

by Inrakdan

Chapter 1

Charlie Grinnan fidgeted in his chair. It was too comfortable, and ironically so, considering everyone who'd sat in it before him prayed they would never meet its warm embrace again. He glanced at the clock. *Only one minute left.* He sighed, and slipped his wedding band up and down his finger. Thinking of Vanessa and his daughters always calmed him down, but he could only worry for the moment. If he got fired, he knew he could always ask her father for a job, but his ego was far too big to let him. *Maybe Gracie will let us sell her brownies,* he thought, stifling a laugh at the too-soft-to-hold, eggshell laden desserts, a batch of which were surely popping out of the oven at home at that very moment.

"He's ready for you now." Jessica nodded toward the large oak double doors as she put the phone back into the receiver. "Good luck, you look like you'll need it," she snickered as Charlie made his way into the office.

It wasn't as regal as he'd been expecting. No certificates of achievement lined the walls, and there was minimal furniture. The grandeur was held by the view of the city from the floor-to-ceiling windows. It was an empire in its own right; fifteen years ago it had barely been a town, but the man now standing with his back to Charlie had made his way to the top and taken his city with him.

"Where's Wilson?" His boss's voice was far calmer and kinder than Charlie was prepared for. *Maybe he's nicer than everyone says.* With a small boost of confidence, he stepped forward.

"No one's seen him since the robbery, sir."

"You think he took it?"

"No sir, I was the last one who had it."

Charlie jumped as his superior spun around in a motion far too quick for the man's age. Though he fought to maintain his composure, his eyes revealed the fury he felt and the blame he had placed squarely on Charlie's shoulders.

"Charlie, I believe?"

"Yes sir. Charlie Grinnan."

“Do you like tea, Charlie?” The man spoke sweetly as he opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out an old wooden box. He pressed a button and Charlie heard Jessica’s desk phone beep faintly outside the double doors.

“Yes sir, my wife Vanessa brews me a cup of Earl Grey every morning. She’ll be wondering where I am now...” He glanced at his watch, if only to look away from the man staring daggers into his heart.

“I’ll be sure to send Vanessa a personal apology for keeping you late,” he spoke curtly, as Jessica brought in a saucer with a steaming cup sitting neatly atop it. “I, unfortunately, cannot drink tea, doctor’s orders.” The older man dropped a single teabag from the box into the water and tucked the box back into the drawer. “Why don’t you tell me how you managed to lose my most prized possession while we wait for this to brew?”

“Sir we followed your instructions exactly. I was guarding Wilson with the other men while we he moved it, but he couldn’t read how to open the vault without his glasses. He handed it to me to read, and I was the one who put it inside after we got the door open.” Charlie could feel his pulse racing; even as he was handed the cup of tea. He took a gulp and felt it burn through his chest.

“So it was in the vault then. How could you have possibly lost it in the vault?”

“Sir we were closing the door and I happened to look in one last time when I saw her hop out and grab it off the stand. As I swung it open again Wilson rushed in and fired twice.”

“Wilson never misses.”

“Maybe he doesn’t, but by the time the rest of us stepped inside both of them were gone, and so was the book.”

Charlie had taken a seat across from the man. He sipped the last of his tea and put the cup and saucer back on the desk. It had been more acrid than he was used to, and he was glad the cup had been so small. The man pressed his fingers to his temples in frustration for a long moment before he spoke.

“Charlie, what would you do, if you were me?” His boss had taken a pleasant tone once again, and Charlie wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or unnerved. “I’ve lost a fortune and the only ones left to pay for it are you and a couple of useless thugs.”

“Sir I assure you, we’re doing everything in our power...” Charlie gasped suddenly. His breaths felt short but he fought to keep speaking. “...We’re doing everything we can to find it...I’m sorry, do you have any water?” He struggled to breathe and his vision began to blur. He began to stand up to leave but collapsed just in front of the double doors.

"Water wouldn't help you with cyanide anyway. What's the matter, didn't like my tea as much as Vanessa's?" The man chuckled, more to himself than writhing body on his pristine marble floor. "Someone always has to pay. I'll be sure to offer her my condolences, don't you worry." He pressed the button on his desk once more and Jessica appeared at the door.

“Should I have Miles take care of this sir?” She gestured toward the now nearly-still Charlie.

“If you wouldn't mind too terribly,” he scoffed, and flashed a toothy grin. “And sweetheart, for such matters, please have them take their tea while they wait. As useless as they are, we might as well lay waste to them instead of my time.”