

Chapter Ten

Vaughn

The kid had done it. He'd actually said *those words*, the one statement I'd never thought I'd hear coming out of his mouth.

As he escorted Gus and Eliza to his apartment's door, I worked my way through the circumstances that had led us here, and in none of them did I see a blatant sign of what tonight would bring.

Yes, the kid had been acting... *strangely* before we'd arrived at his home—I hadn't seen him display anything beyond cool detachment in years—but I hadn't thought anything of it. I hadn't seen it as the brightly lit billboard, indicating danger, that it had been, and looking back on it, I wanted to kick myself for missing the subtle clues of what was to come.

Maybe if I had, neither of us would be in this precarious position.

After closing the door, the kid stalked back to his table, and taking a seat, he pulled a pistol, the one he kept hidden in his overcoat, into view.

"We should talk," he said.

And I shuddered at how empty he'd sounded.

The tone of his voice was nothing new. For years, the kid had always been nothing but predictable in his presentation and carriage. He never gave the world a clue about what must be going on underneath his vacant shell, but still, I heard the threat of violence in it now.

Not that I could blame him. As he'd been working up to saying *those words*, I'd fucked up. I'd let my anxiety for what he'd say shine through, and he'd seen it, knowing exactly what it had meant.

He knew that I'd always known who he was, which was all sorts of confusing, but I couldn't think about it right now. I could only pleasantly smile at this baffling, brilliant, absurd, absolutely *wonderful* kid opposite me and say.

"I figured."

What else could come from him catching me in a mistake?

Even still, he didn't get on with it. He sat in silence, letting time pass us by, and I made no move to break the quiet. Why would I?

Soon enough, though, the lateness—or earliness, I supposed—of the hour made itself known. Dawn sent muted shafts of light through the parchment paper that blockaded this apartment's windows, and when they hit the kid, he... diminished.

I wasn't sure how else to describe what happened. When in the dark, the kid had always seemed more *full*, not like this far-too-young grandfather who was suddenly sitting across from me, and I'd always wondered if he knew about this change in appearance.

I'd always wondered if he knew what it and his 'relationship' with the dark truly meant.

Still, the shift happened, and after a slow blink, the kid leaned forward in his chair, folding his hands on the table.

"Who is Eleanor?" he asking in that typical, clipped tone of his.

And I froze with ice cascading down my spine. Out of all the questions the kid could have asked, all the words he could have spoken, I'd *never* expected to hear that name from him.

Eleanor. One of the two best things to have happened in my life.

The source of my greatest shame.

Lying in bed beside me, she sleepily turns my way, resting her hand on my chest. We've recently come home from a meeting with our friends, and despite the other ways we've used to cope with its emotional fallout, I've known something else was coming for a while.

I brace for it as she opens her mouth.

"I'm going to help him," she says. "I think you should too."

There it is, the decision I've been dreading, and I don't know if I can change it.

"I don't know, love," I said. "Ephiram... he's changed over the years, and you know it. Something about him... it scares me now, horrible as that is. I'm not sure if helping him is wise."

After a moment, she sighs. Sitting up, she applies pressure through her hand on my chest, and I can't look away from her determined gaze.

"I'm helping him," she says. "It's happening, and you can't change my mind."

How I wished I had.

Swallowing hard, I looked away, fighting to remember that I should breathe. It was hard to do that when so much hurt had suddenly been shoved down your throat.

"Eleanor was my wife," I roughly said, "and Ephiram Cunningham killed her."

"Ah."

When nothing else followed, I glanced at the kid, unsurprised by the blank face he'd presented me with. Even still, I could swear I saw something behind it.

"I am sorry to hear that," he said. "My father is a cruel bastard."

"Yes," I gruffly said, "Yes, he is."

More than the kid could possibly know, and that was saying something.

After a moment, he sighed and stood, tucking his pistol back into his jacket.

"Thank you. For the moment, that is all I need to know," he said, "although if at any point you feel like explaining how you already knew my family name, I am all ears."

Oh... was that what he was concerned about? I'd thought it had been about... something else.

"You don't need to worry about that, Lyle," I said. "Your brother told me years ago."

The mention of Maxton made the kid freeze up. It was only for a split second, but I saw it and wondered.

"I see. Thank you for sharing," he said.

Turning away, he shrugged out of his jacket before padding toward his cot, and I'd have been happy to take his unspoken dismissal, letting him get the rest he so clearly needed, if I hadn't had a question of my own.

"Before I go, can we discuss Mr. Teague, please?" I said. "We may have done that broadly before, but pulling him out of power will be a delicate maneuver, and I'd like to know if you have any preferences for how I go about it."

Stopping short, the kid sipped in a breath, and for a second, his eyes went as blank as the expression he typically held on his face. Then, he cleared his throat, and one corner of his mouth lifted, ever so barely.

"Why would I care? He's nothing to me, just a sad man who should never have existed," he said.

If there had been more emotion than usual in his voice there, I didn't comment on it. I'd known for years that *something* lay between those two men, and I didn't like thinking about what it might be.

"Make sure it hurts, though, would you?" the kid continued. "Can't have a monster like him floating around *my* district, not for any longer than we must, and I want him to *know* just how much I've tolerated his presence for as long as we have. Think you can do that?"

...Had we somehow started drinking without me knowing about it? Unless he had alcohol in his system, the kid didn't usually relax around me like this, not even in such a slight way.

"Sure, I can handle that," I said with a frown. "Are you ok?"

"Fine, fine," the kid said, waving a hand. "Time for some sleep now, though, so please. Get out."

Drawing back, I lifted my hands in surrender, and as he collapsed onto his cot, I walked out the door.

I started in the Leaky Tap. If one wanted to start a rumor—true or not—one's best bet for that was always found in the local tavern.

As I heavily took a seat at the bar, its keeper came hustling to me, swiping a cloth around the rim of a glass as he did.

"Hey, Vaughn! Haven't seen you here in a while," he said. "What can I get you?"

"Oh, just an ale. You know what I like."

But then, I sighed, resting my elbows on the bar so I could clutch my head. It was a manipulative move, planned to be that way, and I absolutely hated doing it. This sort of work—best undertaken by the secret police and various other sordid organizations—wasn't my specialty. In fact, I was *terrible* at it, but unfortunately, that same behavior was what this situation called for. If I was to push Russell Teague out of power, I'd have to engage in it, and I desperately wanted that man gone.

So, when the barkeeper set a beer in front of me, I morosely pulled it to my chest, cupping it as I took a sip, and the other man raised an eyebrow.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

Nodding, I said, "Yeah. Work related, though."

"I see."

Ducking his head, the barkeeper intently focused on cleaning the bar top in front of him, all while I waited. In the end, he couldn't stay silent, as I'd expected.

"If I'll be seeing you and your boss here over the next few days, I'd like some heads up," he said.

At that, I winced. *Avan* knew how many times I'd pulled the kid out of this place in the small hours of the morning, long after everyone else had gone to sleep. Doing it had always been an intensely uncomfortable experience for everyone involved. Uncomfortable for the kid because he'd always had far more than one too many, and uncomfortable for everyone else when it came to dealing with him. I didn't think anyone besides me and this bar's various employees knew about those

incidents, not in recent years at least.

Then again, everything to do with the kid had changed after his brother had died, not just his retreat into his frozen persona or his occasional, intense outbursts of drunken stupor.

"No, nothing's up with Lyle. He's fine," I told the barkeeper. "The problem's all mine."

I paused a moment, wondering how to phrase the next part. It had to sound both appropriately shameful and like it had been dragged out of me. No one would want to admit to something like this.

"You know I do the occasional job for crews other than Lyle's, yes?" I said.

When the barkeeper nodded, I sighed.

"Well, a couple of days ago, I did a favor for Mr. Teague," I reluctantly continued. "It was supposed to be a small job, a go-and-fetch sort of thing. I didn't... I didn't know what I was fetching."

Seemingly intrigued, the barkeeper lifted an eyebrow.

"And that something was?" he obligingly drawled.

Harshly breathing out, I took a long pull from my beer, continuing to drink until my lungs were burning. Slamming my mug down, I swiped my mouth, almost violently, and managed to make an aborted gag come forth.

"A... a girl," I eventually whispered. "Maybe eight-years-old. Mr. Teague wanted a little girl."

This pronouncement stopped all activity in the area around me. Even a fellow patron a few stools down paused in his drinking, pinning his eyes on me.

With a groan, I scrubbed my face.

"I don't know what he did with her. Don't want to know, honestly," I said. "But it can't have been good, and I... *avan*, I'm such a coward. As soon as I saw that damn 'package', I should have stopped. I should have gone to the coppers-

"And gotten yourself caught up in something like this?" the barkeep interrupted me. "Vaughn, everyone knows getting the coppers involved in *anything* is a suicidal idea when in Flosa, and you couldn't have defied Mr. Teague at the time. The important thing is that you're here now, talking. I just..."

Shaking his head, the barkeeper rested his rag and the glass on the bar top.

"This is a *lot*," he said. "More than I can handle. I'm just gonna... I'm gonna get my boss, all right? He'll know what to do."

As the barkeeper hurried away, I lowered my face into my folded arms, radiating as much self-loathing as I could. Unfortunately, this pretense wasn't half as difficult as it should be. I might not have directly participated in facilitating Russell Teague's... proclivities, but I certainly hadn't stopped them after the kid had told me about them.

To be fair, he'd also told me that he had a plan to neutralize the monster, one that he'd needed time to implement, and the blackmail he held over Russell's head *had* kept that man from acting out his darker impulses in the years since. That only mitigated my guilt a little, though.

The barkeep soon returned with Norris, the Leaky Tap's owner, on his heels.

"What's this I hear about Mr. Teague?" the stockier man grumbled as he approached.

Waving at me, the barkeeper said, "Go on, now. Tell him what you just told me."

So, I repeated my story, making sure to tear up as I did, and once I'd finished, Norris reacted as predictably as everyone else around me had. Immediately, he accepted what I'd said before cautioning me to keep quiet while he and his friends verified the truth of my story. Then, he rushed out of the bar.

When among decent people, this was how it always went after news of child abuse first broke. There might be some initial shock, but for a short time, the story was also believed, swept along by the outrage every moral human being felt about such awful crimes.

Soon enough, that would fade, allowing doubt and society's habit of outright denying life's horrors to take its place. I wasn't worried about that, though, for one very good reason.

The kid had told me not to.

There was more to that, of course. When he'd first brought this issue up with me, he'd included me in the surface level details of his plans to deal with it. So, I knew the kid had physical evidence that would prove Russell Teague's involvement in the crime I'd accused him of. I wasn't sure what that proof was or how the kid hadn't gotten his hands on it, but whatever it was, it would soon be circulating through the Warehouse District, all as the kid had dictated.

All as he'd had planned for who knew how many years now.

I was just glad he'd let me play a part in this piece of his Plan. If there was one thing I'd always abhorred, it was seeing innocents harmed. I'd experienced enough instances of that to fill a lifetime, and perhaps the kid had seen that on my face when he'd been explaining all of this to me.

So, the fact that he'd eased his insistence on self-reliance for me to help in this small way meant a lot to me.

But now, that part of the Plan was over and done. I finished my drink under the barkeeper's watchful eye, and as soon as I was done, he gave me another.

"You did good, Vaughn," he said. "This one's on me, ok? On all of us."

He tilted his head at the patrons in the Leaky Tap, a few of whom nodded my way, and on noting the hard glint in their eyes, I bit down on a grin.

Whether in a few hours or days, Russell Teague would soon face the wrath of the Warehouse District. For any other man, I might hope that *avan* could help them, but given what I knew about the crime boss, all I could think was, *it's about damn time*.

I was scouting the perimeter around the Barbary's estate when the expected happened.

While making my rounds, I couldn't help my exasperation on examining the grounds opposite me. At one point, the Barbary family had been full of honorable people, whose who'd done what they could to help their fellow citizens. Now, they marked their claimed territory with a tall stone wall, topped by wrought-iron spikes, and beyond, I knew I'd find far more luxuries than a single family should ever own. A small nation's worth of wealth kept from the people who needed it.

And we intended to take some of it from them.

So far as I could tell, the place's protection looked the same as always. Despite the heavy clouds overhead, the sun still illuminated the members of the Watton security team, spaced every hundred meters or so. Loosely standing guard, they kept a wary eye on the street in front of them. Their staggered shifts had made it difficult to find a hole in this single defense alone, but with Gus' help, the kid had pinpointed just such a weakness, although I had no idea what it could be.

Not that this was a change. When it came to the crew's jobs, the kid never told all of us the full plan, the better to make sure none of us could let those details slip free.

Much as it might annoy me, I couldn't begrudge the kid his caution. He'd seen far too much trouble in his life to trust any of us fully, even after our many years of working together.

As I was turning the corner for my return trip home, a bag was dropped over my head, and a split second of panic quickly gave way to me rolling my eyes. Fucking gangsters and their love of drama.

The hood was removed after I'd been roughly escorted several paces from where I'd been standing, and on seeing the abandoned alley around me, I sighed.

Really? Russell couldn't have come up with somewhere less exceptionally *typical* for this confrontation?

Before I could say a word, the gang boss was shouting in my face.

"What the hell are you and Lyle playing at?!"

Running my eyes over him, I noted Russell's ruddy cheeks and glassy eyes, the way his fists were trembling at his sides while he convulsively swallowed, and I barely kept from smiling.

At surface level, this might look like anger, but I saw the real emotion that anger was covering up. This man was scared.

Good.

"Ah, yes," I said. "I was wondering when the cockroach would show up."

At his side, Russell's goons bristled, but before they could react to my words, their boss lashed out, and I let the slap land.

"You should watch what you say, Vaughn," Russell hissed. "You're in deep enough shit with me already."

Humming to myself, I lightly touched my cheek, feeling the heat coming off of it. Yes, this should redden nicely. It wasn't quite enough for what I needed, though.

Spreading my arms, I smiled.

"Whatever you say, Mr. Teague."

As he turned an even deeper shade of red, Russell was hauling back for another slap when the clouds above, which had been threatening rain all day, finally let loose. Water cascaded over everyone in the ally with none of the trickle one usually saw at the beginning of a storm, and while I didn't move, Russell sputtered, shaking out his arms, before taking a step back beneath a roof's eave. He gestured at the goons escorting him. Cracking their knuckles, they stepped into my space.

I didn't resist for the first ten seconds of this confrontation. In that time, several blows landed, but once I determined that I'd gained enough authentic injuries, I moved to stop the fight.

To them, it would look like I'd moved faster than humanly possible. I knew this, but not only was I not inclined to hide my long-honed skills from these three gangsters, but it was the best way I had to fully communicate how much of a threat I was to them.

To me, it was routine, boring in its predictability.

I ducked a punch at my face, swiveled to the right—stopping between the goons—and hooked a foot behind the knee of the one I was facing. He'd fully invested in his initial strike, so when I nudged him, he stumbled forward into the wall. With my fingers in his hair, I bounced his head off of the bricks.

I heard my second opponent snarl, felt air moving toward my lower back, and stepped to the side, avoiding a punch to my left kidney. Grabbing that outstretched wrist, I curled into the man's body, driving my elbow back and into that same joint on him. The force of my momentum had something *popping*, and with a released huff of air, the goon backed away. I barely caught sight of his lower arm's bone jutting out from the back of his elbow before I was absently catching my first opponent's fist, stopping it mere centimeters from my face.

Blood was seeping over his mouth from his nose. I added to it with my own punch, and as he reeled,, I released his hand, shoving him backward. Another hard impact with the alley's wall, cracking the back of his head into it, soon had him slowly sliding to the ground.

My second opponent was running at me, so once more, I stepped aside, raising my arm into his path. It toppled him into the slick mud at our feet, sending his legs crashing into the wall. One flew up while the other *snapped* into a painful looking position. I took a single step forward before placing my boot on his throat, firmly pressing down.

He tried to get me off of him but wasn't successful, not when my stance was firmly set and he was still addled from his fall and the dislocated elbow. When he dropped into unconsciousness, I glanced back to make sure the other man hadn't gotten back up. Sure enough, he was still slumped against the wall, dazedly staring into space. I hoped I hadn't cracked his head too hard in that last exchange of blows.

Sighing, I put my raised foot back on the ground. I checked the scene, making sure I'd neutralized all sources of danger, before crouching to gather up some of the muck that the fight and rain had displaced.

As I spread it over my face and clothes, I said, "I trust my point has been made?"

From where he'd started cowering soon into the fight, Russell Teague cleared his throat.

"Your point?" he croaked.

Pursing my lips, I shook my head. It seemed I'd have to spell it out for the bastard.

"That you can't threaten me. That you can't threaten Lyle. More importantly, that you've played into my hand," I said. "I've been waiting for you to attack me all day. It took you long enough, but that will work in my favor. The crowd at the Leaky Tap should be getting *just* drunk enough to fully appreciate my battered appearance when I get there."

Russell merely gawked at me for a moment before sputtering.

"*What?!*"

The rain was washing off most of the dirt and grime I'd applied to my body, so with an annoyed breath out, I scooped up more.

"It's simple, Mr. Teague. My injuries from this... inconvenience will gain me sympathy, especially as they've come so soon after the confession I made this morning. That, combined with Lyle working his usual magic, will leave you with not much of a defense when our combined accusation brings this conflict to a head," I said. "If you want to avoid a lynching tonight, I'd suggest you get out of the Warehouse District while you still can, but... what do I know? Maybe I've misjudged my neighbors' temperaments. Maybe they won't recognize you for the waste of space that you are."

"But I doubt it."

Bristling, Russell curled his hands into fists.

"You really think you can intimidate me?" he shouted. "You? The insignificant peon of a truly insignificant thieves' crew? *Really?*"

That nearly made me fall over cackling. He had *no idea* who I was.

Instead, I finished with dirtying my clothes and skin before shrugging.

"Honestly? I don't care what you think about me or how you feel," I said. "Your days of ruling this district are over."

I left him standing over his defeated subordinates, making my way toward the Leaky Tap and the final performance of the evening that I'd need to make there.

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