

35. Flirting with Disaster



Vagrant stepped aside and made a sweeping gesture with his hand, allowing us both entry. Serkis stepped aside and let me pass, then moved in behind me. Vagrant waited for us both before clicking the door shut. He moved around to face us.

“And what brings you girls to my end of town?”

Serkis smiled, I could feel it from behind. “Actually, we were kind of wondering what you were doing here, being a new father and everything.” Serkis had a hand on my back, edging me closer to him. He smiled in response.

“I’m a very busy man.”

We both looked around. Serkis laughed a little. “Looks like it. Doesn’t it, Harley?”

I stepped away from her. “You’d think that a busy man like you

could find time for his family? Isn't family the most important thing to you?"

He smiled back at me. "Sometimes. Depends. When things need to be done. Well, you know how it goes. There are other people that require my attention."

"Like who?" I asked.

He looked me over. "Like...you, for instance. What if I wasn't here right now? You couldn't come over here to see me."

"Very true. And that would have been a tragedy."

He laughed a little and moved away to get a drink. He looked us both over. "Like one?"

Serkis made a request of him, moving to my side, a hand on my shoulder. "And she'll have the same." I looked at her. Vagrant smiled wider. But his smiles weren't smiles – they were wicked grins. He was working on his own drink.

"Isn't she a bit young to be playing with the big boys?"

I stepped away from her, took a few steps over to him. "I think you should be more worried that I'm too old to be playing games."

He laughed. "Depends on the game, kid." He held out the two glasses, both of which I took. I reached back and handed Serkis hers, keeping mine close, sipping in front of him. He watched closely, his eyes moving from one to the other.

"You girls still haven't told me what brought you here."

I stepped closer. "We just...missed you. You've been so distant lately."

He came around to me; he was less than a foot away from me. "I guess I'll have to work on that. I'd hate to have you think I didn't like you."

I took a step back to find Serkis' hand on my back. She was letting me know she was there. She wouldn't let it go too far. I had to keep him smiling. Keep him happy. Make him look one way while she got him to look another. She wanted a good clean kill. One shot. Point blank. And then they'd blame a competitor. She had the silencer on the gun, tucked into her own waistband in the back. She was moving away a little, to the side, to line up her shot. To escape his point of vision. I stepped back to where I was.

"I'd never think something silly like that."

He smiled. "Sure you would. You're just a silly little girl."

"Am I?"

His eyes hardened. "Yeah. You are. You're a silly little girl who is trying to play with the big boys. And all you're going to get is trouble. Go home. And stay there. Let the big bad take care of themselves." He shot a glance over to Serkis; she'd pulled the gun out and left it at her side. I jumped forward and kissed him to get his attention elsewhere. His whole body froze for a minute then he loosened up and tried to hold on to me. I pulled away. His eyes were still locked on me. I pulled back, breathing hard.

"Just think – a silly little girl did you in."

Freeze. That deer in the headlights look. That infamous "huh?" expression, seconds before it happens. They don't know. They can't think or move. He looked at me not with contempt but with admiration. There was a sense of respect. I had thrown him off track. He wheeled around to Serkis. She smiled, the gun leveled in her hand.

"Goodbye, lover." Click.

"You...bitch," he muttered. Bang.

Serkis dropped her arm, the gun still smoking. She looked at

him as his body locked up, dropping eventually. "Yeah...I guess I can be. Don't tell anybody though, huh?"

She looked around, finishing her drink and motioning for me to do the same. I think we both knocked them back in a single draught. Serkis looked around the place, moving over to the window. She took my glass and hers and dropped them out. We watched them fall for the few seconds, listening to the distant crash. I didn't understand until I saw a bunch of guys arrive to investigate. She grabbed my arm and dragged me out the door. And we ran. Like Hell.

We got back to the street and took off for the car, which I drove back to Sylum's. We sat in it for a while, parked, the motor shut down. Serkis touched me again, to get my attention. I felt miles away. Like I wasn't part of the waking world anymore. I jumped and looked at her.

"Hey."

"Hey, kid. Listen, I'm here to talk, if you want, about all this, what happened. You know? We're all here for you. Anytime. No matter what. This' a family."

"Some family. Taking out its own."

She sighed. "You need sleep. You'll feel better, come on. It'll do you good. I've got to get back to Pandora. She'll be home in a few days. You go up there and help the boys, will you? Please? And if you can't do it, go for a walk. Okay? I'm sorry and we're here for you and we love you. Alright?"

I was trying desperately to zone in. She'd pulled out the big guns when she brought love into it. She loved Layne. Loving me was something different. I don't know. It was something that we knew and felt and understood but seldom ever said. I nodded to her and got out of the car. She came around to me. I couldn't look at her.

“Listen, it’ll be better now, okay? We got babies to look after. Come on, the boys are probably burning the place down up there. I need you to be the grown up.” She poked me and I looked at her, smiling. Serkis knew how to get to people sometimes. I nodded, even though I didn’t care too much.

“Yeah. I’ll see you later.” I moved to walk away. To check on the boys. To sleep. To do whatever I was told to. Whatever they decided for me. She grabbed me before I could go and hugged me, holding me close. I didn’t feel confined or captive, I didn’t want to scream or tear away. I wanted to stay there because it was safe. No matter how bad it was, if Serkis told me that it would be okay, it would. I don’t know why I believed her, or why her words sunk in and stayed when nothing else did. But that’s how things worked. She held onto me until I wasn’t cold anymore. And she knew it.

“Come on. Sleep will make it better, okay? We’ll talk later if you want. I’ll meet up with you all in a little bit. I want Pandora to be on the same page. And we’ll talk to Sylum and see if it’s okay for everyone to go home. Layne and I intend to move in with Pandora and we’ll all work on raising these kids. And you can come stay awhile if you want – it’s a big place, if you ever get lonely, you know, stay a few nights. We’ll work it out, okay? Sylum should be over in awhile. Talk to him. I’m going to go on the rounds though, I’ll be back soon, I promise.”

She pulled away a little, but held onto my arms. She kissed me on the cheek and let go. And she walked away, looking back every little bit to make sure I was still there. Even when I’d turned to go into the building, I could feel her eyes searching for me. I was devoted to her. I was devoted to her and Layne. And whatever they were devoted to. I was the child. Until now. Because now there were real children.

An empire without a king. Streets with a barely broken-in boss. Trouble was brewing. Or had we already come past it? I

trudged up the familiar stairs to Sylum's apartment, knowing it would be locked, knocking carefully on the door. I waited a few seconds, knowing I wouldn't be able to hear anything on the inside. Layne opened the door, his face flushed. With the open door came a wave of sound, mostly the screaming child. I was dragged in and the kid was almost thrown at me by a frantic Grey. I looked around to find ashtrays all over, nearly overflowing in some. Poor Grey. I would've laughed if he hadn't charged out of the place so abruptly. Layne was pacing around after closing the door behind him.

"I'm sorry...we just don't know what to do with it. It just won't stop," Layne's voice was panicked, like he jumped off a plane without a parachute. I smiled at him, the frantic look in his eye, searching for more smokes. I bounced the kid on my hip a few times and shushed it as much as I could. In about ten minutes it was quiet. In about twenty it was asleep.

Layne had collapsed on the couch. I went over and sat next to him. He was exhausted, his head back, eyes on the ceiling.

"Now, how the hell did you do that?" he muttered. I smiled and laughed softly.

"I'm a girl."

He laughed to himself. "Figures. We tried everything, and all this time, that's what we were lacking. Figures."

I glared at him. "Should I be insulted?"

He looked over. "Nah. But it goes to show you exactly how helpless we are without you around. And our girls kick ass to boot. Now *that's* a plus."

I laughed softly, holding the baby close. When I was fairly confident that it would be okay, I asked Layne if he wanted it back. He shook his head, but after awhile of convincing, he took the kid from me.

“Do me a favor, huh? Don’t call the kid an “it” no more, huh? It’s a he. Thanks.”

I laughed as I got up to stretch. “Sure thing.”

I walked around a little bit, getting reacquainted with the place. Everything was as I remembered. I went back and checked the little room I used to stay in. It was untouched. I didn’t really expect it to be any different, but it was worth checking. I looked around. Layne wasn’t having any serious problems. I curled up on the mattress to collect my thoughts, to clear my mind. To let go of whatever was bothering me. But soon enough, I was out cold too. Sleeping to make up for the madness, the blood and tears lost. The lives ended. Would consequence come? Or would we get away with it? I didn’t truly care. I went to sleep. The family would take care of itself. It always does.