Intern 451

Chapter 451

She leaned forward, her gaze catching his, refusing to let him retreat into his thoughts.

“So, how about something different this time? Forget the guest lists and the press. Go somewhere nice and quiet, just you and Maya. Somewhere the world can’t find you.”

Damien stayed silent for a long moment, the idea of quiet seemingly more radical to him than any

business merger he’d ever overseen. The thought of a birthday without a suit, a handshake, or a

hidden agenda was a foreign concept.

But then, he thought of Maya-and the way her laughter sounded when they were truly alone, stripped of the city’s prying eyes.

His mind drifted back to Isla Aurelia, to those few days in the secluded cabin tucked away on the

far side of the resort. No noise, no staff, no legacy. Just the two of them.

He could almost feel the humid salt air against his skin and the heavy, sacred stillness of that

sanctuary. It was there they had officially become a couple; it was in that private, intimate space where they had truly merged as one. It had been raw-raw emotion, raw vulnerability. He had let the world fall away, and he found that he liked the stripped-back version of himself he found in her arms.

During those days, he hadn't been a Blackwood. He had just been him. He felt a peace he hadn't known since childhood, a relaxation that went deeper than sleep. And above all, he felt love.

He knew right then, in the quiet of that cabin, that Maya was the only woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. With her, he was finally at peace. She wasn't just his partner; she was his happiness. She was his home.

It wasn’t just a vacation-it was the only time he felt like a man, rather than a monument.

A ghost of a smile touched his lips, genuine and private. “Quiet,” he repeated softly, as if testing the weight of the word. “I think I could get used to that.”

Damien took another sip and set the cup down, the clink of porcelain echoing in the morning air.

He leaned back, his eyes distant as he looked toward the horizon.

“When we were at Isla Aurelia, I asked her to marry me,” he admitted, his voice dropping to a low, rough edge. “But she refused. It scared her-my world, my life, the shadows that come with being a Blackwood. She couldn’t see a life with me that didn’t end in the dark.”

He paused, the memory of that rejection still sharp. “She left that night. It was Harper who finally got through to her, who made her see things differently. But later, she prepared something for us.

We talked-truly talked-and that’s when she gave me a sketch.”

A genuine smile touched his lips, one filled with more reverence than he usually allowed.

“She had drawn it when she was still very young, visualizing exactly how she wanted her ring to look. She didn’t give it to me as a demand for a diamond. She gave it to me as an act of trust- sharing a part of herself she’d never shown anyone else. She told me that when the timing was better, I could ask her again.”

He met his mother's eyes, his gaze burning with a quiet, renewed ferocity.

"I promised her a life she deserves. She doesn't need to step into mine-and I don't expect her to.

I'm going to build something just for us… for our future."

His voice hardened with a final, unbreakable resolve. "And I will keep that promise."

He leaned forward, the strategist and the lover merging into one. "Once all this is over… I want to

propose to Maya," he said, his voice low and certain. "Properly propose to her."

He looked down at his hands, his expression softening as he spoke of the future. "I already have

the ring being made with the purest gold, based on the sketch she gave me. But I don't want it to

just be a piece of jewelry. I want to fill it with stones that represent more than just a commitment-

I want it to symbolize the life we've built, the storms we've survived, and the one thing she finally felt safe enough to dream about."

His gaze flicked to his mother, a rare flash of intensity in his eyes. "I've already made arrangements with the best stone collectors in the world. I want the ring to be a map of our history, a promise she can hold in her hand. It's not about the stones themselves; it's about the fact that they were gathered for her-from every corner of the world I had to conquer to reach her."

Dahlia's eyes were misty now, her heart aching with pride for the man her son had become. "Then you have my blessing, Damien. And when you are ready, I have something tucked away that might be the final piece of that map-a legacy to anchor your new world."

Neither of them noticed the figure lingering by the doorway. Jamie had been standing there,

frozen, having overheard the weight of Damien's confession.

He hesitated for a heartbeat, then gathered the courage to make his presence known. He cleared his throat softly, and both Damien and Dahlia turned toward him.

"Jamie!" Dahlia said, her surprise quickly melting into a warm smile. "Why are you up so early?" NN Jamie stepped forward, shyly scratching the back of his head, a boyish awkwardness clinging to him despite the gravity of the morning. "I, uh… I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I woke up to use the bathroom and couldn't get back to sleep, so… I figured I'd come down for a walk. Get some

fresh air."

Damien's expression shifted, the intensity of his talk about the ring softening into a quiet concern. Is Maya awake?"

"Oh no, not yet," Jamie said, shaking his head. "She's sleeping like a baby. Honestly, she looked so peaceful… I can't remember the last time I saw her like that. I made sure to stay quiet so I didn't

wake her."

A look of profound relief crossed Damien's face.

Dahlia reached out, gesturing to an empty chair. "Oh, you silly boy. Don't just stand there. Come,

join us and have some hot cocoa."

Jamie bowed once in acknowledgment, a small, respectful gesture that felt heavy with the weight

of what he'd just overheard.

He walked closer to the table, but instead of taking a seat, he stopped directly in front of Damien.

Jamie's chest tightened with nerves, but beneath the shy hesitation, a quiet resolve bloomed-admiration and awe settling over him as he realized just how deeply Damien truly loved Maya, and

how fiercely he would protect her, no matter what the future held.

He met Damien's eyes, heart pounding, and finally whispered, "Damien…"

Chapter 452

Damien looked up, a faint crease forming between his brows.

"I… didn't mean to overhear," Jamie said, his voice tightening with emotion. "But I heard what you

said. About the ring."

Jamie placed his hand against his chest, his fingers wrapping around the pendant of his necklace. His eyes glistened, shadowed by memories of a harder time. With practiced precision, he clicked a hidden latch on the back of the ornament-one invisible to the naked eye-and gently removed a

small, brilliant stone.

He held it out to Damien, his hand steadying as the light caught the facets. Damien took it,

stunned. "Jamie… what's this?"

Jamie smiled gently, a sad but beautiful light in his eyes. "When I got sick and our finances started draining fast, Maya had no choice but to pawn Mom's jewelry so we could survive. She held on to

them as long as she could, but when her back was pushed against the wall, she had to let them go.

Everything except our parents' wedding bands."

He gave a short, quiet laugh. "She still has those. She told me she's holding onto them so that when I get married, I'll have them for my future wife. Honestly, I think she said it to make me feel

guilty-to make sure I didn't end up with the wrong woman."

Jamie's expression turned solemn as he looked from the stone to Dahlia. "But she didn't know that Dad gave me this stone on my eighth birthday. He said it was our little secret. He wanted me to use it for an engagement ring, too. He's the one who modified this pendant to keep it hidden."

He looked Damien directly in the eye. "But I don't want my future wife to have it. I want Maya to

have it. Dad told me this was the first diamond he ever bought with his own money for Mom… but

he ended up giving her a different one."

Jamie glanced at Dahlia, a new understanding dawning on him. "I didn't think much of it before, but now… I think he refused to give it to her once he knew who she really was. Maybe it was pride.

Maybe he felt like the first thing he truly earned wasn't enough for a woman of her status."

"But for Maya… it's perfect."

"It's the first piece of our father's heart."

He nudged the stone toward Damien. “Take it. Add it to the ring.”

Damien didn’t answer right away.

The weight of the stone in his palm felt far heavier than it should have-like it carried more than memory, more than sentiment. It carried sacrifice. It carried years of quiet suffering he hadn’t been there to witness.

His fingers curled slightly around it, careful, almost reverent.

For a brief moment, the world he controlled so effortlessly-fell away.

This… this was something he couldn’t calculate.

He lifted his gaze to Jamie, studying him not as Maya’s younger brother, not as someone under his protection-but as a man who had endured, who had chosen, who was now entrusting him with

something irreplaceable.

“You’re sure?” Damien asked quietly.

Jamie didn’t hesitate.

“I’ve never been more sure about anything,” he said.

There was no trace of doubt in his voice-only a quiet certainty that made something shift in

Damien’s chest.

Jamie exhaled slowly, his grip tightening briefly around the now-empty pendant before letting it fall

back against his chest.

“She gave up everything for me,” he added, his voice softening. “Every piece of our past… her

present-she even put her future on hold just to keep me alive. And she never once complained.

Not once."

His eyes flickered, emotion threatening to spill over-but he held it steady.

"So if there's anything left that can go back to her… anything that can give her even a fraction of

what she lost…" He shook his head lightly. "Then it should be this."

Chapter 453

Silence settled over the table again-but it was no longer heavy.

It was full.

Dahlia's gaze moved between them, her heart tightening at the quiet exchange unfolding before her. There was something profound in it-something that went beyond words, beyond bloodlines

and legacy.

This wasn't just about a ring.

It was about choosing Maya.

Again and again.

Damien drew in a slow breath.

Then, without another word, he slipped the stone carefully into his inner pocket-close to his chest,

where it would remain.

“I’ll take care of it,” he said.

But the words weren’t just a promise about the ring.

Jamie understood that.

A faint smile tugged at his lips, relief softening the tension in his shoulders.

“I know you will.”

He nodded, absorbing the thought, the quiet significance of it settling between them. “Thank you, Jamie,” Damien said, his voice low and thick with a rare, naked sincerity.

Jamie offered a tired but genuine smile. “Just make sure it’s the most beautiful ring she’s ever

seen.”

With the tension broken, Jamie finally took his seat. Dahlia leaned over, her movements graceful and warm, and poured him a steaming cup of hot cocoa. The conversation shifted, softening into the mundane details of their upcoming plans. They talked briefly about the trip, Jamie’s eyes lighting up with an excitement he hadn’t allowed himself to feel in years.

“I’m looking forward to it,” Jamie admitted, wrapping his hands around the warm mug.

Damien listened, but his internal clock was already ticking. He glanced at his watch and noticed the hands were already approaching 8:00 AM. The world beyond the manor was calling him back.

“I have to go,” Damien said, standing up. He adjusted the cuffs of his shirt, the familiar armor of his professional life sliding back into place with practiced ease.

He looked at his mother, his expression unusually soft. “Thanks for the breakfast, Mom. I didn’t

realize how much I needed that."

He then shifted his gaze to Jamie. The two men shared a look of silent understanding-a bridge built on a father's secret and a sister's future. "Thanks again, bud," Damien said, his voice steady

and sincere. "And yes, I promise. It will be the most beautiful ring she's ever seen."

Jamie offered a tired but genuine smile, leaning back with his cocoa. "I'm holding you to that."

Damien glanced toward the stairs one last time, his eyes lingering on the floor where Maya still

slept, undisturbed by the weight of the morning's revelations.

["I'll come back early so we can all have supper together," he promised, his voice softening just a

fraction, the "titan" receding for a brief moment. "And just in case Maya needs help with the packing… I want to be here."

Dahlia nodded, her heart full as she watched her son. "Take care, son."

With one final nod to his mother and Jamie, Damien turned and walked toward the foyer. The peace of the manor was behind him, and the high-stakes chaos of the world outside was ahead.

But as he felt the hidden weight of the stone Jamie gave him against his chest, he knew he wasn't just going to work.

He was going to end the war-so he could finally come home.

Not long after, Jamie finished his breakfast and excused himself. Dahlia stayed a while longer on the patio, letting the sun warm her face, the manor quiet but alive around her.

She knew the calm wouldn't last long-but the manor had always been their sanctuary, a silent

witness to every milestone, every joy, and every heartbreak the family had endured over the years.

It held their memories, their beginnings, the moments that had shaped them… and now, the first threads of new memories, waiting to be woven as their family grew-threads that would hold them

together, no matter what came next.

But she also knew she needed to handle something important, something they could not avoid forever.

Her fingers tightened slightly around the edge of the table.

Chapter 454

For years, she had watched from the sidelines-guarding, protecting, waiting for the right moment.

But the world was shifting now.

Damien was moving pieces into place. Forces long kept apart were beginning to collide. And

somewhere in the middle of it all… was Maya.

Unprotected from a truth that had been circling her life since the day she was born.

Dahlia closed her eyes briefly.

She had promised Malia that she would help keep that world away from her for as long as possible.

But some legacies… refused to stay buried.

And if the storm was coming-then she would choose how it arrived.

Dahlia took a steadying breath, her gaze fixed on the horizon where the sun rose now above the green tall trees, painting the estate in strokes of gold. She took her phone out and dialed a number she hadn't touched in a very long time.

After a few rings, the soft, refined voice of an elderly lady came through-steady, yet carrying the weight of decades. "Dahlia… you called."

Dahlia's expression softened, a flicker of something ancient and loyal in her eyes. "Lady Cecilia," she said, her voice dropping into a tone of formal, quiet respect and affection. "It's been a while."

The line went quiet for a brief moment, as if the past itself had stirred between them.

Far from the warmth of the manor, the atmosphere at Blackwood Enterprises was already shifting.

The towering glass structure stood like a monument against the city skyline-cold, untouchable, and absolute. Inside, the company moved with its usual rhythm-efficient, polished, undisturbed.

Assistants carried out schedules, executives moved between meetings, and the quiet hum of business carried on without interruption.

Everything appeared exactly as it should.

And yet, beneath that flawless routine, unseen pieces were already shifting into place.

The vehicle came to a smooth stop in the underground basement, directly in front of the private VIP elevator reserved exclusively for Damien.

Before the engine had fully gone quiet, the door opened.

Damien stepped out, composed and unhurried.

James was already there, standing by, posture straight and expression attentive as if he had been

waiting for some time.

“Good morning, Sir.” James greeted, inclining his head slightly.

Damien nodded faintly, keeping pace toward the elevator. The ride up was smooth, direct to the

executive floor.

By the time the doors opened, Monroe was already waiting.

“Mr. Blackwood,” Monroe said, falling into step beside him. “Hudson and Cruz arrived ten minutes ago-they’re waiting in your office. Mr. Ashcroft just arrived as well; he’s heading there now.”

Damien gave a single nod.

“Good.”

James had cleared the entire floor that morning. It was rarely busy anyway-just him and Ellie, the executive secretary handling routine paperwork. He’d assigned her elsewhere to ensure complete privacy.

Damien’s gaze remained fixed ahead, his expression unreadable.

He adjusted his cufflinks once more-the last trace of warmth from the morning completely gone.

In its place stood the man the world feared.

Without a word, Damien reached for the doors and pushed them open.

Chapter 455

Damien pushed the office doors open and paused, taking in the scene before him. He hadn't expected the atmosphere to feel so… tense.

Hudson and Cruz stood at attention, calm and collected, but their posture was stiff, as if waiting for a signal.

Ashcroft, on the other hand, was a different story. He was planted directly in front of them, eyes sharp and unyielding, the kind of look that made it feel like a duel had broken out in the middle of the room. Every subtle twitch of his jaw, every tightening of his fists suggested he was preparing for battle-except the battle wasn't with Hudson or Cruz, it was with the situation itself.

The air felt thick, almost awkward, like the room itself was holding its breath. Damien could feel it -the quiet tension crackling between loyalty, suspicion, and unspoken rivalries.

He stepped further in, adjusting his stance, the faint click of his shoes on the floor punctuating the silence. "Gentlemen," he said, his voice calm, measured, slicing through the unease.

Hudson and Cruz offered crisp, measured nods, their professionalism unshaken. "Mr. Blackwood," they said in unison.

Ashcroft's gaze flickered briefly toward Damien, a flash of restrained irritation crossing his features, before he forced his attention back to the men standing before him.

Damien caught the hint in his best friend's behavior but didn't call it out. He wanted to see exactly what this was about, where it would lead-though he already had a suspicion why Ashcroft was acting like that. He simply stepped forward.

"Welcome," Damien said evenly, his voice slicing through the quiet with calm authority. "I take it

introductions are unnecessary between the three of you."

Ashcroft didn't look impressed. Hudson and Cruz, trained to remain composed under any circumstance, didn't flinch. The three men simply held their silence.

Damien walked toward the reception area of his office, A coffee table rested at the center, flanked by side tables beside the leather couch, with a single armchair on each side. He unbuttoned his coat, gestured for them to sit, and then eased into one of the armchairs himself.

James and Monroe fell in step behind him, standing quietly just behind, every sense alert.

Damien studied the two men in front of him. Both were dressed in tactical gear-clearly part of an elite security team. Their builds were almost identical to his and Nick's, which made Harper's choice make even more sense. Calm. Professional. The kind trained to handle pressure without a

flicker of hesitation.

Ashcroft, however, was a different story. His eyes stayed locked on Hudson and Cruz, as if they'd committed an unspeakable crime. Every clench of his jaw and tense shoulder spoke volumes-he didn't fully trust them, and he wasn't hiding it.

"How was your trip?" Damien asked, his tone casual but deliberate.

"It was fine," Hudson replied. "Everything went smoothly. We made sure the package stayed

secured the entire time."

Cruz glanced at Ashcroft, a faint smirk tugging at his lips-so subtle it would've gone unnoticed

without careful attention. Then he shifted his gaze back to Damien.

"Ms. Harper personally arranged everything," he added. "She made sure we were well taken care

of."

Ashcroft’s eyes narrowed further, his jaw tightening as his hand curled into a fist.

Damien noticed. He almost laughed-but held it back, choosing silence instead.

Hudson glanced at Cruz and gave a subtle shake of his head, silently understanding exactly what

his partner was doing. Then he spoke.

“Mr. Blackwood,” Hudson said, inclining his head politely, his tone measured, “we’ve reviewed the

itinerary and the transport arrangements. Everything is prepared.”

Cruz mirrored him with a short, precise nod. “Masks are ready. Decoys are in place. No variables

unchecked.”

Ashcroft’s eyes flicked briefly toward Damien, a flash of something unspoken crossing his face before returning to Hudson and Cruz-lingering a fraction longer on Cruz. He said nothing, but he didn’t need to; his body alone carried the warning: I’m watching you.

Chapter 456

Damien allowed himself a faint, controlled smile. Calm. Composed. In control. His gaze moved

across the room-not just assessing the men before him, but reading Ashcroft's tension, that unspoken edge that surfaced whenever anyone stepped too close to his world.

"Are we seriously just trusting them like that?" Ashcroft said, his voice sharp, edged with

accusation. His eyes narrowed, something darker-almost possessive-slipping beneath his usual

professionalism. "How do we know they haven't already compromised the package?"

Damien's gaze shifted to Ashcroft-amused, but curious to see where this childish behavior would

lead. He let it play out, choosing to be a good friend and not press the wound.

"What exactly are you saying, Nick?"

Ashcroft leaned back, his gaze shifting to the two men before he scoffed.

"I mean, these two just showed up out of nowhere. Sure, they were sent by Harper-but how do we

know they are who they claim to be? Or where their loyalty really lies?”

His eyes hardened slightly.

“What if they’re already working for the enemy?”

Hudson and Cruz didn’t react-not outwardly. The accusation didn’t shake them. Men like them

didn’t get defensive; they didn’t need to.

If anything, it only confirmed what they already understood-the man questioning them, and the reason behind it.

Hudson’s gaze settled on Ashcroft, calm but firm.

“Mr. Ashcroft,” he said, his tone calm, precise, “caution is understandable. You’re well within your

right to verify our identities-run any checks you deem necessary.”

A brief pause.

“But be careful where you draw the line.”

The air in the room seemed to tighten.

“We weren’t recruited. We were born into this.”

His voice remained level, but the weight behind it was unmistakable.

“Our families have served the Takahashis for generations-long before any of us were in a position to question loyalty.”

His eyes didn’t leave Ashcroft’s.

“Our allegiance isn’t something that shifts. It doesn’t break. And it certainly doesn’t need to be proven in a room like this.”

Another beat. Controlled. Final.

“We answer to the Takahashis,” Hudson finished. “No one else.”

Damien gave a slight nod, impressed by how Hudson handled it-no hesitation, no wasted words.

He inclined his head almost imperceptibly, acknowledging the statement without adding a trace of

tension to the room.

Cruz remained still, mirroring Hudson’s composure-a quiet testament to their discipline and professionalism.

The tension in Ashcroft’s jaw didn’t ease. He remained protective, cautious-and if he were being honest, he knew they could be trusted when it came to operations.

But their apparent closeness to Harper didn’t sit well with him.

Even he couldn’t fully explain the irritation, the quiet edge of annoyance that lingered-especially

when it came to Cruz.

Between the two, Cruz resembled him more. Similar height. Similar build. Even their jawlines

carried the same sharp definition.

And for reasons he couldn't quite name, that only made it worse.

Cruz lifted his wrist, briefly checking the time before lowering it again.

"Every minute counts for this mission," he said evenly. "I believe it's safe to say we can all agree it's

time to focus."

His gaze shifted to Ashcroft.

"This should also help ease your concerns, Mr. Ashcroft."

Without waiting for a response, Cruz reached into his bag and pulled out a tablet. He tapped the

screen a few times, then placed it at the center of the coffee table between them.

A soft ringing sound filled the room.

After a few beats, the screen flickered to life-revealing what looked like a bedroom. A cheerful female voice came through, bright and completely at odds with the tension in the room.

“Hey, Stud Muffin! Perfect timing-I was just about to go to bed! Are you in Damien’s office already?

The shift in tone was immediate.

Hudson remained still, though a faint tightening at the corner of his mouth betrayed him. Cruz didn’t even try to hide the flicker of amusement that crossed his face.

Chapter 457

Across from them, Ashcroft went rigid-his jaw tightening further, eyes narrowing as the voice

settled in.

Damien, meanwhile, leaned back slightly, a slow, knowing smirk threatening to surface as he took

in the room.

Cruz glanced at Ashcroft, a subtle smirk tugging at his lips before he answered smoothly,

“Yes, Ms. Harper. We’re here.”

Harper’s voice came through, bright and full of energy.

“Oh good! Sooo… how was the trip? Did you guys enjoy the extra snacks I sent over? Oh-and the snuggle blanket? Did you use it? They’re comfortable, aren’t they?”

Monroe cleared his throat, while James turned slightly to the side, coughing in a poor attempt to

cover a laugh.

Then Damien spoke.

“Good evening, Ms. Lin.”

Silence.

A sudden clatter echoed through the tablet-something falling-followed by hurried footsteps. A

second later, Harper's face appeared on the screen, a sheet mask hastily pressed onto her skin.

"Boss? Is that you?"

Damien cleared his throat lightly. "Ms. Lin… it seems we've caught you at a bad time."

"Oh-no, no, no," Harper said quickly, waving it off. "You know, just my beauty routine before bed. All good!"

She leaned closer to the screen, eyes bright.

"Sooo… looks like you've met Stud Muffin and Big Daddy, huh?"

Damien blinked. "Excuse me?"

Harper laughed, completely unbothered. "Big Daddy is Hudson, and Stud Muffin is Cruz! I personally gave them those nicknames. Cute, right?"

Before Damien could even react, Ashcroft beat him to it.

He couldn't hold it in any longer; his voice snapped sharp across the call.

"HARPER LIN!!!"

Harper's eyes widened, then a look of understanding-and exasperation-dawned. She rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Oh, of course, you're here too. And can you please stop saying my full name like I did something wrong? What are you, my dad or something?!"

She leaned closer to the screen, hands on her hips. "Besides, I'm not talking to you, okay?"

Harper shook her head, "Seriously, you are impossible!"

She leaned back and picked up the tablet, tapping the screen lightly. "Anyway! Like I said last time,

the masks are high-tech, so we'll need to activate them first and run a few tests-just to make sure

everything works perfectly. We also need to program them to sync with your voice and facial

movements. It's pretty much automatic-super easy, like setting up Face ID on your phone."

She paused, glancing up at the screen from her table, her eyes scanning as if checking something

carefully.

"All right, let's start! But, first, better safe than sorry-boss, your secure system is activated, right?"

Damien gave a small signal.

James immediately moved toward the desk, pulling a remote from one of the drawers. With a

single press of a button, the glass walls surrounding the office darkened, shifting into a deep tint.

The space sealed itself off-soundproofed, shielded from visibility, and completely isolated from

the outside.

A built-in privacy system.

“Perfect! Okay, boys, let’s get those bad boys out!” Harper’s voice rang through the tablet,

brimming with excitement.

For a moment, the entire room fell silent. Everyone held their breath, anticipation thick in the air as

they waited to see the masks unveiled.

Chapter 458

Cruz and Hudson exchanged a brief glance, then nodded once. They carefully placed the black box-looking like a sturdy suitcase-on the table.

The lock was anything but ordinary. Sleek, glassy, and humming with quiet energy, it looked more

like a futuristic interface than a security mechanism. Hudson placed his thumb against the

surface. Instantly, it glowed, projecting a holographic outline of his fingerprint. A soft beep confirmed recognition, the display flashing green.

Then six faint dots appeared. Hudson swiped across them, tracing a pattern with precise movements. Another beep, another green light. Then came a subtle click, the unmistakable sound

of the lock disengaging.

He lifted the latch and swung the case open. Inside, two glass containers lay nestled in custom foam, molded flawlessly to their shape. Hudson and Cruz lifted them with careful precision, placing each on the table like priceless artifacts-then smoothly shifting the black case to the floor, clearing space without breaking the moment.

The masks inside gleamed under the office lights, immaculate and almost otherworldly.

For a moment, the room held its breath. Every eye was on them, waiting for the next move.

Then, faint pulses of blue light flickered across each mask's surface, almost like they were alive-

watching back.

James and Monroe froze, both silently impressed. The masks were astonishing-every detail

mirrored their boss perfectly.

Ashcroft's reaction was even more striking. His eyes widened as he took in the lifelike features, the way the skin, jawline, and contours were captured with uncanny realism-as if the face itself had

been peeled off and preserved inside the glass.

It wasn't just a mask. It was a perfect replica, every line, every nuance, every subtle expression

frozen in place.

Damien remained silent, eyes sharp and calculating, impressed and undeniably curious.

Harper's voice cut through the room, bright and teasing. "Aren't they a beauty?" She peeled off her sheet mask, revealing her glowing face.

James cleared his throat. "Ms. Lin… these are…"

"Badass, huh?" Harper interrupted, grinning. "I know, I know…"

Ashcroft's voice snapped, sharp and horrified. "No! These are… some weird, scary-shit!"

Harper rolled her eyes, her smile fading, replaced by irritation. “Ugh! You’re such an ass! A total killjoy! Debbie Downer! Negative Nancy! Urgh! Seriously, stop being so annoying!”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened, voice low but clipped. “And you… are impossibly cheerful. It’s maddening.

Harper threw her hands up, mock horror in her tone. “Maddening? Me? Oh no, Mr. Grumpypants!

You’re the one sucking all the fun out of the room!”

Ashcroft’s lips twitched-eyes narrowing, fixed on the tablet screen. “What did you just call me?”

His voice was low, serious.

“Mr. Grumpypants!!” Harper shot back, totally unbothered.

Ashcroft snorted, disbelief lacing his tone. “Oh, so I’m Mr. Grumpypants… but you get to give these two ‘Big Daddy’ and ‘Stud fucking Muffin’ and I’m the grumpy one?!”

He leaned closer, jaw tight, jealousy written all over his face. “Seriously?!”

Harper blinked innocently. “What are you-”

Damien cleared his throat, his voice smooth as it cut clean through the moment. “As entertaining

as this is, I’m sure your… aggressive flirting can wait.”

Both Ashcroft and Harper stilled, caught off guard by Damien’s choice of words.

Ashcroft leaned back slightly, the edge in his posture easing just a fraction. On the screen, Harper blinked, momentarily speechless.

Around them, the other men suddenly found anything else far more interesting-averting their gazes, adjusting their stance, pretending they hadn’t just witnessed the exchange unfold.

The silence that followed was noticeably more awkward. Neither Ashcroft nor Harper made another attempt to argue.

Damien, unfazed, spoke again. “About the activation?”

Harper straightened on the screen, quickly regaining her composure. “Right, right! Okay-go ahead and take the masks out and put them on.”

She gestured toward the cases. “Those glass containers are sterilized and climate-controlled, so they’re clean and ready for use. The inner lining is already calibrated for skin contact.”

Chapter 459

Her tone shifted-lighter, but with a clear edge of precision now.

“Once you wear them, the system will automatically initiate a biometric sync-mapping your facial muscles, micro-expressions, and vocal patterns in real time. It’ll adapt to your natural movements,

so nothing looks stiff or off.”

She leaned closer to the screen, eyes sharp.

“Just give it a minute to fully calibrate. After that, the masks should respond like a second skin.”

Hudson and Cruz opened the glass cases in unison.

Without hesitation, Damien reached in and lifted his mask-his own face staring back at him. He

didn’t pause. In one fluid motion, he placed it on.

Ashcroft, on the other hand, hesitated. His gaze lingered as he turned the mask slightly, inspecting

the craftsmanship-the unnerving realism of it. Then, with a quiet exhale, he put it on as well.

The moment the masks settled into place, Harper tapped something on her tablet.

A faint, almost imperceptible electric sensation spread across their skin-like a soft current brushing over their faces.

It lasted only a few seconds. Then it was gone.

Harper’s voice came through, focused now. “Okay, initial contact established. Now I’m going to

share the calibration sequence-just follow it step by step. Boss, you go first.”

Damien straightened in his seat, eyes locking onto the screen.

The display shifted-Harper's feed minimizing as a clean interface took over. A facial grid appeared, thin lines mapping across his features, adjusting in real time-similar to setting up Face

ID, but far more detailed. Points of light traced his jawline, cheekbones, brow-tracking even the

slightest movement.

"Hold still," Harper instructed. "Let it map your baseline."

A soft tone chimed. The grid tightened, refining.

"Now, follow the prompts."

Text appeared on the screen.

Raise your eyebrows.

Blink twice.

Turn your head left… now right.

Each movement was mirrored instantly on the display, the system capturing micro-expressions

with precise accuracy.

Another chime.

“Good. Now voice sync.”

The interface shifted again, a waveform appearing at the bottom of the screen. A line of text

followed.

“Read what’s on the screen, clearly and naturally,” Harper said.

Damien’s voice was steady.

“System check. Voice calibration in progress. Confirming identity and synchronization.”

The waveform responded instantly, stabilizing as the system analyzed tone, pitch, and cadence.

A final tone sounded-clean and decisive.

“Synchronization complete.” Harper’s voice carried a note of satisfaction. “Perfect.”

Ashcroft went next, following the same steps as Damien-precise, controlled, leaving no room for

error.

Within minutes, both were finished.

“Alright, all good,” Harper said. “You can remove the masks now and place them back in the cases.

They did exactly that, lifting the masks off. Their “faces” returned to the glass containers, resting

once more in their molded cradles.

Harper tapped her tablet again.

The cases responded instantly-locking with a sharp click. A thin beam of green light swept

across the masks, scanning them from edge to edge. A soft burst of pressurized air followed, like a controlled air duster, clearing any remaining particles.

Three short beeps echoed.

No one spoke. The room remained still, every set of eyes fixed on the process.

“Okay, all done! Sanitation complete!” Harper chirped. “Next!”

Right on cue, Cruz retrieved another black suitcase and placed it on the table. He opened it with ease-the lock identical to the first-sleek, precise, and secure.

Inside, two more cases rested within the foam.

This time, the faces inside belonged to Cruz and Hudson.

Harper continued, “These are the secondary masks. No need to activate them-they don’t have the

full adaptive system like the first pair. Go ahead and try them on.”

Damien and Ashcroft exchanged a brief glance before reaching in.

They lifted the masks and put them on.

The fit was immediate-seamless.

Harper tapped her tablet again.

That same faint electric sensation spread across their skin-but this time, it was quicker, sharper.

The masks adjusted instantly, settling into place as if locking onto them.

Chapter 460

Like a second skin.

Harper leaned closer to the screen, studying them carefully. “Move your heads. Slowly.”

They did.

Damien turned his head slightly, testing the range. The movement was smooth-natural, without

resistance.

Ashcroft followed, slower, more deliberate, as if expecting something to go wrong.

“Now speak,” Harper prompted. “Anything. Just a few words.”

Damien went first. “Feels fine.”

His voice remained his own-steady, unchanged.

Ashcroft exhaled quietly before speaking. “No issues.”

Harper studied them through the screen, clearly satisfied. “Good. That’s exactly what we want-

comfortable.”

She leaned back slightly, crossing her arms.

“You’ll only need those when you make the transfer in Singapore. Ashcroft stays as himself. Boss-

you’ll wear Hudson’s face posing as Ashcroft’s security.”

She paused just long enough to let it settle before continuing.

“As discussed, Cruz and Hudson will fly straight to Taiwan. Hudson goes in as Damien Blackwood.

Cruz remains Cruz.”

A small, knowing smile tugged at her lips.

“And when the timing’s right, Cruz will switch-wear Ashcroft’s face. Just enough to make it look like Ashcroft arrived in Taiwan to join Damien.”

A quiet round of nods followed-everyone understanding the plan.

“Alright,” Harper continued, a hint of excitement creeping back into her tone. “Now we’re ready for the real part.”

Her gaze shifted to Cruz and Hudson. “Go ahead, boys.”

Without a word, both men moved. Carefully, almost reverently, they lifted Damien and Ashcroft’s masks from their cases and put them on.

Harper tapped her tablet once.

That same faint electric sensation flickered across their skin-quick, precise-before settling.

The masks sealed.

The room went still.

James stared, completely thrown. His eyes darted between them-between his boss… and the man now wearing his boss’s face.

“Boss…” he muttered, looking at Damien-then back at Hudson. “He… you… he…”

The words died in his throat.

He couldn’t even finish.

Because sitting there-

Was Damien.

And also… not.

Harper's grin widened on the screen. "Oh… that's not even the best part."

Her eyes gleamed.

"Go ahead," she said. "Say something."

Hudson went first.

"As entertaining as this is, I'm sure your… aggressive flirting can wait." echoing Damien's earlier

words.

But the voice that came out wasn't his.

It was Damien's.

The room stilled.

James blinked. Monroe straightened, eyes narrowing slightly as if trying to process what he was

seeing-and hearing.

Across from them, Damien stared at his own face… speaking in his voice.

Cruz scoffed softly, then spoke. "Ridiculous."

Ashcroft's voice echoed instead.

Ashcroft's brow lifted, a rare crack in his composure, as he tilted his head-studying the man now

wearing his face.

For a moment, no one said anything.

The resemblance wasn't just close.

It was exact.

Damien-now Hudson.

Ashcroft-now Cruz.

Even the smallest movements-the shift of their jaw, the subtle narrowing of their eyes-matched

perfectly.

Harper's grin widened on the screen. "Told you."

Silence lingered for another beat, thick with disbelief.

Then Monroe let out a quiet breath. "…That's insane."