The mid-morning sun spilled across the semi-open veranda of Hawthorne Keep, tinting the world in warm gold. It was rare to get such good sunlight in the U.K. during this time of the year, so I decided to have this meeting outdoors.

Howard Stringer sat opposite me at the polished wooden table, his half-finished iced tea beading with condensation. His expression was calm, but his tone was blunt when he finally gave me his opinion.

“The Japanese would never let you own the company,” he said flatly.

“Oh?” I frowned, leaning back slightly. “Why so? They didn’t have a problem when they acquired Columbia Pictures in the 90s, so why the hypocrisy?”

Stringer exhaled and shifted in his seat. “I love my job, but almost every day it is made painfully clear to me that I am not one of them. Japan is a very homogeneous society. They do not have the diversity that the US or the UK have, so it is difficult for them to accept a non-Japanese taking the reins over them. My appointment was very controversial as well. Both print and TV media ran multiple stories about me for months.”

I nodded slowly, swirling the ice in my glass. “But the Japanese love me. I have not seen a more loyal fanbase anywhere in the world, be it my music or my films like [Echoes of You] or [Harry Potter].”

Stringer chuckled knowingly. “Let me guess, it is mostly young women?”

That… was true.

When I did not answer, he went on. “Older Japanese men, the ones who are in charge of companies like Sony and who influence the media, will not care if you are a beloved figure. If you acquired a controlling stake or even hinted at the intention, they will resist for sure. It would not even be a question. With me as the CEO and you as the owner, it would be seen as a British invasion or something along those lines.”

I considered his words for a few seconds before leaning forward. “What if I appoint a Japanese person as CEO? I will not run the company anyway.”

Stringer raised an eyebrow, his voice tinged with amusement. “You are asking me to help you replace me?”

“Hypothetically,” I clarified. “If I promised them that, would they be less resistant to me buying them out?”

He took a measured pause, eyes narrowing slightly as he weighed the thought. Finally, he shook his head. “I cannot say for sure. What I do know is that even if there are no laws against it, the Japanese media will definitely not portray it in a positive light. The regulators will do

everything they can to delay the acquisition. It may even take upward of two years to get it done. And although Sony's value may have dropped due to turbulent markets, no one will sell it to you at that price. At the very least, it will be valued at thirty-five billion dollars."

The worst part was that I already knew all of this. Our due diligence team had outlined every one of these scenarios and valuations. At present, Sony Corp's market cap hovered around twenty-five billion dollars. Ten billion in premium was steep, but not unfair given their assets. Moreover, I did not need the whole company. A 51 percent stake would be enough.

The real problem was not the money; it was my image in Japan and the time the acquisition would demand. A two-year time frame was a lot for what I had in mind.

Stringer leaned forward again, lowering his voice slightly as if letting me in on a secret. "How about this? You make a bid for Sony Corp's two major American assets: Sony Pictures and Sony Music. I will take the proposal to the board, and they can deliberate on your terms. Because let's face it, we both know that's the part of our company that you really want."

I studied him carefully. The way he phrased it, it almost felt like there was something more he was trying to say beneath the surface.

"Why would they accept that?" I asked.

"The markets are in a tumble," Stringer continued after a brief pause, his fingers drumming lightly on the arm of his chair. "Sony is facing a little… liquidity issue. So if your offer is generous enough, I can persuade them to consider it."

The reason for their liquidity issue is probably due to the extensive investments they had made in developing their latest PlayStation.

"Didn't you just finish acquiring BMG?" I asked, tilting my head slightly. "And now you want to sell it off to us?"

"We acquired it to sell," Stringer clarified, his tone matter-of-fact. "We offered BMG the option to buy the company from us, but they declined. We had a few more interested parties, but they pulled out because they wanted a full 100 percent stake, so we bought out BMG's stake to sell it again."

"And now those parties have backed out as well," I said, connecting the dots aloud. "That's why you want me to buy it."

He didn't confirm or deny, but the faint curve of his lips was all the confirmation I needed.

The more I thought about his offer, the more enticing it seemed. There was another problem that made me second-guess the idea of buying Sony outright. At its core, it was a tech company, and I had absolutely no idea how to run one. My last meeting with Sundar Pichai had made it abundantly clear to me that I needed to step back from areas I knew little about and hand the

reins to people who actually understood the business. Acquiring the Japanese firm's tech assets would only give me headaches I didn't need.

And I definitely didn't want that.

The kid in me longed to get his hands on PlayStation, but I knew the company was better off in the hands of the Japanese, who actually knew what to do with the business. While I should stick to the business I knew: movies and music.

"Alright," I said finally, nodding at Stringer before picking up a folder lying between us. "I have reviewed the valuation reports from M&A experts on both sides, and the combined worth of Sony Pictures and Sony Music comes to about nine billion dollars, if we are being generous. I'll add another two billion to that and offer eleven billion in total for both companies. Does that sound fair to you?"

"Very fair," Stringer agreed with a small nod. "I'll pass it on to our board and see what they have to say about it."

"Alright." I stood and extended my hand, and we shook firmly.

"You know," Stringer said suddenly, his tone lightening, "I'm going golfing this Sunday with a friend of mine. Would you like to come along? My friend is a hedge fund manager and a huge fan of your investment strategies. It would be a great way to relax."

"I'm not much of a golfer," I admitted with a wry smile. "But my dad is. At least, he used to be."

"Then bring him along," Stringer offered. "I'd love to chat with him as well."

I was tempted to decline immediately, but I knew golf was an elite sport, played by many of the wealthy, less for the love of the game and more for the connections. Now, unfortunately, I was counted among the world's top ten richest people. That changed the dynamics.

Ever since my wealth had been made public, it had become exhausting to talk to people without second-guessing their motives. No one wanted to point out my flaws or mistakes anymore. I had, overnight, become untouchable and perfect. A casual rendezvous with the top 0.1% might not be such a bad thing.

After some thought, I nodded. "Okay, send me the details and I'll ask Dad if he's interested in coming along."

"Great."

That reminded me of something else. I had been meaning to have an important conversation with Dad and Mum, and since I was free from filming [Deathly Hallows] today, there was no better time than now.

(Break)

My parents exchanged a quick glance before Dad leaned forward slightly and asked, “Are you sure about this?”

“Yes,” I said firmly, nodding for emphasis. “I need you to take over as CEO of the movie division of Phoenix and all its subsidiaries, whether it is Marvel or any other studio we acquire in the coming months. I have seen what a sharp businessman you are from the way you handled production on [Harry Potter] and [Twilight]. I am certain you would do a great job with the studio as well. I don’t trust anyone as much as I trust you.”

Dad’s gaze drifted downward, his expression thoughtful.

Mum was the next to speak. “But why? I’m not saying your Dad wouldn’t be great at it, but I always thought…” She trailed off.

“Yes?” I prompted.

She exhaled slowly. “We never really talked about it, but we assumed that now you’re as wealthy as you are, you wouldn’t take on as many acting roles as before. We thought you might shift toward producing—maybe focusing more on Marvel and whatever else is next for you.”

I shook my head. “That is exactly why I’m giving this to you both. Dad can handle the movie production side, and you can take over the TV division. I love acting too much to focus on film production. If you say yes, Dad will need to be in Los Angeles, because that’s where the big players are. And I don’t want you two living apart, so we would all move to LA as a family once [Harry Potter] wraps. It would be perfect. You’d both be doing what you love most, whether it’s television or film, while I get to focus on what I love most—acting.”

They shared another hesitant glance. I understood why. Despite having a permanent home in LA, we had spent most of our lives in the UK.

Even with all three of us holding dual British and American passports, leaving the country we had called home for so long was no small decision.

“I don’t want you to think I’m forcing this on you,” I added, my tone softening. “If you don’t feel comfortable, or if you simply don’t want the responsibility, say the word and I’ll hire someone else to run it.”

Mum sighed, her lips curving in a reluctant smile. “It’s not that. I love the idea. But…what about [Game of Thrones]?”

“You can write and supervise it from LA,” I pointed out. “Just hire a dedicated team to oversee actual production.”

Mum silently mulled over the idea.

“You’ll need a bigger, safer house, for one,” Dad interjected.

“I’ve already handled that,” I said, meeting his gaze. “I bought us a new home.”

His brows lifted. “You did?”

I nodded. “Casa Encantada. I paid one hundred and fifty million for it. It’s considered the most expensive house in the U.S., located in Bel-Air. It has multiple bedrooms, guest suites, and staff quarters. More than enough space for our needs. Once we move there, we won’t have to think about upgrading ever again. Right now, I have hired multiple security companies to make sure it will be one of the safest homes in the world by the time [Harry Potter] wraps.”

I turned to Mum. “And, just like you wanted, I’ve made sure it will run sustainably with solar energy and other green systems.”

In truth, installing solar felt more like a gesture than a necessity for someone at our level. It was hard to ignore the irony when our multiple private jet flights each year easily outweighed any environmental benefit we may derive from a solar-powered home. At least I was honest enough with myself to admit that. Mum… not so much.

But on the bright side, we would not be dependent on the government for electricity if there were ever a prolonged blackout.

“But that’s *your* house,” Mum pointed out.

I shook my head. “No, it’s *our* house. I don’t see the point of buying such a large estate for just two people to live in. It will have plenty of room for me, Scarlett, the two of you, Evan, your relatives, Scarlett’s relatives, or even friends who want to stay over for a night or a few days. And don’t think I don’t know how much you missed me when I moved here alone.”

My eyes swept across the familiar walls and high windows of the Hawthorne Keep’s sitting room, sunlight falling in soft beams through the drapes.

“That was another reason I had asked you to move in with me after the attack.”

Mum sniffled once before walking over and wrapping me in a tight hug. “Of course I’ll come live with you, love. I’d choose that any day over living alone in London.”

My eyes watered a little at that as I patted her back gently. While Mum had not told me about it, Dad had given me a detailed account of her recent mood swings that started ever since I left home. Her therapy sessions had helped, but why rely on therapy alone when I had a very simple solution to the problem?

I glanced at Dad, silently asking his opinion. His deadpan look clearly said, *How can I say no now?*

“And what about the job?” I asked, releasing Mum from the hug. “Do you want it?”

“Yes, I do,” Mum said, her voice firm now. “I want it.”

When we both looked to Dad, he sighed and gave a small nod. “I’ll do it. But you have to promise me you won’t go around acquiring companies willy-nilly without consulting me first.”

“I promise.” I extended a hand toward him, and he shook it.

A lull settled over us as we sat together in the living room, the only sounds the faint tick of the clock and the soft crackle from the fireplace.

“Have you talked to Scarlett about this move?” Mum asked casually.

“I have,” I confirmed. “She doesn’t mind. Right now, she’s too busy perfecting her ballet skills for [The Black Swan], which, by the way, will be the next movie Phoenix produces.”

Dad nodded thoughtfully. “I’ll ask Tobias to send me the details of all our upcoming projects so I can look them over. Anything else?”

“I’m playing golf on Sunday with Howard Stringer, the CEO of Sony. Want to come along?”

Dad raised an eyebrow. “Do you even know how to play golf?”

I shook my head. “That’s why I’m asking you to come, so I’m not completely miserable out there.”

He chuckled. “Fine. I’ll come.”

“Thank you,” I said with a relieved exhale I hadn’t realized I was holding. “This is important. If Stringer leaves that game happy, he’ll push the Sony board to accept the sale on our terms, and hopefully they’ll give me a reply within a week. And then there’s that asshole Rupert Murdoch, who’s quoting an insane price because he knows I want X-Men. He probably runs the most unethical company in the world, yet acts self-righteous, like some godfather of news.” I shook my head. “As I said, an asshole.”

“Come on,” Mum said with a small smirk. “He’s just a cantankerous old man set in his ways. He’ll be dead in a decade. Buy his company then. None of his kids is that capable.”

Her comment sparked a thought. The future of News Corp and Rupert Murdoch. The more I considered it, the more perfect it seemed, at least in my head.

“Hey, Dad?” I asked. “Since you’re going across the Atlantic to visit [Eclipse]’s production on Monday, do you mind making a stop in New York?”

“Whatever for?”

I grinned. “How do you feel about a little blackmail?”

Most parents might have been outraged at the suggestion. Dad only looked mildly intrigued. This was, after all, the same man who once used a photoshopped image of me to get my

childhood bullies expelled from school. Dad might have been many things, but a saint was not one of them, and he had never minded getting his hands a little dirty.

“Blackmail who?”

As I explained my plan, both my parents’ eyes widened in surprise.

(Break)

It had been a strange morning. Ever since I woke up, there was this low, heavy thrum in my chest, like the day itself was warning me something would go wrong.

Beside me, Dad steered the golf cart with the ease of a man who had done it a thousand times before.

“Remind me,” I said, watching him handle the wheel, “exactly how good are you at golf?”

He grinned. “Back in Los Angeles, I played almost every week with my old pals.”

“And you never invited me?”

“I did,” Dad said, chuckling. “You were a kid, and you told me you weren’t interested in ‘swinging a stick into the ground.’ You wanted acting lessons with me and nothing else. Sports just weren’t your thing. Later, when your schedule got insane, I stopped asking.”

Funny how I had no memory of that conversation.

“So why didn’t you play here in the U.K.?”

He shrugged. “My circle’s different here. Most of my old golf buddies are in L.A.”

The cart slowed to a stop. Ahead, two men stood beside another cart. Behind us, two more golf carts rolled to a halt—my security detail keeping pace.

Dad and I climbed out.

“Troy! Steve!” Howard Stringer’s handshake was warm and enthusiastic. “Glad you could make it.”

“The pleasure’s ours,” Dad replied. “Haven’t played in a while—today’s perfect. Thanks for having us.”

Stringer nodded, then gestured to the man beside him. “This is Richard, an old friend. Runs a huge hedge fund here in London.”

Richard stepped forward, extending his hand. “I’m a huge fan of your work, Troy. Not the movies, the stock market. You’re a legend.”

I froze. His hand was in mine, but I wouldn't shake.

Because I knew that face.

Richard Summers. My adoptive father from my first life. The man I had once spent years searching for after he ran away. The man who, alongside his wife Patricia, had left me to rot, trading me for their own safety.

The man whose greed had pushed me into the one path I never wanted: the adult entertainment industry.

I didn't just hate him. I loathed him with all my being.

AN: For multiple reasons, I will post chapters now only on the website, or through Google Drive links. Posting directly on Patreon has become a hassle where I have to think about every word before posting.