
Chapter 1

Maxim

He lost her. He fucking lost her.

It was all Maxim could think, all he could fucking feel. Jonathan laughed from somewhere deep in the house as Maxim paced through the brownstone, hurrying to find him. Maxim wanted war. He wanted death. He wanted to find his uncle and search out the meaning for the betrayal and the hurt he had caused him. Why? Why had his relative done this to him? It didn't seem plausible that one-minute Iolanthe was nearly his for the taking, and the next she was spread out like a banquet, with Jonathan lavishing all thought and attention on her. His fists clenched, the same as his heart. Why?

He followed the manic laughter. Down the stairs, into the dark basement, into the cells below. Jonathan stood in the black of the dungeon, his taunting derision making Maxim ready to plunge his knife into Jonathan's belly. He didn't though. There were some things for which he had to show restraint, and his uncle was the one person he'd promised to always care for. He

failed many, many times, and it constantly grieved him. Maybe this was his penance, losing Iolanthe. Losing the one woman—

He focused, avoiding the angry and bitter sobs that wanted to rack over his body. He turned to his uncle. Jonathan's viperous tease lifted the shackles upon his skin.

"Why did you do it, Jonny?" he asked.

The laughter stopped. His uncle laid his hands upon the metal bars of a cell, caressing them as a lover would.

Jonathan clicked his tongue, examining him. "You want her. A shame."

Maxim flinched. He said nothing. He wouldn't dignify his hurt. He answered quietly, his hands outspread, taming a violently wild beast.

"Why did you do it?" he asked again.

He had to know. Why?

Jonathan cackled, a disgusting parade of pride and tribulation. Introspectively he looked at Maxim, but there was nothing gentle or kind in his gaze.

"If I had been normal," Jonathan said in mock sadness.

Was he truly upset, a man given to torment and pain? No, decidedly not, though Maxim once thought his uncle capable of normal emotion. Numbness radiated from him, a psychopath's destructive force. Despite his ability to consume violence and rage, Maxim didn't understand mindlessness. He felt a shiver of unease inside. His uncle kept speaking.

"If I had been given a useful body or a useful way of life..."

He paused and licked his lips while looking at Maxim, lasciviously and with disgusting lewdness, as if he perused Maxim for a sexual mark. He continued.

"Then maybe. Maybe I would have let you keep her."

Maxim growled. "You're a bastard."

"No..." Jonathan laughed again. "That distinction falls to you."

Whispering, Maxim looked helplessly to the man before him,

the man who controlled him by guilt and his own shame. He found himself begging. Him—the Master.

“What am I supposed to do? She’s gone.”

“You sent her away, not me.” Jonathan crowed with delight. “The one woman you could love, and your own damned pride got in the way. Did you really think I wanted to fuck her?”

Maxim’s brow furrowed and his fists clenched tighter, creating bloody indentations in his palms. “You had her on the—”

“She’s a lovely woman, yes. Definitely fuckable,” Jonathan said, his hazel eyes riveted on Maxim’s reaction. Maxim fought not to give one. Jonathan continued, smugly proud. “Her nipples feel like—”

“Enough!” Maxim spat his defeat. He whispered as he shook his head, “Enough. I understand. You hate me, and by proxy... her.”

“True.”

Jonathan’s hand stroked the metal bar like a man easing an erection. He sighed with false pleasure. Maxim startled.

Again, his uncle laughed. “You see how easy it is to lie? She never knew how much I wanted to wrap my fingers around her pretty neck and take her breath away.”

Maxim stepped forward. “If you had...”

“You’d what? Banish me, too?”

That made Maxim pause mid-step. Jonathan smirked.

“You want her, maybe even love her. You’d do anything for her, I think. And you sent her away. How wonderful.”

“Is this all because...” Maxim couldn’t say the damning words, yet he had to. The agony felt ripe, the burden his own. He swallowed hard. “Because of that night?”

Jonathan cooed. “Of course. You stole my life away from me that night and gave it to her.” His beautifully devious eyes narrowed. “Fuck you.”

Maxim couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think.

“You never acted like you cared,” he said finally, giving back

the venom as good as he got. “You went and fucked any man who would take you.”

Jonathan’s eyes filled with loathing. “Yes...” he hissed. “That’s all I’m good for now. To bend over and take it in the ass. You made me a fucking whore, a slut.”

“I didn’t—”

Maxim reached out along with his exclaimed, broken words, but Jonathan pulled out a knife, waving it about with threat and promise. Hate issued in the air.

“You created a fucking monster,” Jonathan said calmly. Too calm. Numb.

He placed the knife back under his shirt, in its hidden holster. Maxim relaxed only a little when it was gone.

“You’re not a monster,” Maxim said.

He lied. Jonathan’s agenda was different than his own, and it involved retribution of the darkest kind. He couldn’t let his uncle hurt Iolanthe. Thank fuck he’d sent his soldiers with her when she left.

Jonathan lazily leaned against the cell bars, watching him. “So, my dear nephew. What are you going to do, hmm? Make her stay away from you because of your pridefully caused exile, or bring her back into your loving embrace?”

Maxim cringed. His uncle laughed, that disgusting laugh that made him want to renege his offer to care for him no matter what. In the moment, he wanted to slaughter him, to string him up in the market square as he’d always threatened to do. Weighing the matter, he knew he had few options. Kill his relative? That meant never. Find Iolanthe and beg her back? Possibly, though Maxim could only do it now with conditions. Take control of the situation as he’d always done and override everyone? That was something Maxim knew he could handle, a job he lusted for much as he longed for Iolanthe back in his arms.

But the other options weren’t options at all. Jonathan would’ve liked his humbling, that humiliating reconciliation to

Iolanthe, and the damned kneeling before him as a self-professed slave. That was something Maxim would never do—bow. Yet he feared Jonathan would never be satisfied with less. They were at war. And as of this moment, his uncle was winning.

He hissed with restraint, and Jonathan smirked. Fuck how he wanted to smear that smarmy grin off his uncle's face.

"I can't bring her back," he said finally.

"No?"

Jonathan pretended disappointment, though obvious glee was in his voice. His usually dead-looking eyes lit up.

"A shame," his uncle said, leaning precariously against the metal bars. Maxim wondered how he didn't slide down into a ball of lubricious jelly from his slumped state. "What are you going to do, then?"

Maxim's jaw tightened. He didn't want to say, but he owed the man before him too much. His life, his body, his future; Jonathan hadn't lied when he said Maxim had stolen everything from him. Giving it back; that was something he couldn't do. He couldn't repair a broken man's life. And he couldn't make a monstrous soul, moral. He bent his head in near defeat. His body nearly followed. Jonathan smiled.

He answered, his voice soft, "I'm going to do what I set out to do."

Jonathan's eyebrows raised. Maxim continued, his voice strengthening.

"I'm going to take down Elysium. And then I'm going to take down the world."