

Hitched 431

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Elysia shot him a wary look. "What about?"

Tarquin replied, "If you won't come here, I'm coming over to you."

Elysia quickly said, "Wait, I'll come to you!"

Discussing matters in the study always felt more comfortable than in the bedroom.

Upon reaching the study, Elysia stood with caution and asked, "What do you want?"

Tarquin got straight to the point, "Does your son know Nola?"

"No, he doesn't."

"Then why is he spreading rumors that Nola is pregnant?"

Elysia certainly wouldn't admit that Elliot did it on purpose and lied, "My son didn't mean to start a rumor. He just thought her belly looked a bit bulgy and assumed she was pregnant. We didn't expect the media to blow it out of proportion."

Tarquin stared at her with an inscrutable expression for a moment before asking, "Is there anything extraordinary about your son?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do they, compared to other kids, show any unusual traits?"

Elysia confidently and assuredly said, "Not at all. They are just ordinary kids. Oh, they are quite smart though."

"Smart?"

"Yes! Very smart and sensible." Elysia said with pride.

Tarquin asked, "Does that come from their father?"

Elysia countered, "Absolutely not! Their father is a fool! They take after me!"

Tarquin looked at her, dead serious, "If they take after you, they couldn't possibly be smart."

Elysia bristled immediately, "What's that supposed to mean?! Are you calling me dumb?!"

"No."

"Then what are you saying?"

"I'm saying you're not bright, low IQ."

"You..." Elysia was incensed, no longer wanting to engage with him, and turned to leave. Angered.

Suddenly, Tarquin asked again, "Did your son say Nola was pregnant on purpose?"

"Not at all!" Elysia snapped back, denying it.

Tarquin gave her a cryptic look for a few seconds, "Hmm."

Elysia was suspicious, wondering what he was really thinking.

She was curious but didn't ask further.

Because Elliot indeed had spread the rumor on purpose, she was lying, feeling a bit guilty.

And she hadn't figured out the real reason herself yet, so it was better not to say too much to him.

After Elysia left, Tarquin lit a cigarette and sat at his desk, frowning slightly, lost in thought as he smoked.

Because Elijah had a late lunch at Future Community, their dinner was delayed until past 7 p.m.

It was already dark outside.

As night fell, Elijah grew increasingly anxious.

He sat at the dinner table, occasionally glancing at his smartwatch and then out the window.

Though he tried to appear normal, Tarquin saw right through his nervousness and concern.

A father knows his son best. Tarquin had raised Elijah himself and knew him well.

Elijah was clearly troubled today, likely something to do with Nola.

Before dinner was even finished, Tarquin received a call from Lowell,

"Tarquin, it's the strangest thing. We can't find Nola anywhere, just like when we were looking for Ms. Thorne. She's supposed to be in Jindale City, but it's like she's vanished."

Tarquin looked up, instinctively glancing at Elijah.

Elijah, sensing something, furrowed his brow and asked, "What's wrong? Who was that?"

Tarquin, without betraying any emotion, hung up,

"Just work stuff. I need to step out, finish your dinner and don't wait up."

To ease his son's worries, he patted Elijah on the head before leaving.

Elijah watched him go, his mind in turmoil.

Once outside, Tarquin called Lowell back,

"Have someone keep an eye on Future Community. I'm heading over."

"Future Community? Who are we watching?"

"Elysia's son."

Lowell was confused, "Why them?"

"Enough questions!" Tarquin hung up and walked straight to his unassuming sedan.

Axel appeared, opening the door for him.

After Tarquin got in, Axel took the driver's seat, "Where to?"

"Future Community."

Axel, always cool and sparing with words, asked nothing further and drove towards Future Community.

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When they arrived, Lowell was already waiting.

The moment the car stopped, Lowell swung the passenger door open and hopped in, his face alight with curiosity. "Tarquin, why are we tailing Ms. Thorne's kid?"

Tarquin shot back, "Are they still at home?"

"Where else would they be on an evening like this? Probably cuddled up with a bedtime story."

Leaning back, Tarquin lit a cigarette, casting a glance towards the Thorne residence...

Seeing he wasn't inclined to share, Axel stepped out of the car. Lowell followed, seeking answers Tarquin hadn't given. "What's Tarquin's plan with Ms. Thorne's kid?"

"No clue."

"Why's he so fixated on them? They're just kids."

"No clue."

Lowell scratched his head, "You've noticed Tarquin's acting off today, right?"

"Yeah."

"Any idea why?"

"Nope."

Axel's consistent mystery only served to douse Lowell's burning curiosity with cold indifference.

"Aren't you curious at all?" Lowell prodded.

"Not really," Axel replied flatly, continuing on his way.

Lowell watched Axel's retreating figure, baffled. How could he not crave the juicy details? Was he void of all curiosity?

The neighborhood was eerily quiet. The winter nights in Jindale City were bitterly cold, keeping everyone indoors by the warmth of their fires, with hardly a soul wandering outside.

Hands in his pockets, Axel kept to the shadows, avoiding the streetlights. He wasn't entirely clueless about Lowell's questions; he simply preferred silence over the hassle of explanations.

Suddenly, a familiar figure caught Axel's eye. He swiftly blended into the dark.

Blossom, bundled up in a thick down jacket and a fluffy hat, approached with a trash bag, sniffing and sneezing along the way - clear signs of a cold. A gust of wind stirred the silence, sending a shiver through her. Blossom quickened her pace, then stumbled.

"Ah!"

Rushing too fast, she fell, looking like a toppled bear, her trash bags rolling towards a nearby bin. After a moment on the ground, she clumsily got up, brushed herself off with a huff, and stomped the ground in frustration, as if to scold it for her fall.

Then, she hurried to the bin, disposed of the trash, and wrapped herself tightly as she rushed back to her building.

The cold wind carried a faint scent of blood, causing Axel to frown. Once Blossom was out of sight, Axel approached the bin and examined the contents of the trash bag she'd discarded.

What he found made his expression turn stone cold.

Moments later, Axel returned to Tarquin, handing over his phone. It displayed photos he'd just taken. Tarquin glanced at them, then looked up at Axel. "It's from Professor Folly's daughter," Axel explained. "Just found it in the trash."

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Tarquin furrowed his brow, silent.

Lowell rushed over for a look, shocked, "This is utterly creepy! Wait, doesn't this cat's death seem eerily familiar? It's like... I remember now! It's killed the same way as that dead cat someone tried to throw into Elijah's room! Someone twisted its neck to kill it!"

Tarquin and Axel remained silent, exchanging glances.

After a moment, Tarquin handed the phone back to Axel and asked, "Are we sure it was Professor Folly's daughter who threw out this trash?" "Yeah!"

Tarquin, with a cigarette dangling from his lips, pondered deeply.

Lowell was baffled, "How could it be Ms. Blythe? Ms. Blythe and Ms. Thorne are best friends, and she's the cherished only daughter raised by Professor Folly himself. She looks so innocent, doesn't seem like someone who'd harm a cat, much less be that mysterious figure!"

Tarquin and Axel remained silent, the only response was the cold whisper of the wind.

Meanwhile, upstairs.

Elliot had just received a response, timed perfectly.

Evan and Emmett's palms were sweaty with tension.

They feared not getting a reply, that tonight's plan would be ruined.

The message asked them, what do you know?

Elliot didn't reply directly, his fingers flew over the keyboard, trying to trace the sender's location.

But clearly, the sender had protected their location; Elliot couldn't trace it.

Though expected, Elliot frowned in displeasure.

Evan leaned in to ask, "Bro, still can't track him?"

"Yeah!"

"It's okay, he's already taken the bait. Tonight, we'll expose him, see exactly what kind of monster he is!"

Elliot 'hmmmed' again, his eyes narrowed as he stared at the message for a few seconds before replying with Nola's phone, Midnight, let's meet.

The sender immediately replied, I'm not even sure what you know. Why should I meet? For all I know, this could be a trap.

Elliot didn't reply. After a while, the person sent another message,

I'm not playing this game. Just expose whatever you have. I won't meet.

Evan and Emmett panicked at the message, Bro, he's not agreeing to meet!

Elliot was calm, "Don't worry about him, it's reverse psychology. If he didn't want to meet, he wouldn't have contacted us in the first place."

"What now? If we don't show him something, might he conclude we're bluffing and really not show up?"

Elliot was silent for a moment, then shook his head, "We barely know anything about what happened back then; the more we say, the more mistakes we could make. If he realizes we know nothing, he definitely won't meet. But keeping it vague, he's more likely to show up!

After all, if the events of the past were exposed, it would impact him greatly! If he's been plotting all these years, exposure would ruin his plans.

So, as long as we don't give him concrete evidence that we're bluffing, he'll definitely show up."

Just as Elliot finished, Elijah sent a message,

What's the situation? Did he contact you?

Elijah was pacing in Sunshine Community, anxious for not being able to be on the 'battlefield' himself.

Elliot replied, We've made contact, still in a psychological battle. Keep calm, take care of Mom, make sure she doesn't sense anything off.

The next second, Nola's phone rang with a call from an unknown number.

Elliot, with a puzzled frown, immediately hung up!

The person then sent a message, You're not Nola!

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"

Evan and Emmett tensed up again. "Bro!"

Elliot remained cool as a cucumber. "Forget about him, let him talk. He has no proof we aren't who we claim to be, and even if we were, it wouldn't affect him in the slightest. What really matters is what happened back then, not who's meeting him. So even if he figures out we're not Nola, it won't stop him from showing up. Besides, I'm pretty sure he's clueless."

The phone rang again the next second, still from a burner number. Elliot was even more convinced. "See, he's calling again. If we don't pick up, he's just bluffing. If he truly knew we weren't Nola, he wouldn't keep calling." Elliot hung up again. They definitely couldn't answer it, or their cover would be blown.

"Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, are you guys asleep?" Blossom's voice came from outside the door. The kids quickly stashed away Nola's smartphone and dove under their covers, pretending to be asleep.

Blossom gently pushed the door open and tiptoed inside. She checked on them, tucked them in a bit more, and then left. After the door closed, Elliot whispered to Emmett, "Once we're gone, Blossom is your responsibility."

"Don't worry, fooling Blossom is as easy as pie."

At eleven o'clock at night, certain Blossom was sound asleep, Elliot and Evan changed into their sneakers and hoodies, grabbed their backpacks, and headed out.

Tarquin was waiting downstairs. Upon seeing them, the three had different reactions. Tarquin and Axel expected this, only Lowell was totally shocked! In the dead of night, why on earth were these two munchkins sneaking out? Where were they heading?

Unaware of their audience, the boys masked up and left the complex, hailing a cab to the hotel. Before getting into the cab, Evan sharply turned back for a look.

"What's up?" Elliot asked.

Evan furrowed his brow, peering into the darkness for a moment before saying, "Nothing."

The cab drove off, and that's when Tarquin's group showed themselves. Lowell marveled, "Can't believe Ms. Thorne's sons have such sharp instincts. Almost caught us there. But where could they be going this late?"

Lowell started his car, ready to tail them, but Tarquin stopped him, turning to Axel instead, "Follow them on your own. Better to lose them than let them spot you."

"Got it." Axel left the car.

Lowell was worried, "Better to lose them than be spotted, but what if those kids run into trouble? No, wait, Axel's got skills; they won't notice him." Tarquin didn't reply, just said, "Contact the cab company, get the destination of that cab with the license plate starting with JE."

Lowell saw Tarquin's serious look and immediately made the call. Soon they had their answer, "Marriott Hotel! Tarquin, those kids are heading to the Marriott Hotel!"

Tarquin's brow twitched. The Marriott Hotel, a Slater family property! Were these kids on their way to find Nola?

"Take the back roads!"

"Right." Lowell sped off, still couldn't help asking, "Wonder what those kids are up to. Should we let Ms. Thorne know?"

"No need."

"And if something happens, won't Ms. Thorne blame us for not telling her sooner?"

Tarquin glanced at Lowell, "Even if you mess up, those kids won't."

"Huh?"

"They're smarter than you, probably better in a scrap too."

"What?!" Lowell was stunned, catching Tarquin's reflection in the rearview mirror.

"Just drive."

Lowell "..."

Truth be told, having been Tarquin's right-hand man for years, he knew him better than anyone. Today's confusion stemmed from his underestimation of what five-year-olds could do.

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In his eyes, five-year-old kids are usually adorable bundles of confusion, lacking in both intelligence and guile. That's why he couldn't fathom what was going on with Tarquin today; he just couldn't follow the

kid's train of thought. At this moment, Tarquin had already turned his gaze towards the window... He was smoking a cigarette, his stylish brows furrowed deeply.

He had never doubted Elliot, Evan, and Emmett before, but today's incident with Nola pointed directly at them. Nola was a no-brainer, the epitome of dumb, inept, and nasty! Despite her malice, she wasn't cunning—after all, you need brains to hatch schemes, and she had none. That's precisely why he became suspicious of the messages she sent today. She must have discovered something to be sending him those frantic messages, urging him to go check out Elysia's kids at the preschool! Then, there were those bizarre posts on her social media accounts. And after that, she just vanished, and even he couldn't track her down.

Tracing back the sequence of events, it all started with Elliot's comment about her being pregnant. From that comment, problems began to surface, fermenting until they reached this point. Another thing that raised his suspicion... There were so many videos and photos from the preschool incident online. Many kids and teachers got caught on camera, but Elysia's three sons were conspicuously absent. Under normal circumstances, they should have appeared, especially since Nola was closest to them. Why could everyone around Nola be filmed, but not them? It could only mean someone manipulated the situation, removing any photos or videos related to them.

Additionally, there was another issue... After the preschool incident, Nola's PR team immediately tried to clamp down on the story. But they couldn't contain it, and strangely, not a single discussion online involved the kids. Didn't anyone wonder why a five-year-old would know about Nola's pregnancy? What was their relationship with Nola? Surely, people were curious, but someone was steering the narrative, deliberately ignoring this question.

So... Piecing everything together, he couldn't help but suspect Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. And with the way Elijah acted after leaving their house today, he was even more convinced that Elliot, Evan, and Emmett were no ordinary kids, and they were somehow involved in Nola's situation. Now, with the kids sneaking out in the middle of the night, his suspicions were all but confirmed. He couldn't look at them as just five-year-old kids anymore! The world was full of extraordinary occurrences, most unknown to the public, and he was somewhat familiar with these matters...

But still, Elysia wasn't exactly sharp, so how could her children be so brilliant? How could a woman of limited intellect give birth to such geniuses? Who was their father? Or was this exceptional intelligence not inherited at all, but purely a matter of talent?

He was deep in thought when suddenly, Axel's call came through, "I lost them. Those kids are sharp. If I keep tailing them, they'll definitely notice me." He wasn't surprised, "They're heading to the Marriott Hotel. Approach from a different direction, and try not to let them spot you."

"Got it."

After hanging up, he pocketed his phone and lit another cigarette. He had many questions for Elliot and Evan, but before he confronted them, he needed to figure out what exactly they were up to tonight. In this game of cat and mouse, he intended to be the cunning sparrow, waiting for his moment.

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When Elliot and Evan arrived at the hotel, Nola and her bodyguard were still unconscious. The duo swiftly moved them into a bedroom and locked them in, cleverly closing most of the doors and windows but leaving their escape route open. Since they weren't familiar with the person they were expecting, Elliot had meticulously planned an escape route for him and Evan, just in case.

Once everything was in order, Elliot lit the scented candle Emmett had prepared for them. Having taken an antidote in advance, the boys weren't worried about falling victim to its effects. Turning off the lights, they hid in the shadows, waiting.

After a while, Evan checked the time and whispered, "Bro, it's midnight!" Elliot took out Nola's phone and sent the location to their target. Evan was getting nervous again, "Is that all we need to do? Shouldn't we say something? Will he really come?"

"He will. If he wasn't planning to, he would've deactivated the burner phone by now. It's still active, which means he's waiting for our message. He'll come."

Suddenly, Elijah's voice came through the earpiece, "Someone's tampering with the hotel's surveillance."

"Who?" Elliot asked.

"I'm checking. Not sure if it's our guy, but don't worry, I've secured our surveillance system. They can't breach it."

Elliot nodded, then asked, "Is Mom asleep?"

"Yeah, she's sleeping soundly. Don't worry about her."

Then, through the earpiece, Elliot checked with Emmett, "Emmett, is Blossom asleep too?"

Emmett's childlike voice replied, "She's been asleep for a while. Don't worry about us. If Blossom suddenly shows up, I'll say you guys are in the bathroom."

The four of them stayed vigilant at their 'posts', working together to catch the big fish. After a bit, Elijah suddenly said, "Weird, there are two groups messing with the surveillance."

"Two?"

"Yeah, doesn't seem like the same person. One must be our guy, but who's the other?"

As soon as Elijah finished speaking, the doorbell rang!

"Ding"

"Ding"

The kids jumped, and Elliot and Evan instantly looked towards the door.

"Don't open it yet, let me check who it is. A man, dressed as a hotel waiter, carrying a fruit platter. Give me a sec to look him up."

Elijah was quick, "He's indeed a hotel waiter, been working here for three years, nothing shady about him."

Evan whispered, "Why would he come at this hour?"

Elijah replied, "He's carrying a fruit platter, seems he's here to deliver fruit."

True enough, the next moment, the man called out, "Ms. Slater, the manager asked me to bring you some fruit."

Evan was puzzled, "Really? Just for fruit? Should we open the door, bro?"

Elliot frowned slightly. It was an odd time to deliver fruit. Perhaps someone was trying to distract them.

He's coming!

With that thought, Elliot tensed up, about to speak when Evan suddenly dashed towards the window! The next moment, the room erupted with the sounds of a scuffle! Elliot quickly turned on the light!

Evan was grappling with a man in black. The sudden light seemed to surprise the intruder. After a brief moment of shock, he attempted to flee through the window. Evan, quick as ever, kicked a vase towards the window switch. Before the man could escape, the window locked shut!

The intruder then tried to push through the door to the adjacent room, planning to escape from there. But Elliot had already locked that door in anticipation. Finding the door locked, the man in black turned around, giving Elliot a meaningful look.

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He bolted towards us, aiming to snatch Elliot and make a break for it!

But Evan wasn't having any of it. With swift agility, he darted in front of Elliot, grabbed the attacker's fist, and executed a perfect judo throw.

The attacker hit the ground hard, bounced back up, and staggered several steps backward.

Clearly, he hadn't anticipated Evan's moves to be so adept. He shot Evan a surprised glance, then spun on his heel, sprinting towards the window, intending to smash through it and escape.

It was obvious he wanted no part in a tussle with the two young boys.

But before he could reach the window, a wave of dizziness hit him, and his limbs began to weaken.

Realizing something was amiss, he turned, staring at Elliot and Evan in bewilderment, "Did you guys drug me?"

Elliot knew it must be Emmett's incense that had kicked in, and calmly stated, "Since you're already here, no need to rush off. Let's have a chat."

The attacker, still puzzled about the drug, questioned, "How did you manage to drug me?"

Instead of answering directly, Elliot dismissed the waiter at the door, then turned to the attacker, saying, "The drug will only paralyze your nerves and weaken your ability to fight but won't take your life. No worries."

The attacker looked at them meaningfully, "You guys are full of surprises and honestly, quite impressive. Makes me even more eager to play the role of your guardian."

Elliot's eyes widened, "It's you!"

He hadn't forgotten the conversation at Sunshine Community with the mysterious figure who had offered to be their 'guardian.'

This man in black was that mysterious figure!

The attacker smiled broadly, openly admitting, "Yes, it's me."

The group was astounded.

Instead of leaving, the attacker settled himself on the couch, rubbing his temples, then looked at Elliot and said, "Luring me here with Nola, you must have tons of questions. Shoot, I'm in a good mood today, might answer more than you expect."

Elliot didn't hold back, blurting out, "Who exactly are you?"

This was burning on their minds!

But the mysterious figure dodged, "Let's skip that. I'd rather not say."

Evan clenched his fists, ready to force the issue, but the man chuckled, "Evan, if you resort to violence, I might decide not to answer any more of your questions. Is that all you want to know, who I am? Don't you have other questions?"

Evan gritted his teeth, but Elliot held him back, signaling him to stay cool.

They indeed had a myriad of questions on their mind.

Elliot pressed on, "The day our mom passed out, was it you who took her to the hospital? And then you took Elijah away from her?"

"Yes, that was me. After taking Elijah, I contacted Nola, had her hand Elijah over to Tarquin. So... if I say I'm your savior, you wouldn't object, right? Without me, your mom might have died in childbirth."

Elliot countered, frowning, "We do object! If you truly wanted to save our mom, why did you then leave us in the dangerous wilderness instead of keeping us safe at the hospital?"

The attacker explained, "Originally, after taking Elijah, I planned to leave you to your fate. But then, for some reason, I changed my mind... Speaking of which, I've got a question too. How did you survive? And where did you learn your skills?"

Seeing he was clueless about their mountain benefactor, Elliot naturally didn't volunteer any information, merely stating, "By divine grace, our lives were spared."

The attacker chuckled, "You sure are lucky ones."

Elliot steered the conversation back, "Back then, why did you take Elijah to Tarquin? What was your aim? And why did you only take Elijah but left us behind?"

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The man in black squinted his eyes at Elliot, a shadowy figure against the dim light.

"I refuse to answer these questions," he finally said.

Elliot frowned.

"Look, kid," the man continued, "there are things too big for you to understand right now. All you need to know is that I'm here to be your guardian, your protector. I'm not here to cause harm."

"But if you want to be our guardian, why keep your identity a secret?" Elliot pressed.

"When the time's right, I'll reveal all. Next question."

Biting back frustration, Elliot asked, "Did you know my mom was pregnant with Tarquin's child right from the start?"

"Yes," the man simply replied.

"How?"

"I knew everything that happened at the airport that day."

Evan, who had been silently listening, couldn't hold back. "So you knew when my mom was being harassed by that jerk Tarquin?!" "Yes."

"Why didn't you help her?"

The man shrugged. "I didn't know her back then. Why would I intervene? What happened to her was none of my business."

"You..."

Elliot, irritation mounting, asked, "So you're familiar with her now?"

The man smirked. "Very."

"And does my mom know you?"

"Trying to pry information out of me, eh?" The man chuckled. "So eager to figure out who I am? Next question."

Elliot's frustration was palpable. "Since you took Elijah five years ago, have you been plotting against Tarquin?"

The man fell silent, his face unreadable. After a moment, he gave a vague reply, "Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"...Elliot, everyone has their stories, their secrets. It's impolite to dig too deep."

Clearly, he was saying, "Mind your own business."

Before Elliot could retort, the man added, "Just remember, your mom was never my target. She was just someone who got involved with Tarquin and ended up carrying his child. That's the only reason our paths crossed."

"And now?" Elliot pushed.

"Now," the man's smile widened, "I would never harm her. In fact, I want to make her mine, bring her home as my wife."

Elliot's face darkened. "You're in love with my mom?"

"Whether I love her or not isn't the point. It's enough that my precious one does."

"Precious one?"

The man dodged the question, saying, "Your mom's a good woman, a fantastic mother. She'd make an excellent wife too. If we were together, everything would be perfect."

Elliot's voice was icy. "Stay away from my mom!"

"Why should I?"

"Because you're not father or husband material. My mom and I, we don't need you!"

The man looked genuinely puzzled. "And how have you figured that I wouldn't make a good father or husband?"

"A good father or husband wouldn't encourage his family to commit murder."

But the man argued, "To Elysia, Tarquin was a violator, a source of deep pain. He deserves to die. And Allegra almost killed your mom in that accident. She deserves the same. Am I wrong to suggest justice?"

"True love thinks of the future, not of revenge or breaking the law!" Elliot shot back.

The man sighed softly, "One day, you'll see that I can be a great father... and a great husband too. Being with me would bring you happiness."

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His phone suddenly rang after he finished speaking. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled it out and glanced at the screen. Whoever messaged him must've shared good news because a warm smile spread across his face, softening his entire demeanor. He typed a quick reply, still smiling, then pocketed his phone and stood up.

"I've gotta head out, folks. Today's chat is over. Trust me, we'll be like family soon. Just let me wrap up some things here, and I'll take you guys back to our place to find the treasure."

Seeing him about to leave, Evan quickly blocked his path. "You can't go!"

After all the effort to draw him out, Evan wasn't about to let him leave without uncovering his identity.

The man in black seemed to read his mind and asked with a calmness that belied the tension, "Evan, are you so eager to see my face, or is it more important to you that Emmett stays safe?"

Evan was taken aback.

The man continued, "I might not have the strength to fend you off right now, but don't mistake my calm for weakness. Sure, you could force me to reveal myself, but then I'd have to make sure Emmett pays the price."

Gritting his teeth, Evan retorted, "Then I'll just have to take you down now, so you can't ever hurt Emmett!"

The man just chuckled, "Oh, Evan, you're not as sharp as your brother. Who said I need to be the one to harm Emmett? Trust me, if you lay a hand on me, Emmett will be in trouble immediately."

Elijah's voice suddenly came through the earpiece, "Emmett's gone off the grid!"

Elliot and Evan's faces fell, and they demanded, "What have you done to Emmett?!"

"Relax. As long as I'm fine, the kid will be too," the man assured them with an unnervingly calm voice.

He then headed for the door, leaving Elliot and Evan frowning after him, neither daring to stop him again. They cared more about Emmett's safety than unmasking this mysterious figure.

As the man reached the door, he turned back, sighed softly, and said with a tone one might use to cheer up children, "Cheer up, lads. Here's a hint for you—I've been right under your noses all this time. Figuring out who I am shouldn't be too hard, huh?"

With that, he left, door closing behind him.

Evan was shocked. "He's been around us all along? Is he someone we know?!"

Elijah spoke seriously, "Seems like it."

Elliot, frowning deeply, was silent for a few seconds before he opened the door to check. The man had vanished.

"Let's check on Emmett first!"

"Hey, I'm here. Blossom just woke up, and I went to check on her. What's happened?" Emmett's voice suddenly came through.

Elliot, Evan, and Elijah were speechless for a moment.

"Blossom's awake, not sure if she'll come over later. How long till you guys are back?" Emmett asked quietly.

"We're on our way back now! We'll have a team meeting soon. I've picked up on a lot of issues from what he said," Elliot responded.

With the mysterious man gone, staying put was pointless.

Before leaving, Evan asked, "What about Nola, that nasty piece? What do we do with her?"

"Leave her for now. She doesn't know who knocked her out; she'll wake up by morning all the same."

"Got it!"

The brothers quietly left the hotel, the man in black watching them get into a cab from behind a pillar, chuckling to himself with a hint of mockery in his eyes. It was as if he found it amusing that he'd almost been caught by a couple of youngsters!

The crisp sound of a lighter flicking to life came from behind him. Startled, the man spun around, only to see Tarquin standing a short distance away, casually leaning against a car, smoking a cigarette, and watching him through narrowed eyes.

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The man in black frowned, turning his head to scan the surroundings. Everywhere he looked, paths of escape were blocked by onlookers. It was clear; he had become the prey Tarquin had successfully cornered.

"Great, just great. When it rains, it pours, doesn't it?" He mocked himself under his breath, then, as if transforming into a different person, his expression suddenly became dark and menacing.

He glared at the gloomy sky, muttering coldly, "Oh, fate, you're really throwing curveballs at me today, huh? Trying to mess up my plans? Ha, you're underestimating me. My fate is my own, not yours to control. No one, except my beloved, can add to my troubles!"

After saying that, he closed his eyes, picturing the face and laughter of his beloved, whispering to himself, "One, two, three!"

His eyes snapped open, his mood reset. He looked at Tarquin, scoffed twice, and with his hands in his jacket pockets, started walking towards him. Tarquin, unable to hear what he was mumbling, leaned quietly against the car, calmly smoking a cigarette, watching him without a hint of panic. Although he didn't know who the man was, he knew he wasn't just anybody.

When the man stopped a meter away, he bluntly asked, "So, what's this about? You looking to kill or chat?"

Tarquin, slightly surprised, narrowed his eyes. He had followed Elliot and Evan here, cornering the man with questions in mind, but hadn't expected him to jump straight to talk of killing.

"Have I wronged you in some way? Why would I need to kill you?" Tarquin retorted.

The man in black chuckled, turning the question back, "If there's no beef between us, why corner me? I haven't done anything wrong. I'm one of the good guys."

Tarquin flicked his cigarette, "Good guys don't skulk around in the shadows."

"Well, by that logic, you're no saint either. You've been sneaking around after two kids tonight, and now you've cornered me," the man shot back.

Tarquin openly admitted, "I've never claimed to be a good guy."

"Ah, but see, we differ there. I never claim to be a bad guy."

He continued, now seemingly more excited, "Let me tell you a secret. I got played by those kids earlier. Right now, I'm as weak as a kitten, no strength to resist at all. You could easily kill me if you wanted to. What do you think? Tempted?"

Tarquin looked at him narrowly, "Looking for an easy way out?"

"Ha, everyone dies eventually. Sooner or later, it's all the same. But if I die, your good days are over. Killing me would be like shooting yourself in the foot."

Tarquin flicked his cigarette again, scoffing, "So, you're not looking for death, just threatening me not to kill you."

"Calling it a reminder, not a threat. Since it's our first official meeting, let me give you a piece of advice: you'll regret it if you kill me. And I don't say that lightly. You really will regret it."

Tarquin frowned, sensing there was more to the man's words but unable to decipher them. "Why would I regret killing you?"

"Because I'm more important to you than you realize."

Tarquin paused, "...And who are you?"

The man in black was silent for a few seconds, then cheerfully said, "Looks like you're not here to kill me tonight. So, we must be here to talk. Thanks to those kids, I'm all out of fight, so I guess I'm at your

mercy. But I have one condition: don't ask who I am. Anything else, I'll answer. I know you've got a lot of questions."

The more he refused to say, the more Tarquin wanted to know. He replied coldly, "You're in no position to make demands."

"Maybe, but I've got the answers you're looking for."

"I'll find out everything I need to know eventually. Right now, I just want to know who you are."

"Is that what you really want to know?"

"Why are you afraid of me finding out?"

"Not telling you is for your own good. Knowing will only hurt you."

Tarquin's gaze turned icy, "Don't worry about me."

With a sigh, the man in black took a few steps forward. Tarquin, thinking he was about to be attacked, instinctively grabbed his wrist. Instead of resisting, the man lowered his voice and whispered something.

Tarquin's expression changed dramatically, and he pushed the man away! He furrowed his brows, his stare intense and full of astonishment.