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Chapter 1281

They were making it pretty clear to him, each in their own way:

Elysia isn't alone. She's not some helpless girl with no one to have her back, no support, no family standing behind her. If anyone dared to mess with her- especially him—there'd be hell to pay.

It wasn't anger Tarquin felt as he listened to these old men; it was gratitude, honestly.

He was grateful that his wife and kids had people who loved them this fiercely.

"I really have let Elysia down," he admitted, guilt heavy in his voice. "It was my fault, back then. I—"

He apologized first, then spoke from the heart, making his loyalty clear.

It was the third time he'd said something like that today, but he didn't mind. He meant every word.

Every time they brought it up, it felt like he was apologizing to Elysia all over again. Three times, thirty times, three hundred times-hell, three thousand times -he'd do it, and never get angry about it.

He really had wronged her.

Quincy, ever the gentleman, looked just like the sort of old man who'd have a library full of leather-bound books and always know which fork to use at dinner.

"Since you followed Elysia all the way here, and could spot us right away," Quincy said, "I suppose you know a thing or two about who we were before we disappeared off the map."

"You know why Gerald was such a legend in the business world?"

"Skill and luck-can't have one without the other."

"But do you know why he was always so lucky?"

"I'm not even exaggerating-it was because he loved his wife."

"Every time things got rough, Gerald would go out and buy her something special —a diamond necklace, a designer purse, even a whole box of Belgian chocolates just to make her happy."

"He used to say the happier his wife was, the luckier he felt. The more he loved her, the more the world seemed to go his way."

"His advice was simple: a man who loves his wife isn't going to have bad luck."

"That's some real old-school wisdom. You should remember it."

"I know you're already at the top of your game, but if you want to even higher, you need to love
with everything you've got

Tarquin paused, silent for a moment. He'd heard about how much Gerald had loved his wife.

After his wife died, Gerald didn't last long himself. People still said he died of a broken heart.

Tarquin didn't know why Gerald had faked his own death and

disappeared-but he did

everyone admired that kind of

love.

Quincy kept going:

"I just saw Elysia a minute ago. It's obvious-she loves you, and she loves you deeply."

"We love her, too. So if Elysia loves you, we'll accept you. If she likes you, we'll like you."

"But let's two.

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opened in the p , for Elysia and the sake." east,

"But if you ever hurt her again, if you ever let her down, we won't let it slide."

As soon as Quincy finished, Walter chimed in, voice firm,

"We're not like those jokers out there. Sure, there's plenty of folks who want you gone, but none of them can touch you."

"But if we decide to make a move-you'd be done for."

Tarquin didn't flinch. His tone was steady, respectful. "I understand."

Walter's eyes narrowed, a no-nonsense air about him that screamed military through and through.

"No need for more threats," he said. "We'll just see how you behave."

He'd barely finished the sentence when Elysia came running over, calling out, "Tarquin! Quincy! Walter!"

Chapter 1282

Tarquin's face softened, his eyes full of warmth.

"You ran out here wearing so little-aren't you freezing?"

"I'm fine, really."

Elysia slipped her arm through his, her gesture as light as a lifeline.

She turned to the two old men, her voice taking on a playful, almost pleading tone.

"Quincy, Walter, didn't you both already figure out what really happened back then? We agreed to let it go, remember? Don't scare him."

Quincy and Walter exchanged glances, both rolling their eyes at themselves. "Isn't this just the way it goes-girls grow up and leave us old-timers behind?" Elysia jumped in immediately, shaking her head.

"No way! I love you guys just as much as I love him-you know that!"

That made both old men chuckle, the sound echoing on the cool evening air.

"All right, all right," Quincy said, waving her off with a grin. "Elysia's right. Let bygones be bygones. Come on, let's head home-dinner's waiting!"

The two old men started off down the path, their steps surprisingly spry. Tarquin stood frozen for a second.

Elysia tugged on his arm, smiling. "Come on."

Tarquin hesitated, but before he could say anything, Walter called back over his shoulder.

"Don't worry, son, I was just messing with you. Wouldn't dare actually hurt you-if I did, our Elysia would have my hide!"

Quincy chimed in, laughter in his voice, "Evan says you're Elysia's sweetheart now, her prize pumpkin pie!"

The two old men chuckled as they wandered off toward the house, the porch lights glowing invitingly.

Tarquin could only shake his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Elysia squeezed his arm gently. "Don't take it to heart. They know the truth about what happened. They'd never really hurt you."

He looked at her, sincerity in every word.

"I know. I'm not upset. I'm grateful-grateful that they love you this much."

Elysia's smile lit up her whole face.

"See? Now do you believe me? We really were happy, living up in the hills."

"If it hadn't been for wanting to give the kids a more normal life, you know, let them experience all the joys and messiness of the world-just like everyone else-we might never have come down."

"And for their grandkids too. Sometimes, I didn't want to leave at all."

"But meeting them-my grandparents-was the best luck I ever had. They gave

me a second chance at life. They gave me real happiness."

Tarquin's voice was soft.

"Good things happen to good people."

Really, to have people like this in her life-Elysia was unbelievably lucky.

In a world this big, with so many people, how many ever get to stumble across someone powerful, someone who takes them in and raises them right? It's like winning the cosmic lottery.

Elysia hadn't just met one extraordinary person—she'd found six. If that's not luck, what is?

She must've been a saint in her past life. Maybe saved the whole galaxy or something.

"Come on," she nudged him, "Grandma and Grandpa are waiting for you to join us for dinner."

"Yeah," Tarquin replied, finally moving. He looked down, half-expecting the ground beneath his feet to explode-after all, Walter had tried to scare him earlier. But nothing happened. The path was clear.

They'd only walked a short distance when, suddenly, a loud pop rang out behind them.

Tarquin and Elysia spun around, startled. But instead of chaos, they saw bursts of color lighting up the sky-fireworks, one after another, painting the dusk with light.

Elysia grinned, her arm tightening around Tarquin's.

"That's got to be Walter's way of saying welcome. He's not the romantic type, but he sure knows how to pull off a gesture."

Tarquin watched the fireworks explode in dazzling patterns-first surprised, then moved.

What he'd thought was a threat, just a harmless prank. Walter hadn't wanted to hurt him; he just wanted to make an impression.

This was Walter's kind of romance-the old man's blessing, written in fireworks.

Surrounded by the bursts of color,

Elysia seemed to catch the

mood-or maybe she just wanted to make it up to Tarquin after the rough day. After all, he'd been through the

wringer: first Grandma, then Grandpa and the rest.

She turned, stepping in front of him, wrapping her arms around his neck. Rising

on tiptoe, she kissed him-right there, under the sparkling sky.

Chapter 1283

Tarquin froze for a moment, then wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her into a tight embrace. Suddenly, he took the lead, leaning in and kissing her...

The fireworks show ended, and so did their kiss.

The two of them held each other for a while, catching their breath, before sharing a smile. Hand in hand, they started strolling back toward the cozy cabin.

As they walked, they chatted quietly.

"So, what happened to those jerks?" Elysia asked.

"They're scared out of their minds-just as planned," Tarquin replied with a smirk.

Elysia didn't press for details about his plan. Instead, she asked again, "You're sure nothing's going to go wrong?"

"Absolutely sure. Don't worry."

"Oh, by the way, did Bernard see that guy? You know, the one with all the scars on his face?"

Tarquin nodded. "Yeah. Bernard told you?"

"No, but when Bernard came back, he was acting strange, trying to smile but clearly upset. What's the story there? What's his connection with that guy?"

Tarquin hesitated before answering, "They're old friends-well, more like rivals. Some old grudge, but it's been sorted out. By the way, did you talk to Grandma about the virus yet?" He lied, steering the conversation away.

The truth was, Bernard's grudge with the scar-faced thug went way deeper than he wanted Elysia to know-there had been violence, even deaths, and international trouble. He didn't want her to worry about it.

Elysia didn't question it further. She just sighed and looped her arm through his. "Not yet. We started cleaning up as soon as you left."

"Those jerks took over Grandma and Grandpa's house, so Grandma was grossed out-she changed all the sheets and threw all their stuff out in the yard!"

"Once we finished tidying up, we started getting dinner ready. I haven't had a chance to talk to Grandma about the virus yet."

Tarquin nodded. "No rush. It can wait."

"Yeah, I figure I'll tell her after dinner."

"Sounds good."

Dinner was at Tracey's place, and they had a classic fondue night.

The older folks were in good spirits. After giving Tarquin a stern warning, they quickly forgave and forgot. They treated him like their own grandson-in-law, one more enthusiastic than the next.

With the kids' laughter ringing through the cabin, the place felt warm and lively- full of that special kind of family comfort.

Not long after dinner, the little ones

drifted off to bed. They'd been

running wild in the woods for days? barely getting a full night's sleep. After everything that had

happened and with full

over

belfies-they were out like lights, fast asleep.

Elysia and Tarquin were tired too, but still too wired to sleep.

Once the kids were tucked in, Elysia went to find her grandmother to

Tarquin teamed up with the grandfathers to deal with the

finally discuss the virus.ne, net

unconscious poachers they'd found in the house.

With Tarquin's plan and White's help, they used the animals to drag the men far away, dumping them in a cave deep in the woods. Tarquin set up a little surprise-he left behind a hallucinogen in the cave before leaving.

The cave was safe from wild animals, but what would happen when the poachers woke up? Who knows-whether they survived or not was up to fate.

Everything was going smoothly on Tarquin's end, but Elysia soon ran into trouble.

When she told Tracey about the virus, Tracey didn't even blink. She immediately took Elysia to her lab.

Tracey wasn't exactly Mother Teresa and hadn't worn a lab coat in years, but she was still a healer at heart. She couldn't just stand by knowing there was a virus out there hurting people.

Even after retiring to the countryside, she wouldn't just watch the world burn.

In the lab, Tracey didn't bother looking at the virus notes. Instead, she jumped straight into research.

Most viruses were child's play for her she didn't need a case file, just rolled up her sleeves and started working on a cure.

But this time...

Something unexpected happened.

Chapter 1284

Tracey's face changed in an instant, as if she'd just stumbled onto something big.

She furrowed her brow, staring at the virus sample on the kitchen table for a long moment. Then she hurried over to review the files Elysia had brought with her.

The more Tracey read, the deeper her frown became.

Elysia could tell by her grandmother's expression that this wasn't just some routine check-up. Her heart began to race.

"Gran, what's wrong?"

Tracey pressed her lips together, thinking hard, then shot a question back at her.

"Elysia, where exactly did this virus come from?"

Elysia blinked, a little confused. She'd already explained this part, hadn't she? Why was Gran asking again?

Still, she repeated herself, just to be sure.

"My best friend's lousy ex-husband started a pharmaceutical company. The virus sample and the antidote both came from him."

"And his name?" Tracey pressed.

"Zane Livingston."

"Zane?" Tracey repeated, eyebrows knitted, turning the name over in her mind.

After a pause, Tracey continued, "What's his company called?"

"Central Pharmaceuticals."

"Never heard of it. Is it new?"

"Yeah, it's not even public yet. But from what Tarquin told me, this guy has big plans. Tarquin suspects he's trying to release the virus, then sell the cure for a huge profit."

Tracey fell silent again.

There's no way, she thought.

A brand-new company couldn't have developed something this advanced. If any pharmaceutical lab had the brains to create a virus like this, she would've heard about it already.

Elysia fidgeted, glancing at her grandmother.

"Gran, did you find something?"

She was nervous now. Elysia might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but she knew her grandmother was practically legendary for her medical skills. That's why she'd rushed out here to Grandma's place in the countryside, after all.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen her grandmother look like this. That face always meant serious trouble.

Tracey finally exhaled, her tone a little calmer.

"I can handle this virus, Elysia. Don't worry."

"You can?" Elysia said, startled.

She'd thought Gran's worried look meant even she was stumped.

Tracey nodded.

"Leave it to me, honey. You don't need to stress about it."

"But just now—"

Tracey interrupted gently,

"Seeing this virus, I remembered some things I'd rather forget. It threw me for a

minute, but I'm alright. Don't worry about me."

Elysia hesitated, but Tracey was already ushering her out.

"Go on, get back to the kids. I saw little Baby earlier-she's a sensitive soul. If she wakes up and you're not there, she'll probably burst into tears. Plus, you've been running around for days. Go get some sleep. I'll do the same, and we'll talk more in the morning."

Elysia had a dozen questions still burning in her chest, but Gran was firm. She said her goodbyes and left quietly.

As soon as Elysia was gone, Tracey's frown returned, stormy as ever.

She sat in silence for a while, thinking, before picking up her phone and calling Bernard.

"Tell Tarquin to come see me as soon as he gets home," she said.

An hour later, Tarquin returned, trailing behind a couple of uncles who'd come in for pie and coffee.

As Tracey had asked, Tarquin came right over. Tracey was already

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waiting, sipping her tea in the living room, looking like she'd been expecting him for hours.

"Gran," Tarquin greeted her.

Tracey nodded at the sofa across from her.

"Sit down, Tarquin."

He sat, folding his hands in his lap.

"You wanted to see me?"

Tracey's gaze was sharp as she got straight to the point.

"That bottle of poison Elysia brought home-where did it really come from?"

Tarquin hesitated.

Tracey stared him down, her voice firm as steel.

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"Elysia told me it came from some guy named Zane, who runs Central Pharmaceuticals. She thinks he's spreading the virus just to make a killing off the cure." . to FindNovel

She shook her head.

"But let me tell you, Tarquin-neither Zane nor his little start-up has the brains or

the resources to cook up a virus this sophisticated. Not a chance."

Chapter 1285

"If they manage to figure it out, I'm sure I'll have some intel to share."

"Tarquin, be honest with your grandma. About the virus-did you keep it from Elysia on purpose, or were you just as clueless as the rest of us?"

Tarquin hesitated for a moment before confessing,

"I kept it from her on purpose. There's someone dangerous involved in this virus mess, and I didn't want her to panic, so I didn't tell her the whole story."

"Zane's just a partner, you know. His Central Pharmaceuticals is the new kid on the block-he's got a bright future ahead."

"Zane wanted to release the virus, then sell the cure and make a fortune. That part's true. As for the real mastermind, I'm still digging. I don't know if he's just after money or if he's got bigger plans."

Tracey's brow furrowed as she exhaled sharply, but she didn't look all that surprised.

She'd already guessed as much before Tarquin spoke.

"So who is this guy?"

Tarquin admitted, "There's a suspect, but no hard evidence yet. Why? Did something happen with the virus?"

Tracey's face turned serious. She fixed Tarquin with a look.

"This virus-did it come from overseas?"

"...Yeah."

Tracey clenched her fists, her eyes suddenly fierce.

Furious, she slammed her hand on the table. "Those bastards! What, do they think they can wipe us out?"

Tarquin blinked, caught off guard by her outburst.

Before he could ask anything, Tracey waved him off.

"Go get some rest. And don't mention I talked to you, especially not to Elysia.

Keep her in the dark a bit longer-she tends to overthink."

Tarquin was left a bit bewildered, a dozen questions swirling in his mind, but with her clear dismissal, he knew better than to linger.

He pushed his curiosity aside, said his goodbyes, and headed out.

After he left, Tracey made her way to the lab. She grabbed the vial with the virus sample, stuck a label on it, and scribbled a number: 8.

She opened

Safe, tucked the

sample inside, right after 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 17-all lined up in

6,

st

...

When Tarquin got back to the bedroom, Elysia was still awake.

Her face was all twisted up-caught somewhere between relief and worry. Seeing Tarquin, she sat up in bed and whispered, "Is everything taken care of?" She was talking about the poachers they'd sent off to that cave in the woods. "Yeah, all done," Tarquin replied.

He glanced at their sleeping daughter, then leaned over and kissed Elysia on the forehead.

He settled on the edge of the bed, pulling her gently into his arms. "What's wrong? You seem down."

Elysia rested her head on his chest.

"I talked to Grandma about the virus tonight, but..."

She paused, sat up, and looked Tarquin in the eye.

"Grandma said she could cure the virus, but she was acting really

strange. When she saw the sam

she was shocked. No, not exactly shocked... It was something else."

She frowned, searching for the right words.

"When Benjamin and I first found the virus, we were both

stunned-because it was mutating

so fast, and it was so weird, we had no idea how to handle it."

"But Grandma—she knows how to fight it. So why was she so shaken when she

saw it?"

Tarquin frowned. Tracey had definitely been off tonight.

It almost felt like there was some history between her and this virus.

How did she know it was from abroad? Why was she so sure? Those bastards! What, do they think they can wipe us out? That line stuck with him. What story lay beneath those words?

Chapter 1286

Tarquin couldn't quite figure it out, so he just tried to comfort Elysia.

"Grandma's shocked, that's all. She probably never imagined anyone could come up with such a dangerous virus," he said.

Elysia blinked at him, her blue eyes wide. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense."

Tarquin put on a playful grin and gave her cheek a little pinch. "Don't overthink it. The important thing is, if Grandma's got a way to beat it, that's good news!"

"Yeah! You're right!"

"Alright, get some sleep. I'm gonna go get washed up."

He coaxed Elysia to lie down, kissed her gently on the forehead, then headed into the bathroom.

The moment he was out of her sight, Tarquin's easy expression vanished, replaced by a storm of thoughts.

A suspicion flashed across his mind: Could Tracey be involved with the mysterious figure? The virus had been unleashed by this person, and Tracey seemed to know about it before anyone else.

Was there something between Tracey and the mysterious figure? Was he just overthinking it, or did they actually know each other? Was there some connection he hadn't seen?

Stepping into the bathroom, Tarquin turned on the cold mountain spring water and let it pour over him, trying to focus.

The more he thought about it, the less simple things seemed.

Maybe Tracey could give him some answers about the mysterious figure. After all, that person had been lurking around him for thirty years-it was time to end it.

He wasn't about to let a single clue slip by. But he couldn't act recklessly, not yet. He needed to be sure. Once he had proof, he'd strike without hesitation.

Tarquin finished his shower in record time, checked to see that Elysia was sound asleep, pulled on a clean T-shirt and jeans, and slipped out the door. He needed answers now-waiting until morning wasn't an option.

But luck wasn't on his side. Tracey's cozy cabin was dark, not a light on anywhere. She was clearly asleep.

Tarquin frowned, frustrated, but he didn't want to barge in and wake her up. He lingered outside the door for a while, debating, then finally turned away and headed back to his room.

That night, he didn't sleep a wink.

As soon as the sun peeked over the horizon, Tarquin was up and out, making his way back to Tracey's place. Elysia and Baby were still fast asleep when he left.

The yard was quiet, not a soul in sight.

He reached Tracey's little log cabin and raised his hand to knock, but suddenly there was a thud behind him. He spun around, just in time to see Bernard and Evan dropping down from the roof, landing behind him without a sound.

Tarquin blinked in surprise. "Bernard. Evan."

Bernard gave him a knowing look. "You're awfully eager to see the old lady, huh?"

"Huh?"

Bernard

smirked,

"I saw you last night, you know. You rushed over here, looking all serious, then saw the lights were out and left. You're here again at the crack of dawn, looking just as tense. Got something urgent?"

Tarquin hesitated. Bernard was one of the few people in this world who could tail him without getting noticed. Last night, when he'd come to see Tracey, he hadn't sensed anyone else around. Bernard really was a force to be reckoned with—thank God they weren't enemies.

He nodded respectfully. "There's something on my mind, yeah."

Bernard didn't press. "Well, you'll have to wait. Old Tracey's gone up to the herb garden, and who knows when she'll be back."

"The herb garden?"

"Yeah, she left before dawn."

"...Where is it? Can I go find her?" Tarquin asked, already itching to get moving.

Evan shook his head. "Wouldn't recommend it! The herb garden's halfway up the mountain, and unless you're her daughter, she doesn't like people dropping by."

Bernard nodded in agreement. "If you go looking for her, you might just tick her off. And trust me, when she's mad, she's got a mean right hook."

Tarquin grimaced. He knew Tracey was a legendary doctor, hiding out in the mountains and growing her own herbs. But still...

"She'll be safe up there on her own?"

Evan grinned. "Of course! Grandma Tracey's tough as nails."

Chapter 1287

Evan wasn't the least bit worried about Tracey's safety.

"All the wild animals around here know my great-grandma. Some of them she's actually helped out before-rescued them from traps or patched up a broken leg. They're grateful, so they'd never hurt her. Honestly, they'd probably protect her if anyone tried anything."

"And the ones that do want to hurt her? Well, good luck with that. They can dream all they want, but it's just not happening."

"See, Great-Gran might not know karate, but she's got a real talent for poisons."

"Her concoctions are more dangerous than a shotgun, I swear. She could have a bear begging for mercy! That's why all the animals steer clear-nobody messes with her."

Tarquin was silent for a moment, then just nodded. "Yeah... fair point."

Tracey could take down a group of armed hunters without breaking a sweat. Her self-defense skills were no joke.

Tarquin turned to Bernard. "How long does Grandma usually stay out?"

Bernard shrugged. "Hard to say. She might be back by lunchtime, or she might not come home until after dark. She doesn't usually spend the night out there— unless something unexpected comes up."

Tarquin sighed, a little disappointed. That meant he probably wouldn't see Tracey for a while and he had a lot of questions he wanted to ask her.

Bernard must've noticed, because he added, "If it's really urgent, you can always call her on the wristband. She'll come back."

Tarquin thought it over, then shook his head. "No, it's fine. It can wait."

Tracey was out gathering herbs-probably working on a cure for the virus. That was way more important.

As for the mystery person... he could ask her about that when she got back.

So, Tarquin changed the subject. "Bernard, I'm going to take a walk in the woods. If Elysia wakes up, could you let her know not to worry about me?"

Bernard gave him a knowing look. "If Elysia can't find you, she'll just ping you on the wristband. No need for me to play messenger. Let's go I'll come with you."

Evan wanted to tag along too, but Tarquin shook his head.

Evan was tough—he'd grown up in these woods, seen his share of blood and guts. But he'd only ever dealt

It with wild animals. People were a different story, and Tarquin didn't want Evan mixed up in it.

Surprisingly, Evan didn't argue. He just nodded and stayed behind.

Truth is, Evan had his own plans. He couldn't stop thinking about the scar-faced guy his uncle in all but name.

Last night, after dinner, he'd wanted to go find him, but Elliot had told him to give them some space, let everything sink in.

So Evan had waited. This morning,

he woke up early, intending to go straight to his uncle. But then he spotted Bernard, all alone, perched high up in an old oak tree, staring out at the sunrise. He looked. peaceful, for once.

Evan knew Bernard was still hurting about his brother, so he climbed up and kept

him company. They sat there in silence for a while, just watching the world wake

up.

Now, with Bernard cheered up a bit and heading into the woods with Tarquin, Evan finally had his chance.

He tapped his wristband, tracked down his uncle's location, and ran to the supply shed to grab a snack pack—some trail mix, jerky, and a couple of granola bars— before setting off.

He found his uncle dozing against a tree. The night before had been rough for the man-after parting with Bernard, he'd wandered the net

woods punching the air and trying to work out the grief and anger. Eventually, exhausted, he'd slumped against the trunk and drifted off as dawn broke.

At the first sound of footsteps, the scar-faced man's eyes snapped open, wild and alert.

Before Evan even came into view, his voice carried through the trees, "Hey, relax! It's just me!"

A second later, Evan burst into the clearing, a little out of breath, waving a hand. "Seriously, it's just me!"

Chapter 1288

The boss looked at him, clearly surprised. "What are you doing here?"

Evan was a little out of breath. "I was worried about you, so I came to check in. Here I brought you something to eat!"

He handed over a paper bag. "There's some trail mix, smoked ham, and a couple bottles of Grandpa's finest bourbon."

The boss raised an eyebrow, glancing at the food, then at Evan. His expression was complicated. "Didn't he tell you about my relationship with him?"

"He did," Evan replied.

"And you still came to see me? He and I are sworn enemies, you know! Are you planning to stick with me and ditch him?"

Evan shook his head. "Bernard never said you two were enemies. He said you're his little brother in training, which makes you my uncle in the guild."

The boss clenched his jaw, clearly frustrated. "I am NOT his little brother!"

Evan just grinned, keeping things light. "You don't really get a say in this, you know. It's like how kids don't get to pick their parents. That's up to Grandpa and Grandma- they set the rules!"

"You're their son, Bernard's their student, so that makes you Bernard's brother-in- arms. Which means you're my uncle in the guild, whether you like it or not!"

He put the bag down on a nearby rock, pulled out a bottle of bourbon, twisted the cap off, and handed it over. "Here, warm up with a drink."

He knew the boss was a bit of a drinker-never went a day without a shot or two.

The boss hesitated, then took the bottle, eyes lingering on Evan for a moment before tipping it back and taking a long drink. He had a bit of a drinking problem, and right now, he was both thirsty and stressed, so he didn't hold back.

But then, in the next second-

With a thud, Evan dropped to his knees right in front of him.

"You drank the bourbon I offered, so that means you've agreed to be my uncle now!"

"I didn't know about you and Bernard before, so maybe I wasn't as respectful as I should've been. Please, Uncle, don't hold it against me!"

The boss looked completely bewildered. "Who... Who's your uncle? I never agreed to that!"

Evan just grinned wider. "You drank, so you can't back out now! A real man stands by his word!"

"From now on, we're family-uncle and nephew! We gotta look out for each other, stick together, go through the tough times as one, and share the good times too!"

"Uncle, please accept my respect!"

And with that, Evan pressed his forehead to the ground in a full-on kneel.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

When he finished, he stayed kneeling, looking up at the boss with bright, sincere eyes.

The boss just stared at him, completely thrown. "You..."

"Uncle!" Evan called out again.

"You, you..." The boss stammered.

"Uncle!"

"Alright, alright, just—" He was speechless.

"Uncle, uncle, uncle!" Evan insisted, refusing to let go.

The boss's lips trembled, but he couldn't get another word out. His eyes started to

go red-not with anger, but with emotion.

Back in the day, he'd forced Evan into an apprenticeship, just to spite his own brother-in-arms. But Evan

never accepted him, never once

called him 'Master.'

And now, hearing Evan willingly call him 'Uncle' like this, it was like the clouds had

parted and the sun finally shone through.

After his parents died, his

brother-in-arms was the only family he had left. But because Bernard refused to avenge his mother, he'd hated him-and ended up losing even that last bit of family.

But here was Evan, kneeling, calling him Uncle with so much sincerity promising that they were family. That they'd stick together, weather the storms, and share the joys.

To say he wasn't moved would be a lie.

He'd grown up on anger and revenge, been cold and ruthless, but he was still human.

And humans-no matter how hard they try—can't help but feel.

Chapter 1289

"You... you need to get up."

Evan stayed on the floor, shaking his head. "Uncle, Bernard told me about everything that happened between the two of you the bad blood, the tough choices. I don't agree with what Bernard did, just like you. But I get where he's coming from."

He took a breath, voice steady. "My mom always says life is like a giant test sheet, full of tricky multiple-choice questions. You only get to pick one answer every time. It's never perfect, but that's life."

"Bernard didn't go after revenge for your wife. He chose to save you instead. I don't think that makes him wrong."

He glanced up, earnest. "But I understand you too. If anyone ever hurt my mom, I'd do anything—I'd rather die than let it go. I'd want revenge too. I wouldn't want to live with that pain."

"So you're not wrong, and Bernard's not wrong either. The ones really at fault are the people who started all this in the first place."

He remembered what his big brother, Elliot, had told him last night. "Elliot says this world is full of impossible choices. You can't win them all. You have to look at things from different angles, not just get stuck on one thing."

He looked his uncle in the eye. "You're angry at Bernard, but deep down, you're angry at yourself too. You blame Bernard for not avenging your wife, but you're also mad at yourself for not doing it for your own mom. You've got to let Bernard go. And you've got to let yourself off the hook, too."

Those words echoed in his mind. Elliot always gave the best advice, and Evan believed him completely.

His uncle glared at him, eyes red, brow furrowed, silent for a long moment.

Evan spoke up again. "There's something else you should know. Bernard didn't go after revenge, not just because of you. It's also because he never found out who the real killer was."

His uncle's eyes flew wide open in disbelief. "He... he doesn't know?!"

Evan nodded, completely serious. "He really doesn't. When Bernard gave up on revenge and faked his death, it was partly to protect you. But after you could take care of yourself, he still didn't go after the killer—because he just didn't know who it was."

He shrugged. "He's good, but he's not some kind of superhero. He can't do everything. Sometimes, even he's powerless."

Elliot had been clear: at sixty years old, his uncle deserved the truth. No more secrets.

Evan nodded again. "Bernard told me himself. He's still investigating. He just didn't want to tell you because he was afraid it would break you. But I think you're Stronger than that."

He looked his uncle straight in the eye, voice steady. "The real revenge hasn't happened yet. You can't fall apart now. You have to be even stronger. We need to find the killer. We need to get justice."

He gave a small, encouraging smile. "And I'll be with you every step of the way."

His uncle was trembling, lips quivering. Evan's eyes were full of conviction.

"Your loss is my loss," he said. "This is a family thing. My dad, my mom, big

brother Elijah—we're all in this together. We'll help you."

His uncle could only tremble in silence, overcome by emotion.

...

Meanwhile, Tarquin and Bernard had used the GPS tracker on the wristband to track down the survivors.

Out of over a hundred people, only about twenty were left.

And even those twenty weren't whole anymore.

Some were missing arms or legs-their bodies broken. Others, after a night of horror, had minds that were just as shattered. But they still remembered to run down the mountain, desperate to survive.

Bernard and Tarquin hid in the shadows. Bernard narrowed his eyes at Tarquin and whispered, "So, what do you plan to do with the rest of them? Are we just going to kill them all?"

Chapter 1290

Tarquin was calm as ever. "Killing people's illegal. I don't kill."

"...So you're just gonna let them walk down the mountain?"

He shrugged. "No one's stopping them. If they make it out alive, well-that's up to fate."

Bernard shot him an approving look.

That's how a real man does it-tough when he needs to be, but never crossing the line.

"As long as you don't break the law, we're good."

"But what if someone actually makes it down? How can you be sure they won't blab?"

"I can."

"Oh yeah? How? Those guys were scared stiff, but you can't count on them to forget everything."

Tarquin shot back, "How did Gerald manage to stay in touch with the outside world?"

No cell service up here in the mountains. Phones were useless.

Howard's custom wristbands worked like walkie-talkies, but only inside the mountain. No contact with anyone offsite.

And yet, Gerald somehow kept supplies coming and always knew what was happening back home. That meant he had some way of getting messages out.

Bernard asked, "You need to reach someone on the outside?"

"Yeah, I do."

Bernard didn't hide it. "You'll want the signal tower. It's got reception and a phone -call, text, whatever you need."

"...Where's the signal tower?"

"Couple ridges over, not far."

"Can we go now?"

"Sure, I'll take you. Let's move."

Bernard's first impression of Tarquin hadn't been great, but once Tarquin set foot here, they'd counted him as one of their own.

If Elysia and the kids had brought him, he wasn't an outsider.

Bernard led Tarquin through the woods. Pretty soon, Bernard started griping. "Can you pick up the pace?"

Tarquin just blinked.

He was trained, sure—but to Bernard, he moved like a lumbering turkey.

Bernard couldn't hold back the sarcasm. "You're slower than Evan, for crying out loud."

The old guy forgot that Evan had grown up on this mountain. Tarquin hadn't. Evan knew every rock and root. Tarquin was just trying not to trip.

After the teasing, Bernard gave him a few pointers. "Here, watch me. Step like this..."

Tarquin followed along, eager to learn.

Getting coached by the guy who'd once kicked seven rival dojos in a row? That was an honor.

He owed this to Elysia and Evan, no doubt.

So the two of them made their way toward the signal tower, Bernard teaching as they went.

They finally stopped at a roaring waterfall. The water thundered down the rocks, filling the air with mist.

Tarquin asked, "Is the tower behind the falls?"

Bernard gave him a look. "What, you

efine

think this is a movie? Behind the waterfall's just solid rock. Where would you put a tower?"

Tarquin shrugged. TV had made it seem possible.

"We gotta cross the river. You scared?" Bernard asked.

Tarquin shook his head. "Not at all. We swimming across?"

Bernard rolled his eyes. "Are you for real? Even Elysia's got more sense! That water'd sweep you

next state." Content bel

Tarquin

st took the hit. Only two

people had ever called Elysia

smarter than him-Bernard,

Elysia herself.

"So, how do we get over?" Tarquin asked, eager to learn.

Bernard glanced at his wristband and tapped a few buttons. Suddenly—

CLANK—a massive rock beside them split open!

Four steel cables shot out, anchoring themselves into crevices across the river.

The cables pulled tight, forming a makeshift bridge-complete with footboards and handrails.

Bernard grinned at Tarquin. "That's how we cross."