Intern 341

Chapter 341

Dinner at the Blackwoods' Manor had ended hours ago, yet the air still carried the faint echo of what had transpired.

After the meal, everyone had retreated to the garden to enjoy tea under the soft glow of lanterns.

Laughter drifted through the night as Dahlia and Dominic shared old stories about Julian and Malia

-memories from days long past.

Maya and Jaime listened intently, eyes wide with wonder. Every tale'felt like discovering another

piece of their parents-a glimpse into the lives they never had the chance to know. The night was

warm, easy, filled with the kind of happiness that made time feel momentarily forgiving.

Everyone was content.

Everyone except one.

Ashcroft had excused himself early, his tone polite but clipped, muttering something about

needing to “take care of a few things”-something about arranging the medical team and

clearance for Jaime’s upcoming transfer.

Damien hadn’t argued. He knew better.

That sort of thing only took one call from Ashcroft-two minutes, maybe less. He could’ve sent James, Lee, or Monroe to handle it. It wasn’t the kind of task that required the boss himself.

But instead of pointing it out, Damien had simply watched his friend gather his coat, the controlled

movements barely masking the storm beneath.

Nicholas Ashcroft didn’t retreat often. But tonight wasn’t retreat-it was regrouping.

Damien swirled the amber in his glass, his gaze lingering on the back of his retreating friend as it disappeared down the hall-steady strides, rigid shoulders, the picture of control barely holding. A faint smile tugged at his lips, quiet and knowing.

He’d seen Ashcroft fight for territory, for legacy, for loyalty.

But this-this was a battlefield the man had never dared to cross before.

A war he wasn’t trained for.

A war called love.

Outside, the night stretched deep and quiet, the Blackwood estate bathed in silver moonlight. Somewhere beyond its gates, a sleek black car rolled down the gravel drive, its headlights slicing through the fog.

The hum of the engine was the only sound that filled the car. Ashcroft leaned back against the

leather seat, the top buttons of his shirt undone, his fingers drumming absently against his knee in a slow, restless rhythm.

The conversation replayed in shards-Harper’s voice, sharp and unyielding; the spark in her eyes

when she dared to challenge him; and beneath it all, that fleeting tremor she tried to hide the

moment she realized he was coming.

He exhaled through his nose, a low sound caught somewhere between a sigh and a scoff. “Patheti

c,” he muttered, the word meant for himself.

But his hand had already curled into a fist, knuckles taut against his thigh. His reflection in the

window stared back-cool, composed, and utterly false. Whatever this was, he told himself, it

wasn’t that. And yet… his pulse betrayed him.

“Sir?”

The voice of his driver cut through the hum of the engine. Ashcroft turned his head slightly, pulled

from his thoughts.

“Found this earlier,” the man said, holding something out. A small, beaded bracelet lay in his palm-delicate, faintly worn. “It must’ve fallen from your pocket. I found it under the seat.”

Ashcroft’s gaze lingered on it, the faint glimmer of a loose thread catching in the passing streetlight. Memory tugged-that night. The exhaustion in her voice. The way she’d pulled her hand from his, shutting him out with that quiet, distant look in her eyes-something raw enough to make his chest tighten in a way he refused to name.

He hadn’t noticed when it fell. Only when he’d turned to leave, something on the floor had caught his eye-the bracelet, small and out of place against the marble floor. He’d picked it up without

thinking.

He’d meant to return it the next morning-during breakfast, perhaps. But she was already gone.

Now the trinket sat cold in his palm, deceptively simple, yet heavy with the weight of her absence.

The faint scent of her perfume still clung to the thread, almost taunting.

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Ashcroft’s fingers closed around it slowly, knuckles tightening as the city lights carved shadows

across his face.

“Harper Lin… you think you can run from me?” His jaw tightened, gaze hardening as the city lights flickered past.

“You only make distance feel like a dare.”

Back in the Blackwoods’ garden, the air was thick with the scent of chamomile and damp earth. Laughter still lingered, faint and fading – like the soft glow of lanterns swaying lazily from the trees. The tea had long gone cold, untouched on the wrought-iron table, yet no one seemed ready

to leave.

The night hummed with a quiet kind of peace – fragile, fleeting, as though even the wind hesitated

to disturb it.

Maya smiled as Dominic launched into another story – this one about Julian sneaking Malia out to midnight festivals and getting caught red-handed. The group laughed, the sound easy and warm.

Jaime joined in, his grin genuine, but the strain was starting to show. His shoulders sagged, the color draining from his face. He tried to keep up, but his laughter came softer now, his breaths shorter each time.

Jaime straightened in his seat, trying to mask the fatigue etched across his face. But Maya saw it -the faint tremor in his fingers, the pale tinge around his lips, the way his smile flickered and faded

too soon.

She leaned slightly toward Damien, who was seated beside her. His eyes, calm but sharp, followed Jaime just as closely. Without a word, Damien tilted his wrist toward her and checked his watch. It's almost ten," he murmured softly.

Maya's brow furrowed. "That late already?" She turned back to her brother, voice gentle but firm." Jaime… you've been pushing yourself too hard. I think that's enough excitement for one night."

Jaime forced a weak laugh. "No, no, May… I'm fine, really."

But the slight tremor in his voice-and the way his hand lingered on the table for support-spoke louder than any words. Maya's hand brushed his arm instinctively, her gaze full of quiet concern.

Damien, beside her, gave a subtle nod, acknowledging the same worry without a word.

"Sweetheart," Dahlia said gently, her voice threaded with concern, "we can all see you're tired. Your

sister's right-you've pushed yourself enough for one night. Let's call it a day, hmm?"

Jaime straightened in his seat, trying to look composed, but the effort was clear. The faint tremor in his hands, the uneven rise of his chest-it all betrayed him. Still, he forced a smile. "No, please… I'm fine. Really." His voice was quiet but desperate, the words slipping out before he could stop

them. "I just… I want to hear more about Mom and Dad. Please."

The last word lingered, heavy with something that made even Dahlia's gentle expression falter.

"I… I don't remember much about them," Jaime said quietly, his voice trembling. "And the older I

get, the blurrier it gets. Faces, voices… even the sound of their laughter. It's like they're fading, little

by little-and that scares me."

He drew in a shaky breath, eyes glistening. "But when you talk about them like this, it feels like they're here again. Like I'm borrowing your memories to fill the spaces I've lost. Every story-it makes them a little more real. Like I'm creating new memories with them, even if it's only through

yours."

The table fell silent-no laughter, no clinking of cups-just the soft night breeze stirring the lanterns

overhead.

Maya’s throat tightened, her eyes glistening as she blinked hard to keep the tears from spilling. Damien’s arm slipped gently around her shoulders, pulling her close in quiet comfort.

Across the table, Dahlia didn’t bother to hide her tears; they slid freely down her cheeks as she smiled through them, proud and aching all at once.

Even Charles and Eleonor, usually composed in their age-worn grace, felt the young man’s pain settle deep in their chests. Eleonor reached for her husband’s hand beneath the table, and Charles gave a small, steadying squeeze-holding himself together, but only barely.

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Then, as if sensing the weight pressing on everyone, Dominic cleared his throat lightly and leaned

forward. He reached across the table, his large hand settling on Jaime’s shoulder in a firm,

reassuring squeeze.

“Oh, we’ve got plenty more stories, son,” Dominic said, his voice low and steady, warmth threading through every word. Then a grin tugged at his mouth – that familiar, mischievous one that always hinted trouble. “And some really good ones about your dad, locked under bro code.”

He tapped the side of his head, leaning in as if sharing a dangerous secret. “Top-secret stuff in here. Your aunt would kill me if I told you, but…” His grin widened. “I might just let you in on a few- if you promise not to tell your aunt and sister. Deal?”

He gave Jaime a conspiratorial wink, the kind that made the air feel lighter again.

That earned a weak, shaky laugh from Jaime. “Deal!”

Dominic’s smile deepened, eyes crinkling with affection. “That’s my boy.” Then his tone gentled, the teasing giving way to concern. “But your aunt and sister are right it’s time to hit the sack. You look like you’re about to fall face-first into the teapot.”

Dahlia reached across the table, her voice steady, threaded with care. “How about we come visit you tomorrow instead?” she said with a smile. “You can show your Uncle Dominic the project you’re working on. Your dad and he always loved messing around with codes and numbers-he might even have a tip or two to share… though knowing Dom, you’ll probably have to teach him a thing or two. He’s getting old; the tech world moves faster than his coffee brews.”

Dominic gasped, clutching his chest in mock offense. “Old? Excuse me, I can still crack a cipher faster than anyone in this family.”

Damien coughed pointedly, a single eyebrow rising as he silently said, Really?

Dominic shot him a look, then let out a resigned sigh, a sheepish grin tugging at his lips. “Well… except your son,” he admitted with a chuckle. “But I’ll have you know, this brain is still in top form, thank you very much.”

Dominic’s concession drew a soft chuckle from around the table, the easy laughter threading through the quiet evening. Dahlia’s lips curved into a tender smile as her gaze returned to Jaime, steadying him with her presence.

“And I’ll bake some cookies too,” she said softly, her voice carrying the warmth of familiar routines. “Just like your mom and I used to on weekends. I’ll bring them fresh, I promise.”

Her hand reached out, brushing gently over Jaime’s. “But for now, your parents wouldn’t want you pushing yourself like this. They’d say exactly what I’m about to say-time to rest, sweetheart.”

Jaime exhaled, a flicker of defeat crossing his face-but beneath it, warmth lingered. He nodded slowly, eyes lowering, the ghost of a smile tugging at his lips.

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Jaime exhaled softly, the fight finally leaving his body. His shoulders eased, and for the first time that night, the stubborn tension in his face melted into something peaceful. “Alright,” he murmured,

his voice faint but content. “Tomorrow then.”

The lanternlight caught in his tired eyes, glinting off the small smile that lingered there-fragile, but

real.

For a long moment, no one spoke. The garden felt suspended in quiet warmth, the air thick with the ache of love and memory.

Maya's throat tightened. She blinked back the sting in her eyes and managed a faint, reassuring smile as she reached for her brother's arm. "Come on, Jaime," she said softly. "Let's go home."

"I'll have James prepare the vehicle," Damien said, already reaching for his phone.

He was halfway through dialing when a gentle but commanding voice cut through the night.

"Nonsense," Eleanor interjected before anyone could move. Her tone was warm, but firm-the kind of voice that didn't invite argument. She lifted a graceful hand toward the house. "Why not just stay the night? I'll have the staff prepare the guest rooms. It's far too late, and the young man looks

ready to topple over.

And the both of you-" her eyes flicked to Maya and Damien "-you've just returned from your trip.

You need some rest too."

Maya smiled, touched but hesitant. "That's very kind of you, Grandma, really, but-"

Her words cut off as movement at the edge of the garden drew everyone's attention. The soft crunch of gravel under measured footsteps broke the quiet.

Monroe stepped forward, the lanterns casting a glint across the silver pin on his lapel. His

expression was composed, but the weight in his eyes betrayed the seriousness of his news.

"Apologies for the interruption, sir," he said, bowing slightly to Damien. "But we have a situation."

The air shifted instantly; the easy warmth of the garden seemed to tighten, as if holding its breath.

Monroe continued, his tone calm but clipped. "Our surveillance team reported two of Volkov's men at the docks, about two hours after your arrival. They were asking questions-about you and Ms.

Maya."

Damien's jaw tightened, his expression darkening like a storm pulling in. His voice, when it came, was low and deliberate. "What exactly were they asking?"

"Your time of arrival. Whether you left alone or with Ms. Maya," Monroe replied evenly. "They were probing for your next destination. Subtle, but too pointed to ignore."

Maya's stomach knotted, unease prickling at the base of her neck. Damien's face hardened further, a sharp edge settling into his composure. "Has it been handled?"

"Yes, sir," Monroe said with a curt nod. "The staff at the dock have been briefed. They know what to say-and what not to. If those men return, they'll be fed a clean trail."

Damien nodded once, satisfaction tempered by calculation. "Good."

Monroe hesitated before continuing. "There's more. Another pair was spotted near the Aurora residence just a few hours after we left. They haven't made a move… yet. For now, they're just

watching."

Dominic's voice cut in-gone was the easy humor from earlier. His tone was low, serious. "Or

waiting."

Maya's head snapped toward him, her pulse quickening. "Waiting for what?"

Silence thickened around the table. Dominic met his son's eyes first, then glanced to Dahlia, to his parents, and finally to Jaime-before his gaze settled on Maya again, steady but grim. "Waiting for you to come home."

Maya blinked, disbelief flickering across her face. "Me? But… why would they-"

Dahlia's voice broke in softly, though the edge of worry laced every word. "Either they want to confirm your connection to Damien…" She trailed off, unwilling to finish the thought.

Maya's voice trembled. "Or what?"

It was Jaime who answered, his tone small but certain. "Or they want to do something bad to you,

May."

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Dominic's jaw tightened, his usual warmth replaced by steel. "He's right. They're already suspicious about you and Damien. Volkov knows he can't touch Damien directly-so he'll go after the one thing that would hurt him most. You."

A heavy silence followed, the weight of his words sinking in like stone.

Then, almost imperceptibly, the air shifted. A quiet tension rippled through the garden-subtle but undeniable-as if even the night itself had taken a cautious step back.

Damien's eyes went cold, steel replacing what little softness had been there. "They can try," he said, low and steady. "I'll die before I let that happen."

His face set, every trace of warmth gone. "So they're done hiding."

"Seems so, sir," Monroe replied, voice clipped but steady.

Damien leaned back, thumbs steepling as his gaze swept the garden-measured, tactical. Then we'll give them something to look at."

A slow, deliberate smile ghosted his lips, more promise than comfort. "Keep them busy long enough to move Jaime quietly. I want eyes on every route. No mistakes."

Monroe gave a sharp nod, the tension in his posture betraying the unease he didn't voice." Understood, sir." His eyes flicked briefly across the table, taking in everyone there, before returning to Damien. "I'll make the arrangements."

With that, he gave a curt bow and turned, his footsteps fading into the darkness beyond the lantern light.

Maya's chest tightened. The warmth and laughter of moments ago evaporated, replaced by the sharp reality of danger. The peace of the evening had vanished, leaving only tense vigilance in its place.

Dominic leaned forward, his usual levity gone. In a low, steady voice he asked, "Tell me, son – what exactly are you planning?" His eyes searched Damien's face for whatever strategy was already forming.

Damien picked up his glass and drained the remaining amber in one swift motion, placing it back on the table with a faint clink. His eyes met Maya's for a brief moment-steady, calm, reassuring-before sliding to Dominic.

"We'll need to hit them where it hurts," he said quietly, voice low but sharp, carrying the weight of authority that demanded attention. "Ashcroft and I have already planned a series of

coordinated raids on Volkov's warehouses and safe houses. Disrupt their operations, hit their

supply lines, and make sure no trail leads back to us."

Dominic's brow furrowed. "That's bold, son. Won't the heat come straight back at you? They'll

point to you first."

“We’re not going scorched-earth,” Damien answered before Dominic could press further.

Calm, controlled, every syllable deliberate. “Ashcroft and I already pulled the right strings- legal strings. We’ve got warrants lining up through contacts in the ministry and a military liaison who owes Ashcroft a favor. This isn’t a rogue raid. It’s a lawful operation: coordinated enforcement actions on three of Volkov’s key sites-warehouses they use for logistics and an operations safe-house. Enough to cripple their distribution and rattle their command, not to level everything.”

Charles sat in silence, his gaze hard and steady, weighing the risk-but despite himself, a quiet pride softened the lines around his eyes as he looked at his grandson.

Dominic cleared his throat, the lines at his eyes deepening with a mix of concern and pride. ” Legal, coordinated, and surgical,” he repeated slowly, as if tasting the words. “Are you certain this plan will work, son?”

Damien met his father’s gaze and gave a single, resolute nod. “I’m sure.”

He let that land, eyes scanning the faces around the table. “Timing is the weapon. While uniformed teams execute those takedowns-media on standby, legal paperwork in order- we’ll move Jaime quietly under escort. The raids give us the plausible cause and the noise. Volkov’s people will be looking at his losses, not at our convoy.”

Dominic gave a short, approving nod. “Disrupt their supply and command flow long enough to get Jaime out and into secure care. Minimal collateral – a solid diversion.”

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Dahlia’s fingers whitened around her teacup for a heartbeat before she made herself relax. Pride flickered through her expression, tempered by the hard edge of a mother’s worry. “If anyone can pull it off,” she said softly, “it’s you, son.”

A hush settled over the table. Maya’s gaze found Damien’s across the quiet, her worry plain in her eyes. He met it with steady calm, but the tension in his jaw betrayed the storm behind it.

Beside her, Jaime had lost every trace of sleepiness-his eyes wide now, alert, a spark of excitement creeping through his concern. Still, he said nothing; he knew his sister too well to add to her worry.

The silence lingered a beat longer before Eleanor, who had been quietly observing, raised a hand. At once, their trusted butler appeared at her side, bowing with practiced grace.

“Madam,” he acknowledged, standing at attention.

Eleonor’s eyes swept across the faces gathered at the table, sharp and intent. “Alfred, have the staff prepare the guest room down the hall for Jaime, and personally attend to Damien’s bedroom-make sure to check for anything Maya might need.”

Before Maya could even protest, Eleonor continued, her voice calm but firm. “From now on, the two of you will be staying here to ensure your safety. We need to make sure everything goes smoothly, especially with Jaime’s transfer. Jaime will have his own room, and Maya… you can stay in Damien’s. He has his own place, so don’t worry, sweetheart-you’ll have your privacy. But, if you’d prefer a completely separate room, just tell Alfred. He’ll take care of everything.”

Damien’s brow furrowed slightly. His eyes flicked to Maya, sharp and teasing, a slow, knowing curve tugging at his lips. “Or… how about this-Jaime stays here with you, and Maya can stay with me,” he offered, the look he gave her enough to make her pulse quicken.

Maya’s cheeks flushed, and she glanced down at her hands, a shy smile tugging at her lips.

A subtle, knowing smile tugged at Eleanor’s lips, one she tried to hide. “Who will accompany her when you go to work? Consider this an official decree: Maya is now on indefinite leave. She’ll stay here so your mother and I can spend more time with our daughter-to-be.”

Dahlia leaned in, a sly smile matching Eleanor’s. “And with pay-indefinite leave with pay.”

The weight of strategy and danger hung briefly in the air, but Eleanor’s decree and Dahlia’s teasing words cut through it, a welcome thread of normalcy.

The tension eased, laughter bubbling just beneath the surface as the family’s attention shifted from shadows of threat to the comfort of home.

Charles clapped his hands together, grinning. “Ah! Perfect! Now I have someone to play chess with!” He patted Jaime’s shoulder affectionately. “Right, son?”

Jaime’s smile brightened, a hint of excitement breaking through his tiredness, and he

nodded.

Damien cleared his throat, a faint, lopsided smirk tugging at his lips, his gaze lingering on Maya for just a beat longer than necessary. “Well… looks like I’ll be moving back in, then.”

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“Looks like I’m moving back here then,”

The words echoed just enough to pull every eye in the room toward Damien.

Dahlia’s brows lifted, delight flickering across her features. Dominic made a strangled sound -half-cough, half-shock. Charles sputtered, blinking like he’d misheard entirely. And Eleanor simply smiled-warm, victorious-as if she’d been waiting for him to reach this conclusion on

his own.

Jaime tried his best not to laugh, watching the Damien Blackwood behave like a lovestruck teenager over his sister.

Maya’s pulse scattered. Heat crept up her neck, embarrassment and nerves tangling together at the sudden, unexpected declaration spoken in front of his entire family.

Damien looked around at the stunned faces.

“…What?”

Dominic cleared his throat, stiffening in his seat. “Ehem… oh-nothing. It’s just-”

Dahlia cut in smoothly, eyes soft with amusement. “We just didn’t expect to hear that from you, son.”

Charles threw his head back with a booming laugh. “Ha! For years we’ve been trying to convince you to move back in and you always say no. The possibility of Blackwood Enterprises’ stock dropping is easier to believe than this news! This is a good day indeed!”

Damien exhaled sharply, then glanced back at Maya-just long enough for his ears to turn faintly red. He cleared his throat, trying for nonchalance and failing miserably.

“It’s only temporary,” he said. “I’m only moving back because Maya is staying here.”

Charles slapped the table with a booming laugh, loud enough to make Alfred jump in the hallway.

“Ahh! A true Blackwood man!” he crowed, eyes sparkling with wicked pride. “Dramatic, reckless, and led around by his heart!”

He jabbed a finger at Damien, shaking his head in exaggerated disappointment. “Stubborn until the very end-and then suddenly decisive the moment it involves the woman he cares about. Just like your father with your mother. That, my boy, is the Blackwood way!”

Dominic groaned, covering his face with one hand. “For the love of-please don’t make that a

motto.”

Dahlia elbowed him lightly, biting back a smile. Dominic muttered under his breath, “God help

us all…”

Maya’s cheeks warmed, her heartbeat skittering at the unexpected attention.

Damien cleared his throat, jaw tightening just a fraction-caught between embarrassment and something far more earnest.

The room seemed to exhale after Damien’s bold declaration, the last threads of tension loosening in the air.

The earlier heaviness-Volkov, danger, strategy-didn’t disappear, but it shifted to the background, distant enough for a moment of warmth to seep back in.

Almost normal.

Almost.

Maya felt it beneath the laughter and teasing-the quiet current of worry running through every decision they'd made tonight. The way the Blackwoods moved around each other, unspoken unity woven into every glance. Protective. Fiercely so.

Her

eyes drifted over the family-Dominic rubbing the bridge of his nose in mock exasperation, Dahlia still smothering a smile, Charles beaming like this was the happiest twist of fate he'd ever witnessed. Even Eleanor was soft with triumph.

Warmth and belonging-things Maya never imagined she'd find here.

She didn't realize her gaze had turned until it collided with Damien's.

He wasn't laughing.

He wasn't distracted.

He was watching her.

Not the teasing heat from earlier-it smoldered, undeniably-but steadier, grounding. A silent question in the slight tilt of his head, as if asking whether she was overwhelmed, scared, or simply taking it all in.

And just like that, with that tiny gesture, it hit her: He sees me. He really sees me.

Her breath caught, her pulse fluttering.

A faint smirk curved his lips-slow, knowing, full of promise.

“It’s getting late,” Damien said at last, voice smooth but carrying weight. “And we need to start planning logistics for Jaime’s transfer first thing in the morning. We should call it a night.”

He didn’t look away from her. Not once.

Around them, the family shifted, nodding in agreement.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Eleanor murmured, her approval soft but absolute.

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Relief settled over the group-warm, steady-but the shadow of danger still lingered at the edges of the room, crouched just beyond the moonlights' glow. Everyone felt it.

Still… for tonight, they chose warmth over worry.

Dahlia stood first, smoothing her skirt with graceful finality. "Let's head inside. The children need something warm before bed."

Eleanor didn't hesitate. She reached for Maya's hand-surprisingly gentle, almost protective." Come, dear. You look pale. Let's get you settled."

Damien's gaze snapped to Maya at once-sharp, assessing, protective in a way that made her breath catch. He moved subtly closer as if shielding her from a threat no one else could

see.

Alfred, appearing with impeccable timing as always, opened the garden doors for the family to file back inside.

As everyone began to rise, the room shifting into motion, Maya felt a gentle tug on her sleeve.

Jaime.

“Are we really staying here?” he whispered, eyes wide.

Maya softened. “Just for a little while.”

He nodded, the relief visible in his shoulders-and something else too. Something like hope.

Damien stepped closer, lowering his voice so only she could hear.

“You’ll be safe here.”

It wasn’t reassurance.

It wasn’t a promise.

It was a vow.

Warm, golden light poured from the manor’s interior, washing over them as they crossed the threshold. Maya felt the change instantly: safety wrapped around her like a blanket, soft but unyielding.

Behind them, the night air cooled-the world outside still tense, waiting-but the manor felt

alive and attentive. Staff moved quietly, preparing rooms, adjusting lights, everything efficient yet tender.

Jaime drifted toward Charles, pulled in by curiosity.

“So,” Charles leaned down conspiratorially, “do you know how to sacrifice a pawn for strategic initiative?”

Jaime blinked. “…No?”

“Excellent!” Charles beamed. “You’re a perfect student.”

Dominic groaned. “And here it begins.”

Eleanor smiled at the banter, though Maya noticed how her thumb stroked her arm-a subtle,

steadying gesture.

Damien slowed until he was right beside her.

“You okay?” he murmured, voice low, asking like it was meant only for her.

“I’m fine,” she whispered. “Just… overwhelmed.”

He angled his head, studying her.

“Good overwhelmed?”

Her cheeks warmed. “Maybe.”

His mouth tugged into a slow, knowing smirk. “I’ll take that.”

Inside the sitting room, a fire crackled softly. Jaime immediately curled beside Charles as the older man launched into an enthusiastic explanation of rook movement.

Dahlia fetched Maya a cup of ginger tea without asking-like a mother who’d known her for years rather than days.

Eleanor sat close enough to touch, a silent guardian presence.

And Damien-he didn't sit right away.

He stood behind Maya's chair, one hand resting lightly against the back of it, close enough

that she could feel the heat of him.

A silent promise:

You're safe. I'm right here.

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His eyes stayed on her more than on the room.

Maya pretended not to notice.

She wasn't fooling anyone.

The peace lasted until Monroe appeared in the doorway.

He wasn’t tense.

He wasn’t alarmed.

But his presence alone was enough to shift the atmosphere back to alertness.

He bowed his head slightly. “Sir, the perimeter has been secured. Teams are rotating. Vehicles are ready for tomorrow morning’s operation.”

Damien nodded, shifting into command with a subtle change in posture-shoulders squared, voice smooth but steeled. “Good. Keep rotation tight tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

Maya stiffened despite herself. The reminder of danger cracked through the warmth like a

cold wind.

Damien caught it instantly.

His hand brushed the back of her chair-barely a whisper of contact, but it steadied her all

the same.

“It’s alright, love,” he murmured, voice low enough for her alone. “Nothing’s happening tonight. This is the safest place any of us could be. Volkov might be impulsive, but he isn’t stupid-he wouldn’t dare come near this place. And even if he tried…” A small, confident smirk touched his mouth. “We’re ready.”

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She looked up at him-into steady eyes that held certainty, strategy, and a fierce promise all

at once.

Monroe bowed again. “I’ll be outside if needed.”

As he exited, the fire crackled louder, as if trying to fill the silence he left behind.

Finally, Damien took a seat beside Maya-close. Deliberately close.

His voice softened. “Nothing to worry about, okay?”

Maya nodded, offering him a small, grateful smile.

The fire burned low, shadows stretching across the room, when Eleanor gently stood.

Eleanor clapped her hands lightly. “Enough worry for one evening. It’s time for all of us to have a goodnight sleep. Let’s get you all settled.”

Jaime yawned-massive and unhideable-making Eleanor smile.

“Come, sweetheart,” she said, rising. “Your room is ready.”

Charles rubbed his hands together. “Yes! Rest well. Tomorrow morning-first chess lesson!”

Jaime brightened. “I’m ready!”

Dahlia stood and moved to Jaime’s side, brushing his hair back with affectionate precision before wrapping him in a warm embrace. “Sleep well, darling.”

Next, she turned to Maya, pulling her into a warm, comforting hug. “You too, sweetheart.”

The manor shifted into quiet goodnights as everyone moved down the hall.

Eleanor and Dahlia guided Jaime toward his room, Charles and Dominic flanking him like proud royal escorts, while Maya and Damien followed close behind, his hand slid gently against her back, guiding her down the quieter west hallway.

The atmosphere changed-more intimate, warmer.

This was the private wing.

The hallway glowed with the soft, golden light of the lamps, casting long, gentle shadows along the walls.

The room they opened was cozy, warm-fresh blankets, soft bedding, a small lamp glowing,

warm milk waiting on a tray.

“For me?” Jaime whispered, eyes wide.

“Of course,” Dahlia said. “You’re family here.”

The word hit him like a blow.

His eyes blurred-just for a heartbeat-before he nodded.

Eleanor hugged him gently. “Sleep well, dear boy.”

After they tucked him in and stepped out, the door closing softly behind them, Jaime stood in the center of the room for a long moment.

Then slowly-hesitantly-he smiled.

Eleanor and Charles retreated toward their rooms, Dahlia and Dominic following quietly, leaving the manor hushed but alive with soft golden light.

From just behind Maya, Damien’s voice drifted, low and gentle, brushing against her back like a quiet reassurance.

“Come on,” he murmured. “You’re barely staying awake.”

“I am awake,” she whispered, even as her body sagged slightly.

“You yawned three times in the last two minutes.”

“I did not-”

Damien raised a brow.

She huffed. He smirked.

He stopped at a tall oak door and pushed it open.

“Maya,” he said quietly, “welcome to my room.”

Before she could reply, Damien stepped close, pressing his body gently against hers from behind. His hands settled lightly on her waist, and his lips brushed the shell of her ear.

“Our room,” he whispered, each word heavy with meaning.

Chapter 350

Warm light spilled out, revealing deep blues, a soft fire, a wall of books, and a photo of Dominic and Charles with a much younger Damien.

Her breath hitched.

She ran her fingers along a jar of coins, a folded scarf, cuff links-small, human things that made the space feel alive.

“I thought your room would be… colder,” she murmured.

Damien laughed softly. “Disappointed?”

She shook her head.

“No. I like it.”

His expression softened-rare, unguarded.

“I’m glad.”

He stepped closer. Not touching. But close enough that she could feel the heat radiating

from him.

“This is your room now, so feel free to make changes however you see fit,” he whispered.

Maya looked up at him, startled by the intimacy in his tone.

“I won’t do that… this-this is your childhood, your life.”

Damien’s eyes darkened with intensity as he stepped even closer. “You are my life.”

Maya’s lips parted, breath catching. “Damien…”

Damien’s breath escaped in a slow, almost relieved exhale. He stepped closer, the heat of his body brushing hers.

“I’ve been wanting to do this all night,” he murmured, his voice low, intimate.

Maya's heart thudded, words caught in her throat, before he leaned in, capturing her lips with a kiss that was both tender and consuming. Warmth spread through her, and for a heartbeat the world outside-the danger, the strategy, the waiting-faded into nothing.

His hands framed her face, pulling her closer, every unspoken promise and lingering desire

pressing into that single, searing connection.

When they finally parted-just enough to rest their foreheads together-Damien's gaze held hers: dark, steady, and impossibly intent.

"Nothing will touch you," he murmured, lips brushing hers again. "Not while I breathe. That's a promise."

Without breaking their gaze, Damien guided her slowly toward the bed, his hand threading gently through her hair, fingers curling lightly at the nape of her neck.

Every step felt deliberate, a silent dance of anticipation, as though the world beyond these walls had ceased to exist. Moonlight spilled through the balcony doors, mingling with the soft glow of the bedside lamp, casting flickering shadows that danced across the room-but they saw nothing but each other.

Each brush of his lips against hers sent sparks racing along her skin, each touch a whispered confession of the desire and devotion that had been building all evening. His hands moved with a careful, commanding tenderness-resting on her waist, tracing the curve of her back, pulling her closer until her heartbeat collided with his, echoing in rhythm with his own.

The air between them hummed, thick with unspoken need and trust, an intimacy both consuming and protective. One by one, layers of clothing fell away, until only the heat of their skin remained, bodies pressed together, radiating warmth.

The night shrank to the space between them, the heat of their connection pushing every shadow, every danger, to the far edges of her mind.

Every kiss, every lingering touch, became a conversation, fierce and patient, urgent yet tender.

Outside, the world could crumble-here, in this room, they were untouchable, bound together by desire and devotion, wrapped in the rhythm of each other's bodies and hearts.

Hours slipped by in the rhythm of their closeness, each caress and kiss carrying them higher into shared heat. Time lost all meaning as they gave themselves to one another again and again, surrendering to the need and desire that had simmered all evening.

The night stretched on, a tapestry of whispered confessions, heated touches, and waves of passion. They moved together as if the world outside had ceased to exist, each encounter a conversation of longing, trust, and unspoken promises. The night became nothing more than the space between their bodies, the outside world held at bay by the intensity of their shared fire.

Finally, as the night surrendered to quiet, sleep began to tug at her. Maya curled against him, their bodies still entwined, the warmth and rhythm of their closeness settling into a calm, steady heartbeat.