

Hitched 1321

Chapter 1321

The family of seven caught a midnight flight back to Jindale City and landed at around 2 a.m.

Lowell was already waiting at the airport, pacing back and forth by the arrivals gate.

The kids had managed to nap on the plane, so by the time they got off, they were all wide awake and buzzing with energy.

As soon as they spotted Lowell, they all made a beeline for him, shouting, "Mr. Lowell!"

Lowell's face absolutely lit up, and he threw his arms wide, scooping them up for hugs like a dad who hadn't seen his kids in ages. "Oh, you're finally home! If you'd stayed away any longer, I'd have caught the lovesick blues for sure! Did you miss Mr. Lowell?"

Lowell, like Axel, had grown up in foster care. No family, no relatives, no girlfriend, no wife, no kids-just him and his work. He used to orbit around Tarquin's life, but ever since these little ones entered the picture, everything changed.

It was like someone had popped the lid off Pandora's box-suddenly, life was bursting with color, flavor, and a kind of juicy chaos he'd never known before.

He absolutely adored these kids. Hanging out with them was a heck of a lot more fun than babysitting Tarquin, that was for sure.

And the best part? The feeling was mutual. He loved them, and they loved him right back.

"We missed you! We missed you so much! We thought about you every single day!" the kids chorused, bouncing around him.

Lowell grinned so wide his cheeks hurt. "The ski resort out by the edge of town just opened up for the season! If I can swing a day off tomorrow, how about I take you all out for some snow and fun?"

Evan's eyes got huge and round. "But it's barely even fall! How's the ski resort open already?"

"It's all artificial snow-but trust me, it feels just like the real thing. What do you say? Wanna go?"

"Yes! Yes! I wanna go!"

"Me too!"

Even the littlest one piped up, tripping over her own excitement, "L-love... love Mr. Lowell! I wanna go too!"

"We're all going! No one's getting left behind!" Lowell laughed, practically glowing with happiness. He glanced over at Tarquin's bodyguard, waggling his eyebrows. "Jealous much? Look how much these kids love me."

The bodyguard's face was unreadable, but you could sense he was holding back a smile.

Elliot and Elijah, meanwhile, were excited about the ski trip too, but they shot each other a look over Lowell's shoulder, silently rolling their eyes.

Pel

When the boss was away, Lowell had practically run the whole company taking on every job, no matter how big or small, just to keep things afloat. Now that the boss was back and Lowell could finally take a breather, what was he doing? Volunteering to babysit the boss's kids.

Honestly, did he even remember whose kids these were supposed to be?

Chapter 1322

Elliot couldn't help but feel for him. "Mr. Lowell, if you really plan to stay single and child-free your whole life, I'll take care of you when you're old, I swear."

The other kids immediately chimed in:

"I'll take care of Mr. Lowell too! When he's old, I'll bring him all the best food- burgers, fries, milkshakes, you name it!"

"I'll give Mr. Lowell foot rubs and back massages!"

Wait, foot rubs and massages? Seriously?!

Lowell was almost moved to tears by their enthusiasm.

"Alright, alright," he said, trying to keep it together. "Even though you kids are already spoiled rotten, every penny Mr. Lowell earns from now on is going to be spent on you!"

The airport staff nearby exchanged bewildered glances.

Getting paid by the boss, only to spend it all on the boss's kids? That's... new. Not sure what to make of that.

Just then, Tarquin and Elysia walked over, and Lowell quickly greeted them.

"Tarquin, Elysia."

Tarquin nodded coolly. Elysia smiled warmly, "You've had a lot on your plate lately -handling the company and running back and forth checking on my parents.

Thanks for everything."

Lowell waved her thanks away.

"Don't mention it! I've been learning a

et el

ton from Mr. Hawkins lately. Honestly, the man's a genius! I'm just trying to keep up."

Hearing her father praised made Elysia beam. "How are my parents doing?"

"They're great. I didn't tell them

guys were coming home

tonight-they'd be too

sleep if they knew. They miss you a lot."

"Good. Best not to tell them. We're heading straight home now."

Eager to see Clayton Hawkins and Pamela Patel, Elysia and the kids piled into a black SUV and headed home.

Tarquin and Lowell took the other car, a gleaming luxury sedan, making a beeline for the hospital.

As soon as they were on the road, Lowell blurted out, "So, they really found an antidote?"

"Yeah," Tarquin replied.

Lowell let out a low whistle. "Elysia's incredible."

"People always say Elysia married up by being with you," he went on, shaking his

head. "But let's be real you're the lucky one here."

"In front of Elysia, you're just a regular guy, he teased. "You might be loaded, but Elysia's family's got money too. And it's not just a couple of little princes' around her-she's got a whole gang of 'kings' looking out for her!"

"That's what you call being the apple of everyone's eye!"

Chapter 1323

Lowell was driving, eyes on the road but still full of opinions. "Tarquin, you better start stepping up your game. Honestly, I'm worried one day Elysia's gonna get sick of your nonsense and kick you to the curb. You do realize you're dating way out of your league, right?"

Tarquin pressed his lips together, not even dignifying that with a response.

Lowell snorted. "You've been working non-stop for a month and still look fresh as a daisy. Clearly, you're not working hard enough. How about I load you up with some more tasks?"

"Don't you dare," Lowell shot back, hands up in mock defense. "You can run your own company, but leave me out of it. I've got to take the kids skiing this weekend. Anyway, I've actually got something serious to tell you."

Tarquin glanced over, curiosity piqued. "What's up?"

"Yesterday afternoon, someone visited Verity's secret kid in the hospital. Wanna guess who?"

Tarquin blinked. "Someone visited Verity's illegitimate son?"

That kid was hidden away in a little town called Karl Town. Hardly anyone back home even knew he existed-Tarquin himself had only found out recently. Who'd bother checking in on him?

Lowell grinned, enjoying the suspense. "You'll never guess, so I'll just tell you. It was Lucian."

Tarquin's brow furrowed. "You mean my dad's old buddy? That Lucian?" "Yep, that one."

Tarquin's frown deepened. "When did he wake up?"

"Yesterday morning. By the afternoon, he was already at the hospital."

Tarquin let out a breath. Lucian had been his father's childhood friend, the two of them thick as

thieves went to college together, even backpacked across Europe back in the day. Lucian was photographer, and years ago, he and Tarquin's dad had traveled to Hillshire Village together. That

meant Lucian knew all about Keith Garcia's childhood as well.

A few months back, while Tarquin was digging into some old drama between his dad and Keith, he'd ended up looking into Lucian. Turned out, Keith was doing the same. They'd both gone to see Lucian for answers, but somebody beat them there-with the intent to silence Lucian for good.

Luckily, Tarquin and Keith got there in time to save him. But Lucian had been badly injured and slipped into a coma. Tarquin hadn't had a chance to question him since.

Now, out of nowhere, Lucian wakes up and immediately visits Verity's secret kid. How did he even know

connection?

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comatose, how did he even find out the kid was back in the country-or that he was in the hospital?

Who told him? Was it the same mysterious figure that had tried to have him killed?

Tarquin's expression darkened at the thought.

Lucian, his father, the mystery man, Verity's hidden son... There was definitely some web of secrets binding them all together. One thing was clear: Lucian knew something-something big. And someone out there wanted him silenced, no matter the cost.

Chapter 1324

"I've got a video of Lucian visiting Verity's kid at the hospital. Want to see it?"

Lowell picked up his phone, scrolled, and handed it over to Tarquin.

In the video, Lucian-masked and wearing a baseball cap-stood at the glass window of an isolation room.

Inside, Verity's illegitimate son lay unconscious on the hospital bed, barely clinging to life.

Through the glass, Lucian watched him, wiping away tears now and then, his face full of worry and heartache.

Tarquin narrowed his eyes. "Have you checked if there's actually a connection between Lucian and the kid?"

Lowell shook his head, keeping one hand on the wheel. "No. With you off the grid, we didn't want to spook anyone. Axel's been tailing him personally."

Tarquin pressed on, "But Verity's kid is a severe case. How did Lucian even get in to see him?"

Lowell explained, "Lucian paid off a nurse in the secure ward. She snuck him in." "When Dr. Benjamin found out, he didn't want to make a scene. He downloaded the security footage and sent it to me to pass along to you. Said he'd wait for your instructions."

"Lucian's home now. You want to see him tonight?"

Tarquin thought for a moment. "Not yet. First, confirm if there's any blood tie between Lucian and the kid. Get a DNA sample and run a paternity test."

Lowell's eyes widened. "You think Verity's kid might actually be Lucian's?" Tarquin just said, "Let's check first."

Meanwhile, Dr. Benjamin and the team from the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association were in a heated meeting.

To be exact, Benjamin and Sabrina were at each other's throats.

The debate: Should they call in Victor?

Benjamin argued things were spiraling out of control and Victor needed to be

brought in to take charge of the research-immediately.

Sabrina was adamant they'd only been working on the virus for a month, way too

soon to panic and drag her grandfather into it.

The rest of the team stayed silent as the two went back and forth.

Benjamin said, "The virus keeps mutating like crazy. We don't have clue and the first wave of patients are hanging on by a thread

"Now we're seeing new cases already starting with mid-stage symptoms. Any future cases might go straight to the end-stage-like Verity son. Once you're infected chances of recovery are slim te none."

"If we slip up and this thing spreads, you know what happens-total disaster."

"I say we call Victor now. If he can't

do it, we escalate to the World Medical & Pharmaceutical

Association and get the best experts involved."

Sabrina shot back, "We've only been at this a month! It's normal not to have results yet."

"You want to call my granddad right away and make us look completely incompetent?"

"And if he had to handle every new virus popping up in the country, he'd never sleep again!"

"That's like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. His attention should be on the big stuff."

"I say we tough it out for another month or two. If we're still lost, then we call him."

Benjamin was getting pissed. "And what about the people already infected? You think they've got months to spare?"

Sabrina shrugged, "That's their luck. Even if my granddad showed up now, it might already be too late for them."

Chapter 1325

Benjamin said, "We have to at least try this is people's lives we're talking about!"

Sabrina shot back with a mocking grin. "If you're such a bleeding heart, why don't you go play hero yourself? No one's stopping you."

Benjamin clenched his jaw, struggling to keep his temper in check. "The virus is mutating every day. What if it gets out, starts spreading like wildfire, and we still haven't found a cure? Then what?"

"Oh, please," Sabrina scoffed. "You're worrying for nothing! How do you know it'll spread? How do you know we won't find the cure? For your information, I'm already onto something!"

Benjamin blinked. "Excuse me?!"

The Medical & Pharmaceutical Association team looked at her, equally surprised. "What?"

Sabrina looked smug, practically glowing with self-importance. "Just because none of you can crack it doesn't mean I can't."

Benjamin eyed her skeptically. "You really have a lead?"

She snorted. "None of your business! But mark my words, I'll figure it out."

Benjamin didn't buy it for a second. But then again, why would she brag in front of everyone if she didn't have something up her sleeve? She'd look like a total fool if she failed.

The rest of the Association didn't believe her either. Everyone knew Sabrina's capabilities. But nobody wanted to get on her bad side, so they decided to shoot down Benjamin's proposal and keep Victor out of the loop for now.

Fuming but powerless, Benjamin stormed out of the conference room.

Sabrina followed, even angrier than he was, barking after him, "Benjamin! Stop right there!"

He ignored her and headed down the hall to his office.

Meanwhile, Tarquin and Lowell had just arrived at the hospital. As soon as they stepped off the elevator they saw the two of them. Benjamin was marching ahead Sabrina trailing close behind, clearly furious.

"Benjamin! Are you trying to get yourself kicked out of the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association?!" Sabrina snapped.

Benjamin just kept walking, refusing to engage.

She lost it. "Fine! Why don't you just say it? Is it just you who wants out, or does

the whole Lawson family want to be blacklisted?"

At the mention of his entire family, Benjamin stopped in his tracks, glaring at her with barely contained rage.

Sabrina didn't back down. "Let's be real-I can't stand Elysia, and since you're her friend, I don't like you

much either. If you mind your oWIT business, I'll leave you alone. But if you want to go against me, don't blame me for what happens next." Content

She leaned in, eyes cold. "I might not have all the power in the medical world but my granddad does. Messing with me won't end well for you. Hell, it might not end well for the whole Lawson family."

Benjamin's lips pressed into a thin line, his chest heaving with rage. If he didn't have to worry about his family or Victor, and if she wasn't a woman, he'd have decked her right then and there.

But Sabrina didn't care. She just kept going, face icy. "From now on, stay out of

the virus business. You're not going to find a cure, anyway."

He ground out, "If I can't, what makes you think you can?"

She smirked. "Watch me. And if I ever do need my granddad, I'll call him myself. No need for suggestions from you."

With that, she strutted back toward the conference room without even noticing Tarquin and Lowell by the elevator.

Benjamin stood there, stunned and seething.

He'd met a lot of nasty people in his life, but never anyone quite like her. Unbelievable.

Still, he couldn't help but wonder-where did Sabrina get the confidence that she could actually find the cure?

Chapter 1326

Benjamin was heading back to his office when he suddenly heard a familiar voice, "Dr. Benjamin."

He turned around and spotted Tarquin and Lowell. For a second, he just stared, surprised.

"Tarquin? When did you get back?"

Lowell jumped in before Tarquin could answer, "Tonight, Dr. Benjamin. What happened back there?"

Benjamin rubbed his temples, exasperated. "Victor's really drawn the short straw with that granddaughter of his. She's got zero empathy, no sense of ethics, no conscience, and the bedside manner of a rattlesnake. Total disaster. She's arrogant, rude, and impossible to work with. Honestly, I can't think of a single redeeming quality."

"She's not even competent, but her temper's off the charts!"

Tarquin frowned, skeptical. "You really think Sabrina can find a cure?"

Benjamin snorted. "If she manages to pull that off, I'll eat my stethoscope. I know exactly what she's capable of, and trust me, it's not much."

"So why is she so confident?" Tarquin pressed.

Benjamin threw up his hands. "I have no idea what's going on in that crazy woman's head."

Tarquin glanced toward the conference room, deep in thought.

As he and Benjamin headed down the hall toward the office, they kept talking.

"The situation's getting out of hand," Benjamin said, voice low. "The first batch of patients are barely hanging on, and now we've got new cases popping up. This virus is way worse than the last outbreak we had. I suggested we call Victor in, see if he could lead the team. Sabrina shot me down immediately."

Lowell scoffed, "You'd think she'd want Victor here-it'd make her look good if he cracked the case! She must be nuts not to want him involved."

Tarquin smirked to himself. She wasn't nuts-she just had her own agenda.

Elysia said Sabrina was a lousy doctor. Benjamin said the same. Safe to say, Sabrina just wasn't any good.

Now she was making big promises and trying to take shortcuts, hoping to get the glory without doing the work. Tarquin figured it was only a matter of time before she tripped over her own feet.

Still, he had to admit, she was making things easier for him.

On the way here, he'd been racking his brain for a way to get the cure out there without exposing his grandmother or Elysia. Now, thanks to Sabrina, he had a plan.

Plus, Sabrina hated Elysia. Even better.

"Sabrina says I'm just being

paranoid, Benjamin grumbled. "But I call it being prepared. You'll see if

things keep going like this, we're

headed

for disaster.

Benjamin was already feeling the pressure, anxiety creeping in as he realized just

how serious the outbreak was.

Tarquin didn't reply until they reached Benjamin's office. Then, quietly, he said, "We already have the cure."

Benjamin's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "Say what?!"

It was just after four in the morning, and the lights at the Ashford family's Number

One Manor were blazing.

Tarquin had just come back from

the hospital after his talk with Benjamin. He hadn't even made it inside when he heard Elysia and the Kids laughing.

Warmth filled his chest as he walked in. The house was filled with the smell of fresh pancakes and bacon.

"Daddy!" His daughter, Baby, spotted him first. She came running, clutching her stuffed bunny.

Elysia looked up, curious. "You're back early."

Tarquin scooped Baby up with one arm and slipped off his shoes with the other, heading into the living room.

"All done at work," he said, smiling.

He noticed Pamela and greeted her, "Hey, Mom."

Pamela was looking much better these days. Seeing Tarquin, she grinned, "Clayton, Tarquin's home."

Tarquin was surprised-Pamela had actually called him by the right name. She really was getting better.

Clayton was by the kitchen door,

wearing an apron and holding a

totter, looking every bit the docmet

grandpa. "Tarquin, you're

home."

"Hey, Dad."

That single word made Clayton's eyes crinkle even more, his smile growing impossibly wide.

Chapter 1327

"I happened to make a bit too much spaghetti-why don't you have some later? Just sit and relax, dinner's almost ready," Clayton called out as he disappeared back into the kitchen.

He didn't act anything like a billionaire CEO-honestly, he reminded Tarquin more of a sweet grandpa who spent his days baking cookies for his grandkids than some kind of tycoon. There was no pretense, just warmth and kindness.

Tarquin felt a wave of comfort wash over him. He loved Elysia, and by extension, he cared deeply for her parents, Clayton and Pamela. The feeling was mutual; Clayton and Pamela loved him because he loved their daughter. It was the kind of genuine, wholehearted affection that made everything feel especially cozy.

Tarquin's own parents, Kendrick and Elizabeth Gonzalez, had passed away when he was young. It had been so long since he'd really felt the love of a mom or dad. Watching Clayton and Pamela now, his heart felt full in a way he hadn't

experienced for years.

"Why are you two still up this late?" Elysia grinned, nudging her mother.

"We tried to sneak in after getting home," she laughed, "didn't want to wake Mom and Dad. But as soon as we walked into the living room, there was Dad-waiting right there on the couch."

"Wait, he knew we were coming back tonight?" Tarquin asked.

Elysia shook her head. "Nope. He just said he had a feeling. Thought tonight was the night we'd show up."

Clayton's voice rang out from the kitchen, "I had a hunch this afternoon, so I prepped everything already knew you'd be hungry when you got in! That's what you call a father's intuition, right? My daughter and I are just on the same wavelength!" He chuckled, and Elysia's smile got even brighter, her whole face practically glowing with happiness.

Seeing her in such a good mood made Tarquin happy too.

He kissed Baby on the forehead and set her down. "Elysia, why don't you hang

out with your mom and the kids? I'll go help Dad in the kitchen."

He shrugged off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves, heading for the kitchen, only to be promptly shooed out by Clayton.

"Absolutely not! You go relax! I've got this under control."

"Dad, really, I'm not tired-"

"Doesn't matter. Go put your feet up. Don't steal my thunder tonight I'm head chef." Clayton insisted.

Elysia came over, smiling. "You might as well give up. Dad wouldn't even let me or Emmett help."

Clayton waved at them. "Go on, all of you! Sit, relax, let me handle dinner."

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Seeing there was no point arguing, Tarquin relented. "Alright, you stay with into the study Mom. I'll just pop

to deal with something rear quick.

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"Okay, go ahead. We'll call you when dinner's ready," Elysia replied.

Tarquin headed upstairs to the study, calling for Elliot and Elijah to join him. As soon as the door closed, he whispered, "I need a favor help me hack into Benjamin Hospital's security system

"I'm on it," Elijah said immediately, not even asking questions. He slid into the chair and started typing furiously.

In no time, Elijah turned and grinned. "We're in!"

Tarquin was impressed his son had really leveled up during their month in the mountains.

He leaned over the screen. "Pull up the sample room in Building A. Check the security footage."

Elijah tapped away. "This one?"

Tarquin nodded. "Yep, that's it."

He knew the place well-they'd stolen a virus sample from that very room before heading into the mountains.

"Why are we watching this, Dad?" Elliot asked, curiosity piqued.

Tarquin narrowed his eyes, glancing at the clock. He was just about to answer when the security footage flickered a shadowy figure slipped into the sample room, heading straight for the medicine cabinet at the back.

Chapter 1328

"Sabrina?!"

Elliot and Elijah blurted it out at the exact same time.

Sabrina's reputation was infamous among the kids for a reason. Not only did she dislike Elysia, but she'd also been spreading nasty rumors about her at the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association. Even if she'd been away from Oakridge for

a while, the brothers had all been itching to set things straight with her.

Now, they spotted her sneaking around, and Elijah narrowed his eyes. "What's she up to?"

Elliot peered closer. "Looks like she's trying to steal a virus sample."

Elijah immediately turned to Tarquin, concern etched on his face.

Tarquin, when he took samples, only ever did it for research in his remote mountain lab. He'd never let anything dangerous get out. But Sabrina? Who knew what she'd do.

Even though they'd already developed an antidote, anyone infected would still go through hell and back before recovering. If Sabrina managed to smuggle out the sample and unleash it, it could still spell disaster.

"Dad, should we trigger the lab alarm?" Elijah asked, tense.

One hit of that alarm button, and security would be all over Sabrina before she could get away with anything.

Tarquin, reading his son's mind, reassured him, "Don't worry. The one she's taking is a fake."

After he'd swiped the real sample the other day, he'd replaced it with a decoy to avoid suspicion. No one could tell the difference just by looking.

He'd actually planned to return the real one today at the hospital, but after guessing Sabrina might make a move tonight, he changed his mind. Better safe than sorry-if she botched the theft and exposed the real virus, it could be a nightmare.

So, for now, all Sabrina had was a fake.

Elliot frowned. "But why bother stealing it at all?"

Tarquin scoffed, "She wants to hand it off to her grandpa so he can secretly work on the antidote."

"If he cracks it, she gets all the credit, and it'll help her campaign for Association President."

He'd pretty much figured Sabrina's plan back at the hospital. She'd boasted a bit too loudly, clearly pinning her hopes on her grandfather.

Victor, her grandpa, was the top dog in medicine these days-he'd definitely cook up something useful. But if Sabrina wanted his help, she couldn't let anyone else find out. She couldn't just swipe the samples the rest of the team was actively working on, so she went after the

ones in storage.

"Send me the video of Sabrina stealing the sample. I'll need it," Tarquin said.

"Got it," Elijah replied as he started editing the footage.

Elliot looked up, curiosity lighting his face. "Dad, are you doing this to get back at Sabrina for Mom?"

Tarquin shrugged, "Not exactly. We can't go public with the antidote without exposing your great-grandma and your mom. So, we need a plan, and Sabrina's little stunt is actually useful."

If they announced the cure, everyone would demand to know who developed it. Sooner or later, the trail would lead to Elysia, especially since she'd published the first-gen formula before.

Elliot asked, "So you're going to let Sabrina take the fall?"

Tarquin replied coolly, "That

depends on Victor. He'll be in

Oakridge in a day or two f

he plays

Oakriet hand all the credit to

fair and

Sabrina, she'll be fine. But if he tries to rig the game for her, well, she'll end up as the scapegoat."

Elliot didn't prèss for more details. He just scowled, his little brow furrowed. "Even if she's the

any

scapegoat, she shouldn't get credit she trashed Mom behind her back, and we haven't even given her a piece of our mind yet."

"Even if she's the fall guy, she's not taking Mom and Great-Grandma's achievements. Not if we can help it!"

Chapter 1330

Aside from Sabrina, there were also those people from the Medical &

Pharmaceutical Association - just as selfish as she is!

They knew perfectly well what was right and what was wrong, but to avoid getting on Sabrina's bad side, they still took her side!

It was like the lives of the first group of infected patients meant nothing to them. They didn't care at all whether those people lived or died.

Did they ever stop to think that behind every sick person, there's an entire family waiting and worrying?

Dr. Lambert's little girl was still waiting for her dad to come home and bring her the birthday present he missed.

Ms. Watson had already lost her unborn baby. If something happened to her, how would her family ever survive that?

Leah's elderly parents had rushed all the way from their small town. Every single day, they knelt outside the hospital, refusing to leave no matter who tried to talk them out of it.

It was a blistering summer, and those two old folks were kneeling in the scorching sun, praying to God to save their daughter...

Sure, their behavior was a little desperate, but who could blame them for wanting their daughter to be healthy? Any parent would do the same.

But Sabrina and the Medical & Pharmaceutical Association folks? It was like they couldn't see any of it.

Now look at them-suddenly, they're the ones infected, and they're in a total panic!

Now they're all scrambling to call Victor, begging him to come help.

Selfish, every last one of them. Disgusting.

It's like that old saying: not every doctor is an angel in a white coat-some are just devils in disguise.

Benjamin sneered at them, but still did the responsible thing and reached out to Victor's assistant to report what was happening.

Victor called back almost immediately, his voice impatient and tense.

"All of them? Sabrina and the Association group-all infected?!"

"Yeah," Benjamin answered.

"How? Weren't they wearing protective gear while researching the virus?"

Benjamin kept it honest. "We're guessing now they didn't get infected in the lab. It happened in the conference room."

"What do you mean? How could the virus have gotten into a conference room?"

Benjamin knew exactly who was behind it-Tarquin.

Letting them get infected would force Victor to come over, and it'd teach them a lesson too. This virus brought pain like nothing else not just aching muscles and bones, but pain deep inside your organs.

Tarquin wanted Sabrina to know exactly what that felt like, all on behalf of Elysia. And he wanted the Association folks to experience it too-for siding with the wrong people, for turning a blind eye.

Benjamin mixed fact and fiction as he replied, "Early this morning, DR Stevenson called the Association group to a meeting. Before it was even over, they all started showing symptoms. It hit everyone at once."

"I just found out the virus samples that were supposed to be locked away in storage? Someone stole them last night. I think it was intentional-someone deliberately released the virus."

Victor sounded stunned. "Aren't those samples supposed to be under strict security? How could someone just steal them?"

Benjamin replied, "They're guarded tightly. No outsiders could get in, so I'm thinking it was an inside job."

"And wouldn't you know it, last night the security cameras went down. They're still trying to fix them, so right now, we have no idea who did it or if they still have any of the virus left."

Victor went quiet for a few seconds, the tension obvious even through the phone. "Why were they even having a meeting so early in the morning?"

Benjamin answered, "Dr. Stevenson said she'd made a breakthrough and wanted everyone to bring their latest findings to discuss."

Victor was surprised. "So Sabrina was the one who called everyone to that meeting?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Another pause. Then Victor asked, "...Why weren't you there?"

Benjamin explained, "Dr. Stevenson thinks I'm not up to the task. She told me last night I was off the virus project for good, so she didn't call me this morning."

He sounded a little regretful, but inside he was almost giddy. Honestly, even if Sabrina had called him, he wouldn't have gone. Tarquin had warned him in advance.

Someone on Victor's end was calling him, telling him to get in the car. Victor said, "I'm heading to Jindale City now. I'll get in touch once arrive. You need to find whoever stole those virus samples fast!"

"If that virus gets loose and causes a disaster, your hospital will be held responsible!"

"If you think it was an inside job, investigate thoroughly. Don't let anyone off the hook."

"Stealing and releasing a virus is a serious crime. It has to be dealt with—no exceptions!"

Benjamin nodded, "...Understood."

After hanging up, Benjamin glanced over at Sabrina and couldn't help but think to himself: