

# Chapter One: Mall

Van Pyun-Multani stepped out of his truck, still in his school uniform. Slamming the door, he watched Daria skip around the back of it, walking towards the mall's entrance together.

"I'm just saying...Harpy is a close second to The Benefactor." The short girl continued their conversation from earlier, crossing her arms.

"No...no, she's not." The tall male shook his head, pushing the mall door open and holding it for her.

"I mean, she's cute. She's got like Bohemian beach girl vibes. That not good enough for you, man?" She questioned.

"Nah. The Benefactor is the best. No competition." Van looked around for a bathroom, sucking his teeth. "Speaking of The Benefactor, I have to go piss."

"I feel like those two things aren't related." Daria stared up at him, shaking her head, her two French braids swinging with it. "They got the gender-neutral bathrooms."

"Why would I go in one of those?" He started to walk towards them, raising an eyebrow.

"So I can stand outside and bother you. Go piss, girl." She popped her hand on her hip, following him to the bathrooms. Once inside, she sat on the counter, tapping away at her digital watch. "How's your...fabric ripping going?"

"It's not. I can figure out how to rip the holes, but...I can't really figure out how to take things out...or even how to find things. It's complicated. How's DISH going?"

"DISH is going good. I'm wearing part of her right now."

Coming out of the stall, Van raised his eyebrow, going over to the sinks. "No, you're not..."

"Yes, I am." Daria pulled her uniform sleeve up, showing the iridescent purple forearm plate. "I was working on her in the gym today." She hopped down from the counter, holding it up to his face.

"Shame. Should have been getting gains. Like me." The brunette tossed his paper towel in the trashcan, leaning against the wall and starting to do push-ups against it.

"You go to the gym once a week." She hip-bumped him, knocking him into the trashcan. Holding back a snort, she stared at him. "You're real strong."

"Shut up." Van started to walk out of the bathroom, his face a light shade of red as he held back laughter himself.

"Where'd your sister say she was going?"

"One of those dress stores. She's trying to find a dress for the summer dance."

"Wanna go get some food and then find her?"

"Yeah. Those Korean corn dogs are calling my name."

Walking alongside him, Daria whistled a tune, bopping her head. "You know what that is?"

"No."

"It's the Benefactor's theme song."

"He doesn't have a-"

"I made it up."

"You made up a theme song?"

"Uh...you designed a whole new suit for him."

"No, no..." Shaking his hands, Van turned to look down at her. "I did not. I designed a hero suit for myself."

"It looks...just like his." The purple-haired girl poked her lips out.

"It doesn't. I designed it after the sheriffs and deputies of the wild west."

"Van."

"What, man?" He slowed as they approached the line to the food court.

"It looks just like his..." Daria scoffed. "Like...what do you think his is designed after?"

"Okay, and yours is designed after what then?"

"I'm making it as I go. It's purple, it's pretty, and it's cute." She made a flower with her hands, making her face the center.

"Yeah, sure. When I learn how to sew and hone in my powers."

"Yeah, whenever that happens." Stepping in front of him to order, the short girl smiled brightly at the cashier. "Hi, Charlotte! How are you?"

"I'm good!" Charlotte smiled back, nodding. "You?"

"I'm great! Can we get three of the double Korean corn dogs? Oh, and lemonade with each."

"Of course!" She started to ring her up, glancing up at the two. "Are you guys coming to pick up Venus?" The girl looked past her to Van, who nodded. "She just passed by not too long ago. I'll bring you guys your food in just a second."

"Thank you so much, darling." Daria waved as she went to the back, stepping to the other side. "She's so pretty."

"She's basically my little sister. I can't really say that about her." Van shrugged softly, glancing around.

"But I can." The purple-haired girl leaned back against the counter, nodding.

"Alright, here's your corn dogs and your lemonades! I'm gonna go ahead and finish up here for my break, then join you guys. I'm supposed to help her find her dress."

The brunette gave a small nod and started to make his way out of the court, walking towards one of the dress stores with the lemonade in his hand.

"Should we bring messy Korean hot corn dogs into a dress store? That kinda sounds like a disaster, man." The short girl looked into the bag at the corn dogs, glancing up at her friend.

"No. We'll wait outside." Van walked up to the dress store, peeking in. "Actually. Hold these." He handed her the lemonade and walked into the store. Spotting his sister, he came up behind her, patting her shoulder. "Venus?"

"Hm?" The tall, dark-haired girl didn't even glance up from the dress she was examining, recognizing her brother's voice.

"You find anything you like?" He crossed his arms, peeking over her shoulder at the dress.

"I'm too tall for all of them..." Venus sighed softly, looking up at her brother with a sad expression.

"What do you mean? Can't they alter it for you?"

"I think it's too expensive." She stared at a dress longingly, turning back to him.

"I'll fix it for you. Let's go get it." The older brother pointed to the counter, pulling his wallet out.

"Are you sure? I think it might be too hard, Van." She hesitantly grabbed the dress off of its rack, glancing around the store.

"I'll figure it out." Van gave a wave of his hand, taking it from her and beginning to approach the counter. Placing the dress down, he pulled out his card, smiling at the cashier. "Hi, ma'am." Once she greeted him back, he turned to his sister. "Do you have shoes?" He swapped out his card for his mom's, tucking his back into his pocket.

"I don't have shoes, earrings, or jewelry."

"We'll get it all, don't worry. It's only September, Venus. This will all be done before homecoming." He gave a nod of his head, wrapping his arm around her and handing his mother's card to the woman.

Venus hummed in appreciation, laying her head on his shoulder. "Have you seen Charlotte?"

"She's getting off now." The brunette boy grabbed the bag and receipt, thanked the cashier, and started walking out.

"Oh, sweet!" She grabbed the bag, nearly bumping into Charlotte, and looked up. "Charlie! This is the dress I chose."

Van walked past the two girls and grabbed his lemonade, sipping it and motioning for Daria to sit on the bench. Sitting beside her, he grabbed his corn dog from the bag. "She found a dress, and the alterations are too expensive. I told her I'd do them."

"You need my help?"

"Yeah, I was gonna ask if you would."

Daria sighed and shook her head, her braids slapping his shoulders. "I would never." She watched as the two girls squealed at the sight of the dress, pulling her own corn dog out. "I wish I was that excited for homecoming."

"I haven't been excited about homecoming since I was taken freshman year." Van scoffed softly, turning towards the front of the mall. He shifted his attention to a group of teens standing at the front, all wearing cherry-red jackets.

"You know, why are they so excited? Do they have dates?"

"They're going with each other..." The brunette leaned back, his eyes narrowing slightly as he watched the group.

"So, are they going together or *together*?"

"Honestly, I don't know the answer to that one." He muttered, still focused on the group of boys. "Who's this knock-off K-POP group up there?"

"Hm?" Daria turned her attention towards the front, snorting as she laid eyes on them. "They look like they're about to perform Mirotic."

Van hummed in agreement, watching as the teens headed into a store. Finishing off his corn dog, he turned back to his sister and her friend, raising his eyebrow as they approached. "Do they match?"

"Yeah! Charlie's dress is a pretty similar shade to my blue, so we'll match perfectly." Venus plopped on his lap, grabbing her corn dog. "Are you going to homecoming as well?"

"Uh...probably not...I don't have a date or any desire to go."

"You don't need a date." The little sister waved her hand at him, shaking his head.

"Yeah, but if I had a date, I'd probably wanna go." He shrugged, tossing his corn dog stick into the trash can. "But I don't, so...meh."

"Why not go with Daria?" Charlotte tilted her head, her bangs falling into her face.

"Uh...no. I don't want people to think my date is my daughter." Van looked down at Daria, shrugging slightly. "Sorry, D."

"Nah, I don't want people to think my date is my dad. It's mutual." The shortest girl handed him her corn dog stick, sipping her lemonade. She patted the spot next to her for Charlotte and leaned back against the bench. "What's next? Shoes, jewelry?"

"Probably shoes." Venus sat back against her brother, sipping from his lemonade. "I don't want shoes that are too high, or I'll be too tall."

"Nothing's wrong with being really tall." The brunette shook his head, looking behind the girls and towards the store the group of teens had gone in. He watched them for a second, lightly scooting his sister off his lap. "Did you see where those guys went, Daria?"

"They went into that emo store you're staring at." Daria looked up at him, glancing towards the store. "Any particular reason you've asked?"

"They're weirding me out..." He muttered, specifically to his friend. "Maybe we should head out." He motioned for his little sisters to get up, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "We can go to that jewelry store near the Walmart." As the two stood, he looked at Daria, giving a small shake of his head.

The group of teens walked out of the store, all wearing red masks in the style of the Cheshire cat. Turning toward the end of the mall, one of them, in a red jean jacket, climbed onto a bench holding a megaphone.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Van muttered, grabbing Venus and Charlotte’s hands. Spinning around, he faced the other exit, face scrunching up in frustration at the sight of a Red Cheshire masked boy in a trench coat. “Fuck...” He mumbled.

“Good afternoon!” The teen on the bench spoke through the megaphone, stepping from the back of the chair to the edge of the fountain. “I would like to inform everyone inside the mall that this is a Red Cheshire production. It’ll take about 20 minutes with cooperation and maybe 45 minutes with defiance. If anyone would like to defy, I’ll inform you that our armed sniper behind you guards the back exit, and our Kazan Witch is guarding the side exit. As this project’s director, I aim to extract all the money from these stores and exit swiftly. Any objections?”

The mall was deadly silent, with most of the people surrounding the area glancing between the back and front exits. Suddenly, a teenager dashed toward the back exit, attempting to dodge the armed man.

The armed man gun butted the teenager, causing a gasp from the crowd.

“Oh, so we’ll be making a mess today. Understood.” The teen hopped down from the fountain, pointing to the taller man in the leather jacket.

Quickly, the taller man pulled his pistol out of his holster, shooting a man near them in the head.

Charlotte gasped and clasped onto Van, looking up at him with widened eyes. “Should we...”

Van went to glanced around at the other two, his eyes closing in visible frustration. “Where is Daria?” He mumbled, staring at the spot she had previously been in.