

Hitched 1231

Chapter 1231

He honestly thought Elysia wouldn't bother talking to him again anytime soon...

So when he saw Elysia walking toward him, he actually felt a flicker of hope.

As she got closer, Zane tried to act casual and greeted her, "Elysia."

Smack!

He barely got her name out before Elysia's hand cracked across his face.

His head jerked to the side, a perfect imprint of her hand blooming on his cheek. Slowly, Zane turned back to look at her, his expression twisted and complicated. "Elysia..."

Elysia was trembling with anger, her words bitten out through clenched teeth. "I didn't just misjudge you, Zane—I seriously underestimated how low you could go. Congratulations, you've officially redefined what it means to be a jerk in my book." "I've met my fair share of scumbags, but you? You're in a league of your own!"

"You hurt Winona, you hurt Ridley, you destroyed the Newsom family, and you're not done—you'd throw ordinary people under the bus too. Zane, you don't deserve to be called human."

Zane didn't lash out, even after taking the slap. His voice was bitter, almost pleading. "Elysia, please, just let me explain. I admit it—I lied to Winona, I hurt the Newsom family, but everything I did, I did for you!"

"From the first moment I met you, I was crazy about you. I mean, head-over- heels, can't-eat, can't-sleep obsessed."

"But back then, I was flat broke. We would've had nothing. I couldn't even put a roof over your head or guarantee you a warm meal. I didn't want you struggling just because of me. I wanted to give you everything—a nice home, stability, the works."

"That's why I made those choices. I hid how I felt about you, I forced myself to be with Winona because I thought it was for the best."

"Yeah, I married her, but I never loved her. I've only ever loved you. Always, only you."

Elysia shot him a look that could freeze lava. She scoffed, "Only me? So what about Sarah, huh? Or Lyra? Or that cute nurse at the hospital? And all those other girls you've strung along—what are they, just pit stops?"

Zane shook his head desperately. "They were just passing through. None of them meant anything—I was just going through the motions. The only one who's ever had my heart is you."

"I've always wanted to be with you. When you were gone all those years, I nearly lost it. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep I tore my life apart looking for you. I—"

"Are you moved by your own speech yet?" Elysia interrupted, a cold laugh in her voice. "Are you about to cry for yourself, Zane? Do you really think you're some tragic, noble hero? Let me tell you something: the only person you love is yourself."

Zane's brow furrowed. "Elysia, I swear to you, I love you. I always have."

Elysia's voice was sharp as broken glass. "And I swear to you, you make me sick."

Zane's face darkened, his jaw clenched hard. "I know I did a lot of things that made you hate me, but I swear to God, I did it all for you. Every choice I made was because I love you."

"Then I swear to God, every single thing you do just makes me hate you more," Elysia shot back.

Zane's breathing was ragged now, his frustration boiling over. "You don't like me. Is it because of Tarquin? I'll admit, I'm not where he is right now, but just give me

a little more time. I swear, I'll crush him-I'll be bigger than him soon!"

Elysia balled her fists, her glare icy. "Don't even say his name. You don't deserve to. You're not even in the same universe as him."

"And don't talk about love. You don't have a clue what that is."

"And don't waste your breath thinking I'd ever be with you. I'd rather die than be with you, Zane."

"To me, Tarquin is a true gentleman. You? You're a snake in the grass. There's no comparison."

"Only cowards hurt innocent people just to get what they want. Tarquin might have a temper, but he'd never do anything truly cruel or evil."

"His heart is good and honest."

"Yours, Zane, is rotten to the core."

Chapter 1232

Zane was absolutely livid.

"Oh, I'm the villain, and he's the perfect gentleman?!" he spat, voice shaking with rage. "If he's such a great guy, maybe he shouldn't be dragging you along to mess with deadly viruses and their cures while telling you he loves you!"

He jabbed a finger in Elysia's direction, eyes wild. "Do you even realize how dangerous this virus is? One slip, and you could get infected! And let me tell you, it's not pretty-just pure agony!"

"He's putting you in harm's way. He doesn't care about you at all!"

Elysia's face flushed with anger. She clenched her fists and fired back, "Tarquin didn't manipulate me into this! It was my idea to help with the research!"

"He only let me join because he knows there's no stopping me-not because he doesn't care!"

"But you—" she pointed right back at him, voice trembling, "You know how dangerous this is? You know how much people suffer after they're infected? Yet you still unleashed this on the world! How could you be so heartless?!"

Zane's voice rose to a guttural roar. "I did it for you! I was trying to make more money so you could have a better life!"

"For me?" Elysia let out a bitter laugh. "Don't kid yourself. You did it for you!"

"You're just looking for a fancy excuse to ease your guilty conscience, but deep down you know exactly what you've done!"

Zane fell silent, breathing hard, unable to hide how much the truth stung.

Elysia took a couple shaky breaths, forcing herself to calm down.

"Zane, just wait. You'll get what's coming to you. And don't even think about loving me-it makes me sick!"

With that, she spun on her heel and marched toward Tarquin.

Zane lunged after her, but Tarquin was faster—he stepped in and shoved Zane hard, sending him stumbling backward. Zane lost his balance and crashed to the floor.

Tarquin wrapped a protective arm around Elysia, glaring daggers at Zane. "Keep your hands off my wife!"

Zane scrambled up, spitting blood and fury. "She'll be mine one day, just you wait!"

Without another word, Tarquin landed a solid punch across Zane's jaw, knocking him down again—this time, two teeth went flying.

From the shadows, the bodyguards, seeing Tarquin throw a punch, started to move in. After all, why let the boss get his own hands dirty over a nobody like Zane? That was like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. Totally unnecessary.

But Zane wiped the blood from his mouth, got up once more, and sneered at the entourage. "What, you gonna hide behind your lapdogs now?"

"If you didn't have your fancy family name and all that money, you'd be nothing! Give me half your privilege, and I'd outshine you a thousand times over!"

"You entitled trust-fund brat—you don't deserve Elysia's love!"

The bodyguards bristled, ready to pounce, but Tarquin raised a hand. "Stand down."

He shot Zane a cold, piercing look, then turned to Elysia. "Are you done talking to him? Let me have a word in private. Benjamin's upstairs waiting for you—go see him. I'll be up in a bit."

Elysia hesitated, worry creasing her brow. Tarquin gave her a reassuring smile. "Don't worry. I can handle myself."

"Okay, I'll go find Dr. Benjamin."

"Good."

She shot Zane one last withering glare and stepped into the elevator. Tarquin watched until the doors slid closed, then started rolling up his sleeves as he walked toward Zane.

By now, the sun had set, and the hospital corridors were quiet. This was one of those elite private clinics-never crowded, especially at night.

With the bodyguards gone, Zane pulled himself up, eyes burning with hatred.

Seeing Tarquin approach, Zane clenched his jaw. He took a deep breath and strode forward to meet him head-on.

Truth be told, Tarquin had always rubbed him the wrong way-and the feeling was mutual.

There were some grudges a man could never let go. And Zane had been hitting the gym, even taking boxing classes twice a week. Tonight, he was ready to settle the score.

Chapter 1233

He wasn't afraid to take on Tarquin, not even a little!

Zane stormed forward, all puffed-up bravado at least until—

Before he even got close, Tarquin landed a brutal kick that sent him flying across the parking lot!

It was only when the fists actually started flying that Zane realized just how outmatched he was.

Tarquin moved fast-crazy fast. Every punch was solid, every move precise.

Forget fighting back-Zane couldn't even dodge. He caught punch after punch square in the face, barely able to keep his balance, when suddenly Tarquin swept his leg out from under him.

Zane hit the ground hard, knees first, with a sickening thud.

Tarquin loomed over him, face cold as stone. He didn't hesitate—another hard kick, this one straight to Zane's ankle.

There was a nasty crack, and Zane howled in pain. "Aaaagh—!"

Tarquin wasn't done. He landed a fierce kick to Zane's ribs, sending him skidding across the gravel.

Zane felt something snap-probably his ribs. He tried to catch his breath, but it was like breathing through broken glass.

Tarquin stalked toward him, expression thunderous.

Gone was Zane's earlier cockiness. All that bravado? Nowhere to be found. Just raw terror in his eyes.

"You...you—" he stammered, completely floored by Tarquin's skills.

Of course he was shocked. How could he know what Tarquin's past really looked like? Those "years abroad for physical therapy" were a total cover. Tarquin had served in the military, worn the uniform, carried a rifle, flown fighter jets and tanks—even survived a few years in some hardcore survival bootcamps.

And Zane? The guy took two boxing classes a week at the local gym and thought he was hot stuff. Ridiculous.

Tarquin stopped in front of him and, without a word, unleashed another flurry of punches and kicks-this time until Zane coughed up blood.

Finally, Tarquin stood over him, eyes icy cold.

"I never wanted to get my hands dirty dealing with you. But you just had to go and poke the bear, huh?"

"If I hear you running your mouth again, I'll cut out your tongue."

"If you so much as touch Elysia, you'll lose your hand."

"Try and make a move on my wife again? That's a death wish."

"To me, you're not even worth the trouble. If it weren't for certain reasons, you'd be long gone."

Zane curled up on the ground, gasping for breath, not daring to talk back.

Tarquin shot him a look of pure disdain, then took a napkin from the bodyguard nearby and wiped his hands. He gave crisp orders:

"Call Winona. Tell her her husband's been hurt and needs to come home to recover. Deliver him to her personally."

Zane's eyes went wide with horror. Send him to Winona? Why not just finish him off now?

"I—" he started, but the bodyguard cut him off with a punch that knocked him out cold.

Upstairs, Elysia sat hunched at her laptop, studying a video of mutating viruses. Her face was tense with concentration.

When Tarquin came in, she looked up in a hurry. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"What about Zane?"

She wasn't worried about Zane, really-more about Tarquin accidentally killing him and ending up with a murder charge on his hands.

"Sent him to Winona."

"What?"

Tarquin just shrugged. "Winona wanted to let off some steam, right? I figured I'd give her the chance."

Elysia blinked, then relaxed as she caught his meaning. "Nothing...bad will happen, right?"

Tarquin grinned, just a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Her husband's hurt. She'll take 'good care' of him. Trust me."

Elysia got the message and smiled. Honestly, Zane deserved whatever was coming to him.

Tarquin looked over at her laptop, eyeing the virus model on the screen. "Any luck?"

Elysia shook her head, frowning. "I'm stuck. To crack this, I'll probably need Grandma's help."

Tarquin perked up. "Your grandma in the mountains?"

Chapter 1234

Just as Elysia was about to answer, a sharp female voice echoed from the hallway outside.

"I told you, you can't see him, and that's final! Cry all you want, it won't change anything. Those are the rules!"

"I've never dealt with such unreasonable family members. I said he's just in quarantine, not dead already! What's there to cry about?"

"If you waste any more of our time, and we don't find a cure because of it, it'll be on you!"

Another woman's voice broke in, shaky and pleading.

"Today is my child's birthday. She just wants to see her dad, even if it's just from behind the glass. Can't you let us do that?"

"No! How many times do I have to say it—no means no! If you keep pestering me,

I'll have security throw you out! God, you're exhausting!"

Suddenly the woman snapped, and the little girl burst into loud sobs.

Elysia frowned and stepped out into the hallway.

There were three people: two women and a child.

One of the women was in her twenties, dressed in a white lab coat—clearly medical staff.

The other, about forty, was clutching a five- or six-year-old girl to her chest—a mother and daughter, clearly.

The younger woman spotted Elysia coming out of the room and immediately shot her a suspicious glare, looking her up and down.

"Who are you? Why are you in the records room?!"

Elysia didn't have the chance to answer before the older woman hurried over, still holding her crying child.

"You're with the doctors working on the virus, right?" she begged, tears streaming down her face. "Please, have a heart. Let us see her dad, just for a moment. It's her birthday—she doesn't want presents, she just wants to see her father..."

"I know the virus is contagious, we'd stay behind the glass! We just want to see him, please. We're so worried about him. I'm begging you."

The little girl, dressed in a frilly princess dress, clung to her mother's neck, her eyes red and puffy.

"I want Daddy! I want Daddy! I want Daddy..." she wailed.

It all clicked for Elysia—this was the family of that infected male doctor. Because the virus was so contagious, he was still in strict isolation. But now that his family knew what was really happening, shouldn't they at least be allowed to see him through the glass? That was just basic compassion.

Elysia couldn't understand the hospital's reasoning. She started to explain, "I'm sorry, I'm not a doctor, I—"

"You're not a doctor? Then how did you get into the records room? Who are you, a reporter?" the young woman snapped, cutting her off with a harsh, suspicious tone.

"I'm warning you: this virus is still classified. If you leak anything, you'll be in serious trouble. We're talking prison time."

Elysia tried to keep calm. "I'm not a reporter, I—"

But the woman interrupted her again, voice rising.

"If you're not a reporter, what are you? Who let you in? What were you doing in

there? You'd better start talking, or I'm calling the cops right now!"

Elysia just stared at her, exasperated. Who interrupts people this much? Has she ever heard of basic manners?

And wasn't she supposed to be the angel in the white coat? What a joke.

Elysia's patience snapped. "Dr. Benjamin told me to come here."

The woman's brows knit together. "Dr. Benjamin? Benjamin? Why would he send you?"

Elysia shot back, "And who are you? Why should I explain myself to you?"

With a haughty flick, the woman pointed to her own ID badge.

"Take a good look. I'm with the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. I'm the lead on this virus investigation."

Elysia glanced down at the badge: Sabrina Stevenson, Medical & Pharmaceutical Association.

Sabrina-Elysia couldn't help but think of sage, the herb.

Sabrina squared her shoulders, looking even more self-important.

"I don't care what your connection to Dr. Benjamin is. You entered the records

room without our permission, so I have every right to question you. Now answer me, and don't even think about lying!"

Chapter 1235

Tarquin couldn't take it anymore. With a steely expression, he strode over to Elysia's side and stood protectively by her.

"I don't care who you think you are," he said, his voice cold as ice. "But if you raise your voice at my wife again, we're gonna have a real problem."

He'd tried to stay out of the squabble-it was just women talking, after all-but

this woman was way out of line. Someone needed to put her in her place.

Sabrina's eyes widened in shock, ready to snap back at Tarquin-until she actually looked at him.

Whoa. He was gorgeous.

Tall, athletic, with chiseled features and an effortless coolness-was he a movie star or something?

Trying to regain her composure, Sabrina softened her tone, her words suddenly syrupy sweet. "I wasn't yelling. I'm just doing my job. And you are...?"

"You don't deserve to know," Tarquin shot back flatly, not giving her the slightest ounce of respect.

Sabrina's mouth dropped open for a moment.

She was in her early twenties, a sucker for handsome faces and with a pride the size of Texas. Raised in comfort, used to being pampered-being called out in public like this hit her hard.

Her eyes shimmered, cheeks burning red, and she bit her lip, looking at Tarquin with wounded pride.

Elysia shot Sabrina a glare, then turned to the mother and daughter nearby. "Are you Dr. Lambert's family?"

The woman clutching a little girl nodded anxiously. "Yes, yes, I'm Zachary Lambert's wife. This is our daughter."

Tears streaked down the woman's face as she spoke. "I know he's in quarantine. We haven't made any trouble, we'll cooperate with the hospital, I promise, we just... we just want to see him. Please..."

As the woman broke down, the little girl started sobbing too. "Can I see Daddy? I miss him..."

Elysia's heart ached for the child. She knelt down and gently wiped away the girl's tears. "I'm so sorry you're going through this. But I'm not a doctor here, I can't make the rules. I'll try to find out what's going on, okay?"

She pulled out her phone, about to call Benjamin, when he appeared at the end of the hall, looking serious.

He'd been in the records room earlier, researching the virus with Elysia, before he'd stepped out to take a call. Now, seeing the tense group gathered in the hallway-and recognizing Dr. Lambert's family-he hurried over.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Elysia pulled Benjamin aside and lowered her voice. "It's Dr. Lambert's daughter's birthday. She just wants to see her dad for a minute. Why isn't the hospital letting them?"

Elysia genuinely thought the family should be allowed a visit. Not just out of compassion for the girl, but also because-

"Well, now that everyone knows about the virus, isn't it risky just to refuse them? If they get upset and cause a scene outside, we can't keep the whole thing quiet anymore. The hospital and the government can't exactly gag all the families, can they? So shouldn't we focus on keeping things calm?"

Benjamin looked surprised. "No one said they couldn't visit. That's actually what I was sorting out just now. As soon as they arrived, I called upstairs. The higher-ups agreed: the family can visit, but only through the glass with staff supervision."

He glanced at Sabrina. "Dr. Stevenson is supposed to be looking after the families. I saw her walking out with Dr. Lambert's wife and daughter-I figured she was taking them to see him."

Elysia shook her head, frustrated. "They were begging her, but she said no. Said it was hospital policy."

Now it was Benjamin's turn to be stumped. He frowned, silent for a long moment, then sighed. "She probably just didn't want to deal with it. She wants to work on the virus research, but she's not qualified enough, so the bosses put her on support duty—dealing with families, organizing data, that sort of thing."

Elysia frowned. "If she's not up to the job, why'd they put her here in the first place?"

Chapter 1236

Benjamin leaned in closer to Elysia, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper.

"She's Mr. Stevenson's granddaughter, you know. My guess? She's just here to cash in on the glory."

"If we somehow beat this virus, she gets to take the credit. If we don't, well, she won't take the fall—there are enough old-timers running interference out front."

Elysia frowned. "Who's Mr. Stevenson?"

"Former president of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. The big leagues."

Elysia: "..."

No wonder Sabrina strutted around like she owned the place. She was born with connections.

The granddaughter of the former president? That's basically medical royalty.

The Medical & Pharmaceutical Association was the most prestigious organization in the field. If you could name a famous doctor in the country, odds were they were a member. The Association was a big deal-huge reputation, massive network. The president's seat was the golden ticket: whoever landed it was practically untouchable.

After all, sickness and health are the great equalizers. Doesn't matter who you are, how rich or powerful-you can't guarantee you'll never need a doctor.

So everyone respected the Association. No one wanted to cross them-least of all the president.

And Sabrina, as the president's granddaughter, had an even higher standing than your average senator's kid.

"What are you guys whispering about?"

Tarquin suddenly appeared, wedging himself between them and shoving Benjamin aside a little too forcefully. Benjamin nearly lost his balance.

Before Benjamin could protest, Tarquin shot him a look that said, loud and clear: "Stay away from my wife!"

Tarquin then scooted even closer to Elysia, wrapping a possessive arm around her.

Benjamin: ... Seriously? Is this guy jealous of everyone?

He rolled his eyes at Tarquin. "Whatever. I'll go check in with D Lambert's family-help them calm down, get a nurse to take them to see Dr. Lambert. No way Sabrina's getting involved now."

Elysia nodded. "Good. Last thing we need is her making a mess of things."

Tarquin, still salty, grumbled, "What were you two talking about, all huddled up like that?"

Elysia replied, "Just talking about Dr. Lambert's wife and daughter seeing him. And about Mr. Stevenson..."

She gave Tarquin the quick rundown

on Sabrina. He snorted. "Let her mess around all she wants-if she goes too far, she'll drag the whole Stevenson family down with her."

It wouldn't be the first time some entitled heir tanked an entire family legacy.

Suddenly, Dr. Lambert's wife and daughter approached. The little girl, clutching a lollipop, offered it to Elysia.

"Thank you for helping us. This is for you."

Her mother, eyes red from crying, added, "Thank you for speaking up for us. The hospital said we can visit my husband now."

Elysia took the candy and smiled at the girl. "You're welcome, sweetheart. Happy birthday, and thank you for the treat."

The little girl looked up at her, voice trembling. "Will Daddy get better?"

Elysia hesitated. Dr. Lambert wasn't doing well. The virus was mutating faster than anyone could keep up-just as Benjamin had said. There was no magic

cure.

She wanted to promise the world, but she couldn't.

After a moment, she knelt down to the girl's level. "I don't know if your daddy will get better, but I do know he'd want you to be happy. The happier you are, the happier he'll be. And feeling good can help him heal."

The girl nodded seriously. "Okay, I'll be extra happy when I see Daddy."

Elysia smiled, gentle and warm. "That's my girl. Go on, now."

The mother thanked Elysia again before ushering her daughter away.

They'd barely turned the corner when Sabrina's shrill voice erupted from up the hall.

Chapter 1237

"We've had strict orders from the top-absolutely no information leaves this room. And you went ahead and brought in an outsider to look at classified files? Who gave you that kind of nerve?!"

"If she lets anything slip, are you ready to take the fall for that?"

"Do you even realize how ugly things get when the public starts to panic?"

Benjamin kept his cool, trying to explain.

"I only asked her to help because she's got some real expertise in herbal medicine. She's good-really good. And she's my friend. She's trustworthy, I promise. She would never leak confidential info."

Sabrina shot him a look dripping with sarcasm.

"Trustworthy? Based on what her pretty face?"

She'd been in a bad mood all day, especially after Tarquin called her out earlier, so now she was taking it out on Benjamin.

"Expertise, huh? Where'd she go to school? Which hospital does she work for? If she's so amazing, why isn't she with the American Medical Association?"

"If she can't even get into the AMA, maybe you've got a weird definition of 'amazing,' Dr. Benjamin!"

Benjamin frowned, annoyed, but didn't fire back.

Tarquin's face darkened, but Elysia stepped in quickly, whispering,

"Don't pay attention to her-I'll handle it."

In the world of medicine, the Stevenson family practically outranked the Lawsons.

Benjamin picking a fight with the Stevensons would only hurt his own family's future in the field.

It wasn't worth risking it all over some hot-headed girl in her twenties with no manners.

Elysia, wanting to back Benjamin up, strode over.

She didn't even glance at Sabrina. Instead, she spoke directly to Benjamin:

"I haven't cracked the mutation pattern of the virus yet, but I've listed out the antidote's components. Maybe it'll help."

Benjamin's eyebrows shot up. "You managed to identify all the ingredients?"

"Yeah. The formula's on the laptop-take a look."

He hurried into the study, eager to see for himself.

Sabrina watched Elysia with open suspicion, then followed them in.

She didn't buy for a second that Elysia had figured it all out-hell, the association's team of experts had been stumped for two days! How could someone without even a medical license have managed what they couldn't?

Inside, Benjamin picked up Elysia's handwritten list and read it over carefully.

As he recognized a few of the herbs, a lightbulb seemed to go off.

"So it's these? But that doesn't make sense their properties don't match what we need."

Elysia explained,

"It's all about dosage. A little bit of something can heal; too much of the same

thing can kill. It's just basic pharmacology."

Sabrina snatched the list from Benjamin, scanning it quickly.

She might have had her limitations, but as a Stevenson, she'd grown up around medicine-and she knew

to tell when someone knew stuff.

A full 95% of Elysia's list matched what the association's experts had found. That alone said volumes about her skills.

If that last mysterious 5% turned out to be the missing link, Elysia really would be in a league of her own.

Sabrina swallowed hard, pocketed the list, and muttered with a frown,

"I'll show this to the experts. If it checks out, then Dr.

Benjamin-you're off the hook al net

bringing her in and bending the rules."

for

"But let's be clear: if this virus thing gets out, you're still taking the blame, Dr. Benjamin."

With that, she shot Tarquin a pouty, wounded look, then stormed off.

Benjamin scowled. "At this rate, Mr. Stevenson's stellar reputation won't survive his niece much longer."

Elysia knew Sabrina just wanted to take credit for her work, but she didn't care. Right now, the important thing was finding a cure.

Chapter 1238

"Dr. Benjamin, I need to take some antidote and a sample of the virus with me for research. Is that possible?"

Elysia was hoping to head upstate to her grandma's place for help, but she needed to bring the sample with her.

"Take it with you? Absolutely not," Benjamin replied firmly. "All the samples are in the hands of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. I can request that you join my research team, but there's no way you can just take the virus to study on your own."

Elysia frowned. "...."

Without the virus sample, how was she supposed to get her grandma's help?

Benjamin looked at her curiously. "Can't you just do your research here at the hospital?"

"No," Elysia said.

"Why not?"

She couldn't reveal anything about her grandma, so she just stayed quiet for a few seconds before saying, "Honestly, I don't have any leads right now. I'll just head home. If you hear about any new developments, let me know."

She was well aware of her own limits.

This wasn't the kind of virus she could just crack in a lab. Sticking around the hospital wasn't going to help anyone.

It'd be better to go home and figure out how to get her hands on that sample, so she could head upstate to grandma's sooner.

On the way home, Elysia leaned against Tarquin's shoulder, looking completely worn out.

"Something on your mind?" Tarquin asked.

She sighed. "Yeah. This virus is way worse than I thought. If it spreads, it'll be a lot uglier than that last pandemic a few years ago."

She felt terrible for the families already affected and worried for the future.

If this thing really broke loose, nobody would be safe. Her own family would be at risk, too.

The truth was, she wanted her grandma's help partly for everyone's sake, and partly for her own family's.

She understood the old saying: "When the country's safe, families are safe." It applied here more than ever.

Seeing her so down, Tarquin's heart ached. But he was just a businessman-he didn't know the first thing about medicine. He couldn't actually help her with the science.

The only real solution was to find a way to beat the virus.

Trying to get info from Zane had led nowhere; the virus hadn't started with him.

As for the mysterious stranger... Tarquin had thought hard about it today, but it just didn't seem reliable. Even if they managed to catch the guy, what if he decided to go out with a bang and released the virus everywhere, or destroyed the antidote out of spite?

Plus, there was no guarantee this guy actually had a real cure. What if his "antidote" was just the same as Zane's-only able to kill the original strain?

No, the only way out was to figure out how to fight the virus itself.

He looked at Elysia. "So if you head upstate to see your grandma, what do you need? Just the antidote and a virus sample?"

"Yeah, ideally both. But if there's no antidote, at least the virus sample is a must," Elysia replied, frustrated. "But right now, everything's hush-hush. There's no way they'll let samples out. Ugh!"

Tarquin thought for a moment. "Let me handle the sample."

Elysia perked up. "How?"

"I'll work something out. Is there anything else you need besides the sample?"

"No, just the virus sample. That's all," she said quickly.

"Alright. Don't stress. Go home tonight and get some real sleep. Once I've sorted

it out, I'll let you know."

She hadn't had a good night's rest in ages-not since the stuff with Winona, and then everything that happened a few nights ago between her and Tarquin. She'd barely had a minute to catch her breath before diving into virus research. Lately, it felt like she was running on empty.

A husband's supposed to look after his wife, and Tarquin wanted nothing more

than for her to get some rest.

Elysia looked at him, blinking suspiciously. "You're not thinking about... stealing it, are you?"

Tarquin chuckled. "Nope. Not my style."

Elysia let out a long breath. "Good. You can't just break in and grab it. That'd be like going up against the whole government-you'd end up in jail, or worse. And who knows what could go wrong during a stunt like that."

Chapter 1239

If the device containing the virus got smashed, things would get even worse!

Tarquin gently pressed the top of her head. "I know."

By the time the two of them got home, it was already past midnight.

Clayton was still awake, sitting on the living room couch reading a financial magazine.

When he saw them come in, he quickly got up. "Hey, you're back!"

Elysia blinked. "Dad, you're still up?"

"Couldn't sleep," he admitted.

The truth was, he'd been worried about his daughter and was waiting for her.

"So, did you manage to sort things out?"

Elysia didn't want Clayton to worry, so she nodded. "Yeah, it's all sorted. Is Mom and the little one sleeping?"

"Good, good. They turned in early. You guys hungry? I can whip something up in the kitchen."

Elysia hadn't eaten much at dinner-Clayton had noticed and felt a pang in his heart.

Afraid she'd refuse out of politeness, he added, "Actually, I'm a bit hungry myself. I'll make something for the three of us."

Elysia jumped in, "Dad, what do you want? I'll make it."

Tarquin chimed in, "Let me."

He swapped his shoes for slippers, shrugged off his jacket, and rolled up his sleeves, ready to head into the kitchen. But Clayton stopped him.

"Nope, you two sit down and relax. Let me do this. Time for you to taste a little of Dad's midnight cooking."

He set aside his magazine and headed off to the kitchen.

Tarquin grinned at Elysia. "Go on upstairs and get some rest. I'll help your dad— gotta make a good impression."

Elysia smiled, happiness glowing on her face. The heaviness in her heart lifted. "Alright, I'll go check on Mom and the kids."

She headed upstairs, peeking into Pamela's room first, then the baby's.

When she went to Evan's room, she'd barely cracked the door when White, the family's pet-an albino corn snake-lifted its little head, alert at the noise.

But when White saw it was Elysia, it slithered over, nuzzling her hand with affection.

Elysia used to be terrified of snakes, but after all this time, White was just part of the family.

She scooped White up, stroking its tiny head, and wandered into Evan's room.

One look at Evan's sleeping position, and she had to shake her head in exasperation.

Out of everyone in the family, Evan was the wildest sleeper.

Who knows what he'd been up to before bed? Now he was sprawled across the edge of the bed, his head and arms dangling off, looking like he'd roll off any second-headfirst, notess!

Elysia put White down and carefully scooped Evan up.

He blinked open his eyes, groggy. "Mommy?"

"Yeah, it's me, sweetie. Go back to sleep."

She settled him back in bed. The little guy clung to her, not wanting to let go.

So Elysia lay down beside him, gently rubbing his back until he drifted off again.

White, still wide awake, perched on the pillow watching her.

Elysia whispered, "Do you want to go home, White?"

White blinked his beady eyes and flicked out his tongue at her.

Elysia wasn't like Evan-she couldn't actually talk to White-but she knew he missed home, too.

"Once we get the sample, we're heading back! We'll visit Grandpa and Grandma, and you and Evan can see your little buddies again. They probably miss us a ton."

White seemed to understand. He hopped onto Elysia's chest, tilting his head and nudging her hand excitedly.

Elysia laughed, stroking him again. "Alright, alright..."

It had been a while since they'd left home. Honestly, she was just as excited as

White at the thought of going back.

Chapter 1240

Downstairs, two wealthy CEOs were busy in the kitchen. Both men had aprons tied around their waists, sleeves rolled up high.

Clayton was fussing over his little princess, worried she'd go to bed hungry, but also careful about her sensitive tummy.

So, he took matters into his own hands, kneading dough to make delicate, easy- to-digest homemade noodles as a midnight snack for his daughter.

Tarquin, eager to impress his father-in-law-and score some points with his wife— handled everything else: washing, chopping, prepping. He'd transformed himself into a professional sous-chef for the evening.

Clayton glanced over, impressed by Tarquin's efficiency. "I always heard Mr. Bradford of Jindale City was sharp in the business world. Didn't expect you to be sharp in the kitchen, too."

Tarquin grinned. "Learned from my dad when I was a kid. He always said knowing how to cook is a basic survival skill. Plus, it's a big plus when you're looking for a wife. So, I had to learn."

Clayton nodded approvingly. "Your dad's got a point. There's nothing shameful about a man cooking for his family. My old man used to say, 'A man who cooks for his loved ones is never a bad man.'"

"If someone ever mocks you for making dinner for your wife and kids, you don't need them in your life. They're not real men."

Tarquin nodded, "Couldn't agree more."

Clayton finished kneading the dough and plopped it onto the counter. He rolled it flat with practiced ease, folded it, and sliced it into fine strips.

"Irene's loved my chicken noodle soup since she was a toddler. The very first solid food she ever tried was my homemade noodles in broth."

"Even though work kept me busy, I made sure to cook for my girl twice a week. Every birthday-Pamela's, Irene's-from her first to her last, I made her birthday noodles myself."

"I've always thought, no matter how successful a man is outside, real happiness is found at home. Don't you think?"

Tarquin knew Clayton was hinting at him and quickly chimed in, "I agree, Dad. Don't worry-Elysia and our kids will always come first for me. Elysia's number one, kids number two."

"And from now on, I'll follow your lead. I'll always be there for Elysia and the kids on their birthdays. Birthday noodles, made by me."

Clayton chuckled, "I feel good handing Irene over to you."

Tarquin finished washing the veggies and stood by, watching as Clayton sliced the noodles, showering him with praise and peppering him with questions, eager to learn. He even solemnly declared he wanted to master the recipe for Elysia.

The two men chatted away, and Clayton couldn't stop grinning at Tarquin's flattery.

But was Tarquin really buttering up

it

s wife. If his father-in-t

was

happy, his wife would be happy, too.

Mr. Bradford understood this well.

Once the noodles were ready, Tarquin headed upstairs to fetch Elysia.

She'd just finished her shower and was blow-drying her hair. Tarquin strode over, took the hairdryer from

her, planted a kiss on her cheek and

started drying her hair for her.

Elysia asked, "Is the midnight snack ready?"

"Yep. Dad made you homemade chicken noodle soup. He did everything himself

-kneaded the dough, cut the noodles."

"What did you do?"

"I played sous-chef and kept him company."

"What did you talk about?"

"About men cooking for their families."

Elysia was curious. "And what's the verdict?"

Tarquin replied, "A man who cooks

for his loved ones is a good mannet

One who laughs at that isn'

worth

hanging out with."

Elysia couldn't help but laugh. "So, does that mean you can't hang out with Keaton anymore?"

"Wrong! Not only can I hang out with him, I have to-Keaton's a killer cook."

"Really?" Elysia was surprised.

"Really. If it puts a smile on a girl's face, Keaton's a pro."

Elysia pursed her lips, "Guess I underestimated him."