

Hitched 611

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Somehow, Tarquin found himself sweating bullets, his breathing heavy and laden with an intensity that seemed to scorch the air itself. His gaze, fiery and desperate, suggested he was on the verge of losing control, his emotions a tempest barely contained.

The bulging veins on his forehead, coupled with the unmistakable tension in his body, hinted at a struggle within. And from the evident arousal and the heat in his eyes, it was clear he was about to snap.

Elysia, though not the sharpest tool in the shed, was far from foolish. She could tell exactly what was going on with him, and it sent her heart racing, fear tightening its grip on her throat. "You... oh..."

Before she could say another word, Tarquin silenced her with a kiss, a clear sign he had lost all semblance of control. He wanted her, with a desperation that bordered on madness.

Panicked, Elysia tried to push him away, but he was unyielding, pinning her arms above her head against the door with one hand, while the other pulled her closer, as if wishing to merge her into his very being.

Their lips met in a clash of desperation and desire, a kiss so intense that Elysia found herself struggling for breath. His tongue invaded her mouth, tangling with hers in a way that left her dizzy and overwhelmed.

Despite her initial resistance, Elysia's will crumbled under the weight of his desire. Tarquin, fueled by her submission, grew even more fervent, driven by primal urges he couldn't suppress.

He had managed to keep his feelings hidden, never confessing his love for her, but his body's desires were another story. Just like he knew he should wait for Elijah's mother before making a move, he found himself unable to hold back.

He wanted her, wanted to lose himself in her like he did in his dreams. The fire within him burned fiercely, and the physical ache was becoming unbearable.

Meanwhile, outside the room, Elliot was trying to explain the situation to Keith, with Elijah, Evan, and Emmett listening anxiously. After dragging Tarquin back to the study, the boys had rushed to find Elliot, hoping to keep their family's secrets safe.

Keith, after listening to Elliot, remained silent for a moment, the tension palpable. The boys feared their identities and their mother's would be exposed if they couldn't convince Keith to keep their secret.

Finally, Keith spoke, seeking clarification about their father's ignorance of his other sons and their mother's true identity. Elliot, Evan, and Emmett confirmed, explaining their disguise was meant to protect this secret, as their father would grow suspicious otherwise.

Keith seemed to understand their predicament, questioning why they hesitated to reveal themselves to their father. The boys shared their mother's reluctance to be with him, fearing either being taken away or forcing their mother into an unhappy compromise.

"We don't want our mom to be unhappy," Elliot said. "We know if we reveal ourselves, it might force her into a situation she doesn't want to be in." Keith nodded thoughtfully, understanding the gravity of their situation.

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Keith nodded again.

"So, before your mom fell for him, you didn't want to acknowledge him?"

"Yeah."

"I get it now. No wonder you were so startled when you saw me. What about him? Does he like your mom now?"

"He does."

Keith was surprised, "He likes her even without knowing the truth?"

"Yeah, he said it himself."

"Is it just a physical attraction, or does he genuinely like her from the bottom of his heart? Or is it because of certain circumstances that he feels compelled to like her?"

Elliot was confused, "Isn't liking just liking? Is there a difference in how you like someone?"

Keith hesitated for a moment, then lifted his hand to ruffle Elliot's hair.

"There are many kinds of liking. You're still young. You'll understand when you grow up."

Changing the subject, he asked,

"What about you? Do you want them to be together or not?"

Elliot responded, "We'll follow our mom's lead. If he likes her and she likes him, then of course we want them to be together."

"I understand. Don't worry, I won't spill your secret. I'll cover for you."

Hearing this, the kids finally relaxed and collectively thanked him, "Thanks, Keith!"

Keith smiled, "You're welcome."

He then seemed to remember something, his expression turning to one of disbelief,

"The guy who's been bugging me about buying a house recently, that wouldn't happen to be him, would it?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Keith glanced across the street and smiled,

"I haven't told you yet, but we're going to be neighbors. I bought the house across from yours."

"What?!", the kids were shocked.

Keith smiled as he explained,

"I heard from Blossom before the holidays that the house across from hers was going for a steal. I needed a place, so I bought it. Then, a few days later, someone offered to buy it from me for triple the price. I thought that was fishy because it's a fixer-upper. The previous owner sold it for cheap, but this guy wanted to pay a premium for it, so I refused. I wonder if it was him."

Elliot was aware, "It was him."

Elijah was moving to the area, and Tarquin, wanting to keep an eye on things, didn't think much of it at the time and didn't investigate, so he didn't know Keith had bought the house.

Keith grimaced, "This is going to be awkward. He's probably got a bone to pick with me over the house. Our discussions haven't been pleasant."

Elliot reassured him, "Don't worry. He might be tough and opinionated, but he can be reasonable. Plus, you have us. If you really don't want to sell it to him, we can talk to him."

"That's a relief. I really don't want to sell. The commute to work is so much better; I can sleep in an extra half hour every morning."

"Leave it to us."

Keith offered, "I won't let you help for nothing. If you want to make sure he's really into your mom, I can lend a hand."

The kids were puzzled, "????"

Keith elaborated, "He's going to keep coming back about the house. I can pretend I'm not selling because of your mother." Elliot caught on quickly, surprised,

"You mean pretend to be into my mom? Pretend you're not selling the house just to get close to her, to pursue her?" "Exactly. It's a solid plan, and he won't suspect a thing."

The kids were speechless, "

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A few kids hesitated, their young minds sharp but not quite versed in the complexities of love and affection that seemed to baffle even the wisest of adults.

Indeed, there seemed to be nothing more perplexing in the world than the matters of the heart!

They were young, after all, with blind spots in their understanding of the adult world. And then there was the matter of Elijah's request to Tarquin. What if Tarquin's newfound affection for Mom was solely because of Elijah's plea? Just because Tarquin was nice to Mom now didn't mean his feelings were genuine. Mom was kind to him, sure, but it wasn't like she was head over heels.

It was better to clear things up, considering Mom's happiness and how it would affect their plans going forward. They really wanted to get to the bottom of it.

Elliot asked Keith, "Would testing this out affect Mom's mood or daily life?" Mom's well-being was always their top priority. If it would upset her, then it was a no-go.

Keith smiled reassuringly, "Don't worry, guys. I won't let on that anything's up. I know how to handle it. She won't be affected."

The three little ones agreed to Keith's plan and eagerly asked him how he intended to test it. Their conversation flowed easily and joyfully. It was clear that Elliot, Evan, and Emmett all liked Keith a lot. After all, Keith had been their teacher for a while, winning over the hearts of many kids back in preschool.

Only Elijah remained silent, frowning at Keith with a cold gaze. He didn't like this man! Not because Keith had proposed testing Dad. Elijah wasn't against the idea, as he too wanted to know if Dad's so-called affection for Mom was genuine or just because of his request. But the specific reason for his dislike of Keith eluded him; it was as if he was naturally repelled.

"Why did you buy the house across the street and then come knocking on our door with your luggage instead of going straight home?" Elijah suddenly spoke up. His brow was furrowed, and his deep eyes shimmered with an inscrutable light.

Keith turned to Elijah, clearly sensing the boy's coolness towards him, but he didn't get angry. Instead, he explained calmly, "I bought the house right before the holidays and had it being fixed up while I was away. I left the keys with Blossom to keep an eye on things for me. I needed to collect the keys from her before I could move in."

Elijah was silent.

Blossom, returning from the basement with some items, was surprised to see the group in the hallway. She rushed over, her eyes darting between Elliot and Evan, and asked Keith nervously, "When did you get back?"

Keith replied with a relaxed tone, "Just a little while ago. Don't worry, I've got the gist of why Elliot and Evan dressed up as Emmett. I'll keep their secret."

Relieved, Blossom let out a sigh, "I really appreciate you keeping this under wraps for Elysia's sake. I'll go get your keys."

After fetching Elliot, Blossom quietly asked him, "Tell me everything Keith knows, so I don't accidentally spill the beans about something he's unaware of."

Elliot quickly briefed Blossom on what he'd shared with Keith. "Got it! I'll go give him the keys."

After handing over the keys, Elliot walked to the study and called out, "Mom."

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In the study, the atmosphere was thick with tension.

Elysia found herself pinned down on the couch by Tarquin, his weight pressing her firmly into the cushions. Somehow, their heated argument had spiraled into this moment of passion, moving from the entrance to the seclusion of the study.

Tarquin's lips claimed hers with an assertive hunger, his hands firmly holding hers in place. Though he was clearly losing control, he dared not take things further with Elysia here, in this place. Instead, he poured all his pent-up longing into their kiss, venting days of yearning.

Elysia was utterly dazed by the intensity of his kiss, her cheeks flushed a deep shade of red, her eyelashes fluttering.

It wasn't until Elliot's voice pierced the air again, calling out "Mommy?" that she snapped back to reality. Her eyes widened in shock, and she immediately began to resist.

Tarquin too heard Elliot's voice, reluctantly releasing her lips but still remaining close, his body hovering over hers.

The room was charged with their heavy breathing, faces inches apart. Tarquin's frustration was evident in his furrowed brows and dark expression, while Elysia, overwhelmed with embarrassment, could hardly meet his gaze, quickly averting her eyes.

This gave Tarquin a clear view of her flushed neck and ears, igniting an even fiercer desire within him. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to calm down and finally stood up, his expression unreadable.

Despite his unfulfilled desires, he knew he had already pushed the boundaries by leaving her lips swollen. He expected a slap was imminent. However, as soon as Elysia was free, she leaped up from the couch and dashed for the door.

Tarquin was puzzled. "Not going to slap me?"

Just as she reached for the doorknob, Tarquin quickly regained his senses and caught her, whispering lowly, "Your hair's a mess, and your lips are swollen. If you go out now, they'll notice."

Elysia paused, then turned to the desk to grab a small mirror. The reflection showing her disheveled state enraged her, and she stormed over with her hand raised for a slap.

Tarquin braced himself, the delayed retribution he expected was about to land.

But instead of letting her hit him, he caught her wrist gently and offered a compromise, "We have company soon. Can this wait? A slap mark would be too telling."

Elysia, frustrated and unable to pull away, resorted to kicking him instead. After a few kicks, she accidentally hurt her toe, wincing in pain.

Tarquin immediately carried her back to the couch to check her foot, ensuring no serious injury. Holding her foot stirred his desire again, but at her resistance, he quickly let go, saying, "Take a moment here to collect yourself. I'll handle our guests. Just wait a bit before coming out." Elysia shot him a fierce look, wrapping herself in a throw blanket, her demeanor clearly showing she was flustered and embarrassed. "Mommy?" Elliot's voice came from outside the door once more.

Tarquin adjusted his clothes hastily, trying to appear nonchalant as he opened the door to find Elliot with a puzzled expression. "Where's Mommy? What were you guys doing in there? Why didn't you open the door?" Elliot asked innocently.

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Tarquin fibbed, "She's just tuckered out. I was trying to help her sleep and missed your call."

Elliot was puzzled, "You were helping my mom sleep?"

"Yeah, she's been burning the candle at both ends at the hospital with Elijah. She's been all out of sorts today. Tried to nap but couldn't settle, so I helped her relax."

Elysia was seething internally. Rascal! Liar! Who asked him for help?!

She's not a toddler in need of bedtime stories, is she?

This jerk, can't he come up with a better excuse?!

Elliot clearly wasn't buying it. His gaze shifted between Tarquin and the direction of the study where Elysia was, eventually deciding to check on her himself.

Elysia panicked and feigned sleep!

Tarquin stood by the doorway, suggesting, "Let her catch some Z's, don't disturb her now."

Elliot peered at Elysia, instantly seeing through the act. His mom was many things, but an Oscar-worthy actress she was not. Who sleeps with their eyelashes fluttering like that?

But if mom was playing possum, there had to be a reason. He chose not to call her out, instead offering, "Mom, take it easy. I've sorted things out with Keith. Get some rest."

After ensuring his mom was left undisturbed, Elliot stepped out, closing the door gently behind him. Once outside, he confronted Tarquin, "What exactly did you do to my mom?"

"She was all nerves when she dragged you into the study, and now she's pretending to sleep? What's up?"

Tarquin's lips twitched, dodging, "Kid, grown-up stuff. Don't pry."

He then realized Keith wasn't around, asking, "Where's Keith?"

Elliot, letting go of his suspicions, replied, "He headed back to his place, just across the hall."

Tarquin frowned. His previous mention of helping Elysia was meant for Keith's ears, hoping to flaunt a bit of affection. Seems his planned display of affection fell through.

Switching topics, he quizzed Elliot, "What did you two discuss?"

"Private matters."

Tarquin was left hanging just as Blossom, Evan, Emmett, and Elijah made their way in. Seizing the moment, Tarquin excused himself, "Don't bother Elysia, she needs rest. I'm stepping out for a smoke."

After calming his nerves with a few cigarettes at the end of the corridor, his desire cooled off, he found himself at Keith's door, ringing the bell. He needed clarity on what was between Keith and Elysia!

Keith answered almost immediately, clad in casual whites, not at all surprised to see Tarquin, as if he'd been expecting him. Squinting slightly, he invited, "Come in, let's chat."

Tarquin entered, noting the place's modern and simplistic makeover, a stark contrast to his last visit. The living room, devoid of the usual sofas and coffee table, featured a solid wood table, benches, an expansive bookshelf, and a cozy nook on the balcony with a lounge chair among lush plants. A fish tank added a touch of life to the space, hinting at Keith's caring nature.

"Have a seat," Keith offered, brewing a cup of tea with a courteous nod.

Tarquin settled down, and before he could launch into questions, Keith preempted, "I just found out you were the other interested buyer for this place. Sorry if I seemed standoffish before."

Tarquin's brows knitted together as he asked, "How did you know it was me?"

"Elliot told me just now. He knew you wanted the apartment but didn't realize I was the new owner; otherwise, he would've mentioned it sooner."

"So, that chat with Elliot was about the apartment?"

"Yeah, he hoped we wouldn't let the property come between us."

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Tarquin furrowed his brow, deep in thought. If Elliot came to talk about this, why was Elysia nervous?

It dawned on him that Elysia had no clue about his plans to buy a house!

"What exactly is your relationship with Elysia?" he quizzed.

Keith shot back, "What do you think it is?"

After locking eyes for a few tense seconds, Keith broke the silence, "We're just a parent and a teacher, but I've got a thing for her."

Tarquin's face transformed instantly, his gaze sharpening like a blade, icy and cutting.

With an air of calm, Keith continued, "That's why I'm sorry, but I can't sell you the house. I bought it because of her. I want to pursue her." Tarquin's lips tightened, his complexion turning stormy, his tone frosty, "You better stay away from her!"

"Oh? And why's that?"

"You're not worthy of her affection!"

"I beg to differ. I'm single, we're around the same age, I'm a decent guy with a stable job. I can bring home the bacon and do the chores. More importantly, not only do I fancy her, but I also have a soft spot for Elliot, Evan, and Emmett. I genuinely want to pursue her, to give her and the kids a home."

Visibly agitated, Tarquin yanked at his tie, pulled out a cigarette, and lit it with a flick of his lighter.

With a snap, he tossed the lighter on the table.

After taking a few drags, he spoke, "I'll give you an out. Forget about Elysia, sell me the house at a high price, and I'll throw in another one for free. Disappear from Elysia, Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's lives!"

Keith's eyes narrowed at the proposition, "Why should I follow your directions? Sorry, Mr. Bradford, but I'm not taking the path you're offering. I care for her, and her kids, and I intend to be their husband and father."

Suddenly, Keith pulled out a bug from his pocket and turned it off in front of Tarquin.

Elliot had given him the device, and the kids were eavesdropping on their conversation.

After shutting off the bug, Keith smirked, leaned in, and said, "I've actually been into her for a while now. I..."

Whatever Keith whispered next sent Tarquin into a frenzy, his face contorting with rage!

Dropping his cigarette, he threw a punch without another word!

Keith turned the bug back on, touched the blood at the corner of his mouth, and challenged, "Who are you to dictate who I can or cannot like?!" Tarquin, driven to fury by Keith's words, grabbed him by the collar for another punch.

As they scuffled, Keith argued, "If you're into her too, we could've competed fairly! You can't just force me out. If she starts liking you, I'd step back willingly. But does she like you now? She doesn't!

So, I have every right and reason to pursue her. I genuinely care for her. But what about you? Do you... Ah, ouch..."

Hearing Keith's pained groans, the four little ones listening in were stunned, then quickly dashed out of the room towards the commotion.

Blossom, busy prepping ingredients in the kitchen, saw the kids scrambling out and followed them, curious.

Upon seeing Keith's condition, Blossom's eyes widened, and she screamed, "Oh my God!"

The scream echoed through the open doors of both apartments, reaching Elysia's ears.

Realizing something was wrong, Elysia threw off her blanket and rushed out to see what had happened.

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At Keith's place, the scene was chaotic.

Tarquin had been yanked away from Keith by a bunch of kids. Keith lay on the ground, battered and bruised, blood staining his face, his expression twisted in agony. Blossom was frantically dialing 911. Elysia, upon entering, was taken aback by the sight, her eyes nearly popping out of her sockets! Seeing Keith bleeding from his head, she rushed to his side, her voice filled with urgency, "Everything was fine just a moment ago, what happened?! Do you have a first aid kit? Blossom has one at her place! Blossom, go grab your first aid kit, I need to stop Keith's bleeding!"

"Right away!" Blossom hurried off to fetch the kit. Elysia, with furrowed brows, examined Keith's wounds, her face etched with worry. Keith, despite the pain, responded with a gentle voice, "Don't worry, and don't be scared. I'm a grown man; these injuries are nothing." Speaking seemed to hurt him as he winced, clearly in pain from a wound in his mouth.

Elysia's brows were knitted tightly together. Keith's injuries were severe: a broken arm, a still-bleeding head wound that definitely needed stitches, and who knew what else inside his mouth! "I'm... really fine, don't worry," Keith managed to say, though his voice was weak.

Blossom returned with the first aid kit, and Elysia told him, "Don't talk, I need to stop the bleeding." She carefully opened the kit, took out alcohol wipes and cotton swabs, and gently started cleaning his wounds.

Tarquin watched her flurry of worried and tender actions, feeling a burning rage coupled with jealousy! He felt like he'd been submerged in a vat of vinegar! From the moment she walked in, she hadn't glanced at him, not even a flicker of attention! Her entire focus was on Keith!

Tarquin stepped forward, grabbing Elysia's arm, "Stop fussing over him!" Elysia was startled, only then noticing Tarquin. Tarquin was unharmed but had blood on his hands! "Did you do this to Keith?"

She was still piecing things together, having rushed in to see the injured Keith and, acting on instinct to help, hadn't noticed anything else. Tarquin's silence was admission enough for Elysia, who was shocked, "Why would you attack Keith?"

"He had it coming!" Tarquin clenched his jaws, glaring at Keith fiercely. Elysia frowned, "I'll deal with you later." Putting aside the reason for their fight for the moment, and seeing Tarquin was unhurt, she tried to shake off his grip to continue tending to Keith.

Tarquin's anger soared, and without another word, he tried to drag her away, insisting she leave Keith alone. Elysia struggled, "Let me go! Keith's head is still bleeding; I need to take care of it!"

Tarquin snapped, "He deserves it! Leave him be!" Elysia, frustrated, shook off his grip with all her might, "If you want to leave, then go ahead, but don't tell me what to do!" Regardless of Keith being their teacher or a stranger, she couldn't stand idly by and watch him bleed out without doing anything!

Especially since Tarquin was the one who had caused the injuries, Keith's wellbeing was now his responsibility too!

Elysia returned to Keith's side, "This might hurt a bit, but I'll be as gentle as I can." "Don't worry about me. I can handle it," Keith assured her, casting a meaningful glance at Tarquin. Wasn't that a blatant challenge?

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Tarquin's lips pressed into a thin line, his breath heavy, his chest heaving, and his face a stormy grey. He was clearly furious! He glared at Keith for a few seconds, clenched his jaw hard, and then stormed toward Elysia. He was about to forcefully whisk her away to keep her from dealing with Keith. But Elijah grabbed him, "Daddy."

Elijah shook his head at him, taking his hand and leading him outside. If this kept up, Daddy and Mommy were bound to get even angrier! Once they were out, Elijah said, "Mommy is kind-hearted, and Keith is Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's tutor. She couldn't just ignore him. If you force her not to care, Mommy will definitely be mad at you."

Tarquin, seething with rage, wanted to smoke but couldn't do so in front of his child, was incredibly frustrated. Just thinking about what Keith had said made him want to strangle him! And yet Elysia was so concerned about him! This foolish woman!

Elijah said, "Mommy is worried about him and even treated his wounds. It's not because she likes him. Daddy, you need to calm down." Tarquin fumed, "She's just naive! It's like she'd count the money for someone who sold her out! She must have been born without a brain!" Elijah frowned, "Don't talk about Mommy like that."

Tarquin's heart felt heavy as he looked at his son. Elijah said, "We heard your conversation. He had a bug on him from Elliot. He was testing you today, to see if you really care about Mommy."

"Testing me?"

"Yeah, it was his idea."

Elijah explained the whole situation to Tarquin, whose face darkened even more. If it weren't for what he had said, Tarquin might have believed it was a test. But those words, especially since they were said after he knowingly turned off the bug, indicated a significant issue! The words he said today were probably his true feelings, just masked as a test!

"Daddy, the signal cut off right when you were about to react. Did he say something to provoke you, or were you jealous of what he said earlier?"

The kids were sensitive, too; they noticed something was off when the signal suddenly cut. Tarquin clenched his jaw, looking at Elijah. Those kinds of things, he couldn't discuss in front of the children.

"This Keith is trouble. Stay away from him!"

"We can't avoid him; he's Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's tutor, and they all like him."

"I'll find a way to make him disappear!"

Elijah frowned and shook his head, "He's Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's tutor. If you do something to hurt him, Mommy will definitely get mad, just like now. Unless Mommy also realizes there's something wrong with him."

Tarquin's mood turned even darker, pondering how to make Elysia see Keith's true colors. How could he do that without revealing his own feelings for her? What if she knew and started to avoid him?

Paramedics rushed in, and Keith needed to go to the hospital. Elysia wanted to follow, but Blossom said, "The kids are still at home. I'll go by myself; you stay here and take care of them. And try to find out why they fought?"

So, Elysia stayed behind. She stood in the hallway and told the four little ones, "Elliot, Evan, Emmett, Elijah, go back to your rooms; I need to have a word with him alone!"

The four kids glanced at Elysia warily and obediently headed back inside.

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Elysia glared at Tarquin, her fury palpable. It looked like she was seriously pissed off!

Tarquin, with his brows knitted tightly, met her gaze. The anger inside him hadn't cooled off yet, and her fiery demeanor only added to his frustration! Was she about to lay into him on Keith's behalf?!

Did she think he was in the wrong?

"Are you hurt?" she suddenly asked.

Tarquin blinked, taken aback. The first thing she did was ask about his well-being.

Feeling slightly mollified but still stubborn, he scowled and said bitterly, "My whole heart might as well be trampled on by Keith, and you're still worried about whether I'm dead or alive?!"

Elysia rolled her eyes, unable to hold back her irritation, "You beat him up so bad, if something serious happens to him, who's gonna take the fall? If I don't patch him up and he ends up worse, how would you handle that?"

"Deserves him right if he dies!"

"You think you'd feel any better?"

"Absolutely!"

"Stubborn!" she snapped. "Even if you did, you wouldn't get away with it!"

Tarquin only caught the word 'stubborn', and his face darkened as his mind raced with thoughts. He glared at Elysia, swallowed hard, and looked away like a jealous child, "Just tell me, who are you actually concerned about, him or me?"

Without hesitation, Elysia said, "Of course, I'm worried about both!"

Tarquin, dissatisfied, pressed, "But who are you more worried about?! Why even care about him? Do you like him or something?"

"Like him, my foot! He's Elliot, Evan, and Emmett's coach, and now thanks to you, he's injured. Why wouldn't I be concerned?!"

"He's a jerk, no reason for you to care about him!"

"Aren't you just making a scene now?"

"Me, making a scene? You think it's my fault we fought?!"

"I..." Elysia was taken aback. Was his head injured too? His thinking was seriously off-kilter!

Talking to him was like talking to a wall; he wasn't getting the gist of what she was saying at all!

Elysia dropped the subject, circling back to her original question, "Are you actually hurt? Where does it hurt?"

Tarquin, still irritable, retorted, "Yes!"

"Where? Let me check!"

"My heart hurts!"

Elysia: "...". She was beyond exasperated!

She was about to have a heart attack from the frustration!

She stopped asking and instead grabbed his wrist to check his pulse. He tried to shake her off, but she scolded him, "Stay still! Keep this up, and I swear I'll stop caring!"

Tarquin, fuming, shot back, "So you'd rather care about Keith, is that it?"

Elysia rolled her eyes, not bothering to respond, and finished checking his pulse. Aside from being overly emotional, he was physically fine. That gave her some peace of mind.

It seems in this scuffle, Keith was the only one who got the short end of the stick. A clear case of one doing the hitting, and the other getting hit! Elysia calmed herself, "Now, tell me, why did you fight with Keith?"

"He had it coming!"

Elysia frowned at him, "If you don't explain, I'm going to assume the worst about you."

Hearing that made Tarquin's blood pressure spike again! His brain was definitely not functioning properly at the moment, clouded by jealousy, always missing the point in Elysia's words.

All he could think about was how sour he felt!

"Me, the problem? You think it's all my fault?"

Elysia said, "If you hit someone without a good reason, then yes, it's your fault!"

"And you think I'd hit him for no reason?!"

"That's why I'm asking! I'm not blaming you; I just want to know the reason."

Tarquin pressed his lips thin, "Why do you even need a reason?"

"How am I supposed to understand the situation without knowing the reason?"

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Elysia glared at him, her patience wearing thin. "What on earth is your problem?" she demanded, her voice rising in frustration.

Wasn't she just asking a simple question? How did that make it her fault?

Even if he was mad at Keith, why take it out on her?

Why did he have such a big issue with her anyway?

Tarquin's chest heaved with anger. What was he so mad about?

Mad at the comment Keith made.

Mad that she seemed to care about Keith.

Mad that he couldn't express his feelings for her without blowing his cover, leaving him to swallow his pride in silence.

And mad that she didn't just blindly take his side but kept asking questions to figure out who was in the right between him and Keith.

Keith was right about one thing: she didn't like him. If she did, she would've sided with him no questions asked!

He knew she didn't have feelings for him, and yet, here he was, fuming over it, about to explode with rage!

In a fit of anger, he blurted out, "You need to cut Keith off completely. If I catch you talking to him again, I'm taking Elijah with me today!" That comment hit Elysia like a ton of bricks, and she lost it.

"Are you out of your mind?!" she exploded. "Your beef with Keith has nothing to do with me! I was just trying to show some concern for you, and you lash out at me?! What did I ever do to you?!"

And now you want to take Elijah away from me? We had an agreement that you'd only take him after you've caught the culprit and he's fully recovered, but now you... you're going back on your word! You're being unreasonable!"

Tears welled up in Elysia's eyes as she spoke, and without another word, she turned and stormed home.

Tarquin's heart softened instantly. He hurried after her, calling out, "Elysia."

"Don't talk to me!" Elysia snapped, shrugging off his hand and pushing through the front door.

The four little ones stood at the doorway, staring at her in unison.

Elysia paused, her lips moving but no sound coming out. She knew she would break down if she spoke.

Tarquin followed her inside, and Elysia shot him a tearful glare before retreating to her room, slamming the door shut and locking it from the inside.

Tarquin moved to follow her, but Elliot, Evan, and Emmett blocked his way, their tone icy, "Stay away from our mom!"

Tarquin frowned, the kids' attitude towards him adding to his distress. "I didn't mean to upset her."

Elliot accused, "You made her cry!"

Evan stated, "I don't care who's right or wrong, or the reason. You made our mom cry, that's on you!"

Emmett added tearfully, "You... you were mean to our mom. She was just trying to be nice to you, and you yelled at her."

Elijah, with a scowl, chimed in, "You shouldn't have threatened to take me away! And mom was really just worried about you!" That had been the last straw for their mom.

Regret washed over Tarquin. He had just wanted to push Elysia away from Keith.

There was something off about Keith!

But he couldn't explain himself, and in a moment of overwhelming jealousy and anger, he had spoken out of turn.

"I'm sorry, I just said that in the heat of the moment. I didn't really plan on taking Elijah away."

Elliot, Evan, and Emmett glared silently while Elijah advised, "Let mom cool down. You should go cool off too. We're here for her, so don't worry."

Tarquin glanced at the kids, then back towards Elysia's room, "Try to make her feel better."

With that, he left, pulling at his tie in frustration the moment he was out of sight.

Keith, huh? Alright, then. War it is.