his expression.

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The moment was cut through by Harper's voice, bright but slightly apologetic. "Umm… excuse me, don't mean to interrupt the family planning moment, but-"

Before she could finish, a new voice suddenly erupted from the phone-deep, masculine, and full of warmth. It carried a teasing edge, the kind that immediately drew everyone's attention.

"Ane!"

There was a shuffle, the sound of movement, and Harper's startled laugh as she nearly dropped

the phone.

Then the same voice came again, cheerful and unabashed: “Watashi wa anata ga inakute sabishīdesu!” (I miss you so much!)

Across the table, forks paused midair. Dahlia blinked in surprise, Eleanor’s lips parted in faint amusement, and even Charles looked up, eyes glinting with interest.

Ashcroft’s expression turned to stone. His brows drew tight as he froze mid-sip, wineglass hovering halfway to his lips. His gaze cut to the phone, sharp and unreadable, jaw ticking once.

The air thickened-tension and amusement swirling in equal measure.

“Watashi mo anata ga inakute sabishi!” (I miss you too!) Harper replied brightly, laughing.

That did it.

Ashcroft’s jaw locked. Images-irrational and vivid-flashed through his head. A man’s voice calling

her Ane. Harper laughing like that. He could practically see it her smiling up at another man, that

warmth that is supposed to be his.

His chair scraped back sharply as he stood and reached across the table, snatching Maya's phone. "HARPER LIN!" he barked, eyes flashing.

There was a startled shuffle on the other end, followed by a blur-and then Harper's face came into focus, flushed from laughter, a young man now standing beside her. He was tall, good-looking, slightly disheveled from travel, carrying that effortless Takahashi confidence.

Ashcroft's eyes darkened another shade.

Before he could get a word out, the young man tilted his head curiously. "Isn't that Nicholas

Ashcroft?"

Harper rolled her eyes dramatically. "Unfortunately, yes." Then she turned to the camera, snapping, "What do you want?! Give the phone back to Maya!"

Ashcroft didn't move. His jaw clenched, voice low and dangerous. "What do you think you're doing, huh? You disappear overnight without a word-just vanish-and now you're there smiling like that

with him?"

Harper blinked, startled. “Excuse me?”

But Ashcroft was already spiraling, words tumbling out faster than thought. “Don’t you dare act innocent with me,” he snapped. “You left like nothing happened-after everything last night. And

for what? To run back to him?”

“Run back to what are you talking abou-”

“Oh, come on!” he barked, his laugh dry and cutting, sharp enough to slice through the warmth in the room. “I thought he was poisoned! I guess that was all just a performance, huh? A convenient little show so you could run straight back to your so-called perfect man! Must be nice, Harper- trading one bed for another without even skipping a night’s sleep.”

The room froze.

Dahlia’s eyes went wide, a hand rising to her chest in surprise. Charles’s fork clattered against his plate, the metallic sound sharp in the sudden silence. Eleanor’s hand flew to her mouth, her eyes widening in disbelief. Dominic leaned back slightly, swirling his wine with a gleam of anticipation- clearly ready to be entertained. James and Lee exchanged a glance, silent but loaded with unspoken warnings: this is about to get messy. Monroe, on the other hand, leaned forward, a thrill dancing in his eyes-captivated by the unfolding chaos in the way only someone who lived for it

could be.

On screen, Harper's mouth fell open, outrage flooding her expression. "Excuse me?!" she sputtered, her voice spiking with fury.

Before she could fire back, the young man beside her-calm, composed, but clearly annoyed- stepped into frame. "Perfect man?" he repeated smoothly, English crisp but touched by accent." You must be mistaken. I'm her brother."

Silence.

Harper folded her arms, glaring through the camera. "Yeah. My brother, Kenji Takahashi. You absolute idiot."

Ashcroft froze. Every ounce of heat drained from his face, replaced by dawning horror. His mouth opened-then closed again. Words failed him.

Maya tried, and failed, to hide a laugh behind her hand. Damien leaned back, grinning openly now, one brow raised like he'd just witnessed his favorite kind of disaster.

Dominic let out a booming laugh that shook the table. "Oh, this is rich!"

Dahlia swatted his arm, though even she was smiling. "Dominic, hush."

Eleanor muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Men,” while Charles covered his grin with his napkin. Lee coughed into his hand, failing miserably to hide his amusement, and Monroe simply whispered under his breath, “Ouch.”

Kenji arched a brow, a faint smirk playing on his lips. “Well,” he said lightly, “that’s one way to

introduce yourself.”

Harper crossed her arms tighter. “Next time, maybe try asking before accusing me of anything!”

Ashcroft blinked, still frozen, mortified.

Then Harper’s voice cracked through the speaker again, sharp as a whip. “Now give the phone back to Maya, you moron!”

The line hit like a slap.

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Ashcroft blinked twice, exhaling sharply through his nose as he set the phone on the table. The

movement was stiff, deliberate-like a soldier surrendering his sword. “Here,” he muttered,

avoiding Maya's eyes.

Maya hid her smile behind a sip of water before taking the phone. "Hey," she said softly, voice cutting through the chaos like sunlight after a storm.

On screen, Harper was still fuming, but her tone softened when she spotted Maya. "Sorry about that," she sighed, brushing hair off her face. "Anyway-this is Kenji."

The young man straightened, bowing politely toward the camera. "Good evening, Ms. Maya. Mr. Blackwood." His tone was calm, respectful. "It's an honor to meet you. Good evening, everyone."

Maya smiled warmly. "It's nice to meet you, Kenji."

Damien nodded, amused but composed. "Likewise."

Jaime leaned closer, eyes bright. "Hey! I'm Jaime!"

Kenji grinned, his energy instantly lighter. "Hi, Jaime! Harper's told me about you. I think we're going to be great friends."

Harper rolled her eyes but couldn't hide her smile. "Kenji's also a tech nerd," she said, nudging him. "He's twenty-one but acts fifteen on a good day. Jaime won't be bored here-they'll get along way too well."

That was all it took.

Jaime's eyes practically glowed. "Wait-tech nerd? As in software or systems?"

Kenji's grin widened. "Both. I do network security and Al diagnostics mostly, but lately I've been working on adaptive threat detection algorithms."

Jaime straightened instantly, words tumbling out before he could stop himself. "No way! You mean like predictive breach mapping? I read a paper on that last month-where the system self-learns potential entry points based on behavioral data."

Kenji blinked, surprised-and impressed. "You read that?"

Jaime flushed slightly, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yeah, uh, I don't have the equipment to actually test it. But Damien gave me a laptop-" he glanced shyly at Damien, who only lifted his glass in quiet acknowledgment, "-with a few coding environments preloaded. I've been running small simulations. Just… nothing advanced yet."

Kenji's eyebrows shot up. "You've been writing simulations on a personal laptop? That's insane! What language?"

"Mostly Python," Jaime admitted sheepishly. "It's slower, I know, but it's what I could handle without

frying the poor thing. I tried running a dummy firewall script with some basic machine-learning

integration, but it nearly melted my CPU."

Kenji let out a bark of laughter. "That's the best kind of mistake! You learn faster when things

explode!"

Jaime grinned, instantly more at ease. "Yeah, I figured. Though I did have to promise Maya I

wouldn't blow up the Wi-Fi again."

At that, Maya groaned softly and covered her face. "He did. Twice."

The rest of the table watched the exchange, a mix of amusement and admiration on their faces, as the siblings' energy filled the room. Laughter rippled softly-Eleanor smiled fondly, Charles chuckled, and Jaime beamed with pride. Even Ashcroft's scowl softened, though he refused to

meet the screen directly. Damien's lips curved into a faint, approving smirk, eyes lingering on the

two young men-one full of curiosity, the other of experience.

Kenji nodded, eyes bright with interest. “Tell you what, Jaime-when you get here, I’ll show you my setup. You can run your code on a real rig. We’ll debug it together.”

Jaime’s face lit up, all hesitation gone. “Seriously? You’d let me?”

“Of course,” Kenji said easily. “You’ve got the brain. You just need the tools.”

Harper sighed, though affection softened her tone. “Great. Fantastic. My brother’s already

corrupting your brother.”

Maya chuckled, her gaze drifting toward Jaime. Pride flickered in her eyes as she watched him

light up, animated and confident in a way she hadn’t seen in a long time. Then she looked back at

the screen, a teasing smile curving her lips. “If corruption leads to innovation, I’ll allow it.”

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Damien’s smile deepened-soft, proud, threaded with quiet amusement. He leaned closer, his

voice low enough for only her to hear. “Look at him, love,” he murmured, eyes fixed on Jaime, who was grinning ear to ear. “He finally found a place he belongs.”

Maya’s chest tightened at the words. The edges of her smile trembled, tenderness shining through. “Yeah,” she whispered back, her voice barely audible. “He really did. Thank you.”

Across the table, Dominic lifted his glass with a grin that carried both pride and mischief. “A Lockwood and a Takahashi building the next generation of security systems,” he mused, his tone dry but touched with warmth. “Now that’s a headline I wouldn’t mind reading.”

A ripple of laughter spread around the table-soft, genuine, and full of that rare ease that comes when tension finally gives way to something that feels like family.

Harper's voice, playful a moment ago, suddenly shifted. "Okay, enough fun," she said, tone brisk,

serious. "Listen-about Jaime's transfer. What's the plan? Just say the word and I can have

everything ready by the end of the week."

Jaime's smile faltered just slightly. His eyes flicked between Maya and Damien, a mixture of apprehension and trust reflecting there. "I want to go, May." he murmured.

Maya didn't speak right away. She just stared at her brother-the determination in his gaze, the courage beneath his nerves. He was younger, but in that moment, he was braver than she felt. Braver, because he was the one about to walk into something that could change everything.

"He will be safe here, Maya," Harper confirmed, her voice calm but firm. "We've got world-class

specialists lined up. Security is tight. Everything will be prepared."

Kenji's voice also chimed in now more serious the playfulness is gone "I'll be with him too, Ms.

Maya, you have my word."

Maya's fingers tightened around the phone, her thumb hovering over the speaker. She glanced at Damien, who simply nodded. His expression was quiet, reassuring. "We can do it," he said softly." We'll get him there safely."

Harper's relief was audible, but her tone had shifted-steady, sharp, all business now.

"Good. Don't worry about anything, I'll handle it-flights, hospital, security. Just make sure Jaime's medical files and his team are ready. I'm assuming you'll want to bring them along-it's better for him to have familiar faces during the entire process. We're heading home now, and once I get there, I'll check on Hiro's condition and start working on the antidote right away. Give me twenty-four hours-forty-eight at most-and I'll have it cracked. After that, I'm free, and I'll

personally take care of everything for your arrival."

Ashcroft's expression shifted the moment he heard that name again-Hiro.

Something in his jaw tightened, irritation flickering beneath the surface like a struck match. He didn't like hearing it from her lips-didn't like the familiarity in her tone.

He leaned back in his chair, letting out a low, derisive scoff as he swirled the wine in his glass with

deliberate calm. "That's a bit ambitious, don't you think?" he drawled, voice smooth but edged with

disdain. "What makes you so confident you'll find a cure in two days when an entire team of

specialists couldn’t figure it out in over a week?”

Silence dropped like a curtain. Every pair of eyes in the room-from Damien to Dahlia-shifted to Ashcroft, the unspoken warning clear: don’t push it. Damien’s hand hovered over his glass, a subtle

tilt of his chin signaling caution.

Before Harper could bite back, Kenji leaned into the frame, voice calm but crisp. “With all due respect, Mr. Ashcroft,” he said in perfect English, cool and measured, “you’re confusing skepticism with knowledge. My sister isn’t bluffing-she’s a problem solver. She reads pathogens like some men read balance sheets. Underestimate her at your peril.”

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There was a faint, collective intake of breath. Damien’s lips twitched into a barely-there smile. Ashcroft’s smirk thinned, a muscle ticking along his jaw.

Kenji grinned, mischief bubbling up now that the heat was on. “Ane-are you actually with this guy? “His tone was teasing, loud enough for the room to hear. “Oh-Otosan is going to flip when he

finds out!”

Harper’s face flushed-scandalized and amused-as she jabbed a finger at Kenji off-camera. “No!

Of course not! And shut up! You better not say anything to Dad-or I'll tell Mom about summer camp!"

Kenji's laugh chimed through the speaker, unabashed. "Who, me? Never." He bowed theatrically toward the elders gathered around the table, then straightened with a wink. "But seriously-she's not bluffing. Give her twenty-four to forty-eight hours, and you'll stop doubting."

Ashcroft's gaze darkened, jaw tightening as Harper's rapid denial echoed in his mind, every other sound around him fading to a dull hum. That sharp "No! Of course not!" reverberated in his thoughts, twisting into jealousy and suspicion.

"Fine," he said finally, voice low and dangerous, carrying across the table. "If that's the case… I'm coming."

Harper froze mid-laugh, her expression caught between shock and incredulity. “What?!” she demanded, eyes wide.

Ashcroft leaned back, measured and deliberate, a predator assessing his territory. “Just in case

you’ve forgotten,” he said, each word sharp, controlled, “Jaime’s under my medical team’s care. It’s

only proper that I personally oversee everything involving his surgery and recovery.”

Harper’s mouth fell open, her fingers gripping her phone. “Maya…”

Maya’s lips pressed into a thin line. She glanced at Damien. His subtle shrug said everything: don’t

get involved. His hand brushed hers under the table, a quiet anchor.

Maya’s eyes flicked back to the screen, softening with pity. “Harper… I’m sorry… but…”

Kenji caught the tension in his sister’s reaction and couldn’t resist a sly tease. He leaned closer to the camera, eyes glinting with mischief. “Oh, let Mr. Ashcroft come,” he said, voice playful, almost

conspiratorial. “By the time he gets here, Hiro will already be recovered. He’ll be in charge of everything, and trust me… they’ll get along just perfectly. I can practically see it already!”

Suppressed laughter rippled around the table. Charles chuckled softly, shaking his head, while

Eleanor’s lips twitched in a failed attempt to hide a smile. Dahlia and Dominic shared a knowing glance, a secret smirk passing between them. Even Damien’s mouth lifted in a subtle, approving arc, eyes fixed on Ashcroft as he quietly savored his friend’s self-inflicted predicament.

Ashcroft’s eyes narrowed, every line of his composure stretched taut. Every gaze around the table

-curious, amused, or wary-seemed to pin him in place. Kenji’s words were a clear challenge, and

Ashcroft wasn’t the type to back down. Perhaps it was finally time to meet this so-called “perfect

husband.” Beneath his calm exterior, the smoldering heat of jealousy and pride churned, coiling like

fire ready to ignite.

Chapter 339

Harper’s jaw dropped. For a full second, she couldn’t even blink-just stared at the screen,

mortified, as her brother grinned like a devil in disguise.

Her stomach twisted in that familiar mix of dread and irritation. Why did he have to say that? Why

now? She could feel Ashcroft's sharp gaze like a phantom from across the table, piercing through

her even on the other side of the world. Ugh. I cannot deal with him right now. I just… can't.

"Kenji!" she hissed, voice strangled between outrage and disbelief. '

But it was too late. Everyone at the table was laughing, Ashcroft's expression had gone dangerously unreadable, and Maya looked like she was trying very hard not to burst into nervous

laughter.

Harper forced a stiff, painfully bright smile and blurted out, "Umm-okay, well! That was… fun." Her tone was too high, too rushed. "Oh, look at that-we've just arrived! Great timing!" She waved awkwardly at the camera, already reaching for the end button. "So, that's settled then! Take care of Jaime's medical files, and whatever he needs to bring-medications, personal stuff-just have them ready. I'll, uh, call you back tomorrow to talk logistics, okay? Okay! Bye, Maya!"

And before anyone could respond, she jabbed at the screen and ended the call.

The call ended with Harper's face frozen mid-wave before the screen went black.

For a beat, no one moved. The laughter that had filled the room seconds ago evaporated, leaving behind an awkward, humming silence. Maya's polite smile lingered a moment too long before slipping. Across the table, Jaime fidgeted with his spoon, pretending to study the tablecloth.

Damien cleared his throat, the sound sharp in the quiet. "Well… that was-"

"Quite entertaining," Dominic cut in, grin lazy as he lifted his glass for a sip.

Eleanor, who had been quietly observing while sipping her tea, set her cup down with delicate

precision. "Young people these days are quite…

"Contentious," Charles finished smoothly, amusement tugging at his mouth. His eyes slid toward

Ashcroft with a knowing smirk.

Across from them, Ashcroft's hand lingered near his wine glass. His expression remained calm-

controlled-but his eyes told another story. The faintest muscle ticked in his jaw, a glint of something sharp flickering behind his composure. Irritation warred with a darker intrigue, the kind

that came from being both challenged and fascinated.

“That woman,” he thought, his thumb tracing the rim of his glass, “is testing my patience.”

Maya glanced at him, then met Damien’s gaze. A silent understanding passed between them.

No one said it aloud, but the shift was undeniable. The laughter was gone-replaced by something

heavier, expectant.

Harper had just stirred something far bigger than she realized.

On the other side of that screen-half a world away-the air inside the car felt thick with the ghost of that conversation. Harper stared at her own reflection in the darkened display, mortified by the

words still echoing in her head.

Kenji was grinning. Of course he was.

Silence filled the vehicle for exactly three seconds.

Then-

“Kenji Takahashi!” she hissed, whipping around so fast her ponytail nearly smacked him in the

face. “What in the hell was that?”

Kenji burst out laughing. “That was priceless! You should’ve seen his face-Mr. Ashcroft looked like he was about to teleport through the screen.”

Harper groaned, slumping back in her seat. “I hate you,” she muttered, covering her face with both

hands.

Kenji was still laughing, absolutely unbothered, sprawled lazily across the back seat like a cat who’d just knocked something priceless off a shelf. “What?” he said innocently, dimples flashing.” You didn’t like my little performance?”

“Performance?” Harper threw her hands in the air. “You practically invited him here with a red carpet and a marching band! What were you thinking?”

Kenji smirked, completely immune to her glare. “Oh, come on. You should’ve seen his face-he looked ready to eat the camera. You can’t tell me that wasn’t worth it.”

Chapter 340

Harper groaned, dragging a hand down her face. “Kenji, that ‘face’ you’re talking about belongs to

Ashcroft. The last person on earth I want anywhere near me right now.”

He tilted his head, feigning thought. “Mmm… you sure about that? Because the way you yelled ‘No!

Of course not!’ sounded like a little too much conviction.”

Her eyes widened, mortified. “Oh my God, you’re insufferable.”

Kenji grinned wider, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. “You like him.”

“I do not!” she snapped instantly, voice pitching higher than intended.

He laughed so hard he nearly fell off the couch. “Wow, defensive much?”

“Kenji-”

“Don’t worry,” he cut in, feigning innocence. “I won’t tell Dad.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You’d better not.”

Kenji tilted his head with a teasing smile. “Depends. What’s in it for me?”

Harper glared daggers at him, but her lips twitched despite herself. “Kenji, I swear, if you breathe a

word-”

He lifted a finger. “You’ll tell Mom about summer camp, I know,” he said, chuckling. “You’ve been holding that over me for five years.”

“Because it works,” Harper shot back, a glint of mischief in her eyes.

She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes, a slow, wicked smirk curling her lips. “And I’ll also tell Mom about-” she tilted her head thoughtfully, as if savoring the memory, “-the magazine she

found under your bed.”

Kenji groaned. “Oh, come on-”

“-the girl you cried over in sophomore year. What was her name again? Mika, right?” Harper

added, eyes glinting with delight.

“Oh… and don’t forget the time you stole Dad’s car for midnight boba,” she continued, voice dripping with faux innocence.

Kenji winced. “That was one time!”

Harper’s eyebrow shot up, her grin going wicked. “And we absolutely can’t forget your shodo

disaster what a train wreck. I had to secretly video call your principal to wrangle a make-up

project so you could pass. You owe me big time. Wait until Mom and Dad hear about this – you’re

so dead."

Kenji froze, eyes wide. "You wouldn't."

Her grin widened, sharp and merciless. "Try me."

Kenji pouted, shoulders slumping in mock surrender, shaking his head. "Fine, fine. Truce… for now. But shouldn't you be more worried about finding that cure than about your boyfriend showing up-?

"He's not my-!" Harper groaned, cutting herself off before she could give him more ammo. Forget it. I'm focusing on the cure. That's what matters."

Kenji smirked, glancing out the window as their car pulled into the Takahashi estate. "Sure. Whatever helps you sleep tonight, Ane."

Harper muttered under her breath, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest. "I'll sleep just fine, thank you very much!"

Kenji grinned, clearly unconvinced. "Sure you will," he said, stretching lazily against the seat. "You'll toss and turn, replaying every word that man said-probably dream about him lecturing you in that bossy tone of his."

Harper shot him a murderous look. “You’re delusional.”

“Am I?” he asked innocently, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Because I saw the look on your face, Ane. That wasn’t anger. That was panic-and maybe a little something else.”

Her jaw dropped. “Excuse me?!”

Kenji only smirked, glancing out the window as the city lights streaked by. “Just saying… if this Ashcroft guy really shows up, you might want to prepare your heart along with your lab.”

Harper groaned, slumping back in her seat. “I’m going to poison your coffee tomorrow,” she

muttered, half-threat, half-joke.

Kenji just laughed. “Hey Anko-be honest. Is my sister dating that guy?”

Anko, sitting stiffly in the front seat, had been quietly observing the siblings’ banter in silence. He didn’t look up at first, his gaze steady on the road ahead. After a moment, he shifted slightly, fingers lacing together, and finally gave a small, careful shrug.

“Mōshiwake arimasen ga, watashi wa jōshi no kojin-tekina kotogara ni wa kan’yō shimasen,” he said evenly. (“My apologies, but I don’t involve myself in my employer’s personal matters.”)

Kenji groaned, throwing his head back dramatically. “A~a! Anko wa tsumaranai ne! Anko!” (“Ugh, Anko, you’re no fun! Come on!”)

Anko’s only response was a faint, almost imperceptible twitch of his lips-so subtle it could’ve been a trick of the light.

His mouth tightened-caught between professional restraint and the awkwardness of being dragged into sibling drama. He kept his eyes on the road, hands folded on his knee, voice low and measured. “Mōshiwake arimasen, Kenji-sama.”

(“My apologies, Young Master Kenji.”)

Harper’s eyes flashed at her brother. “Drop it, or I’ll drop you off-push you out of this moving car.”

She jabbed a finger at him for emphasis, then immediately huffed and covered her face when Kenji

whooped with glee.

Kenji threw his hands up in mock surrender, grin wide and dimples on full display. “Truce! Truce!”

he crowed, still laughing as Harper pretended to glare him down. The tension broke into a ripple of laughter, the moment as ridiculous as it was affectionate.

Anko’s stoicism cracked for the smallest beat-a faint twitch at the corner of his mouth, the ghost

of a smile that vanished before anyone could claim it. He returned to watching the road, the

silence now more companionable than tense.

Harper turned her face to the window. The city lights smeared past in streaks of orange and white,

and despite herself, a faint, reluctant smile tugged at her lips. Beside her, Kenji’s laughter had

softened into quiet, contented breathing; Anko’s presence remained steady, silent, almost

protective.

For a moment, the car hummed with ordinary life again-teasing siblings, exasperated sighs, small, fleeting moments that made the world feel less like a battlefield and more like home.