Intern 541

Chapter 541

Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the globe, the world remained wrapped in the stillness of the hour before sunrise.

Completely unaware of the events unfolding half a world away, Maya climbed into the waiting vehicle.

Once she had settled into her seat, Damien leaned beside the open door.

“Have a safe flight,” he said. “If you need anything at all, just call me.”

Maya nodded. “I will.”

Dahlia reached over and gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“Don’t worry about us, son. You take care of yourself too.”

Her expression then grew serious.

“And don’t make any impulsive decisions, understand? Make sure everything is taken care of before you leave, okay?”

Damien nodded with a small smile.

“I will. We’ll see you there soon.”

After exchanging one last wave, Damien gently closed the door and stepped aside.

One by one, the vehicles in the convoy pulled away from the manor before disappearing through the rear gate and onto the quiet morning road.

Their journey to Japan had officially begun.

Damien remained where he was, watching until the last vehicle disappeared from view. Only then did he

reach into his pocket, pull out his phone, and make a call.

As soon as the call connected, he spoke in a calm, steady voice.

“They just left. Keep your distance so they won’t notice you, and don’t let them out of your sight until

they’ve safely boarded and departed. Understood?”

the call and slipped his phone back into his pocket just as a quiet chuckle came from

to find Dominic standing a few steps behind him with an amused smile.

respond, Dominic gave a casual shrug.

ppose the more, the better”

en’s confused look, Dominic simply waved a dismissive hand

“Your mother already arranged security along the entire route to the location. There are also men stationed along the perimeter. They’ll be perfectly safe.”

His expression softened as he looked at his son.

“So stop worrying about them and focus on yourself. Remember, you have an important role to play today.”

“I know,” Damien replied with a nod before the father and son turned and headed back inside together. Meanwhile, inside the vehicle, the atmosphere was noticeably quieter.

As they continued driving, the first rays of the rising sun gradually peeked over the horizon, painting the sky in soft shades of gold and amber. The quiet streets slowly came to life as more vehicles joined the roads and the morning rush began to build. Before long, the busy cityscape gave way to long stretches of open road as the convoy veered onto a different route from the one leading to the commercial airport.

The farther they traveled, the fewer buildings Maya saw until the city disappeared behind them, replaced by vast open land and an almost eerie silence.

She had expected the Takahashi Family’s private hangar to be somewhere close to the commercial airport.

Instead, they seemed to be heading farther and farther away from it.

Unable to hide his curiosity, Jaime looked out the window before turning toward Dahlia.

“Aunt Dahlia… are we sure we’re in the right place?” he asked. “This place looks completely abandoned.”

Dahlia smiled gently.

“We’re exactly where we’re supposed to be. This is the Takahashi Family’s private aviation facility.”

Seeing the surprise on their faces, she continued.

“It was deliberately built away from the commercial airport and even other private terminals. The Takahashi Family has always placed a great deal of importance on privacy and security, so they prefer to keep all of their arrivals and departures completely separate from everyone else.”

Jaime glanced around once more, clearly fascinated.

“But… there’s nothing here. No guards, no runway-not even a plane.”

Dahlia chuckled softly.

“That’s because most of the security is automated. The entire facility is monitored by advanced surveillance and identification systems, so don’t be too surprised by what you’re about to see

Almost as if on cue, the vehicle slowed to a stop before a massive steel security gate.

Instead of guards coming forward to inspect them, a soft electronic beep echoed from somewhere nearby as invisible scanners swept across the vehicle.

A second later, the massive steel gates began sliding open on their own. Jaime's eyes widened as he leaned closer to the window, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Whoa… It recognized the vehicle automatically."

The convoy continued deeper into the private facility until a massive dome-shaped structure gradually came into view.

Unlike a conventional aircraft hangar, the building resembled a sleek, futuristic complex. Its curved steel exterior blended seamlessly with its surroundings, while the absence of visible windows gave it an almost fortress-like appearance.

A few moments later, the vehicles came to a gentle stop near the main entrance.

As Maya stepped out of the vehicle, she immediately recognized the petite young woman waiting outside.

It was Hana, Alice's personal assistant.

Hana smiled politely and gave a respectful bow as they approached.

“Good morning, Miss Maya, Mr. Jaime, Madam Dahlia.” Straightening gracefully, she gestured toward the entrance. “Madam is waiting for you inside.”

She then turned her attention to Lee and Kim before motioning to another Japanese gentleman standing nearby.

“This is Ichiro,” she said. “He’ll assist you with your luggage.”

Ichiro stepped forward at once and gave the group a respectful bow before taking charge of their belongings.

With everything taken care of, Hana turned back to Maya and the others and led them through the

towering entrance.

The moment they stepped inside, Maya’s eyes wandered around in quiet amazement.

The interior was nothing like the industrial hangars she had imagined.

The polished floors gleamed beneath warm ambient lighting, while the soaring ceiling disappeared into an intricate network of steel beams and suspended maintenance equipment.

One side of the enormous structure featured a spacious glass-enclosed lounge, complete with elegant sofas, marble coffee tables, a buffet-style dining area with neatly arranged serving stations, and what appeared to be a fully stocked refreshment bar.

Even from a distance, it looked more like the private lounge of a five-star hotel than part of an aviation facility.

Beyond the lounge was a sleek operations center, its walls lined with large digital displays showing live flight data, weather conditions, and security camera feeds from every corner of the facility

Near the center of the hangar stood three enormous reinforced shipping crates, each nearly the size of a small truck. Their matte-black surfaces were marked only with discreet Takahashi insignias, while heavy-duty locking mechanisms and reinforced steel frames hinted that whatever was inside was both valuable and heavily protected.

Maya's gaze lingered on the three enormous crates. They were probably the customized containers Harper had mentioned for transporting Alice's precious antiques.

Before she could take a closer look, however, a familiar voice called out.

"You're here."

Alice walked toward them with a warm smile, looking as elegant and composed as ever.

“Welcome.”

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Alice closed the remaining distance between them and warmly embraced Dahlia.

“I hope your drive here was comfortable,” she said with a smile.

“It was,” Dahlia replied, returning the smile. “Thank you for making all the arrangements.”

Alice inclined her head gracefully before turning to Maya and Jaime, greeting each of them with a warm embrace.

“I imagine this is your first time visiting one of our private aviation facilities.”

Maya nodded honestly.

“It doesn’t look anything like I expected.”

Alice let out a soft laugh.

“Most people say the same thing.”

Jaime blinked.

“Wait… Aunt Alice, did you say one of your private aviation facilities?”

His genuine curiosity earned a soft chuckle from Alice.

“I did.”

She gestured around the enormous hangar.

“Our family works in intelligence, cybersecurity, global logistics, and a few other industries where discretion is essential. The nature of that work inevitably attracts unwanted attention, so we’ve always valued privacy above publicity.”

Her smile remained calm and elegant.

“Because of that, we prefer to handle all of our travel through our own facilities whenever possible rather than relying on commercial airports.”

Jaime slowly looked around the hangar once more, unable to hide his amazement.

“This is incredible.”

Alice smiled before turning toward the three enormous reinforced crates standing near the center of the hangar.

“By the way, these are the customized transport containers I mentioned before for my antiques. The one in the middle has been modified.”

Maya followed her gaze before blinking in confusion.

“Aunt Alice… didn’t you say there were only two?”

Alice let out a light laugh.

“I thought so too,” she admitted. “But I attended an auction yesterday and, well… I ended up bringing home a few more pieces than originally planned.”

She smiled helplessly before adding, “Fortunately, we had enough time to prepare one more container.”

Dahlia laughed softly.

“I had a feeling that was going to happen.”

Alice met her eyes and gave a playful wink.

“What can I say? Beautiful things have a way of finding me.”

As the two women shared a knowing smile, Jaime had already wandered over to the nearest crate. He slowly circled it, his eyes taking in the reinforced steel frame, heavy-duty locking mechanisms, and industrial-grade construction.

“They’re practically armored.”

He looked back at Alice.

“Are they?”

Alice smiled knowingly.

“They’re designed that way. Some of the pieces inside are simply irreplaceable, so I don’t like leaving anything to chance.”

Maya smiled apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Alice. Jaime tends to ask a lot of questions whenever something catches his interest.”

“Oh, don’t apologize,” Alice said with a warm laugh. “Curiosity is a wonderful thing. It keeps us humble enough to learn and brave enough to grow.”

She glanced at the crate before smiling.

“Although I’m probably not the right person to ask about the technical side of these containers. I only know enough to make sure my antiques arrive safely.”

She gave a small shrug.

“If you’re interested in how they’re actually designed and built, you’ll have to ask my children. Harper and Kenji are both nerds when it comes to anything involving codes, computers, and complicated systems. Their father and ! simply smile, nod, and let them get on with whatever it is they’re working on.”

Alice smiled mischievously before adding, “As for me, let’s just say my expertise lies in acquiring expensive things.”

She punctuated the remark with a playful wink, earning light laughter from everyone around her.

Just then, a small group emerged from the glass-enclosed lounge and made their way toward them.

Jaime recognized them immediately.

“Dr. Anderson! Dr. Brown!”

His face lit up the moment he recognized them, and he hurried over with an excited grin.

Dr. Anderson smiled warmly.

“It’s good to see you again, Jaime,” he said, affectionately ruffling his hair before giving his shoulder a reassuring pat. “How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” Jaime replied enthusiastically. “I’m really excited.”

Dr. Brown smiled, clearly sharing his excitement.

“I don’t doubt it. You’ve been waiting for this day for years.” His expression softened. “Once you’ve recovered, you’ll finally be able to do all the things most people your age take for granted. I think you’ve earned that.”

Jaime’s eyes practically sparkled.

“Absolutely! I can’t wait!”

Dr. Brown then turned to Maya, his smile becoming gentler.

“And how have you been, Maya?”

Maya smiled back.

“I’ve been well, Dr. Brown. Thank you… for everything.”

He nodded warmly.

“Seeing both of you standing here like this is thanks enough. It’s been a long road, but you’ve both come

so far.”

Maya felt a familiar warmth spread through her chest. She smiled gratefully, knowing these simple words carried the weight of everything they had endured together over the years.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Dr. Anderson seemed to sense the emotion quietly settling over the moment. Knowing there was no need to linger on it, he gently steered the conversation elsewhere with a polite nod

“Good morning, Ms. Thompson. It’s nice to see you again.”

Maya turned to him and returned the greeting with a warm, genuine smile.

“Good morning, Dr. Anderson. It’s nice to see you too.”

The two doctors then turned toward Dahlia

“Mrs. Blackwood,” Dr. Anderson said with a courteous smile. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, Doctor,” Dahlia replied warmly.

Dr. Anderson then stepped aside and gestured toward the three people standing behind him.

“By the way, these are the other members of the medical team Mr. Ashcroft personally selected to oversee Jaime’s care during his stay overseas.”

He introduced each of them in turn.

“This is Nurse Emily Carter and Nurse Sophia Reed. Both have been with Ashcroft Medical Pavilion for over fifteen years and are among our most trusted senior nurses.”

He then gestured toward the young man standing beside them.

“And this is our youngest team member, Nurse Daniel Park. He came to us on the personal recommendation of the nursing board after graduating at the top of his class and has since become a valued member of our critical care team. From this point forward, the three of them will be part of your personal medical team.”

The three greeted everyone politely before introducing themselves.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, Hana approached Alice and spoke quietly.

“Madam, subete no junbi ga totonoimashita.” (Madam, everything is ready.)

Alice gave a small nod before turning back to the group.

“Before we leave, would anyone like something to eat?”

Dahlia smiled apologetically.

“Eleanor packed enough food to feed an army. If we don’t eat it, she’ll never let us hear the end of it.”

ched softly.

Sounds like Eleanor.”

d Maya and Jaime.

two of you?”

smiled and politely declined.

Alice said. “I suppose we’re ready.”

settled over the room as everyone understood that the preparations were over

phase of their journey was about to begin.

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fasten Your Seatbelts

Fasten Your Seatbelts

Alice gestured toward the reinforced crates.

“For the time being, you’ll remain inside the modified container. Customs officers are required to inspect all outbound cargo before departure, but this container has already been prepared for that process. It’ll pass through the scanners like any other shipment.”

She smiled reassuringly.

“Once we’ve completed the departure procedures, you’ll be able to come out and make yourselves comfortable in the cabin.”

The youngest member of the medical team, Nurse Daniel Park, hesitated for a moment before cautiously raising his hand halfway.

He cleared his throat.

“Um… excuse me, Madam,” he said politely. “If you don’t mind me asking… our names won’t appear on any passenger manifest?”

“They won’t,” Alice replied with a reassuring smile. “Officially, none of you ever left the country.”

Everyone exchanged understanding glances before making their way toward the waiting container.

One by one, they climbed inside the modified crate. Near the entrance sat a large wooden shipping crate secured to a reinforced pallet, making the

another carefully packed antique.

terior appear as though it was carrying nothing more than

Beyond the concealed section, however, the space opened into a surprisingly comfortable compartment. Fold–down seats had been neatly arranged along the sides, with enough room for everyone to sit comfortably during the short wait. The temperature inside was pleasantly cool, and the soft overhead lighting gave the enclosed space a far less cramped feeling than Maya had expected.

Once everyone was settled, the concealed entrance was secured behind them, leaving them to wait quietly for the crate to be cleared and loaded onto the aircraft.

Once everything was in place, Alice turned to Hana.

“Go ahead and let Customs know we’re ready for inspection.”

“Kashikomarimashita, Madam.” (Certainly, Madam.)

With a respectful bow, Hana turned and walked toward the operations center to notify the Customs Department that the cargo was ready for routine outbound inspection.

The compartment soon fell quiet.

Unlike Maya, however, the others appeared remarkably at ease.

The medical team sat calmly in their seats, their expressions composed as though this were nothing more

than another assignment. Prior to departure, they had already been thoroughly briefed on every step of the operation–what to expect and exactly how to respond if anything unexpected happened.

For senior staff at Ashcraft Medical Pavilion, unusual situations were nothing new. They regularly cared for heads of state, royalty, and influential figures whose identities demanded absolute discretion. They had long since learned when professionalism meant asking no questions.

Dahlia appeared just as relaxed, quietly typing away on her phone. Lee and Kim sat opposite them with their usual calm vigilance, while Jaime looked more fascinated than nervous, his curiosity clearly outweighing any anxiety he might have felt.

Only Maya found herself unable to relax.

It wasn't that she doubted Harper's plan–she trusted Harper completely. It was the strange reality of hiding inside a cargo container while waiting to be "smuggled" onfo an aircraft that made her heartbeat a little faster.

As if sensing the growing silence, Jaime spoke up.

“Aunt Dahlia… does your family have a hangar like this too?”

A small smile tugged at Dahlia’s lips.

“We do have several private aviation facilities,” she replied. “But I’d say they’re not quite as advanced as this one.”

Her gaze swept briefly across the concealed compartment around them.

“The Takahashi Family has always been decades ahead when it comes to technology. If something like this doesn’t exist on the market, chances are they’ll simply design and build it themselves.”

She paused before looking back at Jaime, the corners of her lips lifting ever so slightly.

“And Jaime…”

He looked at her.

“Yes?”

Dahlia’s expression softened.

“It’s our family now, remember?”

Jaime blinked.

For a brief moment, he didn’t know what to say.

A quiet warmth spread through his chest, and he quickly lowered his head, embarrassed by the sudden sting behind his eyes.

”

“…Right,” he murmured with a shy smile. “Our family.”

Maya smiled gently. After everything they had lost, seeing Jaime finally find a place where he felt he

enter

belonged warmed her heart.

Dahlia simply smiled to herself before returning her attention to the phone in her hands, as though what she had said was the most natural thing in the world.

Across from them, Lee and Kim exchanged a faint, knowing glance before the corners of their mouths lifted almost imperceptibly. Even the medical team couldn't help but smile softly at the quiet family moment unfolding before them.

A comfortable silence settled over the compartment until muffled voices and the occasional electronic beep drifted through the reinforced walls as the cargo underwent its routine customs inspection.

After a brief silence, the entire container shuddered beneath them before slowly lifting off the ground. Maya instinctively gripped the edge of her seat as the floor beneath them slowly rose.

"They're moving us," Jaime whispered excitedly, unable to hide the grin spreading across his face.

The movement lasted only a minute or two before another soft jolt rippled beneath their feet as the container was lowered into the aircraft's cargo hold. A series of metallic clunks echoed through the compartment as the locking mechanisms engaged one after another, firmly securing the crate in place.

Everything fell still for a moment before another series of metallic clicks broke the silence as the locking

mechanism disengaged.

With a soft hiss, the door slowly swung open, revealing Hana waiting outside with her usual calm, professional smile.

“Everything went smoothly,” she said with a respectful bow. “You’re welcome to move into the cabin now.” One by one, everyone stepped out of the concealed compartment, and Maya immediately found herself looking around in quiet amazement.

The cabin felt more like a private luxury residence than an aircraft. Rich walnut paneling, cream leather furnishings, and warm ambient lighting complemented wide reclining seats, handcrafted tables, an

Γ elegant lounge, and a refreshment bar, while panoramic windows filled the cabin with the warm glow of

the sunrise.

It felt less like boarding a plane and more like stepping into the living room of an exclusive penthouse.

She settled into an aisle seat while Jaime eagerly claimed the window beside her, his excitement impossible to hide.

Once everyone had taken their seats, the cockpit door opened and the captain stepped into the cabin with a welcoming smile.

“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I’m Captain Takeda. On behalf of my crew, I’d like to welcome you aboard.”

He paused briefly before continuing.

enter

“We’ll be departing shortly. Our flight to Tokyo will take approximately fourteen hours, and we’re expecting favorable weather throughout the journey.”

His smile remained calm and reassuring.

“Please settle into your seats and fasten your seatbelts. Once we’ve reached cruising altitude, you’re welcome to move about the cabin. If you need anything at all during the flight, our cabin crew will be happy to assist you.”

With another polite nod, the captain returned to the cockpit as the cabin door closed behind him.

A few moments later, the aircraft began to move.

The aircraft taxied toward the runway before the engines roared to life, and the jet surged forward, lifting smoothly into the sky.

Jaime remained glued to the window as the ground fell away beneath them. Before long, the world below disappeared beneath a blanket of brilliant white clouds, leaving, nothing outside but endless blue skies above and a sea of clouds below.

The first stage of Harper's plan had gone exactly as intended.

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The private jet continued its steady climb, disappearing into the endless blue sky.

Far below, the world carried on, completely unaware of the game unfolding behind the

scenes.

Back at Blackwood Manor, the morning resumed as though nothing had happened.

Dressed in a tailored black suit, crisp white shirt, and neatly knotted tie, Damien descended the grand staircase looking every bit the composed businessman preparing for another day at the office.

As he reached the bottom of the staircase, he found Dominic, Charles, and Eleanor seated in the living room over their morning tea.

Dominic was the first to notice him. He set his teacup down before looking at Damien.

“Son, I just spoke with your mother,” he said. “Everything went according to plan. Their plane took off a few minutes ago, and everything is clear on their end.”

A quiet sense of relief settled over Damien as Dominic looked at him steadily.

“Are you ready?”

Damien met his father’s gaze and nodded once.

“I am.”

Dominic gave a satisfied nod.

“In four hours, the first attack will be initiated,” he reminded him. “You should receive the notification around one o’clock this afternoon. I’ll be ready to leave the moment you call.” Damien nodded firmly before asking,

“What about

Charles

“It’s

woll

had the chance.

. Don’t worry about us.” A reassuring smile crossed his face as he des, Volkov is after you, not us. Your priority is making sure you get

“Your grandfather is right. We’ll be just fine bewe. You with convey

this manor.”

Her expression softened

“The one we’re worried about is you”

Damien offered her a reassuring smile

“I’ll be fine, Grandma. I can take care of myself”

“I know you can,” Eleanor replied, gently squeezing his our “Thats why do y me something.”

Damien looked at her curiously.

“What is it, Grandma?”

She lifted a hand to his cheek.

“Promise me you’ll bring my granddaughter-in-law home safely

A smile tugged at the corners of Damien’s lips.

“I promise.”

“That’s my good grandson.” Eleanor smiled warmly before giving his cheek a gente par

“Now off you go. You may be the CEO, but that doesn’t mean you’re allowed to be late.

The tension in the room eased, and soft laughter rippled through the family.

Leaning down, Damien kissed his grandmother on the cheek.

Charles stepped forward and pulled him into a firm embrace.

“Be safe, son.”

“I will, Grandpa.”

After they separated, Damien turned to his father.

Dominic held his gaze for a long moment before saying,

“It’s our turn to play our part.”

Damien gave a single nod.

“I understand.”

Before either of them could say another word, Alfred entered the room.

“Sir, your vehicle is ready.”

Damien nodded. “Thank you, Alfred. Please look after everyone while I’m away.”

“Of course, Sir.”

With one last glance at his family, Damien walked toward the entrance.

Outside, his sleek black Bentley was already waiting at the foot of the front steps. James stood beside the rear passenger door.

The moment Damien stepped outside, James straightened and greeted him with a respectful nod before opening the door for him.

Damien climbed into the rear seat while James took his usual place in the front.

As soon as the doors closed, Damien spoke.

“Is everything I instructed already in place?”

“Yes, Sir,” James replied. “Everything is ready. The moment we’re notified about the attack, we’ll leave immediately. I’ve already informed the hangar, the flight crew, and everyone involved. They’re all on standby.”

“Good.”

The vehicle slowly rolled forward, passed through the manor gates, and disappeared onto the morning road. As far as they were concerned, the day was unfolding exactly as planned.

They couldn’t have been more wrong.

What they failed to notice was the dark sedan parked some distance away, its driver silently watching their every move.

He waited until the vehicle disappeared from sight before pulling out his phone.

Three rings later, the call connected.

“On tol’ko chto vyekhal. Napravlyaetsya v ofis. Yego mashina pervoy pokinula pomestye. Vsyo spokoyno. Nikakoy neobychnoy aktivnosti.”

(“He just left. He’s on his way to the office. His vehicle was the first to leave the estate. Everything appears normal. No unusual activity.”)

After ending the call, the man started his engine and drove off in the same direction the black

fe Sink His Claws to Hee Prey

Bentley had disappeared.

Thousands of miles away, another man watched in silence like a predator waiting to the perfect moment to sink his claws into his prey.

In a dimly lit office, a crystal tumbler rested between long, scarred fingers. Ambe swirled lazily inside as its owner stood before the floor-to-ceiling windows, his gaza fiya

the glittering skyline beyond the glass.

Silence filled the room-not the silence of peace, but the silence of anticipation-until a sharp

knock broke it.

The heavy door opened, and Igor stepped inside before lowering his head respectfully

“Boss, the doctors managed to stop the infection from spreading Greco regained consciousness.”

The man standing by the window didn’t turn around. A low, humorless laugh escaped him as he slowly raised the crystal tumbler to his lips.

“That son of a bitch really does have nine lives.”

Igor waited until he finished his drink before continuing.

“There’s one more thing. Roman has reported in.”

“Well?”

“The only activity so far is Damien Blackwood leaving the estate for the office. Roman is st tailing him, but everything appears normal. Nothing unusual.”

He hesitated before speaking again.

“Boss… what if Blackwood really has nothing to do with the attack? What if we’re wasting our resources following the wrong man?”

Volkov’s grip tightened around the glass.

He drained the remaining liquor in a single swallow before finally speaking.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Igor.”

He slowly turned away from the window, his cold eyes settling on Igor before raising a finger toward him.

“Never underestimate Damien Blackwood.”

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Volkov walked toward his massive mahogany desk before lowering himself into the

chair behind it.

“The fact that nothing points to him tells me nothing. He’s too smart… never reckless. Men like him don’t leave evidence behind.”

He reached for the wooden cigar box on his desk, took out a cigar, and lit it.

“No one would dare challenge me unless they possessed the power to do so.”

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips as he exhaled a slow stream of smoke.

“And Damien Blackwood is the only one who has that kind of power. Until I know otherwise, he’s still my most likely suspect.”

Volkov leaned back in his chair and made a small dismissive gesture.

“Tell Roman to stay on him. I want to know every move Blackwood makes.”

Igor inclined his head.

“Yes, Boss.”

As Igor turned to leave, Volkov called after him.

“Igor.”

He stopped immediately.

“Tell the doctors to make sure that bastard stays alive.”

A faint snicker escaped Volkov’s lips.

“I’m not finished with him yet.”

Igor gave a single nod.

“Understood.”

With that, he turned and walked out.

Once the door clicked shut, Volkov rose from his chair and made his way to the bar. He poured himself another glass before turning his attention back to the glittering city beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“You’re hiding something, Blackwood…” he murmured.

“And sooner or later… I’ll find out what it is.”

He took a slow sip of his whiskey, welcoming its familiar burn as it slid down his throat. He then walked back to his desk and set the crystal tumbler down.

But instead of taking a seat, he continued toward the wall behind his chair, where an enormous oil painting hung in an ornate gilded frame.

Reaching beneath the edge of the frame, he pressed a concealed button.

A soft click echoed through the office before the painting slowly slid aside, revealing a recessed compartment built into the wall.

Inside, resting atop a polished slab of white marble, sat an elegant gold urn. Beside it stood a framed photograph of a beautiful young woman wearing a radiant smile, her bright eyes forever frozen in a happier time.

Viktor's gaze drifted to the photograph, and a faint, genuine smile softened his features.

With the utmost care, he reached for the urn and gently lifted it from its marble pedestal. Cradling it against his chest, he closed his eyes for a brief moment, holding it as though embracing someone he refused to let go.

"Moya sladkaya devochka," he whispered. (My sweet baby girl.)

His thumb gently brushed across the smooth surface of the urn.

"Prosti menya, doch." (Forgive me, my daughter.)

"Please don't be angry with Papa. There are people trying to destroy everything we've built… trying to bring down our empire. I can't let that happen."

His expression gradually hardened.

“If I prove that Damien Blackwood is behind all of this, I won’t hesitate.”

He lowered his gaze to the urn in his arms.

“You chose to give your heart to the wrong man, my precious girl. Because of that love… I lost you.”

A long silence followed.

“I won’t allow our kingdom to be taken from us by the same man who took you away from

me.”

He held the urn a little tighter against his chest.

“If there is another life after this one… I’ll spend it making everything up to you

He closed his eyes, his voice barely above a whisper.

“But in this life… I have to do what must be done to protect what belongs to us. No matter

how much blood it costs."

His arms tightened around the urn as a chilling smile slowly spread across his face.

"But don't worry, my sweet baby girl. Papa has a gift for you."

His gaze lingered on the photograph beside the urn.

"It turns out Damien Blackwood is capable of love after all. It's just a shame that love never meant for you."

A low, maniacal laugh escaped Viktor's lips. He slowly pulled the urn away from his chest, pressed a gentle kiss to it, then carefully returned it to its marble pedestal.

Turning away, he picked up the cigar he had left burning in the ashtray and took a slow puff, exhaling a thin stream of smoke.

"Destiny… or fate… or whatever the fuck you want to call it… has a very fucked-up way of doing things, moya sladkaya devochka." (My sweet baby girl.)

A dark laugh rumbled from his throat.

“You won’t believe it… but of all the women in this world… it just had to be her.”

He took another long drag from the cigar before exhaling a thick cloud of smoke. Then he crushed the burning tip into the ashtray with a firm twist.

“So I’ll take that woman away from him with my own hands.”

He reached for the crystal tumbler on his desk and emptied the remaining whiskey in a single swallow before returning to the hidden compartment. There, he stood silently before the urn, his gaze settling once more on the smiling face in the photograph beside it.

“I’ll send her to you… and when the two of you meet in the afterlife, you can take your revenge however you see fit.”

A chilling silence settled over the hidden chamber as the warmth vanished from his face.

“If my beautiful Cassandra wasn’t good enough for Damien Blackwood… then no other

woman will ever be.”

phone of the photograph

“Lamar de por memory my dear Cassandra will make sure he never finds happiness for

smile lingered on his lips as he slowly slid the painting back into place, concealing the

Gehanovened to him, the game had already begun, and the first move had never belonged to Kink Band is enemy was already two steps ahead.

In this deadly game of cat and mouse, Viktor Volkov believed he was the hunter, never 1ng he had been the prey all along

Chapter 546

While Nicholas Ashcroft’s mind was busy conjuring every possible scenario of what Harper and Hiro could be doing and every possible way he intended to “punish” her once he saw her, Damien rubbed his temple, silently wondering how his best friend could make himself look like such an obvious, jealous fool.

If this went on any longer, Nick was going to make an even bigger fool of himself.

Before Nick could fire off another question, Damien calmly interjected.

“Kenji… about Phase Two?”

Kenji immediately composed himself, the playful grin on his face fading as he understood Damien was steering the conversation back to business. Although Nicholas clearly wasn't finished with his interrogation, he reluctantly swallowed the rest of his questions and leaned

back in his chair.

"Right… sorry, my bad. Okay, first things first. Let me give everyone a quick update."

His fingers moved swiftly across the keyboard.

"Their plane is still en route. Everything is proceeding normally, and the weather conditions remain favorable. They should arrive on schedule."

"Thank you," Damien said.

"My pleasure," Kenji replied with an easy smile as his fingers danced across the keyboard, bringing another window onto the shared screen.

"Oh… and you've probably figured this out already, but you've got a stalker."

A photograph of a rugged–looking man appeared beside a detailed profile.

“This is Roman Kozlov,” Kenji explained.

“His criminal record includes multiple arrests for aggravated assault, illegal weapons trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, armed robbery, attempted murder, murder, and organized

crime.”

Kenji clicked his tongue.

“He’s spent more time in and out of prison than most people spend at a full–time job, yet he always manages to walk free. He’s one of Viktor Volkov’s most trusted men.”

Another image appeared, showing the same black sedan following Damien’s vehicle earlier

The End of the Huston

that morning.

“He’s been tailing you since you left Blackwood Manor and has been reporting your

movements to Volkov in real time.”

Kenji looked directly at Damien before giving a casual shrug.

“My advice? Let him watch. Act normally and only let him see what you want him to see.”

Damien nodded once.

“Oh, one more thing.”

Kenji opened another encrypted file.

“I’ve just completed a final verification on the private jet Harper arranged for you. Everything checks out. Your flight path is clear, and the crew has already been vetted.”

He paused.

“When you arrive, you’ll be met by a man named Leo. Before anything else, ask him for the verification code.”

He quickly looked back at his monitor.

“Hang on… let me double–check it.”

He tapped a few keys, then suddenly froze.

A strange expression crossed his face before he suddenly burst out laughing.

“Well… this is awkward.”

He looked apologetically at Damien.

“The code is… ‘Harper is amazing.”

Kenji lifted both hands defensively.

“I swear this wasn’t my idea. That’s one hundred percent my sister.”

Even Damien couldn’t help smiling.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Kenji glanced at the clock in the corner of his monitor.

“Well… it looks like it’s time.”

He tapped another key, replacing the shared screen with a large digital countdown timer.

The three men watched in silence as the final seconds ticked away.

Kenji clicked a single button labeled LAUNCH.

Instantly, lines of encrypted code began racing across the screen.

“And… we’re live,” he announced. “Start getting ready. In approximately one hour, your Taiwan headquarters will contact you regarding the incident. Shortly after, the news will break, and chaos will follow. I’m sure you’ve already made the necessary preparations.”

Damien gave a single nod.

“Thank you, Kenji.”

“No problem, Mr. Blackwood.”

Kenji then turned his attention to Nicholas.

“At exactly five o’clock your time, assuming everything goes according to plan, you should already be airborne. That’s when I’ll launch the second attack. Just in case something unexpected causes a delay, you can reach me through this encrypted link.”

Both Damien and Nicholas nodded in understanding.

“All right! We’re all set. Good luck, and have a safe flight,” Kenji said with a warm smile. “I’ll see all of you very soon.”

With that, the video call ended, and silence settled over the office.

Damien picked up his phone and immediately called Nicholas. The call connected almost instantly.

“You know what to do.”

“Yeah… I know,” Nicholas replied absentmindedly, his thoughts clearly somewhere else.

Damien simply ended the call before turning his attention to James.

“Inform Monroe. Tell him to prepare. It’s time. You know what to do.”

James gave a firm nod.

“Yes, Sir.”

Without another word, James turned and left the office, quietly closing the door behind him.

Silence settled over the room.

Damien slowly closed his laptop and leaned back in his chair. Resting his clasped hands before him, he stared into the distance, his expression unreadable.

For years, he had lived beneath the weight of guilt that was never his to bear. Because he

couldn’t save Cassandra, Viktor Volkov had turned her death into an invisible chain,

convincing him it was a sin he deserved to carry for the rest of his life.

He had simply let Volkov believe those chains still bound him.

A faint, cold smile touched Damien’s lips.

How unfortunate.

The illusion was about to end.

“The clock is ticking, Viktor Volkov,” he murmured.

His eyes turned cold.

“I’m taking my freedom back.”

His fingers slowly tightened together.

“Soon… we will meet again.”

His voice was calm, yet every word carried the weight of a death sentence.

“And when that day comes… I’ll personally put an end to your miserable life.”

The corner of Damien’s lips lifted into a faint, merciless smile.

“This time… there’ll be nowhere left for you to run.”

The real hunter had finally stepped out of the shadows.

Once his claws sank into his prey… he wouldn’t let go until he had torn him apart.

Chapter 547

Nearly an hour passed in the blink of an eye.

Inside the executive suite, Damien sat behind his desk, calmly reviewing a stack of documents while James worked quietly at his desk outside the office, sorting through emails, confirming appointments, and finalizing the remainder of the day's schedule.

The atmosphere remained as composed as ever.

Suddenly, James' desk phone rang.

He glanced at the caller ID.

Blackwood Enterprises Taiwan Headquarters.

His gaze instinctively shifted to the clock mounted on the wall.

Exactly one hour had passed since Kenji launched the operation.

Remaining perfectly composed, James answered the call.

"Mr. Blackwood's office. James Horton speaking."

“Mr. Horton, Sir,” a frantic voice said from the other end. “We have an emergency. I need to speak with Mr. Blackwood immediately.”

James remained calm.

“Slow down. Tell me exactly what happened.”

“Our headquarters has suffered a cybersecurity breach, and our IT department can’t contain it.”

James‘ expression remained unchanged.

“One moment, please.”

He placed the call on hold before walking to Damien’s office and knocking twice.

“Come in.”

James stepped inside.

“Sir. Taiwan Headquarters is on the line.”

Damien calmly set the document he had been reviewing aside.

“Put them through.”

James crossed the room, transferred the call to the executive telephone, and activated the

speaker.

Damien leaned back slightly in his chair.

“Director Tanner.”

“Mr. Blackwood!” the regional director exclaimed, unable to conceal the panic in his voice.” We have a major problem.”

Damien’s expression remained unchanged.

“Report.”

“Approximately thirty minutes ago, every system across our Taiwan headquarters suddenly went offline. Our internal network, financial databases, logistics platform, and communication systems have all been compromised.”

He paused to steady his breathing before continuing.

”

“Our cybersecurity team has been working nonstop to contain the breach, but every time they isolate one point of entry, another appears somewhere else. We’ve never encountered anything like this before.”

Damien couldn’t help but marvel at the precision of Harper’s plan. Every move had been calculated with astonishing accuracy, every event unfolding exactly when she intended, leaving virtually nothing to chance.

The regional director took another unsteady breath.

“It gets worse, Sir.”

Damien remained silent, signaling for him to continue.

“Several major news outlets have already picked up the story, and the situation is being blown completely out of proportion. They’re reporting that Blackwood Enterprises has suffered a massive cyberattack. The news is spreading rapidly across social media, and we’re already being flooded with calls from investors, business partners, government regulators, and members of the press requesting official statements.”

As if on cue, James‘ phone began vibrating relentlessly.

One notification after another appeared on the screen.

BREAKING NEWS

Blackwood Enterprises Taiwan Headquarters Suffers Suspected Cyberattack

Shares Expected to Open Lower Amid Security Concerns

James silently walked over and held his phone where Damien could read the headlines. After a brief glance, Damien simply gave a small nod.

James locked the screen and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

Everything was unfolding exactly as planned.

“Have we confirmed any data leaks, compromised customer information, or financial losses?

“Damien asked.

“No, Sir,” the regional director replied. “At this point, we haven’t found any evidence of data leaks or financial losses. The attack appears to be targeting our systems rather than our data.”

Damien nodded once.

“Then, as of this moment, we don’t have a crisis.”

The regional director was caught off guard, momentarily questioning whether he had heard Damien correctly. Faced with a situation that seemed to be spiraling out of control, the CEO’s calm response was the last thing he had expected.

For a brief moment, he found himself wondering if he had overreacted–if perhaps the situation wasn’t as catastrophic as he had believed.

He hesitated.

“Sir… I’m sorry. Did you just say we don’t have a crisis?”

“Director Tanner,” Damien replied evenly, “as far as everyone else is concerned, we have a system outage and an ongoing investigation. Nothing more. Do not allow anyone to speculate beyond the confirmed facts.”

The regional director swallowed hard.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Activate Crisis Response Protocol Alpha. Isolate every affected server from the global network, suspend all nonessential external access, and have your cybersecurity team preserve every system log. I want updates every thirty minutes, regardless of whether there’s

any progress.”

“Understood.”

Damien’s calm authority eased the knot that had been tightening in the regional director’s chest. The panic that had threatened to overwhelm him moments ago gradually gave way to a renewed sense of direction.

“Keep everything under control,” Damien said. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Yes, Mr. Blackwood,” Director Tanner replied without hesitation.

Just as he was about to end the call, Damien spoke again.

“One more thing.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“No employee is to speak to the media. All inquiries are to go through Corporate

Communications. Anyone who violates that directive will be dealt with accordingly. I’ll issue

an official statement within the next thirty minutes.”

“I’ll make sure of it, Sir.”

Only after receiving his final instructions did Director Tanner end the call.

Silence settled over the office once again.

James looked toward Damien.

“Everything happened exactly as planned, Sir.”

Damien rose from his chair and walked toward the floor–to–ceiling windows overlooking the city below. His reflection stared back at him through the glass.

“And in less than an hour, Viktor Volkov will undoubtedly believe I’ll be spending the next few days putting out fires.”

A faint smile touched his lips.

“Notify Human Resources. Then begin preparing for the media conference. Once I finish the official statement… we’re leaving.”

James gave a firm nod.

“Right away, Sir.”

Without another word, he turned and quietly left the office.

Once the door closed, Damien took out his phone and dialed a familiar number.

The call was answered after the first ring.

“It’s time.”

“I’m on my way, Son,” Dominic replied before ending the call.

The pieces were finally beginning to fall into place.

As every second counted, Blackwood Enterprises shifted seamlessly into crisis–response

mode.

A company–wide memorandum was immediately distributed to every employee, reminding them of their confidentiality obligations and instructing them not to discuss the incident with anyone. All media inquiries were directed exclusively to Corporate Communications, while the Public Relations department worked swiftly to contain the rapidly spreading news.

Shortly after the internal memorandum was distributed, the company announced that CEO Damien Blackwood would be addressing the media.

The announcement drew an immediate response.

The front entrance of Blackwood Enterprises was soon swarmed with reporters, photographers, camera crews, and satellite news vans. Security personnel quickly established designated media areas while ensuring employees and visitors could continue entering and leaving the building without disruption.

Ten minutes before the scheduled press conference, Dominic's vehicle pulled up to the front entrance of Blackwood Enterprises.

Almost simultaneously, another vehicle came to a stop behind him, and Nicholas stepped

out.

Monroe, Hudson, and Cruz were already waiting outside. Their presence wasn't a coincidence. Knowing they were being watched, they deliberately made themselves visible, allowing Roman to see exactly what they wanted him to see.

The five men exchanged a quiet look of understanding before entering the building together.

Now… all that remained was for Damien Blackwood to take center stage.

Chapter 548

Across the street, Roman Kozlov remained seated inside the black sedan, his eyes fixed on the towering headquarters of Blackwood Enterprises.

From his vantage point, he watched the scene unfold as the entrance descended into a frenzy of flashing cameras and microphones.

Roman pulled out his phone and dialed a familiar number. The call connected after the first ring.

“Tell the boss to turn on the news,” he said, his eyes never leaving the building’s main entrance. Something big is happening. The place is crawling with media.”

“I’ll let him know,” the voice on the other end said, and the line went dead.

Thousands of miles away…

Inside a lavish dining hall, Viktor Volkov sat alone at the head of an impossibly long dining table, quietly enjoying his dinner. The room was silent except for the occasional clink of silverware against fine porcelain.

A moment later, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed through the room. Igor strode inside and made his way to Viktor’s side before leaning down to whisper into his ear.

Viktor’s hand froze midway to his wine glass as his brows knitted together.

“What?!”

Igor straightened and gave a slight nod. “I think you need to see this, Boss.”

Viktor slowly set his utensils down before unfolding the napkin on his lap and wiping the corners of his mouth.

“Show me.”

Igor immediately raised the tablet he had been carrying. After tapping the screen a few times, a live news broadcast filled the display before he placed it in front of Viktor

BREAKING NEWS

Blackwood Enterprises Hit by Massive Cyberattack

“We interrupt our regular programming with breaking news.”

Blackwood Enterprises is facing what cybersecurity analysts are already describing as one of the most significant corporate cyberattacks in recent years.

The attack reportedly targeted the company's Taiwan Headquarters, one of Blackwood Enterprises' largest and most profitable regional operations, bringing multiple critical systems to a standstill. Initial reports indicate that internal networks, logistics platforms, financial systems, and corporate communications have all been affected.

matter describe the incident as severe. Authorities have been placed on high alert, and government agencies are reportedly preparing to intervene should evidence of criminal activity be confirmed.

The incident has already sent shockwaves through the business community. Investors, international partners, and financial analysts are closely monitoring the developing situation. Although Blackwood Enterprises' stock has remained relatively stable in early trading, market analysts are reporting increasing selling pressure as some investors move to reduce their exposure until the company releases an official

statement.

In response, Blackwood Enterprises' main headquarters has announced that President and CEO Damien Blackwood will address the media shortly. His statement is expected to provide the company's first official update on the incident and outline the measures being taken to contain the situation.

This is a developing story. We'll continue to bring you the latest updates as more information becomes available.

The live footage shifted to the front entrance of Blackwood Enterprises, where dozens of reporters crowded behind security barriers, each one waiting for the CEO's official statement.

Viktor's expression darkened.

His hand curled into a fist before slamming onto the dining table hard enough to rattle the dishes.

BANG!

He shot to his feet.

"Sukin syn!" (Son of a bitch!) he snarled.

Just then, Igor's phone vibrated.

He pulled it from his pocket and glanced at the screen.

"Boss," he said, looking up. "Roman just sent an update. Dominic Blackwood and Nicholas Ashcroft have both arrived at the building. There's also a visible presence of their elite security team."

A dangerous glint flashed across Viktor's eyes.

"If this were something Damien could handle on his own, Dominic wouldn't have shown up," he said coldly. "And if Ashcroft is there as well… then this is far more serious than they're letting on."

His gaze hardened.

"Tell Roman to keep watching. I want to know every single thing that happens there."

Igor gave a quick nod and immediately sent Roman a reply.

Viktor slowly lowered himself back into his chair and reached for his wine glass.

"This is too much of a coincidence," he muttered. "First the attack on me… and now Blackwood Enterprises."

He picked up the wine glass and drained it in one gulp.

"Who would be foolish enough to provoke him?"

He fell silent, his eyes narrowing as he rested his chin against his hand.

“Either someone is reckless enough to challenge Blackwood…” he murmured, “or this is another one of

Damien’s diversions.”

His gaze turned cold.

“If it’s the latter… we need to be ready.”

Just then, the volume from the tablet on the dining table drew his attention.

“…and we’re now taking you live to Blackwood Enterprises, where CEO Damien Blackwood is about to address the media regarding today’s cyberattack.”

Viktor’s eyes shifted to the screen.

The press conference was about to begin.

Damien stepped onto the podium, his expression unnervingly calm. His dark eyes were devoid of emotion, yet Viktor recognized the murderous fury hidden beneath them.

He knew that expression all too well.

It was the look Damien wore when he was truly angry.

The suspicion that this was all an elaborate diversion suddenly seemed far less convincing.

For the first time that day, Viktor questioned his own instincts.

Had he been wrong?

Viktor’s attention remained fixed on the tablet screen.

Damien stood behind the podium, his expression calm and composed as countless cameras focused on

him.

“Good afternoon.”

“Approximately one hour ago, our Taiwan Headquarters experienced a significant cybersecurity incident that disrupted several of our internal systems. Our cybersecurity specialists, together with independent experts, are working around the clock to contain the incident and restore normal operations.”

“I understand the concern this situation has caused among our employees, our clients, our business partners, our shareholders, and the public.”

“Let me be absolutely clear.”

“At this moment, we have found no evidence that customer information has been compromised, no evidence of financial assets being stolen, and no evidence that the integrity of our global operations has been affected.”

“I will personally oversee our response and travel to Taiwan to ensure this matter is resolved as quickly as possible. Thank you.”

As Damien stepped away from the podium, a reporter suddenly shouted,

“Mr. Blackwood! Do you believe this attack was directed at you?”

Damien paused.

He slowly turned back toward the reporter, his expression unreadable. Then his gaze shifted to the camera directly in front of him, as though he were looking straight through the lens.

“Only a fool would try.”

Chapter 549

The moment Damien delivered his final answer, the crowd erupted.

Reporters began shouting over one another as dozens of hands rose into the air, each person desperate to ask another question.

“Mr. Blackwood, do you have any suspects?”

“Has the FBI been contacted?”

“Will the Taiwan headquarters suspend operations?”

“Do you expect the company’s stock to fall further?”

Damien offered no response. As he turned away from the podium, Monroe, Hudson, and Cruz moved into position around him while James stepped forward and took his place behind the microphone.

“Thank you, everyone,” James said, raising his voice above the noise. “Mr. Blackwood has an international flight to catch and will not be taking any further questions. All additional inquiries should be directed to Blackwood Enterprises‘ Corporate Communications Department. An official update will be released as soon as more verified information becomes available.”

The reporters continued shouting, but James ignored them and quickly followed Damien inside the building.

Once they were inside, Dominic, Nicholas, and Ellie were already waiting.

“Ms. Woods,” James said as he approached, “remain here and coordinate with Security to clear the entrance. Once we’ve departed, report directly to Mr. Blackwood Sr. on the executive floor.”

“Understood, Mr. Horton,” Ellie replied before hurrying off to carry out his instructions.

Without wasting another moment, the group made their way to the private executive elevator. As the doors slid shut, Dominic turned his attention to his son.

“You handled that well.”

Damien glanced at him. “Viktor needed to believe the situation was serious.”

“After what you just showed the entire world, he will,” Dominic replied.

Nicholas remained unusually quiet, his attention fixed on his phone. Harper still had not responded to any of his messages, and although he knew there were more important matters requiring his attention, the irritation had yet to leave him.

The elevator descended directly to the underground parking, where three vehicles were waiting with their engines running.

Monroe walked toward the lead SUV with Hudson and Cruz. Their vehicle would lead the convoy, clearing the route and watching for anything suspicious ahead.

Damien approached the second vehicle as James opened the rear passenger door for him. Nicholas

headed for the third vehicle, where Max was already waiting behind the wheel. Their vehicle would remain directly behind Damien’s throughout the journey.

Before Damien stepped inside, Dominic placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Be careful, and keep in touch.”

Damien gave a reassuring nod.

“I will.”

Dominic studied him for another moment before giving a small nod.

Nothing more needed to be said.

“I’ll see you in a few days,” Dominic said.

Damien extended his hand.

Instead of shaking it, Dominic pulled him into a brief embrace before patting him once on the shoulder.

“Have a safe flight, Son.”

Damien returned the embrace. “You take care of yourself here too, Dad.”

When they pulled apart, Dominic’s hands remained on his son’s shoulders for a moment, giving them a reassuring squeeze before he finally let go.

Damien turned and climbed into the vehicle as James respectfully inclined his head toward Dominic before taking his place in the front passenger seat.

Once everyone was in position, Monroe gave the signal to move.

The three vehicles pulled out of the underground parking area in a tight formation and made their way toward the building's main exit.

Dominic remained where he was, watching the convoy disappear through the exit. Only after the last taillights vanished from sight did he turn toward the private elevator.

Outside, the media immediately reacted.

Reporters rushed toward the driveway as the security gates opened, raising microphones and cameras while shouting Damien's name. Several attempted to move closer to the vehicles, but Blackwood security personnel quickly formed a barrier and forced them to remain behind the designated line.

Camera flashes reflected across the tinted windows as the convoy passed through the crowd.

Inside the middle vehicle, Damien remained seated with his attention directed toward the road ahead. He did not look toward the reporters or acknowledge the commotion outside.

The lead SUV turned onto the main road, followed closely by Damien's vehicle and Nicholas's behind it. Within moments, the convoy disappeared into traffic and continued toward the private hangar.

Across the street, Roman Kozlov watched the three vehicles leave.

He waited until several other cars had passed before starting the sedan's engine. Remaining far enough behind to avoid attracting attention, he pulled away from the curb and followed the convoy through the

city.

He had no reason to suspect that every vehicle, every passenger, and every visible member of Blackwood's security team had been positioned exactly where they wanted him to see them.

Approximately thirty minutes later, the convoy arrived at Blackwood Enterprises' private hangar at the executive aviation terminal just outside the city.

Ground crews were already standing by.

As soon as the vehicles came to a stop, the hangar doors slid fully open, revealing the company's Gulfstream waiting on the tarmac with its engines already running.

From his position outside the restricted perimeter, Roman eased his sedan to a stop.

The executive aviation facility was heavily secured. Blackwood security personnel were stationed throughout the area, while access to the private hangars was tightly controlled. Getting any closer would only draw unwanted attention.

Through the perimeter fence, he watched members of Blackwood's security detail fan out across the tarmac as Damien and the others made their way toward the waiting Gulfstream.

Roman reached for his phone and quickly typed a message.

At Blackwood's private hangar. Security is tight. Blackwood is boarding now with his right–hand man. Ashcroft is boarding as well. Only four security personnel are accompanying them. Blackwood's Head of Security, two members of the Elite Security Team, and Ashcroft's bodyguard.

He tapped send, slipped the phone back into his pocket, and returned his full attention to the tarmac.

From a distance, he watched Blackwood's security team unload several cases from the vehicles and load them onto the aircraft.

One by one, his targets boarded the waiting Gulfstream.

Less than an hour later, the Gulfstream taxied away from the hangar before accelerating down the runway and lifting into the sky.

Roman watched until the aircraft disappeared into the distance.

He pulled out his phone and sent one final message.

Aircraft departed. Blackwood has left the country.

Satisfied that his job was done, he slipped the phone back into his pocket, started the engine, and drove away.

What he never realized was that every person in his sights already knew he was there.

High above the city, the Gulfstream steadily climbed toward cruising altitude.

A voice came through Monroe's earpiece. He listened in silence before making his way to Damien's seat.

"Boss," he said quietly. "Roman just left."

Seated across from Damien, Nicholas raised the glass in his hand.

Damien reached for his own, and their glasses met with a soft clink.

Nicholas allowed himself a faint smile.

“He took the bait.”

Damien took a slow sip without saying a word.

At that moment, everything Viktor Volkov believed he knew had been part of a carefully choreographed

To everyone who has continued following Maya and Damien’s story from the very beginning, thank you for your patience, understanding, and support. It truly means more to me than you know.

Now that everyone is on their way to Japan, the stakes are about to get much higher. Tensions will rise, secrets will unravel, and new conflicts will test every character in ways they never expected.

Chapter 550

High above the clouds, Takahashi’s private aircraft continued its long journey toward Japan, far removed from the frenzy consuming New York.

Inside the quiet cabin, the final moments of Damien Blackwood’s press conference played across the large television at the front of the aircraft, delayed by only a minute through the jet’s satellite connection.

The screen faded to black as the live broadcast ended, then searnlessly switched back to the aircraft's flight display.

Jaime let out a quiet laugh.

"Whoa… that's intense. Damien is scary! For a minute there, I almost forgot this whole thing was just part

of the show."

The remark drew a few smiles around the cabin.

"I have to admit, Alice said, turning to Dahlia. "Now I understand why he earned his title. It wasn't just what he said-it was the way he carried himself. Calm, confident… reassuring. Very few people could stand before the entire world during a crisis and make it look so effortless. If I hadn't known the truth beforehand, I would have believed every word he said."

Dahlia smiled modestly, though the pride in her eyes was impossible to hide.

Soft murmurs of agreement spread through the cabin as the others reflected on how calmly and confidently Damien had handled the press conference.

Only Maya remained silent, her thoughts

still lingering on Damien's final words.

She knew they hadn't been meant solely for the reporters.

Dahlia noticed the change in her expression.

"Maya?" she asked gently. "Is something wrong?"

The others turned toward her.

Maya hesitated for only a moment before voicing the concern that had been weighing on her mind.

"I'm worried he may have pushed him too far."

Dahlia reached over and gently rested a hand on Maya's.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," she said with a reassuring smile. "Damien knows exactly what he's doing."

Alice smiled gently. “A good heart is a blessing, Maya, but the world isn’t always kind. There are times when standing your ground isn’t a choice-it’s a necessity. Otherwise, people will keep taking from you until there’s nothing left to give.”

Jaime leaned back in his seat, a thoughtful look crossing his face.

“It’s a dog-eat-dog world, May.”

He shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter whether we’re poor or rich. We should never let people push us around.”

Dr. Anderson, who had remained silent throughout the conversation, finally gave a small nod. After listening to everyone’s thoughts, he decided it was time to share his own.

“Your brother is right, Maya.”

His gaze met Maya’s before he spoke again.

“I’ve spent most of my career treating some of the most influential families in the world. Politicians, business leaders, royalty… people whose names rarely make the news unless something extraordinary happens.”

He paused briefly.

“I’ve seen the very best of humanity… and the very worst. The higher you climb, the darker the shadows become.”

“There are people who build, and there are people who take. Some seek success through hard work, while others would rather seize what someone else has earned.”

He folded his hands in his lap.

“I’ve also watched innocent people suffer because someone else wanted more power, more money, or more control. Sometimes tragedy is simply fate. Other times… it’s the result of good people refusing to believe evil truly exists.”

His voice softened.

“Before you met Mr. Blackwood, your greatest concern was how to survive another day. Today, we’re flying halfway around the world so Jaime can receive a new heart. That opportunity exists because of the resources, influence, and connections surrounding your family now.”

not.”

“Your world has changed, Maya. Whether you wanted it to or not.”

He held her gaze.

“I won’t tell you that every decision Mr. Blackwood makes is right. I don’t believe anyone can. But I do understand why he makes them.”

“This world isn’t filled with harmless people. It’s filled with those who will exploit kindness the moment they mistake it for weakness.”

“You don’t have to become ruthless. But you do have to learn to protect what matters to you. Because if you don’t… someone else will take it away.”

Dahlia gently patted Maya’s hand.

“Dr. Anderson is right, sweetheart. Your life is different now. You don’t have to change your values, and you certainly don’t have to change your heart. But you do have to learn how to navigate this world and make

the hard decisions that come with protecting the people you love.”

Maya took a deep breath before giving a small nod.

Deep down, she knew they were right.

She had chosen this world. More importantly, she had chosen to stand beside Damien-to face whatever

came with him, not run from it.

She didn’t need to change who she was. Her kindness would always remain a part of her. But she also needed to learn that kindness wasn’t meant for everyone. It should be given to those who valued it, not to those who would only exploit it.

She had always believed that every conflict could be resolved through understanding, compassion, or compromise. But the past few months had taught her that some people simply had no interest in any of those things. They didn’t seek peace.

They sought control.

People like that couldn’t be reasoned with.

They had to be stopped.

And Viktor Volkov was exactly that kind of person.