

Wife Mask 171

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But before she could take a step, Cole's voice followed, low and provoking. "Guess I'll do it myself if you can't handle it."

He surmised that if it helped ease her anger, he had no problem putting on a show and pretending to jump.

Without warning, he tilted forward, his body leaning dangerously over the edge.

Elliana's pulse lurched. She seized his collar and hauled him backward, her grip tight and unflinching.

Cole staggered backward as Elliana yanked his collar, nearly throwing him off balance.

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Jeff scratched his head sheepishly. "Elliana, I'm not fooled anymore."

Elliana froze momentarily and then dissolved into laughter when his meaning registered. He possessed an endearing quality now that he'd experienced his change of heart.

Seeing her amusement, Jeff beamed, "I was blinded before, but you've enlightened me. From now on, I'll stick by you through anything!"

Elliana rolled her eyes and moved toward the exit. Only the truly exceptional earned the chance to remain by her side. Jeff fell woefully short of her standards.

Her dismissal didn't deter him. He called after her, "Elliana, go handle your business! I'll care for Darling. That cat is absolutely adorable!"

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"Cole, Elliana might not be a knockout, but she's a diamond in the rough. Marrying her's the best thing you've ever done!" Jeff declared, stretching to meet Cole's gaze.

Cole arched a brow, a faint grin dancing in his eyes. "What's this, pigs flying? Jeff, aren't you Trinity's number -one fan? You sure you didn't get your wires crossed?"

"There's no mix-up here!" Jeff shot back, dead serious. "From now on, I'm Team Elliana-ride or die!"

Cole thought it over, the pieces clicking into place. What went down this morning must've flipped Jeff's script. The kid went from loathing Elliana to stanning her harder than anyone.

Cole released a quiet sigh. Good thing Jeff was just an eight-year-old twerp, or he would've felt a prick of jealousy, wondering if Jeff was planning to steal his wife. Since there was no real threat, He was cool with another Evans treating Elliana right. With that thought, he found Jeff somewhat adorable. He reached out, giving Jeff's buzzed head a rare, brotherly ruffle.

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Matthew explained, "ALL the records tied to your marriage with Mr. Evans in Podgend were wiped clean long ago. And the folks who processed it? Poof—gone, vanished without a trace. Digging into what went down back then has been like chasing shadows. We've burned the midnight oil, sifting through a mountain of data, until we finally hit paydirt: a snippet of old surveillance footage pointing to Victor. We know he was in the mix, but what he did or how deep he was in? Still a black hole."

Elliana listened, soaking it all in, her gaze drifting back to the iPad. She studied the image, letting it simmer.

Matthew sat quietly, giving her space to think.

After about ten minutes, a spark flashed in Elliana's eyes. It hit her. Fifteen years ago, Victor was there the night the Jones family mansion went up in flames.

Fifteen years could change a person's look, but Elliana had a gift for pegging people by their frame. She was dead certain the Victor on the screen was the same guy she'd seen back then. When the Jones fire blazed, a crowd had gathered to rubberneck, with Victor among them.

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Back in the day, the Star Society had been all about mastering elite martial arts, cherry-picking only those with raw, exceptional talent. It had flown under the radar, unknown to most folks. It was like Merritt, who'd once ruled the underground shipping world, yet barely anyone outside that circle knew his name.

Later, when Elliana took the helm from Donovan, she had shaken things up. She branched out into bounty hunting, traded in herbal medicine, and even opened the Ublento Hotel. Only then did the Star Society start turning heads.

During her years under Donovan's tutelage, her primary focus had been martial arts.

Donovan was a force of nature—a martial arts master who carried himself like he could take on the world. Everything he taught her was the distilled essence of combat.

Even now, Elliana couldn't crack the mystery of why Donovan had picked her as his protégé, or why, when she hit sixteen, he'd hurriedly dumped the Star Society on her and vanished, claiming he was off to see the world. Donovan was an enigma, to say the least.

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The Evans family was buzzing with whispers, scratching their heads over why their golden boy, Cole, looked like he'd been dragged through a hedge backward today. Something wild must've gone down last night to leave him in such a state.

But Myles, Aron, and Hugh knew the whole messy story. And all they could say was—when Cole lost his marbles, he didn't just go off the deep end. He dove in headfirst! Making them spar with him was no big deal. They'd been trading punches with Cole since they were knee-high to a grasshopper—they could handle a few bruises. But Cole had even hauled them into high-stakes card games, and not some friendly round with peanuts. Oh no, he made them bet cold, hard cash. What kind of billionaire shook down his own crew for their Lunch money?

The three of them had grown up tight with Cole, so their vibe was more like brothers than boss-and-underlings. The three had been treated like gold, pulling in seven-figure paychecks yearly, and over the years, they'd squirreled away a nice little nest egg. But when Cole's mood took a dark turn due to his recent argument with Elliana, all those perks had vanished faster than a magician's rabbit. Heck, after the cliff card games, even the clothes on their backs were technically "borrowed" from him!

Once returned to the Evans estate, Cole had bolted upstairs to track down Elliana, while Myles, Aron, and Hugh made a beeline for Paulina, desperate to borrow some cash.

The four siblings had all been raised under the Evans roof. They weren't the big shots of the house, but Ruben had hooked them up with their own courtyard when they were kids—a cozy little corner to call their own.

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"Punishment first, then you talk," she shot back firmly.

Her word was final. Knowing they were out of moves, Myles and Aron stuck out their hands. Whack! Whack! Whack! Three sharp strikes each, stinging like a swarm of bees.

As Paulina turned back to her seat, Myles and Aron threw Hugh a look that screamed, "This is on you, jerk!"

Hugh rocked on his heels, barely hiding a smirk.

Paulina settled back into her chair, fixing Myles and Aron with a steely glare. "Alright. Now tell me why you dragged your brother into gambling."

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Paulina relaxed a little and added, "But here's something pretty universal. Don't come on too strong. If you box her in, she won't have room to breathe—and that's when people panic and bolt."

Her words landed. Hard. Cole winced inwardly. Had he been doing exactly that with Elliana? The more he thought about it, the clearer it became. Yeah, he'd been way too intense. Maybe it was time to ease up and give her some space to find her footing.

Just then, Myles's phone chimed. He glanced at the screen and turned to Cole. "Mr. Evans, we've got a new lead on that marriage investigation."

Cole shook off his thoughts and refocused.

Myles stepped forward and handed him the phone. "Take a Look. After combing through a mountain of data, we finally found someone connected."

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"Understood," Myles responded.

Cole shot a playful glance at Myles, Aron, and Hugh. They had gone way back, thick as thieves since childhood. Even though the trio tried to play it cool, Cole could read them like an open book—they thought he'd lost his marbles. He had to admit, last night he'd gone a bit off the deep end. Looking back, he felt a pang of remorse mixed with a hefty dose of embarrassment.

"Myles, you knocked this one out of the park," Cole said.

Myles blinked, caught off guard. Praise from Cole was rarer than a blue moon, especially for something as routine as this.

Feeling a bit sheepish, Cole added, "Whoever's pulling the strings here is a real heavy hitter. Tracing that lead to Victor in the wild, lawless mess of Podgend-with every scrap of evidence wiped clean? That's no small feat."

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The Scorpion King was a ghost of a poison, so rare and ancient that it had nearly faded into myth.

Eliana's only run-in with the Scorpion King was years back when her mom, Rita, had studied it. Since then, Eliana hadn't heard a whisper of it and hadn't dug into it herself, the memory barely a flicker in her mind.

Elliana had always chalked up Rita's work on the Scorpion King, and her whipping up the antidote, Venacure—as just a nerdy deep dive into some old toxin.

But now, with Barbara poisoned by the Scorpion King, Eliana's gut was telling her Rita's research could've been more than a hobby. What was Rita really chasing?

The Scorpion King wasn't a run-of-the-mill poison. Even back in the day, it was a weapon for the elite, far out of reach for the average Joe. Nowadays, anyone wielding it had to be a big fish. Who could have poisoned Barbara? And what tied Rita to the Scorpion King?