

Tyrant 191

Chapter 191: Business and Responsibility

The back room of the tavern was quieter, tucked away from the bustle of laughter and clinking mugs outside. Its walls still carried the faint scent of new timber, though the table at the center was scratched and worn from years of use—kept more out of memory than necessity. Arden closed the door behind them with a firm push, sealing out the noise.

"Sit, boy," he said, gesturing to the table. His voice had the same rough edge as always, but beneath it lingered a sense of familiarity, almost comfort.

Trafalgar lowered himself into the chair, posture relaxed, his dark cloak draping over the side. Marella, ever bustling, pulled out a chair across from him and gave a warm smile. "You must be hungry, Trafalgar. Shall I fix you something? It won't take long."

He gave her a single nod. "Yes. We can eat while we talk—it's going to be a long conversation."

"Then I'll see to it." Marella disappeared toward the kitchen, skirts brushing lightly against the floor. The door swung shut behind her, leaving Trafalgar and Arden alone.

The silence between them was heavier than in the front hall. Arden crossed his arms, leaning against the wall for a moment before moving to sit opposite Trafalgar. His gaze was steady, measuring.

"So, boy," he began, voice low, "how have you been? Rumors travel fast—faster than ale, faster than fire. We've heard plenty. Even from the man who brought Mayla here."

Trafalgar rested his arms on the table, meeting the old man's stare without flinching. "If you mean the loss of my uncle, then yes, I've heard what's being said. But don't worry. I'll tell you directly."

Arden leaned forward, his elbows pressing into the table. The flickering lamplight carved lines into his weathered face. "I'll be blunt, Trafalgar. Rumors aren't just rumors anymore. We've heard about Mordrek, about the dragon, about Valttair's duel. It's spread across Velkaris like wildfire."

Trafalgar exhaled slowly through his nose, fingers drumming lightly against the wood. "Then let me put it plainly. Yes—my uncle is gone. Mordrek was... different. A decent man. A husband, a father. I respected him. But if you expect grief for the Morgain family as a whole, don't. I've no fondness for them."

Arden's sharp eyes narrowed, studying him. "And the Gluttony Dragon?"

"My father defeated it," Trafalgar answered without hesitation. "The scale was massive, even though it was one against one. There's no hiding something like that. If people don't know yet, they will soon."

The old man grunted, leaning back. "So it's true, then. Hm. But let me ask you this, boy—how are you holding up? Don't give me that stone-faced nonsense. You're sixteen. Old enough to call yourself a man, sure, but still young enough to be broken by things like this."

For a moment, Trafalgar's expression didn't change. Then he gave the faintest shrug. "I'm fine. Don't waste your worry on me. It happened. That's all there is to it."

'No point digging into feelings I can't change,' he thought, his jaw tightening briefly. 'The world doesn't stop for grief.'

The door creaked open, breaking the silence. Marella returned, balancing a tray with three steaming plates. The rich smell of seared meat filled the room, cutting through the heavy air.

"Here we are," she said warmly, setting the food down. "Eat. Talking's easier with a full stomach."

The plates clattered softly onto the table. Thick cuts of steak, still sizzling, rested beside roasted vegetables. Marella placed a fork into Trafalgar's hand with the same care she might show a grandson.

"Eat, honey," she said, settling into her chair. "You need strength for the road ahead."

Trafalgar didn't argue. He cut into the meat and took a slow bite, chewing while his eyes wandered across the room. The tavern had changed. No longer a hollow, half-ruined shell, it pulsed with life. Even here in the back room, the hum of voices carried faintly through the walls.

He swallowed, setting down the fork. "The place feels alive now. A full hall, plenty of drink flowing. And the mission board looked crowded too. Business must be good."

Marella beamed, pride lighting her tired features. "Since the renovations, everything has been steady. More work than ever. But I don't complain—it keeps us busy, and under your name, the flow hasn't stopped."

Arden gave a rumbling laugh. "Aye, it's been lively. And speaking of lively—your money showed up." He reached beneath the table and dropped a heavy pouch onto the wood. The sound of coins clinking echoed like a promise. "A lycan came, said his name was Augusto. Left this behind. Surprised me, I'll admit."

Trafalgar lifted the pouch, weighing it in his hand. It was heavy, enough to fund more than just food and ale. "We struck a deal on mithril. This is my share. I'll keep most—Euclid needs it. I'm building a library, and Vincent will teach the children. The rest will go to items and elixirs. But ten percent stays here. Invest it however you like."

Arden nodded once, satisfied. Then his gaze sharpened. "One more thing—why tell us to watch over Mayla?"

Trafalgar set the pouch aside, his expression unreadable. "Like I told you before, she was my maid. But things inside the Morgain household weren't safe for her. Here, she's out of reach. You two have contacts, and I trust you more than anyone else to keep her secure. She's... important to me. That's reason enough."

Arden studied him for a long moment, then gave a curt nod. "Fair. She's been staying nearby, but she'll need a proper place sooner or later. I know someone who owns property in a safe district. Wealthy folk, stable, no trouble. I'll give you the contact."

"Good," Trafalgar said simply.

Marella added with a wink, "And if you tell her you come through me, the landlady will shave off some coin. She owes me a favor."

"That'll do," Trafalgar replied. "Still, I'll be at the academy soon. I won't always be around. On the first of every month, Arthur will come—broad man, middle-aged, you'll recognize him. If I'm absent, have him wait. He's my man."

"Understood," Arden and Marella said together.

They finished the last of their meal. Arden gathered the plates without a word—his way of balancing Marella's cooking. Trafalgar leaned back, satisfied that nothing had been left unspoken.

Then the back door creaked open. Two figures stepped inside. Garrika's sharp green eyes lit up the moment she spotted him.

"Trafalgar!" she shouted, bounding forward. Before he could react, she wrapped him in a fierce hug.

He stiffened, trying to pry her off. "Garrika—enough."

Behind her, Mayla lingered at the threshold. Her brown hair, tied in a neat ponytail, framed a face no longer hidden behind the plain uniform of a maid. A white blouse, a brown skirt—simple, but striking. She looked... different. Beautiful, in a way Trafalgar hadn't noticed before.

Her lips curved into a soft smile. "Young master—" She paused, corrected herself. "Forgive me. Trafalgar. I'm glad to see you again."

He met her gaze, surprised by the warmth in her eyes. "...Yes. Finally."