Let There Be Light After Us

Two ambitions don't have to cast each other in shadow



Laura Bellini

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ROMANS

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

The first thing I felt when I entered the workshop was the heat. Not the comforting warmth of home or the dry air from a radiator. This heat was dense, almost tangible, settling against my skin and beneath my clothes, carrying the smell of metal, dust, and something mineral I couldn't identify. I stopped behind a yellow line painted across the floor and watched a man on the other side of the workshop rotate a ball of molten glass at the end of a long blowpipe. It was orange, almost white at its centre, like a tiny sun held in the hands of someone who knew exactly how much freedom he could allow it.

That was precisely why I'd come here.

Not for the sun.

For control.

I had forty-two minutes before my meeting, a folder full of drawings, and a plan I'd been working on for seven months. Six lamps. One collection. Hand-shaped glass, without any pretence of perfection, with a subtle shift in the axis of the light that would make each piece look different after dark than it did during the day. I'd found the right technology, calculated the costs, and spoken to galleries in Warsaw, Berlin, and Copenhagen. All I needed now was a workshop capable of producing the glass exactly as I wanted it.

Maurycy Kłos's workshop.

The mere knowledge that I needed someone else irritated me more than it should have.

I took out my phone, photographed the light reflecting off a steel table, and instinctively dragged my finger across the

screen, as though I could already crop the image into a finished lamp. Glass should diffuse light, not imprison it. Every one of my designs began with that principle. People bought lamps because they needed an object. I designed them so that, after a few weeks, they would stop noticing the object and begin noticing the space it created.

"Ms. Sowa?"

I turned.

The man approaching me didn't look like someone sent from reception to collect a visitor. He wore neither a shirt nor a jacket, only a dark T-shirt, work trousers, and safety glasses pushed up onto his head. The threads of grey at his temples made no attempt to disguise themselves. A pale scar marked his left forearm, his hands were dusted with a fine, matte powder, and there was something decidedly too calm about the way he looked at me for a man who was nine minutes late to a meeting.

I glanced at my watch.

"If you're Maurycy Kłos, then yes."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Are we starting with punctuality?"

"We started nine minutes ago."

"So we are."

He stepped closer and offered his hand. His grip was firm without being demonstrative. The kind of handshake that acknowledged another person's presence rather than trying to prove anything.

"Maurycy Kłos. I'm sorry. One of our glass shades cracked during annealing. I wanted to find out why before I started telling you that everything here works perfectly."

That should have disarmed me.

It didn't.

But it did interest me.

"Perfect things rarely interest me."

He glanced at the folder tucked beneath my arm.

"Then we might get along."

He started down the length of the workshop, and I followed him. He didn't take me to an office. Instead, we passed two furnaces, a table covered with tools, and several wooden moulds darkened by years of use. Every few metres someone stopped him. He answered briefly, never raising his voice. Once, he changed a decision after a worker said a single sentence. Another time, he asked someone not to correct a piece but to leave it alone and examine it after it had cooled. He wasn't playing the part of the owner.

He didn't need to.

And that was precisely the problem.

I liked competent people.

Far too much.

"I was expecting a table, coffee, and a discussion about deadlines," I said.

"You'll get all that later. First, I want to show you why half your drawings won't turn out the way you expect."

I stopped.

He took another two steps before he noticed.

"Excuse me?"

He turned and looked at me without the slightest trace of remorse.

"I've reviewed the materials you sent."

"And you managed to decide in nine minutes that half of them wouldn't work?"

"No. That took me almost two hours yesterday."

I felt the first unmistakable crack appear in my carefully arranged day.

"Interesting that you didn't mention it in your email."

"If I'd written that in an email, you would have replied that we needed to find a way."

"Because we do."

This time, he really smiled.

Not broadly. Not flirtatiously. Like a man who had just heard exactly what he expected to hear.

"That's why I invited you."

I didn't like how a single sentence had been enough to shift my irritation a few inches towards curiosity.

Maurycy opened a heavy door leading into a smaller room. Glass samples lined the shelves: milky, smoky, transparent, and coloured all the way through. Some were smooth, while others were rippled, as though someone had captured the movement of water inside them. In the middle of a table lay a printout of one of my designs.

My drawing was covered in pencil marks.

I walked over immediately.

"Those are my proportions."

"I know."

"You've changed them."

"I've marked the places where the glass will make a different decision from you."

I raised my eyes.

"Glass doesn't make decisions."

"Then you haven't worked with it yet."

I should have found that patronising. Instead, I heard something in his voice that I recognised from my own. Confidence born not from the belief that he was infallible, but from the hundreds of mistakes he'd already made.

Maurycy picked up a small sample of amber glass and held it towards the light. At first glance, it was too heavy, too dark for my design. Then he shifted it a few centimetres, and I saw a thin streak of gold running through the centre of the material.

For a moment, I said nothing.

"Temperature changes the distribution of colour," he explained. "If we try to make exactly what you've drawn, you'll get a beautiful object. If we allow the material to deviate a little from the design, you might get light."

I held out my hand.

He didn't give me the sample immediately.

Our eyes met over the piece of glass.

"May I?" I asked.

Only then did he place it in my palm.

It was cool and heavier than it looked. I moved it beneath the lamp. The golden line appeared again, this time across my fingers.

I could already see the lamp.

Not the one in my drawing.

A better one.

The discovery irritated me almost as much as it delighted me.

"You said half the designs wouldn't work."

"Yes."

"And the other half?"

Maurycy rested one hand on the table. He stood opposite me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of the workshop radiating from him and catch the faint smell of smoke, although I hadn't seen him smoking.

"The other half could be the beginning of something neither of us would ever create alone."

I lowered my gaze to my drawing, now covered in his annotations.

I'd come here to find a manufacturer for my collection. He was supposed to receive the technical documentation, calculate the production costs, and prove that he could bring my idea to life without interfering with what belonged to me.

Less than fifteen minutes later, I was beginning to understand that Maurycy Kłos had no intention of simply carrying out anyone else's instructions.

The worst part was that, for the first time in months, I genuinely wanted to hear what he would suggest.

I lifted my head.

"All right. Will you show me where else you think I'm wrong?"

For a second, he looked at me as though the question meant something more than a discussion about glass.

"If you really want to know."

I did.

And that was why, standing opposite him in the amber light of the glassworks, I thought for the first time that my carefully protected plan might not survive this meeting.

I simply didn't know which frightened me more: that Maurycy might try to change it, or that I might allow him to change something in me as well.

Chapter 1 - The Price of Your Own Light

Maurycy spread three more drawings across the table, and I immediately noticed that he hadn't arranged them in numerical order. He had chosen the ones he considered the most difficult. For a moment, I watched his hands moving the sheets across the wooden surface. They were the hands of a man accustomed to weight, heat, and materials that did not forgive carelessness. Even so, he handled my designs with a gentleness that was almost surprising in someone who had just so unceremoniously challenged half my work.

"Let's start with this one," he said, pointing to the lamp with the asymmetrical shade.

"The most difficult one?"

"The most honest one."

I studied him more closely.

"Do you always speak like that?"

"Like what?"

"As though every sentence you say is meant to be engraved on the workshop wall."

He laughed softly.

"Only when someone tries to convince me that glass should behave like aluminium."

I had no intention of smiling. Unfortunately, I did.

I took an additional sheet from my folder. It showed a technical cross-section of the shade, which Maurycy apparently hadn't received with the documentation I'd sent. I spread it beside his notes and pointed to the place where I intended to conceal the mounting mechanism. The structure

was based on two independent elements. One would bear the load, while the other would only diffuse the light.

"I'm not trying to force glass to do anything it can't," I explained. "I want it to look as though it's suspended in the air without any help from metal."

Maurycy leaned over the cross-section.

"This wasn't in the files."

"Because it's a structural solution, not a production quotation."

"And yet you're expecting a quotation."

"I'm expecting a conversation after which I'll be able to provide the complete documentation."

He was silent for a moment. Then he pushed the earlier drawing aside and pulled the new one towards him.

"In that case, we start again. But this time, we both put our cards on the table."

I didn't answer immediately.

In fifteen years of running my own studio, I'd learned that the word "collaboration" was sometimes an elegant way of describing a situation in which one person supplied the idea and another took control of the story of how it had come into being. I'd already designed for companies that printed my name in their catalogues in a smaller font than the specifications of the power cable. I had no desire to return to those days.

"That depends on what you mean by putting all our cards on the table."

"I'm not interested in your client list or your profit margins. I want to know whether I'm supposed to manufacture six objects or create something with you that doesn't exist yet."

That was the first sentence that genuinely stopped me.

"I came here with a finished collection."

"You came here with six very good designs. That's not quite the same thing."

I should have been offended. Instead, I looked at the amber sample lying beside the drawings. An hour earlier, I hadn't imagined any place for it in my collection. Now I could see how it might transform the most important lamp in the entire set.

"What exactly do you want, Mr. Kłos?"

"Maurycy. If we're going to spend several weeks together, the surname will become tiresome."

"We haven't agreed that we're going to spend several weeks together."

"I know. That's why I'm trying to persuade you."

He raised his eyes, and for the first time since we'd met, there wasn't the slightest hint of a smile on his face.

"I want to co-create this collection. Not merely manufacture it."

A metallic clatter came from the workshop beyond the wall. Someone called out something indistinct, and then I heard the steady hum of the ventilation system again. I thought that under different circumstances, I might have considered his proposal the fulfilment of a professional dream. Working alongside a man who understood his material as thoroughly as I understood light was, after all, exactly what I needed.

The problem was that I hadn't planned to share the helm.

"What would that mean in practice?"

"We work on the forms together. You're responsible for the light, the function, and the visual language of the entire collection. I'm responsible for the glass, the technology, and what the workshop is capable of. If something doesn't work, we both have the right to say no."

"And if we disagree?"

"We find a third solution."

"That sounds lovely until money enters the conversation."

Maurycy nodded.

"Which is why we'll discuss that too."

We sat down at the table. He took out a notebook with a stained cover, not a laptop or a prepared presentation. He wrote down numbers quickly, without embellishment. The cost of moulds, trials, working hours, waste, annealing, and possible corrections. He made no attempt to conceal items that might reflect badly on the workshop. When I asked what percentage of pieces failed during production, he answered without hesitation.

"With this geometry? At the beginning, perhaps twenty-five per cent."

"That's a lot."

"Enough that I won't promise you miracles."

"And later?"

"If we develop the process properly, we should get it below ten."

I began taking notes. At one point, he handed me a pencil before I could reach into my handbag. There was something

strangely intimate about the ordinariness of that small gesture. He had noticed that I needed a tool and simply given it to me. No comment, no interruption to the conversation.

For the next hour, we argued about millimetres, temperatures, and proportions. Maurycy rejected my first suspension solution. I demonstrated that his proposal would worsen the distribution of light and create a dark patch on the ceiling. He brought over a sample of glass with a different thickness. I held my phone's torch against it, then moved the light source to the appropriate angle.

"See?" I asked instinctively.

I didn't realise I'd switched to the informal form of address until he answered.

"I see."

He didn't correct me. He didn't turn it into a joke. He simply stood beside me so he could look from the same perspective.

That was when I first realised how easily I could become accustomed to his presence.

Not to his appearance, although it was difficult not to notice the broad shoulders and composed face of a man who made no attempt to conceal his forty-seven years. It was more the way he listened. He didn't merely wait for his turn to speak. When I presented an argument, he examined it, even if it contradicted something he'd previously believed.

I had been missing that kind of attention for a long time.

At around two o'clock, a woman in a navy-blue apron entered the room. She had short hair and the expression of

someone who hadn't allowed herself to be surprised in years.

"Maurycy, Andrzej wants to know whether you're approving tomorrow's trial. And we've received confirmation from the printers."

She handed him two documents.

"Thanks, Ewa. I'll be there in ten minutes."

The woman looked at me with friendly curiosity.

"Are you the lady with the lamps?"

"Liliana Sowa."

"Ewa Borkowska. My job is to make sure this man doesn't promise clients things we can't actually manufacture."

"He's promised me very little today."

"That means he cares."

Maurycy sighed.

"Ewa."

"I'm leaving."

When the door closed, I noticed that one of the documents concerned the workshop's catalogue. A large logo dominated the top of the page: KŁOS. GLASS AND LIGHT. Beneath it were photographs of several elegant objects.

"You have your own product line?" I asked.

Maurycy covered the document with his notebook, but not quickly enough for the movement to look accidental.

"For a few years now. A small one."

"And you want to expand it?"

"I want the workshop to be known for more than just fulfilling other people's orders."

I understood why my collection might interest him more than our initial conversation had suggested.

"So we both have something to prove."

He looked at me.

"To whom?"

"Depends on the day."

For a moment, I thought he might ask for more. He didn't. He closed the notebook and pushed back his chair.

"Come on. There's something else I want to show you."

He led me into a small room behind the main workshop, where a lamp stood on a metal stand. It looked nothing like anything in his catalogue. The shade was irregular, almost transparent on one side and as dark as strong tea on the other. Light passed through it unevenly, casting a soft streak across the wall.

"This was an experiment from two years ago," he said. "It never went into production."

"Why not?"

"I couldn't find the right structure for it."

I knelt to examine the base. It was heavy, far too substantial. It destroyed the glass's sense of lightness.

"I know what's wrong."

"I thought you might."

"You don't need a base. You need a counterweight hidden in the mounting."

Maurycy crouched beside me.

"That's exactly what I thought when I saw your design number four."

I turned my head. Our faces were closer than an ordinary professional conversation required. I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and a small cut on his chin. He smelled of soap, wood, and something warm that I couldn't separate from the scent of the workshop.

He didn't pull away abruptly.

Neither did I.

"So that's why you invited me?" I asked more quietly.

"Among other reasons."

"And the other reasons?"

He stood first and offered me his hand. I accepted it, although I didn't need help.

"We haven't worked those out yet."

We returned to the table with a different attitude. I no longer felt the need to prove that every one of my original decisions had been perfect. I wanted to see what we could achieve if we combined his understanding of glass with my experience in lighting design.

That didn't mean I was agreeing to everything.

"Let's do one trial," I suggested. "One shade. No commitment to the entire collection."

"Which design?"

"Number four. But with the new mounting."

"And a different thickness of glass."

"All right."

Maurycy wrote down our agreement, then hesitated over an empty line.

"For now, we could register this internally as a workshop project."

I raised my head.

"Internally, you can call it 'Cosmic Pancake' for all I care, as long as the documentation stays in-house. But I want the contract to contain a clear provision about authorship of the design."

He didn't like that. I saw a brief tension in his jaw.

"Of course."

"Maurycy."

"Yes?"

"I didn't say that by accident."

He put down his pen.

"I know."

For a moment, we sat opposite each other in silence. It wasn't unpleasant, but it carried the weight of something neither of us wanted to name yet.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll prepare a proposal outlining the terms. You can review it. We won't begin anything without your approval."

"And you won't begin without my drawings."

"Looks as though we're stuck with each other."

"Don't exaggerate. For now, we're only stuck with each other for one lampshade."

He smiled, and I realised I had been waiting for that smile.

When I left the workshop, the sky over Lower Silesia was the colour of wet graphite. The air was cool and smelled of rain. Maurycy walked me to the door, although there was no need for him to.

"Liliana."

I turned.

"Yes?"

"I don't want you to think I'm trying to take over your collection."

I looked at him for a moment.

"Then don't give me a reason to."

He wasn't offended.

"Fair enough."

I got into my car with a folder full of new notes and a head full of thoughts I hadn't planned to take away with me. For the first time in months, I wasn't certain what the final result of my work would look like.

And for the first time in just as long, that uncertainty wasn't entirely unpleasant.

Chapter 2 - Boundaries and Promises

The following morning, Marta's phone call woke me before I'd managed to drink my first coffee. My friend had a habit of calling at hours she considered reasonable, regardless of whether the rest of the world agreed with her. For the past twelve years, she'd run a small design gallery in Wrocław, and she was one of the few people who could tell me that one of my designs was bad without risking the end of our friendship.

"So, how did it go?" she asked without bothering to say hello.

I stood by the window of my rented apartment, looking out over the wet rooftops of a small Lower Silesian town. The drawings I hadn't put away the previous evening were scattered across the table. Beside them sat a cup of cold coffee and the amber glass sample Maurycy had allowed me to take so I could examine it in natural light.

"Interesting."

"That's your word for either a disaster or a fascination. Which one is it this time?"

"I don't know yet."

Marta laughed.

"So the man is handsome."

"We're talking about a workshop."

"Of course. That's why you sound like a seventeen-year-old trying to convince her mother she's only going out to borrow a notebook."

I rested my forehead against the cool windowpane.

"He's forty-seven, he runs his own business, and he thinks half my designs need changing."

"Sounds promising."

"Marta."

"What? You've finally met someone who doesn't just tell you what you want to hear."

I didn't answer. Not because I had no arguments, but because I knew she was right about that one thing.

Over the past few years, I'd built a life that looked exactly the way I wanted it to. My own studio, an apartment in Wrocław, enough commissions that I didn't have to accept every offer, and enough solitude that no one disturbed me when I worked until two in the morning. After my divorce, I'd spent a long time convincing myself that independence meant never having to explain my decisions to anyone. Eventually, I'd begun to suspect that I'd confused independence with the habit of keeping silent.

"I'm supposed to agree on the terms of our collaboration with him today," I said.

"And what are you afraid of?"

I looked at the glass sample.

"That he'll want too much."

"And you?"

"So will I."

Marta didn't answer immediately.

"Then perhaps, for the first time in a long while, you'll be talking as equal partners."

After we ended the call, I opened my laptop and checked my messages. Maurycy had sent a draft schedule at six