

Hitched & Hitched Again: A Comedy of Marital Mayhem (Elysia and Tarquin) - Chapter 241[598 words]

Hiding in the car and watching the surveillance feed, Lowell was taken aback when he saw Elijah head downstairs. He turned to Tarquin, his eyebrows knitted in worry, and asked, "What do we do now, Tarquin?"

Tarquin had been avoiding Elysia these past few days, yet he couldn't stop worrying about Elijah. Whenever Elysia visited, he would just stay in the

car.

Before Tarquin could respond, Elysia and Elijah emerged from the building.

Elijah paused at the entrance, seemingly asking Elysia where they were heading.

Elysia, knowing she couldn't just take him out of the neighborhood without a plan, scanned the area. It was bleak; not a speck of green in sight in the old-style complex devoid of any landscaping.

Pointing towards a playground behind some flower beds, Elysia suggested, "How about we check that out?"

Elijah didn't respond but walked towards the playground with Elysia following closely. It was quiet around the playground with no other kids in sight. Approaching the slide, Elijah eyed it with disdain. "You expect White to play on that?"

Elysia chuckled, "Well, it won't play by itself, but you can give it a try. Climb up, slide down, and I'll catch you. Sounds fun, right?"

"Childish!"

Elysia was at a loss for words...

Elijah rolled up his sleeve, revealing White, and squatted down, attempting to encourage it to play. However, White, as if disliking the cold, quickly darted back under Elijah's sleeve.

With quick reflexes, Elijah grabbed it, preventing its escape. White, clearly upset, turned its head and flicked its tongue out in annoyance.

Elysia jumped at the sight, but Elijah remained unfazed, bold as ever. He frowned slightly, taking White off his arm and placing it on the ground. White seemed to dislike the dirty or perhaps too chilly ground and immediately turned towards Elijah.

Elijah stepped back, and White followed. They continued this dance until White, seemingly irritated, swiftly jumped into Elijah's shirt pocket. Elijah's eyes sparkled, impressed by White's agility. Unafraid of being bitten, he reached into his pocket and lifted White out.

White, tongue flicking angrily, glared at him. Elijah, with a hint of disdain in his gaze, locked eyes with it.

Elysia stood by, staring at Elijah. His defiant expression was the spitting image of his father's!

Indeed, the environment plays a significant role in shaping one's personality. Even without any psychological conditions, living with his father would inevitably mold Elijah into a cold and distant person.

"What's that you've got? Show me!" A voice suddenly broke the silence. A rambunctious boy demanded to see what Elijah was holding.

White turned its head, its presence emanating a chilling aura, far from that of a harmless pet, its danger apparent.

Elijah glanced at the boy, his brows furrowing. He quickly tucked White back into his pocket and turned to leave.

The boy, unhappy, blocked his path. "Hey, I'm talking to you! Are you deaf or mute?"

Elysia's brows furrowed in displeasure.

Whose ill-mannered brat was this?

"How dare you speak like that? Where are your parents?" she chided.

The boy stuck his tongue out at her. "I came here by myself! Now, show me what's in your pocket, or else I'll beat you up!"

Just as Elysia was about to give the boy a piece of her mind, Elijah suddenly spoke up, "Move!"

Though shorter than the boy, Elijah's command, delivered with a look upwards, carried an aura that utterly crushed the boy's bravado. His presence was like a mini version of his father!

The boy, visibly shaken by Elijah's demeanor, pouted and scooted away on his skateboard.

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Elysia was on edge, worried that Elijah's temper might flare up and he'd lose control. Quickly, she crouched down, placing her hands on his shoulders to calm him.

"Elijah, don't bother with him. Not everyone has manners. Getting mad at someone like that is just making things hard on yourself. It's not worth it." Elijah didn't say a word but started walking towards their apartment building. Elysia hurried after him.

They had barely reached the entrance when that boy suddenly appeared again, zooming towards them on his skateboard with a deliberate look of mischief!

By the time Elysia snapped back to reality, the boy was already too close to avoid.

Just as the collision seemed inevitable, Elijah ran over and knocked the boy down, tumbling to the ground himself in the process.

"Elijah!" Elysia was horrified, rushing over to help him up.

Tarquin and Lowell were also taken aback, rushing over quickly.

"Did you get hurt anywhere?" Tarquin asked, full of concern.

Ignoring them, Elijah stood up and glared coldly at the boy still lying on the ground.

The boy, either from pain or fear, started crying loudly. His cries attracted an elderly lady in her sixties, who began shouting from a distance, "Oh dear, what's happened? Has someone been bullying you? What did you do to my grandson? If you've hurt him, I'll have your heads..."

Elysia frowned. No wonder the kid was such a brat; he had this kind of grandmother.

A rotten apple doesn't fall far from the tree!

"Lowell, handle this!" Tarquin clearly didn't want to argue with these people and carried Elijah upstairs.

"Ms. Thorne, you go with Elijah. I'll handle this," Lowell told Elysia.

"This isn't Elijah's fault. It was him..."

"I know, we saw everything. You go upstairs."

Elysia paused for a moment before turning to go upstairs.

Tarquin had already removed Elijah's jacket and shoes, checking him for injuries.

Elijah had taken a fall trying to protect Elysia, resulting in scrapes on his legs and arms.

Seeing the scrapes, Tarquin's expression darkened with concern. "I'm going to clean these with alcohol. It'll hurt, but try to bear with it."

Elijah remained silent as Tarquin went to fetch the first-aid kit.

Elysia rushed back into the room, her heart aching for Elijah, blaming herself, "I'm so sorry, Elijah. This is all my fault."

Elijah ignored her, but turned to Tarquin and said, "I did it willingly."

Tarquin looked at him surprised, saying nothing. He was taken aback that Elijah would stand up for Elysia. When he said he did it 'willingly,' it meant he didn't want Elysia to be blamed. He was protecting her, even though she had only been with him for a few days.

Tarquin silently handed Elysia the first-aid kit without a word.

Elysia's focus was entirely on Elijah as she opened the kit and quickly grabbed some cotton swabs and alcohol.

"Elijah, this might sting a bit. If it hurts, just let it out, okay? Don't hold it in."

Elijah gave Elysia another look. His dad had always told him to bear the pain. But Elysia said to let it out if it hurts, not to keep it inside.

Elysia, moved, tended to his wounds with tears welling up in her eyes. "Does anything else hurt?"

Elijah gave her a look as if she were a 'sobbing little girl.'

"No more." He said coldly, then got up, took White back to his room, and locked the door behind him.

It was a clear sign he wanted to be left alone.

Elysia sniffled, tidying up the first-aid kit.

Tarquin was sitting on the living room sofa, frowning at her.

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Elysia pouted apologetically, "I'm so sorry about today. I didn't mean for him to get hurt, I..."

"Did you find out anything?" Tarquin cut her off mid-sentence.

Elysia understood exactly what he was asking. Sitting across from him on the sofa, she sincerely assessed Elijah, "His condition is not as bad as I feared. From his actions today, it's clear he knows right from wrong and understands empathy."

His defense of her today was obviously a result of her looking after him these past few days. She cared for him, and he protected her, a clear display of understanding and empathy.

"It's like, you scratch my back, and I scratch yours. He's not one for big expressions, but he knows what's in his heart. His aloof nature has to do with some personal challenges and his upbringing. He's a lot like you in that way."

Tarquin raised an eyebrow at her, the implication clear - was he being called aloof?

Elysia continued, "Environment shapes character. If you're always giving off a frosty vibe, don't expect a kid to be all sunshine and rainbows."

Tarquin pressed his lips together, saying nothing.

Elysia, ignoring his icy demeanor, went on, "But really, Elijah is warm-hearted beneath that cool exterior. He's a good kid, brave too, not easily bullied, as today's events have shown. All in all, Elijah's doing better than I expected."

A flicker of pleasure crossed Tarquin's eyes but vanished almost immediately.

"What's the next step?" he asked.

Elysia frowned. "Healing the mind requires a touch of the heart. To truly help him, we might need to start with his mom."

Tarquin replied icily, "We have no leads on his mother's whereabouts right now."

"I know, let me think..." Elysia glanced toward Elijah's room for a moment. "I'll go start on lunch first."

Without a clear plan in mind, she headed to the kitchen.

Tarquin watched her leave, then retreated to his own room.

Aside from discussing Elijah, they had little else to talk about. Neither brought up their kiss; not out of forgetfulness, but a mutual decision to avoid awkwardness.

Lowell returned, and Elysia asked, "Everything sorted?"

"Yeah, the boy's parents came forward to apologize."

"A child's misdeeds reflect on the parents. It was right for them to apologize."

"Yeah. How's Elijah?"

"Just some scrapes and bruises."

"And his father?"

"In his study. Keep an eye on Elijah for me, will you? I'm heading to the grocery store to pick up some things. Be back soon." "What do you need? I can go."

"No need. Oh, and I was thinking of making burgers for lunch. No need to go out, let's eat in."

With that, Elysia grabbed her coat and left.

Lowell thought to himself, Elysia would make an amazing wife for Tarquin. She's beautiful, kind, and caring. What's not to like?

Inside the study, Lowell mumbled, "A whole family of oddballs. I called the cops. They'll handle it."

Tarquin responded coolly, "A child's misdeeds reflect on the parents. This might teach them a lesson."

"Yeah, Ms. Thorne said the same. You two are on the same wavelength."

Tarquin shot him an unamused glance, but Lowell just chuckled, "I mean, when it comes to raising kids, you're both in agreement."

Tarquin flicked his cigarette ash, quickly changing the subject, "Any news from Baby ET's Support One?"

Lowell's smile faded into concern. "I've sent loads of messages, but no replies. They say working with him depends on fate and his mood. Can't rush it."

Tarquin's expression darkened with frustration. He desperately needed what he had!

With it, there was a 99% chance of finding Elijah's mother.

Finding his mother would heal Elijah's emotional wounds, freeing Tarquin from his own longing.

"Also, your grandfather's been on us about the ancestral rites again, saying we need to plan the ceremony in advance. And Elijah's speech needs to be sent to the family ahead of time too."

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Tarquin's face darkened, his eyes filled with a fierce determination.

The best thing about the old neighborhood was its convenience.

Right at the entrance, there was a row of small shops - a breakfast diner, a fruit stand, a greengrocer, and even a clothing store.

Elysia had picked up some fresh meat and vegetables.

Noticing the oranges looked particularly fresh, she decided to make some orange juice for Elijah, so she bent down to pick the best ones.

As she was selecting the oranges, a man's voice suddenly rang out, "You nearly got yourself killed meddling in his affairs. Are you foolish, or do you just think you're invincible?"

Elysia's heart skipped a beat!

Unbeknownst to her, a man had appeared beside her, his face obscured by a mask. A luxury car was parked by the curb, its windows tinted so she couldn't see who was inside.

Elysia knew it had to be those who wished Elijah harm, coming to warn her again!

She clenched her jaw and, with furrowed brows, said, "Elijah's doing better now. I'm just here to cook for him, earn a bit of hard-earned money. That's all."

The man was taken aback, "He's better?"

"Yeah." Elysia nodded and hurried back home. Once inside, she leaned against the door, catching her breath.

Lowell and Tarquin, hearing the commotion, came out to see her pale face.

Lowell asked, "What's wrong, Ms. Thorne?"

Elysia, with a serious look and furrowed brows, turned to Tarquin.

"We need to talk!"

Tarquin, puzzled, glanced at her and led her into the study.

As soon as the study door was closed, Elysia immediately said, "You need to announce that Elijah is better now!"

Tarquin, confused, asked, "Why?"

"I'm scared of being targeted again! If you say Elijah is better, no one will pay attention to me anymore."

Lowell couldn't help but interject, "But Elijah isn't better, and lies are easily exposed."

"We just need to make sure no one sees Elijah."

Lowell mentioned, "We have a family gathering next month, and Elijah has to attend. He'll definitely meet others there."

Elysia was curious. "Family gathering? Will all of Elijah's relatives be there?"

"Yes."

This could actually be a good opportunity. But, if they really did as Elliot suggested, it would be too dangerous for her! Was it worth taking such a risk for Elijah?

Thinking of his young, innocent face... Elysia gritted her teeth,

"I don't care! If you don't do as I ask, I'm leaving now, and I will never bother with him again!"

Tarquin's face darkened, and Elysia stood her ground, defiant.

"I mean it!"

Lowell looked awkwardly at Tarquin; they didn't understand what Elysia was thinking.

They thought she was just afraid of retaliation. While they could understand Elysia's feelings, if they really announced it, wouldn't they be the laughingstock at the family gathering?

Tarquin and Lowell shared the same thoughts. Tarquin sternly said, "If you're just afraid of retaliation, I can ensure your safety, I..."

"I don't trust you! If you can't meet my conditions, then we have nothing more to talk about, goodbye."

Elysia turned to leave when Tarquin urgently called out, "Okay, okay!"

Elysia stopped in her tracks, pressing, "Announce it now."

Tarquin, visibly annoyed, glared at her and grabbed his phone. He sent a message in the family group chat.

[Announcement: Elijah's condition has completely improved.]

Just one sentence, and the Bradford family chat exploded with activity!

The next second, Tarquin's phone rang, Gideon was calling.

Tarquin didn't answer; instead, he looked at Elysia and asked, "Satisfied?"

Elysia's demeanor softened, "... Yeah."

But then, Tarquin snapped, "Then get out!"

Elysia was taken aback by his sudden outburst.

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Elysia pouted, turning on her heel and exiting the room.

Tarquin scowled, lighting up a cigarette before finally picking up the phone.

"Is Elijah okay now?" Gideon asked.

Tarquin remained silent, prompting Gideon to ask again, "What happened so suddenly? How did he get better?"

Impatiently, Tarquin snapped, "He just did."

"How is that even...?"

"How is it not?"

Clearly in a bad mood, Tarquin's attitude left Gideon silent for a few seconds before he said, "I'm coming over to see him."

"Not a good time." Tarquin ended the call bluntly.

Listening to the dial tone, Gideon cursed under his breath, "Damn it!"

His confidant tried to calm him down, "Sir, didn't you notice? If Tarquin isn't happy, it means something's off. If Elijah was truly better, he'd be thrilled." Gideon narrowed his eyes and asked, "So, he's lying?"

"It seems pretty obvious."

"Why would he lie?"

"Who knows, but this means the family reunion will be even more interesting. The moment Elijah shows up, it'll be a slap in Tarquin's face. And now that Elijah is 'better,' he can participate fully in the reunion ceremonies."

After a pause, Gideon chuckled coldly and sent a message to the family group chat.

[This is a momentous occasion for the Bradford family! We must pick a perfect day to celebrate! And since Elijah is 'better,' the reunion ceremonies can go as planned. Tarquin, make sure Elijah's speech is ready in advance.]

Following Gideon's message, congratulations for Elijah's recovery flooded the chat.

But the Bradfords were a skeptical bunch, keeping a careful watch to see if Elijah truly had recovered.

Seeing no response from Tarquin, Gideon wasn't bothered. He put away his phone and asked his confidant, "Have we gotten in touch with Alpha Thorne yet?"

Shaking his head, the confidant replied, "No, sir. After Mr. E gave us his information, we tried to reach out immediately, but there's been no contact. It's possible Mr. E's information was inaccurate."

"Impossible! With Mr. E's resources and standing, he wouldn't deceive us. Alpha Thorne has been an enigma since he burst onto the scene a year ago, shocking the entire financial world. It's no wonder we can't reach him! But to think he's the one who breached Tarquin's security system... well, it makes sense. Who else but him could pull off such a feat, both financially and technically?"

Alpha Thorne was the moniker Elliot used in the financial circles.

Gideon had used the item in exchange for this investigation into Tarquin's security breach, glad it didn't constitute deception while preserving his own identity. "Alpha" was a known entity in the business world, yet Elliot's real identity remained a mystery.

The confidant nodded in agreement. "So, what's our next move? We want to partner with him, but we need to make contact first. Should we ask Mr. E for more help?"

Gideon frowned. "I traded something of significant value with Mr. E, and he agreed to assist us with three inquiries. We've already used one; we can't waste another on this. Keep trying to reach Alpha. Once we make contact, I'm sure I can convince him to collaborate with us."

Unable to contain his curiosity, the confidant asked, "Sir, you sound very confident. Do you have something else up your sleeve?"

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Gideon squinted his eyes, exuding an aura of arrogance, yet he chose not to respond directly. Instead, he simply stated, "Try contacting him first!"

Meanwhile, in the study, Tarquin was puffing away at his cigarette, his brow furrowed and his expression sour. He was clearly not in a good mood. Lowell knew the reason and tried to offer some advice, "Don't be mad at Ms. Thorne. She's not familiar with us; it's normal for her not to trust you. She's just trying to protect herself by setting those conditions."

Tarquin continued to drag on his cigarette, not willing to engage in the conversation. He understood the logic, but the fact that she didn't trust him irked him nonetheless!

And now, the upcoming family gathering was going to be even more of a challenge. He said Elijah was getting better, but if Elijah wasn't, it would be his reputation on the line!

And the request for Elijah to give a speech, there was no way to dodge it now. But how could Elijah possibly stand up and deliver a speech in his current state?

Seeing him so troubled, Lowell changed the subject to divert his attention, "I just got word today. Gideon has identified the person who breached our security system. It's Alpha Thorne."

Tarquin lifted his eyelids slightly to glance at him.

"The sharp-eyed, never-loses Alpha?"

"Yes! The one who invested billions last year and made a fortune, almost catching up to your worth!"

Tarquin frowned. "Is the information from Gideon's side reliable?"

"Yes. It came from Mr. E."

Tarquin scowled, taking another drag of his cigarette.

Lowell continued, "If Gideon really teams up with Alpha against us, that could be troublesome. Gideon is not the issue; it's Alpha who's dangerous. Alpha remains a mystery in the financial world. Since his appearance, no one knows his real identity, nor has anyone seen him. But so far, Gideon hasn't been able to contact him. Even if he does in the future, it's not certain Alpha would collaborate."

"Keep a close eye on Gideon. The moment he makes contact with Alpha, inform me! And, let's dig deeper into this Alpha character." "Understood."

At this moment, Tarquin was angry, while Elysia was anxious.

She was afraid he'd refuse her request, and now that he agreed, she started to worry all over again.

These days, she had been pondering over the strategy Elliot provided! She kept hesitating whether she should take such a big risk for Elijah. Today, she finally made up her mind!

Now that she had made her choice, there was no turning back. If things went well, it would be a cause for celebration; if not, it would be digging her own grave!

For Elijah, she was truly going all in. It was not easy for someone as timid as her to make such a bold decision.

"Ouch-"

A lapse in concentration often leads to accidents, and while Elysia was chopping ingredients for stuffing, she accidentally cut her finger.

Tarquin and Lowell heard the commotion and came out, with Elijah following close behind.

All three of them turned their attention towards her.

Seeing her bleeding finger, Lowell quickly rushed over. "Ms. Thorne, what happened?"

"Just cut my hand by accident."

"Is it bad? Do we need to go to the hospital?"

"It's not serious. I just need a bandage. Could you please..."

Before Elysia could finish her sentence, Tarquin had already brought over the first aid kit. Without uttering a word, he took her injured hand to inspect it, then picked up the alcohol to clean the wound.

"Ah!" Elysia winced at the sting.

Tarquin glanced at her under his eyelids.

Elysia, with a grimace, muttered, "It hurts."

Tarquin, with a look of disdain, retorted, "Drama queen!"

Elysia was left speechless.

Drama queen, really?

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Tarquin's actions softened significantly despite his tone.

Lowell, standing off to the side, couldn't help but internally groan at his own awkwardness. "He might as well have been born mute," he thought, "at least then he'd be endearing!"

All because of his "drama queen" remark, after bandaging Elysia up, she didn't even mutter a thank you.

Elysia pouted, ready to continue chopping the stuffing, when suddenly Elijah swiped the knife off the cutting board.

Elysia jumped. "Elijah?"

Without a word, Elijah turned and handed the knife over to Tarquin.

Tarquin frowned, clearly annoyed.

Seeing the situation, Lowell quickly took the kitchen knife from Elijah's hand. "I'll do it."

He then swiftly tied an apron around himself and started chopping the filling for the burgers with a 'thunk thunk thunk'.

Elijah didn't say anything, just turned and went back to his room.

Elysia stared after him, a bit stunned. She hadn't interacted much with Elijah and didn't really understand him yet, but it turned out he took the knife from her because he was worried about her hurting her hand.

A warmth spread through Elysia's heart, and she made her way towards Elijah's bedroom.

Seeing Elysia enter Elijah's room without getting kicked out, Lowell remarked, "You know, Elijah and Ms. Thorne are really getting along better. It's clear he's quite fond of Ms. Thorne, even looking out for her. Tarquin, have you noticed Elijah seems happier lately?"

Tarquin glanced meaningfully at Elijah's bedroom door but didn't respond. He shifted his attention back, scrolling through his phone on the living room couch.

Lowell, feeling cheerful, continued chopping the filling happily.

In his room, Elijah was sitting by the window, frowning slightly as he looked outside.

Elysia walked over and pulled up a little chair to sit next to him.

"Elijah, thank you for caring about me."

Elijah, as stoic as his dad, just frowned a bit more, ignoring her.

Elysia, full of maternal warmth, raised her hand to pat his head, but Elijah dodged, wary.

Elysia's hand froze mid-air for a few seconds before awkwardly dropping it down, seizing the chance to bond, "Elijah, do you miss your mom?" Elijah looked at her, his expression unreadable.

Elysia continued, "If there's anything you're confused about regarding your mom, you can ask me. I probably understand your mom's thoughts better than your dad."

Elijah was silent for a long while before finally asking, "Why?"

"Because I'm a mother too. Mothers understand mothers best."

Elijah frowned, looking at her as if he had a thousand words to say but was too guarded to speak.

Elysia gently said, "You don't have to be so wary of me. I'm not interested in your dad, and he's not interested in me, so I won't take your mom's place. I care about you because I have three kids of my own. They're about your age and... they look a lot like you. Seeing you reminds me of my own kids, so I really hope you're happy, just like how I want my little ones to be happy every day."

Elijah remained silent.

Elysia added, "I know you're not much of a talker, but you're smart. You know who cares about you and who doesn't. You understand what I'm saying, right?"

Elijah's expression softened slightly, but he still didn't speak.

Elysia, struck by a sudden idea, offered, "Elijah, do you want to know what it feels like to have your mother by your side?"

Elijah tensed at the question!

Elysia said, "If you want, you can tell me. I can help you."

Elijah didn't say yes, but he didn't say no either. He frowned and looked at her for a long while before turning his gaze back to the window, as if deep in thought.

Elysia let out a silent sigh, not wanting to disturb him further.

His lack of refusal meant he was considering it. If he agreed, she could engage in role-playing with him to understand him better!

Elijah looked out the window, and Elysia watched him...

If he wasn't frowning, he'd look exactly like Elliot or Evan. Having been around him this long, she hadn't seen him smile.

How could she make him smile?

Hitched & Hitched Again: A Comedy of Marital Mayhem (Elysia and Tarquin) - Chapter 248[644 words]

Elysia furrowed her brow as she recalled what Lowell had said. Lowell mentioned how Elijah had been the butt of jokes for years.

Elijah was just quiet, and people mocked him, calling him mute. He was actually struggling with mental health issues, yet they labeled him crazy.

And because of family interests, some were even hoping Elijah would just vanish.

Thinking about the harsh words Allegra had once spat at Elijah, Elysia felt her blood boil.

Some relatives are kin by blood, but utterly heartless in spirit.

"It's all going to be okay." Elysia suddenly spoke up, causing Elijah to turn his head towards her. Before he could react, she had pulled him into a hug!

Elijah shivered, his breathing quickened, and his cheeks flushed red.

This was his first embrace from a woman, ever!

Half nervous, half shy. He tried to wriggle free, but Elysia's grip was too strong, he couldn't escape.

"You..."

"Elijah, believe me, everything will get better! I'll fill your heart with sunshine, turn you into a healthy, lively kid! I'll make all those who mock you, curse you, and wish you ill, shut their mouths!"

Outside, Tarquin's hand lingered on the doorknob, yet he didn't push the door open.

His expression complex, he stood at the doorway, Elysia's words reaching him loud and clear.

Lowell was still in the kitchen. "What's up, Tarquin?"

Tarquin withdrew his hand, turning back to the kitchen, glancing at the meat Lowell was preparing for the meatloaf, "Just like that, huh? Did you season it?"

"Not yet."

Tarquin took off his suit jacket, rolled up his sleeves, washed his hands, and started seasoning.

Lowell asked, "Not calling Ms. Thorne anymore?"

"No."

Lowell was taken aback, "Are we both cooking?"

Tarquin, clearly annoyed, "Can't do it?"

"I... I can prep the meat because that's grunt work, but making burgers and meatloaf, that's a skill, and I might not be up to it."

Tarquin rolled his eyes. "Out of the way!"

Lowell was left speechless.

When Elysia came out of Elijah's room, Tarquin was nowhere to be seen, only Lowell bustling in the kitchen.

Seeing the meatloaf ready on the counter, Elysia was surprised.

"Lowell, you know how to make meatloaf too? You're amazing!"

Lowell chuckled awkwardly, "Not me, Elijah's father did."

Elysia was astonished, "He can cook too?"

"Yeah, he often cooks. He's pretty good at it."

Elysia looked at the meatloaf Tarquin made, perfectly shaped.

"I wouldn't have guessed. With his temper, I thought he was only good at snapping at people!"

"He's had it tough, looking after Elijah all these years, playing both mom and dad."

Elysia admitted it internally but muttered, "You've had it tough too, putting up with his temper every day. If it were me, I'd have bolted. No way I'd stick around."

Just as Elysia finished speaking, a cold voice came from behind, "You think I'd want you to stick around? Not a chance!"

Elysia jumped, turning to see the person who had just washed up from the bathroom.

He glared at her, clearly having heard her and not pleased.

Elysia wanted to retort, but her attention was diverted by his appearance.

Because of cooking, he had removed his suit jacket, now in dress pants and a shirt. The pants were crisply tailored; the shirt fitted perfectly, not a wrinkle in sight. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, the shirt neatly tucked into his pants.

Lean waist, long legs, a figure of poise.

Without a tie, the top two buttons of his shirt undone, revealing a hint of his collarbone and a well-defined throat, he exuded a casual sexiness. His exposed forearms were strong and muscular, setting off a surge of attraction.

Admiration is natural, and Elysia couldn't help but swallow.

Then, with a frown and clear displeasure, he shot back at her, "Are you ogling me?"

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Elysia was taken aback for a second, and then her cheeks flushed a brilliant red, stammering, "Who, who's ogling you?"

Tarquin responded with calm directness, "You."

Elysia's eyes widened further, her face growing even redder as she retorted fiercely, "Y-you... Stop talking nonsense! I did not! So, looking at you once is inappropriate? Get over yourself! So full of it! Such a... a narcissist!"

Elysia, refusing to admit anything, fired back with righteous indignation before quickly turning to busy herself with making a sauce, her heart pounding rapidly.

Tarquin, lips pursed, rolled his eyes at her but didn't engage further, heading to Elijah's room instead.

Dinner was still a bit away, and he took this opportunity to chat with Elijah.

They'd talk about Elysia, and also about the Bradford family's annual commemoration of their ancestors.

Elijah was playing with White, sitting at a small round table with White on it, engaging in a staring contest. It was like watching an eagle, seeing who would blink first.

Tarquin's expression softened a bit. Though he wasn't fond of Elysia, he had to admit, Elijah had been in a much better state these days, thanks to her.

Tarquin took the seat Elysia had just vacated.

Elijah and White turned their gazes towards him.

White, fearless, didn't shrink away like other animals might upon seeing him. The little one, head held high, flicked its thin, red tongue out, looking coolly at him.

Tarquin narrowed his eyes, taking a closer look at White.

At first glance, it was all black and somewhat adorable. But upon closer inspection, one could see the subtle patterns on its body. These patterns, unique and barely visible, floated across its skin like shimmering waves.

Looking at it felt like peering into an ancient, mystical pond, those patterns like the hidden forces beneath a calm surface.

Mysterious, dangerous, chilling to the bone.

No wonder it captivated Elijah, it was small and cute, yet had a cool demeanor, much like Elijah himself.

And it wasn't just its appearance that was rare, it was clearly intelligent. Its eyes moved observantly, clearly taking in everything around it. Tarquin asked Elijah, "You like it?"

Elijah, not directly answering, implicitly agreed.

"Did Elysia give it to you?"

Elijah responded coolly, "It's her son's pet, not for giving."

"Do you want it?"

Elijah paused before saying, "A gentleman doesn't covet what others love."

Though he desired it, he couldn't simply take it by force.

Tarquin, touched, ruffled his hair. "Elysia was right, Elijah, you're a good kid, very sensible when you're well."

"I'll get someone to find you one just like it."

Elijah remained silent, and Tarquin continued, "Are you fond of Elysia?"

Elijah looked at him, countering, "Do you like her?"

Tarquin openly replied, "She's good to you, so naturally, I don't dislike her. But not disliking doesn't mean liking. My interactions with her are because of you, unrelated to whether I like her or not."

Elijah, seeming to ponder Tarquin's words, finally remarked, "She's both silly and naive!"

Tarquin knew he was talking about Elysia. Though it sounded derogatory, it was laced with affection.

Elijah liked her.

"Her kids must be really lucky. She loves them dearly," Elijah commented out of the blue.

Tarquin added, "She loves you too, always trying to make you happy."

Elijah's lips twitched, but he didn't argue.

Tarquin then suggested, "If you're okay with it, I'll talk to her later, see if she can stay with you longer, alright?"

Elijah frowned, "What about when Mom comes back? Kick Elysia out again?"

"No, we'll see what she wants by then. If she wishes to stay, that's possible. Like Heath, she can stay with us, and I'll pay her a salary."

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When Elijah heard the word "mom," his expression turned noticeably gloomy.

"Didn't you say there was news about Mom? When is she coming back?"

Tarquin's brow furrowed slightly as he fibbed, "She's been held up by other matters. It'll be a little while longer before she can return."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Um... yeah."

"Does she not like me?"

"What? No, of course, she likes you."

"Does she not miss me?"

"She does miss you."

"Then she must not miss me that much," Elijah said, a hint of hurt in his voice, before turning his gaze out the window. His little face scrunched up, looking wounded.

If she really missed him, she'd have come to see him at the first chance. What could possibly be more important than seeing him?

Tarquin knew what Elijah was thinking and it pained him.

Every time this topic came up, he couldn't help but resent her. How could she leave her son like this, not care for so many years, not even want to check in on him?

Even if she was angry about what happened back then, what fault did their son have?

Tarquin grumbled in his heart but insisted out loud, "No mother doesn't love her child. She must have her reasons for leaving. Let's give her some more time. I believe she will come back, and I believe she loves you."

After a moment of silence, Elijah asked, "What kind of person is mommy?"

"She's....," Tarquin sighed, "very gentle, tears up easily, like a kitten when she cries."

Elijah frowned, "Why would she cry in front of you? Did you always make her upset?" Tarquin choked on his words.

Elijah continued, "What does she look like when she smiles?"

Tarquin was stumped - he didn't know.

But he couldn't say that to his son. He had to make something up, "When she smiles, it's like the sunshine, or a blooming flower... just like when Elysia smiles."

Elijah looked out the window again, falling silent.

"You have to believe love is mutual. You love her so much, and she surely loves you too. You miss her, and she's definitely missing you as well." Tarquin said those words as much to comfort his son as to reassure himself. He missed her, hoping she missed him just as much.

After a brief silence, Tarquin changed the subject.

"Elijah, in a few days, it's the Bradford family's annual commemoration day. We'll be going up to the hill to pay our respects."

"I'm not going," Elijah said without hesitation.

Tarquin wasn't surprised by his response but insisted, "It's a requirement for everyone. Your grandfather would want to see you too. It's not just about honoring them; it's about remembering your grandfather as well."

Elijah's little brow furrowed deeply.

Tarquin knew he disliked such events but continued, "This year is different. You're turning five, and according to tradition, you'll have to pay respect to our ancestors on your own, get to know each of them, and even prepare a speech to give in front of everyone."

Elijah turned to Tarquin, his voice firm and cold, "I'll only pay respect for Grandpa!"

That was his compromise. Tarquin knew this was his limit.

He wanted to say more, but Elijah suddenly got up and left the room, heading to the bathroom.

Tarquin watched him go, his expression gloomy. He knew Elijah wouldn't agree.

If it weren't for Elysia insisting he announce Elijah was well, he could have avoided the other traditions. Now, he had no excuse to skip them.