

Hitched 1311

Chapter 1311

Baby, with her hair in two playful pigtails, sat nestled between Tracey and Elysia, carefully sorting through the fresh herbs they'd gathered that morning.

She didn't really understand what the two adults were talking about, but she could tell from their worried faces that something was up. In her sweet, high-pitched voice, she piped up to cheer them on:

"Great-Gran, Mommy, don't be sad! Baby's super strong, Baby can carry the flag!"

Tracey turned to look at Baby, and immediately a smile softened her features.

This kid's got spunk!

"Our Baby is the best!" Tracey beamed, giving Baby a gentle poke.

After a bit of playful teasing, Tracey turned to Elysia, her tone more serious.

"Elysia, I know medicine isn't really your thing, but Baby's still so young..."

"For Baby's future, and for the future of medicine in general, you really should learn from Grandma. Really dig deep."

"If, God forbid, Grandma's not around someday, at least you'll be able to carry on."

"Grandma..." Elysia's heart twisted-not because she didn't want to learn, but because Grandma was talking about not being there anymore.

But Tracey just shrugged, matter-of-fact.

"Birth, aging, sickness, and death. It's the way of life, honey. Grandma's been around a long time-I'm not afraid of dying."

"What scares me is leaving and having nobody to take up the torch."

"If there were already someone in the medical world ready to step up, I wouldn't worry so much. But right now, someone has to care."

Elysia looked at her, full of affection. Grandma should've been enjoying her retirement, not still worrying about the world.

A real heroine-tough as any man!

"Don't worry, Grandma. Teach me-I'll learn!"

Meanwhile, in Quincy's cozy cabin, Quincy was holding Emmett's hand, helping him dip a pen into ink and write a few bold, swirling words across a big sheet of paper:

"Peace and Prosperity"

The script was strong and lively, almost dancing on the page.

Quincy nodded. "If you want to study ancient aesthetics, Emmett, you have to start with the language. The beauty of our heritage begins with its script."

"Focus on the writing, then look at their clothes, their food, their homes and how they built them."

"Fashion is like fireworks-beautiful

but fleeting. But the beauty of old

cultures? That lasts for thousands

of years. Never turn your back on it."

Emmett nodded seriously. "I'll remember everything you say, Quincy!"

Quincy smiled. "Now close your eyes."

He pulled out a bottle of perfume and sprayed a fine mist into the air, letting it settle.

"What do you smell?"

Emmett squeezed his eyes shut, inhaling deeply. After a moment, he grinned.

"Pine forests... a bubbling brook... camellias... cherry blossoms... peach cobbler... a hint of whiskey... fresh linen..."

He opened his eyes in surprise.

"Quincy, is this a new formula?"

Quincy laughed, clapping him on the back.

"That's my clever apprentice! Come on, I'll show you a brand new way to blend scents!"

Over in Howard's cabin, Elliot and Elijah were huddled over a laptop, following

Howard's digital tutorial step by step.

Suddenly, the lines of code on the screen flickered and scrambled.

A second later, a giant mushroom cloud exploded onto the screen.

The two brothers' eyes lit up. They slapped each other a high-five.

"Thirty-six seconds! We did it!"

Did what, exactly? They'd just broken

through a top-secret military firewall

in record time-thirty-six seconds

flat. And not just any firewall, but the

one protecting an enemy nation's

weapons cache, which they'd just

remotely detonated.

Their thirty-six seconds would leave that country scratching their heads for years.

Elijah grinned. "Where do we go next?"

Elliot narrowed his eyes, a sly smile on his lips.

"We take them down again. Let's keep going."

Howard had always told them: when

those guys trespassed on our land

and hurt our people, they never

apologized, never admitted a thing.

"Well, now it was time to make them pay.

Practicing on their firewalls? Totally justified.

Chapter 1312

Inside Walter's Cabin

Walter was hunched over his workbench, sketching out fireworks for Baby. His blueprints were covered in adorable bunnies—each one fluffy, bright-eyed, and bursting with life.

It was an odd sight: an old man in his seventies, patiently drawing cute animals with a look of pure tenderness, nothing remotely threatening about him.

But the words tacked up on his wall told a different story: "Respect is earned at the tip of a blade; truth is found at the end of a cannon's range!"

And beneath those bunny sketches? Stacks of designs for next-gen fighter jets and flying aircraft carriers.

Some of his work had even been featured at the big November Air Show, though those were just the older models.

After all, you can't display the latest inventions right out in the open-standard protocol. When you see them showing off a new jet, you can bet the next two or three generations are already rolling off the assembly line. Who knows, maybe versions five and six are flying secret missions as we speak!

So, if you're ever at an air show, don't be too impressed by what you see on stage just remember, the really cool stuff is still locked away, out of sight.

But if you wanted excitement, you had to check out the scene with Evan.

Deep in the thick woods, the tension was so thick it scared off the wildlife— nothing but the smell of gunpowder and the sound of arguing voices.

"Evan, you gotta listen to me!"

"No, Evan, he's just a footnote in Bernard's win column. Bernard's the real deal, you should listen to him!"

"Evan, sure, I can't beat him in a straight fight, but when it comes to stealth and evasion, I'm in a whole different league!"

"Oh, really? Big talk for someone who's never faced me head-on!"

"If you don't buy it, let's put it to the test!"

"Bring it on! Whoever backs down isn't a real man!"

Bernard and the scar-faced big guy were at each other's throats, then suddenly turned to Evan and shouted in unison,

"Evan, you be the judge!"

And off they ran.

Evan was left standing there, his head spinning. He racked his brain, spit flying as he tried to talk them down-just barely managing to get them to bury the hatchet and face a common enemy.

But then came another problem: who would teach Evan their skills?

Each was convinced their way was best.

If Evan trained with one, the other sulked. If he switched, the roles reversed.

Meanwhile, White had found the perfect spot to sit back, snack on a bag of trail mix, and enjoy the chaos.

High above, a fat python watched from the branches. Not appreciating White's intrusion, it flicked its tongue and lunged.

White whipped his head around his narrow eyes glinting coldly. He raised his head, hissed, and mimicked a striking pose.

The python locked eyes with him and, for some reason, went pale as a ghost- then shot away at top speed.

White was stunned. "Huh?"

It ran off? Just like that? They hadn't even started fighting! Did the snake know him or something?

Curiosity piqued, White forgot the drama below and dashed after the snake through the underbrush.

Back under the big oak, Evan was desperate to keep the two old-timers from coming to blows again.

"This isn't fair!" he shouted, his voice echoing through the trees and sending birds flying. "Uncle, you're still injured! Even if Bernard won, it wouldn't count for much!"

Soon enough, both men returned—almost at the same time-standing right in

front of Evan.

He exhaled in relief.

"Look, enough bickering! Here's how it's going to work:"

"In the mornings, I'm learning from Bernard. Uncle, you can't interrupt."

"In the afternoons, it's Uncle's turn.

Bernard, you're just an observer. No

even if you

keep it to yourself!"

"But I still need time to help Walter with the new gadgets, so I can't spend all day with you two."

Both Bernard and his rival frowned, clearly not thrilled with the arrangement.

Evan just shrugged and pouted, "If you don't like it, fine! I'll just go hang out with Walter instead. See ya!"

He turned on his heel, ready to walk away.

But before he could take a step, two

big one from each side landed firmly on his shoulders.

Both men, in perfect unison, said-

Chapter 1313

"Fine, we'll do it your way!"

Evan let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding.

"It's already afternoon, so today, Uncle will be teaching me. Bernard, you'll just

have to watch," Evan said.

"Hmph!" Bernard snorted, one of them looking smug while the other looked

seriously annoyed.

The big guy with the scarred face stepped forward, his expression deadly serious.

He was just about to launch into a lecture when Bernard suddenly cut in.

"If you suck at offense, don't mess him up. I'll teach him how to attack, you stick to

defense!"

Everyone knew, after all: the best fighters could play both sides of the game—
offense and defense.

The scar-faced guy glared daggers at Bernard, practically grinding his teeth.

"This is my time. Nobody asked you. If you keep quiet, nobody's going to think
you're dead," he snapped.

Bernard just rolled his eyes and shut up.

The scar-faced guy really didn't want to admit it, but Bernard wasn't wrong. When
it came to attacking, Bernard had skills he just couldn't match.

He'd tried teaching Evan some offense before, but after sparring with Bernard,
he'd figured it was better to focus on defense. That was where he really had
something to offer.

"Evan, when your opponent is weak, sure, you can end things quick. But if you're
up against someone just as good as you—or even better—solid defense will keep

you alive and might just give you the upper hand."

"Come at me. I'll show you how to cover yourself better..."

...

While Elysia and the kids were busy—some drawing with sidewalk chalk, others chasing each other around the backyard—Tarquin was off to the side, standing quietly by the picket fence, a cigarette smoldering between his fingers.

His smoking habit had gotten a lot better, but he hadn't quit completely. When something weighed on his mind, he still needed that familiar comfort.

All he could think about was finding the real source of the eighth mutation of the virus. Over and over, he replayed memories of his parents—their laughter, their voices, and especially the day they died.

He tried to pick apart those memories, searching for clues, for anything he might have missed the first hundred times.

Some memories were sweet, some were bitter. But because it all ended so badly,

even the sweet ones turned sour, and the bitter ones just hurt more.

Eventually, all that pain just turned into grief.

Tarquin furrowed his brow, not wanting to go back through those memories again,

but forcing himself to anyway.

He smoked, and remembered. Smoked, and remembered, again and again.

...

By dusk, Evan and the scar-faced guy returned to their little cabin.

They'd sent a message ahead, so

nobody was surprised to see them.

Dinner was served outside on the

porch—fried chicken, mashed

potatoes, corn on the cob,

lemonade—everyone gathered

around, laughing and sharing stories

as the sun dipped below the trees.

Just after sunset, a sudden flash of
light appeared outside the backyard
fence. It burst open, and in the
fading light, everyone saw a tiny
bunny made of glowing sparks.

Then, another flash, and another rabbit appeared.

One, two, three... five, six, seven, eight...

New sparkly bunnies popped up
before the old ones disappeared,
each one wiggling its nose, sporting
a different color—white, gray, black,
even a few pink ones.

The kids' jaws dropped in awe. "Whoa—"

Baby was bouncing with excitement next to Elysia, practically jumping out of her

shoes. "Bunny! Mommy, look—so many bunnies!"

The kids were thrilled, and even Walter grinned from ear to ear.

"Hey, Baby, do you like them?" he asked.

"Love them! Love them!"

Evan's eyes went wide. "Walter, are those... fireworks?"

"Yup! Made them this afternoon. Pretty cool, huh?"

"But... why don't I hear any noise? Aren't fireworks supposed to go bang?"

Walter grinned. "Didn't want to scare the little one, so I made them silent."

Evan stared. "Wait, what?!"

It wasn't just Evan—Tarquin looked over too, just as shocked. "How the hell did

you pull that off?"

Silent fireworks. Only Walter.

Chapter 1314

"Walter, are you full yet?"

Evan dashed over to Walter, his bright hazel eyes wide with curiosity.

Walter nodded. "Yeah, I'm stuffed. Why?"

"Come on, come on, let's get back to your fort. I want to learn that silencing trick!"

Evan grabbed Walter by the arm, dragging him along. After a few steps, he spun

around to call back to Bernard and their mentor.

"Bernard, Uncle, don't look for me tomorrow! I'm skipping martial arts. I'm gonna

learn how to make-"

He caught Elysia watching and quickly changed course.

"-uh, fireworks! Super cool fireworks!"

The two older guys exchanged a look. "..."

They weren't thrilled about their student getting stolen, but honestly, they had to

hand it to Walter-the guy had real skills.

Elysia, for her part, didn't really get what was so impressive about it all. To her,

Walter was just a guy with a knack for making fireworks and little inventions.

She called after Evan, "Be careful, you two."

Evan grinned. "Don't worry, Mom, Walter's got my back!"

Evan was the kind of kid who loved a good brawl, was always up for an adventure, obsessed over martial arts, and totally geeked out over anything that exploded or had gears and wires.

Life went on like that for days.

Everyone was busy, chasing their own dreams and passions. Elysia, mindful of her grandmother's concerns about the future of medicine and her own baby's health, worked hard to learn everything she could about holistic healing.

The kids all dove into whatever fascinated them, each determined to reach new heights.

By the end of August, the antidote was finally ready.

Which meant it was time for Elysia and the kids to leave the mountain.

The elders knew they couldn't keep them there forever, so they walked the family a long way down the winding path, saying their goodbyes.

Partings are always bittersweet.

The kids cried their eyes out, and even the old folks had tears in their eyes.

Tracey wanted Baby to stay, but the

little girl was still too young to be

apart from her parents. Tracey not

wanting her great-granddaughter to

suffer, let her go.

"Elysia, I've recorded a set of lessons

for Baby. Teach her for me. When

the time is right, I'll come find

you or you can always come back

up here."

Elysia's eyes were red as she nodded. "Okay."

Baby clung to Tracey's hand. "Don't be sad, Great-Grandma. I'll carry the flag for

you!"

She didn't really know what "carrying

the flag" meant, just that her

great-grandma worried about it. If

she carried it, maybe

Great-Grandma wouldn't worry

anymore.

Tracey hugged her tight, tears welling up. "Good girl. My brave Baby."

Meanwhile, Bernard was saying goodbye to Evan.

His eyes were watery, and the stubbornness seemed drained from him-he

looked suddenly older, all the scars on his face deepening his frown.

The two of them bickered constantly, fists flying more often than not. But

underneath it all, they were still family.

After a long silence, Bernard said gruffly, "I'll watch over Evan. I'd die before

letting anything happen to him."

Bernard scowled. "You're not allowed to die! We haven't avenged your aunt yet.

You have to stay alive, you hear me?"

Walter just knit his brows and said nothing.

Evan wiped his eyes, gaze fierce. "Don't worry, Bernard, Uncle. I'll make sure we get justice for Auntie."

The two old men just sighed.

After saying goodbye to Elliot and Elijah, Walter came over and handed Evan a flash drive.

"Hang on to this. It's got all the stuff you love-you'll have plenty to tinker with."

Evan's eyes lit up as he threw his arms around Walter. "Thanks, Walter."

Walter ruffled his hair fondly.

"Remember our motto?"

Evan grinned. "Of course! 'Honor is found at the edge of a blade, and truth is in the range of a cannon!'"

Chapter 1315

"Anything else?"

"No matter where I go, my heart will always be with Zhinora!"

The little guy's voice rang out, strong and proud. Walter nodded, serious as ever. "Good kid! You're gonna do great things someday, you know that?"

But right then, the one crying the hardest was Emmett.

Emmett was always the emotional one, tears streaming down his cheeks as he clung to Quincy's neck, holding on like he'd never let go.

Quincy's eyes were shining with unshed tears, voice trembling as he spoke,

"Emmett, remember what I told you. Stay true to your art, keep your feet on the ground. Art is the soul of our country-loving your homeland is an artist's duty." "Love your country above all else!"

Emmett nodded so hard he was practically shaking,

"I—I remember! Love... love your country above all else!"

Quincy could barely get the words out, his voice thick, "Good... good..."

After saying their goodbyes to Elysia and the kids, a group of old folks pulled Tarquin aside for a private chat.

No one knew what they talked about, but Tarquin's brow stayed furrowed the whole time.

It was a while before they finally split up. The elders stood on the hill, watching as Tarquin, Elysia, and the kids made their way down the slope, not turning back- afraid that if they did, they'd never be able to leave.

Tarquin was lost in thought...

He still didn't really know why all these elders had faked their deaths and holed up together in the middle of nowhere. But he couldn't shake a bad feeling...

It was like these mountains were an invisible iron cage, keeping these brilliant minds trapped, never letting them go free.

From the things the elders said, it was obvious-they wanted to leave, but for some reason, they couldn't.

What were they so worried about? With a lineup like this, who could possibly threaten them? What force could keep these legends contained?

Reinet

And why did they say Gerald and Howard would never come back? Was it that once you left, you couldn't return? Or had something happened to them out there?

"Ahhh-"

Suddenly, Emmett's startled scream snapped Tarquin out of his thoughts.

He looked over to see Emmett, eyes wide with terror, staring across the lake like he'd seen a ghost.

Tarquin

owed his gaze, his own

he

brow knitting tight. Instantly, Baby's eyes, scooping both

covered

t and Baby up in his arms.

"Both of you-eyes shut, now."

Elysia, confused and worried, started to glance across the lake, but Tarquin called out,

"Elysia, just keep walking! Don't look back."

He motioned to the other three kids, "Let's go, hurry."

Elliot, Evan, and Elijah had already seen whatever it was. Their eyes were huge,

mouths hanging open in shock. Even Evan looked stunned.

The scar-faced old man saw it too, his gaze sharpening with suspicion.

White, the snake, opened its sleepy eyes, took one look, and shivered shooting Evan a nervous tongue flick before slithering away toward the lake.

Evan's little face scrunched up in confusion. He turned to Elysia.

"Mom, you guys go on ahead. I need to pee. I'll catch up."

The scar-faced old man watched Evan chasing after White, clearly not comfortable letting him go alone, and followed.

Elysia, anxious, started to protest, but Tarquin reassured her,

"White's with him, and so is his uncle. He'll be fine. We should keep moving."

Elysia was torn—curious, but scared. She wanted to know what they'd seen, but

she was terrified it was something out of a horror film.

She peeked over at Tarquin and the kids, voice trembling,

"What... what did you guys see over there?"

Chapter 1316

Elliot, Emmett, and Elijah all caught it—they glanced at Tarquin, brows furrowed, waiting for him to explain.

Tarquin was quiet for a few seconds before he finally spoke up.

"It was an animal carcass. A bit gory. I didn't want you or Baby to get scared, so we kept you back."

All three kids instantly widened their eyes—yeah, right!

Tarquin shot them a look: Let it go. White lie.

The trio pursed their lips and looked down, deciding not to call him out.

Elysia squinted at him, suspicious. "An animal carcass?"

"Yeah."

"What kind of animal?"

"I couldn't tell, honestly. Looked like it got attacked by something bigger, half- eaten. Bit of a mess."

Elysia frowned. "So... are there other predators around? Is Evan in danger?" "He's fine. White and Bernard's apprentice are with him."

"That's true." Elysia let out a sigh, buying the story. "Jeez, the way you guys acted, I thought you'd seen a freaking ghost or something."

Baby piped up in her tiny voice, "Me too! I thought Daddy and my brothers saw a ghost! Spooky!"

Elysia pulled her close. "Don't worry, honey. Nature's tough. It's normal for animals to get attacked out here."

"Mommy, you don't be scared either!"

"I'm not, sweetie. I mean, I'm a surgeon, remember? I've seen way worse than a dead animal. If I'd known it was just that, I wouldn't have been so on edge."

"Mommy, you're amazing!"

Elysia grinned. "You'll be even braver than me someday, Baby."

While the mother and daughter chatted away, Tarquin and the boys listened quietly. Honestly, those two were the easiest to reassure in the whole family.

They walked on for a bit, then found a clean patch of ground to stop and wait for Evan and the others to catch up.

Elliot and Elijah kept sneaking glances at Tarquin, clearly itching to talk about what they'd really seen, but with Elysia nearby, they didn't dare bring it up.

After a while, Evan showed up, flanked by the scar-faced old pro.

Tarquin and the boys looked him over, hoping for some sign of what really happened, but with Elysia

present, no one wanted to ask to net

much Judging by Evan's calm though, it couldn't have been anything too terrible.

"Evan, you didn't run into any wild animals, did you?" Elysia asked.

Tarquin answered first, "Your mom knows we found a half-eaten animal. She was just worried there might be more predators around, so she was worried about you guys."

Evan caught on right away that Dad wasn't telling the whole truth and jumped in, "We didn't see anything else. Even if there were predators. Mom, you don't have to worry about me! They're more scared of me than

I am

of them!"

Elysia pursed her lips. "There's all kinds of wild animals in the woods. Don't get cocky. Be careful."

"Okay, Mom, got it." Evan flashed her a cheeky grin, trying to act casual.

Elysia let it go. Honestly, this little distraction took her mind off missing her parents.

The family kept moving, and as the sky darkened, they picked a spot to set up their tents for the night.

Just like before, they didn't travel after dark, so the kids could get a decent rest. Later that night, after Baby fell asleep, Elysia turned to Tarquin.

"What did my parents say to you before we left?" she asked softly.

A strange look flickered in Tarquin's eyes. They'd talked about a lot, but mostly it was words of advice.

He said, "They just want me to take care of you and the kids. They know you've been through so much already, and they don't want you to ever go through that kind of pain again."

Elysia let out a long breath.

"They don't have much family left. Me and the kids are all they have now. I just wish they didn't insist on staying out here in the woods. If only they'd come live with us-we could take care of them in their old age."

Chapter 1317

The four kids were in the next tent

over, lights still on-clearly not

asleep yet. Outside, their scar-faced

protector sat by the campfire,

keeping watch like always. The kids

had begged him to come inside and

rest with them, but he wouldn't

budge. He'd been that way since

they arrived.

Tarquin decided not to go straight to Evan. Instead, he greeted the man first,

"Evenin', Pops."

He was following Elysia's lead. She'd

told him the man was Bernard's old

apprentice and Evan's mentor, so

out of respect and a touch of

warmth, they called him "Pops" a

way to welcome him into their

family.

The scarred man looked at Tarquin, a little unsure. He wasn't used to being called

"Pops." It made him happy, but he still felt awkward about it.

His whole life had been one long

struggle, especially after his mother

passed. Not a single easy day since.

No friends, no family, nothing but

survival and the heavy weight on his

mind.

It was a miracle he'd made it this far.

And now, suddenly, he had people who cared. A family. It was all new to him, and

he didn't quite know what to do with it.

Still, the way he looked at Tarquin now—there was no coldness or suspicion left.

"Evan's still up," he said, guessing why Tarquin had come.

"I figured," Tarquin replied. "Why don't you get some rest? I'll take the first watch.

You can switch with me halfway through the night."

The old man started to protest, but Tarquin cut him off, "Elysia's orders. If I don't

listen, she'll give me hell."

The old guy hesitated, his lips twitching, but finally just climbed up into the tree

nearby to catch a nap. He was used to sleeping rough and didn't like sharing a

tent anyway.

Tarquin understood. He didn't push it.

And with that, he headed off to find Evan, questions burning in his mind.

Chapter 1318

Inside the tent, the four little ones were still wide awake. As soon as Tarquin came in, Evan piped up,

"Did Mom and the baby fall asleep?"

"Yeah, they just nodded off," Tarquin replied.

Before Tarquin could ask anything else, Evan said,

"Dad, you're here to ask about what we saw today, right? Don't ask me, I have no clue."

"Huh?" Tarquin looked surprised.

Evan explained, "Uncle Lucas and I followed White to the lake, but as soon as we got there, White stopped us."

"White said there was something in the lake—something dangerous. He wouldn't let us come any closer. He just dove in and swam across himself."

"I wanted to follow, but Uncle Lucas wouldn't let me."

"It took ages for White to come back. I asked him what happened, but he wouldn't say. He just mumbled something about 'family business.'"

Tarquin frowned. "Family business? White has family?"

"No idea. He wouldn't say."

"...So where's White now?"

"Outside. Probably sleeping up in a tree."

"Did he seem upset or anything?"

"Nope. I kept an eye on him. He acted like he always does got excited when he should, happy when he should. Nothing weird."

Tarquin fell silent, thinking it over, brows furrowed. He didn't really get it, but he decided not to worry too much.

As long as White was okay, and whatever was out there wasn't a threat, that was good enough.

"If it's White's personal stuff, we shouldn't get involved. Let's all get some sleep- we've got a long hike tomorrow."

The kids nodded, closed their eyes, and snuggled into their sleeping bags. After a day trekking through the hills, they were beat.

Once the little ones were all asleep, Tarquin slipped out of the tent.

He spotted the old man with the scarred face sitting by the campfire. Tarquin was surprised and walked over.

"Grandpa, how come you're not resting?"

Before the old man could answer, Tarquin's sharp gaze flicked to the left.

A pair of deep, mossy green eyes glinted in the grass, watching him intently.

It was

the eyes were visible,

his spine. Content bchillet

at him. It sent a chill down

Tarquin scanned the area. There were more pairs of eyes in the shadows all around them.

He tensed, instantly on alert.

But the old man just calmly tossed another dry branch onto the fire, totally unbothered, not even flinching.

Tarquin whispered, "What are those?"

The old man replied, "They're here because of White-Evan's companion."

Tarquin was surprised. He hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary until now. "Did they just show up?"

"Yeah."

"Are they dangerous?"

"Doesn't look like it. As long as White's here, they won't come close."

Tarquin hesitated. "Evan said it's White's 'family business.'"

The old man nodded, "So we don't need to get involved."

For the next few nights, those eyes kept showing up. They never

attacked, never came too

close-they just followed the yel

at a distance.

Tarquin couldn't talk to White, but he could read a bit of his mood.

Like Evan had said, White never seemed off. No sign anything was wrong. Until the night before they finally left the wilds...

After Evan fell asleep, White slipped out, heading deep into the mountains.

The eyes trailed behind him, vanishing into the darkness.

At dawn, White returned alone. The eyes were gone.

Tarquin had stayed up all night by the fire.

White padded over, tongue lolling, and looked up at him.

Tarquin held out his hand, palm up, right in front of White's nose.

White looked at his hand, then up at him. After a moment's hesitation, he nudged

up against it.

Tarquin gently ruffled his fur, voice soft and warm,

"We all care about you, you know. You're part of this family. If something's weighing on you, you can talk to Evan. Don't keep it all

bottled up. We worry about yone

lot. Evan's even lost sleep these past few nights because of you"

Chapter 1319

``text

Tarquin didn't say a word, but that didn't mean he didn't notice.

Evan missed White-a lot.

White stuck out his little tongue, stared at Evan for a moment, then hopped down

from his hand and scurried into the tent.

He made a beeline for Evan, nuzzled his tiny head against Evan's cheek, and

curled up right beside him.

"Back again? Planning to leave me again?" Evan's voice came out of nowhere,

making White jump a foot in the air.

He bolted like a startled squirrel, only to see Evan's eyes open and— yep, there

was that tongue again.

Evan's eyes were red, rimmed with tears.

"I thought you'd gone off with them and weren't coming back," he said quietly.

He'd known White was sneaking out at night. He'd watched him these past few

days, pretending not to notice, but how could he not see? Those strange

creatures had been lurking around, obviously trying to take White away.

White slunk over and ducked his head.

Evan, blinking back tears, stuck out his fist for a bump.

"Look, I don't want you to go, but if you've got some secret reason, just say it. I'm

not unreasonable. Worst case, I'll come visit you every now and then."

White shook his head and stuck out his tongue again.

Suddenly, Evan sat up, scrubbing at his cheeks with both hands.

"Wait—they're not your family?"

White shook his head, and Evan just stared.

"But... didn't you say you had family business to take care of? I thought they were

your folks!"

White gave another tongue-flick, and Evan's jaw dropped. "They're... enemies?!"

Not wanting to wake Elliot and the others, Evan scooped up White, bolted out of

the tent, and didn't even bother with a jacket.

Tarquin and Big Mike—his face a patchwork of old scars—looked up in surprise.

"What's going on?!"

Evan shot them a glare. "Private matter! No eavesdropping!"

The two exchanged a look and just shrugged.

It wasn't until the sun was up that

Evan and White finally came back.

White was back to his usual self,

curled around Evan's wrist, fast

asleep. Evan, on the other hand,

looked seriously ticked off.

Tarquin had a hunch it had to do with White. He couldn't help but ask, "What

happened?"

Evan gritted his teeth, lips twitching. "None of your business!"

Then, glaring into the woods, he muttered, "One day, I'm coming back. They'd better be ready!"

Tarquin just stared, completely lost.

No clue what just happened.

"Evan, what are you mumbling about?" Elysia yawned, stepping out of her tent.

When Evan spotted Elysia, his eyes welled up and he ran straight into her arms.

"Mommy, hold me."

Elysia instantly sobered up. Evan almost never acted like this.

She bent down, scooped him into a hug, and looked worried. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

Evan clung to her neck, silent.

Elysia glanced around and saw only Tarquin. She shot him a look. "Did your dad upset you?"

Tarquin froze, then hurriedly denied it. "No way! Not me! I swear!"

No way he was taking the blame for

this. Elysia loved him, but everyone

knew he was at the bottom of the

family pecking order. If he took the

rap, she'd never let it go—and he

valued his marriage too much for

that.

Elysia kept her arms around Evan, giving Tarquin a suspicious glare.

"It's just you two here. If you didn't upset him, then who did?"

Tarquin hesitated. No way he was getting into the whole White saga—Elysia

would only worry more. So he made something up.

"We're getting close to the new development area. Maybe Evan's just missing his

great-grandparents."

Elysia eyed him, half-convinced, then turned back to Evan. "Is that it?"

Evan nodded.

She quickly soothed him, "Don't be sad. We'll visit again soon, okay?"

Evan just sniffled and sobbed, tears and snot everywhere.

Tarquin watched, frowning with

concern. He still had no idea what

was really going on—but seeing his

son so upset broke his heart.

Chapter 1320

That afternoon, they finally reached the foot of the mountain.

They grabbed a quick bite—some sandwiches and coffee from a roadside diner—before hopping into a private car headed straight for the airport.

On the way, Tarquin glanced over and asked, "Those eight guys still behaving themselves?"

He was talking about the eight surviving poachers. Out of a group of over a hundred, they were the only ones who'd made it back down alive.

The wilderness out there was no joke—dangerous and unforgiving.

The driver, who was one of their own, replied, "Their heads are all messed up. Looks like the woods scared them senseless. One's rambling about seeing ghosts, another swears he saw Bigfoot..."

But no one mentioned the cabin. No one breathed a word about someone living deep in those woods.

Honestly, just making it out alive was miracle enough-their minds were shot to pieces. Remembering a random cabin? Not a chance.

Tarquin pressed on, "What about their partners on the outside? All caught?"

He knew where there were hunters, there'd be buyers. Those poachers definitely had a whole network behind them.

The driver nodded. "Yeah, all of them. They're a big operation-really slick, like a well-oiled machine. Everything they hunted up there-hides, antlers, you name it got shipped overseas. There's another team waiting on the other end, moving the goods straight into black market sales. Even a bunch of officials were mixed up in it."

Tarquin frowned. "And the officials? They get them too?"

"Everyone we could identify is locked up."

"Keep someone watching. I don't want a single one slipping through the cracks."

The driver gave a firm nod. "And about developing this area the higher-ups gave the green light. Should be able to break ground in a week, if nothing comes up."

Tarquin nodded. "Make sure everything stays discreet."

"Understood."

Elysia, who'd been quiet, finally spoke up, curiosity in her eyes. "You're developing the place?"

Tarquin explained, "We're going to build up the area around the mountain basically secure the entry points. If anyone shady tries to get up there again, we'll know about it right away and can stop them at the door." .

Technically, the land at the base wasn't really developed yet, but public access

was allowed for hikers and campers.

Tarquin was funding the renovations mainly to upgrade the entry to the wild forest. Right now, there were just a couple of battered

signposts-practically useless!

Anyone with a sense of adventure could just wander right in.

He planned to put in a state-of-the-art electric fence, set up surveillance, and station a few trusted people to keep watch. That would seriously cut down the chances of trespassers.

Fewer people wandering in meant less risk of their secrets being discovered.

Sure, almost no one ever made it as far as the hidden cabin, but you could never be too careful.

He wasn't putting his own name on

the project no need to attract

attention. If he suddenly started pouring money into a patch of forest that had no obvious benefit, people would start asking uncomfortable questions.

Elysia caught on. She gave him a grateful look. With the driver there, she didn't mention her grandparents, just reached over and quietly laced her fingers through his, squeezing his hand tight.