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Chapter 551

Silence settled over the cabin once more as Maya quietly reflected on their words.

Then, unable to bear the heavy atmosphere any longer, Jaime was the first to break the silence.

A small grin spread across his face as he looked at Maya.

“That’s right, May. Just like I promised you, once I get better, I’ll be the one protecting you too. I’ll work

hard, become successful, and make lots of money. Then no one will ever be able to push us around again.”

His determined expression was so earnest that it melted the lingering heaviness in the cabin.

A chorus of warm laughter followed.

Maya smiled, reached over, and affectionately ruffled his hair.

“Okay, Super Jaime. I get it.” She chuckled. “You’ll be my knight in shining armor.”

Jaime immediately shook his head.

“Umm… nope.” He pointed toward the screen where they had watched the press conference moments earlier. “That’s Damien’s job.”

He tapped a finger against his chin, pretending to think.

“I’ll be your…”

His face suddenly brightened.

“Your personal bodyguard!”

Lee immediately raised a hand.

“Hold that thought. That’s already my job.”

Another round of laughter echoed through the cabin.

Jaime laughed along before snapping his fingers.

“Oh, I know!” He pointed proudly at himself. “I’ll be your secret weapon!”

Maya raised an eyebrow as if to say, Really?

Then she smiled, reached over, and gently pinched his cheek.

“Hmm… I like that. And i’ll hold you to it too.”

The cabin erupted in laughter once again.

Then, as though a completely unrelated thought had hijacked his brain, Jaime’s eyes lit up with unmistakable excitement.

“Oh! Speaking of Japan…” He turned eagerly toward Alice. “Aunt Alice, how far is the Ghibli Museum from

Alice couldn’t help smiling.

“Not very far,” she replied. “Once you’ve recovered, I’ll make sure Kenji takes you anywhere you’d like to go.

“Really?” Jaime’s eyes sparkled. “Awesome! I’ve always wanted to see it in person!”

Watching his excitement, Dahlia smiled warmly

“That reminds me,” she said. “Since you’ll only be staying in Japan for a short while, there’s someone I’d like both of you to meet.”

She looked at Maya and Jaime before continuing.

“A very dear friend of mine will be in Tokyo during our stay. We haven’t seen each other in quite some time, so I thought it would be the perfect opportunity to catch up.”

Alice blinked in surprise.

A dear friend?

She had known Dahlia for decades, yet she couldn’t recall anyone important enough for Dahlia to go out of her way to introduce to Maya and Jaime.

Although curious, she kept her thoughts to herself.

“Of course,” Maya replied with a smile. “We’d love to meet her.”

Dahlia nodded, her smile carrying a warmth that none of them noticed.

Before anyone could say another word, the captain’s calm voice came over the cabin speakers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve just passed Alaska and are now beginning our crossing of the North Pacific. Our estimated time to arrival in Tokyo is approximately eight hours. We hope you enjoy the rest of your flight.”

The announcement naturally shifted everyone’s attention toward the windows.

Outside, the vast expanse of the North Pacific stretched endlessly beneath them, carrying them toward a country that would change more than one life.

As conversations gradually resumed throughout the cabin, Alice quietly rose from her seat.

“Dahlia,” she said with an easy smile. “Would you come with me for a moment? There’s something I’d like to show you.”

“Certainly.”

The two women made their way toward the aircraft's private lounge at the rear of the cabin. Once the sliding door closed behind them, Alice turned to her with a small smile.

"All right…" she said. "Now tell me."

Dear Friend

Dahlia blinked.

"Tell you what?"

Alice's smile faded into a more serious expression.

"Who is this mysterious friend you're suddenly so eager for Maya and Jaime to meet?"

Dahlia remained silent.

She turned away, her gaze drifting toward the window as she considered her answer. For a long moment, the only sound between them was the quiet hum of the aircraft.

She knew the decision she had made carried enormous risks. The fewer people who knew about it, the safer everyone would be. But Alice had been her closest friend for decades. if there was one person she could trust to understand… it was her.

Taking a slow breath, Dahlia finally turned back to face her.

“…It’s Cecilia.”

Alice frowned slightly.

“Cecilia?”

She searched her memory, repeating the name in her mind. Then, as realization suddenly struck, her eyes widened.

“…Cecilia Lockwood?”

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Dahlia gave a slow, soleran hod.

“I know it’s risky,” she admitted quietly. “But it’s the only way I can think of to prevent a much bigger problem later. At least this way, we have a little control over how the truth corros out. I have to do something to protect them.”

Alice fell silent, her expression filled with concern.

Deep down, she understood exactly what Dahlia meant.

Maya and Jaime’s identities would not remain hidden forever. It was only a matter of time before the Lockwoods discovered the truth. If that happened on someone else’s terms, the consequences could be far worse.

After a long moment, Alice reached across the space between them and gently took Dahlia’s hand.

“I understand,” she said softly. “And I want you to know that I support your decision.”

She gave Dahlia’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

“You can count on me… and on my family. Whatever happens, we’ll face it together.”

Dahlia’s eyes glistened with gratitude.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Alice smiled warmly and gave her hand one last reassuring squeeze.

What followed remained between the two of them.

Alice listened intently without judgment, offering her thoughts whenever appropriate. She also suggested several additional security measures and contingency plans to ensure Maya and Jaime’s safety should th unexpected happen.

By the time their conversation came to an end, the two old friends had carefully prepared for every scenario they could think of, each silently hoping none of those preparations would ever be needed.

Meanwhile, aboard the second aircraft, two hours quietly slipped away.

Time crawled through the cabin, each passing minute tightening the invisible countdown to the next phase of Harper’s operation.

Then, the clock finally reached its mark.

Exactly four hours had passed since the first attack was initiated.

Almost simultaneously, both men's phones vibrated.

Darnien and Ashcroft lowered their gazes to their phones as a new broadcast message appeared on the

screen.

Phase II initiated. SATCOM call inbound.

Stand by. Good luck. – K.T.

Neither marr reacted outwardly.

Damien locked his screen and slipped the phone back into his pocket. Ashcroft mirrored the motion, thei eyes meeting for only the briefest moment.

Another hour passed in relative silence until the aircraft's satellite phone finally rang.

One of the flight attendants answered the call, listening quietly for a few moments before replying, " Understood."

She ended the call and walked over to the seating area.

“Excuse me, sir. Operations requested that we switch on the live news immediately.”

Damien exchanged a brief glance with Ashcroft before turning his attention back to the attendant.

“Go ahead.”

The flight attendant gave a respectful bow before returning to the galley and switching on the cabin television. The screen flickered to life, immediately cutting to a live breaking news broadcast.

…Breaking news out of Singapore…”

…Ashcroft Pavilion, one of the nation’s leading private medical facilities, is experiencing a widespread system outage…”

“…Multiple critical hospital systems have gone offline, forcing disruptions across several departments…”

“…Hospital officials have not released a formal statement, and the cause of the outage remains under investigation…”

As the live broadcast ended, the flight attendant quietly switched off the television, leaving the cabin in silence.

Damien turned to Monroe.

“Monroe, inform the captain. We’ll reroute to Singapore.”

Monroe gave a curt nod. “Yes, Boss.”

He disappeared into the cockpit and returned several minutes later.

“The pilot requested a diversion, Air Traffic Control has approved the reroute. We’re now on course for Singapore.”

Damien acknowledged him with a single nod.

“Good.”

Monroe walked back to his seat. A few minutes after he settled in, a soft chime echoed throughout the cabin, followed by the captain’s composed voice over the speakers.

“Gentlemen, we’ve completed the reroute. We’re currently over northern Canada and have been cleared

“Based on our current fuel load, we won’t require any additional stops. Estimated flight time from our current position is approximately sixteen hours Weather conditions along our route are favorable, and w expect a smooth flight for the duration. I’ll keep you advised of any significant changes.”

The announcement ended, and the cabin settled into a quiet calm.

Sixteen hours was a long flight.

Everyone eased back into their seats, making themselves comfortable for the journey ahead. Ashcroft motioned to the flight attendant for another pour of whiskey, and Damien silently held out his glass as

well.

As the attendant refilled both glasses, Damien glanced at Nick.

“So… what did you tell your old man?”

Nick lifted his glass and drained the remaining whiskey before setting it down.

“The truth.” He gave a small shrug. “He knows I couldn’t care less about the Pavilion’s affairs, so he’d rather handle them himself.”

A quiet scoff escaped him.

“But you know how he is. I still had to tell him.”

“And he just agreed?” Damien asked.

Nick shook his head.

“Well… as long as no real operation is compromised and he’s not actually losing any money, he’s fine with

it.”

He let out a dry laugh.

“In fact, the old man sounded pleased. He thinks I’m finally ready to willingly take over the business.”

“You know you’ll have to eventually,” Damien said.

“Eventually,” Nick echoed with a faint smile. “But not yet. Besides… a lot can happen between now and then. Eventually… it might not even come to that.”

Damien studied him for a moment before taking a slow sip of his whiskey.

“Maybe it’s time you reconsider.”

Ashcroft simply shrugged.

“We’ll see.”

As both aircraft continued across the skies toward their respective destinations, events were already unfolding thousands of miles away on the opposite side of the world.

In Russia, news of the incident at Ashcroft Pavilion Singapore had already reached Volkov.

Standing before his desk, Igor delivered the latest intelligence. “Our sources confirmed that Blackwood’s aircraft requested a diversion to Singapore shortly after the news broke. It doesn’t appear to be a routine systems outage if Ashcroft deemed it necessary to be there it person.”

Volkov’s expression darkened as a familiar sense of unease settled over him.

He emptied the contents of his glass in a single gulp before hurling the crystal tumbler across the room. It smashed violently against the wall, scattering shards of glass across the floor.

“Suka!” (“Fuck!”) he snarled. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

He slammed both hands onto his desk, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath as he jabbed a finger toward Igor.

“I want all eyes on them. The ‘moment that aircraft lands in Singapore, I want to know who’s getting off it. I want every single movement tracked from the second they touchdown. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Boss.”

“And tell them to double the security around the area and at all our facilities.”

Igor gave a sharp nod before turning and leaving to carry out the orders.

Volkov turned toward the window, staring into the darkness beyond the glass. His jaw twitched with tension, his fists clenched at his sides.

“What the fuck is going on? This is too much to be a coincidence. Someone is behind all this, and I need to find out who.”

Chapter 553

The first hints of dawn had yet to break over Russia.

Volkov was still inside his office when another urgent report arrived.

This time, the news hit him harder than anything before it.

One of the Takahashi family’s facilities had suffered a highly publicized incident only hours after the outage at Ashcroft Pavilion Singapore.

Without warning, Volkov swept his arm across the desk. Documents, folders, pens, and a crystal paperweight crashed onto the floor, the glass shattering into countless pièces.

“First our shipment… then Blackwood, Ashcroft, and now the Takahashis?” His voice grew colder with every word. “Someone is clearly targeting the most powerful families.”

Volkov rose from his chair and began pacing the office.

“This isn’t a coincidence anymore. It’s planned.” His voice hardened. “Within twelve hours, the other thre families have all been hit… each attack exactly four hours apart. That’s no accident. Someone is orchestrating this.”

His gaze snapped toward Igor.

“Kto posmel?!” (Who would dare?!)

Igor waited for the outburst to pass before speaking carefully. “Boss… do you still suspect Blackwood is behind this?”

Volkov shook his head.

“No. If Blackwood wanted to come after me, he’d come after me. He wouldn’t cross that line with the others… especially Ashcroft.”

His expression darkened. “This is different. Something much bigger is happening.”

Igor hesitated before asking, “What’s the plan now, Boss?”

Volkov stopped pacing.

“The hell I care how they deal with their own problems. As for us… Keep watching Blackwood. Double our surveillance around every facility.”

He slowly clenched his fists. His eyes narrowed.

“Whoever is behind this won’t stop. They’ll make another move… and when they do, I intend to be ready. We need to set a trap!”

He resumed pacing before finally waving Igor away.

“Leave me. I need to think this through. But make sure to let me know everything that’s happening. Every single detail.”

Yes, Boss.”

Igor gave a respectful nod before quietly leaving the office.

Left alone, Volkov stared into the darkness beyond the window. For the first time in years, Viktor Volko had no idea who was really pulling the strings. And as events continued to unfold, an uneasy feeling settled deep within him.

Whoever was behind all of this wasn’t finished. Deep down, Volkov knew it was only a matter of time before they came for him again.

As dark thoughts and growing paranoia continued to consume Viktor Volkov thousands of miles away entirely different atmosphere prevailed aboard the first aircraft.

Soft morning light filtered through the cabin windows as the private jet cruised steadily across the Pac Inside, the once-quiet cabin gradually came to life as the flight attendants served an elegantly prepared breakfast, filling the cabin with the rich aroma of freshly brewed coffee and warm pastries.

The atmosphere was noticeably calmer than it had been hours earlier. With the longest stretch of the journey now behind them, conversation flowed more naturally as everyone settled into the unhurried rhythm of the flight.

A short while later, the captain's voice came over the cabin speakers.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I hope everyone had a restful flight. We've now entered Japanese airspace and remain on schedule, with approximately two hours remaining before our arrival in Tokyo. Weather conditions at our destination are excellent, and we're expecting a smooth arrival. Please enjoy the remainder of the flight."

As the announcement ended, several heads instinctively turned toward the windows, where an endless blanket of clouds stretched beneath the aircraft, glowing softly beneath the morning sun.

Jaime immediately leaned toward Maya, unable to contain his excitement.

"Did you hear that, May?" he said with a wide grin. "We're almost there!"

His enthusiasm was impossible to miss. Maya smiled, amused by how excited her little brother was. For all the hardships he'd endured growing up, moments like this reminded her that he was still just a fifteen-year-old experiencing so many firsts.

"Oh!" Jaime suddenly exclaimed. "You looked completely knocked out, so didn't wake you. But, May, you totally missed the sunrise!" His eyes lit up as he recalled it. "It was so awesome! The sun came up right over the clouds, and everything turned gold. Seriously… it was one of the coolest things I've ever seen."

Dahlia smiled at his excitement before turning to Maya.

"Did you sleep well, sweetheart?"

Jaime grinned.

"Oh, she did, Aunt Dahlia! Her and Damien were pretty busy last night, so-"

Before he could finish, Maya lunged forward and clamped a hand firmly over his mouth.

"Mmff!"

"Jaime!" she hissed, her face instantly flushing a deep crimson.

Her little brother merely blinked innocently over her hand, completely oblivious to why she was so

mortified.

Dahlia couldn’t help but laugh softly, the corners of her lips lifting in amusement.

After a moment, Maya slowly withdrew her hand, still refusing to meet anyone’s eyes.

“I actually did,” she admitted shyly, hoping to steer the conversation elsewhere.

Truthfully, she had been completely exhausted.

After everything that had happened the previous night-the emotional whirlwind, the adrenaline, and the timate hours she’d shared with Damien-her body had finally surrendered.

The moment the aircraft reached cruising altitude, the fatigue caught up with her, and she’d slept throug most of the flight without waking once.

Dahlia waited until Maya had regained her composure before speaking.

“By the way, Damien called earlier.”

Maya’s head immediately snapped up.

“He did?”

Dahlia nodded. “He wanted to speak with you, but you were sleeping so soundly that he specifically told not to wake you.”

A warmth spread across Maya’s chest. Even from thousands of miles away, he was still thinking about he

“He said everything went smoothly on their end,” Dahlia continued. “The first twelve-hour phase has been completed. Every incident was initiated according to schedule.”

Maya quietly released the breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding.

Thank goodness…

“They’re now en route to Singapore,” Dahlia added. “Given the distance, they still have about thirteen hours before they land.”

Maya nodded slowly, relief softening her features. She trusted Harper's strategy completely, and she trusted Damien just as much. Even so, knowing he was safe and that everything was progressing according to plan lifted a tremendous weight from her heart.

"I just hope everyone stays safe," Maya murmured softly. "Until all of this is finally over."

Dahlia placed a comforting hand over hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Have faith, sweetheart," she said reassuringly. "Before long, this will all be behind us."

The next two hours passed in what felt like the blink of an eye.

Before long, the captain began the aircraft's descent into Tokyo.

Maya turned toward the window as the Takahashi family's private aviation complex gradually came into

view.

Spread across an enormous stretch of private land was a sprawling complex built around a massive aircraft hangar. The architecture immediately felt familiar, sharing the same steek, modern design as the aviation facility they had departed from. But everything here was on an entirely different scale.

The hangar alone appeared nearly three times the size, flanked by exparisive maintenance buildings, an operations center, and its own private runway stretching into the distance.

It wasn’t surprising.

After all, this was the Takahashi family’s main territory-the heart of their operations in Japan.

Chapter 554

As the plane touched down and rolled smoothly along the private runway toward the enormous han something unusual caught Maya’s attention.

Clusters of bright purple and pink balloons swayed gently near the hangar entrance, accompanied by colorful streamers that looked completely out of place against the sophisticated aviation complex.

“… What is all that?” she muttered.

Alice glanced out the window, rolled her eyes, and sighed under her breath.

She didn’t say a word.

She already knew exactly who was responsible for this.

The aircraft gradually slowed before coming to a gentle stop.

As the captain welcomed them to Tokyo over the cabin speakers, everyone unbuckled their seatbelts, gathered their belongings, and made their way toward the cabin door.

The moment the cabin door opened, they were greeted by a cheerful female voice blaring through a megaphone.

“WELCOME TO TOKYO, JAPAN!!!”

Waiting at the bottom stood a perfectly straight line of large, powerfully built men dressed entirely in black. Their expressions were stern, their posture impeccable, and every one of them radiated the quiet confidence of highly trained professionals.

Yet despite their intimidating appearance, every one of them was holding either a pink or purple balloon

Several held colorful streamers, while others stretched out a large banner that read:

WELCOME!

Standing proudly at the very front was a petite young woman with a bright smile that seemed incapable fading.

A bright, excited smile spread across Harper's face as she bounced lightly on the balls of her feet.

She looks different.

Her once wavy hair had been straightened into silky locks, though it remained dyed a soft plum color and tied into two playful pigtails that bounced with every excited movement.

Dressed for Tokyo's late August heat, she wore a pair of white sneakers, light denim shorts, a simple white spaghetti-strap top, and a lightweight unbuttoned shirt that fluttered gently in the warm breeze. It was a stark contrast to the colorful outfits she had been so fond of back in New York.

The casual outfit made her look relaxed and effortlessly chic, striking a perfect balance between youthful charm and quiet maturity.

Beside her stood a young man in his early twenties, noticeably taller than Harper.

He wore a pair of white sneakers, light blue jeans, and a plain white T-shirt that perfectly suited th summer weather.

His neatly styled dark hair framed a strikingly handsome yet youthful face, while his calm, compos expression stood in stark contrast to Harper's boundless excitement.

Despite their different personalities, the resemblance between the siblings was unmistakable.

Lee and Kim were the first to step off the aircraft, followed closely by Jaime's medical team.

Alice emerged next, with Dahlia just behind her.

The moment Alice stepped onto the tarmac, the rows of Takahashi security personnel straightened further before bowing in unison.

"Okaerinasaimase, Okusama."

("Welcome home, Madam.")

Alice acknowledged them with a graceful nod.

As Dahlia stepped down beside her, the guards bowed once more.

"Welcome, Madam Blackwood."

Dahlia smiled warmly and inclined her head in acknowledgment.

Behind them, Jaime and Maya were the last to emerge from the cabin.

The moment they stepped onto the tarmac, Harper rushed forward with Kenji beside her.

“Mom!”

The siblings greeted Alice first, each giving her a hug and a kiss on the cheek before doing the same w Dahlia.

A few warm pleasantries were exchanged before Alice finally looked past them, taking in the rows of security personnel still standing at attention with balloons and streamers in hand. The sight earned a sl amused raise of her eyebrow.

“How come I never receive this kind of welcome every time I come home?”

Harper gasped dramatically.

“Oh, Mother! Don’t tell me you’re jealous.” Harper grinned mischievously.

“You know I’m not here every time you come home. Besides…” She glanced at her brother with exaggerated doubt. “Do you really think Dad and Kenji could pull off something this cute?”

“…It’s embarrassing,” Kenji muttered under his breath.

Harper’s head snapped toward him.

“I heard that.”

Smack!

She gave the back of his head a light swat.

“Ow!” Kenji rubbed the back of his head before looking at Alice. “Mom! Look at her! She’s so violent!”

Harper raised her hand again, ready to smack him a second time.

“Harper.”

Alice’s calm voice stopped her mid-motion.

“Stop hitting your brother.”

Harper pouted but lowered her hand.

As Alice and Dahlia continued walking toward the building, Kenji smirked triumphantly over his should

Harper rolled her eyes at him, but the moment she spotted Maya, her expression instantly brightened.

“MAYAAA!!”

Before Maya could even react, Harper let out an excited squeal, sprinted over, and threw her arms tight around her.

“I missed you so much!”

Maya laughed as she hugged her back just as tightly.

“I missed you too.”

After finally letting Maya go, Harper turned to Jaime with the same radiant smile.

“Hey, buddy! How come you look like you’ve grown so much?”

Jaime chuckled.

“Harper, you’re exaggerating. We literally just saw each other on a video call a few days ago.”

“I don’t care!”

She pulled him into a quick hug anyway, and Jaine laughed as he returned it

Once they separated, Kenji stepped forward and offered Maya a polite nod.

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Ms. Maya.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Maya replied with a warm smile. “And just Maya is fine.”

Kenji smiled and nodded.

“Welcome to Japan, Maya.”

“Oh, come on!” Harper groaned dramatically. “Don’t be so formal. She’s practically your big sister now. Give her a hug!”

Kenji hesitated for a brief moment before smiling awkwardly and stepping forward to give Maya a lig Tug

“There,” Harper declared with a satisfied nod. “Much better.”

Kenji then turned his attention to Jaime and extended his hand.

“It’s nice to finally meet you in person, Jaime.”

“Likewise.” Jaime returned the handshake with a grin.

“Would you like me to give you a tour of the facility?” Kenji asked.

Jaime’s eyes immediately lit up.

“Seriously? Yes! I’d love that!”

The two young men headed toward the building together, already engrossed in a discussion about the facility's cutting-edge technology and advanced engineering.

Meanwhile, Harper slipped her arm through Maya's and gently tugged her along.

"Come on, let's go inside. It's way too hot out here." She glanced toward the cargo crew unloading the aircraft. "They still have to unload Mom's antiques before we can leave anyway."

Then, leaning in closer, she lowered her voice to an excited whisper.

"I had a whole spread prepared for us in the lounge. We can eat, chat, and catch up while we wait."

The two women walked toward the entrance together but just before stepping inside, Harper suddenly came to a stop.

"Oh, wait!"

Maya halted beside her and watched curiously as Harper turned toward the long rows of security personnel, who were still standing perfectly at attention with balloons, streamers, and banners in hand,

Harper flashed them a bright smile and raised both thumbs in the air.

“Alright, you’re dismissed! Great job, everyone!”

As one, the guards bowed smartly.

“Arigatou gozaimasu, Bosu!”

(Thank you, Boss!)

Immediately, the stern-faced security guards relaxed. The perfectly rigid formation dissolved as several men exchanged relieved smiles, lowering their balloons and banners before dispersing to return to their duties.

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“Seriously? Yes! I’d love that!”

The two young men headed toward the building together, already engrossed in a discussion about the facility’s cutting-edge technology and advanced engineering.

Meanwhile, Harper slipped her arm through Maya’s and gently tugged her along.

“Come on, let’s go inside. It’s way too hot out here.” She glanced toward the cargo crew unloading the aircraft. “They still have to unload Mom’s antiques before we can leave anyway.”

Then, leaning in closer, she lowered her voice to an excited whisper.

“I had a whole spread prepared for us in the lounge. We can eat, chat, and catch up while we wait.”

The two women walked toward the entrance together, but just before stepping inside, Harper suddenly came to a stop.

“Oh, wait!”

Maya halted beside her and watched curiously as Harper turned toward the long rows of security personnel, who were still standing perfectly at attention with balloons, streamers, and banners in hand,

Harper flashed them a bright smile and raised both thumbs in the air.

“Alright, you’re dismissed! Great job, everyone!”

As one, the guards bowed smartly.

“Arigatou gozaimasu, Bosu!”

(Thank you, Boss!)

Immediately, the stern-faced security guards relaxed. The perfectly rigid formation dissolved as several men exchanged relieved smiles, lowering their balloons and banners before dispersing to return to their duties.

Chapter 556

Maya shook her head; unable to hold back a laugh.

Harper really was something else.

She naturally slipped her arm through Maya's once again as she led her toward the entrance of the complex.

"Harper, you do realize that whole welcome committee you organized was a little overboard, right? Maya said, unable to suppress another smile.

"And… they looked completely out of place."

"What are you talking about?" Harper replied innocently.

She leaned in and lowered her voice.

"Actually, I didn't even have much time to prepare. You know… A mischievous grin spread across her face. "I was a little busy last night, so I had to throw everything together at the last minute this morning."

Maya stared at her for a long moment.

“… That was you throwing something together at the last minute?”

“Yup!” Harper popped the P proudly before grinning from ear to ear. “Come on! Let’s eat. I’m starving?”

Maya could only shake her head as Harper happily tugged her inside.

The interior of the Takahashi Aviation Complex was every bit as impressive as its exterior

Towering floor-to-ceiling glass walls overlooked the expansive hangars, while polished stone floors, brushed steel accents, and state-of-the-art technology gave the building a refined, futuristic elegance. Impressive as the Takahashi family’s private aviation complex in New York had been, this headquarters in Tokyo was on an entirely different level.

Despite everything Maya had experienced since stepping into Damien’s world, she still found herself quietly impressed.

The wealthiest families truly lived in a world of their own.

Harper continued leading her through the sprawling complex. Every staff member they passed immediately paused what they were doing to bow respectfully before resuming their work.

Eventually, Harper stopped in front of a pair of elegant double doors.

She released Maya's arm and turned to face her, an excited grin instantly spreading across her face.

"You're going to love this."

"I personally picked everything on the menu so you could try authentic Japanese cuisine," she said proudly. "But don't get too excited. This is just a little welcome brunch."

She leaned in with a playful wink.

Tonight, we'll have the real feast at home.

Without another word, Harper turned back around, placed both hands on the handles, and pulled the double doors open with a flourish

The moment the doors swung open, a wave of cool, perfectly conditioned air washed over Maya. The rich aroma of freshly prepared cuisine instantly greeted her, and the sight before her brought her to an abrupt stop:

The private lounge looked less like a waiting area and more like the dining room of a world-class luxury hotel

An extravagant buffet stretched nearly the entire length of the room, overflowing with an astonishing variety of food.

Fresh sushi and sashimi rested beside beautifully prepared wagyurdishes, while elegant tiers displayed delicate pastries, macarons, fruit tarts, and cakes. Crystal pitchers of freshly squeezed juices sat alongside premium teas and handcrafted coffees. Bowls of seasonal fruit, imported cheeses, artisanal breads, and countless other delicacies filled every remaining space.

Uniformed attendants stood discreetly nearby, ready to assist at a moment's notice. Behind an expansive serving counter, a team of chefs dressed in crisp white uniforms and tall toques worked with practiced precision, preparing fresh dishes as the buffet was continuously replenished.

Harper clasped her hands together with an expectant smile.

"So?"

Maya slowly turned to look at her.

You said this was a little brunch." She glanced back at the buffet before looking at Harper again. "This looks like you're expecting to feed a hundred guests!"

Harper scratched her cheek sheepishly.

“…It looked smaller in my head.”

Maya couldn’t help laughing.

Harper’s definition of “little” was clearly very different from everyone else’s.

Beyond the lavish buffet, the spacious lounge had been arranged with several tables for the arriving guests and crew.

Alice and Dahlia had already settled at a table beside the floor-to-ceiling glass walls overlooking the expansive aviation complex.

Nearby, Jaime’s medical team shared another table, while Lee, Kim, the flight crew, and the pilots were already helping themselves to the lavish brunch.

Sunlight poured into the lounge, bathing the room in warm natural light. Yet despite the blazing late summer sun outside, the interior remained perfectly cool and comfortable

Maya couldn’t even feel the slightest hint of heat.

Just then, Jaime and Kenji walked into the lounge, their conversation still revolving around the facility

The moment Jaime looked up, his eyes widened

“Whoa..” he breathed. “This is so cool! You can see the entire complex from here!”

Kenji smiled.

“The glass is specially engineered,” he explained. “It’s bullet-resistant, shatter-resistant, and laminated with

a transparent thermal film that blocks out almost all of the outside heat.”

Jaime walked closer, instinctively reaching out to touch the glass.

“It doesn’t even feel warm.”

“That’s not even the best part,” Kenji said with a grin. “It’s also one way

Jaime’s eyes widened.

“…Seriously?”

Kenji nodded.

“From the outside, all anyone sees is a reflective surface. But from in here, you have a completely unobstructed view of everything happening across the complex.”

Jaime let out a low whistle as he looked back outside.

“That… is awesome.”

After admiring the lounge for another moment, the four of them finally made their way to the buffet, each filling a plate before looking for a place to sit.

Just as Kenji was about to pull out a chair beside them, Harper reached over and lightly grabbed his

sleeve.

“Nope. You and Jaime can sit over there.”

She pointed toward a nearby table.

Kenji looked at her, then at Maya, before letting out a resigned sigh.

“We haven’t seen each other in forever,” Harper said matter-of-factly. “We have a lot of catching up to do”

Without waiting for a response, she gave him a gentle shooing motion with both hands

“Go. Shoo.”

Chuckling to himself, Kenji simply picked up his plate and headed for the neighboring table with Jaime

Leaning in slightly, Jaime asked in an amused whisper,

“Does she always do that?”

Kenji nodded as though it were the most normal thing in the world.

“All the time.” He sighed dramatically “She’s a bolly”

Without even looking, Harper casually said,

I can hear you, moron”

Kenji didn’t even look offended. Instead, he flashed Harper a grin.

“Love you too, my amazing sister.”

Then he leaned toward Jaime with an exaggerated sigh.

“See what I have to put up with?”

Jaime couldn’t help but chuckle.

As Maya and Harper settled into their seats, Maya’s gaze drifted through the glass walls toward the private apron where their aircraft was still parked.

Outside, the enormous reinforced shipping containers were being unloaded from the aircraft with extraordinary care. Even with specialized transport equipment, each container required multiple handlers to guide its every movement, ensuring it remained perfectly stable as it was slowly transported toward the hangar.

“They’re treating those containers like they’re carrying crown jewels,” Maya remarked.

“In Mom’s eyes…” Harper replied with a laugh, “… they practically are.”

She lowered her voice conspiratorially.

“Our house has rooms that most people think are museums. In fact, Dad stopped asking how much they cost years ago.”

“What was that, Harper?”

Harper nearly jumped in her seat at the familiar voice behind her.

Chapter 557

She turned to find Altce and Dahlia standing just behind her, evidently on their way out to check on the arriving containers.

“Nothing, Mom.”

Alice regarded her with a knowing smile.

“Mm-hmm. Your father simply knows better than to ask too many questions”

Harper feigned offense.

“You know, it’s not nice to eavesdrop, Mom.”

Alice merely raised an amused eyebrow, clearly impressed by her daughter’s attempt to turn the tables

“Is that so? And talking about others behind their backs is perfectly fine?”

Harper let out a defeated sigh and raised both hands in surrender.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. It’s not like I said anything bad.”

Alice simply shook her head before letting her gaze drift from Maya back to Harper.

“That’s lesson number one for the two of you, young ladies.”

The sudden change in topic caught both Maya and Harper off guard, prompting Harper to let out a quiet, embarrassed groan.

“Uh-oh… here we go.”

Ignoring Harper’s theatrics, Alice continued with what was clearly another piece of unsolicited advice.

“If there’s something your heart truly desires-something that brings you genuine happiness-don’t be afraid to stand your ground simply because your partner disagrees.”

A gentle warmth entered her eyes.

“A healthy marriage isn’t about one person always getting their way. It’s built on mutual respect, honest communication, and knowing when something truly matters to the person you love.”

Her gaze briefly drifted outside, watching the massive reinforced containers being carefully transported into the hangar.

“Your father doesn’t share my passion for antiques.”

A hint of amusement crossed her face.

“In fact, I suspect he still thinks some of them look like old junk.”

Harper snorted softly.

“I mean… some of them are kind of…”

Alice shot her a sharp look, and Harper immediately mimed zipping her lips shut before tossing away the

Timaginary key.

“But he understands that they matter to me,” Alice continued. “So even if he doesn’t always understand why, he supports me because he knows they make me happy”

She looked back at Maya and Harper.

“And I do the same for him.”

A warm smile settled on her face.

“That’s how a marriage lasts. You don’t have to love all the same things.

“You simply have to love each other enough to respect one another.”

Alice then turned her attention to the next table, where Kenji and Jaime were seated.

“And that goes for both of you as well,” she said. “Just because you’re the man doesn’t mean your opinions should always come first. Never dismiss something simply because you don’t understand why it’s important to your partner.”

She smiled gently.

“Respect your wife’s dreams and passions just as you would want her to respect yours.”

Harper pouted.

“That’s easy for you to say, Mom. Not all men in the world are like Dad or Uncle Dominic.”

Then she turned to Maya.

“Or Damien.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh.

“At least Maya already found her perfect man. What about me?”

Seizing the opportunity, Jaime grinned.

“I’m sure Nick could be your perfect man too, Harper.”

Jaime’s teasing earned immediate laughter from everyone except Harper, whose face instantly turned beet red. She whirled around in her seat to glare at him.

“What?!” she sputtered. “That arrogant, smug-faced playboy? Please! I’d rather adopt twenty cats-or better yet, stay single for the rest of my life!”

Kenji took a sip of his drink, looking completely unfazed.

“Well, you can’t have cats,” he pointed out. “And Dad won’t let you stay single forever, so you’d better start figuring it out.”

“Did I ask for your opinion?!” Harper shot back, glaring at her brother as everyone else laughed

Alice simply shook her head, an amused smile togging at her lips

Without another word, she and Dahlia continued on their way, leaving the younger ones to their lively banter.

Harper huffed and turned back around in her seat, folding her arms across her chest with a pout

A second later, she grabbed her chopsticks, picked up an entire piece of sushi, and stuffed it into her mouth in one bite.

Her cheeks puffed out instantly, making her look even more adorably sulky

Fortunately, no one teased her any further.

A comfortable silence settled over the table as everyone resumed enjoying the meal.

After swallowing the last of her sushi, Harper reached for another plece.

“Anyway,” she said, “how was the flight?”

Maya shrugged.

“It was good. Honestly, I didn’t think a flight that long could be so comfortable. I literally slept through most of it.”

An impish smile spread across Harper’s face.

“Did you two spend the whole night having sex? Is that why you were so exhausted?”

Maya’s face instantly flushed.

“Harper! Stop!”

“Aha! Guilty!” Harper declared with a smug grin, clearly delighted she’d gotten exactly the reaction she wanted.

She reached for another piece of sushi, took a bite, and chewed leisurely before speaking again, her tone so casual it was as though she were commenting on the weather.

“By the way, before you arrived, I received word that Volkov’s becoming increasingly paranoid He’s doubled the security at all of his facilities.”

A satisfied smile tugged at her lips.

“Which is exactly what we wanted. It means the plan worked. His attention has been completely diverted He’s so focused on protecting what he already has that he won’t see what he’s about to lose.”

Maya’s expression immediately turned serious. Despite Harper’s reassuring words, she couldn’t shake the lingering unease in her chest.

Harper immediately caught the flicker of worry in Maya’s eyes.

Then, as though she hadn’t just casually discussed a high-stakes deception operation, she popped the rest of the sushi into her mouth and chewed thoughtfully

Her eyes suddenly lit up, as if she’d just remembered something completely unrelated

“That reminds me

She swallowed before breaking into a grin.

“Do you want to check on your boyfriend?

Maya’s eyes immediately brightened.

“I can call him?”

Harper nodded. “Of course. But not from your phone.”

Maya’s excitement faltered. “Then…. how?”

A mischievous smile slowly spread across Harper’s face as she reached for another piece of sushi.

“Finish eating first. Then we’ll head upstairs to the command center.” Her grin widened. “We’ll tap into the aircraft’s secure communications network and temporarily take over one of the cabin display feeds.”

She wiggled her eyebrows.

“We’ll surprise them.”

Maya stared at her for a moment before letting out an amused laugh.

“Very funny.” She smiled, shaking her head. “You almost had me. You say that like taking over a multimillion-dollar aircraft’s onboard systems is the most normal thing in the world.”

Harper merely shrugged.

“For us? It is.”

Chapter 558

Maya blinked twice, searching Harper’s face for any sign that she was joking. She waited for the inevitable punchline, for Harper to grin and admit it was all just a prank… but it never came.

“…You’re serious.’

Harper looked back at her with an expression so steady that it almost seemed as though Maya was the one asking the ridiculous question.

“Of course I am! Now hurry up and finish eating. The sooner we get there, the sooner you’ll get to see your boyfriend.”

Maya shook her head with a helpless laugh.

“You really are something else, Harper.”

They finished the last few bites of their meal in comfortable silence. Harper was the first to stand, brushing the imaginary crumbs from her shorts.

“So…” she said with an eager grin. “Ready?”

Maya nodded as she dabbed the corner of her mouth with her napkin.

“Mm-hmm. I’m ready.”

Together, the two stepped out of the lounge. Across the hangar, Alice and Dahlia were still

overseeing the meticulous inspection of the priceless antiques as specialists carefully unloaded

them one container at a time. Meanwhile, Kenji had already led Jaime deeper into the sprawling

aviation complex to continue the tour he had promised.

With everyone else occupied, Harper led Maya deeper into the headquarters.

After taking the elevator to one of the upper floors, they passed through a series of secured corridors and biometric checkpoints before finally stopping outside a pair of sleek matte-black

doors.

Mounted beside the entrance was a brushed steel plaque engraved with the Japanese characters, with COMMAND CENTER neatly printed beneath them.

Harper nodded toward the reinforced doors.

“This is the safest room in the entire complex. The doors are blast-resistant, bullet-resistant, and designed to withstand fires hot enough to melt most of the building around them. The biometric scanner has its own independent battery backup, so even if the entire facility loses power, it’ll keep working. And if someone somehow destroys the scanner…” She casually tapped the wall beside it.

ORG

“…there’s another concealed authentication system built into the structure. You’d have to know exactly where it is to even find it.”

Maya blinked in surprise. “That’s impressive.”

Harper merely shrugged. “My dad’s a little paranoid when it comes to security. He doesn’t believe in single points of failure. Every critical system has a backup, and every backup has another backup. Even if the rest of the complex suffered catastrophic structural damage, this room was engineered to remain fully operational long enough to coordinate an evacuation and emergency response.”

As Maya absorbed everything she’d just heard, Harper casually placed her palm against the biometric scanner. A thin red beam swept across her hand before a soft chime sounded. The The scanner flashed green, and the heavy doors slid open.

Inside, rows of operators sat before curved workstations surrounded by enormous displays filled with aircraft telemetry, satellite feeds, weather maps, flight paths, security alerts, and streams of live operational data. The steady rhythm of keyboards blended with quiet conversations as personnel coordinated operations across Takahashi’s global network.

The moment they stepped inside, the room fell silent as every operator rose from their seats.

“Konnichiwa, Bosu,” they greeted in unison, several of them also bowing respectfully toward Maya.

Harper returned their greeting with an easy smile. “There’s plenty of food downstairs. Go help yourselves. We need this place for a little while.”

“Hai, Bosu.”

Without another word, the operators logged out of their workstations, collected their tablets, and quietly filed out of the command center. Within moments, only Harper and Maya remained.

Maya looked around the now-empty command center in disbelief.

“They just… left.”

Harper shrugged as she made her way toward the largest workstation in the room.

“They’re used to it.”

Maya let out an awkward laugh. “I… I guess I still can’t picture you like this.”

Harper glanced back at her, an amused smile tugging at her lips. “Like what?”

“I mean…” Maya scratched her cheek. “In my head, you’re just my bubbly, carefree best friend. Seeing everyone treat you like… well, the boss… it’s still surreal.”

Harper laughed softly. “You know, technically, you’re higher up the food chain than I am.” She flashed Maya a playful wink. “You just have to embrace it.”

She settled into the leather chair before the massive console and patted the empty seat beside her.

“Come sit.”

Maya pulled the chair closer and settled beside her as Harper rolled her shoulders, stretched both/ arms overhead, then flexed each finger one by one before cracking her knuckles.

A mischievous grin slowly spread across her face as she rested both hands on the illuminated keyboard.

She glanced sideways at Maya.

“Now… watch this.”

The keyboard immediately erupted into a rapid staccato of clicks.

Harper’s fingers danced across the keys at a speed Maya’s eyes could barely follow as windows opened, disappeared, and were replaced by dozens more in rapid succession.

Lines of code streamed endlessly across the enormous monitor.

The display changed so quickly that Maya gave up trying to understand what she was looking at

“…How are you even reading all of that?” she asked in disbelief. “Do we really have to go through all this just to make a phone call? Can’t we just use the satellite phone?”

“We can,” Harper replied without taking her eyes off the screen. “But where’s the fun in that?”

Maya opened her mouth to respond, but nothing came out. She simply stared at Harper, deciding it was probably best not to question the eccentric genius beside her.

Barely two minutes later, the endless stream of code suddenly came to a halt and a single line appeared in the center of the display.

SECURE CONNECTION ESTABLISHED

A heartbeat later, the wall-sized monitor flickered.

The lines of code disappeared, replaced by a live video feed.

The luxurious interior of Damien’s private aircraft came into view.

Every detail reflected understated elegance, from the rich wood paneling and soft ambient lighting

to the handcrafted leather seats arranged throughout the spacious cabin. There was nothing

ostentatious about the design, yet every inch quietly announced a level of craftsmanship and exclusivity that only a handful of people in the world could afford.

Maya’s eyes widened.

You actually did it.”

Harper leaned back in her chair with a satisfied grin.

“Told you.”

Chapter 559

Across from

over the other, leisurely sipping his whiskey

Farther down the cabin, James, Max, and Monroe occupied an entire seating section by themselves.

All three were sound asleep.

James had his head tilted back with his mouth hanging open.

Max was sprawled across two seats, hugging a pillow.

Monroe leaned awkwardly against the window, snoring loudly enough that even the cabin microphone occasionally picked it up.

Maya and Harper couldn't help but laugh.

"Oh my goodness," Maya giggled. "They look exhausted."

Harper, however, frowned. "And that asshole looks wasted! Look at him. How embarrassing!"

Maya slowly turned to look at her, the corners of her lips curling into a knowing smile.

"I see… so Nick's the only one you're paying attention to, huh?"

Harper scoffed and immediately looked away, a faint blush dusting her cheeks. “What?! Of course not! Don’t be ridiculous!”

Before Maya could tease her any further, Harper quickly cleared her throat and shifted her attention back

to the monitor

“Anyway… where are my boys?” Her eyes darted across the live feed before lighting up. “Ah! There they are.

Toward the rear of the cabin, Hudson sat quietly looking down at a tablet while Cruz occupied the seat across from him, lazily scrolling through his phone.

Neither of them seemed to care in the slightest about the sleeping trio nearby.

Maya’s gaze lingered on them for a moment before wandering through the rest of the cabin, eventually finding the one person she had been looking for all along.

Even from thousands of miles away… just seeing Damien made her smile.

A thought suddenly crossed Maya's mind. She tore her eyes away from the monitor and looked at Harper.

"… Wait. How did you even manage to hack the system? How is any of this possible?"

Harper gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her chest.

"Excuse me? I did not track the aircraft."

Maya blinked, even more bewildered.

"…You didn't?"

"Nope." Harper casually leaned back in her chair. "I authenticated myself through the aircraft's security management system. There's a difference."

Maya frowned.

"…Isn't that even more dangerous? I mean… if you can get into it so easily, doesn't that mean someone else could too?"

"Aha!" Harper raised a finger triumphantly. "That's where you're wrong."

She swiveled her chair slightly toward Maya.

“The Gulfstream itself already comes with one of the most secure avionics and network architectures in the world. But this isn’t just any Gulfstream.” She nodded toward the screen. “it’s Damien Blackwood’s.”

“…So?”

“So the Blackwoods commissioned an entirely custom security ecosystem-encrypted communications, onboard intrusion detection, network isolation… basically everything you’d expect from one of the most powerful families in the world.”

Maya slowly nodded.

“…And?”

Harper’s grin widened.

“The company that won the

contract just happened to be HLT Technologies.”

“…HLT?” Maya echoed, furrowing her brows. “Why does that sound so familiar?”

“HLT Technologies is just another cutting-edge cybersecurity company.” Harper said with a shrug.

Maya searched her memory until realization slowly dawned on her..

She remembered.

It was Jaime.

One evening, after coming home from work, Jaime had been practically bursting with excitement as he rambled on about a rising cybersecurity company called HLT Technologies. He had gone on and on about how their innovations were revolutionizing the industry and how countless major corporations were scrambling to work with them.

At the time, Maya hadn’t paid much attention. She had simply smiled, nodded, and let Jaime enjoy his little geek-out.

But now… everything was starting to make sense.

“Wait…” Maya slowly lifted her gaze to Harper, her eyes widening. “…You?”

“Bingo.” Harper snapped her fingers.

“HLT is mine.”

Maya’s jaw dropped.

Harper shrugged casually

“You already know I never wanted my entire identity to revolve around being a Takahashi. I wanted to build something that was truly mine.”

A proud smile spread across her face.

“So I founded HLT from scratch.”

“HLT… Harper Lin Takahashi,” Maya murmured, finally making the connection. Then, unable to contain her curiosity, she asked, “If you already had your own company, why did you even work at Blackwood Enterprises?”

Harper laughed.

“Because I got bored.” She shrugged. “I wanted a real challenge. Besides, if I kept running HLT myself, it’d eventually attract too much attention-and attention is the last thing I want. So I handed the day-to-day operations over to people I trust and applied for a job at Blackwood Enterprises instead. At the time, I was just looking for something interesting to do.”

Maya looked at her.

“And the aircraft security suite?”

Harper’s lips curled into a proud smile.

“I wrote it.”

Maya stared at her in stunned silence.

“Every line of code. Every authentication protocol. Every encrypted management channel.” Harper lightly tapped the keyboard beneath her fingertips. “So while everyone else sees an impenetrable security system

“…you’re using the master key,” Maya finished.

Harper’s smug grin returned.

“Exactly.”

“So, going back to your question… Someone would have to be me to break into the system.”

She paused dramatically before flashing Maya a cheeky smile.

“And the good news is…” She spread her arms proudly. “There’s only one me!”

Maya could only shake her head, a soft chuckle escaping her lips.

You’re really amazing, Harper.”

“I know.” Harper replied without a shred of humility, waving fire compliment away.

“Now, enough chitty-chat. Let’s call your boyfriend”

Harper reached for the secure satellite phone on the console and lifted the frandset to her ear. With a few quick presses on the keypad, she initiated the encrypted connection.

As soon as the call connected, she tapped a button, switching the phone to speaker. The steady sound of ringing echoed through the command center.

Almost simultaneously, the same ringtone drifted from the speakers broadcasting the aircraft's live feed.

A flight attendant emerged from the galley and walked over to the communications console. Seeing the encrypted satellite line flashing on the display, she promptly picked up the handset.

"Gulfstream Delta Bravo Zero Zero One."

"Hi! Could you please put Mr. Blackwood on the line?" Harper replied cheerfully.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"It's a secure call for Mr. Blackwood."

Another brief pause followed.

"One moment, please."

Handset in hand, she made her way toward Damien.

“Excuse me, Mr. Blackwood,” she said respectfully, extending the handset toward him. “There’s a secure call for you.”

Damien accepted the handset with a slight nod.

“Thank you.”

Back in the command center, Maya unconsciously held her breath as she watched him raise the handset to his ear.

“…Hello?”

Chapter 560

Damien’s calm voice echoed through the command center.

“…Hello?”

Harper’s lips immediately curled into a grin.

“Good evening, Mr. Blackwood.”

A flicker of recognition crossed Damien’s face before the corners of his lips lifted ever so slightly.

“…Harper?”

“The one and only.”

The instant Damien said Harper’s name, Nick’s head snapped toward him.

“Harper?” he repeated, his eyes darting around the cabin as though expecting her to magically appear.” Where? Is that Harper?”

Damien paid him no attention. His entire focus remained on the call.

Nick’s outburst, however, was enough to rouse the others.

Monroe snorted awake before instinctively sitting up straight, while James blinked blearily, looking around as he tried to figure out where he was. Even Max reluctantly lifted his head from the pillow he had been hugging, his hair sticking out in every direction.

Hudson and Cruz, on the other hand, barely reacted. They simply looked up from their tablet and phone, respectively, before calmly turning their attention toward Damien.

Watching the live feed, Maya instinctively glanced sideways at Harper. The moment Nick reacted so dramatically, a faint blush crept onto Harper's cheeks. She quickly rolled her eyes as if annoyed by his antics, but the smile tugging at the corners of her lips betrayed just how pleased she actually was.

Maya couldn't help smiling to herself. For all their constant bickering, those two really were hopeless.

Harper quickly composed herself and cleared her throat.

"I've got someone here who wants to talk to you."

The change in Damien's expression was almost immediate. He straightened ever so slightly, the relaxed smile on his face softening into something far gentler.

"…Maya?"

Instead of answering, Harper simply turned toward Maya with an encouraging smile.

For reasons she couldn’t quite explain, Maya suddenly found herself feeling nervous.

It had barely been a day since they last saw each other. Yet somehow… it already felt much longer.

Maya took a quiet breath, trying to calm the unexpected flutter in her chest before finally speaking.

Damien let out a quiet chuckle.

“…I miss you.”

Maya’s smile softened.

“I miss you too.”

Although thousands of miles separated them, hearing each other’s voices again made the distance seem to disappear.

“How was your flight?” Damien asked.

“It was good.” Maya laughed softly. “Aunt Dahlia told me you called while I was asleep, but you told them not to wake me. Sorry I missed your call. I was completely exhausted and ended up sleeping through almost the entire flight.”

The knowing smirk that slowly spread across Damien’s face immediately gave away exactly what he was thinking.

“I know…”

Maya caught the meaning behind those two simple words immediately, and her cheeks flushed crimson.

“You…”

Her voice came out in an embarrassed mumble, only making Damien’s smile grow even wider.

Sitting quietly beside her, Harper looked from Maya to the monitor, then back to Maya again.

One was blushing, while the other looked entirely too pleased with himself.

A mischievous smile slowly spread across Harper’s face.

“Oh…”

Without another word, she turned her attention back to the command console and began typing. Her fingers danced effortlessly across the keyboard as commands scrolled rapidly across several monitors before disappearing just as quickly.

A second later, the large display inside Damien’s aircraft flickered to life.

Every head in the cabin instinctively turned toward it.

Nick was the first to react.

“… What the hell…”

The moment his eyes landed on the screen, whatever drowsiness remained instantly vanished.

James blinked several times as if he still hadn’t fully woken up, while Monroe leaned forward in confusion. Even Hudson and Cruz finally set aside their tablet and phone, giving the display their full attention.

There, filling the screen, were Maya and Harper sitting inside the Takahashi Command Center.

Harper leaned back in her chair with obvious satisfaction.

“There.”

Folding her arms proudly, she added, “Now you can actually see us. We’ll still need the phone for audio, but at least this feels a lot more like a proper video call.”

She then flashed Damien a mischievous smile.

“Well, Boss, I was just checking in to make sure everything’s going well on your end… and to let you know that the love of your life arrived here in one piece-safe and sound.”

Damien’s gaze instinctively shifted toward Maya, the relief in his eyes unmistakable.

“I’m glad.”

Maya smiled warmly before remembering something.

“Oh, Aunt Dahlia also mentioned that one of her old friends is here. She said she wants Jaime and me to meet her.”

Damien raised an eyebrow. “An old friend? Who?”

Maya shook her head. “I’m not sure. She didn’t say. She just told me that Jaime and I should meet her

while we’re here.”

Damien nodded thoughtfully. Although his curiosity had been piqued, he didn’t dwell on it.

The conversation soon shifted to more serious matters.

Harper gave Damien a concise update on everything she’d learned regarding Volkov’s recent movements. Damien listened attentively, occasionally asking a question or offering his thoughts as they discussed the

situation.

Before long, the topic shifted to Jaime.

“The donor heart is expected to arrive around seven tomorrow morning,” Harper said. “Once it arrives, Jaime’s medical team will perform the final compatibility checks. Assuming everything goes according to plan, the transplant is scheduled to begin around noon.”

Maya instinctively lowered her head and clasped her hands together.

“Jaime will start fasting at midnight,” Harper continued. “Tomorrow morning, he’ll remain under observation while his medical team completes the final pre-operative tests and prepares for surgery.”

She paused briefly before adding, “As long as your flight stays on schedule, you should arrive around nine tomorrow morning. That’ll give you plenty of time to see Jaime before he’s taken into the operating suite.”

Damien gave a small nod before his gaze shifted to Maya.

“That’s good.”

Then a voice suddenly echoed through the command center speakers.

“Shitsurei shimasu, Bosu. Okusama ga subete junbi ga totonoimashita node, shuppatsu dekiru to otsutae suru yo ni to.

“Excuse me, Boss. Madam asked me to let you know that everything is ready and they’re ready to leave.”

Harper glanced at the time before letting out a small sigh.

“Looks like that’s our cue.”

Maya smiled softly at Damien.

“I guess we’ll talk again soon.”

Damien returned her smile.

“Take care of yourself. I love you.”

This time, Maya didn’t hesitate. Despite knowing she had an audience on both ends of the call, she simply smiled back at him.

“You too. I love you.”

Harper cleared her throat dramatically.

“Bye, Boss!” She gave him a playful salute. “Oh, and don’t forget to ask Leo for the code. And the code is-

“I know,” Damien interrupted with the faintest hint of amusement. “Harper is Amazing.”

Harper froze for a split second before breaking into a self-satisfied grin.

“Oh… I know.”

With a satisfied nod, she waved at the screen.

“Okay, time to go. Bye!”

Just as her finger hovered over the button to disconnect the gall, Nick suddenly shouted,

“Harper Lin! Stop ignoring me! I can tell you’ve seen my messages!”