

Hitched 1391

Chapter 1391

Aside from Sophus, who only regretted the broken engagement because of the family business, everyone else was just there for the show.

Honestly, they were thrilled things had fallen apart. It meant they could keep picking on Beatrix without her getting any fancy new title.

God forbid Beatrix actually became Mrs. Huber-then she'd be the one lording it over them!

Beatrix just sat quietly, brows knit, not saying a word. She ignored Sophus's thunderous anger, Sophie's dramatic eye rolls, and her older sisters' icy remarks.

The Sutton family raged and sniped for ages, but Beatrix stayed silent.

It was like throwing a punch at a pillow-no resistance, just more frustration.

But what could they do? Beatrix never complained, never argued, didn't even look angry. She just sat there, calm and silent, refusing to take the bait.

Finally, Sophus snapped, "Go to your room and think things over. Try harder-see if you can still win Mr. Huber's heart!"

Beatrix nodded, stood up, and calmly said goodbye to Sophus and Sophie before heading upstairs.

She was halfway down the hall when she heard her sister sneer, "She really thought she could crawl into his bed and move up in the world. Looks all sweet, but she's a real piece of work-just like her mother!"

"And the best part? She gave it all up and he still dumped her. What a joke!"

The further Beatrix walked, the quieter the laughter got.

She clenched her fists, eyes stinging with angry tears.

Keaton was her ticket out-her one shot at turning things around. She didn't need love, but she needed Keaton. She had to become Mrs. Huber.

Anyone in her way? Too bad for them.

Beatrix took a shaky breath, whipped out her phone, and typed out a message:

If you can take care of Winona for good, I'm willing to work with you.

She knew she was playing with fire, but she was sure of one thing: Keaton would never let her fall.

Her hand drifted to her stomach, her eyes calculating.

Dusk. Number One Drive.

Tarquin had barely stepped inside when Elysia's voice rang out from upstairs. "Tarquin! Get up here, now!"

She stood at the top of the stairs, arms crossed and looking like a boss about to lecture an employee. She shot him a glare and turned back to the bedroom before he

could reply:

In the living room, Evan was playing with Baby and Lan, and looked up with a wicked grin.

"Dad, did you screw up? I think Mom's gonna kill you!"

Tarquin pressed his lips together. "You'd like that, huh? Your mom roughing me up?"

Evan just snickered, his look saying, You brought this on yourself.

Tarquin sighed. His son had been a little salty with him lately. Last time, he'd given Evan a special visitor's badge to the Air Force base, so now Evan kept pestering him to actually take him there.

But Evan had school! Elysia never allowed the kids to skip without a real reason.

If he snuck Evan out for a field trip and Elysia found out... No way. He'd rather have his son mad at him than his wife.

So, he'd said no. And Evan had been giving him the cold shoulder ever since, clearly rooting for Elysia to go off on him.

Some son.

Clayton was in the kitchen, apron on, spatula in hand, prepping dinner. He glanced over and asked, "What'd you do to upset her?"

Tarquin shrugged. "Honestly? No clue. Looks like I messed up, but I don't know how."

Clayton grinned. "Well, you better go up and face the music. If she actually starts throwing stuff

Emmett, also sporting an apron, nodded eagerly. "Yeah, Dad, just shout for Grandpa if she gets rough. We'll come save you!"

Everyone knew: when it came to Elysia, Tarquin didn't have much say at home. And that was just the way things were.

Chapter 1392

Upstairs Bedroom

Elysia was sitting on the couch, waiting for someone, her arms folded and foot tapping on the rug.

Tarquin came in, flashing his best sheepish grin. "Hey, what's going on here?"

He made a move to sit down next to his wife-maybe snuggle up a little-but before he could even touch the cushions, Elysia shot him a look.

"Stand up straight! I have a question for you!"

Tarquin froze, obedient as a puppy.

Elysia narrowed her eyes, clearly annoyed. "Be honest. Did you know that Mr. Huber and Janelle were trying to set up Winona and Keaton?"

Tarquin's handsome eyes squinted-so it was about that, huh?

He decided honesty was the best policy. "Yeah, I knew."

Elysia huffed and kicked his shin. "You knew and you didn't tell me?!"

Tarquin tried to smooth things over, giving her his most charming smile. "Look, I knew Mr. Huber and Janelle had good intentions. No matter what happens, there's no way they'd let Winona get hurt."

Elysia hesitated-she did trust Richard and Janelle's judgment.

"Still, you should've told me! This is Winona's whole future we're talking about! If I hadn't bumped into Jess today and she told me, I'd still be in the dark!"

"My bad, honestly." Tarquin apologized so smoothly, it was clear he'd had practice. "I should've told you. Totally my fault."

Elysia's brows stayed furrowed. "Mr. Huber and Janelle are great, but Keaton? Not so much."

"He's not a bad guy, but he's

hopeless when it comes to

relationships! Winona's already been

burned once by Zane. If Keaton hurts her next, how is she supposed to pick herself up again?"

"Blossom and Axel, I get it. In love, whoever falls first loses. Blossom's been chasing Axel forever. If she's heartbroken, that's on her. I can't blame Axel for that."

"But if Keaton leads Winona on—when she's finally opening up again—and then just bails like he always does? What then?"

"I'm telling you, I've only got these two best friends. If either of them gets hurt, I'm gonna be furious! Keaton's your buddy if he makes

Winona cry, I'm coming after

Tarquin threw his hands up in surrender. "Don't worry. If he actually asks Winona out, he's in for the long haul. If he dares treat her like anyone else, kick his ass myself before I

before like

come crawling to you for forgiveness."

Elysia pursed her lips. "Did you talk to him about this? Does he even know what he wants? If he's just looking for some short fling, he should leave Winona alone."

"I talked to Winona today. She only sees him as a friend right now. If Keaton feels the same, fine. But if he's got other ideas, he needs to keep his distance!"

Tarquin nodded seriously. "I get you. I'll talk to him, give him the full 'Don't screw this up' speech."

He paused, glancing at the couch. "So... can I sit down now?"

Elysia pouted. "Yeah, fine."

The second he sat, Tarquin wrapped his arms around her and kissed her cheek. "Jeez, you scared me. I thought something terrible happened!"

Elysia shot him a glare. "This *is* serious! Winona's happiness is at stake!"

Seeing she was about to get worked up again, Tarquin quickly said—

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"Yeah, yeah, you're right. This is a big deal—I'll take it seriously. I'll talk to Keaton about it tomorrow, just sit down and have a real conversation with him."

Elysia let out a long sigh and relaxed into Tarquin's arms. "Even though Winona hasn't really shown it, what Zane did to her was seriously damaging."

"It's only because she's so tough-if she were even a little bit more fragile, I honestly don't think she'd have made it through."

"But no matter how strong she is, she's still just a girl. If something like this happened again, I don't think she'd survive it. That's why I'm so worried."

Tarquin hugged her tighter and nodded. "I get it, I really do. Don't worry, I'll take care of it. Oh, and some good news-Zane left the country."

Not catching him was bad news, sure.

But him leaving-well, that was a win for Winona.

With Zane out of the country, there's no way he could show up and hurt her again.

Elysia's eyes widened in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah. So at least for now, Winona's safe. No need to worry about Zane coming back for revenge."

Elysia nodded quickly. "That is good news, actually. Does Keaton know? Has Winona been told?"

"Keaton knows. I'm pretty sure he's already told her."

Elysia released another breath, her worries easing a little.

Suddenly, she remembered about Elizabeth Gonzalez's ashes.

"By the way, I heard from Father Michael today. He wanted to know what we wanted to do—whether to keep having memorial services for Mom, or if it's time to finally lay her to rest."

After they found Elizabeth's ashes, they didn't bury her right away.

Instead, they'd left her at the church for Father Michael to pray over her.

The original plan was just one memorial cycle, but then with the pandemic and everything, they'd had to hole up in the woods, and things just got delayed.

So they ended up keeping her there a little longer than intended.

Mentioning Elizabeth made Tarquin's face darken, his expression growing heavy.

His parents' deaths were a tragedy-grisly, and even after, there had been no peace for them.

Whenever he thought about them, he couldn't help but remember the mysterious stranger and the real eighth-generation virus.

Lately, he'd been racking his brain-where could his parents have hidden the virus?

But no matter how much he thought about it, he had absolutely no clue.

And the mysterious stranger still hadn't gotten in touch.

He'd tried to set up a meeting through Lucian a few days ago, but the guy was radio silent.

Without finding the real

eighth-generation virus, and with the

stranger missing, he couldn't just

make a move if he went after the wrong person, things could go really wrong...

Then, as if struck by a thought, Tarquin frowned deeply.

"It's time to let Mom rest, to bury her and reunite her with Dad."

Elysia nodded. "Okay, whatever you say. You'll need to pick a date for the burial, and

say I'll have to open Dad's

casket."

Elizabeth and Kendrick had been so in love-it only made sense to lay them to rest together.

They'd have to open Kendrick's grave, and place Elizabeth's ashes at his side.

Tarquin's expression was somber. "Yeah, I know."

Elysia hugged him, her cheek pressed to his chest in comfort.

"For your mom and dad, this is a

eret

happy thing, really. They've probably

been to see each other again

for a long time. Don't be sad

"...Yeah."

He wasn't sad. It was, in its own way, a celebration.

Besides, he'd been wanting to open the coffin anyway. There were things he

needed to confirm.

Chapter 1394

The next morning, after dropping the kids off at school, Tarquin and Elysia headed together to the old town chapel where Elizabeth's ashes were kept.

They'd come to ask the priest about the details and best dates for Elizabeth's burial.

The priest spoke at length, and Elysia listened intently, afraid she might forget something important. She even brought along a notebook, jotting everything down point by point.

When they left, she stopped by a little shop at the foot of the hill and bought stacks of golden paper, stuffing the trunk full.

Each pack held hundreds of sheets. Altogether, she easily had tens of thousands.

Tarquin raised an eyebrow. "What are we going to do with all this?"

Elysia dusted off her hands. "We're going to fold paper boats for Mom."

"Don't they sell them ready-made?" he asked, a little baffled.

"It's not the same," Elysia insisted. "I heard that if you fold them yourself, the message really gets through. Before folding, you can write their names, a blessing, or even a secret message on the back."

She didn't really know if she believed in this stuff. To her, it was a way for the living to express their longing for those who had passed on-a kind of comfort for the heart. Maybe the dead never truly receive these blessings, maybe they do. But at least it helps those left behind, helps them let go a little.

She knew that Elizabeth and Kendrick's deaths were still a deep wound for Tarquin. Every time they spoke of them, Tarquin's mood would sink. Today, he hadn't smiled since they arrived at the chapel. After kneeling in front of Elizabeth's urn, he just stood there, lost in thought, for a long time.

Maybe this small gesture could ease his pain, if only a little. She also really wanted to honor Kendrick and Elizabeth, to thank them for bringing Tarquin into the world and making her his wife.

"When we get home, let's fold them together," she said softly. "We'll ask Elliot, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, and the baby to help too. I bet Mom and Dad will be thrilled to get them, wherever they are."

Tarquin got it. He didn't say anything, just cupped Elysia's face and kissed her gently on the forehead.

He wished his parents had lived longer. They would have loved Elysia, he was sure of it.

They were driving home, not far from the chapel, when Elysia's phone buzzed. It was her father, Clayton.

"Irene, when will you and Tarquin be home?" he asked.

"We're on our way, Dad. What's up?"

"Your mother and I are at the preschool. Evan got into a fight."

"What?!" Elysia was stunned. "Is everyone okay? Is anyone hurt?"

"Evan's fine," Clayton replied. "But Emmett and Elijah are a little banged up-nothing too serious. The baby's shaken and won't stop crying. The other kid? He got the worst of it."

Elysia frowned. "What happened?"

Clayton explained: "Apparently, during recess, this kid started picking on Elijah. Elijah ignored him so the kid got mad and tried to hit him. Emmett stepped in to break it up, but the kid pushed him down and jabbed both Emmett and Elijah with a pencil."

"Evan came back from outside, saw what happened, and just... lost it. He punched the other boy so hard he knocked out a tooth and broke his arm."

Elysia was speechless. "Why didn't the teacher call Tarquin or me?"

"They said they couldn't reach you, so they called me," Clayton said. "Your mom was with me and as soon as she heard about the fight," she insisted we come over

"When we got here, all the kids were crying-even Elijah. Your mom's heart just broke for them."

"The other kid's parents are making a huge scene, yelling about how our kids have no manners."

"They said Elijah has mental problems, called Evan a 'super-bully,' and even insulted you and Tarquin for good measure."

Chapter 1395

"Your mom totally lost her cool and marched right up to the other kid's parent and slapped them across the face. After that, things went off the rails."

Elysia's heart skipped a beat. "Is my mom hurt?!"

"No, no, she's fine. I was there with the school security, we kept her safe. But, well, now the other parents are even more pissed off. The teacher said we're not allowed to talk to the other family anymore. She wants you and Tarquin to come down."

Elysia asked, "Is Blossom not at school today?"

"No, she's out at some conference at another school."

Elysia frowned. "We're on our way back now. Tell the teacher we'll be there in about forty minutes, okay? You and mom just keep an eye on the kids and don't argue with the other parents."

"Alright, alright, I got it."

Once she hung up, Elysia immediately called the preschool teacher to get the details.

The teacher just said, "I'd rather talk in person."

When Elysia hung up again, Tarquin glanced over. "Which kid got into a fight?"

"It was Punikon. The one who's half Zhinora, half Thyania."

Their kids went to an international preschool. Most kids were from Zhinora, but there were also some mixed kids and a handful of foreign kids.

Tarquin frowned. He remembered Punikon—a little troublemaker, if ever there was one.

His family ran a martial arts studio. Dad and both grandparents were from Thyania; his mom was Zhinorian.

Punikon had been learning Thyanian boxing since he could walk and was known for being pretty aggressive-kind of like Evan, but with even less self-control.

The difference was, Evan never picked on regular kids or strutted around like he owned the place. Punikon, on the other hand, always wanted to be king of the playground. If things didn't go his way, he'd start swinging.

Tarquin shot off a text to Lowell, asking him to dig up whatever he could on the Punikon family.

Elysia chewed her lip, worry etched all over her face. "At the last parent meeting I overheard

I overheard some moms

talking-Punikon's family is a big deal, especially in Thyania. They've got serious connections."

"And the parents are impossible to deal with. Even the school doesn't want to cross them."

Tarquin kept his eyes on the road,

reassuring her, "Look, everyone at that school has

connections nobody wants to on any toes. But if the school doesn't want to get on the wrong side of Punikon's family, they definitely don't want to tangle with us. Trust me, I've got this."

If he couldn't protect his own kid in Jindale City, what business did he have being here? This was his turf.

Elysia spent the whole drive on edge. When they finally pulled up, she rushed over to the teacher waiting at the entrance.

"Where are my parents and the kids?"

The teacher led them inside, speaking quickly. "They're all in the lounge. Don't worry, everyone's calmed down now."

Elysia pressed, "How did this even start? Weren't there any teachers around?"

The teacher explained, "Usually there's always someone in the classroom. But today, one of the kids suddenly got a stomach ache, so our staff took him to the nurse's office."

"The other teacher hadn't arrived yet. That's when it all happened."

"There's no camera near the bathroom, so we don't know exactly what went down. All we can do is ask the kids."

"I talked to Punikon, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah."

"Punikon said he wanted to be friends with Elijah, but Elijah ignored him. He got

mad and decided to try and scare him."

"Then, out of nowhere, Emmett ran over and started hitting him!"

"He says Emmett threw the first punch, so he fought back. He also claims he didn't go too hard, but when Evan came back from outside. he pinned Punikon down and just kept wailing on him."

Chapter 1395

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Chapter 1397

Elijah was hiccuping through his tears.

"I don't like Punikon. He's always messing with my stuff, and he calls me 'Little

Mute.'"

"Today he tried to force me to talk to him. I wouldn't, so he got mad and tried to hit me. He knows karate, and neither Emmett nor I could fight him off."

Emmett piped up, "I don't like him either. He's just mean!"

Baby wailed, "He... he knows about my bunny. He said he'd kill my bunny and make soup out of it. Waaaah..."

Evan clenched his tiny fists.

"I've never liked that kid. He's always flipping me off and trying to start a fight. I've ignored it, but today he hit Elijah and Emmett. I'm done letting it go!"

Elliot looked serious. He hadn't been in the classroom when the fight happened, otherwise none of this would've gone down.

But he knew Punikon started it.

"Mom, I asked around. Everyone in class said it was Punikon who threw the first punch. He even threatened to poke Elijah's eyes out!"

Elysia's brows knitted together as her breathing grew shaky, chest heaving with anger.

Who was the real troublemaker here?!

Suddenly, chaos erupted outside the room. The sharp voice of a woman ripped through the hallway:

"Get them out here! The whole family's nuts-old and young! My son gets hurt and now you're all hiding like cowards? Not happening!"

"If the kids are too young for the law, then arrest the parents! Let them do the jail time!"

"I know you're in there, Evan Thorne's mom! Don't you dare hide from me!"

There was no mistaking it-Punikon's mother was here, and she was gunning straight for Elysia.

Clayton's face was thunderous.

"That woman doesn't listen to reason. She doesn't even understand plain English!"

Pamela's eyes flashed. "She's a bad lady!"

Elysia said, "Mom, Dad, watch the kids for me. I'll handle this."

The little ones wanted to follow, but Elysia shook her head firmly.

Tarquin reassured them, "You stay here. Don't worry, I won't let anything happen to your mom."

In the hallway, a woman with heavy makeup and wild clothes was shouting at the top of her lungs.

Behind her stood a dozen hulking guys-obviously some kind of gym rats or amateur fighters.

Teachers and security were doing their best to keep things calm, urging everyone to take a breath and not get violent.

As soon as she spotted Elysia, the woman gave her a once-over, sneering, "So, you're the one?!"

Elysia stepped up. "That's right. I'm the mother of Evan, Emmett, and Elijah."

The woman folded her arms across her chest, strutting like she owned the place.

"Your kid put my son in the hospital! What, is he some kind of super freak? Mean as a snake, just like his mama, I bet!"

Tarquin's face darkened and he started to speak, but Elysia stopped him with a look.

No way was she letting a man argue with this woman.

Elysia's voice was icy. "Does Punikon have any family members who can actually hold a normal conversation?"

one

The woman bristled, eyes blazing. "Excuse me? Who are you calling

abnormal? keep youth

ap

your

see what happens!"

A man by her side shoved past the school security frowning as he stalked over to Elysia the dozen muscle-heads falling in behind.

With a thick accent, he said, "I'm Punikon's dad. What do you people want to do about this?"

Tarquin stepped forward and shielded Elysia.

He glared coldly at the man, the names Punikon, Thyania Dojo, and Bernard spinning through his mind.

After a tense moment, Tarquin finally asked, "Are we handling this privately, or are we making it official?"

The man sneered, eyeing Tarquin's sharp suit and clearly thinking he was no threat.

"What do you want to do about it?"

Tarquin's voice was steely. "If you

want to settle this privately, let's take

it somewhere else, If you want to make it public, I'll call the police right now."

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The man let out a cold laugh.

"Alright then, let's settle this our way. You got the guts to face me in a ring?"

"If I lose, we'll drop everything that happened today. But if you lose, not only do you pay up, you get down on your knees and apologize. Loud and clear."

The Thyania crowd behind him started hollering, egging him on. "Come on, man! Prove you're not all talk-let's see what you're made of!"

The woman shot a sneer at Elysia, her tone dripping with mockery.

"If your family's too scared to fight, just save us the trouble and get down now- beg for forgiveness."

"And bring your little troublemakers out, along with that crazy old bat of yours. They can all kneel and apologize, too."

"After that, my son gets to teach Evan a little lesson. Then we'll call it even."

Tarquin didn't even glance at her. He looked straight at Punikon's father and asked,

"So, where's this going down? Your gym work for you?"

The man raised his eyebrows, surprised. "You know we run a boxing gym, and you still want to do this? Got guts, I'll give you that. Eight tonight, at my place. Don't be late."

"Fine by me."

"If you chicken out, everyone'll know you're nothing but a coward!" someone jeered as the group walked off, laughing and talking smack.

"Looks like some weak little businessman to me this'll be fun. Let's show him what Thyania's champion can do!"

"And if his kid broke our boy's arm, let's see if he can handle a taste of his own medicine!"

As they left, Tarquin watched them go, his gaze sharp as a blade.

Elysia frowned, anxious. "You seriously agreed to fight them, knowing their family runs a gym? This is a setup if I've ever seen one. We should just call the cops."

Tarquin turned to her, reassuring. "Don't worry. I wouldn't have agreed if I wasn't sure I could win. And even if things get rough, they're not touching me-my security team's got my back."

Thinking about Tarquin's ever-present bodyguards, Elysia felt a bit better.

She let out a sigh and grumbled, "Like father, like son, huh? What kind of parents act like that and expect their kid to behave?"

Most athletes are supposed to be straightforward and easygoing, but that whole family seemed off. Especially the mother-she was totally unhinged.

Tarquin tried to calm her. "Let's not stress about this now. I'll deal with the fight tonight, and then we'll sort out the kids' situation. For now, let's just take the kids home and help them settle down

Elysia nodded. "Alright."

She called the school and got the kids excused, then took them home.

On the drive, Clayton and the kids kept asking what was going to happen.

Tarquin just said they'd meet later to talk things over—he didn't mention the ring fight.

Elysia didn't want Clayton or Pamela

worrying either, so she kept quiet about it All the way home, she focused on calming Pamela and the kids.

AQUMS

When they arrived, Heath had lunch ready for everyone.

After eating, the four boys-Elliot, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah—said they were going up for a nap.

Elysia wasn't tired, so she grabbed a stack of gold foil paper and started folding paper cranes on the couch.

Clayton and Pamela joined in.

Tarquin was there too, jotting down well-wishes on cards.

They chatted as they worked-about the fight at the preschool, about Elizabeth's

funeral, even the weird stuff with the exhumation.

Half an hour later, Tarquin's phone buzzed. It was a message from Elliot:

Dad, can you come to our room? We need to talk.

Tarquin narrowed his eyes, made up an excuse, and headed upstairs.

The four boys were waiting for him in the little study. As soon as he walked in, they pulled him in and had him sit down.

"Dad, are you really fighting Punikon's father tonight?"

Tarquin squinted. "Who told you that?"

Elijah spoke up. "I just saw it

online the guy's already told the et

Thyania press. Bragging about how he's fighting that rich guy from Zhinora tonight!"

Tarquin glanced at Elijah's laptop, a cold smile tugging at his lips. Elijah continued:

Chapter 1399

"I did a bit of digging into Punikon's family," I said, leaning back in my chair. "Turns out, his granddad was a legendary boxer-practically a household name back in

Thyania!"

"And both his dad and uncle? Former heavyweight champs themselves. Boxing runs in their blood. The whole family's been running a boxing gym for generations."

Emmett looked up at me, his brow furrowed with worry. "Dad, what if you can't beat him?"

I ruffled his hair, giving him a reassuring grin. "If I thought I couldn't, I wouldn't even bother, kiddo. Don't worry. On my way to drop you off at school, I already got the lowdown on Punikon's family. Your old man's not losing this one."

Punikon's granddad was a real legend—had a reputation that reached far beyond our borders.

But as for Punikon's dad? Not so much. The word is, the year he took the championship, it was all rigged behind the scenes.

I was sure of it—if it came down to me and him, I wouldn't lose.

Plus, I had my suspicions. Back in the day, Bernard went solo and swept through gyms across seven countries. Everyone said his next stop was Thyania.

But then, something happened. His wife and apprentice got into trouble, and Bernard had to go off the grid—faked his own death, disappeared without ever making it to Thyania.

Something about all that just didn't add up.

When Bernard was supposed to be heading their way, all the big gyms in Thyania were panicked. Not a single fighter had the guts to step up.

Then, out of nowhere, they started getting cocky. Suddenly, they were making all this noise, telling the world Bernard was going to meet his end in Thyania. They boasted about their homegrown fighting style, swore up and down they could take Bernard down.

"If he dares show up, he won't be leaving," they said.

After Bernard's "death," the Thyanian boxing scene only got bolder. Even now, they're still bragging that Bernard got scared off because he knew he couldn't beat them.

It all seemed a little too convenient. If you ask me, they only started running their mouths when they knew Bernard wasn't coming.

If that's the case, the Thyanian boxing world must know what really happened back then.

Whether they were behind the trouble with Bernard's wife and apprentice or not, they've got to know something.

Ever since came back from the

mountains, the whole business with

the mysterious guy and the eighth-generation virus has been weighing on me.

But the old folks' story-I've kept that in the back of my mind, too. Why they all faked their deaths and

vanished is still a mystery. No leads nothing.

But here's the thing: before each of them disappeared, they all had unfinished business. Regrets.

They saved my wife and kid, so I figured I owed it to them to help tie up some of those loose ends.

Today's scuffle with the Thyanian kid was a fluke, but accepting this challenge? That was no accident.

I'd already looked into the Punikon family as soon as I heard about them.

The moment I learned they were Thyanian fighters, Bernard popped right into my head...

After a moment of thought, I added, "Don't worry about tonight's match, guys. I know what I'm doing."

Evan piped up, "Can I fight too, Dad?"

I shrugged helplessly. "Not up to me. You'll have to ask your mom."

Evan drooped. "She'd never let us. She thinks it's too dangerous and chaotic."

I thought for a second. "I'll be in and

out before you know it. Nothing worth watching. But after we've said our goodbyes to your grandma maybe I take you on a tour of the weapons lab."

Evan's eyes lit up. "Are you serious?!"

"Absolutely."

The boys chatted for a bit, clearly reassured. Then they raced downstairs to write

notes for Elizabeth and fold paper cranes.

But Elliot didn't go downstairs.

He called me into his room, looking dead serious.

"Dad, I think I've figured out a way to find the mysterious guy!"

Chapter 1400

Tarquin narrowed his sharp blue eyes. "Hmm?"

Elliot pulled something from his pocket and handed it to Tarquin. "Use this."

Tarquin glanced at it—Elliot had gotten it from Gideon Bradford, using his Alpha status.

This thing was all the rage on the black market. Rumor had it, if you held it, you could ask its owner any question, and they'd always have the answer. There was nothing this mysterious owner didn't know.

As for who the owner actually was, no one had a clue.

Tarquin had tried to get his hands on it before, back when he was looking for Elijah's mother, but he'd never had the chance. How Gideon managed to snag it was another mystery.

"If you already have a suspect in mind, Dad, and you think using it would be a waste," Elliot said, furrowing his brow with that serious little face of his, "then use it to find the real source of the Eighth Generation Virus."

Elliot was the sharpest of all the kids, and the one whose mind worked most like Tarquin's. In the whole family, only Elliot and Tarquin knew about the Eighth Generation Virus-and just how dangerous the mysterious figure and the virus both were.

Tarquin studied the object in his hand for a moment, then asked, "Any word from Gerald or Howard?"

The sudden topic change threw Elliot off a bit. "No, not yet."

Tarquin looked back at the thing. "You think this'll really give us answers?"

Elliot shrugged, not nodding or shaking his head. "I don't know. But I think it's worth a shot."

Noticing Tarquin's hesitation, Elliot asked, "Are you worried about tipping someone off?"

Tarquin stayed quiet, not offering any explanation. He handed the object back to Elliot. "Hold onto it for now. After the casket's opened, if we need it, I'll ask you for it."

Elliot's little face showed a flicker of confusion, but he nodded obediently and tucked the thing away.

Then, curiosity getting the best of him, he asked, "Dad, is there some secret in Grandpa's casket?"

Why else wait until after it was opened?

Tarquin's brow furrowed. His expression grew heavy. "The secret behind the mysterious figure and the Eighth Generation Virus-it might all be hidden in your grandpa's casket."

Elliot was surprised, silent for a moment. Then he said, "The mysterious guy has been after the virus for ages. When Grandpa and Grandma died, I'm sure every inch got searched. There's no way they'd leave Grandpa's casket unchecked."

"I know. The virus itself won't be in there. But there might be a clue."

"Huh?"

Tarquin reached over and ruffled Elliot's hair. "You'll see when we open the casket."

Elliot was still puzzled, but he didn't press further.

After a few seconds, he looked up at his dad-wide-eyed and earnest. "If anyone ever hurts your feelings, just remember Mom and us. We'll never betray you, never hurt you. We'll always be bent here and we'll always love you."

Tarquin looked down at his son, heart swelling.

Elliot probably guessed that the suspect was someone close-someone Tarquin trusted.

Being stabbed in the back by an enemy? That was just life.

But by someone you loved? That was true cruelty.

Elliot was trying to comfort him, to ease his pain.

Tarquin scooped his son up in his arms. "As long as I have you all, even if the sky falls, I won't be scared. Come on, let's go light some candles for Grandpa and Grandma."

Elliot nodded. "Okay!"

Carrying Elliot, Tarquin headed for the door, but Elliot called out to him, "Dad?" "Yeah?"

Elliot said quietly, "You're amazing, you know? You're the best father I could ever ask for."

Tarquin looked at his son, his heart overflowing. As a father, nothing meant more than hearing that from his child.

And for the rest of the afternoon, Tarquin felt lighter than he had in a long, long time.