

Hitched 491

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Elliot's lips quivered slightly before he said, "If you can catch him without any trouble, I'll be seriously impressed!"

Tarquin chuckled, "Alright, for the sake of your admiration, I'll catch him tonight! Unless he's not in Future Community!"

The little guy, with a stern expression, emphasized, "Without any trouble!"

What he really meant was for it to be done safely, for crying out loud!

Tarquin laughed again. Although he wasn't particularly interested in Elysia, he genuinely liked her kids. Being a father himself, he had a soft spot for children in general, but not quite like the deep fondness he felt for Elliot, Evan, and Emmett.

That's why he had previously thought to himself how great it would be if they were his kids! He started to envy that unfortunate man who had passed away too soon!

While envying, a question suddenly popped into Tarquin's mind. He wanted to catch the mysterious man because he was a threat to him, and he knew something about Elijah's mother, not to mention that one thing he said... But why did Elliot want to catch him?

Curiosity got the better of Tarquin, and he asked.

Elliot replied earnestly, "I'm afraid he'll harass my mom!"

"You don't want Elysia to be with him?"

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Anyone who deserves my mom has to be able to live openly in broad daylight, not lurk in the shadows like him!"

That was the bare minimum! Mom was radiant like the sunshine, hopeful about the future like a child! Elysia was easy-going and optimistic about life. Anyone who wanted to be with her had to be positive and sunny at heart! At the very least, they had to be honorable and straightforward! Otherwise, they could stay as far away from their mom as possible!

Tarquin seemed to understand, once again reaching out to ruffle his hair, "Elysia is lucky to have you guys." Elliot corrected him, "Being able to have her as our mom is our luck. You don't understand how great she is!" Tarquin smiled again. Was this kid blindly idolizing?

"What are you laughing at? You think my mom isn't good?" Elliot asked, displeased.

Tarquin answered honestly, "No, she's just a bit naive, a bit too fond of the finer things, but not bad at heart."

Elliot was unhappy with that description, "What do you mean 'not bad'? What's bad about my mom?"

Tarquin hesitated for a moment before asking, "You're so smart, don't you know what Elysia did six years ago? Her actions back then were not commendable."

Tarquin didn't intend to bad-mouth Elysia in front of Elliot; he was merely curious. Back then, Elysia's affair had caused a scandal, leading to her being kicked out by her husband. Her reputation suffered... Elliot, Evan, and Emmett must know about this, yet why did they still think of Elysia as perfect, without a single flaw?

Elliot knew what he meant and instantly got angry, "Foolish! Ignorant! Unreasonable!"

After saying his piece, he stormed off, but then, pausing at the door as if still fuming, he turned around and added, "Elijah mentioned you're trying to woo my mom. Well, a word of advice, watch yourself, or you might end up crying all the way to the funeral home chasing after your wife!"

With that, Elliot turned and left!

Calling him ignorant and foolish because despite investigating his mom and knowing about the scandal six years ago, the affair, and how she was thrown out by her husband! How could he not see the connection between his mom and that estranged wife he'd been seeking? Wasn't that the epitome of ignorance?

Not recognizing his mom as the woman he'd been searching for could be overlooked, given the manipulations of the mysterious man and the evidence pointing otherwise. But why on earth hadn't he connected his mom with his wife?

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So, saying he's ignorant isn't even slightly unfair! And as for being unreasonable—

It's because he actually believed those old rumors, saying that six years ago, mom's behavior was questionable. Wasn't he basically saying he thought mom was living a loose life back then? Who started those rumors anyway? What right did he have to criticize mom? It was infuriating! With his attitude, it's no wonder mom never liked him. And if mom did ever take a fancy to him, I'd be the first to make sure he had a hard time! Tonight, mom said she wanted to bury the hatchet and live peacefully with him, which means she's not holding a grudge anymore! Normally, all he'd have to do now is try to win mom's favor, but look at him now...

The more Elliot thought about it, the angrier he got, to the point that when he left the study, he slammed the door really loud.

Tarquin was baffled! He had no idea what Elliot was thinking, so he was quite puzzled by Elliot's sudden change of attitude. Just a second ago, everything was fine between them, and then suddenly... Our friendship was like a boat that capsized without warning! Did he learn to flip-flop like this from Elysia, that silly woman? And him, running after his wife in tears? As if begging for reconciliation at a funeral? No way. He would never actively pursue Elysia, so the whole "chasing after his wife in tears" scenario was off the table.

Tarquin put away his headset and left the study. He glanced towards the bedroom. Elysia was still asleep, and Evan, Emmett, and Elijah were all lying by her side, keeping watch. Elliot was not there; he had gone to the bathroom. Tarquin knocked on the bathroom door, telling Elliot he was leaving. Elliot didn't respond. He knew the kid was upset, but since he had to go to Future Community, he didn't try to appease Elliot and just left.

As soon as he got downstairs, he received a call from Axel, "Zane showed up."

Tarquin was surprised, "Zane? He met up with Blossom?"

"Yeah, Zane went to the animal hospital looking for Blossom. They're at a café now."

Tarquin frowned. He and Axel had theorized that Blossom might be meeting with someone mysterious tonight. The mysterious person, wanting to stay under the radar, would have sent that warning message. Could Zane be the mysterious person? While Axel was tailing Blossom, Zane did have time to harm stray cats in Future Community.

But, Elliot had a point. Zane has been secretly in love with Elysia for years. If he was the mysterious person, when Elliot asked if he liked Elysia, he'd instinctively say yes, not that it didn't matter if he did. Moreover, if Zane was the one, how would he explain what he told me before?

"Can you hear what they're talking about?"

"No, I'm outside the café. Didn't dare get too close, didn't want to spook them."

Tarquin pondered for a moment, "Keep an eye on them."

"Got it."

After hanging up, he got in his car and drove towards Future Community himself. Regardless of whether Zane was the mysterious person, he had to visit that old lady's house since the dead cats were found there. Those dead cats might have been killed by the mysterious person or an accomplice, and Blossom, unaware, might have disposed of them in the trash. Or, maybe Blossom did it herself at the old lady's house. After all, people can be devious, and helping stray cats regularly doesn't clear her of suspicion. In this world, there's no shortage of hypocrites. Though he also felt it was unlikely that Blossom was the one harming the cats, he couldn't rule it out. Maybe a lot of questions could be answered at that old lady's house! So, he had to check it out himself!

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Tarquin arrived at the Future Community, the neighborhood eerily silent, with only a few scattered lights on. At this hour, most residents were already deep in sleep. Parking his car in a secluded corner, Tarquin glanced towards Blossom's house, which, along with the one opposite, remained dark. Squinting slightly, he stepped out of his car. The remnants of stray cats had been cleared, yet a thick scent of blood lingered in the air, adding a chilling touch to the cold night.

He strolled towards building 10, took the elevator to the top floor, and approached the house opposite Blossom's. After a quick glance at the door number, he rang the bell. As expected, the bell echoed unanswered. Pulling out his phone, Tarquin pretended to make a call, "Hello, maintenance? I'm a resident from building 10, unit 2. There's a leak from the apartment above dripping into mine, and nobody's home up there. Could you send someone to check the top floor of unit 2? I'll wait here..."

Before he could finish, the door creaked open a sliver, revealing a man's voice, "Where's the leak?" Tarquin didn't respond, and sensing something amiss, the man tried to close the door. Quick on his feet, Tarquin wedged the door with his shoe and forced his way in!

The man immediately lashed out, but Tarquin, with his quick reflexes, dodged and grabbed the assailant's wrist, pinning him against the door. The intruder was no easy target and managed to free himself, launching a counterattack. A scuffle ensued in the pitch-dark room, with the sound of objects breaking the only clue to their violent ballet.

Soon, the intruder was at a disadvantage. Realizing this, the man hastily turned on the light. Upon recognizing Tarquin, his surprise was evident, "You?!"

Tarquin, brow furrowed, observed him. The man was dressed in casual black, still wearing a mask indoors, clearly cautious about concealing his identity. His build and attire matched the mysterious figure Tarquin had encountered that night. But there was something off...

A shadow of doubt crossed Tarquin's eyes as he asked, "Is it you?" The man's brow tightened, then relaxed as he chuckled, "I knew you'd come looking, but didn't expect you so soon. Elliot fiddled with the surveillance, didn't he? Did he show you the footage, making you think Blossom disposed of the dead cats from this apartment, leading you here?"

Tarquin didn't bite, instead probing further, "Were those cats killed by you or Blossom?" "Guess," the man smirked, glancing at the sofa, "Since you're here, might as well sit down and have a proper chat. I reckon you're more interested in asking questions than killing me."

Heading to the kitchen, he noticed Tarquin hadn't moved and turned back, "What's the matter, afraid to sit? Worried I might have a trick up my sleeve? Don't worry, I'm no match for you in a fight. I'll get you a glass of water, and we can talk."

Tarquin, with a cold voice, retorted, "You're not him." The man paused, then laughed, "Not who?" Tarquin wasn't in the mood for games, warning sharply, "The one I'm looking for isn't you. Don't make things harder for yourself. Where is he?"

The man tensed, hesitated for a moment, then bolted into the bedroom. Tarquin was quick to follow. Inside, the man had the elderly homeowner in a chokehold, threatening, "If you don't want her dead, let me go." The old lady was motionless, seemingly unconscious.

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Tarquin's voice was icy. "I don't know her. Do you really think I'd let you walk away just because of a stranger? Not unless you spill his details and whereabouts!"

The man chuckled darkly. "You will. I know you."

Tarquin frowned. "And why would you know me?"

"Because we've met before, haha. But sadly, you don't remember me. No worries, you'll recall soon enough."

As he spoke, the man tightened his grip, causing the elderly lady to struggle for air.

Tarquin's expression darkened further. The man was right. Although he didn't know this elderly lady, he couldn't just stand by and watch her die.

"I can let you go, but first, you answer my questions."

"Do you think you're in any position to negotiate with me?"

Tarquin glared at him coldly. "If you really knew me, you'd understand that when I'm pushed, I can become someone even I don't recognize." The implication was clear: push me too far, and I won't care about this old lady's life anymore. Then you'll really be in trouble.

The man eyed Tarquin warily, pondering the truth of his words. Before he could decide, Tarquin began his interrogation.

"Who is he, exactly?"

This 'he' was the enigmatic figure. Tarquin had encountered him once, and Axel had clashed with him as well. Neither the aura nor the skill set matched; the man before him was not the enigma. He merely shared a similar build and attire.

The man looked momentarily flustered, but quickly regained his composure. "I don't understand what you're talking about. Haven't you been searching for me? Remember what I told you the last time we met? That night, I said to you..."

He repeated the words the mysterious figure had told Tarquin during their last encounter.

Tarquin's brows knitted together instantly. What he'd just said were indeed the enigma's exact words! So far, not even Lowell, Axel, or Elliot were privy to these words!

Yet, even so, Tarquin was certain the man before him was not the enigma, just a stand-in. It must've been the enigma who told him, which is how he knew.

Tarquin didn't expose him. Instead, he followed up on the topic. "Where is she now?"

The man chuckled. "Let me go, and I'll tell you her location."

Before Tarquin could ask anything else, the man suddenly intensified his grip. "If you don't let me go, I won't just kill her; I'll make you suffer for life. You'll never find out her whereabouts or that of Elijah's mother. Don't believe me? Try me!"

As he spoke, he tightened his hold on the elderly lady's neck and edged toward the door, forcing Tarquin to step back. There was no way Tarquin was letting him go today! Even though he was just a stand-in, he must know a lot about the enigma. But, he couldn't just let the elderly lady die either.

Tarquin pondered his next move, planning to save the elderly lady first, then deal with him!

Dragging the elderly lady by the neck, the man reached the entrance. Seeming to sense his escape from Tarquin was imminent, he chuckled again. "Mr. Bradford, apologies, but I must eat my words. Next time we meet, I'll surely reveal her location. Until then."

With that, he shoved the elderly lady toward Tarquin and swiftly opened the door to flee. Tarquin caught the elderly woman, gently placing her on the ground, ready to give chase, when suddenly-

Thud!

The man was kicked back into the room, crashing heavily onto the floor!

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That kick had some serious power behind it. The man grunted, trying to sit up and make a run for it, but he just couldn't manage it. It felt like his bones were shattered!

Tarquin was momentarily stunned, then quickly looked toward the door.

And there, standing in the doorway, was the little guy!

Wrapped in a thick winter coat, with a baseball cap on backward and arms crossed, he stood there with a frown, looking every bit the picture of defiance.

The moment their eyes met, the little guy turned his gaze away with a haughty sniff, as if he was too cool for school.

Just as Tarquin was about to ask what brought him here, Evan pulled a lollipop out of his mouth, sporting a face that could easily be Emmett's twin, and strutted in.

"Don't get it twisted. I didn't come because I'm worried about you or anything! I couldn't care less. I'm only here because of Elijah, so don't flatter yourself."

Tarquin was speechless.

Not long after Tarquin had left, Elliot emerged from the bathroom.

Despite his anger, he was worried about Tarquin going to Future Community alone. That mysterious figure they were dealing with was no easy mark, with a penchant for unpredictability and danger.

He feared there could be a trap waiting at Future Community, putting Tarquin at risk.

Without Tarquin, they'd lose the closest thing they had to a dad - albeit a cheap and clueless one.

After much deliberation, Elliot called an emergency meeting of the brothers.

He quickly briefed them on his conversation with Tarquin that evening and suggested they enlist Evan's help, pointing out that among them, Evan was the most capable.

Only Evan had a shot at dealing with the mysterious figure effectively; the rest might just end up in the way.

Elliot figured if the mysterious figure wasn't at Future Community, fine. But if he was, having Evan there would minimize the risk to Tarquin.

Plus, with White looking out for him, Evan was virtually untouchable.

Even if Evan couldn't overpower the mysterious figure outright, between White and his arsenal of homemade gadgets, escaping unscathed was a given.

When Elliot finished his pitch, Evan immediately balked.

"Why should I? He was all tough when he was picking on Mom back in the day, wasn't he? Doesn't seem like he needs anyone's help. He's so great, after all. I've got better things to do than worry about him.

You know what I really want? Three things: eat, sleep, and beat him up. I wish I could catch him and give him a good thrashing every single day. So, me helping him? Not happening."

Elliot knew Evan well - knew that despite his tough talk, he had a soft heart and cared deeply about appearances.

So, he offered Evan a way to save face.

"We all know you don't like him, but don't think of it as helping him. Think of it as helping Elijah."

With that, Evan was on board.

Of course, upon seeing Tarquin, Evan maintained his cool detachment.

"Stop looking! Let's get on with it. A grown man needing a kid's help, shameful!"

Tarquin couldn't help but smile, tipping his cap in acknowledgment, "We owe you one tonight. Without you, he would have gotten away."

"Hmph! Just remember who's boss around here."

Tarquin chuckled, flicking Evan's forehead, "Respect your elders."

Evan was about to retort when the man on the ground stirred again, clearly still hoping to escape.

So, father and son turned their attention back to him.

The man didn't get far before he spat out a mouthful of blood!

Yet, even in this state, he clung to his mask, determined not to reveal his face to Tarquin.

But after a particularly violent cough, the mask fell away.

Tarquin eyed him, seeing a face that was young, unfamiliar, and not entirely unattractive.

"I don't know you. You're not him. Why are you so afraid of me seeing your face?"

The man's emotions flickered from fear to anger, and then he closed his eyes, resigning himself to his fate on the ground.

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Tarquin furrowed his brows, a sudden realization dawning upon him.

"You're his double, aren't you? Once you're exposed, he's going to kill you, right?"

Tarquin hit the nail on the head!

The man opened his eyes wide, no longer bothering with excuses.

"Yes, so do whatever you want. Kill me, torture me, it doesn't matter. If you don't, he surely will."

Tarquin's voice turned icy, "Not necessarily. You must have some intel I desperately need. Make a deal with me. If I'm satisfied, I might just let you live."

But the man chuckled, a wild laughter echoing, "He's the devil himself. No one escapes his grasp. Whoever he decides should die at midnight, won't live to see dawn."

"But here I am, still alive."

"You're wrong. He doesn't want you dead. He wants you to wish you were. Ha-ha-ha..."

A chill ran through Tarquin, "Tell me who he is, and I can guarantee your safety!"

The man looked at him for a moment, then shook his head, "I'd rather die than betray him."

Tarquin: "..."

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"But I can tell you, he's prepared a New Year's surprise for you. Something jaw-dropping, just you wait, heh."

"And that thing he told you that night? It was true!"

Tarquin tensed, "!"

Evan eyed Tarquin, confusion written all over his face, "?!"

Seizing their moment of distraction, the man suddenly stood up, leaped, and jumped out of the window!

Tarquin: "!"

Evan: "!"

Father and son shared a stunned moment before rushing to the window, peering down before sprinting outside.

By the time they reached the ground, the man lay in a pool of blood, dead.

A security guard, on patrol, stumbled upon the scene and screamed, immediately calling for help.

Soon, Tarquin and Evan were surrounded by a group of guards.

A sharp and menacing glare suddenly shot towards them from behind. When Tarquin and Evan turned, they found nothing suspicious, just Blossom. Both father and son frowned in unison, "..."

Blossom seemed to have just returned from outside. She ran over to see what the commotion was about, then, spotting Tarquin and Evan, gasped in shock.

"Evan? Weren't you guys at Sunshine Community? What are you doing here? And where's Elysia?"

Before her words even settled, she caught sight of the body on the ground.

Her pupils dilated in terror!

Then, a scream, and she fainted.

Evan rushed to her side, "Blossom!"

Axel also ran over, a frown creasing his forehead at the sight of the corpse, "Tarquin."

Tarquin remained silent, his expression icy.

This turn of events was completely unexpected.

He hadn't anticipated a death tonight!

Soon the police and paramedics arrived. Since Tarquin and Evan were found near the body, the police questioned them.

And it all pointed toward Tarquin-the man had died from the fall, and Tarquin was in the room at the time.

So, Tarquin became the prime suspect.

Seeing the police about to take him, Evan frantically vouched, "He didn't do it! I swear!"

But being only five, the police merely noted his statement but still took Tarquin away.

Tarquin cooperated, though before leaving, he cast a cold glance at the body, then at the unconscious Blossom, instructing Axel, "Take Blossom and Evan home. Don't leave until Blossom wakes. Look after the kid. Call Lowell, have him handle this mess."

Clearly, Tarquin didn't trust leaving Evan and Blossom alone.

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Axel led Blossom and Evan upstairs.

After settling Blossom into her room, Evan dashed back to his own, frantically dialing Elliot. "Bro, there's a problem!"

"I'm already aware," Elliot responded calmly.

Panic was evident in Evan's voice, "The cops suspect that jerk Tarquin of murder and took him in! I told them he's innocent, but they wouldn't listen to me. It was clearly the stand-in who jumped on his own. I saw it with my own eyes; I can testify!"

Despite his longstanding grudge against Tarquin and his desire to avenge his mother, Evan wouldn't exploit this situation.

Elysia had raised them well; they would never stoop so low, especially not over a matter of life and death.

So, even though Evan disliked Tarquin, he repeatedly told the officers that Tarquin wasn't the culprit.

Watching Tarquin being taken away still made him anxious, worried, and restless!

Elliot explained, "The cops taking him is just procedure, not that they don't believe you. He was at the scene, so naturally, he's a suspect.

Don't panic. This is Tarquin we're talking about. If he did it, he's smart enough to cover his tracks. And if he didn't, no one can frame him.

So, don't worry too much about him. Now, Evan, try to calm down and walk us through what happened in detail."

Meanwhile, Tarquin had been brought to the local police station.

He cooperated with the authorities, sitting alone in the interrogation room, calmly smoking a cigarette.

Outside, a group of young officers was watching him through the large glass wall.

They didn't know Tarquin personally, but his icy demeanor was impossible to ignore, drawing in their collective gaze.

"Who is he? He looks distinguished, but his aura is so cold. This is my first time seeing someone like him."

"He's no ordinary Joe. Josiah called earlier, telling us not to mess with him, and to treat him well! See that cup of tea in front of him? That's from Josiah's private stash, and he usually doesn't share it with just anyone."

"Really? Josiah's acting like he's entertaining a major donor!"

Indeed, calling Tarquin a major donor wasn't entirely off the mark.

The taxes Tarquin paid annually could support nearly half of Jindale City's public servants.

At the moment, he was piecing together the information he had gathered that day.

First, the mysterious message he received that night might be true, suggesting he might still have...

Second, the mysterious person had left him a New Year's gift, likely indicating trouble ahead.

Third, the only clue they had about the mysterious person was a unique heart-shaped birthmark on their chest.

As for the identity of the mysterious person, that remained unknown.

The connection between Blossom and the mysterious person was also unclear, leaving Blossom under suspicion. And the stand-in claimed they had known each other for a long time!

But from whose perspective was the stand-in speaking?

Was it the stand-in who had known him for a long time?

Or was it the mysterious person who had known him for a long time?

Lost in thought, Tarquin was interrupted as the interrogation room door opened, and a middle-aged man walked in.

The man was warm and greeted him, "Mr. Bradford, good evening. I'm Josiah, the officer in charge of this area. Sorry about the inconvenience

tonight. I wasn't on duty and had to rush here after getting a call from the higher-ups. I hope those young officers outside didn't give you a hard time?"

Tarquin responded politely, "No worries, Josiah. You don't have to apologize or feel uneasy. I didn't kill anyone. He jumped on his own. Just doing your job is fine by me."

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Josiah let out a sigh of relief under his breath when he heard the news. He had never met Tarquin before, but he knew of him by reputation. If the victim turned out to be one of Tarquin's doing, things could get extremely sticky. He might even have to throw himself into the mix! Dealing with high-profile figures was always a tricky business, best avoided if possible. But now, with the situation literally landing on his doorstep, Josiah had no choice but to face it head-on.

Thankfully, Tarquin's words served as a much-needed reassurance. If the man wasn't killed by Tarquin, that simplified matters. All he needed to do was quickly investigate, find the evidence, and clear Tarquin's name.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, Josiah muttered a silent prayer of thanks and ventured, "Maybe tonight you could..."

"No need for any special treatment. I'll stay put right here."

Tarquin's understanding almost moved Josiah to tears! Procedurally, Tarquin was a suspect and should be held at the precinct for a certain period. But with his status, if he insisted on leaving, Josiah knew he wouldn't be able to stop him. And if Tarquin did leave, and word got out, Josiah would be the one facing the backlash.

Touched by Tarquin's cooperation, Josiah promised, "Rest assured, I'll clear this up as quickly as possible so you can return home!"

No sooner had Josiah finished speaking than Lowell rushed in, looking harried. Josiah, sensing an opportunity for them to talk privately, excused himself. Lowell had been working late at the office when he got the call about Tarquin being implicated in a homicide case. He came as quickly as he could.

"Tarquin, I've managed to dig up the details on that decoy. His name is Gregory, 28, born right here in Jindale City, but he moved abroad with his parents when he was young. His relatives still think he's living overseas. I've looked into his social and family circles, but nothing stood out. It's baffling why he'd be chosen as the decoy. Here's his file for you to review."

Lowell's efficiency was top-notch, unearthing everything there was to know about Gregory. Tarquin skimmed through the thick stack of documents without much interest. The mastermind behind this was

clever, picking someone without any apparent connection to himself. It would be unusual to trace anything back to him from Gregory.

But still... Since Gregory had no ties to him, the mention of a long-standing acquaintance must refer to the mastermind himself. And this mastermind had a distinctive heart-shaped mole on his chest... For the life of him, Tarquin couldn't recall who it might be.

"Look into people with a heart-shaped mole on their chest, but keep it low-key. Start with those I've had dealings with in the past. Let me know immediately if you find anything."

"Right. And there's something else. Someone's trying to pin the murder on you tonight. Looks like they're trying to ensure the accusation sticks." Tarquin's lips thinned, a flash of disdain in his eyes.

Outside the interrogation room, Josiah was immediately surrounded by a group of curious officers. "Josiah, who is he, really? You even offered up your prized tea for him."

Standing in front of the window, looking at Tarquin, Josiah was filled with admiration. "He's truly an influential figure! Despite his status, he doesn't act entitled or demand special treatment. He's in a league of his own compared to those spoiled rich kids! I'll take the lead on this case. Keep me updated so we can get this resolved and send this significant figure on his way!"

Just as Josiah finished speaking, his phone rang. He glanced at the caller ID and quickly answered. The caller's words took Josiah by surprise, "Find a way to keep Mr. Bradford from leaving?"

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As the first light of dawn crept into the sky, Elysia stirred awake. The news from the night before, about a death in their neighborhood, hit her like a cold shower. She was completely on edge when Elliot mentioned that at the time of the incident, Evan and Tarquin were at the scene. The mere thought sent shivers down her spine.

"Where's Evan now? Is he okay? Did it scare him?" she asked, her voice laced with concern.

"He's over at Blossom's house. Mom knows about it. Evan's got nerves of steel; he wasn't scared," Elliot hurried to reassure her.

Taking a few deep breaths, Elysia's frown deepened as she probed further, "Why were Evan and Tarquin together in the first place? What on earth were they doing at Future Community so late at night?"

Knowing they couldn't hide the truth, the kids had agreed on a story the night before. Elliot repeated the carefully chosen words, "Mom had a bit too much to drink last night and needed to stay over. Evan isn't too fond of step-dad, wanted to come home. Step-dad, worried for his safety, escorted him back. Once home, they heard noises from the neighbor's, went to check it out, and accidentally witnessed someone fall from the building. Security called the cops, and since step-dad was at the scene, he got taken in for questioning."

Elysia was shocked, "The police think Tarquin did it?"

"Just suspicion."

Worry etched on her face, she pondered, "What if they can't find evidence to clear his name? He'll be branded a murderer!"

Elliot challenged, "Are you worried about him?"

Speaking her truth, Elysia admitted, "I may not like him, but I don't want him to be in trouble. After all, he's been a father to Elijah for years; he deserves some credit. Besides, if he's being wrongfully accused, that'd be just tragic."

"Right, Mom. The cops are really good at their job; they'll figure out the truth."

Her concern didn't wane as she turned to Elijah, her heart aching at the sight of his evident lack of sleep. She pulled him into a comforting embrace, "Don't worry, Elijah. Like Elliot said, the police are on top of things. They'll get to the bottom of this."

Elijah, moved by his mother's concern for Tarquin and troubled by the gravity of the situation, fought back tears.

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Returning to Future Community over half an hour later, Elysia's eyes immediately sought out Evan. Rushing to him, she enveloped him in a hug, "Evan, did it scare you? I'm so sorry I wasn't here."

Despite knowing Evan to be brave, she couldn't help but worry. To her, Evan was just a typically mischievous boy, not someone accustomed to dealing with life and death situations.

Evan quickly reassured her, "Mom, don't worry. I'm not scared at all."

Choking up, Elysia blamed herself, "It's all my fault. If I hadn't stayed out last night, none of this would have happened."

Evan tried to comfort her, "You can't blame yourself, Mom. These things happen. If I'd known, I would've just stayed over at Elijah's and not come back."

"Let's sleep together for the next few nights. You won't be scared that way," she offered.

"Okay."

After ensuring they had both calmed down, they felt reassured. Hearing that Blossom had fainted upon discovering the body, Elysia rushed to check on her after Axel had left.

In their rooms, the kids convened to discuss Tarquin's predicament. Elliot, with a worried frown, noted, "It's been hours, and they haven't released Tarquin. It doesn't look good. I think someone's framing him."

Elijah clenched his fists, anger seeping through, "Someone's trying to pin this on Dad, using it against him!"

Evan, visibly anxious, added, "What do we do? He didn't do it, but if they make him take the fall, he'll be marked for life!"

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Emmett stammered, "And... and murder is a capital offense. He'll get a life sentence, at least!"

Silence fell upon the room.

Four little kids, each with brows furrowed deeper than the next.

After a while, Elliot was the first to break the silence, "We've got to figure out a way to clear his name!"

At that moment, Tarquin was still at the police station.

Elliot's analysis was spot on; indeed, someone was pulling strings behind the scenes.

Tarquin's arrest had sent shockwaves through both the Bradford family and their rivals.

Everyone was using their resources to dig up dirt and brainstorm strategies to pin the murder on Tarquin!

They didn't care whether he was guilty or not; they just wanted to frame Tarquin as the killer!

Even if they couldn't get him the death penalty, a life sentence would suffice.

Gideon rushed to the police station early in the morning to 'visit' Tarquin, feigning concern, "Tarquin, the situation doesn't look good for you. Tell me the truth, did you do it? Only if I know the facts can I figure out how to help you, I..."

"You care about me? Yeah, right! Cut to the chase," Tarquin interrupted, clearly annoyed.

Gideon frowned, pausing before saying, "Many shareholders are worried that this scandal will affect the company. The board hopes you'll step aside for now, just in case we can't contain this. We don't want the company to suffer collateral damage."

Tarquin looked at him coldly, "If I step aside, who'll take over?"

Gideon replied, "It has to stay within the Bradford family. I can step in temporarily to oversee things. Don't worry, once this is all over, you'll get your CEO position back."

"Ha!" Tarquin let out a cold laugh. What a hero stepping in during a crisis!

"Tell those jittery board members, if they're really scared, they might as well dump their shares now before things escalate. Don't worry about finding buyers; I'll buy all the shares they sell, cash deal."

Gideon's face darkened instantly. Realizing that coaxing wasn't working, he started to threaten, "Tarquin, you know better than anyone how many people care about you and how many want you gone. There's a saying, 'when the wall falls, everyone pushes'! You're already in police custody. Those who care can't make waves without you, but those who want you dead will join hands to take you down. What really happened doesn't matter. What matters is how the truth is manipulated. As far as I know, someone has already made arrangements to pin the murder on you! If you're convicted, your life is over. Without you to protect him, Elijah is done too! Think about it, what's more important, that CEO position, or your and Elijah's future?"

A murderous look flashed in Tarquin's eyes at the mention of his Elijah!

The Bradford Group was never his main concern. His business spanned across the globe; he wouldn't bother much about one company.

He held onto the position because it made investigating certain matters convenient.

And to spite the Bradford family-they were all eyeing that spot, but he wouldn't just hand it over, ha!

"Come talk to me about it when I'm actually sentenced to death. Now, leave me alone!"

"You won't see the light until you're in the coffin. There'll come a day when you'll beg for my help!"

Gideon left the police station, seething with anger. Many from the Bradford family were lingering outside the station, and seeing Gideon's expression, they knew negotiations had failed. Although disappointed, they weren't without hope, "If he doesn't willingly give up power, then he can forget about a smooth resolution to last night's incident!"

"Even if he relinquishes power, he must die! This is our golden opportunity to get rid of him! It's like a gift from heaven!"

"Hopefully, we can get him sentenced to death before the year's end. Once he's gone, that little brat Elijah won't last long either. Then, it'll be our turn to reign. Heh, looks like we're finally going to have a good year."