

Tyrant 221

Chapter 221: Follow Me

The office had fallen silent once Sister Alena left. The soft ticking of an old mana clock was the only sound, steady and faint beneath the hum of the lanterns.

Trafalgar glanced around the room, then at Cynthia, who stood by the desk with her arms crossed.

"So," he said, breaking the silence, "what exactly did you want to show me? Another moral lesson about friendship and responsibility?"

Cynthia didn't answer right away. She simply turned toward the door and said, "Follow me."

He blinked. "That's not ominous at all."

Without another word, she stepped into the dim hallway. Trafalgar sighed and followed, boots echoing lightly on the creaking floorboards. The orphanage felt different at night—peaceful, alive in a quiet way. He could still hear muffled laughter downstairs and the faint clatter of dishes being washed.

Cynthia led the way up the narrow staircase to the third floor. The lanterns flickered along the wall, casting soft golden light on her hair. She didn't look back once.

Trafalgar shoved his hands into his pockets, his thoughts trailing somewhere between caution and curiosity.

'Alright, she's quiet, serious, and leading me somewhere isolated... either she's going to show me something sentimental or throw me off the roof. Fifty-fifty chance.'

They reached the top of the stairs, where the hallway narrowed and dust gathered in the corners. Cynthia stopped before a small wooden hatch in the ceiling, faintly outlined by the glow of the nearest lamp.

She looked back at him with a hint of a smile. "We're here."

Trafalgar tilted his head. "You brought me to... a ceiling?"

"You'll see."

She reached up, pulling down a rope attached to the hatch. With a soft creak, a narrow ladder unfolded and hit the floor with a thud.

Trafalgar raised an eyebrow. "You sure this isn't the part where you push me through first?"

Cynthia rolled her eyes but her lips curved slightly. "If I wanted you gone, I'd choose something faster."

"Good to know," he said dryly, though his tone held more amusement than wariness.

The faint sound of night wind filtered down from above as the trapdoor swung open, carrying a cool breath of air and the scent of the city beyond.

"Go on," Cynthia said, stepping aside. "I'll climb first."

Cynthia tightened her grip on the ladder and began to climb. The wood creaked softly beneath her as she ascended, her light summer dress swaying with each step.

Trafalgar looked away almost immediately, rubbing the back of his neck. 'Great. A ladder, a dress, and me. Fantastic combination.' He stared determinedly at the opposite wall, eyes fixed on absolutely nothing. 'Let's just pretend this ceiling pattern is fascinating.'

A cool draft drifted down from the open trapdoor, carrying the faint scent of rain-soaked stone and wildflowers from the city gardens. Above, Cynthia pushed the hatch fully open, the hinges whining softly.

"I'm up," she called down. "Your turn."

He hesitated a moment, glancing up only when it was safe. "You're sure you're not going to close it on me, right?"

Cynthia leaned slightly over the edge, her silver-white hair catching the lantern light. "I thought about it," she said with a teasing smirk, "but it'd be too noisy."

"Comforting," he muttered, placing a foot on the first rung.

The ladder shifted slightly under his weight as he climbed, the faint hum of the orphanage fading below him. When his head finally rose through the trapdoor, the first thing that hit him was the wind—cool and steady, brushing against his skin like a sigh.

He climbed the rest of the way and stepped onto the roof. The tiles were worn but stable, their surface shimmering faintly under the glow of Velkaris's distant lights.

Cynthia stood near the center of the roof, her hair and dress moving gently with the evening breeze. For a moment, Trafalgar found himself just... staring. She didn't look like the composed, strict girl who scolded him hours ago—she looked softer, almost free.

He quickly caught himself and looked around instead. "So... this is it? The secret ceiling you wanted to show me?"

Cynthia glanced at him over her shoulder, the faintest smile tugging at her lips. "Not quite. Come here and look."

Trafalgar sighed but walked toward her anyway, boots scraping lightly against the tiles. The view wasn't anything spectacular—no grand skyline, no divine glow. Just rooftops, lanterns, and narrow streets stretching into the dim horizon. But there was something peaceful about it.

He stopped beside her. "Alright, I'm here. What now?"

"Now," Cynthia said softly, looking out over the rooftops, "you see it the way I do."

The wind carried a faint chill across the rooftop, rippling through Cynthia's hair as she sat down near the edge. She patted the tiles beside her, and Trafalgar—after a hesitant glance—joined her.

From up here, Velkaris looked smaller, humbler. The streets below were lined with flickering lanterns and the sounds of evening life: distant laughter, faint conversation, the creak of carts rolling home. In the windows of the houses nearby, warm light spilled out—families gathered at tables, children chasing each other through cramped living rooms, mothers setting plates down with tired but happy smiles.

It wasn't a breathtaking view, but it was alive.

Cynthia rested her hands on her knees. "When Barth and I were little, we used to sneak up here. Sister Alena scolded us the first few times, but after a while... she let us."

Trafalgar tilted his head slightly. "Why here?"

"Because from here," she said, pointing toward the rows of glowing homes, "we could see everything we didn't have... and everything we wanted to protect."

He stayed silent.

Cynthia smiled faintly, her voice soft but steady. "We didn't have money, or parents, or anything fancy. But every night, Barth would tell me, 'If they can laugh like that, then maybe we can too someday.' I didn't believe him at first, but... somehow, it stuck."

Trafalgar looked at her, the moonlight reflecting in her golden eyes. There was no sadness there—just quiet strength.

"So, you became the strong one," he said slowly. "The one who made sure he could keep laughing."

Cynthia chuckled softly. "Someone had to. Barth's always been shy. Timid, even when he was small. If I didn't speak for him, he'd stay silent forever."

"Sounds familiar," Trafalgar murmured. "Still the same now."

She smiled at that. "Yeah... but he's trying. I think meeting you helped with that."

He blinked, caught off guard. "Me?"

Cynthia nodded, her tone thoughtful. "You treat him like an equal. Not a charity case, not someone to pity. Just... a friend. I think he needed that."

Trafalgar looked away, eyes drifting back to the rooftops below. 'A friend, huh? I wasn't trying to be one. But maybe... that's exactly why it worked.'

The wind picked up again, carrying the scent of bread and smoke from the city. For a moment, neither of them spoke. The silence wasn't awkward—just calm.

Cynthia's voice finally broke it. "When you said earlier that you envied us... I didn't understand it. But now, looking at this—maybe I do."

Trafalgar turned his head slightly. "Yeah. Guess we're both learning new things tonight."

Their gazes met briefly before she turned back toward the city. Down below, laughter echoed faintly from the street—real, ordinary happiness.

The wind had grown gentler, carrying the last traces of laughter from the streets below. Cynthia stood, brushing the dust from her dress. "We should go. It's getting late," she said softly.

Trafalgar stretched his arms and nodded. "Yeah, before Sister Alena locks us up here for the night."

Cynthia rolled her eyes and moved toward the trapdoor. She crouched, gripping the ladder carefully. The breeze tugged at her dress again as she started climbing down. Trafalgar turned away immediately, staring determinedly at the horizon. 'Not this again. I'm not losing progress with her because of gravity.'

"Be careful," he called down. "The ladder's a bit unstable."

"I've climbed it a hundred times," Cynthia replied, voice muffled from below.

A moment later, her feet touched the floorboards, and she looked up at him from the hallway below.
"Your turn."

Trafalgar began descending, boots thudding lightly on each rung. When he reached the bottom, Cynthia was waiting with her arms crossed, wearing a faintly suspicious look.

"Trafalgar," she said flatly.

He blinked. "...What?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "You didn't happen to look up while I was climbing up before, did you?"

He froze, halfway through turning toward the hallway. "What? No! Of course not!"

Cynthia's lips curved into a faint smirk. "Good. Because if you did, I'd make you regret it."

"Yeah, no problem," he muttered, clearing his throat and walking ahead quickly. 'Definitely does this on purpose.'

They stepped out into the corridor. From the window nearby, Trafalgar caught sight of Barth outside, carrying a small bag of trash to the bins, waving politely at a few younger kids chasing each other under the lantern light.

Cynthia's expression softened. "He's happy here," she murmured.

Trafalgar nodded, watching quietly. "Yeah... he really is."