

Hitched 331

Chapter 331

Tarquin's gaze was intense, almost piercing. "Do you know her?!"

"Who?"

"Elijah's mother!"

Huh?

Elysia was taken aback by his sudden mention of Elijah's mother, pausing for a moment before shaking her head. "I don't know her!" But Tarquin clearly wasn't buying it, his voice laced with a warning edge. "Elysia, you better think carefully before you answer."

Elysia frowned, her irritation growing. "I have absolutely no connection with Elijah's mother. I don't know her!"

Tarquin stressed each word. "Then tell me, why were you trying to take off my shirt tonight?!"

"I..." Elysia bit her lip, hesitant.

Taking off his shirt was to see the bite mark on his shoulder! She wanted to make one last verification. DNA tests could be wrong, but that bite mark was unmistakable!

Yet, she couldn't voice her thoughts! Doing so would reveal their past encounter six years ago, leading him to question the origins of the children! As she remained silent, Tarquin pushed for an answer. "If you can't give me a convincing explanation, you'll never escape my sight again!"

He had guessed it. Elysia trying to take off his shirt had to do with the bite mark on his body! It hit him just tonight.

The first time they met, Elysia had asked him to take off his shirt, which he initially thought was her flirting with him! Then, during their interactions, she sneaked into his room at midnight, attempting to strip him, making him think she was shameless, wanting more! Today, she was almost frantic for him to strip, and when he refused, she dared to knock him out to do it herself!

After undressing him, she did nothing, clearly not intending to take advantage of him! And she had repeatedly stated that she wasn't attracted to him! She didn't like him as a person, nor was she lusting after his body, so her anxious attempt to strip him likely meant she wanted to see the bite mark on his shoulder to confirm something!

That bite mark was left by Elijah's mother, a secret known only to him, her, and the heavens! Why would Elysia know about it?

Either Elysia was Elijah's mother. Or, Elysia knew Elijah's mother, who had told her about the bite mark!

Clearly, the answer was the latter. Because he had Benjamin perform a paternity test before, which showed Elysia and Elijah were not related by blood. Benjamin wouldn't lie to him, so Elysia wasn't Elijah's mother, leaving only the latter as the answer.

Elysia knew Elijah's mother! That's why he was so desperate to confront Elysia and prevent her from leaving! And he wouldn't casually mention the bite mark; it was a secret shared between him and Elijah's mother! Only if he was a hundred percent sure of Elysia's motives tonight would he bring it up.

Both harboring their secrets, emotions ran high. Elysia, struggling for breath, couldn't find the words under Tarquin's intense gaze, sensing he might know something. Pressuring her to speak about the bite mark! But she couldn't reveal the truth!

"Speak!" Tarquin's command was cold.

Startled, Elysia shuddered. "I... I..."

With a predatory gaze, Tarquin left Elysia in a state of panic. Unable to tell the truth and without a suitable lie, she had only one option...

Elysia turned and ran, trying to escape him. But Tarquin didn't give her the chance, his long strides easily catching up, blocking her path. Colliding into his chest, Elysia's forehead throbbed with pain. Like a bird trapped in a cage, she stumbled, touching her sore forehead, then turned to run in another direction.

Tarquin's grip was swift, catching her arm and pinning her against the wooden pillar of the gazebo.

"Ah-"

Elysia's arm winced under his firm grasp, and her back slammed against the solid wood! The pain in her arm and back was so intense, tears were almost spilling from her eyes.

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Tarquin had no clue that she was the one who made his heart skip a beat, so he wasn't the least bit gentle!

His face was a thundercloud as he glowered down at her, "Just answer my questions honestly, and I won't hurt you!"

He didn't intend to cause her pain, but in the heat of the moment, his emotions got the better of him, making his grip tighter than usual.

He was convinced that Elysia must know Elijah's mother!

For the first time in six years, he felt like he was on the verge of finding her!

That's why he was nearly out of control with excitement!

He had spent so many sleepless nights thinking about her; besides Elijah, she was all he could think about!

Now that he finally had a chance to get information about her, he was determined not to let Elysia go before getting her to talk!

One was desperate to escape, to stay as far away from him as possible, burying some secrets deep within, avoiding facing him or engaging in conversation!

The other was relentless, not giving her a chance to escape, eager to extract information about Elijah's mother from her lips!

The silence around them was palpable as they caught each other's gaze once more...

Eventually, it was Elysia who looked away first.

She turned her face, tears streaming down her cheeks. She was at a loss, unsure how to solve the problem, resorting to helpless crying. Tonight, she realized he was that wild man she should have settled scores with long ago!

She was the victim here!

But instead of getting her revenge, she ended up being held hostage by him, just like before, powerless against him!

Elysia was both angry and aggrieved, crying fiercely.

Her tears sent Tarquin into a panic!

Not because he felt sorry for her, but because he was worried something might happen to Elijah's mother.

Her crying seemed to indicate trouble for Elijah's mother.

Tarquin became frantic, angry, feeling a tightness in his chest, and he snapped at Elysia, "Why the tears?! Elijah's mother is a kind and gentle soul, even the heavens would protect her, she'll be fine! Keep your tears to yourself!"

It seemed like he was talking to Elysia, but in reality, he was reassuring himself.

He was terrified something might happen to Elijah's mother, terrified to the point of nervousness!

That's how he always comforted himself.

Elysia looked at him with red eyes, filled with grievances and confusion. She didn't understand why he kept mentioning Elijah's mother tonight? She wasn't crying over Elijah's mother!

Nor did she say anything about her being in trouble!

Before she could ask, Tarquin suddenly added, "I've been searching for her for years, willing to do anything for her! I could make you live in luxury in heaven or suffer in agony in hell!"

Heaven?

Hell?

Elysia bit her lip, instinctively retorting, "I just want to live a normal life on earth; I don't wish for heaven, nor do I fear hell!"

Tarquin pursed his lips, momentarily exasperated by her way of thinking, then said, "If you help me find her, I'll make you very wealthy! But if you withhold information, I can ensure you'll never see your children again in this lifetime."

Elysia's eyes widened in shock, her anger boiling over, "How dare you threaten me about my children? They are mine, born from my womb after nine months, brought into this world at the risk of my own

life, and raised day by day! I am their birth mother; what right do you have to say I can't see my children?!"

"I said, if..."

"There are no ifs!" Elysia interrupted fiercely, her agitation clear, "I will be with my children forever, until my dying breath!"

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"The main point here, Tarquin, is about Elijah's mother!"

"I don't care about your 'main point.' You don't get to talk about my child! And like I said before, I don't know who Elijah's mother is. You could threaten me all you want, but I can't tell you what I don't know! I've been living out in the countryside for years, barely knowing you or Elijah, let alone her! So drop it with Elijah's mom and don't you dare threaten my kid! Try me, and see what happens!"

Tarquin was fuming, "Elysia! Why the hell are you shouting?"

"Jerk! Why the hell are YOU shouting?!" Elysia's voice was even louder!

Jerk?

Just as Tarquin was about to lose it, Elysia retorted, "And why are you so desperate to find Elijah's mother anyway? Got no shame? You forced yourself on her back then, you're her nightmare! Maybe she just wants to avoid you, hoping to never see you again in her lifetime! If you had an ounce of decency, you'd stop looking for her! Your searching is harassment!"

Just like her, she dreamed of staying as far away from him as possible for a lifetime! He was her nightmare!

Tarquin, enraged, responded, "What happened between her and me is none of your business!"

"Then stop asking me about her! I'll say it again, I don't know her!"

"You..."

"Don't believe me? Then go ahead, kill me! If I don't know, I don't know. There's nothing I can do to change that."

"1

, " Tarquin was grinding his teeth, "Then tell me, why the hell do you keep trying to take off my clothes? What are you up to?"

The topic had circled back, and Elysia's confidence waned slightly.

"What does this have to do with Elijah's mother?"

Tarquin demanded an answer, "Answer me!"

"

, " Elysia's heart was racing, her eyelashes fluttering rapidly.

It seemed tonight, she had to clear this up once and for all! How to say it? How could she possibly bluff her way out of this?

Suddenly, Elysia's face lit up, "Because of money!"

Tarquin was skeptical, "What?"

Elysia, scrambling for an excuse, said, "I thought you had a great body, figured I could make a good sum by selling some nudes!"

Tarquin was appalled, "You took nude photos of me?!"

Elysia, setting aside her shame for a moment, shook her head, continuing, "No! I hadn't even started taking photos when Lowell and Dr. Benjamin barged into the room."

Tarquin, doubting her story, pressed on, "They ran in after hearing you scream. If you wanted to take photos to sell, why scream?"

"I was mad!"

"Mad?"

"Very mad! I thought you'd have a great body, but after unbuttoning your shirt, I was so disappointed!"

Tarquin was taken aback, "?!"

Elysia, looking disgustedly at him, then pouting and shaking her head as if extremely let down, "Sure, you have pecs and a six-pack, muscles all tight and skin healthy, but I found it lacking. Your physique feels too common, wouldn't fetch a good price. I doubt anyone would pay five bucks for a picture! Times are hard, nobody's gonna spend a penny if it's not model-level."

"...Tarquin...!"

He was angry, very angry!

But Elysia felt a bit better, thinking, let him be mad!

She muttered, "The truth hurts, I didn't want to say it, but you forced my hand."

Tarquin was speechless.

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"But don't be too hard on yourself. Your physique is definitely leagues above those bargain bin rejects. I reckon even at a dime a pop, readers might give it a thought."

Tarquin glared at her, a glare so icy it could freeze someone solid.

Elysia shrank back a bit, "You should be grateful; I'm trying to comfort you here."

"So I'm supposed to thank you for that?!" His words came out strained, squeezed through clenched teeth.

Elysia's lips trembled, "No need!"

"Ding ding ding." Elysia's phone rang; it was Elliot.

The little ones were worried about her, fearing their goofy dad might have flipped and upset her again, so they called to check in.

Elysia quickly stepped aside to answer, "Hello, Elliot."

"Mommy, what are you up to?"

"I... I'm talking with Elijah's dad."

"Oh, we're with Elijah right now. Don't worry about us; he hasn't caught onto our secret."

And don't worry about not being able to see Elijah in the future. Elijah's dad was just scared you'd fight over custody, so he spoke in anger. We've explained it to him, and he's realized his mistake and said he'd apologize to you."

Hearing this, Elysia felt a wave of relief. Tarquin hadn't recognized the kids, which was good news!

And the possibility of seeing Elijah again was also good news!

But an apology? That hadn't happened.

He'd been nitpicking non-stop!

But it didn't matter; she wasn't exactly holding her breath for his apology!

"Blossom is probably on her way to pick you guys up. Go home with Blossom, and I'll come back later too."

"Mhm."

After hanging up, Elysia placed her phone over her heart, taking several deep breaths to calm her nerves.

As long as the kids were okay, she was okay!

The past was the past; she hadn't thought about revenge or rekindling anything. She just wanted to live a quiet life with her kids. So, even confirming his identity was no big deal!

Sure, finding out he was that wild man had initially stirred emotions, but now, after their argument, she felt the anger dissipate.

Her discovering his identity was one thing; as long as he didn't find out hers and the kids', all was well!

Elysia calmed down, exhaling deeply.

She tucked away her phone, ready to bid farewell and leave, but just as she turned, she nearly jumped out of her skin at Tarquin standing right behind her - like a towering specter, scaring someone half to death!

"What on earth?! You could scare someone to death, you know?!" Elysia complained.

Tarquin's face was a storm cloud as he bore down on her, an ominous presence.

"I'm asking you one last time, do you really not know Elijah's mother?"

"I don't! I really don't know her!"

"...So you've been stripping me for photos just to make money?"

Elysia's lips quivered, not as bold as before, "...Yes."

After all, she truly didn't know Elijah's mother; she wasn't lying.

But the whole thing about taking nudes for cash was a complete fabrication!

Tarquin's gaze was terrifying, prompting her to blurt out in a bid to fortify her courage,

"We could partner up; you strip, I shoot. A dime a shot, profits split fifty-fifty."

Tarquin's facial muscles twitched with rage, "Get lost!"

Elysia felt her eardrums might burst from his roar, "You..."

"GET OUT-"

His bellow sent her scurrying away, not daring to utter another word, sidestepping him and bolting!

She didn't look back, as if a tidal wave or a beast were on her heels!

After Elysia left, Tarquin stood alone in the gazebo, lighting up a cigarette.

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The night wrapped around him tightly, with only the faint glow of his cigarette offering any light. They say the higher your hopes, the greater your disappointment.

Tonight, his expectations had been sky-high. He thought Elysia was undressing him to tend to a bite. He thought Elysia knew Elijah's mother! He was convinced he'd get some information out of Elysia! Even just a little bit would help him find her!

He had taken advantage of her, and he felt guilty for it! But at the same time, he genuinely wanted to find her and treat her right. He wanted to spoil her, pamper her, protect her! People said Elijah was obsessed with his mother. Truth be told, he was just as obsessed with that woman! Desperate to find her, willing to lay his heart bare, all to treat her right!

He felt if he could just find her, he'd spoil her to the heavens. He'd happily revolve around her 24/7 without ever getting tired! Even if she wanted the stars from the sky or the moon from the sea, he'd rack his brain to pluck them or scoop them up! He knew it was futile, knew it was impossible, but as long as it made her happy!

He wanted to find her so badly, to spend his life spoiling her!

Tarquin's heart felt like it was on fire, burning and aching. It wasn't until Lowell cautiously approached, mentioning that Blossom had arrived at the community gate to pick up the children, that he snapped back to reality.

"Let her pick them up."

"Okay."

Lowell made a call to the community gate, then cautiously looked at Tarquin, asking, "Tarquin, are you okay?"

Tarquin frowned, stubbing out his cigarette, and started walking out as he called Keaton Huber. He was irritated and in the mood for a drink. Lowell didn't know what had happened but felt a pang of sympathy for him, silently sighing as he followed Tarquin to the bar.

The two left, and the gazebo sank back into silence. A disheveled woman with a pale face suddenly emerged from behind the bushes. She tilted her head, suspiciously watching the direction Tarquin and Lowell had gone... She didn't know Tarquin, didn't know who he was, but she had seen his face. She thought of Elysia's child... They looked exactly alike!

"Sarah!"

Suddenly, hearing her name called, Sarah shuddered and started to run, only to trip over a tree root.

"Ouch-"

She didn't know where she had hurt herself, but it was painful enough to bring tears to her eyes. Hearing the noise, Zane rushed over, followed by a doctor and nurses. Seeing her, Zane was angry,

"I've told you not to wander off. Why won't you listen?!"

Sarah looked at him with tearful eyes, feeling both aggrieved and angry,

"I came out to find my child! You refuse to help me, and now you won't even let me look myself? You don't care about him, but I do. He's my child. I miss him... I miss him so much..."

She broke down crying. Zane frowned, impatiently,

"I've told you many times, your child is gone. Where do you expect to find him?! And even if this child is gone, there can be others. Why must you torment yourself like this?!"

Sarah sobbed and asked him,

"Can there really be another? I didn't even get the chance to have this one. Can I really have another?"

Zane was clearly annoyed,

"It's not up to me whether you can have another. It depends on fate and your health condition! Other people recover from a miscarriage after a while, but look at you! If you keep this up, I'll have no choice but to have you committed to a psychiatric hospital!"

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Sarah was in a full-blown panic, shaking her head like she was trying to dislodge the very thought from her mind.

"No, no! I don't want to go to a psychiatric ward. Please don't lock me up. I was wrong. I won't run away anymore. I won't look for my child. Please, don't do this to me. I'm begging you."

With doctors and nurses around, Zane's tone softened a touch, "I'm doing all this for your own good. You've got to understand that."

Sarah glanced at him, her eyes wide and fearful, "I know, I know..."

"Come on, let's go back and get you checked out properly by the doctor."

As Zane helped Sarah up and led her towards the clinic, she sneaked a look in the direction Tarquin had left, frowning slightly.

In the hospital ward.

Gideon's right-hand man returned to the room and whispered, "Sir, young master Tarquin was at the hospital just now." Ever since the day of the wolf attack during the family's ancestral rites, Gideon had been recuperating in the hospital.

Hearing this, Gideon narrowed his eyes slightly, "Elijah's condition acted up again?"

"No, it was Ms. Thorne who fainted. Master Tarquin was here to see her, but they've both left now."

Leaning against his pillow, Gideon took a sip from his water glass, "How has Elijah been these past few days?"

"Not sure. Master Tarquin has stationed a lot of security around the estate, our people can't get in. But judging from the incident during the ancestral rites, it's almost certain Elijah has dissociative identity disorder!"

Gideon showed no sympathy, merely asking, "How long can someone with dissociative identity disorder survive?"

"It's hard to say, depends on their fate."

"We must find a way to keep him alive, even if he ends up in a vegetative state, he must keep breathing!"

Alive, he could be used. Dead, he was worthless!

His confidant nodded, "Understood. If there's any news on Elijah, I'll inform you immediately."

"Hmm, have you figured out what happened with the wolves?"

Shaking his head, his confidant replied, "We confirmed someone trained them intentionally, but we don't know who. Strangely enough, although the trainer prepared them to target Elijah, they suddenly turned on us instead. I even consulted with a zoologist, and they couldn't make heads or tails of it either. There was no sign of anyone controlling them at the time."

Frowning, Gideon asked, "So, the wolves' attack has nothing to do with Tarquin?"

"Definitely not. Those wolves targeted Elijah; Master Tarquin would never harm Elijah. It must be someone else's doing, but without finding that animal trainer, we can't trace the mastermind."

"Forget it then, Tarquin will be more vigilant than us. He won't let anything happen to Elijah! If he can't protect Elijah, we stand no chance. Better we focus on our own issues. Have we made contact with Alpha yet?"

His confidant shook his head, "Sent many messages, all ignored. I'm starting to think the intel Mr. E gave us might be off."

'Mr. E' referred to the top-tier hacker 'Baby ET's Support One', Elliot.

Gideon dismissed the thought, "Unlikely. Mr. E wouldn't joke about his reputation. It's normal for Alpha not to respond; ever since his rise, too many have sought him out. How many can actually reach him? He's as enigmatic as Mr. E!"

He mused, "All the capable ones are eccentrics!"

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"Exactly, what's our next move then? We've been trying to reach Alpha with no luck. Without his cooperation, we stand no chance of taking down young Tarquin.

Sir, didn't you mention that if we could just get in touch with Alpha, you're confident he'd team up with us? Why not use what you have as bait, kind of like how they lure Mr. E out of hiding? Let's send the bait Alpha's way."

Gideon pondered for a moment before rejecting the idea, "Let's make contact first."

"Understood. Also, after the family memorial service, those folks from the Bradford estate were lamenting even louder, growing even more disapproving of Elijah. They all blame the turmoil on Elijah, pointing all their grievances his way, vehemently opposing his succession as the head of the Bradford family."

"Hmph! The Bradford lineage has always been direct, and Elijah is the sole heir; his claim is undisputed! Don't think I'm unaware of their schemes. They're just hoping to disinherit Elijah and pick a new successor! That way, their own kids would have a shot at rising to power!"

His confidant understood that among the Bradford clan, only Elijah possessed the pure lineage, unlike the others. Take the AllegraVerity household, for example. Though they also bear the Bradford name, they followed their mother's surname, unlike Elijah.

Before the confidant could respond, Gideon continued with a sigh, "It's also a stroke of luck that Elijah is frail. Otherwise, not only them, but I wouldn't have had the chance to reclaim the Bradford Group in this lifetime! We must preserve Elijah's life! But he must remain weak; only then will Tarquin be distracted, and my opportunity will be greater!"

The confidant nodded in agreement, moving closer to whisper to Gideon, "Everyone thinks Elijah's sickness is due to his overwhelming grief for his mother. Do we need to take further action?"

Gideon narrowed his eyes thoughtfully for a moment and replied, "Yes! Tarquin has been too presumptuous lately in my presence. We need to teach him a lesson!"

Gideon knew exactly how to inflict pain on Tarquin! As long as Elijah was in trouble, Tarquin's life would be miserable!

The confidant added, "But we can't get to Elijah now. We'll have to wait for the family's New Year's Eve dinner, which is just a few weeks away." During the New Year, the Bradford family gathers for a grand feast, with all members in attendance! Tarquin will also bring Elijah along. "Plan carefully, we must act discreetly. Elijah must suffer but not die! And Tarquin mustn't suspect a thing!"

"Understood! Don't worry, after all these years, no one has caught on. There won't be any slip-ups."

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The entire Bradford family believed in the direct lineage tradition! Elijah was thought to be the sole bloodline! They watched him closely, some wishing death upon him, others hoping to leave him barely alive and in agony! They thought, with Elijah gone, the Bradford family would lose its legitimate lineage! Even if Tarquin fathered ten or more children, none could replace a son!

However... What they didn't know was that Elysia had given Tarquin several children! Their blood was as pure as Elijah's, making them rightful descendants of the Bradford family! This secret was known to none but Elijah, kept from the rest of the family! A day would come when they'd be shocked to their core! A day when their malicious intents would backfire on them! Evil deeds eventually meet divine retribution!

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Over here, when Elysia got home, the three little munchkins were eagerly waiting for her.

As soon as they saw her, they dashed to her side, "Mommy!"

Elysia, as usual, gave one a hug and another a cuddle, "Why are you all still awake?"

"We were waiting for you, Mommy. What did Elijah's dad tell you?"

"Did he apologize?"

"Are you feeling better now, Mommy?"

The little ones were tripping over each other, their eyes and hearts full of concern for their beloved mom.

By this time, Evan and Elijah had already switched back.

Elijah stayed in Sunshine Community, while Evan, along with Elliot and Emmett, came back with Blossom.

Evan, clenching his little fists, stared intensely at Elysia, even more excited than Elliot and Emmett! It felt like ages since he'd seen her, though it had only been an afternoon.

And when he finally spoke, the atmosphere shifted, "Mommy! Did that jerk give you any trouble? Don't be afraid of him, if you feel upset just let me know, and I'll go sort him out! I'll turn him from flat to round!"

Elysia, chuckling, pinched Evan's cheek, "Mommy appreciates the sentiment, but we can't always be thinking about fighting. You should learn from your big brother on how to handle things."

"I know! I won't just throw punches, but if anyone dares to bully my mom, I won't let them off easy!"

Elysia felt a warm glow in her heart, "Mommy's fine, don't worry. Elijah's dad didn't trouble me. And look, Mommy's happy now, no longer upset." The three let out a collective sigh of relief, as if a heavy burden had been lifted.

Elysia praised them, "You were amazing tonight, managing not to get recognized by Elijah's dad."

"It's all thanks to Emmett's makeup skills, practically like a master of disguise!"

Flushed with pride, Emmett beamed, "As long as Mommy wishes, I'll make sure he can't recognize big bro or second bro."

Elysia gave Emmett a kiss, "Our Emmett is the best!"

With a kiss from Mommy, Emmett was even more thrilled, "Mommy, are you hungry? I made you lots of delicious food."

"A bit, yes. How about you all join me?"

"Sure!"

The three nodded eagerly and scampered to the dining room. Emmett went to the kitchen to serve the food, Elliot rolled up his sleeves to wash the fruits, and Evan took care of setting the table and chairs.

Watching the busy trio, Blossom exclaimed, "I was pretty worried about you tonight, but now, all I feel is envy! With three great sons to warm your heart, I no longer fear for you getting hurt by any jerk."

Elysia nudged her, "Why the jealousy? My sons are your sons too, you're their beloved Blossom!"

Blossom lifted her chin proudly, "Right, right! These are also my great sons! Boys, Blossom's here to help! Let me do that."

...

In the cozy home, the atmosphere was lively and warm.

Elysia's tense nerves finally relaxed. The sadness of not seeing Elijah again, the anger and excitement at the discovery of the mysterious man, and the nervousness of being cornered in the gazebo, all came to an end.

She enjoyed a late-night meal with the three little ones, cheerful and content.

However, once the kids were tucked into bed, a sudden thought struck her! Her relaxed nerves tensed up once again!

Blossom noticed the change, "What's wrong?"

Elysia, frowning, said, "I just remembered that strange man!"

"Who?"

"After the kids were taken upstairs by Lowell tonight, I was waiting for them at the apartment building's entrance, and then I heard a strange voice..."

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Elysia recounted her conversation with the mysterious stranger, and Blossom was flabbergasted.

"Voice without a face? Ghosts, maybe? Did you see a ghost?"

Elysia frowned, "If it were just a ghost, that'd be fine. But the scary part is, he knows about my fling! He knows Elliot and the others are Elijah's dad's flesh and blood!"

"How could he know? You never spoke of it, not even to me or Winona. There shouldn't be a third person in the know! Wait, wait, wait, have you confirmed that Elijah's dad is that fling from back then?"

Blossom was as surprised as if she had discovered a new continent.

Elysia nodded, "Yeah! The mystery guy sent me a paternity test, and I've seen the unique scar on him! No doubt about it!"

Blossom's eyes were as wide as saucers, shocked for a moment before her brows furrowed, "The hell, we finally found him! What do you wanna do, Elysia? Sue him? If you're up for it, I'll call my folks right now and get them to hook us up with the best lawyer!"

Elysia shook her head, "I haven't thought about it. Aside from the fact that it's been so long and there's no evidence, just for Elijah's sake, I wouldn't sue him. What would happen to Elijah if he got into trouble? Poor kid's already without a mom, and despite being a jerk, he's good to Elijah."

Blossom let out a frustrated sigh, "That's true, but letting him off the hook feels too easy on him, and too unfair to you."

Elysia shook her head again, "Not unfair, I've made peace with it. He hurt me but also gave me wonderful kids; we're even. As long as he doesn't try to take them from me, we'll keep to our own paths. I'm just worried about that mystery guy, afraid he might spill the beans."

"He probably won't. From the sounds of your conversation, it seems like he's got a beef with your ex, doubt he'd spill anything anytime soon." Elysia exhaled a sigh of relief, "Anyway, I can't stay here."

"Huh?"

"I used to have this slight hope, fantasizing maybe the kids just resembled him and weren't actually his. Now that I'm sure, I can't stand to have any ties with him."

"What about Elijah?"

Elysia frowned, "Ideally, I'd leave after Elijah gets better, but... I have this feeling his illness is more complicated, not likely to improve easily." "What do you mean?"

"I've studied many cases over the years, none were purely from missing someone too much. Most kids, like Corbin Denton, developed psychological issues after experiencing something traumatic. Or it's congenital, like emotional detachment disorder, present from birth! But Elijah doesn't have a congenital

disorder, nor has he experienced those traumas... The more I'm with him, the more puzzled I become; his psychological condition just doesn't add up."

"If Elijah's sickness isn't from missing someone, what could it be?"

Elysia thought hard, her brows knitted, "I don't know yet, but although Elijah's not cured, his condition is relatively stable. Even without me, he shouldn't be in any immediate danger."

Blossom, knowing her deep affection for Elijah, comforted her, "Don't worry too much about him. Even if you leave Jindale City, you can still communicate. You guys can call or video chat often."

"Yeah! Right!"

"But what about your divorce? How can you leave without settling that?"

Mentioning that made Elysia furious. Tarquin, that jerk... She really didn't want to insult him, but his stalling on the divorce was infuriating! Jerk!

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"Achoo-"

Tarquin was in the middle of sipping his whiskey when he suddenly sneezed.

Keaton, with a teasing glint in his playful eyes, quipped, "Sounds like someone's talking trash about you."

Tarquin ignored him, didn't even spare him a glance, and continued to drink.

He kept pouring himself drink after drink until he was flat out drunk.

Slumped against the couch, he closed his eyes and yanked at his tie, looking downright miserable.

"Tarquin," Keaton called out to him several times to no response.

Once it was clear he was out cold, Keaton turned to Lowell and asked, "What in the world happened today? Why's he so down in the dumps?"

Keaton chose his words carefully, saying 'down in the dumps,' not 'mad.'

Having been around Tarquin long enough, Keaton knew the difference between when Tarquin was sad and when he was angry.

Tonight, it was sadness, not anger, that overwhelmed him.

Lowell scratched his head, clearly puzzled, "I'm not sure how to even start."

"Just spit it out, anything you remember," Keaton urged.

"It all began with Elijah, no wait, it actually starts with Ms. Thorne..." Lowell recounted the day's events to Keaton in one breath.

He talked about Elijah wanting to call Elysia 'mom,' the argument fueled by Elijah's split personality with Tarquin, and Tarquin wanting to meet Elysia's kids, which led to Elysia getting so nervous and angry.

He also mentioned Elysia collapsing and being rushed to the hospital, waking up to slap Tarquin, and Tarquin being sedated and stripped by Elysia... And before coming to the bar, Tarquin cornering Elysia and dragging her to the gazebo for a private chat.

"...That's pretty much it. But what they talked about privately, I have no clue. All I know is after Ms. Thorne left, Tarquin was alone at the gazebo smoking, and he already looked like a wreck."

Keaton, with a thoughtful look, listened quietly and then asked, "Elijah's mother wasn't brought up today, was she?"

Lowell shook his head, "I don't know."

Keaton mused, "It must have been mentioned. Only the topic of Elijah's mother could've hit Tarquin this hard." "But I didn't catch Tarquin bringing her up."

"You weren't there for his chat with Elysia in the gazebo, were you? That might have been when it came up!"

"True, but why would Tarquin bring up Elijah's mother with Ms. Thorne? And to get so worked up about it!" Keaton glanced at the drunken Tarquin and countered, "Elijah wants Elysia to be his mom?" "Yep!"

"He doesn't want his own mom anymore?"

Lowell sighed in exasperation, "I'm just as clueless, man. Elijah's just as hard to read as Tarquin."

Keaton continued, "Whose idea was this? Elijah's or Elysia's?"

"Seems like it was Elijah's."

"That means Elijah is moving past his trauma, which should be a good thing."

"But Elijah also wants Tarquin to be Ms. Thorne's husband."

"What? That too?"

"Yeah! The argument between Tarquin and Ms. Thorne today must have stemmed from this. Tarquin's heart belongs to Elijah's mother, and he suspects Ms. Thorne of manipulating Elijah, hence the resentment.

But how they ended up discussing Elijah's mother beats me."

Keaton remarked, "A woman who's been missing for six years, and we don't even know if she's alive! Even if she is, and by some miracle, Tarquin finds her, what if she's moved on? Is Tarquin supposed to make her leave her new family?!"

Lowell nodded in agreement, "Exactly! If you ask me, Tarquin should just get together with Ms. Thorne. She's beautiful, kind-hearted, and Elijah adores her. And Tarquin doesn't mind her. If they got together, it'd be like merging two families into one, double the happiness. Sounds perfect to me.'