Intern 211

Chapter 211

He lowered his gaze, eyes fixed on the floor, as if the words themselves had anchored him

there.

“That incident shattered her. She was in a coma for a month, and when she woke… her mind had snapped. She was haunted by that night-screaming, hurting herself, even attempting to take her own life. Eventually, they placed her in a mental institution.”

Then he looked up at Maya, her face pale, eyes glistening, tears threatening to fall.

“I never loved her the way she wanted me to, but I still cared for her, Maya-as a brother, as a friend. We grew up together. I watched her grow from a child into a woman. What happened to her… it affected me too. I felt for her, for what she’d become. So… almost every day, Nick and I would visit her, check on her, make sure she was surviving… make sure someone cared, even if it wasn’t the way she had hoped.”

Then the softness in his eyes hardened. His jaw tightened, the muscle twitching.

“Then… almost three months later, an outside enemy struck. Someone who wanted to destabilize the peace between our families. They knew Cassandra was the Volkovs’ only daughter-the beloved princess, their heir-and that she was a weakness they could exploit against us… against the Four Families. And they did. They took her.”

His eyes darkened, the room tightening with the gravity of his words. Silence pressed in, everyone listening, breaths held.

“They… did things I can’t even begin to describe.” His voice dropped to a low, ragged growl, each word dripping with a fury he had long buried-something primal, cold, and unforgiving.

“We tried everything we could to save her. Every resource, every ounce of time and effort. from all four families-we threw it all at her. But the enemies…” His jaw tightened, eyes narrowing with a cold edge. “They were always one step ahead.”

A silence followed, heavy, suffocating. He drew in a shallow breath, forcing himself to

continue.

“And then… one day… I got a message.” His voice dropped, low and haunted. “Anonymous. Nothing in it-just a code.” His fingers twitched against his leg, as if he were still clutching the paper. “We worked on it for days. Weeks. But… nothing. Nothing made sense.”

He paused, eyes lowering, shadows flickering across his face. “Finally… as a last resort, I reached out to the Takahashis.”

Another silence, longer this time.

“At first… they refused. They didn’t want to get involved-especially because this had everything to do with the Volkovs. There’s always been a wedge between their families. They never truly got along, but each stayed in their lane… kept things civil.” His voice tightened, carrying a trace of bitterness.

“But my mother…” His jaw clenched slightly. “She stepped in. She’s close to Mrs. Takahashi- they’ve been best friends since childhood. She begged her, pleaded… asked her to convince her husband. And… considering she has a daughter of her own, her maternal instincts kicked in. Eventually… she agreed to talk to him.”

Harper’s fingers twitched slightly on her lap, a faint tightening around the edge of her glass. She said nothing, but the brief flicker in her eyes-almost imperceptible-hinted at a memory buried deep, one only she could recognize.

His throat worked, the words thick, almost stuck. “And eventually… he agreed.”

“They managed to crack the code. It was coordinates-nothing else. Just numbers.”

He paused, shoulders heavy, as if the memory itself pressed down on him. “We went immediately… though we had no idea what we’d find.”

“When we got there… the place was empty. And Cassandra…” His voice dropped, rough with memory. “…she was tied to a pole. Naked. Barely breathing. Her pulse was weak, her body bruised, wounded.”

He flexed his hand unconsciously, as if still feeling the knots beneath his fingers. “I was the one who untied her. She opened her eyes for just a moment… smiled at me, and said she was glad I finally came for her. She apologized to her father… and then… to me.”

His words faltered. His breath hitched.

“Before she took her last breath.”

Silence.

He forced the last words out, his voice breaking.

“She… she died in my arms.”

He let the words hang in the room, heavy, dark. Silence followed, thick and suffocating, as if the very walls were absorbing the grief and fury in his voice.

Maya’s chest constricted, a sharp stab of sorrow and disbelief cutting through her. Her eyes shimmered, wide and uncomprehending-shock, hurt, and pity tangled into one. Her lips

parted, trembling.

“Damien…” The name caught in her throat, fragile and broken.

She shook her head, tears welling, threatening to spill. “I… I’m sorry. I didn’t know… Cassandra … what she went through, what all of you endured-what you went through…” Her voice faltered, dropping to a barely audible whisper. “I… I can’t even begin to imagine.”

Damien’s eyes darkened, the warmth in them eclipsed by a shadow of grief. His voice was low, taut with sorrow. “That day… we didn’t just lose a friend,” he said, each word deliberate, heavy. “We lost a sister too.”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, his usually controlled features betraying a flicker of grief and fury. His eyes, sharp and dark, mirrored the pain in Damien’s, but there was also a simmering rage -anger at the injustice, at the cruelty of it all.

Damien’s jaw clenched, his voice dropping lower, almost a growl. “Viktor put the blame on me. He knew the truth, but it was easier to condemn me than to face his own daughter’s mistakes. And I… I started blaming myself too.”

He paused, eyes dropping to the floor, his voice thick with regret. “I started asking myself… what if Viktor’s right? What if I had forced myself to return her feelings? What if I’d just tolerated it-pretended-loved her the way she wanted me to? What if I tried harder… really tried… and learned to love her the way she needed?”

His voice wavered, almost a whisper. “Maybe… maybe she’s still alive now. Maybe we already have our family. Kids… a life together… maybe…

He swallowed hard, the weight of memory pressing down. “Maybe, none of it would’ve happened.”

Maya's chest tightened, a flicker of something bitter surfacing-jealousy, or perhaps remorse. She could have been me, her heart ached at the thought. Her place in Damien's life could have been Cassandra's. The space she now occupied, the closeness she cherished… it could have belonged to her.

She swallowed hard, the weight of that thought pressing down like a stone. Yet beneath the sting of jealousy, a fierce determination ignited. I'm here. He chose me. He chose to fight for me, to fight for us.

No shadow of the past-no ghost from yesterday-will steal our happiness, our future.

Chapter 212

Maya exhaled shakily, letting the words settle in her bones. But the silence that followed was heavy, pressing in from all sides. Damien's shoulders rose and fell, each breath jagged, as if the memories clawing at him refused to stay buried.

He exhaled again, a harsher, broken sound.

"Grief. Anger. Guilt." His jaw tightened, voice dropping into a low growl. "For two years, those three consumed me. They dragged me into the darkest parts of myself."

His eyes hardened, distant-haunted. "I made it my mission to hunt them all. Every last one. To make them feel what they did to her-tenfold, a hundredfold. I was uncontrollable. I would've killed anyone who stood in my way. It was as if I'd turned off my humanity. Nothing mattered. Not innocence. Not collateral damage. All I saw was blood. All I craved was vengeance."

Maya's chest tightened, aching at the confession.

Then his gaze shifted to Ashcroft, his voice dropping, edged with steel. “Nick was the one who pulled me back. He promised to help me find the ones responsible-and we did, one by one.” His tone turned lethal. “And when we finally reached the head of it all… I delivered him to Viktor myself.”

He paused, the weight of his words thick in the air. “Viktor exacted his justice-ruthless, final. He slaughtered everyone tied to that man, innocent or not. If a drop of the enemy’s blood ran in their veins, he killed them. In front of him. He spared no one… before killing the enemy

himself.”

His jaw flexed, something darker flickering in his eyes. “Nick and I were there. We witnessed everything. He said it was for Cassandra-that we needed to see it with our own eyes, to understand what vengeance really is.”

Damien’s lips curved in a bitter, hollow smile. “That was the moment he began to trust me again… but only under one condition.”

Maya’s heart squeezed, her breath trembling. “Wh… what condition?”

Damien’s eyes flickered with something raw, almost wounded. “That I would never fall in love. That in the eyes of the world, Cassandra would remain my one and only love-the love I lost.”

Maya’s lungs stalled mid-draw, shock flashing through her. “Wh-what? Did you-did you agree to that?”

His shoulders lowered, tension bleeding out like surrender. “At the time… yes. To keep the peace. To keep the families from tearing each other apart. But the truth?” His jaw locked, voice dropping low and rough. “I was drowning in anger, in guilt-so much that I twisted it into something else. I told myself I was doing it for Cassandra, that it was the right thing. That carrying the weight meant something. That maybe… I loved her. But it wasn’t love. It was a lie I clung to. A blur of grief and rage that made me lose sight of reality-and fed me fantasy instead.”

A shadow cut across his gaze, dark and unyielding. “I convinced myself I wasn’t built for love. That it was nothing more than an empty word-one I’d never speak, never feel. Anyone who dared to love me was damned the moment they did. That’s why it was easy to agree… because I never believed in it. If I failed to give Cassandra the love she wanted, then it only proved I was incapable of giving it to anyone else.”

He let out a slow, measured breath. “Since then, Viktor and I have kept it civil. We don’t cross paths. He stays in his lane, I stay in mine.”

Then his eyes shifted to hers-softened, yet piercing, as if seeing straight into her soul. Every unspoken word trembled on the edge of his gaze. “Until…”

Maya’s breath hitched, her chest tightening as understanding blossomed like wildfire. “…Until you met me.”

He held her gaze, unflinching, his voice dropping low-soft, yet heavy with undeniable truth. Yes… until I met you. Until I fell completely in love with you.”

Chapter 213

Slowly, he moved-kneeling before her. His hands closed around hers, firm, almost desperate, as if letting go would mean losing her entirely. His eyes locked on hers, no walls, no armor- just the raw, unguarded man beneath.

“Maya… you’re the first person I’ve ever truly loved. Something I never thought I had the right to feel. It wasn’t duty. It wasn’t expectation. It wasn’t forced. It was mine. Real. I didn’t plan it. I couldn’t control it. I just… felt it.”

A rough exhale left him, almost a low, self-mocking laugh, remembering how she had undone him from the start. “Please forgive me for disrupting your life. I tried to stop it-believe me, I did. The moment I saw you, you disarmed me. You got under my skin. I couldn’t think, couldn’t focus… you consumed me every damn second. You were a distraction I didn’t know how to fight.”

His grip on her hands tightened, as if anchoring himself to her very being. “That’s why I had you transferred-out of sight, out of mind. Or so I told myself. But the farther I tried to distance myself from you, the stronger the pull became. You’re gravity, Maya-inescapable, relentless. Like a drug, the more you weren’t around, the more I craved you.”

He held her gaze, searching her eyes as if trying to imprint every detail onto his soul. His chest rose and fell, heavy with longing and vulnerability, and his voice trembled just slightly despite the intensity behind it. “And in the end… I made my choice. I chose you. I chose to fight for you. I don’t want to exist without you. Every part of me… belongs to you.”

His voice roughened, weighted with fierce tenderness. “All I’ve ever wanted was to give you the future you deserve. Quiet. Peaceful. Safe. Even if…” he swallowed hard, a flicker of pain darkening his eyes, “…even if you choose to live it without me.”

His hands clutched hers tighter, desperation bleeding through every ounce of strength in his grip. Sadness carved itself into his gaze, sharp and unrelenting. “I crossed lines I swore I’d never cross to build that future. I wanted to shield you, to keep you untouched by this world. But…” His voice faltered, breaking under the weight of his own failure. A ragged, shuddered breath escaped him. “I failed… because I wasn’t fast enough. And now… they’re-”

Maya's throat tightened, but instead of crumbling, something inside her snapped. Her heart hammered with fury as she cut him off, her voice sharp, unwavering. "They're after me. They want to use me against you. To break me just to wound you. Because Viktor-" her eyes flashed, no longer clouded with fear, "-he can't stand that you've found happiness when he's lost his daughter."

Damien's eyes flicked to hers, tense, sharp-but not entirely steady. "Yes," he admitted, voice

Clair

low, almost grudging. "To them… you're leverage. A weapon. A reminder of everything I was told I could never have."

He reached for her, cradling her face in his hands. His gaze was molten, torn between rage and devotion.

"They can try, Maya. They can come at me with everything they have. But…" his voice dropped, possessive, unshakable, "-I will never let them touch you. I will never let them take you from me. Not now. Not ever. They'd have to kill me first."

Her chest heaved, every beat a collision of heartbreak and fierce, fragile hope, as his vow pressed down on her like a living force.

Damien's eyes locked on hers, raw and unshielded, every layer of armor gone, exposing the man who loved her beyond reason. Her heart ached and surged all at once, caught in the gravity of him.

“Damien… please… don’t say that,” she whispered, voice trembling, as if speaking might keep the world from breaking apart around them.

Damien’s jaw tightened, his eyes burning into hers with a darkness that made the air feel heavier. “Viktor isn’t just dangerous, Maya. He’s pure evil. Inflicting pain isn’t a means to an end for him-it’s his entertainment. He’ll make a man beg for death and then deny him that mercy, just to watch him bleed out slowly. And he doesn’t stop with one life. He wipes out everyone tied to his enemy-family, friends, children. He leaves nothing but ash and blood.” His voice roughened, guilt and rage coiling beneath every word. “His grudge against me isn’t about business-it’s personal. His daughter died, and in his twisted mind, I don’t deserve happiness. I don’t deserve love. I shouldn’t get to breathe freely while his daughter lies underground. To him, no one else should ever stand beside me but her. And now that space- the one he believes belonged to her-” his hand tightened around hers, his chest rising and falling with barely contained fury, “-is being occupied by you. That makes you his target. His obsession. His next game.”

His jaw clenched, a shadow cutting through his expression. “Maya… Viktor is someone we can’t underestimate.” His voice was low, tight, every word laced with the weight of knowing. He doesn’t just go after weaknesses-he destroys them. He doesn’t bluff, he doesn’t hesitate, and he never stops until he’s taken everything. That’s who he is. That’s why I said what I did- because the only way he takes you from me is over my dead body.”

He drew in a breath, steadying, his gaze never leaving hers. A flicker of pain, of something unspoken, passed through his eyes before he finally asked, voice low and rough, “Remember when I asked you to give me time-and to trust me?”

Maya nodded, her chest tight, her breath shaky.

Damien’s thumb brushed her cheek, lingering there as his gaze bore into her. “Because I need time to clean this mess up. I need time to close any unfinished business in my life before you fully step into my world. It was never my intention to drag you in like this. I wanted everything cleared, every loose end tied.” His voice roughened, as if the truth itself cut him inside.

He exhaled, his jaw flexing. “That last business trip… it wasn’t just business. It was part of the plan. Strip my enemies one by one, discreetly. Tear their foundations from the inside, weaken them for the final blow. But Viktor-” his eyes burned with fire, “-Viktor is smart. He has eyes on me. And he found out earlier than I expected. That’s why he’s making his move now.”

Maya’s pulse spiked, but it wasn’t fear that dominated-it was sharp, focused attention. Every word he said sank in, each detail etched into her mind.

And though the path ahead was marked by danger, she felt a strange clarity: she belonged in this battle with him.

Chapter 214

Maya blinked, letting each word settle, each strategy imprint itself in her mind. Danger thrummed in the air, but it no longer paralyzed her. Instead, a sharp focus anchored her-she belonged here, in this fight, by his side.

Damien’s hand slipped from her cheek as he leaned back, eyes dark and calculating. “That trip triggered something-it caught his attention. We knew it was risky, but it had to be done.”

“We expected him to make a move, and we were prepared-but not this fast. Orion’s involvement, Miller showing up-it wasn’t a coincidence. That was the first sign something was off.”

Maya’s brow furrowed, her pulse quickening.

“Sienna was right. The campaign was meant for Altair-Orion was never even in the picture. We had no business with them. But they forced their way in, manipulated the table… and stole the contract.” His lips twisted into a bitter line.

Maya swallowed, her eyes widening. It wasn’t just bad timing-someone had orchestrated

this.

“Orion is one of the largest talent agencies in the world-they’re not strangers to us. But they’ve always stayed neutral among the Five Families, which is why we’ve never conducted business with them: to avoid conflict and keep the field fair. That’s why their sudden involvement immediately raised red flags. They don’t move like that unless someone is pulling the strings.”

“The day Miller showed up was the same day Nick got word from his intel in Moldova-at one of Viktor’s checkpoints. That place had been quiet for years, but right after our trip, unusual activity started increasing.”

He shook his head, his voice hardening. “At first, we weren’t sure if their sudden involvement was tied to Viktor. All we had were fragments of the puzzle. That’s why I told Trina to find a way to get rid of him, make it look like he messed up. Enough reason to terminate the contract, make it appear purely business. That way, whoever sent him would be misled into thinking their suspicions were wrong, while we worked to confirm ours.”

“We did some digging and discovered that Orion is a sinking ship, crawling with rats. That’s why Nick left yesterday morning-he tracked one desperate enough for money and a way out, squeezed intel, and returned last night with the answers.”

“He found out Orion’s basically an empty shell. Viktor’s been pumping cash in to keep it afloat, just to watch me. And Miller? They knew he had a link to you. Enough to make him

useful. They sent him to provoke me… to confirm their suspicions.”

Harper tapped her chin and snapped her fingers. “Aha! That explains it! That’s why Lee looked suspicious that morning.” She swung her finger toward Ashcroft, eyes gleaming. “And why the boss didn’t kill you-even after you c**k-blocked him. Makes perfect sense now!”

Everyone froze, all eyes on Harper. Maya’s cheeks flushed bright with embarrassment, while Damien felt a flicker of unease, swallowing hard at her words.

Ashcroft let out a sharp cough, as if he’d choked on his own words. His eyes snapped toward Harper, and he jabbed a finger at her. “You really don’t have a filter, woman! And why do you have to put it that way?!”

He raised his hands defensively, a mix of exasperation and amusement in his expression. ” Hey! To be fair, I didn’t know, okay? If someone had given me a heads-up, do you really think I’d have knocked on his door last night?”

Harper rolled her eyes with a smirk. “Yeah, yeah, whatever!” She waved off Ashcroft’s protest and turned her attention back to Damien. “Sorry to interrupt boss, please, continue.”

Damien cleared his throat, forcing his composure back. “But Miller is weak. Seeing you again lit something inside him-jealousy. It cracked his mask and exposed him. His emotions made him sloppy, and that… gave me exactly what I needed.”

Maya’s lips parted. “So… this is what Ms. Trina meant when she said I did everyone a favor?”

Chapter 215

Damien’s voice dropped, low and precise. “Yes. His jealousy forced his hand-made him reveal his intentions, gave me the excuse to cut him off, sever ties with Orion completely, and finally confirm who the real puppet master was behind it all.”

Maya’s voice was cautious, almost hesitant. “What… what happens to Ethan now?”

Harper snapped, rolling her eyes. “Who cares?! He wants his cake, he can eat it too. He’s a jerk, Maya! Whatever happens to him… happens. He deserves it.”

Maya’s brows furrowed, a flicker of unease in her eyes. “I… I just…”

Damien’s eyes flicked to her, a flash of something sharp-jealousy, possessiveness-passing beneath his calm mask. A brief tightening of his jaw betrayed the storm beneath. “He’s… disposable,” he said, his voice a dangerous whisper, edged with steel and cold fire. “A tool. Nothing more. He served his purpose, and now he’s useless. I could end him myself-and part of me wants to-but even if I don’t, Viktor will. He’s a liability. No value. He’ll be discarded

permanently.”

Maya swallowed, feeling the possessiveness, the tinge of jealousy, and the cold finality in his words. The weight of what it meant to be caught in Damien's world pressed down on her. Her gaze dropped, conflicted-she hadn't expected such ruthless clarity, and yet… somehow, she understood.

She nodded once, her voice low but calm. "Okay… I get it."

Damien leaned closer, his gaze locking onto hers with a heat that made the air thrum between them. "You're safe. That's all that matters. Nothing will touch you, Maya. Not while I'm here."

He held her gaze for a long, silent moment, eyes searching hers. Then, his voice dropped, threaded with fear and vulnerability.

"I don't expect you to understand… or accept all of this. I know it's too much. You never chose to be part of any of it."

He paused, swallowing hard, as if each word cost him something.

"If you… if you decide to pull away… to run from all of this… I won't blame you. I… I understand."

The room held a tense silence, heavy and suffocating, as Maya processed his words-his promise, his threat, and the unspoken depth of his devotion.

Maya's eyes welled with tears, her heart hammering painfully in her chest. Her lips trembled, caught between fear and awe.

She felt the full weight of his world pressing down-the danger, the power, the raw honesty- and beneath it all, the unwavering love he held for her.

Her hands clenched in her lap, knuckles white, before she placed one on his, eyes burning with determination and newfound courage.

“I… I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered, voice trembling but resolute. “I won’t leave you… no matter what. I’ll fight with you, for you. For us.”

Her voice, though soft, carried a tremor of determination, the kind that came from finally stepping fully into the life she’d chosen-by choice, not chance.

Damien’s chest tightened, a surge of emotions crossing his face-relief, awe, and a softness he rarely allowed himself to show. His gaze locked on hers, steady and intense, as if trying to memorize the fire in her eyes. For a long moment, he said nothing, letting the weight of her words sink in. Then, almost imperceptibly, the corner of his mouth curved in a faint, approving smile.

“You… you have no idea what that means to me,” he murmured, his voice edged with a tenderness he rarely let show. His hand tightened around hers-a silent promise that whatever came next, they would face it together.

Her tears burned, not from fear but from the raw ache of his pain-fury for the way they dared to twist his heart. They spilled before she could stop them. “Damien…” she breathed, his name falling like a prayer, threaded with anguish and love. Her voice steadied, sharp with resolve. “He thinks he can steal

this from us, drag me down just to punish you. But I won't let him. I refuse to be his weapon. I will not allow anyone to use me to destroy what we have."

For a heartbeat, silence reigned. Damien was caught off guard, her conviction ringing like a battle cry. The others froze, struck by the force of her defiance-sympathy for the price she had paid to love him, pride in the strength with which she now stood beside him. In that moment, her fire spread like kindling, sparking in each of them, igniting a will to fight with them, not just for them.

He leaned forward, cupping the side of her face, and the rest of the world seemed to vanish, leaving only the two of them. "I love you, Maya," he whispered, his voice a fierce vow. Then, without another word, he pressed his lips to hers, kissing her with a passion that spoke of every fear, every longing, every truth they had just shared.

Harper clapped her hands like she'd just witnessed the grand finale of a fireworks show.

"This… this is so freaking awesome!!" she shouted, eyes sparkling. "I'm so proud of you,

Maya! That's right-fight for your love!"

Then her eyes widened as a lightbulb went off in her head. "Wait… oh! I've got an amazing idea! You should learn how to fight! Self-defense, combat training-the whole thing. You can't just scream and cry and wait for Superman to swoop in every time, right? You need to be ready… and strong. Confident. Capable. You'll be unstoppable!"

Her excitement bubbled over, and she practically bounced in place, gesturing wildly. "I can teach you!" She froze mid-sentence, realizing she'd spoken before thinking. Quickly, she corrected herself, "Or… at least help you find the right people. This is perfect-Maya, you're going to be a total badass!"

”

Ashcroft let out a mocking laugh, shaking his head as if he’d just heard the joke of the year. Teach her? Teach her what-how to drive the enemy crazy by running her mouth like you do?”

He smirked, voice dripping with mockery. “Honestly… if Maya learns half of your… chaotic energy, those guys won’t know what hit them.”

Harper smacked his arm, jabbing a finger at his chest, eyes blazing.

“Don’t underestimate me! You have no idea what I’m capable of. I can fight, handle guns, and I’m damn good with anything sharp-so maybe think twice before testing me,” she shot back, pride and fire practically sparking off her.

Ashcroft shook his head, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Oh, I know exactly what you’re capable of, Harper… That’s why I’m staying right here-for my own safety.”

Maya and Damien exchanged a glance, both shaking their heads almost in perfect unison as they watched the two bicker, a mix of amusement and exasperation flickering across their

faces.

Chapter 216

Damien cleared his throat, sharp and deliberate, cutting through the banter. His eyes flicked

between Harper and Ashcroft.

Maya shifted, her curiosity piqued despite the tension. “So… what’s next? What should I do?”

Lee spoke up, voice steady. “I think Ms. Lin’s suggestion makes sense.”

James nodded in agreement, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “I think so too. Ms. Maya learning self-defense isn’t a bad idea.”

Harper threw her arms up triumphantly. “Thank you! See? I’m right!” She rolled her eyes at Ashcroft again, clearly enjoying the jab.

Ashcroft let out a resigned huff, muttering something under his breath that only Harper could have caught.

James held up his hands, though, a note of caution in his voice. “But… it’s best if we leave it to the professionals.” He quickly averted his gaze, avoiding Harper’s sharp, challenging eyes.

Lee offered, a hint of humor in his tone, “How about me? Or Monroe-we could teach her the basics.”

Maya’s eyes lit up, her excitement barely contained. “Yes! I want to learn too, even just the basics.” She turned to Damien, seeking his approval. “What do you think? Is that okay with you?”

Damien hesitated, his eyes flicking to Maya as if weighing the thought. A tight line formed across his jaw.

Ashcroft’s grin widened, catching Damien’s hesitation. “Hey, D! Why don’t you teach her yourself? I mean… I can’t imagine you’d be too comfortable watching other men wrap their hands around my sister-in-law, right?” He leaned back, smirk sharp, eyes glinting with mischief. “I can teach her with guns. You know I’m damn good at it.”

Damien’s jaw tightened slightly, eyes narrowing. “I don’t think so.”

Harper huffed, clearly unimpressed. “Ha! I’m probably a better shot than you are.”

Ashcroft’s smirk faltered for a fraction of a second, pride pricked. With a fluid motion, he reached for his gun at his waist, placing it on the table.

“The heck?” Harper exclaimed, eyebrows shooting up. “Who brings a gun to the beach?”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Ashcroft said smoothly. “Now watch and learn, woman!” Within three minutes, he had dismantled the weapon, each piece laid out neatly on the table. In under five minutes, he reassembled it flawlessly, every movement precise and effortless.

He looked up at Harper, a smug glint in his eyes. “Think you can do that?”

Harper stared at him for a split second before bursting into laughter. “That’s it?! Took you what… five minutes? Your family’s supposed to be experts in weapons, right? I expected

better.”

Damien shook his head slightly, a reluctant smirk tugging at his lips. He couldn’t help but find it entertaining-watching his best friend’s ego get shredded by a woman was oddly satisfying, while Maya and the two men in the room watched the back-and-forth with a mix

of amusement and awe.

Offended, Ashcroft shot back, “You!” His eyes narrowed, a challenge flashing in them. “You

bark a lot, but I bet you can’t bite!”

Harper’s grin widened, unfazed. “Oh, trust me, I can bite-and scratch, and kick, and shoot… you name it.”

Ashcroft leaned forward, a daring gleam in his eyes. “Show me then-I dare you!” He jabbed a finger toward the gun on the table.

Harper’s eyes flicked to the gun, then back at him, a mischievous smirk curling her lips. “Oh, you want me to play with that?” she shot back, crossing her arms. “Fine… but don’t cry when I beat you at your own game.”

Harper’s eyes narrowed in determination as she picked up the gun. Her hands moved with astonishing fluidity, dismantling it in under a minute. She didn’t pause, sliding each piece back together seamlessly in less than two.

Everyone in the room froze, mouths slightly agape, eyes wide with disbelief. Maya blinked, unable to hide her awe. Damien’s smirk faltered into genuine surprise, and even Ashcroft’s cocky confidence wavered, his jaw tightening as he stared at her handiwork.

Harper set the gun down, a triumphant glint in her eyes, clearly enjoying the stunned silence. “Not bad, huh?” she said, a smug smile tugging at her lips.

Maya’s voice trembled slightly, awe lacing every word. “Harper… how… how did you…?”

Harper smirked, shrugging casually. “Oh, that? Being the only girl in my family, my parents were… extra careful. They made sure I could handle myself-so every summer I went to this intensive self-defense program. Weapons, tactics, the works. They didn’t want me relying on anyone else to protect me.”

Maya’s eyes lit up as she turned to Damien, hope and excitement bubbling over. “Damien… Harper can teach me!”

Damien’s eyes flickered with hesitation, a shadow crossing his features. He opened his mouth, then closed it, the conflict clear-he didn’t want Maya to get hurt, not even a scratch.

Damien’s gaze softened, a protective edge in his voice. “Maya… I can protect you. You don’t

need to-”

Maya cut him off, voice firm despite the tremor in her chest. “Please… I want to. I need to

learn too.”

Damien’s jaw tightened, hesitation flickering across his features. After a long pause, he finally exhaled, his voice low but conceding. “I’ll think about it.”

Maya’s face lit up with a genuine smile. “Okay, thank you!”

Harper clapped her hands together, eyes sparkling. “Alright, that’s settled. Now… can we eat? I’m starving!”

Maya, feeling more relaxed, shook her head and chuckled. She glanced at Damien and said, ” Let’s feed her before she eats us.”

Damien let out a low chuckle, a faint smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Agreed,” he said, glancing at James. “Make the arrangements. Have them set up lunch here.”

James nodded. “On it.”

He walked away, pulling out his phone to make the necessary calls.

Ashcroft, still tongue-tied and simmering with embarrassment, retreated to the bar, pouring himself a glass of amber liquid to burn away his mortification. Meanwhile, Harper animatedly chatted with Lee, laughter punctuating their conversation.

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amien, by contrast, extended a quiet invitation to Maya. “Come with me,” he murmured, gesturing toward the balcony, offering a moment of privacy away from the lively chaos

inside.

Maya’s eyes lifted to his, curiosity flickering in them before she gave a small nod. She rose from her seat, smoothing her dress as Damien’s hand brushed lightly against the small of her back, guiding her toward the balcony.

He closed the glass door behind them, shutting out the hum of voices inside. Instantly, they were embraced by the island’s warmth-the afternoon sun wrapping them in a golden haze, the air thick with

the mingling scents of salt and hibiscus. A gentle breeze carried across the veranda, lifting strands of Maya's hair as the rhythmic crash of waves against the shore blended with the distant cries of seabirds.

They stood side by side, forearms resting against the balcony railing. Maya tilted her face toward the sea, closing her eyes as she drew in a deep breath of the salt-kissed air.

The breeze brushed over her skin, carrying with it the faint scent of the ocean and blooming flowers, and for a moment, her chest rose and fell in a rhythm that matched the waves below.

Damien didn't look at the view. His gaze stayed fixed on her-on the way her lashes fanned against her cheeks, on the faint curve of her lips as the tension seemed to slip from her shoulders. She looked at peace, bathed in sunlight, and he felt the urge to reach out, to touch her, to pull her closer. Instead, he stayed still, silently watching, as if afraid a single movement might break the fragile calm surrounding her.

Maya felt the weight of his stare and slowly opened her eyes. When she turned to him, she caught a flicker in his gaze-gentleness, almost unguarded.

"What's wrong?" she asked softly.

Damien's jaw tightened before the words slipped out, rough and low. "I'm sorry, Maya."

Her brows knitted together. "For what?"

His voice was strained, thick with the heaviness he rarely allowed to show. “For this mess I pulled you into. I…”

Maya lifted her hand, placing it gently against Damien’s face. He closed his eyes, leaning into her touch, a shuddered breath escaping him.

“Damien,” she whispered, her voice steady despite the ache in her chest. “I understand. You were born into this life, into this world. You didn’t choose this path-it was forced on you.”

Her thumb brushed lightly across his cheek, grounding him. “I’m not going anywhere. I’ll fight

with you, for us. We’ll build that future together. No shadow of the past will steal our happiness.”

Damien’s hand covered hers, holding it against his face. His lips brushed her palm briefly before he tugged her into his chest, wrapping her in a fierce, desperate embrace. The island heat pressed in around them, but all he felt was her heartbeat-steady, grounding, his

salvation.

“I love you, Maya… so much. Please don’t leave me,” he murmured.

“I won’t,” she whispered, arms sliding around him. “I promise. I love you too, Damien.” Her words hung between them, a vow sealed in the salt-kissed breeze.

They stayed like that for a while, wrapped in each other as the afternoon sun painted the horizon in gold. The world outside seemed to slow, waves crashing in a steady rhythm below, granting them a rare pocket of time untouched by anything else. Neither spoke-they simply held on, letting silence speak the rest.

After a long stretch of silence, Damien's lips brushed the top of her head. "I want to take you somewhere," he murmured, his voice low, meant only for her. "Just us. Pack a small bag- your essentials, a change of clothes…" His mouth dipped closer to her ear, his breath warm against her skin. "And maybe those red bikinis too."

Heat bloomed in Maya's cheeks as she tilted her head back, curiosity sparking in her eyes.

Where?"

A faint smile curved his mouth, secretive, almost wicked. "You'll see," he said, eyes glinting with promise. "We leave before sundown."

Her lips curved, shy but glowing, and she nodded. "Okay," she whispered, the word soft, carrying both her trust and anticipation.

A gentle knock eventually broke their quiet. James's voice followed through the door, steady and respectful. "Sir, lunch has arrived."

Reluctantly, they pulled apart and went back inside. The staff was already moving with quiet precision, setting the table. Plates were arranged, silver gleamed against crisp linens, and the rich aroma of freshly prepared food filled the room, warm and inviting, grounding them back into the world, surrounded by people they trusted.

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perfectly seared steak. The aroma wrapped around them like a gentle reminder that life, even in the midst of chaos, could still hold ordinary pleasures.

Maya slid into her seat beside Damien, her fingers brushing his as they reached for napkins. He caught her gaze with a faint smile, and she felt that familiar warmth settle in her chest.

The table had settled into an easy rhythm, conversation weaving between light teasing and shared bites. Glasses clinked, the warm breeze carried laughter, and for a moment it felt almost ordinary-like they were just friends gathered on a lazy afternoon.

Harper, ever the instigator, leaned back with a sly grin. “So… Ashcroft. The rumors are true, huh? You’re the prince of the underworld?” She wiggled her eyebrows playfully.

Ashcroft nearly choked on his water, glaring at her. “Excuse me?”

“You know,” Harper went on, completely unfazed. “All those whispers, especially online. There’s this forum-full of conspiracy junkies. They’ve even got a whole thread about the Five Families. And guess what? Your name pops up a lot. People say the reason you’re never front and center in your family’s legit businesses is because you’re too busy running things’ underground.” She smirked. “I mean, besides the entertainment columns calling you a playbo y every other week, it kind of tracks. You’re the same age as boss here, yet you’ve never taken a visible role in the clean side of things. Makes people wonder.”

Ashcroft's mouth curved into that lazy, devil-may-care smile. He leaned back in his chair, swirling the glass in his hand.

"Let them wonder," he drawled. "Mystery's good for business. Besides, the truth's never half as entertaining as the stories they make up."

Harper rolled her eyes with a playful scoff. "Whatever…" she muttered, smirking as she toyed with her glass.

Ashcroft arched a brow, amused. "Alright then-what about Damien? What do the whispers say about him?"

"Oh, that one's easy," Harper shot back without hesitation. "If you're the prince of the underworld, then he's the King. And well…" she gave Damien a cheeky glance, "…just about an hour ago, we all found out that one's true."

Then her expression lit up, like a switch had flipped. "Oh! Wait-so that means…" She gasped dramatically and threw both hands up in mock reverence.

"Maya is the Queen!! Ha! All hail the Queen!"

She clasped her hands together and made a dramatic bow, grinning wide as she gestured toward Maya with both arms as though presenting her to a crowd.

Maya flushed instantly, half laughing, half mortified as she waved Harper off. "Stop it, Harper

But Damien's low chuckle cut through her protest. He leaned back in his chair, that knowing smirk tugging at his lips as his eyes locked on Maya.

"She's not wrong," he drawled smoothly, his voice dark with possession. "Maya is my queen."

Maya's breath caught, her cheeks burning hotter, while Harper clapped her hands like she'd just won something.

"See! Even the King himself admits it. Case closed!"

Harper suddenly perked up, glancing at her phone. "Oh! By the way… I'm texting with Sienna and Jessa. They said they're heading out tomorrow. Guess they figured since the work part is wrapped up, they'd sneak home a day early and get some extra family time before we're all back in the grind on Monday." She looked up with a playful shrug. "They asked if we're packing up too."

Damien shook his head. "I don't mind staying as planned." Then his gaze slid to Maya, a faint smirk tugging at his lips. "Whatever my queen wants."

Maya's cheeks instantly warmed, her lips parting in a startled laugh as her heart gave that familiar flutter she still wasn't used to.

Harper gasped, clutching her chest like she'd just witnessed history. "Oh. My. God. Did you hear that? The smoothness! The delivery! Ughhh, I live for this-Daya supremacy!!" She fanned herself dramatically,

then pointed at them both with an accusing grin. “You two are literally my favorite ship. Forget fairytales-Daya is endgame!”

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Before Maya could protest, Harper wiggled her brows mischievously. “Sooo… let’s stay as planned, ok? That’s settled. Now… they’re planning a little campfire drinking-bonding thing tonight and want us to join. What do you say?”

Maya bit her lip, sneaking a glance at Damien before looking back at Harper. “Umm… actually

… I can’t.”

Harper blinked, confused. “Wait-what? Why not?”

Maya hesitated, then admitted softly, “Because… he wants to take me somewhere.”

Harper’s jaw dropped so fast she almost fell off her chair. “EXCUSE ME?!” She clapped her hands together like a kid on Christmas morning. “Ohhhhhh!! A secret date? A romantic surprise?? Stop it, I can’t handle this level of swoon!”

She threw her head back with a dramatic sigh, fanning herself wildly. “You two are like- straight out of a novel. A dark brooding hero, his queen, mysterious plans… Ughhh, Daya Nation is thriving tonight!! Someone give me popcorn because I am living for this.”

Harper leaned in, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Fine, fine. Go have your magical mystery date. But I swear, when you get back, I want details. And if you don’t spill, Maya…” She pointed at her with mock severity. “…I will die. Dead. Deceased. Buried. Don’t make me haunt you.”

Harper clapped her hands again, eyes wide. “Wait! Hold up-do we need to glam you up? Are we talking dinner, fancy dinner, or… what kind of secret rendezvous is this?”

Damien’s voice was calm, low, precise. “Just somewhere private and quiet. We’ll be staying there for the night.”

Harper’s jaw practically hit the floor. “No-freaking-way! Okay, okay, I got you. I’ll help you pack. Only the essentials… and by essentials, I mean sexy lingerie!” Her eyes gleamed with mischief. “That matching black lace bra and thong I forced you to buy? Wear it. Perfect. Absolutely perfect.”

Ashcroft froze with his drink halfway to his lips, eyes darting between Harper and Maya. Lee, mid-chew, nearly swallowed wrong, coughing as his food went down the wrong pipe. James, spoon paused above his soup, just stared, completely caught off guard.

Damien’s smirk tugged at his lips, clearly entertained, while Maya’s face burned bright red.

“Harper!!” she snapped, heat rising up her neck.

Damien’s eyes flicked to Maya, an almost imperceptible smirk forming. He let the comment

hang in the air, clearly enjoying both Harper’s antics and Maya’s blush.

Harper shrugged innocently, a mischievous grin tugging at her lips. “What? We’re all adults

you, here.” She leaned back slightly, eyes glinting as she scanned the table. “Let’s start with Mr. Playboy. For someone like you… what’s your lingerie preference in a woman?”

Ashcroft smirked, leaning back with effortless confidence. “G-strings… or better yet, nothing at all. I like to see everything.”

Harper raised her eyebrows, clearly delighted. “Oh, spicy!”

She turned to Lee next. “How about you, Lee? What’s your type?”

Lee shrugged. “Anything… just… no granny panties.”

Everyone at the table burst into laughter, the sound mingling with Harper’s delighted snicker.

“And you, Mr. Horton?”

James cleared his throat, clearly flustered. “I… I find bikinis… attractive.”

Harper nodded thoughtfully, pretending to jot notes in the air. “Fair, fair.”

”

Finally, Harper’s gaze landed on Damien. “And you, boss? What’s your preference?”

Damien’s eyes flicked between Maya and Harper, a slow, knowing smirk tugging at his lips. To be honest… I find the classics most attractive,” he said, voice low and teasing. “White, red, black… lace, silk… the kind that teases just enough to hint at what’s beneath. That alone says more than words ever could.” His gaze sharpened on Maya, possessive, unwavering, leaving no doubt whose attention-and desire-he claimed.

Then, his lips quirked in a lazy smirk as he glanced away. “But… whatever my queen chooses to wear is perfect to me.”

Maya’s breath hitched slightly, a flush creeping up her neck. Her pulse quickened, and she found herself instinctively pressing a hand to her chest, caught between embarrassment and the thrill of being so utterly seen by him.

Harper blinked, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Ooh, boss getting all classy and sultry, huh?! like it.” She turned toward Maya, grin widening. “And how about you, Maya? What’s your preference?”

Maya froze, caught completely off guard. “Huh… what about me?”

“Briefs or boxers?” Harper asked, tilting her head with playful curiosity. “What do you prefer?” Her voice was teasing, full of that irrepressible energy that made everyone around her either

laugh or cringe.

Maya’s cheeks flushed a deep shade of crimson. She fumbled for words, momentarily speechless, caught between embarrassment and the ridiculousness of Harper’s line of questioning.

“I… I don’t know! How would I even know?” she stammered, her voice a mix of

embarrassment and amusement.

Harper laughed, nudging her lightly with an exaggerated wink. “Ohhh, come on, there’s gotta be a side of you that has an opinion somewhere!”

Maya looked down for a moment before shrugging. “Whatever he’s comfortable wearing.”

Harper raised an eyebrow, smirking, but before she could tease further, Maya waved her hand. “Just… eat, Harper!”

Harper shook her head, mock exasperated. “Oh my, my… this is bad. We have to fix this. What time are you guys leaving?”

Damien’s eyes flicked to James, a faint tilt of his head signaling him to answer.

James cleared his throat. “Everything should be ready before sunset, and the chopper will be here by five.”

Harper glanced at her phone. “Okay… we have time.” She turned to Maya, eyes sparkling with mischief. “Now… finish up! Let’s go!”

Maya’s eyes went wide. “Where are we going?”

Harper leaned in, lowering her voice conspiratorially. “To your room. We need to… study a little. Watch a good… porn… you know, research. Figure out what works, what doesn’t… and then I’ll help you pack!”

Maya froze, her face a deep shade of red, mortified.

Ashcroft nearly chocked on his drink, covering his mouth with back of his hand, while James’s ears went pink as he looked away politely.

Damien’s jaw flexed, his gaze narrowing on Harper, the edge of a warning glinting beneath his calm exterior.

Harper only grinned wider, utterly unbothered by the tension she stirred. “Relax, boss. Strictly educational. Just… basic anatomy. Trust me! You’ll thank me later!”

Maya buried her face in her hands, groaning.

Laughter rippled around the table, though Damien’s stare lingered on Maya-dark, sharp, possessive. A silent promise: she wouldn’t be learning from anyone but him.

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Ashcroft let out a bark of laughter, leaning back in his chair before throwing a playful punch into his palm. “Porn is cheap! Why not the real deal?”

Harper didn’t miss a beat, flashing him a sly smile. “Because, genius, sometimes theory helps before practice. Observation is part of learning-control, rhythm, timing… even inspiration. You don’t just throw someone into the ring without sparring first, do you?”

Ashcroft raised his brows, conceding with a smirk, and the table erupted into light laughter.

Not long after, lunch wound down, plates half-finished as conversation melted into easy chatter. Harper sprang to her feet with her usual energy, looping her arm through Maya’s. Come on, sunshine. You and I have work to do.”

Maya’s eyes widened in alarm. “Harper-”

“Nope.” Harper tugged her toward the door. “No arguing. Trust me.”

”

Before Harper could whisk her away, Damien caught Maya’s hand and reeled her back into the heat of his presence. He bent low, brushing a slow kiss against her temple. “See you later, love,” he murmured, his voice meant only for her. Then his mouth dipped to her ear, a dangerous curl tugging at his lips. “Don’t enjoy what you’ll watch too much. Just watch- don’t touch. That part’s mine to take care of.”

Maya flushed crimson, heart racing, as Harper huffed impatiently and dragged her off, leaving Damien’s warning smoldering in her chest.

Harper dragged Maya out, the door clicking softly behind them, leaving the room heavy with silence.

Ashcroft finally broke the silence, leaning back with a slow, approving nod. “Well… that went better than I expected,” he said, voice low and measured. “I knew she was tough, but the way she handled all of it- took it all in. That’s next level. Don’t you think?”

Damien’s gaze lingered on the spot where Maya had been, a faint smirk tugging at his lips, eyes sharp with possessiveness. “Yeah,” he said simply, voice dark. “She’s the one… best decision I’ve ever made in my life.”

Ashcroft chuckled softly, swirling his drink. “Good. Then we better deal with the problem as soon as possible, so you two can finally have your happily ever after.”

Damien walked toward the window, shoulders squared, gaze fixed on the endless stretch of turquoise water meeting the horizon. The sunlight shimmered across the waves, calm and

golden-a stark contrast to the storm of complications waiting for them.

He murmured softly, more to himself than anyone else, “The days ahead… they’re going to be a mess. But before we head back, I want to spend some quiet time with her.”

He turned slightly, his voice crisp as he addressed James. “Make sure everything is in order.”

James nodded smoothly, already anticipating his boss’s needs. “Yes, sir. Already taken care of everything as you instructed.”

Damien hummed in acknowledgment, his eyes returning to the horizon, thoughtful.

After a brief pause, James hesitated, then cleared his throat. “Um… sir… by the way, your mot

her is back.”

Damien snapped his gaze toward him, sharp and immediate. “When?”

“Just this morning,” James replied, voice careful. “She… she’s looking for you.”

Ashcroft let out a low whistle, eyebrows raising. “Uh-oh. She already knows.”

Damien’s jaw tightened, his voice calm but edged with steel. “It’s just a matter of time.” He turned slightly, narrowing his eyes. “And Dad?”

James met his gaze evenly. “He’s back too. Landed just about the same time.”

A hard line formed along his jaw. The Volkovs’ shadow was spreading, and now it was closing in. He could feel it in the air, the unspoken danger pressing at the edges of their world. With his parents back, it wasn’t just family matters that demanded attention-they’d already sense the threat looming and would insist on knowing every detail.

But tonight, none of that mattered. His focus was Maya. He wanted tonight to be perfect-for them, and especially for her. Everything else could wait.