

Hitched 1581

Chapter 1581

Keaton was stumped. He couldn't think of a good solution right away. He rubbed his temples for a moment, looking up at the distant lighthouse. After a long moment of silence, he got up and went upstairs. He changed his clothes, called the cleaning service to come tidy up, and then drove away. He was already far from the neighborhood when he suddenly thought of Winona's dress. It was a form-fitting, cinched-waist dress, hard to take off. In their haste last night, he hadn't even bothered with the zipper-he'd just ripped it straight off her. The image of her in that torn dress, bare shoulder and cleavage exposed, grabbing his collar and tilting his chin up... A goddess, a total knockout-words weren't enough. He had pinned her against the glass right then and there... no time to even think about running upstairs for protection. Thinking back on that electrifying scene, Keaton swallowed hard, his throat tight with a lingering heat. He grabbed a bottle of water and chugged half of it in one go. Then he jerked the steering wheel, making a sharp U-turn back to the villa. The cleaners were already there. Seeing him return, they paused, startled, before quickly greeting him, "Mr. Huber." Keaton's eyes scanned the floor. Seeing no clothes, he asked urgently, "Where's the dress that was by the window?" The cleaner hadn't taken out the trash yet. "Is this it?" she asked, holding it up. Keaton took the dress, the soft fabric a ghost of Winona's presence against his palms. He lingered over it for a moment, the memory of her skin still searing his mind. Scenes from last night flashed through his mind, one after another. His mouth went dry, and a wave of heat washed over him. He swallowed hard, then dashed upstairs with the dress. He hung it in his closet, but after staring at it for a moment, he took it down and stuffed it into his safe. The upstairs cleaner was a familiar face; she'd been working for him for years. She was completely baffled by this bizarre move. Who on earth would lock a piece of shredded silk in a safe like it was a diamond? Keaton offered a casual explanation. "She's got a hell of a temper. If she comes back asking for her dress and I don't have it, she'll kill me. I'm just keeping it, just in case." The housekeeper nodded politely, a tight, awkward smile on her face. She didn't understand at all. The dress was torn to shreds; who would ever want it back? And even if the girl did ask for it, why put it in a safe? Couldn't he just hang it in the closet? Was he afraid it would get stolen?! It made no sense, but she didn't dare ask, so she just kept smiling awkwardly. Keaton locked the safe and added, "The dress is too torn up to belong in my closet." The housekeeper was speechless. *So it doesn't belong in the closet, but it belongs in the safe? Since when is a closet more valuable than a safe? He's clearly treasuring it like a prized possession!* The housekeeper couldn't resist. "Are you seeing someone, Mr. Huber?" she asked, her curiosity getting the better of her. Keaton shook his head. "No, why do you ask?" The housekeeper smiled. "I've been working for you for seven or eight years, and this is the first time I've ever seen you bring a woman back here." Keaton wanted to say they were just friends, but after what had happened, the words wouldn't come out. They had slept together. 'Friends' didn't quite fit anymore. Without offering an explanation, Keaton left the villa again, feeling a bit lost himself. The dress was ruined; Winona definitely wouldn't want it back. So why was he keeping it? But then he thought, what if? What if she came back for it someday and it was gone? What if she got upset? Besides, the house was huge. It could spare the space for her dress. Keaton drove, his mind racing, filled with thoughts of Winona. He wanted to call her, but what would he say? He could talk about the dress! He had ripped it, so he should buy her a new one. And her phone-he'd dropped her phone, so he should get her a new one of those, too. Right, they had plenty to talk about. With his excuse ready, Keaton picked up his phone and called Winona.

Chapter 1582

Meanwhile, Winona had already arrived at the airport. She was wearing Keaton's clothes, a face mask, and sunglasses, completely bundled up. Her flight wasn't boarding yet, so she was waiting in the VIP lounge. She took her phone out of her pocket and, after a moment's hesitation, turned it on. As soon as it booted up, a flood of new messages appeared-missed calls, unread texts. Before she could even look through them, a call from Keaton came through. Seeing his name flash on the screen, her heart hammered in her chest, a wave of irritation washing over her. After a brief thought, she ignored the call. Noticing a missed call from Elysia, she composed herself and called her back, forcing a light tone. "Hey, Elysia, are you in Jindale City already?" Elysia's voice was frantic. "I got here at noon! Where have you been? Your phone was off. I asked Blossom, but even she couldn't reach you, so she had Tarquin ask Keaton, and he couldn't get ahold of you either! You scared me to death." Winona was too embarrassed to explain what had happened with Keaton, so she laughed it off. "My phone died. I just turned it on. I'm actually at the airport right now. A last-minute event came up out of town, and it's so rushed I didn't have time to say goodbye. We'll catch up when I'm back." She had known about this event before and originally planned to turn it down. But after leaving Keaton's house today, she felt a sudden, desperate need to get away. Though she had acted calm in front of him, the moment she was out of his sight, her composure crumbled. If she had slept with anyone else, she might not have cared. They could just never see each other again, no harm, no foul. But not Keaton. They had far too many mutual friends and family. Keaton's parents, Richard and Janelle, adored her like their own daughter. His sister, Jessamine, was as close to her as a real sibling. His best friend, Tarquin, was her own best friend's husband. No matter what, they would definitely see each other often in the future. Avoiding him forever was impossible. But now that they'd slept together, they couldn't go back to the way they were. And they certainly weren't about to start dating. So she was stuck. She had no idea how to handle this. That's why she didn't want to see her parents, or Elysia and Blossom Blythe. She just needed to get away by herself for a bit, to breathe. Get away from this city, away from him. So she called her agent and took the gig. Being a celebrity meant traveling all the time anyway. Winona had only been staying in Jindale City because of the situation with Zane. So her excuse didn't raise any alarms for Elysia, who had no idea she was actually running away from Keaton. Elysia was just worried. "With Zane still on the loose, is it safe for you to be at an event?" Winona smiled. "It's safe! I have plenty of bodyguards with me, don't worry. I have to get back to work eventually. I can't let Zane stop me from chasing my dreams." Elysia let out a long breath. "Okay, then. When will you be back?" "I'm not sure yet. I'll see how things go over there." "Even with bodyguards, you need to be careful." "I know." Winona chatted with Elysia for a little while longer before hanging up. The second she did, Keaton's call came in again. She didn't answer, but he kept calling. Not knowing what to say to him, she sent him straight to voicemail again. [What's up?] He replied instantly. [Couldn't reach you. Everyone was worried.] Winona: [I'm not a three-year-old. Nothing to worry about.] Keaton: [The cleaners were here today. They asked if you still wanted that dress.]

Chapter 1583

As soon as Winona saw the word 'dress,' blood rushed to her face. She was mortified, the memory of him ripping it to shreds still fresh. [I don't want it. Just throw it out!] she typed back angrily. Keaton

wasn't surprised. He immediately texted, [I'll buy you a new one.] Winona shot back, [No need!] Before Keaton could reply, Winona added, [I'm busy right now, gotta go.] Keaton quickly typed, [And your phone. I accidentally dropped it last night. I already ordered you a new one. I'll give it to you when it arrives.] Winona paused, checking her phone. Sure enough, she found a small scratch on the casing. She didn't know how Keaton had dropped it, but she still replied, [It's fine, it still works.] Before he could respond, she sent another message. [Busy.] After sending the text, she switched her phone off and boarded the plane. ... Back at Number One Mansion, Tarquin asked Elysia as she hung up the phone, "Did you get ahold of Winona?" "Yeah, her phone died. It scared me to death, I thought something had happened to her." Tarquin said, "Keaton's in Jindale City looking after her. He won't let anything happen." Elysia sighed. "Knowing Keaton... I can't tell if it's a blessing or a curse for Winona." She changed the subject. "By the way, have you heard from Elliot and Evan? School starts tomorrow. When are they coming back? I have to call the teacher and ask for time off." Tarquin continued his lie. "I heard from them. It'll be at least another week before they're back." There was a comms outpost in the mountains, so it was possible to contact the outside world. If Elliot had arrived, he would have definitely called to report that they were safe. Since he hadn't, it meant they either hadn't arrived yet or hadn't had a chance to get to the station. So it would be at least another week, considering the hike down alone took several days. Elysia frowned, still worried. "They've been gone for so long. What really happened to my grandpa?" Tarquin ruffled her hair soothingly. "It's nothing serious. He was just feeling down. Elliot and Evan are with him, so don't worry. For now, just ask the teacher for a week's leave of absence." Elysia didn't press further. "Okay." ... At that moment, Elliot and Evan were nearing the mountain compound. Evan wondered aloud, "We're almost home. Why hasn't Great-Grandpa Bernard come out to meet us?" Elliot walked on, a growing unease in his heart. They had entered the monitored zone yesterday. Normally, their great-grandparents would have spotted them by then and come to find them. But so far, they were nowhere to be seen. They were now at most a half-hour's walk from the cabin, deep in the core area, yet it was still eerily quiet. There was no sign of their great-grandparents. Elliot couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. "Evan, you and White go scout ahead. Be cautious. If you see anything unusual, don't do anything rash. Come back and get us immediately." "Got it!" Evan said, then looked at the man with the scarred face. "You watch over my brother for me." The scarred man knew how capable Evan and White were, so he nodded confidently. "Go on." Evan and White sprinted ahead, disappearing from sight in an instant. The scarred man stared in the direction they had gone, his own brow furrowed with worry. He felt it, too. Something wasn't right. Putting everyone else aside, he knew Bernard's personality. If Bernard knew they were here, he would have been ecstatic and come running to meet them. But he hadn't. This was not normal. And when things weren't normal, it usually meant trouble.

Chapter 1584

The man with the scarred face grew more anxious. He turned to Elliot. "Elliot, let's speed up. I'll carry you." Elliot was just as eager to get to the cabin, so he nodded. "Okay!" The man hoisted him onto his back and took off at a run towards the cabin. About ten minutes later, the cabin came into view, and Walter finally appeared. He stood in the distance, waving at them. "Elliot!" Elliot's eyes lit up. "It's Walter!" The scarred man saw him too and quickened his pace, running over with Elliot on his back. "Walter!" Elliot called out excitedly. "Hey, hey." Walter chuckled, taking Elliot from the scarred man's back and lifting him high into the air. "Look at you, kid! You've gotten sturdier in just over a month!"

Elliot quickly asked, "Walter, have you seen Evan?" "I did, I did. Evan's with Bernard and the old lady right now. Quincy's at home cooking up a feast for you two." He then turned to the scarred man and greeted him with a smile. "Come on, let's go home!" Walter started walking with Elliot in his arms, but Elliot, worried about tiring him, slid down to walk on his own. He held Walter's hand and asked as they walked, "Walter, didn't you guys see us enter the area yesterday?" "We saw you. We knew the moment you arrived. We were about to go check, but then we realized it was you, so we weren't worried and didn't head over." Elliot was even more confused. If they knew it was them, they should have been even more eager to come find them, right? Especially Bernard. He would have been overjoyed to see them and would have come running. Elliot frowned. "Walter, did something bad happen here in the mountains?" A strange glint flashed in Walter's eyes, but he quickly covered it with a smile. "Nothing major. Quincy and I were out yesterday. When we saw you'd arrived, we rushed back." "Bernard and the old lady were at home, but Bernard got sick. He hasn't fully recovered yet. He wanted to come get you, but your great-grandmother forced him to stay put." Elliot's face fell. "What's wrong with Bernard?!" The scarred man also frowned, looking at Walter with a worried expression. Walter feigned calmness. "A cold and a fever. Just a little bug. The old lady is looking after him, so you don't need to worry." "A cold and a fever?" Walter nodded, sighing. "People get old. Our bodies aren't what they used to be. Getting a little sick is normal." Elliot and the scarred man remained silent. When they reached the cabin, Walter called out, "I brought them back." Quincy hurried out of the kitchen. Even though Elliot wasn't his successor, he was incredibly fond of the boy. "Elliot!" Elliot quickly greeted him, "Quincy." Quincy beamed. "I didn't expect to see you again so soon. Are Emmett and the others doing well?" "Yes, they're great. Where's Bernard?" "In his room, talking with Evan." Just as Quincy finished speaking, the great-grandmother emerged from Bernard's cabin, her face full of affection. "Elliot." Elliot ran to her. "Great-Grandma!" The old woman chuckled. "Good boy, you've gotten taller." Bernard and Evan also came out of the room. Evan's eyes were red and swollen, as if he had just been crying. When Elliot and the scarred man saw Bernard, they both froze. They barely recognized him. In just over a month, Bernard had wasted away to skin and bones. He'd always been lean, but this was a sickly, emaciated thinness. Elliot's eyes welled up. He ran and hugged him. "Bernard." Bernard scooped him up and launched him into the air, catching the boy with effortless precision.

Chapter 1585

"Well, look at you! Back so soon. What a surprise!" Bernard said cheerfully. Elliot had been worried sick, but being thrown into the air like that shocked the anxiety right out of him, leaving only sheer terror. "Elliot," Bernard asked, "how about Bernard takes you for a real flight?" Elliot's face went pale, and he quickly shook his head. "No, that's okay." Only Evan enjoyed Bernard's 'flights,' and only Evan could handle them. Both he and Emmett were terrified of them. The scarred man frowned, his gaze fixed on Bernard. "Why are you so thin?" Bernard just grinned. "Thin or not, I can still take you down. Wanna spar right now?" The scarred man fell silent. Seeing him act just as spirited as ever, Elliot and the scarred man felt a bit of their unease subside, even though it was clear he had more than just a cold. Bernard asked, "I heard from Evan that you two are here on a mission this time?" Elliot decided to address the virus first. "Great-Grandpa, Great-Grandma, let's talk inside." Once inside, Elliot immediately took out the small box he had been carrying. "What's this?" Bernard asked curiously. "Strain 8," Elliot said. At those words, the expressions on the three elders' faces changed instantly. The great-grandmother's brow furrowed deeply, her pupils dilating in shock. It took her a moment to speak. "Where did you get

this?" Elliot explained, "My grandparents got it from the bad guys when they were alive. My dad only found it a few days ago and had us bring it to you immediately." The great-grandmother's face was grave as she picked up the virus sample and examined it closely. "Great-Grandma," Elliot asked, "is this the legendary 8th generation virus?" She didn't nod or shake her head, her expression deadly serious. "I need to go to the lab. Don't follow me. I'll go alone." "Be careful, Great-Grandma!" Elliot urged. To confirm if it was truly Strain 8, she would have to open it. It was incredibly toxic; infection meant certain death. It was extremely dangerous. "I know. Don't worry." The great-grandmother left with the virus. Quincy said, "Your great-grandmother has handled more poisons than you can imagine. She's a professional. She'll be fine opening it for testing, so don't worry. You all chat for a bit, I'm going to check on the food in the pot." As soon as Quincy left, Bernard said, "Evan, let's go play outside. The virus is the old lady's business. We can't help with that." "Are you well enough to go out and play?" Evan asked quickly. Bernard grinned. "Of course I am. I'm all better now. Let's go, let's go." Walter frowned slightly, looking as if he wanted to say something, but he held his tongue. The scarred man started to follow, but Bernard stopped him. "You stay here. When the old lady gets back, you take Elliot to the comms outpost. Have him call Elysia to let her know they're safe, and while you're at it, have Tarquin arrange for some supplies to be brought in from the outside." Without giving the man a chance to reply, he picked up Evan and left. Elliot glanced worriedly in the direction Bernard had gone, then asked Walter, "Is there still no news from Gerald and Howard?" Walter shook his head. "We lost contact after they went down the mountain. No idea what they're up to. We're running low on supplies here. Since we can't reach Gerald, we'll have to trouble Tarquin." Elliot frowned. Getting his dad to send supplies was a small matter. The bigger issue was that Gerald was in charge of supplies for the mountain. He would have known they were due for a restock, so why hadn't he returned? Gerald was meticulous and highly responsible. Even if he was held up, he would have made sure the supplies were sent ahead. This was another thing that didn't add up.

Chapter 1586

The Matriarch returned just as Walter finished organizing the list of supplies. She was thrilled. "That's it! It's Strain 8!" Elliot let out a long sigh of relief. At least they didn't have to worry about finding it anymore. "I'm going to the comms outpost to tell Dad. Great-Grandma, do you need Dad to ship in any medicine?" Walter explained, "We haven't heard anything from Gerald. Since Elliot is here, I was thinking we could have Tarquin send some things over first. This is the list I made. See if you need to add anything." The Matriarch nodded. "Alright." Twenty minutes later, she handed the completed list to Elliot. "Have Evan go with you." She said Evan, not Bernard. Elliot, ever perceptive, took the list without changing his expression. "Evan went out with Bernard." The Matriarch looked surprised. "Bernard went out again?!" Seeing his great-grandmother's tension, Elliot grew concerned. "Great-Grandma, is Bernard not supposed to go out?" The Matriarch frowned. "It's not that. He just recovered from his illness. He needs to rest." The small, scarred old man immediately spoke up, "I'll go get him back." The Matriarch shook her head and sighed. "Let him be. He's happy to see Evan. He won't come back even if you call him." Elliot's brow furrowed. He asked, unconvinced, "Great-Grandma, are you sure Bernard is okay?" The Matriarch looked at him and was silent for a few seconds. "He's fine. He knows his own body. If he feels unwell, he'll come back to find me." With that, the Matriarch changed the subject. "In that case, let your great-uncle and Walter go with you. Grab a bite before you go." ... After they left, Quincy looked worried. "Can Bernard's body still handle this much activity?" The Matriarch sighed. "We can't control

him. Having Elliot, Evan, and his junior suddenly show up is a joyous occasion for him. Perhaps it was fate's way of letting them have one last good gathering. So, don't worry about him." Quincy frowned, his appetite gone. "Elliot didn't find any trace of Gerald and Howard out there either. I fear the worst for them." "They said they'd definitely be back for Christmas dinner when they left. But they've been gone so long without a word. I'm afraid they won't be making it back for that dinner." As Quincy spoke, he heaved a long sigh. "The eldest and the fourth are likely gone, and Bernard is gravely ill. With a heavy sigh, he added, "Our time is running out. Can we still complete our mission?" The Matriarch said with a frown, "We do our best and leave the rest to fate." The room fell silent for a moment before she spoke again. "But don't be so negative. When we die, the next generation will take our place. Elliot, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, and Baby-every one of them is a promising talent! They may be young now, but being raised by Elysia and Tarquin, they'll surely grow up right. Our entire bloodline is full of talent; it will endure and thrive!" "Besides, we've always had a spirit of unity, a spirit of selfless sacrifice for the greater good. It's in our blood, passed down from our ancestors! They once had the power of nations on their side, but we had an unbreakable will. Now, the playing field is finally even. Do their descendants still have that same fire in their bellies?" The Matriarch snorted coldly. "Even though we have traitors in our midst, most of our people are loyal to the bone. If they think we're the same easy targets we were decades ago, they're in for a violent awakening. As for what we old folks couldn't finish, we'll leave it to the children. They will surely be more successful than us in the future. What good did our strength do us? Weren't we cornered, forced to fake our deaths and live in hiding in these mountains?!"

Chapter 1587

"The children will never be pushed to our desperate state. With this new era of peace to protect them, they will surely reach ever greater heights." Quincy took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. "We all suffered under oppression. Just having the chance to see this prosperous era is a great fortune. And fate sending these children to us, giving us successors, is an even greater one. We can rest in peace when we die." "I used to worry that Elysia was too kind, not ruthless enough, and that she would suffer for it. But now she has Tarquin by her side. Tarquin has a strong moral compass, but he's also decisive and acts with a killer instinct. He perfectly compensates for Elysia's gentle nature." Kindness is a virtue, but too much of it is a weakness. To be kind to your enemies is to be cruel to yourself. To achieve great things, one needs a certain edge of ruthlessness. The Matriarch said, "You underestimate Elysia. Elysia is kind, not gentle. She may be timid, but she has a spine of steel. She's also destined for great things. Of course, having Tarquin by her side is even better." The Matriarch suddenly sighed. "But there are still regrets... I fear we won't have the chance to help Gerald, Bernard, and Howard get their personal revenge. Never mind them, we probably won't even get a chance to settle our own scores!" Quincy frowned. "The mission comes first." The room fell silent again for a while. Quincy then asked, "Strain 8 you've been searching for has finally appeared. Can you defeat it?" The Matriarch's expression turned solemn. "It has to be possible. Failure is not an option. Before I die, I will absolutely solve this massive problem! Otherwise, I won't be able to rest in peace!" Quincy let out a long breath and asked, "Should we tell the children our secrets this time?" The Matriarch shook her head. "Even if we do, we can't tell the children first. We'd have to tell Tarquin. When they left last time, I saw something in his expression. He might have already sensed something. But let's wait. The more you know, the greater the pressure." ... Deep in the mountains, Bernard started coughing after playing with Evan for a while. Evan grew nervous. "Bernard!" Bernard pointed ahead. "I'm fine. Go get me some spring water from over there. My throat is

dry, I'm thirsty." "Okay, okay. You sit down and rest for a bit." The moment Evan left, Bernard turned his head and coughed a violent spray of blood into the dirt. It was blackish in color-a very bad sign. Bernard frowned, sighing helplessly. He wiped the blood from his mouth and looked toward Evan in the distance. They used to come to this spot often. The spring water here was crisp, refreshing, and pure. Whenever he and Evan got thirsty running through the mountains, they always came here to quench their thirst. He had even left a small cup by the spring. The little guy nimbly hopped onto the rocks and started filling the cup. Bernard smiled, his eyes filled with adoration. By the time Evan returned with the water, Bernard had already covered the black blood with dry leaves. The boy carefully handed the water to Bernard. "Bernard, drink up." After a few sips, Evan quickly asked, "Feeling better?" Bernard smiled and nodded. "Much better. I was just thirsty." Evan's little brow furrowed with worry. "Bernard, let's go home, okay?" "Hmm? Why go home? You don't want to play anymore?" "Yeah, I'm tired. I want to go home." Bernard narrowed his eyes. "Liar. With your stamina, you could play until dark and not get tired. And even if you were, you'd be too much of a rascal to want to go back." Evan blinked a few times, then came clean. "I want you to go back and rest."

Chapter 1588

Bernard chuckled. "A few coughs and you're this scared? You think Bernard is that fragile? We're not going back yet. I'm going to teach you something new. Come on." But Evan didn't move. "You can teach me after you've rested properly." Bernard looked down at him. Before he could speak, Evan's lip quivered, and he suddenly burst into tears. "You lied to me, didn't you? You're really sick, aren't you? You just coughed up blood, didn't you? I... I can smell blood. And you... you can't keep up with me anymore. It used to be me who couldn't keep up with you!" Bernard was speechless. Seeing the little guy cry, he felt a lump in his throat. He pulled the boy into his arms, ruffling his hair, and took a deep breath before speaking. "The reason I can't keep up is because I just recovered. My strength isn't what it used to be. And the smell of blood isn't from me, it's from over there." Evan followed Bernard's finger and saw a small pool of blood. Next to it was a recently deceased bird, clearly attacked by some animal. Evan was only half-convinced. "...Are you sure you're okay?" Bernard shook his head. "You know your great-grandma's temper. If I were seriously ill, she'd have me hooked up to an IV and locked in a sickbed!" Evan stared at him for a moment longer, then threw himself back into Bernard's arms, sobbing loudly. "Bernard, I'm scared!" "Hmm? Scared of what?" "I'm scared something will happen to you! You can't let anything happen to you!" Bernard's eyes reddened, and it took all his effort not to let the tears fall. This was the little man he had watched grow from a tiny tot to over a meter tall. The last time the boy was here, he had tumbled down a slope and hadn't shed a single tear. Yet now, without even knowing the truth of his condition, he was crying his eyes out. Bernard was deeply moved. The thought that he would soon never see him again made his heart ache with a sharp pain. After a long moment, Bernard finally said, "Don't be scared, Evan. Even if Bernard dies one day, you shouldn't be scared. Our Evan is a real man, who stands tall. If you cry this easily, you won't be a real man." The little boy shook his head wildly in his embrace. "I don't want to be a man, I just want Bernard to be okay! You promised me you'd always be around! You... you're supposed to be there for everything!" Bernard smiled through his red-rimmed eyes. "Alright, alright, I promise. Look, that little monkey in the tree is laughing at you." Evan finally wiped his tears and turned to look at the tree. A little monkey was indeed staring at him. White, feeling protective of Evan, raised its head and flicked its tongue at the monkey, posturing to attack. The monkey's eyes went wide with fright, and it scampered away in a flash. Bernard squatted

down and wiped Evan's tears. "Bernard just has a cold. Because I'm old, I don't recover as fast as you do. But I still have enough energy to teach you a few moves! These are new techniques Bernard just developed. I guarantee you'll be much stronger after learning them. Are you sure you don't want to learn?" "Don't forget, you won't be here for long this time. You might be heading down the mountain with Elliot tomorrow. If you don't learn today, you won't get another chance." Evan was tempted, but he asked cautiously, "Are you sure you're up for it?" "Of course. Forget you, even if your uncle were here, I could take both of you on without breaking a sweat!" Evan pouted. "You're bluffing!" "Hah, don't believe me? Try me! My new techniques are incredible!" As Bernard spoke, he made a move. Evan had no time to think and immediately parried. In truth, the techniques weren't new at all; they were ancient. These were the very moves he had used to dismantle the champions of seven international underground fight leagues. The techniques he had taught Evan before were the ones he had developed later. The reason he had never taught Evan these was to avoid attracting the attention of his enemies.

Chapter 1589

His past exploits had been sensational. By defeating the champions of seven different guilds, he had delivered a huge slap in the face to those countries, making him an enemy to many powerful factions. He was afraid his old enemies would recognize his techniques and come after Evan. If his own life wasn't nearing its end, he still wouldn't have taught him. After falling gravely ill, he thought he'd never see Evan again and had recorded instructional videos, but even the clearest video was no substitute for in-person training. So, no matter what, he had to seize this opportunity to teach Evan everything. ... Meanwhile, Elliot had reached the comms outpost. Gerald had shown him this place before, so he expertly operated the equipment and dialed Tarquin's number. Tarquin, who had been waiting for the call, answered instantly. "Elliot, have you arrived?" "Yes, Dad. I gave it to Great-Grandma, and she confirmed it. It's the one." Tarquin let out a breath, his anxious heart finally settling. "Good. Was the journey smooth?" "Perfectly smooth. Dad, Great-Grandma made a list. She needs you to help ship some supplies over." Tarquin asked, "So, Gerald and Howard haven't contacted the mountain either?" "No, that's why we need your help." "...Alright, leave it to me." After that, Elliot added, "Dad, I want to stay in the mountains for a while longer before coming back." "How long are you thinking?" Tarquin asked. "Maybe a week or two. Bernard is sick, and I want to wait until he's fully recovered before I leave." Elliot was sharp. He had a gut feeling that Bernard's illness wasn't as simple as his great-grandparents were letting on. "Is it serious?" Tarquin asked. With Walter present, Elliot said, "It doesn't look serious right now. Don't tell Mom, she'll worry." "...Alright." Elliot then asked, "Where's Mom? I want to talk to her directly about taking some time off school, so she doesn't keep worrying." "Hold on." Tarquin took the phone to find Elysia. As soon as she heard it was her son, she quickly took the call. "Hello, Elliot! Where did you two run off to? You haven't contacted me in so long." Elliot laughed. "We're in the mountains." Elysia was astonished. "The mountains? You went back to the mountains?!" "Yeah. Don't worry, Mom. We came back with our great-uncle. Everything went smoothly." Elysia stared in shock for a long moment before asking, "Why didn't you tell me you were going back to the mountains beforehand?" "I was afraid you'd worry, and I was afraid you wouldn't let us go." Tarquin covered for them. "They came back with my grand-uncle." Elysia assumed the old man was feeling down and had gone back to the mountains to see Bernard. She didn't overthink it and asked, "Is your great-uncle doing okay?" "Yes, he's fine. But we want to stay in the mountains for a few more days. Mom, when you ask our teachers for leave, could you ask for a bit more time?" Elysia knew the trip to the mountains was arduous, and she also knew they

would be safe there, so she felt at ease. "Alright. Be careful when you come back down the mountain. And send my love to your great-grandparents." "Okay." Elliot chatted with Elysia for a bit, and Walter and the old man spoke with her as well. After hanging up, they prepared to leave. But Elliot turned to Walter and asked, "Walter, tell me the truth. What's really wrong with Bernard?" Before Walter could speak, Elliot said, "I'm not Evan. You can't fool me that easily. He's not sick, he's poisoned, isn't he?" Walter and the scarred man froze. Elliot's small brow was tightly furrowed. "Who poisoned him? Who did this to him?"

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Walter didn't know how to explain, his expression stiffening. Elliot didn't press him on that point, asking instead, "Walter, tell me the truth. Can Bernard get better?!" Walter's brow furrowed, and he remained silent. The answer was clear. Realization hit Elliot, his eyes welled up, and he let out a heart-wrenching sob. Walter quickly pulled him into an embrace, comforting him softly, "Elliot, life and death... it's the natural way of things. Everyone's time comes eventually." Elliot didn't answer. He just clung to Walter, burying his face in his chest, and cried as if his heart was breaking. The scarred man stood frozen, staring at Walter in utter disbelief. A few seconds later, he turned and ran. He ran as fast as he could. Walter knew he was going to find Bernard and shouted after him, "Don't tell Evan yet! He doesn't want him to know!" The scarred man paused for a split second before charging back into the woods, tears streaming down his face. His elder brother was like a father to him. Though he had resented Bernard for many years, deep down, he saw him as his own flesh and blood. If he was going to die, what would he do? The only family he had left in the world would be gone. His vision blurred. The scarred man roughly wiped away his tears and ran even faster into the forest, like a madman. When he reached Bernard, Bernard was still watching Evan practice his moves. Seeing him, Bernard was about to greet him with a smile but noticed his expression was wrong. His eyes were filled with tears, grievance, sorrow, confusion, and a terrified panic. He was a man in his early sixties, but right now he looked like a helpless child. Bernard guessed what had happened. He knew about his condition. "Sigh..." With a soft sigh, Bernard stood up. "We'll talk later. Don't let Evan know for now." Just as he finished speaking, Evan ran over. "Uncle!" Bernard pulled Evan aside. "Evan, you head home first. I need to talk to your uncle about something private." Evan saw the tears in his uncle's eyes and grew worried. "Bernard, what's wrong with Uncle?" Bernard leaned in and whispered in his ear, "He's missing your grandmaster and his wife. He's embarrassed and can't let it out with you here. After all, a grown man crying in front of a little kid... it's pretty embarrassing. You go on ahead, and I'll comfort him." Evan knew his grandmaster and his wife had died tragically. He frowned and said with determination, "Vengeance will be served, but not yet! Don't worry, you and Uncle can rest assured. One day, I will get justice for them!" Bernard smiled, gratified. "Good. Now, go on back." "Okay." After Evan left, Bernard walked over to the scarred man and called him by his childhood name. "Jeremy." The scarred man's full name was Jeremy Warner. Bernard's was Jake Warner. Bernard was an orphan adopted by the Warner family. They gave him the name Jake, signifying he was their first child. Jeremy's parents had adored him, treating him as their own son from the moment they took him in. That was why he had flown into such a rage after his father, the man who had also been his mentor, was murdered, going abroad to systematically dismantle the champions of seven elite global fight leagues. It was why he had faked his own death and hidden in the mountains when his adoptive mother and younger brother were kidnapped, unwilling to gamble with their lives. And it was why he had lost his mind for so long after his adoptive mother was defiled and brutally

killed... Their devotion had been the foundation of his world. His master and his wife had treated him like a son, and he had loved them as his own parents. He hadn't been called by that name in a long, long time. In that moment, Jeremy's emotions reached their peak. He stared at Bernard with red-rimmed eyes and screamed, "You were poisoned! Why didn't you tell me? Why did you lie and say it was a cold? Were you just going to keep this from me until the end, leaving me to find your lifeless body without even a chance to say goodbye?"