

Chapter Seven: An Impossible Woman

Lyle

Maxton's shouting again. I don't like it when he's upset like this. It makes him sound too much like dad.

With my arms full, I creep toward where he's talking with another man. Even at fifteen-years-old, Maxton towers over Lonnie, but that bastard is still standing up to my brother, as if he were a bully.

Maxton is anything but a bully.

As I come closer, he growls, "-can't report him! If you do, he's dead!"

Lonnie crosses his arms with an eyebrow raised.

"Why should I care about that?" he says. "He's got ashie blood in him! You can see it in his damn eyes and how much he likes to sneak up on people."

At that, I flinch. I haven't been trying to scare people. The dark's just been more protective of me since Maxton and I left home, and sometimes, I forget how much it hides me.

Bristling, my brother shouts, "His heritage shouldn't matter! But even if it did, he's a damn MP's son. That has to count for something."

"Maybe it would have before you two got disowned. Now, it don't count for shit," Lonnie says. "So. If you want to take shelter from Flosa's cold here, you'll pay the same rent as my other tenants, and if you want me to keep your brother's secret, you'll have to give me a little something... extra. You see, I've heard rumors about you too-"

"They're not true."

Avan, I've never heard Maxton sound so cold before, and as he steps into Lonnie's personal space, I blink, fighting to stop the world from going fuzzy.

"Let me show you what I think of your... rent," my brother softly says.

He cocks his head, and for a moment, our father is standing in his place, making me want to RUN. Instead, I force myself to walk into the firelight, and Lonnie jumps.

It's been three weeks since Maxton and I first came here, and people still find my abrupt appearances unnerving. Will anyone besides my brother ever look at me without fear again?

"Are you going to hit him, Max?" I ask. "Dad would."

For a breath, Maxton freezes, but then, he spins in place before rushing to gather me in a hug.

"I'll never be like dad," he whispers. "Don't you worry about that, little buddy."

I know that. Making a face, I squirm out of my brother's arms so I can hesitantly approach Lonnie. As I come closer, he takes a step back before squaring his shoulders, and I stop so I can show him what I'm holding.

"Can we pay with these?" I ask.

With wide eyes, Lonnie leans forward to pluck an orange out of my arms.

"Haven't seen one of these in ages," he says. "How did you...?"

Trailing off, he runs his eyes over me, as if seeing me for the first time, and I have to wonder. Does he see how useful I can be yet? Surely, that outweighs everything that's wrong with me.

"Does that mean we can stay?" I say.

After a pause, Lonnie smirks, glancing over my head.

"You see, Maxton? This is what I'm talkin' about. Re-source-ful-ness," he says before returning his attention to me. "Yeah, you can stay. Keep one orange each for you and your brother, and I'll sell the rest of them to cover your first month's rent. Sound good?"

Wonderful. He's acting like dad used to when he was in a good mood. I know it'll be a matter of time before the bemusement he's presenting becomes something much more dangerous, but I'll take advantage of it while I can.

When I nod, Lonnie ruffles my hair—which makes me want to bite him—before taking his payment and stalking toward other, huddled groups. With my last two oranges, I shuffle closer to the fire, crouching beside it, and when Maxton joins me, he pulls my neckline aside to check my timepiece's readout.

He should be proud. The number on it hasn't changed much, only reflecting the normal passage of time.

Once he's settled, I hand him his orange, which he holds up to the light.

"Lyle?" he quietly says.

He doesn't continue until I look at him.

"Where did you get this?"

Shit. How do I answer that?

"It's ok, buddy. You're not in trouble," Maxton says. "I just need to know."

That's good but...

"I- I don't know," I say, biting my lip.

Because I know how that sounds: like I'm crazy or lying.

Drawing my legs to my chest, I hug them while spinning my orange between my fingers.

"I went to see mom. She sometimes gives me years, when she can," I say, "but dad..."

He might not know what my mother's been doing, but he'll find out soon, and I don't like thinking about what he'll do when that happens.

"Ok. So, you were near Parliament Grounds," Maxton says. "That explains how you found the oranges. Eating them is quite fashionable nowadays."

He rolls his eyes.

"What else do you remember?"

...He's not going to call me horrible for being stubborn? I mean... I'm not being stubborn. I really don't remember how I got the oranges, but when I say that, people usually don't believe me. It's why I typically make up an explanation for what I've done, but... this is Maxton. I don't want to lie to him.

"I was coming back here," I say. "I saw a fruit stand, which reminded me of how hungry I was, and the next thing I knew, I was running away from it with my arms full of oranges."

And doesn't that sound insane?

"So... you stole them," Maxton says.

Hunching even further on myself, I shrug, and with a sigh, my brother rubs my back.

"Ok. Did anyone see you doing it?" he asks.

Oh... he doesn't believe me. Avan, I can't cry. I CANNOT.

"I... don't know," I say.

Somehow, I swallow the fiery fist that's been shoved down my throat.

"No one was chasing me, though," I say, "so... no?"

"Good," Maxton says.

Gently, he nudges my chin until I'm looking at him and hell! What sorrow I see in him.

"Make sure no one sees you next time too," he says.

Furrowing my brow, I say, "Next... time?"

Maxton nods.

"When I took you away from home, this isn't the life I wanted for you," he says before shaking himself. "That doesn't matter now, though. So, Lyle. Let's not just survive here. How do you feel about bringing dad down as well?"

For a moment, all I can do is blink at my brother.

"Re- really?" I somehow manage. "I... I'd like that. I'd like that a lot!"

And the sorrow I saw in Maxton vanishes. Laughing, he slings an arm around my neck, drawing me to where he can kiss the top of my head.

"Then, we have a lot of thieving in our futures," he says.

Which is very exciting, and I can't want to talk about it more but...

"Max, I'm hungry," I mumble. "Remember?"

Snorting, my brother releases me, and I shove my orange toward him.

"Can you peel this for me?" I ask.

"Of course I can."

As Maxton reaches for the orange, the world twists, and his voice chases me through the change until I'm lying beneath wooden planks again. Barely contained whimpers have replaced the screams from earlier, and through the planks, I can see the hole that they've drilled through my brother's skull. I can see a peek of his brain, wrinkled like a blood orange.

Someone above me clears his throat.

"By the lost monarch's will!"

That same man steps between me and my limited view of my brother, but I know the needle's been inserted, releasing a first electrical pulse, when he releases the most awful sound I've heard in my life, and hearing it, I lose all reason.

When I've once more regained control, I'm standing, out of breath, on the far side of a gathered crowd, and I can't help myself. Despite knowing it for the awful idea that it is, I look back.

Maxton, the best big brother I could have asked for, is fighting against his restraints and...

It's my fault.

I run, never looking where I'm going with a mantra repeating in my head: my fault, my fault, MY FAULT! When on our last job, all I had to do was kill the copper who'd come to investigate, but I couldn't pull the trigger, and now, my brother's paying for my failure.

So, I flee from the square where he'll slowly die, but his screams chase me wherever I go.

They chase me into the Warehouse District, chase me to the apartment that we shared, chase me as I pace across it, banging my fists on my head.

And when night comes, they follow me into the dark, intent on sticking with me until I've returned to-

A stinging sensation on my cheek woke me up from the nightmare this time, and hissing, I blinked back tears, struggling to orient myself. Before I could do that, a bread crust—of all things—bounced off of my chest, and I shot upright, seeking its origination point.

Unfortunately, I didn't get far in that search, as in that moment, the body's distressed call defeated the lingering haziness of sleep. As it came into awareness, I wasn't sure how I maintained a blank presentation. Gideon wasn't helping with alleviating this pain, and with my plethora of bruising, my broken finger, and the weakness that came after a seizure, it was... a lot.

Someone unknown was in the same space as me, though, and because of that, I couldn't be anything more than a blank slate. I might relax that state—to a degree—when around my crew, but that wasn't allowed when around anyone else.

So, I took this pain, and I did my best to ignore it, even if I had to freeze for a moment to do that. Then, I returned to the question of where I was and who was with me.

Apparently, I was in an attic, or that was what I assumed from the crates around me, the dust in the air, and the rafters overhead. Those could indicate that I was in a warehouse, of sorts, but based on what I could remember from last night, I doubted my location would have so drastically changed. Plus, I'd spent a lot of time in attics, both as a child and after growing up.

As for who was with me, that turned out to be... a woman. And a rather pretty one at that.

"She has *blonde* hair," Crazy Caleb said. "Oo... I want to touch it."

Crawling into view, he reached for the stranger, and my fingers itched to scrunch alongside his. He truly wanted to touch this person we'd never met before.

No. That wasn't happening.

Sitting back on his heels, Crazy Caleb groaned, "Aww... you're no fun."

...Fun wasn't a word typically associated with me, no.

Still, though. Blonde hair? That was an unusual feature to flaunt in the Ibisian Empire., especially this deep in the heart of it. Most people with blonde hair tended to dye it to a darker shade. After all, a shade this light was most commonly found in the Empire's most recently gained colony, Ostiu, and no sensible person in Flosa wanted a connection with that region.

The stranger was starting to look at me funny, though, so I donned my most practiced smile and offered her my hand.

"Hello, there. You must be the woman who saved my life last night," I said. "My name is Lyle. What is yours?"

"Oh wow...." Crazy Caleb said. "Offering her your name when you meant to *rob her father last night?* How daring."

Oh, *avan*. He was right.

This was why I didn't like having this inconvenience around, though. His very presence had always made me more impulsive.

"Good to know you care," Crazy Caleb grumbled.

"I'm Zorana Barbary."

Blinking, I returned my focus to the stranger in the room, who was awkwardly smiling at me.

"Don't you know that, though?" she said. "You're obviously a thief, and despite how desperate you seemed last night, you must be good at what you do to have gotten past my home's securities. Only an ignorant or newly-born thief wouldn't know who he was robbing."

Well. That was more insight than I'd expected from this woman. She was part of the nobility, and while I hadn't walked in that social circle for quite some time, I'd never met one of them who was quick on the uptake, on the rare occasions I'd had to deal with them.

Also, she had yet to take my hand, which was problematic. If she had, I could have used that contact to draw her into a chokehold and escape, not that I'd decided to use such a direct course of action yet. In fact, I hadn't at all decided how to handle her and how she'd discovered me.

"You could start by lowering your hand," Crazy Caleb said. "You look like a fucking moron. It's embarrassing."

Good point.

Withdrawing my offer of a handshake, I tugged on my neckline to check on my readout, and when I saw the number on it, I barely remembered to keep breathing.

Ten years? Who gave a complete stranger—a thief—ten years of their life?

"So... miscreant," Zorana said. "What were you doing in my bedroom last night? Besides breaking into the house, I mean."

"Did I need another reason beyond that?" I said before sighing. "Tell me. Why am I not in a prison cell? If you know why I entered your home last night, I find it odd that you have yet to send for the... police."

I couldn't call those *people*—I wasn't sure if that word applied to them—coppers right now. She wouldn't know what I'd meant by it.

"Why would I have sent for them?" Zorana said. "I gave you what you needed, so there's no need to get them involved. Right?"

That was an... interesting approach. What did I...?

"I like her," Crazy Caleb said with a giggle. "She's left you speechless."

Which was unacceptable at this point. I had to take control of this conversation, guiding it until I could escape from this place.

Maybe I could get out now.

"While I appreciate your help, I should leave you be, yes?" I said. "It is bad enough that you have given me so many years. I should not also waste your time."

As I cautiously climbed to my feet, Zorana shot to her own, extending a hand toward me.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "You're still hurt, miscreant. I saw your finger, and you can't have recovered from such a massive seizure already. Stay for a while. Get some rest. If you do, maybe I won't have to drag your twitching body to another hiding spot."

She'd done that? All by herself?

"Why are you so surprised? It's not that hard," Crazy Caleb. "Roll a body onto a sheet, and you can drag it to plenty of places without using too much energy."

I didn't want to know why he was so certain of that.

"Let me be the judge of what I can handle," I said.

Stepping forward, I leaned around Zorana, although I was careful to leave space between us, and extended my hand into the sunlight. Even before that illumination touched my skin, I knew it would be bad. I was having a hard time with simply staying on my feet right now, but I had to try. I had to get myself somewhere safe.

So, I let sunlight caress me, and immediately, my hand started shaking. I clenched it, digging my fingernails into my palm, before retracting it and sinking to the floor.

"I suppose a break is in order," I said. "I would not want to trouble you more than I already have."

With a half-smile, Zorana said, "It hasn't been too much trouble. Really."

Sure, it hadn't. Give a thief a veritable fortune. Drag his seizing body into a secluded corner of the attic. Wait for him to wake up. That was no trouble.

"You know... most people have enough of a conscience to help someone when they're hurting, Lyle," Crazy Caleb softly said.

I didn't reply to him, nor did I speak a word of what I was thinking. I merely kept my blank face in place and wondered what on earth I should do now. With my body unable to stand even a modicum of light exposure, an immediate escape was beyond me, unfortunately. That left me with what? Talking?

How was one supposed to do that with a complete stranger and a noble's daughter at that?

It helped that she didn't seem disturbed by me. In fact she'd been curiously watching me for most of my time here and I...

I was actually comfortable around her, despite having no idea what to do. Why was that?

"So, miscreant. Tell me more about yourself," Zorana said. "It's the least you can do after waking me up in the middle of the night."

Oh. Um. That was a.... delicate subject.

Even still, I didn't find it as difficult to approach as I normally would. Again, why the hell was that?

"Well, first of all, my name is Lyle, not miscreant, and I am a thief. I steal the years that I need to live," I absently said. "What more is there to share?"

Clicking her tongue, Zorana said, "Plenty, I'm sure. No one's life solely revolves around their work. Do you have a wife? Family?"

Beside me, Crazy Caleb snorted.

"Nope," he said. "No way in hell will he-"

"I do not wish to discuss that topic," I interrupted. "Instead, why not tell me about yourself? Why did you help me?"

Because I truly did not understand what this woman had done.

Tilting her head, Zorana stared at the ceiling, chewing on her lip, and as she did that, sunlight brushed over her blonde hair. Such a gorgeous color.

She started answering me, and yes, I should listen to what she was saying. I knew this, but even still, I couldn't focus on her words.

That hair. How comfortable I was around her. What was going on?

Then, it clicked.

Who else was I this comfortable around? Who else made the lullaby that I was ever singing to the dark shift in tone and volume, even if the change seemed... different this time?

Without considering what I was doing, I asked, "Are you Ostium?"

Because the only other people who prompted these strange feelings in me were the Ostium kids that I sometimes tended to.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, though, I was cringing inside, knowing what a huge mistake I'd made. Zorana Barbary was a nobleman's daughter, and Ostiu was the land of troublemakers and rebels. The outcasts. What noble house wanted to admit that a native of that nation had tainted their bloodline?

Instead of scoffing, as I'd expected, Zorana shrank on herself, grabbing her hair. She could barely meet my eyes as she said.

"Yes. How did you know? Is it... is it-?"

"The hair, yes," I said.

Curling even further on herself, Zorana stroked those long locks.

"Dad usually makes me dye it," she said, "but he's not home right now, so I don't have to."

Not home? I really would have died last night if Zorana hadn't helped me.

That, however, wasn't important right now. The look on this woman's face and how she was holding herself... well did I know them.

"I can't take you and your disgusting eyes anywhere! Go to your room! Maybe I can keep you hidden in there."

With Crazy Caleb growling beside me, I said, "Please, do not be ashamed of it. I- I find it quite beautiful, if I might be so bold. I am not trying to flatter you with that statement. It is merely that I... have Ostium blood too. My eyes?"

Glancing up at me, Zorana quickly looked away before chuckling.

"I'd noticed that," she said. "Silly of me to get embarrassed about who I am when I'm with someone who might understand, but... that's how it is."

And wasn't that horrible and, in a way, absolutely infuriating?

"It's not right," Crazy Caleb said.

No, and it hadn't been for a long time.

Sighing, Zorana tossed her hair behind her before pulling herself up as tall as she could.

"Yes, I have Ostium blood. My grandfather on my mother's side was a wealthy merchant in that nation's capital, and after the war, he immigrated here," she said. "And now, miscreant, this quarter-Ostium girl intends to get you some supper. If you're to be my guest for a time, I should make sure you're comfortable."

Zorana got to her feet before I could say a word, and as she made her way to a trapdoor, I scrambled to my hands and knees.

"Wait!" I called. "I did not—"

She disappeared through the hatch.

"—mean to scare you away," I quietly finished.

With a sigh, I sat down before sprawling on the floor, and quite uninvited, Crazy Caleb leaned into view with a sloppy smile on his face.

"That was well done, you most eloquent of men you," he said.

"Fuck off," I muttered.

Laughing, Crazy Caleb faded away, and I closed my eyes. I might as well rest them while I had a moment. Given my current situation, I doubted anything here could hurt me-

Screams. All I hear are his screams. They boom and bounce in the air around me, and no matter how well I block my ears, I can still hear them. Please, stop! I'm so sorry, Max-!

A short water bath woke me up, and as I shot upright, I gasped, scooting away from a blurry figure.

"Sorry," Zorana said. ""You were thrashing and screaming something fierce. I didn't want the noise announcing your presence to the whole house. Who knows what they'd do with you?"

After sputtering for a solid minute, I pulled myself together and donned my blank face again.

Slicking my hair back, I said, "Probably wise."

As Zorana sat opposite me, she tossed me a roll, and on catching it, I hesitated. Why was she feeding me, on top of everything else?

Why did I care? Food was food. I knew better than to refuse it.

As I started in on the roll, Zorana shifted in place, biting her lip, but I didn't prompt the question on her tongue. It was bad enough that she'd seen me having a nightmare. I'd much rather if she never asked about it or anything else uncomfortable, even if I knew that wouldn't be possible. The curious types, as she seemed to be, could never keep from speaking their mind.

Eventually, she found her courage.

"I'm sorry to be so intrusive, and if you'd rather not answer this question, you don't have to," she said, "but who's Maxton?"

I froze. *Maxton?* Where had she heard that name?

Coming out of the blue as it had, it made the world shrink, and I forced myself to inhale. I couldn't indulge in shallow breathing or an escape into the fog around me, not right now.

"Why do you ask?" I managed to say.

Looking away, Zorana said, "You were screaming the name while you slept."

Oh.

Wait. I talked in my sleep? *Still?* That was... good to know. It was another reason why I wouldn't let anyone share my bed anytime soon.

There I went again, though, getting distracted by irrelevancies. Zorana had asked a question, and *avan*, if it wouldn't be difficult to answer.

Steeling myself, I said, "Maxton was my brother."

I hated how I'd had to say that sentence, using the word 'was'. That he was gone was painful enough. Why did the language needed to express that fact have to remind me of it too?

Jerking toward me, Zorana took one look at my face and softened. I wasn't sure what she saw there. I wasn't displaying emotion right now. I'd checked, but still, tears started shimmering in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Losing family is never fun."

No. It really wasn't.

Slowly, Zorana inched closer, and confused by what she was doing, I watched her until she hesitantly leaned forward and... wrapped her arms around me.

In an instant, I went stiff, in body and mind. Inside, someone started roaring in anger while another voice wailed a desperate cry, but much as they and I might need it, I couldn't shove Zorana away. As I'd said, she was a noble's daughter. Hurting her would *at the very least* be counter-productive to my goals.

So, with more control than I'd thought possible, I took hold of her arms and tugged her free.

"I appreciate what you are trying to do. It is more than kind," I said, "but please, do not touch me."

"Oh," Zorana said. "I didn't mean-"

Waving at her, I said, "It is fine. Please, do not worry about it."

With a nod, Zorana sat back, but once she had, any shame she'd been displaying vanished. Cocking her head, she frowned at something above me.

"What... is... that?" she asked, pointing.

When I craned my head to look where she'd indicated, my heart stopped in my chest. Above and around me, the dark was going crazy, whipping various shades of it into a frenzied storm. Oh... this was bad.

Fortunately, I knew how to stop it. With a thought, all emotion was dumped from me, and I started singing the dark its lullaby. After a few heartbeats of this, it settled into its normal undulations, letting me focus on the problem that its outburst had caused.

Damage control.

Zorana, however, didn't seem to have put together that what she'd seen in the dark might be related to me. She was also, surprisingly, not panicking about it. Tapping her fingers on her lips, she stared at a spot above my head for a moment before meeting my eyes.

"Do you understand what just happened?" she said. "Was that-?"

Frowning, she started leveling her finger at me, and I loudly sighed.

"How on earth would something that strange be connected to anything human?" I said. "Please, Zorana. I do not know what we just saw, but it seems to have gone now. Unless it returns, I would prefer to pretend that it never happened. It is too stressful for me to consider in this state."

Yes, I was playing the injured card. Showing such weakness now would be better than letting Zorana think that I could have long-dead magic. People had made similar assumptions about me and the dark before, and at those times, I'd barely wormed my way out of danger. I'd rather not do that now.

To my utter surprise, Zorana, shrugged, seemingly content to drop the subject, which...

Much as I'd wanted that reaction, I had to admit. It was a tad unbelievable. Who could drop a discussion of a possibly life-threatening phenomenon, something never-before-seen, like she had?

Or at least, I thought she'd never seen something like the dark's response to me before. If she had seen something as strange as that in the past, I'd love to ask about it, but... in this case, it was best not to tempt fate.

Instead, I'd repeat the question that had been on my mind since I'd woken up. For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to believe the first answer Zorana had given me to it, and given that she'd had a chance to indulge her curiosity, that she'd let me indulge mine seemed only fair.

"I do not understand. Why have you helped me?" I said. "I came here to hurt your father, if only in a financial way. To me, saving the life of an aggressor seems... counterintuitive."

Pursing her lips, Zorana stared at her hands in her lap.

"You meant to steal from my father because you had to, or that's what I assume from how low the number on your timepiece's readout was. And your desperation, your need to survive, is in no way your fault," she said. "I helped you because everyone deserves a chance at life. I helped you because you needed me to, and that's all there is to it."

So, Crazy Caleb had been right. People *did* help others when they were hurt.

Why did that still seem so unbelievable?

"And of course, there's that thing the Prime Minister always says," Zorana continued. "I may not agree with many of his policy, but in the last election, he did have one good quote. How did it go? 'Help those who ask for it because...'"

I didn't hear the rest. A buzz had filled my ears... my mind, and the world turned to fuzz around me, taking on a crimson hue. Energy, the precious commodity that I'd been lacking not long ago, surged through my body, and fighting it, I hissed a single sentence into Zorana's stream of words.

"It is not enough."

Avan above, the control it had taken to speak that quietly! I wanted to scream it from the rooftops, to howl it-

Furrowing her brow, Zorana said, "I'm sorry. Did you say something?"

Suddenly, I was on my feet, towering over her.

"I said, IT'S NOT ENOUGH!" I shouted. "It's not enough to give years to needy beggars, pat yourself on the back, and go home to your enormous mansion. Our whole system, this pathetic government left clinging to the vestiges of long-absent monarchs, is corrupt. It needs to *come down*."

I was left panting with my hands in fists at my side, but rather than cowering from me, as any normal person would have, Zorana merely stared into space for a moment before cocking her head.

"And what would take its place?" she said.

Just like that, the steam got sucked out of my engine. Swaying, I barely made it to the ground before my legs could give out, and somehow, I kept from scrubbing my eyes. I returned my facial expression to neutral and regained control.

Because that question? I'd never been able to answer it.

If everything went to Plan, I likely wouldn't survive it. I wouldn't see the world that I longed to create, and that meant I was a coward, only willing to throw my temper tantrum and raise a ruckus. I couldn't consider the back-breaking work that would come afterward.

That was what I tried to explain to this impossible woman.

"I was made for destruction," I said. "Building an empire's wealth on something besides the years of people's lives? Establishing a government that is fair to all people, where someone can rise above their station and where the punishment for crime is something besides a painful death in the chair? Deciding these things is for better people than me."

Whatever confusion had been on Zorana's face cleared. In its place, her mouth formed a perfect little 'O', and I wondered how I'd confounded her this time.

"That..."

For a moment, she couldn't continue, but swallowing hard, she forced herself onward.

"That's how he died, isn't it?" she softly said. "Maxton."

Sucking in a breath, I shot my eyes to the rafters overhead. Wasn't the pattern that they made lovely? Such strong support, keeping that giant block of wood from crashing down on us! How I wished I could find something similar right now.

"Oh... hell," Zorana whispered. "Miscreant. I'm so sorry."

That took me by surprise. Most people who learned how Maxton had died didn't receive the information well. Usually, they turned dismissive, saying silly things like 'he deserved it' or 'good riddance'. No one liked facing what was done to even the most harmless of criminals in our current

day and age.

There was a reason that members of a convict's family were encouraged to avoid execution day.

Zorana, however, gave me something that I'd never known I'd needed: sympathy. Commiseration. A glimpse of the compassion that I should have always had and the knowledge that she could understand my suffering.

Fuck, if it didn't hurt. I barely kept myself contained, unsure how I wasn't blazing what I was feeling to the world.

"It's happening again."

That comment had been so softly spoken that it barely drew me out of my internal struggle, but when I pulled free of it, I noted Zorana staring above my head again.

Oh. The dark.

Again, I sang my friend its lullaby. Again, I felt it calm down, and again, Zorana met my eyes with an uncertain smile.

"Are you sure that storm has nothing to do with you?" she said.

"I cannot answer that question," I said. "I am sorry."

And for once, I actually meant it.

"What now?" I asked.

Could she ignore the dark's outbursts, or would she do what she should have done from the beginning: call the coppers? I still had no clue why she hadn't done that, even with her answering a similar question twice before.

Wrinkling her nose, Zorana said, "I'm not sure. I'd say that we should move, but that... storm, if that's what it was, has calmed down, and it didn't hurt us either time it showed up, so... maybe we can talk more? I know you'll need your rest, though. When you feel well enough, we can think about getting you out of the house unseen, but that probably won't happen for a while. You should at least spend another night here."

...Another night?

Rapidly blinking, I looked around the attic again. Boxes and crates all around me. Cobwebs in the roof's corners. Sunbeams outlining the dust motes in the air around Zorana.

Orange sunbeams.

"How long have I been here?" I asked, dreading the answer.

If I was right, then both of us were in trouble. I'd told my crew to meet me at my apartment this evening, and if I wasn't where I'd said I'd be, Vaughn would *not* take it well. He'd tear the city apart while looking for me.

"It's been almost a day," Zorana said. "You slept through the morning and most of the afternoon, and it's a good thing too! You looked like you needed it."

Damnit.

"Zorana, you need to listen to me," I said. "I need you to go downstairs and talk to the person in charge of your household staff. A man going by the name of Vaughn will soon visit this estate. He will ask after a 'Mr. Cunningham', and when he does, someone must *quickly* tell him that Mr. Cunningham has successfully concluded his business here, although a slight hiccup might delay his reunion with his associates. Exactly those words. Can you pass the message along? It is important."

Having swayed away from me, Zorana nodded a little.

"I can do as you've asked, although I'm curious why I should," she said before shaking her head. "Not that that question is important right now. From the way you've asked it, I assume your request is time-sensitive?"

"It is," I said.

"Then, I should get on it immediately."

Standing, Zorana brushed off her skirt before smiling at me.

"You stay right there, miscreant," she said. "I have more questions for you."

I was sure she did. Why did the idea of that warm me as much as it had?

"Where would I go?" I said, nodding to the nearby shaft of sunlight. "You have seen what light does to me. For the moment, I cannot leave."

Laughing, Zorana said, "Fair enough."

And the sound of her pleasure made my heart swell, starting a crescendo in the music between us, which was... unusual. What the hell was going on?

Fortunately, the source of this confusion quickly left me, and as I settled onto my elbows, I tracked her movement around the house through the dark.

Our conversation this afternoon had been... interesting. Unexpected. I wasn't sure what to make of it or if I should bother with interpreting everything that had been said. Once I left this place, I doubted it would matter.

It took me a moment, but by the time Zorana had reached the ground floor, I realized that throughout the second half of our conversation, I'd been alone. Well... alone except for her. This surprised me. Not even Crazy Caleb had stuck around, despite how much he'd seemed to like our partner in the conversation.

Had something about her been keeping the others away, or... had they found Zorana as comforting and—dare I say it—safe as I had? If so, that would be interesting.

I dwelled on this for a while, getting increasingly drowsier, and before long—

—someone kicked me awake. Hell. Had I just slept without dreaming? *No nightmares?* That hadn't happened in forever.

Again, someone's foot shoved my ankle.

"Hey. I'm here to rescue you."

Vaughn. Of course it was him. I'd known the floorplan that he'd retrieved for me yesterday would eventually lead him here.

Sighing, I got up, not once acknowledging the help my crew's muscle was offering me. He didn't seem to mind this, hovering like a shadow as he was, but then, he'd never complained about how I tended to ignore him.

"I did not need rescuing," I said, "but I appreciate the effort anyway."

"It *is* what you pay me for," Vaughn said.

Nodding, I glanced around the attic, noting that it was empty and that sunlight had stopped streaming through its single window.

"Where is Zorana?" I asked.

It was curious how quickly I'd focused on that aspect of my situation.

"Downstairs, I think," Vaughn said. "After I arrived earlier, there was quite a ruckus. I left them to it, too focused on getting to 'Mr. Cunningham'."

Goodness, that had been sarcastic. Did Vaughn think I was ungrateful for the risks he'd taken today?

I should reassure him of that, even if it would be perfunctory at best. I wasn't sure how else to comfort another person.

"I have already thanked you for your work," I said. "Work that *I pay you* to do."

What sort of commotion had Vaughn been talking about? I hoped it had nothing to do with me. I would hate to have caused Zorana trouble...

And why was that, exactly?

Mentally shaking myself, I stepped around Vaughn, advancing on the window. It was already open, and leaning through it, I brushed my fingers over the grappling hook that was embedded in the sill before tugging on its connected rope.

"Interesting way of retrieving me," I muttered.

"I worked with what I had," Vaughn said.

As he always had.

"Well, let us leave this place," I said. "There is nothing more for me here."

Zorana would have to do without answers to her questions, but what else should she have expected from a 'miscreant' like me?

"Besides," I continued, "I am sure that you and the others would like an explanation for what has been going on."

"Like you'll ever give us one," Vaughn grumbled under his breath.

Oh, what little faith he had in me! Not that I could blame him for it. I'd always been reticent about my activities, almost to a paranoid degree.

Still. I was ready to leave. I'd gained what I'd needed from this place: a new lease on life and with it in hand, I could return to the Plan.

Climbing out of the window, I started descending the rope and put thoughts of an impossible woman out of my mind.

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Revision #3

Created 9 January 2025 06:50:49 by FatalisticFable

Updated 25 October 2025 17:30:26 by FatalisticFable