

An Unreasonable Man

by

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THEATRE DRESSING ROOM. LODZ, POLAND, 1867.

An opulent room - all gilt and red velvet. A dressing table and stool, a chaise long. There is a mirror on the wall and a costume dummy nearby wears a doublet and hose.

Terence, white, 20's, English, enters with a suitcase. He goes to the dressing table, opens the case and starts to lay out pots, potions, make up sticks in a very particular order. He places a small pile of letters in the centre of the arrangement. He then brings out scrolls, medals and ornate silver pins and displays them around the mirror.

MAN O/S

Terence, open the fucking door!

The door opens to reveal Ira Aldridge, 60, black American, in a heavy overcoat. He carries a large box and his breathing is laboured.

TERENCE

I was going to come and get you sir.

IRA

Too late.

TERENCE

Evidently.

IRA

What?

TERENCE

Yes sir.

IRA

Take this.

Terence takes the box.

IRA (CONT'D)

This coat...feels...like a dead weight on my back. Get it off me ...it's dragging me down.

Terence removes Ira's coat and hangs it up.

TERENCE

You're still in your pyjamas sir.

IRA

What?

TERENCE

You're still in your pyjamas.

IRA

I heard you first time, I meant what is your point?

TERENCE

Well...usually you dress to come to the theatre.

IRA

Ah but I have learned something Terence. What is the point huh? Of getting out of bed, spending all that valuable energy dressing to arrive here and change again? There is no point.

TERENCE

If you have visitors...

IRA

I shall receive them in my dressing gown.

TERENCE

Mrs Aldridge...

IRA

Will know nothing of it.

TERENCE

She made me promise...

IRA

You weren't there to help me. If you tell, I'll tell and you'll get punished first.

TERENCE

How old are you sir?

IRA

Old enough.

TERENCE

My mother sent some tonic for your chest sir, a herbal mix she said.

Terence gives Ira a bottle.

IRA

How is she?

TERENCE
Extremely grateful for your...

IRA
We all need a helping hand at some time.

TERENCE
Most people don't have the good fortune to get one.

IRA
Smells potent.

TERENCE
She said it has liquorice root in it.

IRA
I'll save it for later. Thank her for her kindness.

TERENCE
She...Yes sir.

IRA
And send the landlord something... substantial. Thank him for his ...discretion. Did I rave? Was I entertaining?

TERENCE
Never entertaining sir. Do you think this is wise...?

IRA
You see the full moon Terence? Like a saucer of milk, hanging so low I could drink it. Shame I ain't got no appetite.

Ira starts to remove his boots, Terence helps.

IRA (CONT'D)
Has it really been two weeks?

TERENCE
Yes sir.

IRA
Was I worse than last time?

TERENCE

No, the doctor was hopeful from the start....

IRA

Always a bad sign. I blame that journey, I should've rested I know, but those trains are so relentless, I just wanted to get here. At least the track actually comes into Lodz now. Two weeks...

TERENCE

There is a gentleman at stage door who....

IRA

Can't waste more time. Are we ready?

TERENCE

Yes sir.

Ira walks over to the mirror. Terence follows with a scrap book. Ira nods. Terence reads.

TERENCE (CONT'D)

"Ira Aldridge is the lion of St Petersburg...His face is the fiery mirror of his soul...this original genius is equal to everything... such a quivering movement of his spine, his shoulders, my very own body was shaking; in my imagination I saw the history of a whole people..."

Ira indicates for Terence to stop.

IRA

You need to work on your intent.

TERENCE

Yes sir.

Ira rolls up his sleeve and rubs oil into a large scar.

IRA

I have this sensation like a...a vibration. Do you get that?

TERENCE

No sir, I can't say I do.

IRA

Like I can't settle. As soon as I rest it returns. Like I'm running but I'm not am I?

TERENCE

No sir.

IRA

No sir...Health is an unreliable master Terence, it dictates everything, forces you to bow when you should leap.

Ira opens his box and brings out a crown and sceptre.

IRA (CONT'D)

I shall give Lear tonight.

TERENCE

Sir?

IRA

Are you grown deaf in just two weeks?

TERENCE

The censors banned Lear sir.

IRA

So? I will not be dictated to. They controlled my repertoire in Petersburg, they will not do that here. They are bullies and shall be dealt with as such. If a nation is dissolved do it's people cease to exist? No, this is still Poland. Let the Russians know they cannot suppress art.

TERENCE

There will be serious consequences.

IRA

Nothing I can't handle. They lost Crimea, they shall lose me. I shall give Lear.

TERENCE

You're being difficult.

IRA

I've earned it.

Terence gathers up the doublet and hose.

TERENCE
Your letters...The gentleman at...

IRA
Not now.

Terence exits. Ira sifts through the letters. One letter stops him. He tears it in two and throws it in a drawer.

He sits and tries to remove his socks but cannot. A knock at the door.

IRA (CONT'D)
Yes?

FEMALE VOICE
It is Clara.

IRA
Enter!

Clara, 20's, white Polish, not particularly upmarket, enters.

CLARA
Mr Aldridge. Madam Doloretta sends respects.

IRA
I have not had the opportunity to call upon her as yet.

CLARA
She heard you were better.

IRA
Fast isn't she?

CLARA
I come in?

Ira nods. She closes the door.

IRA
Remove your coat Clara, it seems you're staying.

She does so.

IRA (CONT'D)
I have chosen to do Lear tonight. What do you think of that?

CLARA

I do not know...

IRA

You do not know what you think? Or you do not know Lear?

CLARA

I...

IRA

Undo your hair Clara, it's too severe.

She does so.

IRA (CONT'D)

It's about a king reduced by his daughters.

CLARA

I do not understand reduced.

IRA

Compressed, diminished, shrunk. I've know many such men. You too I imagine. He carves up his kingdom and misery and death follow. They fear I'm telling you what you don't already know. This regime is peopled with fools.

Clara waits.

IRA (CONT'D)

What is it you want Clara?...At your age I wanted the impossible. Your ambitions are more modest I imagine. More manageable.

He lifts a foot toward her.

IRA (CONT'D)

My socks defeated me.

She bends down and peels his socks off. Ira looks down her cleavage. She starts to undo his trousers. His breathing becomes more laboured. He looks at her with longing but stops her hand.

CLARA

What did I do?...I hurt you?...I do anything... Tell me what you want I do it.

IRA

I do not want to see how old I have become.

Clara nods, gets up and puts out the lights. The stage is dark. The sound of fumbling, Ira's breathing, footsteps...

CLARA

I don't...what...?

The light comes on. Ira is fastening his trousers. Clara wipes her mouth.

IRA

Get out.

CLARA

Do not be angry...you have been sick...

IRA

Don't you dare pity me!

CLARA

Give me a chance...If you relax...

IRA

Get out!!

CLARA

I could...I...I...my payment....

He throws some coins out of the door. Clara exits to pick them up. Ira slams the door. His breathing is hard, a panic attack? He pulls at his collar. He leans against the door, frightened.

Joshua Aldridge, 20, black American, enters. He holds a travelling bag.

JOSHUA

Ira!...Ira! Ain't got time to be daydreamin'. Over here. Come on! Move.

New York Harbour, 1824. Passengers mill around, families, uniformed porters, street hawkers.