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The silence lingered.

Not stunned-

Measured.

Damien’s gaze stayed on the man sitting across from him.

His face.

His voice.

His presence.

Perfectly replicated.

Not an imitation. Not even close.

Exact.

His eyes narrowed slightly-not in disbelief, but calculation.

Useful.

But Damien Blackwood was not a man who accepted anything at face value-no matter how

impressive they appeared on the surface.

Because something like this wasn't just useful-it was dangerous.

In the wrong hands, it wouldn't just deceive-it would destroy. Identities could be stolen, trust could be manipulated, entire systems could collapse under something this precise, this flawless.

His gaze shifted briefly between the men wearing the masks, sharp and assessing.

Control. That was what mattered.

Not the technology itself-but the people behind it.

Because a tool like this demanded more than skill. It required absolute loyalty, discipline, and restraint. The kind that didn't crack under pressure, didn't waver when tested.

Anything less – Would be a liability.

Across from him, Ashcroft leaned back slowly, eyes still fixed on Cruz-on himself. His jaw

tightened, irritation flickering beneath the surface.

"…I don't like it," he said flatly.

Cruz tilted his head, the movement eerily identical. "You don't have to."

Ashcroft's own voice answered him.

That did it.

Ashcroft leaned forward slightly, eyes sharpening. "Yeah," he muttered. "That's exactly the

problem.”

Hudson remained silent, composed, still wearing Damien’s face like it belonged to him.

The tension began to rise again-

Until Damien moved.

Just a slight shift forward.

“Enough.”

One word.

And that was all it took.

The room settled instantly.

Ashcroft leaned back again, exhaling slowly through his nose. The tension didn’t fully leave him- but it folded back under control, where it belonged.

For now.

On the screen, Harper grinned, eyes practically sparkling.

“Okay… now that’s impressive.”

Her tone had shifted-less teasing, more admiration.

“With this?” she continued, gesturing slightly. “No one will question a thing.”

Damien finally looked at her.

“Good.”

A pause.

Then-

“We proceed.”

The words landed simply.

Decisively.

And that was that.

A brief silence followed-short, but weighted.

Then Monroe spoke, as composed as ever.

“And if someone looks closer?”

That shifted the room.

Not panic. Not doubt.

Just awareness.

Because that was the real question.

Harper didn’t answer immediately this time.

For once, she actually paused to think.

And in that rare moment, something shifted.

A flicker passed through her eyes-sharp, dark, unmistakably serious.

Gone was the bubbly, carefree Harper Lin they were used to.

In her place stood someone else entirely.

Colder. Heavier. Dangerous.

Not the PR employee.

But the Oyabun of the Takahashi Empire-the woman who now ruled one of the most powerful and dangerous dynasties in existence.

“If someone looks close enough,” she said slowly, “then it won’t matter what face you’re wearing.”

Hudson’s lips curved faintly. On Damien’s face, the expression carried a darker weight-sharper,

more dangerous than it should have been. It wasn’t just the mask. Hudson himself carried his own

kind of danger-far from some random soldier. He was lethal, born and built for this.

“Then they’re already a problem.”

Beside him, Cruz-wearing Ashcroft’s face-tilted his head slightly, his gaze darkening.

“And what better way to handle problems…”

A brief pause.

“…than to eliminate them.”

Harper nodded lightly. “Mmhmm… Snaggletooth and Nibble have been quite lonely lately. They could use some playmates.”

Monroe blinked. “I’m sorry-who?”

Cruz answered without hesitation. “Ms. Harper’s pets.”

A pause.

“Two great whites.”

The room went still.

“They’re housed near our main base,” he continued calmly. “The island operates off-grid-same

location where we run the Takahashi cyber intelligence network across North America.”

His tone remained even.

“The surrounding waters are secured with submerged reinforced barriers set deep enough that smaller marine life can pass through unnoticed. To anything larger…” he paused slightly, “it’s a closed perimeter.”

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A beat.

“Low-level current runs along the outer grid-not enough to harm them, but enough to condition

movement. They don’t cross it.”

Harper smiled, satisfied. “So they stay exactly where they’re supposed to.”

Her eyes gleamed faintly.

“And they’re very well fed.”

Cruz continued, unfazed. “They help with… cleanup.”

A brief pause.

No one asked what that meant.

They didn’t need to.

A faint smile touched Cruz’s lips. “Very efficient, too.”

Ashcroft swallowed hard, as did James and Monroe. The revelation lingered in the air, heavy and

unsettling.

Harper-the sweet, bubbly woman on the screen-having something like that didn’t quite fit in their minds… and yet, it clearly did.

Then Harper tapped her tablet lightly, her expression shifting into something more thoughtful.

“But… anyways,” she said, tone light again, “I know it’s impressive already, but I still recommend a

test run.”

A few eyes shifted toward the screen.

“Even just a few hours,” she continued. “You need to see how the real-world reacts.”

Monroe tilted his head slightly. “And how do you suggest we do that?”

Harper smiled slowly.

“Oh, that part’s easy”

That smile alone was already a warning.

“Keep the masks on,” she said. “Walk around. Act like your ‘new faces’ and see if anyone notices.”

She shrugged lightly.

“Start at Blackwood Enterprises–at the company lobby, hallways, security checkpoints-places where people should recognize you without thinking.”

Her gaze shifted toward Cruz and Hudson.

“They’ve already studied your behavior. Mannerisms, posture, speech patterns. They won’t slip.”

Then back to Damien and Ashcroft.

“And you two? Well… technically, you’re posing as security. Just stay quiet. Stay alert. Speak only when necessary.”

A small, teasing tilt of her head followed.

“I’m confident Boss can do it, but I’m not so sure about Mr. Grumpypants. He might get a heart attack if he can’t talk.”

Ashcroft scoffed softly under his breath. “You…”

Harper raised an eyebrow, smirk forming as she crossed her arms, clearly saying this is exactly what I mean.

Ashcroft exhaled sharply, straightening slightly. “That’s easy. It won’t be a problem.”

Harper smirked faintly.

“Oh? Confident, are we?” she teased. “Careful, Mr. Grumpypants. Wouldn’t want you breaking

character.”

A brief pause.

Then her smile turned… wider, more mischievous.

She leaned closer to the screen.

“And if you really want to test it…”

“Why not…” she added, dragging it out slightly, “push it further.”

The room didn’t move-but the shift was felt.

“Go home,”

Ashcroft’s eyes narrowed immediately.

“…No way.”

Harper ignored him.

“Ohhh, Boss…” she said, eyes lighting up with mischief. “I wonder what you’ll do if Maya hugs

Hudson thinking it’s you.”

Silence.

Thick. Sharp.

“If that happens,” she continued sweetly, “you have to understand, okay?”

A pause.

“please don’t hurt Big Daddy.”

She winked.

That did it.

James choked on air, turning sharply away. Monroe dropped his gaze, adjusting his sleeve like his

life depended on it.

Cruz looked downright entertained.

Hudson didn’t move an inch. A subtle shift in the air told him he was being put on the spot.

He could feel Damien’s sharp gaze settle on him. For a moment, it felt like a target had been placed directly on his back.

Ashcroft went rigid. That damn “Big Daddy” again. His jaw tightened slowly, dangerously.

Damien said nothing.

But the faintest shift in his gaze suggested he had already considered it.

Monroe let out a quiet breath that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Ashcroft shot him a look.

“Don’t tell me you agree?”

Monroe didn’t even try to hide it now. He glanced at Ashcroft.

“I think Ms. Lin is right.”

Ashcroft leaned back again, dragging a hand down his face.

“…Unbelievable.”

Monroe cleared his throat and straightened.

“We already suspect Volkov has eyes on the manor. We just can’t pinpoint where. If this is true, then going back tonight with these masks on will be the first test.”

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He looked at Ashcroft for a brief moment before shifting his focus back to Damien.

“Boss, if the people closest to you don’t notice, then those eyes won’t either.”

Harper’s expression shifted slightly at that, as if something clicked.

“Oh!! Speaking of… it’s true. You do have eyes on the manor. Three to be exact.”

A casual pause.

“But don’t worry, I’m already handling it. They can’t get near the manor anymore, so these morons

are relying on advanced surveillance tech.”

Her lips curled faintly.

“Well… ‘advanced’ always has a loophole. It can be hacked. Not easily of course-you’d need good

specialists just to attempt it. But I’m not just good.”

A small, confident tilt of her head.

“I’m the best. So I didn’t just penetrate their system… I manipulated it. They’re seeing exactly what I

want them to see.”

Monroe’s eyes sharpened instantly.

“What? Where?”

Harper didn’t even blink.

“Four houses down. Across the road.

A light tap on her tablet.

“Just leave everything as it is. That’s the safest move. They won’t suspect anything if nothing changes. But if you move against them, Volkov will know they’ve been compromised.”

A beat.

“And we need them to keep reporting.”

Silence settled for a moment.

Then Damien spoke.

“Thank you, Harper. I owe you.”

Her smile softened just a fraction.

“Ohh, you’re welcome, Boss. Don’t mention it. It’s no biggie-actually keeps me entertained.”

Damien exhaled lightly, shaking his head at her antics. She might act carefree most of the time, but when she moved, she moved with precision-clean and seamless.

He turned slightly.

“James.”

“Sir.”

“Prepare,” Damien said calmly. “Clothing. Access. Movement clearance.”

A beat.

“Create a situation that justifies our presence throughout the building.”

James nodded immediately. “Understood.”

“Monroe.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Coordinate with him. I want zero disruption-but full exposure.”

Another nod. “Of course.”

That was it.

Decision made.

Damien stood.

“It’s settled,” he said.

He moved toward the floor-to-ceiling glass window, the city stretching out beneath him. His hands

folded lightly behind his back, posture relaxed-but controlled.

“We start the show in two hours.”

A pause.

“Any questions?”

Silence.

Hudson shook his head.

Cruz did the same.

Ashcroft remained still a moment longer before muttering, “None. For now.”

Damien’s lips curved into a faint, almost imperceptible smile.

“Good.”

He turned.

“Let’s keep it that way.”

The shift was immediate.

The tension that once filled the room didn’t disappear-It sharpened.

Every man moved with quiet precision, already stepping into their roles.

And as Damien stood there, watching it all fall into place-He allowed himself the briefest moment

of satisfaction.

Everything was aligned. The pieces moved.

And now-

They would see just how well the masks could lie.

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The room emptied with purpose.

Every movement aligned with the decision already made.

James and Monroe led Hudson and Cruz to the adjacent receiving suite-a private lounge

reserved for high-profile clients when Damien was unavailable to receive them immediately. Those granted access there were never ordinary guests.

The space was designed for discretion and comfort. A refined lounge more than a waiting room, it featured deep leather seating, polished wood finishes, and a private bar stocked with rare spirits and premium beverages. Even the bottled water was imported sparkling mineral from an exclusive European label. Beyond it, a private powder room allowed guests to freshen up in complete privacy.

It sat just outside the smaller executive conference room within Damien’s office-the one reserved only for select, high-value dealings. Not the main boardroom used for corporate theater, but the more private room where real business was handled.

At Damien's instruction, James prepared the suite for Hudson and Cruz to rest, recover from travel, and freshen up while he and Monroe moved to make preparations for the test run. Clothing, access clearances, movement routes, internal coordination-everything would be arranged before the masks were put to their first real test.

Still wearing Damien and Ashcroft's faces, Hudson and Cruz followed James and Monroe into the receiving suite.

Even with full knowledge of who stood before them, James and Monroe couldn't help the faint awkwardness settling over the room.

It was unsettling.

Instinct didn’t seem to care what the mind knew.

To break the silence, James cleared his throat.

“Um… ahem.” He gestured lightly toward the lounge. “Gentlemen, please help yourselves. Make yourselves comfortable. Monroe and I will handle the preparations. I’ll return shortly with clothing and your access passes.”

Hudson inclined his head slightly.

“Thank you, Mr. Horton.”

James blinked.

“Oh-no need for formalities,” he said quickly. “Just call me James.”

Hudson noticed the hesitation in him almost immediately.

There was a brief pause before he asked, calm and direct,

“Is there something you want to ask?”

James stiffened slightly.

“Oh… um, no. It’s just…”

His eyes flickered-despite himself-to Damien’s face.

“This feels strange. Talking to you like this when…”

Hudson finished it for him.

“When you’re looking at your boss’s face?”

James gave a reluctant nod.

“Yes.”

Hudson merely nodded, a faint smile touching Damien’s face in a way that felt oddly disorienting.

“That means it’s working.”

James frowned slightly.

“Excuse me?”

Hudson held James’s gaze with quiet ease.

“If Mr. Blackwood’s right-hand man feels intimidated-even knowing the truth-then the mask is doing exactly what it was designed to do.”

The words settled.

And suddenly James understood.

This wasn’t merely appearance.

It was presence.

Authority.

Perception.

The realization hit him almost visibly.

“…Right.”

His expression shifted.

Not discomfort anymore.

Recognition.

This was the first test.

And it had already begun.

James straightened slightly, recovering himself.

“We’ll leave you two to settle in.”

Then he reached into his pocket, pulled out a card, and handed it to Hudson.

“Here’s my number. Call me if you need anything.”

Hudson accepted it and inclined his head in a small, respectful gesture.

“Thank you.”

James glanced once at Monroe, then back at them.

“Alright then, we’ll go ahead. I’ll be back shortly.”

With that, he and Monroe turned and left.

Back in Damien’s office, silence settled almost immediately after the others left.

The shift was noticeable.

Ashcroft watched the door until it shut completely, as if making sure no one was coming back, then slowly turned toward Damien.

Or rather-

Toward Hudson's face.

He stared for a second before grimacing. "How exactly did we end up in this creepy freak show?"

Damien looked up at him and, instead of answering, gave him a slow smile.

On Hudson's face.

Ashcroft physically recoiled.

"See?!" he snapped, pointing at him. "Stop doing that. You're creeping me out even more."

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Damien let out a quiet scoff, clearly amused. "Stop being dramatic."

His calmness alone suggested none of this was remotely abnormal. Wearing another man's face

seemed to require no adjustment at all as he walked to his desk, took his seat, opened his laptop,

and carried on as though this were an ordinary morning.

Ashcroft stared at him in disbelief before following and dropping into the chair across from the desk.

“And you’re overly nonchalant,” he muttered.

Minutes passed.

No response.

Ashcroft sat there watching Hudson-no, Damien-typing away at the keyboard, brows faintly furrowed, looking genuinely focused, as if he had already moved on and Ashcroft’s discomfort wasn’t worth acknowledging.

That somehow made it worse.

Ashcroft slapped both hands against his lap in frustration.

“D! Come on, man! Talk to me!”

Only then did Damien look up from the screen.

“What exactly are you creeped out about?”

Ashcroft exhaled sharply, visibly frustrated, then pointed back and forth between Damien’s face

and his own.

“This,” he said. “This is what’s creepy.”

He gestured again, trying to articulate what was bothering him.

“We are us-but not. It feels wrong. Weird.”

His jaw tightened.

“And seeing another man wearing my face?” He leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. That’s fucking messed up.”

Damien’s mouth twitched, almost suppressing a smirk.

“Is it messed up because you can’t wrap your head around it,” he said calmly, “or because you don’t

like the person behind it?”

Ashcroft answered without hesitation.

“Both.”

Then, as if another offense suddenly resurfaced, he narrowed his eyes.

“Have you seen how cocky that Cruz guy is?”

Damien said nothing.

He merely leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest, and lifted one brow-silent,

waiting, almost inviting Ashcroft to continue.

Which, of course, he did.

Ashcroft leaned forward, clearly agitated now.

“I don’t like the way he looks. He’s giving me this… arrogant, full-of-himself, piece-of-shit vibe,” he said, disgust plain in his tone. “Like he thinks he’s above everyone or something.”

His irritation only seemed to build.

“And worse?” His eyes narrowed. “Harper calling him Stud fucking Muffin?”

He scoffed.

“Stud Muffin my ass.”

That finally earned a reaction.

Damien said nothing, only studied him for a long moment with quiet, unreadable scrutiny, one

raised brow still lifted in faint amusement.

Then, with that same maddening calm, he said-

“Jealousy doesn’t suit you.”

Ashcroft’s head snapped up.

“Who says I’m jealous?”

Damien just shook his head, uncrossed his arms, and looked ready to return to what he had been doing.

“I am not jealous,” Ashcroft repeated.

“Right. Okay,” Damien said dryly.

Ashcroft stared at him. “Come on, man.”

Damien exhaled, then closed his laptop and looked back at him, this time giving him his full

attention.

“Look, Nick-denying it only makes you look stupid.”

Ashcroft blinked.

“You like Harper. Admit it or not, that’s what this is.

He spoke with the same calm certainty he used when stating facts.

“Your irritation with Cruz is coming from jealousy. Harper seems close to those two-especially

Cruz. She gives them importance. She cares about them. There’s history there. A familiarity you

don’t have with her.”

His gaze held steady on Ashcroft.

“And that bothers you.”

Ashcroft just stared at him, caught off guard.

Damien continued, almost matter-of-factly. “Look, I don’t think Harper is into either of them. Especially Cruz.”

A faint smirk touched his mouth.

“She’s being playful. Just being Harper.”

His expression turned almost pointed.

“She’s a handful, and you already know that.”

Ashcroft looked genuinely unsettled now. He blinked, visibly thrown.

“Wh… what the fuck?” He narrowed his eyes. “You’re not Damien, are you?”

Damien shook his head. “Then how do I know you have a birthmark on your left butt cheek?”

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Ashcroft’s eyes widened.

For the first time all morning, he looked genuinely alarmed.

Damien ignored it.

“Look, man, for the love of God, I’ll say this one last time-if you like Harper, you better man up and

do something about it before it’s too late.”

That landed, because coming from Damien of all people, it sounded almost absurd-and

somehow serious.

Before Ashcroft could respond, a knock sounded at the door.

Damien looked up.

“Come in.”

The door opened, and James stepped inside, a tablet in one hand and two garment bags draped

over the other arm.

“Sir, everything is ready.”

He moved toward the seating area and placed the garment bag carefully on the couch.

“These are your security uniforms. All important meetings have been rescheduled as instructed,

except one-just a touch-base with the PR department regarding the Isla Aurelia progress update.”

He glanced at the tablet.

“A memo has also been sent to HR and Security advising that you’ll be conducting your quarterly

random walkthrough today. I’ve already briefed Hudson and Cruz on the flow. They’re already changing in the adjacent room.”

Damien gave a slight nod in acknowledgment.

“Good.”

James glanced at the tablet again, tapped a few times, then said, “The conference room is ready. Meeting with Ms. Trina’s team begins in twenty minutes.”

Damien’s gaze shifted to Ashcroft, who still looked like he hadn’t fully recovered from the previous

conversation.

A faint trace of amusement touched Damien’s expression.

“Come on,” he said as he stood. “Time to test your girlfriend’s project.”

Ashcroft’s head snapped up.

“My wha-”

But Damien was already moving.

“James, bring mine into the room. I’m changing now.”

“Yes, sir.”

James walked toward the couch, picked up one of the garment bags, and moved to follow Damien toward the private room.

As he passed beside Ashcroft, he paused just enough to glance at him.

“He said your girlfriend.”

Ashcroft turned sharply.

“What? What did you say?”

James blinked, almost innocent.

“Oh, I’m just repeating what the boss said. He said it’s time to test your girlfriend’s project.”

“Wheard him, Horton,” Ashcroft replied a little too quickly, the coldness in his tone not quite hiding

the sudden awkwardness beneath it.

James tried to hide a smile and only gave a small shrug.

Then, without another word, he followed after Damien toward the private room.

Leaving Ashcroft sitting there-

still trying to decide whether he’d just been mocked… or exposed.

Left alone, Ashcroft stayed where he was for a moment, trying to absorb everything that had just happened.

Damien’s words kept replaying in his head, annoyingly clear, annoyingly direct, and somehow far more unsettling than they had any right to be.

After a long exhale, he pulled out his phone and searched Harper’s name.

His thumb hovered over the call button.

For a man who had never hesitated in a crisis, he had never been more uncertain.

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The office had gone quiet, but Ashcroft barely noticed.

His attention was fixed entirely on the phone in his hand, his gaze locked on one name as if it carried more weight than it should.

It didn’t make sense. It shouldn’t have mattered this much.

And yet-here he was, hesitating.

For a man who had never struggled to make a decision, this felt… ridiculous.

He was about to press it-then stopped, his thumb hovering over the screen.

With a quiet exhale, he changed his mind and opened Messenger instead.

He typed, We need to talk.

Ashcroft stared at the words for a full second before frowning and deleting them.

Too serious.

He tried again.

Let’s talk when I get there.

He studied it, jaw tightening-then deleted that too.”

Too stiff.

A breath left him as he dragged a hand over his face, forcing himself to try again, slower this time.

We have to talk… properly, when I get there.

He read it twice.

Then grimaced-and deleted it.

What the hell was he doing?

His jaw tightened as frustration crept in.

This was ridiculous. He had negotiated with criminals, dealt with hostile governments, stared down men who would kill without hesitation-yet somehow, sending Harper Lin a simple message had him second-guessing every word like an idiot.

His grip tightened slightly around his phone as the memory surfaced-uninvited, unwelcome, and

far too clear.

That night in the cave-the heat between them, the way she felt against him, the way she sounded.

His eyes shut briefly.

The deal.

No attachment. No complications. Three months-and then it ended.

That was what they agreed on. No expectations. No questions.

Definitely not this-staring at her name on his screen like it meant something it wasn't supposed

He looked at her name again.

Then, after a long pause, typed one final message.

We had a deal, Ms. Lin. I'll uphold mine when I arrive. I expect the same from you.

The words sat there-authoritative, demanding.

He stared at the screen, not deleting it, not sending it either, his thumb hovering as something

unfamiliar crept in and refused to settle.

This was him. Direct. Uncompromising. A man who didn't take no for an answer.

And yet, the fact that he didn't even understand what this feeling was unsettled him more than he

cared to admit.

A part of him already knew. Somewhere along the way, he had broken the deal-and worse, he hadn't even noticed when it happened.

His jaw tightened as he forced his thoughts into something simpler-something he could control.

Right. This was just lust. Nothing more.

Once he got what he wanted, it would pass.

It had to.

His thumb hovered over the button, tension coiling as if the damn thing might explode beneath it.

For the first time in a very long while, Nicholas Ashcroft felt it-hesitation.

Not doubt. Not fear. Something sharper.

Something in his gut telling him this message might be a mistake he'd end up dealing with later.

But uncertainty was not something he tolerated.

Never had been.

If he wanted something, he didn't wait around thinking about consequences-he moved. He took

He finished it.

That was who he was.

He needed to do something-anything-to finally define whatever this was between them, because

not knowing was starting to piss him off.

His jaw set.

Then, before he could overthink it again, he pressed send.

The message vanished.

Delivered.

Ashcroft went still, staring at the screen like he could take it back if he tried hard enough.

"…Well," he muttered under his breath.

Too late now.

Before he could spiral any further, the door to Damien's private room opened.

Damien stepped out first, still wearing Hudson's face. To anyone unaware, it would have been

impossible to tell otherwise-same build, same posture, the illusion almost seamless at a glance.

He looked, for all intents and purposes, like Hudson himself stepping through the door.

Dressed in the fitted black elite security uniform of Blackwood Enterprises.

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Reserved only for the upper tier of Blackwood's security division-personnel who had undergone advanced training, cleared higher-level assignments, and operated above standard field teams.

On paper, they sat alongside Monroe's command structure. In practice, they were the handpicked few assigned to the company's most sensitive, high-profile operations.

Rarely seen. Rarely deployed. Never casually present.

Designed to disappear into a crowd-yet somehow never actually did.

Every line served a purpose: mobility, precision, silence over display.

It was meant to blend in at a glance.

It never did.

It didn’t ask for attention.

It commanded it.

An understated warning in fabric form-saying without words that the person wearing it wasn’t

ordinary.

And somehow, on Damien, it fit too well.

Ashcroft looked up-and immediately frowned.

“This is fucked up,” he said flatly.

Damien didn’t even slow down. “You’ll live.”

Ashcroft pushed himself up from the chair just as James followed behind, moving toward the

couch where he picked up the second garment bag.

“Here’s your uniform, Mr. Ashcroft,” James said, holding it out.

Ashcroft took it with a muted, “Yeah, yeah.”

But his attention had already drifted again.

Still stuck on the message.

On whether she’d reply. On what she’d say. On whether she’d even-

No.

Focus.

He still checked his phone anyway, then checked it again a second later, like repetition might

somehow change the result.

Nothing.

Fuck this.

A sharp exhale left him as he locked the screen and shoved it back into his pocket, jaw tightening as if that alone could force the thought out of his head.

Damien glanced at him, catching the edge of irritation-or maybe something closer to

nervousness, though he didn't comment on it. "Expecting a call?"

Ashcroft shot him a look. "No." A beat. "I'll go change."

Without waiting for a response, he turned and headed toward the private room.

A few minutes later, Ashcroft stepped back out, now dressed in the same fitted black elite security

uniform.

On anyone else, it would have made them blend seamlessly into the building's high-level security

personnel.

But on him-

It didn't quite land the same.

Not the posture. Not the ease. Not the still-contained tension in his stance.

Damien's gaze flicked over him once, assessing without hesitation.

"Relax your shoulders," he said.

Ashcroft frowned. "They are relaxed."

"They're not."

A quiet exhale left Ashcroft's nose as he forced them down a fraction.

“Better,” Damien said.

“Don’t get used to it.”

Damien ignored him.

James stepped forward, tablet already in hand.

“Hudson and Cruz are in position,” he reported. “They’ll enter the conference room after Ms. Trina’s team arrives. It’ll appear as a standard meeting-nothing unusual.”

Ashcroft’s focus sharpened immediately. “And us?”

James glanced down at the tablet. “Mid-meeting, you’ll enter with Monroe. He’ll introduce you both as elite security OICS assigned to the Isla Aurelia grand opening event.”

Ashcroft exhaled once. “Fine.”

Damien adjusted the cuff of his sleeve, his expression settling into something colder-less

conversation, more focus.

“How much longer before the meeting starts?”

“Five minutes, sir,” James replied. “They’re likely already on their way to the conference room.”

Damien gave a slight nod. “Let’s move to the private lounge. No one can see us from inside this room.”

They exited the office together, stepping into the executive corridor as the building’s rhythm continued around them-steady, unaware, unknowing, and completely unprepared.

As expected, Trina’s team arrived less than five minutes later and settled into the conference room, the atmosphere shifting into something structured and formal.

Trina couldn’t help but notice how quiet the floor felt compared to usual. Her gaze moved briefly

across the room before settling on James.

“Mr. Horton,” she asked politely, “if you don’t mind me asking… the floor seems quieter than usual

today. Where is Ellie?”

James remained composed, offering a professional smile without missing a beat. “Oh, Ms. Woods

is on field work today. She’s meeting with some suppliers.”

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Trina nodded and didn’t put any further thought into it. It wasn’t unusual-Ellie was often deployed for external meetings with suppliers or clients that didn’t require Damien’s direct involvement.

Moments later, the conference room door opened.

Hudson entered-posing as Damien.

The tailored suit, the posture, the face, the walk-everything aligned perfectly-enough that, to

anyone inside the room, it looked exactly like Damien Blackwood himself had just stepped in.

James immediately bowed as protocol dictated. The rest of the room followed, rising to their feet

in respectful greeting.

The meeting continued as normal, Trina moving through the presentation she had prepared to outline progress for the grand opening. Slide after slide covered financials, construction updates,

theme direction, design approvals, and the finalized list of suppliers.

She spoke with practiced confidence, guiding the room through each section without hesitation.

As she reached the final portion of the deck, she briefly addressed the last sensitive matter.

The images of Ethan Miller were displayed-not for circulation, but strictly as confirmation of

resolution.

Trina made it clear that all original copies had already been destroyed, and what remained in the presentation was only for verification purposes before being permanently deleted after the

meeting.

Damien-still in Hudson's guise-gave a slight nod. "Good. I don't want a single copy of those photos getting out. Make sure every trace of his link to Blackwood Enterprises is cut off. Physical

or digital-I want it all gone."

"Understood, sir," Trina replied immediately.

Damien then glanced at James.

James gave a subtle nod in return, already understanding without needing further instruction. He stepped aside, pulled out his phone, sent a quick message, then slid it back into his pocket.

A few minutes passed.

Then a knock came at the door.

It opened.

Cruz entered first-posing as Ashcroft.

Behind him was Monroe.

And following closely were the other two-Damien and Ashcroft, fully disguised as Hudson and Cruz-falling into position as the next phase of the test began.

Damien gave a brief glance around the room before speaking.

“I’m sure you’re already familiar with Nicholas Ashcroft,” he said, nodding slightly toward Nick.

The room responded with polite, restrained nods.

Then Damien shifted his attention, pointing subtly toward the two men standing beside Monroe.

“These are Hudson and Cruz,” he continued. “They’re part of our elite security team. They’ll be

working alongside Monroe in charge of security for the grand opening.”

His tone stayed even-controlled, matter-of-fact-as if it were the most routine introduction in the world.

He then shifted slightly toward Trina. “This is Trina, head of the PR department. She and her team are leading the grand opening.”

A brief pause.

“Coordinate with her for any security requirements.”

Trina nodded once, composed and attentive.

At that, Hudson and Cruz gave a slight, professional bow in sync.

“Understood,” they said in unison, their tone steady and respectful, perfectly fitting their roles as elite security personnel.

Chapter 470

The rest of the meeting continued without interruption.

Updates were reviewed, final confirmations were signed off, and timelines were reinforced. Everything proceeded exactly as planned-controlled, structured, uneventful.

When it eventually wrapped up, Damien closed the discussion with a brief acknowledgment, and

the meeting was formally dismissed.

No one in the room seemed to suspect anything unusual. Trina and her team gathered their

materials calmly, still fully convinced the entire interaction had been standard corporate

procedure.

As everyone began to leave, the women paused briefly, offering polite smiles as they offered their

regards for Maya, and casually asked whether both Maya and Harper would be able to attend the

grand opening.

The question landed lightly in the air-simple, conversational, harmless.

Damien responded without hesitation, assuring them that both Maya and Harper would be

present.

A few final courtesies followed-soft goodbyes, professional acknowledgments, the kind of exchanges that left no room for doubt or discomfort.

And one by one, the room slowly emptied.

Ashcroft gave a slow look around the room, then flicked his gaze toward Cruz.

“Big role you played there,” he said, voice edged with sarcasm. “Didn’t even say a word.”

His attention shifted back to Damien.

“Well,” he added, exhaling lightly, “that looks like a success.”

His mouth twisted slightly as he continued, “I think that’s enough freak show for the day.”

He reached up, already moving to pull the mask off-

“Stop.”

Damien’s voice cut through immediately.

Ashcroft froze mid-motion, hand still raised. He turned his head slowly, irritation now fully showing.

“What?!”

Damien didn’t move. Didn’t even blink.

“Not yet.”

Ashcroft let out a sharp, disbelieving breath, dropping his hand as he fully faced him.

“Come on, man,” he snapped. “I can’t stand another minute wearing this face-and watching

someone walk around in mine.”

Damien finally met his eyes, calm and unshaken.

“We’re just getting started.”

Ashcroft’s expression tightened.

“What? No… no way,” he snapped, stepping forward slightly. “How are you not bothered by this?”

Damien didn’t react.

“We need to test how far this can go,” he said evenly.

Ashcroft let out a sharp breath and dragged a hand down his face.

“Let’s be real,” he said, voice low but frustrated. “Do you really think Volkov’s men-or even Volkov

himself-are that smart? We already proved it works. Trina and her team didn't suspect a thing."

He scoffed lightly.

"And honestly? Even I'm getting creeped out by this-and I know exactly what's going on behind it."

He pulled a chair out and slumped into it, then lifted his gaze back to Damien.

"What makes you think Volkov's men are going to notice anything?" he added sharply. "They're

idiots. They can't even get near the manor."

Damien's eyes stayed steady.

"We can't be sure, Nick."

A pause.

“What do you want us to do?” Damien continued. “Sit back and assume Volkov’s too stupid to

catch on? He’s already watching us. Closely. One wrong step and everything goes sideways.”

His tone hardened slightly.

“That’s a risk I’m not willing to take.”

Silence followed.

Then-

“If I may.”

Cruz’s voice cut in.

All attention shifted to him.

He cleared his throat once before continuing.

“Mr. Ashcroft… Ms. Harper spent a lot of time and effort making these masks for one reason. To help her friends.”

His tone stayed controlled, but firm.

“I’m not enjoying this any more than you are. I understand the concern. But I’m just doing my job.”

A beat.

“Let’s act like grown men here and focus on what needs to be done.”

Ashcroft’s jaw tightened immediately, ready to fire back-

But Cruz lifted a hand slightly, stopping him.

“Before you say anything else,” Cruz added calmly, “for the record+my loyalty to Ms. Harper is exactly that. Loyalty and respect. Nothing more.”