

Hitched 1401

Chapter 1401

He wrote warm wishes to Elizabeth Gonzalez and Kendrick, reminiscing about all the little moments they'd shared, showing not a trace of gloominess.

Even Elysia Thorne noticed something was different!

After all these years together, this was the first time he'd been so laid-back while dealing with anything related to Elizabeth and Kendrick.

After dinner, Tarquin Bradford was getting ready to head out to the Punikon gym for a sparring match.

While Elysia helped him fix his shirt and straighten his tie, she couldn't help but tease, "You and Elliot were upstairs alone after lunch-what did you two talk about that's got you in such a good mood?"

Tarquin couldn't hide his pride. "Elliot said I'm a great dad. That I'm an amazing father and a pretty decent guy overall."

A smile curled at Elysia's lips. "No wonder you're so happy! Your son's stamp of approval, huh?"

Tarquin nodded. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Elysia finished with his tie, letting her hands rest on his shoulders. "Well, I think you're not only a wonderful dad-you're also a pretty fantastic husband."

Tarquin's eyes narrowed playfully. "Now that's the sweetest thing I've ever heard." He slid his hand around her waist, pulled her close, and kissed her deeply. Elysia rose up on her toes, melting into his kiss.

By the time they broke apart, both of them were a little breathless.

Still leaning against him, Elysia warned, "Okay, I'll stay home like you want, but if you come back hurt, I swear, you're sleeping in the guest room for a month-no exceptions!"

Tarquin swallowed hard, his voice low and teasing, "What if I come back in one piece? Do I get a reward?"

Elysia knew exactly where this was headed. Blushing furiously, she whispered, "I'll give you a surprise."

"What kind of surprise?" he pressed.

She rolled her eyes. "If I tell you, it's not a surprise anymore, is it?"

Tarquin grinned. "You even know what I like?"

"You like me," she shot back without hesitation.

He laughed a grin so handsome it looked like it belonged in a graphic novel.

Leaning in, he whispered something in her ear, then nipped at her earlobe. Elysia turned beet red and wriggled out of his arms. "You just go already!" But Tarquin pulled her right back in. "Did you hear what I said?"

Her face was blazing. "Uh-huh."

He chuckled, ruffled her hair, and kissed her forehead, clearly reluctant to let her go.

When his phone finally rang, he sighed in defeat. "Lowell's calling. Guess I really have to leave now."

Elysia gave him one last warning, "Don't get yourself hurt! I'd rather you forfeit than get injured, got it?"

Tarquin affectionately tapped her nose. "Don't worry, I have no intention of sleeping in the guest room. Just relax and wait for me I'll be home early if I can."

They indulged in a few more minutes of cuddling before Tarquin finally headed downstairs.

Lowell was waiting by the door, rolling his eyes. "Ever since you fell for your wife, you've checked out on everyone

and everything else is love

really that powerful?"

Tarquin slid into the backseat, scrolling through news on his phone without looking

up. "Single guys don't get to weigh in on love."

Lowell pursed his lips and gave a dramatic eye roll.

As he started the car and pulled away from the house, his phone buzzed again. He glanced at the screen but didn't answer. Punikon a

granddad reached out-wants to talk

before your match, privately."

Tarquin didn't hesitate. "Not interested."

Punikon's grandfather worked at the embassy, so he definitely knew who

Tarquin was. If the old man came to

plead his case, Tarquin would be stuck deciding whether to go along with it or not. Better to just avoid it altogether.

Chapter 1402

As soon as Tarquin left, Evan sneaked out through the window.

Outside, Scarface the big guy with a face full of scars-was already waiting for him. The two of them headed off together toward the gym.

Evan looked troubled, like his mind was spinning with questions.

Scarface was just about to ask what was wrong, ready to offer some advice, when

Evan blurted out, "Hey, why is Dad always kissing Mom?"

Scarface: "....." How was he supposed to answer that?

He'd never been in love himself and couldn't really wrap his head around why couples were so attached to each other.

After thinking for a bit, he finally said, "I guess it's 'cause he loves her."

Evan frowned. "So when I grow up, am I gonna be like Dad? Always sticking to my wife and wanting kisses?"

Scarface: "...Not necessarily."

"Why not? You just said Dad kisses Mom 'cause he loves her. I'll definitely love my wife, so I'll want kisses every day too!"

Scarface replied, "Well, you might not even find a wife."

Evan's eyes went wide. "No way! I'm so good-looking. If you and Bernard can't find wives, that's just 'cause you're ugly. I'm not ugly!"

Scarface: "... " Wow, nothing cuts deeper than a kid you care about!

Was this little rascal even worth it?

Evan suddenly beamed, caught up in his own daydream. "When I grow up, I'm gonna find the prettiest, kindest woman in the world, just like Dad. I'll spoil her rotten! Ha ha..."

Scarface found himself at a loss for words and started thinking maybe he should have a talk with Tarquin and Elysia.

Couldn't they keep their lovey-dovey stuff away from the kid?

Tarquin and Elysia would probably protest: "We have no idea when he saw anything!"

Scarface changed the subject. "So, how are we getting in? The gym charges for tickets."

Evan grinned. "I've got an invite! Punikon sent it to me. He wants me to see his dad beat up my dad, in person."

Scarface nodded, then added, "Just don't do anything reckless when we get there. Keep a low profile, okay?"

Evan shot back, "You always say Bernard is too timid, and now you're telling me to be low-key?"

The old man muttered under his breath, "Back then I only had to look after myself. Now, things are different."

He had people he cared about now...

Bernard was hiding out, faking his own death for some big secret-he couldn't be exposed yet. And Evan well, Evan was the great hope of the local martialarts world, but it wasn't time for him to step into the spotlight, either.

So, they were just here to watch the action-no grandstanding. They had to keep off the radar.

Evan grinned, full of confidence, "You're worried about me and Bernard, right, Uncle?"

Scarface ignored him. "Race you! First one to the gym wins!"

Before he'd even finished his sentence, Evan shot off like a rocket. "See you there, Uncle!"

Scarface watched the kid's small figure disappear down the block, his eyes full of affection.

Once, his life had been just

S and vengeance, like bet

was already a ghost. Now, for the first time in years, he felt alive.

Scarface started two minutes after Evan, but somehow arrived at the gym first.

When Evan finally showed up, Scarface pointed to his watch. "You're 399 seconds late."

Evan gawked, "How did you get here so fast? Did you cheat and plan the route ahead of time?"

Scarface shrugged. "If you were fast enough, you'd have beaten me even if I did. Gotta keep working, kiddo!"

Evan pouted, but couldn't argue. He clenched his fists. "Starting tomorrow, I'm adding an extra hour to training!"

Scarface's eyes lit up.

These days, Evan was his whole world. When Evan went to preschool, Scarface waited outside. When Evan came home to Number One Mansion, Scarface watched over him there, too.

Chapter 1403

The happiest time of his day was always between five and seven in the morning.

That was when he took Evan out back, up into the hills, for training.

If Evan needed to train for an extra hour, that just meant more time together—and honestly, that made him even happier.

"So, from now on, we'll train for an extra hour every night. Then you can head home, get cleaned up, and hit the sack."

"Deal!" Evan grinned.

The two of them-one old, one young-agreed on their new plan, slipped on their face masks, and headed for the gym.

The place was buzzing with energy. Outside the gym, a bunch of people were streaming live on their phones.

Most of them were local influencers from Thyania, chattering away in rapid-fire Thai that neither Evan nor the old man could understand.

Since they couldn't make out a word, they just ignored the fuss and strolled up to the entrance.

At the ticket booth out front, two burly Thyanian guys were on duty. With their thick arms and intimidating scowls, they looked like they could bench-press a truck.

When they spotted Evan and the old man, one of the bouncers wrinkled his nose and asked in choppy English, "This is a gym. What you want here?"

Evan held up his smartwatch and scrolled to his invitation. "We're here for the match. See? Punikon sent me this. He invited us."

The two guards glanced at the screen. "You are.....?"

Evan said, "I'm Punikon's classmate. And this is my great-grandpa."

The guards exchanged a look, then waved them through-but not without tossing out a jab: "You Zhinorian folks, so skinny! You better watch from the balcony upstairs. If the crowd knocks you over, we're not responsible!"

"Yeah, yeah, we got it," Evan said, brushing off the sarcasm as he and his great-grandpa walked inside.

This was the biggest Thyanian gym in the country—at least a thousand square meters on the first floor alone. In the center was a raised boxing ring, where all the big matches went down.

The place was already packed. There were Zhinorian and Thyanian fans, plus people from all over, united by their love of martial arts.

Most of the audience were men, but here and there, a few glamorous livestreamers were broadcasting the event.

It was just an ordinary Thyania-Zhinora friendship

match nothing special really. But slap the words "Zhinorian billionaire on the poster, and suddenly everyone wanted in.

On top of that, Tarquin was determined to make this fight go viral in Thyania. So,

behind the scenes, Lowell had paid for a serious social media boost.

Now, everyone in Thyania was hyped for the eight o'clock livestream, eager to watch their local fighters "crush" the Zhinorian rich guy.

Back in Zhinora, though, the match was flying under the radar-Tarquin had all but buried it on the trending

50 most of the audience was

from the Thyagian side

Evan and his great-grandpa squeezed through the crowd, searching for Tarquin.

They didn't spot him, but they did

recognize Punikon's

father-bare-chested and looking

every inch the champion A popular. thyantan influencer was

interviewing him, with a translator by her side.

She asked, "So, what made you challenge the Zhinorian billionaire to this match?

It's been years since you stepped into the ring. Why now?"

Punikon's dad squared his shoulders, his muscles rippling under the lights. "I'm fighting for my son!"

"My boy, Punikon, got into a scrap at school with the son of this Zhinorian billionaire."

"My son, out of humility and respect for our family's values, didn't fight back."

"But the other kid had no sense of honor-he knocked out my boy's tooth and broke his arm!"

"And as if that wasn't enough, his parent didn't apologize—instead, he slapped my wife across the face!"

"As a father and as a husband, I can't let that go."

"I've heard he's a skilled fighter himself-a real big shot back in Zhinora. That's why I challenged him personally!"

"If they don't understand humility and respect, I'll teach them with my fists!"

"I want the world to know: Thyanian fighters are not to be underestimated. I'm fighting for the honor of Thyania itself!"

Chapter 1404

The influencer was on the verge of tears.

"I see a great father and husband. I see an incredible fighter. And most of all, I see a true son of Thyania!"

The Thyanian crowd roared, spirits high and voices even higher.

They cheered and shouted Punikon's name, their excitement filling the gym like the smell of popcorn at a Friday night football game.

But not everyone was swept up in the fever. Some visiting fighters from the East rolled their eyes. One of them, arms crossed, spoke up with a smirk,

"Hey, this is supposed to be a friendly match. No need for all the patriotic stuff. Let's keep it about the fighters, not the countries. No point messing up the good vibes between our people."

Punikon's father frowned, tension building like a storm cloud.

A few hotheaded Thyanian fighters immediately turned on the Eastern guy, some cursing, a couple flipping the bird, and one even poking him in the chest.

The young Eastern fighter wasn't having it.

"Back off, man! Touch me again and see what happens!"

"Oh, I'll touch you all right. What are you gonna do about it? Don't forget, you're in our gym now!"

The Thyanian fighter shoved him hard, eyes glinting with challenge.

The Eastern fighter didn't back down; he swung and landed a punch.

"Just so you know, this is still Zhinora territory, not your Thyanian kingdom!" Shouts turned to scuffles, and in a flash, the whole place erupted into a brawl.

The Thyanian side had the numbers, so it wasn't long before the Easterners were on the losing end, bruised and battered.

As fists flew, the Thyanian fighters jeered,

"Back in the day, even your so-called King of Fighters wouldn't dare challenge us

in Thyania. Know why? Because he was scared!"

"If he was scared, who do you nobodies think you are, running your mouths here? You're out of your league!"

The "King of Fighters" they meant was Bernard.

Evan, watching the chaos, fumed. "Uncle, they're mocking Bernard! You're just gonna let them?"

Before he could finish, the old

master grabbed a tin of peppermint candies

m the table and started

chucking them at the fighting crowd.

The mints flew with the precision and speed of BB gun pellets, smacking into the Thyanian troublemakers.

Cries of pain rang out. "Who the hell-?!"

The candies seemed to come from nowhere, flying in from all directions. No one suspected Evan or the old man.

Finally, Punikon's father stepped in, trying to calm the Thyanian fighters.

He deliberately spoke in English-ostensibly so the Zhinora fighters wouldn't understand him.

"Don't bother with them. Save it for the ring. I'll make sure they regret it tonight."

The crowd stormed off, yelling,

"Smash him! Knock him out! Show them what Thyanian fists can do!"

The Eastern fighters nursed their

bruises, but none left the gym. They

were a

determined to stay and

watch the 8 o'clock showdown,

hoping for a little redemption.

At 7:50 PM, Tarquin finally arrived, fashionably late.

He wore the suit Elysia had picked out for him, a mask covering his face, and slipped in through the back door.

Word spread fast, and Punikon's father immediately headed backstage to confront him.

"Last chance to back out, kid. Forfeit now, or it'll be too late once you're in the ring."

Tarquin ignored him, pulling out his

own boxing gear. He let the

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Thyanian staff check it over, then headed to the locker room to change.

When he came out, Punikon's father handed him a contract.

The "friendly match" had just turned into a fight for survival.

Tarquin narrowed his eyes, glanced at him, then picked up the pen.

Punikon's father leaned in, voice low.

"You know what you're signing, right? In a fight like this, even if I kill you, I walk free. That's the rule."

Tarquin finished signing, checked the time, and headed straight for the ring- without so much as a second glance.

Chapter 1405

That kind of contempt really set Punikon off. He clenched his jaw, practically fuming.

Some folks at the gym muttered,

"Man, he's acting all high and mighty. You think he actually knows how to fight? I checked every ranking I could find for Zhinora martial artists—not a single mention of Tarquin. Nobody on the circuit's ever heard of him!"

Punikon's father scoffed,

"Zhinora businessmen are arrogant to the core. Just because they know how to make money, they think they can rule every field they step into. Hah!"

He clearly looked down on Tarquin.

The only reason he hyped up Tarquin's reputation was to boost his own. The tougher your opponent, the more impressive it looks if you beat them.

Little did he know, he was nothing but a pawn in a bigger game. If it weren't for the bait-and-switch, he wouldn't even get the chance to face Tarquin in the ring.

Punikon's father stood up and walked to the ring, handing the referee the signed contract for the match.

The ref held it up so everyone could see.

Once the crowd realized this wasn't just a friendly spar but a "no holds barred" match-winner takes all, loser might not leave the ring alive-the mood shifted instantly.

A friendly match is just practice, a handshake at the end.

But this? This was the kind of fight that could end in a funeral.

After reading the contract out loud, the ref turned to both men, asking if they agreed.

Tarquin and Punikon's father nodded without hesitation.

The local Thyania fighters went wild, whistling and taunting, shouting, "Knock him out! Make him pay!"

By contrast, the Zhinora team looked tense and worried.

They didn't know who Tarquin was, or which rich guy might have secret fighting skills—but everyone recognized Punikon's name.

The Punikon family carried serious weight in Thyania.

After their earlier scuffle with the locals, the Zhinora group was desperate for a comeback-they needed one of their own to win.

Up on the balcony, Evan and the old man-his mentor, a grizzled veteran with a face like a roadmap-watched quietly.

Evan whispered,

"This has gotta be Punikon's doing. He's gone too far. He's practically setting his own dad up for a beating!"

The old man frowned,

"Every fighter has their own reasons for learning the art. Some do it to protect- protect themselves and the people they love."

"But others... they learn just to hurt and destroy."

"Martial arts don't have borders. It's like art-meant to be celebrated everywhere, no matter where you're from. If someone's strong enough, they deserve respect no matter their Country:

"But there are always those who

can't stand to see someone else

shine that's how

my father

died too strong, too bright, and others just couldn't take it. They schemed to take him down."

Bernard faced the same fate.

He was too skilled, threatened too many powerful interests—so they played dirty, forced him into hiding, made him fake his own death.

The whole martial arts world had lost its way.

The strongest weren't honored—they were hunted.

Evan caught the pain and anger in his mentor's eyes. He tugged the old man's sleeve,

"Don't be sad, Uncle. I swear, I'll find whoever hurt Grandpa and Grandma, and make them pay. I'll get justice for them."

The old man looked at him, deadly serious,

"Your grandpa's biggest dream was

for us to stand tall in the world

of

martialarts to bring real real glory to our people: You have to keep pushing, finish what he started."

Evan nodded hard, voice ringing with determination,

"Yeah! I'll do whatever it takes to make it to the top of the world stage—to show all

those who look down on us, all those schemers, just what we're made of!"

Chapter 1406

The boss's eyes were full of approval. "A real man stands strong and proud!"

Evan might be a little wild, but he's got a good heart and a bright future ahead of him no doubt about it.

Frankly, the global martial arts scene had gone off course. Someone needed to set things right. Bernard and I, well, our time had passed. Now, all our hopes rested on Evan.

Suddenly, a sharp whistle cut through the air. The match was about to start.

From the crowd, the Thyanian fighters shouted at the top of their lungs, "Hit him! Go on! Smash him!"

On the other side, the Eastern fighters pumped their fists and cheered, "Let's go! You got this!"

They might've just brawled backstage, but now everyone was desperate for their own team to win.

Up on the platform, Punikon's dad was flexing like he was about to enter a hotdog-eating contest at the local fair. He shook his head, smirked, and swaggered over to Tarquin.

He looked Tarquin up and down, like he was checking out a scarecrow, and sneered, "Weakling!"

He flipped Tarquin the bird, just to make sure everyone saw.

The Thyanian supporters went wild, chanting in unison, "Weakling! Weakling! Weakling!"

The whole gym echoed with it.

Tarquin, mask on and brows furrowed, didn't miss a beat. He dashed forward, grabbed Punikon's dad's outstretched middle finger-

CRACK! He broke it right there for all to see.

In the next breath, he grabbed the guy by the wrist and launched him with a judo throw that slammed him onto the mat. A couple more sickening cracks later, Punikon's dad's limbs were out of commission.

He howled in pain—a shriek that could've shattered the windows.

Suddenly, the whole place went dead silent. You could've heard a pin drop.

Tarquin hadn't come here just for the fight; he wanted to make a statement to the whole Thyanian crowd.

His moves were sharp, ruthless, and precise. After he'd taken out Punikon's dad's arms and legs, he landed a few punches to the guy's head-clean knockout.

The silence was eerie.

This was a "no holds barred" match-Tarquin could've finished him off if he wanted. And everyone knew it.

The tension was thick. Everyone stared, holding their breath.

But Tarquin simply lowered his fists and signaled to the referee that he was done.

The ref stammered, "You're... you're done fighting?"

"Yeah," Tarquin said calmly.

The ref rushed over to check on

Punikon's dad, then turned to the et

crown

"He's unconscious,

Hanus and legs are busted thoughts

Hands and legs are bust

The guy was finished his fighting days were over.

The silence lingered, even the loudmouthed Thyanian influencer was struck dumb.

Tarquin, still wearing his mask and breathing steady, looked straight into the live camera, eyes brimming with disdain.

"I'm just a businessman, not a real fighter. All I want to say is the Punikon family? Nothing special. Thyanian martial arts? Overrated."

"And just so you know, I didn't kill him—not because I'm scared of the Punikon family, but because my wife asked me to be a good, law-abiding citizen She told me not to kill

anyone

"I listen to my wife."

He finished with a cocky little smile, then strolled off, leaving the crowd reeling.

There was another beat of stunned silence—then the Eastern fighters erupted, jumping and shouting like their team had just won the Super Bowl.

"Damn, that felt good! So satisfying!"

"Did you hear that? Even our amateurs can KO you guys! Thyanian martial arts— what a joke!"

"Tiny Thyanian school? Handled! Easy!"

"See what true class looks like? This

is what it means to have real stature! Signed a death match contract and still let the guy live that's sportsmanship

"And you know what else? That's what a good husband looks like! Did you hear

him? He listens to his wife! Man, he LOVES his wife!"

The Eastern fighters were beside themselves-elated, vindicated, finally standing tall after all the humiliation.

Their aches and bruises didn't matter anymore.

Meanwhile, the Thyanian fighters, who'd been acting all tough before, were suddenly quiet as church mice.

Chapter 1407

They clenched their fists and gritted their teeth, furious but totally lost for words.

Winners write the story, losers just get left behind and today, they'd lost.

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After changing out of his gear, Tarquin left the gym. Lowell called out,

"Hey, Evan and the big guy are here too. Should we get them to ride with us?"

Tarquin wasn't surprised. Knowing Evan, there was no way he'd miss out on the action.

"Nah, you know they hate car rides. Let them make their own way home."

Lowell shrugged and started the car, steering them out of the parking lot.

"By the way, the school board president called while you were changing. He's out of town, just heard about what happened at the preschool."

"He was pretty apologetic. Said the school will take full responsibility for Elijah and Emmett getting hurt."

"He also mentioned he'd talked to a bunch of teachers and kids. Apparently, Punikon's been a problem for a while-violent, won't listen, that sort of thing."

"Lots of parents have complained before, and the school has tried reaching out to his folks, but they never bothered to cooperate."

"So now the school's decided: they're asking Punikon to leave."

That sounded polite, but everyone knew it was just a nice way of saying he'd been expelled.

Tarquin's face stayed cold and unreadable. If the school hadn't acted, he would've made sure they did.

A kid that young, already so aggressive-what would he turn into as he got older? Maybe if his parents actually cared, maybe with the right guidance, things could change.

But Punikon's folks clearly didn't get it.

If the parents' values are a mess, what hope does the kid have?

He definitely wasn't about to let his own children hang around someone like that.

Honestly, neither would Elysia.

Lowell went on,

"The school said if you have any suggestions, they're open to hearing them."

Tarquin pulled out his phone and shot Elysia a quick text before replying,

"Just tell them to tighten up on supervision. We can't have anything like this happening again."

He'd barely finished speaking when his phone rang-Elysia.

Tarquin's whole expression softened as he answered,

"Hey, what's up?"

Elysia sounded super excited,

"I just finished watching your match! Are you heading home now?"

"Yeah, I left right after. You caught the livestream?"

"I did! Winona sent me the link-babe, you were amazing!"

The praise made Tarquin's heart do a happy little flip. "Just wait, I can be even more amazing."

Lowell, driving, caught Tarquin's giddy face in the rearview mirror and rolled his eyes dramatically.

The CEO was grinning like an idiot and didn't even care.

"Ahem," Lowell coughed, a pointed reminder:

Hey, there's a third wheel in the car, maybe tone down the mushy stuff?

Tarquin shot him a death glare, then went right back to being sweet on the phone,

"The school just called. They're

bet

expelling Punikon, so you don't need to worry about him bothering the kids anymore."

"Expelled, huh? I wonder if his parents will accept it?"

"They don't really have a say. Their

kid wasn

the wrong, and it's

preschool-it's not mandatory

School's within

rights.

Elysia didn't feel sorry for Punikon in the slightest. The kid was already way off track-not worth anyone's sympathy.

"With him gone, the school will be a lot more peaceful. When will you be home?"

Tarquin checked the time. "About forty minutes. And just like you asked, not a scratch on me."

"You're the best! Hungry? Want me to whip up something for you?"

Elysia was in such a good

mood—her husband safe and sound, and she could gush about him all she wanted. She felt like she'd just had a spoonful of honey.

Chapter 1408

If Elysia was in a good mood, Tarquin was right there with her-his happiness was basically tied to hers.

He looked totally smitten, his voice dripping with affection.

"No need, babe. Just be good and wait for me at home. I've got a reward for you when I get back."

Elysia hesitated, remembering the cheeky whisper he'd breathed in her ear before leaving. Her cheeks flushed pink.

"...I'm hanging up now."

Before Tarquin could answer, she ended the call.

Tarquin just sat there, grinning at his phone like an idiot.

Lowell, watching him through the rearview mirror, couldn't help himself and piped up,

"Tarquin, you've changed, man! You used to be the big bad wolf-now you're, what, a foxy little heartthrob?"

Tarquin shot him a cold glare from under his lashes.

The chill in the air made Lowell realize he might've stepped over the line. Calling

the big boss a foxy playboy? Not the smartest move. If they weren't old friends, he'd probably be toast by now.

Lowell's heart skipped a beat, scrambling for a way to save himself. But then Tarquin, cool as ever, replied,

"Hey, if I can win over my wife, that's a skill."

Lowell stared, stunned. Was Tarquin actually admitting to being a heartthrob? And proud of it, too?

He could only awkwardly agree,

"...Right, right. Whatever you say."

You're the boss, after all. Who's going to argue?

Back at Number One Mansion, Elysia hung up, cheeks flushed, and headed to the bathroom to wash up.

A "reward" from Tarquin meant only one thing-he wanted her. Didn't matter how many times it happened; she still got nervous and shy about it.

She took a long, steamy shower, slapped on a face mask, and finally felt the butterflies in her stomach settle down.

After blow-drying her hair, she crawled under the covers, waiting for Tarquin to come home.

She pulled out her phone to find Winona Newsom and Blossom Blythe chatting away in their trio group chat about the whole Punikon situation. She typed:

[I called Tarquin. That kid got expelled from school.]

Winona: [Good riddance. No wonder that kid turned out like that with parents like his.]

Blossom: You and Mr. Bradford are

going to be heroes to the other parents. So many wanted Punikon

gone but were too scared to say anything because of his family's connections.]

Winona: [Mr. Bradford looked extra dashing tonight, Elysia. You better give the man a proper reward later.]

Something hit Elysia and she typed,

[His birthday's at the end of the month. Any ideas for a gift?]

Blossom: [Easy, just get him what he likes.]

Winona: [Mr. Bradford's number one favorite is you. Just wrap yourself up and give yourself to him!]

Elysia: [How am I supposed to do that, exactly? Jump into a giant gift box and let him unwrap me?]

Winona: [Too cliché! He doesn't care about some cardboard box-what he wants is you, in all your glory. The sexier you are, the more he'll love it.]

With that, Winona started spamming the chat with a bunch of lacy lingerie pics.

Blossom and Elysia both blushed furiously, hiding under their blankets, faces nearly as red as their pajamas.

Before they could even respond, Winona kept going:

[Elysia, pick one and wear it. Do a little dance for Mr. Bradford when he gets home-trust me, he'll be so into it he might get a nosebleed Best birthday gift ever, hands down!]

Elysia: "..."

Winona then tagged Blossom and started sending even more messages,

[Blossom, you need to try this too. Those cold, stoic guys are always the wildest underneath. When Axel gets back from Mariana Land, just go for it!]

[He might put up a little

resistance guy's got moves-but if you manage it, that means he's into you And trust me after one night you'll have him eating out of your hand!]

Blossom, blushing like crazy, dared to ask, [Seriously?]

Winona replied, full of confidence,

[Of course! Axel might act all aloof, but underneath he's just a sweet puppy who's

never even had a real girlfriend!]

Chapter 1409

Men like that are always two-faced-cool as ice during the day, hot as fire at night. The more distant they act under the sun, the more intense they get after dark!

Elysia's heart was pounding as she read the group chat, her cheeks burning. Blossom just had to tag her directly:

Elysia, is it true? Is Mr. Bradford really that hot at night?

Elysia:

She swallowed, hesitated for ages, and finally typed back,

He's definitely not the same man at night as he is during the day.

Winona chimed in immediately,

Come on, Blossom, trust me! I may have only hooked up with Zane Livingston, but I've seen a lot! Take your sister's advice-you won't regret it. Pick something for yourself!

Then she tagged Elysia: And you better hurry and choose, too. Your hubby's birthday is at the end of the month!

Almost against her will, Elysia clicked through the photos her friends had sent— lingerie shots, skimpy and bold, making her heart race.

Can anyone really wear something this revealing? she typed, her fingers trembling.

Winona replied bluntly,

Girl, you're married! There's nothing on you Mr. Bradford hasn't seen before. Men love a little mystery-leave him wanting more!

You've got a killer figure. Show it off!

Elysia: “.

11

"What's got you so focused, huh?" Tarquin's voice suddenly sounded right behind her.

Elysia jumped, dropping her phone to the floor, screen up for all the world to see. Mortified, she lunged for it, but Tarquin got there first.

Just then, another photo from Winona popped up a black lace number, barely there at all.

Elysia, this one's perfect for you! You're so soft and fair-skinned, black lace will look insanely hot on you. Mr. Bradford won't know what hit him-he'll spoil you rotten!

Elysia: “.

Her breath caught, face flaming red, eyes round as saucers. She snatch

the phone back

under the covers, hiding in fol.ne

sheets

Tarquin's Adam's apple bobbed as he gave her a wicked grin, then pounced on her through the comforter.

"Babe, I love your friends! Keep them around, yeah? I fully support this!"

Before she could protest, his hand snuck under the covers.

Elysia peeked out, breathless and flustered, "Stop it, you...mmph-"

Tarquin silenced her with a kiss-forget the shower, he couldn't wait another second!

When Elysia finally woke the next morning, Tarquin was long gone.

She was wearing a fresh tank top and sleep shorts-no prizes for e guessing who'd dressed her. He'd been so fired up last night, keeping her up half the night until she'd passed out from exhaustion.

Had he bathed her? Dressed her? When had he even gotten up?

She had no clue. Her head was spinning. Groaning, she rolled out of bed, wincing

at the soreness all over, and stumbled to the bathroom.

Thank God it was just muscle aches.

She cursed Tarquin under her breath as she crawled back into bed, sleeping straight through until afternoon.

When she woke again, it was already two o'clock.

Her phone was full of messages

from Tarquin, Winona, and Blossom. She

Applied to the bem.

all

Heading downstairs for something

to eat.

Clayton Hawkins and Pamela Patel were in the living room. As soon as Elysia

appeared, Clayton called out,

"Sleeping Beauty's finally up! Hungry?"

Elysia: "...Starving."

"I saved you some lunch. Let me go heat it up."

Clayton headed straight for the kitchen with practiced ease.

Pamela gave her a curious look. "Late night? You slept half the day!"

Elysia blushed, mumbling, ". Just went to bed late."

Chapter 1410

Pamela asked, "Is this about Punikon? I heard from your dad that the school already expelled him."

"Yeah, the whole Punikon thing is over now. You and Dad don't have to worry about it."

Elysia instinctively knelt down to check Pamela's pulse, just like she always did.

Pamela was stable these days-as long as nothing too upsetting happened, she was doing pretty well.

Her mind still wasn't as sharp as it used to be, but there had been a lot of improvement.

After finishing, Elysia smiled and said,

"You're doing great, Mom. Your health's looking really good today. Gold star for you."

Pamela beamed at the compliment,

"I've been doing everything you said-taking my medicine, eating on time, going to bed on time. Oh! And I've been sticking to those after-dinner walks. Your dad can vouch for me."

Clayton came out of the kitchen carrying dinner plates,

"She's right, I can back her up. She's been doing fantastic. Irene, come on, dinner's ready!"

"Okay, I'm coming."

With a smile, Elysia followed her mom to the dining room.

She started eating, while Clayton and Pamela sat with her, chatting as they ate.

"Tarquin called me at lunch," Clayton said, "He wanted to check if you were awake. He didn't call you himself because he was worried he'd wake you up." Elysia asked, "He didn't come home for lunch?"

"Nope."

She figured he must've eaten at work, so she didn't think much of it. She asked, "Did he need something?"

"No, just wanted to check in on you. Oh, and he said you don't need to pick up the kids today-he'll grab them on his way home."

"He's picking them up?"

"Yep."

Elysia didn't give it another thought, taking a sip of her chicken soup.

"Alright then, I'll stay home. I'll fold paper cranes for Grandma and Grandpa later."

"Sounds good. We'll all do it together. By the way, Irene, our new house is finally ready. Your mom and I are planning to move in."

Elysia looked surprised, "Already? That was fast."

"Yeah, it was pretty much move-in, ready when we bought it. We just made a few changes here and

there nothing major. We can move anytime

"Did you check for any issues? Like, you know, mold or anything?"

"Checked everything. All clear."

Elysia breathed a sigh of relief. She hated the thought of her parents moving out, but she understood why.

They wanted to give her a home of her own here in Jindale City-a place that was just hers, not connected to Tarquin any way. Somewherd she could go whenever she wanted, especially if she and her husband ever had a spat. She wouldn't be left with nowhere to turn.

Even though Tarquin was wonderful and her parents knew it, they still insisted on

having their own place-just in case.

She understood. She didn't try to talk them out of it.

"So, when are you thinking of moving?"

"How about tomorrow or the day after? The kids are off from school, so it'll be more fun to move together."

"Alright, I'll talk to Tarquin when he gets home and see if it fits his schedule."

"Don't be sad, honey," Clayton said kindly. "Even after we move out, we'll still see you every day. We're just down the road!"

To stay close to Elysia, Clayton had bought a house in the same neighborhood-a cozy single-family home.

Elysia grinned,

"I'm not sad! After you move, I'll just come over to your place for dinner all the time. Dad's cooking is my favorite."

Clayton beamed with pride,

"Anytime you want, sweetheart. I'll cook for you every day!"

"Deal!" Elysia said, then added, "What about Hawkins Sea-freight? Are you really not going back to the office?"

"It's fine. Everything's running

smoothly at Hawkins now. If

anything important comes up, I'll do a video call I'm staying here in

ndale City for good and t

I'must go

back to check on things once in a while."