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"What's happening here? You come to save the day?"

Evan furrowed his brows, a look of confusion washing over his face as he eyed Tarquin.

Suddenly, Tarquin whipped his head around to face him!

Their eyes met, and the little guy was startled, quickly averting his gaze as if he'd been caught snooping.

The next second, he was all riled up!

His tiny brows knitted together in a fierce, yet adorable, attempt at a threat, "Better let me go, or I swear I'll sock you one!"

Hearing this, Tarquin lifted his hand and gently flicked Evan's forehead, "Such cheek!"

His tone was gentle, his actions tinged with indulgence.

He didn't know this was his own son. In his eyes, the little trio was just part of Elijah's small circle of close friends, and it was his duty to look after them.

Besides, he genuinely liked and admired these little rascals for their cleverness.

Moreover, considering their tragic dad, who had passed away too soon, all of them, like Elijah, were raised in single-parent homes, and he felt a pang of sympathy for them.

All these factors combined made him instinctively more tender towards them.

Evan, his cheeks flushing with embarrassment and annoyance from the indulgent gesture, protested, "Stop, stop touching me, or I'm really gonna hit you!"

"Ha." Tarquin chuckled, amused, "Just like your silly mom, small but fiery!"

The little guy was incensed, "Don't you dare call my mom silly! She might be silly, but she's also kind and cute!"

Tarquin raised an eyebrow, "Doesn't that still make her silly?"

Evan was speechless...

Seeing the little guy genuinely upset, Tarquin decided not to tease him further, explaining, "Elijah was a bit worried about you guys meeting Nola, so he messaged me to check in. Don't worry, I've got everything under control."

That's when Evan realized why he had suddenly shown up! Pouting, he muttered, "I wasn't scared!"

Tarquin squinted, "You would've been if I hadn't come."

"I said I'm not scared! Nola, that mean lady, couldn't hurt me if she tried!"

"And what if Elysia finds out about all this commotion?"

Evan quickly said, "Elliot said the stable has cameras. So, if mom and the cops show up, it's fine. The footage will prove it wasn't us causing trouble, but those crazy horses!"

"But wouldn't Elysia worry?"

"Worry about what? I said we have evidence it wasn't us. The Slater women can't touch me! Mom doesn't need to worry!"

"But she will worry about you getting revenge from the Slater family."

Evan paused, "?!"

Tarquin, ever patient, said, "Elijah also knows you guys can handle yourselves, but he's worried that if things get out of hand, it might be too much to clean up. That's why he sent me. You've stirred up quite the mess with the Slater family, and Nola will definitely call the cops, which will lead them to drag Elysia into this. Given how Elysia is such a scaredy-cat, don't you think she'll be terrified, losing sleep over this? She might even end up crying a river, inconsolable!"

Evan, wide-eyed, found himself at a loss for words.

Elliot had warned him before coming that today was about getting even, but not to alarm mom. Because mom gets worried easily. He was only supposed to let Nola face the music silently.

But now, with the situation blown out of proportion, the Slater family would definitely involve their parents! And mom would definitely be scared of them facing retaliation from the Slater family!

This is bad, really bad...

He hadn't thought this far when they started their mischief!

The thought of mom getting scared, anxious, and crying left Evan feeling nervous too. In an instant, his feisty aura was gone! No longer the cocky little master, he looked vulnerable and helpless.

Blinking up at Tarquin, he asked, "Can... can you make sure my mom doesn't find out about what happened today?"

"Sure can!"

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Evan's eyes lit up. "What's the plan?"

"Just wait and see. Don't worry. With me on your side, the Slater family won't make Elysia come over! I'll handle this mess for you. Just do as I say. Let the doctor check you over, and if you're all good, I'll let you go. Now, let's go find Elliot and Emmett."

Tarquin spoke with the warmth of a doting father.

Evan felt a soothing touch on his heart as he gazed at Tarquin, his little face a mix of emotions. Without further resistance, he allowed himself to be carried towards the stables.

Once they arrived, Tarquin had a doctor examine Evan to make sure the lad was alright before letting him go. Evan hurried back to Elliot, rubbing his hands together with a guilty expression.

"Bro, I think I've caused another mess."

Elliot ruffled his hair. "Don't sweat it. The cleanup crew has arrived. Mom won't find out."

The commotion today was quite something, and Elliot was a bit worried, but he felt reassured after seeing the messages from Tarquin and Elijah. Evan glanced at Tarquin. "Can he really handle it?"

"Absolutely! Like I've told you, as long as it doesn't involve Mom, he's a genius. Just watch."

""

Soon, it was time for the showdown. Their house was a wreck, the living room a disastrous and stinking mess, impossible to enter, so they gathered in the stable's lounge to deal with today's debacle.

Tarquin lounged in a chair with his legs crossed, the three kids seated beside him. Together, they were an intimidating force, like a mob boss out with his crew, demanding respect.

Facing them were Donovan, Nola, and Aileen. Donovan had rushed back from the office upon hearing the news, his face grim, still unclear on the full extent of the situation. Aileen, having fainted and been rudely awakened, looked utterly deflated, as if she'd been resurrected. Only Nola seemed to channel her grief into fury, ready for battle. She wailed about her losses, detailing the damages and the kids' alleged crimes.

"My jewelry, bags, clothes, and all those expensive perfumes, destroyed! Even the coral gemstone Mom bought for 500 million dollars got smashed! All those priceless antiques at home, ruined, even the Slater family's heirloom vase didn't survive! It's all their fault!"

Donovan shot up, his eyes nearly popping out. "The ancestral vase is broken?!!"

"Smashed to bits, beyond repair! Dad, Grandpa, and our ancestors are gonna rise from their graves looking for you! You must avenge this!"

Donovan slumped back, ashen-faced. Nola pointed accusingly at the three kids.

"These troublemakers did it! They wrecked our home! The Slater family demands compensation, double the loss! Call their parents, let's settle this. If they can't pay, they'll pay with their lives! Or let that woman Elysia rot in jail forever!"

Aileen sneaked a glance at Tarquin. She was a clever woman. She knew Tarquin was here for the kids, and she feared he might defend them. Suppressing her rage, Aileen turned to Tarquin with a pitiful look, choking up.

"Tarquin, it's not that we want to be hard on the kids, but the Slater family's loss today is too great. We can't just overlook it. We need to discuss compensation with their parents."

The Slater family and the three kids all turned to Tarquin. With a slight frown and a lift of his eyelids, Tarquin spoke coldly.

"I am their guardian. What does the Slater family want to discuss?"

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"Huh?!"

The Slater family, upon hearing the news, widened their eyes in disbelief, "What?!"

The three little ones also had their eyes wide open, equally shocked.

Tarquin, unfazed, smoothed a crease on his suit sleeve and repeated, "I am the guardian of these kids. What do you, the Slater family, want to discuss? How do you want to settle this?"

Nola was flabbergasted, "Tarquin, have you lost your mind? They're not your kids. How can you claim to be their guardian?!"

Tarquin looked at her, "If I say I am, then I am. Got a problem with that?"

"I..." Nola bit her lip, feeling utterly wronged.

Aileen knew trouble was brewing the moment Tarquin made his stance clear. Her heart sank, and she fainted.

"Mom!" Nola cried, rushing to Aileen's side.

The family doctor quickly attended to her, assuring everyone that Aileen had just passed out due to overwhelming emotions and was otherwise fine. Donovan, having just recovered from the shock of their family heirloom being destroyed, glared at the three youngsters. He wished he could tear them apart, but with Tarquin protecting them, he dared not act rashly.

He turned his furious gaze towards the servants of the Slater family, "What exactly happened here today? I want the full story, and nobody better lie to me, or else!"

Donovan's outburst had the Slater family's servants trembling and falling to their knees in fear! There was the Slater family's butler, the family veterinarian, and Nola's personal maid. Under the fierce scrutiny of Tarquin and Donovan, they confessed one after the other,

"Sir, it was Miss Nola's doing!"

"Miss Nola and her mother had arranged to meet these kids to confront them about spreading rumors of Miss Nola's pregnancy. Furious, Miss Nola wanted to teach the kids a lesson! So she had the veterinarian inject a mature horse with a stimulant, hoping the animal would go wild and hurt the kids!"

"Little did they know, these kids were lucky. Not only did they escape unharmed, but they also ended up causing chaos all over the Slater estate on the back of the crazed horse!"

The maid sobbed, "We were wrong for letting Miss Nola carry on with her scheme, please forgive us, Mr. Bradford, spare our lives..."

Nola, upon hearing this, slapped her maid, "You traitor! After all the years I've taken care of you, this is how you repay me? Do you have any proof it was my doing?!"

The people kneeling on the ground shivered, not daring to make a sound.

Nola then turned to Donovan and Tarquin, tears streaming down her face, "I've been framed! I don't know what they're talking about! I never intended to harm anyone, let alone children. They're making all this up; they're framing me!"

Tarquin ignored her, turning to Donovan with a cold gaze. Donovan, no fool, knew the truth even without evidence. His breathing became erratic with anger!

He gave Nola a stern look before addressing Tarquin, "Tarquin, I will investigate this matter thoroughly and ensure the kids get a proper explanation. Give me a few days, and if it turns out as the butler and maid have said, I will personally bring Nola to apologize to the children's guardian. We will also seek the guardian's input for appropriate compensation."

"There's no need. Once you've figured it out, just contact me directly. I don't want any outsiders bothering them anymore," Tarquin added, "The kids were quite frightened today. If they end up with any psychological trauma, the Slater family will be held accountable!"

Donovan paused, the kids frightened? He must have missed that entirely! Feeling frustrated but unable to retort, he simply nodded in agreement.

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"Absolutely! Should these three kids run into any trouble down the line, the Slater family will take full responsibility. Once I get to the bottom of this, I'll come find you."

"Alright."

Tarquin stood up, satisfied, and noticing Emmett shivering slightly as if afraid, he scooped the little guy into his arms.

"Elliot and Evan, let's head out."

The two boys obediently got up and followed him.

They hadn't gotten far when Donovan's angry bellow echoed from behind,

"You two fools! Are you trying to bring disgrace upon the Slater family? A curse upon our house, a curse upon our house indeed! How could I ever have married such a wretched woman! And to think we'd have a daughter so spiteful and foolish! You're going to be the death of me!"

"

"Live by the sword, die by the sword," Elliot said coolly.

If Donovan hadn't been messing around with a mistress, allowing her to usurp the family's peace, perhaps things wouldn't have come to such a sorry state.

What curse upon our house? The man's a total disaster himself!

At this moment, Evan was unusually compliant, not throwing in any of his usual remarks, but instead asked again cautiously,

"Are you sure today's mess won't reach Mom's ears?"

"Not a chance," Tarquin and Elliot said in unison.

The two exchanged a glance, with Elliot being the first to look away.

Evan sighed in relief, "Good, I was so worried Mom would find out and get upset again."

Emmett, still in Tarquin's arms, hugged his neck tighter and couldn't help asking,

"Why can't we just have the cops arrest the bad lady if everyone says she's out to get us?"

Elliot explained, "Words alone aren't enough; just their accusations against Nola aren't sufficient to prove her guilt without evidence."

"What a shame, the bad lady did something terrible, yet she gets away with it."

Elliot smirked,

"They've been punished in their own way. The hurt they've felt today is far worse than a few days in jail. The Slater family has taken such a hit, they're in both emotional and financial pain! The important thing is, we got back at them without dragging Mom into this mess, so today is definitely a day to celebrate."

Turning to Tarquin, Elliot expressed his gratitude, "Thanks for today."

When it came down to it, their stand-in dad really did pull through.

So, even Evan, who was usually the least fond of Tarquin, couldn't help but mumble,

"I owe you one, guess I'll have to pay you back someday!"

Tarquin simply replied with a "you're welcome," then added,

"Just keep your word, and let me know as soon as you hear anything about that mystery person."

Elliot responded just as readily, "No problem."

Clearly, today was a day of familial warmth and bonding!

Tarquin dropped them off at the Blossom car, deciding not to personally drive them back to Future Community.

Today's events had to be kept from Elysia. She also couldn't find out about his private encounters with her children; knowing her temper, she'd definitely make a scene.

He wasn't afraid of her making a scene! He just found her annoying!

As the father and sons parted ways outside the Slater family mansion, the three little ones headed back to Future Community, and Tarquin to his office.

Once they had all left, a man dressed in black with a cap pulled down over his eyes emerged from a corner. He glanced towards the direction Tarquin had gone, then back at the departing trio, a cold, unhappy look in his eyes.

He seemed to loathe the sight of their familial harmony!

Pulling out his phone, he sent off a message. After hitting send, a sinister smirk crossed his lips.

"Family warmth and bonding, huh? Heh heh heh..."

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Evan and Tarquin simultaneously whipped their heads around, their expressions and movements perfectly in sync, eyes wide with caution.

Though father and son weren't in the same vehicle, they both sensed danger at the same moment.

In Evan's car, Elliot asked, "What's up, Evan?"

Evan frowned slightly and said, "Feels like someone's got their eyes on us."

"Who? Tarquin?"

"Can't see anyone. Just feels like hostility in the air, probably not him."

Elliot scrunched his brows, "Should we circle back and check?"

"No need. Might just be my imagination. Plus, if someone really is watching us, they'd be gone by the time we head back. Don't worry, as long as I'm here, no one's gonna hurt us."

Evan turned back around, glancing at Blossom who was still knocked out, and asked, "What about Blossom?"

Blossom was still in a deep slumber, the driver handpicked by Tarquin at the last minute.

Elliot took another look back before returning his gaze forward, "Let's just wake her up when we get to the neighborhood entrance. Blossom's easy to deal with, don't worry about her."

Meanwhile, Tarquin had also turned his attention back forward. He flicked his cigarette ash, lifting his fair hand to take another drag. He had a heavy smoking habit, having restrained himself in front of the kids all day, he lit up the moment they were apart.

Lowell was driving, glancing at him through the rearview mirror, "Something wrong, Tarquin? Notice something off behind us?"

Tarquin had sensed the hostility from behind as well, but couldn't spot any suspicious figures, "It's nothing."

Lowell didn't dwell on it, instead, he began excitedly reflecting, "Ms. Thorne's kids are really something! If what happened today had happened to ordinary kids, they'd be dead or crippled, not walking out of the Slaters' place unharmed! And look at them, they totally turned the tables on the Slaters! I was shocked when I peeked inside; it was more chaotic than a house party gone wrong! A house party leaves a mess, but it doesn't stink. The Slaters' place, on the other hand, smells like a barnyard, full of chicken, duck, goose, and pig droppings. It's a disaster!"

After his remarks, Lowell switched gears, "I'm telling you, you should really make a move and pursue Ms. Thorne. If you win her over, her kids would be ours too. Then Elijah could grow up with them as real brothers! Never mind how much they could help Elijah, at least he'd have their company. All these years, it's been just Elijah, and frankly, the kid's been lonely. Having siblings might even prevent him from feeling so isolated that it affects his health."

Lowell was essentially urging Tarquin to get together with Elysia! The brothers had always been fond of Elysia, hoping she'd join their family. Knowing Elliot and Evan's capabilities only heightened this desire. They were dead set on convincing Tarquin to bring Elysia into the family fold. They saw it as a chance to ensure their family's future prosperity!

Tarquin took a drag of his cigarette with a stoic face. He hadn't considered being with Elysia because of the children, but Lowell's words made him think of something else. He remembered the shocking revelation from the mysterious visitor last night... Though the Bradford lineage had always been direct, could it be...

Something struck Tarquin, leaving him struggling to breathe, his chest tight with anxiety. He took a deep drag, his brows furrowed deeply as he stared out the window, lost in thought.

The sharp ring of his phone snapped him out of his reverie. It was Gideon, "Tarquin, got a moment to swing by today?"

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"Can't talk now, just say it over the phone." Tarquin's voice was chilly, devoid of any warmth.

Gideon wasn't surprised. "Next week is New Year's Eve, don't forget to bring Elijah back for the family dinner."

"I know."

"...And what about those wolves that suddenly showed up during the memorial? Did you figure out what that was all about?"

"No."

Gideon continued, "Those wolves might have attacked others in the end, but I swear they were after Elijah initially. I'm worried someone's out to get him. You need to dig deeper, can't take this lightly. Elijah is the last of the Bradfords, we can't afford to lose him!"

"Uh-huh."

Gideon didn't say anything more, and Tarquin just hung up.

Tarquin couldn't even bother to roll his eyes at Gideon's feigned concern now.

Gideon indeed didn't want Elijah dead, but he sure as hell didn't want him thriving either. He'd be thrilled if something bad happened to Elijah! Inside the Bradford family mansion.

As soon as Gideon hung up, his right-hand man immediately reported, "Sir, that person sent a message. The poison's placed in the usual spot, and I've sent someone to retrieve it. We can act anytime! But, do you think it's necessary to make another move?"

Gideon had that calculating look. "Of course, it's necessary! I've heard Elijah's been doing better lately, must be the effects wearing off. He can't recover before we achieve our goal. Besides, Tarquin's been increasingly dismissive of me lately. We need to teach him a lesson!"

Gideon knew exactly how to hurt Tarquin!

"Understood. Shall we proceed during the family dinner?"

"Yes, plan carefully, we mustn't let Tarquin suspect anything!"

"Don't worry, sir. After all these years, nobody's suspected a thing. Everyone thinks Elijah's illness stems from missing his mother, nothing more." "Make sure to control the dosage. We can't have Elijah dying on us; he's only useful alive. But, keep him barely hanging there, neither dead nor alive. That'll keep Tarquin distracted, and my chance will come!"

"Got it!"

"And have you gotten in touch with Alpha Thorne yet?"

The mention of Alpha had the man worried. "Sent out loads of messages, all gone unanswered! No clue what he's up to lately, not a peep from him." Gideon, frowning, sighed. "Don't give up. Keep trying! He's our key to taking down Tarquin!"

"I just worry, even if we reach him, he might not agree to work with us."

What Gideon didn't know was that the Alpha he desperately sought was his own grandson, Elliot, living in exile!

Confidently, he said, "Just get him to talk to me. I'll handle the rest. Your job is to reach out to him!"

"Yes, sir! Oh, and sir, Tarquin went to help Elysia's son out of a bind at the Slaters' today..."

After narrating the incident about Nola getting exposed online and the day's events at the Slaters', the man speculated, "With Tarquin showing such concern for Elysia, makes one wonder if it's love or something to do with Elijah. Should we have a chat with her?"

Gideon, dismissive, "Let her be for now. She's of no importance! Our focus is the plan for the family dinner. And Alpha!"

"Understood!"

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After the driver Tarquin had sent left, the trio gently woke Blossom up, revealing a surprise she hadn't expected. They were back in their own neighborhood, not at the Slater family's place where they were supposed to be. Blossom was utterly baffled.

"Didn't we go to the Slaters'? Why are we here? What's going on?!" she exclaimed, her confusion plain as day.

The trio launched into a story, claiming that Blossom had been knocked out cold by the cold medicine right when they arrived at the Slaters'. Not wanting to disturb her peaceful slumber, they had proceeded to the meeting without her.

"We apologized to the Slaters on your behalf, and they were super cool about it. We had a blast chatting with them. When we were done, they even arranged for a driver to take us all back here, seeing you were still out cold," they explained, each adding their own bit to the story.

Blossom, still trying to process everything, asked worriedly, "They didn't give you a hard time, did they?"

"Of course not! We hit it off great," they reassured her.

Blossom sighed in relief, then immediately started to berate herself for falling asleep during such an important event. "I can't believe I slept through it. I'm such a failure!"

The trio was quick to comfort her. "You're not a failure, Blossom. You're a goddess!"

"A fairy queen!"

"A superhero! We told the Slaters just how awesome you are. We said nobody messes with us when we have you on our side. That's probably why they were so nice."

Feeling a bit better, Blossom couldn't help but boast a little. "Well, of course! No one messes with my crew and gets away with it!"

After their successful pep talk with Blossom, the trio went inside to spin a tale for Elysia, telling her how much the Slaters adored them and were practically in tears when they left.

Elysia, much like Blossom, fell for the story hook, line, and sinker, her worries completely dissipated by their convincing act.

Meanwhile, Elijah was buzzing with excitement, not because of any drama with the Slaters, but because he had managed to bring his dad Tarquin closer to his brothers Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. He shared with his siblings that their secret was safe since the Slaters hadn't spilled the beans to their mom or anyone else.

Emmett, with his adorable lisp, credited their "cheap dad" for the smooth operation, which got a nod of agreement from Elliot and a reluctant acknowledgment from Evan.

Seizing the moment, Elijah suggested, "How about we all have dinner together tonight? We've never really had a family dinner, all six of us." After a brief hesitation, the brothers agreed, seeing it as an opportunity to acknowledge Tarquin's help.

Elijah, thrilled by their consensus, sneakily dialed Tarquin. "Dad, are you busy tonight?"

Tarquin, swamped with work at his office, was surprised by the call. "What's up?"

"Well, if you're not too busy, how about having dinner with me, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett tonight? They've agreed to it, and you're treating." Tarquin paused, processing his son's words. The idea of a family dinner, as unexpected as it was, hinted at a chance to mend fences and grow closer. "They want to have dinner with me?" he asked, a mix of hope and curiosity in his voice.

"Yeah, they were really touched by how you helped them out today. So, they agreed to have dinner with you. It's on you, though," Elijah clarified.

As Tarquin mulled over his son's proposal, the thought of spending an evening with his family, despite the mountain of work waiting for him, brought a rare smile to his face.

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"...So, I lent them a hand, and now they're touched enough to join me for dinner as a thank you?"

"Yep! Exactly! It's a rare opportunity, Dad, you've got to cherish it. To show you're serious, why don't you cook dinner tonight? Whip up some of your best dishes!"

Tarquin: "..."

Why did he suddenly feel so undervalued? He was the one who helped, yet now he's playing host!

Seeing his dear old dad silent, Elijah continued, "Dad, if you're aiming to win over Mom, you've got to charm her son first! You weren't exactly Mr. Nice Guy to Mom before, and Elliot and his brothers weren't your biggest fans. If it wasn't for your help today, they wouldn't have agreed to have dinner with you! So, don't feel hard done by. Just count your blessings and don't look a gift horse in the mouth."

"..." A roast from his own son was a critical hit!

Tarquin bit his lip then asked, "Is Elysia joining too?"

"Of course, she is! It wouldn't do without Mom!"

Tarquin, skeptical, "She knows about the drama with the Slater family today?"

"Nope, Elliot told Mom we all had a grand time with the Slater family. She bought it, so when you see her, zip it about the Slater family drama!" Tarquin inwardly scoffed, thinking how easy it was to fool some people.

Elijah emphasized again, "Dad, this is a golden chance I snagged for you. You better seize it! Make a good impression, get Elliot, Evan, and Emmett to warm up to you a bit more. If they give you the nod, Mom's approval won't be far behind!"

"..." Tarquin couldn't care less about Elysia's approval.

But he knew, if he didn't plan this dinner right, his son would make a scene!

Coincidentally, he had some pressing questions for Elysia too, about that mysterious person.....

After a moment, Tarquin conceded, "Alright! Dad's got it, I'll cook dinner for them tonight."

"Good."

After hanging up, Tarquin pondered over Elysia and the mystery surrounding her...

Lowell was also in the office, teasing, "Elijah's got more sense than you! Knowing to win the small ones over first to get to the big one! He's right, you know, don't be ungrateful. Ms. Thorne is a catch! Even if it's just to find a brother for Elijah, you should put in the effort!"

Tarquin snapped out of his thoughts and looked at him, "Like Elysia?"

"Yeah! I do!"

"Then why don't you pursue her? If you succeed, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett can still be brothers to Elijah."

Lowell's smile froze, "Tarquin, that joke's in poor taste! I do like Ms. Thorne, but I'm not looking to make her my wife. I'd rather she be my sister-in-law!"

"..." Overthinking it, idle hands! Clean up those files on your desk by tomorrow morning; I'll be checking."

Lowell was aghast, "You're kidding, right?"

"I don't see the joke."

Lowell was near tears, "That's impossible to finish overnight! Besides, I'm just an assistant, how can I do a CEO's job? I'm not cut out for it, really not!"

"Can't do it? Then find Charlie, leave tonight, start there tomorrow."

Lowell: "I was wrong, I'll drop the matchmaking act, please, let me off."

"Too late! Work through the night!"

After delegating his work, Tarquin stood up, grabbed his coat and car keys, and left.

Lowell, in misery, "Where are you off to now?"

"None of your business."

Lowell: "... The merciless capitalist strikes again!

After leaving the office, Tarquin immediately called Keaton, "Got any dirt on Elysia?"

"I was just about to call you, there's definitely something fishy. Meet up to discuss?"

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When Tarquin strolled into Blissful Uncle's Bar, he found Keaton cozied up in a booth with his latest flame, practically glued to his side and playfully jostling him around.

At the sight of Tarquin entering, Keaton nudged his girl, "Hey, call Tarquin over."

It was well known among their circle that Keaton and Tarquin were as close as brothers could be, even more so than blood.

Seeing Tarquin was always a big deal, given his notorious temper and the 'legendary' status he carried around. The girlfriend was a bundle of excitement, nerves, and fear all rolled into one. "Um... Tarquin."

Tarquin didn't spare her a glance, just made his way over to the sofa opposite Keaton, lit up a cigarette, crossed his legs, and leaned back, puffing away.

The girl, feeling the sting of rejection, looked at Keaton with puppy eyes, a hint of tears brewing, "Keaton."

Keaton, ever the charmer, pinched her cheek and slipped her a credit card, "Don't mind him, darling. He's like this with everyone, acts like the world owes him a fortune. Go enjoy some shopping, I've got business. I'll catch up with you later."

Her mood instantly lifted at the sight of the card, and after planting a quick kiss on Keaton, she got up to leave, even throwing a timid bow Tarquin's way as she went. Tarquin, for his part, didn't acknowledge her at all.

Now alone, Keaton also lit a cigarette, "Man, you could be a little nicer. That's my girl, after all."

Tarquin scoffed, "Why should I be nice to your girl?"

"I'm your brother!"

"She's not my woman."

The implication was clear: Tarquin reserved his kindness for his own woman.

Keaton bit his lip, "Saw right through you, you're going to be whipped."

Tarquin simply rolled his eyes.

It wasn't that he wanted to disrespect Keaton's relationships; it's just that Keaton went through girlfriends like seasons change. Why bother getting attached?

If Keaton was serious about a woman, ready to make her part of the family, Tarquin's attitude would be different, politeness included.

"So, what's the scoop with Elysia?" The conversation shifted to the matter at hand.

Keaton, narrowing his eyes, teased, "First off, are you into her or what?"

"No."

"Then why the interest in her love life?"

"Cut the crap."

Keaton sighed, "Could you at least pretend to ask nicely? With that attitude, I'm not inclined to tell you anything." Tarquin flicked his cigarette ash, cool as ever, "Should I invite Jess over to take a closer look at your new flame?" The mention of Jessamine Huber instantly changed Keaton's demeanor; sibling rivalry was a powerful thing. "Using my sister against me, that's low," Keaton grumbled.

Tarquin just smirked, unbothered.

Keaton rolled his eyes, "Fine, you win. Here's the deal: Zane's got a thing for Elysia, always has."

That caught Tarquin's attention.

"Zane's been carrying a torch for Elysia since college, but ended up with her best friend, Winona, instead. Despite that, he's been nothing but a model husband and son-in-law, keeping his true feelings for Elysia under wraps.

But I dug up something juicy. Remember Gage Slater's sudden downfall a couple of months back? That was all Zane's doing."

Tarquin's brows knitted together, "Because of Elysia?"

"Yeah. Gage had been harassing Elysia, and Zane took care of him."

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Tarquin's mood darkened a notch.

After Gage's incident, the Slater family had spent a fortune in manpower and resources to investigate the matter, even posting a bounty on the dark web. Plenty of hackers and hitmen got involved in the search, but the killer remained elusive.

He had even sent Lowell to dig around, to no avail. He hadn't expected Zane to be behind it!

"Are you sure about this?"

"Absolutely. I wouldn't have mentioned it otherwise. You know I have my ways of gathering information. Mywork is the widest."

Tarquin's voice was icy, "I underestimated him."

Just the case with Gage alone showed he was no simple character. With so many people on the case, and still, he couldn't be caught!

Keaton added, "And there's more. The Lincolns have been saying that Winona took on a movie role last year, signed a nondisclosure agreement, and has been off filming in secret. But it's been over a year and she's nowhere to be seen. Whether something's happened to her or she's actually filming is anyone's guess.

Also, Zane has a cousin named Sarah, whom he's always looked after. She took a break from school because of a pregnancy. Strangely enough, as soon as Elysia returned to town, there were complications with Sarah's pregnancy. I heard Sarah's been calling Elysia a murderer.

Elysia's not the type to harm a fly, but she could be the catalyst. Maybe Zane saw her come back and immediately ditched Sarah and the baby, going as far as to... you know, leading Sarah to resent Elysia."

Tarquin frowned, asking coldly, "Was the baby Zane's?"

"There's no baby anymore, no way to prove it, but it's highly likely."

"But isn't Sarah Zane's cousin?"

"Yes! Close cousins! Some people just have twisted desires."

Tarquin was silent, "..."

He had been pondering over the identity of a mysterious person these past few days, going back and forth, with the only lead being Elysia. Because the mysterious person had said, he fancied Elysia and wanted to whisk her away as his bride.

It wasn't hard to deduce from his words that he was harboring a crush on Elysia.

But Elysia had only been back in Jindale City for a little over two months, and aside from those he knew, she hadn't been in contact with other men. So, this mysterious person was likely someone from her past, someone who had a hidden crush on her.

So, he had Keaton look into Elysia's secret admirers. Keaton was particularly good at digging into personal affairs, and Tarquin had specifically mentioned Zane.

He had seen Zane with Elysia a few times, and the way Zane looked at her was anything but innocent.

Zane was a suspect.

Now, even more so.

After leaving Blissful Uncle's Bar, Tarquin called Axel to check if he had seen Zane around Future Community lately.

Axel replied, "I have."

"When?"

"Now."

Tarquin frowned, "...He's at Future Community right now?"

Axel had been hanging around Future Community for the past few days investigating a separate matter.

Axel hummed in confirmation, "He hurried upstairs, probably to see Ms. Thorne."

"...Did he show up any other time before this?"

"Haven't noticed."

Whether Zane had been around or not wasn't certain, Axel could only say he hadn't seen him.

Sensing something was off, Axel offered, "Do you need me to go up and check?"

"No need, just keep an eye on him."

Zane was fond of Elysia; he wouldn't harm her, especially not in broad daylight. And with Elliot and others at home, there was no need to worry about Elysia and Elijah's safety.

After hanging up, Tarquin made another call, arranging for someone to tail Zane.

Whether Zane was the mysterious person or not was still up in the air, but his suspicion warranted investigation!