

Hitched 1411

Chapter 1411

Clayton let out a deep sigh and said with heartfelt emotion,

"I've missed out on over twenty years with you. I didn't just let you down-I let your mom down too. Now, with the years we have left, I just want to spend as much time together as I can."

Truth was, he'd been thinking about retirement for a while now. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized his daughter wasn't exactly cut out for the family business.

And his son-in-law... well, Tarquin was a good guy, sure. But people change. Who's to say that ten or twenty years down the road, Tarquin would care for their daughter the way he does now?

So, no way was he about to just hand Hawkins Sea-freight over to Tarquin.

They wanted it to stay in the family meant for their daughter. After all, Hawkins Sea-freight was their blood, sweat, and tears. Tarquin may have married in, but he didn't build it. The company was supposed to be her safety net, her backbone.

If he was being honest, the most suitable person to inherit it would be Elliot.

Elliot was a business prodigy, even as a kid. Someday, he'd be every bit as capable as Tarquin-maybe more so. Plus, Elliot was loyal to the family. Giving him the company was as good as giving it to their daughter.

But Elliot was still so young. Clay couldn't bear to dump all that pressure on the little guy just yet.

So he'd keep running things for now, and wait until Elliot was older. There'd be time to figure it all out.

Elysia felt a rush of gratitude. How lucky was she, to have parents who loved her this much?

They were Oceanopolis natives-actually, the wealthiest family in the city. And they'd left everything behind to move to Jindale City, just to be with her.

"Dad, if you ever need to go back to Oceanopolis, just let us know ahead of time. Mom and I can go with you, if we're free."

"Of course, sweetheart. Of course."

After lunch, Elysia got back to folding paper stars—a little family tradition they'd picked up lately, getting ready for the upcoming holiday.

The spare room downstairs was already packed with boxes of them.

Preschool let out at 4:30, and half an hour before, Elysia called Tarquin to double- check.

Once she confirmed that he'd be picking up the kids, she stayed home and didn't head out.

Right on time, Tarquin sent her a video-he'd picked up the kids and filmed them all waving hello. "Got them safe and sound," he said. "Don't worry. Just wait for us at home."

All five little ones squeezed into the frame to greet her.

Everything seemed perfectly normal.

But then, out of nowhere, she got a message from the teacher—and things took a weird turn.

The teacher wrote:

"Hi Evan's mom! I just realized Evan

forgot to take home his craft

.ne?

assignment. Would you be able to printout another copy for him at home?"

Elysia replied, "Sure, just send me the file."

Teacher: "Will do. And if he has any questions on how to do it, he can ask Elliot, Emmett, or Elijah."

No mention of Baby-Baby wouldn't know, anyway.

Elysia frowned. "Did he not pay attention in class? Why doesn't he know how to do it?"

Teacher: "He was out sick today."

Elysia's heart skipped a beat. She called the teacher immediately. "Evan was out sick today?"

"Yeah, didn't you know? His dad called and said he had a stomachache, so he'd be resting at home."

"Was it Evan who called in, or his dad?"

"His dad, of course. He said you told him to let Evan stay home and rest."

Elysia pressed her lips together, forcing herself to stay calm. "Alright, thanks for letting me know."

When she hung up, she headed straight upstairs, phone in hand.

Clayton and Pamela poked their

heads out of the kitchen, noticing

her expression. "Everything alrights Elysia?"

"No

for Dad. Evan's teacher just

forgot to send his homework then going to print it for him in the study."

"Alright, honey."

As soon as she turned the corner, her face darkened. She was seething.

That man. Sneaking around, letting their son skip school behind her back? Oh, he was in for it.

Chapter 1412

About ten minutes later, Tarquin came back with the kids.

He looked sharp as ever in his tailored suit, holding Baby in one arm and carrying her backpack in the other.

Baby had her hair in two cute pigtails, a bunny-shaped hair clip perched on her head. She was wearing a princess dress with white knee-high socks, and her shoes-limited-edition Mary Janes with little pearls were the envy of every little girl in her class.

Her big round eyes, chubby rosy cheeks, and fair skin made her the picture of adorable mischief—a classic cutie pie.

The four boys led the way in matching shirts and slacks, each with a lookalike backpack slung over their shoulders. Before they even got through the door, they were already calling out,

"Nana! Pops! We're home!"

"Hey, hey!" Clayton and Pamela came rushing out, beaming with joy.

Seeing their four handsome grandsons, the couple couldn't help themselves—hugging one, kissing another, laughing all the while.

Baby, still in Tarquin's arms, kicked her little legs excitedly and called out,

"Nana, Pops, I'm home too! Look, I'm right here!"

Clayton chuckled and hurried over.

"Of course Pops sees you, Baby! Come here, let me hold my little princess."

He scooped Baby up from Tarquin and spun her around, making her giggle with delight.

He barely had time to enjoy the moment before Pamela swooped in, "Nana's turn! Let's go inside, I made cookies!"

Tarquin gave a gentle, "Hey, Mom, Dad."

Clayton and Pamela nodded and herded everyone inside, still smiling ear to ear.

Pamela and the kids walked ahead, chatting, while Clayton and Tarquin lagged behind. Clayton leaned in and lowered his voice.

"Did you upset Irene again today?"

Tarquin's expression shifted. "What happened?"

"I dunno, after she talked to Evan's teacher on the phone, she seemed off."

Tarquin blinked, "She called Evan's teacher?"

"Yeah."

"What'd they talk about?"

"Something about Evan's homework. I'm not sure. I just heard Irene say she was

going upstairs to print out some assignments for him."

Printing homework? Well, that definitely means the cat's out of the bag.

Clayton eyed him. "So what exactly did you do?"

Tarquin decided honesty was the best policy.

"I took Evan to visit a military technology base. He's always wanted to go."

"Oh, well, that's not so bad. Evan's always been into that stuff-military gear, weapons Irene knows that. She'd probably support it. Wait, you took him today?"

Clayton caught on.

Today's Friday. Evan should've been in school!

Tarquin nodded sheepishly, "... Yeah."

Clayton's eyes widened. "You let him skip school on a Friday?!"

Tarquin looked awkward. "It wasn't skipping-we asked for leave."

Clayton just stared at him for a long moment, lips pressed together, then finally shook his head.

"You are so busted. I mean it. You

know how Irene is about school!

Remember before the semester

started, Baby cried every morning her eyes were all

puffy-and Irene still wouldn't let her take a day off! What on earth gave you the nerve to sneak Evan out?!"

Tarquin mumbled to himself. Well, the nerve came from me, I guess.

Last night, after coming home from the gym, Elysia had been in a great mood and pretty much let him do whatever he wanted. Their night had gone... very well.

And this morning, he'd seen the news from Thyania, and that had put him in an even better mood.

Thyania's martial arts community was inviting fighters from all over the world to a big friendship

tournament-Evan's grandfathernet

was leading the charge with a huge cash prize that was all over the

international headlines.

It was all thanks to last night's big match. Exactly what Tarquin had hoped for.

On the way to school, the kids had showered him with praise, saying he'd been

the coolest dad ever in the ring last night.

Honestly, it was hard not to feel on top of the world.

Chapter 1413

The kids' praise totally went to his head!

He got so carried away, he called in sick to work just to help Evan fulfill his dream.

Now, he regretted it.

Why did he have to take off today of all days? Couldn't he have just waited until tomorrow? Tomorrow was Saturday-Evan didn't even have school!

But regret was useless now.

Clayton saw his son-in-law looking all gloomy and couldn't help but feel sorry for him. He sighed and said,

"You're probably better off going to apologize first. Same old drill-if she starts smacking you, just yell for help. We'll come rescue you."

Tarquin managed a weak smile. "...Thanks, Dad."

Out in the living room, Pamela was carrying the baby off to find Lan.

Elliot, Emmett, and Elijah had just said hi to Elysia. The moment they spotted Tarquin walk in, the three little guys dashed over to him.

Elliot whispered, "Dad, Mom found out you called the school for Evan. She's got murder in her eyes."

Emmett nodded seriously. "She's so mad, I think she wants to eat you alive!"

Elijah chimed in, "Dad, she's probably really going to hit you. Brace yourself."

Tarquin winced. "...Where's Evan?"

"Mom kept him upstairs with her."

"She's giving him a talking to?"

Tarquin had barely finished the sentence when Evan came trudging down the stairs.

He spotted Tarquin, shrugged helplessly, and said, "Dad, you're toast. Seriously. Mom's on the warpath."

Tarquin asked, "Did you tell her everything?"

"Yeah, I had to! If I didn't, she'd get even angrier. I do not want Mom angrier."

Tarquin groaned. "So what did she say?"

Evan replied honestly, "She said this was a one-time deal. No more skipping school behind her back, and definitely no more faking sick!

"She also said, yeah, I messed up, but admitting mistakes and making it right is what a good kid does."

Tarquin pressed, "And then?"

"Then she patted my head, gave me a hug, let me go, and sent me down here. She told me to send you up."

Evan added, "Oh, and she's still really mad at you!"

Tarquin asked, "Did you try to plead my case?"

Evan straightened up, looking all noble. "Of course! You only got in trouble because of me, so I had to say something-but...no luck. She told me Kid let the grown-ups handle this.' So Dad, I did my best. You're on your own, buddy

Tarquin gave him a look, but didn't bother with the fact his own son was calling him buddyke some. old pal. He just started up the stairs, resigned to his fate.

Clayton called after him, "Tarquin, remember-if she starts swinging, yell loud! We'll come save you."

Tarquin shot his father-in-law a thumbs-up over his shoulder.

Upstairs, the bedroom door was closed. Tarquin knocked gently. "Elysia...?"

"Get in here!" Elysia snapped, her tone sharp as a whip.

Tarquin's mouth twitched. He opened the door, stepped into the bedroom, and closed it behind him.

Elysia was sitting on the couch, glaring at him so fiercely it was like she was wielding kitchen knives with her eyes.

Trying to lighten the mood, Tarquin flashed his most charming grin, hoping maybe, just maybe, his looks could win him some mercy.

"Hey, honey..."

Elysia was having none of it.

After all these years, that smile might have worked on some young girl, but it was

no match for Elysia in full fury.

She bared her teeth, her eyes blazing.

"What are you grinning about? What's so funny?!"

Chapter 1414

The corners of Tarquin's mouth twitched as he strode over, his long legs eating up the distance.

Just as Elysia was about to explode, he suddenly dropped to his knees with a dramatic thud!

Elysia's eyes went wide. "?!"

She instinctively tried to jump up, but Tarquin held her in place.

Still kneeling in front of her, he started apologizing.

"This whole thing was my fault today. I shouldn't have called Evan out of school behind your back-and told them he was sick, no less!"

"I realize now what a dumb move that was. I promise, I won't do it again!"

"People say admitting mistakes is the first step to fixing them, right? So please, honey, give me a break just this once."

Elysia was so thrown off by his kneeling, she just stared, blinking, completely speechless for a moment.

"You... get up first!"

"Not unless you forgive me, babe!"

Elysia was getting flustered. "Don't you know a man's knees aren't for kneeling?!"

"I know, but I'm not kneeling to anyone else—just my own wife. No shame in that." Elysia's eyelid twitched. "Get up!"

"Nope!"

"Tarquin!"

Suddenly, Elysia shouted, "Are you asking for a beating?!"

Tarquin immediately handed her a coat hanger.

"Use the hanger, honey. Don't hurt your hand."

"You-! You think I can't bring myself to hit you, is that it?!"

"No, no, I deserve it. Go ahead, I'm ready."

"You..."

Elysia's cheeks were bright red, but she couldn't deny he was being so sincere about apologizing!

She just couldn't bring herself to hit him.

Unable to hit him, she started lecturing instead.

"I've never seen a dad like you! You actually take your son out of school and teach him to lie! What's going through your head?!"

"You even told them he had a stomach ache! What, are you trying to make sure he knows exactly how to fake being sick next time he wants to skip class?!"

Tarquin said, "You're right, honey, I'm sorry."

"Evan's already a handful-the

naughtiest of the bunch! If you don't teach him right, I'm the one left worrying he's going to be out of control) and you're over here making it worse! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!"

"Honey, please, don't be mad. I really get it now," Tarquin pleaded.

Elysia let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm not stupid. Even on this trip back home, I could see Evan's smarter than most kids his age But heus

no matter how smart he is he stick

needs to go to school!"

belongs to

"Do you think I send them to preschool just so they can memorize the alphabet?

There's only so much you can learn from books at that age!"

Tarquin nodded, "I get it, I do. You want them to adjust, make friends, learn b to deal with new people

and situations. That's what really matters while they're growing up.

Elysia gritted her teeth. "So you understand, and you still skipped school with him!"

"Which is why I deserve to be punished. Just don't make yourself sick over it. If you need to hit me, go ahead."

Elysia snapped, "You're impossible!"

Tarquin nodded, "Yup. I'm the worst."

"You... You're really driving me crazy!"

"How about I hit myself for you?"

Elysia was speechless.

No matter what she said, Tarquin just kept agreeing with everything, nodding along.

He was basically the poster child for "apologize sincerely and often."

No-he was ridiculously good at it!

Eventually, Elysia's anger fizzled out.

She tossed the hanger aside.

"Fine, get up. I'll let it go this time. But if you dare do it again, I really will smack you!"

Tarquin looked like he'd just been pardoned by the president.

"Thank you, my lovely wife, for your mercy! I'll remember this for the rest of my life!"

Elysia shot back immediately.

"Who said you're off the hook? I said I wouldn't hit you, but you're sleeping in the guest room tonight."

Tarquin had just gotten to his feet when he dropped back down to his knees with another dramatic thud.

"Wait, what did you say?"

Elysia enunciated clearly, "I said, you're sleeping in the guest room tonight!"

Tarquin panicked. "No way! Just hit me instead!"

He picked up the hanger and tried to hand it back.

Elysia refused. "I said I wouldn't hit you, and I won't. But maybe a night in the

guest room will help you remember this lesson!"

Chapter 1415

"Honey..."

"Don't call me. I'm going down for dinner. If you want to kneel, be my guest."

Elysia strode toward the door, and Tarquin scrambled after her.

He grabbed her arm, but she shook him off.

Just as Elysia reached for the doorknob, Tarquin made a split-second decision. He pressed her gently against the door, blocking her path with his arm.

He was determined to make her forgive him!

He tried to kiss her, but Elysia turned her head away. "Tarquin, do you want a black eye that badly?!"

"Babe, I know I messed up. You can smack me if you want, but please don't say we're over-"

Before Tarquin could finish, a tiny voice piped up from the hallway:

"Big bro, second bro, third bro, Elijah-what are you guys doing lying in front of mom and dad's door?"

Elysia froze. "!"

Tarquin froze. "!"

She shoved Tarquin aside and flung open the door.

All four kids were huddled outside, looking as guilty as a pack of puppies caught stealing cookies. Their eyes darted everywhere but at her.

For a few stunned seconds, Elysia could only stare. Then she found her voice.

"When... when did you all get here?"

Elliot chimed in, "Just now!"

Evan added, "Maybe ten minutes ago?"

Emmett mumbled, "We came upstairs with Dad."

Elijah said, "We just got here!"

All four answered at once, none of them matching.

Elysia's eyes narrowed. "So you've all learned to lie just like your dad, huh?"

The kids looked at each other, then quickly corrected themselves, "We came up right after Dad did!"

Elysia crossed her arms. "And why exactly did you come up?"

Elliot answered for the group, "We were worried you'd actually hit Dad, so we were ready to rush in and kneel with him. You know, to beg you to forgive him!"

Elysia whipped around and glared at Tarquin, her eyes practically shooting daggers.

Seriously? Even the kids know you kneel for forgiveness?!

Tarquin, however, just shrugged, looking completely unbothered.

and his

"My dad did it before me, dad before him. There's no shame in

a husband kneeling to his wife. Being afraid of your wife just means you love her! If my dad could keel to my mom, I can sure as heck kneel to you. Someday, the boys't know it's a family tradition!"

Elysia was speechless. She couldn't even argue with his logic, so she just gritted her teeth.

"Starting tonight, you're sleeping in the guest room. Don't even think about coming back to our bed unless I say so."

She said it with finality, scooped up the youngest, and marched downstairs. Tarquin sighed.

The four boys looked at him with a mix of sympathy and helplessness.

"We were just trying to help, Dad."

"At least you didn't get smacked."

Tarquin groaned, "Honestly, I'd rather have gotten smacked..."

...

Downstairs, Clayton had been watching the whole scene unfold from the bottom of the stairs.

As soon as he saw his daughter coming down, he called out, "Irene, come help your old man dish up dinner."

"Coming," Elysia replied, setting the youngest down and heading for the kitchen.

Clayton took the chance to plead Tarquin's case. "You know, Tarquin's not a bad guy. He just spoils the kids a bit. That's a heck of a lot better than those deadbeat dads who don't care about their kids at all."

belongs to

"Especially for a CEO. Most guys in his position wouldn't even know their kids' birthdays, let alone spend time with them."

"I know you're strict about their grades, but a little scolding is enough. Don't go too hard on him."

Elysia grinned. "Don't worry, Dad. I'm not really mad at him."

Clayton shook his head. "Not mad? You're making him sleep in the guest room! Trust me, as someone who's been married a long time that's the ultimate punishment."

Elysia couldn't help but tease him. "Relax, Dad. I'm not torturing your son-in-law."

She leaned in and whispered something in his ear, then grabbed the plates and headed out of the kitchen.

Clayton's eyes lit up, and he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Those two lovebirds. They'll be just fine."

Chapter 1416

Tarquin had already come downstairs, looking like a puppy who just got scolded. Elysia ignored him, carrying her plate of food straight into the dining room. Tarquin sighed and strode into the kitchen. "Dad, what did Elysia say to you?" Clayton lowered his voice, "Don't get all gloomy. She said she's moving into the guest room for two reasons: one, to punish you, and two, to get a surprise ready for you."

Tarquin blinked. "A surprise?"

"Yep."

"What kind of surprise?"

"She didn't say. So even if you were a total angel today, she'd still find some reason to kick you out."

Tarquin groaned, "Can I just skip the surprise and keep my wife?"

Clayton shrugged. "Hey, don't ask me. Go ask her."

Tarquin threw a glance at Elysia. She shot him a glare.

He tried flashing her a winning smile. She rolled her eyes so hard it looked like she might pull a muscle.

Tarquin: ... Yeah, no need to ask. That's a hard no.

Elysia turned away, but couldn't help grinning to herself.

Silly guy, as if she'd really want to sleep apart if not for the surprise she was planning for him! Her husband deserved a little spoiling, after all.

Sure, he'd skipped out with Evan the other day. A bit of scolding was enough— she wouldn't banish him to the couch just for that. But his birthday was coming up fast, and she needed time to set up his surprise...

And if it's going to be a surprise, he absolutely can't know what it is.

That means he'll just have to suffer a little now for a sweet reward later. Delayed gratification, babe!

...

Once Tarquin realized there was a surprise in store, his mood lifted. But a night without his wife beside him? Pure torture.

He tossed and turned, then finally called Keaton Huber.

Keaton picked up instantly, but sounded like he wanted to hang up just as fast. "Dude, you calling me this late? Make it quick, I'm busy chatting up a girl right now."

Tarquin raised an eyebrow. "Where'd you find a girl?"

"Just met her tonight, and trust me, she's about to be my girlfriend. So spit it out, don't ruin my game."

Before Tarquin could answer, Keaton suddenly had a realization.

"Wait, shouldn't you be cuddling with Elysia right now? Why the heck are you calling me? Hold up-did she kick you out of bed?!"

Tarquin: ...

Keaton heard the silence and burst out laughing, "Dude, what did you do to get yourself exiled? Bro, you must've broken some kind of holy rule!"

Tarquin scowled, refusing to take the bait. Instead, he relayed everything Elysia had told him earlier.

Then, more seriously, he warned Keaton: "Look, I don't care if you

or not

or no

want to chase after What

but if you ever make her cry: coming for you. Elysia made me promise."

Keaton was absolutely flabbergasted.

"Man, you are completely whipped! Seriously, don't you ever think about your bros? It's all about your wife, huh?"

"It's bad enough you put your wife first-now you gotta protect her best friend, too?"

"So what, I'm not as important as your wife? Fine. But now I'm not even as important as your wife's bestie? That's cold, man!"

"You know what, Tarquin? I don't care about anyone's opinion, but gotta hand it to you-you are the mosthenpecked man I know Aren't you even a little embarrassed?"

"What's so scary about women anyway? I just don't get it. If I ever get married, I'll

be the king of the castle. My word will be law!"

Mr. Huber was still young and clueless. Mr. Bradford, on the other hand, knew better.

"The louder you talk, the harder you'll get knocked down, trust me."

Keaton scoffed, "No way I'll ever be whipped like you! I'm 100% alpha, man. Oh,

wait, the girl's sending me a voice note-gotta go!"

"As for Winona, relax. We're just

velmet

friends. I swear, I'll never make move. If I do, I'll babysit her grandkids or something! out!"

gaussien vay, làm

Keaton hung up, clearly eager to get back to his date.

Tarquin didn't bother calling again. He rolled over and texted Elysia.

[Hey babe, you still awake?]

[Can't sleep. Miss you.]

No reply. After a while, he tried again.

[Babe, I'm going to bed. Can I get a goodnight kiss? Do I deserve one?]

Elysia: ...

She couldn't help but think of that meme that was blowing up online lately—a series of dramatic, needy texts.

Honestly, this man was asking for it.

But hey, her husband deserved a little pampering. Elysia replied,

[Goodnight kiss, mwah.]

Tarquin grinned and texted back, [Love you.]

He even sent a sticker of a cartoon hugging and kissing.

Elysia smiled, her lips quirking up. [I'm going to bed now. Don't bug me.]

Tarquin: [Love you, love you, love you, Elysia, I love you!]

Elysia laughed quietly to herself. "Silly man, such a big baby sometimes."

Honestly, men are just grown-up kids.

When a man's completely at ease with a woman, he turns into the goofiest version of himself.

Elysia didn't reply again. She closed the chat and got to work—not on medicine this time, but on planning her husband's birthday surprise...

Chapter 1417

Time flew by, and before they knew it, the end of the month had arrived.

Because the priest at the local church had changed the date twice, the final exhumation was set for 10 a.m. on September 26th.

It was only a few days before Tarquin's birthday, which fell on September 29th.

The night before the exhumation, Elysia went over the checklist for the next day, reading it again and again.

After she'd memorized every detail, she double-checked all the things they'd need, determined not to let a single thing slip through the cracks.

She genuinely admired Kendrick and Elizabeth, her late parents-in-law, from the bottom of her heart.

Elysia never quite knew how to express the love she felt for them as a daughter-in-law. All she could do was make sure tomorrow's reburial ceremony would go perfectly her own way of showing respect.

By the time she finished, it was already 11 p.m.

The kids were fast asleep, so Elysia headed to the study to find Tarquin.

He was sitting at his desk, smoking, but quickly stubbed it out when he saw her. Elysia walked over, picked up his lighter, and lit a new cigarette for him herself.

"If you're stressed, just smoke," she said softly.

Tarquin put out the cigarette again, then pulled her into his arms.

"No matter how bad I'm feeling, I just need to see you. You're better than any cigarette, you know that?"

Elysia sat down on his lap, arms around his neck without even thinking about it.

"I went through the checklist again," she said. "Everything's set for tomorrow. No mistakes. First thing in the morning, we'll go pick up Mom."

"Thank you, babe."

She hugged him a little tighter. "It's already eleven. Shouldn't you head over to the old house?"

Kendrick's memorial was kept in the family chapel at the old house.

The priest had asked Tarquin to spend the night there, joining in prayers with the monks to prepare for the reburial in the morning.

Superstitious or not, Elysia figured anything that brought peace of mind to the living was worth it.

Tarquin glanced at the clock. "Yeah, I should get going. You get some rest. I'll be back early to pick you guys up."

"Promise me you won't be too sad, okay? I worry about you."

He smiled pinched her cheek affectionately, "I won't be sad, you're right We should be happy

and Dad finally get to be together again. It's a good thing."

Elysia nodded. "Exactly. If we're happy, they'll be happy too."

She rested her cheek on his shoulder: "Even if they can't be here

you still have me and the kids als

always be with you, no matter what."

Tarquin was touched. He ran his hand gently through her hair.

Just then, Tarquin's phone rang-Lowell was calling, reminding him it was time to head to the old house.

Elysia let out a deep breath and climbed off his lap. "Alright, go on. You've got important things to do."

"Yeah. You get some sleep."

"I will."

They hugged one more time and left the study together.

Tarquin walked her back to their bedroom, watched her get into bed, tucked the blanket around her, and kissed her forehead before he left.

At the door, he couldn't help but look back at her. "Goodnight, sweetheart."

Elysia, already wrapped up in her comforter, replied in her best cheerful voice, "Night, honey. See you tomorrow!"

Tarquin grinned, turned off the light, and closed the door behind him.

He met up with Lowell, and as soon as they got in the car, Tarquin's phone rang again.

It was a call from an anonymous number.

Tarquin had a feeling he knew what was coming, narrowed his eyes, and answered.

He stayed silent, and so did the caller.

After a long pause, the voice on the other end finally spoke, distorted by a voice changer.

"Ran into Big Gale Windham out on

the Atlantic. That shipment snudet

oukthrough Hawkins Shipping Just got it-and it's been switched.'

M?

"

There was a weary sigh. "Tarquin, you really aren't going to make life easy for me, are you?"

Tarquin recognized the mysterious caller immediately. He didn't bother with small talk. "Are you coming tomorrow or not?"

Chapter 1418

The mysterious caller said,

"I'd love to come, but I can't risk it. If I show up, you'll just nab me. Way too dangerous."

Tarquin didn't reply. He lit a cigarette, took a slow drag, and stared out the window.

"Is it you?" he finally asked.

The caller shot back, "Is it who?"

Tarquin said, "My dad treated you pretty well back in the day. You used to be a real patriot, too."

The mysterious man let out a low, creepy chuckle.

"Patriotism? Please. I love money more. Why don't you take a guess who I am? If you get it right, I'll come see you tomorrow."

Tarquin said nothing. He wasn't about to say the name on his mind—not until the last possible second. What if he was wrong? It could put him in the crosshairs.

He took another puff, tapped the ash into a coffee mug, and kept his tone steady.

"If you want the real Gen-8 virus, you'll have to come see me in person. No show, no deal."

The caller replied,

"But you haven't even found it yet. Once you do, I'll come running."

He sighed,

"I'm sorry about your parents. Really. But don't blame us for being ruthless. They were the ones who went too far!"

"We spent decades on this research. Poured in a fortune. You think we'd just let them walk off with it?"

"And we sure as hell weren't going to let them leak anything back to Zhinora."

"They were way out of their league, trying to play hero!"

Tarquin's jaw tightened, his eyes dark.

"You don't get to talk about my parents. Aren't you a Zhinorian too? Aren't you worried this virus could wipe you out as well?"

The mystery man laughed. "Who told you I was from Zhinora?"

Tarquin shot back, "Aren't you?"

He dodged, "I never said I was. Never said I wasn't. Why don't you guess?"

Tarquin wasn't in the mood for games. "Why'd you call me? What do you want?"

The caller said, "What if I told you I just want to keep you from getting hurt? Would you believe that?"

Tarquin was silent.

The man continued,

"I know how much you loved your parents. Thinking about them must really get to you."

"Honestly, I feel for you. I cared about your folks too. If they hadn't gone down the wrong path, we might have been good friends."

Tarquin flicked his ash. "If there's nothing else, I'm hanging up."

There was no point arguing over whose path had gone astray. He didn't want to listen to any more nonsense.

"Hold on," the caller said. "There's something I don't get. The antidote your team developed it reminded us of someone. Tracey."

"But from what we know, she's been dead for years."

"So, is she faking it, or do you have some new genius on your side?"

"And last time you went to Darkfort City, I doubt you were just there for a hike."

"Elysia, along with Elliot, Evan, et

Emmett, disappeared in those

woods for five years. Not only did

they survive but they all came back with some serious skills."

"What's really in those woods?"

Tarquin wasn't surprised at the questions. In fact, it reassured him. If the guy was fishing for info, it meant he hadn't found anything out on his own. Grandpa and Grandma's secrets were still safe.

Tarquin kept his voice calm.

"If you want answers, do your own digging."

The caller chuckled again.

"Digging's a pain. I'd rather just ask

you. We could trade-info for info et

You tell me what want to know

tell you what you want to know."

Tarquin asked, "And what could you possibly tell me?"

Chapter 1419

The stranger said, "I can give you information on Zane."

He leaned in, lowering his voice. "And I can help you make Axel disappear. He just went off to Mariana Land, right? All I need to do is pull a few strings, and he'll never come back. He'll die out there, and no one will ever know."

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, his expression going colder.

"News about Zane isn't worth trading for my intel," he said flatly. "And as for Axel..."

He leaned forward, his tone sharp. "Go ahead, try something. See if Axel gets hurt because of you. If anything does happen to him, I'll make sure you regret it."

"When I find the real eighth-generation virus, I'm handing it right over to the government. We have nothing more to discuss."

There was a long silence on the other end before the mysterious caller spoke again.

"Kidding, relax. Axel's not my problem-never was. Sorry for your loss, pal. But when you get your hands on that virus, I'll come see you myself."

The line went dead.

Tarquin listened to the dial tone, his brow furrowed in frustration.

Lowell was driving, glancing at Tarquin through the rearview mirror.

"Mystery man?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Think he'll try to hurt Axel?"

Tarquin shook his head. "He wouldn't dare. We're not the ones begging for help- he's the one who needs something from us. If he steps out of line, he loses his shot at a deal."

Lowell hesitated, then asked, "Do you know where the eighth-generation virus really is?"

Tarquin's reply was simple: "We'll find out when we open the coffin."

Lowell took a moment, then tried again. "Tarquin, is your suspect... who I think it is?"

Tarquin looked up, their eyes meeting in the mirror.

He didn't answer, but the silence was telling.

Lowell understood. He frowned, glancing at Tarquin with a look of sympathy. If it really was that person, how much would it hurt Tarquin?

The car fell silent, the tension thick. After what felt like ages, Tarquin's phone started to ring again.

This time, it was someone familiar-Soren.

Soren had loved Elizabeth his whole life and had never married. A respected general, tough as nails, but gentle when it came to her.

Tarquin steadied himself and answered. "Soren."

"Tarquin, I'm at the foot of the hill. I want to go up to the chapel to spend some time with your mother. Let whoever's on security know I'm coming."

Ever since Elizabeth's ashes were interred there, Tarquin had posted his most trusted people to keep watch.

"When did you get back?" Tarquin asked.

Soren sounded tired. "Just now. As soon as I heard you'd found your mother's ashes I wanted to come back but there's been unrest at the border and I couldn't get away."

"She'll be buried with your father tomorrow. Once she's in that casket, I might never see her again."

Tarquin knew how deep Soren's

feelings for his mother ran-part of

love part friendship part family. Soren's devotion was any less than his father's.

"I'll make the call now," Tarquin said.

"Thank you."

After hanging up, Tarquin called the security team and told them to let Soren through.

About half an hour later, he and Lowell arrived at the Hawkins Mansion.

The old family home was empty now, except for cleaning staff. No one from the Bradfords lived there anymore.

Usually, it was quiet as a grave. But not today.

The place was buzzing with noise, inside and out.

In the chapel, a priest was reciting prayers. Outside the main gates, Allegra Bradford was causing a

Re

scene with the rest of the family

crying and shouting. Reporters

crowded around, cameras flashing.

To be clear, the others were quietly weeping. Allegra, though, was putting on a

show.

"Who do you think you are, opening Killian's casket? How dare you let that woman through our door?"

"No one in the Bradford family ever recognized her! What right does she have to

be buried with Killian?"

"If you want them buried together, you'll have to bury me first!"

Killian Bradford-that was Kendrick's original name.

Tarquin stepped out of the car in a sharp black suit, his face cold as ice.

Chapter 1420

"My mom wants to be buried next to my dad, not get a place in the Bradford family mansion. She doesn't need any of you to accept her! As long as my dad and I do,

that's enough!"

"If any of you have a problem with it, keep it to yourselves. And if you can't, go ahead and drop dead-I'll even make sure you're buried, out of respect for my dad!"

The room full of weeping relatives quickly averted their eyes when Tarquin walked in, none daring to meet his gaze.

Even the reporters wisely stepped aside, keeping their cameras down.

Allegra, eyes red from crying, glared at Tarquin and yelled,

"You bastard! Your father lived as a Bradford and died as a Bradford! For your mom to be buried with him, the family has to agree!"

"I'm the oldest now, so I call the shots. And we Bradfords don't want that tramp Elizabeth in our family plot! She's not worthy!"

"If you dare bury them together, I'll kill myself tonight just to show you!"

Tarquin's voice was icy. "Then do it now. But if you don't, tomorrow I'll make sure you're dragged along and forced to watch my mom and dad be buried together."

"And the rest of you, open your eyes tomorrow and see for yourselves you could never measure up to her."

"She might be gone, but even her name is worth more than your lives."

Then Tarquin turned to the security guards at the door, voice sharp as a whip.

"If anyone tries anything, don't bother stopping them. Just toss the bodies out and deal with them later."

"If they don't follow through, don't let any of them leave. Tomorrow, bring them to the cemetery. Make them kneel and watch my mom's burial."

The guards nodded in unison. "Yes, sir!"

Without looking back at the wailing crowd, Tarquin strode into the old house.

He'd met plenty of women in his life.

He knew the strength and dignity of his mother. He'd seen Elysia's kindness and goodness, which made him despise women like Allegra even more.

This bunch had always hated his mother.

They once swore that if the Bradfords ever accepted her, they'd all kill themselves in protest.

When he was a kid, after returning to the Bradford estate, these women would openly badmouth his mother in front of him.

They called her a homewrecker, a

gold digger, said she was just after

his dad, called her every name in the book-slut, whore, shameless tramp.

All of it, just jealousy.

They envied her beauty, her education, her character, and most of all, his father's love for her.

They couldn't stand seeing something so pure, so they tried to destroy it.

He'd seen the worst of selfishness and cruelty in these women.

If it hadn't been for Gideon Bradford's selfishness, and these women fueling the fire his parents wouldn't have suffered so much for love.

They wouldn't have had to move overseas, wouldn't have died far from home, wouldn't have left him to fend for himself.

He wouldn't have grown up without his parents' protection, suffered so much, been through so much pain.

And now, when he finally wanted to bring his mother home to rest beside his father, they came out crying, trying to stop him.

Like they mattered at all.

Well, if they wanted attention, he'd give them all they could handle.

Tomorrow, he'd make sure they all saw make sure they saw, crystal clear, how he'd bring his mother home in glory to rest beside his father.

The honor she'd have was something these women could only dream of in their lifetimes.

Tarquin spent the night in the family chapel. At the first light of dawn, he left.

According to his plan, he'd go back to Number One Mansion, pick up Elysia and the kids.

Then, together, they'd go to the church to bring Elizabeth home.

When he walked out of the Bradford estate, Allegra and the rest were still there- not a single one had made good on their threats.

Seeing him, Allegra screamed,

"Tell me! Just tell me what makes Elizabeth worthy of your father?! What makes her worthy of the Bradford family burial ground?!"

Tarquin didn't even spare her a glance. He got in his car and drove home.