

Tyrant 199

Chapter 199: The Vanishing in the Crowd

The soft hum of conversation filled the restaurant. Candles flickered between them, their glow casting faint reflections over silver cutlery and crystal glasses. Outside the panoramic window, Velkaris shimmered like a sea of lights, endless and alive.

Trafalgar leaned back slightly, savoring the warmth of the room. For once, there was no tension in his chest—no thoughts of duties, bloodlines, or expectations. Just quiet. Just her.

Mayla took a sip of her wine and set the glass down carefully. "So... Trafalgar," she said, her tone unsure at first.

He looked up, surprised by how naturally his name sounded coming from her lips. "What is it?"

"It still feels strange," she admitted, smiling faintly. "Calling you by just your name."

"Well, you're not my maid anymore," he said, half-smiling. "It'd be weird if you didn't."

Mayla nodded, playing idly with the edge of her napkin. "Right. Old habits, I guess."

Silence settled for a moment—comfortable, unforced. Then she asked, "So what will you do now? You're not planning to stay in Velkaris for long, are you?"

Trafalgar glanced toward the window, the city's lights reflected in his dark-blue eyes. "No. I'll have to go back to the academy soon. I've already missed too many classes. Not that it matters much... but I can't afford to fall behind."

She tilted her head. "And Euclid? Everything's handled there?"

"For now, yes," he replied. "The city can run without me. Arthur's reliable enough. There's nothing more I can do until the rest of the reconstruction finishes."

Mayla leaned forward slightly, curiosity softening her expression. "Then what will you do when you go back?"

"Train. Study. Pretend to be a normal student for a while."

That earned her quiet laughter, the kind that always made him forget the weight on his shoulders.

"Pretend?" she teased.

He smirked. "I was never good at fitting in."

Mayla pushed a small piece of fish across her plate with her fork. "You'll be gone again soon," she murmured. "It feels like you just got back."

Trafalgar smiled faintly. "It's not the first time I've had to leave things halfway done."

"You've always been like that," she said quietly, though her tone carried no bitterness—only understanding.

He exhaled, resting an elbow on the table. "Euclid's stable now. Vincent has the library, Arthur's handling the guards... There's nothing left that needs me hovering around."

Mayla nodded slowly. "Then it's settled. You go back to your academy life, and I'll find something to keep me busy here."

"You already decided what that'll be?"

"I think I'll help Arden and Marella," she said, a small smile curving her lips. "The shop's lively these days, and I'd go crazy sitting in that apartment all day."

"That sounds like you," Trafalgar said softly, the corner of his mouth lifting. "You were never good at staying still."

She laughed under her breath. "Neither were you, well, long ago and now."

For a moment, their gazes met across the table—familiar, calm, and quietly sincere. Trafalgar leaned forward slightly. "Listen, Mayla. If anything ever happens... if you need something, or if someone bothers you—contact me, all right?"

Mayla blinked, then smiled in that gentle way she always did when he was being overly cautious. "I will. But nothing's going to happen."

"Still," he said, his tone firmer now. "I mean it. You can even visit me at the academy if you have to. There's no rule saying you can't."

Her expression softened again. "Visit you, huh? I'll remember that."

"Good," he said, leaning back. "That way I'll have one reason to actually look forward to being there."

The dinner ended slowly, their plates cleared, and the hum of the restaurant dimming into something softer, almost intimate. Trafalgar glanced out through the wide glass windows—the night of Velkaris was alive as ever, carriages of mana-glow drifting through the streets below, laughter and chatter rising from the walkways.

He set a few gold coins on the tray, more than enough to cover their meal, and stood from his chair. "I'll settle the bill," he said casually. "You go ahead. Get some fresh air; it's crowded in here."

Mayla nodded, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "All right. I'll wait outside."

When she passed by him on her way out, the faint scent of lavender lingered in the air. Trafalgar's eyes followed her briefly before he turned toward the back hall where the washrooms were located.

Inside, the muffled sounds of conversation faded. He splashed cold water on his face, staring into the mirror for a moment. His reflection looked calm, but his thoughts were anything but. 'Back to the academy... reports... training... and the others. Guess normal life doesn't really exist for me anymore.'

A few minutes later, he stepped out, adjusting his cuffs as he walked toward the front entrance again.

The street outside was alive with motion—crowds flowing like a river, laughter spilling from nearby taverns. Mana lamps glowed along the pavement, casting shifting blue hues across the cobblestones. But among that familiar rhythm, one thing immediately stood out.

Mayla wasn't there.

Trafalgar's brows knit together. He scanned the street—right, left, across the square. Nothing. The spot where she'd said she'd wait was empty.

He stepped forward, eyes narrowing. A pair of merchants were whispering near a corner, pointing toward an alleyway up ahead. Something about their faces made his chest tighten.

A ripple of unease coursed through him, his mana stirring instinctively. 'No...'

Without another thought, Trafalgar broke into a run, pushing through the crowd toward the direction they'd pointed—where the sound of a distant commotion echoed faintly through the night air.

The crowd noise faded the deeper Trafalgar ran into the alley. The polished stone of the main street gave way to damp cobblestones and narrow walls, where the glow of the mana lamps barely reached.

"Mayla?" he called, his voice low but sharp, echoing off the walls. No answer. Only the faint hum of the city far behind him.

He slowed his steps, scanning the ground. A half-torn fabric fluttered near a crate—brown cloth, familiar. Trafalgar froze, his pulse spiking. He crouched and picked it up. It was the edge of her sleeve, torn clean through. Her scent lingered faintly on it.

'This is hers...'

The air felt heavier suddenly. He clenched the fabric in his fist, his mana stirring beneath his skin. 'She wouldn't wander off. Someone took her.'

He glanced toward the dark end of the alley—no signs of struggle, no tracks, just silence. Whoever did this had been careful. Too careful.

'Why her?' His mind raced. 'No one here should know who she is. Unless... it's about me.'

He turned sharply, striding back toward the main street, the crowd parting as he moved. 'Who would dare? A random thief? No... not with this precision. They knew where I'd be, and they waited.'

By the time he reached the brighter avenues again, his breathing had steadied, but his expression was ice. He tucked the torn fabric into his pocket and started walking fast—toward the northern district.

'Garrika might still be at the shop. If anyone can help me find her quickly, it's her.'

His boots struck hard against the pavement as he moved, thoughts overlapping faster than he could contain them. 'What if they hurt her? No... don't think that. Find her first. Ask later.'