

The Heart System #Chapter 271 - Read The Heart System Chapter 271

Chapter 271: Chapter 271

- Sexual Activity Completed

Partner: Threesome

EXP Gained: +300

Good-Hearted Bonus: +30

Star Rating: 3.1 ★★★

Reason: You came too early.

Bliss Multiplier: 30c

Mystery Chest Earned

Well, I could've done better, but after hearing what Minne said, I just couldn't hold it in anymore. I let go. At least I got some rewards for it, and a mystery chest.

The chest gave me fifty more gold, bringing my total to...

SHOP

- Aphrodisiac Drink (10c)
- Silk Lingerie Set (25c)
- Sensual Massage Oil (15c)

- Mystery Pleasure Toy (30c)

- Flirt Potion (20c)

- Hypnotic Perfume (40c)

- Time Stop (90c)

- 500 Dollars (50c)

- 1 Ability Point (150c)

- 1 Mastery Point (160c)

- Main Quest Unlock (Bought)

- Desire Aura (100c)

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Credits: 2182c

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Nice. Every time I opened the shop, that one mastery point always seemed to blink at me. It was tempting, but no. I decided to wait and level up first, see if any new items popped up, then I'd make my decision.

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Evan Marlowe (Lvl 12)

=====

Age: 21

Height: 180 cm

Weight: 75 kg

=====

EXP: [██████] 3478/3491

=====

God, I was so close to leveling up. But, of course, the system penalized me for climaxing too early. Eh, whatever. Hearing those words from Minne made me feel a lot better, anyway.

This girl... I swear...

♥□♥□♥□

This was it.

I eased the car up to the side curb and killed the engine. The snow-speckled windshield went quiet, the heater hummed, and for a second I just stared at myself in the rearview mirror. Charm skill doing its job, hair looking decent, face sharp. I still wanted to level that skill up more, see how far I could push it, but credits were tight... well, not tight but I just wanted to save them for later.

"Come on, Evan," I muttered at my reflection. "It's just dinner. Friendly dinner. She isn't gonna confess."

But who the hell was I kidding? I literally heard her talking with Kayla. Of course she was going to confess. And I'd never rejected a woman before. Not properly. What was I even going to say if she actually... said it? Damn.

I opened the door, stepped out, and the cold punched me right in the face. Snow was falling hard now, fat flakes sticking to my hair and coat instantly. I locked the car and hurried toward her building, hands tucked deep into my pockets, boots crunching in the snow.

I raised my hand to knock.

The door opened before I touched it.

Mendy stood there in the warm yellow glow of her hallway. I stepped inside quickly, shaking the cold off my shoulders, exhaling in relief.

"Hey," she said softly. "I'm really glad you came."

"Hi," I replied, turning toward her—and froze for a second.

Holy hell.

Mendy wasn't wearing her usual t-shirts or comfy sweaters. Her long, straight dark hair fell over her shoulders, smooth and shiny, and the dress... wow.

It was a long, elegant wine-red dress that hugged her sides and flowed down her legs. Thin straps on her shoulders. A soft V-shaped neckline that showed just enough

cleavage to make my heartbeat tick up. She'd even done light makeup—subtle lipstick, eyeliner, cheeks a little rosier than usual.

"Oh... wow," I let slip. "You look... really good."

Her cheeks went red in an instant. "T-thanks. I just... bought this, so I thought I'd try it on. For tonight."

"Yeah?" I said with a small smile. "It's perfect. Looks great on you."

"You're making me blush," she murmured, giving an awkward, shy little laugh.

"Sorry," I chuckled. "I mean it, though."

"Oh! I'll get your jacket."

I shrugged off my jacket, and she took it gently, hanging it on the rack like it was something fragile. I pulled my gloves, shoved them into the coat, and rubbed my hands together to get some warmth back.

Mendy motioned toward the living room. "Shall we?"

"Yep." I followed her in. "Sorry I came in just sweaters and pants. Didn't know the dinner had a dress code."

She snorted, nudging my shoulder lightly. "There wasn't a dress code. Trust me."

We both laughed awkwardly. That kind of laugh where you don't know where to look next.

I sat on the single couch, and she sat on the double—closest to me, angled toward me. Then she paused, smacked her forehead lightly with her palm, then got up after two seconds.

"I forgot. Do you want something to drink?"

"Got a soda?"

"Penelope might've brought some yesterday," she said, heading to the kitchen. "Let me check."

I watched her cross the kitchen tiles, her hips swaying under the red fabric. When she bent down to open the fridge, the dress stretched just enough for me to notice how round her ass actually was.

Kayla still held first place... but Mendy wasn't far behind at all.

Nah, no. No. Focus, Evan. You're not here for that.

She lit up when she found a soda, twisted the cap off, and handed it to me on her way back. She returned to the kitchen for her own drink and poured herself some orange juice.

When she sat again, she tucked one leg under the other, subtle but cute.

"So," I said, leaning back. "How're you doing lately?"

"Good," she said. "I, um... moved the couches. If you noticed."

"Oh yeah," I nodded. "This single one used to be over there, and that double one was near the window."

"Mm." She smiled shyly. "Just... trying new things. I got bored yesterday and wanted to rearrange."

"I get that. Sometimes you just need a change of scenery."

We both sipped our drinks, letting a quiet moment settle. I kept shifting my eyes—bottle, carpet, table—doing anything not to stare too long at her. Knowing what I knew made the air feel thick.

"Are you hungry?" she asked finally. "I made lasagna. And banana pudding for dessert."

I whistled. "Banana pudding? I might skip dinner and go straight for that."

"You love desserts?"

"Not really," I shrugged. "But banana ones? Yeah. Those are my weaknesses."

She smiled wider, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Good to know."

We took another sip, and the silence returned—but it wasn't uncomfortable. More like both of us felt something hovering in the air, waiting for the right moment... or the wrong one.

Maybe this awkwardness would save me. Maybe she'd rethink confessing because the vibe was off.

God, I hoped so.

"Uh..." I started, searching for something, anything, to bridge the silence. "Kayla was really nice, right?"

"Yes!" Mendy brightened immediately. "She even helped me pick this dress."

"Oh? So you got help from her?"

She froze for half a second, eyes widening like she'd said something she wasn't supposed to. "It's... kind of. I just wanted to make sure it fit me properly."

"Hmm." I finished the last sip of my soda and set the bottle on the coffee table. "Well, shall we eat? I'm starving."

"Of course." She stood up so quickly the hem of her dress swayed. "I'll get the table ready—"

My phone rang sharply. I held up a finger to her and fished it out. Tuck. That probably meant something important.

"Sorry. Work stuff," I said.

"No problem," she said with a warm smile. "I'll get the table ready while you talk."

I nodded gratefully and slipped toward the sliding glass door, entering the back garden. The moment I stepped outside, the cold air slapped me across the face. The snow layering the garden tiles glittered under the porch lights. I shut the glass door softly, swiped up, and answered.

"Big T," I said. "What's up?"

He greeted me instantly with the n-word, his signature way of saying hello. "Listen, my man—are you in trouble?"

"What?"

"A chick came into the gas station, yo," he said. "Tall, stacked, full-on milf energy. Name's Carrie."

"Ah." I dragged a hand down my face. "What did she want?"

"Dirt on you," he said. "She said she'd pay for any kinda information."

"Damn... that bitch." My jaw clenched. "What did you tell her?"

"Nothin', man. You know how it is. We tight."

"Thanks."

"I looked her up too. This woman is loaded, bro. Like she wipes her ass with money."

"Yeah, I know." I muttered. "She and I aren't exactly friends."

"Why not?"

"I'll explain later." I exhaled, breath fogging in front of me. "Just stay away from her. And let me know if she shows up again."

"Aight, man. Stay safe."

"You too, T."

I hung up and squeezed the phone in my hand, staring through the glass at the dark reflection of the snowy backyard. Carrie wasn't just pissed—she was actively digging. Looking for dirt, tapping people I knew. All because her son wanted Kim like she was some collectible toy.

She wasn't all bark. Not at all.

I just didn't know what the hell I could do about it right now.

Behind me, the door slid open again. Warmth flooded out and Mendy peeked outside, her hair brushing her shoulder.

"It's ready," she said gently.

"Great." I forced a smile and stepped back inside, trying to leave the anger out on the snow.

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The dining table was nicely set—lasagna steaming in the middle, salad in a glass bowl, two glasses of orange juice waiting beside the plates. She'd even lit a small candle between us.

"I know you don't like wine," Mendy said softly. "So I poured you orange juice."

"Perfect." I smiled and sat down.

She took her seat across from me. The food smelled incredible, and she watched me expectantly as I picked up my fork. I took a bite and nodded.

"Really good."

She flushed a little. "I'm glad. I wasn't sure if you'd like it."

We ate for a minute in silence. The clink of forks, the hum of the heater, the soft crunch of salad—it all blended into the same cozy-but-awkward atmosphere.

"So..." she finally started. "This weather is crazy, right?"

"Yeah," I chuckled. "Feels like it doubled in cold just in the last hour."

"Mm-hm." She stabbed a piece of lasagna and looked out the window. "If it keeps up, I might get snowed in tomorrow."

"That might actually happen," I said. "Snow's thick out there."

"Mm."

Our tiny weather talk ended there, sinking back into another round of quiet eating. The awkwardness stayed, thick as the steam rising from the lasagna.

"So, um... Nala," Mendy began softly. She fiddled with her fork a little. "How are... things with her? Nala."

"G-good," I answered. "I'm lucky to have her."

"Right." She nodded slowly. "You talked about her when you came here with Kayla. I... well, you really in—"

Her voice caught. She stopped mid-sentence, swallowed wrong, and then started coughing hard. Her face went red instantly.

"Hey—" I stood and moved beside her quickly, patting her back. "Easy, easy."

She coughed again, eyes watering, chest hitching. I grabbed her orange juice, slid it into her hands, and watched her gulp it down in two large, desperate swallows.

Finally, she exhaled sharply, leaning back into the chair with a hand on her chest.

"Oh my god..." she muttered, embarrassed. "Wow. I'm so sorry."

"You okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah, totally fine," she said with a weak laugh. "Sorry about that."

"Should I get you some water?"

"No, no," she waved quickly. "I'm okay. Really."

I sat back down, still watching her for a moment. "Tell me if you need anything."

She smiled softly. "Yeah... I keep hearing those exact words from you." Her cheeks turned pink. "Feels like you'd show up whenever I needed you, like... I don't know."

"Like Flash?"

She snorted, then coughed once more and covered her mouth. "Like Flash."

We both laughed. She took a few more sips of her juice while I went back to my lasagna, though I kept glancing at her. That little choke had cut her sentence in half. And now I was way too curious about what she had been trying to say.

"Um... like I was saying," she continued carefully. "K-Kayla told me that you and Nala are... in an open relationship."

"Oh..."

I froze with the fork halfway to my mouth. Swallowed my bite way too quickly. Then I put the fork down and looked right at her.

God. Kayla. Why would she tell her that? Of all people to tell, Kayla picked the one woman planning to confess to me tonight. Amazing timing as always. Damn it. This was awkward as fuuuck.

Mendy's eyes stayed glued to me, waiting.

"So?" she asked quietly.

"It's..." I exhaled. "Yes. We are."

She didn't look away. She just nodded once, but her expression tightened. Not anger. Not jealousy. Something like disappointment? Confusion? Hurt? I couldn't tell—but it made my stomach clench anyway.

She shifted her gaze down to her plate, sliding her fork back and forth through the lasagna. "With a CEO, huh?" she said with a small, crooked smile. "Wow."

"It's complicated," I said. "Yeah."

"So... you like seeing your girlfriend... get... um... like..." Her words tangled, her face went red again. "H-handled by another man?"

"No!" I said quickly. "God, no. I don't share Nala with anyone. She's mine. I'm hers."

"Huh?" She blinked. "So... only you get to... mess around?"

"K... kinda?" I rubbed my forehead. "Jesus, Mendy, these are personal questions."

"I know, I know," she said, hands flapping nervously. "I wasn't trying to pry. I just... wanted to know how things are with Nala. That's all."

"Why?"

She rubbed the back of her neck, eyes drifting toward the ceiling as if searching for an excuse. Then she shrugged softly. "Just curious. That's all."

"Huh... okay."

But the look she had while she said that? That wasn't curiosity. That was something else entirely.

Feeling a little ashamed, I kept eating the lasagna while sipping my orange juice. Mendy's expression had shifted into something unreadable. Not sad, not angry, not happy. Just... neutral. Like someone who'd learned to hide whatever was boiling underneath.

Was she masking it? Or did she really feel nothing about what I said?

"I guess... it wasn't something you wanted to hear?" I asked quietly.

"No," she said, shrugging with an awkward laugh. "I mean... I knew I had no shot next to a CEO but—"

We both froze at the same time.

She blinked once, twice, cheeks burning red, and slapped both hands over her face, elbows on the table. I just sat there like an idiot with a fork in midair, a piece of lasagna dangling off it like a loose tooth.

Five long seconds of crushing silence passed.

Then the lasagna slid off my fork and slapped onto the plate loud as hell. It echoed like a bomb going off in the quiet room.

God. Kill me.

"I'm..." she murmured behind her hands. "I didn't mean to say that."

"Well..." I cleared my throat. "You know... it's... I mean... like..."

"This isn't how I planned anything would go," she mumbled, voice cracked with embarrassment. "God, I'm so stupid. This whole dinner was so stupid."

"That's not true."

"It is," she said quickly, shaking her head, still hiding. "I shouldn't have said that. I sound pathetic."

"Hey." I leaned forward slightly. "What you said was just wrong."

She peeked between her fingers. "I don't want pity, Evan. Please." Her voice dropped to something small and sad. "I can't even look at you right now. I'm sorry."

"No." I stood, pushed my chair back, and walked around the table to her side. "Look at me. Please."

"No—Evan, seriously—" She shook her head, trying to hide again.

I reached down gently and took her wrists, easing her hands away from her face. Her eyes were shiny, embarrassed, defeated. She let out a shaky breath, like she'd finally given up trying to cover the moment.

She looked adorable. Painfully adorable. How the hell did that idiot Richard ever get to date her?

"I love Nala," I said softly. "And that's why I can't be with you. Not because you 'have no shot' next to a CEO or some bullshit like that. You're beautiful, Mendy."

"Evan..." She exhaled through her nose. "I'm already rejected. You don't have to sugarcoat it."

"You call this a rejection?" I grinned, stepping back and putting my hands on my hips. "Alright, if that's how we're doing it, guess I gotta tell you how I first got rejected."

She looked up at me, still visibly embarrassed, but the tiniest smirk pulled at her lips. She didn't say yes out loud, but her eyes did.

"Okay," I said with a nod, "Third grade. There was this girl in my class. I forgot my book that day, so the teacher sat me next to her."

She chuckled, leaning back and crossing her arms, fully listening now.

"We hit it off. I saw her doodles on the book, Spider-Man stuff everywhere. His mask, webbing, even a terrible drawing of Green Goblin blowing up a pumpkin bomb. I told her Spider-Man was my favorite too, and we talked about him the whole class. Then during recess. Then the whole damn week."

"A whole week?" she laughed. "That's commitment."

"A hundred percent. So that one Monday morning, I go up to her desk. I sit down. I clear my throat. And I hit her with, 'Will you be my Mary Jane?'"

"No," she gasped.

"Oh yeah."

"What did she say?"

"She said no."

Mendy clapped her hand over her mouth, eyes widening. "Oh my god."

"So then I panicked," I continued. "And I said, 'Okay... what about Gwen Stacy?'"

"Noooo," she groaned, laughing into her hands. "Evan, no. No. That's so bad."

"Yep. And then she grabbed her backpack, stood up without saying a word, and went to another desk."

"Oh my god," she said again, half laughing, half wheezing. "The cringe. The secondhand embarrassment. I'm suffering."

"And then," I said with a hand on my chest, "I went to the bathroom and cried like a champion."

Her laughter softened and faded, her shoulders easing down from her ears. The tension she'd been drowning in finally slipped off her. Huh, that also got me five points from her. Nice, I guess. Wasn't expected, but welcomed.

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 23 / 40★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 11 /20

Nala: Interest: 100 /100★★★★★

Penelope: Interest: 5 /20

Minne: Interest: 28 /40★

Ivy: Interest: 2/20

Eleanor: Interest: 10/20

=====

Progress:

★★☆☆☆ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★☆☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

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We both laughed, the last of the awkward tension shaking loose between us... but only for a moment. After a few seconds, the room slipped back into silence. I eased into my chair again, let out a long breath, and nodded to myself like I was psyching up for a boss fight. I just wanted her to understand me, that was all.

"I'm honored that you feel that way for me, Mendy," I said finally. "You're a wonderful woman. Really. I'm lucky I met you. I kind of wish it happened under different circumstances, but... what's done is done, huh?"

"Yeah..." she murmured, tracing her finger around the rim of her glass.

"No hard feelings, right?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Honestly, I'm... relieved I finally got that off my chest."

"Thank you for saying it. Really."

And that's when it hit me like a guilt punch right to the ribs, I had listened to her confession plans while I was balls-deep in Kayla. I could've stopped. I didn't. And that made me feel like a jackass sitting across from her, pretending everything was fine.

"S-so..." Mendy's voice trembled slightly, her eyes searching mine for some kind of confirmation. "Are we still friends? Did I mess this whole thing up?"

I looked at her, my chest tightening. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt her. "Still friends," I said softly, trying to reassure her with a smile. "And no, Mendy. You didn't mess anything up. I'm... happy you said what you did. I really am."

Her lips parted, a faint blush creeping across her cheeks, and I saw the weight lift from her shoulders. "I'm... glad to hear that." She looked down, fiddling with her fingers. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I didn't want to make things weird."

I shook my head. "You didn't. You didn't make anything weird. Honestly, I'm just... glad you were honest with me."

Everything felt... nice.

But then it happened.

It was like everything stopped. The air seemed to freeze. I felt a shift, something deep within me. The sky outside, visible through the window, changed. It wasn't just the fading light of the evening; it was pink, almost surreal, as if reality had bent.

I stood up suddenly, my legs stiff. "What the hell...?"

Mendy remained frozen in place, her smile still intact, but her eyes weren't quite as bright now. Something was wrong, but before I could even process it, I heard footsteps. Not from her, but behind me.

I turned. Dierella stood there, her expression a mix of disbelief and fury, her arms crossed tightly over her chest. She was pissed, no doubt about it.

"Are you a fucking idiot, Evan?" Her voice was a hiss, sharp as a blade. "She's begging for you to fuck her. And you're sitting here doing nothing."

The words hit harder than they should have. "No," I said, my voice low, but firm. "It wouldn't be right. Not like this."

Dierella's eyes narrowed, her lips curling into a bitter sneer. "The fuck it won't," she spat. "Just fuck her and be done with it. This isn't some damn game, Marlowe."

I shook my head, the tension in my neck coiling tighter. "I'm not doing that." My jaw clenched. "She's at a vulnerable place right now. I'm not going to take advantage of that."

Dierella didn't even blink. She stepped closer, her voice lowering but still venomous. "She called you here, knowing damn well you're with Nala. She wore a dress for you, made this dinner for you—just you. What's the real problem? Why are you refusing her? You coward, stop tricking yourself."

I felt my chest tighten. She wasn't wrong about the dress, the dinner, the fact that Mendy had clearly set herself up for something... more. But this wasn't just about me. "Because it's not the right time," I said, my voice strained, almost pleading. "It's not the right way. It's not about me wanting her or not. It's about where we both are right now."

Dierella's laugh was dark. "Right," she sneered, eyes cold. "You really think she's just gonna wait around for that perfect fucking moment? That's not how this works, Evan. You either take her or leave her. But don't stand there pretending you're the fucking saint."

"I'm not a saint," I snapped back, frustration bubbling in my throat. "But I'm not going to be a dick either. I'm not going to hurt her like that."

"She's already hurting, you dumbass." Dierella shook her head, her lips curling in disbelief. "You're really this much of an idiot?" She turned on her heel, muttering under her breath as she stormed off. "Un-fucking-believable..."

I stood there, feeling the sting of her words, but before I could think it through, everything around me shifted again.

I was back at the dinner table. Mendy was smiling at me, her face warm, but now something in her eyes had changed. She looked almost... fragile. It hit me then—hard.

I was looking at her, and all I could see was the mess I'd caused. Richard's mess. My mess.

I didn't want to be the person who reminded her of what she'd been through, of that day when she nearly ended it all.

I thought I could be the good guy, the one who didn't take advantage of her, who stayed away because she was too vulnerable. But I wasn't being good. I was just scared. Scared that if I let myself feel something for her, it would only make everything worse.

I exhaled slowly, my heart heavy. "Mendy..." I said her name like it was the only thing I could say.

She looked at me, tilting her head slightly, her expression open but cautious. "Yeah?"

"If we had met before..." I stopped myself, swallowing hard. It was harder to say than I thought. "Before everything went to shit with Richard, before any of this... I think I would've—" I hesitated, the truth clawing its way to the surface. "I think I would've fallen for you."

Her eyes widened, and she went still for a moment, then flushed, her voice barely a whisper. "I... I think that would've made me really happy." She looked away, her hands fiddling with the hem of her dress. "But... it's not that simple now, is it?"

I shook my head, suddenly feeling all the weight of my words. "No, it's not." I let out a dry laugh, the sound bitter in my own ears. "I'm sorry I lied to you. I knew you were going to confess today. Kayla told me."

Her face shifted, the hurt there but not overwhelming. "Oh..." She swallowed, her voice trembling. "I thought..."

I couldn't let her twist in that. "I hoped you wouldn't," I said quickly. "Not because I didn't like you, but because when I look at you... I see myself. I see that day. The day you almost—" I stopped, my throat tight. "I can't look at you without remembering that. Without remembering how I failed you."

Mendy reached out, her fingers brushing mine across the table. "I forgive you," she said softly, her voice full of sincerity.

Her eyes softened as she held my hand, and for a long moment, neither of us spoke. Damn, this was awkward. I didn't know what to do with the tenderness she was offering.

I cleared my throat, trying to break the tension. "Ah, look at me rambling." I chuckled nervously, shaking my head. "The girls tell me I always act like some melancholic detective, always brooding and analyzing things. I think... I think they might be right."

Mendy raised an eyebrow, her lips curling into a small, amused smile. "The... girls?" Her tone was lighter now, the air between us easing just a bit.

I froze for a moment, realizing where this could go. "Uh... well, you know..." I fumbled, rubbing the back of my neck. "The ones I..."

She tilted her head, her expression shifting into something between confusion and mild amusement. "The other girls that you mess around with?"

I gulped, her words catching me off guard. "Y-yeah..." I stammered. "I'm sorry."

Mendy chuckled softly, her lips curling into a small smile.

"Wait, what's funny?" I asked, furrowing my brow.

"Sorry, I'm just... a little on edge right now," she said, her voice light, but I could hear the tension in it.

"Oh." I nodded, not really sure what to say to that.

She sighed, leaning back slightly in her chair. "Please stop acting like an idiot, okay? I forgive you. End of story. Got it?"

I blinked, a little thrown off by how direct she was. "Well, I wish it was that easy."

She shot me a firm look, her eyes soft but serious. "It's that easy. I forgive you, Evan."

I couldn't help but smile, though it was more out of self-deprecation than anything else. "It's like telling a depressed person to stop being depressed and hoping it would work."

She raised an eyebrow, a half-smile tugging at her lips. "Well, it's not the same thing."

I gave a mock thoughtful hum, tapping my finger to my chin. "Hmm, well... it's kinda the same thing."

We both laughed, the moment of tension finally breaking. But it was brief, and as the laughter faded, something heavier lingered between us.

She looked at me then, her expression shifting to something more serious but still tinged with that quiet amusement.

"Would you..." she began, then stopped herself.

I leaned a little forward. "Hmm?"

"Nevermind."

"What is it?" I asked gently. "Come on, tell me."

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Persuasion Attempt: Mendy

□□□□□

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Remaining Chances: 0/3

Huh... that triggered Honeyed Words automatically. Good. I was gonna need it.

"Forget about it," Mendy said quickly.

Attempting Persuasion

"You can tell me, Mendy. Come on."

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding:

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"You can tell me, Mendy. Come on."

She flinched like I'd poked the one spot she didn't want touched. "No, no, no. It's too embarrassing."

Uh-oh.

Damn. Failed? Really? I had an eighty percent chance. Of course I was the twenty percent idiot.

Two shots left.

Attempting Persuasion

"I just told you my most embarrassing story. I think you owe me one, huh?"

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding:

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"I just told you my most embarrassing story. I think you owe me one, huh?"

"I..." she muttered, cheeks pink. "It's worse than that. It was like... a hypothetical question."

Okay. Last one.

Attempting Persuasion

"I love hypothetical questions."

=====

Base Chance: 30%

Honeyed Words: +50%

=====

Final Chance: 80%

Upon Succeeding:

► Proceed with Persuasion? [Y/N]

"I love hypothetical questions."

Persuasion Attempt: Mendy

=====

=====

Remaining Chances: 3/3-SUCCESS!

Mendy hid her face again for a second, then let her hands fall to her lap with a soft slap. Her chest rose and fell, nerves hitting her hard, and her eyes flicked around the room for escape routes. Ceiling. Table. Plate. Finally, reluctantly... me.

"Okay," she whispered. "Hypothetically... what if you and I..."

"Yes...?" I said gently, leaning in to help her finish.

"Would you ever be... okay with me?" she asked quietly. "I've seen pictures of Nala Nolin. She's... really cute. Sexy. Unlike me. And she has way more than I do and I just—"

"Yes," I said instantly. No hesitation.

Her brows lifted, and a shy little laugh escaped her. "W-wow."

"You probably lost some confidence after Richard or whatever," I said, sitting back but keeping my eyes on her. "But you're sexy, Mendy. The kind of sexy that would turn me into a caveman if I wasn't careful."

She laughed again, covering her mouth, her cheeks warming. "W-wow. You're... really something, Evan."

Fuck this. Why was I still scared? Mendy... she forgave me. I didn't need to feel guilty every time I looked into her eyes. She seemed happy, full of life. She had moved on... and I guess I had to do the same. Getting stuck in the past was only going to make our relationship, whether as friends or anything more, worse.

I needed to man up.

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees. "I'm gonna ask you a hypothetical now."

She straightened slightly. "Okay..."

"Hypothetically... if I got up right now and..."

"Yes—?" Now she was the one urging me.

"If I, uh... okay. Would you be okay with a guy like me? Knowing my situation? Everything that comes with it?"

She looked down, pressing her lips together. Her fingers fidgeted with the hem of her dress. Then she shrugged gently, not in dismissal, but in quiet honesty.

"I don't know," she said softly. "I'd be like any of the other girls you sleep with. Nothing special."

Her voice cracked a little on the last word, 'special,' and that tiny break told me everything she was trying not to admit. She wasn't worried about Nala. She wasn't worried about the open relationship. She was worried she didn't matter.

Man up. Man up.

I got up from the chair and walked over to Mendy.

"Then just this one night," I said, voice low. "I want to make you feel special."

"I'm..."

"You can say no," I told her, looking straight into her eyes. "I'm not like Richard. I'd respect you. But right now, with my whole heart... there's nothing I want more. The only word in my head is your name."

"Evan..."

I leaned in and kissed her without waiting. She pulled back at first, surprised, but then her eyes got a little watery. She put a hand on my right cheek and kissed me back, deeper this time, soft and sweet. The kiss turned hungry fast. I grabbed her by the waist, lifted her easily, and carried her straight to the bedroom. I shouldered the door

open and we crashed onto the bed together, Mendy underneath me, both of us breathing hard, faces inches apart.

I glanced left and spotted a dildo on the nightstand, still wet. I smirked. She saw where I was looking and exhaled, shaking her head.

"Don't, please."

"You were alone," I said gently. "I get it."

I wasn't going to have full sex with her tonight. If Mendy was ever going to be okay with me, she had to be okay with the other girls too. Tonight was about her. About making her feel wanted, cherished, special.

I kissed her chin, then her cleavage, then slid her dress to the right, kissing down her tummy. She shivered when my lips brushed her skin. I grabbed her knee, lifted her leg, and licked slowly from her knee all the way to her toes, tasting the faint salt of her skin.

"Ahh... Evan."

"Shh," I whispered. "Don't move."

I hopped off the bed and dragged her gently to the edge. Her dress rode up to her hips. I crouched, parted her legs wide, and stared. Red panties, soaked through, clinging to every curve. I pushed them aside and groaned. Her pussy was perfect—smooth, pink, glistening, the lips swollen and begging.

I kissed her inner thighs first, teasing, never quite touching where she wanted. Then I moved higher, kissing just above her pussy, breathing her in. She smelled faintly of flowers—sweet, clean, like she'd washed just for this.

"You thought this might happen, didn't you?" I murmured, lips brushing her clit. "Got yourself all pretty down here. Flowers and everything."

"S-stop smelling," she gasped, half-laughing, half-moaning. "Are you a pervert?"

"This makes me feel special," I said, then licked her cunt in one long, slow stripe from bottom to top. "Should be the other way around, no?"

"Oh... fuck..."

I parted her lips with my thumbs and licked again, slower, savoring every fold. My tongue circled her entrance, then flicked up to her clit. She was already shaking. I slid one finger inside her, curled it, and rubbed that spot while my tongue danced over her clit.

"Evan... oh, shit..."

I added a second finger, pumping slow, curling both while I sucked her clit gently. Her hips rolled, trying to chase more. I pulled back just enough to blow cool air over her soaked pussy, watching her squirm.

"You're so fucking wet for me," I whispered, kissing the inside of her thigh. "Love how you taste. Love how you open up for me."

She moaned louder, hands fisting the sheets. I went back to work—tongue flat and firm against her clit, fingers thrusting faster, curling hard. Her thighs started trembling.

I slid my hands under her dress, found her waist, and grazed my fingernails gently along the soft skin there. She hissed, hips bucking. That was the spot—Erogenous Insight glowing bright in my head. I kept stroking her waist with one hand, fingers inside her with the other, tongue never leaving her clit.

"Evan—fuck—I'm—"

Her voice cracked, thighs trembling so hard the bed shook. Then, I got up so I could focus more on her waist and looked at her... fucking beauty. I leaned in, kissing her tummy once. Twice.

"Oh... feels... so good..."

I curled my fingers harder inside her, while my mouth stayed on her stomach. I kissed her soft tummy slowly, lips brushing the faint sheen of sweat, tongue tracing lazy circles just above her navel.

"Cum for me, Mendy," I murmured against her skin, voice low and rough. "Let it all go. I want to feel this pretty cunt squeeze my fingers while you fall apart."

"Evan—oh god—I'm gonna—"

"Do it," I growled, kissing lower, right above her mound, while my free hand grazed slow, gentle lines along her waist, light scratches that made her shiver. "Cum for me right now. Soak my hand. I've got you. Let me feel every pulse."

"Evan..."

"I love the way you act. You talk. You think." I said after kissing her tummy again. "I love everything about you, Mendy."

That broke her.

Mendy's entire body seized, back bowing so high off the bed only her heels and shoulders touched the mattress. A raw, desperate scream tore from her throat—"EVAN!"—as her pussy clamped down like a fist, pulsing wildly around my fingers. She came harder than I'd ever seen, a hot rush flooding my hand, splashing my wrist and soaking the sheets beneath her. Her legs shook violently, hips bucking against my palm as wave after wave crashed through her, body convulsing, tears streaming down her cheeks from the intensity.

I didn't stop. Kept curling my fingers inside her, kept grazing my nails along her waist in slow, teasing strokes, drawing every last tremor out until she was sobbing my name over and over, voice breaking, hands fisting the sheets so tight her knuckles turned white, whole body twitching with aftershocks like electric shocks.

Only then did I ease off, pressing soft kisses to her stomach, her ribs, working my way back up her trembling body. I lingered at her breasts, moved the dress aside, taking one stiff nipple into my mouth, sucking gently while she caught her ragged breath, her chest heaving under me.

She was flushed crimson from her cheeks to her breasts, glowing with sweat, eyes glassy and stunned with pleasure, lips parted as she panted.

"Evan," She said, voice soft.

"Hmm?"

"Let's just stay friends."

"O-oh..."

What the fuck?



Chapter 275: Chapter 275

I sat at my desk, staring at a screen full of things that absolutely required my attention. Calendar blocks color-coded by priority, internal memos flagged for Nala's approval, a procurement request waiting for my signature before it could move up the chain, and a half-finished summary report I was supposed to send to legal before lunch. Being the CEO's secretary wasn't glamorous. It meant filtering calls, drafting replies in her voice, organizing meetings she didn't have the patience for, and making sure half the building didn't collapse under its own bureaucracy.

I wasn't doing any of that particularly well today.

I leaned back in my chair and exhaled slowly. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Nala through the glass wall of her office, pacing slightly as she spoke into her phone, one hand rubbing her temple as she listened. To my right, two analysts were hunched over a tablet, quietly arguing about a discrepancy in a financial projection. Everyone around me was locked in, focused, productive.

And there I was. Running on almost no sleep. Fighting to keep my eyes open.

"God..." I muttered under my breath.

I hadn't slept last night because of Mendy. Or rather, because of everything after Mendy. 'Let's just stay friends.' The words still echoed in my head, refusing to settle. Was she serious about that? After the way she reacted, after the way her body trembled when I went down on her, after how close she'd held onto me like she was afraid I'd disappear? What did "friends" even mean to her?

My thoughts were a tangled mess.

I rested my elbow on the desk and let my chin sink into my palm, staring blankly at my screen. There was still time before we could head home. No escape yet. Just me and my thoughts.

"Ya-hoo."

A gentle pat landed on my shoulder.

"Evan."

I turned my head and found Kim standing beside my desk, her arms relaxed, her expression soft but curious. "Oh. Hey."

She tilted her head slightly. "What's up? You look... down."

"Eh, I'm good," I said, forcing a small chuckle. "Just tired."

It wasn't the whole truth, but it wasn't a lie either.

Carrie's face flickered briefly through my mind, uninvited. Tom's mother. Rich. Dangerous. Persistent. I was still keeping her existence from Kim, and the longer I did, the more uncertain I felt about whether I was protecting her or just delaying the inevitable fallout.

Kim stepped closer and leaned forward, planting both hands on my desk. I leaned back a little to look up at her properly. She smiled at first, then her lips curved into a knowing smirk.

"Come on," she said quietly. "Tell me. What's been bothering you?"

"Nothing," I replied, a little too quickly, a little too practiced.

She squinted at me. "I know my melancholic detective like the back of my hand. Something's up. Just tell me."

Before I could respond, the glass door to Nala's office slid open.

"Wow," Nala said, smiling as she looked between us. "I didn't know I was paying you two to stand around and do nothing."

Kim straightened instantly and snapped into a mock-serious salute. "Sorry, Ms. CEO. We'll get back to work immediately."

Nala shook her head, amused, and closed the door again.

Kim pushed herself away from my desk, letting her arms fall to her sides. "You heard the boss. Guess I'm back to my desk."

"Yep," I said dryly. "Terrible management."

"I know, right?"

"Yeah," I added. "We should quit."

She laughed, waving at me as she walked toward the elevator. I watched as she stepped inside and pressed the button, the doors sliding shut between us. Once the elevator disappeared, I stood up, reached behind me to the coat hanger, and pulled my cigarette pack from the pocket.

I glanced at Nala's office again and lifted the pack slightly, shaking it side to side. She caught the gesture, rolled her eyes fondly, and gave me a thumbs-up. Then she blew me a kiss through the glass.

I exaggerated a dodge, crouching slightly. She dropped her shoulders in mock defeat and flipped me off.

"Ouch," I muttered with a tired smile.

I walked toward the elevator, pressing the call button. As I waited, my thoughts drifted again, unhelpfully.

"Alright," I said under my breath. "Carrie Beldenwary. How the hell am I supposed to deal with you?"

The elevator dinged open. I stepped inside, pressed the ground floor button, and leaned back against the wall as the doors slid shut. My reflection in the mirrored surface looked about as exhausted as I felt.

Mendy's voice crept back into my head. Just friends. I closed my eyes briefly and exhaled through my nose, steadyng myself.

The doors opened again. I nodded to the security guard at the desk as I passed, zipped my coat up tighter, and stepped outside into the cold. Snow brushed against my collar as I pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag.

I exhaled slowly, smoke curling into the winter air.

I was tired.

I tilted my head back and looked up at the sky. Snow drifted down in slow, lazy spirals. For a brief moment, I let myself just stand there, breathing in the cold, letting it sting my lungs enough to keep my thoughts from spiraling.

I closed my eyes and took another drag from the cigarette, holding it in longer this time. I had no idea what I was supposed to do next. No idea how to deal with Carrie, how to keep her away from Kim, or how to make sure this didn't turn into something uglier than it already was.

When I opened my eyes again, the sound of tires crunching against snow pulled my attention toward the parking lot.

A car rolled in and came to a stop a few spaces away from the entrance. I watched idly as the passenger door opened.

Amelia stepped out.

She looked like she'd been in a rush. Her hair, usually neat and controlled, was slightly disheveled, strands escaping whatever tie had tried and failed to keep it in place. She straightened herself quickly, clutching a thick folder against her chest. Her coworker got out from the driver's side a second later, saying something I couldn't hear before shutting his door.

Amelia didn't wait for him. She hurried toward the stairs, heels clicking sharply against the concrete.

She took the steps two at a time. She was almost there when it happened.

Her left heel snapped with a sharp crack.

She stumbled forward, the folder slipping from her hands as she lost her balance and went down hard near the automatic doors. Papers burst into the air, instantly caught by the wind, scattering across the entrance and tumbling down toward the parking lot.

"Oh shit," I muttered, sliding the cigarette to the corner of my lips as I moved. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Amelia said quickly, already trying to push herself up, rubbing her ankle with a wince. "God... the papers."

She was sitting on the ground, skirt riding up slightly from the fall, pencil-tight and paired with sheer pantyhose. The posture made it impossible not to notice how sharply put together she was, even in a moment like this. I caught an accidental glimpse of something I definitely wasn't supposed to see and immediately turned my eyes away, focusing on her face instead.

"I'll get them," I said. "How many were there?"

"Seven," she replied, frustration clear in her voice.

"Alright," I said, nodding as her coworker reached her side and helped her carefully to her feet.

"Thank you," Amelia said to him, then glanced at me. "Really, thanks."

I gave her a short nod and turned toward the stairs, heading down into the parking lot as the wind carried the papers farther away.

The first one was easy to spot, plastered against a tire by melting snow. I crouched, peeled it free, and folded it under my arm.

The second had slid beneath a parked car. I knelt again, cold seeping through my jeans as I stretched to grab it. While I stood, Mendy's face flashed through my mind, the way she'd looked when she said we should just be friends. Calm on the surface, but brittle underneath.

I exhaled slowly and kept walking.

The third paper was halfway down the ramp, fluttering weakly against a railing. I caught it just before the wind could steal it again. Carrie's voice followed immediately after in my thoughts, sharp and confident, calling Kim hers like she had any right to do so.

My jaw tightened.

The fourth and fifth were farther apart. One stuck to a snowbank, the other spinning lazily in circles near a concrete pillar. By the time I grabbed them, my fingers were

numb. I flicked my cigarette away, watching it hiss and die in the snow as I ground it out with my boot.

Tom's face surfaced next. Cowardly. Quiet. Hiding behind his mother while she fought his battles for him. The thought made my stomach twist.

The sixth paper took longer. I nearly missed it, pressed flat against the far edge of the lot, damp and half-frozen. When I finally picked it up, my breath fogged heavily in front of me.

I scanned the ground once more.

"There you are," I muttered, kneeling to grab the final sheet where it had lodged itself against a drain. "The last one."

Chapter 276: Chapter 276

I stood there for a second longer than necessary, holding the stack in my hands, letting the cold and the silence settle me.

It was strange, but the simple act of tracking them down, one by one, had helped. It gave my thoughts somewhere else to go, something physical to focus on instead of the mess in my head.

I turned back toward the building, papers secure under my arm, feeling just a little steadier than I had half an hour ago.

I climbed the stairs, the cold still clinging to my coat, when my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out mid-step and answered, entering the building.

"Hello?"

"I saw you entering the building," a woman said. Calm. Professional. "Have you found all the pages?"

"Yeah," I replied automatically, then slowed. "Wait—who is this?"

"Maeve. Amelia's here in the infirmary. I'm actually looking at you through the window right now." There was a faint smile in her voice. "You can come up if you want."

I glanced toward the glass doors ahead. "Alright... Emilia's there too?"

A pause. "Amelia?"

"No—Emilia."

"Oh. Nope," Maeve said. "She and her friend are at that house you and Ms. Nolin talked about."

"Alright. Thanks."

I ended the call and headed for the elevator, stepping inside as the doors slid shut behind me. I pressed the fifteenth-floor button and leaned back slightly, exhaling as the elevator hummed upward.

The doors opened with a soft chime.

I walked down the hall and pushed open the infirmary door.

Amelia was there, sitting on one of the beds. Her shoe was off, foot wrapped loosely, nothing dramatic. She looked a little embarrassed, a little tired. Maeve sat behind the desk nearby, legs crossed, half-focused on her phone like this was just another Tuesday.

Amelia's eyes immediately dropped to the papers tucked under my arm. Her face visibly relaxed. She'd been lying back, but she pushed herself upright, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"You found them," she said, genuinely relieved. "Wow. Thank you."

"Yeah," I said, stepping closer. "I played Slender Man back when I was young. I'm good with finding pages, heh."

"Slender... men?" she asked, one eyebrow lifting.

I winced. "Never mind."

I handed her the papers. She took them carefully, thumbing through the stack like she didn't quite believe they were real.

"Thank you," she said again, quieter this time. "I didn't make copies. I really thought they were gone."

"It's fine," I said. "How's your foot?"

"Nothing serious," Maeve answered without looking up. "Minor sprain. Heel snapped, not the ankle. She'll live."

"Good," I said, nodding. "What an unlucky day, huh?"

"Yeah," Amelia sighed. "I missed the bus too. I'm late."

"You use the bus?" I asked, then paused. "Oh. Right. We actually met on one."

She nodded. "Mm."

"You don't have a car?"

"No license," she said. "I could buy one. But who would drive it?"

"Where do you live?" I asked. "If it's close, maybe I could—"

"Near Jerry Waffle."

I blinked. "Oof. That's far."

She shrugged lightly. "I manage."

EVENT

Amelia's Interest +5

"You really should learn to drive," I said. "Buses are a nightmare. At least take taxis."

"Taxis are expensive," she replied. "I'm okay with the bus."

"Well," I said, shifting my weight, "if you ever want to learn, I can help. I taught a friend once. Ivy. She only crashed twice."

She stared at me.

"Twice?" she said, then laughed—soft, surprised, like it escaped her. It didn't quite fit her usual serious expression, which somehow made it better. "You're a terrible mentor."

"Maybe," I admitted.

I took a step back and lifted my hand in a small wave. "Anyway. I should get going."

"Yeah," she said, holding the papers to her chest. "See you, Evan."

"Hmm."

"And... thanks," she added, smiling this time. A small one. Real.

I nodded once and turned for the door, the image of that smile lingering just a little longer than it probably should have.

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 23 / 40★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 11 /20

Nala: Interest: 100 /100★★★★★

Penelope: Interest: 5 /20

Minne: Interest: 28 /40★

Ivy: Interest: 2/20

Eleanor: Interest: 10/20

Amelia: Interest: 5/20

Progress:

★★★★★ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★☆☆☆ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★☆ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

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Select a woman to track progress.

I left the infirmary and headed down the hall, my steps slower now that the rush was gone. The elevator waited at the end of the corridor. I pressed the button and stood there, hands in my coat pockets, staring at my own reflection in the dull metal doors while my thoughts tried to catch up with me.

The doors slid open. I stepped inside, rode it down in silence, then stepped out onto our floor.

Nala was in her office. She looked up the moment she saw me, a tired but warm smile spreading across her face. She lifted her hand and crooked a finger, wordlessly telling me to come over.

I smiled back and walked to her door, pushing it open.

"There's my favorite secretary," she said lightly. "Hey."

"There's my favorite CEO," I replied. "How are you?"

"Tired," she admitted, leaning back in her chair. "Should we head home early today?"

"Sure," I shrugged. "Less work, happier Evan."

We both chuckled.

She stood, smoothing her skirt as she came around the desk. When she reached me, she slid her arms around my shoulders and leaned in. I met her halfway, kissing her softly, familiar and grounding in a way I didn't realize I needed until that moment.

Then...

A sudden flash.

Bright. Quick. From the corridor.

I pulled back instinctively and turned my head to the left. The hallway was empty. No footsteps. No voices. Just the quiet hum of the building.

"What happened?" Nala asked, brows knitting slightly. "Something wrong?"

"I thought I saw something," I muttered, scanning the corridor again. Nothing. I shook my head. "Probably nothing. I'm just tired."

She studied me for a second, then nodded. "Yeah. Long day."

"Let's just head home," I said.

"Yup."

As we grabbed our things, the thought of that flash lingered in the back of my mind. But I pushed it aside. Stress, lack of sleep, too much on my plate. That had to be it.

At least, that's what I told myself.

♥ □ ♥ □ ♥ □

I unlocked the door, stepped inside, and slipped the keycard back into my pocket. Jasmine, Nala, Kim, Tessa, and I followed in one by one, all of us moving slower than usual, exhaustion weighing on our shoulders.

I kicked my boots off near the entrance and brushed the clinging snow from my coat. The others did the same, coats coming off, bags set aside, fabric rustling as everything was hung neatly by the rack.

"I swear my feet are about to fall off," Jasmine muttered as she stretched her shoulders.

"I'm just glad we left early," Tessa added with a tired sigh.

"Same," Kim said quietly. "Today felt way too long."

Minne appeared from the kitchen, her warm smile instant and comforting despite the heavy mood. "Dinner is ready, Master."

"Thanks, honey," I said, exhaling deeply. "I'm gonna wash my face first."

I headed to the common bathroom and closed the door behind me. Cold water splashed against my skin as I leaned over the sink, letting it run over my face. I straightened and looked at myself in the mirror. Tired eyes stared back at me, sharper than usual, my face still handsome but worn. My hair had gotten longer too, strands falling forward and brushing my eyes. I looked... stretched thin.

Then Nala's voice cut through the apartment.

"Evan?"

Her tone was wrong. Tight. Nervous.

"Evan, come here."

I shut off the tap immediately and stepped out, my heart already starting to pound. The living room came into view, and I stopped short.

The girls were gathered in a loose circle around Nala. No one was speaking. Their faces were tense, pale, uncertain.

I walked closer. Jasmine and Kim stepped aside slowly, and that's when I saw it. Nala was holding an open envelope in one hand. In the other, a photo.

My chest tightened.

It was us. Nala and me. Kissing. Today. In her office, just before we left. Beneath the photo, a single line had been printed:

'Give me Kim or this'll spread out. I wonder what the investors would say to this?'

Silence crushed the room.

"Carrie," Kim said quietly, her voice shaking. "It's her... isn't it?"

I rubbed my face slowly, fingers dragging down my cheeks. "Yeah," I said. "It's her."

All eyes snapped to me.

"She came here," I continued, forcing the words out. "She threatened me. Told me to give Kim back to Tom."

Kim's anger flared instantly. "Why didn't you tell me?" she snapped, stepping forward. "Why would you keep that from me?"

"I thought she was all talk," I said, my jaw tightening. "I really did. I didn't think she'd go this far."

Nala looked up at me, fear clear in her eyes as she held the photo like it might burn her fingers. "Evan... we can't let this spread. Do you know what will happen if it does?"

"What would even happen?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady. "We could just tell them we're a couple."

"Before Project Phoenix?" she shot back quietly. "We can't afford any drama. Not now. Not when we're this close. If this photo goes public, we're screwed."

I dragged a hand through my hair and nodded to myself, forcing my breathing to slow. "Okay," I said. "Okay. I'll think of something. I promise." I glanced around the table. "Let's just... eat first, huh?"

Kim clenched her fists. "Tom..." she muttered, bitterness thick in her voice. Then she turned and walked straight toward the door.

"Kim," I said quickly, stepping after her.

Jasmine caught my arm. "Let her have some time," she said softly. "She needs it."

I hesitated, every instinct telling me to follow, but I stopped. Slowly, reluctantly, I nodded and watched her leave.

Chapter 277: Chapter 277

We moved to the dinner table one by one. Chairs scraped quietly against the floor. No one spoke. Nala placed the photo at the edge of the table, face-up, like a silent threat watching over us.

Minne served dinner without a word, her movements careful, her eyes downcast.

I stared at the photo as the plate was set in front of me, my jaw tightening until it hurt.

Fucking whore.

This wasn't just intimidation anymore.

This was war.

As Minne set my plate down in front of me, my phone buzzed against the table. The sound felt too loud in the silence. I frowned, picked it up, and saw Kayla's name flashing on the screen.

Bad timing. Really bad timing. But with Carrie already crossing lines, I couldn't afford to ignore anyone close to me.

I pushed my chair back and stood. Without a word, I walked to the balcony, slid the glass door shut behind me, and let out a heavy sigh before answering.

"Hey," I said, forcing my tone to sound lighter than I felt.

"Evan," Kayla said. "Hey. How did the... dinner go?"

I leaned my forearms on the balcony railing, staring out at the city lights. "Complicated," I said honestly. "I went down on her. And after that... she told me we should just be friends."

There was a pause on the line.

"Wow," Kayla said softly. "My god. That was unexpected."

"Yeah." I nodded even though she couldn't see it. "Look, I gotta go. I'm dealing with too much shit right now."

"Wait," she said quickly. "Aren't you going to call Mendy? You two should at least talk and—"

"She wanted to stay friends," I cut in, irritation creeping into my voice. "So we're staying friends. I'm done worrying about her. Now, bye, Kayla."

I ended the call before she could respond. A second later, the familiar translucent UI slid into view.

Minus three points from Kayla.

I stared at the numbers, jaw tightening.



WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 20 / 40★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 11 / 20

Nala: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Penelope: Interest: 5 /20

Minne: Interest: 28 /40★

Ivy: Interest: 2/20

Eleanor: Interest: 10/20

Amelia: Interest: 5/20

=====

Progress:

★★★★★ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ -100 Interest: Milestone reward

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Select a woman to track progress.

Man... fuck me. I was already on edge, and I'd managed to hurt her on top of everything else. I dragged a hand through my hair, frustration buzzing under my skin. I'd fix that later. I had to.

Right now, Carrie was the real problem.

I rubbed the back of my head angrily, turned, and kicked the sunbed hard enough that it scraped across the balcony tiles. Then I went back inside.

The living room felt heavier than before. Jasmine and Tessa glanced at me from the table, exchanging looks. Nala didn't look up at all. Minne focused on the plates like I wasn't there.

The tension was thick, pressing in from every side.

"I promise," I said as I dropped back into my chair. "I'll handle Carrie."

Tessa tilted her head, one brow lifting. "By kicking sunbeds?" she said with a half-smirk. "I doubt it."

"We need to think of a plan," Jasmine said calmly. "We shouldn't rush this."

"Especially when Kim is in danger," Nala added quietly. "And the company."

I nodded, gripping my fork a little too tightly. My mind raced through names, options, favors. Maybe Cora? No. This wasn't some back-alley problem or a quick scare. This was Carrie. Money, connections, influence.

I had to think bigger. I had to get dirty. If she was digging up dirt on me, then I'd do the same to her.

"Nala," I said, meeting her eyes. "Where can we learn more about Carrie?"

She hesitated, then swallowed. "Only one name comes to mind. Anotta."

"Anotta," I repeated, grimacing. "Why her?"

"She's always beside Carrie at charity galas," Nala said. "The one you told me about. The night you exposed Vanessa? She was there too."

"So she's my only option," I muttered.

"Probably," Nala said. "I'm sorry. I can't think of anyone else."

I exhaled slowly. "Great."

Fucking Anotta. Of course our paths weren't done crossing.

I looked down at the plate Minne had prepared. Grilled chicken laid over a bed of warm rice, lightly glazed, with vegetables arranged neatly on the side. Normally, I'd be starving.

I took a bite, chewed, then realized my stomach wasn't in it. The food tasted fine. I just didn't have the energy to care.

"Jasmine," I said, setting my fork down. "Can you call Kim after dinner? Make sure she's okay?"

She nodded immediately. "Yeah. I was going to. She's probably still at the hotel. Maybe at the bar."

"If she is, I'll go meet her," I said. "She shouldn't be alone. I don't know why you stopped me earlier."

"She should be alone," Tessa said gently. "At least for a bit. I know I would."

I leaned back in my chair, jaw tight. She wasn't wrong. I just hated the idea of Kim thinking I didn't care.

I forced myself to take another bite.

Minne returned from the kitchen and poured me a glass of orange juice. I looked up at her and smiled faintly. For a second, she smiled back.

Then she spoke.

"Master," she said softly. "I'm sure you can deal with that woman. I trust you."

Something in my chest tightened at that.

"Thanks, Minne," I said, nodding. "I'll never abandon Kim. Or any of you."

And I meant it.

Not Jasmine. Not Kim. Not Nala. Not Tessa. Not Minne.

Carrie had picked the wrong people to threaten.

♥□♥□♥□

I stepped out onto the balcony of the penthouse, the cool evening air brushing against my skin. The city lights below flickered like a sea of stars, distant but constant. I took a deep drag of my cigarette, the smoke curling up and dissipating into the night, my mind still lingering on the events of the night. Mendy. She was... something else. The way she had opened up to me, the way we'd connected—physically, yes—but there was more beneath that, something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I exhaled slowly, sitting on the sunbed, lost in my thoughts when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

I pulled it out, seeing Mendy's name on the screen.

I almost smiled. Almost.

"Hey," I answered, trying to keep my voice light, like everything was fine. I wasn't sure what kind of mood she was in after what had happened between us, but the last thing I wanted was to make things awkward.

"Hey," she replied, her voice soft. She hesitated for a moment before continuing. "I'm... I'm sorry about earlier."

I blinked, surprised by the apology. "Mendy, don't apologize," I said. "You don't need to. We're fine."

She was quiet for a moment. I could practically hear her chewing on her words, unsure how to say what was on her mind. When she spoke again, her voice was tinged with uncertainty. "I just... I don't know. I feel like I made a mistake. It was a moment of weakness, and I don't want it to mean anything. Or, rather... just... I don't want to be another girl in your bed, Evan."

"Mendy," I said softly, my voice lower now, more serious. "This... this thing between us? It's not just about sex. It never was. And I'm not trying to make you feel like you're just another... another conquest or whatever. That's not who I am."

She sighed, and I could tell she was still unsure. "I don't want to feel like I was just... a moment of convenience for you."

My hand tightened around the cigarette. "You're not a convenience, Mendy," I said firmly. "You never were, and I'm not gonna treat you like that. If you want to be friends, if that's all this is, I can respect that. But don't think for a second that it wasn't real, because it was. And it still is."

Another pause. I could hear her breathing, like she was trying to process what I had said. Her voice came back quieter, almost like she was talking to herself. "You were really good, you know? I haven't felt like that in... months. Maybe even longer. But... I don't know. It feels like it was a mistake. Like I said, a moment of weakness."

I let her words settle for a moment, the sting of them hitting harder than I expected. It wasn't about the sex. I wasn't bothered by that. It was the doubt in her voice, the way she was second-guessing everything that happened between us.

"Listen to me," I said, my voice softening. "It wasn't a mistake. And I'm not going to let you believe that. It wasn't some moment of weakness. It was real. And I think you felt that too. If it was a mistake for you, then I've got no business trying to convince you otherwise, but I don't think that's it. You don't have to be ashamed of it. I'm not."

There was silence on the other end for a long beat, and I wondered if I had said the wrong thing, if I had pushed too hard. But then she spoke again, this time her voice a little steadier, a little more grounded.

"I don't know what to think right now. I just... I don't want to feel like I'm just another girl in your life, Evan. I don't want to fall into something and then wake up and realize it doesn't mean anything to you."

I let out a quiet breath, letting the weight of her words sit between us for a moment. "Mendy," I said, the words coming out more gently this time, "you're not 'just another girl.' You're... you're important to me. Don't start second-guessing everything just because of a moment. Don't do that to yourself. We'll figure this out, one step at a time. No pressure. No rush. If you want to be friends, we can do that. But don't make yourself feel bad about this."

Huh... five points from her. Nice.

WOMEN - INTERACTIONS

Jasmine: Interest: 40 / 60★★

Kayla: Interest: 20 / 40★

Tessa: Interest: 27 / 40★

Kim: Interest: 35 / 40★

Delilah: Interest: 75 / 80★★★

Cora: Interest: 100 / 100★★★★★

Mendy: Interest: 16 /20

Nala: Interest: 100 /100★★★★★

Penelope: Interest: 5 /20

Minne: Interest: 28 /40★

Ivy: Interest: 2/20

Eleanor: Interest: 10/20

Amelia: Interest: 5/20

Progress:

★★★★★ - 20 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 40 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 60 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 80 Interest: Milestone reward

★★★★★ - 100 Interest: Milestone reward

=====

Select a woman to track progress.

"Thanks, Evan," she said softly. "For... for being patient with me. I just needed to hear that."

I leaned against the railing again, a small smile tugging at the corner of my lips.
"Anytime, Mendy. Anytime."

With that, the call ended, and I stood there for a long time, staring out at the city below, the weight of the conversation still heavy on my shoulders.

I took one last drag from a new cigarette, tossed it into the ashtray, and went inside, ready to figure out what came next.

"Now... I have to meet Kim..."

Chapter 278: Chapter 278

The hotel bar sat on the second floor, tucked behind a pair of dark glass doors that muffled the noise of the lobby below. Warm amber light washed over everything inside, soft enough to feel intimate, bright enough to gleam off polished surfaces. The counter stretched long and curved, made of dark walnut wood sealed to a mirror shine. Behind it, shelves climbed almost to the ceiling, stacked with crystal bottles arranged by color rather than brand, deep greens fading into ambers and clear glass. A strip of low golden light ran beneath each shelf, making the liquor glow like something precious.

High stools lined the bar, leather seats cushioned and worn just enough to feel lived in. Small round tables filled the rest of the space, each with a single candle trapped in frosted glass. Jazz hummed quietly through hidden speakers, the kind that blended into the background without demanding attention. Floor-to-ceiling windows ran along one side, revealing the city outside, lights scattered like stars beneath a slow fall of snow.

Kim sat at the bar, second stool from the end, her back straight but her shoulders slightly drawn in. A tall glass of apple juice rested in front of her, condensation pooling beneath it. She wasn't drinking much. Mostly, she stared at the wooden counter, eyes unfocused, fingers idly tracing the rim of the coaster.

"Hmm..."

I paused a few steps away, watching her for a second longer than I probably should have. She looked smaller like this. Not physically, but emotionally, like the weight she was carrying had folded her in on herself. I hated that feeling in my chest that followed. The same one that had been there all evening.

I walked over and took the stool beside her, the leather creaking softly as I sat. The bartender glanced at me, nodded once in silent greeting, then went back to polishing a glass.

Kim's eyes lifted for a brief moment when she sensed me there. They flicked to my face, then down again to the counter, like she hadn't yet decided whether to acknowledge me.

I rested my forearms on the bar. "Hey," I said quietly.

"Hey," she replied, her voice steady but distant.

I signaled the bartender. "Just water," I said. He nodded and slid a glass toward me a moment later.

For a while, neither of us spoke. The music filled the silence, a slow saxophone weaving between notes. Kim took a small sip of her juice, then set the glass back down carefully, as if afraid it might tip.

She broke the silence without looking at me.

"Carrie Beldenwary," she said. "Do you know how many boards she sits on?"

I turned slightly toward her. "No. But I'm guessing more than zero."

A humorless smile tugged at her lips. "Twelve. That I know of. Charities, private foundations, education trusts. She doesn't just donate money. She owns influence."

I frowned. "So what?"

She finally looked at me then, eyes sharp despite the exhaustion behind them. "So people listen to her, Evan. Pastors. Politicians. Investors. She hosts these galas that look harmless on the surface, all white dresses and prayer speeches, but they're not really about charity. They're about networking. About power."

"She's religious," I said. "So what? Half the city is."

Kim shook her head slowly. "Not like her. Carrie isn't just religious. She's devout to the point of obsession. Everything is sin or virtue. Black or white. And she decides which one you are."

Her fingers curled around the glass.

"That's why she hated me from the start."

I didn't interrupt. I could tell she needed to say this.

"She smiled at me the first time we met," Kim continued. "Said I was pretty. Said Tom was lucky. Then she asked where my parents were. What church I went to. Why I worked nights. I answered honestly. I thought honesty mattered to people like her."

Her laugh was soft and bitter.

"It doesn't."

I clenched my jaw. "She had no right."

"She thinks she does," Kim said. "She thinks God gave it to her."

She finally took a longer drink, then wiped her mouth with a napkin. "She told Tom I was a temptation. A test. Said I would ruin his soul. That I wasn't fit to carry the Beldenwary name."

I looked at her, anger burning slow and hot in my chest. "And he just... let her?"

Kim's shoulders lifted in a small shrug. "Tom never disagreed with her. Not really. He just nodded and looked ashamed, like I was something he'd broken by touching."

I wanted to say something violent. I didn't.

"She has connections in media too," Kim went on. "Quiet ones. Editors who owe her favors. Sponsors who listen when she hints. If that photo gets out..." She trailed off, fingers tightening around the glass again.

"So what?" I said firmly. "We deal with it."

She turned to me, brows knitting together. "How?"

"Like we deal with everything else," I said. "We don't fold."

Kim shook her head. "You don't understand. This isn't some jealous ex or angry investor. Carrie doesn't fight fair. She doesn't have to. She can destroy reputations without ever touching someone directly."

I leaned closer, lowering my voice. "And you think I'm just going to step aside and let her take you?"

Her lips parted slightly. She hesitated. "I think... I think we can't beat her, Evan."

The words landed heavier than anything else she'd said.

I turned fully toward her, resting my elbow on the bar. "Look at me."

She did.

"We can," I said. "And we will."

Kim searched my face like she was looking for a crack, some doubt I hadn't noticed yet. "You don't know what you're promising."

"I know exactly what I'm promising," I said. "I'm not abandoning you."

Her breath hitched. "Evan—"

"I mean it," I said, more quietly now. "She doesn't get to scare you into disappearing. She doesn't get to rewrite your life because it fits her beliefs better."

Kim's eyes shimmered. She looked away again, staring at the shelves of liquor like the bottles had answers.

"She called me a mistake," she said softly. "Said God forgives, but society doesn't. That I'd always be a stain."

I felt something twist in my chest. "She's wrong."

"She believes she's right," Kim replied. "And belief like that... it's dangerous."

I reached out, my hand stopping just short of hers on the bar. I didn't touch her yet. I wanted her to choose it.

"She believes she's untouchable," I said. "People like that always do."

Kim swallowed. "And what if she is?"

"Then we touch her anyway," I said. "Metaphorically. Legally. Strategically. Whatever it takes."

She let out a shaky breath. "You say that like it's simple."

"It's not," I admitted. "But simple doesn't mean impossible."

The bartender passed behind us, refilling a bowl of citrus slices. The jazz shifted to a slower tempo.

Kim's composure finally cracked. Her shoulders sagged, tension bleeding out all at once.

"I didn't want you dragged into this," she said. "You already have so much on your plate. The company. Nala. Everything."

I shook my head. "You are not a burden."

She laughed weakly. "You say that so easily."

"Because it's true," I said. "You think I'd be here right now if you weren't important to me?"

Her eyes met mine again, glossy now. "She said she'd take everything from me if I didn't come back to Tom."

I felt my jaw tighten. "And?"

"And part of me wondered if it would just be easier," Kim whispered. "To disappear. To let her win."

I reached out then and placed my hand over hers. She stiffened for half a second, then relaxed, fingers curling into my palm.

"Don't," I said. "Don't even think that."

Her breath started to shake. "I'm so tired, Evan."

"I know," I said gently. "You don't have to carry it alone."

That was it. Her control finally gave out.

Kim's lower lip trembled. She tried to say something, failed, then pressed her mouth shut like she could hold it in that way. Tears welled anyway, slipping free and trailing down her cheeks.

"I hate her," she whispered, voice breaking. "I hate that she still scares me."

I slid closer, my arm coming around her shoulders. She hesitated for a heartbeat, then leaned into me, her head settling against my shoulder like she'd been waiting for permission.

Her sobs were quiet but deep, shaking her frame as she cried into my coat. I held her, one hand firm at her upper arm, the other resting against her back, steady and grounding.

"It's okay," I murmured. "I've got you."

She clutched the front of my jacket, fingers twisting into the fabric. "Don't let her take me away."

"I won't," I said without hesitation.

Her breathing slowly began to even out, though she didn't pull away. She stayed there, head on my shoulder, eyes closed, trusting me with the weight she'd been holding all night.

I wrapped my arm a little tighter around her and stared out through the window at the falling snow, already thinking, already planning.

This wasn't over.

But neither was I.



Chapter 279: Chapter 279

I slid under the blanket and watched as Jasmine reached over and shut the lights off. The room dimmed instantly, leaving only the faint glow of the city leaking through the curtains. Nala crawled closer to me, her body warm against my side, while Jasmine hopped fully onto the bed and settled in, tugging the blanket up around her shoulders.

Outside, the snow was coming down hard. Every now and then, a gust of wind pushed rain against the windows, making the glass rattle faintly. The storm felt loud and unforgiving out there, but inside the room, everything was quiet and warm, almost too calm for what was hanging over us.

"Nala," I murmured. "I won't be working tomorrow. I've gotta... handle some stuff."

She hummed softly and rested her palm flat against my chest. "Of course. Do what you need to do."

Jasmine shifted closer too, propping her head slightly against my shoulder. "I still can't believe it," she said quietly. "Carrie... Tom... Kim... what a day."

"Yeah," I muttered. "It sucks."

"Guy wasn't enough," Jasmine added with a tired exhale. "Now we have Carrie. Just perfect."

I let out a dry breath. "I kicked his ass. I can do the same for Carrie. Don't worry."

Nala tilted her head slightly, her voice softer. "How was Kim? Since you two came back to the penthouse, she... she was just quiet."

"A little... confused," I said. "But she's strong. I know she can pull through."

"Yeah," Jasmine agreed. "Kim's tougher than she looks."

"She told me to just... give up," I added. "That's not happening."

Jasmine lifted her head and looked at me. "Good. Because we're not going anywhere."

I smiled faintly and leaned in, kissing her lips. "That we're not, Jas."

She settled back down, hugging me tightly. One of her legs slid over mine, warm and familiar, and she let out a long breath as if she was finally letting go of the tension. I reached up, brushed my fingers through Nala's hair, and kissed her forehead, then did the same to Jasmine.

She was right. We were sticking together. Whatever this turned into, we'd face it as one.

"Let's just sleep," I murmured. "Tomorrow's going to be a long day."

"Mm," Jasmine said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight," Nala whispered as her eyes closed.

I stared up at the ceiling. "Yeah... goodnight."

As if sleep would actually come that easily.

The blanket felt heavier than it should have, pressing down on me the same way my thoughts did. Outside, the storm kept raging, and inside my head, it was no different. Every worst-case scenario lined up one after another, all of them ending with Carrie getting exactly what she wanted.

"Fucking hell..." I whispered under my breath. "How am I supposed to sleep like this?"

I shut my eyes, forced myself to breathe slowly, tried again. Minutes dragged by. Nothing.

Eventually, the sound of breathing around me deepened. Jasmine's grip loosened slightly. Nala's chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm. They were out.

Carefully, I straightened, easing Jasmine's leg off mine and slipping out from under the blanket. I grabbed my shirt, pulled it on quietly, and padded toward the door. The hallway was dim, lit only by the low night lights along the wall.

As I stepped into the living area, I noticed the glow from the dining table.

Minne was sitting there alone, a glass of orange juice in front of her. Her phone was in her hand, the light reflecting in her eyes.

She startled slightly when she saw me and immediately stood. "Oh—M-Master..."

"Ssh," I said gently, lifting a finger to my lips. "Let's not wake the others."

She nodded quickly and sat back down. "S-sorry, Master."

I walked over and sat on the couch opposite her. As I did, I caught a glimpse of her phone screen before it dimmed. Carrie's name was still there, search results open.

"Couldn't sleep?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, Master. That woman was... scary."

"Yeah," I said quietly. "She was."

"Mm..."

I leaned back slightly, folding my arms. "You were looking her up."

"Yes," Minne admitted. "I wanted to understand who she is."

"And?" I asked.

She thought for a moment, fingers tightening around her glass. "She's powerful. People praise her a lot. They say she's generous and kind. But..." She hesitated. "Some comments are strange. Some men call her 'mommy' online. I think it's because of her body."

A tired chuckle escaped me. I shook my head. "Yeah. That tracks."

Minne exhaled softly, her shoulders still tense as she leaned back in her chair. I stayed seated on the couch, staring at the coffee table like it might suddenly hand me an answer. Nothing came. Carrie was a wild card. Guy had been simple. A loud, arrogant idiot hiding behind money and a title. Carrie was different. She was doing all this because her son wanted to swap out his "toys," and somehow she thought that gave her the right to threaten everyone around me.

I leaned forward, grabbed my cigarette pack, and lit one. The flame flared briefly, then died as I took a long drag and let the smoke roll slowly out of my lungs. It hung in the air, curling lazily.

Minne watched me for a moment. The worry in her eyes softened, replaced by something gentler. A small, almost shy smile appeared on her lips.

"C-can you do the little bubbles, Master?" she asked.

I glanced at her. "Little bubbles?"

She nodded, sitting up a bit straighter. "The circle smoke things."

I let out a quiet chuckle. "Yeah. I can do that."

I took another drag, held it, then carefully shaped the smoke as I exhaled. A thin ring drifted forward, wobbling slightly before breaking apart. Minne's smile widened, and for a second, the tension eased for both of us.

Then, just as quickly, the moment faded. The same name crept back into my head, souring everything.

I cleared my throat. "How's your mother?" I asked, changing the subject. "Getting better?"

"Yes, Master," Minne said, nodding. "Day by day."

"Good," I said honestly. "I'm glad."

She hummed softly and looked down at her hands.

I took another drag and stood, walking over to the window. Outside, the snow was still coming down hard, blown sideways by the wind. The trees along the street bent unnaturally, branches shaking like they might snap at any second. It looked miserable out there.

When I turned back, Minne was checking her phone again. I couldn't help smiling at the way her brows furrowed in concentration. I took a few steps and stopped near her.

"So," I asked, "what's the plan? Stay up all night and sleep through the day?"

She shook her head. "I was going to drink some water," she said. "But... I didn't want to go back to my room."

I nodded, understanding more than I said aloud. I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray.

"Mast—"

A quiet knock cut her off.

I froze, listening. Minne did the same. A few seconds passed, then another knock followed, just as soft. Whoever it was clearly didn't want to wake the entire penthouse.

I lifted a finger toward Minne, signaling her to stay put, and moved to the door. I peeked through the viewer.

Eleanor stood there, shoulders slumped with exhaustion. She was wearing a crop top and a skirt, her jacket unzipped. Her makeup had smudged slightly, and her hair looked like she'd run her hands through it one too many times.

I opened the door. "Eleanor?"

Her relief was immediate. "Thank god you're awake. I just got back from work and... I forgot my keycard again. Can I borrow yours?"

"You can ask the lobby," I said. "They'll—"

"I tried," she interrupted. "But since my room's downstairs and the penthouse is under your name, they wouldn't let me."

I sighed, then reached for the keycard on the shelf by the coat hanger. "Alright. Come on."

"Thank you," she said, already sounding half asleep.

Minne stood and gave Eleanor a small nod as I slipped my shoes on. Before I closed the door, I saw Minne heading toward her room, her steps slow and heavy with sleep.

"You started work today?" I asked as Eleanor and I walked toward the stairs.

"Yeah," she replied. "Charlotte wanted to see if I could handle bartending. Or waitressing."

"And?"

She let out a tired laugh. "Bad. I almost broke two wine glasses."

"You'll get better," I said. "Better than... being a... eh, you know what I mean."

"I know," she muttered. "Working is hard."

"It gets easier," I said. "I worked at a gas station before all this. I'd take bartending any day. Trust me. There would be less drunk people."

She looked at me. "Less drunk people?"

I snorted. "You have no idea how many drunks show up at gas stations after midnight."

We reached her door. I tapped the card against the reader. The light turned green and the lock clicked open.

Eleanor turned to me with a grateful smile. "Seriously. Thank you. You keep saving my bacon."

"No problem," I said.

She hesitated, one hand on the door. "I didn't wake you, did I? It's pretty late."

"Nah," I said. "I was already... uh... awake."

"Why?"

"Well..."

"I'll make the wildest fucking guess. You ready?"

"Be my guest."

"Carrie Beldenwary."

My eyes widened. "What, can you read minds now?"

She sighed. "I saw her the other day. And I figured there was no way you didn't get dragged into another mess. That she was here for another reason."

"Yeah. Fuck my life."

"What does she want?" Eleanor asked. "Something to do with Project Phoenix? I keep hearing about it like it's a myth."

"Nah, nah, nah," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "She wants to take someone important to me. And I won't let her."

Eleanor studied me for a moment, then nodded. "Personal, then."

"Yeah," I said. "But not tonight."

She exhaled. "Fair. I'm exhausted. See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah," I said, stepping back. "Don't forget your keycard next time."

She smiled faintly. "Yes, sir."

I turned and headed back toward the penthouse, the weight in my chest settling in again. Carrie wasn't just a problem anymore. She was a threat. And sooner or later, I was going to have to face her head-on.



Chapter 280: Chapter 280

I didn't know where I was.

I stood in the middle of an endless stretch of greenery. It felt unreal, like someone had turned the saturation of the world all the way up. The sky was too blue, painfully vivid. The grass beneath my feet looked alive, each blade sharp and bright, swaying even though there was no wind.

I looked down and realized I was standing on a wide circular platform. It reminded me of a manhole cover, but far more intricate. Symbols were carved into it, spiraling inward, glowing faintly as if they were etched with light itself.

Then I looked up.

The world folded in on itself.

The open field vanished, replaced by the warmth of a large, cozy mansion. Wooden walls rose around me, polished and dark, and a wide fireplace crackled directly ahead. The fire cast long, dancing shadows that stretched across the room. Just above the mantle, a small window showed the same impossibly blue sky, like the outside world hadn't changed at all.

Three figures sat around the fireplace.

I was only a few steps away from them, between the three figures and the fireplace.

To my left, lounging sideways in her chair with one arm draped lazily over the backrest, sat that pink-haired goddess. I couldn't remember her name, but she was the one who helped me take Sarah down. Short hair, messy and sharp, framing a face locked in a permanent, mocking smirk. Her eyes gleamed with amusement, like she was constantly seconds away from laughing at the universe itself.

She wore little more than a thin, cropped top that barely contained her chest and a pair of dangerously low-cut shorts. Her legs were crossed, bare skin catching the firelight, completely unapologetic.

"My, my," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "If we'd known we were having a guest, I would've shaved my pussy."

Her smirk widened as she tilted her head, clearly enjoying my stunned silence.

Her whole presence screamed chaos. Like she hated everything and, at the same time, was daring it all to burn.

To her right sat a woman I didn't recognize.

She was... mature. Late thirties, maybe older. Thick in a way that felt powerful rather than sloppy. There was a softness to her belly, but it only added to her presence, making her look grounded and overwhelming all at once. Her legs were full, strong. Her chest was impossible to ignore, heavy and unrestrained beneath a loose, revealing wrap that did absolutely nothing to hide her shape.

Her eyes, though, were gentle. Calm. Observant.

"Miko, honey," she said smoothly, her voice low and rich. "What shall we do with him before Dierella comes?"

"Dierella" I muttered without thinking. "The goddess of dreams." My gaze flicked around the room. My heart pounded. "This is a dream, right?"

The mature woman's eyes hardened instantly. She straightened slightly in her chair.

"A mortal shouldn't speak unless spoken to," she said coldly.

Before the words could sink in, the pink-haired goddess waved her hand dismissively.

"Mana, relax," she said. "He's not our subject. We don't discipline him."

Mana clicked her tongue but leaned back again, her irritation barely contained.

On the other side of the fireplace sat the third woman.

She had red hair pulled into a high ponytail, thick strands falling loose around her shoulders. Her body was athletic and powerful, with wide hips and thick thighs that looked carved from muscle. She wore a tight, sleeveless outfit that clung to her frame, the fabric stretched across her chest and waist like it was fighting a losing battle.

She hadn't spoken yet. She just watched me, eyes sharp and calculating.

They were goddesses. There was no doubt about it. The air around them felt heavy, ancient, like reality itself bent slightly in their presence.

I swallowed and forced myself to speak again.

"Do you... know a woman with an umbrella?"

The change was immediate.

Miko's smirk vanished. Mana's relaxed posture stiffened. Even the red-haired goddess shifted in her seat, her fingers tightening against the armrest.

They exchanged looks.

Fear flickered across their faces. Or panic. Or something far worse... or all of the above.

The fire crackled loudly, shadows swallowing half their expressions, making it impossible to read them clearly. Then, slowly, their eyes all returned to me.

The room seemed to shrink.

The light died.

Everything went black.

"NO!"

I jolted awake with a shout, gasping for air as my chest heaved violently. Sweat clung to my skin, my heart slamming against my ribs like it was trying to escape.

The familiar sight of the bedroom greeted me. The window across the room. The pale morning light.

A dream. Just a dream.

I wiped my face with my hands, breathing hard. Nala and Jasmine weren't in bed. From the living room, I could hear the quiet clatter of forks against plates, the soft sizzle of bacon and eggs. Breakfast. Normal sounds. Grounding sounds.

Then the door creaked open.

"Evan?" Jasmine's voice drifted in. "Did you say some—oh."

She stopped short when she saw me.

"Hey," I said hoarsely. "Sorry. Nightmare."

She walked over quickly, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing my hair back with her fingers. "You're soaked," she said softly. "You should take a bath."

"Yeah," I nodded. "I should."

"MASTER!"

Minne's scream cut through the apartment like a knife.

My stomach dropped.

I was on my feet instantly, rushing toward the sound. Jasmine, Nala, and Tessa followed close behind as I shoved open Kim's door.

Minne stood frozen near the bed, trembling. In her right hand was a folded piece of paper. She looked at me with wide, terrified eyes and silently held it out.

I took it.

My hands shook as I unfolded the letter.

"All good things must come to an end," I read aloud, my voice barely steady.

The girls gathered around me, reading over my shoulder.

"I know this new life I had would disappear one day. Or you, Evan. But I was wrong. I guess I'm the one who is disappearing."

My chest tightened.

"Thank you for giving me hope, Evan. Thank you for being my friend, Nala, Jasmine, Tessa. And you, little maid."

Minne let out a small, broken sound.

"I don't want anyone to risk this life for a stupid reason. I'm going with Carrie."

The room felt like it tilted.

"Again, thank you for everything. And... well... bye. I love you, Evan. I'll take good care of her... or him."

Silence swallowed us whole.

Kim was gone.

Minne didn't stop there.

Her hand lingered at her side for a second, fingers curling like she was bracing herself. Then she reached into the pocket of her apron and slowly pulled something else out.

"It... there was this too," she whispered.

It wasn't a letter.

It was a thin, glossy piece of paper—slightly bent at the corners, like it had been folded and unfolded too many times. An ultrasound print.

I took it from her without a word.

The image was grainy, washed in shades of black and gray, unfamiliar at first glance. A curved white arc marked the edge of the womb. Inside it, barely formed but unmistakable once you knew what you were looking at, was a tiny shape. A small head. A faint curve of a spine. A blur that was a heartbeat frozen in time.

Numbers and medical text ran along the edges, dates, measurements, abbreviations I didn't understand, but they didn't matter.

Kim was pregnant... with my baby.

Behind me, I felt the room react before anyone spoke.

Jasmine sucked in a quiet breath and then slowly shook her head, eyes fixed on the floor like she couldn't bear to look any longer.

Tessa crossed her arms tightly over her chest, jaw clenched, exhaustion written into every line of her face. She didn't say anything—just stared down, shoulders heavy, like she'd finally run out of anger and was left with nothing but weight.

Nala exhaled sharply through her nose and dragged a hand down her face, fingers pressing into her temples. When she finally looked up, her eyes were glassy—not crying, not yet—but wrecked.

Minne stood in front of me, her lower lip trembling now. She tried to hold it together, but her eyes shone, wet and wide, like one wrong breath would break her.

"M-Master..." she murmured, voice cracking.

I couldn't answer.

I couldn't move.

The ultrasound felt heavier than it should have in my hand, like it weighed more than paper ever could. My fingers tightened around the edges until the print bent slightly, the image warping under the pressure.

Kim hadn't just left.

She'd sacrificed herself.

I slowly lowered the ultrasound, my vision blurring as anger rose up and swallowed everything else. My other hand closed around the letter still crumpled in my palm.

Then I crushed it completely.

Paper crinkled loudly as I balled it up, my knuckles whitening. I turned away from them, stalking toward the window, my breath coming hard as I stared out into the cold morning light.

Snow fell outside, calm and indifferent. The world hadn't stopped. Cars still moved below. People still lived their quiet, ignorant lives.

My reflection stared back at me in the glass—eyes dark, jaw locked, something ugly and furious burning behind them.

"Carrie..." I muttered.

The name tasted like poison.

"Oh, Carrie. Carrie, Carrie, Carrie..." My voice dropped, shaking with restrained violence. "I'll fucking make you regret this."

"M-Master..."

"I swear," I sneered. "I swear to fucking God."

NEW MAIN QUEST

Title: Unwanted Sacrifice

Task: Take Kim back

Reward: 8500 EXP

