

## Hitched 481

### Chapter 481

"You've been compromised."

Tarquin forwarded the message to Axel.

Axel glanced at it, furrowing his brows and looking up sternly at Blossom in front of him. Just in time to see her slipping her phone into her pocket.

Jindale City was in the north, where winters were harsh and nights even more so. Wrapped in a thick beige parka, Blossom stood by the roadside waiting for the light to change, her hands tucked into her pockets before she brought them to her mouth, blowing on them to warm up, chuckling from the cold. With every bounce on her toes, the bunny ears on her hat wobbled back and forth. At first glance, she was the picture of adorableness. Hardly the image of a mysterious informant!

But she was undoubtedly a suspect. Whether the message came from her was up for debate since it was sent from a burner phone, Axel said, "I'll go test the waters with her, contact you later."

Tarquin reminded him once more, "Safety first, apprehension second! Call me if anything happens."

"Got it."

Call ended, Axel pocketed his phone and lowered his baseball cap as he walked towards Blossom.

Blossom sensed something and turned to look at Axel. From a distance, she couldn't make out Axel's features, but she still looked interested and gave him a couple more glances. Just then, a car zoomed by, and Axel, spotting an opportunity, quickly moved behind Blossom and forcefully pushed her into the street.

"Ah!" Blossom screamed, tumbling onto the road.

The crowd gasped in horror.

"Lady, get up quickly, there's a car!"

Some quick-reacting bystanders shouted at Blossom, but she seemed petrified, sitting in the middle of the road, staring wide-eyed at the oncoming car, frozen in fear!

The crowd panicked, their screams, honks, and screeching brakes mingling into a chaotic symphony, but none could snap Blossom out of her fright. She was too scared to move!

Axel, dressed in a black tracksuit with a cap, stood among the chaotic crowd, staring intently at Blossom. As the car was about to hit her, with no sign of her moving, he frowned slightly, a peculiar look flashing in his eyes. Then, with swift action, his fingers flicked towards the speeding car.

"Bang!" The car's left tire suddenly burst, veering the vehicle to the side. It passed Blossom by mere inches.

The crowd was stunned. This heart-stopping moment had them all in shock.

Axel, with knitted brows, walked over to Blossom. Just as she came to her senses, relieved from the near-death experience and remembering Axel's push, she was furious!

She got up from the ground, cursing at Axel, "You jerk, why did you push me?! Were you trying to kill me, you..."

As Axel approached, she suddenly stopped berating him, her eyes wide, "You... you..."

Axel: "... " Recognize me?

In the next second-

Blossom's expression shifted to one of infatuation, "Sorry about that, handsome. Are you okay? Did you get hurt? Should I take you to the hospital to get checked out?"

Axel: "The accident involved you."

Blossom, realizing belatedly, "Oh? It was me? Did you hit me? Oh my goodness, it hurts, you can't leave, you have to take me to the hospital, you're responsible for this."

Axel frowned, "I didn't hit you."

Blossom was stumped again, "No, not you?"

As she was pondering how to continue the conversation, Axel suddenly extended his hand towards her. Blossom's heart raced, her cheeks flushing as she quickly placed her hand in Axel's. She thought she was about to embark on a romantic love story.

But...

Axel didn't touch her hand; instead, he firmly grasped her wrist.

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"Ouch!"

The moment Blossom finished speaking, she suddenly felt a strong pull on her wrist. She got up, stumbled, and her body described a perfect arc in the air... from sitting on the ground to lying flat, making a close acquaintance with the earth. Blossom ended up with a mouthful of snow, her head buzzing.

After what felt like an eternity, when she finally managed to get up, Axel was nowhere to be seen. Blossom was utterly confused...

In the corner, Axel was scrolling through Blossom's phone, which he had smoothly taken earlier. After a while, he dialed Tarquin, "It's not her." Tarquin had just served dinner, and Elysia was calling the kids to wash up. He took the call into his study, "You tested her?"

"Yeah, no suspicious info in her phone, and she can't fight."

Muscle memory is tough to fake. If Blossom knew how to fight, she would've instinctively jumped to avoid danger the moment that car came barreling towards her. Even if she was good at hiding, her pulse wouldn't lie. When he had pulled her up earlier, he had deliberately checked her pulse, and indeed, she had no martial arts training. So, Blossom couldn't be the mysterious figure.

Tarquin squinted, lighting a cigarette. He wasn't too surprised by this outcome. He had suspected all along Blossom wasn't their mysterious figure. Taking a drag from his cigarette, Tarquin mused, "If she's not the one, then she's probably being used by them. There's definitely a connection between her and the mysterious figure."

Otherwise, the dead cat the figure had killed wouldn't have ended up in her trash.

Axel added, "Checked her close circle, nothing suspicious. She keeps to a simple crowd."

"Then widen the search. Look into everyone she could possibly come into contact with, not just friends and colleagues."

"Got it. And the message?"

Since Blossom was cleared, the message Tarquin received was questionable. Axel had been tracking Blossom; why would the mysterious figure suddenly want him to back off?

"Is she meeting the mysterious figure tonight?" They both pondered the possibility simultaneously. If Blossom was indeed planning to meet the mysterious figure, Axel following her could indeed pose a threat to their plans. This would explain the message.

Tarquin flicked ash from his cigarette, pondering, "The mantis stalks the cicada, unaware of the oriole behind. While you were watching Blossom, could you have been watched too? Noticed any tails?"

"None." He was confident in his skills; had someone been following him, he'd have noticed. He was 100% sure no one was tailing him. Tarquin's eyes narrowed in thought, "..."

After a moment, Axel spoke, "I'll keep tailing Blossom, see who she's meeting tonight."

"Be careful."

"Will do."

After hanging up, Axel pulled his hat down further and merged with the crowd. Blossom was still frantically looking for her phone when Axel discreetly dropped it among the bystanders. It didn't take long for someone to notice,

"Here it is, probably fell out of your pocket when you dashed into the street. See if it's broken."

Blossom quickly took it, checked, "It's fine, thank you so much."

"Don't mention it, young lady. You're quite lucky, that car had a sudden blowout, or it could've been much worse!"

"Tell me about it, scared me half to death."

The incident quickly passed, and the crowd dispersed. Blossom crossed the street and continued on, dialing as she walked. Axel followed closely behind.

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At the dinner table, all the kids had washed up and were ready, but Tarquin was still holed up in his study.

Elysia went to call him. After all, he was the host and it would be rude not to invite him to his own dinner after he'd been bustling around preparing everything.

Pushing open the door to the study, a cloud of cigarette smoke hit her, making her cough immediately. Frowning in disapproval and worried the smoke might drift into the rest of the house, she stepped inside and quickly shut the door behind her. As she made her way to the window, muttering under her breath, "Don't you know smoking's bad for you? With a habit like that, you're heading for trouble."

She flung open the window to air out the room. Tarquin, lost in his thoughts about Blossom and the mysterious person, barely acknowledged her. Elysia tapped on the desk to get his attention, "Earth to Tarquin! Quit smoking, it's time to eat."

Tarquin looked up at her, simply saying, "Elysia."

"What's up?" she asked, puzzled by his tone.

He seemed like he wanted to ask her if she'd noticed anything odd about Blossom lately but then thought better of it, considering her naive nature and the cunning of the mysterious person.

After a moment's silence, Tarquin finally stubbed out his cigarette and stood up to leave.

Elysia, confused by his behavior, pressed, "What was that look for?"

Tarquin shot back, "Seems like you only grew a brain to make yourself taller."

With that, he opened the door and left, leaving a stunned Elysia to process the insult.

"Jerk! What's his problem?!" Elysia stormed out of the study, only to be greeted by the bright faces of her four little ones, eager to have her join them at the table. Tarquin had already taken his seat, and

despite her irritation, Elysia couldn't bring herself to argue in front of the children. She shot him a glare and then smiled at her kids as she approached.

The small dining room was cozy, the family of six gathered together, the cold wind howling outside while inside was warm and cheerful. This was their first family dinner together, and Elijah was more excited than anyone, having longed for a family reunion like this.

Before they started eating, Elijah asked Tarquin, "Dad, what about the surprise you prepared for Mom?"

Caught off guard, Tarquin hesitated as Elysia looked on, surprised, "There's a surprise?"

"Yeah, Dad said he had something special for you."

Elysia eyed Tarquin suspiciously, "You prepared a surprise for me?"

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett also turned their attention to Tarquin, clearly intrigued.

Wanting to avoid turning the surprise into a shock, Elliot suggested, "Let's see what it is."

Elijah gave Tarquin an encouraging look, signaling it was time to reveal the surprise.

Feeling the pressure with all eyes on him, Tarquin reluctantly headed back to his study. Everyone waited in anticipation, curious about the surprise. After a moment, Tarquin returned, handing Elysia a plain white card.

"What's this?" Elysia asked, puzzled.

"It's a thank you for all you've done for Elijah. This credit card is for you to use as you like while you're taking care of him. Don't worry about paying it back," Tarquin explained.

So, it was just money?

Elijah's expression fell, clearly disappointed in Tarquin's lack of creativity. Evan and Emmett also lost interest; money wasn't something they cared much about.

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Evan even muttered under his breath, "Is that it? How dull."

Tarquin: "..."

Elliot, however, gave Tarquin an appreciative glance, secretly admiring him for knowing how to play his cards right.

This was indeed a surprise for Mom!

Elliot knew Elysia best, and her eyes were as wide as saucers!

She was utterly astonished as she gazed at Tarquin, "For... for me?"

"Yeah."

"Can I use it for anything?"

"Yeah."

"How... how much can I spend? How much per month?"

"As much as you want."

Elysia's breath hitched, shocked, "Is this card unlimited?"

"For now, yes."

"Seriously? You're not pulling my leg, are you?"

Tarquin: "...Do I look like I'm entertaining a toddler?"

His words had barely left his mouth when he felt a kick under the table. Elijah had stealthily kicked him.

Tarquin glanced at his son and had no choice but to reassure Elysia, "Yes, really. I'm not joking."

"...But wait, I thought all those unlimited cards I see on TV are black? Why is this one white?"

Tarquin was about to roll his eyes at her when he caught Elijah's warning look.

He pursed his lips, forced to engage properly, "Don't worry about the color. Just enjoy spending, buy whatever you want. I'm not putting any limits." Elysia held her breath, "So, what you're saying is, this is an unlimited card? For me? I can just go on a spending spree?"

Tarquin: "Yes!"

Elysia turned to her kids, "Elliot, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah, you all heard him, right? Mom didn't mishear?"

The quartet: "Yeah!"

Elysia was near tears of joy, "Oh my stars! This... this... this... this is such a surprise! Am I a rich lady now?! Oh my goodness, I've made it!" Tarquin and the kids: "..

Elysia looked at Tarquin, her eyes brimming with excitement, "You've made it too! You've finally done something worthwhile!" Tarquin: "?"

Had he never done anything worthwhile before? Was everything he did before not considered significant? Was she praising him or making a dig at him?

Before Tarquin could figure it out, suddenly-

"Bang!"

Elysia slammed her hand on the table and sniffed fiercely.

Tarquin jumped at her sudden movement.

Just as he was about to ask what got into her, Elysia grabbed the bottle of wine from the table and poured herself a full glass.

She looked at him as if making a vow, "From this day forward, let's wipe the slate clean! Whoever brings up past grievances is a dog!" With that, she downed the wine in one go.

And then she poured another, "From now on, we live in peace. You show me respect, and I swear I'll double it!"

And with that, she downed another glass.

Not satisfied with just one, she went for three in a row!

Tarquin watched her, puzzled by her bold declarations.

The kids knew all too well.

For a moment, they didn't know how to feel.

Mom was clearly dazzled by the money...

Her determination to live peacefully with their stepdad meant she was ready to let go of past pains and turn a new leaf.

That was something to be happy about.

But...

Was she being naive? It was a credit card, after all. The control was in someone else's hands.

Today they allow you to spend, you can enjoy.

Tomorrow if they change their mind, you can't spend a dime!

Elliot watched his mom's overjoyed expression and couldn't bear to burst her bubble, so he could only facepalm in resignation.

Oh dear, Mom's intelligence... Is there any hope?

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This dinner was supposed to be Elijah's happiest feast and Elysia's most heartwarming meal. But guess what? No one was as joyful as she was! The most obvious sign was her, cup after cup, managing to get herself completely sloshed! Once drunk, she totally let loose! The cozy diner became her stage, and Tarquin with the four kids her audience.

"Drink up! Tonight, we're not going home unless we're plastered! I, Elysia, have finally made it! Not even thirty and I've hit the jackpot, a self-made millionaire! Millionaire, you get what that means, right? It means super rich, heaps and heaps of cash! Ha-ha... Let me tell you, I just can't help but laugh, can't control myself, ha-ha..."

Tarquin and the four little ones quietly watched her burst into laughter.

Elysia giggled sneakily, covering her mouth as if she was up to no good, then said, "Elliot, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah, from now on, just say what you want, mommy's got the dough now. No more penny-pinching for us. Whatever you fancy, mommy will buy it for you! Not just for you guys, I'll also get presents for Blossom! I'm gonna gift Blossom a hundred puppies! No, make that a thousand! And I'll find Winona, invest in her so she won't have to kowtow to anyone, let her have the freedom to act however she wants, choose whoever she wants as a co-star, because I've got the funds... Oh, I'm just so thrilled today, let me think, how about I sing a song to boost the mood? What do you want to hear? The national anthem! Let's go with the national anthem! Ahem... Rise up, those who refuse to be slaves, with our flesh and blood, let's build our new Great Wall..."

Tarquin and the four munchkins: "..."

Suddenly-

"Thud!" Mid-song, she collapsed onto the table, motionless. The kids were startled, "?!?!"

Realizing she'd fallen asleep, Tarquin's eyes nearly rolled back into his head. Then, the house got even livelier. Elijah instructed Tarquin, "Daddy, mommy can't be comfortable sleeping like this, take her to the bedroom, let her sleep on the bed."

Though reluctant, Tarquin complied. Without making a fuss, he lifted Elysia horizontally and headed to the bedroom. Evan dashed to the bathroom for a towel, intending to wipe Elysia's face. Emmett hurriedly waddled to the kitchen, fretting over his mom getting thirsty, to get Elysia some water. Elliot asked Tarquin if they had any hangover soup at home, and upon receiving a negative answer, he quickly called a delivery service to bring some over. The house was bustling, and before Tarquin could make it to the bedroom with Elysia, she suddenly jolted awake! She became wildly enthusiastic about singing the national anthem to him. Naturally tone-deaf, coupled with her drunkenness, listening to her sing was torture. And it wasn't just the singing; Tarquin could've endured that, but she also grabbed his ear while singing. Tarquin was grinding his teeth in annoyance, but luckily, it wasn't a long walk from the dining

area to the bedroom. He was unapologetically rough, tossing her onto the bed! The action was a bit brusque!

The next second, Elysia threw up all over him. Tarquin was disgusted, exploding, "Elysia!"

"What are you doing?!" The four sons chimed in unison, each louder than the last, glaring at him displeased.

Tarquin was fuming, "She puked on me!"

"She didn't do it on purpose, why are you shouting?"

"Just change your clothes, no big deal."

"Petty!"

After scolding him, the four little guys immediately surrounded Elysia, fussing over her.

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Tending to every need, from offering a glass of water, wiping faces and hands, to pulling off shoes and socks, their care knew no bounds; it was kindness incarnate.

Tarquin just stood there, speechless.

Was Elysia his true love, and he merely an unexpected chapter in her life?

President Bradford, feeling a surge of jealousy, metaphorically gulped down a whole barrel of vinegar before kicking it over in frustration. He then quickly showered, changed into a fresh set of clothes, and by the time he was done, he found the four little ones huddled at the bedside, chattering away.

"Mommy is so beautiful, even more than a fairy."

"Mommy is so cute when she's tipsy, she even sang the national anthem."

"Have you noticed? Mommy is even softer when she sleeps."

"Ha!" Tarquin couldn't help but laugh out loud.

All four heads whipped towards him, their eyes not exactly friendly, "What's so funny?!"

Facing their icy stares, Tarquin pursed his lips, "Nothing. I'll go wash the dishes."

As he turned towards the kitchen, he could still feel the chill in the air behind him.

He couldn't help but muse: Ignorance truly is bliss!

It seemed Elysia must have saved the galaxy in her past life to be so adored by her children in this one.

Rolling up his sleeves, Tarquin efficiently cleaned up the kitchen and dining area.

Just as he was finishing, a call from Axel came through.

Sensing it was important, Tarquin headed to the study to answer, "What's up?"

"All the stray cats in Future Community are dead. It's the work of our mystery person."

Tarquin's frown deepened, "When did this happen?"

"Just found out. They said the cats' bodies were still warm, so it must have been recent given the weather."

As Tarquin lit a cigarette, he wondered, was this a random act of cruelty, or a threat because Axel had been tracking Blossom?

"Did you and Blossom head back?"

"Not yet."

Tarquin took a drag, "So, you were out for an hour, but the cats were killed recently. This means after you left, our mystery person was in Future Community! Or perhaps they have an accomplice there!"

Axel replied, "The way the cats were killed, it looks like the mystery person's doing, but we can't rule out an imitator."

Tarquin took another puff, "Who did Blossom meet tonight?"

"She's at the animal clinic, hasn't left yet. She's been helping stray cats for years, came tonight because one she recently rescued had surgery. She was there to check on it and settle the bill."

"It seems Blossom is clear for now, but it's possible the mystery person set this up after realizing you were following her."

"Did you check everyone at the animal clinic?"

"Yeah, no suspects."

After a moment of thought, Tarquin instructed, "Keep an eye on Blossom. I'll handle Future Community."

Ending the call, Tarquin smoked in deep contemplation before calling Elliot into the study.

The moment Elliot smelled the smoke, he commented, "My mommy hates the smell of smoke."

Tarquin thought to himself: What does that have to do with me?

But wanting to avoid upsetting Elliot, he kept his complaints to himself and said, "I need access to Future Community's surveillance footage, especially around your building."

He knew Elliot had tampered with the local surveillance, and without his permission, their investigation would hit a dead end.

Elliot frowned immediately, worried.

If Tarquin saw the footage, wouldn't that expose him and Evan? After all, they weren't always in disguise.

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"What are you looking to find?" Elliot asked him.

Tarquin laid his cards on the table, "Blossom and the mysterious figure are tangled up somehow. I want to check the surveillance, see if we can trace their connection."

Elliot was taken aback, "Blossom and this mystery person are connected?!"

"Yeah!"

"Why do you suspect Blossom? Got any proof?"

Tarquin explained, "The mystery person has a thing for harming stray cats. We've found dead cats in the trash bags Blossom tossed out, more than once. And the way those cats died... it's exactly how the mystery person does their thing."

Elliot's brows furrowed deeply. He suddenly remembered the night they were threatened by the mysterious figure, using Emmett as leverage. At that time, it was only Emmett and Blossom together. After the threat, Emmett went off the grid, only to find out later it was because Blossom had shown up out of the blue.

Could Blossom really be connected to this mysterious figure? But Blossom seemed so pure, so kind!

Elliot shook his head, firmly stating, "Blossom can't be the bad guy."

Tarquin replied, "Didn't say she was bad, but she's as naive as your mom."

Elliot: "..."

Tarquin added, "I suspect she's being used by the mystery person. Otherwise, those dead cats wouldn't just magically appear in her trash. Unless... The mystery person is living with her, killing stray cats and sneaking them into the trash bags, while Blossom unknowingly takes them out."

This kind of scenario isn't rare in thrillers. Some folks secretly squat in someone else's home, making it theirs when the owner isn't around. When the owner is home, they hide in some corner, waiting for the owner to leave or fall asleep before sneaking out.

"No way!" Elliot immediately objected. "We've been living with Blossom for the past two months. If there was something off at home, we'd have noticed!"

Tarquin agreed. The mystery person might be elusive, but these kids weren't to be underestimated. He could hide from Elysia and Blossom, but he couldn't escape the notice of these young detectives. So it was just a thought. He didn't believe the mystery person would hide in Blossom's house either. But the connection between Blossom and the mystery person was solid.

Elliot suddenly asked, "Is it possible the trash bags weren't ours to begin with?"

"Possibly, so I want to check the surveillance, see how those dead cats ended up with Blossom."

Elliot was silent for a moment before saying, "Our neighbor, the old lady across the hall, is suspicious. Blossom mentioned that the lady's son settled overseas, hasn't been back in years. The lady lives alone now, but since she's quite old and suffers from dementia, she's got a nurse coming over to check on her. Blossom's pretty close to her, sometimes brings her treats. If she saw trash outside her door, she'd likely take it out too."

As Elliot spoke, his frown deepened, "I'll check the surveillance first. Elijah's room has a computer, I'll go now."

Tarquin said, "I've got a computer in my study. Let's watch it there together, it'll be quicker."

"You can't watch."

"Huh? Why not?"

Elliot muttered, "The video's got some of our brothers' secrets, stuff you shouldn't see."

Don't ask what secrets. If you ask, it means I won't tell you.

Tarquin didn't pry further. The secrets of kids weren't his concern. Actually, asking Blossom directly would be the simplest solution, but they feared spooking whoever was involved.

Soon enough, Elliot found something significant.

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He dashed to the study to find Tarquin.

"Look, these past few days, Blossom has been heading out first thing with the trash, then she goes to the old lady's place. After staying there for about twenty minutes, she leaves, and her trash bag has magically doubled in size.

That means, lately, Blossom's been helping the old lady with her trash. And those dead cats? They're coming from her house. But whether Blossom knows about those dead cats, that's still unclear!"

Tarquin's face darkened.

"At least this proves that the problem is with the old lady's house. Our guy could be hiding out there!"

At that revelation, both father and son tensed, a chill running down their spines.

Their mysterious person was living right across the street?

Elliot was worried about Elysia and Emmett's safety.

Tarquin was concerned for Elijah's safety.

"We've got to root him out!" they declared in unison.

The two exchanged a look, their expressions in sync.

This mysterious person was like a thorn in their sides, pricking at both their hearts. Until they plucked it out, they'd be in agony, living in fear every day!

Elliot asked, "Got any plans?"

Tarquin didn't hide his intentions, "I'll take advantage of the night and head over later."

"You're thinking of going tonight?"

"Yeah!"

"How will you go about it?"

"Hmm?"

Elliot was puzzled, "You're going after him without a plan?"

Tarquin said, "No need, I'll play it by ear."

Elliot frowned, "This guy is unpredictable and skilled. If he's really there, it could be dangerous."

Tarquin was unfazed, "No worries. If he manages to lay a finger on me, more power to him."

Elliot was immediately displeased. "..."

What does 'no worries' mean?

This wasn't the arrogance of believing he won't get hurt; it was the nonchalance of not caring if he did. Like getting hurt was so normal he'd become numb to it, completely indifferent.

Maybe it was the blood relation kicking in, but Elliot felt uneasy. It was hard to tell if it was worry or something else, but deep down, he didn't want anything bad to happen to Tarquin! And he didn't like Tarquin talking like that!

Tarquin was still advising Elliot, "Elysia's had a bit too much to drink and can't go anywhere tonight. You guys should just stay here. There's a security guard downstairs, so don't worry about safety. Keep an eye on your brother and Elijah for me."

He got up to leave, but Elliot grabbed his sleeve.

Tarquin looked puzzled, "Something else?"

"Wait a sec!"

Elliot hurried out, only to rush back in a moment later, handing Tarquin an earpiece.

"Wear this. It'll let me track your location and we can communicate. It might lower your chances of getting hurt!"

Tarquin's eyes narrowed. "... You're worried about me getting hurt?"

"Getting hurt isn't exactly a picnic, better to avoid it if possible!"

"You're worried about me?"

Elliot's lips twitched, struggling for a reply. "..."

Understanding dawned on Tarquin, his heart softening, and he asked gently, "Weren't you not a fan of me before? Why the sudden concern?"

Elliot's frown deepened, as if worrying over him was the most embarrassing thing, reluctantly saying, "I'm not worried about you! I'm worried about an ambush!"

Tarquin chuckled, knowing well that worrying about an ambush meant worrying about him. In that moment, Tarquin felt a warm glow in his heart, affectionately ruffling Elliot's hair, he couldn't help but say, "Your dad's lucky to have you. Wish you were my son."

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Elliot was momentarily lost in thought upon hearing those words. He just stared at Tarquin, clearly taken aback by his sudden statement. The speaker might not have meant much, but the listener took it to heart. A mix of emotions suddenly surged within him—it was hard to pinpoint exactly what he was feeling. There was pride and surprise at being acknowledged, but also a tinge of bitterness and grievance at not being recognized earlier. But where did this grievance come from? He couldn't quite figure it out. After all, he hadn't expected to be recognized! And really, Tarquin was someone he could do without.

The three brothers had lived with their mom since they could remember. She was their world-caring for them, loving them. Joyful moments, sad ones, sick days, sleepless nights, learning to eat, to speak, to walk... it was always just Mom.

As for Dad... Back when they lived in the countryside, they barely had any idea of what having a dad meant. Probably because Mom took such good care of them, they never really felt the absence of fatherly love. But then, returning to Jindale City and accidentally finding out about him... The brothers didn't feel joy, only resentment and anger. Not for failing to be a father, but for the pain he caused Mom! They even thought about getting back at him, to take revenge for Mom!

However, as they learned more about him, and with Elijah's presence, as well as being influenced by their peers in preschool... Their understanding of 'Dad' began to change. No child is devoid of the desire for fatherly love. Preschool is such an innocent environment. At three to five years old, kids, unlike older students, don't have their own circles or topics of interest that are as varied. Even though they are away from their parents at school, their parents are still their everything. When chatting, every sentence would revolve around their parents.

"Wow, your bunny hair clip is so pretty."

"Isn't it? My mom bought it for me."

"Your quiet book is so cool."

"Of course, my dad made it for me!"

Talking about Mom, the brothers had endless stories. But whenever the topic shifted to Dad, they fell silent. Nothing to say, unable to join in. And yet, kids, especially the boys, loved to brag about their dads. Evan, due to his personality, disliked Tarquin the most. So, initially, when kids discussed their dads, he would become impatient. He'd interrupt them, annoyed, "Let's not talk about dads! What's so great about stinky dads? Let's talk about moms! My mom's name is Elysia. She's so pretty, kind, and gentle, and she can cook so many delicious things..."

But gradually... After spending more time in preschool, Evan stopped interrupting. After all, one moment he'd interrupt, and the next, kids would start talking about their dads again. Evan would just sulk, looking annoyed and frustrated. Emmett once asked him privately, "Elliot, is having a dad something to be really proud and happy about? Why do they all like talking about their dads so much?" He countered, "Emmett, do you want a dad?" Emmett paused for a long while before hesitantly saying, "I love Mom the most! But I also wish I could proudly tell them we have a dad who loves us! I wish I had a dad to drop me off and pick me up from school, to hug me and lift me high... Whenever they ask about our dad, I'm afraid to answer, worried they'll laugh at us for not having a dad's love..."

Clearly, Emmett, too, yearned for a dad. Though Evan didn't express his longing for a dad as directly as Emmett did, deep down, he felt the same. In this world, there's probably no 5-year-old child who doesn't crave the love of a father. But still...

#### Chapter 490

Evan and Emmett definitely yearned for a father figure, but it seemed Tarquin was not the one they had in mind. Emmett was simpler in his desires; as long as their mom was happy, any dad would do. Evan, on the other hand, was a tough nut to crack. He had a strong resistance towards Tarquin. Even if their mom grew fond of Tarquin and Evan accepted him as a father, deep down, he couldn't shake off the repulsion. He couldn't forget the hurt Tarquin had once caused their mom. Despite their mom moving past it, Evan couldn't let it go.

But Elliot had his own thoughts. Influenced by his peers at preschool and his understanding of what a 'dad' should be, he found himself wanting a father too. Unlike Evan and Emmett, he secretly wished for Tarquin to be that dad. Perhaps it was the ties of blood speaking. Or maybe because of Elijah! Or it could be, in some ways, he acknowledged Tarquin's worth. If one could overlook the harm done to their mom six years ago, Tarquin was an ideal 'dad candidate.'

He was handsome and fit, someone who would make their mom proud in public, a man of stature and intellect unmatched in wealth and status. Not only was he a money-maker, but he also excelled in household chores, equally adept in the boardroom and the kitchen. With a stroke of his pen, he could sign off on billion-dollar deals. With an apron tied around his waist, he could whip up a delicious meal in no time. In his company, their mom would never face any disdain, either out in the world or at home. His demeanor might be a bit aloof, but he was a gentleman at heart. His affection for Elijah was proof enough of his good nature. Moreover, Elliot found a unique connection with him; they clicked, solving problems with ease and communicating effortlessly.

So, putting all these factors together, Elliot's heart naturally leaned towards Tarquin. If they were to choose a dad, he hoped it would be Tarquin. Of course, this was contingent on their mom growing fond of him! If she remained indifferent, Tarquin's name would be erased from the 'potential dad' list, and they'd look for another candidate!

Tarquin, unaware of Elliot's inner turmoil, mistook his furrowed brows for sadness over the mention of their deceased father, and promptly apologized. "Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up your dad," Tarquin said, trying to console him.

Elliot snapped out of his reverie, avoiding Tarquin's gaze, his face scrunched up in discomfort. Tarquin, convinced Elliot was missing his own dad, tenderly touched his head, trying to change the subject. "So, what do you think about the ambush?" he asked, gently.

Elliot blushed at the touch, moving away to avoid further contact. Regaining his composure, he analyzed, "That mysterious person is smart. He'll anticipate that teaming up to check the surveillance would lead us back to him. If we find out, you'll definitely go after him."

Tarquin's eyes narrowed, "So, you're worried he's set a trap waiting for me?"

"Yeah."

"Don't fret. First, he might not connect me with checking the surveillance. And even if he has laid a trap, it doesn't matter. At worst, I'll get injured, but I'll survive."

Elliot frowned, "Mom always said our bodies are a gift from our parents. Getting hurt carelessly is disrespectful; taking care of ourselves is the first step in showing respect to them. You're not treating your safety seriously, and that's wrong."

Tarquin's eyes softened, "I understand. As long as Elijah is safe, I'll make sure to stay safe too. I'm Elijah's shield; I won't let myself get hurt easily." In that moment, Elliot felt a pang of envy towards Elijah. Tarquin really did care a lot for him.