

Hitched 1261

Chapter 1261

"We're just a bunch of hunters," the man said.

"Poachers?" Tarquin raised an eyebrow.

"Y-yeah. That's right."

"When did you come up the mountain? And how'd you find this place?"

"We've been in the woods for a while, but only stumbled on this place last night. Honestly, it was pure luck-we were tracking a deer, and it led us right here.

Once we realized there was food, water, and even some decent beds with warm blankets, we figured we'd found the perfect base camp."

Tarquin pressed, "Who was staying here before you?"

"No idea. We haven't seen the owners since we arrived no sign of anyone."

"Do you have any clue who they are?"

"Looks like a family, probably. There are too many rooms for just one person. And inside, we found old folks' sweaters, kids' sneakers, and a bunch of men's hoodies and jeans. Our boss reckons it's three generations living together.

He thinks they're dirt poor-couldn't handle life in town, couldn't afford a house, so they moved out here to live off the grid."

Tarquin and the kids exchanged skeptical glances. How does someone with that kind of logic end up as the boss?

A desperately poor family, surviving out here in the wild like it's nothing? But at least their guess was way off. That meant they had no clue who really lived here —and that was good news for the elderly folks who just wanted to keep to themselves.

Tarquin continued, "Any idea where the family went?"

"Nope."

"You didn't look for them?"

"We checked around nearby, but saw nothing suspicious. The boss said not to waste time on them—just some broke nobodies. If they come back, he says we should just take them out."

"How many of you are there?" Tarquin asked.

"Over a hundred, at least. Some aren't here—they're outside the forest, selling what we catch."

"Where'd you get your guns?"

"No clue. I'm just a grunt. If you want to know that stuff, you'll have to ask the boss."

"How long are you planning to stay?"

"Boss says we're here for the long haul. Plenty of game in these woods—enough

to last a lifetime. And it's nice and hidden."

"Your boss-Brock, right?"

"Yeah, Brock's the boss. His brothers

are second and third in line-Lyle's the third. They run the crew, but even they answer to someone higher up. I'm nobody special, just follow orders."

Tarquin paused, satisfied with what he'd learned. He held out his hand. "Give me back my watch."

The man fumbled to pull it out and handed it over-his hands shaking. Money's no good if you're dead.

"Listen, I'm warning you," the man stammered, if you keep your cool, you might still make it out alive. But if you try anything—if you shoot me—there are people just waiting outside to storm in and mow everyone down!"

Tarquin calmly slipped his watch back on. He tossed the handgun over to the man. "Get out."

The guy hesitated for a split second, then snatched up the gun-ready to try his luck. But before he could even raise it, Tarquin's hand was around his throat, squeezing. The man gasped, struggling for air, unable to puff the trigger. If Tarquin squeezed any harder, he'd be dead

"Try anything again, and you won't get a third chance," Tarquin growled in a low, cold voice.

He only let go when the man was turning blue. The poacher slid to the floor, clutching his throat, staring up at Tarquin in raw terror. He finally understood who he was messing with.

Tarquin stood over him, voice icy. "When you walk out of here, act like none of this ever happened. Keep your head down, and you might just get out alive."

The man didn't believe Tarquin could make much trouble-but he was scared out of his mind. After all, Tarquin had just dragged him to the edge of death. Twice. "Y-yeah, I won't say a word. Not a thing happened here. I swear."

With that, the guy staggered to his feet, clutching the gun, and bolted out the door terrified that if he waited even another second, Tarquin would finish the job.

Chapter 1262

Elysia huddled in the corner, shielding the kids with her arms, her heart thudding with worry. She glanced toward the front door, waiting until the man had run off before she finally dared to speak.

Turning to Tarquin, she whispered anxiously, "You're sure he won't go blabbing out there?"

If that guy brought back a whole gang, they'd be in real trouble. Those guys had numbers—and worse, they were armed to the teeth.

Tarquin shrugged, confidence in his voice. "Don't stress. He won't dare. He's just a flunky, more worried about saving his own skin than playing the hero."

Elysia hesitated, still uneasy. But Tarquin went on, "Think about it. He just got threatened and let go—hardly something he wants to brag about. Besides, none of them actually escaped, so there's nothing for him to gain by talking."

He moved closer, kneeling beside Elysia and the kids, his gaze softening. "Look, your grandparents are just out. They weren't captured or hurt. You can breathe easy."

Relief washed over Elysia, and she nodded, exhaling deeply. Thank God the old folks were safe.

But her relief didn't last long. The next problem loomed, heavy as a thundercloud. "What do we do now? They've got over a hundred guys, all with guns."

The kids looked up at Tarquin, wide-eyed. Evan opened his mouth, closed it, then just stared, waiting for Tarquin to take charge.

Evan and White were practically kings of these woods-they knew every inch, every creature. They could've unleashed the wild animals on the intruders, but with so many armed men, the risks were huge. The animals would take heavy losses. Worse, the cabin-Grandpa and Grandma's pride and joy-might get wrecked in the chaos.

There had to be a better way. One that didn't put the animals in harm's way or destroy the house.

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, thoughtful. "We wait for now. When their boss comes back, I'll get the details out of him. Once we know exactly what we're up against, we'll make our move."

His voice was steady, almost cold. "These guys are

criminals cold-blooded, ruthless. Their fate's already sealed: either they meet their end in these woods, or they go face justice back in town. But it all starts with taking down their leader. Once we have him, the rest will fall in line."

Time crawled by. The sun set, and the world outside turned inky black. A faint light flickered on the porch but inside, they sat in darkness. The temperature dropped, and Tarquin shrugged off his parka, draping it over Elysia and Baby to keep them warm.

Elliot frowned, breaking the silence. "Dad, why isn't Brock back yet?"

Tarquin didn't seem surprised. His tone was calm. "That scar-faced freak's tough. Those hunters will have their hands full trying to catch him."

"Think the hunters will make it back?"

Tarquin nodded. "I think so. That guy doesn't know the full story-he won't go all out. He's probably stringing the hunters along, hoping to buy us a chance to escape."

Just as he finished speaking, a strange noise drifted from outside. It wasn't loud- no screams, just muted grunts, then the unmistakable thud of bodies hitting the ground.

One.

Two.

Three.

More...

Tarquin was instantly alert, rising to his feet and striding to the door. Elliot and Evan hurried after him, peering out into the darkness from behind his shoulder.

Suddenly, a familiar voice rang out, loud and indignant, "Would you look at these freeloaders! The minute we leave, they think they own the place. Guess when the lion's away, the alley cats play king, huh? Who the hell do they think this land belongs to!"

Chapter 1263

"Let me tell you, even if their great-great-granddaddy showed up, he wouldn't

dare take over my house! Bunch of arrogant idiots!"

"Shh, there are still a few people breathing in there," the old woman said, glancing over at Tarquin.

"Oh yeah? Some stragglers, huh? Let me see who's left."

The two seniors strode over together. The spry old man was just about to kick the door open when the old woman stopped him with a hand.

"Easy, don't go charging in. There are kids inside."

"Kids?"

She nodded. "Yeah, you can hear the lighter breathing. Just a few, and they're really young. Not just one, either."

At once, the old man's thoughts jumped to Elliot, Evan, Emmett.

"Don't tell me that's our Elysia and those three troublemakers back already?" Before the old woman could say anything, the old man shook his head.

"No way, no way. Elysia might be slow, but those three boys aren't! If it was them, they wouldn't have gotten caught by these fools. I'm telling you, my Evan could wipe the floor with them!"

The old woman was the calm one. "Two adults, five kids in there. Doesn't sound like Elysia's crew. She's only got three kids."

The old man grumbled, "If it's not Elysia, what the heck are they doing here? Did these idiots drag them in?"

The old woman shrugged. "Why don't we just open the door and ask?"

The old man asked, "They're all awake?"

"Wide awake. You can hear the way they're breathing, all worked up, listening to us."

He turned toward the door and called out, gentle as could be, "Don't be scared, now! We mean you no harm. I'm coming in, alright?"

With an old but steady hand, he turned the lock. There was a loud 'crack' as the thick chain snapped. The door creaked open.

The next second-

A small figure darted out of the dark, launching straight at the old man!

He squinted, stepped aside, and dodged the little attacker with ease, catching the

kid by the collar like he'd done it a thousand times.

"Flip on the lights, would you? Let's

see which family's wild child this is. Look at that, knows a bit of

self-defense too. Just like my Evan, always-"

He didn't get to finish. The lights flicked on.

He found himself face-to-face with Evan.

He froze.

He and Evan stared at each other for a long, stunned moment. No

a.ne

screams, just shocked silence. Then the old man whipped around to look at the old woman, his eyes huge.

"I'm losing my mind! I swear I just saw Evan! My eyes must be shot!"

Evan's eyes were red, his voice muffled as he called, "Bernard."

The old man got even more flustered.

"Serioeck my ears! I'm

hearing things now-Evan's

me! Am I dreaming? Am I callimet

way

to the pearly gates or something?"

The old woman didn't answer. She'd seen Evan too, and she was just as stunned.

Elysia came running over, her eyes shining with tears as she spotted them.

"Grandma! Bernard!"

The old woman gasped. The old man gasped. For a second, time itself seemed to freeze.

Then, the old man turned to the old woman again, shouting, "Now I'm seeing Elysia too! I must be dying, I'm hallucinating, right?!"

The old woman snapped out of it and gave him a light smack. "Snap out of it! That's our Elysia! And those are the boys!"

Tears welled up in the old woman's eyes as she rushed forward. "Elysia!"

Chapter 1264

Elysia's eyes welled up with tears in an instant. She threw herself into the old woman's arms, sobbing, "Grandma!"

The old man, small and spry, hadn't quite caught up to what was happening. He stared in wide-eyed confusion. "Huh?!"

Before he had a chance to react, Elliot and Emmett dashed over and each grabbed onto one of his legs, shouting, "Bernard!"

Bernard blinked like crazy, totally taken aback. He looked down at Elliot, then at Emmett, then finally at Evan—the little guy he was still holding up by the back of his hoodie like a mischievous kitten.

The old man and the youngest boy locked eyes for a moment, both of them staring, neither blinking.

After a brief, stunned silence, Bernard suddenly let out a loud exclamation.

"Well, I'll be darned! It really is you little rascals back again! For a second there, I thought my old eyes were playing tricks on me and my ears were going too!"

"You nearly gave me a heart attack, you little troublemakers! Bernard almost thought he was about to kick the bucket!"

Still holding Evan by the hoodie, Bernard didn't go for a hug or any kind of warm welcome. Nope—he just tossed Evan off to the side like he was tossing a sack of potatoes!

Tarquin, who was standing off to the side, just gaped in shock. "!"

But Evan didn't hit the ground. The kid twisted midair, landed on his feet like a cat, and grinned.

Bernard gave an approving nod. "Look at you go, kid! Haven't seen you in half a year, and you've really stepped up your game!"

Then he leaned down to ruffle Elliot's hair. "You've shot up, Elliot! And you're looking sharper than ever. Almost catching up to how handsome your old Bernard was at your age! I'll tell you, when I was your age, I was quite the heartbreaker."

Bernard let out a booming laugh, then bent down and scooped up Emmett, lifting him high and weighing him in his arms.

"Not bad, not bad! Emmett, you've put on some healthy weight. Gotten taller and sturdier, too! Finally not such a little bean sprout anymore!"

Emmett had always been the frail one as a baby, not nearly as tough as Elliot or Evan. So besides Elysia, the old folks always worried about Emmett's health the most.

Emmett, being the most sensitive, was already a ball of tears. "Bernard... Bernard..." he sobbed.

Bernard quickly started to comfort him. "Hey now, Emmett, no more tears. How about Bernard takes you for a ride on the 'Superman Express'?"

The moment he heard that,

Emmett's crying stopped cold, his mouth quivering in terror. "N-no thank

you, Bernard. I-I think I go

hi to Great-Grandma Tracey."

And off he ran, hurrying to find Tracey.

Bernard looked down and saw that Elliot's eyes were a little red too. He tried to

cheer him up: "Elliot, want Bernard to take you flying?"

Elliot's mouth twitched. "... Thanks, Bernard, but I should go check on Great- Grandma first."

He quickly let go of Bernard's leg and made a beeline after Emmett.

No way was he risking the "flying" game. That was enough to scare the life out of anyone!

Bernard's idea of "flying" wasn't your average piggy-back ride. Nope, it meant hauling you up to the roof, or even higher-climbing up a tall old oak tree in the backyard, no safety net, no nothing. Then, like a wild monkey, he'd leap from branch to branch, still holding you, before tossing you right out of the

tree-only to catch you just before

you hit the ground.

Whenever the kids were little and started to cry, Bernard would take them "flying." They'd always stop crying after that.

Bernard thought he was curing their sadness, but really, they were just scared

stiff!

If you kept on crying, Bernard would just take you for another round!

Only Evan ever actually liked the game.

Bernard, of course, had no idea how terrifying his "cheering up" technique really was. Watching Elliot and Emmett hurry away, he grumbled to himself,

"Kids these days, growing up so fast. Don't even need Bernard to cheer them up anymore. Guess they're learning to tough it out on their own."

Elliot and Emmett: ".

11

Meanwhile, Evan finished greeting Tracey and came running back, eyes shining.

"Bernard! Can we go flying?"

Bernard's eyes lit up. "Let's do it!"

He scooped Evan up under one arm and, with a nimbleness that defied his years, bounded up the wall and onto the rooftop.

Chapter 1265

Leaping from one rooftop to the next, then springing onto the big oak tree behind the house, the pair vanished into the darkness in no time.

Tarquin: "..."

He was starting to see exactly who Evan took after.

Evan's mannerisms, the way he talked and moved it was almost uncanny. He was just like the old man.

Even their personalities...

There were still a bunch of armed thugs knocked out in the living room, and those two just decided to up and leave-to go have fun, no less.

Talk about nerves of steel!

One was a little kid, the other an old kid, and both of them seemed to crave mischief even more than the other.

Still, watching that old man sweep Evan up and sprint away with such speed, Tarquin had to admit, he was impressed.

He'd grown up learning to handle himself, and he could tell-the old man was something else.

Honestly, even if he and Axel teamed up, they'd stand no chance in a fair fight.

If Tarquin faced him alone, he wouldn't last ten moves before getting hurt. If things got serious, he wouldn't make it out alive.

Tarquin frowned, watching the direction the old man and Evan had disappeared, then finally let out a long breath.

There's always someone better out there no matter how tough you think you are. There's no "best," just "better."

But with the old man watching over Evan, Tarquin knew he didn't need to worry. Evan would be fine.

He turned toward Elysia and Tracey.

Tracey had stopped crying and was now bent over, chatting quietly with Elliot and Emmett.

Until now, Tarquin's attention had been entirely on Evan and the old man. Now, he really looked at Tracey for the first time.

She looked...familiar.

He took another glance and his heart skipped a beat, shock flooding his face.

She was...

Tracey, sharp as ever, caught his stare and looked up at him.

Tarquin gazed at her weathered face. Usually, he kept his emotions in check, but now he was visibly stunned.

Surprise. Disbelief. Even a little fear.

Tracey narrowed her eyes. "..."

Elysia quickly wiped her tears and stepped in to introduce them.

"Grandma, this is my husband-Elliot and Evan's father. Tarquin, this is Grandma."

Tracey eyed Tarquin up and down for a long moment, then scowled.

She let out a dismissive snort, her tone frosty. "So you're Elysia's so-called husband who can't be bothered to step up?"

Elysia: "...Grandma."

"Don't you defend him! Calling him irresponsible is being generous! His wife and kids nearly got killed, and as their husband and father, that's on him-no excuses!"

Elysia tugged at Tracey's cardigan, trying to reason with her. "He didn't know I was pregnant before, he "

Tracey cut her off, waving a hand.

"You're too soft-hearted, always making excuses. Whatever the reason, the fact is, he failed to protect you and the kids. He didn't do his job as husband or father!"

Tarquin stared at Tracey, finally snapping out of his shock.

He didn't get angry-instead, he took the scolding with humility.

"You're right, Grandma. I let Elysia down, and I let the kids down. I promise, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to them."

Tracey's tone stayed ice-cold.

"If you're good to my Elysia, I'll let you call me Grandma. Otherwise, you're just another enemy to this old lady!"

Sensing the tension, Elysia quickly tried to smooth things over, clinging to Tracey's arm. "Grandma, please..."

Tarquin bowed his head respectfully. "I understand."

Tracey finally softened, just a bit.

"My Elysia's been through enough. Treat her right, or you'll have me to answer to! And don't think just because I'm old it'd be hard for me to deal with you!"

Tarquin knew Tracey's harsh words came from a place of love for Elysia and the kids.

He also knew she wasn't bluffing.

Because now, he'd recognized her for who she really was.

If she wanted to leave him crippled-or dead-she could do it in the blink of an eye.

Chapter 1266

Who is she?

She's Tracey-the one they call the Miracle Healer.

She's been a living legend in the medical world for almost a century. When it comes to brewing up medicine or concocting poison, nobody could match her. In every hospital and research lab, her name is whispered with awe, almost reverence. She's a myth brought to life—a miracle worker, a force of nature. Some folks say she's as close to a god as a human can get.

But why is the Stevenson family held in such high regard in the medical field? It all goes back to Sabrina Stevenson's grandfather. He once had the rare fortune of meeting Tracey-she gave him a few pointers, shared a sliver of her knowledge. From that day on, he claimed to be her last protégé, her chosen student. That's how he ended up as President of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association, and the Stevenson family's reputation soared. Sure, he was talented, but it was Tracey's blessing that set him apart.

People could talk about Tracey all year and still not run out of stories. Here's the gist of her legend: she could bring the dead back to life in a heartbeat or send the living to their graves just as fast. She crafted antidotes to save lives and brewed up toxins that could end them. That's why, when she spoke, Tarquin believed every word. If she wanted him dead, it would be child's play.

The only reason Tarquin never guessed it was Tracey who taught Elysia medicine was because-well, Tracey was dead. She'd been gone for over a decade. The story went that she'd died after accidentally infecting herself with a virus during her research. When news of her death broke, it sent shockwaves everywhere- from high-level officials to everyday folks at the local diner. Everyone was stunned and grieving.

She'd been an orphan, never married, never had kids, and at the time of her death, she was the President of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. The Association pulled out all the stops for her funeral—a grand affair attended by everyone who was anyone. The Stevenson family, wanting to show off their connection, even had all the younger members show up in black suits and veils, mourning her like family.

The funeral was so massive, it made headlines not only across the country but overseas as well. Respectable outlets called her passing "the fall of a superstar- a loss not just for Zhinora, but for all humanity." The less savory media? They said, "Good riddance. Maybe now there won't be any more Zhinorians in the World Pharmaceutical Organization."

Her influence in medicine was immense, and her death felt final-so final that nobody ever questioned it. Not until now. No wonder Tarquin never made the connection. Who would believe she'd faked her own death?

It finally made sense how Elysia, who had no formal medical background, could surpass someone like Benjamin Lawson in just five years. The saying is true: a great teacher makes a great student.

Tarquin looked at the elderly woman, sincerity written all over his face. "I know Elysia's had it tough. I owe her so much, and I promise I'll treat her right. But it's not just because of what she's been through. I love her."

His voice was steady, honest. Elysia blushed, a shy, happy smile tugging at her lips.

Tracey's sharp eyes softened as she

glanced at Elysia. She let out a

chuckle, her tone warm for the first

time. "I've never cared much for men, for all that lovey-dovey business. But if Elysia's found true love, I'm happy for her!"

"Grandma..." Elliot and Emmett piped up, jumping to Tarquin's defense.

"Great-grandma, don't be mad at

Daddy. He and Mom just had a

bunch of misunderstandings before, that's why things were so messy. But now, he treats her really well. I approve."

"Yeah, Daddy's the best. He's good to Mom, good to us. He used to be a bit of a jerk, but now he's a great dad."

Tracey's smile bloomed, bright and

genuine as she turned to Tarquin "You're a lucky guy. Having Elysia and the kids love you-that's your blessing."

Tarquin nodded, his handsome face full of gratitude. "Elysia is my lucky charm- my guardian angel."

He didn't call her a treasure, but something deeper, and that made Tracey laugh out loud, her voice booming with delight.

"All right, enough about the past. Let's turn the page. From now on, treat Elysia right."

"I promise. You can count on me," Tarquin replied firmly.

Tracey nodded, satisfied, finally letting Tarquin off the hook. She turned to look at Baby and Elijah.

"And who are these two little munchkins?"

Elysia jumped in to explain:

Chapter 1267

"They're Tarquin and my kids too. This is Baby, and this is Elijah. BabyElijah, say hi to your great-grandma."

The two little ones obediently greeted Tracey together,

"Hello, Great-grandma!"

Tracey was absolutely delighted.

"Oh my goodness, look at you two! Why are there two little ones? Elijah looks just like Elliot and Evan! And Baby's the spitting image of Elysia!"

Elysia laughed as she explained,

"Back then, both of them were taken away, so when Grandpa and Grandma found us, it was just me, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett."

"Elijah grew up with Tarquin, and Baby was raised by someone else..."

"Grandma, I'll fill you in on all the details about the kids later. For now, tell us about you and Grandpa."

"Why is it only you and Bernard back? Where are the other grandpas?"

"What happened last night? Why wasn't anyone home? There was always someone around before."

"And how did those hunters get so close without you knowing?"

Tracey let out a long breath and glanced at the hunters knocked out cold on the floor, frowning a little.

"It was just bad timing, really. Gerald had some personal business and had to go down to town, and he took Howard with him to help out."

"So it was just Bernard, Quincy, Walter, and me at home."

"Yesterday morning, Quincy wanted to go out and paint-he found this spot when Bernard took him exploring as a kid, said it was magical."

"Walter was bored and curious, so he tagged along."

"With all four of the old guys gone, it was just me and Bernard holding down the fort."

"Wouldn't you know it, as soon as Quincy and Walter left, we spotted people hunting in the eastern woods."

"Bernard had found a bunch of young whooping cranes nesting over there, and we were worried those scoundrels would wipe them out!"

There are less than three thousand whooping cranes left worldwide-barely over a thousand in this country. They're rare!

"And

wolverines, martens, and all kinds of

rare wildlife out east. Lose

and it's a step closer to

one,

"And then there's Pippin, the fox Evan raised since he was a pup. He's got his own territory and a family out there now."

"If something happened to Pippin, Evan would be heartbroken."

"We couldn't just let those jerks have their way, so Bernard and I locked up and headed out to the eastern woods."

"Bernard went to teach them a lesson, and I went to help any animals that got hurt."

"We never expected anyone would find this place-especially not so many at once!"

"By the time we got your message, it was almost too late. We hurried home as fast as we could, only just got back."

Elysia was speechless.

No wonder the house was empty-what a coincidence.

When they'd arrived five years ago, Grandma and Grandpa had already become the guardians of the forest.

They always loved the animals. They

used to say that as outsiders, since they'd intruded on the animals' home, it was their duty to do right by them. .

swnov

Whenever they found hunters, they'd find a way to drive them off. If they found an

injured animal, they'd do everything they could to help.

Tracey glanced at the hunters still sprawled out on the ground, worry etched on her face.

"They're poisoned-won't be waking

up anytime soon. With Bernard around I'm not worried about the rest of those folks outside, but there are just so many of them. It's a real mess."

It wasn't that they couldn't handle them—it was about keeping their identities secret.

Before, if they found a couple of poachers, Gerald would knock them out and quietly hand them over to the rangers.

But now, with this many, sneaking them out wasn't exactly realistic.

And now these folks knew where they lived-who knew what trouble that could bring?

Tracey frowned, clearly troubled.

"Grandma, you and Elysia catch up. Let me handle these guys," Tarquin suddenly spoke up.

Tracey immediately turned to him. "You have a plan?"

Chapter 1268

Tarquin nodded. "Yeah, but I'll need a little chemical help."

"Chemical help? You mean something that erases memories? As far as I know, there's no drug on earth that can make someone forget a chunk of time just like that," Tracey said, frowning.

Tracey sighed. "Even I haven't managed to invent anything like that, and I've tried."

Tarquin grinned. "No, Grandma, you misunderstood. I'm talking about a hallucinogen."

"...Oh, a hallucinogen. Well, we have some of that around here. We used to use it to scare off hunters and trespassers," Tracey replied, a hint of pride in her voice.

"But it's got its downsides. It doesn't work the same on everyone."

Elysia piped in, her tone gentle but firm. "Tarquin, you know Grandma and Grandpa just want to live quietly up here in the mountains. Off the grid. They don't want anyone finding us."

The message was clear: whatever Tarquin did, it had to keep every single trespasser quiet. No loose ends.

Tarquin nodded again, serious this time. "I get it. The hallucinogen is just a backup, not the main plan. I've got other tricks up my sleeve. You just stay with Grandma and help her out. I'll take care of the rest."

Elysia looked at him with pure gratitude and no small amount of admiration. "Okay!"

She turned to Tracey. "Grandma, you can trust Tarquin. If he says he'll handle it, he will."

Tracey's eyes softened as she looked at Tarquin. "You're a good kid. Thank you." "You're too kind, Grandma."

Whenever Tarquin was around Tracey, he was the perfect grandson—well-mannered and sweet.

He figured: love me, love my family. Elysia's grandma was his grandma too, as far as he was concerned.

"If you need anything else besides the hallucinogen, just say the word. Make yourself at home," Tracey said, then led Tarquin to her cozy little cabin and handed him the jar of the homemade stuff.

Afterwards, she and Elysia headed off with the kids to tidy up the rooms and get dinner started, probably a hearty beef stew, some cornbread, and a big apple pie cooling on the windowsill.

With the hallucinogen in hand, Tarquin followed Elliot to Howard's room.

Now, to Elysia, Howard was the classic quirky old guy glued to his computer, spending hours every day gaming and tinkering. But what most people didn't know was that Howard's name, whispered in hacker circles, was enough to send shivers through the spines of CEOs and politicians all over the world.

Like Tracey, he'd faked his own death, retired, and vanished from the public eye.

If he ever decided to come out of hiding, you could bet half the tech industry and more than a few governments would lose sleep.

Even the Patel brothers, big shots as they were, would bow deeply if they met him in person.

Back in his heyday, Howard was the reason top-secret military networks in half a dozen countries were in a permanent state of panic-firewalls up, security teams cursing and sweating bullets, and still, he'd waltz right through.

Plenty of nations had labeled him Public Enemy Number One.

Elliot could have been just as legendary, if he hadn't been more interested in making money than in notoriety.

Elliot made himself at home at Howard's computer, typing in the password with practiced ease. A few quick clicks later, the screen lit up with glowing red outlines.

"Howard's got surveillance set up all around the woods," Elliot explained. "Anybody sets foot within a mile, the alarm goes off here first."

"Howard can track their movements using these heat signatures, then figure out how to chase them off," he continued, scrolling through the feed.

"Here, Dad-look. That's Evan and Bernard."

On the screen, the faces weren't clear-just red human

vera

silhouettes-one adult, one kid, leaping from branch to branch like a couple of monkeys. Their coordinates shifted wildly as they darted through the trees.

Elliot zoomed in on another area with more heat signatures.

"These must be the big guy with the scarred face and Brock's crew."

A cluster of figures huddled together, weapons drawn, clearly on high alert.

Up in the branches of a huge oak, someone perched, nearly invisible in the thick summer leaves, watching the group below.

One of the men caught sight of him and shouted, "He's up there! I see him! In the tree!"

A hail of bullets followed, the tension in the room palpable as they watched the scene unfold on the monitor.

Chapter 1269

The boss moved with lightning speed, darting behind a thick oak and using the trunk as cover. In one smooth motion, he leapt to the next tree, barely making a sound.

Gunfire chased him-rounds cracking through the air as the shooters tried to keep up, but he stayed just out of reach.

A few tense moments later, the woods fell eerily silent again. The hunters had lost him again.

But Tarquin and Elliot, crouched low behind a mossy log, could see the boss just a few yards away, hidden behind another sturdy tree.

The boss bent down, scooping up a handful of rocks from the forest floor. With a quick flick of his wrist, he hurled them-vanishing behind the brush at the same instant.

Those rocks flew like bullets, smacking into several of the hunters with brutal force.

One rock went clean through a hunter's arm, another buried itself deep into someone's thigh bone. The screams that followed tore through the quiet-pure agony.

Watching the action play out on the computer monitor, it was obvious-the boss wasn't just running. He was toying with them, buying time for Tarquin and Elliot.

The screen showed everyone's location, constantly updating. In the corner, a counter ticked down: 56 people left. The boss was one of them.

Elliot hovered his mouse over a hunter's rifle, and a pop-up displayed the make, model, and country of origin.

He moved the pointer to a hunter's face. Instantly, a small window appeared with a crisp color photo and a detailed bio.

Tarquin stared, speechless. He'd seen plenty in his life, but watching Elliot work the controls, he couldn't help but feel a surge of respect for Howard.

"Impressive," Tarquin murmured, eyes glued to the screen.

There were more heat signatures in the area-three separate spots, each marked in bright red on the map.

Elliot pointed to the last one. "That's Quincy and Walter."

"Quincy's a designer, an artist—he loves painting mountain landscapes and rare wildlife."

He nodded toward the other dot. "And that's Walter. He was the chief engineer at the Department of Defense. Some of our most

advanced weapons-stuff that made headlines all over the world-were his inventions."

"And Evan? Besides his hand-to-hand skills, he's a whiz with explosives-learned everything from Walter."

"Sometimes he even dreams up wild gadgets-again, all thanks to Walter's mentoring."

Suddenly, a memory flashed through Tarquin's mind. He frowned, his brow furrowing. "The old man? You mean... the legend?"

Elliot nodded. "Yeah. That's him."

Tarquin just stared at the computer

screen, stunned at the tiny,

gray-haired man's photo. He'd-

always known there were some

serious heavyweights hiding out in these woods, but never one like this.

This "legend"—the man who'd given entire foreign defense contractors nightmares, the one whose very name sent shivers down spines around the world.

No one could touch him when it came to defending the country. If he was the second most valuable asset, no one dared claim first.

If word got out that he was still alive, foreign soldiers would freak out-panic even. Our own military? They'd be crying tears of joy.

If he ever decided to come out of hiding, it wouldn't just be one top general sent to

greet him—it'd be every branch, Army, Navy, Air Force, you name it.

Tarquin took a long moment to process, then asked, "Your Gerald... Is that Mr. Morgan? Gerald Morgan?"

Elliot nodded again, dead serious. "That's the one."

Tarquin let out a low whistle.

The Morgan family had produced several titans of industry, but Gerald was on another level. In the

business world, they called him the "legend"—a man whose power and influence could turn the market upside down with a snap of his fingers.

Chapter 1270

It took Tarquin a long moment to finally speak.

"You guys are... Quincy, right? Are you really Quincy?"

Elliot nodded again, more seriously this time. "Yeah. We are."

Tarquin just stared at him, stunned into silence for a good while.

Quincy. The Quincys. The name still echoed among the old guard of artists and fashion icons—absolute legends. To put it simply, even someone as proud as Grandpa Emmett would show them nothing but the utmost respect.

And Bernard... well, Tarquin didn't even have to ask about him.

He'd known it the moment he laid eyes on him.

That wild, brazen kid who made headlines for storming the ring in seven different countries—that was him!

Back then, foreign fighters had mocked Americans, calling them soft, and Bernard couldn't take it. He'd taken on challenger after challenger, fists flying, and showed the world what a real lion's strength looked like.

He was young, ridiculously strong, and so fierce that fighters from half of Europe and the States called him out, denouncing him for breaking the “spirit of sportsmanship” and spreading rumors he must have been doping to be that good.

His feats sent shockwaves around the world.

He died young, but even now, his name is still spoken with reverence in martial arts circles.

Anyone who practiced, everyone who ever dreamed of being somebody, admired him, envied him, wanted to be him.

Tarquin took a deep breath. These people—every last one of them—were legends.

Elysia's grandparents? Certified, world-renowned legends.

And every single one of them was supposed to be dead.

Not just Grandma, but all the grandpas too. They'd all supposedly died years ago. Who would've guessed they'd been living it up in the mountains all this time? Tarquin couldn't help himself. “So... why'd they fake their deaths?”

Elliot answered, "Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma said they'd spent half their lives working too hard and worrying too much. They just wanted a break, so they decided to retire somewhere quiet."

"...That's really the reason?"

Elliot could tell what his dad was thinking. He'd wondered the same thing.

He was quiet for a moment, then added, "I never pushed them for details, but I haven't noticed anything weird. They really do seem to just relax-doing what they love every day. But I can't say for sure that's the whole story."

Tarquin frowned, thinking it over.

All these top-tier legends suddenly dropping off the map, just because they were tired?

It made sense, sort of... but it also felt too simple. Too convenient.

If there was more to it, what could it be?

Elliot might be just a kid, but he was sharp-sharp enough to know something didn't add up.

Tarquin let it go for now. No point overthinking what he couldn't solve.

He said to Elliot, "I'm heading out for a bit. You and Elijah stay here

Great-Grandma and your mom Keep an eye on Emmett and the baby, okay?"

Elliot nodded, already knowing what his dad was up to. He handed Tarquin a wristband.

"Dad, take this. There's no cell signal in these hills, but you can use this to stay in touch with us."

Tarquin looked at it. It looked like an ordinary fitness tracker.

Elliot explained, "Gerald and Howard built this together. You can call us with it, and it'll show everyone's location. There's even a heat-sensor tracker, so you can keep tabs on people."

"...Nice!"

Tarquin slipped the band on, slung on his backpack, and left Howard's cabin.

Inside the backpack: a stash of sedatives.

He didn't head straight for the hunters. Instead, he checked the tracker to find Evan and Bernard first.

When he found them, the old man and the little boy were running wild, having an absolute blast.

Evan spotted Tarquin and leaped down from a tree. "Dad! What're you doing out here?"

Tarquin saw him all sweaty and grinning, and pulled out a tissue to gently wipe his face, smiling fondly.