

Hitched 541

Chapter 541

Elysia gathered her thoughts, her expression turning more serious. "Have you ever considered that what you feel for Elijah's mom might not be love? Maybe you just want to make amends, and making amends isn't the same as loving someone."

Tarquin furrowed his brow. "Elijah told you about his mom and me?"

"...Yeah."

With a furrowed brow and a craving for a cigarette - which he resisted due to Elysia's presence - he fell silent for a moment before looking at her again to repeat his earlier question, "Whether it's about making amends or love towards Elijah's mom, that's my issue. Why don't you want me to pursue her?"

Elysia was straightforward, "Because I hate seeing you torment yourself. I want you to be better, to stop dwelling on the past. We should look forward, don't you think?"

Tarquin was silent.

Elysia continued, "I think you're trapping yourself in a dead end and torturing yourself. You think you're in love with Elijah's mom, but if you think about it, you don't even know who she is. How can you love someone you've never met? Love appears in two forms: it either grows over time, or it's love at first sight. You've neither met her nor spent time with her. How could you possibly be in love?"

Tarquin's face darkened as Elysia went on, "What you feel for her isn't love; it's just a sense of responsibility, and it's all coming from you. Maybe she doesn't want you to take responsibility. Maybe she's moved on, forgotten about the past, and started a new chapter in her life. Your relentless search for her might not be a blessing but a burden to her."

Tarquin scowled, "You're not her. How do you know she doesn't want me to take responsibility?"

"...Women understand women. Plus, didn't I tell you? I've been through something similar. I wanted to avoid him at all costs, not be found by him." Tarquin looked skeptical, "The man who wronged you is looking for you?"

Elysia was taken aback, quickly clarifying, "I don't know if he's looking for me. I'm talking about how I feel. I just don't want him to find me."

Tarquin stared at her for a long moment before saying, "Your experience sounds a lot like Elijah's mom's."

Elysia sighed deeply, "..."

The four little ones thought: What do you mean 'sounds like'? It's exactly the same! Dad, you're clueless!

Tarquin looked at Elysia with a complex expression. Everything about her, from her experiences to the vibe she gave off, reminded him of Elijah's mom! If it weren't for the paternity test he had done, he might have thought she was Elijah's mother. Sadly, she wasn't.

"Your experiences might be similar, but unlike her, you kept your child by your side. She gave her child to me... Do you think she knows about Elijah?"

"She doesn't!"

"Hmm?"

Elysia realized she had been too assertive, hastily adding, "I'm thinking from a mother's perspective. I believe if she knew about Elijah, whom she carried for nine months, she wouldn't have the heart to abandon him."

Tarquin, with a cold expression, remained silent, "..."

Elysia added, "I genuinely suggest you forget about Elijah's mother. Stop looking for her and start a fresh, beautiful relationship. Live a good life for yourself."

Tarquin glanced at her, "You really want me to start a new relationship?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I... I'm just suggesting it as a friend."

If he could start a new relationship, she'd feel less guilty. She wouldn't have to feel so remorseful about taking Elijah away and leaving him all alone.

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Tarquin was utterly clueless about what Elysia was thinking, making it hard not to suspect that her suggestion was driven by a budding interest in him. After pondering for a moment, he called out to her, "Elysia."

"Hmm?"

"Are you...?"

Suddenly, the atmosphere dipped into silence.

Evan was curious, "What does he want to ask?"

Elijah, ever the excited one, declared, "I know Dad. Dad wants to ask Mom if she likes him!"

"What?!" Evan was taken aback, so was Emmett, while Elliot seemed a tad nervous, clenching his tiny fists secretly, eager to hear Mom's response. But as seconds ticked by, Tarquin remained silent.

Evan, growing impatient, exclaimed, "What's taking him so long? Is he going to ask or not?"

Elijah frowned, "He might not ask after all."

"Why not?" Emmett was curious.

"Dad's got a lot of pride," Elijah explained. "He's probably worried that if he's overthinking it and gets a 'no' for an answer, he'd look vain and that would be embarrassing."

"But doesn't he want to know if Mom likes him?" Emmett asked.

"Of course, he's curious. But knowing Dad, with his steady nature, he won't ask until he's absolutely sure," Elijah reasoned.

It seemed the sons knew their father well. Did Tarquin really want to ask Elysia if she liked him? The fact that she could bare her wounded heart to care for him, urge him not to look for Elijah's biological mother, and wish for his happiness, pushing him towards a new romance - weren't these signs of her affection? But he also feared misunderstanding her feelings, potentially embarrassing himself.

Elysia, having waited without hearing the rest of his question, grew anxious and asked with wide eyes, "What do you want to ask?"

After a moment's thought, Tarquin changed his approach, "Do you... care about me a lot?"

Elysia was taken aback, clearly not expecting this question. But after staring at him for a while, she nodded earnestly, "Yes!"

He was the father of her children; it was impossible for her not to care about him. And he wasn't a bad person... If he were just a heartless jerk, she could have easily taken Elijah and left without a second thought. But he wasn't, and taking Elijah away directly would leave her feeling guilty and remorseful.

So she hoped he could find some happiness, making it a bit easier for her to leave with Elijah someday.

Tarquin watched her with an inscrutable expression, his deep gaze tinged with an indiscernible emotion. But he was too good at masking his feelings, making it impossible to tell whether he was pleased or something else.

As they silently stared at each other, lost in their thoughts, Elysia's resolve crumbled first. She averted her gaze, as if caught in a guilty act. Just as she was about to fabricate an excuse for her concern, Gideon, along with the Bradford family members, emerged from the chapel, observing them from a distance.

Coincidentally, Elysia's stomach chose that moment to growl.

Tarquin snapped out of his thoughts and took the lead, "Let's go, dinner's waiting."

With that, he strode towards the chapel, leaving Elysia to touch her stomach and sigh as she watched his retreating figure. She wondered if he had taken her words to heart. If he could move on and start a new romance, perhaps shifting some of his affection away from Elijah, it might soften the blow when she eventually took Elijah and left.

"Not hungry anymore?"

Realizing she hadn't followed, Tarquin turned back and called out to her. His voice was deep and soothing, carrying a hint of indulgence that was hard to miss.

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Elysia snapped back to reality as her gaze landed on him, momentarily caught off-guard.

He stood a few meters away, hands casually tucked into his pockets, his sharp features slightly softened by a gentle squint, exuding an air of rugged handsomeness. His tall, lean figure carried an aura of aloofness, usually emitting a chilly vibe that marked him as someone not easily approached. But today, for reasons unknown, he seemed less frosty and more approachable, his presence even more distinguished and gentlemanly.

A fair assessment would be: a man of remarkable presence.

To exaggerate: He was too handsome, too charismatic, almost too good for this world.

Even though Elysia harbored no romantic feelings for him, she couldn't help but internally award his looks and demeanor a perfect score.

"Daydreaming? Are we going or not?" he called out.

Elysia quickly responded, "On my way!" She hurried towards him, forgetting she was wearing high heels. Her foot slipped, and she stumbled forward.

The sneaky quartet gasped, hearts leaping into their throats!

Tarquin's brow furrowed, and he swiftly moved to catch her.

The four kids exhaled in relief: That gave us a scare. Daddy scores a point in this round.

Elysia found herself in Tarquin's arms, her face twisted in pain.

Tarquin quickly knelt to examine her ankle, pressing gently. Elysia hissed in pain, though not too severely.

Tarquin said, "It's not swollen. Try walking on it."

Elysia moved her foot, "I can walk. These darn high heels, I can never get used to them."

"I'll have someone bring you a pair of comfy slippers."

"No! I'm wearing a cocktail dress; it has to be paired with heels to maintain the aura!"

Tarquin looked at her, "You don't need to impress anyone for Elijah's sake. With me around, you could show up in pajamas and they wouldn't dare disrespect you or Elijah. Change into slippers later, whatever makes you comfortable."

"I don't want to. I don't want to change. Heels look good! It's just a slight twist, not a real injury. I'll tell you when I really want to change."

Seeing her insistence, Tarquin pressed his lips together, "Torturing yourself, for what?"

Elysia muttered, "You're not a woman, you wouldn't understand."

Tarquin didn't push further, wanting to support her but she refused, leaving him to respect her wishes.

A thought lingered in his mind: Does caring mean I'm falling for her?

The four little ones had already scampered back to their original spot, keen to keep their spying a secret.

Evan remarked, "Overall, for a cad, Tarquin did okay this time, earning a point!"

Emmett asked, "Wasn't it three points?"

Evan explained, "He's too timid to directly ask Mommy if she likes him, deducting two points there. The remaining point is for catching Mommy in time, preventing her from falling."

"Oh, got it. I think he's starting to like Mommy."

Elliot interjected, "Drop the 'I think.' It's more than 'starting.' He's definitely into Mommy, just too stubborn to admit it, probably still hung up over Elijah's mother."

Emmett immediately asked, "Should we tell him the truth?"

Evan shook his head, "Of course not. Mommy doesn't like him back yet. We'll wait until she does."

Elliot nodded, "Evan's right. Let's wait a bit longer. Love is complicated for adults. We should stay out of it for now."

Evan mumbled to himself, "I'll note this down. Once he scores a hundred, I'll approve of him being with Mommy."

Elijah remained silent, deep in thought about how to score big points for his dad.

By now, the Bradfords had joined the four kids, glancing at Elijah to gauge his mood, frowning at his apparent well-being. Then, they turned their attention to Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, feigning curiosity.

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"Who's your daddy?"

Evan glared at Allegra, the same woman who had earlier tried to run over his beloved mom. Suppressing the urge to lash out, he snapped, "What's it to you? You old witch!"

Allegra's face darkened instantly.

"How dare you speak to me like that? Such disrespect! Have you no manners at all?"

Evan retorted, "I don't just talk back; I can throw a punch too. Want a free demo? No charge if it doesn't hurt."

"You... Has Elysia never taught you that it's wrong to insult others?"

This time, Elliot jumped in, "Insulting people is wrong, but calling out vile folk is totally fair game."

"Vile folk?"

"In this world, there were no swear words at first. They were invented because of vile people. You could say, vile folk are those who deserve to be called out."

Allegra glared at them, "Are you saying I deserve to be insulted? Is this how Elysia taught you to speak to your elders?"

"Our mom taught us to be polite to our elders, but she also said that doesn't apply to the likes of those who don't act their age."

Allegra clenched her teeth in anger, "You wild children!"

Elliot frowned, "We're not wild. We have a dad, a mom, and people who love us. But you, on the other hand, acting like savages, ganging up on a bunch of kids. Shame on you."

Fuming, Allegra snapped, "I've had enough of your lip. If Elysia won't discipline you, I'll do it myself. Guards!"

Evan's eyes sparkled, "A fight, is it? Count me in!"

But before Evan could make a move, Elijah stepped forward.

He shielded Evan and fixed the approaching guards with a death glare, so intense they halted in their tracks.

Elijah's anger was palpable, reminiscent of Tarquin's intimidating aura.

Turning to Allegra, Elijah spoke coldly, "Are you really trying to bully my family right in front of me?"

The room went silent, everyone shocked by Elijah's behavior. As the sole heir to the Bradford family, his arrogance was not unearned, but his fierce protectiveness was unexpected.

Allegra frowned, "Elijah, are you confused? We're your family."

Elijah's gaze was icy, "I decide who my family is, not you. And to answer your question, their dad is my dad."

"What?! Their father could be any random man, how could he possibly be "

"My word is final. Anyone who has a problem with that can leave the Bradford family for good, stripped of their name."

The room gasped in shock.

Being cast out of the Bradford family?

As the sole heir, Elijah had the authority to make such a decree.

But to threaten disownment so readily was like signing a death warrant for them. The benefits and privileges of being part of the Bradford family were too significant to lose.

Ignoring their astonishment, Elijah coldly swept his gaze over the crowd, "These are my people, brought into the fold by my father and me. Those who can't stand it can either get over it or blind themselves!"

With that, Elijah turned and left with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett to find Elysia and Tarquin.

The Bradford family was left in stunned silence.

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Elijah's mannerisms, including the way he threatened others with that chilling tone and piercing gaze, were a carbon copy of his father, Tarquin! It was like looking at a mini Tarquin! Whenever he spoke, it felt as if Tarquin himself was addressing the crowd, instilling a level of respect that was hard to ignore.

Add to that the fact that the Bradford family tradition had always been to pass everything to the sole heir, and Elijah, being the only heir to the Bradford legacy, had an aura that allowed him to walk with confidence through the family's vast estate. Despite his young age, his presence commanded attention!

The Bradfords were initially shocked but then quickly fell into a buzz of worried whispers.

"What in the world is going on? Is Elijah really cured? How did he recover so swiftly?!"

"As soon as he opens his mouth, he's talking about disowning us or worse, blinding us. Such a young age and already so ruthless and malicious..."

A woman halted her tirade mid-sentence, suddenly aware of her surroundings, then quickly changed her tune, "Elijah was such a good kid; he must've fallen in with the wrong crowd, picking up bad habits!"

They dared not criticize Elijah openly, fearing that their words might reach Tarquin's ears through the grapevine. So, they turned their ire towards Elysia and her brothers, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett.

"Bad company corrupts good character. Elijah's been led astray following them!"

"Tarquin's lost his senses, falling for that Elysia. What's she got besides her looks? Just look at how she's raising those kids!"

"Elysia comes from nowhere, no family, no background, just a pretty face trying to snag a rich husband. If she really marries into the Bradfords, there'll be no peace. Mark my words, she's trouble."

Allegra, fuming, turned to her father Gideon and said,

"Dad, when Tarquin comes to you wanting Elysia and her kids to officially join the Bradford family and be added to the family tree, you have to say no! Tell him we all disapprove. Elysia, with her humble background, has no place in the Bradford family!"

Aunt Verity, always one to stir the pot, added, "Tarquin should remember his father. Marriages not blessed by the family never last or bring happiness."

The room went silent, eyes narrowing, as if they'd struck a nerve with Tarquin, gaining the upper hand. Their mood visibly brightened.

Gideon, with a furrowed brow and a stormy expression, looked towards where Tarquin and Elysia were standing, then glanced at Elijah with an inscrutable look, and without a word, limped towards the main house. The others, sensing the shift in atmosphere, followed suit.

Elysia and Tarquin, blissfully unaware of the murmurs, alongside their sons, also made their way to the main house.

Inside the main house, the staff had prepared dinner, just waiting for the right moment to serve. Knowing Elysia was hungry, Tarquin suggested,

"If you're hungry, why don't you and the kids start with some snacks to tide you over? The Bradfords might be a tough crowd, but they do know their food. You'll like it."

"And you?"

"I need to have a word with Gideon."

Elysia, concerned, reminded him, "Don't forget to ask him for the medical bills!" It was a pressing issue for her; the injury couldn't just be overlooked. They had to claim those medical expenses!

Tarquin, lips pursed as if holding back a smile, gave her a look that seemed to say, 'Still on that, huh?'

Elysia's eyes widened as she pressed, "You didn't forget, did you?!"

"No, I didn't."

"Good, did you bring the hospital bill?"

"Why would I need that?"

"Are you serious? How are you going to ask for reimbursement without it? They'll come up with any excuse not to pay."

Tarquin's lips twitched, amused at her naivety.

"The bill understates it. Not showing them could mean we get more."

Elysia paused, baffled, "We can ask for more?"

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"Sure, I'll handle it. Why don't you grab a bite to keep your strength up? Just holler if you need me; I'll be just upstairs."

"Alright, go on then. I've got the kids. Knock 'em dead! And hey, if you can't get it sorted, give me a shout, I'll come down and we'll tackle it together. Oh, and try not to get into a brawl, let's win them over with reason!"

Tarquin: "...Got it."

After he left, Elysia took the kids over to the pastry section.

The Bradford family's selection of sweets was truly something else, making the average bakery look like child's play. The pastries, fresh from the oven, were a feast for both the eyes and the stomach.

Evan and Emmett were practically drooling.

But Elysia was cautious, not fully trusting the Bradfords just yet.

She did a quick safety check to make sure everything was up to snuff before letting the kids dive in.

"Oh, this is so good! Mom, you have to try this."

Evan held up a piece of ice cream cake with a look of pure joy, eager to share his find with his mom.

Elysia took a bite from Evan's fork.

The cake melted in her mouth, perfectly sweet - delicious.

She nodded in approval. Tarquin was right. The family might have its issues, but the pastries were top-notch.

"Here, Mom, these two are your favorites," Emmett said, handing over a couple of pastries.

Elysia smiled, "Don't worry about me, kiddo. Pick whatever you like."

The kids scampered off to choose their treats, while Elysia watched from a distance, keeping them in sight.

"Bet you've never had pastries this good in your life, huh?"

Allegra's voice came from behind, dripping with condescension, as if she were royalty looking down on a commoner.

Allegra, flanked by a group of elegantly dressed women, eyed Elysia with disdain.

Elysia internally scoffed at the arrival of these drama queens.

She swallowed her bite of cake and faced them head-on, "I haven't just never had pastries this good; I've also never seen people this awful." One of the women snapped, "Who are you calling awful?"

"Whoever took offense," Elysia shot back.

"You..."

Another jumped in, "Elysia, you're here enjoying pastries while we can't stand you. Are you clueless or just plain daft?"

Elysia was unphased, "Seems to me you're the ones with issues. If you don't like me, keep walking. Why make a spectacle? And since when does not being liked mean I should be upset? I don't like you lot, but you don't see me crying in a corner."

"How dare you! Do you know who you're speaking to?"

"Nope, and I don't care to know. All I know is your opinion of me doesn't matter. As long as my man... Tarquin, likes me, that's all that counts." My man, referring to Tarquin.

Allegra's frown deepened, "Elysia, do you really think just because he likes you, you can waltz into the Bradford family and claim our fortune? This family isn't just his; he doesn't call all the shots!"

Marry into the Bradford family and claim their fortune? Elysia realized they had the wrong idea.

No wonder they were so irate!

But she wasn't about to correct them. Let them stew in their misunderstanding.

Better for them to be infuriated!

Elysia leisurely finished her pastry and wiped her hands with a napkin.

Then, she shrugged off her cashmere coat, revealing a stunning red designer dress underneath.

She stood up, ready to face them head-on. Battle stations!

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A group of women stared at her, their eyes widening in sheer astonishment!

They had seen beautiful women before, and evening gowns weren't anything new to them either. But perhaps, they hadn't come across a natural beauty who could bring out the true elegance of a gown quite like Elysia did!

Even those who didn't particularly like Elysia couldn't help but be dazzled by her beauty and figure at that moment!

Elysia stood tall and majestic like a queen, running her fingers through her luxurious wavy hair, arms crossed as she looked down upon the group of

women,

"Do you really think I married into the Bradford family for your wealth? Wrong. I did it for his love! His love is all I need. Your Bradford fortune? I couldn't care less about it!"

Couldn't care less?

As arrogant as that sounded, if she was willing to renounce the Bradford family's wealth, it would actually be a relief for them.

The women were still muttering among themselves when Elysia added,

"But make no mistake, I won't just hand it over. What's rightfully ours must be shared, not a penny less! We're a family of six now, everyone deserves a piece!"

"Elysia, you..." the women gritted their teeth in frustration.

One woman, seething with anger, blurted out,

"And you think your bunch of no-good stepchildren deserve a share of the Bradford estate? They..."

"Slap!"

Elysia delivered a slap so swift, not indulging her for a second,

"Adults are talking, leave the kids out of it. Dare say another word about my children and see what happens!"

The woman was shocked, covering half of her face, glaring at Elysia,

"You dare hit me, you..."

As the woman attempted to retaliate, Elysia grabbed her wrist tightly,

"I'm not just willing to hit you, but any of them. Whoever dares speak ill of my kids will face me!

And just so you know, my children aren't just Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, there's also Elijah!

Whatever you've been whispering about Elijah before, I turned a deaf ear. But from now on, be careful. Anyone dares to curse or bully my Elijah, I'll fight you with everything I've got!"

The group of women was stunned into silence by Elysia's outburst, taking a while before another dared to speak,

"Elysia, to be so bold and defiant on our turf, you..."

"Wondering where I get my courage from? My man gave it to me!" Elysia stood proud,

"My man said, even if I were to tear your family's world apart, I shouldn't worry. If you have a problem with that, go take it up with him." Allegra's face turned dark,

"A woman who only knows how to rely on her man, and you're proud of it? Shameless!"

Elysia scoffed,

"Of course, I'm proud. I rely on my own man, not someone else's. What's there to be ashamed of?

If your men were competent, you could rely on them too. Let them come to my man if they've got an issue!"

"..."

The women collectively lost their voice, "..

None of their men dared to confront Tarquin!

Elysia mocked them further,

"Jealous of me because your own men don't measure up, how pathetic. Ah well, I'll not stoop to your level. I guess I deserve to be envied, what with a man who's both capable and loves me dearly!"

The women were green with envy and added,

"Without your man, you're nothing!"

Elysia chuckled, "Heh, that's not quite right. Let's not talk about men for a moment, just ourselves. Do you feel superior to me in any way?

I have looks and children, love and affection. What do you have?

At most, more money than I do. But money can't buy love, can it? And it's not like I'm struggling to put food on the table!

So whatever you have, I might have less, but I still have it! But what I have, you lack entirely! And it's something money can't buy! So really, what are you bragging about?"

The women were speechless.

Elysia looked around the circle and added,

"A bunch of clearly unhappy women, trying to mock someone living a blissful life, how amusing."

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A group of women were absolutely fuming because of Elysia!

It seemed like Elysia had not only humiliated them but was now flaunting her happiness in the most infuriating way!

Before any of them could say a word, four little ones noticed the commotion and ran over, "Mommy!"

Emmett clung tightly to Elysia's hand, standing by her side.

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett lined up in front of Elysia, eyes glaring at the group of high-society ladies as if they were guardians.

Despite their young ages, their stares were intimidating enough to send a clear message:

Stay away from our Mom!

Dare to touch our Mom and see what happens!

Want to be cut off from the Bradford family? We can arrange that in a heartbeat!

The ladies were speechless...

Elysia, looking at her brave sons, felt an immense sense of pride and told the envious Allegra and her entourage,

"Seeing how pitiful you all look, let me give you some friendly advice. You really don't want to mess with me. I've got my kids and my man to back me up.

If you mess with me, they'll get mad, and trust me, they won't just be exchanging words with you."

With that proudly said, Elysia, in high spirits, led her children to continue their afternoon enjoying some cupcakes.

The group of women, grinding their teeth, watched her leave, seething with rage!

They had come to pick a fight with Elysia but ended up swallowing their own anger.

But with Elijah around, they dared not escalate things further and could only stew in their frustration!

Meanwhile, the downstairs bustle contrasted sharply with the quiet study upstairs, where only Tarquin and Gideon were present. Tarquin, taking matters into his own hands, printed a document and tossed it in front of Gideon.

Gideon's eyes widened in disbelief, "Share transfer agreement?!"

Tarquin, legs crossed and leaning back in his chair, reminded him,

"Elysia's medical bills."

Gideon was stunned. He knew Tarquin wouldn't let the day's events slide, but he never expected him to demand shares!

He could have handled a demand for a hefty sum, but shares were a whole different ballgame!

1% of the shares alone brought in millions in dividends annually, not to mention 2%!

Besides, shares weren't just about money; they represented a say in the company's affairs.

Tarquin already owned 69% of the shares, while Gideon's totaled less than 20%, with the rest scattered among the board and other Bradford family members.

Even Allegra and Verity from the Bradford family each only held 2%.

Others in the Bradford family didn't even have 1%!

And with the Bradford Group thriving, everyone was clutching their shares tightly, making it nearly impossible to acquire more at this time!

Tarquin asking for 2% out of the blue was... unthinkable!

Why didn't he just outright kill him instead?!

Gideon steadied himself, trying to contain his anger, and said,

"Tarquin, you've got this all wrong. You know our family tradition of sole inheritance. Elijah, being the sole heir of the Bradfords, couldn't be left to fend for himself.

It was only right for Elijah to be with you until your accident. After that, I had no choice but to bring him back to the family mansion for his safety.

After all, too many are out to harm him, and Elysia, just an ordinary woman, couldn't possibly protect him. That's why I stepped in.

I'm sorry she got hurt, but these shares... Come on, you already own so much. Do you really need to squeeze out my grandfather's last bit?" Tarquin's smirk was tinged with scorn,

"No need for such a long explanation. Those shares aren't for me; they're for Elysia." Gideon was taken aback, even more shocked, "You're asking for shares for Elysia?!"

"Yes, she was injured and bled today; you're responsible."

Gideon, brows furrowed, struggled to understand,

"You... you've really fallen for her?"

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Tarquin's voice was icy, "This is between her and me; you've got no part in this. Just sign the paperwork and throw in an extra million, and we can call it a day. If you don't agree, I'll find another way to get her medical bills paid."

The threat in his tone was palpable, casting a shadow over Gideon's face.

Tarquin's "other ways" of getting the money were sure to be far more brutal and terrifying than the current proposal!

Yet, giving away 2% of his shares felt like slicing flesh from his own body!

Gideon fell silent for a moment before tentatively offering, "She got hurt by my people, and I owe her for her medical bills. Would ten million do?"

"No deal!"

Gideon's expression darkened, "Do you really have to push me this far, Tarquin?"

Tarquin glared back, "You knew what you were getting into. Why act surprised now?"

This was all Gideon's own doing!

After a tense stare-off, Gideon exhaled as if making a monumental decision, "I can give her 1% of the shares, at most!"

"That won't do!"

Gideon's breathing grew rapid, clearly struggling to keep his temper in check, "1% of the Bradford Group's shares is more than enough to cover her medical bills. Hell, it's enough to buy her life ten times over!"

Tarquin's expression darkened, "You should be grateful she's still alive. Otherwise, you'd be mourning the loss of the entire Bradford family right alongside her!"

The implication was clear: if she died, he'd bring the whole Bradford family down with her.

Gideon stared at him, shocked, "You've always been in love with Elijah's mother. You couldn't possibly have fallen for Elysia. Why do you care so much about her?"

"That's none of your business! A 2% transfer of shares, not a fraction less. 1% for Elysia's medical bills and the other 1% for her and her child's emotional distress. Technically, you should also give 2% to me and Elijah, but let's keep this between us for now. Consider the 2% for me and Elijah a fee for our silence."

Gideon's face turned even darker, "?!"

2% wasn't enough; he was actually thinking about 4%?!

After a long look at Tarquin, Gideon asked, "If you secure shares for Elysia, she'd be thrilled. Why wouldn't you want her to know?"

"You don't need to know."

Gideon frowned, "You're hiding the shares and your true identity from her. What are you really up to?"

"That's not your concern."

"...And you're not worried I'll spill the beans?"

Tarquin shot him a cold look, "If you do, I'll just come clean to her. It's no big deal. But don't expect to get off easy!"

Gideon clenched his jaw, "..."

"

Tarquin added, "You have three seconds to decide. Sign or don't sign?"

Gideon inwardly cursed, glaring venomously at Tarquin for a full three seconds before finally signing the document.

Signing it felt like his organs were being ripped out!

Tarquin took the signed document, glanced over it, and tucked it away with satisfaction.

Gideon said, "If she suspects anything when signing, it's on you."

Tarquin ignored him, but before leaving, he threw in a reminder, "Don't forget the million!"

Gideon,

"

The moment Tarquin left, Gideon hastily grabbed some heart medication from the table and swallowed it, feeling genuinely enraged to the point of

nausea.

Downstairs.

Tarquin momentarily tucked the share transfer document away, intending to find Elysia.

Just then, he witnessed the following scene...

A woman slipped and fell towards Elysia.

Instinctively, she grabbed Elysia's hair as if clutching at a lifeline and yanked it down hard.

Elysia's head jerked back, and she hissed in pain.

Even as the woman was steadied by her companion, she didn't let go of Elysia's hair, pulling with vicious intent, regardless of Elysia's well-being.

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The woman standing next to her was glaring at Elysia, clearly on purpose. Tarquin's face darkened, and he strode over. With a swift movement, he pushed the woman's hand away and pulled Elysia into his arms. The woman, upon seeing Tarquin, gasped in fright and hurriedly apologized,

"Sorry, Ms. Thorne, I didn't mean it. I was just admiring your dress and wanted to ask where you bought it. Then I slipped, and instinctively grabbed your hair."

"Yeah, yeah, I can vouch for her, it was an accident."

The two women were overly humble in their demeanor. Elysia frowned, touching her hair which was now painful, her face contorted in discomfort. Several strands of hair had been yanked out, and it truly hurt. But since she had her back to them, she couldn't tell if their actions were intentional or accidental. For a moment, Elysia was unsure how to handle them.

Their kids had been munching on cookies and only now came over, having not seen whether the women did it on purpose. Seeing their mom in pain saddened them deeply. Just as the little ones were about to speak up, Tarquin beat them to it, saying,

"If you're so keen on losing hair, then go shave it all off before coming back to the family dinner!"

Elysia: "?"

The two women: "!!!"

Shave off their hair? Was Tarquin suggesting they go bald? But they were women! They weren't nuns! Having their hair shaved off, how could they even step outside?! Tears welled up in the eyes of the two women as they were about to defend themselves, but Tarquin added,

"If you don't want to shave, then get out of the Bradford family and never come back. Change your names and start anew!"

Change their names and start anew? The two women broke down crying,

"We really didn't mean it, we've apologized, sob sob sob..."

Tarquin couldn't be bothered to argue,

"Accidental or not, I only care about the outcome."

And the outcome was Elysia in pain, several strands of hair pulled out. After Tarquin's cold glance towards their relatives, the two men shivered and quickly dragged the women away. Before leaving, they repeatedly promised to make sure their hair was shaved off completely, not a strand left! The two women were dragged away crying in full view of everyone. Other women instinctively touched their own hair, terrified. This move wasn't severely harmful, but it was incredibly humiliating!

Women were frightened, and men were equally nervous; Elysia was too attractive, and they had been staring a bit too long. Now, they quickly averted their gaze, afraid that Tarquin might gouge their eyes out for looking too long. Elysia was shocked and touched by his actions, blinking her big eyes in astonishment. Before she could speak, Tarquin teased her,

"I leave you alone for a minute, and someone pulls your hair. You can only show off in front of me and the kids."

Elysia immediately pouted,

"That's not true! Your aunt came over with a bunch of women looking for trouble, and I almost made them cry."

"What's the use of making them cry? You have to make them feel pain to teach them a lesson."

Elysia pursed her lips,

"I think I did pretty well. I took on a whole group by myself, and they didn't win!"

Tarquin pursed his lips, scoffing, "You're the best, number one in the world."

"I..."

Suddenly, Emmett chimed in,

"Mommy, are you and Daddy flirting or what?"