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Chapter 631

Maya’s gaze dropped sharply to the hand clasped within hers.

She held perfectly still.

There.

Jaime’s fingers moved again.

It was barely more than a twitch, so faint she might have missed it if she hadn’t been holding his hand. But this time, there was no mistaking it.

“Jaime?” His name left her in a breathless whisper.

Beside her, Cecilia quickly wiped her tears and stepped closer.

“What is it?”

Maya couldn't answer. Her entire attention was fixed on her brother's hand, her surprise quickly giving way to concern.

Had she upset him?

A flicker of regret immediately followed. Maybe she shouldn't have told him about their grandmother yet. Maybe she should have waited until he was stronger, until he was awake and ready to hear it.

"Jaime," she whispered again, leaning closer. "Buddy, can you hear me?"

For several agonizing seconds, nothing happened.

Then his fingers twitched against hers once more.

Maya sucked in a sharp breath.

"Oh my God."

Her eyes flew to his face just as the faintest crease appeared between his brows.

Cecilia saw it too. Her hand flew to her mouth as fresh tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Oh, heavens… my grandson…

As though Jaime could somehow sense the emotions surrounding him, another subtle change passed over his face.

Then a single tear slipped from the corner of his closed eye.

Whatever concern she had felt moments ago disappeared beneath a rush of emotion. She tightened her hold on his hand, careful not to squeeze too hard, while Cecilia’s quiet sobs grew beside her.

“I think he can hear us,” Maya whispered tearfully. “I think my baby brother can hear us.”

Cecilia could only nod, one trembling hand still pressed over her mouth as she cried

For those few precious seconds, neither woman could contain herself. Maya leaned closer to her brother, tears streaming freely down her face as she continued speaking softly to him, while Cecilia stood beside her, overwhelmed by the possibility that Jaime was responding to their voices.

But the moment was abruptly shattered by a sharp, insistent beeping.

Maya jolted.

Her head snapped toward the monitor beside Jaime's bed, the same one Dr. Anderson had pointed out earlier. The steady rhythm she had watched only minutes ago was now accompanied by a flashing warning across the screen.

Before either woman could react, the door swung open.

Dr. Anderson hurried inside with Nurse Daniel directly behind him.

The sudden rush of movement left Maya momentarily frozen. One second she had been crying beside her brother, and the next, Dr. Anderson was already at Jaime's bedside.

"Excuse me, Maya. I need to check him."

Still stunned, she released Jaime's hand and quickly stepped back, Cecilia moving with her as Dr.

Anderson took her place beside the bed.

Nurse Daniel immediately reached for the monitor and silenced the alarm, plunging the room into an unsettling quiet broken only by the softer sounds of the equipment.

Maya barely moved as the two men worked, Dr. Anderson's attention fixed on Jaime and the readings in front of him while Nurse Daniel moved efficiently beside him.

Their quiet concentration frightened her more than the alarm had.

She watched as Dr. Anderson spoke quietly with Nurse Daniel in terms she could hardly follow.

She caught something about milligrams, heart rate, and ectopy, followed by several other words that meant absolutely nothing to her.

Not long after, Nurse Daniel made a few adjustments on one of the machines, then turned toward the door. He gave Maya and Cecilia a brief nod as he passed before leaving the room.

The moment the door closed behind him, Maya's attention returned to Dr. Anderson. She quickly stepped toward him.

"Dr. Anderson… What's wrong? What happened? Is he okay? Is he in pain? What's-"

Dr. Anderson interrupted gently, giving her a small, reassuring smile. "He's fine."

She stopped, her tear-filled eyes searching his face.

“His heart rate climbed because he became a little overstimulated,” he explained. “Even under sedation, patients can sometimes register familiar voices, touch, or emotional stimulation. We can’t know exactly how much Jaime heard or understood, but judging by his movements and the change in his heart rate, he was responding to something.”

He glanced toward Jaime before continuing.

“Normally, an increase in heart rate from excitement or emotion isn’t something we’d be concerned about. In fact, seeing his new heart respond appropriately is reassuring. But his transplant is still very fresh, and his body has just been through major surgery. For now, we want to keep him as calm and comfortable as possible and avoid overstimulating him while he recovers.”

Maya nodded, but fresh tears gathered in her eyes as guilt quietly settled inside her. She knew she hadn’t meant to upset Jaime, but she couldn’t stop wondering if she should have waited before telling him.

Dr. Anderson gave her another reassuring smile before excusing himself, reminding them that they could stay a little longer as long as they kept things quiet and allowed Jaime to rest.

For a while, neither of them spoke. They simply stayed beside Jaime, watching him as the room returned to the peaceful rhythm it had before.

Cecilia looked at her grandson once more before her gaze shifted to Maya. The sadness lingering on her granddaughter’s face didn’t escape her notice.

“I think I’ll leave you two alone for a little while,” she whispered.

Maya looked at her and managed a small nod.

Cecilia gave her shoulder a gentle squeeze before quietly leaving the room.

Once the door closed, Maya turned back to Jaime and sat beside his bed with one hand still wrapped around his, unwilling to let go.

Eventually, she folded her other arm along the edge of the mattress and rested her head against it, staying close to him without saying another word.

She didn’t know how long she remained that way before the door opened again.

Assuming it was one of the nurses coming to check on Jaime, she remained where she was, not even bothering to look up. Her eyes stayed closed, her fingers still loosely wrapped around her brother’s hand as she listened to the footsteps drawing closer.

They stopped beside her, and a moment later, a warm hand settled gently against her back.

The familiar touch sent warmth spreading through her, bringing with it a sense of comfort and safety she had long since grown accustomed to.

She knew that touch.

Without opening her eyes, Maya quietly murmured, “Damien.”

Damien’s hand moved slowly along her back.

“Hey.”

Maya finally opened her eyes but didn’t lift her head. She only turned slightly toward him as he pulled a chair closer and sat beside her.

Cecilia had already told him what happened. In fact, she had been the one who suggested he come in and stay with Maya for a while.

So Damien didn’t ask any questions. He simply reached for her free hand and held it, letting her know he was there.

For a while, neither of them spoke until Maya eventually broke the silence.

“I told him about Grandma Cecilia,” she said softly before finally lifting her head to look at him.

“And I believe in my heart he heard me because he reacted, and I…” Her voice cracked.

“I saw a tear fall from his eye.”

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tear slipped down her cheek as she slowly sat up and turned toward him.

His expression softened as he noticed the worry behind her tear-filled eyes.

Maya looked down at their joined hands.

“I keep wondering what that reaction meant,” she admitted softly. “What if he was sad about it? Op maybe he’s mad?”

“Hey.”

Damien gently brushed the tear from her cheek.

“I’m pretty sure it’s neither of those.”

Maya searched his face.

“How do you know?”

Damien glanced at Jaime before looking back at her, a gentle smile touching his lips.

“How do you feel about it?”

The question caught Maya off guard.

“Me?”

Damien nodded. “Yes, you. How do you feel about meeting your grandmother? Did it make you upset or sad? Are you angry?”

Maya fell quiet.

She thought about everything she had felt since learning the truth. The shock, the confusion, the questions she still didn't have answers to. But beneath all of it, there was one thing she knew with certainty.

Slowly, she shook her head.

"I was surprised when I found out, but…" She looked up and met his eyes. "I'm not upset or sad, and

I definitely don't feel angry."

She thought about everything she had seen in Cecilia.

"When I look at her, I can see how much she regrets what happened. I can see the remorse in her eyes and how much she wishes things had been different." Her voice grew softer. "But more than that, I can feel that she's sincere and… I can feel her love."

Damien smiled and gently cupped her cheek.

"Then maybe you should give your brother a little more credit. Whatever happened in the past was between your grandparents and your mother. If there are regrets or apologies owed, then those belong to them."

His hand remained against her cheek.

“But from everything you’ve told me about your mom, I don’t believe she regretted the life she chose. Maybe she would’ve wanted her parents to be part of that life too. Maybe things could’ve been different if they had been. But I don’t believe she spent her life blaming them for the choices she made.”

She held his gaze as his words slowly settled in, easing some of the worry that had been weighing on her.

“You’re right,” she whispered with a small nod.

His thumb swept away the last tear from her cheek. “Then stop crying, okay?”

A small smile tugged at her lips as she nodded, and he leaned forward to press a soft kiss to her forehead.

When he pulled back, his gaze briefly shifted toward Jaime before returning to her.

“I think we should let him rest for now. Harper apparently has an entire day of activities planned for us, and from the way she was talking about it earlier, I’m not sure we’re allowed to refuse.”

Her soft laugh prompted him to lean closer and lower his voice.

“Besides, we should probably go rescue Nora.”

Her brows lifted in confusion. “Rescue her?”

“Your best friend has been torturing the poor woman with nonstop questions about the royal family since you came in here.”

Maya’s lips twitched.

Damien shook his head, fighting a smile. “And knowing Harper, Nora has probably been interrogated about everything from palace bedrooms to what the King eats for breakfast by now.”

That earned a genuine laugh from her, the sound warmer and lighter than anything that had left her since he entered the room.

Soon, they rose to leave.

Before stepping away from the bed, Maya leaned down and pressed a tender kiss to Jaime’s

forehead, then another to his cheek.

“Keep getting stronger, okay?” she whispered near his ear. “I love you.”

Damien waited until she straightened before stepping closer himself. He wrapped his hand firmly around Jaime's, giving it a gentle, encouraging squeeze.

"Keep fighting, kid," he murmured. "You're doing great."

With one last look at him, the two quietly left the room.

The sight waiting for them outside was almost exactly what Damien had predicted

Harper was now seated between Cecilia and Nora, talking animatedly while the two older women listened. Cecilia still wore a patient smile, but Nora's increasingly strained expression made it look as though she had been subjected to a particularly exhausting interrogation.

A few steps away, Nick leaned against the wall, watching the entire spectacle with the unmistakable expression of a man who was both amused and slightly embarrassed on his girlfriend's behalf.

The opening door drew everyone's attention.

Harper immediately perked up when she spotted them and sprang to her feet.

“Heyyy! Welcome back!”

Maya couldn’t help smiling at her enthusiasm, but when her gaze shifted to Nora, she nearly laughed. The older woman was looking at her with such unmistakable gratitude.

She and Damien headed into the adjoining room to remove their protective gear. When they emerged a few minutes later, Harper practically bounced toward them with excitement.

“Perfect timing! Are you guys ready to have some fun?”

Nick looked at her. “What are we doing, anyway?”

“Shh!” Harper cut him off. “Stop asking questions and just tag along. I promise you guys are going to enjoy it!”

Maya and Damien exchanged an amused glance while Nick simply shook his head, apparently giving up on getting an answer.

Before they could leave, Maya walked over to her grandmother. Cecilia and Nora rose from their seats as she approached.

“Grandma, maybe you should get some rest first,” she said with concern. “They told me you’ve been here since before sunrise, and you barely got any rest last night.”

Cecilia gave her a gentle smile.

“I’m fine, sweetheart. I’d rather stay here. I’ll be more at peace knowing I’m nearby.”

“But…”

“I’ll have someone prepare a room,” Harper quickly chimed in.

Cecilia and Maya both turned toward her as she gave them a sweet smile.

“That way, you can stay close to Jaime and still get some proper rest. You can freshen up, sleep for a few hours, and come back whenever you want.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you, but it really isn’t necessary,” Cecilia said.

“Please,” Maya urged softly. “I’ll feel better knowing you’re getting some rest too.”

Cecilia hesitated, but the sincerity in Maya’s concern warmed her heart. After a moment, she gave in with a small nod.

“All right.” She turned to Harper with a grateful smile. “Thank you, Harper.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it, Your Royal Highness Grandma Queen,” Harper replied cheerfully. “I’ll have someone come get both of you as soon as the room is ready.”

Cecilia blinked at the ridiculous title while Nora pressed her lips together, clearly trying not to laugh.

Maya smiled at her grandmother. “We’ll see you later, Grandma.”

“Enjoy yourselves,” Cecilia said warmly. “And take care.”

“We will.” Maya gave her a gentle smile and was about to follow the others when Cecilia turned to

Damien.

“Damien, please look after Maya.”

He glanced at Maya beside him before meeting Cecilia’s eyes again.

“Always,” he promised with a respectful nod.

With their goodbyes exchanged, the four of them finally left, ready to find out exactly what Harper had planned for them.

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As the four of them made their way through the estate, Nick still couldn’t seem to let it go.

“Come on, Babe. Just one clue.”

“Nope.”

“One tiny hint.”

“No.”

“Do we need to leave the estate?”

Harper kept walking without so much as looking at him. “Not telling you.”

Nick let out an exasperated sigh. “You’re really enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Very much.”

Maya laughed as Harper continued ahead with a suspiciously pleased smile, clearly enjoying keeping them in suspense.

But despite her refusal to reveal anything, Maya had a feeling that whatever her best friend had planned was nothing any of them were expecting.

Especially when she told them to change into something more comfortable, preferably clothes they could move freely in.

With that being the only hint Harper was willing to give them, they split up and headed back to their respective rooms to change.

Not long after, the four regrouped in casual activewear and set off through the estate, following Harper’s lead toward their still–unknown destination.

With curiosity starting to get the better of him, Nick kept throwing out one guess after another along the way, from sightseeing to exploring the nearby area, even wondering aloud whether they needed cash and should stop by a bank first.

Every guess fell on deaf ears.

Harper simply kept walking with that suspiciously pleased smile on her face.

To their surprise, she didn't lead them toward the main entrance at all. Instead, she took them underground, through the same passage Maya had accidentally followed her into that night.

They continued through the passage until daylight appeared ahead and emerged into a large open field enclosed by high fencing on all sides.

Maya slowed as she took in their surroundings.

Several tables had been arranged along one side of the field, covered with equipment she couldn't immediately identify. Across from them, a group of men dressed in fitted black shirts and matching pants stood waiting, some with their arms crossed while others talked quietly among themselves. Despite their relaxed stance, there was something undeniably intimidating about them.

Anko stood at the front, waiting for them.

Maya's steps faltered as an uneasy feeling crept over her. Whatever Harper had planned, the sight in front of her suddenly made her a little less eager to find out.

The moment the four stepped onto the training ground, the relaxed atmosphere vanished. Every man immediately straightened, their hands moving behind their backs as they turned toward Harper before bowing in unison.

“Bosu–san.”

Nick glanced around, caught off guard.

“Where are we? What is this place?” His eyes swept over the men before returning to Harper. “And why does it feel like we’re about to be executed?”

Harper turned to them with a triumphant grin, delighted that she had kept them guessing.

“This is the Takahashis‘ private training ground!” she announced excitedly before turning to

Maya. “And your self–defense lesson officially starts today!”

Maya’s eyes widened as she pointed at herself.

“Me?”

Harper nodded enthusiastically, her grin growing even wider.

Maya glanced at the training ground, then back at Harper.

“Wait… you’re serious?”

“Very.” A proud smirk tugged at Harper’s lips. “You said you wanted to learn how to defend yourself, remember? Well, today’s the day.”

Maya blinked and swallowed hard.

She had meant it when she told Harper she wanted to learn. After everything that had happened to her, she was tired of always being the person everyone else had to protect.

But when she thought about learning self–defense, she had pictured something simple.

Maybe a one–on–one lesson focused on a few basic techniques.

Not an entire private training ground filled with equipment and intimidating men, as though she had somehow signed up for military training.

Beside her, Damien, who had been quiet throughout, finally spoke.

“So this is what you’ve been plotting all morning.”

Harper turned to him with an innocent smile. “Plotting sounds so sinister. I prefer planning an enriching educational experience.”

Her expression turned cheekier as she gestured between them. “Besides, isn’t this great? All four of us can train together!”

With a casual shrug, she crossed her arms and lifted her chin with unmistakable pride, as though they were discussing the most ordinary thing in the world.

“Look, I’m good with sharp objects, and I’m sure you have a few tricks up your sleeve too.”

Then she turned to Nick.

“And you…”

.” Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully. “Well, besides being exceptionally talented at spreading your genes around, from what I know, you deal with high–powered weapons.”

She paused, eyeing him from head to toe.

“I have no idea if you’re actually any good with them, but at the very least, you can share some useful information.”

Nick stared at her in disbelief.

“Excuse me? First of all, I do not spread my genes around.” He pointed at her. “And second, you have no idea if I’m actually any good? Woman, high–powered weapons are my territory. I could probably hit a target with my eyes closed.”

Harper raised a brow. “Perfect. We’ll test both claims today.”

Nick looked perfectly smug until her choice of words seemed to register. His brows slowly pulled together, some of that confidence slipping away.

“Wait. What do you mean, both?”

“Ha!” Harper flashed him a mischievous grin. “You’ll see!”

Before Nick could press her for an explanation, she turned her attention back to Maya.

“Anyway, the point is, we all know how to do different things. So instead of teaching you just one way to protect yourself, we can each teach you what we’re good at.”

Then she glanced between Damien and Nick, a teasing grin returning to her face.

“And besides, when was the last time you guys actually broke a sweat? This will be good for all of us.”

Damien didn’t look nearly as convinced.

“I think this is too much all at once,” he said, his attention shifting to Maya. “Let’s slow down and not overwhelm her. She doesn’t need to learn everything in one day.”

Before Harper could respond, Maya reached for his arm.

“No. I want to do it.”

He looked down at her, concern immediately settling over his features.

“Are you sure? This is a lot to take in at once.”

“Yes, I’m sure.” She gave him a soft smile. “Besides, you’re here with me. If it gets too much, you’ll be right there, won’t you?”

Damien fell quiet.

If it were up to him, he would have shut Harper’s plan down. It was too much, too soon, especially after everything Maya had already been through.

But the determination in her eyes stopped him.

He had promised himself he would trust her judgment and stop allowing his need to protect hapter 362 A Different Kind of Fun her to become something that held her back. And right now, she was telling him exactly what she wanted.

He let out a long breath, some of the resistance leaving his expression.

“Okay.”

Maya’s smile brightened as she gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “Thank you.”

Harper watched the exchange with quiet amusement. Seeing Damien give in without an argument and Maya confidently stand her ground made one thing obvious.

Their relationship had truly come a long way.

“Yayyy!” she suddenly cheered, practically bouncing on her feet.

“Let’s have some fun! Follow me!”

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Harper wasted no time putting her plan into motion.

With an excited bounce in her step, she headed toward the other side of the field.

Maya, Damien, and Nick followed, Maya’s earlier apprehension giving way to curiosity. She had no idea what Harper planned to teach her first or what half the equipment was for, but there was no backing out now.

Nick, on the other hand, had lost every bit of his earlier enthusiasm. Whatever excitement he’d had about sightseeing, exploring somewhere new, and trying different food had disappeared.

He looked around the training ground with considerably less interest, then up at the sun beating down on them.

What the hell happened to the storm?

For once, he found himself wishing it had stuck around a little longer. Hell, volunteering to stay behind and keep Jaime company was suddenly sounding like the better option.

Leaning closer to Maya and Damien, he muttered, “So much for sightseeing.”

Maya laughed, while Damien could only shake his head with an amused smile.

“This was your girlfriend’s idea, after all,” Damien reminded him. “Consider it an opportunity to prove you’re as impressive as you keep telling everyone you are.”

Nick scoffed. “Ha! Tell yourself that. Maybe you’re the one who needs this more than I do. Stretch those aging muscles a little. Make sure your stamina hasn’t started going downhill.”

Damien snickered, completely unfazed.

“My stamina has been thoroughly tested on multiple occasions.” A knowing smirk tugged at his lips as he glanced at Maya and gave her a shameless wink. “I have nothing left to prove.”

Maya's cheeks immediately turned pink, and she quickly looked away, unable to hold his teasing gaze.

Damien couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction as he faced forward again.

"Besides," he added casually, "I'm not the one walking around with blue balls."

Nick watched the entire exchange, his face twisting into a grimace as Damien's meaning became painfully obvious.

"Jesus. I was talking about exercise."

Damien didn't bother responding, and moments later, the three of them caught up with Harper beside the tables.

"Okay!" Harper announced, immediately pointing toward the first one. "This is my area of expertise.

Maya followed her gesture, and her eyes widened.

The entire table was covered with sharp objects.

There were knives in nearly every size and shape imaginable, from small blades that could easily be concealed in a palm to larger combat–style knives. Several traditional Japanese blades were arranged neatly among them, along with slender metal weapons that looked almost like oversized needles.

And then Maya saw the sword.

An actual sword.

Her eyebrows shot up.

Of course Harper had a sword.

“I love anything sharp,” Harper declared proudly. “So take a look, pick up whatever catches your attention, and see what feels comfortable in your hand. Once you choose, I’ll teach you the basics and how to handle it safely.”

Before Maya could fully process that, Harper was already moving toward the next table.

“And over here…

She swept both hands dramatically over another collection.

“Firearms!”

Maya stared.

Several types had been laid out across the table, ranging from smaller handguns to much larger firearms that Maya had absolutely no intention of pretending she knew anything about.

“I can use them,” Harper continued, “but they’re not really my thing.” She glanced toward Nick.”

Which is where Mr. High–Powered–Weapons–Are–My–Territory becomes useful.”

Nick’s earlier reluctance seemed to disappear just a little.

Harper pointed toward the far end of the training ground.

“I’ll have them set up targets over there so we can practice later.”

Maya slowly looked from one table to the other.

Knives. A sword. Guns. Targets.

Harper had really prepared for this.

Then her attention drifted toward the intimidating group of men still standing off to the side.

“Um…” Maya hesitated before pointing toward them. “What about them? Are they just going to stand there and watch us?”

Harper followed her gaze.

“Oh! Them?” She smiled brightly. “Of course not. They’re our sparring partners for the self–defense portion.”

Maya’s eyes widened again.

“I made sure to pick some of our strongest men too,” Harper added proudly. “There’s no point making it too easy for you. You need to know what it feels like going up against someone stronger.

She paused, then glanced toward the tables.

“And if any of them annoy you, we can always use them for target practice.”

Maya snapped her head toward her.

Harper grinned. “Kidding.”

Maya wasn’t entirely convinced.

Even more unsettling was the fact that none of the men reacted. Not one flinched, protested, or even looked remotely concerned.

Maya stared at them for another second.

Just how loyal were these people?

Apparently loyal enough to let their boss casually volunteer them for target practice.

The more Maya embraced this world, the more she realized there were some things about it she might never completely wrap her head around.

Harper turned back to Maya, practically buzzing with excitement.

“So, where do you want to start?”

Maya swallowed as her eyes moved between the two tables, then toward the men waiting nearby.

“Um… I…”

There were so many options that she didn’t even know what to choose first.

Beside her, Damien seemed to notice her hesitation.

“What if you start with shooting?” he suggested. “Mom already took you shooting before, so at least you have some experience handling a gun. It might be easier to start with something you’re already familiar with.”

Maya looked at him, considering the suggestion for a moment before nodding.

“Okay. Let’s start with that.”

“Great!” Harper clapped her hands together. “Firearms it is!”

She snapped her fingers.

Almost instantly, several of the men sprang into action. Two stepped forward and moved the table of blades farther aside to clear more space, while a few others disappeared toward the far end of the training ground.

Maya watched in fascination as they returned moments later carrying everything needed to set up the shooting range. Without wasting any time, they began positioning the targets at varying distances downrange.

Within minutes, the empty stretch of training ground had been transformed into a fully prepared shooting range.

Maya stared at the setup.

Apparently, when Harper said they were going to have some fun, she had come prepared for just about everything.

Once everything was ready, the four of them took their positions facing the targets.

Damien stood beside Maya and handed her one of the smaller handguns.

“Show me what Mom taught you first.”

Maya nodded and focused on the target ahead. She adjusted her stance the way Dahlia had taught her, secured her grip around the weapon, and raised it carefully.

Damien watched without interfering, while Nick and Harper stood a few steps behind them, offering their support in very different ways.

Nick remained relatively quiet, watching with an encouraging smile.

Harper, on the other hand, seemed to think Maya was competing for a gold medal.

“Come on, Maya! You’ve got this!” she cheered, bouncing excitedly on her feet. “Show that target who’s boss!”

Maya pressed her lips together, trying not to laugh and lose her concentration.

“She’s only doing target practice, not competing in the Olympics, you know,” Nick pointed out.

“I know!” Harper whispered loudly. “I’m motivating her!”

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Maya shook her head at the two behind her, fighting back another laugh as she tried to refocus on the target.

Sensing her distraction, Damien leaned closer, his voice dropping near her ear.

“Ignore them. Just concentrate.”

Maya gave the slightest nod, keeping her eyes fixed on the target.

She took a steady breath, tightened her grip, and pulled the trigger.

The sharp crack of gunfire echoed across the training ground, instantly cutting off Harper and

Nick’s banter as both turned their attention back to Maya.

Her first shot struck the closest target, nowhere near the center, but Maya’s face immediately brightened.

“I hit it!”

Damien chuckled. “You did.” He leaned over and kissed her temple. “Now try again, love. See if you can hit one of the targets farther back.”

Maya nodded eagerly and raised the firearm again as Damien took a step back.

Her next few shots landed as well, scattered across the different targets but enough to show that she still remembered the basics.

Only after Maya finished her first round did Damien step closer. He took the firearm from her, replaced the empty magazine, then handed it back.

“Not bad,” he said. “But your stance is a little off.”

Moving behind her, he carefully adjusted her posture before guiding her arms into a better position.

“Relax your shoulders,” he instructed quietly. “Don’t fight the recoil. Keep your grip firm, but don’t tense your whole body.”

Maya followed each instruction as Damien made a few more small adjustments.

A few steps behind them, Harper watched with a ridiculously delighted smile on her face.

Nick glanced at her and scoffed. “Tsk. You look like you’re watching a romantic movie.”

“Shhh!” Harper lightly smacked his arm without taking her eyes off them. “Look at them. They’re

sooo sweet.” She clasped her hands together beneath her chin. “Eeeeeee!”

Nick shook his head before leaning closer to her. “How about I teach you a thing or two? Come on. Let’s go shoot on the other side and leave those two alone.” He nodded toward the pair. “D’s got her.”

Harper finally tore her attention away from Maya and Damien and turned to Nick, an adoring smile spreading across her face.

“Awww. Look at you being such a sweet boyfriend.”

To Nick’s surprise, Harper wrapped both arms around his arm, pressing herself against his side as she eagerly tugged him toward the other side.

Nick shook his head, but a small smile tugged at his lips.

Harper was simply being Harper, with all her quirks, boundless energy, and unapologetic weirdness. That was probably what had made him fall for her in the first place.

The two soon found their own spot farther down the range and began shooting, the crack of their gunfire joining Maya's.

It didn't take long for their practice to turn competitive. One good shot was immediately answered by another, then another, until they were exchanging smug looks and playful challenges between rounds, each determined to outdo the other.

Before long, they were completely absorbed in their own little competition, leaving Damien and Maya to continue training uninterrupted.

The next hour passed in a steady rhythm of gunfire, encouragement, and occasional corrections.

With every round, Maya became noticeably more comfortable. Her movements grew less hesitant, her grip steadier, and her shots gradually crept closer toward the center of the targets.

Damien remained patiently beside her throughout it all, observing more than interfering. He corrected her when necessary, offered quiet guidance between rounds, and changed the magazines for her whenever she emptied one.

At one point, Maya stepped aside and insisted that he take a turn.

Damien obliged.

He raised the firearm, took aim, and fired several shots in quick succession, shifting smoothly from one target to the next.

When Maya looked downrange, her mouth fell open.

Every shot had landed dead center, including those on the farthest targets.

She turned toward him. “Seriously?”

Damien lowered the firearm, looking entirely too pleased with himself.

“What?”

“You could’ve warned me you were that good.”

A smirk tugged at his lips. “You didn’t ask.”

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“He’s a sharpshooter,” Nick called out from the other side. “Top marksman in our graduating class at the academy. Last I checked, his record still stands.”

Maya’s eyes widened as she looked back at Damien.

“First a civilian fighter pilot, and now a sharpshooter?” Her eyes narrowed playfully. “What else are you hiding, Mr. Blackwood?”

Damien merely shrugged, the smug look on his face making it obvious he was enjoying her reaction.

“Do I get a prize for being good?” he teased.

Maya rolled her eyes. “Nope!”

He could only chuckle, but watching him shoot had made her even more determined to improve. By the next round, she was concentrating harder than ever.

Her growing confidence eventually drew her attention toward the larger firearms waiting on the table. It took some convincing, and more than one skeptical look from Damien, but she finally persuaded him to let her try one of the rifles.

The difference was immediate.

The added weight alone forced Maya to adjust her footing, and the stronger recoil caught her off guard on her first attempt, earning a startled laugh from her.

Damien stayed close, carefully guiding her through the adjustment until she became more comfortable with it.

By then, nearly two hours had passed.

The training ground no longer felt nearly as intimidating as it had when Maya first walked onto it. Spent casings littered the designated shooting area, fresh targets had been brought out several times, and the sound of gunfire had become so familiar that none of them seemed particularly

3.5 bothered by it anymore.

25 Punte

Not long after, Hiro arrived at the training ground with Anko close behind him, followed by several members of the household staff carrying food, drinks, and everything needed for lunch.

Rather than making everyone return to the manor, a table was quickly set up nearby, allowing them to eat right there on the training ground.

The break was a welcome one.

Shortly after one, lunch was finished, and after a brief discussion, they agreed that knives would be next.

While they had been eating, Harper's men had already prepared another section of the training ground for her next lesson.

Harper was naturally the first one out of her seat.

"Come on!" she announced excitedly. "Time for the real fun stuff!"

Maya laughed as she stood, with Damien and Nick following shortly after.

She had only taken a few steps when Hiro gently touched her arm.

Maya stopped and turned toward him.

Hiro didn't say anything. He simply looked at her and gave her a thumbs–up.

A small smile immediately spread across Maya's face before she returned the gesture.

Damien witnessed the entire exchange, his eyes narrowing slightly.

There it was again.

That strange, silent understanding between them that he still couldn't make sense of.

What exactly was going on between those two?

"What was that about?" he asked.

Maya turned to him with an innocent smile. "Nothing! Let's go."

Before he could question her further, she continued toward the training area.

Damien watched her for a moment before following.

Every instinct told him to press the issue, but he kept his mouth shut.

Whatever Maya and Hiro were keeping between them, sooner or later, he was going to figure out what it was.

Chapter 636

Harper had been excited about the shooting lesson, it was nothing compared to the enthusiasm on her face now.

The moment they reached the table of blades, she practically lit up.

“All right!” Harper clapped her hands together before turning to Maya. “Now we’re talking.”

Maya laughed as she joined her beside the table.

Harper picked up one of the training knives and held it out for Maya to see.

“Before you start throwing anything, you need to learn how to hold it properly,” she explained. “Your grip matters. Too loose and you lose control. Too tight and you make your movements stiff.”

She demonstrated the grip slowly, positioning her fingers around the handle.

“You want it secure and comfortable. Something you can control without feeling like you’re fighting against it.”

Maya watched closely.

“And throwing isn’t just about using your whole arm and hoping for the best,” Harper continued. Your stance, your balance, the distance, your release… all of it matters.”

She demonstrated the motion without letting go of the knife, showing Maya how the movement should flow naturally rather than come from brute force.

“The biggest mistake people make is trying too hard,” Harper added. “You don’t need to throw it like you’re trying to launch it into another country.”

Nick snorted from somewhere behind them.

Harper ignored him.

“You control the movement. The knife does the rest.”

”

Maya nodded slowly, absorbing every word.

There was something noticeably different about Harper now.

The bubbly enthusiasm was still there, but beneath it was an unmistakable confidence. Her movements were precise and effortless, and unlike most of her outrageous claims, she didn't seem interested in exaggerating her ability.

She didn't need to.

"All right." Harper picked up another knife and turned toward the targets. "Let me show you."

She stepped into position.

Her expression sharpened.

Then she threw.

The blade struck the center of the nearest target.

Before Maya could react, Harper already had another knife in her hand.

Another throw.

Another hit.

Then another.

One after another, the blades sailed across the training ground, striking targets at different distances with startling accuracy.

By the time Harper lowered her hand, every knife had found its mark.

Maya stared at the targets.

Then at Harper.

Then back at the targets.

Harper turned toward her with an enormously satisfied grin.

“See?”

Maya laughed. “Okay. Now I understand why you were so excited about this.”

Harper proudly lifted her chin. “I told you. Sharp things are my specialty.”

“Impressive. Didn’t think you had it in you, babe,” Nick called out.

Harper shot him a look. “Jealousy is very unattractive, ‘babe‘!”

Nick opened his mouth, then apparently thought better of arguing with her.

Harper grinned triumphantly before turning her attention back to Maya.

“Your turn. But first, you need your own knife.”

She gestured toward the collection spread across the table.

“Pick them up. See how they feel in your hand. Don’t choose something just because it looks impressive. You want something that feels natural when you hold it.”

Maya stepped closer and began examining the selection.

Some were immediately too large for her liking. Others felt awkward or unnecessarily heavy. She tred several before setting each one back down.

Eventually, her attention settled on one of the smaller blades.

It was surprisingly compact, with a simple handle that made It far less intimidating than some of the larger knives surrounding it.

Maya picked it up and carefully tested its weight in her hand.

“This one.”

Harper’s eyebrows rose.

“Oph. Good choice.”

Maya looked at her. “Really?”

“Yep.” Harper moved closer to inspect her selection. “Small, light, easy to control, and discreet enough to carry without drawing much attention.”

Maya turned the handle carefully in her palm.

“It doesn’t look as scary as the others.”

“That’s exactly why you shouldn’t underestimate it,” Harper replied. “A blade doesn’t have to look intimidating to be dangerous.”

She tapped a finger lightly against the handle.

“Something this size can be concealed easily, which makes it practical if your goal is self–defense rather than walking around looking like you’re preparing for medieval warfare.”

Maya laughed.

Harper smiled, but her next words carried a little more seriousness.

“Just remember, small doesn’t mean harmless. Any blade can cause serious injury, so if you’re going to carry one, you need to respect what it can do and know how to handle it safely.”

Maya looked down at the knife again.

Small.

Unassuming.

And surprisingly comfortable in her hand.

She tightened her fingers around the handle and looked toward the targets.

“All right,” she said. “Teach me.”

Harper gladly obliged.

As the afternoon wore on, Harper guided Maya through the basics, correcting her grip and stance and patiently demonstrating the throwing motion whenever Maya struggled to get it right.

To Maya’s surprise, she enjoyed it far more than she had expected.

There was something satisfying about the concentration it required. Unlike shooting, where the recoil had taken time to get used to, the smaller knife felt almost natural in her hand.

Her first few attempts were far from impressive. One blade struck the outer edge of the target, another barely stuck, and one missed altogether.

But she improved quickly.

Before long, more of her throws were finding the target.

Harper watched another blade stick and slowly turned toward Maya with an impressed look.

“You know, I’m starting to think you’ve been hiding something from me.”

Maya laughed. “What?”

“You’re picking this up suspiciously fast.”

“I’ve missed plenty.”

“For someone who’s never done this before?” Harper shook her head. “You’re a natural.”

Damien, who had been quietly observing from a short distance away, stepped forward and slipped an arm around Maya’s waist before planting a kiss on her cheek.

“I agree. Looks like knives might be your weapon of choice.” He leaned closer to her ear, his voice dropping into a teasing murmur. “And it’s so damn sexy, too.”

Maya immediately flushed and playfully pushed him away. “Stop it!”

Damien chuckled as he stepped back, clearly pleased with himself.

Harper watched them with an amused grin. “Okay, lovebirds. Let’s keep the dirty talk inside the bedroom, shall we?”

Maya’s cheeks grew even hotter. She quickly looked away from Harper before shooting Damien an accusing glare, as if the entire thing were his fault.

Damien merely grinned, looking anything but sorry. He gave her one last playful wink before leaving her to continue her lesson and heading back toward Nick, who was seated off to the side, completely absorbed in something on his phone.

With the two women left to themselves again, Harper wasted no time moving on to the next part of Maya’s training.

She called one of the men over and instructed him to bring out one of the training mannequins.

Maya's eyebrows rose when a life–sized dummy was brought over and positioned just a few steps in front of them.

"What's that for?"

Harper beamed. "Maya, meet Billy Joe Jim Bob!"

She gestured toward the mannequin as though she were making a perfectly normal introduction.

Maya blinked. "Billy who?"

Chapter 637

Harper burst out laughing before walking over to the mannequin.

"Throwing a knife at a target is one thing," she explained. "Knowing how to use one when someone is right in front of you is completely different."

She gave the mannequin a friendly pat on the shoulder.

“And Billy Joe Jim Bob here is going to help you understand.”

Maya stared at the mannequin for another second. “What’s with the name?”

“Oh.” Harper shrugged. “Well, I was going to name him Billy, but then I thought Billy sounded too nice. So I changed it to Joe, except we already have a guy here named Joe, and every time I told someone to bring Joe out, they kept bringing the actual Joe.”

Maya blinked.

“So then I changed it to Bob,” Harper continued. “But Bob felt too short. Like I didn’t put enough effort into it, you know?”

“Not really.”

“Exactly! So I thought, why choose?” Harper threw both hands out enthusiastically. “Why not just combine them all?”

Maya frowned. “Then where did Jim come from?”

“Oh, Jim…” Harper glanced around before leaning closer and lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I was heartbroken at the time. There was this guy I really liked, but then I found out he got married.”

Maya’s eyebrows rose.

“So I marched into a liquor store, asked the clerk for the strongest thing they had, and he handed me this really pretty bottle.” Harper sighed dramatically. “I didn’t even bother reading the label. I paid for it, went home, locked myself in my room, and started drinking.”

Her eyes suddenly widened.

“And let me tell you, that man was right. That thing was gasoline!” Harper slapped a hand against her chest. “It burned all the way down. I swear I could feel it setting fire to organs I didn’t even know I had.”

Maya burst out laughing.

“But it did the job.” Harper affectionately patted the mannequin again. “Jim got me through a very difficult night, so naturally, I had to honor him.”

Maya stared at her. “You named part of the mannequin after the whiskey you drank because some guy got married?”

“When you say it like that, you make it sound weird.”

“It is weird.”

Harper shrugged. “Anyway, Jim earned his place. Billy Joe Jim Bob! Easy to remember, no confusion, everybody wins.” She grinned proudly. “Cool, right?”

Maya shook her head. Somehow, to Harper, all of that made perfect sense.

Billy, she could understand.

Joe? Sure.

Bob? Perfectly normal.

Even Jim had somehow earned his place after getting Harper through a drunken heartbreak.

But Billy Joe Jim Bob?

How exactly had combining all four made the name less complicated?

Completely oblivious to Maya's disbelief, Harper gave the mannequin another pat before turning her attention back to the lesson.

"Okay, enough about him. Back to business."

Maya pushed aside her amusement and focused on Harper again as the other woman's playful demeanor gave way to a more serious, instructive one.

"If you're ever forced to use a knife to defend yourself, knowing how to hold one isn't enough,"

Harper explained.

"You need to understand that where you strike matters just as much."

Maya's attention sharpened. "You mean actually stabbing someone?"

"Stab, slice, chop, whatever it takes to hurt them enough to make sure they can't come after you again." Harper nodded matter-of-factly. "Yes, exactly that."

Harper walked over to the table and picked up the same knife Maya had chosen earlier, then returned to Billy Joe Jim Bob, casually turning the blade in her hand.

“I’ll show you.”

Maya stepped closer, watching intently as Harper positioned herself in front of him.

Using the knife, she pointed out several vulnerable areas, explaining where a strike could cause enough pain or injury to stop an attacker and give Maya a chance to escape.

“The goal is always to get away,” Harper reminded her. “But if someone puts you in a position where you have no other choice, you don’t waste time trying to look impressive. You do enough to make them stop.”

She demonstrated several controlled strikes against Billy Joe Jim Bob, showing Maya the difference between simply swinging the blade and using it with deliberate purpose,

Maya watched carefully, increasingly impressed by how effortless Harper made it look. There was no hesitation or wasted motion. Each movement flowed smoothly into the next, quick and precise, as though the knife were simply an extension of her hand.

By the time the demonstration was over, poor Billy Joe Jim Bob looked considerably worse for wear. Harper hadn’t held back for Maya’s benefit, putting enough real force behind each strike to leave visible evidence of exactly what the blade could do.

Apparently satisfied with her handiwork, Harper gave Billy Joe Jim Bob one final tap with the handle of her knife.

“There. He survived.”

Maya couldn’t help but stare at the damage. “Barely.”

Harper paused, her attention drifting back to Billy Joe Jim Bob as she surveyed the damage she’d done.

“Well… I did get a little carried away.” She shrugged, completely unapologetic. “If he were real, he’d most definitely be dead.”

Maya nodded. “I can tell.”

Harper glanced down at the knife still in her hand. Then, to Maya’s surprise, she casually stuck it into the top of poor Billy Joe Jim Bob’s head and dusted off her hands as though she’d just finished a job well done.

Maya stared at her in disbelief but Harper simply smiled.

“Give an attacker a chance to recover, and you’re giving them a chance to come after you again.”

She nodded toward the knife now sticking out of Billy Joe Jim Bob’s head.

“And remember what I told you earlier. A small blade doesn’t mean a harmless one. Even something that size can do serious damage.”

She stepped aside and gestured toward the battered mannequin.

“Your turn. Let’s see what you remember.”

Maya stepped forward, her attention settling fully on the mannequin. She took a deep breath, reached up, and pulled the knife from its head.

Her first few attempts were slow and cautious as she tried to remember everything Harper had shown her. She focused on keeping her grip steady and her movements controlled, repeating each motion until it began to feel less awkward.

Gradually, her hesitation faded.

The more she practiced, the easier it became to find her rhythm. Her movements grew smoother and more confident, still nowhere near Harper’s effortless precision, but enough that she no longer had to stop and think through every motion before making it.

Harper watched closely from beside her, occasionally stepping in to correct her positioning or remind her to stay in control whenever Maya started moving too quickly.

While the two women became increasingly absorbed in their knife training, Hiro remained nearby, quietly observing the activity around him.

After a while, his attention settled on Nick.

He had heard enough about Nicholas Ashcroft over the years to know the man's reputation. But knowing of someone and actually knowing them were two entirely different things.

And considering Nick was now dating his best friend, Hiro figured it was about time he got to know him a little better.

Chapter 638

Pro considered simply walking over and starting a conversation, or perhaps inviting him for a drink later that night, but where was the fun in that?

There were far more interesting ways to get to know a man than asking him questions.

Of course, a man as confident as Nicholas Ashcroft rarely backed down when his pride was challenged, and Hiro had been around enough powerful, self-assured men to know exactly which buttons to push.

All he needed to do was give Nick's ego the slightest nudge and see what kind of man lay beneath all that arrogance and playful charm.

His gaze shifted toward the open sparring area, and a faint, almost mischievous smile tugged at his lips.

And what better way to get to know someone than through a friendly match?

A satisfied look crossed Hiro's face as his gaze settled once more on Nick.

Nick and Damien were seated off to the side. While Damien's attention remained fixed on Maya, Nick was still absorbed in his phone, looking completely relaxed as he scrolled through what appeared to be something amusing.

Hiro watched him for a moment before making his way over. Without saying a word, he simply took a seat beside Nick.

Nick glanced up when Hiro sat beside him and gave him a casual nod. "Hey."

Then his attention returned to his phone.

Hiro didn't seem bothered by the brief acknowledgment. His gaze drifted toward the two women training nearby.

"Maya's picking it up really fast," he remarked. "You can tell she's determined and eager to learn."

Damien heard him, and although a trace of annoyance toward Hiro still lingered over whatever he and Maya seemed to be keeping between them, he set it aside. He certainly couldn't dismiss a compliment about his woman, especially when he could see the same thing for himself.

For someone with little to no experience handling weapons, Maya was doing remarkably well.

"Hmm," Damien murmured, his eyes remaining on her. "She is. And Harper knows how to teach her without overwhelming her."

Hiro smiled as he watched them. "Anyone around here would die for the chance she's getting right now."

That caught Damien's attention, and he turned to Hiro. "What do you mean by that?"

Hiro chuckled. "Harper is known around here as the 'Master of Sharp Weapons'. Anything can be deadly in her hands. Everyone here, especially the students, would love the chance to learn from her, but she never teaches anyone. Not even her brother."

He glanced toward Harper and Maya again.

"This is the first time."

That finally caught Nick's attention.

He stopped scrolling, put his phone away, and looked toward Harper. “You mean Harper is really that good?”

“Yes.” Hiro nodded. “And when I say around here, I mean beyond the walls of this estate. Let’s just say anyone who knows the Takahashis, friends or foes, knows that.”

Nick fell silent, his gaze settling on Harper with a newfound appreciation as he watched her guide Maya through another movement.

Damien glanced at him. “You better work harder if you want to keep up with her.”

Nick immediately scoffed, his usual arrogance returning. “What do you mean? My skills can match my woman’s just fine.”

There it was.

Hiro had found the opening he’d been waiting for.

He crossed his arms over his chest, his expression turning noticeably more serious.

“You mean my woman?”

Both Nick and Damien snapped their heads toward him.

Nick reacted immediately. The relaxed amusement disappeared from his face as he shot to his feet and stared down at Hiro.

“What the f**k did you just say?”

Hiro remained seated, calmly meeting Nick’s burning gaze. Then, as if deliberately adding fuel to the fire, a teasing smile curved his lips.

“Am I wrong? She was supposed to be my bride first.”

“Don’t even f*****g think about it!” Nick snapped, his fists clenching at his sides as though he was already one wrong word away from throwing the first punch.

Damien, on the other hand, remained silent. His eyes shifted between the two men as the pieces slowly began to fall into place.

He was starting to understand exactly what Hiro was trying to do.

Rather than interfere, Damien leaned back in his seat and decided to stay out of it.

This ought to be interesting.

Hiro chuckled and shook his head. “Relax. I’m simply stating the facts.”

He rose to his feet and stood directly in front of Nick. “Don’t worry, I have absolutely no intention of taking Harper from you. We both feel exactly the same way about that arrangement.”

The amusement gradually disappeared from his face.

“But that doesn’t mean I don’t care about her. Arrangement or not, I was her best friend first.”

That made sense.

Nick already knew about the woman Hiro was seeing, so hearing that he felt the same way about the arrangement was enough to ease some of the anger simmering inside him.

But one part of what Hiro had said gave him pause.

I was her best friend first.

What exactly was that supposed to mean?

Nick was about to ask what he meant when Hiro nodded toward the open sparring area.

“Interested in a match?”

Nick followed his gaze, then looked back at him.

And suddenly, it clicked.

The comment about Harper being his bride. The reminder that he had been her best friend first. Hiro hadn’t been trying to piss him off for the hell of it. He wanted to size up the man who was now dating his best friend.

A slow, knowing grin spread across Nick’s face.

“So that’s what this is about.” He glanced toward the sparring area again. “You want to spar with me?”

Hiro’s lips curved. “Unless the famous Nicholas Ashcroft is afraid his woman’s best friend might embarrass him.”

Nick let out a short laugh.

There it was. Another deliberate jab at his pride.

Well, s**t.

Hiro knew exactly what he was doing.

Nick met his eyes, the confidence in his expression leaving no doubt that he was willing to play along.

“Sure.”

Hiro’s smile widened into a satisfied smirk. “Great. Let’s start with a few laps to warm you up.”

Nick raised an eyebrow, about to tell him he didn’t need a damn warm-up, but Hiro was already pulling his shirt over his head and tossing it aside.

The body hidden beneath his clothes was impressive. Firm, defined muscle covered his lean frame, the kind built through years of real combat training rather than hours spent sculpting it in a gym.

Intimidating as f**k, Nick had to admit.

But he wasn't intimidated.

He'd worked damn hard for his own body, and he knew exactly what he was capable of. Hiro might look like he could hold his own in a fight, but Nick was more than confident he could, too.

Without missing a beat, Nick pulled off his shirt. His own body was equally impressive, broad and muscular, with a defined chest and hard six-pack that made it obvious how seriously he took staying in shape. The dark sleeve tattoo covering his right arm only added to his imposing appearance.

He tossed his shirt aside and met Hiro's gaze, a cocky grin spreading across his face.

"All right! Let's see what you've got!"

Chapter 639

"I've been training on these grounds since I was five. It wouldn't exactly be fair to you." He nodded toward the open field. "So go ahead. I'll give you a five–minute head start."

Nick stared at him.

Cocky bastard.

He let out an incredulous scoff. “Ha! And what makes you think I need one?”

Before Hiro could answer, Damien chimed in from behind them.

“I’d take it if I were you.”

Nick turned to him. “What? Whose side are you on?”

Damien shrugged. “Nobody’s.”

Nick narrowed his eyes at him for a second before turning back to Hiro. “Fine. But don’t blame me when you can’t catch up.”

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and placed it beside Damien, then rolled his shoulders and stretched his arms before giving his legs a quick stretch.

Just as he was about to start, Hiro leaned slightly closer.

“One friendly reminder,” he murmured, keeping his voice low enough for Nick alone to hear. “Those men bow down to your girlfriend.”

Nick’s eyes flicked toward him.

Hiro’s smirk deepened.

“You wouldn’t want to give them a reason to laugh at the man she chose.”

Nick’s eyes narrowed at the warning, but if Hiro was trying to make him nervous, it wasn’t going to work.

“Tss! You talk too much. How many laps?”

“Ten.”

Nick glanced around the training ground, casually sizing up the wide stretch of open field before looking back at Hiro with a confident smirk.

That was it?

WED

“Piece of cake.”

Hiro smiled but said nothing.

Nick moved into position, planting one foot forward as he readied himself. Ten laps would get his blood pumping, sure, but from where he stood, the distance looked like nothing he couldn’t handle.

“Ready?” Hiro asked.

Nick straightened. “Born ready.”

Their exchange finally caught Harper and Maya’s attention. They stopped what they were doing and looked across the field, only to find Hiro and Nick standing shirtless several yards away, facing each other with an unmistakably competitive air between them.

Harper blinked.

“What the hell are those two doing?”

Maya laughed. “Maybe they’re competing for the princess’s heart.”

Harper's brows pulled together. "What princess?"

Maya turned to her, amused. "You."

"Me?" Harper pointed at herself before bursting into laughter. "Please. One is my childhood best friend who's already in a relationship, and the other is my…" She paused, a little smile creeping onto her face. "Well, my boyfriend."

Her gaze wandered back to the two men.

"And eww! I'm not a princess. That's too girly."

She lifted her chin proudly.

"I'm a queen."

Maya laughed. "Of course you are. Should we go see what they're up to?"

Harper considered it for a second before narrowing her eyes at Hiro.

“Maybe we should.” She tilted her head. “Do you see his face?”

Maya looked more closely. “What about it?”

“That’s his up–to–no–good face.”

Maya glanced at her. “He has one of those, huh?”

“Oh, absolutely.” Harper nodded with complete certainty. “And I have a feeling Ashcroft is about to

WED find out exactly what it means.”

Before Maya could respond, Harper grabbed her hand and started pulling her across the field.

“Come on. We need front–row seats.”

Across the field, Nick lowered himself slightly, ready to take off.

He had no idea that the training ground he’d just dismissed as a piece of cake was a hell of a lot bigger once you actually had to run around it.

Nick took off while Hiro remained exactly where he was, arms crossed over his bare chest as he calmly watched him put more and more distance between them.

Damien looked even less concerned. He had settled comfortably into his seat, leaning back with both arms stretched along the backrest, looking more like a spectator waiting for the entertainment to begin.

By the time Harper and Maya reached them, Nick was already making his way around the field.

Harper watched Nick for a moment before turning a suspicious look on Hiro.

“Okay. What are you doing to my boyfriend?”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Hiro kept his attention on Nick. “I’m not doing anything to your boyfriend. It’s just a friendly match.”

Harper raised a brow. “And why exactly would you do that?”

“I’m curious.” Hiro finally glanced at her. “I want to see what our future Danna–sama is made of.”

A faint blush crept into Harper’s cheeks.

“What are you talking about? That’s…”

“That’s what?” Hiro challenged, amusement flickering in his eyes. “Don’t tell me whatever is going on between you two isn’t serious.”

Harper opened her mouth, but nothing immediately came out.

“It’s…” She glanced toward Nick. “It’s still too new.”

Hiro studied her for a moment. He had known Harper long enough to notice how carefully she was treating this relationship, something he had never seen her do with any man before Nicholas. If anything, her reluctance to rush whatever was happening between them only confirmed what he already suspected.

She was in love with him.

“Just watch,” he said, turning his attention back to the field. “As the future Wakagashira, it’s my duty to know what kind of man might one day stand beside my Oyabun.”

Harper stared at him for a moment before looking back at Nick.

“But he’s not made for this kind of physical training,” she argued. “He’s the heir to the Ashcroft empire. He was born into luxury, billion–dollar deals, and people waiting for his orders. He was raised to command, not spend his life running around training grounds.”

Hiro gave her a pointed look.

“Being born into wealth and power doesn’t make someone fragile,” he said calmly. “So just watch and don’t interfere.”

His gaze returned to Nick, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

“And maybe you shouldn’t underestimate your boyfriend either. They don’t call a man the ‘Prince of the Underworld‘ because he knows how to sit behind a desk and give orders.”

Harper looked at him.

“A title like that is earned.” Hiro’s expression grew more serious. “And I doubt he earned his without knowing how to take a hit, spill some blood, and get his own hands dirty.”

Harper understood Hiro’s point. Nick’s reputation existed for a reason, and she knew him well enough to know he’d be more offended than appreciative if she stepped in on his behalf.

Meanwhile, Damien shifted upright and made room for Maya beside him.

The moment she sat down, his arm slipped around her shoulders, pulling her against his side as he pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Tired?”

“A little bit, but I’m okay.” Maya settled comfortably against him. “How about you?”

“Bored.”

She chuckled. “Why don’t you run with Nick?”

Damien hummed thoughtfully. “Hmm… I didn’t realize you wanted to see me shirtless too.”

Maya turned to him, but he was already leaning closer to her ear.

“How about we go back to the bedroom instead?” he whispered teasingly.

“I can get completely naked for you.”

Chapter 640

Heat rushed into Maya's cheeks. Even after everything they had done together, Damien could still say the most shameless things with a completely straight face and leave her flustered in seconds.

"Stop that." She nudged him with her elbow. "You're getting more and more shameless lately."

Damien merely shrugged, entirely unapologetic.

"Watching my future wife handle a gun and a knife, then practically murder that poor dummy was so damn hot. I can't help it."

He leaned closer again, lowering his voice until it was meant for her ears alone.

"I'm turned on," he murmured, his voice dropping into a low, sexy growl. "Take a look."

His eyes dipped meaningfully toward the unmistakable bulge in his pants.

Maya's eyes widened, and the heat already burning in her cheeks spread all the way to the tips of her ears. She could have blamed her flushed face on the afternoon sun before, but there was definitely no blaming the sun now.

"Damien!"

Flustered, she quickly snatched the small towel beside her and tossed it over his lap, covering him before anyone else could notice. She rolled her eyes at him, but the smile tugging at her lips completely betrayed her.

Damien chuckled, clearly entertained by her reaction, before turning his attention back to the field, where Nick was still running.

“Now I need a distraction. I need to sweat this out, otherwise…” he said casually, deliberately leaving the rest unfinished.

Maya immediately turned to him again and pressed a finger against his lips before he could make things worse.

“Shh! Just go and run with Nick!”

Damien clicked his tongue.

“If I joined him, I’d probably just make him look worse.”

Maya followed his gaze toward the field, her curiosity getting the better of her. “What’s going on anyway?”

Damien's lips twitched. "Just a little testosterone–fueled male bonding."

While Damien clearly found the whole thing amusing, Nick, on the other hand, was beginning to realize there was nothing amusing about it.

By the second lap, he knew he had made a serious miscalculation.

The training ground was much larger than it looked from the center. What had seemed like a manageable distance while standing still somehow felt twice as long once he had to run the entire perimeter.

His breathing had already grown heavier, sweat beginning to bead across his forehead and chest.

f**k.

His eyes swept across the training ground, only to find several of the Takahashi men watching him from the sidelines with obvious interest. And as if that wasn't bad enough, Harper was watching too.

f*****g great.

There was no way in hell he was going to let her see him struggle.

Nick forced himself to maintain his pace, ignoring the growing burn in his legs as he pushed into his third lap.

That was when Hiro finally started running.

It didn't take long for him to catch up.

For several seconds, Hiro simply ran beside him, effortlessly matching his pace.

"Tired already?"

Nick shot him an irritated look, refusing to let his labored breathing betray him. "Tss. Who says I'm tired?"

Hiro simply shrugged, a low snicker escaping him as he effortlessly picked up his pace.

Nick watched in disbelief as the distance between them widened with alarming speed.

By the time he was nearing the end of his fourth lap, Hiro was already gaining on him again.

Damn it! That cocky bastard runs like f*****g Flash.

Refusing to be humiliated, Nick pushed himself harder.

Bad idea.

Pushing himself harder only drained what little energy he had left. His lungs burned, his legs grew heavier, and with every stride, the finish seemed farther away instead of closer.

Meanwhile, Hiro maintained the same steady, relentless pace without showing an ounce of exhaustion. He barely even looked like he was sweating.

By the time he forced himself into his eighth lap, the cocky bastard had already completed all ten.

Un–f*****g–believable.

Five minutes. He had been given a five–minute head start, enough to put him nearly two full laps ahead. Yet somehow, Hiro had wiped out the entire advantage, overtaken him, and finished with two laps to spare.

Hiro was already standing beside Harper, casually drinking from a bottle of water as if he hadn't just run ten f*****g laps. A light sheen of sweat covered his chest and shoulders, but otherwise, he looked irritatingly unaffected.

And worse, he was smirking.

Nick wanted to wipe that smug look right off his face. Unfortunately, that required energy he no longer possessed.

But quitting wasn't an option. Not with Harper watching. And he had been so focused on keeping his legs moving that he hadn't even noticed their little audience had nearly doubled.

Several more people had gathered along the sidelines, many of them young enough to look like students or trainees, all watching the unexpected spectacle with obvious interest. He even spotted Max and Lee among the growing crowd.

f*****g fantastic. Apparently, his suffering had become the afternoon entertainment.

So he gritted his teeth and forced his exhausted legs through the final two laps until he finally crossed the point where they had started.

The moment he stopped, his legs felt like they no longer belonged to him.

He bent forward, bracing both hands on his knees as he fought to catch his breath, every instinct screaming at him to collapse onto the ground and stay there.

Harper immediately started toward him, but Hiro caught her by the arm before she could take more than a step. When she looked at him questioningly, he simply shook his head, released her, and walked toward Nick himself.

A bottle of water suddenly appeared in front of him.

“Here.”

He looked up to find Hiro holding it out.

Nick snatched the bottle from his hand, twisted off the cap, and practically emptied it in one go. When he finished, he crushed the plastic in his fist and tossed it onto the ground beside him.

Hro was already holding out another bottle, an infuriating hint of amusement still lingering on his face.

“Looks like you could use another.”

Before Nick could even reach for it, Harper stepped in and snatched the bottle from Hiro’s hand.

“That’s enough. Leave him alone.”

She handed the water to Nick before turning on her best friend, pointing an accusing finger at him,

“That was not fair! You’ve been running around this place since we were kids. Why would you make him do ten laps?”

Hiro laughed, raising his hands in feigned innocence.

“Hey, he said he could do it.”

“I can!” Nick immediately straightened, despite his lungs still fighting for air. The last thing he needed was Harper defending him like he couldn’t handle himself.

“I’ve just been busy lately. Haven’t had much time to work out, and the jet lag sure as hell isn’t helping.”

He took another breath and lifted his chin stubbornly.

“If I were in my usual shape, I would’ve finished a hell of a lot sooner.”

Hiro crossed his arms over his chest and snickered. “Is that so?”

Harper narrowed her eyes at him. “Hiro…”

Without warning, Hiro suddenly lunged forward and swung a fist at Nick.

Despite his exhaustion, Nick reacted instantly, jerking out of the way just before the punch could connect.

“What the f**k?!”

“Your enemies won’t give a damn whether you’re jet–lagged or not!”

Before Nick could fire back, Hiro came at him again.