

Hitched 1271

Chapter 1271

"I need to talk to you guys about something."

Barely had Tarquin finished his sentence before he felt danger in the air. He glanced up, heart skipping a beat.

Bernard had leapt down from the oak tree, eyes sharp and face set in a scowl. Tarquin, ever alert, dodged the old man's sudden attack just in time.

But Bernard was relentless, moving with surprising speed for someone his age! Tarquin's brows shot up in surprise as he danced backward, barely keeping up.

This little old guy's not messing around, he thought, forcing himself to focus. But it was clear-he was struggling.

There's always someone better out there, Tarquin realized. Sure, he was good at making money, but when it came to fighting, Bernard had him beat by a mile.

Among normal folks, Tarquin was pretty handy. Next to Bernard, though? He might as well be swinging at shadows.

He just couldn't keep up.

After only a few moves, Bernard landed a solid blow.

Tarquin grunted in pain, biting back a curse. He could tell Bernard hadn't used full strength, but still his shoulder felt like it was about to split in two.

If Bernard had really gone for it, Tarquin would be toast.

But Bernard wasn't done. With a cold stare, he came at Tarquin again!

From the sidelines, Evan hollered,

"Bernard, you better stop! If you lay a finger on him, my mom's gonna bawl her eyes out! That's her precious baby boy now!"

Tarquin: "..."

Bernard paused instantly, turning to Evan. "Isn't Elysia's precious baby boy supposed to be you kids?"

Evan puffed up his chest. "My dad's part of the club now! He's Mom's new favorite, and if you hurt him, she'll cry so much you'll never hear the end of it. No one can calm her down-not even with her favorite apple pie!"

"And if Mom starts crying, you know Great-Granny will come after you! What if she jabs you with that crazy knitting needle of hers again and you end up stuck in bed for a week? Then what?"

Bernard's mouth twitched. "...."

Tarquin's did too. "..."

Why did it sound like he'd just been compared to Elysia's pampered pet poodle?

Bernard finally composed himself, folded his arms behind his back, and gave Tarquin a squinty, appraising look.

"Elysia might be a bit clueless, but her taste in men's not half bad."

"You're not as good-looking as me, but you'll do."

"You're not exactly Bruce Lee, but you're good enough to protect Elysia and the kids."

"You look sturdy enough. Overall... not bad. I'll give you a five out of ten."

He stuck his chin in the air, acting like he was being generous.

That haughty look-exactly the same as when Evan used to size him up! Tarquin: "..."

Before he could get a word in, Bernard turned to Evan,

"Evan, you'd better keep training. You're no match for him right now! He could flatten you in ten moves, easy."

"What happens if he ever bullies your

mom

Who'll

you can't defend her?

and up for Elysia if I'm no

,

Tarquin opened his mouth, about to protest that he'd never hurt Elysia, but Evan

beat him to it, chin tilting up.

"If I can't beat him, I'll just use my

Velbet

homemade explosives. He tries mess with Mom, I'll blow him to

kingdom come-there won't be enough left to sweep under the rug!"

Tarquin: "...Right. Good kid."

Bernard burst out laughing, clapping his hands.

"Not bad! But remember, no matter how good your gadgets are, nothing real skill. You'd better keep

practicing!" Content belonto theet

"Don't worry, Bernard, one day I'll be able to flatten him with my bare fists!"

Tarquin: "... Yeah. That's my boy, alright."

Chapter 1272

The old man and the little boy were chatting away, so caught up in their own world that nobody noticed the look on Tarquin's face.

The old man leaned in toward Evan and said,

"Listen, Evan, you remember what Bernard always says: Maybe your fists can't fix everything, but they sure can fix the kind of people who start the trouble in the first place!"

"Doesn't matter who it is—if someone's messing with your mom, you go all out and give them a real good wallop!"

Evan balled his tiny fists and nodded so hard his hair flopped,

"Yeah! If anyone bullies my mom, I'll knock their socks off! I don't care who it is!"

The old man grinned, "Even if it's your dad."

Evan replied without a hint of hesitation, "Of course! My mom's the most important!"

Tarquin: "..."

For a second, he honestly didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

He was touched that his little boy loved his mom so much.

But on the other hand, he felt a pang of sadness—his own son didn't seem to care about him at all.

Tarquin just stood there, somewhere between a smile and a sigh, and glanced over at Bernard.

Suddenly, a chill ran down his spine, as if he'd just dodged a bullet.

If he hadn't built a real relationship with Elysia, what kind of mess would he be in right now?

One, two, three, four, five... six!

That's right, six heavy-hitters, all out for his hide!

Just the thought made Tarquin swallow nervously. And he'd alwa

thought of

himself as a brave guy, but even he had to admit this was terrifying.

He was just an ordinary guy. There was no way he could go up against a squad of geniuses and powerhouses like this.

Then his thoughts flashed to a certain crowd...

All those busybodies in Jindale City who used to gossip about Elysia, sneering about her raising kids out in the sticks with a bunch of "no-good nobodies."

Well, envy is a real disease, Tarquin thought. Those folks must be terminal, to have the nerve to say that.

Nobodies? Ha! Any one of these six legends could stroll into town and wipe the floor with their entire clan!

Tarquin steadied himself and greeted Bernard politely, "Hey, Bernard. Good to see you."

The old man cleared his throat,

"Well, whether it's good or not depends on you. You treat my Elysia and those rascals right, then I'll be good. If I'm good, things go well for you. Got it?"

He wasn't just talking-he was laying down the law.

Tarquin nodded,

"I get it, sir. Don't worry-Elysia's the queen of our house. The kids are little

princes and princesses. I'm just the loyal butler."

A butler's job is to serve the queen and her royal kids, after all. He'd treat them right.

The old man narrowed his eyes and added,

"Glad you understand. Now, about you hurting Elysia before-I'm not done with you over that. That slap was just a reminder. If you ever will

with

break her heart again, you ap

have words. Don't go thinking just because we've retired that we can't come out of hiding. For her, we'd do anything."

Tarquin was all seriousness,

"Sir, from now on, the only one doing any bullying in our marriage is her. I swear

I'll never hurt her again."

The old man finally looked satisfied, the threat fading from his eyes as he laughed,

"A man's word is his bond, son. Don't make me regret trusting you. Don't let me down."

Tarquin replied, "You have my word."

He respected these old guys, partly because of Elysia-her family was his family

now.

But also because these men had reputations and accomplishments that

commanded respect. They were true legends and patriots.

Bernard spoke up, "So, what brings you to us today?"

Tarquin got down to business,

"Elysia and Grandma are tidying up at home. I came out to ask you and Evan for help-there's still some of

no

those poachers left to det

Bernard finally remembered the unfinished business and asked,

"What did Grandma want done about it?"

"...She didn't say. She left it in my hands."

Bernard looked surprised, "You're handling it?"

Back in the old days, it was always Gerald who took care of things when trouble

came to the mountains.

Chapter 1273

If Gerald wasn't around, it was always the old lady who had to worry about

everything.

The old lady was out of options, so then it fell to Quincy Howard.

Bernard and Walter were wild cards-one loved to solve problems with his fists,

the other preferred to charge in with whatever weapon he could find.

Usually, if something was going down in the mountains, these two weren't the first people you'd call.

They just waited for orders and did what they were told.

Their position among the big shots? Well, it was about as humble as Evan's was whenever he stood in front of Elliot and Elijah.

Tarquin nodded.

"I got it. I asked Grandma for some shrooms-uh, hallucinogens. I was thinking..."

He started laying out his plan, but before he'd even finished, Bernard and Evan were already getting hyped.

"Sounds good! Solid plan! We're in! Let's do it!" they both chimed in, way too excited.

Tarquin: "..."

The old guy and the kid didn't even look at him-just grinned at each other, like they were already plotting mischief.

"This is gonna be a blast," Bernard crowed. "Wait till I ride the black bear through their camp-scare the pants off those guys!"

"Riding a bear? Pfft, just wait," Evan shot back. "I've got an even bigger show planned. Oh, hey!"

Bernard turned to Tarquin. "You got any gear?"

"Uh... just the shrooms."

Bernard shook his head. "Not enough, not even close. Evan, c'mon, time to 'borrow' some gear."

"Yup!" Evan nodded so hard his baseball cap nearly fell off.

As the odd pair started to leave, Tarquin hurried to block them.

"Wait, where are you 'borrowing' from? What are you taking?" "From home, obviously. And as for what-just you wait and see." Tarquin: "?"

Before he could get another word in, Bernard waved him off.

"You go on ahead and find those folks. Evan and I will grab the gear and catch up."

And then, poof-they were gone.

Tarquin: "...

He had no idea what those two were

about to swipe from home, and honestly, he wasn't sure he wanted to. He didn't want them to go, but he couldn't exactly stop them either.

With a sigh, Tarquin checked his smartwatch and started following the GPS towards the group's last known location-alone.

He didn't rush; he needed to wait for Bernard and Evan anyway. He wanted to warn them about the Scarred Guy before they all ran into each other.

If Bernard suddenly crossed paths with Mr. Scarface without a heads-up, fists would fly and trouble would follow.

Handling the poachers was one thing, but if Bernard and Scarface went at it, both of them might end up wrecked. Both were incredibly tough and a fight between them could end in a hospital visit-or worse.

So, Tarquin had to warn Bernard first.

By now, it was pitch black out. The dense branches overhead blocked whatever moonlight there was, making the woods even darker-creepy and dangerous.

All around, insects chirped and strange rustlings echoed through the trees.

Far off, wild beasts howled-a chilling, bone-deep sound that rose and fell through the night.

Tarquin had been through the wringer at boot camp before.

Survival training in the wild was not

nothing new to him; he'd spent plenty of nights alone in the forest.

Still, he moved carefully, keeping an eye out for venomous snakes or creepy crawlies.

He switched on his headlamp and made his way through the thick underbrush, step by slow step.

He had no idea how long he'd been walking when-

Suddenly, something fell off.

The bugs stopped chirping, little critters scurried away, trees shuddered, the ground trembled.

The noise was huge, like a pack of giant predators was closing in-and, from the sound of it, more than just one.

Nighttime hunters were always on the prowl for food-and they were fierce.

Getting tangled up with them now made zero sense. He had bigger problems to deal with. No way he was losing time brawling with a hungry bear or wolf.

Frowning, Tarquin was about to pick up his pace when, right in front of him—

He froze in his tracks, heart hammering in his chest.

His eyes narrowed as he stared straight ahead...

Chapter 1274

The beam from Tarquin's flashlight cut through the darkness, and for a split

second, he was reminded of a character from an anime.

No-Face.

Yeah, that was it. No-Face.

Except this No-Face had to be at least seven feet tall!

But unlike the quiet, eerie No-Face from the anime, the figure in front of him was growling like a grizzly bear!

Not exactly true to character.

Tarquin had a pretty good guess about what was going on. He pressed his lips together, about to ask when a sudden noise rustled above his head.

He looked up—and nearly dropped his flashlight.

There, hanging upside down from a tree branch, was a ghost!

A ghost, with its face covered in what looked like blood. In fact, its whole body

was smeared in red-pretty gruesome at first glance.

Tarquin couldn't help but roll his eyes a little. After a beat, he called out,

"...Evan, Bernard."

Evan immediately yanked off the No-Face mask, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"Dad, how'd you know it was us?"

Bernard, meanwhile, leapt down from the branch and whipped off the blood- soaked sheet, peering at Tarquin with the same question,

"Yeah, what gave us away?"

Tarquin didn't answer right away-he'd noticed a fresh scrape on Bernard's forehead.

"Bernard, what happened to your head?"

"Got smacked by the old lady!"

Tarquin: "?!"

Bernard explained, "She caught me swiping another bed sheet. Chased me all over the house. If I didn't come back with a battle scar, she wouldn't have let it go! She's tough as nails, that woman."

He seemed almost proud, not one bit embarrassed about being walloped by a woman.

Evan chimed in, "Bernard's got this thing about stealing the bed sheets at home. Great-Gran can't keep up with how fast he nicks them."

"She finally caught him in the act today, totally lost it, and gave him a good whack!"

Bernard just waved it off. "No big deal! Just a scratch. My only regret is I didn't get enough sheets to play the swamp monster. That one's way more impressive! Ghosts just aren't my style, you know?"

↳

Evan nodded solemnly. "Yeah, I like the swamp monster too."

Bernard grinned, "Give it a couple days-once Great-Gran gets some new sheets, I'll snag a few more."

Evan looked worried. "But she said if you steal her bed sheets again, she'll break your legs and you'll never leave the house."

Bernard turned to him conspiratorially, "Then you help me next time! She adores you, Evan. If you get caught, she couldn't bring herself to lay a finger on you!"

Evan shrugged helplessly. "That's true, but Bernard, did you forget? She said if I steal anything, you get the blame anyway."

Bernard: "..."

Tarquin: "..."

No wonder the two of them had been so hyped when he mentioned his plan earlier. They just loved this sort of thing.

They'd dashed home to "gear up"-which apparently meant raiding the linen closet for sheets...

Tarquin eyed the sheet Bernard was holding. It was still sticky and reeked of iron.

"What's this stuff supposed to be?" he asked.

"Pig's blood! Looks real, right? I'm gonna splash a few drops on those jerks later-scare the life outta them. But you still haven't told us-bow'd you know it was us?"

"Just a hunch," Tarquin replied.

"A hunch? Man, you're good at this."

Tarquin didn't answer, just shook his head.

Bernard suddenly had a bright idea. "Hey, next time, will you help Grandpa swipe some sheets? Elysia adores you-she'd never lay a hand on you for my sake! And I won't make you do it for

nothing-Grandpa'll put on a whole swamp monster show! It'll blow your mind, promise!"

Tarquin's mouth twitched, but he managed a reluctant nod, playing along with the

old man's antics.

Chapter 1275

"...Alright."

A deep, rumbling growl echoed through the woods again. Tarquin quickly turned to

Evan, desperate for a distraction.

"How on earth are you making that growling noise?"

"Growling? Oh! Not me-it's him!"

With a theatrical flourish, Evan yanked the sheets aside, revealing the truth.

Tarquin's heart skipped a beat. It was a bear-a real, hulking bear!

Evan was perched on its shoulders, clutching its ears and kicking his little legs in excitement.

"This is my new friend, Benny! Benny, say hi to my dad!"

The massive black bear looked seriously unimpressed. It let out a thunderous roar, right at Tarquin.

The sound rattled Tarquin's bones. It was like the bear was venting all its pent-up frustration directly at him.

Tarquin's lips twitched. Was he really the easiest target here? Did Benny the Bear think he was just a pushover?

"Alright, let's get moving," the old man cut in, already turning away. "Your grandma said we need to wrap this up quick. She and Elysia are waiting for us to get home for dinner."

As the old man started to scurry off, Tarquin called after him, "Bernard."

Bernard turned, "Yeah?"

Tarquin glanced at Evan. "Evan, did you tell Bernard about...that man?"

Evan blinked, suddenly remembering the scarred man he'd met earlier.

His brows furrowed with concern. He hopped down from Benny's back and ran over to Bernard.

"Bernard, do you know an old man with scars all over his face?"

"Huh?"

Instead of explaining, Evan demonstrated a few moves right there in front of Bernard. "He showed me these."

Bernard's expression darkened instantly, the lightness vanishing from his face.

"He taught you that? He actually found you?"

"No-it was just a chance meeting. Evan quickly summarized the important parts, then looked up at

hard. "Do you want to see him? If don't, I can go tell him.

Bernard's brow furrowed, silent for a long moment as Tarquin and Evan watched him anxiously.

Finally, Bernard sighed heavily. "I'll see him."

Evan looked uneasy. "Will you be in danger?"

Bernard neither nodded nor shook his head. "If he wants a real fight, so be it. But

first, let's finish what we came here to do."

Without another word, the old man picked up the pace, sprinting ahead.

Evan's heart pounded. "A fight to the death...nobody wins those!"

Tarquin's face tightened, but he just said, "Let's go."

They both took off after Bernard.

Soon, they reached a group of

hunters. The men were onenet

huddled together, eyes wild

feareas if they'd just seen something out of a horrorovie.

"Who's there?!"

"Aaahhh-!"

"Stop yelling, man! What the hell are you screaming for?"

"I—I swear I saw a ghost, Brock! I'm not kidding, I saw a ghost..."

"Shut up! Anyone else talks nonsense and I'll put a bullet in them myself!"

The hunters, all big, burly men, were crowded together, glancing nervously around.

Evan and Tarquin, careful to keep their flashlights off, hid in the shadows nearby.

Evan scanned the area, but there was no sign of Bernard or the scarred stranger. He tugged at Tarquin's sleeve, worried.

"Dad, they're not here."

Tarquin checked his watch, and through the faint blue glow, saw two figures in the distance—already` fighting. One was running, the other in hot pursuit.

Bernard was running. The scarred man was chasing him.

Chapter 1276

Evan was getting more and more anxious. "Are they fighting already?"

Tarquin lowered his voice.

"Not yet. Relax. You know Bernard's got our plan in mind. If he's going to make a move, it won't be here and now. He'll pick the right place."

He'd definitely keep his distance, Tarquin thought, just to make sure nothing messed with their plan.

And judging by the state of this bunch, Bernard must have already scared the living daylights out of them before he left.

"Let's take care of these guys first-quick and clean. Then we'll go find them," Tarquin said.

Evan was still nervous, but he nodded. "Alright."

Father and son worked like a well-oiled team. Tarquin scattered a handful of hallucinogenic powder, while Evan played the spooky ghost, darting right under the hunters' noses.

The group of hunters was already on edge, and once the powder kicked in, their nerves snapped.

Chaos erupted. People screamed and dashed for cover in every direction.

Some got hit by friendly fire, some fainted dead away, and others just ran around wailing for their mothers.

Tarquin and Evan, having taken the antidote ahead of time, were immune to the effects.

They herded the frenzied hunters like wolves, making sure none of them slipped out of the circle-keeping them in the thick of the hallucination, pushing their panic to the max.

Only when Tarquin figured the drug had done its job did he let them bolt into the forest.

Deep in the woods, the real battle began.

The hunters had guns, but their minds were muddled.

The wild animals had no weapons, but their minds were sharp and clear.

Each had their strengths and weaknesses-an even match.

Howls echoed. Gunshots and screams rang out.

It was obvious the animals were winning.

Some hunters didn't get far before a wolf pack brought them down, tearing them apart.

A cheetah took one out with a single bite to the neck.

A black bear smacked another clear across a clearing-he landed a dozen yards away, dead before he hit the ground.

The cold-blooded predators of the daylight were now prey, fleeing for their lives.

And the animals, the ones hunted all day, had become the hunters.

Tarquin stood up in a tree, coldly watching it all unfold, not a trace of pity in his eyes.

Were these people worth pity?

Not at all.

Innocent people suddenly attacked by wild animals-now that would be a tragedy.

But these guys? They barged in here with hunting rifles, breaking every law on the books, planning to kill for Now they were the hunted.

Sere was nothing tragic about that.

They brought it on themselves.

The government had made it clear-no poaching, no hunting wild animals. That wasn't just a slogan.

Living in harmony with nature isn't just for the sake of the animals-it's for all of humanity.

A broken ecosystem is a terrifying thing.

Tarquin would never kill a person

that if the animals did,

s just the luck of the dre

Whoever survived, survived.

After watching for a bit, Tarquin nudged Evan, and together they set off to find Bernard and the old scar-faced boss.

He'd come back tomorrow to see which hunters had survived, and plan the next

move.

By the time father and son reached the two old men, the fight had already broken out at the top of the hill.

Both were seasoned fighters-every move was dangerous.

Evan, panicked, wanted to break it up, but Tarquin held him back.

"Let them get it out of their system first," Tarquin murmured. "We'll only step in if we have to."

Their feud had been simmering for years-words wouldn't settle it. They needed to fight it out.

"But what if they really hurt each other?" Evan whispered.

"As long as nobody dies, it's fine," Tarquin replied.

Sometimes a good fight was the only way to let go of old grudges.

They waited in the shadows, ready to step in if anyone tried to go too far.

After a while, Bernard's eyes flashed with sudden determination. He snatched the old boss's wrist-and with his other hand, clamped down hard on his throat, pinning him to the ground in one swift, brutal move.

Chapter 1277

With just a little more pressure, he could've ended him right there.

"Bernard!" Evan yelled, sprinting over, panic all over his face.

Bernard frowned, silent for a moment, then let go and stood up.

"I'll be waiting for you up in the mountains. Come find me when you've toughened up! Now get lost!"

The big guy with the scarred face flushed red, coughing like crazy.

Evan dashed over, anxious. "Hey, are you alright?!"

The scarred man glared at Bernard, his eyes red and wild. He didn't bother wiping the blood off his face, just wiped his tears away roughly, not saying a single word.

He got up, limped off deeper into the woods, heading down the mountain.

Evan stared after him, worried, then rushed forward and shoved a bottle of painkillers into his hand. "Here, take these. They'll help."

The scarred man shot him a strange look, but took the bottle and disappeared into the trees.

Evan watched him go for a while, then hurried back to Bernard. "Bernard, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Bernard grunted.

"What about him-?"

"Let him go!" Bernard snapped. "With his skills, he's not about to get eaten by a bear or anything. But with that attitude, trying to get revenge? He'll wind up dead, and he won't even know how it happened!"

Bernard glared down the path after the scarred man, fuming. But beneath the anger, his words were laced with frustration-like he expected better from him.

Once the scarred guy was out of sight, Evan nudged Bernard again. "Bernard, what's going on between you two? What happened?"

Bernard sighed a long, heavy sigh. Suddenly, whether from the fight or from something weighing on his heart, he coughed hard and spat out blood.

"Bernard!" Evan shouted in alarm.

Tarquin rushed over too. "You okay, sir?"

Bernard wiped the blood from his mouth. "I'm alright."

"Here, sit down, take it easy," Tarquin said, helping Bernard lower himself onto a big rock at the top of the hill. Evan fished out some medicine from his backpack— just aspirin, but it was better than nothing—and handed it over.

Bernard caught his breath, then finally spoke, his voice gravelly. "He's my mentor's son. My little brother in a way. Back in the day, our mentor was betrayed-set up by some foreigners. On his deathbed, he asked me to look after his wife and his boy."

"He was just a kid back then, maybe eight or nine. I was a hotheaded young man full of fire, angry as hell. All I could think about was getting revenge for our mentor. I ignored his widow's pleas, and I went overseas, half bent on settling the score."

"When I left, the kid clung to my leg, crying his eyes out. He'd always depended on me. But I wasn't going on a vacation—I was heading into danger. I couldn't let him come along."

"I tore myself away from him and went to Alerasia. The men who betrayed our mentor had to pay. My mentor had done everything for me. I couldn't just let it go. I was ready to die for that vengeance."

Bernard broke off, coughing again, his face twisted with anger.

After a moment, he continued, "Looking back, I was too young too cocky. I got to Alerasia, challenged their champion in a fight to the death, and killed him in front of everyone in the ring."

"After that, I traveled across seven

countries, taking down their best fighters, making sure everyone knew my mentor's name. I thought, was strong, that proved my mentor was strong. All I cared about was revenge. I didn't think about my mentor's wife or my little brother back home..."

Chapter 1278

The old man's face twisted with guilt and regret as he spoke.

"I did get my revenge. I cleared my mentor's name, even brought pride to our people. But I was too flashy about it. When they couldn't beat me fair and square, they started playing dirty."

"They killed my mentor's wife in the most brutal way, then used my junior as a pawn against me! They forced me to throw fights-told me to lose on purpose in the ring to foreign fighters, just so they could save face on the world stage."

"If I refused, it was either take my own life, or they'd kill my junior. The kidnappers let us video chat. He was devastated-his eyes were red and he shouted at me, teeth clenched: 'Avenge her! Don't worry about me, just get revenge for my mom!'"

"After our mentor died, his wife was my junior's last anchor. Losing her broke him. He was just a kid, and suddenly he had nothing left to live for-only a burning need for revenge."

"But by then... everything inside me had changed. I was angry, but I was also wracked with guilt. I regretted being so brash. If I hadn't drawn so much attention with my revenge, none of this would have happened to them!"

"There are countless ways to get payback, but I chose the dumbest one. I only thought about making things right for my mentor-I never stopped to consider the danger I was putting his wife and kid in."

"If I hadn't been so loud about avenging my mentor, they wouldn't have gotten caught up in it."

"So after she was killed, I lost my nerve. I gave in. I'd already gotten her killed in my quest for revenge-there was no way I'd let my junior die for it too."

"He was their only son, their legacy. I had to keep him safe. But when they tried to make me throw the fights, just couldn't do it. It wasn't just about mme-it was about our country's honor. I was a fighter, proud to represent our people, and I'd never let those foreign fighters humiliate us."

"But I couldn't just let myself die, either. If I died, what if they broke their promise and killed him anyway? So, in the end, I faked my own death. For whatever reason, after I disappeared, they let my junior go."

"For years after that, he barely scraped by just surviving, really. Life was hard enough, but the pressure was even worse. He wanted to avenge his mother, but he didn't have the strength or the skills."

"He couldn't even track down who'd

done it. He only knew it was foreigners who killed her and kidnapped him, but he had no idea who exactly. And even if he found out, what could he do? That kind of helplessness... it eats you alive. His life fell apart." Content bétongs to FindNovel

"As for me, I couldn't help him openly. All I could do was give him a little support from the shadows,

make his life a bit easier. But

emotionally? I was useless

harder things got for him, the more he missed his mom, the more he wanted revenge-and the more he grew to resent me."

"He knew I wasn't really dead. He didn't think I'd faked my death and disappeared for his sake-he thought I was a coward, spineless, that I didn't care about his mom at all. Over time, that resentment just grew, and so did his despair."

"Later, I tried to set him up with a new mentor, get him back into training, but he refused. He even threatened to end his own life if I didn't avenge his mother."

Chapter 1279

"I had no choice," Bernard sighed, "so I told him: the day you can finally beat me,

I'll tell you who killed my wife. I even promised to help him get revenge."

"He took it to heart," Bernard continued, his eyes distant. "He threw himself into training, worked harder than ever. For a while, it looked like he finally had something to live for. But..."

Bernard's gaze drifted off to the horizon, and he let out a long, weary breath.

"The truth is, I still have no idea who the killer is. I've been trying to figure it out for years, but they covered their tracks too well. There's not a single clue left behind."

"If I can't get to the bottom of it, there's no way my brother could."

"So all I could do was keep my distance. I didn't want to see him."

"Nothing good comes from us meeting. Only pain."

"If I don't know the murderer's name, I can't let him win. But if he loses, he gets angry and desperate. It's a lose-lose situation..."

Tarquin and Evan listened quietly, neither of them interrupting. After a while,

Tarquin spoke up:

"You know, since you've been hiding out here, it's not exactly easy for you to

investigate. But if you trust me, I can give it a shot. I can't make any promises, but I've got contacts overseas—old friends, people who owe me favors. It might be easier for me to dig around."

Bernard turned to Tarquin, his brow furrowed in thought. He was silent for a moment, then exhaled heavily. "Let's talk about it later."

He didn't know who the killer was, but he was certain it had something to do with foreign fighters.

If Tarquin started poking around, he might get himself targeted.

Bernard didn't want the younger generation getting tangled up in this mess.

"You just focus on living a good life with Elysia. Raise those kids right. Try to stay out of trouble as much as you can."

Bernard's eyes softened as he looked at Evan. "Now you know why I always tell you—keep a low profile when you're out there. If you need to teach someone a lesson, fine, but don't draw too much attention to yourself."

Evan scrunched up his little nose, frowning. He felt bad for Bernard. He even felt

bad for the old scarred man whose life had been torn apart.

Evan didn't think Bernard was

wrong. And he understood the

scarred man's pain. If anyone hurt

his mom, he wouldn't care about

anything else but revenge, either.

In the end, the grudge between these two old men wasn't their fault. The ones to

blame were the killers.

Evan didn't say anything out loud,

but he made a promise to himself: If

Bernard and the old man couldn't

solve the case before they were

gone, he'd take over. He'd keep

looking. He'd never stop, not until he

found the truth.

Tarquin was thinking similar

thoughts, but said nothing. Instead,

he looked at Bernard and asked, "Is

that why you've been hiding out here

all these years? Because of all this?"

Bernard gave Tarquin a look that was impossible to read. He neither confirmed

nor denied it. Then he let out another long breath and abruptly changed the

subject.

"Come on, let's head back and get something to eat. After that, we've got some

unruly relatives to deal with."

Clearly, the old man didn't want to answer Tarquin's question.

He got up, forcing a smile onto his face so the others wouldn't worry.

"Evan, want me to give you a piggyback ride?"

Evan sniffed, but played along. "No way! I want to race you home. First one back

wins!"

Before Bernard could respond, Evan took off running.

Bernard laughed. "Hey, you can't just take off before the race starts! Cheater!"

Evan glanced back and stuck out his tongue. "All's fair in love and war!"

"Oh, you little rascal! Trying to trick your old grandpa? I'm coming for you!"

In an instant, the old man and the little boy disappeared from Tarquin's view, their laughter echoing in the distance.

Tarquin stood there for a moment, frowning thoughtfully.

He had a feeling there was a lot more to these old men and their life in the woods than met the eye...

Chapter 1280

In the distance, the hunt in the forest was still raging.

It was too far away to hear any screams, but the roars of wild beasts echoed through the trees.

Tarquin glanced down at the numbers glowing on his wristband.

Over fifty illegal poachers had slipped into these woods-now, more than half of them were dead.

Only twenty-two left.

Not a flicker of surprise or sympathy crossed Tarquin's face.

Play stupid games, win stupid prizes, he thought. They brought this on themselves.

He tapped his wristband, switching to the navigation screen, and started trekking toward the lodge. There were still a few dozen poachers back at the house waiting to be dealt with.

The forest was wild and thick. No trails, just tangled roots and brambles everywhere.

Lucky for him, Tarquin was no stranger to the wilderness. With his digital map guiding him, he found the old cabins soon enough.

The elders' cabins were a circle of eight wooden lodges, each one snug against the next.

All two-story, all built from sturdy oak, all practically identical.

Six of the elders had a place of their own. Elysia and the kids shared another. The last was a communal storeroom, stacked with supplies and food-canned beans, jerky, crackers, peanut butter, and all sorts of homey essentials.

No towering fences here, just a waist-high picket fence strung with twinkling fairy lights. The glow was soft, not too bright, but magical all the same.

They blinked and shimmered like tiny fireflies, wrapping the cabins in a gentle halo.

In the heart of the deep woods, the sight gave Tarquin a sense of warmth he couldn't quite describe.

Just thinking of Elysia and the kids inside made his expression soften.

He strode forward, ready to see them again—

Suddenly-

Tarquin's brow creased. He stopped dead, frozen mid-step.

No mistaking it: he'd just stepped on a landmine.

One wrong move and he'd be blown to bits. Just great.

Frowning, Tarquin tried to figure out why there'd be a bomb buried so close to the cabins. The elders were all legends in their own right-ho way they'd let anything so dangerous get this close to home.

Unless... someone had just planted it. Waiting for him to step on it.

A thought struck him. His eyes darted toward the cabins, his expression unreadable.

It was quiet. Too quiet. He stood there, one foot pressing down on the hidden explosive, not daring to move.

He wasn't scared-just a little exasperated.

After what felt like forever (and a very numb leg), he finally spotted two elders strolling his way.

One wore a crisp white tracksuit; the other, a sharp dark blazer.

Both had a certain air about them—men you didn't mess with.

"That him?" one asked, gaze sharp.

"No doubt about it," the other replied.

Tarquin already knew who they were. He called out, "Hey Quincy. Hey Walter."

He'd figured it out the second he triggered the mine. Walter was a notorious tinkerer—loved inventing weapons and traps.

Gerald and Howard were out of the woods at the moment, and he'd already met Bernard, so these two had to be Quincy and Walter.

The elders eyed him up and down, like they were sizing up a prize pig at the county fair.

"Handsome enough, I suppose," Quincy muttered.

"Too bad he's the one who put our Elysia through hell," Walter snapped.

Tarquin couldn't argue with that.

The elders treated Elysia like a granddaughter. No way were they cutting him any slack.

They loved Elysia to bits—and hated him just as much.

Didn't matter why things happened

the way they did; Tarquin

y things hap

the

Elysia

root of all the danger and pain and the kids had suffered.

From Grandma's frosty threats, to Bernard's not-so-friendly slap, and now this "welcome" from Quincy and Walter-a landmine, just to make sure he knew his place.