Intern 401

Chapter 401

The walk to the study felt longer than it should have.

Footsteps echoed softly through the manor's corridors, each turn marking how far they'd moved from polite conversation. No one spoke. Whatever Harper was about to reveal already hung between them, tightening nerves and sharpening focus.

By the time they reached the study, anticipation weighed heavily in the air.

Charles's study was vast and imposing-dark wood paneling lining the walls, towering shelves filled with leather-bound volumes, and tall windows draped in heavy curtains that muted the late light. A large desk dominated one end of the room, while a seating area with deep armchairs and a long sofa occupied the center, arranged for discussion rather than

comfort.

Everyone found a place to sit, the room settling into a quiet, expectant hush.

Moments later, Alfred entered with two maids in tow, each carrying trays. Porcelain cups were set down carefully, steam curling upward from freshly brewed hibiscus tea, its floral scent spreading through the room.

Jaime returned and wasted no time. He connected his laptop to the projector, the screen flickering to life against the far wall.

As the tea was served, Damien rose from his seat and stepped aside, already issuing quiet instructions into his phone. Within minutes, James, Monroe, and Lee were summoned- along with Ashcroft's head of security. No explanations were needed. If Damien called them in, it meant whatever was coming required absolute containment.

Once the maids finished, they withdrew in silence. Alfred lingered as Eleonor straightened slightly in her chair.

"Tighten security around the house," she said calmly. "All staff are to remain in their designated areas."

"Yes, Madam," Alfred replied.

Across from her, Charles spoke-his tone even, but carrying the unmistakable weight of a patriarch's command.

"Make sure no one comes near this wing until the meeting is over. You know the protocol."

Alfred bowed. "Understood, sir."

Stepping into the corridor, he pressed a discreet panel embedded in the doorframe. A muted chime sounded as the study sealed itself-soundproofing engaged, encrypted firewalls activated, and a silent security sweep initiated to detect any foreign devices. Hidden microphones. Cameras. External signals. All blocked. All neutralized.

Blackwood Manor might appear warm, even familial, but its legacy was never built on comfort. Its walls were raised by generations who understood power, guarded it fiercely, and expanded it without mercy. The Blackwoods weren't on top by luck-they stayed there by design.

The doors closed behind him with a final, decisive click.

Exactly ten minutes later, Jaime's laptop chimed.

"Right on time," he muttered, clicking the message Harper had sent. The link opened instantly, initiating the call.

One ring.

Two.

Then the screen shifted.

Harper's face appeared on the screen, clear and sharp. The space behind her was dim, lit mostly by the glow of multiple monitors-lines of code, maps, and data streams blinking softly in blues and greens. Cables snaked across a wide desk cluttered with tablets, keyboards, and half-disassembled gadgets. It was unmistakably her domain-part tech hub, part personal man cave, controlled chaos that made perfect sense only to her.

“Hi,” Harper said, her voice bright, almost breezy.

For a split second, it felt disarmingly normal.

Then her gaze shifted, sweeping across the room through the camera lens. Her brows lifted, lips curling with unmistakable delight.

“Oh wow,” she said. “We’ve got a full house.”

A ripple of movement passed through the study-subtle straightening, exchanged glances, the faint clink of porcelain as someone adjusted their cup. Even with tension thick in the air, Harper had a way of poking at it like a live wire, daring it to spark.

Maya hesitated, then leaned slightly toward the screen.

“Harper… um-was it really necessary for Jaime to be here?”

Jaime straightened immediately. “Wait-what? May, I can handle it,” he said, a touch defensive. “I’m not a kid anymore.”

Harper blinked, then tilted her head, studying him. “Well… not strictly necessary,” she admitted. “But it’s better if he is.” Her lips curved faintly. “His laptop is literally the safest device in that house right now.”

Chapter 402

Maya frowned. “What… what do you mean?”

Harper’s eyes lit with amusement. “Oh. You didn’t know?” She glanced at Jaime. “You sneaky

little rascal.”

Jaime froze.

“He wrote his own code,” Harper continued easily. “Built his own firewall. Layered custom encryption from scratch. And honestly?” She shrugged. “With a little fine-tuning, it’s solid. Scary solid.”

She grinned at the camera. “Virtual high-five, buddy. That’s brilliant. Patent it when you’re done-you could make millions if you ever decide to sell. I’d buy it.”

Jaime blinked. “Uh-thanks?”

Dominic let out a hearty laugh, pride radiating from him. “Ha! I knew it! Genius!” He clapped once. “Better than your father already.”

Maya stared at Jaime. “Wait-what? He did what?”

Harper chuckled. “You do know your brother’s a tech nerd, right?” she added lightly. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Jaime replied dryly.

“Good,” Harper said. Then, softer, to Maya: “Relax. He’s fine.”

Maya studied Jaime for a moment, pride easing the tension in her shoulders. Finally, she nodded once. “Okay.”

Harper’s gaze swept the room through the camera-finally landing on Damien.

The change was immediate.

The lightness drained from her expression. Shoulders squared, posture straightened, focus snapping into place.

“Hey… boss,” she said, tilting a crooked smile. “We’re good, right?”

Alice's eyes flicked between her daughter and Damien, heart tightening. "What did she do? Harper… what did you do?"

Harper's grin twisted, half-innocent, half-plotting. "Nothing, Mom… okay, maybe a little

harmless trouble. Let's just say I'm Team Women today. You know… priorities."

Alice exchanged a knowing look with Dahlia, then let her gaze flick between Maya and Damien-understanding everything without a single word spoken.

Maya's cheeks burned. She lowered her gaze, suddenly fascinated by the floor-or her shoes.

Harper turned back to Damien, her grin teasing but cautious. "So… boss, we're good, right?"

Damien's jaw ticked. He held her gaze, silent and steady, letting the weight of the moment linger. Then, finally, he gave a single, deliberate nod.

"Yes."

Harper let out a quiet breath. "Cool. Beans."

She straightened, taking a measured breath. “All right. Enough chit-chat. Let’s get to it.”

The air went taut.

“So… I have some… not-so-good news,” she said carefully, letting the pause stretch just enough. “…and some good news.”

Her eyes never left the screen, sharp and steady.

“So,” she added softly, the faintest edge of mischief in her tone, “which one do you want first?

The question lingered in the study, suspended like a held breath.

No one answered at first.

Damien leaned back slightly in his chair, arms folding across his chest-not defensive, but braced. His gaze never left the screen.

“The bad news,” he said at last.

A corner of Harper's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile.

"I figured," she murmured. "Alright, here we go."

Her fingers moved out of frame, quick and precise. The screen shifted.

Files bloomed across the wall-timestamps, encrypted strings, movement logs. Data

scrolled too fast for most eyes to follow, a quiet storm of information.

"This," Harper said, her voice sharpening, "came through my radar moments after the Volkov incident this morning."

Nicholas leaned forward without realizing it. Charles' expression hardened, the ease draining from his features. Even Dahlia, who rarely betrayed tension, straightened.

"While Marco Greco is busy taking credit and enjoying the spotlight," Harper continued, " Viktor Volkov isn't fully buying it."

Maya's fingers curled into the armrest.

"What do you mean?" Dominic asked calmly.

“I mean the attack did its job,” Harper replied. “It redirected attention. Created blind spots.”

A beat.

“But it also tripped Volkov’s paranoia.”

She looked directly into the camera.

“He shifted his focus.”

The room felt smaller suddenly. Heavier.

Chapter 403

The room stayed still for a heartbeat longer, the quiet stretching between them like the calm before a storm. Every pair of eyes lingered on Jaime, the weight of his words settling in their

chests.

Maya’s throat tightened, a lump forming, but she didn’t look away.

Jaime’s gaze dropped for a fleeting second, as if gathering every ounce of courage in his chest.

Then he lifted his eyes, locking onto Maya with a steadiness that belied the tremor in his voice.

Tears shimmered at the edges of his lashes, but his determination burned brighter.

“Remember what you always tell me?” he whispered, voice thick with emotion. “That Mom and

Dad are always watching over us… that they’re keeping us safe. I believe it, May. I really do. So…

don’t worry, okay? I’ll be fine.”

He let the words hang, giving the moment space, then continued, softer, yet firm. “And I… I

promised you I’d take care of you once I get better-remember? I’ll keep that promise. No matter

what.”

Maya felt it all at once-fear, hope, love-crashing together inside her. Her fingers curled into her

lap, nails pressing into her palms without thought. Her eyes glistened, refusing to look away, as if absorbing every ounce of his bravery. The knot in her throat made it hard to breathe, but relief and pride washed through her in equal measure.

A fragile, trembling smile broke across her face. “Jaime…” she whispered, voice barely audible, yet it carried all the weight of love, fear, and unwavering trust.

For a single heartbeat, it was just the two of them-anchored to each other amid the storm gathering outside these walls.

Then he let out a soft, shaky chuckle, the sound breaking the tension like the first drop of rain on a quiet lake. “And besides,” he said, his voice uneven but steadying, “I still have a lot to do, you know?

His eyes found Charles at the far end of the table, mischievous despite the gravity in the room.* Grandpa Charles still has to teach me how to play chess like a pro."

Charles huffed a soft chuckle, shaking his head. "Only if you're ready to lose a lot first," he said, eyes bright with pride.

Then his gaze drifted to Eleonor, seated beside Charles. "And Grandma Eleonor said she'd show me the secret to growing really sweet oranges." He grinned, and sure enough, Eleonor wagged a finger at him, a faint laugh tugging at the corners of her lips.

He turned toward Dominic beside him, his expression warm and teasing. "And Uncle Dominic and I still need to finish fixing Dad's disaster of a programming project." A soft laugh escaped him.

Dominic's grin was wide, pride and amusement flickering in his eyes. "That's right, son," he said, clapping him lightly on the shoulder.

His attention shifted to Dahlia and Alice. "Oh-and I'll still help Aunt Dahlia, Aunt Alice, and Harper plan your wedding. Well… maybe not with the creative side of it, but I can carry the shopping bags, right?"

A ripple of laughter ran through the room, warm and brief, like sunlight breaking through clouds.

He shifted slightly, glancing toward Monroe and Lee stationed in the corner.

“I know this plan is meant to protect me,” he said. “But once I’m normal again, Monroe and Lee can finally teach me self-defense-how to fight, how to handle weapons. So I can protect myself… and protect everyone else too.”

Monroe and Lee both gave him a thumbs-up, nodding with quiet approval.

Then his eyes landed on Nicholas, a playful tilt in his expression.

“And maybe… I can learn a thing or two about pursuing a woman from Mr. Ashcroft.”

Harper snorted softly, covering her mouth, trying-and failing-not to laugh.

“Ha! Good luck with that!”

Nicholas froze, Jaime’s words hitting him like a spotlight. Harper’s smirk on the screen was a deliberate jab, and Alice’s sharp eyebrow drilled into him. His playboy reputation-suddenly very public-bit him square in the pride.

Chapter 404

He cleared his throat, cheeks burning. “I… uh… what happened to your whole ‘I don’t want a girlfriend ever’ declaration earlier? And besides…. you’re looking at the wrong person.” His eyes flicked to James in the corner, minding his own business, and he decided to throw it on him.

“Oh! Horton! Yeah… ask Horton! That’s his expertise!”

James blinked, caught off guard, eyes wide. Since when is pursuing women my expertise?

Jaime just shrugged, a grin spreading across his face-perfectly satisfied with the chaos he'd

unleashed.

His smile softened, steadier now. He leaned forward slightly, letting everyone in on the quiet

certainty in his heart. "I'll be the proudest brother at Maya's graduation, and I'll be the one to walk her down the aisle on her wedding day."

His gaze shifted to Damien, steady and quietly thankful, before returning to Maya, whose eyes

shimmered with tears he wouldn't let fall. "And… a few months from later, or maybe a few years,"

he continued, warmth threading through each word, "you'll have your babies, and I'll be the best

uncle to my future nephews and nieces."

Harper’s eyes sparkled. “Oh-and don’t forget-you’ll still sell your program and be the top

programmer in the world.”

Jaime laughed, shaking his head. “Yeah… that too.” He smiled, almost sheepish. “I’ll create the best

program, make millions, and build my own empire-just like my future brother-in-law!”

A teasing sparkle appeared as he looked at Damien. “You’ll have to mentor me, so I can be rich like you… and spoil my nephews and nieces rotten!”

Damien chuckled, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I couldn’t agree more.”

He let the words linger, letting the room catch its breath with him. Then his eyes found Maya’s, steady and full of quiet promise. “…So yeah, May,” he said, voice low but certain, “…I’m not going anywhere.”

Maya felt a lump in her throat, but a fragile relief eased the tightness in her chest. Her eyes shone as she looked at him, her lips trembling into a smile she couldn’t quite steady.

Charles’s expression softened, pride and resolve carved deep into his features.

Dominic let out a quiet breath, shaking his head with a grin that failed to hide the emotion in his

eyes.

Eleonor, Dahlia, and even Alice lifted their hands discreetly, brushing away tears as maternal instinct and fierce pride welled up all at once.

As the emotions began to settle, she felt a warm, steady hand brush over hers. Damien, seated beside her, had been quietly watching the surge of feelings ripple across her face. Instinct urged him to pull her close-but hesitation held him back, the unspoken lingering between them. After a

moment, he slid his hand under the table and gently wrapped his fingers around hers.

She hadn't expected it… but she didn't pull away.

His hand gave a reassuring squeeze-I'm here. You're not alone.

On the screen, even Harper went still, watching Jaime with something close to awe, clearly struck

by the bravery and determination he'd just shown.

Silence settled again, every eye still fixed on him. No words were needed-the weight of his

promise settled over them all. Whatever came next, they would face it together.

Maya and Jaime held each other's gaze a heartbeat longer. Then, with a small, resolute nod, Maya

gently pulled her hand from Damien's and brushed the tears clinging to her cheeks with the back of

her hand. She took a steadying breath and turned back to the screen.

"Alright," she said, voice firmer now, calm but charged with purpose, "he's ready… so let's do this. What's the plan?"

Harper, still caught up in the wave of emotions from Jaime's display, blinked for a moment, slightly off balance. She shook her head, letting the last of the tension slip away. "Oh! Right… okay," she

said, regaining her composure. She tapped a key, and two locations flared to life on the screen.

Chapter 405

"We stage a cyberattack on Blackwood Enterprises' Taiwan headquarters, while another hits the

Ashcroft Pavilion in Singapore."

Nicholas exhaled sharply. "Wait-what? The Singapore Pavilion is one of our highest-operating

facilities."

"And Taiwan is one of Blackwood's most profitable," Harper said calmly. "That's the point."

She leaned back in her chair. "Internally, the attacks are contained. Less than an hour of disruption. No permanent damage. No data loss."

A pause, the weight of the plan settling over the room.

"Externally, she continued, voice steady, "it will look catastrophic."

Damien's eyes narrowed. Nicholas's jaw tightened.

"Every minute those facilities are down costs millions," Harper went on. "Losses that demand your

presence. Both of you. Publicly."

Damien’s understanding clicked into place. His jaw set. “So we travel.”

“Yes,” Harper said. “But you don’t arrive.”

The screen shifted. The two men from earlier reappeared.

“They switch with you mid-route. They land in Taiwan and Singapore.” She looked up. “You don’t.”

Nicholas leaned forward. “Then where do we go?”

Harper met his gaze. “Here.”

Monroe stepped in, arms crossing. “From a distance, maybe. But up close?” His eyes sharpened.” And how about the airport security?”

Harper’s lips curved into a wide, unmistakably proud smile. “Already handled.”

The screen shifted-revealing an Al-rendered image of a human-like mask, eerily precise, down to pores, skin texture, even subtle asymmetry.

“These are high-grade biometric masks,” Harper said lightly. “Medical silicone layered with adaptive polymer. Heat-responsive. Expression-mapped.” She glanced around the room. “I’ve been working on this project for four years.”

Her smile sharpened. “Perfected it two nights ago. Timing, right?”

She tapped again. The image morphed-one face becoming Damien Blackwood, the other

Nicholas Ashcroft.

“Once worn, those two men won’t just resemble you,” she said. “They’ll be you. Facial structure, micro-movements, voice sync-everything.”

Monroe frowned. “And the airport biometric scanners?”

Harper didn’t miss a beat. “Each mask is implanted with an identity chip. When scanned, it registers as Damien Blackwood and Nicholas Ashcroft.” She shrugged. “I already hacked their system. Passports, biometrics, travel logs-all clean. Already taken care of.”

Nicholas stared at the screen. “… That’s unsettling.”

Harper beamed. “Thank you.”

Damien exhaled slowly. “So the world sees us land.”

“Yes,” Harper said. “Just not you.”

A quiet settled over the room.

“As far as Volkov is concerned,” she continued, “your travel is validated. You boarded. You arrived. Because, as far as the world knows, you were attacked as well.”

Eleonor spoke softly, sharp as a blade. “Which creates the illusion that he isn’t the only one under fire.”

Harper nodded. “Exactly.”

She tapped again. Another marker appeared.

“I’ll stage a third incident-minor, but visible-at one of our allied locations. Enough to sell the narrative.”

Her gaze lifted, steady and unflinching. “Just like Grandma Eleonor said-we’ll create the illusion that all five families are targeted, not just him.”

Chapter 406

The implications of Harper’s words settled slowly, like dust after a controlled blast. No one spoke right away. Calculations ran behind narrowed eyes, instincts measuring risk against necessity. It wasn’t fear that lingered in the air-but scrutiny.

Dominic frowned, leaning forward slightly. “Who are these men? Can they be trusted to be part of

this?”

Before Harper could speak, Alice’s voice cut through the tension-calm and certain. “Yes.”

All eyes swung to her. She nodded once, slow and sure, as if confirming something everyone should already know.

“Those are Hudson and Cruz,” she began, her tone even, factual.

“They were born into the program. Their parents are senior operators within Seiei Butai’s external division-our legacy security arm, responsible for protecting the Takahashi family’s offshore operations.”

A pause.

“These two were evaluated before they could walk, selected before they could choose. Trained in operations and loyalty from the very start, their allegiance has been tested countless times.”

Alice let the silence stretch, letting each word sink in. Her gaze swept slowly across the room, sharp and precise, taking in every face.

“They operate completely under the radar. No one outside the inner circle knows their connection to the Takahashis. They oversee the family’s cyber intelligence operations across North America- defensive, offensive, and contingency response.”

Alice paused. Then, with a steady motion, she raised her hand and pointed to the wall, where the photos of the two men were projected.

“Every breach we’ve neutralized before it made the news? That was them.”

She lowered her hand and folded her fingers together, letting the weight of her words settle.

“Their loyalty isn’t assumed-it’s been forged over generations.

Only four families are entrusted with these high-ranking roles, passed from eldest child to eldest child for over a century.

Hudson and Cruz are already the sixth generation to carry this responsibility.

Each successor is trained from birth, tested relentlessly under pressure, in isolation, and in

circumstances most people wouldn't survive.

They've neutralized both digital and physical threats, safeguarding the Takahashis' offshore operations and assets for decades-just as their ancestors did before them."

She met Dominic's gaze. "If anyone can pull this off, it's them."

A heavy silence settled over the room, thick and charged, almost tangible. It wasn't hesitation. It

wasn't doubt. It was a shared understanding.

The pieces were falling into place, each one sliding neatly into position.

Harper's eyes met her mother's through the screen, a sly smirk tugging at her lips.

"Exactly! Picture this-Tom Cruise in Mission: Impossible, backflipping off a speeding train while

casually hacking the Pentagon!" Her hands sliced through the air, chopping and gesturing to

emphasize every impossible stunt. "Top Gun swagger-bam! Jack Reacher muscle-pow! And a

little sprinkle of 'I just disarmed a bomb with my pinky'-ping!" She flicked an imaginary bomb away

with her pinky, eyes wide for comedic effect.

"Badass, hot, sexy… basically human nuclear codes of awesome!" She spun once, arms wide, as if unveiling the greatest heroes ever conceived.

Alice's eyebrow shot up so fast it practically threatened lift-off. "Harper Lin! Stop behaving like a

madwoman!"

Nicholas Ashcroft's jaw locked like a vault. Out of all the theatrics, his brain refused to move past

her words about those two men-Hot… sexy. His blood went full lava mode, his ears felt like they

were on fire, and somewhere in the back of his mind, a tiny alarm bell screamed: Fuck! First Hiro…

and now these two?!

He clenched his fists, trying to appear composed, but inside, he was a ticking time bomb of

jealousy, confusion, and disbelief. This woman will be the death of me. Wait until I get my hands on

you-I'll show you what "hot and sexy" really means.

Harper rolled her eyes, unfazed. "Fine, fine… but you get the picture. That's why I've been counting

on them-they're flawless for the job."

"As a matter of fact," Harper continued, already moving on, fingers flying across her console,"

they're on their way to you. Right now."

Chapter 407

Nicholas stiffened. "What do you mean they're on their way here?"

Harper rolled her eyes so hard it was a miracle they didn't get stuck. "Duh. Exactly what I said. Context clues, Ashcroft. Try them."

"You-"

"Whatever," she cut in, waving him off like an inconvenience. Her tone shifted, sharper now. "Volkov has eyes everywhere-especially on both of you."

Her gaze flicked briefly to Damien, then snapped back to Nicholas.

"That's why they're already en route," she continued. "And they're bringing four masks."

Max, Nicholas's head of security, straightened and stepped forward. "Four?"

Harper nodded once. "Yep." She tapped again, and the display shifted-schematics layering over the images. "I made masks for them too. Hudson and Cruz will wear yours."

A beat.

"And you two?" She pointed lazily at the screen. "You'll wear theirs."

A murmur rippled through the room.

“They’ll meet you at Blackwood Enterprises tomorrow morning,” Harper continued, unfazed.” Monroe will intercept them in the lobby-new security recruits, clean files, spotless credentials.

Nothing suspicious.”

She leaned back, lips curving. “Easy part.”

Her tone sharpened.

“But when you walk out of that building? You won’t be Damien Blackwood and Nicholas Ashcroft anymore.” She pointed again, this time at Hudson and Cruz’s images. “They will.”

Harper leaned closer to the camera, expression suddenly serious. “They know the protocol. They’re solid. This part”-her finger jabbed toward the screen-“is for you two.”

“Once the masks are on, you do not remove them until you’re inside a secured, private space. Your

home. Your room. Somewhere you’re absolutely certain is clean.”

She didn’t blink. “If we want Volkov to have zero reason to doubt anything, consistency is

everything. Tomorrow is a test run.”

Then she sighed. “Oh-and here’s the catch.”

The screen flickered, pulling up a simplified mask schematic.

“Their masks don’t have all the bells and whistles. No voice modulation. No micro-expression sync. “She shrugged. “So don’t talk. At all. Unless it’s absolutely necessary-and if it is, change your

voice.”

Nicholas frowned. “What? Why take that risk?”

Harper groaned. “Ugh-so annoying.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Because it’s freaking expensive!”

She stabbed a finger at the schematic. “The materials alone cost ten million per mask. The identity chip? Triple that. I already dropped almost a hundred million on all four.”

She leaned back, arms crossed. “My bank account is already crying, okay? Besides, you don’t need the upgrades. You’ll be posing as security. You’re not supposed to talk. Or be interesting.”

Nicholas scoffed. “I didn’t realize you were short on money. Send me your account details-I’ll make it very happy.”

Harper recoiled like he’d offered her poison. “Absolutely not.” She flicked her hand dismissively.” Don’t get me wrong, I love money. I just don’t want yours.”

“Told you, Aunt Alice,” Jaime said, a sly smirk tugging at his lips.

Alice merely hummed, a quiet mmhmm, her expression saying she’d known all along.

Ashcroft opened his mouth, ready with something sharp-then realized there was nothing he could

say that wouldn’t make it worse.

Harper narrowed her eyes at the screen. “Told her what?”

Jaime shrugged, pure innocence. “Oh, nothing.”

Harper exhaled once, re-centering. “Anyway-back to the plan.”

She tapped the screen, and the visuals shifted again.

“Make sure everything on your end is ready-Jaime’s medical team, the records, all of it. In two days, everyone flying in for Jaime’s operation leaves with Mom.”

She let that sit.

“Everyone-except Damien and Ashcroft.”

Damien’s head snapped up. “What? No.” He pushed back from the table, agitation sharp in every

Chapter 408

“Damien,” Harper cut in, firm but not unkind. “Listen to me.”

He stopped.

“Volkov’s attention is already on the two of you. If you leave with them, he splits his focus.”

Her gaze flicked briefly to Maya and Jaime, then returned. “That’s when people get hurt.”

“But if you stay,” she continued, “he locks onto you. Every resource he has follows your trail. That clears the airspace, the borders, and the handoffs for everyone else.”

Damien’s jaw tightened. “And what are we doing while he’s hunting us?”

“You play your role,” Harper replied. “You move exactly how he expects you to move.”

She tapped the screen once, a clean timeline snapping into place. “We’re just giving them a head start.”

She leaned forward now, tone sharpening.

“Then we’ll trigger all attacks on the same day.”

“Four hours after their departure, the first strike hits Blackwood Enterprises’ Taiwan headquarters.

Protocol activates immediately. But it'll take at least thirty minutes before your systems fully shut down and the alert propagates."

She glanced up. "An hour after initiation, you're notified. Right on cue, you do exactly what's

expected-make arrangements to fly out to the affected location."

Her fingers stilled.

"All four of you board the same plane. You leave the country as yourselves."

A beat.

Her eyes sharpened. "Once you're airborne… that changes."

"Once you're inside the aircraft, you switch-clothes, shoes, everything visible to the naked eye." Her fingers flicked, advancing the schematic.

"Mid-route, we execute the aircraft transfer. Four hours after the first attack, we trigger the

second. Ashcroft is notified mid-air, giving the flight a legitimate reason to reroute and make a stopover in Singapore."

She let her gaze linger.

"On paper, Cruz and Ashcroft disembark there, while Hudson and Damien continue on to Taiwan."

Another beat-colder now.

"In reality," she finished, "it's you and Ashcroft getting off in Singapore… and Hudson and Cruz heading to Taiwan instead."

Her eyes lifted. "You'll fly straight here-and before you land, the third attack triggers, exactly four hours after the second. The four-hour gaps establish a clear pattern, making it look coordinated and deliberate. That's what sells it to Volkov."

Harper leaned back slightly, exhaling through her nose before continuing.

"Holding his attention for twelve hours is all we need. After that, Hudson and Cruz lock it down, the

others are already gone."

Her voice didn’t rise-but it landed hard.

“By the time Volkov realizes he chased the wrong shadows, it’s too late.”

A pause.

“By then, Jaime’s surgery will be done, he’ll be moved to a secure recovery location, and we’ll already be a few steps ahead-planning the next move Volkov will never see coming.”

Hearts raced, the air electric with anticipation. The game had begun; every second mattered, and the first move was already in motion.

Chapter 409

The room remained suspended in the aftermath of Harper’s final words, as if sound itself needed permission to return. Screens hummed softly. Status lights blinked. Somewhere in the room, a clock ticked-steady, indifferent.

Twelve hours.

It wasn’t the number that unsettled them. It was what could happen inside it.

Damien finally exhaled, dragging a hand down his face. His gaze lingered on the darkened map, invisible lines of pursuit already drawn in his mind.

His jaw tightened as he looked around the room-at the people who mattered. The only ones that

did.

Damien straightened.

His gaze moved through the men positioned along the room's edge. Monroe, James, Lee-and then Max. Men who'd bled with him. Men who would take a bullet without hesitation, not out of

duty, but loyalty earned the hard way.

Finally, his eyes settled on Ashcroft. They were closer than blood, bound by the kind of history that makes dialogue redundant; they'd already traded enough life and limb to be more than kin.

No words were required. In that silence lived a tacit understanding between two men who knew exactly how ugly this game could get-and exactly what it would cost to win.

"If it comes to it," Damien said, his voice a low, unyielding blade of cold, "we can handle Volkov's

men."

He shifted his focus to the screen-back to Harper.

“But if we’re not traveling together, I need to know they won’t run into problems. No delays. No surprises. They get in, they move, and they’re safe.”

His gaze finally broke from the screen, seeking out the one person who anchored him.

Maya sat at his side, her composure a mask-but the moment their eyes met, the air between them tautened like a wire. All the unspoken fears and promises passed in a single, shared breath.

Damien didn’t flinch. He didn’t waver. He just looked at her, his voice dropping to a register that finally betrayed the weight of the fear looming inside him.

“That’s the only part I care about.”WWThe silence that followed was heavy, a private world built between them in the middle of a war room.MMIt was Alice who eventually cut through it. She spoke

up smoothly, already prepared. “The flight manifests are done. I’ll be returning home with my antiques, as usual.” She gave a faint, knowing smile. “Two shipping crates are… modified. That’s where everyone will stay until loading is complete.”

She met Harper’s eye through the screen, a silent command passing between them. With a single keystroke, the screen changed again-schematics this time.

“The crates are chipped,” Alice continued calmly. “When scanned, they’ll register as standard cargo. Antiques only. No anomalies. Once inside the aircraft, they’ll exit the crates. To the world, nothing changes.”

A heavy silence swallowed the study-not the quiet of uncertainty, but the cold weight of

comprehension. No one questioned. They understood perfectly.

“The plan had teeth. Ashcroft leaned over the table, his eyes fixed on the map, but his hands. were braced hard against the wood-white-knuckled. “Let’s walk through the timeline.” He glanced at Damien, then back to Harper “In forty-eight hours, the team for Jamie’s op departs in the modified cargo. Simultaneously, we trigger the first diversionary attack. It’ll take an hour for the smoke to reach Damien’s doorstep-enough time to justify an emergency flight”

“I’ll be on that plane with him,” Ashcroft continued. “On the manifest, we’re headed for Taiwan. But once we’re over the water, we trigger the second attack. I ‘receive’ the news mid-air, giving us a foolproof reason to reroute for Singapore.”

“In Singapore, Max, Cruz, and I disembark with Damien-only he’ll be traveling as one of my security detail, posing as Hudson. From there, we catch a private line straight to Japan.”””He paused, the silence in the room suddenly jagged. “Meanwhile, the original bird continues to Taiwan with Monroe, James, and the real Hudson on board to play the part of Damien. To anyone watching from the ground, Damien never left that plane.”On the monitor, Harper let out a low, sharp whistle. “Wow. And here I thought you were struggling with the math.”

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She leaned into the camera, a smirk cutting through the grain of the video feed. “Glad to see comprehension finally kicked in.”

The jab landed squarely against the heavy silence, but instead of shattering it, the tension seemed to bleed out of the room just a fraction. Jamie, who had been quietly observing, let out a sudden, involuntary snort-the sharp, clumsy sound of a teenager trying, and failing, to maintain a

facade of seasoned calm. He quickly lowered his head, his shoulders tensing as he attempted to

conceal the lapse, keenly aware of the gravity of the conversation. The small, human sound

offered a momentary break in the intense focus of the room. It was the kind of irreverence they

needed to keep from suffocating under the weight of the plan.

On the monitor, Harper's smirk didn't fade. If anything, Jamie's reaction was all the confirmation

she needed that her jab had hit its mark.

"It's tight," she added, her voice finally dropping the sarcasm for a moment of unfiltered honesty."

But you missed one teeny, tiny detail."

[Ashcroft’s brows knitted, his expression clouding with a sudden confusion. “What detail?”

Harper hedged, a small, uncomfortable laugh escaping her as she shifted in her seat. “Well… when you said you’ll catch a private line straight to Japan? That’s true. The bird is waiting and

fueled. But…”

[“But what?” The impatience in Ashcroft’s voice was a sudden, sharp crack.

“Geesh! Relax, soldier!” Harper snapped back, rolling her eyes at the screen. She blew a stray hair out of her face, her gaze flickering nervously between Damien and Ashcroft, but the snark didn’t move an inch.”””Umm…” She bit her

lip, a mischievous smile spreading slowly across her face as she let the bombshell drop. “One of you is going to have to fly it.”NNAshcroft exhaled, a long, controlled breath that signaled he was finally releasing the tension he’d been bracing against. He leaned back, his features smoothing into a look of quiet confidence; clearly, he viewed the news as if it doesn’t matter.But Maya didn’t share his ease. Worry etched its way across her face, shattering her earlier composure. Her eyes darted from the screen to everyone else in the room as if she’s expecting to see the same worry in their faces, her voice rising with an edge of unfiltered

anxiety.

“Wait, what?” she interrupted, her hands clenching at her sides. “One of them has to fly it? But… that’s dangerous. I mean, how are they even supposed to-“NNOn the monitor, Harper’s expression went flat, her head tilting in dumbfounded confusion. NN”Um, Maya… chill,” she said, her mischievous spark returning as she looked at Damien. “What exactly are you so worried about? ”N”

What do you mean, what am I worried about?” Maya’s voice climbed an octave, her gaze darting between the screen and the stoic faces around her. “You just said one of them has to fly the plane. How is that even possible? Can’t we just find a pilot? Someone who actually knows what they’re doing? It’s a thousand times safer than-“She stopped. A low, dry chuckle started with Monroe and rippled through the men at the room’s edge. Even Harper on the monitor couldn’t help herself, burying a grin behind her hand.Maya’s brow furrowed, her confusion turning into a flash of heat. She looked from Ashcroft to the others, her hands gesturing at the laughter. “What? What’s so

funny? Why are you all laughing?” She turned to Damien, searching his face for an explanation, but even there she saw the ghost of a subtle smirk.”””Did I say something funny?” she pressed, her

voice dropping to a sharp, defensive whisper. “What’s going on? What am I missing?”””On the

monitor, Harper’s smirk widened until it was a full-blown grin. She leaned back, crossing her arms

with the supreme confidence of someone holding all the cards.”””You really don’t know?” she

asked, her voice dripping with mock disbelief. “Well… maybe you should ask your boyfriend.”}

Maya’s head snapped toward Damien, her brow furrowed. “What do you mean? Ask him what?”{\

Ashcroft let out a dry, knowing chuckle, leaning back in his chair to enjoy the show. “Yeah, D,” he prodded, his eyes glinting with amusement. “Why don’t you tell her? Don’t leave the lady in the dark.

“Maya looked at Damien, her breath catching as she searched his face. The silence in the room wasn’t heavy anymore; it was electric. “Tell me what, Damien?”Harper didn’t wait for him to answer. She couldn’t help herself.”Your boyfriend is a licensed aviator, Maya,” Harper said, her voice dropping into a register of pure, glossy prestige. “And I’m not talking about some weekend private pilot certificate. We’re talking multi-engine ratings and a Type Rating for every long-range jet in existence.”

She paused for effect, her eyes glinting with mischief. “The guy spent his twenties burning through flight hours in ex-military L-39 Albatros jets just for the hell of it. He’s got enough PIC time to make a commercial captain look like an amateur. He doesn’t just ‘fly, Maya-he’s a civilian fighter pilot

with a much better paycheck."

Harper leaned back, looking thoroughly pleased with the bombshell she'd dropped. "Turns out, when you have that much money, you don't just buy the plane-you learn how to tame it."

[Maya turned back to Damien, her eyes wide as she tried to reconcile the man she knew with this new, lethal layer of his life.

"You're a pilot?" she whispered. Damien finally let a small, self-deprecating smile reach his eyes. " It's a hobby that got out of hand. But yes-I can fly."

"Maya looked from the screen to Damien, her face flushing a soft, telltale crimson. The weight of the room's collective knowledge made her feel suddenly small.

"Oh," she murmured, her voice dropping into a hushed apology. "I'm… I'm sorry. I didn't know."

As the words left her, heat crept up her neck, carrying with it the weight of everything she didn't know. The quiet shock settled in-the realization of how much of Damien's world still existed beyond her reach. Layers she'd never seen. How many versions of Damien were there, beyond the one she touched, laughed with, loved?

The truth landed softly but struck hard. His world was vast, dangerous, precise… and hers

suddenly felt small by comparison. Ordinary.

In the space that opened between them, her insecurities rushed in, uninvited and relentless.

What place did someone like her have beside someone like him?

The question lodged deep in her chest, unanswered-and far more unsettling than she wanted to

admit.