Intern 531

Chapter 531

Damien looked at Jaime for a moment before reaching over and gently patting him on the shoulder.

“You will,” he said with quiet certainty. “You’re a brave young man, Jaime. But you know your sister will always worry about you.”

Jaime shrugged with a small smile.

“Yeah, I know. But at least she won’t have to worry as much anymore.”

As if remembering something, the smile on his face gradually faded. He looked at Damien with an expression far more serious than before.

“By the way… I want to say thank you.”

Damien’s brows drew together slightly.

“For what?”

“For everything,” Jaime replied. “For accepting my sister, for loving her, and for taking care of her… and me.

For taking care of both of us.”

A sheepish smile returned to his face.

“Thank you. Really.”

Damien looked at him quietly for a moment before a faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said. “Taking care of Maya is something I’d do for the rest of my life, whether anyone asked me to or not.”

He gave Jaime’s shoulder another light pat.

“And as for you… you’re family.”

Before Jaime could respond, a sleepy voice drifted from inside the room.

“Damien…?”

Damien glanced over his shoulder toward the couch.

“Jaime’s here,” he answered, stepping aside to let him in.

“Come in.”

Jaime immediately walked inside.

“Hey, May! Good morning!”

Maya slowly sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes before looking at him in confusion.

“Jaime? What are you doing here?”

She glanced at the clock.

“It’s early.”

Jaime plopped down beside her while Damien quietly closed the door behind him and walked back, folding his arms across his chest as he watched the siblings with quiet amusement.

“Not really,” Jaime replied matter-of-factly.

“According to today’s forecast, sunrise is at seven o’clock. Aunt Dahlia said we’re leaving before sunrise.”

He grinned.

“So you’d better get ready.”

After saying that, Jaime’s eyes wandered around the room, taking in the messy bed, the small pile of clothes on the floor outside the bathroom, and Maya, who had clearly just woken up on the couch.

His brows slowly rose as his attention shifted to the oversized shirt Maya was wearing. He looked at Maya, then at Damien, before looking back at her again as a grin gradually spread across his face.

“Wait… did you sleep on the couch?”

Before Maya could answer, he pointed at the shirt she was wearing.

“And what are you wearing? You look like a hanger wearing that shirt.”

Jaime stared at her for another second before his eyes suddenly lit up.

“Ohhh… I get it now.”

Maya blinked at him in confusion.

“Get what?”

Jaime lifted his chin proudly, looking as though he had just solved the greatest mystery in the world.

“You two were busy making my future nephew or niece.”

His eyes suddenly widened.

“Or both! That would be amazing! Two babies at once! You guys should do it more often.”

Maya’s cheeks immediately flushed crimson, and the innocent remark earned a genuine laugh from

Damien.

“I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works, bud,” Damien said with an amused smile.

“But I certainly wouldn’t mind trying.”

He shot Maya a playful look, his brows lifting in silent suggestion.

“Damien!”

Maya shot him an exasperated look before leaning over and pinching Jaime’s thigh.

“Ow!” Jaime yelped as he rubbed the sore spot. “What? What’s wrong with what I said?”

“You’ve said enough,” Maya replied, pointing a warning finger at him.

She quickly got to her feet and started toward the bedroom.

“I’ll go get ready.”

As she passed Damien, she suddenly stopped, reached over, and pinched his arm as well.

“And you… stop encouraging him.”

“Ow.”

Damien rubbed his arm, feigning innocence.

“What did I do?”

Maya simply shot him a warning look from the corner of her eye before turning away without another word.

She walked straight to the bathroom, closed the door behind her, and a second later, the distinct click of the lock echoed through the room.

Silence fell.

Damien and Jaime looked at each other for a moment before sharing a quiet laugh.

Then Jaime lowered his voice.

“She gets cranky when she doesn’t get enough sleep”

After saying that, he slapped both hands against his thighs and pushed himself to his feet.

“Well, Brother-in-law, I’ll leave you to it. I’ll head back to my room first.”

He flashed Damien a grin, glanced down, then looked back up with a thumbs-up.

“You’re pretty gifted.”

Before Damien could react, Jaime let out a quiet chuckle.

“See you later!”

With that, Jaime quickly slipped out of the room, gently closing the door behind him.

Left alone, Damien stood there for a moment, shaking his head with a quiet chuckle. Glancing down at himself, he finally realized he was still wearing nothing more than a T-shirt and a pair of boxers. Comfortable enough in his own skin, he hadn't given it a second thought, nor had he minded Jaime seeing him like that.

The sound of running water drifting from the bathroom reminded Damien it was time for him to get ready as well, so he turned and headed toward the walk-in closet to change.

Meanwhile, across the hall…

Unlike the lighthearted atmosphere that had filled Damien arid Maya's room moments earlier, a heavy silence lingered inside Dominic and Dahlia's bedroom.

Seated before her vanity, Dahlia slowly pulled open the bottom drawer and took out a small vintage jewelry box.

She carefully lifted the lid.

Nestled inside was a delicate necklace she hadn't worn in years.

Her fingers trembled ever so slightly as she picked it up by the pendant, her thumb absently tracing its

worn surface while she stared at it in silence.

Dominic stood quietly behind her, watching her reflection in the mirror.

“You know I’ll always support your decisions,” he said gently. “But… are you confident about this?”

Dahlia’s fingers tightened ever so slightly around the pendant before she drew in a slow breath and lifted her eyes to meet Dominic’s through the mirror.

“Not completely,” she admitted softly. “But nothing stays hidden forever, Dominic.”

Her gaze drifted back to the necklace resting in her palm.

“I’m doing this for our children. Have you seen how much our son has changed?”

A faint, bittersweet smile touched her lips.

“He finally found someone he loves enough to build/a future with. If the truth is destined to come out someday, I’d rather have even a little control over what happens than none at all.”

Dominic slowly nodded.

“I know,” he said quietly.

He walked over and stopped behind her.

Without a word, Dahlia handed him the necklace

Dominic carefully fastened it around her neck before resting his hands lightly on her shoulders.

“But like you said… nothing stays hidden forever,” he said softly. “Tobias will eventually find out. What happens then?”

Dahlia remained silent for several moments, her fingers absently tracing the pendant now resting against

her chest.

She met Dominic’s eyes through the mirror.

“That’s why we need Cecilia on our side.”

Chapter 532

Silence lingered between them.

Dominic remained quietly behind Dahlia, his hands still resting lightly on her shoulders as the weight of her words hung heavily in the air.

After a moment, Dahlia lowered her gaze and gently closed the vintage jewelry box before setting it back inside the drawer.

She lifted her eyes to meet Dominic’s through the mirror.

“When the time comes, we’ll face Tobias together.”

She paused, her voice calm yet resolute.

“But before that happens, we need Cecilia to trust us.”

Another brief silence followed.

“She needs to see Damien and Maya’s love with her own eyes… to see the happiness they found despite everything that was taken from them.”

Silence settled over the room once more.

The softness in Dahlia’s expression faded, replaced by quiet resolve.

“Her remorse is the key.”

Holding Dominic’s gaze through the mirror, Dahlia continued.

“Only when Cecilia truly regrets the past will we have a chance of protecting our children.”

Dominic didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, his eyes lingered on the woman before him.

He had known Dahlia for decades.

She had always carried herself with quiet elegance, the kind that never demanded attention, yet naturally commanded respect.

But beneath that graceful exterior was a side of her that very few people had ever seen.

A fiercely protective mother.

A loyal friend who had never stopped searching for answers.

A woman who had quietly carried the burden of Malia's disappearance for years without ever allowing herself to break.

Sometimes, Dominic wondered if the guilt she carried had become heavier than the truth itself.

He gave her shoulders a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

"You've been thinking about this for a long time… haven't you?"

Dahlia lowered her eyes, swallowing against the tightness in her throat as emotion slowly welled inside

her.

“When we were children, Malia and I used to dream about the future together,” she said softly. “We always

believed that one day our children would grow up together, become friends, fall in love, and build the

family we used to imagine.”

A faint, bittersweet smile touched her lips before gradually fading.

“But I couldn’t protect her, Dominic. When she needed me the most… I wasn’t there. And when her children needed someone to protect them… I wasn’t there either.”

She paused, drawing in a shaky breath as a tear slipped quietly down her cheek.

“When her letters suddenly stopped coming, I had this terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that something was wrong. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew… I just knew. For years, I searched for her. I followed every lead I could find, only to end up at another dead end.”

She looked up at him, her eyes glistening with years of buried regret.

“But perhaps fate had a different plan for all of us. Without either of us knowing, it brought our children together on its own… as though they were always destined to find one another.”

Her fingers curled gently around the pendant resting against her chest.

“And this time, I refuse to lose them too.”

Dominic’s eyes softened.

He quietly knelt before her and gently cupped her face, his thumb brushing away the tear that had escaped down her cheek.

“You’ve blamed yourself for far too long, sweetheart.”

His voice was barely above a whisper.

“What happened to Malia… wasn’t your fault. It was a tragedy no one could have foreseen.”

He rested his forehead gently against hers.

“But if this is the chance fate has finally given us to give our children the happy and peaceful life they deserve… then we’ll see it through together.”

He lingered there for a moment before lifting his gaze to meet hers once more.

“Let’s just hope your plan works.”

For a moment, Dahlia said nothing.

She slowly pulled away, her fingers instinctively finding the pendant resting against her chest.

“A mother’s love is unlike anything else in this world,” she said softly.

“For all these years, Cecilia held on to one hope… that one day her daughter would come home.”

Her voice faltered as she lowered her eyes.

“I can’t even begin to describe how broken she was when she learned her daughter… had passed.”

Another tear slipped silently down her cheek.

“It was as though her entire world had shattered in an instant.”

Her fingers tightened around the pendant before she lifted her gaze to meet Dominic’s once more.

“Heaven forbid… I never want to know that kind of pain, Dominic.”

Her voice trembled despite her composure.

“You know our son. Damien would die for Maya without a second thought. And I refuse to stand by and do nothing, only to spend the rest of my life regretting that I could have done something to protect him.”

She gently took Dominic’s hand in hers.

“You and I both know how hard Malia fought to protect Julian… and where that protection took her. The choices she made… the sacrifices she endured.”

She slowly shook her head.

“What chance do we have? We’re simply not strong enough to stand against the Lockwoods.”

Her hold on his hand tightened ever so slightly.

“This is the only leverage we have.”

She slowly released his hand, her fingers instinctively finding the pendant resting against her chest once more.

“And if Malia is still alive…”

A faint, bittersweet smile touched her lips.

“I truly believe this is what she would want too.”

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Dominic’s gaze drifted for a rnoment, as though searching through memories long buried:

When he finally spoke, his voice was quiet.

“Tobias loved Malia more than anyone. Everyone knew that.”

His gaze lowered, a hint of sadness crossing his face.

“And yet… when the time came, he still chose his family’s legacy and traditions over his own daughter.”

He looked back at Dahlia.

“Even if Cecilia stands with us… what makes you believe Tobias won’t make the same choice again?”

Dahlia closed her eyes for a brief moment.

“Because this time..” she whispered, “it won’t just be Malia he’s looking at.”

She slowly opened her eyes and met his.

“It will be his granddaughter.”

A quiet certainty settled over her features.

“She is his flesh and blood. Every time he looks at Maya, he’ll be reminded of the daughter he lost-her eyes, her smile… even her heart.”

A shadow of sadness passed across Dahlia’s face.

“No matter how hard a man tries to bury the past… he can never escape the child he failed.”

Dominic remained silent, the truth of Dahlia’s words settling heavily in his chest.

He couldn’t deny them.

He had witnessed Tobias and Malia’s relationship countless times over the years.

The bond between father and daughter had always been undeniable.

Malia had been Tobias’s princess-his pride, his joy, the one person he treasured above all else.

There had never been any doubt that Tobias loved his daughter.

Perhaps that was what made the tragedy even crueler.

Love had never been the problem.

Pride was.

And when pride won… it was always the people they loved who paid the price.

Chapter 533

Dominic let out a slow breath before rising to his feet.

He fell silent, absently rubbing his chin as he took a few slow, thoughtful steps across the room.

Eventually, he came to a stop and looked back at Dahlia, a faint crease settling between his brows.

“And what about Jaime?”

Dahlia looked at him questioningly.

“What if Tobias decides to let Maya live the life he denied Malia… only to place the burden on Jaime?”

A faint smile unexpectedly curved Dahlia’s lips.

“That’s exactly why I’m not worried.”

Dominic frowned.

“What do you mean?”

Dahlia held his gaze for a moment before finally voicing what had been on her mind.

“Tobias always wanted a son.”

A trace of sadness touched Dahlia’s smile.

“If he’d had a son, Malia would never have had to carry the weight and pressure of their family’s legacy

alone.”

She met Dominic’s gaze, quiet certainty shining in her eyes.

“And that’s exactly why I believe Jaime will be the one to change him.”

Dominic remained silent, still not fully understanding where Dahlia was going with this.

A faint smile touched her lips.

“Malia and Julian raised their children well,” she said softly.

“They may not have had the privilege of watching them grow into adults. And yet, in those few short years

they had together, they taught their children what truly mattered.”

“They taught them that family comes before everything else.”

Her eyes softened, glistening with unshed tears.

“Neither Maya nor Jaime possesses an ounce of greed, and the bond they share is something no amount of wealth or power could ever break.”

She held Dominic’s gaze, watching the worry in his eyes slowly give way to understanding.

“If Tobias chooses to let Maya live the life he denied his daughter, then the burden of the Lockwood

legacy will inevitably fall on Jaime.”

A quiet tenderness softened Dahlia’s features.

“And if accepting that burden is the only way to protect his sister, Jaime won’t hesitate to sacrifice his own

freedom.”

Dominic frowned, the words leaving his mouth almost instinctively.

“But Maya would never allow him to do that.”

Dahlia nodded.

“Exactly.”

“She would rather carry that burden herself than watch her brother give up his future for her. And Jaime would never allow Maya to make that sacrifice either.”

A faint smile touched her lips as she slowly shook her head.

“They’ll keep trying to protect each other, no matter the cost.”

Her voice softened with quiet conviction.

“And that’s exactly what Tobias needs to see. For the first time in his life, he’ll witness two heirs who value each other more than the legacy he’s spent his entire life protecting.”

She rose to her feet and closed the distance between them.

Taking Dominic’s hand gently in hers, she met his eyes.

“And perhaps… only then will Tobias finally understand what Malia had been trying to teach him all along.”

Dominic searched Dahlia's eyes, as though weighing every word she had spoken.

The worry that had shadowed his face throughout their conversation gradually eased.

"I understand now," he said quietly.

His fingers gently tightened around hers.

"This was never about changing Tobias."

He paused, a faint smile touching his lips.

"It was about giving him one last chance to remember that, before he was a king, he was a father."

Dahlia's eyes glistened as she gave the slightest nod.

"I hope he'll choose differently this time," she whispered.

“It may be too late for him to make things right as a father… but perhaps it’s not too late for him to become the grandfather Maya and Jaime deserve.”

Before either of them could say another word, the sudden vibration of a phone against the bedside table

drew both their attention.

A knowing look crossed Dahlia’s face.

“It must be important”

She gently released Dominic’s hand and walked over to the bedside table.

Her eyes fell on the screen.

Alice.

She reached for the phone and answered the call.

“Yes?… Mm-hmm… I understand.”

Her eyes briefly shifted toward Dominic.

“Thank you. We’ll be leaving soon. We’ll see you there.”

After exchanging a few more words, she ended the call and set the phone back on the bedside table.

Dominic searched her face.

“Everything all right?”

Dahlia nodded.

“That was Alice.”

“She wanted to let me know that her security team just called to confirm the medical team Nicholas arranged arrived safely. Max personally dropped them off.”

A reassuring smile touched her lips.

“They’ve completed all the necessary security checks, and everything is clear. Alice has also arranged a comfortable place for them to rest while they wait.”

She paused before adding,

“She also confirmed we’ve been cleared for departure. The plane is scheduled to leave at eight-thirty.”

Dominic’s eyes drifted to the clock on the wall.

It was just a few minutes before six.

Dahlia walked over, gently cupped his cheek, and he naturally leaned into her touch.

“You worry too much,” she said with a faint smile.

Dominic let out a quiet breath.

“hope you’re right… about everything.”

Dahlia held his gaze, a gentle smile warming her features.

“So do I.”

Rising onto her toes, she pressed a tender kiss to his cheek.

“I’ll finish getting ready. We should be leaving before seven. It’s only about a thirty-minute drive, so we’ll have plenty of time before our departure.”

Dominic nodded.

“I’ll go check on Jaime too. Knowing him, he’s probably already packed and waiting by the door.”

The image earned a genuine chuckle from Dahlia, briefly softening the heavy emotion in her eyes.

“Oh, I wouldn’t be surprised.”

Leaning down, Dominic pressed a gentle kiss to the top of her head.

“Go finish up. I’ll check on everyone downstairs.”

With that, he turned, opened the bedroom door, and quietly left.

Left alone, Dahlia reached for the pendant resting against her chest, gently wrapping the chain around her

fingers.

“Malia…” she whispered.

“I’ll protect our children., no matter what it takes.”

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, holding the pendant close.

Some hopes were too fragile for promises.

Now, all they could do… was trust that fate would be kinder this time.

Chapter 534

Back in Damien and Maya's bedroom, Maya stepped out of the bathroom not long after Jaime had left. It didn't take her long to freshen up since she had already showered just a few hours earlier.

Damien had already changed into a black sweatshirt and gray sweatpants. Seated on the couch, he looked up as Mave disappeared into the walk-in closet.

A few min

pulling

she emerged dressed in a simple cream knit sweater, dark jeans, and white sneakers,

y-on suitcase behind her.

"All

asked.

ed while you were in the bathroom," Damien said. "Jaime's medical team has already arrived. sonally dropped them off. They've already cleared security, so everything's good."

lief that washed over Maya was unmistakable.

ase tell Nick… thank you."

amien slipped his phone back into the pocket of his sweatpants.

He'll live," he said. "Besides, you already thanked him last night. That's enough."

A soft chuckle escaped Maya.

"I don't think there's such a thing as thanking someone too much. Besides, he's like a brother to me now, you know?"

Damien's lips curved into the faintest hint of a smile as he pushed himself off the couch.

"Yeah, well… that's exactly why he doesn't need all that gratitude."

His gaze dropped to the small carry-on beside her.

"Where's the rest

Maya glane

“This

Da

y

before shaking his head in disbelief.

ya spoke before he could question her further.

supposed to come here for a visit before going home, but then everything

to bring Jaime here instead, so these are basically the same clothes I packed for along with a few more that Jaime managed to bring.”

Understanding crossed Damien’s face as he remembered everything that had happened.

“Right. I’m sorry. It completely slipped my mind.”

Maya rested a hand on the suitcase handle and smiled.

“It’s all right. If I end up needing anything else, I’m sure Harper won’t mind lending me a few clothes.”

Damien’s brows immediately drew together.

“I don’t like the idea of you wearing someone else’s clothes.”

Maya let out a soft laugh.

“What’s wrong with that? They’re just clothes, Damien.”

Without another word, he reached into his wallet, pulled out a black card, and held it out to her.

“Here.”

Maya looked at the card in confusion before lifting her eyes to his.

“What’s that for?”

“Use it to buy whatever you need,” Damien replied matter-of-factly. “Clothes, shoes, toiletries…. whatever

you want.”

Maya accepted the card and examined it for a moment before a playful smile slowly spread across her

face.

“Hmm… can I buy a car with this too?”

A faint smirk tugged at Damien’s lips.

“You could buy the entire dealership if you wanted.”

Maya stared at him, completely dumbfounded.

“I was kidding.”

She gently slipped the card back into his hand.

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“If I really need anything, I have enough money saved to buy it myself.”

Her expression softened.

“But thank you,”

Damien looked as though he wanted to argue.

Before he could, Maya met his eyes with a quiet look that made her meaning perfectly clear. She appreciated the gesture, but she wasn’t going to change her mind.

After a brief pause, Damien let out a resigned breath and slid the card back into his wallet.

“All right.”

He knew there was no point pressing the issue. Besides, he would be with her throughout the trip. If she needed anything, he could simply take her shopping himself.

Damien leaned down and pressed a light kiss to Maya’s forehead.

“You’re the boss,” he said, reaching for the handle of her suitcase.

“I’ll take this.”

Maya didn’t argue. She simply smiled and let him take the carry-on before walking over to the couch. Picking up the laptop and phone Damien had bought for her, she carefully slipped both into her purse.

Damien walked over and extended his hand toward her purse.

“I’ll take that too.”

“I can carry this,” Maya protested.

He simply looked at her, silently waiting.

Knowing there was no point arguing, Maya let out a small sigh and placed her purse in his hand.

“Okay…”

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A satisfied smile crossed Damien’s face as he placed Maya’s purse on top of the carry-on. Resting his free hand lightly against the small of her back, he gently guided her toward the door.

They stepped out of the bedroom just as Dahlia emerged from the room a few doors down the hall, already dressed for the trip.

Dressed in an elegant ivory knit dress layered beneath a long camel coat, with her hair neatly pinned back, she carried herself with such grace and composure that it was difficult to believe she had been so emotionally overwhelmed the night before.

The three of them paused as they caught sight of one another.

Maya was the first to smile.

“Good morning, Aunt Dahlia.”

“Good morning, sweetheart,” Dahlia replied warmly as she walked toward them.

Damien stepped forward and kissed his mother on the cheek.

“Morning, Mom.”

Dahlia returned the gesture before Maya leaned in to greet her the same way.

As they pulled apart, Damien looked at his mother with quiet concern.

“Did you get enough rest? How are you feeling?”

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Chapter

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“did,” Dahlia answered with a reassuring nod. “Thank you for asking.”

Her expression turned apologetic as she looked at both of them.

“And… please excuse me for how I was last night. It had been a long and emotional day, and by the time ! got home, I was simply exhausted.”

Damien and Maya exchanged a brief glance.

The explanation made perfect sense. With everything surrounding this trip, it wasn’t surprising that the day had taken such an emotional toll on her.

As the conversation drifted into a comfortable silence, Maya’s eyes were drawn to the pendant resting against Dahlia’s chest. She studied it quietly, with a faint crease forming between her brows.

Ever since meeting Dahlia, she had never once seen her wear that necklace.

Noticing the change in Maya’s expression, Dahlia looked at her with quiet concern.

“Maya? What’s wrong?”

Maya slowly lifted her gaze, her eyes already beginning to glisten.

“I’m sorry… I just… your necklace. It looks familiar.”

Dahlia glanced down at the pendant resting against her chest before gently holding it between her fingers.

“Oh, this?”

She lifted the pendant between her fingers and met Maya’s tear-filled eyes, a mixture of warmth and longing reflected in her own.

“Your mother and I had matching ones made when we were younger.”

Chapter 535

At the mention of her mother, Maya finally understood why the pendant had seemed so familiar.

A memory resurfaced in her mind.

She had seen her mother wear it before.

Whenever there was something worth celebrating-a birthday, an anniversary, a graduation, or one of hers or Jaime's school events-Malia would often wear that very pendant.

As the memories came flooding back, a thought quietly crossed Maya's mind.

Perhaps her mother had worn it for the same reason Dahlia wore hers now.

Because on the days that mattered most, she wanted to feel as though her best friend was right there beside her.

Maya let her eyes rest on the pendant for another moment before looking back at Dahlia.

"Is that why… last night…"

Her voice trailed off before she could finish.

Dahlia stepped closer and gently rested both hands on Maya's arms.

“Yes.”

Her smile softened with quiet nostalgia.

“I spent most of yesterday thinking about your mother.”

She drew a slow breath before continuing.

“I kept wishing she were here to see everything that’s happened lately.”

A bittersweet smile touched Dahlia’s lips.

“I wanted to tell her how brave Jaime has been through all of this…”

Then she let out a quiet laugh as an image came to mind.

“Although

“An

ably be pacing back and forth by now, worrying himself sick."

"She'd probably tell him to get himself together. Otherwise, he

been the more anxious one.

coming home from school with nothing more than a mild stomach flu. She hadn't

been able to keep any food down, and Julian hack practically worn a path to her bedroom, checking on her every few minutes.

By the fifth or sixth visit, Malia had finally thrown her hands up.

"For goodness' sake, Julian," she had scolded with an exasperated laugh "How is she supposed to get any rest if you keep barging in every five minutes? If anyone's going to make her sick, it'll be you."

Even Julian had laughed sheepishly before promising to stop.

He lasted all of ten minutes before quietly peeking through the bedroom door again.

The memory brought another soft laugh to Maya's lips.

Standing quietly beside her, Damien found himself watching every subtle change in her expression. The little smiles that came and went so naturally tugged at the corners of his own mouth, and before he realized it, he was smiling right along with her.

Dahlia's smile softened even more as she gently cupped Maya's cheek, her eyes shimmering with quiet warmth.

"…and how proud she would be of the woman you've become, sweetheart."

Maya's smile slowly faded as emotion welled inside her.

A lump formed in her throat as Dahlia's emotions from the previous night finally made perfect sense to

her.

In the short time Maya and Jaime had been welcomed into Damien's family, Dahlia had embraced them

with a warmth that came so naturally it never once felt forced. She cared for them with the quiet devotion of a mother, never making them feel like outsiders or a responsibility she had taken on for someone else's

sake.

Despite everything that had happened, she hadn't hesitated for a second to accompany them on this trip or to stay by Jaime's side throughout his recovery.

Of course she had spent the day thinking about her best friend.

Deep down, Maya couldn't help sharing the same wish.

She simply wished their mother could have been there too.

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Dahlia's hand slowly fell away from Maya's cheek before her eyes drifted to the pendant once more. She gently rubbed it between her fingers, smiling to herself before looking back at Maya.

"Do you still have your mother's?"

A gentle smile remained on her lips.

“I’m sure she’d be happy to see you wearing it.”

The question caught Maya completely off guard.

She Had to Make

The warmth in her eyes slowly faded, replaced by guilt.

A small, apologetic smile tugged at the corners of her lips as she lowered her head and gently shook it.

“I used to.”

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

“But… I don’t anymore.”

A faint crease formed between Dahlia’s brows.

“What happened?”

Maya drew a slow breath before answering.

“When Jaime’s condition got worse, I ran out of every other option

Her voice remained steady, but the sadness behind it was unmistakable.

“I had to… pawn Mom’s jewelry to help cover his medical bills.”

She paused, lowering her eyes once more.

“It was my last resort. The only things I couldn’t bring myself to part with were Mom and Dad’s wedding bands. I still have those.”

When she looked back at Dahlia, quiet remorse filled her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Dahlia. If I had known how much that necklace meant to both of you, I never would have…”

Dahlia didn’t let her finish.

She gently took both of Maya’s hands in hers and gave them a reassuring squeeze.

“Shh.”

She slowly shook her head.

“You don’t owe me-or anyone-an apology.”

Regret washed over Dahlia almost instantly.

Caught up in the emotion of the moment, she had completely forgotten that Jaime had already told them. the morning before how Maya had been forced to pawn their mother’s jewelry so they could survive.

But hearing those words from Maya herself now made Dahlia’s heart ache all over again.

“You did what you had to do. Anyone in your position would have done the very same thing. There is nothing to be sorry for.”

Maya’s eyes turned misty once more as she gave a small nod.

Although Dahlia’s reassurance eased some of the guilt weighing on her heart, it could never erase the choices she had been forced to make.

Chapter 536

The sadness lingering in Maya’s eyes, along with the guilt she still carried, didn’t escape either Dahlia or Damien.

Wanting to ease that burden, Dahlia suddenly thought of something.

Just as Damien was about to say something, she spoke first.

“You know…” she said gently. “Do you happen to remember the name of the pawn shop?”

Maya looked at her in surprise before giving a small nod.

“I do.”

A faint, wistful smile touched Maya’s lips.

“I kept all the receipts and paperwork. They’re still in a folder at home.”

Dahlia looked at her in surprise.

“You kept them?”

Maya nodded.

“I couldn’t bring myself to throw them away.” Her smile softened with quiet longing. “I always told myself that one day, when things got better… I’d go back for them.”

A genuine smile spread across Dahlia’s face.

“That’s wonderful.” Relief softened her voice. “Then that makes things much easier.”

Before she could say anything more, Damien spoke for the first time since the conversation had turned to

the necklace.

“Tell me where they are.”

Both Dahlia and Maya turned to him.

“I’ll go get them,” Damien said matter-of-factly.

Maya blinked in confusion.

“What?”

“The receipts,” Damien replied. “Tell me where you keep the folder. I’ll take care of it myself.”

Maya instinctively opened her mouth to refuse but before a word could leave her lips, Dahlia gently took

her hand.

“Sweetheart,” she said softly, “let Damien do this for you. Honestly, he only beat me to it. I was about to suggest the very same thing.”

Mayn looked from Dahlia to Damien.

She Rrew he wasn’t offering out of obligation.

He simply wanted to help bring a piece of her parents back home.

After a brief hesitation, she gave a small nod.

“…Okay.”

”

Then something occurred to her.

“But… you’re leaving today too.” She looked at Damien. “Wouldn’t it be better to do it after we get back?”

Damien studied her for a moment.

“Maya…” A faint smile tugged at his lips. “Is this your way of declining again?”

She quickly shook her head.

“No. I just don’t want your plans today getting sidetracked.” She smiled reassuringly. “I promise… we’ll go get them when we come back.”

After holding her gaze for a brief moment, Damien finally nodded, a gentle smile crossing his face. “All right. We’ll do it together.”

A faint smile spread across Dahlia’s face as she watched the exchange between them.

“Great! Now that’s settled.”

She gave Maya’s hand one last gentle squeeze before letting it go.

“Now,” she said, turning toward the staircase, “we’d better get going while it’s still dark.”

With that, Dahlia started toward the staircase.

Damien and Maya fell into step behind her.

At last, the explanation she had given had put both their minds at ease.

Γ

What had weighed so heavily on her the night before hadn’t been anything they needed to worry about- it was simply the heartache of missing her best friend on a day she had wished they could have shared

together.

Before they reached the bottom of the staircase, Dominic and Charles’s familiar bickering drifted up from

the foyer.

“Come on, Dad,” Dominic said. “When was the last time you even used yours? I’m pretty sure the place that gave it to you doesn’t even exist anymore.”

Charles looked thoroughly offended.

“You little rascal! Just because I don’t use it all the time doesn’t mean it doesn’t work.”

Domini laughed.

That’s exactly what worries me.”

Charles huffed.

t

“Mine works perfectly fine. In fact, I’m willing to bet it’s much better than whatever you’re carrying around”

Dominic raised a brow.

“Dad, are you seriously trying to compete with me?”

Charles folded his arms across his chest.

“Why shouldn’t I? I offered which means it was my idea,”

Dominic smiled witho

“Just because you

While the two

expression of

Neither of

better

Jus

beat.

$

esn’t mean you thought of it first. I’ve been planning this for days.”

e sat comfortably on the sofa between them, wearing the patient ad long since accepted that neither man intended to back down.

ling to concede the smallest point, each insisting that his own opinion was the ened with quiet amusement.

ed out of the dining room with Alfred following close behind. Two members of the them, each carrying insulated food containers and neatly packed travel bags.

“Eleanor reminded them. “The soup is in the larger containers, and the smaller ones e sure everything is loaded into the vehicles before anyone leaves.”

staff replied in unison.

Damien, and Maya reached the bottom of the staircase, Dahlia looked between Dominic th an amused smile.

th is going on here?”

nd of her voice, everyone turned toward the staircase.

Chapter 537

The moment Dahlia spoke, the father and son’s argument came to an abrupt halt. Both men fell suspiciously silent, and neither seemed particularly eager to explain.

Dahlia slowly raised an eyebrow before turning her attention to her husband.

“Dominic,” she said evenly. “Care to explain?”

“Ahem…” Dominic cleared his throat.

“Sweetheart, we… uhm…”

The words died in his throat. For some reason, he suddenly found the floor far more interesting than meeting his wife’s eyes.

When no explanation came, Dahlia simply folded her arms and raised her other eyebrow.

“Well?” she asked. “Where did all that confidence from a moment ago go?”

Dominic awkwardly cleared his throat again, but the words simply refused to come. Instead, he continued staring at the floor, still unable to meet his wife’s eyes.

Dahlia looked at him for another moment before quietly turning to Eleanor.

The two women exchanged a knowing look.

Without another word, Eleanor stepped forward and shifted her attention to the Blackwood patriarch.

“And how about you, old man?” she asked, folding her arms. “What are you arguing with your son about

this time?”

Charles looked thoroughly offended, puffing out his chest in protest.

“Who are you calling old man?”

Eleanor answered with nothing more than a sharp look and a raised eyebrow.

r

Charles opened his mouth as though to argue, thought better of it, and quietly looked away.

"…Never mind."

Eleanor let out a long, exasperated sigh.

"Honestly, aren't the two of you embarrassed? It's barely morning, and you're already arguing again. Right in front of Jaime, no less."

She looked from father to son and shook her head.

"You're both worse than a pair of five-year-olds. I could hear you bickering all the way from the kitchen." She folded her arms. "Now what is it this time?"

When neither man answered, she raised an eyebrow.

M

Chapter

Neither father nor son uttered a single word. Only moments ago, they had been arguing loud enough for the whole house to hear. Now they looked like two boys who had just been caught causing trouble. Unable to get an answer from either of them, Maya turned her attention to the only other person sitting between them.

“Jaime…”

Jaime looked up innocently.

“Huh?”

Maya smiled knowingly.

“How about you tell us what’s going on?”

His eyes widened.

“Why me?”

Maya’s smile only grew.

“One…”

Jaime pouted, stubbornly trying to hold his ground.

"…Two…"

Before she could count any further, he let out a long, defeated sigh.

"All right, all right," he surrendered, looking around at everyone.

He rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly.

"Well… Grandpa Charles and Uncle Dominic both wanted to give me their credit cards so I'd have spending

money."

He quickly looked at Maya, as though afraid she'd misunderstand.

"But, May, I swear, I told them I didn't need one."

His eyes shifted back to the two men beside him, and he gave a helpless shrug.

“Then somehow… they started arguing over whose card was better and which one I should take.”

Dominic and Charles exchanged awkward looks. Hearing the situation explained out loud somehow made

it sound even pettier than it had moments ago.

Neither of them could bring themselves to argue with Jaime’s version of events.

Damien was the first to break the silence.

“Is that all?”

Everyone looked at him.

If that’s the case, then you should take mine.”

As though it were the most obvious solution in the world, Damien reached into his pocket and pulled out

his wallet.

He had just started sliding out the same black card he had handed Maya earlier when he caught sight of

her.

She was looking at him with one eyebrow quietly raised.

Damien immediately paused.

After a brief moment, he slowly slid the card back into his wallet, cleared his throat, and tucked it into his

pocket.

"…You're right," he said with practiced composure. "You don't need it."

Dominic couldn't help smirking.

Charles wore a similarly satisfied smile, while Eleanor and Dahlia exchanged amused looks, both pleased to see that Maya hadn't needed to say a single word for Damien to get the message.

Before anyone could say another word, Lee and Kim walked in.

"Excuse us," they said in unison, bowing politely.

Lee turned to Damien.

"Sir, everything is ready. Security is in position, and there has been no unusual activity at the front gate. As planned, we'll be departing through the rear entrance to avoid drawing attention."

Kim looked toward Dahlia.

"Madam, everything has been loaded into the vehicles except for Ms. Maya's luggage. We're ready whenever you are."

With everything finally settled, everyone exchanged their goodbyes, offering Jaime words of encouragement for his upcoming surgery and wishing them all a safe trip.

Eleanor, of course, couldn't let them leave without one last reminder.

r

“Make sure to have something to eat,” she fussed. “I packed enough food for the trip, so don’t even think about skipping breakfast.”

Dahlia laughed softly.

“Don’t worry. We will.”

Satisfied, Eleanor finally waved them toward the door.

As they stepped outside, the quiet morning was suddenly interrupted by the sound of a phone ringing.

Maya barely reacted. Having gotten a new phone only a few hours earlier, she didn’t immediately realize it

was hers.

Damien, however, felt the vibration coming from Maya’s purse, which rested on top of the suitcase he was pulling behind him.

He unzipped the purse, retrieved the phone, and glanced at the screen.

“Love,” he said, handing it to her. “Harper’s calling.”

Before Maya could take it, Jaime’s eyes landed on the unfamiliar phone in Damien’s hand.

He blinked.

Then his eyes widened.

“Wait…” he blurted out. “Why did you get a new phone?!”

The moment the words left his mouth, everyone’s attention shifted to him.

Maya looked at him in confusion.

“Jaime… what’s wrong? Is there a problem?”

Only then did Jaime realize he had reacted a little too quickly.

His heart sank as panic surged through him. All the effort he had put into it had just gone to waste.

The night before, he had secretly installed something on Maya's old phone. He had spent so much time making sure she wouldn't notice, convinced everything was finally in place.

Now she had an entirely different phone, and everything he had done had been for nothing.

Of course, he couldn't possibly admit that out loud. If he did, he would only get himself into even deeper

trouble.

Forcing himself to stay calm, he pushed the panic aside.

He would just have to find another opportunity to do it.

Jaime quickly forced a smile.

"Nothing," he said, waving a hand dismissively. "It just caught me off guard."

No one seemed suspicious.

At least… he hoped not.

Inside, however, he silently prayed Maya would let it go.

Chapter 538

Jaime silently repeated those words to himself, hoping they would somehow come true.

Please… just let it go.

For a brief moment, no one said a word

Maya studied her younger brother, a faint crease forming between her brows. His reaction had been unusually strong, but knowing Jaime, she couldn't imagine him being upset over something as trivial as a new phone.

Damien was the first to break the silence.

"I'll buy you a new one too."

Jaime's eyes widened.

"Ahaha… no, no! There's no need for that."

He waved both hands frantically before a thought suddenly came to him.

"I mean…" he said with an awkward laugh. "I've been telling May for the longest time that it was time to replace her phone, but she's just too frugal. She kept insisting the old one still worked, so there was no

reason to buy a new one."

He pointed at Maya before flashing Damien a thumbs-up.

"That's why I was so surprised she finally agreed." He grinned sheepishly. "Good job, Brother-in-law."

A few amused smiles appeared around them.

Maya looked at Jaime for another moment before the faint crease between her brows slowly disappeared.

When she thought about it, his explanation did make sense.

He had, in fact, been telling her to replace it for quite some time. Even Harper had been urging her to get a new phone, but Maya had always insisted there was no need. As far as she was concerned, as long as the old one still worked and did everything she needed, there was no reason to spend money on a

replacement.

“All right…” she said, letting out a quiet breath. “Your adrenaline must still be all over the place. You’re acting a little strange.”

Jaime nodded a little too quickly.

“Yes! That’s exactly it!” he said with an awkward laugh. “I’m just… really excited. Sorry.”

Only then did the tension in his shoulders finally begin to ease.

Before anyone could dwell on it any further, Harper’s name flashed across the screen once again as the phone continued to ring, drawing everyone’s attention back to the call.

Damien rested a gentle hand against Maya’s lower back before reaching for her suitcase.

“Go ahead and answer it,” he said. “I’ll load your luggage first.”

Maya nodded with a grateful smile.

“Okay.”

“We’ll be in the vehicle,” Dahlia said, motioning for Jaime to come with her.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” Maya replied. “This won’t take long.”

While Maya stepped aside, the rest of the family exchanged one last round of goodbyes.

Before heading toward the waiting vehicles, Dominic wrapped his wife in a quick hug before turning to Jaime and pulling him into another embrace.

“We’ll see you after your surgery,” he said with a warm smile.

Jaime returned the hug with a grin.

“Thank you, Uncle Dominic.”

Charles stepped forward next, pulling Jaime into a firm embrace before giving his shoulder a reassuring

pat.

“Don’t think getting surgery gets you out of our chess matches,” he said with a chuckle. “You still owe me a

rematch.”

Jaime laughed.

“You’d better be ready, Grandpa.”

Eleanor hugged him as well, instinctively smoothing the front of his shirt the moment she pulled away.

“Take good care of yourself,” she said gently. “Listen to your doctors, and don’t give your sister anything else to worry about.”

Jaime chuckled.

“I promise, Grandma.”

Satisfied, they finally made their way toward the waiting vehicles.

Maya felt a warmth spread through her chest as she watched them.

Γ

In just a matter of weeks, the Blackwoods had embraced both her and Jaime as though they had always been part of the family. The genuine love and concern they showed him brought an unexpected sting to

her eyes.

Not wanting to interrupt the moment, she quietly walked a short distance away before accepting the video

call.

Harper’s bright, beaming face instantly filled the screen.

Tiga Dobr

“Heyyyyy bestie!” she greeted excitedly, waving enthusiastically at the camera. “All set for the trip? Are you

un your way already?”

Maya couldn’t help smiling.

“We’re just about to leave.”

“That’s great!” Harper practically bounced with excitement. “Mom just called. She’s on her way there too, and everything’s all set on this end. You guys just enjoy the flight!”

A bright grin spread across her face.

“I’m soooo excited!”

Maya laughed softly, but her smile gradually faded as something on the screen caught her attention.

Harper didn't appear to be at home.

She seemed to be standing in the middle of a vast, open concrete lot. Behind her stood the dark outline of what looked like an old, abandoned warehouse, its weathered exterior illuminated by only a handful of floodlights. Beyond that, the rest of the compound disappeared into the darkness of the night.

More than the unfamiliar location, however, it was what Harper was wearing that caught Maya completely

off guard.

Visible from the waist up, Harper was dressed in a sleek black tactical suit that fit her like a second skin. The matte black material hugged her frame, while the clean, streamlined design gave her a sharp, professional appearance. Her plum-colored hair was neatly tied into a high ponytail, making her look nothing like her usual bubbly, carefree self.

Maya blinked.

"**…**Harper?"

Harper tilted her head.

“Hmm? What?”

Γ

Just then, Damien returned after loading Maya’s suitcase into the vehicle. As he stepped beside Maya, his gaze naturally fell on the screen, and he immediately took in Harper’s surroundings.

Maya frowned.

“Where are you? And… what are you wearing?”

Harper glanced around before looking down at herself.

“Oh, this?”

She lowered the phone slightly, giving Maya a better look at the sleek black tactical suit she was wearing before flashing a proud grin.

“Not bad, huh? Admit it-I’m giving off serious Black Widow vibes. I kind of feel like one too.”

Before Maya could say another word, a man's voice called out from somewhere behind Harper.

"Bosu-san, seiatsu kanryö. Futari wa kuruma ni nosemashita" (Boss, all clear. The two we caught have

been loaded into the vehicle.)

Harper gave a small nod.

"Yoshi. Ikō." (Good. Let's go.)

She turned back to the screen as though nothing unusual had happened.

"Just collecting a debt."

Maya looked at her blankly.

"…Collecting a debt?"

Standing beside her, Damien had already pieced together what was happening. Given the nature of his

own world, the scene unfolding behind Harper was all too familiar.

Harper smiled.

“Remember when our men were poisoned?”

Maya nodded

“Well… we found the people responsible.”

Her smile remained, but there was a dangerous edge to it now.

“So…” she said. “It’s time for them to pay up.”

Only then did Maya put two and two together. Her eyes widened as she stared at the screen.

Somehow, she had a feeling that whoever Harper was collecting that debt from was in for the worst night of their lives.

Chapter 539

Harper slipped her phone into her pocket as the call ended.

The playful smile she had worn while talking to Maya disappeared almost instantly.

In its place was the calm, composed expression of someone completely focused on the task at hand.

She turned toward the waiting convoy.

Several black SUVs and a single black transport truck sat beneath the floodlights with their engines idling quietly.

Around them stood more than a dozen members of the Takahashi Special Assault Unit. Dressed in matching matte–black tactical uniforms with lightweight body armor, utility belts, gloves, combat boots, and black balaclavas concealing all but their eyes, they waited in disciplined silence for their boss's next command.

Nearby, another team of operatives was already clearing the scene. Several bodies had been laid together in one area while others methodically loaded them into a separate transport vehicle, leaving no trace of

what had taken place.

The only sounds filling the abandoned industrial compound were the distant hum of the engines, the occasional scrape of boots against cracked concrete, and the muted clank of equipment as the cleanup

continued.

Harper's gaze settled on the black transport truck.

Unlike the SUVs surrounding it, the truck had no windows along its cargo compartment. It had been specially outfitted for prisoner transport.

Without another word, she walked toward it.

The assault team immediately parted, clearing a path for their boss.

One of the operatives stepped forward and swung open the truck's heavy rear doors

Inside stood the two men responsible for poisoning her people.

Yuma and Riku Shibata.

The Shibata brothers had been foolish enough to believe the Takahashi Family stood in the way of their expanding criminal empire. Convinced they could eliminate their rivals, they had orchestrated the poisoning as the opening move of their plan.

Their wrists were secured overhead to reinforced anchor points beneath the steel roof, while heavy restraints around their ankles prevented them from taking more than a single step in any direction. Fresh bruises covered their faces, and parts of their clothing were stained with blood.

The moment they saw Harper, both men froze in disbelief.

pfer

Chapter

They had expected an older crime boss of a seasoned underworld veteran.

Instead, standing before them was a petite young woman wire looked as though she had barely graduated from college.

Shock quickly gave way to fury.

nter

“Kono ama!” Yuma snarled, violently struggling against his restraints. “Aite ga dare da ka wakatte’n no

ka?!” (You bitch! Do you have any idea who you’re messing with?!)

“Omae wa owari da!” Riku shouted. “Shibata–gumi ga kono mama de yurusu wake ga nai!” (You’re

finished! The Shibata Syndicate will never let this go!)

Harper’s face immediately brightened.

“Oh!” she greeted cheerfully, giving them a friendly wave.

“Hello there.”

Her pleasant greeting only infuriated them further.

The two brothers hurled one threat after another, throwing themselves against their restraints as though they could somehow reach her.

Harper quietly watched them for several seconds before letting out a soft laugh.

“My…” she said with an amused smile. “You’re both still full of energy.”

Before either of them could move any farther, Harper calmly reached to her side and drew something from her belt. With an almost lazy flick of her wrist, two dark shapes flashed through the air.

Thunk. Thunk.

The pair immediately froze as they felt the cold steel lodged in the restraints beside their shoulders.

Harper smiled pleasantly.

“I’d stay still if I were you,” she said. “The next throw won’t be nearly as forgiving.”

The color drained from both men's faces.

"Omae… dare da?!" Yuma demanded. "Ore–tachi ni nani no yo da?! Ore–tachi ga nani ka shita no ka?!" (W ho are you?! What do you want from us?! Did we do something to offend you?!)

Riku quickly cut in.

"Kané nara harau!" he shouted desperately. "Ikura hoshii?! Iwareba haratte yaru!" (If it's money, we'll pay! How much do you want?! Name your price and we'll pay you!)

Harper burst into laughter.

The bright, carefree sound echoed throughout the truck, leaving the two brothers staring at her in bewilderment.

For a brief moment, they could only exchange confused looks.

Then realization set in.

"Omae… atama okashii!" Yuna shouted. "Kono kichigal onna!" (You crazy bitch!)

“Kichigai da!” Riku yelled, his voice rising with panic. (She’s crazy!)

Harper’s laughter gradually subsided, but the smile never left her face.

At the same time, the warmth in her eyes vanished, replaced by a calm, unreadable gaze that sent an inexplicable chill through both men.

Their shouting slowly faded into uneasy silence.

Neither brother understood why, but every instinct screamed the same warning.

The petite young woman standing before them was by far the most dangerous person in the entire compound.

Harper smiled pleasantly.

“Oh, where are my manners?” she said. “I haven’t even introduced myself.”

She placed a hand lightly against her chest.

“My name is Harper…”

She paused just long enough for the silence to settle.

When she spoke again, her smile remained, but there was an unmistakable edge in her eyes.

“Harper Takahashi.”

The moment the surname left her lips, the blood drained from both brothers‘ faces.

Their eyes widened in disbelief.

“T–Takahashi…?”

The arrogance that had filled their voices moments earlier vanished completely.

At last, they understood exactly who they had provoked.

One of the operatives stepped beside Harper and presented her with a small black pouch.

Harper accepted the pouch and unzipped it, taking her time as she slowly opened it.

Both brothers followed her every movement, their eyes fixed on its contents.

The moment they caught sight of what was inside, panic immediately spread across their faces.

Nestled neatly inside were two sterile syringes, their glass chambers filled with an opaque, dark purple

liquid.

“What are you doing? Yuma demanded.

What is that?” Riku asked, his voice betraying a hint of panic.

Harper didn’t answer right away. She simply closed the pouch again and looked at them with the same pleasant smile.

“I’ve always believed actions have consequences,” she said lightly. “And every choice comes with a price”

The brothers exchanged uneasy glances and swallowed hard.

She tilted her head slightly. “You poisoned my people, so I thought it was only fair to return the favor.”

The two captives immediately began struggling again, their chains rattling against the floor as panic took

over.

Harper let out a soft sigh, looking mildly disappointed.

“Honestly… I was hoping we’d have a more civilized conversation.”

She shifted her gaze toward the members of her assault team waiting silently nearby.

“Osaete.” (Hold them.)

“Hai, Bosu–san.” (Yes, Boss.)

Two operatives immediately stepped forward and firmly restrained the two brothers, preventing them from struggling any further.

Harper murmured, “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo..” Her finger drifted between them before it finally stopped, pointing directly at the eldest brother, Yuma.

Harper smiled.

“Looks like you’re first.”

Chapter 540

Yuma’s face instantly tumed deathly pale.

For the first time in his life, he was truly afraid.

He had long since lost count of how many lives he had taken, how many people he had crussed, and how many deaths he had ordered without a second thought. Violence had always been a means to an end, and he had never once believed the same fate could come for him.

But this…

This was different.

The Takahashi Family is one of the Five Great Families. In the underworld, everyone knows the same

unwritten rule–you never provoke any of them unless you're prepared to face the consequences.

Then the rumors had begun.

The Takahashi heir had supposedly refused to inherit the throne, fled Japan, and disappeared without a trace. With the current Oyabun growing old and no successor stepping forward, many believed the

Takahashi Family was no longer the powerhouse it once had been.

That was exactly what had given the Shibata brothers the confidence to make their move.

If they could bring down one of the Five Great Families, they wouldn't simply eliminate a rival–they would rise in status themselves, earning the recognition and influence that came with defeating a dominant

power.

But the young woman standing before him…

Every instinct screamed that something was terribly wrong.

Her shuriken throw had been impossibly fast and frighteningly precise–even he couldn't have pulled off a

throw like that himself.

More importantly, hardened elite operatives–men twice her size–addressed her as "Bosu–san" and carried out her every command without question.

Then her earlier words echoed in his mind.

"You poisoned my people."

His pupils contracted.

Her people…

Those weren't the words of someone merely carrying out orders.

Could she be…

The missing Takahashi heir?

Harper stepped closer, her expression as bright as ever. She held the syringe up for a brief moment, giving it a light tap before expelling a tiny bead of the dark purple liquid from the tip.

She looked at Yuma and smiled.

"Ready?"

The color drained from Yuma's face.

"M–Matte!" Yuma blurted out. "Tanomu! Hanashi ae! Gojū pāsento da! So da! Ore–tachi no shūeki no gojū pāsento wa Takahashi–ke ni watasu! Shibata–gumi wa Takahashi–ke ni shitagau! Dakara… dakara tasukete kure!" (W–Wait! Please! We can talk this over! Fifty percent! Yes–fifty percent of everything we earn will go to the Takahashi Family! The Shibata Family will work under the Takahashi Family! So… please let us go!)

Harper burst into laughter.

“Cute,” she said, pretending to wipe away an imaginary tear. “Watashi–tachi ga okane ni komatte iru to demo omotta no?” (Do you really believe we’re short on money?)

Her laughter gradually faded, though the smile remained.

She stepped closer until only a breath separated them. The warmth vanished from her eyes, replaced by something so cold that Yuma instinctively held his breath.

Leaning in just enough for him to hear every word, she spoke softly, her voice carrying through the truck.

“Nande anata–tachi no yogoreta okane no hanbun de manzoku shinakya ikenai no? Mondai no moto o keseba ii dake no hanashi desho?” (Why would I settle for half of your dirty money when I can erase the problem at its source?)

She leaned back just enough for their eyes to meet, her bright smile returning.

“Besides…” she said almost sweetly, “keeping an enemy alive is bad juju.”

Without a single hesitation, she stabbed his leg with the syringe.

Yuma froze, the shock taking a second to sink in before the reality of what happened hit him. He instantly started thrashing and yelling, but the man behind him held him down.

“That’s the same poison you used to try to kill my men,” Harper said. “But yours is weak and cheap, so I made some upgrades. I’m just giving you a literal dose of your own medicine.”

Harper held his gaze for another moment before giving a small, satisfied nod. Then she turned her

attention to Riku.

“Now,” she said brightly, “where were we?”

She smiled–a cheerful, bright smile that was much more terrifying than her earlier expression.

Riku’s face instantly paled as Harper approached him. She took out the second syringe and looked at him

with that same bright expression.

This might sting a little,” she said, and without missing a beat, she drove the needle deep into his thigh.

Riku immediately began thrashing as well, cursing and shouting as the fluid entered his system, but Harper just calmly set the empty syringe away. She lightly patted her hands together to dust them off, completely

unbothered.

“Don’t worry, you won’t die… yet!”

She placed a finger on her chin, tilting her head as if genuinely trying to solve a fun little puzzle.

“Mmmm… I’d say… twenty hours tops. But… it all depends on how your body can keep up. If you’re weak… maybe ten to twelve.”

Suddenly, she clapped her hands together like an excited little girl, her eyes lighting up

“I can always give you a little dose of antidote here and there to keep you alive!”

Almost immediately, the brothers felt the toxin spreading through their veins, their strength draining with

every passing second.

Harper smiled sweetly as her gaze drifted over the two brothers.

“Catching a rat in its hole is surprisingly easy.”

With that, she clasped her hands behind her back and turned to the two operatives.

“Chop, chop! We have less than twenty–four hours,” she said with her usual sunny smile. “I have guests arriving soon, and I still want to play.”

“Hai, Bosu–san.” (Yes, Boss.)

The two operatives let go, and the brothers immediately went limp–looking like complete dead weight, hanging like wet paper against their restraints.

Satisfied, Harper turned on her heel and walked toward the waiting SUV, leaving the brothers in uneasy

r silence.

The two prisoners could only watch in growing fear as the van doors slowly slid shut.