

Hitched 1291

Chapter 1291

Tarquin: "..."

Bernard strolled up to the rickety bridge like he'd done it a thousand times before, walking right along the chain without even grabbing the handrail. His hands were tucked behind his back, as if he didn't have a care in the world.

He didn't bother holding on himself, but he did toss Tarquin a warning.

"Better hang on, man. If you fall and break something, Elysia's gonna have a heart attack."

Tarquin accepted the advice, sounding a little humbled. "...Alright."

When they reached the other side, Bernard tapped his wristband, and the makeshift bridge started folding itself up with a soft whirr.

Tarquin asked, "Did Walter design this?"

"Yep. Walter used to be the chief engineer for the military—sharpest guy I know. He loves tinkering with this kind of stuff. If you can dream it up, he'll make it real."

Tarquin seized the opening.

"If Walter had such a sweet gig in the military, why fake his own death and go off the grid?"

Bernard just kept his hands behind his back, squinting at the horizon.

"That's his business, not mine. If you want to know, you should ask him yourself."

Tarquin shot back, "Alright, then why did you fake your own death and disappear?"

Calling you out, old man.

Bernard turned and gave him a long look. "Didn't I tell you already? Because of my brother."

"...That's one reason. There must be something else, right?"

Bernard's eyes narrowed even further, and he stared hard at Tarquin for a while before saying, almost out of nowhere,

"Anyway, whatever we're up to, it's nothing shady."

With that, he started walking on ahead.

Tarquin: "... So apparently, there **was** more to the story-a bunch of big shots all faking their deaths and hiding out in the woods. What could their secret be?

They walked for a while longer, and Bernard led the way to what looked like an ordinary cellar. He opened a hidden stone door, and inside, the place was way bigger than it appeared from the outside.

There were computers and even some old smartphones inside.

Tarquin picked up a phone. It powered on-battery full-but there was zero signal.

He was just about to ask when Bernard chimed in,

"You need to follow the prompts on your wristband. Yeah... all this is Howard's handiwork."

It was a pretty complicated process, and the two of them fiddled with the setup for

a good while before finally getting it to work.

Tarquin couldn't help but wonder:

were all these precautions really just about retiring in peace, or was there something else they were hiding from the world?

He shook off the thought for now and dialed Axel's number.

Axel picked up almost instantly. "Who is this?"

"It's me," Tarquin replied.

Tarquin's voice caught Axel off guard. "Tarquin?"

"Yeah."

Axel wasn't convinced, so they exchanged a quick code phrase before he relaxed.

"I thought you were in the middle of nowhere. How are you even calling me?"

Axel was a man of few words, but even he sounded curious.

Tarquin didn't bother explaining. "Get things in place at Darkfort City.

fre mountains in a few days. Someone might be coming doplne

a close watch."

"If they forget about anyone living up here, leave it be. If they remember, make sure they forget again."

Axel got the message. Keeping things hushed up was his specialty.

"Understood."

Tarquin asked, "Any movement from the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association?"

"Nothing. They haven't noticed the virus sample is missing."

Tarquin had swiped the backup sample, not the one they used for research, so no one had caught on.

"What about Zane?"

"He's still stuck with Ms. Newsom,

and it's rough. Some tabloid

reporters caught a whiff of theal.' "

but Mr. Huber managed to shut it

down..."

They chatted a bit about the situation in Jindale City. As Tarquin was about to hang up, Axel suddenly said,

"Tarquin, Sabrina's using your wife to stir up trouble. You want to get involved?" Tarquin frowned. "What's she doing now?"

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Axel summed it up bluntly:

"Sabrina's been spreading rumors at the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association, saying your sister-in-law's got no ethics and doesn't deserve to be a doctor. She's trying to shut down her career in medicine before it even starts."

Tarquin's face darkened at that.

The truth was, Elysia had never planned to climb the medical career ladder anyway—her real passion was child psychology.

Sabrina's hostility? Pure jealousy.

Elysia had it all: a good family background, a great marriage, and to top it off, sharper medical skills than Sabrina. If Elysia ever decided to stay in the medical field, Sabrina wouldn't stand a chance.

Sure, Sabrina was Victor's granddaughter. But that didn't mean she could run the whole show. If there was someone more talented in her generation-and there was-she'd get pushed aside like anyone else.

And as for making it to the top of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association? That was pretty much a pipe dream for Sabrina.

That's why she was so desperate to knock Elysia out of the running.

She was jealous, and she was scared.

But honestly, did she really think just being Victor's granddaughter gave her the right to walk all over Elysia?

Spreading lies about Elysia? The nerve! Even Victor himself would show Elysia some serious respect if he ever met her.

Elysia had spent five years learning from Tracey-not officially as a student, but Tracey personally mentored her. Compared to that, what did the Stevensons even have?

If Sabrina would just chill out, Elysia would stay focused on child psychology and never be her competition. But if Sabrina kept pushing, Elysia might just get mad enough to re-enter medicine-and then the Stevensons would really have something to cry about.

Tarquin's voice was icy as he gave his orders. "Have Benjamin go talk to Victor in person. Tell him this comes straight from me."

"I'm not exactly known for my patience, especially when it comes to my wife. If he can't keep his own granddaughter in line, I'll be happy to do it for him."

Did Sabrina really think she could mess with his wife? Not a chance.

...

Meanwhile, across town, gentle smoke curled up from the chimney of the little cabin.

Elysia had no id

idea about the drama

brewing back in Jindale City. She

didn't know that simply refusing to join Sabrina's virus research had turned Sabrina against her completely-or that Sabrina was now making her the target of every nasty rumor she could dream up.

Right now, Elysia was in the kitchen making breakfast, in a perfectly good mood.

She knew her grandma was off

tending the herb garden, and Evan had gone into the woods with Tarquin and Bernard. She wasn't worried-they could handle themselves.

In the kitchen, Baby and Walter were keeping her company.

Elliot and Elijah, as soon as they woke up, had rushed off to Howard's room to

tinker with his latest homemade security system.

Emmett was with Quincy, the two of them hunched over some project, with

Quincy's excited exclamations floating down the hall:

"Yes! That's it! Emmett, you've really got a knack for this!"

Back in the kitchen, Walter was doting on Baby as usual.

"Hey, Baby, you wanna see some fireworks tonight?" Walter asked a big grin on his face. He'd been in the military, and it showed-he stood straight as a board, even when he was relaxed.

He loved all the kids, but it was obvious Baby was his favorite. He was practically

tiptoeing around, trying not to say anything that might scare her.

Baby's big blue eyes widened-half excited, half nervous.

"Will they be loud?"

"Of course they will," Walter said, chuckling.

"Baby's scared of loud noises," she said, her voice soft and sweet.

Walter crouched down to her level. "You don't like loud bangs, huh?"

She shook her head, pouting a little. "Walter, can you make the fireworks just do the pretty part, not the noisy part?"

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"Well, about that..."

Walter looked conflicted. Fireworks and explosives, after all, work on the same principle—once they go off, they're bound to make a bang.

Elysia was kneading some dough at the kitchen counter. She couldn't help but laugh when she saw Walter's face, caught between not wanting to say "no" and clearly out of options.

"Fireworks are always loud," she said, "but we can watch them from far away. Mommy can cover Baby's ears, and if your ears are covered, there's nothing to be afraid of."

"Yeah, Walter, I really want to see fireworks!" Baby chimed in eagerly.

Walter snapped out of his thoughts. "Alright then, in a bit, Walter will get everything ready. We'll throw a special fireworks show just for our Baby! I'll try to make them as quiet as I can."

"Thank you, Walter!" Baby beamed.

Walter grinned so wide his cheeks almost hurt. "No need to thank me! What kind of fireworks does Baby want?"

"Bunnies! I love bunnies the most."

"Bunnies? No problem! Walter will make a whole bunch of little bunny fireworks for you."

The two of them-one grown, one little-chattered away, excitedly planning the night's fireworks display.

When breakfast was ready, Walter scooped Baby up and went to round up the rest of the family.

Elysia set aside some food in a thermal container for Tarquin and his crew, who were still out and about. She also packed up a separate serving, planning to bring it to Grandma in the herb garden later.

Soon, Quincy and Emmett arrived, followed by Elijah and Elliot. Everyone squeezed around the makeshift wooden table, digging into steaming hot breakfast -scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, golden pancakes, and a pitcher of orange juice. The kitchen filled with the cozy hum of family.

But Elijah was clearly distracted, fidgeting in his seat, glancing at Elliot every few seconds, looking like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Elliot, who knew him all too well, smirked. Elijah was dying to get back to tinkering with Howard's

homemade security system! If not

wasn't for Elysia insisting they eat breakfast, Elijah would've skipped the meal entirely.

Ever since Elliot had taken him to see Howard's room yesterday, Elijah had been completely obsessed. Only in that room, surrounded by wires, monitors, and

blinking lights, could he actually focus-hyper-focus, really.

Among the brothers, Evan only

cared about martial arts and weapons computers bored him

death. Elliot liked tech, but not as

much as finance—he was all about making money. But Elijah? He was absolutely nuts about computers.

So when he saw Howard's handiwork, it blew his mind. He'd always thought his mentor was the best in the world. Now he finally understood the saying: there's always a bigger fish in the sea.

He realized there's no "best"—there's

always someone better. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he'd never have believed someone so genius with computers existed. Now, all he wanted was to worship at Howard's feet and learn everything he could, even if it meant skipping meals and sleep.

If Howard was here, Elijah would probably shamelessly follow him around like a puppy.

Elliot wolfed down the last bite of his pancakes and turned to Elysia and the two older men at the table. "Mom, Quincy, Grandpa Walter, you guys take your time. I'm stuffed—I'm going to go hang out in Howard's room."

Elijah jumped up so quickly he nearly knocked over his chair. "Me too! I'm done!"

Elysia called after them, "Don't mess with Howard's stuff!"

"Got it!" they called back, already halfway down the hall.

Not long after, Walter slipped away too, eager to get started on his bunny-shaped fireworks.

Emmett and Quincy finished eating, helped clear the table, then headed out as well-hand in hand, whispering and giggling about whatever secret project they were cooking up.

Elysia helped Baby into a warm jacket, grabbed the packed breakfast in one hand, and took Baby's tiny hand in the other. Together, they set off toward the herb garden to visit Grandma.

Chapter 1294

Late summer in the deep woods meant one thing: mosquitoes. Lots of them. Thankfully, Quincy's homemade bug spray worked like a charm.

No need for frantic swatting or desperate waving-one whiff of that spray and the bugs kept their distance, drifting off before they came anywhere near.

Elysia had spent enough time up here to know her way around the herb garden blindfolded. She led Baby straight through the brambles, past the old oak, and right to the patch where the wild herbs grew thick and wild.

This mountain was a treasure trove. Rare medicinal plants that city doctors would pay a fortune for? Here, they grew like dandelions in a summer lawn.

Tracey was already there, kneeling in the dirt with her old wicker basket, plucking leaves with the practiced ease of someone who'd done this a hundred times before. She spotted Elysia and Baby and beamed, waving them over.

"Elysia!" she called, her voice bright as morning.

Elysia grinned, taking Baby by the hand and walking over. "We brought you breakfast, Grandma. Better eat it while it's still hot-I'll take over here."

Tracey set down her basket and scooped Baby up for a kiss, not bothering with any of that 'oh, you didn't have to' business. "You start with this patch. When you're done, move over to the next one, alright?"

"Got it. Are these herbs for the antidote?" Elysia asked, eyeing the greenery.

A shadow flickered across Tracey's face. "That's right. I'm hoping I can crack it with these common herbs. If not, we'll have to try something else."

She didn't say it, but Elysia knew what she meant: fancy recipes were fine for the rich, but if the antidote cost a fortune, it wouldn't help anyone who really needed it. If things ever got bad, if the outbreak spread, even the government might struggle to afford the cure. But if she could make it cheap enough? Maybe it could be handed out for free—or at least be something ordinary folks could actually buy.

Elysia nodded, pulling on her gloves. "Alright, Baby, you stay with Great- Grandma, okay? Mommy's got some work to do."

Baby looked up, big-eyed. "Can I help, Mommy?"

Elysia smiled. "You can help by keeping Great-Grandma company. Make sure she eats all her breakfast, alright? That's a big help to Mommy."

Some of these herbs were poisonous-you had to be careful. No way was Baby going near them.

Baby nodded solemnly. "I'll make sure she eats every bite."

Elysia ruffled her hair. "You're the best."

With Baby settled, Elysia swung the basket over her shoulder and got to work. She moved quickly, nimble and sure-handed, even faster than Tracey.

Tracey watched her granddaughter's swift progress, pride shining in her eyes. But then she sighed, just a little.

Elysia had a gift for medicine, a gentle heart, and-most importantly-there was just something about their bond. Tracey wanted nothing more than to pass on everything she'd learned, to make Elysia her apprentice, her legacy. But Elysia's heart was set on psychology, not medicine.

A shame, really.

Tracey had never thought much about finding a student when she was younger. But now, with her hands not as steady and her knees creaky she felt the urge. Was it for her own sake, or for all those folks out there who couldn't afford a doctor's visit?

Getting sick was easy. Getting help was hard-and expensive.

She knew her skills shouldn't be lost. But she wouldn't just teach anyone. There were plenty of students out there who'd jump at the chance, but Trace wanted someone who feally belonged. Someone who'd share her heart, not just her knowledge.

She was still lost in thought when Baby tugged at her sleeve. "Great-Grandma,

why are you sighing? Don't you want your breakfast?"

Tracey shook herself and laughed. "Oh, honey, I love your mommy's cooking. I

was just thinking how old and slow I've gotten your mommy picks herbs way faster than I do these days!"

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"Great-Grandma isn't old at all! Mommy says she could live to a hundred. Great- Grandma is only in her seventies—she's still young!"

Tracey burst out laughing at Baby's serious tone.

"You're absolutely right, sweetheart. Seventy-something is still young for Great- Grandma!"

Tracey took Baby's little hand and led her away from the porch. Nearby, the sound of water trickling over stones filled the air—it was a mountain spring running down from the woods. Tracey was headed there to wash her hands before breakfast.

Suddenly, Baby pointed at two plants growing side by side, her eyes wide with curiosity.

"Great-Grandma, are those twins? How come they look so much alike?"

Tracey glanced at the two herbs and raised her eyebrows in surprise.

"You think they're not the same kind?"

"Nope! See, that one's got purplish tips, and the other one's more reddish at the ends. But they look almost exactly the same-like twins!"

Tracey squinted at the plants, then at Baby. "..."

Baby was right. The two herbs looked nearly identical, but they were completely different species. Their uses couldn't be more opposite—one was a lifesaving medicine, the other a deadly poison! Mixing them up could be a disaster.

Tracey grew them together because they liked the same soil and sunlight. It was convenient, but honestly, only someone with her experience would dare do it. She was confident she could tell them

apart. Most people couldn't even spot the difference in color at the tips-the shades were so faint that even medical students would have trouble.

"Baby, how did you know one has purple tips and the other red? Did Mommy tell you?"

"No, I just noticed! It's super obvious. Can't you see it, Great-Grandma?"

Tracey grinned. "Well, I can, but it's not easy! You're amazing for noticing that at your age!"

Baby beamed with pride and pointed again, this time at another pair of plants.

"I can tell those two apart too! They look the same, but their roots are totally

different. And those over there one's got tiny thorns, and the other has big, sharp ones, right?"

Tracey nodded enthusiastically. "Exactly! You have quite the eye!"

She was so excited she almost forgot

bout breakfast, eager to

more of the herb garden.

Baby put her foot down.

"Mommy said I have to make sure you eat breakfast first, Great-Grandma. Breakfast before anything else!"

Tracey laughed and relented. "Alright, alright, breakfast it is!"

She rinsed her hands in the cold spring water and sat down to enjoy the bagel and scrambled eggs Elysia had brought over. When they finished eating, she and Baby. wandered through the herb beds together.

Tracey quickly discovered that Baby could spot subtle differences

between plants that would stump most adults. The little girl even. asked questions that made Tracey pause and think-questions clever enough to challenge a medical

student!

Delighted, Tracey knelt down beside Baby and asked,

"Sweetheart, do you like doctors?"

"You mean like nurses and doctors-the ones they call angels in white?"

"That's right!"

"I like them! Angels in white help sick people and have kind hearts."

"Would you ever want to be one of those angels, Baby?"

Baby nodded, her eyes bright. "Yes! I want to help people too!"

Tracey's face lit up. "Then how about Great-Grandma teaches you everything she knows?"

Baby didn't hesitate. "Okay!"

"Really?" Tracey's eyes sparkled.

"Really! Pinky promise!"

They hooked their pinkies, sealing their little promise right there in the sunny

garden.

Chapter 1296

When Elysia came back with her basket full of wild herbs, she spotted Tracey and Baby, the oldest and the youngest of the family, making a pinky promise on the

porch.

Grinning, Elysia called out, "Hey, what are you two up to?"

Baby's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Mommy, Mommy! I'm gonna be a nurse when I grow up!"

"Oh yeah?" Elysia raised an eyebrow, amused.

"Great-grandma says she's gonna teach me everything she knows!" Baby

announced, bouncing on her toes.

Tracey chuckled, her eyes crinkling with delight. "Elysia, I think this little one has a real future in medicine!"

"She's just a kid, and yet she can already tell the difference between all these herbs! She's a natural. I'd love to start teaching her some medical basics, if you're okay with it?"

Elysia didn't hesitate. "Of course! Baby, do you want to learn?"

As far as Elysia was concerned, you could never know too much. It was always a good idea to pick up more skills if you had the chance. She wasn't a doctor herself, but she'd learned first aid and some medical know-how from her own grandmother. It had come in handy more times than she could count.

If she hadn't understood both psychology and some basic medicine, she probably never would've been able to help Elijah. And Tarquin's insomnia—if she'd known nothing, she'd have just been left worrying and helpless. But now, she could mix up treatments, try a little acupuncture, adjust his remedies on the fly—and not panic when things changed.

Besides, medicine wasn't just any skill. It was something that could help everyone, everywhere. Learning medicine meant you could help yourself and the people you cared about. That was a win-win in her book.

So if Baby was interested, Elysia was all in. And if not? That was fine too. She'd never force her daughter to do something she didn't love. After all, passion was the best teacher—when you enjoyed something, you learned faster and had more fun.

Baby hopped around in pure joy. "I love it, I love it! When I become a nurse, I can take care of Daddy, Mommy, and my brothers, too!"

Elysia ruffled her daughter's hair, her heart melting. "If you love it, that's all that matters. Mommy's got your back!"

Then she turned to Tracey with a grateful smile. "Thank you, Grandma. I know it's a lot of work."

"Oh, it's no trouble at all!" Tracey beamed. "I'd be thrilled to take Baby on as my apprentice!"

Elysia laughed. "Well then, Baby will have to serve you a good old English afternoon tea as thanks!"

Tracey nodded, pleased as punch.

Elysia knew her grandmother was an amazing healer, but she had no clue about Tracey's real reputation. To her, it was just about Baby

learning a useful skill. She ne

imagined that, if the world found out Tracey had taken on a new apprentice, it would cause a stir in every medical school from Harvard to Johns Hopkins.

By the time the three of them finished gathering herbs and made it back to their cozy cabin, it was almost lunchtime.

Tarquin was home. When he saw them coming up the path, he hurried out to greet them, giving Tracey a respectful nod first.

He took the heavy basket off Elysia's shoulders. "Was it tough out there?"

Elysia shook her head and flashed him a grin. "It was nothing! I'm not some delicate flower, you know. When did you get back?"

Before Tarquin could answer, Baby piped up, "Daddy, Mommy was amazing! She picked most of these herbs herself!"

Tarquin grinned at his daughter, balancing the basket as he scooped Baby into his arms. "Are you tired, sweetheart?"

"Nope! Oh, Daddy, guess what? Great-grandma is going to teach me all about medicine. When I've learned enough, Mommy and I will fix your insomnia

together! We'll definitely get you sleeping like a baby!"

Tarquin blinked. "She's teaching you medicine?"

"Uh-huh! We even made a pinky promise about it!"

Tracey looked at Tarquin, her gaze gentle but firm. "Baby's got real talent-she's a natural. I'd like to teach her some skills, but I promise, I won't push her into being a doctor if she doesn't want to. Learning medicine's just a skill, not a life sentence."

Tracey knew some folks from wealthy families mapped out their kids' whole lives the moment they were born. Becoming a doctor wasn't always seen as glamorous as living the life of a trust fund heiress. But for Tracey, giving Baby a choice was what mattered most?

Chapter 1297

Being a doctor isn't just tough-it's downright risky sometimes.

Especially if you're one of the good ones.

Tarquin paused for a moment, then turned to look at Elysia.

Elysia just grinned. "I think learning some medical skills is a great idea. Baby's into it, too. I think it's awesome."

Tarquin just stared at her.

He could tell right away-Elysia had absolutely no clue what it actually meant

when Tracey said she wanted to take Baby on as her apprentice.

Put it this way: if word got out, the whole medical community would lose its mind.

The Stevenson family would be beside themselves with jealousy.

Honestly, Tarquin was happy for Baby, and he looked at Tracey with genuine gratitude. "If Grandma's willing to teach her, that's a real blessing for Baby. Thank you, Grandma. It means a lot."

Tracey was delighted that Tarquin hadn't objected. She immediately called to Baby, "Oh, it's no trouble at all! Come on, sweetie, let your great-grandma show you some really neat stuff."

"Okay!" Baby hopped down from Tarquin's arms and grabbed Tracey's hand, bouncing along as they headed toward Tracey's cozy little cottage.

Tarquin slung a basket of herbs over his shoulder and walked behind them with Elysia. They were bringing the fresh herbs over to Tracey's place.

Elysia asked, "Did you guys eat the breakfast I left for you?"

"I did. Bernard and Evan didn't."

"Really? Why not?"

"They're still not back yet."

Actually, Bernard had come back earlier, but when he saw Evan was still gone- and knew Evan was out there with his student-he got worried and went looking for them.

Elysia didn't really think they were in any danger. She was just concerned they'd get hungry. "It's nearly lunchtime. Aren't they starving by now?"

"They'll be fine. Evan packed some food when he left."

"Oh, then he'll probably be gone until dinner. I should've guessed. Anyway, are all those poachers taken care of?"

"Yeah, it's all sorted out. Don't stress about it."

Elysia let out a sigh of relief. That was one less thing on her plate.

"Once Grandma figures out the right antidote, we can all go home. I just hope there aren't any surprises back in Jindale City."

"...Zane's still with Winona Newsom, and Central Pharmaceuticals is still expanding. It'll be fine. How long do you think Grandma will need

make the antidote?"

"Hard to say. There's no set time."

"No rush. This is a good chance for you to catch up with Grandma and Grandpa anyway."

"Yeah, you're right."

Tarquin carried the herbs into Tracey's little cottage.

Tracey was busy showing Baby

some of her babies"-tiny

hydroponic seedlings and some rare

aquatic creatures, all floating in glass jars. The sun made them shimmer, and they looked almost magical.

"Look

holding Baby," Tracey said,

a jar. "You can this plant's essence, and it'll

all sorts of wild hallucinohet

you

She pointed to another. "And this one? Even the meanest grizzly bear would drop

like a stone with just a single leaf."

"And over here this one's a virus killer..."

Tracey described everything with so much enthusiasm, clearly hoping to spark Baby's curiosity.

Baby was totally hooked, eyes wide, looking from one jar to the next. "Great- Grandma, do you think I could grow these myself one day?"

"Of course! I bet you'll find even more amazing plants and critters out in the wild.

You'll be even better at it than your old great-grandma!"

Baby's face was full of hope. Tracey's face was all pride.

By lunchtime, Elysia was in the kitchen, making sandwiches and salad.

Tarquin scooped Baby up for a quick change-she'd been running around the herb garden and got mud all over her clothes.

Once Baby was dressed, Walter whisked her away to show off some fireworks displays he'd been designing for the upcoming Fourth of July.

Tarquin, now alone, went back to Tracey's cottage.

"Grandma?"

Tracey looked up, curious. "What's up?"

Tarquin nodded seriously. "I wanted to ask you about someone..."

Chapter 1298

Tracey paused what she was doing and called Tarquin over.

"Have a seat, honey."

She poured two glasses of water-passing one to Tarquin and taking a sip from her own. Setting the pitcher down, she looked Tarquin dead in the eye from across the table.

"So, who are you trying to dig up info on?"

Tarquin's voice was calm, almost too calm. "The person who created this virus."

Her eyebrows shot up and she gave him a long, searching look before responding, her tone slower and more cautious.

"And what makes you think I know them?"

He didn't hesitate. "I can tell, Grandma. You weren't surprised by the virus. Not really. It was more like you recognized it."

Tracey had been shocked when she saw the virus, but not because she hadn't expected someone to develop it. No, the real shock was that she was already familiar with it. She'd seen it before, which meant she'd been involved with it somehow—and probably knew who was behind it.

She furrowed her brow, staring at Tarquin in silence for a moment, then took another sip of water, eyes never leaving his face.

"All right then, what do you know? Let's hear it from your side first."

Tarquin didn't beat around the bush. "From what I've got, the virus originated in Karl Town, Alerasia. There's an OE News Agency there—looks like an ordinary newspaper, but under the surface, it's got a massive underground research lab."

"I don't know the full extent of their research, but I'm pretty sure the virus is their handiwork."

Tracey's face darkened, and she leaned forward, voice edged with urgency.

"You're sure it came from there?"

Tarquin shrugged. "I can't say one hundred percent, but it's highly likely. Our first identified case came straight out of that town. He grew up in Karl Town and told me the newspaper staff and even other townies were basically guinea pigs for that underground lab."

Tracey pressed on, "Isn't that town mostly zhinorians? The paper, the whole town?"

"Yeah, it's almost all zhinorians. Karl Town's famous for it-biggest zhinorian community around."

Tracey clenched her jaw, something clicking in her mind. She slammed her palm

on the table with a bang, making the old wooden thing shiver.

"Bastards!" she spat. "They think they can wipe us out? Dream on!"

She was visibly shaking with anger.

Tarquin's eyes narrowed as something dawned on him.

"Grandma... are they experimenting on zhinorians? Testing out viruses to hurt

us?"

Tracey shot him a look, but didn't answer directly. Instead she asked, "How did you catch wind of the first infected?"

Tarquin laid it out straight.

"He's my aunt's kid-my cousin, sort of. We don't get along. He came back from Karl Town, and honestly, I think he was looking for me."

"But I happened to be out of town, in Oceanopolis with Elysia, so we never crossed paths. Still, my people were watching him. The moment he got sick, I knew."

Tracey looked suspicious.

"So the first carrier comes looking for you? You got beef with the person who made this virus?"

Whoever unleashed the

virus-whatever their

reason-sending an infected person

after Tarquin was clearly a threat. If

Tarquin had met him and caught the virus, who knows what would've happened?

Tarquin nodded, voice low. "Yeah... We have a personal vendetta. My mom and

dad might've died because of this person."

Tracey's eyes narrowed even more.

"And what exactly did your parents do to get on their bad side?"

When Elysia got together with Tarquin, they'd run background checks on him-mostly looking at his reputation and love life. They hadn't taken a deep dive into the Bradfords, or really looked into Tarquin's parents at all.

Chapter 1299

They never expected Tarquin's parents to be tangled up with those kinds of people.

If they'd had any idea, they would've dug up every bit of information about them

ages ago.

Tarquin frowned, his voice steady.

"I honestly don't know exactly why my folks got on their bad side. What I do know is, before my parents died, they left behind something that's really important to them."

"They've been watching me all these years, hoping I'll lead them to it."

"Whatever beef they had with my parents, it probably revolves around that thing."

Tracey's eyes widened. She leaned in, her tone urgent. "What is it? What did they leave behind?"

Tarquin shook his head.

"I wish I knew. My parents died so suddenly, and they never mentioned anything suspicious to me. I've gone through their stuff a hundred times-nothing stands out."

Tracey frowned, pressing further.

"Were your parents scientists? Maybe in the medical field?"

Tarquin shook his head again.

"No, not as far as I know. Their work had nothing to do with medicine-they were both more like literary buffs, really. My mom did work for OE News Agency for a while, though."

Tracey blinked in surprise, staring at Tarquin for a moment.

After a pause, she asked softly,

"What do you think this thing is? Any guesses?"

Tarquin's shoulders slumped.

"I have no clue. I've thought about it over and over. I keep replaying every little moment we had as a family, but... nothing. Maybe they were just trying to protect me. Or maybe they never got the chance to tell me."

"They never even hinted at something like this."

"But one thing's for sure: whatever it is, it means a lot to those people. Otherwise, they wouldn't have spent all these years following me around."

"And I think it must matter to the country, too. Before my parents died, they reached out to the Ministry of National Security. It even got the top brass involved."

"They sent in the military to try to get my parents out, but it all went sideways. They couldn't bring them

back a

and they never found that

thing, either."

Tracey let out a long breath, rubbing her temples. After a while, she suddenly changed the subject.

"Tarquin, do you think it's tragic, what happened to your parents?"

"They managed to reach the Ministry

of National Security, and the

ministry went straight to the top. The government even sent the military. That has to mean their deaths were linked to national security, right?"

"If they really did die for their country, do you think it was worth it?"

"How do you feel about someone sacrificing their life for the greater good?"

She rattled off her questions, one after another.

Tarquin didn't get all fired up or start making speeches. He just spoke quietly, but you could tell he meant every word.

"It's tragic, sure. But it was worth it. They were protecting not just our country, but our family and their own sense of honor."

"A strong country is the backbone for all of us. The more prosperous we are, the prouder we can be."

"When you come from a powerful nation, you can walk into any part of the world with your head held high. People respect you. They treat you differently."

"But if you lose your country, what's left for your family? Or your own dignity?"

"People living in war zones can barely survive, let alone talk about pride or happiness."

"Our peace, our comfort-it all comes from the strength and prosperity of our country."

Tarquin wasn't the type to go waving flags or shouting slogans. He was just a businessman, through and through.

But before he was a businessman, he was always a patriot.

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Tracey nodded, then asked,

"If our country was in danger, would you take your money and run overseas, or...?"

"I'd stay and stand with my country and my family."

Tarquin cut her off, answering without hesitation, his face serious.

Tracey looked at him, clearly pleased, her tone softening.

"The person you're asking about-I can't help you there. I honestly don't know who they are."

Tarquin frowned. "What?"

Tracey explained,

"I think you want to know who's really pulling the strings behind the virus. I've only ever heard rumors about their research team."

"The one truly responsible for your parents' deaths—that's gotta be the mastermind, the one calling the shots behind the scenes."

She leaned back, sighing.

"Scientists abroad, most of them are just highly-skilled employees. Their research directions, even what happens to their results—all of that is decided by the big shots funding them, not the scientists themselves."

"But if you want, I can dig up every detail I know about the research team later and send it to you."

"Right now, though, there's something more important. Come with me, Tarquin."

She stood up and headed for the lab, Tarquin hurrying after her, unsure what to expect.

Inside the lab, Tracey opened the safe right in front of him.

Inside were some sealed folders and eight small vials, each labeled with a

number. She took them out and lined them up on the workbench.

"You were right. I've known about this virus for a long time. I've been researching

it myself. That's why I was so shocked when Elysia brought it to me."

She pointed to the first vial.

"This is the very first version—the generation one virus. It was a total failure."

She gestured down the line.

"This is generation two, three, four... The one you brought is generation eight."

"All the versions before number

eight kept getting stronger-two was worse than one, three worse than two, and so on. But the eighth version you gave me? It's weird. It's not stronger than the seventh. In

fact, it's somewhere between four and five in strength."

"In other words, it's more dangerous than the fourth, but weaker than the fifth."

"Another strange thing: the first seven versions came out in quick succession every three or five years, another one popped up. But between the seventh and eighth versions, there's a thirty-five year gap!"

She looked at Tarquin.

"Think about it. After all that time, the eighth version should've been even deadlier,

but it's weaker. Do you know why that is?"

Tarquin stared at the vials, troubled.

"Does it have something to do with how my parents died?"

Tracey nodded.

"If my hunch is right, the problem started with your mom and dad."

"The seventh generation virus was created thirty-five years ago. Normally, after a few years, the eighth would appear-and it should've been more lethal."

"The seventh was already horrifying-people barely survived three or four days after infection. Imagine how terrifying the eighth would've been! If it had worked as planned, it would kill in less than a day."

"But something happened. Thirty-five years went by before the eighth version showed up, and it turned out to be a dud."

"My guess? They did make a real eighth generation virus, but something went wrong. An accident, maybe one that stopped it from ever being released."

"And I think your parents were part of that accident."

Tarquin's eyes widened.

"You're saying they killed my parents, and have been watching me all these years, because of the real eighth generation virus?"

Tracey nodded again.

"That's exactly what I think."

Tarquin frowned, puzzling it out.

"But my mom was just one of their test subjects. How could she have gotten that

close to something so secret?"