

Hitched 1221

Chapter 1221

This is really bad news for his company. Who would want to invest in a total jerk?

Investing in a scumbag comes with risks-what if the government cracks down on him one day? All their money would go down the drain.

So, the big shots who were planning to invest started to hesitate.

Their hesitation made Zane panic.

The stuff online had confirmed his ties to Central Pharmaceuticals. There was no way to deny it now-he just had to own up and deal with it.

He personally called up all those big-name investors who had shown interest before.

But, without exception, he got the cold shoulder from every single one of them.

Zane started to freak out. Without new investments, he couldn't expand production, and if he couldn't expand, there was no way he could land that huge contract coming up.

We're talking billions here-no way he could let that slip through his fingers.

He was counting on this deal to make it big!

As Zane was getting desperate, his assistant suddenly announced, "Boss, Alpha just reached out to us. He wants to talk about an investment."

"Alpha? That investment genius?"

"Yeah, that's him."

"I thought he and Tarquin didn't get along..."

Zane mulled it over for a second. "Get in touch. I'll talk to him myself."

It didn't take long for Elliot, using a voice changer, to contact Zane as Alpha.

Elliot offered to invest five billion, but there was a catch-they had to sign a profit- guarantee agreement.

Zane promised that Central Pharmaceuticals would earn at least ten billion in profit within three months.

If he didn't hit that number, he'd hand over full controlling interest in Central Pharmaceuticals to Alpha.

Elliot agreed. And if Zane did hit the target, Elliot would throw in another ten billion as a follow-up investment.

Zane knew there was a huge order coming in, so he was feeling pretty confident.

He didn't hesitate and signed the agreement that very afternoon.

Elliot and Tarquin wasted no time-they wired the five billion straight into Central Pharmaceuticals' account.

A little bait is always worth it for a big hunt.

Besides, they figured the money would come back to them soon enough.

That evening, Tarquin's phone rang. It was Benjamin.

Benjamin said, "The antidote we got from Zane-it does work against this virus."

"But it only works on the first generation, the original strain. Once the virus mutates, the antidote is almost useless."

"So, if we use it on Verity's illegitimate kid, it won't help at all."

Tarquin frowned. Only the original strain, huh...

But at least it means the antidote is effective for something.

This virus originated from Karl Town, almost certainly the work of that mysterious figure.

If Zane had access to this virus-and the antidote-it meant he was involved with that mystery man.

What exactly was the connection between Zane and this guy?

Why would Zane be mixed up in this?

Tarquin pressed his fingers to his brow, deep in thought.

"Is there any way we could use the antidote from Zane to develop a real cure for the mutated virus?"

Benjamin sighed. "It's tough. Really tough."

Tarquin said nothing. If they couldn't find a cure, this would be a ticking time bomb for humanity.

If it ever spread on a large scale, it would be a disaster.

Just like the pandemic a few years back...

Mysterious figure. Virus. Antidote. Central Pharmaceuticals. Zane. A ten-billion profit in three months!

Tarquin's mind whirled with worry. He had a bad feeling-like something huge and terrible was about to happen.

"What's the World Pharmaceutical Organization saying?" he asked.

Benjamin replied, "We reported the virus as soon as we found it, but we haven't heard anything from them. I guess they haven't found a way to deal with the mutated strain yet."

Tarquin fell silent.

Just then, Elysia came home.

Seeing the worry lines on his face, Elysia asked, "Honey, what's wrong?"

Chapter 1222

Tarquin put away his phone and pulled her into his arms with a quick kiss.

"Just got back?" he asked.

"Yeah. The kids are downstairs with Mom. Caroline and Blossom stayed over at Winona's; they didn't come home with us."

Tarquin said, "Don't worry about them. I've arranged for someone to keep an eye on them. They'll be safe."

"I know. But what's on your mind? Talk to me," Elysia said as she settled onto his lap, gently smoothing the worry lines from his brow.

Tarquin wrapped an arm around her waist, his thoughts heavy.

Zane had both the virus and the cure-and claimed he'd make a billion dollars in three months. That kind of confidence? It was... unnerving.

He could just release the virus, then sell the cure for a fortune. It wouldn't be the first time something like this happened out here. Plenty of pharmaceutical companies played both sides of the fence.

But Zane's so-called 'cure' couldn't even kill the mutated strain. If he really unleashed this thing, the consequences would be unimaginable.

The only real solution was to develop a working antidote-fast. Before Zane or his mysterious partner made their move.

But Tarquin wasn't a doctor. He could only do so much.

"Is there a problem with the antidote Zane gave you?" Elysia asked suddenly.

Tarquin's eyes flicked up. "Did you hear something?"

Elysia replied, "Dr. Benjamin called this afternoon. I was helping Winona tidy up, so I missed it. When I called back, he was really vague-hung up after just a few words."

"Dr. Benjamin knows I have a medical background. Maybe he wanted my help with the antidote?"

Tarquin didn't answer, but the look in his eyes said enough.

Benjamin knew Elysia was skilled in alternative medicine, and if he'd hit a wall with the virus, it made sense he'd turn to her. But Benjamin also knew there was something shady going on with Zane and his secret partner, and working with an unknown virus was dangerous. He wouldn't involve Elysia unless he had no other choice.

So when he reached out, he was hesitant, not wanting to say too much. Elysia pressed, "Is that what you're worried about? The antidote?" Tarquin was quiet for a moment, then decided to keep it to himself.

"No, just work stuff. Nothing you need to worry about. I've got it handled."

He didn't want Elysia involved unless it was absolutely necessary. Besides, Central Pharmaceuticals was still too small-Zane wouldn't release anything just yet. He'd wait until he could mass-produce the antidote and really cash in.

For now, there was no immediate danger. Maybe the World Pharmaceutical Organization could handle it. If not... maybe then Elysia could help.

Elysia didn't press.

"Should I call Dr. Benjamin and check in? I know my way around herbal remedies; maybe I could help if there's an issue with the antidote," she offered.

"No need. If Benjamin really needs you, he'll say so," Tarquin replied.

Just then, Evan's cheerful voice floated up from downstairs.

"Mommy! Grandpa's home!"

Elysia's face lit up. "Dad's here?!"

"Sounds like it."

Elysia's worries melted away as she hurried downstairs to see Clayton, Tarquin at her heels.

Downstairs, Clayton was lifting the kids high into the air, spinning them around one by one. After everyone had a turn, Baby, clutching her stuffed bunny, piped up, "Grandpa hasn't lifted Lan yet! Grandpa, it's Lan's turn!"

Baby adored Lan. She couldn't even fall asleep unless Lan's little dog bed was in her room at night.

Chapter 1223

Lan was being extra sweet today, glued to Baby's side like a little shadow.

Clayton's face lit up with a warm, doting smile.

"All right, all right-Grandpa's got you. Come here, let Grandpa hold our Baby's

little pet."

He scooped up the tiny bunny, gently stroking its fur, while the kids gathered around, bubbling with excitement.

The scene was pure coziness-a slice of home.

Just then, Elysia came down the stairs, cheerful as ever.

"Hey, Dad," she called, grinning at Clayton.

Clayton's eyes sparkled with pride when he saw his precious girl. He couldn't hide

how much he adored her. But a second later, his brow furrowed in concern.

"Haven't been sleeping well lately?" he asked, studying her face. "You look thinner... and are those dark circles under your eyes?"

Elysia laughed it off.

"I was a bit worried about Winona the past few days-didn't sleep much. But it's okay now."

Clayton had seen all the drama online about Winona and Zane. He shook his head, frowning.

"The Newsom family really caught a bad break, running into such a jerk! What goes around comes around, though—guys like that never end up happy."

With that, he shot a look at Tarquin, feeling secretly grateful.

The Hawkins family lucked out, he thought. They got themselves one hell of a son-in-law.

Still, the next moment, a pang of sadness hit him.

There wasn't even a wedding photo in the house.

His daughter never wore a wedding dress. She never had a real wedding.

What girl doesn't want to walk down the aisle in a stunning white dress and have her big day?

His baby got none of that—just a marriage certificate.

Of course, he didn't blame Tarquin for any of it. But his heart ached for his girl, his one and only daughter. He wanted nothing more than for her to be happy, to have no regrets.

Clayton took a deep breath, pushing down the feeling so he wouldn't spoil the mood. With a smile, he turned to Elysia.

"I brought you guys some gifts!"

He set Lan down carefully and wheeled his suitcase over, popping it open. The case was stuffed with all kinds of quirky little trinkets-not fancy, but each one fun and unusual.

"Wow!" The kids squealed, rushing over in a noisy bundle.

Clayton picked out a mini bunny keychain and handed it to Elysia.

"This one's for you. Picked it out especially-see if you like it."

Elysia examined it. "This looks familiar somehow..."

Clayton's face lit up.

"It's just like the one you loved as a kid-the one that used to hang in your room, remember?"

Elysia's eyes widened. "That's why! It really does look just like it!"

"Do you like it?"

She nodded, swallowing back tears. "Yeah! I love it. Thanks, Dad."

For a second, it felt like fatherly love had taken on a physical shape, right there in her hand.

Clayton's grin stretched from ear to ear.

"Silly girl, what's with the 'thanks'? As long as you like it, that's all that matters. Ha!"

Honestly, his daughter liking his little gift made him happier than landing a billion- dollar deal.

"Grandpa! Is this one for me?"

"Grandpa, I want this one!"

"Grandpa, this is awesome-I love it! Thanks, Grandpa!"

Pamela came back in after her therapy session, and the kids scrambled over.

"Grandma, Grandma, Grandpa's home!"

"Look, Grandma Grandpa brought us all these presents! He even got some for you!"

The living room buzzed with laughter and chatter for a good long while before it finally quieted down.

Later, Elysia and Emmett headed into the kitchen to whip up some extra side dishes for Clayton.

Pamela and Baby joined in to help.

Meanwhile, Elliot, Evan, and Elijah dashed upstairs to inspect their new toys.

That left just Clayton and Tarquin alone in the living room.

Clayton sipped his tea, glancing at Tarquin every now and then, clearly wanting to say something but holding it back.

Chapter 1224

Tarquin could already guess what was on Clayton's mind, so he spoke up first.

"I've already asked someone to tally up everything I own," he said, his voice steady. "Once it's all done, I'm transferring everything to Elysia's name. On our wedding day, everything will be hers."

Clayton gaped at him, genuinely stunned. "Wait-what?!"

Tarquin just nodded, looking him straight in the eye. "I don't really know how else to show her how much I love her. I want her to have everything-me, my heart, my money. All of it."

He hesitated, then added, "Dad, it was my fault Elysia never got a real wedding. I regret that, every day. That's why I've been planning—so I can finally give her the ceremony she deserves."

Clayton was quiet for a moment, his face softening, eyes misty. "Son, I know everything you two have been through. Not having a wedding wasn't just your fault. But the fact that you want to make it right... that means the world to me."

He took a deep breath, his voice rough with emotion. "Elysia is my only daughter. For years, I couldn't be there for her, and it broke my heart. Now that I have her back, I can't stand the thought of her ever being hurt."

Tarquin nodded solemnly. "I understand, sir. She's my one and only, too. I'd never let anything happen to her."

"You and Mom don't need to worry," he went on earnestly. "Whatever other women have, Elysia will have. And whatever they don't have, I'll make sure she gets it anyway."

"We'll take wedding photos. We'll throw the best wedding anyone's ever seen. Every tradition, every celebration-I won't let her miss out on a single thing."

Hearing that, Clayton finally let out a breath he'd been holding for years. "You have no idea how much that puts my mind at ease. I trust you, Tarquin. If you say it, I know you'll do it."

He hesitated a moment, then got a little serious. "But listen, son, let me be a dad and nag you for a second, okay? I know love is the most unpredictable thing in this world."

"I'm not asking you to promise to love her for the rest of your life. All I ask is—if the day ever comes when you don't love her anymore, please, don't hurt her. Just tell me. I'll come and get her, no questions asked. I won't let her get caught up in your life if it's not working anymore."

He straightened, his jaw set. "But if you ever do anything to hurt her—if you ever pull a Zane and Winona situation—I swear, I'll come after you myself, old bones and all."

Tarquin didn't look the least bit offended. He just smiled gently. "I get where you're coming from, Dad. But honestly... you don't have to worry. If anything, it'll be her leaving me, not the other way around."

"And if that ever happens," he said with a lopsided grin, "I hope you'll remember I'm your son-in-law and put in a good word for me. Because without her, I'd be totally lost."

Clayton just stared at him for a second, speechless, his eyes rimmed red.

At dinner, for the first time in twenty years, Clayton picked up a glass of wine, grinning ear to ear as he toasted Tarquin.

Neither of them could really hold their liquor.

After a few rounds, one was completely wasted, the other pleasantly buzzed.

Later that night, once Elysia had tucked the kids and her parents into bed, she made her way back to the bedroom.

She'd barely stepped inside when Tarquin appeared in the doorway, blocking her path.

Startled, Elysia leaned back against the door. "What are you doing standing there?"

"Waiting for you," he said, the whiff of whiskey on his breath unmistakable.

She looked him up and down-still in dress pants and a button-down. "You haven't showered? I thought you'd be done by now."

"Can't," he replied, almost sulking.

"Huh?"

"I'm drunk. Can't shower alone-I'll just fall over."

Elysia rolled her eyes. "You said you weren't drunk after dinner. Even told Heath to make Dad some hangover soup."

Tarquin blinked, a lazy grin spreading across his face. "Wasn't drunk then. But now? Wasted."

He leaned in, his eyes dark and smoldering, murmuring right in her ear, "Besides... the thought of showering with you? That's enough to make me dizzy."

A shiver ran down Elysia's spine, her cheeks flushing hot.

Chapter 1225

"Who said I was taking a shower with you?!"

"I'm drunk, Elysia. I can't do it by myself. You gotta come with me."

Elysia flushed bright red, pretty sure she knew exactly what he was getting at. "If

you can't shower alone, then just skip it tonight!"

"No way. I feel gross."

"I don't care if you're gross."

"Well, I do."

Elysia rolled her eyes. "Then sleep on the floor!"

"It's cold down there. I'll catch a cold."

"Fine, then take the couch!"

"Sofa wrecks my back. It's not healthy."

She gave him a withering look. "Then sleep wherever you want. Just move, I'm going to bed."

She tried to brush past him, but suddenly Tarquin pressed his entire body against her, pinning her to the door.

Their bodies were flush-no space left between them.

Through her pajamas, Elysia could hear the hammering of his heart-and feel the heat radiating off his skin.

Her own heart was picking up speed, her breathing coming quicker.

The room seemed to get ten degrees warmer in a heartbeat, charged with a sultry tension.

Elysia swallowed, lowering her voice in a warning. "Tarquin! Move it or I'll start yelling."

She had her reasons for not giving in.

He was always gentle with her-except in the bedroom, where he turned into a completely different person.

By day, he was a saint; by night, a wolf!

A wolf who hadn't had a steak in about a century, by the way he acted.

And this whole "showering together" thing? No way. Way too embarrassing.

Worse, the guy had a thing for bathroom antics—he got even more riled up in there. Last time, she could barely walk for days.

Winona's mess still wasn't sorted out, her dad had just arrived, and she couldn't spend tomorrow laid up in bed.

So, absolutely not!

Elysia tried to push him off, but Tarquin, tipsy and shameless, just pretended not to hear her.

He pinned her wrist above her head with one hand, gently tilted her chin up with the other, making her meet his gaze.

He brushed a feather-light kiss over her lips, then murmured at her neck, "Come on, let's shower together."

"No way! Mmm—"

Tarquin nipped at her neck, repeating, "Together."

"No! No, I said-mmm—"

He bit her again, insistent. "Together."

Elysia realized arguing was useless and tried reasoning instead, "Tarquin, seriously, cut it out. I've got stuff to do tomorrow, I need to actually sleep-ugh, you jerk, get off—"

But Tarquin wasn't listening. His touch made her dizzy, her breathing uneven.

She almost wanted to retaliate and bite him right back to shock some sense into him, but then-footsteps sounded outside the door.

Elysia tensed up instantly.

Tarquin leaned into her ear, whispering threateningly, "If you don't cooperate, I'll yell and tell them you took advantage of me while I'm drunk."

Elysia stared at him, scandalized. Was he even serious?!

She was about to curse him out when the footsteps stopped right outside.

"Ma'am, your hangover soup's ready!" came the housekeeper's voice.

Elysia panicked—but before she could reply, Tarquin covered her mouth in a deep, heated kiss.

Elysia wanted to shove him away, but didn't dare make much noise-she could only let him have his way, feeling like a thief caught in the act.

With just a door between them and the housekeeper, there was something illicit and thrilling in the air.

The housekeeper waited a moment, then, getting no answer, left quietly with the soup.

As soon as the coast was clear, Tarquin scooped Elysia up bridal-style and strode straight to the bathroom-kissing her all the way.

Chapter 1226

Right before things went all the way, Elysia clung to her last shred of sanity and warned Tarquin in a shaky voice, "Only... only once, okay?"

Tarquin's breathing was heavy, but he agreed right away. "Okay! Just once."

The night was soft, and love was electric.

Of course, things never go exactly as planned.

That "just once" quickly turned into twice... then three times... and, well, you get the idea.

So the next morning, Elysia was absolutely wiped out.

She tried to get out of bed several times, but her legs were jelly. She felt like she'd been trampled by a stampede of wild horses.

There was no way she was getting out of bed. The minute her toes touched the floor, her legs started trembling.

Lying defeated on the bed, Elysia shot Tarquin a murderous glare and gritted her teeth. "Tarquin, you jerk!"

Tarquin knew he'd gone way overboard. He didn't dare argue back-he was worried if he made her mad, she wouldn't let him anywhere near her again.

"I know, I'm a total jerk. I'm sorry, it's my fault..." He apologized over and over, trying everything to make it up to her.

He brought her pain relief cream, helped her to the bathroom, even took care of every little thing so she wouldn't have to worry.

"I know you're embarrassed and don't want Dad and Mom to know you can't get out of bed. Don't worry, I've got a cover story all set."

"If Dad asks why you're still in bed, I'll say you pulled an all-nighter studying for your psychology certification."

"Studying?" Elysia shot him a look. "More like you kept me up all night!"

She wasn't buying it. "What if Dad asks me what book I was reading?"

"He probably won't," Tarquin tried to reassure her.

Elysia glared. "What if he does?"

Tarquin grinned, "Then I'll just grab one of your books from the study and show him."

Elysia frowned at his smug smile. "What are you smiling about?!"

His grin only got wider, but when Elysia shot him another icy glare, he quickly coughed and tried to look serious. "Don't be mad. I'm not laughing. Does my excuse work?"

Of course the excuse would work. But Elysia was in no mood to be

friendly, so she just ignored him and

pulled the comforter over her head, pulled the

muttering curses at Tarquin under

her breath.

She'd planned to meet up with Winona today, and maybe take her parents and the kids out for brunch and a stroll around the park. Now, all her plans were ruined. She was stuck in bed, totally at Tarquin's mercy.

Tarquin gently patted her through the covers. "You rest. I'll bring you some breakfast."

"I don't want any!"

"You'll be hungry..."

"Go away! Leave me alone!"

Tarquin just smiled even more and tucked her in, trying to look as apologetic and helpful as possible.

Downstairs...

Clayton had been up for hours already.

He'd taken a morning walk around the neighborhood, checked out Elysia's place, and now he was

settled on the living room couch net

flipping through a thick stack family photo albums-pictures of the kids when they were little ones Elysia had printed out years ago.

The photos brought a smile to his face. When Tarquin finally came down alone, Clayton looked up and asked, "Where's Irene?"

Tarquin lied smoothly, not missing a beat. "She stayed up all night reading. She's catching up on sleep and said not to wake her for breakfast."

Clayton frowned in concern. "What book kept her up all night?"

"Some psychology stuff. She wants to get certified, maybe look for a job down the line."

Clayton shook his head. "She shouldn't be losing sleep over books. It's not good for her health."

"I'll talk to her. No more all-nighters," Tarquin promised.

Clayton nodded thoughtfully. "So Irene's thinking about going back to work?"

"Yeah. She's got dreams and ambitions, and I fully support her."

Clayton smiled. "Work can be tough, but if it's what she wants, we should let her go for it. It's good to have dreams. Do you know what she wants to do?"

Chapter 1227

"She wants to open a center-specifically for kids struggling with mental health issues."

Clayton raised an eyebrow. "Really? But she didn't even major in psychology. What made her want to do that?"

"She spent a few years living out in the wilderness. Picked up a lot on her own. Now she's really into it."

Clayton perked up at the mention of the wilderness. "I've been meaning to ask you about that! I heard back when Irene had that accident, someone rescued her, and she ended up living in the woods with her kids for five years. Do you know who helped her?"

"No idea."

Clayton looked surprised. "Not even you know?"

"Nope. Elysia told me she promised her rescuer she wouldn't talk about what happened out there, or share anything about the person."

Clayton's jaw dropped. "That secretive, huh?"

"Yep."

Clayton sighed. "I was hoping to find out who it was, so I could thank them properly."

Tarquin, for his part, felt more curiosity than anything else.

He wondered what kinds of people lived in those woods, and what exactly went on out there.

Elysia was amazing with holistic medicine-she always knew what to do when someone was sick.

And Elliot, Evan, and Emmett? Each of those kids is a prodigy in their own right. Sure, they've got natural gifts, but you don't get that far without a good mentor.

No way Elliot could be making that much money as a kid without someone guiding him.

No way Evan could be that skilled.

And Emmett—no matter how smart he is—wouldn't have picked up all those sleight-of-hand tricks on his own!

And then there's White, that clever little snake of theirs. You don't find animals like that unless they come from a truly unique place.

There aren't many things in this world that fascinate Tarquin-but the people from Elysia's past, and everything that happened in those woods, definitely did.

He was very, very curious.

Downstairs, Pamela and the kids were starting to wake up.

Whoever bumped into Tarquin first would always ask about Elysia.

He brushed off their questions with the same line: "She stayed up too late reading, so she's catching up on sleep."

Once breakfast was ready, Tarquin took a tray upstairs.

Elysia hadn't fallen asleep yet. When she saw him, she immediately rolled her eyes.

Tarquin just grinned. "Nobody

sus thing. They all say you

can't keep burning the candle at both ends, even if you're studying.

Health comes first." fo FindNovel

Elysia gritted her teeth. "You're such a jerk."

Tarquin chuckled. "I made you some oatmeal the way you like it. Let me help you eat a bit."

He set the breakfast on her nightstand, helped her sit up, and tucked a pillow behind her back.

Sitting next to her on the bed, Tarquin spooned oatmeal for her.

Elysia was starving-exhausted and hungry, like she'd been doing manual labor all night.

As he fed her, Tarquin said, "Dad was asking earlier about your rescuer from the woods. He wants to find a way to thank them."

Elysia paused mid-bite. "How'd that come up?"

"He just brought it up. Are you planning to go back out there sometime?"

"Yeah. The kids have wanted to for

situatie we've sorted out Zane's

and Mom's health is better,

at

I promised them we'd make a trip. Honestly, I want to go back too."

Tarquin immediately said, "Take me with you when you go." All his curiosity pointed straight to that place. Elysia looked at him, hesitating.

He jumped in with a reason: "Come on-your-rescuer out there obviously cares about you and the kids. Don't you think they'd want to meet your husband? It's like meeting your in-taws for the first time."

Elysia just muttered, "We'll see when the time comes."

They both thought it would be ages before they went back.

Neither of them realized just how soon they'd need to return-and this time, there

was no avoiding it.

Chapter 1228

After breakfast, Tarquin's phone suddenly rang-it was Benjamin.

"Verity's illegitimate son," Benjamin said, his voice low and urgent. "His condition's gotten worse. Honestly, I don't think he's going to make it."

Tarquin's heart sank. That was the last thing he wanted to hear.

If this virus could do more than just give people a nasty cold—if it could actually kill someone—then things were a whole lot more serious than they'd thought.

He pressed a hand to his forehead, took a moment, then pocketed his phone and turned to Elysia.

"Hey, why don't you just relax here at home today? If you need anything, just call me. I have to step out for a bit."

Elysia could see the worry etched on his face. "Is everything okay? Did something happen?"

Tarquin forced a small smile. "It's just work stuff. Nothing for you to worry about, and don't stress about Dad either. I'll handle everything. You just get some rest, alright?"

He leaned down, kissed her forehead, and tucked the blanket more securely around her before heading out.

Downstairs, he found Clayton and asked about the day's plans.

Clayton, always thoughtful, didn't want the whole family hanging around the house and disturbing Elysia's rest, so he had planned to take Pamela and the kids out for a walk—maybe to the park or for some ice cream.

Tarquin quickly arranged for a couple of guys to keep a discreet eye on them, just in case.

With everything at home squared away, he drove straight to the hospital. Benjamin was out of quarantine now, but his face was drawn and grim.

"It doesn't look good," he said, voice heavy.

Tarquin jammed one hand in his pocket and peered through the glass window into the hospital room.

Verity's son lay in bed, hooked up to more machines than Tarquin could count, the monitors beeping erratically, as if life itself might just slip away at any moment.

Benjamin spoke quietly. "His organs are shutting down. His liver looks like it belongs to someone in their eighties."

Tarquin frowned. "Is it the virus?"

"Yeah. And some of the doctors and nurses who were exposed are showing similar symptoms."

"So... no cure? Nothing?"

Benjamin shook his head, defeated. "The virus mutates too fast. Every time we

think we're onto something, it changes. We just can't keep up."

Tarquin exhaled sharply. "Why do some people get infected and others don't? You were exposed, and you're fine."

"We haven't figured that out yet."

Tarquin blew out a long breath. "Did you ask him about Zane?"

"I did. He doesn't know Zane, never heard of Central Pharmaceuticals either."

Benjamin hesitated, then asked, "Should we try talking to Zane? If this virus gets out, it'll be a disaster."

Tarquin shook his head. "It's

pointless. Zane only cares about money. As long as he's got the antidote and can make a fortune off it, he won't walk away from this. And even if we take Zane out, whoever's really behind this will just find someone new to keep things going."

There were only two ways to end this.

Either they found a cure, fast.

Or they went after the source-find whoever was behind it all, and stop the virus at its root.

Neither option was going to be easy.

Benjamin's jaw tightened.

"Whoever's behind this, and Zane

too-they're monsters. Putting the

whole world at risk, just to make a

buck. Don't they worry about karma catching up to them?"

Tarquin's frown deepened, his mind racing with worry.

Benjamin asked, "Any luck figuring out who this 'mystery man' is?"

Tarquin didn't answer, just shot him a look. Instead, he asked, "How long does he have?"

Benjamin glanced back at the patient. "Could be months. Could be just a few days. It's impossible to say."

"Keep me posted if anything changes."

With that, Tarquin left the hospital, slid into the driver's seat of his car, and lit a cigarette. Then another. And another. The more he thought about the mystery man and the virus, the heavier his chest felt, as if a boulder was pressing down on him, making it hard to breathe.

Chapter 1229

Stuck. Right in his throat, like a lump of unchewed steak-couldn't swallow it down, couldn't cough it up. It felt awful.

...

That night, as soon as he stepped through the front door, Elysia noticed. She barely glanced up from the kitchen, but her nose wrinkled.

"You've been smoking. And the hospital-again? What happened? Did something go down?"

Elysia had the nose of a bloodhound, especially when it came to cigarettes or anything medicinal.

Tarquin froze for a second. Elysia pressed on, her voice gentle but firm, "Just tell me the truth, okay? If you keep me in the dark, I'll only worry more."

He caved. "I went to see Benjamin. At the hospital."

"About that antidote?" she guessed.

He nodded, unable to meet her eyes.

She stepped closer, concern written all over her face. "Did something go wrong with it? Winona called me today, asking about the antidote and the virus. Zane got in touch with her."

Tarquin's brow creased. "What did Zane want?"

"Same old threats. Said he's the only one who can save Ridley, trying to push Winona so he could get his hands on the Newsom family estate."

"Tell Winona not to play his games."

"I already did. But you and Dr. Benjamin seem really on edge. Ridley's fine though, right?"

Elysia had no clue about the other infected kid. Nobody else did-word about the new virus hadn't reached the public yet. The government was keeping it under wraps to avoid a panic.

Before Tarquin could answer, Elysia's eyes widened. "Wait-are you lying to me? Ridley's sick?"

He shook his head, quick and firm. "No. Ridley's okay, I swear."

"Then why are you so tense?" She studied him, her gaze sharp.

He hesitated, then said quietly, "Ridley's not infected. But someone else is. And it's bad."

She blinked, caught off guard. "Who?"

"Someone you don't know. And a few doctors and nurses, too."

"But how? Is this Zane's doing?"

Tarquin left out the part about the mystery man. "He's working with someone. Right now, Zane's got both the poison and the antidote. think he wants to unleash the virus, then sell the cure and make killing."

Elysia scowled, disgusted. "Poison the world and sell them the medicine? That's evil. But can't Dr. Benjamin fix it?"

He shook his head. "The virus mutates too fast. He's hit a wall-no cure yet."

"So Zane's antidote is the only shot?"

"Not exactly. His antidote only works on the original strain. If Zane actually spreads this thing, and it mutates again, people are in real trouble."

Elysia was silent for a moment, taking it in.

No wonder Tarquin and Benjamin looked so stressed this could threaten everyone.

"Did Dr. Benjamin report it to the World Health Organization?" she asked.

"He did. They're working on it, but the virus keeps changing. No luck yet."

Elysia frowned, thinking hard. After a moment, she said, "You stay home with the kids. I'll go to the hospital and talk to Benjamin. Maybe I can help."

She'd learned a lot about natural medicine from her grandmother back in the countryside. She didn't think

nk she was a miracle worker, but maybe just maybe-she could spot something the others missed.

Tarquin stopped her gently. "Let Benjamin send you the files first. Take a look, rest

up, and if you still want to go, go tomorrow."

Elysia considered this, then nodded. She'd have to study the notes anyway before doing anything.

Tarquin called Benjamin, who sent

he even

file he had without

hesitation. He knew Elysia's reputation-if not for Tarquin he would've asked for her help long ago.

Chapter 1230

Ever since Elysia got her hands on those files about the virus, she'd become completely obsessed-eating, sleeping, everything else took a back seat.

To say she worked herself into the ground wouldn't be an exaggeration.

She'd be up late into the night, sometimes staring at her laptop until three in the morning. If Tarquin didn't practically drag her to bed, she'd probably pull all- nighters every night.

Even after less than four hours of sleep, she'd be up at dawn, pouring over the data all day.

That evening, she suddenly announced, "I need to go to the hospital."

She looked so serious that Tarquin asked, "Is it urgent?"

"It's urgent. I have to go now," she replied, grabbing her coat.

Tarquin knew there was no stopping her, so he just got his keys and went with her.

Clayton and the kids all knew she was working on something important-they didn't get in her way, just told her to go and not worry about things at home.

On the drive over, Elysia's brows were furrowed in worry.

Tarquin reached over and squeezed her hand. "Do your best and let the chips fall where they may. Don't put so much pressure on yourself."

If she could help beat this virus, that'd be amazing. If she couldn't, it wasn't her fault.

Elysia nodded, but her frown deepened. "Zane is absolutely ruthless," she muttered, shaking her head.

Just reading through the files made her sick to her stomach.

There were four people in critical condition from the infection.

Patient zero was a man in his thirties, background unknown, and he was already in the danger zone-barely hanging on.

The other three? All medical staff.

One was the attending physician—a man in his forties, breadwinner for his family, with elderly parents and young kids depending on him. Now, he was fighting for his life, and his whole family's world had come crashing down.

The other two were nurses. One was a rookie, fresh out of college, working her first year. She'd grown up in a small town, her parents scraping by as farmers to put her through school. Now this—her family's hopes were shattered.

The second nurse—she was newly pregnant, married six years, finally expecting her first baby after so many struggles. And now, infected. No one knew if she or her baby would make it.

Elysia didn't even know these people, but her heart hurt for them.

This virus didn't just destroy individuals, it wrecked families.

If Zane spread this thing any further, there'd be even more victims, more broken homes.

That's why she called him ruthless.

To create a crisis like this, just for his own gain—he didn't deserve to be called human.

"Evil doesn't go unpunished. He'll get what's coming to him," Elysia said angrily, her hands balled into fists.

Sontent belongs to sw

Tarquin gave her hand another squeeze. "Don't worry. Karma's a real thing."

As they walked into the hospital, Tarquin's phone buzzed. It was Benjamin.

"Tarquin, are you guys here yet?" Benjamin asked.

"We just got here. Why?"

"Zane showed up. He wanted to see Winona's dad. I turned him away think he's getting suspicious of Winona, so he's snooping around the hospital."

Tarquin frowned, about to reply-but then he spotted Zane himself, striding out of the main entrance.

As soon as Elysia saw him, she trembled with anger.

Tarquin hung up and held her hand, quietly trying to calm her down.

Zane spotted them, too, and blinked in surprise.

Elysia turned to Tarquin, her jaw set. "Wait here. I need a word with him. Alone."

She had too much bottled up-she needed to let it out.

Tarquin wasn't thrilled, but nodded. "Alright."

Elysia squared her shoulders and marched over.

Zane saw her coming, a look of surprise—and, strangely, hope-lighting up his face as he jogged over to meet her.

He was dressed in a pale suit,

looking every bit the charming,

passing by would think he was a stand-up guy.

respectable gentleman. Vel

But Elysia knew better.

This was the first time they'd seen each other since Zane and Winona had their falling out.

He knew Elysia would be furious. And she was.