Intern 441

Chapter 441

“Understand something, Marco,” Volkov said quietly. “Men who accomplish great things don’t need

to brag about them.”

Marco’s jaw tightened. Volkov crouched down until they were eye level, his voice a low murmur.

“You are enjoying this far too much. Which tells me one of two things.”

Marco held his stare.

“You’re either very stupid,” Volkov said.

A beat of heavy silence followed. “Or you believe someone very powerful is protecting you.”

The basement fell quiet.

The silence stretched, heavy and suffocating, until Marco broke it with a jagged laugh that sounded like gravel grinding together.

“You’re a fool to think that,” Marco spat. “Do you really believe it takes an outsider to bring you

down? Wake up, you arrogant piece of shit!”

He strained against the chair, his face inches from the light. “I’ve watched three years of fractures,

Viktor. Three years of the young ones sharpening their teeth while you played at being

untouchable. I’m the only one who didn’t switch sides-the only one who kept the ‘ghost’s favorite

son’ from being gutted a dozen times over. But the throne isn’t shaking; it’s already rotted through. The younger faction despises you, they just didn’t have the nerve to move.”

He shook his head and smirked, then spat at Viktor’s feet.

“They’re done. And so am I,” he said coolly. “I’m finished playing the loyal dog. Someone needs to drag you off that pedestal before you collapse and crush the rest of us.”

Volkov just stared, his expression as flat as the concrete floor. “And I’m assuming,” he said softly,

you think that ‘someone’ is you?”

Marco leaned forward as far as the restraints allowed, eyes wild and bright.

“They don’t call me the Shark for nothing, Viktor. I go where the blood is. And I finally realized

there’s no side left to stand on but my own.”

His voice cracked-not with fear, but with ugly triumph.

“It’s just a matter of time.”

He jerked against the restraints, the chair screeching faintly against concrete.

“You’ve become a liability,” Marco pressed, breathing hard. “Unpredictable. Emotional. Ever since s he died, you’ve been snapping at shadows like a wounded animal.”

Volkov didn’t move.

Marco smiled, sensing the crack.

“You’re not feared anymore,” he continued, softer now. Crueler. “You’re unstable.”

A wet laugh rattled in his chest.

“No heir. No legacy. You’re the end of the line.”

He tilted his head, eyes gleaming.

“Like father, like daughter.”

The silence that followed was different.

Sharp.

Alive.

“And look where that madness got her?” Marco finished, voice dropping to a whisper meant to cut.

“Six feet under. Rotting. While you play king in a basement.”

The shift was immediate.

Volkov moved.

The crack of palm against flesh exploded through the room. Marco’s head snapped sideways, the

metal chair screeching violently as it skidded across the concrete.

Blood sprayed from his split lip.

For a moment, the world rang.

Volkov stood over him, breathing slow but heavy, fingers flexing at his sides as if resisting

something far worse than a slap.

His eyes were no longer bored.

They were feral.

“Сукин сын!”

The words ripped from him, stripped of civility.

“How dare you, you son of a bitch!” Volkov snarled, his voice shaking with a fury so tightly contained it felt lethal. “You do not speak about my daughter. You do not say her name. You do not

even let the thought of her pass through that filthy mouth.”

Volkov’s hand fisted into Marco’s collar, yanking him upright despite the restraints. He tightened his grip until Marco’s breath hitched.

“Even forming a sentence about her is a privilege you were never given.”

The air in the basement turned suffocating.

“She carried more legacy in her smallest finger than you will ever hold in your entire miserable

existence," Volkov continued, each word carved from rage. "And you dare compare yourself to her?

His jaw flexed, eyes burning – not wild, not unstable.

Focused.

"You mistake my restraint for weakness," he said, voice dropping lower, more dangerous. "You mistake grief for instability."

He leaned closer, their faces inches apart.

"I buried my daughter," he said quietly. "Do you understand what that means?"

A beat.

"It means I have already endured the worst thing a man can survive."

He released him abruptly, letting the chair slam back against the concrete.

“You,” Volkov finished coldly, straightening his cuffs, “are not even worth the dirt on her grave.”

Marco’s laughter spilled out – low, jagged, ugly.

“Oh,” he muttered, tilting his head despite the blood dripping from his lip. “Did I finally hit a nerve,

Viktor?”

“Shut up.”

Not shouted.

Spoken through his teeth.

Marco saw it – the tremor in the control.

“You know exactly how much blood was spilled to avenge her,” Volkov said, his voice dropping into something far darker. “Every single person who caused her suffering paid for it. A hundred fold. I wiped their names from existence. Down to the last drop of their filthy bloodline.”

He stepped closer.

“You know what I am capable of.”

Marco’s smile returned.

Cruel. Knowing.

“Yes,” he said softly. “I do.”

A pause.

“And I also know it wasn’t you who found them.”

Silence snapped tight.

“They were delivered to you,” Marco continued, watching carefully. “Gift-wrapped. Traced. Handed over.”

Volkov didn’t blink.

Marco leaned forward as far as the restraints allowed.

“It was Damien Blackwood who hunted them down,” he whispered. “You just took the credit.”

The words landed.

Heavy.

“You didn’t avenge her,” Marco pressed, voice turning vicious. “You inherited the revenge.”

Volkov’s breathing slowed.

Dangerously slow.

“Because when it came time to act,” Marco finished, eyes gleaming with something close to triumph, “you were too broken to even find the men who killed your own daughter.”

A beat.

“So tell me, Viktor… if you couldn’t save her… what makes you think you can save your empire?”

Volkov’s hand closed around Marco’s throat.

“I can kill you right now,” he said, voice low, vibrating with restraint. “And no one in this building would dare question it.”

Marco choked – then laughed.

A reckless, bloody sound.

“You could,” he wheezed. “But you won’t.”

Volkov’s grip tightened.

“Go ahead,” Marco rasped. “Do it.”

A crooked smile split his bloodied mouth.

“Let’s see what happens.”

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The basement felt smaller.

He swallowed hard but kept smiling.

“Eliminate me, and you don’t just remove a problem,” Marco said hoarsely. “You remove the weight

that keeps the scale from tipping.”

Volkov’s jaw flexed.

Marco’s voice steadied.

“Rule number one. We fight. We discipline. We teach lessons when necessary.” His eye gleamed. ”

But we don’t turn knives inward.”

A beat.

“You break that rule,” he whispered, “and you’re not king anymore.”

Volkov’s breathing deepened – once, twice – before he shoved Marco back. The chair slammed against concrete.

Not because he couldn’t kill him.

Because killing him would cost more than blood alone.

Marco dragged in air, smiling through red-streaked teeth.

“Whether you like it or not,” he muttered, “you need me alive.”

He leaned back as far as the restraints allowed, forcing confidence into his posture.

“I may be the reason for your downfall,” Marco said quietly, certainty replacing rage. “But I won’t be

the reason for your death.”

He met Volkov’s stare head-on.

“When I become king, I’ll need a loyal dog.”

His smile widened, blood staining his teeth.

“You’ve always been good at barking orders.”

A beat.

“You’ll fit perfectly.”

Volkov straightened slowly, smoothing his cuffs.

Then he looked at him.

Truly looked at him.

And smiled.

“Oh, brother…”

Volkov’s voice was almost weary.

“Strays may bare their teeth.”

A pause. The weight of the room pressed in.

“But only blood is born to wear the crown.”

Volkov’s words hung in the damp air.

Marco opened his mouth to respond-

But Volkov had already turned away.

“Igor.”

The single word carried across the basement.

From the shadows near the far wall, Igor stepped forward. He had been standing there the entire

time, silent as a statue, watching the exchange unfold without so much as shifting his weight.

“Yes, sir.”

Volkov didn’t look at him.

“Hand me the drill.”

For the first time since his capture, Marco’s confidence flickered.

Igor walked to the metal workbench against the wall. The heavy drill rested there beside coils of

wire and rusted tools. He picked it up without hesitation and placed it into Viktor’s waiting hand.

Marco swallowed.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, the bravado in his voice suddenly strained. “What the hell are you doing?”

Volkov turned back slowly.

A thin, sinister smile curved his mouth.

“You’re right,” he said calmly. “I cannot take your life with my own hands.”

Marco tugged hard against the restraints now, the chair rattling against the concrete.

“Exactly,” he said quickly, trying to reclaim control. “You kill me and the whole structure collapses.

You know that.”

Volkov said nothing.

Instead, he squeezed the trigger.

The drill roared to life.

The mechanical whine ripped through the basement, echoing off the stone walls like a swarm of

angry metal.

Marco’s remaining eye widened.

“Viktor-wait-”

Volkov stepped forward.

Slow. Deliberate.

“But,” he said softly over the shrieking motor, “that doesn’t mean I cannot make your life miserable.

Before Marco could react, Volkov drove the spinning drill into his left knee.

The scream that tore from Marco’s throat was raw and animal.

Metal bit through flesh and bone.

The chair jerked violently against the restraints as Marco thrashed, his body convulsing while the drill chewed deeper.

The sound of the motor mixed with his screams until the entire basement seemed to vibrate with

Then, just as suddenly-

Volkov pulled the drill free.

Marco collapsed forward in the chair, choking on broken breaths as blood spilled down his leg and

pooled beneath his boot.

Volkov switched the drill off.

The silence afterward felt deafening.

He handed the tool back to Igor without looking.

“Have the doctor patch him up,” Volkov said calmly. “Just enough to keep him alive.”

Igor inclined his head.

“But no surgery,” Volkov added.

Igor paused.

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Volkov’s eyes flicked briefly toward Marco’s ruined knee.

“I want that leg disabled.”

Igor bowed once.

“Understood.”

Volkov adjusted the cuffs of his jacket as if he had just finished a minor inconvenience.

He turned and began walking toward the stairs.

Marco groaned behind him, breath shaking, blood soaking through his pant leg.

Volkov reached the bottom step-

Then stopped.

For a moment he stood there, perfectly still.

Then he glanced back over his shoulder.

“You know,” he said thoughtfully, “I am still not convinced you actually have the courage to do what you claim.”

His gaze drifted over Marco’s trembling form.

“But I must admit,” he continued, voice cool, “I admire your confidence.”

Marco tried to speak, but only a broken wheeze escaped him.

Volkov’s eyes hardened.

“You are forgetting something.”

He took one slow step back toward the center of the room.

“Rule number two.”

His voice dropped lower.

“Our operations are the backbone of this legacy. Our loyalty is to business first. Even before family.

A faint smile touched his lips.

“And we protect our business.”

His gaze settled on Marco’s ruined leg.

“But since you seem to enjoy taking credit for disabling my operations…”

Volkov shrugged lightly.

“I thought it only fair to return the favor.”

Marco’s breathing turned ragged.

Volkov’s expression became almost amused.

“Let’s see,” he said quietly, “what your loyal followers think of a crippled king.”

Then he turned and walked up the stairs.

Behind him, Marco Greco’s screams followed him into the darkness.

Volkov didn’t look back.

Some lessons, after all, were meant to last a lifetime.

On the opposite side of the world, miles away from the damp stone walls of the basement, dawn

crept slowly over the Blackwood estate.

The twilight wrapped the manor in a calm that felt almost unreal.

Soft golden light spilled from the tall windows, illuminating manicured gardens dusted with frost.

The world here looked peaceful-untouched by the violence unfolding elsewhere.

But

peace was only an illusion.

Damien Blackwood hadn’t slept.

After that phone call, the gears in his mind had refused to stop turning.

Every possible move. Every consequence. Every angle.

As much as he wanted to strike now, to crush the entire Volkov empire before the sun even

finished rising, he knew better.

Harper’s plan required patience.

A diversion first.

Then the extraction.

Right now, the priority was Jaime.

Jaime’s surgery.

Jaime’s safety.

Because Damien understood something everyone else seemed to overlook-

Jaime was Maya’s lifeline.

If anything happened to him, she wouldn't just grieve. She would shatter. And Damien knew there were some things in this world even he couldn't put back together.

And he would burn the world to the ground before letting that happen.

His hand tightened around the glass of whiskey in his palm.

Amber liquid swirled inside it as he stared out across the frost-covered estate.

"You're on borrowed time, Volkov," Damien murmured quietly.

His voice was calm.

Deadly calm.

"I will destroy everything you have. Piece by piece… until there is nothing left of your empire but

ash."

His fingers tightened around the glass.

“And when the dust settles…”

His eyes hardened.

“I will take your life with my own hands.”

He finished the whiskey in a single swallow, the burn barely registering as it slid down his throat.

The empty glass clicked softly against the table.

Damien rose and walked toward the window.

Outside, the sun was beginning to climb slowly over the horizon, its light cutting through the fading

night.

He watched it in silence.

“Cassandra…” he said quietly.

For a moment, his reflection stared back at him in the glass.

“Your death became a chain I wrapped around my own neck.”

His voice grew colder.

“I carried that guilt for years. A burden that was never truly mine to bear.”

A pause.

“But I see it clearly now.”

His gaze drifted toward the rising sun.

“Forgive me.”

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The words held no warmth.

“No mercy.”

“Destroying your father’s legacy is the only way to break that chain.”

His jaw tightened.

“You will see him soon.”

A faint, chilling smile touched his lips.

“That is the last kindness I will ever give you.”

His phone rang.

Damien glanced at the screen.

Ashcroft.

He answered immediately.

“Yes.”

Ashcroft’s voice came through the line, tense.

“I received new intel. Viktor ordered Marco Greco brought to him/

Damien didn’t react.

“Sources say he was taken down to the basement.”

A pause.

“What if Viktor squeezes him hard enough?” Ashcroft continued. “What if Greco cracks and starts

talking?”

Damien’s gaze drifted back to the horizon.

“He won’t.”

Ashcroft hesitated.

“You sound very certain.”

Damien’s tone remained calm.

“Marco Greco is many things. Arrogant. Ambitious. Reckless.”

A faint smirk crossed Damien’s face.

“But he is far too proud to break that easily.”

His phone vibrated in his hand.

Damien frowned slightly and pulled the phone from his ear, glancing at the screen.

Viktor Volkov.

Ashcroft’s voice crackled faintly through the speaker.

“What? What happened?”

Damien didn’t answer immediately.

He opened the message.

A photograph filled the screen.

Marco Greco sat slumped in a metal chair, wrists bound behind him. Blood soaked the front of his

shirt. His face was barely recognizable-one eye swollen completely shut, cheekbone purple and distorted, dried blood crusted along his jaw.

But it was the knee that caught Damien’s attention.

Marco’s left trouser leg had been ripped open, the knee beneath mangled and soaked in dark red where the drill had bitten through flesh. The leg hung crooked at an unnatural angle.

Damien’s expression didn’t change.

Beneath the image was a short message.

I followed your advice and handled some housekeeping. It seems I’ll be sleeping peacefully tonight.

Damien let out a quiet breath as he read the message.

Then he lifted the phone back to his ear.

“Viktor’s paranoid,” he said calmly. “Not the sharpest tool in the shed… but not the dullest either.”

Ashcroft frowned on the other end of the line.

“What do you mean?”

Instead of answering, Damien simply forwarded the message.

A second later Ashcroft’s phone buzzed on the other end of the line.

There was a pause.

Then-

“Holy shit.”

Ashcroft’s voice lowered as he stared at the screen.

“He got it good… Christ.”

Another pause.

“Look at that knee…”

He exhaled sharply.

“Is he even still alive?”

Damien turned his gaze back toward the rising sun beyond the manor windows.

“Yes.”

Ashcroft scoffed. “You sound very sure about that.”

Damien’s voice remained calm.

“Volkov is standing on a very fragile pedestal right now.”

A beat passed.

“He still needs Greco alive,” Damien continued evenly, “to keep the balance from collapsing.”

Ashcroft exhaled slowly.

“And what happens if Greco manages to pull it off? If he takes control?”

Damien’s smile returned.

Cold.

Predatory.

“Then his reign will be very short.”

Silence stretched across the line.

Damien’s voice dropped lower.

Darker.

“Kings fall when real players enter.”

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Ashcroft was quiet for a moment.

Then he said thoughtfully,

“Volkov holds power through blood. Greco’s always been the outsider.”

A pause.

“If Viktor goes down, the structure weakens before Marco even gets a chance.”

Damien said nothing, allowing Ashcroft to finish his thought.

“And if Viktor isn’t the sharpest tool in the shed… but not the dullest either-”

A faint scoff came through the line.

“Marco’s worse. That’s why the nickname fits him.”

A brief pause.

“The Shark. A bloodthirsty bastard who bites before he thinks.”

“We should be able to eliminate him before his seat on the throne even gets warm.”

Then something in Damien’s earlier words seemed to click.

A pause followed.

“Wait a second.”

Ashcroft’s tone sharpened.

“Volkov said he followed your advice… did you talk to him recently?”

Damien didn’t bother denying it.

“Yes,” he said flatly. “He called me a few hours ago.”

Ashcroft sounded genuinely surprised.

“Damn… what does he want?”

“He was fishing,” Damien replied calmly. “Trying to play the intimidating host and see if I’d slip

about the attack."

Ashcroft let out a chuckle. "Ha. Good luck with that."

Damien's gaze drifted toward the pale horizon beyond the manor windows.

"And he asked about Miller."

Ashcroft frowned. "Who?"

"Ethan Miller."

There was a brief pause before recognition hit.

"Oh, that whiny piece of shit we tossed to the sharks."

Damien hummed in acknowledgment.

Ashcroft laughed under his breath. "He's long gone. The sharks probably digested him already…

hell, they might've eaten him twice by now."

He paused, then added casually, "Pretty sure I still have his tongue in a jar somewhere."

Damien gave a faint scoff. "You collect the strangest souvenirs."

Ashcroft laughed low. "Imagine if I kept every little thing-my shelves would be full. I keep only the ones with an… interesting story."

Damien's voice was dry, edged with mockery. "Right… I forgot he was Harper's 'boy toy.' Of course you'd keep a piece of him."

Ashcroft nearly choked on his drink. "He is not! And besides… she's not allowed to have a boy toy!"

Damien's lips curved into a faint smirk. "Oh… she's not allowed, huh? I didn't realize she needed you r permission. That's… bold."

Ashcroft shifted uncomfortably, a faint cough breaking the silence. He cleared his throat, his voice

taking on a teasing edge.

“By the way… you and Maya just disappeared last night. I doubt you’ll share the details, but I’m

assuming you two are okay?”

Damien only hummed in response.

Ashcroft laughed, sharp and sudden.

“Holy shit… that’s good news.”

A beat, then he added, still amused,

“You’re a completely different kind of devil when the two of you are fighting, you know that?”

A beat passed before Ashcroft spoke again, curiosity creeping into his voice.

“Actually… what are you even doing awake?”

He gave a short snort.

“Shouldn’t you be sleeping like a baby right now? I mean, I assumed you two would still be-”

“Shut up,” Damien said flatly, stopping Ashcroft mid-sentence.

Ashcroft ignored the warning entirely.

“I’m just saying,” he continued, clearly entertained. “For a guy who just patched things up with the woman he’s obsessed with, you sound like you woke on the wrong side.”

Ashcroft was quiet for a moment before his voice sharpened slightly.

“Wait… what did Maya say about Volkov’s call?”

“She doesn’t know,” Damien replied.

His gaze drifted briefly toward the east wing of the manor.

“She spent the night in Jaime’s room.”

Ashcroft went quiet for a moment.

“What? Why? I thought you two had already patched things up.”

“We did,” Damien replied evenly. “She just wanted to spend more time with him before the surgery.”

A/slow, knowing hum came through the line.

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“Ohhh… now that makes sense.”

Damien’s brow creased faintly. “What?”

Ashcroft chuckled, amusement creeping into his voice. “Your mood.”

Damien didn’t respond.

“You didn’t get the grand finale last night, that’s why-”

“I walked her to Jaime’s room just after midnight,” Damien cut in coolly.

A brief pause followed before he added, almost deliberately,

“After we spent some time together.”

On the other end of the line, Ashcroft let out a long whistle.

“Well, well.”

“So you did manage a small victory before getting kicked out.”

Damien’s voice flattened. “It’s none of your fucking business.”

Ashcroft laughed outright.

“Relax. I’m genuinely happy for you.” Another chuckle slipped through the line. “The world’s a much

safer place when the two of you aren’t at each other’s throats.”

Damien glanced down at his watch. The numbers were creeping toward six in the morning.

“Enough of your nonsense,” he said flatly. “We’re meeting Harper’s men this morning. Meet me at

the office in three hours.”

Ashcroft groaned immediately. “Whoa-hold on. Let’s get something clear here. They’re not Harper’s men.”

Damien’s tone remained dry. “I’m fairly certain they’re more hers than you are.”

Ashcroft groaned. “Are you my friend or what? Besides, the sun isn’t even fully up yet and you’re already scheduling misery.”

Damien’s tone remained dry. “I am. But your denial is embarrassing.”

He abruptly ended the call before Ashcroft could fire back.

Damien lowered the phone, his gaze drifting toward the pale light across the horizon.

After a moment, he slipped the phone into his pocket and turned away.

The hallway was dim, the soft wall lights casting long shadows across the polished floor.

He moved silently toward the east wing, each step measured, careful not to disturb the stillness of the house.

When he reached Jaime's room, he paused.

The door wasn't fully closed. A narrow gap revealed a sliver of warm light inside.

Damien pushed it open just enough to step inside.

Inside the room, Maya was sleeping soundly beside Jaime, one hand still loosely wrapped around him.

Damien stepped further in, his eyes briefly settling on her.

A strand of her hair had fallen across her cheek. Even in sleep, her fingers still clung to Jaime's

hand, as if letting go wasn't an option.

He reached over, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She didn't stir, but the warmth of her skin

contrasted the cold, blood-slicked conversation from moments ago.

For a long moment, he simply stood there, anchored by the slow rhythm of their breathing.

He leaned down, his voice a low vibration in the quiet. "I swear, I'll do everything to give you the life

you deserve… no matter the consequences."

He lingered for a heartbeat, then pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

"I love you," he whispered against her skin, the words finally finding the air.

Then, as quietly as he had entered, he slipped from the room, leaving the soft rhythm of their

breathing behind.

As he turned, the door across the hall opened. Dahlia stepped out, pulling her robe tighter against

the morning chill. She stopped short, her eyes meeting his in the dim light.

She glanced at the door he'd just closed and smiled gently. "Are they still asleep?"

Damien gave a low hum of affirmation. As he stepped closer, Dahlia caught the sharp scent of whiskey and the heavy fatigue etched in his features.

"You haven't slept," she said. It wasn't a question.

Damien didn't bother denying it. His silence was answer enough.

Dahlia studied him for a moment, her voice dropping. "Volkov?"

"Handled," he replied shortly.

She nodded slowly, though they both knew nothing was ever that simple. For a moment, she watched him, noticing how his gaze kept drifting back toward the door he had just exited.

“She worries too much,” Damien muttered, his voice rough.

“That’s because she loves too much,” Dahlia replied softly. She watched him for a beat, then a

small smile touched her lips. “You’re worse, you know.”

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Damien lifted a brow. “Am I?”

Dahlia gestured toward the room where Maya slept. “You look like you’d burn the whole world down if anything happened to her.”

Damien didn’t hesitate. He simply met his mother’s eyes and spoke the truth. “I would.”

Dahlia stepped closer and gently placed her hand on his arm. The warmth of the gesture seemed

to ground him, a soft anchor in the middle of the morning’s cold reality.

“I know you would, son,” she said softly, her touch steady. She looked up at him, her eyes mirroring

his intensity but filled with a warmth only a mother could carry.

“But remember, you don’t have to fight alone.” She gently squeezed his arm, her voice steady and

sure. “We are all in this together, and we’re going to make sure we win.”

Damien looked down at her hand, the weight of her words settling over him. For a moment, the

silence of the hallway didn’t feel quite so heavy.

“I’m scared, Mom,” he exhaled, the confession finally breaking through his armor.

Dahlia’s brow furrowed, worry etching deep lines into her face. “Scared of what?”

Damien met her eyes, his usual coldness replaced by a raw, hollow vulnerability. “I’m scared that

when all of this is done-when she finally sees how messy my world truly is-it will scare her away.

That she’ll leave me.”

He looked at the door, his voice dropping to a jagged whisper. “I can’t lose her, Mom. I can’t. I-”

Dahlia reached up, placing a hand gently against his face. “Shh…”

She looked deep into his eyes, her expression filled with the quiet certainty only a mother could

possess.

“Listen to me, son. Never underestimate the power of true love. Maya genuinely loves you-not for

what you have, or the version of you the world sees, but for who you truly are. Trust her. And trust what you have together. Always.”

Damien looked at his mother, the fear in his eyes shifting into a quiet, desperate hope-a rare moment of complete surrender.

“I know…,” he murmured, the weight of the confession finally easing from his chest. “and I hope that’s enough. Because she’s the only thing keeping me human.”

Dahlia held his gaze for a heartbeat longer, her hand lingering on his cheek as if to shield him from

the day ahead.

“It’s more than enough, son,” she said, her voice steady and certain.”

Then, her hand slid to his arm, and she stepped back with a soft, encouraging nod.

“It’s the only truth you must hold onto.”

Then her eyes went cold, the warmth fading into a razor-sharp intensity.

“There are sharks circling every move you make, Damien. In these waters, you don’t survive by playing nice.”

Darkness flashed in her eyes-something Damien had never seen from his mother before.

“You survive by becoming the devil they never saw coming. The most dangerous thing they’ll

ever face.”

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Darkness lingered in Dahlia's eyes for a moment longer before it slowly faded.

When she spoke again, the steel was gone, replaced by the quiet warmth only a mother could carry.

Her expression softened, and her thumb brushed once over his sleeve before she let him go.

"You've always been relentless, Damien," she said softly. "Even as a boy, when one way failed, you never saw it as the end-only a reason to find another."

She met his eyes, quiet certainty in her gaze. "We're confident that you'll do whatever it takes to get through this."

Damien gave a small nod, his voice low and steady. "I know. I just can't afford to be reckless where she's concerned."

He exhaled, meeting his mother's eyes again, a tired brow raised. "What about you, Mom? What

are you doing up so early?"

A quiet laugh slipped from her, warm and light in the stillness of the hall.

"Well, your father is snoring so loudly that not even these walls can drown him out," she said lightly,

drawing him away from the worry still weighing on him. "I was only coming down for a cup of tea,

but since you're already up, why don't you clean up and meet me in the dining hall? I'll prepare

breakfast for us."

She gave his arm a final, playful squeeze. "We can at least start the day with a meal and some hot cocoa. After all, when was the last time we shared a cup? It's been years since I last made your

favorite."

A small, knowing smile touched her lips as she glanced back at the door where Maya slept. “You

used to throw little tantrums if I didn’t have a cup ready for you in the morning. If it wasn’t for Maya moving in, I doubt I’d have had the chance to make my son’s favorite again.”

She gave him a pointed, motherly look. “Don’t make me wait.”

A faint smirk tugged at the corner of Damien’s mouth-the first crack in his mask all morning.

“I’ll be there,” he said quietly.

Dahlia gave him one last nod and smile before heading toward the stairs. Damien watched her go for a moment, then turned toward his own room.

It would be a long day ahead. But for now, the manor was still a sanctuary-quiet, untouched, and

suspended in the fragile peace before the storm.

Dahlia headed down the wide staircase, the soft morning light spilling across the polished wood. She met Alfred in the kitchen, already moving with the quiet efficiency that made him a pillar of the

house.

The soft clatter of pots and porcelain filled the room as he gave the staff their usual morning instructions.

He heard her footsteps and turned, meeting Dahlia's gentle smile.

"Good morning, Alfred," she said, her tone bright with a rare warmth.

"Good morning, Madam," Alfred replied, his voice steady. The rest of the staff followed suit, bowing respectfully as they greeted her.

Dahlia nodded in acknowledgment. "Alfred, I'd like to prepare breakfast this morning."

Alfred blinked, surprise flickering across his features. "Madam? Are you sure? The staff can-"

She shook her head gently. "Yes, I am. It's been far too long."

He didn’t argue. Instead, he straightened, attentive and ready.

“Please have everything I need brought out,” Dahlia said, quiet authority settling into her tone. “I

want to start with hot cocoa.”

Alfred’s eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s wonderful, Madam. It has been far too long since the manor smelled of your hot cocoa.”

Dahlia smiled softly, a flicker of nostalgia in her gaze. “And… could you send someone to set up the patio? Damien will join me soon. That’s where I’d like us to eat-fresh air, morning sun… a little peace before the day begins.”

Her voice softened further, memories lingering in her eyes. “Just like it used to be.”

Alfred’s posture remained impeccable, his loyalty evident in every movement. “Of course, Madam. I’ll have the staff prepare everything exactly as you wish.”

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A faint, almost uncharacteristic smile tugged at his lips. “It’s… heartening, Madam. It would be nice to see you and Sir Damien share a morning like this again.”

Dahlia’s lips curved into a soft laugh. “Then it’s about time we change that.”

She glanced toward the staircase, her eyes almost misty. “I’ve been away so much, searching for

Malia… but now that I’ve found her children, I’ve somehow found her too.”

Her gaze returned to Alfred, steady and warm. “I want to make the most of the time I have with my

family-especially with my son.”

She paused, a flicker of emotion in her voice. “You’ve watched him grow, seen his ups and downs…

She glanced at Alfred, her eyes softening. “…and by now, you know that once he sets his mind on

something-or someone-he will not stop until he succeeds.” Her voice cracked just slightly, but

the joy behind it was unmistakable.

Alfred’s eyes softened, a small, almost reverent nod acknowledging her words.

“Damien should be down soon. Let’s make the most of it, Alfred,” she said, her smile returning as a quiet determination settled over her.

He nodded, a quiet pride shining in his eyes as he moved to marshal the staff, the clatter of trays

and silverware punctuating the warm, anticipatory energy of the manor.

Dahlia stepped outside and drew in a slow breath. The morning air was cool and clean against her

skin, touched with the scent of dew, earth, and trimmed hedges. Beyond the patio, dawn stretched

across the horizon in soft gold, while the first birds of morning called gently through the stillness.

For a moment, she simply stood there and let the quiet settle around her.

Then she turned and went back inside.

The freshness of the morning lingered with her as she returned to the kitchen, where warmth and

quiet activity welcomed her. Without pause, she slipped into familiar motions guided as much by

memory as by habit.

She began with the hot cocoa.

It had always been Damien's favorite, and she made it now with the same care she had years ago. Milk warmed slowly over the stove, dark cocoa folded in until it turned smooth and rich, followed by just enough sweetness to soften the bitterness and the faintest hint of cinnamon.

It was a method she had learned long ago during stolen afternoons at the Harrington estate, in old kitchens where recipes were passed down in low voices and love was often expressed through

the smallest details.

As the cocoa thickened, its rich aroma filled the kitchen, mingling with the scent of fresh bread and

warm butter. Dahlia arranged the cups herself, each soft clink of porcelain stirring memories of

simpler mornings-of family gathered close, laughter untouched by grief, and a little boy who used to demand his cocoa before he was fully awake.

For the first time in a long while, the manor smelled like those mornings again.

She then asked Alfred to have the house staff carry everything out to the patio. As she stepped out of the kitchen, the quiet was broken by the sound of measured footsteps descending the polished

staircase.

Dahlia lifted her gaze just as Damien came into view. She gestured for them to go ahead as she

waited for Damien to reach the bottom of the stairs.

He descended with his usual composed stride, calm and collected on the surface, though the lingering strain of the past days still clung to him in ways only a mother would notice. It was there

in the faint heaviness beneath his eyes, in the restraint held too tightly across his shoulders-subtle

signs of a man who carried far more than he ever allowed anyone to see.

A small smile touched Dahlia's lips.

"Hm… there you are," she said warmly, her eyes sweeping over him with quiet approval. "Just in

time. You look much better now, son-far less exhausted than when I saw you earlier." She

gestured lightly toward the open doors. "Come. I had everything set on the patio."

With that, she turned and began walking toward it.

Something faint shifted in Damien's expression-so subtle most people would have missed it, but

softer, almost caught off guard.

He hadn't expected this.

When his mother had spoken of breakfast, he had assumed she meant something simple and ordinary-a meal in the dining room, nothing more. The thought that she had everything arranged outside, on the patio, had not crossed his mind. And for reasons he could not immediately explain, that small detail struck something quiet in him.

He could barely remember the last time he had sat outside like this, sharing breakfast with his mother beneath the open morning sky.

Perhaps the last time had been when he was fourteen, back when mornings had still carried a

certain ease-before responsibility, power, and the endless demands of adulthood had stripped

them of their simplicity.

He followed her outside and took the seat across from her, settling into it with a rare ease.

Morning light stretched over the manor's stone walls, brushing them in soft gold, and for a fleeting moment, the weight of the world beyond its grounds seemed mercifully far away.

Damien's gaze swept over the simple spread laid out on the table before settling on the steaming mug of hot cocoa placed in front of him. The rich aroma alone stirred something warm and

familiar in his chest, quiet and unexpected.

"Try it," Dahlia urged softly, a hint of anticipation in her smile. "Tell me what you think."

Damien reached for the mug, then lifted it and took a slow sip.

The moment the hot cocoa touched his tongue, memory rushed in without warning-warmth,

childhood, quiet mornings untouched by pressure or expectation.

For a brief second, he was no longer the man carrying the weight of empires on his shoulders, but

the boy who used to sit here with small hands curled around a cup far too big for him.

His gaze lowered to the mug, something unreadable flickering in his eyes.

“It tastes exactly how I remember it,” he said softly.

He took another sip before his eyes drifting toward the horizon. Morning light stretched across the

estate, calm and golden, and the stillness around him felt almost unfamiliar.

“This…” A faint smirk tugged at his lips as he wrapped both hands around the warmth of the mug. He let his gaze drift over the quiet morning view before shaking his head slightly. “I can’t

remember the last time I had the chance to sit like this and actually take in something peaceful— much less have breakfast in peace.”

Dahlia smiled softly as he took that first sip, the brief peace on his face warming her heart.

For one fleeting moment, he was her little boy again-and she would stop at nothing to keep him s afe, happy, whole-at any cost.

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The rich, spiced aroma of cocoa curled through the quiet morning air, a gentle warmth that stood in sharp contrast to the icy precision of Damien's thoughts.

They spoke in low, measured tones-the kind of conversation that only exists between those

bound by blood, trust, and burdens too heavy to name.

Dahlia's eyes softened as she leaned slightly forward. "Is everything ready for Hudson and Cruz's

arrival at the company this morning?" she asked.

Damien nodded, his tone clipped but steady. "Monroe has it all under control. I told Ashcroft to

meet me in my office in three hours."

It was a casual exchange of logistics, yet the air between them remained thick with the unspoken stakes of the coming hours.

Dahlia nodded, then lifted her cup and took a slow sip of cocoa, letting the warmth ground her for

a moment.

Her gaze lingered on her son over the rim, tracing the sharp lines of his face, the controlled set of

his shoulders. He sat there, composed and formidable, yet the truth was clear: while his body remained anchored to the patio chair, his mind had already wandered miles away, entangled in the labyrinth of strategy and stakes that never seemed to rest.

A sudden, sharp pang of pity struck her-not because of what he couldn't do, but because of everything he could.

[She looked at the lines of tension in his face and realized that the weight of their name, the crushing gravity of their legacy, hadn't just settled on him when he became a man. It had been

there long before he ever had a choice.

Before he was even born, the world had already decided who he had to be.

Is he happy? she wondered, the thought tasting more bitter than the cocoa.

Is he successful because he wants to be, or because he was never given the choice to be anything

else?

The silence of the manor felt heavy then, filled with the ghosts of all the expectations he had lived up to. She needed to pull him back, if only for a second, to the boy he used to be.

“Your birthday is coming up,” she said, her voice cutting through his internal calculations. “Do you have any plans?” she asked softly.

Damien blinked, the sharp edge of his focus shifting back to her. He was clearly caught off guard; for a split second, the mask didn’t just slip-it hung there, useless. His eyebrows furrowed, a genuine look of bewilderment crossing his face as if she had just spoken in a language he no longer understood.

“Is it?” he asked, the words sounding foreign even to him.

“He didn’t check his phone or a calendar. He didn’t need to. The blankness in his expression told

Dahlia everything she needed to know.

He hadn't just forgotten the date; he had entirely lost track of himself in the process of protecting everyone else.

"I hadn't even noticed," he admitted quietly, his brow still knit in that same perplexed line. "James normally handles all that stuff."

Dahlia felt that sting of pity sharpen. To the rest of the world, he was a titan, a man who saw every move ten steps ahead. But here, in the morning light, he was just a son who had forgotten he was allowed to have a day that belonged only to him.

"Well, it is," Dahlia said, her tone firm but laced with a mother's underlying tenderness. "And while I know the world is demanding everything from you right now, I hope you'll leave a little room for

yourself. Or at least," she added with a knowing tilt of her head, "for you and Maya."

Damien's expression softened at the mention of her name, the furrow in his brow finally smoothing

out.

"You know what?" Dahlia said, her voice regaining its steady strength as she set her cup down. "

You're turning thirty-six, Damien. Ever since you were a boy, you've always had these huge birthday

parties. But let's admit it, son-those lavish events are more for pleasantries and business than for

celebrating what the occasion actually means."