

Hitched 531

Chapter 531

Red socks, red boxers, red thermal underwear, and a red shirt... a sea of red.

Bright and vibrant, yet all a blur.

He never liked red; his wardrobe was a palette of dark hues, the only exception being white.

And then...

He took a closer look at the boxers she bought for him, the smallest size!

Did she have some misunderstanding about his size?

Luckily, Elysia didn't just get him one set; she treated everyone equally, buying three sets for the kids and three for him!

Tarquin opted for a dark suit and shirt instead, skipping the thermal underwear and the boxers she bought.

They were too small, impossible to wear!

Tarquin was the first to get ready, sitting in the living room waiting for them, when Lowell sent over a list.

All outsiders.

Some from within the system, others on the fringe.

Staying at the police station these past few days, even spreading false rumors about entrusting his legacy, was all for this list. This list contained names of those who had tried to bring him down during this ordeal and those who had tried to save him. Those who wanted to save him, regardless of their motives, would be rewarded.

As for those who wished him dead... their good days were over!

Tarquin read through the list with a cold expression, stood up, and walked to the balcony to call Lowell, instructing him on how to deal with these people.

As soon as he hung up, he heard noises behind him.

The four little ones had changed into their outfits!

All in matching vintage-inspired New Year's sets.

They wore red sweaters adorned with vintage elements on top and black embroidered skirts at the bottom.

The fabric was high-end, and the hand embroidery was top-notch, clearly custom-made.

Combined with their clean, charming little faces, Tarquin was reminded of royal princes from old TV shows.

He couldn't help but feel moved at this moment.

The four kids, nearly identical in height and build, looked like quadruplets. Oh, if only they were all his sons, Tarquin thought!

Emmett ran straight into Elysia's room,

"Mommy, I'm here."

"Alright, come in."

Emmett was there to do Elysia's makeup.

Their outfits, along with what Elysia was wearing today, were all chosen by Emmett.

Only Tarquin's was picked out by Elysia.

Now, in the living room, it was just one adult and three kids left.

Elijah asked, "Daddy, why are you dressed like that? Didn't Mommy also buy you clothes like ours?"

Tarquin honestly replied, "It's not my style."

Elijah frowned, "You don't like it?"

"...Daddy just doesn't really wear red."

"But Mommy says, for New Year's, you have to wear red. It's festive."

Elijah seemed a bit upset but didn't insist on Tarquin changing.

Evan snorted, "If you don't like it, fine. I don't want to match with certain people anyway! Humph!"

Tarquin: "..."

The three kids sat in the living room waiting for Elysia while Tarquin started a video conference on his phone to deal with urgent business matters. Having spent a few days at the police station, his company was in chaos, and now was the time for a board meeting to stabilize morale.

He was mostly there to listen and occasionally nod, using only one earbud so he could stay aware of the surroundings.

After a while, Elysia came out.

"Wow-"

Elliot, Evan, and Elijah exclaimed in unison, amazed.

Tarquin also lifted his head curiously...

His gaze sharpened, his heart skipping a beat.

The desire for beauty is universal, and men are visually oriented by nature. Tarquin was no exception; he was just another man who appreciated beauty.

Looking at Elysia, he couldn't look away.

The continuous chatter of company directors in his ear became annoying. Frowning, he didn't care about the importance of their discussion and casually ended it with,

"Meeting adjourned!"

He shut off his phone, removed his earpiece, and focused all his attention on Elysia.

Elysia had traded her usual comfortable, casual sporty look for a striking red dress that accentuated her figure.

Her hair was styled into mature, wavy curls.

Her makeup was sophisticated and refined.

Her entire presence was transformed.

The dress, a Western rendition of the elegant Eastern qipao, balanced sexiness and modesty perfectly.

It not only showcased her perfect figure without being over-the-top or revealing but also highlighted her inner beauty.

And the choice of red added a unique allure, capturing a timeless elegance.

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She stood there, shimmering like a queen, yet exuding the tenderness of a young girl. She was breathtakingly beautiful. Perfection personified! Elysia twirled on the spot, "What do you think?"

"Mommy, you're so pretty!"

"Mommy's a queen!"

The kids took turns showering her with compliments. Noticing Tarquin's silence, Elijah sneaked up and nudged him, his eyes signaling: Say something!

It was Tarquin's moment to shine!

He swallowed hard, seemingly to placate Elijah, but his compliment was genuinely heartfelt, "Stunning."

Elysia lifted her chin in pride, "Of course, I'm the queen! This is the masterpiece Emmett picked out for me!"

Tarquin's gaze involuntarily shifted to Emmett. He knew Elliot was the smart one, good with money and a whiz at computers, and Evan was the athlete, but Emmett's talents had eluded him. He had thought Emmett was just following Elysia's lead, unremarkable and soft. But now, he realized he had underestimated the kid. This child had a knack for fashion, a true talent. He'd be unstoppable when he grew up.

"Huh? Why are you wearing that today? I picked out a burgundy outfit for you, matching with us. Go change into it, quick."

Elysia only then noticed Tarquin's attire, thinking he'd dressed mistakenly and urged him to change.

Evan chimed in, "He said he doesn't like red."

Elysia was surprised, "You don't like red? But it's festive, especially for the holidays! You don't even like burgundy?" Tarquin nodded in agreement.

Elysia sighed in disappointment, "Well, alright then. Wear what you have on. I'll see if I can return the other outfit. It was quite expensive, and I can't let it go to waste. You look sharp in this one, but it's a shame you won't match with us."

Tarquin glanced at the five of them and then at himself, indeed feeling out of place. As if he'd been left out of the team.

Hesitating for a moment, he stood up, "Wait here."

He headed to the study and returned minutes later, changed. His shirt was burgundy, matching Elysia's dress, and his suit and trousers were black, just like the kids' outfits. However, his suit had red accents on the collar and cuffs. Overall, it was a dark ensemble since the red shirt was barely visible at the collar.

Elysia was curious, "I thought you didn't like red?"

Tarquin replied, "I didn't want to stand out."

Elysia smiled, "Welcome back to the team. See, you look dashing in red, like a groom."

Emmett added, "Mommy looks like a bride."

Elijah agreed, "Emmett's got the best eye!"

Tarquin: "..."

Elysia: "..."

Lowell pulled up in a spacious SUV to pick them up, his eyes lighting up at the sight of their coordinated outfits. This was the epitome of family goals! A handsome father, a beautiful mother, and adorable kids-who wouldn't be envious of this family? And Tarquin, in his red shirt, was a rare sight.

His gaze lingered on Elysia, unable to look away, "Ms. Thorne, you look absolutely gorgeous today."

Just as Elysia was about to thank him, Tarquin interjected with a scowl, "Silence is golden, Lowell!"

Lowell: "?!?"

Elysia was exasperated, "Can't you ever be nice? Lowell did nothing to you. A compliment bothered you that much?!"

Tarquin remained silent, boarding the SUV.

Elysia reassured Lowell with a smile, "Ignore him. He's got issues."

Lowell chuckled awkwardly. It wasn't insanity; it was clear jealousy.

Only then did Elysia notice the vehicle change, her curiosity piqued as she asked Tarquin, "Did you borrow this or buy it? It looks expensive." Tarquin dodged the question, instead speaking earnestly, "When we get to the family estate, don't be intimidated by anyone. If they give you any trouble, you give it right back. Do whatever you want, without worrying about others. I've got your back. Even if you cause an uproar in the Bradford family, there's nothing to fear."

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Hearing those comforting words, Elysia immediately made her stance clear, "Don't worry, I won't start any trouble unless they come for me first. It's not like I'm out looking for a fight. I just want them to understand that Elijah has a mom now! They can't mock or bully our Elijah anymore!"

Elijah looked at Elysia, his eyes brimming with tears. He finally had a mom! After longing for what felt like an eternity, his dream of having a mom had come true. And not just any mom, but Elysia, the best mom in the world!

He had never been so happy in his life, nor had he ever looked forward to the holiday dinner as much as he did this year. He couldn't wait to show everyone: look, this is Elijah Bradford's mom! His real mom!

Tarquin watched Elysia with a thoughtful gaze for a few seconds. In his eyes, Elysia might not be Elijah's biological mother, but he was grateful and moved by her words nonetheless.

Elysia affectionately stroked Elijah's cheek, sending him off to play with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. She then reminded Tarquin, "And when you go, don't just focus on the food. Don't forget to ask them to cover the medical bills! It must have cost a fortune today, at least a few thousand, right? Make sure they pay up every penny."

Tarquin was speechless. Was he only going to the old mansion for the feast? And mentioning thousands like it was pocket change seemed a bit exaggerated to him. After all, Benjamin's was the best private clinic in Jindale City, where a comprehensive check-up could cost upwards of tens of thousands!

Without further clarification, Tarquin simply nodded in agreement. Outside the car window, the festive lights shone brightly, and the spirit of the season was in full swing. The kids, pressed against the window, marveled at the sight.

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, who had lived in the countryside, were not accustomed to the festivity, and Elijah had never been fond of celebrating. But this year felt different; it was a joyous reunion, and the kids were thrilled.

Evan turned to Elysia, buzzing with excitement, "Mom, mom, I heard there's a New Year's Eve event tonight. How about we go to Mar River after dinner instead of watching the holiday specials at home? Can we, can we please?"

The other three kids looked at Elysia with hopeful eyes. She smiled and nodded, "Of course, of course."

The children were over the moon, turning back to the window, chattering excitedly like little birds.

Elysia then turned to Tarquin, "It's the holidays, let's make the kids' wishes come true. If you're busy tonight, I can take Elijah and the others out for some fun. You do your thing."

"I'm free," Tarquin responded.

Elysia was taken aback, "Oh, you are? Really?"

He looked at her, "You wish I wasn't?"

Elysia chuckled awkwardly, her words not matching her thoughts, "No, no, of course not."

Truth be told, she'd rather go out with the kids alone. With him around, she felt somewhat restrained, always worried about exposing the children, feeling uneasy.

"You're overthinking it. I'm not doing this to accompany you; I'm here for Elijah," Tarquin clarified.

Elysia snapped back to reality, wide-eyed and curious, "Why would you think that? I never assumed you were coming for me."

Tarquin just looked at her, speechless.

Suddenly, Elysia remembered something important, "Oh, almost forgot, Lowell, before we head to the old mansion, let's stop by Sunshine Community first. I just remembered we haven't put up the holiday decorations there. It'll be too late after dinner, and I want to take the kids out for some fun." Lowell glanced at Tarquin through the rearview mirror, slightly taken aback by the sudden change of plans.

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When Tarquin finally nodded in agreement, he couldn't help but smile and respond, "Alright."

So, the family of six decided to make a detour to Sunshine Community first.

The festive decals were something Elysia had picked up that morning. This year's model was maic, eliminating the need for messy paste or tape, making the whole process much simpler and more convenient.

The family divided the tasks among themselves efficiently. Elliot and EvanElijah were in charge of sorting out the festive decals and figuring out where each should go.

Emmett was tasked with transportation, handing over the decals that Elliot and the others had prepared to Elysia.

Elysia and Tarquin were in charge of putting them up.

As Tarquin got to work, Elysia directed him from behind, "It's crooked, move it a bit to the left... oh no, now it's too far left, a bit to the right."

Tarquin teased her, "You've already bought them, why didn't we put these up before heading out?"

Elysia retorted, "How could I do it without you here?"

"You mean you can't put up decals without me? Are you saying you're too clumsy to even do that?"

Elysia rolled her eyes in disdain, "You're the clumsy one! I've heard from the elders that you can't put up these decorations until the whole family is together. You can't leave anyone out; everyone has to be home first. I would have done it earlier if we weren't waiting for you."

Tarquin gave her a meaningful look, "Am I considered family?"

Elysia was momentarily taken aback, but before she could respond, Tarquin continued, "What about those who work away from home and can't make it back for the holidays?"

Elysia snapped back to reality, "That's different. I'm talking about those who can make it home."

Tarquin didn't pursue the conversation further.

After their efforts, the previously bare house finally felt festive.

The decals made everything look bright and lively.

Tarquin felt a bit nostalgic, as if he had suddenly been transported back to his childhood.

There was one year when his parents brought him back for the holidays, and the house was decorated just as vibrantly by Elizabeth.

But that was the only year. Afterward, the house never saw such warmth again.

It was always cold and empty.

He had chosen to live here with Elijah mainly to conceal their identities. Previously, the house was uninhabited, visited only occasionally by him.

But those visits were brief, moments of solitude on the sofa with a cigarette, leaving as soon as the smoke cleared.

"Let's go, we should head out for the holiday dinner. After that, we've got plans to take the kids out."

Elysia's call pulled him back to the present.

Tarquin looked at her; she was kneeling at the entrance, helping the children into their coats.

Her face was alight with joy and tenderness.

Tarquin was moved, a warm rush of emotion swirling inside him.

He was about to head to the door when Elysia suddenly turned to him, instructing, "Almost forgot something important. Go to the kitchen and take out the meat from the fridge. We need to prepare the dumplings tonight for tomorrow morning. We can't use knives on New Year's Day, so we have to get everything ready tonight and just cook them in the morning."

Tarquin was familiar with this tradition. Elizabeth had always prepared the dumplings on New Year's Eve for the next morning, a custom he had almost forgotten after so many years without a proper celebration.

Hearing someone remind him of it brought a complex mix of emotions, a blend of bitterness and warmth, which he couldn't quite identify.

He gave Elysia another look before heading to the kitchen to follow her instructions, taking out the meat and vegetables in preparation.

The family of six then set off for the ancestral home.

Tarquin had made it clear beforehand that his identity was not to be revealed in front of Elysia at the ancestral home, so he wasn't worried about her finding out.

However, as the car slowly made its way into the driveway of the ancestral home, Elysia began to feel suspicious.

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Amidst Evan and Emmett's wide-eyed astonishment, she turned to Tarquin, her voice laced with disbelief.

"Is this, really, your family's old mansion?"

"Yeah," Tarquin responded simply.

Elysia glanced outside the car window at the sprawling golf course. "Your... your family's place is this huge, this lavish?"

Tarquin knew exactly what was running through her mind and said, "You're just not used to this kind of luxury. If you ever visited the Bradfords, the wealthiest family around, you'd be even more astounded."

Elysia let out a sigh of relief. "You had me scared for a moment there. I thought your family was the Bradford clan."

Tarquin looked puzzled. "Why be scared?"

Elysia pouted slightly. "Well, technically, I'm still married to a Bradford, so I'm the wife of the richest man, Tarquin Bradford, in name at least!" And they hadn't divorced yet.

So, if today her secret lover and Tarquin met, it would be a scandalous encounter between a 'homewrecker' and a legitimate husband.

Though neither of them loved her, the mere thought of such a confrontation was terrifying.

Elysia tried to brush it off. "I'm just not accustomed to such grandeur. I've heard the Bradfords can be quite intimidating."

Tarquin, still oblivious to the fact that she was his wife, didn't think much of it. The Bradfords were indeed a den of lions, with everyone harboring dark secrets. Frightening, indeed.

"We just share a surname. My family has nothing to do with the Bradfords' wealth."

"Oh," Elysia thought to herself, how easily fooled she was.

She continued to gaze out the window, marveling at the breathtaking scenery and the rare species of trees visible from the road. She couldn't help but ask, "Even so, your family must be quite affluent, right? Maybe not the wealthiest, but definitely up there?"

Tarquin replied, "Their wealth has nothing to do with me. They don't like me much, and I've never really benefited from their riches. I used to be wealthy myself until my business tanked, and I ended up penniless."

"You've started to make money again recently, haven't you?"

"A little, but I've given all the cash to you."

"What? You gave me all your money?"

"Yeah."

"So, you're broke now?"

"I've got a few thousand... well, maybe just a couple hundred bucks to my name right now, not entirely sure."

Elysia was shocked. "Which is it, thousands or hundreds? And why would you give it all to me?"

She conveniently ignored the 'billion' part, never having imagined his assets could reach into the billions.

Tarquin explained, "You've been taking care of Elijah. I'm grateful to you."

Elysia believed his words, her expression a mix of being touched and guilty.

"You're making me feel terrible. I thought you had come into a huge fortune. Yesterday, I went on a shopping spree and spent so much money! Can you even afford to pay off the bills next month?"

"I've checked; I can cover it."

"Maybe I should return some of it to you."

Tarquin's eyes narrowed slightly. "Would you really?"

Elysia clenched her teeth, as if making a painful decision.

"I can't let you be left destitute. I'll give you back five thousand... no, eight thousand!"

Tarquin replied dryly, "Thanks, but there's no need."

He had given her a million, and she was contemplating returning a few thousand, as if it were a huge sacrifice, and even then, she was already feeling the pinch.

Elysia asked, "Do you think it's too little or too much?"

Tarquin, looking into her bright, innocent eyes, couldn't bring himself to scoff at her naivety. "I meant I've got a few hundred in cash. I still have assets that haven't been liquidated; you don't need to worry about me."

Elysia immediately asked, "You have assets that haven't been liquidated? How much?"

"I haven't really calculated."

Elysia was curious, but prying too much into someone's financial affairs felt rude, so she didn't press further.

"So, when will you liquidate them?"

"Does it matter to you?"

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"Yeah, you've only got a few bucks left. How long will that last you? Look, if you ever need cash in a pinch, just come to me. Anytime you need, I've got you covered."

Tarquin gave her an unreadable look. "...Yeah."

The four little ones pursed their lips, collectively rolling their eyes at Tarquin.

Keep spinning your tales, let's see how you explain your way out of this one.

Then, their gazes shifted back to Elysia.

Silly mommy, bless her heart.

She believes anything he says. Lucky for her, they were on the lookout. Otherwise, she'd be thanking him for the privilege of being conned. The car came to a smooth stop.

The butler, accompanied by the staff, approached to open the car door. "Young Master."

Because of Tarquin's prior instructions, they all referred to him as 'Young Master,' dropping any formal titles.

Tarquin, with a poker face, stepped out of the car and personally lifted each of the little ones down.

Seeing Elysia and the kids, both the butler and the staff were momentarily surprised, but quickly reverted to their professional demeanors.

The butler smiled ingratiatingly, "They're all waiting for you in the chapel, just missing you now."

It was a century-old tradition of the Bradford family to visit the chapel for blessings before the New Year's Eve dinner.

Since they had made a detour to the Sunshine Community to hang door decorations, they were running a bit late, and the others had already arrived. Elysia felt that visiting the chapel was a solemn affair, and being unrelated to the Bradford family, she opted out.

But Elijah clung to her hand, unwilling to let go, wanting her to join them.

Elysia glanced at Tarquin, who didn't object, so she silently followed.

When the family of six made their appearance before the entire Bradford family, the expressions on their faces were priceless!

Words like 'shocked' didn't do them justice.

Their eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, each looking more stunned than the last.

They had their own schemes and complicated feelings!

The New Year's Eve dinner was a family affair, and here Tarquin was, bringing strangers home.

From their matching outfits, it was clear they were a family unit. Was Tarquin planning to marry Elysia?

Was Elysia going to bring her kids into the Bradford family?

Bringing them to the chapel, was Tarquin intending to have the ancestors of the Bradford family acknowledge Elysia's children? How could they? They had no blood relation to the Bradfords, how could these outsiders deserve a place in the Bradford chapel?! Moreover, if Elysia and her kids squeezed into the Bradford family, it would mean a redistribution of the Bradford Group's shares. The pie was only so big, and more people meant less for each.

Hence, after the initial shock, there were frowns all around; no one welcomed Elysia and the little ones into the Bradford family. Luckily, they were brought by Tarquin; anyone else might have faced a harsher reception!

Elysia wasn't scared, nor did she care.

She wasn't scared because Tarquin had her back!

And she didn't care because she had braced herself already.

They didn't like Tarin and Elijah, so of course, they wouldn't be fond of her and her children.

She was mainly there for Elijah; everything else was irrelevant. They didn't care for her and her children, well, the feeling was mutual!

For those she didn't care about, ignoring them was the best response.

Since it was time for the blessings, Gideon didn't press Tarquin on the reason for bringing Elysia's family.

With the day's events still fresh, he didn't dare annoy Tarquin further by sending them away.

So, for the time being, Elysia's presence was tacitly accepted as they all entered the chapel.

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Elysia stepped into the Bradford family's ancestral hall for the first time and was truly astounded. The hall was vast and tall, making her feel incredibly small, like an ant stepping into a skyscraper. The walls of the hall were lined with portraits of deceased members of the Bradford family, each accompanied by a description of their life's journey. From a distance, Elysia could only see the portraits, unable to read the inscriptions below.

In the center of the hall, there were many memorial plaques, each with candles and fresh flowers placed in front. There were also monks in the hall, chanting prayers and blessings, adding to the solemn and respectful atmosphere. Members of the Bradford family stood in front of the plaques, bowing collectively before proceeding to light incense in honor of their ancestors, family by family. Gideon, being the eldest in the Bradford family, was the first to step forward. He was followed by Tarquin and Elijah. Although Tarquin's aunts were older, their status did not surpass his due to their gender, so they had to wait their turn. Once Tarquin's aunts had paid their respects, it was time for the more distant relatives of the Bradford family.

As Gideon lit his incense, Tarquin turned to Elysia, "When it's our turn to honor my dad, you can stay here with the kids if you'd prefer." He didn't pressure her, knowing well she wasn't Elijah's biological mother. The privilege of honoring his father was reserved for Elijah's biological mother, so whether Elysia participated was of little consequence to him.

Before Elysia could respond, Elijah piped up, "Daddy, I want Mommy and Elliot, Evan, and Emmett to come with us. Grandpa would be happier." Having his daughter-in-law and grandsons present would surely bring joy. Elijah looked at Elysia with hopeful eyes, "Mommy, Daddy said Grandpa was a great man. Let's all light incense for him, to make his year a happy one."

Elysia glanced at Tarquin, who remained calm, "It's up to you." Though she wasn't Elijah's biological mother, a polite gesture of lighting incense for Elijah's grandfather was acceptable, and he wouldn't object. As it was Tarquin's turn, he stepped forward confidently. Elijah clung to Elysia, leaving her no choice but to follow under the watchful eyes of the assembly.

The Bradford family frowned collectively at this! They saw this act as more significant than Tarquin had anticipated, associating it with formally recognizing Elysia's status within the family. By bringing Elysia to light the incense, Tarquin was essentially declaring her his spouse in the eyes of his father.

Elysia could feel the cold stares from behind, her nerves kicking in. She was naturally timid, and the eerie atmosphere of the ancestral hall, combined with the cold glares, made her uneasy. As Tarquin took the incense for her, their eyes met, his gaze reassuring her: "Don't worry, I'm here for you." Elysia took a deep breath, feeling a bit more settled. She then signaled Elliot, Evan, and Emmett to follow Elijah's lead. The six of them together paid their respects to Kendrick.

Kendrick, originally named Killian Bradford, had used Kendrick as his name for safety reasons during his studies abroad. When he and Elizabeth had no choice but to marry overseas, they used the name Kendrick on their marriage certificate. They bowed deeply, and Tarquin placed the incense in Kendrick's personal urn, a tradition he followed every year, dedicating his respects solely to his father.

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Elysia, though puzzled, quietly followed his lead and mimicked his actions. Elijah, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett each placed incense in Kendrick's holder. Suddenly, the candle in front of Kendrick's photograph flickered loudly, and the flame shot up high.

Evan, amazed, asked, "Hey, is Grandpa Kendrick really happy?"

Elliot confirmed, "The higher the flame, the happier he must be."

Emmett was thrilled, "Grandpa Kendrick likes us."

Elijah looked content, "I just told Grandpa about his daughter-in-law and grandkids."

Tarquin: "..."

Elysia: "..

The Bradford family collectively scowled, "..."

In the quiet chapel, only the voices of the youngsters echoed, unusually loud. Elysia felt awkward and gestured for them to be quiet.

Elijah smiled gently, "Mom, no need to be shy, Grandpa likes you."

Hearing this, Elysia's embarrassment grew, her lips twitching: Where's the ground when you need it to swallow you up?

This was a chapel, and she couldn't argue with the children; she could only shake her head at Elijah, signaling him to keep quiet. Tarquin wasn't bothered. After all, his dad wasn't foolish. If he had really brought a daughter-in-law to see him, he would have mentioned it himself. Elijah's words were just child's babble. But to the rest of the Bradford family, Elijah's words, coupled with his smile, made them even more uneasy!

After Tarquin finished his ritual, it was Allegra and her family's turn. Tarquin didn't bother waiting inside and led Elysia and the kids out. Once outside, he lit a cigarette, looking somewhat downcast.

Elysia shrugged helplessly, "You four are looking for trouble, huh? There's nothing between him and me, yet you blabbered nonsense inside the chapel. Look, you made him upset."

Elijah immediately shook his head, his words full of empathy for Tarquin, "It's not that; Dad's just missing Grandpa and Grandma. He always feels sad after the ritual."

"Oh? Is that why?"

"Yeah, Dad's been pretty lonely these years, he just doesn't show it. Mr. Lowell said that when Dad was about four or five, his parents died, supposedly murdered. Then, Dad was brought back here, and that's when the nightmares began..."

Elysia frowned slightly, turning to look at Tarquin. He leaned against a large oak tree, a cigarette between his fingers, occasionally taking a drag, his brows slightly furrowed, his ruggedly handsome face tinged with melancholy. He was an unbreakable father, but he too was once a child. He too once had parents and carefree days.

Elysia felt a twinge of sympathy looking at him and asked Elijah, "How did your grandparents die?"

"I'm not quite sure, just heard from Mr. Lowell they were murdered, and the culprit's still at large."

"...Then why is there only your grandpa's memorial in the chapel and not your grandma's?"

She had noticed earlier that the space beside Kendrick's photograph was empty. Typically, Tarquin's mother's memorial would be placed next to Kendrick's.

Elijah shook his head again, "I don't know, Dad never mentioned it."

Elysia pondered for a moment, then told the kids, "Stay here for a bit, I'm going to keep him company."

Elysia walked towards Tarquin. The four little ones quickly followed and hid behind a bush, spying. The little sneaks knew Mommy was going to comfort Daddy; they were eager to hear what they would talk about and how much their relationship would progress.

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Tarquin was taking a drag on his cigarette when he spotted Elysia approaching. Instinctively, he thought about stubbing it out. He knew Elysia hated the smell of smoke.

"Just smoke if it helps you relax," Elysia said. "I don't mind."

Tarquin glanced at her and crushed the cigarette under his shoe anyway.

"Alright, there's a point for Dad," the kids chimed in unison.

"Who told you I was in a bad mood?" Tarquin asked.

"I don't need to be told, it's written all over your face," she replied.

"Just needed a smoke, that's all."

Really? Quitting just like that when the craving hits?

Elysia didn't push it, though. His gesture of stubbing out the cigarette touched her.

Tarquin leaned against a large tree, hands in his pockets, while Elysia stood opposite him, arms behind her back, leaning against a smaller tree. They chatted casually, both relaxed.

Elysia shared, "I've never told you this, but although my last name is Thorne, I don't actually know my birth parents' names. I was adopted by the Thornes, and to this day, I have no idea where my real parents are, who they are, or even if they're alive. Ever since I can remember, my adoptive parents barely tolerated me. Scolding and physical punishment were the norm. I never knew what it was like to feel parental love. That's why I threw myself into my studies, hoping to change my fate... Unfortunately, life had other plans. I was forced to drop out of college and get married, only to be kicked out by a husband who despised me... But look at me now, I'm happy, right? Life is about making the best of it, happy or not, since we all meet the same end. Might as well enjoy the ride, right?"

The kids thought, "Mom's story is so sad. We'll get back at the Thornes for her someday! But she's amazing, comforting Dad with her own stories of hardship."

Tarquin swallowed hard, touched by her openness. He had lost his parents early and was taken in by the Bradfords, a den of wolves. Every day was a struggle for survival. Gideon, the head of the family, wanted to use him to consolidate power, keeping the ambitious relatives at bay. Meanwhile, others plotted against him, hoping to eliminate him and secure their own progeny's ascendancy. Many nights, he lay alone, curled up in a corner, crying silently, clutching a knife until dawn. And it was highly likely that his parents were killed by members of the Bradford family. No wonder he harbored such hatred towards them!

"People say I'm ruthless, that I have no respect for my own grandparents or aunts. They call me cold-blooded, not understanding what it means to be a family. Ha, as if they know what they're talking about! My hatred for the Bradfords isn't unfounded! If not for certain circumstances, I'd have cut them out of my life long ago. Prison or a hospital bed would've been too good for them! And because of my own childhood, sometimes I even resent Elijah's mother. Though Elijah was safe under my protection, he missed her terribly. Many nights, he too curled up, silently crying until dawn."

Tarquin took a deep breath, looking back at Elysia. His childhood was undoubtedly tragic, but compared to hers, it seemed almost bearable. At least he had known love once, with Kendrick and Elizabeth. But Elysia... Born only to be abandoned. Adopted, yet unloved. Striving hard to get into her dream college, only to be forced to give up her dreams.

Chapter 540

Starting over for the second time, she found herself cast out by her husband, scorned and unwanted...

He was oblivious to the full extent of her past tragedies. Yet, even with the little he knew, her life seemed unbearably harsh.

No wonder she now relished in her happiness; she deserved every bit of it. It was as if the universe was finally settling its debts with her. Thankfully, her spirit remained unbroken, vibrant even. Many others might have crumbled under such weight.

"What was the deal with all those rumors about you back in the day?" Tarquin asked.

Elysia shot him a surprised look, pursing her lips.

How dare he bring that up, as if he hadn't played his part in her misfortune?!

Had he not been so overbearing at the airport... would any of that have followed?!

Taking a deep breath, Elysia confronted him, "Do you believe me if I say I was unjustly accused of infidelity within my marriage?"

"I believe you," Tarquin answered without hesitation, his response swift and decisive.

A few months back, when they had first met, he might have doubted her.

But now, he believed.

Despite her occasional foolishness and materialistic tendencies, she wasn't the type to step out of line.

The little ones chimed in: "Alright, alright, dad gets a point for this, making it two in total."

Elysia was taken aback, "You believe me? You used to say I was no good."

Tarquin's lips twitched, "That was a misunderstanding, my mistake. I apologize."

Elysia, ever so magnanimous, waved it off, "Alright, apology accepted."

Tarquin gave her another look, pressing on, "Why were you forced into that situation? What happened during your marriage? Were you mistreated? Did your husband misunderstand something?"

"Mhm."

"Did you confront the person who mistreated you?"

Elysia glared at him, then averted her gaze, "I did."

"And? Did you report it?"

Elysia pouted, "...I don't want to talk about him."

After a pause, Tarquin offered, "If you ever want revenge, I'm here to help."

The kids noted: "He's trying, so no change in score, still two."

Elysia's lips twitched. Was he looking to punish himself?

"No need, it's all in the past now. Time to turn the page."

Tarquin persisted, "What about your husband? Did he know the truth behind your so-called infidelity?"

"...I'm not sure."

"If he knew yet treated you that way, he's worthless. A decent man would stand by his wife, not scorn her upon learning she was wronged. Even if he wanted a divorce, dragging your name through the mud was uncalled for."

The kids agreed: "Right, he's the worthless one here."

Evan: "Should we deduct a point?"

Elijah: "Why?"

Evan: "Just not liking him right now, makes me mad."

Elliot: "...We can't dock points for that, let's be fair and leave it."

Unaware that the man before her was her husband Tarquin, Elysia was at a loss for words.

After a moment, she confessed, "I never hated my husband."

Tarquin, puzzled, asked, "Even after all he did, you don't hate him? Are you that in love? What, are you obsessed with romance?"

"You're the one obsessed!" Elysia retorted, then hesitantly added, "Are you still looking for Elijah's mother?"

"Yes."

Elysia, hesitant, advised, "I think you should stop looking."

"Why?" Tarquin was confused.

The kids explained: "Because mom is right here, and she's not too fond of you right now. She doesn't want to be found by you."