Intern 571

Chapter 571

While Damien flew high above the clouds toward Japan, the estate fell into the quiet stillness of the nig

Maya accompanied Jaime to his room and immediately began fussing over his things.

While Jaime took a quick warm shower, Maya unpacked his suitcase and carefully arranged his clothes toiletries, medications, and other personal belongings. She then prepared a small carry–on bag with the essentials he would need during his recovery, making sure nothing had been overlooked.

By the time Jaime stepped out of the bathroom dressed in his pajamas, Maya had already checked everything twice.

He looked at the neatly organized bag before shaking his head with an amused smile.

“You know I’m only staying in the other wing for a few days, right? Not moving there permanently.”

Maya shot him an unamused look.

“I know. I just want to make sure we don’t forget anything.”

“You’ve checked that bag at least three times already,” Jaime teased as he walked over to the bed.

“And I’ll probably check it again tomorrow morning,” she replied without looking up, her attention still focused on going through the contents of the bag.

He only laughed softly as he climbed onto the bed and settled comfortably against the pillows.

Maya zipped the bag shut before sitting beside him, quietly studying his face. Although he had been cheerful the entire evening, she still couldn’t bring herself to ignore the question that had been weighing on her mind.

“How are you feeling about tomorrow?”

Jaime answered without the slightest hesitation.

“Excited.”

Maya searched his face.

“Not nervous?”

Jaime shook his head.

“Not at all. I trust my doctors.” A small smile tugged at his lips. “Besides, once this is over, I’ll finally be able to do a lot more without everyone worrying about me all the time.”

Maya could only shake her head with a helpless smile.

“We’re still going to worry… especially me.”

“I know,” Jaime replied with an exaggerated sigh. “I don’t think that’s ever going to change.”

“Nope.” Maya reached over and gave his cheek a light pinch.

The siblings shared a quiet laugh before Maya finally stood.

“All right. Remember, no more food or drinks tonight, okay? The doctors said you need to fast before the surgery,”

“I know.”

“And get some sleep.”

Jaime flashed her a mischievous grin.

“Yes, Mom.”

Maya rolled her eyes but couldn’t help smiling. She leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to his forening

“Good night.”

“Good night, May.”

She had almost reached the door when Jaime suddenly called after her.

“May!”

Maya stopped and looked back.

“What is it?”

Jaime hesitated for a moment, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Umm… can I borrow your phone?”

Her brows immediately knitted together.

“My phone? Why?”

“Nothing important.” He shrugged, trying to sound casual. “I just want to check something. Besides, you just got a new phone. I haven’t even had the chance to check it out yet.”

Maya didn’t think much of it. She walked back over, handed him her phone, and reminded him one last time.

“All right, but don’t stay up too late.”

“I won’t.”

“And don’t mess with my settings.”

Jaime grinned.

“I promise.”

Satisfied, Maya finally left the room.

Jaime remained perfectly still, listening as her footsteps faded farther down the hallway.

The moment he could no longer hear them, the playful expression vanished from his face.

He quietly climbed out of bed, crossed the room, and locked the door.

Then he hurried toward his backpack, pulled out his laptop, and placed it on the bed. Within seconds, the screen came alive beneath his rapidly moving fingers.

He then reached into his bag once more, pulled out a data cable, connected Maya’s phone to the laptop, and launched a program he had personally written.

Lines of code immediately began running across the screen as the process started. For several seconds, everything appeared to be working exactly as intended.

He watched the progress bar carefully.

10%….. 32%….. 68%…..

Then the screen suddenly flashed red.

TRANSFER FAILED.

Jaime’s shoulders immediately dropped. He tried again, only to receive the same error.

“Crap!” He let out a frustrated groan.

“This phone is too new,” he muttered under his breath. “The program was designed for her old one.”

He stared at the screen, tapping one finger restlessly against the edge of the laptop as he considered his

options.

Giving up wasn’t one of them.

After several seconds, his eyes suddenly widened.

“Aha!” A slow grin spread across his face. “I’ve got it.”

Jaime straightened, his expression turning serious as his fingers flew across the keyboard once more. Moving even faster than before, he began rewriting part of the program on the fly.

Outside, Maya made her way back toward her room when a familiar figure caught her attention.

“Harper?”

She watched as Harper quietly slipped around the corner at the far end of the hallway, heading in the opposite direction from where their rooms were.

Curiosity immediately got the better of her.

Keeping a respectful distance, Maya followed.

Harper seemed completely unaware that someone was behind her. She left the main manor through a side entrance before following a dimly lit stone pathway that wound deeper into the estate grounds.

At first, Maya assumed Harper was simply taking a late–night stroll.

But as she continued following, the surroundings gradually began to change.

The beautifully landscaped gardens gave way to older stone walls and narrower passageways. The warm glow of the garden lanterns faded behind her, replaced by sparse overhead lights that cast long shadows across the ground.

Before Maya realized it, Harper had descended a flight of stone steps leading underground.

She hesitated for only a second before following after her.

The farther Maya ventured into the underground passage, the cooler the air became. A faint metallic smell lingered in the damp, musty corridor, making the place feel nothing like the elegant estate above.

Where is she going…?

Unease slowly crept into Maya's chest.

She was just about to turn around when-

“Aha! Gotcha!”

Harper suddenly sprang out from behind a stone pillar, startling Maya so badly she nearly jumped out of her skin.

With her usual bright, bubbly smile, Harper triumphantly pointed a finger at her.

“You sneaky rascal!” she giggled. “You were following me!”

Chapter 572

Maya instinctively clutched a hand to her chest, trying to steady her racing heartbeat.

“Oh my gosh, Harper! You scared me!”

Harper let out an apologetic laugh and Rashed a peace sign.

“Oops! Sorry.”

Maya glanced around, finally taking in her surroundings. “What is this place?”

Harper didn’t answer immediately.

Instead, she regarded Maya thoughtfully, as though weighing her decision. Then, as if finally reaching a conclusion, she let out a quiet sigh and stepped closer, affectionately linking her arm through Maya’s.

“Your boyfriend would probably kill me if he found out,” she admitted with a sheepish smile. “But… I’m sure you won’t let that happen.”

Maya only looked at her in confusion.

Harper’s smile softened as she met Maya’s eyes with quiet sincerity.

“Besides, this is part of your life now. I think it’s better if you learn about it sooner rather than later.”

Maya frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Harper’s eyes sparkled mischievously as she gently tugged Maya forward.

“Come with me. You’ll see.”

Before Maya could ask another question, Harper was already leading her deeper into the underground

passage.

They continued through the dimly lit corridor until Harper finally came to a stop in front of what appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary stone wall.

Maya looked around in confusion. There was no door, no hallway, and no visible entrance-just a solid stone wall that looked no different from the rest of the underground passage,

“Why did we stop?” Maya asked

Harper simply smiled.

“You’ll see.”

She then placed her palm against the cold stone.

A faint blue glow immediately spread beneath her hand as an illuminated biometric scanner materialized directly on the wall. It swept across her palm within seconds before a soft mechanical click echoed through the corridor.

The stone wall rumbled gently, and a concealed section slowly slid aside, revealing a hidden entrance

beyond.

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Maya's eyes widened as she stared at the opening, momentarily speechless. It looked like something straight out of a science-fiction movie.

"Come," Harper said with a smile as she led Maya through the hidden entrance.

The moment they stepped inside, the concealed stone wall behind them began sliding shut.

The opening grew narrower with every passing second, and the faint light from the corridor gradually disappeared until the room was swallowed by darkness.

Without realizing it, Maya instinctively tightened her grip on Harper's arm.

Just as the hidden entrance sealed completely with a muted thud, soft overhead lights flickered to life.

Maya blinked against the sudden brightness before slowly taking in her surroundings.

The room was surprisingly small, just large enough to comfortably accommodate several people standing inside.

Aside from the concealed entrance behind them, its only notable feature was the entire wall directly in front of them, which was made of floor-to-ceiling glass. Beyond it, however, there was nothing but darkness, making it seem as though the room overlooked an endless black void.

The room itself was completely empty. There was no furniture, no equipment, and no other visible door.

At first glance, it appeared to be nothing more than an ordinary, windowless room.

Maya frowned in confusion.

"… What is this place?"

Harper gently released Maya's arm before walking toward the glass wall.

When she turned back around, the bright, bubbly smile that almost always adorned her face was gone.

In its place was an expression Maya had never seen before.

A quiet coldness had settled in Harper's eyes, making the cheerful young woman seem almost unrecognizable and sending an inexplicable chill down Maya's spine.

"Do you remember how Damien dealt with Beckett?" Harper asked, her voice calm, cold, and devoid of its usual warmth.

The question caught Maya completely off guard. The name alone stirred memories she wished she could forget-the kidnapping, the fear, and the nightmare that had nearly cost her life.

After a brief pause, she nodded.

"…Yes."

Harper held her gaze.

"And you've probably already figured out what happened to Ethan Miller too."

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Maya slowly nodded again.

She had never asked Damien for the details, but after everything that had happened, it wasn't difficult to piece together the answer.

A quiet silence settled between them.

Finally, Harper spoke again.

"As cliché as it sounds… this is our reality."

She took a step toward Maya and gently rested a hand on her shoulder.

"And now… it's yours too."

"There are people in this world who want to hurt us. Some want our wealth. Others want our influence, our resources, or the power that comes with the name."

Her voice remained calm, but every word carried unmistakable conviction.

“Greed, envy, ambition… they’re enough to make people do unimaginable things.”

Harper held Maya’s gaze. The coldness in her eyes seemed to deepen, revealing a darker resolve Maya had never seen before.

“And if we simply stand by and do nothing…they’ll destroy everything-and everyone-we love.”

Harper’s words stirred a quiet realization within her.

They echoed almost perfectly what Dr. Anderson had told her aboard the flight-that sometimes tragedy wasn’t fate at all, but the result of good people refusing to believe evil truly existed.

Harper let her hand fall from Maya’s shoulder before turning toward the glass wall. She stood with her back to Maya.

“Do you remember why I had to leave the island without even saying goodbye?” she asked without turning

around.

Maya nodded.

“The poisoning.”

Harper’s gaze remained fixed on the glass wall.

“That’s right.”

“Someone wanted to weaken our family’s defenses. They thought that if they could create enough chaos, they’d have the perfect opportunity to strike.”

Only then did Harper turn to face Maya, her expression still unreadable.

“And do you remember when I told you during our video call that I was out collecting a debt?”

Maya nodded once more.

Rather that Later

A faint smile tugged at the corner of Harper’s lips.

“Well… I did.”

She turned back toward the glass wall and pressed a concealed switch hidden beside it. A soft mechanical hum filled the room as the black glass gradually lost its opaque tint, becoming perfectly transparent.

Maya’s eyes widened.

Behind the glass was another room.

Two men sat bound securely to heavy metal chairs. Their clothes were disheveled, their faces pale, and exhaustion was etched into every feature. Neither looked capable of putting up any resistance.

Harper stepped beside her, but her gaze remained fixed on the prisoners.

“Those two are the Shibata brothers. They believed the Takahashi Family stood in the way of expanding their criminal empire. They thought that if they eliminated us, they could seize the influence, power, and opportunities our family protected… and bend everything to their own advantage.”

The realization hit Maya almost instantly.

She turned to Harper, her eyes widening even further.

“They were the ones behind the poisoning.”

“Yes,” Harper replied, never taking her eyes off the two men.

“That’s why they’re here.”

A brief silence hung in the air before she added in the same calm, icy voice,

“To pay their debt.”

Chapter 573

Maya couldn’t tear her eyes away from the two men behind the glass.

Surprisingly, she didn’t feel afraid. She didn’t feel disturbed or even uncomfortable. Instead, an unexpected sense of understanding settled quietly within her.

Over the past few months, she had been slowly pulled into a world she never knew existed.

She had fallen in love with Damien and discovered just how far he was willing to go to protect the people he loved. She had seen what he was capable of, the choices he was willing to make, and

the way he delivered justice on his own terms.

She had come to know Nick and Harper beyond their carefree facades. She had lived under the same roof as the Blackwoods, spent countless hours with Dahlia, and earned her trust enough to be entrusted with a secret she had kept hidden even from her own family.

One day, she and Jaime had been nothing more than orphans struggling to survive. The next, they

had become part of a world filled with people powerful enough to change the world, yet kind

enough to open their hearts to two complete strangers.

Behind their wealth, influence, and privilege, however, lay responsibilities and burdens that few

people would ever truly understand.

She had experienced fear. She had known what it felt like to be helpless, vulnerable, and betrayed.

She had learned that trusting the wrong person could cost someone everything, and that evil didn't always announce itself before it struck.

Then came the revelation about her mother's true identity…

Piece by piece, the world she once believed in had changed.

Harper was right. This was their reality.

And now… it was hers too.

She knew she couldn't afford to be weak.

She knew there were people willing to destroy innocent lives for wealth, power, and greed.

She also knew that if she wanted to protect the people she loved, she had to accept the reality Harper was showing her.

Simply hoping evil would disappear was never going to be enough.

Without realizing it, Maya took a step closer, getting a better look at the two men behind the glass.

They had tried to destroy Harper's family. They had shown no remorse for the innocent lives they

had endangered, all for the sake of greed and power.

If they were willing to go that far just to get what they wanted…

Who were they to deserve kindness?

Who were they to deserve forgiveness?

Who were they to deserve mercy?

If they had done it once, they would do it again. And what if, next time… They succeeded?

People like them weren't ordinary criminals. They weren't the kind of people who made mistakes out of anger or desperation. They were monsters who took lives without hesitation if it meant getting what they wanted.

The thought alone made Maya's chest tighten.

Without warning, Jaime's face appeared in her mind, and with it came a frightening realization.

If anyone ever tried to take him away from her… if anyone ever tried to hurt him or any of the people she loved…

She would do whatever it took to stop them… no matter the cost.

An uneasy quiet settled between them.

Harper remained where she stood, giving Maya the time she needed to process everything. Yet beneath her composed exterior, a quiet uncertainty crept into her heart.

Had she made the right decision bringing Maya here? Had she shown her too much… too soon?

Just as Harper was beginning to question herself, Maya finally broke the silence.

“…Why are they still alive?”

Harper blinked, genuine surprise flashing across her face

“What… what did you just say?”

Maya slowly turned to meet her eyes.

“They tried to kill your family,” she said calmly. “If they’re still alive… wouldn’t they just try again?”

Her gaze shifted back to the two prisoners behind the glass.

“They failed this time…”

A brief pause followed.

“But what if they succeed next time?”

Harper stared at Maya in genuine surprise.

“Wait… You’re not scared?”

Maya shook her head.

“Not uncomfortable?” Harper asked, still unconvinced.

Maya let out a slow breath before meeting her eyes.

“Why would I be?” she asked calmly. “Like you said… this is my reality now too.”

“I can’t pretend this world doesn’t exist just because it’s frightening. I can’t change it.” A faint, bittersweet smile touched her lips. “And even if I had never met Damien, Jaime and I would still be tied to a world that might be even more dangerous than this.”

For a brief moment, Harper simply stared at her before a slow smile spread across her face.

“Well…” she said with an amused chuckle. “…Now that’s unexpected.”

She folded her arms across her chest before giving Maya an approving nod.

“I’m impressed. Looks like you’re finally coming out of your shell.”

Maya let out a helpless laugh and shook her head.

“I actually knew someone was following me almost from the very beginning,” Harper admitted.

“I was planning to pay my ‘toys’ a little visit tonight…” She gestured toward the two brothers behind

the glass. “But when I realized it was you, I changed direction and brought you here instead.”

Without warning, Harper suddenly stepped forward and wrapped Maya in a warm hug.

“I’m glad I did.”

Maya hugged her back just as tightly, a grateful smile spreading across her face.

“Thank you, Harper. I’m glad you did too.”

As Maya embraced the reality of the world she had become a part of, another chapter of that very reality was quietly beginning to unfold.

Nearly an hour away from the Takahashi Estate, Cecilia's vehicle turned onto a quiet, tree-lined street before coming to a gentle stop in front of an elegant two-story residence.

Though modest by royal standards, the home possessed a quiet elegance of its own. Its white stone façade, manicured gardens, and warm lights glowing through the windows gave it the

refined charm of a luxurious private residence rather than a sprawling estate.

It would serve as Cecilia's temporary residence during her stay in Japan, allowing her to remain close to her grandchildren while keeping her visit as discreet as possible.

The chauffeur stepped out and opened the rear door.

Just as Cecilia was about to step out, her phone suddenly rang.

She paused and glanced at the screen. After a brief hesitation, she settled back against the seat and gave the chauffeur a small nod.

Understanding immediately, he gently closed the door before walking a respectful distance away, leaving her the privacy she needed.

Inside the vehicle, Cecilia closed her eyes and drew in a slow, steady breath.

Only then did she swipe across the screen and lift the phone to her ear.

“…Tobias.”

Chapter 574

“Cecilia!”

His voice exploded through the speaker, equal parts anger and relief.

“Thank goodness you finally answered! Where the hell have you been? Do you have any idea how worried I was? I’ve been calling you for hours! No one knows where you went. All anyone could tell

me was that you left with your aide, and that was it!”

He barely paused to breathe.

“What were you thinking? Why would you leave without your security detail? Where are you right

now?”

Cecilia slowly closed her eyes and drew in a quiet breath.

"…It's our daughter."

Silence.

The three words stopped Tobias cold.

For several moments, the only sound Cecilia could hear through the phone was his heavy, uneven breathing. When Tobias finally found his voice again, it was noticeably calmer, though the frustration still lingered beneath the surface.

"What about her?"

A brief silence followed.

“Let me guess…” A bitter laugh escaped him. “After nearly thirty years, she finally realized she

made the wrong choice.”

His tone grew colder.

“Life with that man wasn’t what she expected, so now she wants to come back? She probably misses the life she threw away and expects us to welcome her back with open arms, as if the last

twenty-seven years never happened.”

He exhaled slowly through his nose.

“Do you have any idea how many people we sent looking for her? How many resources we

exhausted trying to find her? We never stopped searching, but she was too stubborn to come

home.” He paused briefly before continuing. “If that’s why you disappeared, Cecilia, then let me

make one thing very clear-”

Before he could continue, Cecilia quietly interrupted him. She closed her eyes once more before whispering the words she had dreaded saying aloud.

“Our daughter has passed.”

The words washed over Tobias like a torrent of ice-cold water.

For several seconds, he couldn’t breathe.

“W-What…?” His voice trembled. “What did you just say?”

Tears finally spilled down Cecilia’s cheeks.

“Our daughter is gone, Tobias…” she whispered brokenly. “My daughter… she’s gone…”

A strangled sob escaped her lips.

On the other end of the line, Tobias's hand trembled so violently that the phone nearly slipped from his grasp. He staggered backward until the backs of his knees struck the edge of a chair, forcing

him to sit down.

His eyes widened in disbelief. The world around him seemed to fade away, leaving only the sound of Cecilia's heartbroken sobs through the phone.

"No…"

His voice was barely audible.

"No…"

Suddenly, he exploded.

"No! Shut up!" he roared. "Take it back, Cecilia! How dare you say something like that about our daughter! Take it back! Right now!"

Cecilia squeezed her eyes shut.

“Seven years ago…” she choked out. “Our daughter and her husband were involved in a car accident.”

“No!” Tobias blurted, shaking his head in disbelief. Cecilia ignored him. Fighting back another sob, she forced the words out.

“They both…”

“No!” Tobias shouted again, refusing to let her finish. “I don’t believe you! I refuse to believe a single word you’re saying!”

His breathing became ragged.

“This is probably just another scheme the two of you came up with!” he yelled. “You and your daughter think telling me she’s dead will finally make me stop searching for her? Is that it? Is that

what this is?”

Cecilia’s tears flowed even harder. More than anyone, she wished it were all just a nightmare-

something she would wake up from at any moment.

At that moment, she wished Tobias was right. She wished it were nothing more than a/cruel lie she

and their daughter had concocted together.

But it wasn't.

"If you don't want to believe me… then don't." Her voice suddenly broke. "But I'm telling you the

truth!"

She clutched the phone so tightly her knuckles turned white.

"Our daughter is gone, Tobias!" she screamed through her tears. "She's gone!"

Her breathing turned uneven as years of suppressed grief came crashing down all at once.

"And it's all because of your stupid traditions… your precious legacy… and the damned pride you refused to let go of!"

Silence filled the line, broken only by Cecilia's heart-wrenching sobs.

After a few moments, she forced herself to take a shaky breath. When she spoke again, her voice was calm… almost empty.

“I need some time alone, Tobias. I need to mourn our daughter’s passing… alone.”

She closed her eyes.

“Please don’t look for me. I’ll come home when I’m ready.”

A painful silence followed.

“I just…” Her voice cracked one last time. “I just need time to grieve.”

Before Tobias could say another word, the line went dead.

He stared at the phone in disbelief before immediately calling her back.

Once. Twice. Three times.

The call never connected.

She had already turned her phone off.

Tobias remained frozen in place, staring blankly at the dark screen in his hand.

Then something inside him finally broke.

“No!”

With a furious roar, he hurled the phone across the study. It slammed into the wall with a deafening crash before shattering into countless pieces across the polished floor.

His chest heaved violently.

“No… no… no…”

He swept everything off his desk in one violent motion. Books, documents, picture frames, and priceless ornaments crashed onto the floor as nearly three decades of bottled-up emotions/

erupted all at once.

As his gaze fell to the wreckage, it landed on a shattered picture frame. Beneath the broken glass

was a photograph of eight-year-old Malia.

His legs finally gave out beneath him. Dropping to his knees, he ignored the shards of glass

scattered across the floor and reached for the photograph with trembling hands.

He stared at it in silence. The little girl in the picture smiled back at him so brightly, her tiny jeweled

tiara slightly crooked atop her head as she sat proudly on his lap.

She looked so full of life… so innocent… so carefree.

Memories he had buried for decades came rushing back all at once.

Her laughter as she ran through the palace halls.

Her tiny hands reaching for his whenever she was afraid.

The way she would throw herself into his arms after returning from her lessons.

The tiny voice that used to call him, “Daddy.”

His vision blurred beneath a fresh wave of tears.

With trembling hands, he pressed the photograph tightly against his chest, as though holding it

close could somehow bring his little princess back.

At that moment, Tobias let out a heart-wrenching cry that echoed through the grand halls of the

palace-a place that had once been filled with the laughter of a little girl. It had watched her grow

into a fine young lady, celebrated every milestone and every achievement, witnessed her tears, her

anger, and the disappointment in her eyes the day she walked away.

Since then, the palace had known only silence, its once vibrant heart left waiting for the princess

who would never return.

“Malia…! My daughter…! My little princess…! I’m so sorry…! I’m so… sorry…”

For the first time in nearly three decades…

The proud king wept.

Chapter 575

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She looked so full of life… so innocent… so carefree.

Memories he had buried for decades came rushing back all at once.

Her laughter as she ran through the palace halls.

Her tiny hands reaching for his whenever she was afraid.

The way she would throw herself into his arms after returning from her lessons.

The tiny voice that used to call him, “Daddy.”

His vision blurred beneath a fresh wave of tears.

With trembling hands, he pressed the photograph tightly against his chest, as though holding it

close could somehow bring his little princess back.

At that moment, Tobias let out a heart-wrenching cry that echoed through the grand halls of the palace- a place that had once been filled with the laughter of a little girl. It had watched her grow into a fine young lady, celebrated every milestone and every achievement, witnessed her tears, her anger, and the disappointment in her eyes the day she walked away.

Tobias remained frozen in place, staring blankly at the dark screen in his hand.

Then something inside him finally broke.

“No!”

With a furious roar, he hurled the phone across the study. It slammed into the wall with a deafening crash before shattering into countless pieces across the polished floor.

His chest heaved violently.

“No… no… no…”

He swept everything off his desk in one violent motion. Books, documents, picture frames, and

priceless ornaments crashed onto the floor as nearly three decades of bottled-up emotions/

erupted all at once.

As his gaze fell to the wreckage, it landed on a shattered picture frame. Beneath the broken glass

was a photograph of eight-year-old Malia.

His legs finally gave out beneath him. Dropping to his knees, he ignored the shards of glass scattered across the floor and reached for the photograph with trembling hands.

He stared at it in silence. The little girl in the picture smiled back at him so brightly, her tiny jeweled tiara slightly crooked atop her head as she sat proudly on his lap.

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Since then, the palace had known only silence, its once vibrant heart left waiting for the princes

who would never return.

“Malia…! My daughter…! My little princess…! I’m so sorry…! I’m so… sorry…”

For the first time in nearly three decades…

The proud king wept.

Chapter 576

Oblivious to the heartbreak her mother had left behind and unaware of the storm unfolding on the other side of the world, Maya and Harper stood before the glass wall.

“Can they see us?” Maya asked curiously.

“Nah.” Harper beamed with pride. “From their side, all they can see is an ordinary stone wall.”

However, the smile on Harper’s face didn’t last long. It gradually faded as she drew in a slow, steady breath, the warmth in her eyes giving way to the same cold resolve Maya had seen

before.

“To answer your question earlier…” she began quietly. “The poison inside their bodies is twice as potent as the one they used on our people. They should have been dead before you and the others even arrived, but…” She paused briefly. “That felt too merciful.”

Her gaze remained fixed on the two brothers.

“So I’ve been giving them small doses of the antidote every now and then. Just enough to keep them alive.”

Her eyes grew noticeably colder as she turned to meet Maya’s gaze, a quiet hatred simmering beneath the calm surface.

“Our men walked straight into their trap. They were locked inside like animals waiting to be slaughtered before poisonous gas was pumped into the room. They were denied even the chance to fight back.”

Her fists tightened at her sides as she lowered her eyes, struggling to keep her emotions in

check.

“Most of them survived… but a few didn’t.”

“Everyone here is family, Maya,” Harper said quietly. “We train together, fight together, celebrate together… and sometimes we mourn together too. Losing even one of them hurts.”

A dangerous glint flashed in Harper’s eyes.

“They’ll die eventually.” Harper’s voice was almost emotionless. “I’m simply deciding how much they should suffer before they earn that privilege.”

Maya listened without interrupting. When Harper finally fell silent, she looked back at the two prisoners, no trace of sympathy left in her eyes, before speaking.

“Then let them decide.”

Harper frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“Let your men decide what happens to them,” Maya replied softly.

“They gave their loyalty to your family, knowing that one day they might have to risk-even sacrifice-their lives to protect it. And I understand why you feel responsible for every single

one of them.”

She gently placed a hand on Harper’s arm and met her eyes.

“But you weren’t there, Harper.”

Her voice remained calm, yet every word carried quiet conviction.

“You didn’t see what they went through. You didn’t see how they fought to stay alive… how they tried to save one another… what they were thinking, what they were feeling, or the fear they must have carried as they watched their brothers fall beside them.”

She glanced toward the two prisoners behind the glass before looking back at Harper.

“If anyone deserves to decide what justice looks like… it’s them.”

Harper fell silent, her gaze lingering on Maya as her words echoed in her mind.

She had expected Maya to plead for mercy.

Instead… Maya had shown her a path Harper herself had never considered.

Maya wasn't asking Harper to decide their fate, but to place that choice in the hands of those. who had lived through the nightmare-a decision Harper couldn't deny was perhaps the fairest justice she could give them.

"…You're right," Harper admitted as she pulled her phone from her back pocket and dialed a

number.

As soon as the call connected, Harper's expression turned ice cold.

"Arufa Chimu ni tsutaete. Röya ni ima sugu kite." (Tell Alpha Team to come to the holding cells immediately.)

She ended the call and slipped the phone back into her pocket.

When she looked at Maya again, the coldness in her eyes had disappeared, replaced by a look of quiet admiration.

“You know…” she said softly. “You really can’t deny it anymore… your Lockwood blood is finally showing.”

She gave Maya’s shoulder a gentle squeeze.

“You don’t just have the heart of a queen… you have the wisdom to become one.”

Nearly fifteen minutes passed before the heavy steel door on the prisoners’ side finally slid open, drawing Maya’s attention as a tall man stepped into the room.

He was a man in his thirties with sharp features and a lean, athletic build. There was no arrogance in the way he carried himself, only a quiet confidence that felt strangely familiar to Maya.

It took only a few seconds before she remembered.

Hiro.

She had seen him once during one of Harper's video calls, and his calm demeanor had left an impression on her.

One after another, more men entered behind him. Dressed in matching black tactical uniforms, they filed silently into the room until all eight surviving members of Alpha Team stood shoulder to shoulder behind Hiro.

The moment the Shibata brothers saw them, their expressions changed completely.

They immediately struggled against the restraints binding them to their chairs, their weakened bodies shaking violently as fear spread across their faces.

"W-What are you doing?!"

"Stay away from us!"

Their desperate voices echoed throughout the chamber, but no one paid them the slightest

attention.

Harper calmly stepped forward before pressing another button. With a soft mechanical hum, the opaque glass gradually turned transparent.

All eight men straightened before bowing in perfect unison.

“Bosu-san.”

Harper acknowledged them with a small nod.

As they rose, their eyes shifted toward Maya. Without hesitation, they bowed once more.

“Ms. Maya.”

Maya blinked in surprise before offering an awkward nod in return.

Among them, Hiro’s lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile. It was clear he recognized her as well.

Harper took another step forward, her calm gaze sweeping across the eight men before finally coming to rest on Hiro.

“When I brought these two here,” she began, gesturing toward the Shibata brothers, “I thought I had already decided how I was going to deal with them.”

“But my best friend reminded me of something I had completely overlooked.”

Her eyes returned to Alpha Team.

“I wasn’t there to witness what you endured… what you saw… what you felt as you fought to survive and watched your brothers fall beside you.”

The eight men remained silent. Grief flickered across their faces before hardening into cold

fury.

“So…” Harper continued, her voice steady, “I’m placing that decision in your hands.”

She glanced at the brothers, whose faces had already turned deathly pale, before turning back to Alpha Team.

“From this moment until sunrise… justice belongs to you.”

Several of them turned toward the two brothers. Their unreadable expressions and icy eyes were enough to make the Shibata brothers’ blood run cold.

“W-Wait…” the older brother stammered, desperately struggling against the restraints digging into his wrists. “You can’t do this!”

“Please!” his younger brother cried. “We’ll tell you everything! We’ll cooperate!”

Their desperate pleas were met with silence. No one acknowledged them.

Only when Harper finally spoke did their frantic cries cease. Her cold voice drowned out every desperate plea.

“Karera no saigo no iki wa watashi no mono da.”

Their final breath… belongs to me.

Chapter 577

Maya didn’t understand a single word Harper had just said, but she could feel the weight behind

those words.

The solemn expressions on Alpha Team’s faces, coupled with the terror that had suddenly overtaken the Shibata brothers, told her that whatever Harper had just declared… it was something final.

Almost as one, the eight men lowered their heads.

“Hai.”

Harper gave the men a single nod before pressing the button. The glass instantly turned dark onde

more, sealing off both the view and the sound between the two rooms.

Maya glanced at her curiously.

“What did you say?”

Harper was quiet for a moment before answering.

“I told them…” Her gaze drifted toward the darkened glass. “Their final breath… belongs to me.”

Maya fell silent.

Now that she understood what Harper had said, everything made sense.

The men had suffered the betrayal. They had earned the right to deliver justice, giving them the chance to avenge the brothers they had lost.

But the final judgment still belonged to Harper.

Harper noticed Maya had fallen silent, seemingly lost in thought.

Thinking she had overwhelmed her, guilt crept into her heart. Perhaps she had gone too far… perhaps she had shown Maya more than she should have.

She gently placed a hand on Maya's shoulder. The coldness in her eyes had faded, replaced by the same gentle warmth she always reserved for her best friend.

"You don't have to stay for this." A small smile tugged at her lips. "Come on. I'll walk you back to

your room."

She reached for Maya's hand, but Maya gently pulled it away.

“I want to stay.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

Harper studied her for a moment before trying one last time.

“Maya… there’ll be shouting. There’ll be blood. You’ll hear them scream.” Her voice softened.”

Some things… once you see them… you can never unsee.”

She searched Maya’s face, hoping to find even the slightest hesitation. Instead, she found only

quiet determination.

“I’ll be fine,” Maya replied softly. “Don’t worry.”

Harper let out a quiet sigh of surrender.

“Maya,” she said gently, “once this begins, there’s no taking it back. You can’t pretend you never

saw it.”

“I know.”

“And you still want to stay?”

Maya nodded.

“I do.”

Her eyes drifted toward the darkened glass.

“If I’m going to become part of this world… then I can’t keep looking away whenever it becomes ugly.”

Harper stared at her for a moment before letting out a defeated sigh.

“Fine.” She threw up her hands in surrender. “But don’t blame me if you end up having nightmares.” A teasing smile tugged at her lips. “Should I ask them to bring us some popcorn too?”

That earned a genuine laugh from Maya, easing the heavy atmosphere that had settled over the

room.

Harper called for Anko to bring them two chairs, remarking that it would take hours, so they might as well be comfortable. Once the chairs arrived, she pressed the button again, restoring the view into the chamber.

For the next several hours, the surviving members of Alpha Team carried out the justice they believed their fallen brothers deserved.

Some struck the Shibata brothers with their fists. Others delivered heavy kicks, each blow carrying grief, anger, and loss that words could never express.

When their rage had finally subsided, they chose to make the brothers experience the same fate they had forced upon their comrades. Poisonous gas was repeatedly released into the chamber, and each time death drew near, just enough antidote was administered to keep them alive.

The cycle continued for hours.

Only after the last dose of antidote had been used did the chamber finally fall silent once more.

“Well…” Harper let out a quiet breath as she rose to her feet. “I guess it’s my turn.”

She was about to press the button when Maya suddenly stopped her..

“What are you doing?”

Harper looked at her. “I have to go in there.” She glanced toward the darkened glass. “I don’t think you’d want to see what comes next.”

Maya frowned.

“Why?”

“Because…” Harper hesitated before letting out an awkward laugh. “It’s different when it’s me doing it.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “What if you see that side of me and decide you don’t want to be my friend anymore? I’d rather not take that risk.”

Maya couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re something else.”

Then something suddenly came to mind. A mischievous smile slowly spread across her lips.

“Besides…” she said, tilting her head. “I remember you bragging about how good you are with anything sharp.” She narrowed her eyes playfully. “Now I’m starting to think… maybe you were just bluffing.”

Harper blinked in disbelief.

“I’m not!”

“Well then, prove it.” Maya smiled, a playful challenge dancing in her eyes. “I want to see you do it.”

She folded her arms with a grin.

“Consider this your interview, If I’m impressed… I might just hire you as my personal tutor.”

Harper pouted at first, but then her expression shifted into a sharp, prideful smirk as she accepted

the challenge.

“Fine! Stay here and watch carefully.”

“Mmhmm…” Maya replied smoothly, utterly unbothered.

Harper turned and left, leaving Maya alone in the viewing room.

A few minutes later, the heavy door on the other side opened, and Harper stepped inside.

The eight members of Alpha Team immediately straightened and bowed as she walked past

them.

Anko entered a step behind her, cradling a long object carefully wrapped in a pristine black cloth

Harper’s attention shifted to the darkened glass. A confident smirk tugged at her lips, knowing

Maya was watching from the other side.

“Let’s get this over with.”

She sounded almost bored as she walked toward the two brothers sprawled across the floor,

barely clinging to consciousness after hours of relentless punishment.

Anko stepped to her side and carefully unfolded the pristine black cloth in his hands, revealing a

traditional Japanese wakizashi.

The blade gleamed beneath the dim lights, its mirror-polished surface reflecting the room with almost eerie clarity. The edge was so impossibly fine it seemed capable of slicing through the air itself. A symbol of honor, duty, and final judgment, it carried a weight far greater than the steel

from which it was forged.

Harper's hand closed around the hilt with calm familiarity.

Hiro and another man stepped forward, grabbing Yuma and Riku and forcing them upright.

After hours of relentless punishment, the brothers were little more than empty shells. Their bodies hung limp

ing to life, sustained only by the repeated doses of antidote. Death had long

sing

desperately wished for.

rs, her voice as cold as ice.

s with.”

ght of final judgment.

achi ga ubatta inochi no tame da. Inochi de harae.”

Ye you took… you will repay it with your own.

Chapter 578

In one smooth, swift motion, Harper carved through the air.

Her arm swung in one precise movement-slashing down from their chests to their stomachs, then slicing horizontally across their necks, tracing a clean, fatal letter “T” onto their flesh.

The next second, blood spurted violently from the deep gashès.

The brothers choked hopelessly on their own blood, their eyes rolling back before their limp bodies collapsed heavily onto the floor.

Maya watched through the glass, her heartbeat echoing in her ears. Harper's movements were so swift that she barely saw them.

By the time Maya's eyes caught up, it was already over.

Harper lowered the blade and, without looking back, handed it to Anko.

"Nakama-tachi mo, kore de yasuraka ni nemureru."

Our brothers can finally rest in peace.

A short while later, Harper returned to the viewing room with Anko following behind her.

Before stepping inside, she turned to him.

“Handle the rest. Make sure everything is taken care of

Anko gave a respectful nod before Harper entered the room and closed the door behind her.

The cold, commanding woman from moments ago seemed to disappear almost instantly.

Harper turned to Maya with a smug little smile and raised an eyebrow.

“Sooo…” she drawled. “Did I get the job?”

Maya stared at her for a moment before a chuckle escaped her lips. Shaking her head, she finally conceded.

“I guess.”

Harper’s face immediately lit up.

“Yay!”

She hurried over and wrapped both hands around Maya's arm, all traces of the ruthless woman Maya had just watched through the glass seemingly gone.

"After Jaime's operation, I'll take you to our training grounds and teach you the basics. But since we're leaving in a week or two, we can continue at my house."

Maya turned to her.

"Your house?" Her brows knitted together. "Isn't that a little too open? What if your neighbors see us and Think we're psychos?"

Harper burst out laughing.

"Not that house, silly! My other house."

Maya's confusion only deepened.

"What other house?"

Harper's grin widened.

"You'll see."

Before Maya could question her further, Harper tugged impatiently on her arm.

“Anyway, it’s almost five in the morning! We should head back, clean up, and maybe get some sleep.” She paused, apparently reconsidering. “Actually, forget sleeping. Come to my room. We can have some girl talk. You don’t look sleepy anyway.”

“That’s because my body still doesn’t know what time zone it’s in.”

“Exactly!” Harper declared triumphantly. “Your jet lag finally has a purpose.”

Maya laughed as Harper pulled her toward the door.

Together, they left the darkness beneath the estate behind and made their way back toward the manor, though something in Maya had quietly changed.

The world she had witnessed was no longer something to fear or turn away from. It was now a world she had chosen to understand and embrace.

With neither of them ready to sleep, they retreated to Harper’s room, where their conversation carried on well into the early morning.

By sunrise, the rest of the estate was already wide awake.

Dr. Nakamura and his team had arrived half an hour earlier, joining Dr. Anderson and the rest of the medical staff in the private medical wing.

Preparations for Jaime's surgery were well underway. The operating room was being readied, every piece of equipment carefully checked and tested, while the doctors reviewed Jaime's medical records.

They went over the surgical plan repeatedly, making sure everything was ready for the moment the donor heart arrived.

Then, shortly after seven, the news everyone had been waiting for finally came.

The heart had arrived.

Within minutes, the quiet efficiency inside the medical wing shifted into controlled urgency.

The donor heart underwent a thorough inspection while the team completed their preparations.

Finding a suitable donor had proven far more difficult than anyone had hoped, especially given Jaime's age, size, and medical condition.

Because of this, mechanical circulatory support had remained one of the options being considered while they continued waiting for a compatible heart.

Then, only days earlier, tragedy had struck northern Japan.

A powerful earthquake had devastated several small communities, leaving dozens injured and claiming several lives. Among the casualties was a teenage boy whose family, despite their unimaginable grief, had made the difficult decision to donate his organs.

Through the Takahashi family's extensive connections, word of the available heart had reached Dr.

Nakamura almost immediately. Tests soon confirmed what none of them had dared hope for-the donor was a suitable match for Jaime.

After learning about the family's circumstances, Harper quietly arranged an anonymous donation to help them rebuild what they had lost.

They would never know who had provided the money, only that someone had chosen to return a small measure of kindness after the extraordinary gift they had given another family.

From that moment, everything had moved quickly.

Arrangements were made to secure and transport the heart to Tokyo, while Dr. Nakamura's team worked around the clock to ensure everything necessary for the transplant was ready

Now, with the donor heart finally in their hands, medications were checked equipment was tested once more, and every member of the surgical team went over their final instructions.

Extra precautions had also been taken because of Jaime's rare blood type. Compatible blood was relatively scarce, so several units had been secured in advance, carefully screened, crossmatched, and reserved exclusively for his surgery.

By the time the donor heart was cleared, everything they could possibly anticipate was already in place.

Meanwhile, back inside the main manor, another concern had begun weighing on Maya.

Harper had been keeping a close eye on Damien's flight. A stretch of severe weather along their route had forced him to alter course slightly, adding nearly an hour to their original travel time.

They had initially been expected to land shortly after nine that morning, but according to the latest update, they were now running at least an hour behind schedule.

The news immediately worried Maya, but Harper was quick to reassure her.

“Relax. Damien knows what he’s doing,” Harper assured her with an easy smile. “They’re fine. They’ll be here before you know it.”

She also explained that she had already made additional preparations in case the weather worsened. Several alternate landing locations had been arranged along their route, giving Damien options if continuing directly to their original destination became impossible.

The reassurance eased some of Maya’s worry, but not all of it.

Until Damien and the others were safely on the ground, a small knot of unease remained in her chest.

Chapter 579

While Damien’s plane remained somewhere over the Pacific, the Gulfstream had already reached its destination.

Nearly two hours earlier, it had landed safely in Taiwan without incident.

James had arranged everything well before their arrival. The moment they stepped off the plane, vehicles were already waiting to take them directly to Blackwood Enterprises headquarters.

From the moment Hudson emerged wearing Damien’s face, he played his part flawlessly. His expression, mannerisms, and commanding presence gave no one reason to suspect that the man who had just arrived in Taiwan was anyone other than Damien Blackwood himself.

Monroe had also confirmed what they had anticipated.

Someone was watching them.

But rather than acknowledge the surveillance, they continued as though everything were perfectly normal, giving whoever was watching exactly the show they expected to see.

Damien Blackwood had arrived in Taiwan.

He had gone directly to Blackwood Enterprises.

And as far as anyone watching was concerned, he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

By the time Hudson and the others reached headquarters and settled into their respective positions, the first stage of their deception was firmly in place.

Confirmation of their safe arrival had brought some relief to everyone.

By eight that morning, breakfast had been laid out across the long dining table, though hardly anyone seemed particularly interested in eating.

Everyone except Jaime.

“This is torture.”

Jaime sat slumped dramatically in his chair, staring at the plates of food spread across the table as though they had personally offended him.

“I haven’t eaten since last night, and you people seriously decided to eat in front of me?”

Maya couldn’t help but smile.

“You’re the one having surgery.”

“Exactly!” Jaime protested. “Which means I should be getting special treatment.”

“You are getting special treatment,” Harper pointed out as she reached for a piece of thick, crispy bacon. You’re getting a new heart.”

Jaime narrowed his eyes at her.

That doesn’t make watching you eat that delicious piece of bacon right in front of me any less cruel.”

Harper deliberately took a large bite, closing her eyes as she chewed with exaggerated enjoyment.

“Mmm… oh, that’s good!”

Jaime swallowed hard, his eyes lingering on the bacon before he finally dragged them away and turned to Dahlia.

“Aunt Dahlia, can I at least have some orange juice?”

Dahlia gave him an apologetic smile.

“Sorry, sweetheart. Doctor’s orders.”

Jaime let out a miserable groan and slumped even farther into his chair.

A few quiet laughs traveled around the table, briefly easing the tension that had been hanging over them since morning.

Even Maya laughed, though the knot in her stomach never completely disappeared.

Today was finally here.

After all the waiting, the uncertainty, the endless tests and consultations, Jaime was getting his new heart.

She looked across the table at her brother.

He was joking. Complaining. Rolling his eyes at Harper as though this were any other morning.

But in just a few hours, the doctors would put him under anesthesia and open his chest.

Maya's smile slowly faded, and Jaime seemed to notice.

"Stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Maya asked, feigning innocence.

"Like I'm about to die."

Maya's heart clenched. "Jaime-"

"I'm serious." His expression softened. "I'm getting a new heart, May. That's a good thing."

Maya swallowed the emotion rising in her throat and forced a smile.

"I know."

"Then smile," Jaime said confidently.

So she did

Jaime immediately grinned back at her.

"That's better! At least you get to eat, unlike me." He sighed dramatically. "So pitiful."

Maya chuckled and shook her head.

Despite everything he had been through, Jaime somehow remained the same cheerful, optimistic boy she had always known. Even on the morning of the biggest operation of his life, he was still finding reasons to joke, laugh, and make everyone around him smile.

And somehow, seeing that gave Maya a little more courage too.

Before she could dwell on her worries any longer, the sound of approaching footsteps drew everyone's attention toward the entrance.

Hannah appeared at the doorway first.

"Excuse me. Madam Cecilia is here."

She stepped aside, and a moment later, Cecilia entered the dining hall.

"Good morning!" she greeted warmly.

Jaime immediately brightened at the sight of her.

"Grandma Cecili

Something night before

Cecilia’s face at the word. Even after hearing Jaime call her Grandma the something deep inside her.

with Tobias, Cecilia had gone back inside the house and locked herself in her alone with everything she was feeling.

carried a pain that was entirely her own. It did not make her grief greater than her

d she believe for a moment that Tobias had suffered any less.

Cecilia knew how deeply he had loved their daughter.

ched him suffer silently every day after Malia disappeared, burying his grief beneath pride, the stubborn belief that one day she would come home. Tobias had simply carried his pain

Ow, Cecilia knew he was breaking too.

of her had wanted to go to him, to let them finally grieve together instead of continuing to suffer parately.

But she couldn’t. Not yet.

She had her own dernons to face-vears of regret, guilt, and question she desperately wanted answers to

but knew she might ne

of Tobias's.

knew how to carry her own pain, much less share the weight

very time she closed her eyes, Malia appeared

New Heart A New Beginning

she saw the little girl who used to run into her arms. Other times, it was the young woman who ed away from their family all those years ago.

came the image that hurt the most-the daughter she would never have the chance to see again.

eventually, Cecilia stopped trying to sleep.

By the time morning came, her eyes were swollen from hours of crying. She spent what little time she had trying to conceal the evidence, refusing to let her grandchildren see her grief-especially Jaime, not on the morning of his surgery.

Whatever pain she carried would have to wait.

Today was not about the daughter she had lost, nor was it about her grief or her husband's.

Today was about the grandson she still had-and Cecilia intended to be there when he opened his eyes with a new heart beating inside his chest.

And with that new heart, she held on to a quiet hope-that it would symbolize not only a second chance at life for Jaime, but perhaps a second chance for her to finally become part of their lives.

Chapter 580

T, A New Beginning

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So she did.

Jaime immediately grinned back at her.

“That’s better! At least you get to eat, unlike me.” He sighed dramatically. “So pitiful.”

Maya chuckled and shook her head.

Despite everything he had been through, Jaime somehow remained the same cheerful, optimistid boy she had always known. Even on the morning of the biggest operation of his life, he was still finding reasons to joke, laugh, and make everyone around him smile.

And somehow, seeing that gave Maya a little more courage too.

Before she could dwell on her worries any longer, the sound of approaching footsteps drew everyone’s attention toward the entrance.

Hannah appeared at the doorway first.

“Excuse me. Madam Cecilia is here.”

She stepped aside, and a moment later, Cecilia entered the dining hall.

“Good morning!” she greeted warmly.

Jaime immediately brightened at the sight of her.

“Grandma Cecilia! You’re here!”

Something flickered across Cecilia’s face at the word. Even after hearing Jaime call her Grandma the night before, it still touched something deep inside her.

The night had not been kind to her.

After her conversation with Tobias, Cecilia had gone back inside the house and locked herself in her room, needing to be alone with everything she was feeling.

As a mother, she carried a pain that was entirely her own. It did not make her grief greater than her husband’s, nor did she believe for a moment that Tobias had suffered any less.

Of all people, Cecilia knew how deeply he had loved their daughter.

She had watched him suffer silently every day after Malia disappeared, burying his grief beneat pride, anger, and the stubborn belief that one day she would come home. Tobias had simply carried his pain differently.

And now, Cecilia knew he was breaking too.

Part of her had wanted to go to him, to let them finally grieve together instead of continuing to suffer separately.

But she couldn’t. Not yet.

She had her own demons to face-years of regret, guilt, and questions she desperately wanted

answers to but knew she might never receive. She barely knew how to carry her own pain, much

less share the weight of Tobias’s.

So, for one night, Cecilia had chosen to face it alone.

But no matter how hard she tried, sleep refused to come. Every time she closed her eyes, Malia appeared before her.

Sometimes she saw the little girl who used to run into her arms. Other times, it was the young

woman who had walked away from their family all those years ago.

And then came the image that hurt the most-the daughter she would never have the chance to

see again.

Eventually, Cecilia stopped trying to sleep.

By the time morning came, her eyes were swollen from hours of crying. She spent what little time she had trying to conceal the evidence, refusing to let her grandchildren see her grief-especially

Jaime, not on the morning of his surgery.

Whatever pain she carried would have to wait.

Today was not about the daughter she had lost, nor was it about her grief or her husband's.

Today was about the grandson she still had-and Cecilia intended to be there when he opened his eyes with a new heart beating inside his chest.

And with that new heart, she held on to a quiet hope that it would symbolize not only a second chance at life for Jaime, but perhaps a second chance for her to finally become part of their lives.