

Hitched 1241

Chapter 1241

Tarquin asked, "So, when you head back to the cabin in the mountains, are you taking your folks with you?"

Elysia shook her head.

"No, I promised my grandparents I'd keep everything about them a secret. Can't bring a whole crowd along. Besides, Mom's health isn't really up for a serious hike."

The trail was tough enough, and her grandparents' place was tucked way off the beaten path.

They'd have to trek through a stretch of thick woods, then wind their way through what felt like half a national park just to find the cabin.

Last time they came down the mountain, they'd been out there for days.

Tarquin frowned. "So what are you gonna tell your parents? They hate being apart from you."

Elysia thought for a moment. "I'll just tell them it's confidential family stuff. They'll get it."

Tarquin pressed, "But can you even find your way back?"

Elysia grinned. "No way I could, not by myself."

Tarquin sighed. "Then how are you getting there?"

She shrugged, "White and Evan know the way. They'll guide me."

He just shook his head.

After drying her hair, the two of them headed downstairs.

Clayton had already set the table-three steaming bowls of chicken noodle soup and a plate of fresh salad.

As soon as he saw Elysia, Clayton called out,

"Irene, come try your dad's secret recipe!"

Elysia hurried over, "Smells amazing!"

Clayton beamed. "Dig in, but don't burn yourself."

Elysia hadn't washed her hands yet, so Tarquin grabbed a fork, spun up some noodles, blew on them, and offered them to her.

Elysia felt like a princess-spoiled by her dad, adored by her husband.

She took the bite from Tarquin, nodding with delight. "Oh wow, this is so good!"

Clayton grinned from ear to ear, looking every bit the proud dad. "If you like it, have some more."

"Definitely," she agreed.

After their late-night snack, Clayton insisted on doing the dishes. Elysia wouldn't let him do it alone, so she stayed to help, while Tarquin tidied up the dining room.

In the kitchen, father and daughter had a quiet moment.

"I took your mom and the kids to see a house today," Clayton said.

"Oh? What kind of house?"

"A cozy little cottage. Once it's fixed up, your mom and I are moving in. We've decided—Jindale City is home now."

"Really?" Elysia's eyes went wide.

He nodded, "Wherever you are, we'll be there too."

Elysia felt a wave of love and surprise.

"You two could stay here, you know. Why move out?"

Clayton just smiled. "This house belongs to Tarquin. I know he'd never kick us out, but I want to buy our own place, with our own money. Something that's just for us, not tied to Tarquin at all."

"And if you and Tarquin ever have a spat, you'll have your own place to come home to."

"Maybe I'm not as successful as Tarquin, but I can give you a comfortable life. I can provide for you, always."

"My little Irene's a princess in her own right. You didn't marry above your station, sweetheart."

Elysia's heart swelled; she knew her dad was giving her confidence, letting her know she would never have to feel less than anyone.

Her dad was saying: you're just as good as anyone. You're my princess.

Eyes brimming, she nodded.

"Then when you decorate, make me a princess room."

Clayton was over the moon.

"You got it. The biggest, sunniest room is all yours."

Elysia smiled, happiness shining on her face.

Life has a way of coming full circle. The tougher things used to be, the sweeter happiness feels now.

She had her parents' love, her husband's devotion, and her children's laughter. And right now, for Elysia, that was everything.

Chapter 1242

After chatting a bit about the house, Elysia seized the chance to talk to her dad.

"Dad, in a while, I'll need to take the kids on a little trip. I won't be able to bring you and Mom along, but you two can just stay here and wait for us. I'll come back as soon as I'm done, I promise."

Clayton looked up, worried. "Where are you going?"

Elysia decided to be honest. "I want to take the kids back to the mountains for a bit."

"You mean the place where you used to live?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I promised the people there I wouldn't tell anyone about them, so I can't take you and Mom. Plus, you know how Mom's health is-she shouldn't be traveling that far."

Clayton sighed, clearly uneasy. "But... why now? Is something wrong?"

"There's a little something, but don't worry, it's not a personal issue."

"Is it good news? Or is it dangerous?"

"It's not dangerous at all. We'll be safe, I promise."

Elysia just wanted to ask her grandma for help with the antidote research. Even if they didn't have a breakthrough, there was no real danger for her in the mountains.

Sure, there were wild animals, but most of them scattered the second they saw Evan.

"Is it really necessary to go?" Clayton pressed.

Elysia nodded again. "Yeah, it is."

Seeing that his daughter wasn't going to reveal more, Clayton changed tack. "Is Tarquin going with you?"

Elysia hesitated. She honestly hadn't figured that part out yet.

After all, her grandparents were reclusive-they didn't like meeting new people.

But before she could answer, Clayton spoke up, firm as ever. "Look, your mom and I can stay, but Tarquin has to go with you. I'd only feel comfortable if he goes too. I can't let you take the kids out there alone."

He trusted the people in the mountains not to harm his daughter or the grandkids. But what about the journey? What if something happened on the way, before they even got there? The wilderness was full of dangers-wolves, bears, who knew what else?

He'd spent over twenty years searching for his daughter, and now he couldn't bear the thought of losing her again. If something happened to her, he and his wife wouldn't survive it.

Seeing Clayton's furrowed brow and unyielding expression, Elysia quickly agreed. "Okay, okay, you win. I'll bring him along."

Outside, Mr. Bradford was pretending to tidy up but was actually eavesdropping by the door. He couldn't help but think, "Best father-in-law ever!"

...

Meanwhile, at the hospital...

The Medical & Pharmaceutical Association's special task force had gathered around, discussing for ages before finally reaching a conclusion.

"The formula is absolutely correct. Amazing! Sabrina, did you figure out this antidote yourself?!"

Sabrina was stunned. Absolutely correct?

That woman-who wasn't even allowed into the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association-had actually cracked the formula for the antidote?

How was that possible? She didn't have a medical license, didn't have the credentials-how on earth...?

And to make things worse, she was beautiful, married to a handsome man, and apparently a genius too. Sabrina could barely contain her jealousy.

What had she done to deserve all these breaks in life? Sabrina, who'd come from a respected background, hadn't had a single stroke of luck like this!

Simmering inside, Sabrina forced a smile and lied, "Yeah, I figured it out. Didn't you see my notes? Since you all wouldn't let me on the main project, I worked on it secretly myself."

The truth was, when Elysia's notes on the antidote's composition landed in her hands, Sabrina didn't take them straight to the task force. Instead, she went back to her room, copied them out in her own handwriting, organized them a bit, and then presented "her" version to the team.

Her thinking was simple: if Elysia's analysis turned out to be right, she'd take the credit. If it was wrong, well, no one else had figured it out anyway, so nothing lost.

Chapter 1243

Sabrina copied the report ahead of time, without a second thought.

Some people believed her without question, and immediately started singing her praises.

"No wonder she's Old Mr. Stevenson's granddaughter-Victor's family is just full of prodigies! She's amazing! Victor must be so proud!"

"She's young, talented, a rising star in medicine. Dr. Stevenson is absolutely the brightest hope of her generation!"

But not everyone was convinced.

Everyone knew Sabrina's abilities-since when did she get so good? Could she really have figured out the cure's formula? Yeah, right.

But because of who Sabrina was, no one dared say anything out loud. If you wanted to survive in the medical world, you didn't make an enemy of her.

So the room was filled with praise for Sabrina.

She just soaked it up, her face glowing with pride, acting like she'd actually discovered the cure herself.

After stealing Elysia's credit, Sabrina went to find Benjamin.

"Give me your friend's number," she demanded.

Benjamin had just heard about Sabrina stealing the credit, and he was honestly disgusted. He forced himself to stay calm. "Why do you need it?"

"Personal business," she replied curtly. "None of your concern."

"Uh-huh. And what kind of personal business?"

She rolled her eyes. "I said it's private, okay?"

Sabrina shoved a piece of paper at him. "Don't go thinking I stole your friend's work. I'd already figured out the formula before she handed it in. Here's my own notes. See for yourself."

Benjamin glanced at the paper, lips pressed in a thin line.

He didn't need to look twice to spot her little trick.

He knew Elysia wasn't interested in fame or credit, and honestly, he couldn't be bothered arguing with Sabrina. He just said flatly, "You don't need to explain yourself. It's not like you invented a cure that wiped out the virus for good. My friend really doesn't care."

Sabrina's face fell.

Benjamin's words hit a nerve. The credit that Elysia didn't care about, Sabrina was flaunting like it was her greatest achievement. It made her look desperate.

She snatched the notes back, frowning, and snapped, "Just give me her number already. I've got a great opportunity for her-she'll regret it if she misses out!"

"My friend doesn't like talking to strangers. I'll ask her first."

Sabrina glared at him. "It should be her honor that I'm reaching out! Why do you even have to ask?"

Benjamin rolled his eyes and ignored her, stepping aside to call Elysia.

Elysia had just laid down when her phone buzzed. Hearing that Sabrina wanted to talk, she was surprised.

"What does she want?" Elysia asked.

"She wouldn't say. Just said it was personal."

Elysia thought for a moment—if she turned Sabrina down flat, Sabrina might take it out on Benjamin. Plus, the virus samples were still under the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association's control, which meant they were basically in the hands of the Stevenson family. So she said, "Just tell her she can call me."

A few minutes later, Elysia's phone rang again—this time, an unknown number.

She knew it was Sabrina. She leaned against her headboard and answered. "Hello?"

Sabrina got straight to the point. "This is Sabrina. We met at the hospital today." "I know. What's up?"

"Tomorrow morning, come to the hospital. I'm giving you a chance to work with me on the virus research. If we succeed, I'll recommend you for membership in the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association."

Sabrina's tone was pure charity—a queen bestowing favors.

Elysia understood exactly what she was doing.

Work together? If they succeeded, all the credit would go to Sabrina—just like this time with the cure's ingredients.

Elysia didn't reject her outright. Instead, she asked, "Will you let me take the virus samples to my own lab for independent research?"

Chapter 1244

"Take it out of the lab? Absolutely not! The only way you're allowed to work on it is at the hospital.""

Sabrina muttered, half amused, half exasperated.

"You have no idea what a golden opportunity this is! If it weren't for me, you'd never get anywhere near the best medical experts in the country. Stop trying to bargain with me!"

Elysia's tone was cool, almost bored. "Then never mind. I'm not going."

Sabrina stared at her, stunned. "You're not coming? Don't you want to work on virus research with me?"

"Nope. Not interested."

"Wait—did you hear what I just said? I'm offering you a chance to work with the top medical minds, to maybe get a spot in the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association!"

"I heard you. Still not interested."

Sabrina couldn't believe it. "Do you even realize what it means to rub shoulders with those people? Or what joining the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association could do for your career?"

"I don't know, and honestly, I don't care. The Association isn't exactly a dream of mine."

Sabrina was dumbfounded. "You don't care about the Association? Are you out of your mind?"

Before Elysia could answer, Tarquin snatched her phone and cut in, his voice icy. "Maybe you're the one who's lost it. Stop bothering my wife and get lost."

He hung up, not waiting for a reply.

Sabrina just stared at her phone, so shocked her jaw nearly hit the floor. Ungrateful brat!

Absolutely clueless!

She'd offered Elysia a free pass into the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association, something most people would kill for, and all she got was a brush-off?

Was Elysia some kind of idiot?

If she didn't care about the Association, what future did she think she had in medicine?

Moron!

Sabrina gritted her teeth, seething.

"Reject me, will she? She'll regret this; just wait. Even if she comes crawling back

someday, I won't give her another chance. Stupid little nobody!"

She stomped off, not noticing a pair of eyes watching her from the shadows.

Back at home, Tarquin set Elysia's phone down and turned to her.

"If she ever talks down to you again, just let her have it. Don't bother being polite just because of her status."

Honestly, even if Elysia did want a future in medicine, she had no reason to be afraid of Sabrina. But she didn't-so why worry?

His wife afraid of Sabrina? Not a chance.

Elysia, for her part, barely gave Sabrina a second thought. She doubted Sabrina could cause any real trouble.

Her real worry was the virus sample.

If Sabrina was willing to use her for research but wouldn't even promise access to

the sample, it meant getting her hands on it was going to be tough.

Tarquin seemed to read her mind. He took her phone, pulled her gently into his arms, and switched off the bedside lamp.

"Let me deal with the sample. You just get some sleep."

"But-"

"If you can't sleep," he added, a teasing grin in his voice, "I can help you work off some energy."

Elysia's face flamed. She knew exactly what kind of "exercise" he meant, so she shut her mouth, closed her eyes, and snuggled into his chest.

Tarquin wrapped her up in his arms, patting her back softly, soothing her to sleep like a parent with a restless child.

Once she was out cold, he carefully slipped his arm free, tucked the blankets around her, kissed her on the forehead, and headed to the walk-in closet.

A few minutes later, dressed in black sweats, he slipped out of the house.

Axel was already waiting in the car, engine quietly humming.

Tarquin climbed in. "Let's go."

Axel glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Everything's ready. I can handle it myself."

"I'll go in person."

Axel just nodded, putting the car in gear and driving off into the night.

When morning came and Elysia woke up, Tarquin was lying next to her, still in his pajamas, breathing evenly, peaceful as could be.

Elysia looked at him, her heart overflowing with quiet love.

Chapter 1245

She couldn't help herself-her hand drifted upward, sneaking over to touch him, her movements secretive and shy.

Her fingertips brushed gently over his cheek, his brows, his nose, and finally, his lips...

Her thumb lingered on his thin lips, tracing them softly.

Her own heart thundered in her chest, and she had to swallow hard, her mind flashing with images that made her cheeks burn. Elysia yanked her hand back in a hurry.

Click-

But before she could retreat, Tarquin caught her finger between his teeth.

Elysia's eyes flew wide open in shock. "!"

She tried to pull her finger free, but he wouldn't let go.

His tongue curled around her fingertip, and her heart skipped a beat, her eyes going round as saucers.

She watched, helpless, as Tarquin's eyes-shut just a moment ago-opened, clear and sharp.

Elysia's heart leapt into her throat. "You were faking it?!"

Tarquin's gaze was dark as midnight, so intense she nearly forgot to breathe. He looked at her like a wolf, just woken up, spotting a rabbit right in front of him.

Elysia suddenly realized the danger. "You... You let go right now!"

Tarquin didn't. He just looked even more tempting.

Elysia's breath came fast, her face flaming red, like someone was tickling her with

a feather right at her core. It was maddening.

"Tarquin! You're incorrigible!" she gasped.

The way she said his name-half furious, half flustered-almost made him surrender right there.

Tarquin bit down lightly before finally letting her go. Then, in one smooth move, he

rolled over and pinned her beneath him.

"Trying to mess with me, huh?"

Elysia stiffened, denying it, chin up. "No, I wasn't!"

"Oh, really? Then what were you just doing?"

"I... I thought there was something on your lips. I wanted to wipe it off."

Tarquin knew she was lying. He squinted at her, a sly smile playing on his lips.

"Oh yeah? What was on my lips?"

"Uh... a crumb. From dinner."

"Is that so?"

"Uh-huh!" Elysia nodded furiously, like a bobblehead.

"Well, sweetheart, you've got a crumb on your lips too."

"Huh?!"

"Let me help you with that." He dipped his head and captured her lips with his.

Elysia squeaked in protest, "Mmm-!"

Tarquin tugged the blanket up over both of them...

The small bedroom filled with the sounds of laughter and mock outrage, voices tangled together.

When it was all over, Elysia lay sprawled, breathless and spent, while Tarquin stared at the ceiling, clearly frustrated.

Someone was still unsatisfied. But he knew there were things to do today, so he held back.

Once Elysia had caught her breath, she gave him a sharp pinch.

"Didn't you say yesterday you'd give me a break for a while?" "...You started it."

"I did not!"

She glared at him, fierce as a kitten, and Tarquin couldn't help but laugh.

"Okay, okay, don't be mad," he said, reaching for something by the bed. "I've got a surprise for you."

Elysia narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously.

"L

11

"You wanted those samples, right? I got them for you."

Elysia froze, her whole expression changing in a heartbeat. "You mean the virus sample?"

"Yep. And the antidote, too."

Elysia gaped, stunned. "Are you serious?"

"Of course I am. When have I ever lied to you, babe?"

Elysia shot upright, then realized she wasn't wearing anything and ducked straight back under the covers.

She didn't bother with her embarrassment-there were more important things at hand. "Where are they?!"

"In the car."

"How did you get them?"

"That's a secret."

"You... you didn't actually steal them, did you?"

"Of course not. Didn't I tell you? No stealing."

No stealing. Just a little... creative acquisition.

Last night, he and Axel had snuck out on a midnight mission for exactly this reason.

Elysia, still worried, pressed, "You're sure these are the real virus samples? There's no mistake?"

"Trust me, sweetheart. When do I ever mess things up?"

Elysia was so excited she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him hard. "You are amazing!"

Tarquin's Adam's apple bobbed. "Any reward for your hero, then?"

Elysia yanked the blanket up and covered his head, hiding his teasing grin.

"You got your reward already. Now close your eyes and no peeking-let me get cleaned up, and then we're heading out to see Grandma!"

Chapter 1246

Tarquin threw back the covers, ready to say something, but the words died on his lips. There, standing by the window, was a slender, graceful figure with flawless, porcelain skin. Long hair, a trim waist, legs that went on forever... Her silhouette was just stunning.

He'd seen her, touched her, kissed every inch, but it never felt like enough.

His throat tightened. All he could think about was the memory of pressing her up against the glass patio door, hiking her leg up, losing himself in her...

He wasn't satisfied last night, and now his body was burning up for her all over again.

He wanted nothing more than to sweep her up and take her right then and there- but he didn't dare.

Elysia was desperate to get those virus samples back to the mountain, and if he left her too sore to walk, she'd go ballistic.

Best-case scenario, she'd just give him the silent treatment.

Worst case, she'd banish him to the guest room for the whole week.

It just wasn't worth risking his future happiness for a few minutes of pleasure.

Tarquin glanced at his phone and saw a message from Lowell. He shrugged on his bathrobe, grabbed his phone, and stepped out onto the balcony.

The cool morning breeze helped clear his head as he called Lowell back to talk shop.

He'd known ever since they got the samples last night that today would be a travel day.

He'd spent most of the night on the phone with Lowell, making sure everything at work would run smoothly while he was gone.

Elysia had made it clear-her friends up in the mountains didn't trust outsiders, so this time he wasn't bringing anyone. Not even Lowell or Axel.

Lowell would stay behind to keep work on track.

Axel's job was to keep an eye on Zane, just in case he and that mysterious stranger tried anything in Tarquin's absence.

Tarquin wrapped up his call with Lowell after a few minutes, just in time to see Evan vaulting over the backyard fence.

The wall was nearly ten feet high, but the kid made it look easy.

son, Evan used the

Instead of coming in through the back door like a normal trellis, climbed up to Tarquin's bedroom window, and let himself in.

Tarquin wasn't even surprised anymore. He knew Evan had been training with that scarred, tough-as-nails guy everyone called "the Freak."

For weeks now, the guy had shown up at dawn to drag Evan out for training.

Tarquin trusted him not to hurt Evan, so he told the security team to just leave them be.

But now that they were heading back to the mountains, he needed to talk to his

son.

Evan came in, sweat-soaked and breathing hard, clearly fresh from a workout. He looked up, surprised. "Dad?"

Tarquin smiled gently. "Don't chug water right after you exercise. Take it slow."

"I just had a couple sips. Did you need something?"

Tarquin hesitated, then asked, "We're heading back to the mountain today. Do you have any plans for that freaky guy?"

He knew that "the Freak" had been looking for Evan's mentor for ages.

Back in the day, the guy had hidden out at some remote monastery, got mixed up with Gideon up with Gideon Bradford, all

ck down a certain someone.

Now he was shadowing Evan for the same reason.

Wherever Evan went, he went. If Evan returned to the mountains, the Freak would follow.

And since there was bad blood between the Freak and Evan's mentor, Tarquin doubted their reunion would be peaceful.

Plus, Evan's mentor might not even want to see the guy...

Evan's eyes went wide. "We're really going back?"

Tarquin nodded. "Yep."

"Are you sure? Did Mom say so?"

Tarquin smiled. "She did. We leave after breakfast."

Evan's excitement was obvious at first. But in just a few seconds, his face

changed, worry clouding his eyes.

"If I go home, he'll definitely come with me. But if he sees my mentor... what if he tries to start something?"

Tarquin sighed. "Honestly? He probably will."

Evan frowned, looking completely lost.

Tarquin ruffled his hair and offered, "You've got two options. Either figure out a way to keep him from following you, or just let it happen and face whatever comes. Maybe it's time they settled things, one way

or another. What do you think?"

Evan looked up at him, face scrunched in thought. "He's so strong... Is there even

a way to stop him from tagging along?"

Tarquin grinned. "There's always a way. You could slip him something in his coffee-knock him out for a while. Or, could have someone hold him here in Jindale City. But if you go that route, you'll probably ruin whatever trust you've built with him."

Chapter 1247

Jindale City was Tarquin's turf-if he wanted to make someone's life difficult, it was never a problem.

But this time, things were tricky. The person he wanted to deal with had a complicated relationship with Evan. There was no good way to go after them directly.

Tarquin and Evan's mentor had a history. Sure, that made them enemies in theory. But at the same time, Tarquin had always looked out for Evan...

The little guy was frowning, clearly troubled. After a moment, he blurted out, "I'm gonna talk to him myself!"

No sooner had he finished the sentence than he was climbing out the window again.

Sneaking out the back made it a straight shot up the hill behind the house-much easier.

Tarquin didn't stop him. This was between his son and the oddball. As a father, he wouldn't make Evan's choices for him.

He'd just be there in the background, waiting. When his son needed him, he'd step in-no sooner, no later.

...

On the Hill.

The man waiting there was a mountain of muscle, face crisscrossed with scars. He squinted as Evan appeared again, giving him a slow once-over. "Yeah?"

Evan marched right up, frowning. "What's the deal between you and my mentor?"

The big man's brow furrowed. "None of your business, kid."

Evan's voice shot up, "Of course it's my business! If you're my mentor's enemy, you're my enemy too!"

"...I'm your mentor too, you know."

"I never agreed to that!"

The man's face darkened-he was annoyed now.

Evan felt a pang of guilt. He hadn't exactly treated him as a mentor, but after all this time together, he had grown attached.

If he didn't care, he wouldn't have come to talk things out-he'd have just set a trap and kept the guy stuck in Jindale City for good.

Evan balled his little hands into fists. "I'm going to visit my mentor soon. If you

can't promise me you're not up to anything, I'm not taking you with me!"

The big guy's eyes widened in shock. "You're going to see him?!"

"Yeah!"

He was flustered. "When?!"

"...First, you tell me: what's really going on between you and my mentor?"

He pressed his lips together. "When I see him, I'll tell you everything."

Evan gritted his teeth. "If you're planning to hurt him, I won't let you anywhere near him!"

The big guy stared at Evan for a long beat, then asked, "What do I have to do for you to trust me?"

"You have to promise: when we get there, you'll listen to me! I'll talk to my mentor first. If he wants to see you, then you can meet him. If he doesn't, you can't force your way in!"

The big guy hesitated, scowling.

Evan stood his ground. "If you can't agree to that, I'm not taking you."

There was a tense silence. Finally, the big guy nodded. "Alright. I promise."

Evan let out a huge breath of relief. "Then get your stuff ready. We're heading out soon."

He turned to leave.

The big guy called after him, "Kiddo, you really trust me that much?"

Evan glanced back and shot him a look. "Would you betray my trust?"

They locked eyes for a moment, the big man finally saying, "No. I wouldn't." "Good. I believe you."

With that, Evan was off.

The big guy watched him go, a complicated mix of emotions flickering across his face.

Back at Number One Mansion

When the kids heard they were heading up to the mountains, they were more excited than ever!

Elliot and Emmett's eyes sparkled with anticipation, while Elijah and Baby were bubbling with curiosity.

Elijah usually played it cool and didn't say much, but you could tell he was dying to know what was going on. Instead of asking, he just stuck close to Baby and let her do all the talking.

Baby, meanwhile, was clutching her stuffed bunny, chasing after Elliot and Emmett, firing off questions left and right:

"Will we get to see Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma in the mountains?"

"Are there any mountain lions up there?"

"What about big ol' bears or sneaky little foxes?"

"Are

too? Does White

mouse's mom and dad in the grandparents or a grandpa avenet

grandma on both sides?"

"Can Evan really talk to all the animals in the mountains?"

Chapter 1248

The kids were buzzing with excitement and honestly, so were the adults.

Once Elysia had calmed Pamela down, she started packing. And boy, did she pack. Big bags, little bags, you name it. She wanted to bring everything she thought was good for Grandpa and Grandma.

After all, they'd saved her life, and after five years of living together, Elysia already considered them family. Blood didn't make you family-love and loyalty did.

Clayton watched her stuffing another bag. "Irene," he said, "aren't you all hiking up into the mountains? How are you supposed to carry all that?"

That snapped Elysia back to reality. Right-they'd have to trek through thick forests and climb rocky trails. No way she could carry this much.

Grumbling, she started unloading some things, though she clearly hated to leave anything behind.

When Evan walked back into their home at Number One Mansion, Elysia and the kids had almost finished packing.

Evan went straight to Tarquin. "Dad, he's coming with us," he announced.

Tarquin's sharp eyes narrowed. "You talked it out?"

"Yup! He promised to follow my lead when we get to the mountains. I'll check with my mentor first-if my mentor doesn't want to see him, I won't let them meet. Besides, once we're up there, I'll have plenty of help. If he tries anything, I'll deal with him myself!"

After all, the animals in the mountains were his friends. In the wild, Evan was king. Tarquin ruffled Evan's hair. "As long as you've got it worked out."

He wasn't worried about the oddball causing trouble. With him, Evan, and Evan's mentor, three against one-what could go wrong?

Before setting off, Tarquin called Keaton.

He asked Keaton to look after the Newsom family while they were gone.

Winona and Zane's mess still wasn't sorted. Even though Zane was in Winona's hands now, Tarquin wanted to make sure nothing went sideways.

Keaton didn't mind helping-honestly, he was kind of excited. Winona knew a ton of gorgeous ladies, and any excuse to hang around was a good one.

Still, he grumbled, "Seriously, are you guys ever going to deal with that scumbag? Planning to keep him around till next Christmas?"

Tarquin's voice was calm. "He may be scum, but he's bait too."

If they took care of Zane too soon, their mysterious adversary would just find another crooked partner, and things would get even harder to control.

Better to string Zane along for now. He wouldn't dare sabotage Central Pharmaceuticals just yet not while it was still expanding. He'd wait till it got bigger before making his move.

Keaton was smart; he got the message. "I hear you. Don't worry about a thing, the Newsoms are safe with me. Good luck up there."

After hanging up, Tarquin made a few more calls, quietly passing all the evidence they'd gathered about Zane's shady deals with Burmalia to the police. They'd work with the cops on this. Once they were back from the mountains-virus or no virus—Zane was going down.

Once everything in Jindale City was squared away, the family said their goodbyes to Clayton and Pamela and hit the road.

A luxury SUV whisked them off to the airport. Their private jet was already waiting

to fly them to Darkfort City, and from there, they'd drive to the mountains.

Finally, they'd hike deep into the wilderness, following winding trails into the heart of the wild.

They'd barely left the city when Elysia's phone buzzed.

It was Sabrina.

Elysia considered ignoring it, but if the call was about the virus, she couldn't risk it. She answered, "Hello?"

Sabrina cut right to the chase. "Elysia, this is your last chance. Are you going to join me in researching the virus or not?"

Apparently, Sabrina had spent all night thinking about it. If Elysia really did manage to find a cure, Sabrina could claim the credit-and pave the way for herself to become the next president of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. Content

Elysia said, "I told you last night, I'm not interested."

Sabrina sounded annoyed. "Think this through, will you? The Stevenson family leads the entire medical field. Not even Benjamin would dare cross us lightly-what makes you think you can?"

Chapter 1249

"You've got no connections in the medical field, no family name, nothing. Without me, you're nobody! The fact that I'm inviting you to join my research team is a privilege you should be grateful for!"

Elysia's response was ice-cold.

"I don't need connections, I don't need a leg up, and I definitely don't need your so-called privilege. Goodbye!"

"You-Listen, developing a cure for this virus, that's the sacred duty of every doctor! If you refuse to help, you're heartless-unpatriotic, ungrateful!"

Sabrina's voice shot up like she was preaching from a pulpit, making Elysia's refusal sound like a crime against humanity.

Elysia wasn't in the mood for her theatrics. She didn't say another word, just hung up.

Who the hell was Sabrina to judge her compassion or her sense of duty?

She wasn't about to let herself be guilt-tripped by Sabrina's moral posturing. Not today.

A minute later, Sabrina sent a long-winded message:

[If you don't have compassion and a sense of responsibility, you don't deserve to be a healer. Hell, you don't even deserve to be a decent human being!]

Elysia snorted and shot back:

[I'm pretty sure you're the one who doesn't deserve to be a healer. Or a decent human being, for that matter.]

After hitting send, she blocked Sabrina for good.

What a piece of work. Always scheming to steal someone else's achievements, and the second she can't, she throws a tantrum.

Not that Elysia had any illusions about curing this virus single-handedly—but even

if she could, she wouldn't let someone like Sabrina take the credit.

She just wanted to live her own life, away from all the politics and drama of the medical world.

After her little clapback, Elysia was over it. But Tarquin? He was fuming.

Messing with his wife, over and over again-did they think he was just going to stand by and watch?

Tarquin fired off a quick text to Lowell: [Dig up some dirt on the Stevenson family!]

Lowell replied instantly: [The Stevenson family from the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association?]

[Yeah. I want all their dirty laundry.]

Suddenly, Elysia leaned in, catching him off guard. "Who are you texting? You

look like you just bit into a lemon."

Tarquin slipped his phone away and gave her a gentle, teasing grin.

"Just Lowell. Work stuff."

He definitely wasn't going to tell her he'd just declared war on the Stevenson family over Sabrina. No need to give Elysia anything to worry about.

She seemed to buy it. "We have no idea how long we'll be out in the woods this time. Aren't you worried about being away from the office for so long?"

"I'm not worried. Lowell's keeping an eye on things, and I told your dad too-if anything urgent comes up, he can review the project files."

Elysia's eyes widened. "You asked Dad?"

"Sure. He's a smart guy-he's run Hawkins Sea-freight like a pro for years. He can handle a little corporate decision-making."

She knew her father was brilliant,

but... "Stiff, it's a bit weird, isn't it? mean, you're his son-in-law. Isn't it awkward to have him step in at your company? People might talk."

Tarquin chuckled and gently pinched her cheek. "Let them talk. It's my company. And what's mine is yours. What's your dad's is yours, too. No matter how we shuffle things around, it all comes back to you."

Elysia was speechless. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't touched.

This man would give her everything-his life, his heart, his money, his love.

She glanced at their kids in the front seats, then, trying to be sneaky, traced a heart into Tarquin's palm.

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, and he grinned, raising his voice just enough for the kids to hear, "Are you flirting with me?"

The kids all whipped around to stare at Elysia.

She froze, her face burning, lips twitching in embarrassment.

She shot Tarquin a glare and quickly changed the subject, "Evan, you and White remember the way back, right?"

The forest was wild and dense, the

kind of place where even the sunlight struggled to find a way in. It was easy to get lost-hell, even Elliot had trouble with the directions sometimes.

They'd made it out last time only because Evan and White led the way.

Chapter 1250

Everyone glanced quickly at Evan, but before he could get a word in, White leapt right into the spotlight.

The little guy flicked his bright red tongue and bounced happily onto Elysia's shoulder, nuzzling her chin with a soft hiss.

It was almost like he was saying, "Don't worry, I got this!"

Evan puffed out his chest, all confidence.

"Don't worry, Mom! White and I will definitely find our way home."

Elijah looked puzzled. "But there aren't any real trails in the mountains. How do you even know where you're going?"

Evan grinned, proud as could be.

"We don't remember the paths, but the animals sure do! They're like my and White's secret agents."

Elijah's eyebrows shot up. "Wait, you mean you can actually understand all the animals?"

Evan laughed.

"Not exactly! I just hang out with them a lot, so I kind of pick up on what their body language means."

"It's the same with White-he just gives me a look and I know exactly what he wants!"

"And if I give White a look, he gets what I mean too, right buddy?"

Evan held out a tiny fist, and White dipped his head, giving him a gentle bump-a perfect demonstration of their little mind-meld.

Elijah and Baby were instantly fascinated, circling around Evan and White, peppering them with questions.

The kids' attention drifted away again, so Elysia shot Tarquin a glare and pinched his side under the table.

Tarquin just grinned, caught her hand, and traced a little heart on her palm before lacing their fingers together.

Tarquin couldn't help his curiosity. "So, Evan, how did you get White to be your pet?"

White was a clever little snake,

clearly wild and dangerous-a far cry from your average house pet. Every time Tarquin looked at him, he remembered the chaos at the Bradford family's annual reunion: that wild pack of wolves charging straight at the Bradfords, only to turn on their heels and attack someone else when the lead wolf suddenly dropped dead.

Back then, no one understood what had happened. Even the professional animal handlers agreed that someone must have paid to train the wolves to go after Elijah specifically.

But now it was obvious: it was all because of White.

White was tiny-no longer than a breadstick, and just as skinny-but his venom packed a serious punch.

Survival of the fittest, as nature intended.

White might be small, but he was mighty, which was why even the wolves listened

to him. Getting close to a snake like White was no easy feat.

Elysia sighed.

"There are all kinds of rare plants and animals deep in the mountains."

"Evan's always been a handful.

When he was little, he'd beg his great-grandpa to teach him self-defense moves, and when

practice ended, he'd go out looking for critters to wrestle with

"Over time, he just spent more and more time with the animals-sometimes I thought he was more at home with them than with people."

"One day he came running back home, bawling his eyes out. I thought he'd gotten

hurt, but nope—it was a tiny snake in his hands that needed help."

"He begged me and his great-grandma to save the poor thing. Said the snake lost

its mom and got bitten by another snake. Just broke his heart."

"Back then, White was no longer than a finger, barely hanging on."

"I wasn't sure we could save him, but Evan was so heartbroken we had to try."

"For the next three weeks, Evan

barely left the house. He stayed right by White's side, not even pestering his great-grandpa for lessons or running off to the woods. Honestly, the whole forest seemed quieter."

"It took about twenty days, but eventually White pulled through."

"After that, they were inseparable. Eating, sleeping, playing-wherever Evan went, White went, too."

"And more than once, when Evan was in trouble, White risked everything to protect him."