

## Hitched 1591

### Chapter 1591

"I'm telling you, no way! If you dare to die, I'll have you thrown out of the Warner family! I'll make sure the whole family turns its back on you! I'll make my parents turn their backs on you!" Bernard's face was etched with sorrow. "Jeremy..." The scarred old man started to sob. "You can't do this to me. I hated you for so many years, I searched for you for so many years, and I just found you! You can't just walk away!" "Ever since Mom and Dad died, I haven't had a single good day! Now I've finally found you, and life is finally getting happy, but you're going to abandon me and leave this world alone!" "What am I supposed to do if you die? What about me?" The old man cried his heart out, a man in his sixties weeping like a child in front of Bernard. It's like they say no matter how many decades pass, you'll always be the little brother in their eyes.

He knew that life and death weren't Bernard's to command, but he couldn't stop himself from complaining, from trying to scare him. As if a good scare could somehow magically make Bernard better. Bernard's vision blurred as a heavy weight settled in his chest, stealing the very air from his lungs. He watched his brother cry, watched him rage and roar, watched him vent all the pain and despair in his heart. Only when he was spent did Bernard step forward and pull him into a hug. He patted his shoulder gently, like an older brother comforting a temperamental younger one. "Don't be sad. I'm an old man. Even without the poison, I wouldn't have many days left." "When I'm gone, Evan will be here for you. Evan is your family now, too. And Elysia, and Elliot, Emmett... they're all your family." "Besides, they can be with you all the time. Unlike me, stuck deep in these mountains. Even if I weren't dying, I couldn't be by your side every moment." "Jeremy, some things are just fate. We can't change them." The scarred man choked back a sob, his already rough voice now even hoarser. "Is... is it really hopeless?" "Yes, it's hopeless." "Not even Tracey can fix it?" Bernard sighed softly. "The poison is in my bones. Even she can't do anything about it." "..." The old man broke down again, crying with the pain of utter despair. They say strength is silence, but some grief is too heavy to hold back. When a man's heart truly shatters, even the strongest soul will weep. After what felt like an eternity, the old man finally asked, "When were you poisoned? Who did it? You're so skilled, how could you have been poisoned?" Bernard helped him to a nearby rock and sat beside him. He sighed. "Back then, they kidnapped you and our mentor's wife. They gave me two choices: die, or play their game." "Playing their game meant holding a press conference for the whole world and admitting that I had cheated in all my matches against those other schools. Then, I'd have to fight them all again and lose on purpose." "I chose to die, without a second thought." "Admitting I cheated and then losing on purpose... that wouldn't just have destroyed my reputation and the Warner family's name. It would have disgraced every fighter in this country. How is that any different from being a traitor?" "Our mentor always said, 'Better to die with honor than live as a fraud.'" "This poison... they injected me with it after I chose death." The old man was stunned. "!" Bernard continued, "Of course, I didn't plan on actually dying. You were just a kid back then. With our mentor and his wife gone, I was the only family you had left. If I died, what would happen to you?" "I'd known the old doc, Tracey, for a long time. We made preparations beforehand. I knew the poison wouldn't kill

me right away." "Her medical skills are incredible. If I wasn't so old now, with my immune system failing, my body would have been able to keep this poison in check." The old man was speechless. ".."

#### Chapter 1592

Bernard added, "But I'm not sad about it. Not at all. Seeing you again... you have no idea how happy that made me." "I honestly thought I'd never get the chance to sit down and have a meal with you again, to talk with you face-to-face. Then you showed up with Evan." "You know, when I was teaching him, I intentionally held back a few moves. I figured only you would be able to recognize my style in his fighting." Bernard tilted his head back, looking up at the sky through the gaps in the leaves. "I think fate has been pretty good to me. I was abandoned by my birth parents, but I was found by our mentor and his wife." "Then they had you, and I gained a little brother. Life was perfect." "Later, after they were both gone, I couldn't be there for you, and I was very lonely. But right then, I met Gerald and the others..." "And when I was getting old, worrying I had no one to carry on my legacy, Elysia and Evan appeared." "And you... even though I still haven't avenged our mentor and his wife, even though I failed to take care of you, you were still willing to forgive me..." "My life... I'd say it's been a full one." His greatest regret was that their mission was still unfinished. Gerald and Howard were likely gone, and now he was on his way out. It would be difficult for Quincy, Walter, and the old lady to finish the work that remained. And he wouldn't get to spend more time with his brother, or watch Evan grow up... "Jeremy, when I'm gone, I need you to look after my friends here in the mountains for me." "If they need help with anything, and you can help, please do. They're good people. Great people, in fact." "One day, if you get the chance to know their stories, you'll understand. They are worthy of your help, and your respect." "You also have to help me look after Evan. He's my successor, but he's yours too, and the Warner family's." "The kid has talent, a strong moral compass, and with Walter's guidance... even our mentor and his wife would have loved him. The future of the Warner family rests on his shoulders." "You have to watch over him. Don't let him make the same mistakes I did. Even if he wants revenge, he has to be smart about it, not reckless." "And you. You're the only one left from our generation of the Warner family. You have to be even more careful. If something happens to you, the Warner family will be well and truly finished." Hearing Bernard lay out his last wishes, the old man lowered his head and wept. ... When Evan got back to the cabin, only Quincy and the old lady were there. The old lady was in her lab, studying the 8th-generation virus, while Quincy was practicing his calligraphy. Seeing Evan return alone, Quincy looked up in surprise. "Evan, where's Bernard?" "Great-grandpa's talking with my great-uncle. They'll be back later. Where's my brother and everyone else?" Quincy looked curious. "The old-timer is with Bernard? I thought he went with Elliot and Walter to the signal station to call your dad and let him know you're all safe." Evan paused. "I didn't see my brother or Walter." The boy glanced at the wristband he used in the mountains. "My great-uncle must have left first. Walter and my brother are already on their way back. They're almost here." Evan walked over to Quincy's side. "Peace, Joy, and Health. A Life Smooth and Without Worry'... This one is great! Quincy, can I have this piece?" "Of course you can. If you like it, Evan, it's yours." "I love it, thank you, Quincy! I want to hang it in Bernard's room, to wish him joy, peace, and good health." Hearing this, Quincy's hand faltered, a flash of pain in his eyes. Evan loved Bernard so much. If Bernard was gone... it would shatter the boy's heart.

#### Chapter 1593

Sigh... Quincy sighed silently. "Come on, let's go hang it in his room." "Okay!" The old man and the young boy took the calligraphy to Bernard's room. Just as they finished hanging it, Elliot and Walter returned. Seeing Elliot's red-rimmed eyes, Evan immediately asked, "Elliot, what's wrong?" Elliot knew Evan didn't know the truth yet and decided to keep it that way for now. "It's nothing. I was just on the phone with Mom. I miss her." Evan's questions came quickly. "Is Mom okay? She must miss us so much. I miss her, too." Elliot said, "Mom's fine. She's worried about us. I told her we came to the mountains and not to worry. I also asked her to get us a few extra days off from school when she calls our teacher tomorrow." Evan's eyes widened. "Mom knows?" Elliot nodded. "Yeah, she knows." "So... was she mad?" "No, she was just surprised. She told us to be safe and to say hi to our great-grandfather and great-grandmother for her." Evan let out a long breath, relieved. "So how long can we stay in the mountains?" "Ten days, maybe two weeks, shouldn't be a problem. If we need more time, we can just ask Mom again." Hearing they could stay for so long, Evan beamed. "That's great! I was hoping to stay until great-grandpa is completely healed anyway. Besides, he's teaching me some new moves. I can master them before we leave." Elliot nodded, a fond look on his face. "Mhm." After chatting for a bit, Elliot went to Gerald's room. He wanted to search for more clues, to see if Gerald had left any instructions before he disappeared. Quincy went to the kitchen to prepare dinner, and Walter took Evan to his own cabin. When Evan saw the new fighter jet blueprints Walter had designed, he was blown away. "Whoa! Walter, are these all new designs you made since we left?" Walter nodded. "I was bored, and inspiration just happened to strike." In truth, Bernard's worsening condition had thrown them all into a panic. Everyone had been pushing themselves to their limits lately, hoping to leave something more behind for the world before their own time was up. Evan leaned closer to Walter's computer. "But Walter, can you even build these?!" Walter replied, "Probably not right now. I'm just providing the concept. Maybe someday, when new materials are developed, they'll be possible." Evan mused, "The world is still reeling from our 6th-gen fighter, and it shocked a lot of countries. If they saw your new designs, Walter, it would rewrite everything they thought they knew about aerial warfare." Walter said, "Of course, they can't know. Like I've told you before, you can show your strength, but you can't show all of it." "Showing just enough lets your enemies know you're not a pushover. Hiding the rest keeps them from knowing your true power." Evan nodded immediately. "I remember. 'Know yourself and know your enemy, and you will never be defeated.' If we don't let them figure out our true capabilities, they'll have a much harder time beating us." "The weapons we show off to the public are, to us, already old news. We'd never be willing to reveal the new stuff." Walter smiled. "Exactly." Evan said, "A while back, my dad took me to visit a military research base." "The director there said we've gone from a militarily weak nation to a strong one. We're very powerful now!" Walter nodded in agreement, but before he could speak, Evan added, "Of course, that doesn't mean we can get arrogant. We have to keep working hard and innovating! It's like they say, if you're not moving forward, you're falling behind!"

#### Chapter 1594

Walter's smile widened. He really, really liked Evan. In both talent and personality, Evan was like a combination of him and Bernard. You could see a bit of Bernard in him, and a bit of himself, too. When the kid grew up... hell, he didn't even need to grow up. Give him another ten years, and he'd definitely be more formidable than both Walter and Bernard combined. After all, when you combine two powerhouses, the result is bound to be even stronger. "Evan, take a look at this new weapon design." Evan glanced at it. "It's a prototype?" "Yeah, not finished yet. Any thoughts?" Evan tilted his little head,

studying it intently. After a moment, he said, "What if you added a pair of retractable wings? The wings could let it fly, but they could also turn into paddles to move through the water. What do you think?" Walter narrowed his eyes. "Interesting idea, but very difficult to implement. The materials you'd need for flight are completely different from what you'd need for water." Evan replied, "Difficult doesn't mean impossible. Here's what I was thinking..." The two of them were deep in discussion when Bernard returned, finally ending their brainstorming session. Not seeing the scarred old man, Evan asked curiously, "Bernard, where's great-uncle?" Bernard said, "He's still pretty down. He wanted to be alone for a while, so he didn't come back with me." Evan looked worried. "Should I go keep him company?" Bernard smiled and shook his head. "No need. This is something he has to work through on his own. No one else can help. Don't worry about him. He'll be fine by tomorrow morning." Elliot heard the voices and came out of Gerald's room. Tears stung Elliot's eyes the second he saw Bernard, and he had to clench his jaw to keep from breaking down. "Bernard." Bernard sent Evan to go get the old lady for dinner, then he walked over to Elliot and patted his head. "You know everything, don't you? It's okay, my boy. Don't be sad." Elliot threw himself into Bernard's arms, sobbing quietly. "... " Bernard comforted him. "Of all you kids, you're the smartest, the calmest, and the most rational. I don't need to give you a long speech; you already understand." "I just want to tell you this: Elliot, you are the best big brother in the world. I have no doubt that with you leading them, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, and the baby will all have happy, healthy lives full of sunshine." "Having you is a blessing for your four siblings, a blessing for Elysia and your father, and a blessing for us old-timers." "Because of you, we can leave this world in peace, knowing that as long as Elliot is here, everything will be okay." Elliot cried harder, a thousand words stuck in his throat. In the end, he only managed to say one thing. "I'll take care of Evan and great-uncle Jeremy. I'll take care of Mom, and I'll take care of Great-grandma, Quincy, and Walter." Bernard smiled. "I'll hold you to that promise. And if you want to keep it, you have to take care of yourself first. You can only take care of others if you're okay yourself." "Okay!" Seeing Evan coming back from the old lady's cabin, Bernard wiped the tears from Elliot's face. "Keep this a secret for me, for now. I don't want Evan to know so soon." Elliot sniffled hard. "... Okay." That night, both Elliot and Evan insisted on sleeping with Bernard. Evan, oblivious to the situation, spent the time before bed telling Bernard jokes. The old man and the little boy took turns, their laughter echoing in the small room. The more they laughed, the more Elliot's heart ached. He hid under the covers, crying silent tears. He was terrified that Bernard would suddenly be gone, and he worried that Evan wouldn't be able to handle the truth when he found out. ... The scarred old man didn't return that night. He came back at dawn the next day. After a night of wrestling with his grief, he had accepted the reality of the situation and was much calmer. For a while after that, life was peaceful. Every day, Evan would follow Bernard into the mountains to practice, with the scarred man trailing them at every step. The old lady remained in her lab, studying the 8th-generation virus, while Walter was holed up in his room, working on his new fighter jet designs. Quincy spent his time writing and drawing, and also took on the role of chef.

## Chapter 1595

For the most part, Elliot spent his time in Gerald's and Howard's rooms, and at night, he would sleep with Evan and Bernard. But the good times didn't last. One afternoon, about two weeks later, the scarred old man came bursting back into the compound, carrying Bernard in his arms. He stormed into the old lady's cabin, his lips trembling violently. "Save him! Save him! Please, I'm begging you, save him!" The others heard the commotion and rushed over. One look at Bernard's condition, and everyone's

expression changed in an instant. It was obvious. Bernard's time had come. Evan, still unaware of what was happening, was trembling from head to toe, crying hysterically. "Elliot! Elliot! Great-grandpa was coughing up blood!" Elliot's brow furrowed tightly. He held his brother, his own eyes welling with tears as he looked at the frail Bernard. "... The old lady's face was grim. "Get him on the bed, now!" The scarred man carefully placed Bernard on the bed, then stood to the side, panting nervously. Tracey checked Bernard's pulse and quickly began the treatment. A few minutes later, Bernard coughed up several more mouthfuls of dark blood and slowly opened his eyes. The old lady quickly gave him two pills to swallow. Seeing Bernard close his eyes again, Evan rushed to the bedside, crying. "Great-grandma, what's wrong with great-grandpa? We were in the mountains, and he just started spitting up this blood! So much of it... and then he passed out... I kept calling his name, but he wouldn't wake up..." "I... I... I even threatened him! I told him if he didn't wake up, I wouldn't love him anymore, but he just ignored me..." The old lady looked at Evan's pitiful state, her lips moving for a long time without a sound. How could she tell this little boy that the Bernard he loved so much was at death's door? How could she say such cruel words? Though Evan wasn't as sharp as Elliot, he sensed something was terribly wrong, but he refused to accept it. He was tugging on Tracey's sleeve, his body racking with violent sobs as tears blurred his vision. "Great-grandma, please save Bernard, I'm begging you, I... I... I... I'm scared..... Waaaaah....." The old lady's heart broke. She pulled Evan into a hug, large tears rolling down her own cheeks. "My dear boy, your Bernard... he's... he's..." "Evan... don't be scared... it's okay..." Bernard's eyes fluttered open again. He reached out and weakly tugged on Evan's shirt, his voice barely a whisper. His time was clearly running out. Evan scrambled to the bedside and grabbed Bernard's hand. "Great-grandpa! Great-grandpa..." Tears blurred his vision. The little boy tried to wipe them away, but they just kept coming, an unstoppable flood. Bernard raised a trembling hand and tried to wipe Evan's tears, forcing a faint smile. "Evan, don't cry... don't cry..." Evan sobbed, his small body shaking as he made his own threat through hiccuping breaths. "If... if you get better, Bernard, I'll stop crying. If you don't... I'll... I'll cry forever and ever... waaaaah..." "Evan... be good... listen to me." "No, \*you\* be good, Bernard! You listen to me! Get... get better first..." Bernard's lips trembled, a tear tracing a path from the corner of his eye down his temple. \*Silly boy,\* he thought. \*I can't get better...\* The pain was so intense he couldn't form another word. He just used his remaining strength to pull Evan into a hug. Evan collapsed onto his chest, a broken mess of tears. "Don't scare me, Bernard, I'm begging you, please get better, okay? I can't lose you... waaaaah... I really can't lose you... You love me the most, so don't scare me like this, I'm so scared, waaaaah..." The old lady, perhaps unable to watch this scene any longer, turned and left the room, her eyes red. As soon as she was gone, a final wave of despair washed over the others. If there was any chance of saving him, she wouldn't have left. Even though they knew this day was coming, when the moment of farewell finally arrived, it was still unbearable. Their hearts ached so much they could barely breathe, and their tears flowed freely. The grief was a river that had burst its banks, drowning them all.

## Chapter 1596

To be separated by death is one of the cruelest pains in the world. After all, the dead can't be brought back. Once they're gone, they're gone forever, a world apart, a final farewell. No matter how much you miss them later, you can never see them again. With immense sorrow, everyone looked at Bernard. The goodbyes had already been said. After a moment of silent prayer, they filed out of the room, leaving the last moments for him and Evan, for a grandfather and grandson to say their final farewell. Bernard's

eyes were red as he gently stroked Evan's head, whispering his name. "Evan....." Evan lay on his chest, sobbing violently. "I don't want you to leave! I don't! " "You spoils me the most... Whatever I ask... you always says yes. I'm begging you, don't leave me. I can't live without Bernard..." "You promised me you'd live to see me grow up and have a family of my own! You promised you'd be there forever!" "You... you also said you'd watch me get married and come to my wedding..." "You told me you were invincible! You said you'd never leave me!" "You can't go back on your word! It's not right to break a promise..." Bernard choked back his own tears. "Bernard will become a star, the sun, and the moon... I'll become everything in the world, and I'll always, always be with Evan..." Evan shook his head, shaking it hard. "I don't want that! I don't want great-grandpa to change! I just want my Bernard! I don't want you to be a star or the moon, I just want my great- grandpa!" Bernard's heart ached. He took a moment to catch his breath before speaking. "Evan, Bernard doesn't want to leave you either. I love you so much. I wish I could live a few more years. My Evan is still so little and needs someone by his side..." "Evan, I really want to watch you grow up, to see you become a fine young man, full of spirit, conquering the world, and climbing to the very top!" "I want to see you get married and have kids, to become a man who can stand tall and proud!" "Evan can't bear for me to leave, and I can't bear to leave my Evan..." "But... Bernard is old. My life has reached its end..." "We can't control when we get old, get sick, and die. There's nothing I can do..." Evan cried out, "I... I'm still young! I have a long life ahead of me! I'll share it with Bernard... I'll give my life to Bernard....." Bernard managed a small smile, tears rolling down his cheeks as he did. "Silly boy. You can't share a life. And even if you could, Bernard wouldn't take it. I want my Evan to live to be a hundred." Evan shook his head. "I don't want to live to be a hundred! I just want Great-grandpa! If he dies, I'll die too! I want to be with he....." Hearing this, Bernard's brow furrowed instantly. The emotional surge brought on a coughing fit. Evan quickly sat up. "Bernard!" Bernard calmed himself, his expression turning serious. "Evan, do you remember the one thing I always told you when I was teaching you martial arts?" Evan nodded, his lower lip trembling. "I remember... No... no matter what, staying alive is the top priority!" Bernard's voice was stern. "If you remember that, then was it right to say you wanted to die just now?" Evan shook his head. "No." "If it was wrong, then take it back!" "I... I take it back. I won't die. And Bernard isn't allowed to die either!" Bernard let out a long sigh, his expression softening slightly. "I am dying because heaven is taking my life, not because I want to. Evan, you must remember this: we must respect life, cherish life. No matter what happens, you are never allowed to even think about taking your own life. Remember that!"

## Chapter 1597

Evan nodded. "I... I'll remember! But I... I don't want Bernard to die... I'm scared! I'm so scared! Great-grandpa, I'm scared..." The little boy was crying so hard his whole body trembled violently. It was a stark contrast to his usual bright, optimistic, and fearless self. Today, he was small, helpless, and pitiful... Not a child genius, just an ordinary five-year-old. The person who loved him most was dying, and he was heartbroken. Bernard's tears streamed down his face again as he tried to comfort him. "But if Bernard doesn't die, it will hurt so much. Evan, I'm sick. The sickness is deep in my bones, and it's unbearable... Dying is like falling asleep. Bernard won't hurt anymore..." Evan's lips trembled. "You wake up from sleep. When you're dead, you don't wake up..." Bernard asked, "So, do you want Bernard to be in pain?" Evan shook his head frantically. "... " "Since you don't, then don't be sad. Just think of it as Bernard falling asleep." Evan's lip quivered, looking utterly wronged and miserable. "Then... what do I do when I miss Bernard? What if I want to hear Bernard's voice? What if I want Bernard to tell me a story? I... I..." Evan

was sobbing his heart out, and Bernard's own heart ached for him. He wanted to wipe away his tears, but after trying for a long time, he couldn't even lift his hand. A wave of frustration washed over him... He couldn't even raise his hand anymore. He used to be able to hook a finger in Evan's clothes and carry him all over the mountain. Now, he couldn't even wipe away his grandson's tears..... After a long pause, Bernard gathered his strength to speak. "Evan, if you miss me, you can talk to me anytime, anywhere. I won't be able to answer, but I will definitely hear you and see you. I will always be with you..." "You are my pride, Evan. Having you in my life... it was the greatest gift I ever received. Be brave for me, okay?" "Evan, you have to be good. Grow up healthy and strong. Love your country and your family. Be a man who can stand tall and proud..." "And you have to help me take care of your great-uncle Jeremy. When I'm gone, you'll be his only family..." "That's right, his name is Jeremy Warner. He's from the Warner family... the once-great Warner family... If you can, help me and Jeremy make the Warner name mean something again..." "And... don't live in hatred. You must love yourself. Loving yourself is the same as loving those around you. When you are happy, your mommy and the others can be happy..." "Evan, you can think about avenging your grandmaster and his wife, but not now. Remember, don't be reckless. Staying alive is the top priority..." As he finished, Bernard used his last ounce of strength to raise his hand, trembling as he touched Evan's little face. He smiled and said, "If there's a next life... let... let Bernard meet you again... Bernard loves... loves... loves Evan..." "Bernard wishes... wishes... wishes Evan... a peaceful..... and happy... and smooth... life..." As Bernard's voice trailed off into a whisper, and the hand that had held so much power and love finally stilled, slipping lifelessly from Evan's tear-stained cheek. "!" He stood frozen for a full minute before letting out a heart-wrenching scream. "BERNARD—!" Hearing the cry, the others rushed back into the room. Bernard's eyes were tightly closed. He was no longer breathing. The old matriarch checked his pulse, then felt for breath at his nose, and shook her head sadly. "Bernard... is gone."

## Chapter 1598

Elliot lost control and burst into tears. "Great-grandpa... Great-grandpa..." The man with the scarred face dropped to his knees by the bed with a thud. "Brother—" Quincy and Walter's lips trembled, tears streaming down their faces as a sharp pain shot through their hearts. "... "The heavens seemed to know, as if on cue. Even for this time of year, the rain lashed against the windows in blinding sheets. Outside the window, lightning flashed and thunder roared, the wind shrieked through the trees like a chorus of lost souls. It was as if the world itself was mourning Bernard's passing... Evan stood rigidly by the bed, his eyes wide, staring at Bernard. He wasn't crying or making a sound. His body was stiff. His mind went numb, a high-pitched static drowning out every thought until there was nothing but a hollow, aching void. His heart felt like it was being squeezed by a giant, invisible hand, and he couldn't breathe. The only thing he could feel was pain. Pain radiated from his heart, instantly spreading to every corner of his body... It hurt. It hurt so much. It was an unbearable, suffocating pain that wiped his mind clean, making him forget who he was, where he was, and what had just happened. Not until a clap of thunder cracked right outside the window... \*BOOM-\* Evan finally snapped back to reality. He heard his uncle and brother crying, saw his great-grandmother, Quincy, and Walter shedding silent tears. And he saw Bernard's closed eyes and the complete stillness of his chest... He remembered. Bernard was dead. His Bernard was dead. The person he loved most was gone. The person who doted on him the most was gone. He didn't have Bernard anymore... He was gone, gone, he didn't have Bernard anymore... No one would ever toss him high in the air again. He would never hear Bernard call him 'Evan' again... Bernard

would never smile at him again, never teach him martial arts, never talk him into stealing his great-grandmother's bedsheets to go play ghosts in the woods... His Bernard was gone forever. Evan's eyes widened, his breathing becoming rapid and ragged. His whole body trembled. "AHHH!" As if possessed, he screamed, spun around, and ran out of the room, straight into the torrential rain. "Evan!" Elliot was terrified and immediately chased after him, but he only caught a glimpse of Evan's back. Just like when Bernard was alive, he leaped from the porch beam to a large tree, then from that tree to another behind the cabin. His small figure quickly vanished into the dense forest... But this time, Bernard wasn't with him. He was alone, small, and pitiful... Elliot wiped away his tears and, without a second thought, plunged into the rain. He was worried about Evan; he had to find his brother! The old matriarch quickly grabbed him. "It's dangerous in the mountains during a thunderstorm. Your skills aren't good enough. you can't risk it." "Evan is skilled, and he's been out in the rain with Bernard many times. He knows this forest well. He'll be okay, don't worry about him." "He's in too much pain. Just let him be alone for a while. Let him get it all out." "... Deep in the forest, Evan was drenched, running wildly, screaming, "Ah, ah, AHHH—I!" He was in so much pain. Truly, so much pain. In all his remembered life, he had never felt a pain like this. He never imagined a person's heart could ache this much. The animals in the forest were startled, scattering in all directions. Birds flew from the trees in a panic, flapping desperately through the rain. Evan was like a madman, crashing through the forest in the downpour. He deliberately fell from trees, intentionally tripped, purposefully plunged into mud pits, and put himself in dangerous situations...

## Chapter 1599

Before, when he fell from a tree, Bernard would catch him before he even hit the ground. When he tripped, Bernard would instantly appear by his side, asking, "Does it hurt?" When he fell into a mud pit, Bernard would pull him out, clucking with concern while laughing at him. When he was in danger, Bernard would always charge ahead to protect him... But today, when he fell from the tree, Bernard didn't appear to catch him. When he tripped, Bernard didn't show up to ask if he was okay. When he fell into the mud pit, Bernard didn't come to pull him out. When he was in danger, Bernard wasn't there to shield him. He went to every single place he had ever been with Bernard, calling his name over and over... But tragically, no one answered. Finally, he collapsed. He fell beside the mountain spring where he and Bernard often drank, crying all alone. "Great-grandpa, where are you? I miss you. I'm hurt... please, make the pain go away... I want to hear you tell a joke. I want you to hug me." "Why? Why would you do this?! Damn you! Give him back to me! Give him back! You can't take great-grandpa away." He was in so much pain. His whole body ached. Even breathing hurt. Whitey, his wolf, lay down beside him, nudging his chin with its forehead in silent companionship. As dusk fell, Elliot finally found him. Elliot and the scarred man had used a tracker to locate Evan. He lay flat on the cold earth, eyes fixed on the gray void above. The light had gone out of them, leaving behind a hollow shell of a boy whose world had just collapsed.

Elliot's heart broke. "Evan!" Evan didn't react at all. "... Elliot gently shook his arm. "Evan!" Evan turned his head and looked at him, his expression blank, like a machine devoid of emotion, as if he didn't even recognize him. Elliot was terrified. "Evan, wake up! Don't scare me!" It took a long moment before Evan seemed to recognize Elliot. His little lip quivered, and he started to cry. "Elliot, great-grandpa is dead.



We don't have great-grandpa anymore. Great-grandpa's gone. He doesn't want me anymore." Elliot's own tears streamed down his face. "Great-grandpa didn't abandon you. He loves you very much. He just went to live in another world..." Evan whimpered, "But I fell and it hurt and he didn't even care. He didn't come to make it better..." Elliot's heart ached for him. "Great-grandpa does care. He's just asleep. When he wakes up, he'll be right by your side, watching over you..." Evan's sobs were ragged. "But I don't want him to just watch over me. I want him to be here, to hug me..." Elliot helped him up and pulled him into a tight embrace. "Don't be sad, Evan. You still have me. And great-uncle, and Quincy and Walter. And Great-grandma, and Mommy and Daddy, and Emmett, Elijah, and Baby... We can all be here to hug you..." Evan cried even harder. "But brother, what do I do? I miss Bernard so much. I can't stop. I just miss him so much. I miss him..." "Elliot, it hurts. It hurts so much. My heart feels like it's going to burst. It hurts too much. Brother, it hurts. It really, really hurts..." Elliot's tears fell like rain. "I know. I know everything. If it hurts, just cry. Cry it all out. I won't laugh at you. I'm here with you. I'll always be here with you..."

## Chapter 1600

In Jindale City, Elysia Thorne was chopping vegetables when a sharp, sudden pang of dread caused her hand to slip. The blade bit into her finger, and blood immediately bubbled to the surface. Tarquin Bradford, working at the adjacent stove, caught the flash of red and his expression immediately sharpened with concern. He quickly turned off the flame and went to her. "What's wrong? Did you cut yourself?" "Yeah, don't worry. It's not deep. Just grab the first-aid kit and help me clean it." Tarquin looked tense as he hurried to the living room. He returned with the kit and, frowning, carefully cleaned Elysia's wound. The cut was indeed shallow, but his heart still ached. "How could you be so careless? Is something on your mind?" Elysia frowned slightly. "I feel a bit... anxious." Tarquin immediately asked, "Are you sick?" Elysia shook her head. "No, I just feel uneasy... Have Elliot and Evan contacted you in the last two days?" "No. Are you still worried about them?" "It's not that. With Great-grandpa and Great-grandma in the mountains, I know they're safe. It's just... I can't put my finger on it. My heart is racing, like something bad has happened." Tarquin asked, "When did you start feeling this way?" Elysia answered with a furrowed brow, "I've been a little on edge for the past few days, but it's worst today. The shadow had been hanging over her all day, a cold, restless dread that had only intensified as the sun began to sink." Tarquin was worried. "I'm taking you to the hospital." "No need. I'm a doctor myself. I'm not sick, it's more... psychological..." "Are you just missing the kids?" Elysia frowned. "...It doesn't feel like that." Tarquin asked again, "Did you call my parents?" "I did, around noon. Everything's fine on their end. That's why I'm wondering if something happened in the mountains? Something bad?" Tarquin's brow tightened. "... He didn't know either. They couldn't initiate contact with the mountain compound, so he had no way of knowing the situation there. To find out, he'd have to go himself. But with the 8th generation virus now introduced to the mountain, and his great-grandparents needing to remain hidden, it wasn't a good time for him to go. Not when the 'Mysterious Man' was still watching him. All he could do was comfort Elysia. "...Don't scare yourself. Elliot and Evan can contact us. If something bad had happened, they would have called." Elysia let out a long breath, a sense of unease still lingering, her heart periodically pricked with a sharp pain. "Tarquin, I feel so miserable. My eyes are stinging, and there's this lump in my throat I can't swallow. I don't know why, but I just feel like breaking down." Hearing this, Tarquin's thoughts suddenly jumped to Bernard... He'd felt uneasy ever since Elliot told him Bernard was sick. At his age, even a minor illness could be fatal. And Elliot had said they would return

once Bernard recovered. The fact they weren't back meant Bernard wasn't well yet. A man in his seventies, sick for this long... Besides, Elliot was a thoughtful boy. If it were just a common cold, he probably wouldn't have waited for a full recovery before coming back. Could it be... Tarquin didn't dare to think further, and he certainly didn't dare tell Elysia. If something had happened to Bernard, Elysia would be devastated. So would Elliot and Evan... He secretly tightened his brow, then reached up to gently smooth Elysia's forehead, trying to soothe her. "You're probably anxious because of Winona Newsom." He was trying to distract her. Elysia looked stunned. "What about Winona?" Before Tarquin could answer, Elysia said, "Are you talking about the pregnancy rumors that have been flying around? I know about that. Jess already asked me privately. I can confirm, Winona isn't pregnant, and there's no way she's carrying Keaton Huber's child." Winona had gotten her period last month; she knew that for a fact. Tarquin said, "It's not that. It's... there's something fishy going on between Keaton and Winona."