

Hitched 551

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Tarquin remained silent, his gaze fixed somewhere in the distance.

Elysia's cheeks flushed a crimson red. "Don't be ridiculous, that doesn't count! We're discussing serious matters here. Emmett, who taught you that word?"

"From Evan."

Elysia turned her head towards Evan, feigning anger.

Evan tilted his head up, gazing at the sky. His deep, dark eyes rolled around in their sockets, deliberately avoiding her gaze. Soon after, he dragged Emmett away to grab some food.

Elliot glanced at Tarquin with a slightly narrowed gaze and said to Elysia, "Mom, I'm gonna go find my brothers."

A proud smile graced Elijah's face as he said, "Dad's got Mom's back, so I'm relieved. I'll go catch up with Evan and Emmett."

As soon as Elijah caught up with Evan, he said, "Doesn't this earn Dad some points? He stood up for Mom just now."

Evan nodded. "Yeah, give him a point."

Elijah, trying to bargain, asked, "Can't we give him two points instead? Adding points one by one, when would they ever finish?"

Among the four, Elliot and Emmett remained neutral, but Evan was the most critical of Dad. If they could win Evan over quickly, the four brothers would be united in purpose! Then, they could all work together to bring Dad and Mom closer!

Seeing Evan's hesitation, Elijah turned to Elliot for support.

Elliot chuckled, "Dad did good today, dealing with those two troublemakers. Let's give him two points."

Evan, always listening to Elliot, conceded, "Alright, alright, two points it is. That makes it three points in total."

Tarquin was oblivious to the fact that, in Evan's eyes, he was now worth three points. And that was only after Elliot and Elijah's intervention!

Finally, Gideon made his way down from upstairs, and Tarquin called out to Elysia, "Let's go, time for dinner."

Elysia's face was a picture of embarrassment; Emmett's sudden outburst had left her feeling awkward. Fortunately, he seemed to have moved on as if nothing had happened. Elysia steadied her nerves and gathered the four little ones, getting ready for the family dinner.

As the other guests noticed Gideon, they too made their way to the dining room. The Bradford family, despite its tradition of single inheritance, was not short of daughters. Along with the relatives from the extended family, they were quite a prosperous and populous household.

The large round table that could seat dozens was not nearly enough, and the dining room was arranged with several smaller tables to accommodate everyone.

Gideon took his place at the head table, with Tarquin of course, and Elysia and the four little ones joined them at the head table. Despite some murmurs of disapproval from those who felt Elysia didn't deserve to sit at the main table, the events that had transpired earlier silenced any open objections.

As everyone settled down, Gideon was about to speak when Tarquin suddenly pulled out a share transfer document. The sight of it instantly shattered Gideon's composure, his face darkening and his blood pressure skyrocketing.

Tarquin, unfazed by his reaction, handed the document to Elysia, "Sign this first, then we can eat."

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

She glanced down and saw the words "Settlement Agreement."

To avoid revealing his true intentions, Tarquin had cleverly added a page about a settlement agreement to the share transfer document. "Grandpa accidentally hurt you at home today, and he feels terrible about it. He's agreed to give you a million dollars as compensation for medical expenses. If you have no objections, just sign on the last page."

Tarquin said, flipping directly to the last page to keep her from seeing the words "share transfer."

"How much?!" Elysia's eyes widened in shock.

Tarquin repeated, "One million dollars."

Elysia was astounded. Sure, she had gotten a bit hurt today, but there was no way her medical bills would amount to a million dollars!

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Elysia, her heart racing, discreetly swallowed her fear and refrained from signing on the spot, instead pulling Tarquin to the side for a private word. The rest of the Bradfords looked on with suspicion and curiosity. Today's news of Gideon's visit to Future Community was already the talk of the day. By bringing it up in front of everyone, Tarquin seemed to be issuing a warning: mess with Elysia, and you'd face the consequences. But was making such a big deal necessary over a mere million dollars? Looking at Gideon's expression, doubts only deepened. To Gideon, a million dollars was pocket change, so why did he seem so infuriated?

Elliot, intrigued, picked up the settlement document to take a closer look. His eyes lit up when he saw the words "stock transfer." No wonder Tarquin was insisting on Elysia signing in front of everyone. No wonder Gideon looked so upset. It turned out... While 2% of the shares might not mean much to him, to

everyone else, it was akin to a gold mine! For Elysia, it was a literal gold rush! In essence, Tarquin had just secured a gold mine for his mom!

Elliot let out a sigh of relief, glanced at Tarquin with a newfound respect, and turned to Evan, saying, "Give the man some credit!"

Evan nodded, "He even remembered to ask for medical expenses for mom. That's worth a point. A million dollars, look how happy it made mom." "No, give him five points!"

Evan was shocked, "Five?"

Elliot repeated, "Five points!"

Evan's eyes widened in disbelief, "That much, just like that?"

"Yeah! He deserves those points! Trust me on this."

Elliot showed them the stock transfer document. Elijah was quietly thrilled, not expecting his dad to pull off such a move! Evan and Emmett might not have grasped the full significance of the shares, but seeing Elliot so serious, Evan agreed, "Alright, then an extra five points it is!"

Elijah was secretly ecstatic; dad just scored eight points!

Allegra, unable to contain her curiosity any longer, stood up and walked over to investigate. Elliot, unopposed, handed her the document. Allegra, skeptical at first, gasped aloud when she saw the content, "Oh my God—"

Gideon immediately snapped, "Quiet!" Tarquin had insisted on keeping the stock transfer a secret. If Allegra spilled the beans, he would have to cough up another 2%!

Allegra quickly clamped her mouth shut and approached Gideon, lowering her voice to challenge, "Dad, how could you give Elysia shares? And 2%, no less! I'm your eldest and a true Bradford, having given so

much for the family, and I only have 2%! What makes Elysia deserve the same as me?!" The whole of the Bradford estate and the guests were stunned! What the heck, Gideon was giving Elysia 2% of the shares?! Holy smokes! Had Gideon lost his mind?! Everyone in the Bradford family knew the value of those shares. Gideon granting Elysia a share was unthinkable!

Apart from Gideon, only Allegra and Verity held 2% of the shares, with others not even having 1%. And now, Elysia suddenly had 2% as well! Just moments ago, they were looking down on Elysia as some poor nobody, unfit for their elite circle. But in the blink of an eye, she was wealthier than them, a slap in their faces.

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Gideon was in a sour mood, practically feeling the pinch in his wallet.

"My shares are my own business! Everyone back to your seats and stop getting on my nerves!"

The room was filled with murmurs of discontent.

"Sure, it's your right to do as you please with your shares, but they're part of the Bradford family legacy. How can you just hand them over to an outsider?"

"And to give away so much in one go, what were you thinking?!"

Gideon, fuming, slammed his cane on the floor with a resounding 'thud'.

Did he even want to give them away? Was it his choice? He was more frustrated than anyone, feeling like he'd swallowed a bitter pill, but he lashed out anyway.

"Anyone else wants to speak up? I'll make you all cough up 2% of your shares to give to Elysia!"

Silence fell.

Meanwhile, Elysia was just as anxious on the other side. Her worries weren't about shares, but about the million-dollar question. She clung to Tarquin by the window, unable to make out what the others were saying, but their displeased expressions were clear enough.

"Is a million too much?" she asked Tarquin, her voice laced with worry.

Tarquin didn't answer right away, his gaze fixed on her hand still holding his arm. Her hands were delicate and pale, the kind you'd expect from a lady of high society, not someone in her position.

When he remained silent, Elysia gave him a slight shake, "Hey, I'm talking serious here."

"You worry about a million being too much? Since when did you start turning down money? I thought you dreamed of living the high life," Tarquin finally responded, his thoughts returning to the present.

"Yes, but I never imagined I could get a million just for this! A million dollars, that's more than a decade's salary for most. We're not crossing into blackmail, are we?"

Tarquin couldn't help but understand why Elliot had been so secretive about his wealth around her. A million dollars made her this nervous? She was both greedy and cowardly. Even if she had the slightest ill intent, she wasn't the type to pull off a grand scheme.

"Just sign the settlement," Tarquin reassured her with a smile. "We're asking for more because they can afford it. If they were just regular folks, you'd be lucky to get a few thousand. Be happy you're getting a million."

Elysia nodded, coming around to his perspective. "You're right. The compensation should match the offender's ability to pay. If only I knew I could get this much, I might have aimed for a more serious injury!"

Tarquin shook his head at her comment, half-amused, half-exasperated. "You're hopeless and naive. No amount of money beats good health. Even a child knows that. Silly!"

Elysia pouted in response, "I was just saying."

Feeling a bit relieved, she let go of Tarquin's arm, and he felt an unexpected emptiness. He looked at his arm for a moment before adding, "Just sign the agreement without worrying about their reactions. Once you do, the money will be in your account today."

"Got it!"

Elysia was visibly excited as they headed towards the dining room, her steps light and almost bouncy. The Bradford family members glowered at her, secretly hoping she'd back out.

Elliot was already flipping to the last page of the contract, pen in hand, ready for Elysia's signature.

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"Mom, please sign here. I've checked it for you, and the settlement document is all good."

"Alright!" With a flourish, Elysia signed her name.

The Bradfords: "...". Their anxiety turned into utter despair!

Elliot chuckled as he neatly filed away the settlement document. "Congrats, Mom. You've finally made it; you're a wealthy woman now."

The million dollars from Tarquin and that unlimited credit card were nothing.

But this 2% shareholding turned Elysia into a bona fide wealthy woman!

Elysia thought Elliot was referring to the million-dollar medical bill and immediately whispered, "Let's keep it low-key."

Her eyes curved with joy, her smile almost reaching her ears. She was clearly overjoyed.

In the oddly tense atmosphere of the dining room, she was undoubtedly the happiest.

Only their family of six was joyful, while the rest looked like they had lost all hope!

"Let's eat," Gideon said with a dark face, pulling everyone's attention to the Christmas dinner.

He couldn't bear to think about the shares anymore; it made his blood pressure soar!

Servants began bringing in the dishes one after another. Gideon shot Tarquin a glare and then focused on Elijah.

He let out a cold huff and signaled to his confidant, who understood and left the room.

The Bradford family's Christmas dinner was extravagant, with ingredients so fine and dishes prepared by top chefs.

They had Lobster Bisque, Turducken, Prime Rib, Shrimp Scampi, Clam Chowder, a Seafood Medley, Caesar Salad, and Cornbread.

Not to mention authentic dishes like Southern Fried Chicken, Tex-Mex Stir Fry, Honey Glazed Ham with Papaya, and more.

Elysia, Evan, and Emmett were practically drooling.

They were the little foodies of their family.

Once all the dishes were on the table, Gideon, feeling deflated, rushed through a couple of blessing words and then they began their meal.

Due to his sour mood, many formalities were skipped.

Elysia picked up her fork and first served Emmett some Prime Rib, then got Evan some Shrimp Scampi.

Next, she served Elijah and Elliot some Papaya Chicken and Tofu Casserole.

All their favorite dishes.

"Thanks, Mommy!"

The four voices chimed in unison, sounding incredibly cute.

Elysia looked at them, her face blooming with happiness.

She was already blissful with three sons; adding Elijah this year doubled her happiness!

It was a joyful year!

"Enjoy," she said.

After serving the kids, Elysia realized her favorite Caesar Salad was right in front of her!

What a coincidence!

She had been craving this dish for so long, even discussing it with the kids on the way here.

Delighted, she served herself a portion to savor this earthly delight.

Tarquin glanced at her, discreetly moving his fork away from the Lobster Bisque in front of him.

Only then did the Lazy Susan start to turn.

The Bradfords all sneakily glanced at Tarquin.

Tarquin, eating with an air of aloof elegance, ignored them all.

Their gazes then shifted to Elysia.

Unbeknownst to her, the Caesar Salad had been deliberately placed in front of her by Tarquin.

While he seemed to be casually picking at his Lobster Bisque, his real intent was to have the Caesar Salad stop in front of Elysia!

This subtle yet blatant favoritism had all the women at the table green with envy.

Looking at the men beside them, who were either quietly eating or chatting away, it was clear they didn't care as much!

A woman's fate can be so different!

Jealousy was an ugly thing!

This dinner, akin to a state banquet, left them feeling rather unsettled.

Midway through the meal, Elysia's phone suddenly rang.

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The call was from Blossom.

"You all go ahead and eat, I'll take this call," Elysia told Tarquin and the children before stepping out with her phone.

As soon as she was gone, Allegra immediately turned to Tarquin with a scowl, "Are you seriously in love with her? A woman from the lower rungs of society, saddled with a bunch of unruly kids, what on earth do you see in her? Does she even belong in the Bradford family?"

Tarquin's face darkened, and he didn't mince his words in response, "Whether I love her or whether she belongs in the Bradford family is none of your business! You have no right to judge! And for your information, those kids are well-raised by Elysia. They're great kids. If you think they're ill-mannered, maybe it's you who needs to take a good look in the mirror. They have more manners than some people I know!"

He glanced coldly around the room, making sure everyone knew exactly who he was referring to.

Allegra turned a shade of purple, "Tarquin, you..."

"If you don't want to eat, then leave. If you're going to stay, then eat quietly and keep your opinions to yourself," Tarquin snapped back. The rest of the Bradfords exchanged uncomfortable glances.

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett all silently approved of Tarquin's defense, while Elijah was secretly pleased that Tarquin hadn't outright denied his love for Elysia.

Just then, a new bowl of steaming soup was served by the housemaid, and everyone got a bowl, including the kids who were now happily spooning soup into their mouths.

Suddenly, Elijah's spoon clattered to the floor, and he slumped down, crashing to the ground.

"Elijah!" Tarquin's face went pale as he rushed over, with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett following closely behind, "What's wrong with Elijah?!"

Elijah was foaming at the mouth, convulsing for a few seconds before going still.

The shock and panic were palpable on Tarquin and the boys' faces. "Call a doctor-now!"

Tarquin's voice was hysterical as he began CPR on Elijah, "Elijah, wake up! Elijah! Elijah!"

But Elijah lay lifeless, eyes shut, not responding to Tarquin's desperate pleas.

Tarquin continued the chest compressions, his voice trembling, "Elijah, please, wake up! Listen to me! Elijah-"

He repeated Elijah's name over and over, sweat dripping down his forehead as he refused to stop, "Where's the doctor? Get the doctor here now!"

He roared, his voice breaking, almost on the verge of losing it completely, his emotions a mix of shock, panic, and fear.

Emmett was already in tears, "Elijah, Elijah, I don't want Elijah to die, waaaah..."

Evan was crying too, "Bro, what's wrong with Elijah?! Waaah...why won't he wake up?!"

Elliot was pale, gasping for air, "Quick, go get Mommy!"

Evan quickly wiped his tears and ran to call Elysia.

The Bradfords stood frozen, finally realizing Elijah wasn't breathing. Their eyes nearly popped out of their sockets in shock, "Elijah's...he's dead?!"

Dead?!

Gideon was in disbelief, pushing himself up with his cane to check on Elijah.

Tarquin was still on the floor, desperately trying to revive Elijah, who showed no signs of life, clearly gone.

Gideon was stunned!!!

He turned to his confidant, who was just as shocked, shaking his head frantically, indicating it wasn't his doing, clueless about what had just happened.

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They had indeed poisoned Elijah; it was all premeditated!

But their goal was to keep Elijah hanging by a thread, turning him into a sickly figure!

The poison they used was never meant to kill, much less act so swiftly!

They weren't fools; only a madman would let Elijah succumb to the poison right there at the dining table!

Doing so would directly cast suspicion on them by Tarquin, wouldn't it?

So now, Gideon and his trusted allies were utterly baffled and panicked, clueless as to why Elijah had suddenly succumbed to poisoning!

The culprit surely wasn't them, so who could it possibly be?!

The family doctor rushed over in a hurry, checked Elijah's breathing, then pried open his eyelids to look, trembling as he said,

"Young Master Elijah... is gone!"

Everyone: "!!!!!!!"

Tarquin couldn't believe it, his gaze filled with terror as he looked at the family doctor!

The doctor's words struck like a thunderclap, shattering his heart and all his hopes!

"Master Tarquin, please, accept my condolences."

"Get out-"

Tarquin shoved the doctor aside, his face grave as he continued to perform CPR on Elijah, refusing to accept reality,

"Elijah can't be gone! Elijah, wake up! Listen to me, Elijah..."

His voice choked up, unable to speak further.

Yet his hands never ceased their efforts...

Emmett's crying grew even louder!

Elliot couldn't hold back his tears any longer; the doctor's words were the final straw that broke him.

If earlier he was scared and upset, now he was just devastated.

The rest of the Bradford family slowly emerged from their shock, their expressions suddenly diverse.

After their initial shock, they felt a secret joy!

With Elijah gone, the heir to the Bradford estate was now up for grabs!

Their descendants finally had a shot at ascending to power!

To them, Elijah's death was a fortunate turn of events!

If it weren't for their fear of Tarquin, they'd probably be laughing out loud by now.

Elysia, who had been outside on a call, heard about Elijah's predicament and rushed to the dining room.

When she saw Elijah motionless on the ground, her eyes widened in shock!

Gasping for air, she stumbled and fell next to Elijah,

"What happened to Elijah?!"

Allegra interjected, "He's dead!"

Elysia's mind went blank; she shook her head vigorously, her teeth chattering,

"It can't be! Impossible! My Elijah can't be dead! My Elijah was supposed to live a long life! We had plans; we were going to celebrate the New Year together!"

Her fingers inadvertently touched Elijah's now still pulse...

Her expression went through a myriad of changes!

Her face turned ashen, tears instantly streaming down her face, panic-stricken,

"Elijah... Elijah, please wake up, look at mommy, don't scare me, Elijah... don't do this, mommy is scared, Elijah..."

Elysia sobbed uncontrollably, frantically shaking Elijah.

Unable to wake her son, she looked helplessly at Tarquin, "...please, wake him up..."

Tarquin could no longer hold back his tears; they rolled down his cheeks!

With bloodshot eyes, he looked at Elysia, feeling as though an invisible hand was tightly squeezing his heart, making it hard to breathe, nearly suffocating.

He sniffled hard, bowed his head, and continued performing CPR on Elijah.

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Elijah lay motionless on the ground, his body limp and lifeless. Elysia's fear escalated into uncontrollable trembling as tears streamed down her face. She looked at her three little ones, refusing to accept reality.

"Please... tell mommy that Elijah isn't responding because he's just sleeping, right? He's just asleep, isn't he?"

Her refusal to face the truth only made the scene more heartbreaking. The three kids buried themselves in her embrace, their cries growing louder. "Mommy! Waaaahhh..."

The Bradford clan stood aside, watching with cold indifference. The women, once envious of Elysia, now seemed to relish in her pain. It was as if they were finally venting their pent-up malice.

There were snide remarks and attempts to stir discord.

"Crying as if it's real, who are you trying to fool? Deep down, you're probably wishing Elijah was dead."

"Yeah, Elijah wasn't even her own flesh and blood. How many stepmothers truly care? She must be thrilled about this!"

Some offered insincere condolences.

"Ms. Thorne, no need to cry. Tarin's the one who's truly suffering, he needs your consolation."

"Yeah, save your crocodile tears. Better focus on the real victim here! Your wailing won't change anything."

Elliot clenched his fists, shooting a venomous glare that could freeze blood. His eyes were red, tears clinging to his lashes, but his gaze was fierce, like a predator seconds away from a kill.

Allegra's heart skipped a beat at that look. It reminded her of the devastating aftermath faced by Elizabeth and Kendrick, the same look Tarquin had. The resemblance was uncanny! If you only looked into those eyes, you'd swear it was a young Tarquin staring back. Allegra was shocked, taken aback, and frightened. That gaze was truly intimidating!

The snarky comments ceased as the women clamped their mouths shut, not daring to utter another word. Elliot, fighting back his grief and rage, turned his attention back to Elysia.

"Mom, you need to calm down. Now's not the time for tears. We have to save Elijah! He needs you!"

Elysia nodded, her voice breaking, "Right, right, we need to save him!"

She roughly wiped away her tears, which refused to stop, bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, and pinched her palm to force the pain to focus her. She needed to shift from being a grieving mother to a decisive doctor.

Elliot then stopped Tarquin from making futile rescue attempts. He knew that no matter how hard Tarquin tried, it was pointless. Their only hope was mom. If there was even a sliver of chance, mom would surely save Elijah. If not, then...

"Let mom handle Elijah! Find a quiet place for mom and Elijah, now!"

Tarquin, his brows furrowed, his forehead veins bulging from stress, looked terrifying. He watched Elysia force something into Elijah's mouth, making him swallow, and then remembered Elysia's medical expertise. Tarquin forced himself to remain calm, turning to the Bradford crowd with a sharp, fierce tone,

"Get out!"

The Bradford family shivered and didn't dare to resist, promptly leaving the scene. Even Gideon was kicked out!

Once outside, they started murmuring among themselves.

"He really doesn't care about us, does he? Kicking us out into the cold like that. As if that's going to bring Elijah back to life!"

"There's no way Elijah's coming back. Even the family doctor said he was gone for good!"

"But how did Elijah suddenly die? He seemed so lively and healthy today. I thought he had fully recovered!"

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"Can't you guys see? Elijah's lips were turning blue, and he was foaming at the mouth, like he was poisoned!"

"You mean to say, Elijah was murdered?"

As soon as these words were uttered, the reactions varied among the crowd.

Gideon, panic-stricken and irritable, stepped away from the group to confront his confidant.

"Are you absolutely sure nothing went awry today?"

His confidant, fully grasping the gravity of the situation and nearly in tears, assured, "Boss, if anything had gone wrong, I wouldn't dare hide it from you! Everything went according to plan, smooth as butter!"

"Then why is Elijah dead?!"

"I... I have no idea, sir. It's not our first time poisoning Elijah, and besides, he's the one who provided the poison. Nothing was changed in our routine!"

Then, lowering his voice, the confidant added with a hint of paranoia, "Boss, do you reckon our poisoning plan was uncovered tonight, and someone used it to take Elijah out?"

Gideon's face darkened, and after a moment of silence, he said, "Even if we didn't directly cause his death, we must ensure Tarquin never finds out about our attempt. With Elijah gone, he'll definitely dig deep. We need to cover our tracks thoroughly!"

"Don't worry, boss. He won't be able to trace anything back to us. But... surely, the real culprit is among those people, right?"

Gideon's gaze turned icy as he stared at the members of the Bradford family from a distance, filled with murderous intent. It was clear to him that someone had exploited his actions to kill Elijah! Someone had made him a pawn in their game!

Gideon watched them for a long while, clenched his teeth, and then looked towards the main mansion's entrance. The rest of the Bradford family also had their eyes glued to the main door. Although everyone knew Elijah was gone, they were all waiting for what would come next.

After what seemed like an eternity, the main mansion doors finally opened. Tarquin, with a grim expression, rushed out holding Elijah, followed closely by Elysia, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. As the Bradford family members moved to approach, a cold stare from Tarquin froze them in their tracks.

Tarquin's lips were pressed tightly together, his gaze cold and fierce as he scanned over them. Still holding Elijah, he quickly got into a car and left the mansion. The Bradford family members were left dumbfounded for a moment before they began to gossip,

"Why's he glaring at us? It's not like we're the ones who did it!"

"Not even a word, what, in a hurry to reincarnate or something?"

"He must be taking Elijah's body to the hospital. What's the point when he's already gone?"

"Just let him be, no matter how much he struggles, Elijah won't come back. Gotta say, this is quite the shocker for the year's end!"

The group dispersed with an air of mirth, leaving Gideon with a sinister expression.

A few minutes later, Tarquin and Elysia arrived at Benjamin's hospital with Elijah. Benjamin, having been alerted earlier, was already there to make arrangements. Elysia entered the emergency room to attempt a rescue, while Tarquin, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett waited anxiously outside.

The good news was that Elysia had managed to pull Elijah back from the brink, granting him a faint breath of life. The bad news was that Elijah remained unconscious, still not out of danger. Whether he would live or die was now up to fate.

The three younger ones sat on the hallway bench, eyes red and swollen, staring intently at the emergency room door. Tarquin, with a face full of anger, knew Elijah wouldn't be out anytime soon. Clenching his jaw, he stepped aside to call Lowell and Axel,

"Seal off the Bradford mansion, no one goes in or out without my say-so! Conduct a thorough search; we need to find out how Elijah was poisoned, where the poison came from, and who the culprit is!"

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After giving his orders, Tarquin began to chain-smoke, one cigarette after another, a storm cloud of worry and anticipation brewing around him. With each passing second, the New Year's Eve countdown began outside, signaling the end of an old year and the dawn of a new one. The countdown echoed,

"10, 9, 8, 7... 3, 2, 1... Happy New Year! Cheers to a prosperous new year, haha..."

The arrival of the new year was celebrated with fireworks lighting up the sky over Jindale City, and the sounds of celebration filled the air. But for the group of six who had promised to ring in the new year together, a cold, unyielding door separated them into two worlds. Elysia was still in the emergency room, fighting to save Elijah's life! Tarquin, along with Elliot, Evan, and Emmett, were left in the haunting silence of the corridor, a mix of anxiety and helplessness their only company. The joy of the new year seemed a world away; their reality was fear, worry, and impatience. Elijah's fate was still unknown.

This was supposed to be the happiest year of his life...

Tarquin, staring toward the direction of the emergency room, took a harsh drag of his cigarette, his eyes swollen, his heart heavy. He reminisced about every moment with Elijah. He remembered the first time he saw Elijah. Five years ago, Nola handed him the baby, wrapped in a blanket with a note claiming he was the father. Shocked and skeptical, he looked down at newborn Elijah, so tiny and wrinkled, barely the length of his arm. He took baby Elijah for a medical check-up himself, even getting a paternity test done.

That first night with Elijah, not even knowing for sure if he was his son, he stayed at the hospital, clumsy and inexperienced in caring for a child, spending a sleepless night for Elijah's sake. The next day, the paternity results confirmed Elijah was indeed his son. He could still vividly recall the mix of emotions, unable to contain his laughter even in front of Benjamin. It was a whirlwind of excitement, shock, surprise, but above all, overwhelming joy...

From that day on, his life shifted from solitude to fatherhood. Elijah was his first child, and he was a new father; together, they grew. Without any prior experience, he insisted on being hands-on, which led to many a mishap. The first time he changed Elijah's diaper, just as Elijah had a messy accident. In his rush to clean up, he left Elijah unattended for a moment, returning to a scene straight out of a horror movie. Elijah, covered in mess from head to toe, created a memory Tarquin could never forget.

Then there were the firsts - the first bath, the first time dressing him, the first grasp of his finger. Elijah made him fall in love with photography, capturing every moment of his son's life. Like any father, he wished to freeze time, recording every milestone. He still remembered the pride and joy when Elijah first called him "Daddy" - so much so, he called Lowell and Axel Keaton at two in the morning, boasting and insisting they come over to hear it for themselves, non-attendance not an option.

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There they were, a bunch of grown men, staying up from the wee hours of the morning, keeping watch over Elijah until the crack of dawn. And throughout it all, Elijah didn't utter a single word.

Little Elijah slept soundly, snoring away, but at some point, his diaper shifted, leaving poor Keaton, who was keeping vigil by his crib, with quite the surprise on his face.

Then there was the day Elijah took his first steps. To Tarquin, that moment was more exhilarating than striking gold in a high-stakes lottery!

He smothered Elijah's cheeks with kisses, lifted him into the air, and raced across the lawn, proudly proclaiming, "My boy's the best! Top of the world!" Keaton couldn't help but tease him, "You'd think nobody's kid had ever learned to walk before."

"Heh," Tarquin chuckled at the memory, a laugh breaking through his lips.

But in the next second, tears welled up in his eyes.

He glanced again towards the emergency room, his breath catching in his throat.

Every little moment of Elijah's life flashed through his mind like scenes from a movie.

From a tiny baby no longer than his arm to a little boy now standing at four feet three, they'd shared more than five years of memories.

When Elijah was happy, Tarquin was right there, sharing in his joy, often even more overjoyed than Elijah himself.

When Elijah felt sad, the weight of his sorrow was even heavier on Tarquin's shoulders.

On the countless nights Elijah stayed awake, missing his mother, Tarquin would hide in the shadows, silently keeping him company.

This kind of love for Elijah, it was something perhaps only another parent could truly understand.

He loved Elijah more than words could express.

The mere thought of losing Elijah was unbearable. He imagined he'd go mad, lash out at the world, and then... what? There was nothing beyond that abyss.

As his cigarette burned down to the filter, Tarquin lit another, his hands trembling uncontrollably.

Fear gripped his heart. Today, he was truly afraid.

At the first light of dawn, the doors to the emergency room finally swung open.

Elysia stepped out.

The three kids sprang from the bench in unison, "Mommy!"

Tarquin quickly snuffed out his cigarette and rushed to her side, his eyes searching hers anxiously.

His lips moved, but no sound came out. He was terrified of hearing the worst.

Elysia sniffled, her voice choked with emotion, "Elijah's back!"

He'd been saved!

Tarquin and the kids were stunned into silence.

The hallway fell silent for a brief moment before the children burst into relieved sobs.

Tears filled Tarquin's eyes as he pulled Elysia into a tight embrace.

All the words that needed to be said were conveyed in that hug.

Elysia understood. She didn't resist, quietly letting him hold her.

They both needed this embrace, not just him. She could finally let go of her fears, no longer needing to brace herself for the worst. She could switch back from being a doctor to just a mother.

The tension that had kept her composed snapped, and she needed his support to keep from collapsing.

This was her son, her flesh and blood she had just begun to properly love and care for, and she had almost lost him.

The terror was overwhelming.

When Allegra told her Elijah was gone, she thought her heart would stop from fear.

"I...I thought I was going to lose Elijah, I was terrified... you know? I was absolutely terrified..."

Cradled in Tarquin's arms, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Tarquin held her tightly, his voice deep and hoarse, "I know!"

At that moment, no one could understand each other's feelings better than they could.

They were like comrades who had survived a battle together, seeking solace and warmth in each other's embrace after escaping the clutches of death.