

Chapter Eight: Revelation of Intent

Lyle

Or that was what I tried to do. As if to thwart my attempts to forget Zorana, however, a new voice entered the crowd of those that typically filled my head, and while following Vaughn down Flosa's streets, I couldn't help but listen to it.

"What kind of miscreant are YOU?"

"That's how he died, isn't it? I'm so sorry."

"What would take its place?"

Up ahead, Vaughn slowed down, glancing at me.

"Are you humming?" he asked.

I absently replied with... something, too enmeshed in my thoughts to care about the words I spoke.

Her hair seems to glint as she flings it over her shoulder and proudly proclaims her heritage.

She laughs, and the music that's ever mine soars.

"Dear avan, Lyle. Are you happy?"

Was I? Whatever the answer to that question might be, it was certainly a good one. I hadn't been happy in...

How long had it been since Maxton had died?

The point was; I hadn't been this happy in a while. I didn't remember what the emotion was supposed to feel like.

"Hell. You are happy."

Another voice tagged onto the end of Vaughn's whispered words.

"Huh. Been a while since I've been summoned to help you control something good. I'm not sure if I should do it."

Gideon? What did he sound so shocked...?

What the fuck was I doing?

As I crashed into the body, I silenced the hum on my tongue and reverted a rebellious grin into its typical flat line. I didn't know how I'd gotten so distracted, but something like that could not happen to me.

Fortunately, the only person who'd seen this slip was Vaughn, and he'd been around me long enough that such glimpses into everything I hid were unavoidable. This one did seem to have unnerved him, though. He was giving me the oddest of looks, and when I raised an eyebrow at him, he spun forward once more, driving his heels into the cobblestones.

Meanwhile, Gideon refused to stop staring at me, striding beside me with his hands in his pockets.

"She really got to you, didn't she?" he said.

If she had, I couldn't acknowledge it. She was too distracting, too much of a liability. She was like my orphans under the bridge, but since I'd discovered the weakness before forming a connection with her, I could easily sever anything that might have been building between us.

I must focus only on the Plan.

"Must you, though?" Gideon said. "*Avan* help me, but I think Max would have forgiven you for taking a little time to think only about yourself.

Maybe he would have. My brother *had* been the only person who'd ever taken care of me, the only one who could save me from the hell of my childhood, but no matter what he might have said about my current circumstances, I couldn't listen to it. He and Gideon didn't understand how easily swayed I could be, how simple I'd find abandoning the Plan.

And I couldn't do that.

"Fine," Gideon sighed. "It's just... she was so nice. Pretty too."

Yes. Yes, she had been.

And that was the end of it.

Soon enough, Vaughn and I turned onto the street that my apartment bordered, and when I saw the figures restlessly pacing in front of my door, I resisted the urge to cock my head. Why were Eliza and Gus here?

When Gus saw Vaughn coming, he moved toward us with purpose.

"Did you find him?" he said. "I swear, Vaughn. If he's hurt and you didn't fuck up the people who did it, I don't know what I'll do."

That was... curious. I hadn't known he cared that much about me.

"Maybe he's worried about losing the leader of his crew," Gideon said.

I could see that.

"Or maybe both of you are being stupidly cynical. Would match your cranky attitudes."

With an internal groan, I did my best to ignore Crazy Caleb's appearance at my side, even as he darted forward. Giggling, he slowed down beside Gus, keeping pace with him, and looked the scout up and down.

"Goodness, Lyle. I didn't know you were recruiting them so *young* these days," he said. "I thought we had a rule about that."

"Kindly shut the fuck up, Caleb," Gideon grumbled. "I don't like what you're insinuating."

Oh, goodie. I just *loved* it when those two started arguing.

While they sniped at one another, I fought through the noise of their chatter, concentrating on what Vaughn was telling Gus, and instead, got my focus zeroed onto Eliza. She hadn't moved from my home's stoop, staring in my direction with her nose wrinkled.

Hell. Had the dark begun loosening its concealing protection when around this woman? Why did it think Eliza was safe enough for her to see me here?

"She's nice. I like her kids, and she's good to them. Loves them. She reminds me of mom."

And now, we were four. With a slow sigh, I imagined that I'd put my arm around Ruo, drawing him into a side hug, and beside me, the kid ducked his head, hiding a smile.

I wasn't sure what was drawing everyone from the crevasses of my mind, but at least we hadn't been joined by... *that one*. Maybe, if the three who were here could keep their voices subdued, I could hide how loud my internal world had suddenly become.

Digging in a pocket, I stepped beneath the streetlight that illuminated my door, and after a sharply indrawn breath, Eliza jerked her head in a nod, as if confirming a suspicion. Gus and Vaughn fell silent as I drew forth my key, but before I could finish transitioning my center of focus to the world outside of my head, where it belonged, something slammed into my back.

Hissing, Gideon took a step forward, reaching for me with Crazy Caleb restraining him. Fortunately, before anything more violent could occur, Gus whispered—

"I'm so glad you're ok."

—and it took everything I had to keep from throwing the scout off of me.

He wasn't attacking me. I was safe. *We* were safe. He'd simply forgotten how much I didn't like people touching me.

Vaughn saved both of our asses. As he loomed into view. Gus' weight was pulled off of me, and I released a held breath. Turning toward my crew, I caught sight of Vaughn releasing his hold on our scout.

"Not a good idea," he said.

Gus flushed, rubbing the back of his neck while retreating a few paces.

"Right. Sorry," he said. "I guess I just..."

His voice faded to an indiscernible mumble as another man popped into being nearby, circling Gus with a sneer.

"Tell me you'll put this... *gutter trash* in his place, you stupid child," the Tyrant hissed. "You may be unworthy of our family's good name, but you're still a part of it. No mere peasant should touch you."

Great. Now, I had seven people—four inside and three in the outside world—to split my attention between. That wouldn't be stressful *at all*.

I wouldn't even consider how having all of *them* here might affect my behavior.

In the past, the only way I'd gotten through times like this was by putting Gideon, the Tyrant, Ruo, and Crazy Caleb on the edge of my awareness. I couldn't completely ignore them, but I *could* pay them as little attention as possible, staying constantly aware of how *I* was supposed to act as I did.

So, I heard Gideon click his tongue and Crazy Caleb groan. I saw Ruo flinch and skitter behind me, but I didn't react to it.

I only considered how I should respond to what Gus had done. Up until now, I'd discouraged other people's touch because most of them struggled to remember how much something they considered normal—like touch—could completely and totally unsettle someone else. To maintain the barest sense of safety for myself, I'd had to remind everyone around me of this fact.

Now, though, I wasn't sure if those reminders were still necessary, especially when I was with my crew. They knew me, or they did so as much as I'd let something like that happen. I could... trust them to respect my preferences, keeping in mind all the while that they were human. Sometimes, they'd cross lines without meaning to.

Plus, Gus was *not* gutter trash or a peasant. He was part of my crew, an associate I could rely on.

So, as he continued fumbling through an apology, I tiredly waved it off.

"It is fine," I said. "While it is true that I do not like being touched, I understand why such things sometimes happen. I am simply more sensitive to it than I should be. My father... he is not a kind man, but my predilections toward touch should not greatly change your behavior when around me. So, please. Let us forget what has happened and move on."

As I turned back to my apartment, I ignored how quiet it had become behind me, unlocking the door.

Gideon stepped up beside me.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "For once, I'm not trying to be hostile here. I'm just confused. Are you...?"

A metaphorical tug on my pant leg had me glancing down.

Solemnly looking up at me, Ruo said, "You're right. It's time. Tell them the Plan."

"*What?*" the Tyrant shouted at my back.

As I pushed the door open, I suppressed a smile, even as I wondered what Ruo was talking about. Tell my crew about the Plan? I might have decided to relax around these people, but I was nowhere close to opening up about *that*.

"Nah, Lyle. The kid's right," Crazy Caleb said. "This crew of yours was worried about you. They care, and that's worth something."

But he'd sounded so serious while saying it that my eyes shot wide open. Crazy Caleb was never that sincere unless it was truly needed.

"Please, tell me you're not actually considering-" the Tyrant started.

"*Shit*. They're right," Gideon interrupted. "I haven't been paying as much attention as I should have recently, or I'd have noticed it sooner, but based on the rundown I'm getting from you... yeah. The pieces are in place. It's time for the next step."

Oh, hell. Never mind that Gideon had just agreed with Crazy Caleb, something I never thought I'd see. He was the only one of us who knew all of the Plan's details, and if he was talking like *that*, it meant... it meant...

"And you know that these three are trustworthy," Crazy Caleb added. "Look at them. You know their stories."

I did. With the door open, I stepped aside to let my crew enter my home, and as they passed me, I recited everything I'd learned about their pasts to myself.

Gus. As a child, he and his family had worked for my father. In addition, Gus suffered from a bad case of malaise, and as part of his self-treatment plan for that, he'd gotten himself addicted to

kalvna. When my father had found out about this, he'd kicked Gus and his family out of our household. The kid's parents had abandoned him and his sister on the streets, and as young as they'd been, it had only been a matter of time before one of their timepieces ran out of years. Unfortunately, this had happened to the sister first, leaving Gus with a sense of regret and self-blame a kilometer long as well as an intense hatred toward our governmental system.

That was why he toasted Ida's name during our after-heist ritual. She'd been his sister.

Eliza. Born in the Warehouse District, she'd married young. She and her husband had struggled to provide solely for themselves, let alone the three kids they'd soon had, and as always in a situation like theirs, the couple had eventually run afoul of Flosa's gangs. As part of this, Eliza had gotten her face cut up, and her husband had killed the bastard who'd done it as payback. The coppers had caught him in the middle of cleaning up the murder, and as a result, he'd been sentenced to death by the chair.

His name had been Adrian.

I wasn't sure about Vaughn's history or why he made a toast to Eleanor during our ritual. Any time I'd considered looking into him or his past, I hadn't gotten far before something distracted me, and I'd never persisted with the investigation for one, very good reason.

I'd known Vaughn since before Maxton had died. He and my brother had been friends and honestly? That was all I'd ever needed to know he wouldn't betray me.

That was my crew: three people who'd been badly hurt by a corrupt system. I'd scouted all of them for that reason alone, but over time, a connection had formed between us, despite my desire to stay unattached, and as they got settled around my apartment's table, I could acknowledge something that I'd been denying for years.

They were my friends, if only in a way. I didn't have to rely on the dark alone to keep myself safe. I had three people who'd help me if I asked, and I... I would give far too much to ensure their happiness.

So, I locked the door behind me, and resting my hand on it, I took a deep breath. *Avan*, this would be difficult for me. As a general rule, I didn't trust people. Being close to others felt dangerous. Uncomfortable, to an extreme.

Now, I'd have to knowingly do that with my crew. Not only that but I'd have to continue doing it, long past the conclusion of tonight's meeting.

I didn't know if I could.

"Lyle?" Vaughn called from the table.

"Might as well get started," Gideon said. "All we can do is try."

Of course.

Even still, I didn't join my crew at the table, where they'd lit the only candle in this place. First, I grabbed my first aid kit from the medicine cabinet because much as I could ignore how badly I was hurt right now, I shouldn't leave these injuries untreated.

With it in hand, I plopped into a chair and sighed. What should I say first?

"If you plan on being so moronic as to share your dreams with undesirables such as these, starting with an explanation for why you're in such bad shape would be best, yes?" the Tyrant grumbled. "Although I'm not sure what you hope to gain from sharing with these... people. How on earth could *they* help *you*?"

That was an easy enough question to answer.

"While on a job last night, I broke my finger," I said. "Would one of you help me with splinting it? Unfortunately, I cannot do that by myself."

With a cough, Vaughn pulled away from me while Gus frowned, but Eliza merely clicked her tongue, scooting her chair closer. As she gathered what she'd need from the first aid kit, she shook her head.

"What were you thinking, pulling a job alone?" she said. "You could have been caught."

She took my injured hand, none too gently I might add, and I suppressed a wince.

"I was, actually," I said. "Caught, that is."

This revelation got a reaction. My crew started demanding more details from me while Eliza paused in her ministrations, and I lifted my free hand to quiet them.

"Obviously, we do not need to worry about what has occurred over the last twenty-four hours," I said. "I am alive, and we are together. If I had betrayed you to the coppers, those bastards would have shown up long before now. We would be in their custody. So, please. Calm down, and give me a moment to share my story."

Slowly, they relaxed, all while Ruo swiveled his head to glance between them, frowning.

"I don't get it," he said. "Don't they know you'll keep them safe? You always keep your loved ones safe."

Folding to the ground, he leaned against my leg with his head in my lap, and I barely kept from brushing my fingers through his hair. He didn't need to know how clueless these people were about my feelings for them, not that they could help it. After all, I hadn't known how I felt until a few minutes ago.

When I was around my crew, though, Ruo generally stayed away, for his own safety, so it made sense that he wouldn't understand this fact.

I wouldn't make him leave now, though. It didn't seem right.

"Yeah, probably wise," Gideon said. "He's gotta get *some* outside experience, or we're never gonna grow."

At my side, he was sitting on the table's edge, looking down on me with his arms crossed, and on the other side of it, Crazy Caleb had perched on Gus' leg, primly folding his hands on his knee. When he noticed me looking at him, he made a silly face, which I blinked at.

All four of us ignored the Tyrant as he paced along the far wall.

And all three members of my crew were staring solely at me, never knowing about the others around them. I should start explaining myself before they decided to leave.

"In the past, I have been reticent about my plans with you, as I am sure you have noticed," I started with.

Seemingly eager to interrupt me, Vaughn snorted.

"That's an understatement," he said.

"Perhaps," I said, "but I did it for your protection. My long-term plans and goals are dangerous, and I'd hoped that by keeping you in the dark about them, I could keep you safe. The time has come, however, for that to change. So. Here is your explanation for why I am so battered and why Vaughn had to rescue me from the Barbary estate tonight."

I couldn't look at their faces. I couldn't see their blank-faced surprise.

I couldn't give them the chance to notice the beat of my heart, thundering in my chest.

Licking my lips, I said, "After distributing everyone's cuts two nights ago, I was accosted by two of Russell Teague's men. They brought me to their boss, and in an effort to keep him appeased, I gave him an advance on his cut of our heist."

"Why did he drag you halfway across the district, just for that?" Gus said. "We pay him every time, on time."

Still sitting on the scout's leg, Crazy Caleb shifted in place, refusing to look at me, while Gideon bristled at my side. I knew why they were having such bad reactions to this topic, connected as they were to the man in question. I understood it, more than they could possibly know, but I couldn't avoid the subject just to relieve their discomfort.

I'd also determined not five minutes ago that I'd start sharing more with these people. I wouldn't reverse that decision so soon after making it.

So, I said, "Mr. Teague and I have an interesting relationship. We have... history, and if that were not enough, we each hold a piece of damaging information over the other person's head, or that is

what he thinks, at least. I am not too concerned about the blackmail he thinks he has on me.

"Because of this, though, he likes to test me on occasion. That is what our meeting two nights ago was about, even if he wanted to disguise it as ensuring our payment of his cut. May I please move on?"

Gus looked like he wanted to ask another question, but Vaughn rested a hand on the scout's leg to stop him, passing it through Crazy Caleb's abdomen. That man made a face while my crew's muscle inclined his head to me.

"Go ahead, Lyle," he said.

Nodding, I said, "Unfortunately, because I had already made a stop at our stash, giving Mr. Teague his advance almost drained my timepiece. Once all was said and done, I was left with about one day."

Eliza, diligently working on the splint for my broken finger up to that point, jerked on its final linen wrap, sending a spike of pain up my arm. Rolling his eyes, Gideon touched my shoulder before that spike could reach it, shaking out his hand once he had, and my pain vanished.

"A *day*?" our lookout shouted. "Lyle!"

"I know," I said. "Giving Mr. Teague so much of my life was foolhardy of me, but I had a plan to replace the years. Eventually, it led me to the Barbary estate last night, where I meant to rob Lord Barbary of a portion of his wealth."

"Why rob anyone at all?" Vaughn growled. "Why not just take from the stash?"

Oo, he'd sounded angry. With his arms tightly crossed, he was scowling at me, but all I could do to answer that disapproval was shrug.

"I thought I had the time to pull a job, so that is what I did," I said. "I miscalculated, though. Badly. After getting into the house, I could not continue with the job. I thought I would die there, but Lady Barbary saved my life. I spent the next day recovering in her attic, which is where Vaughn eventually found me."

There was a beat of silence, one I had trouble interpreting, and then, Vaughn coughed a laugh.

"A noble saved your life?" he said. "Yeah... I don't believe that."

For some reason, this made me tense. Why did I feel the need to defend another human being, let alone Zorana?

Fortunately, Gus stepped in before I could say something I might regret.

"No, that makes sense," he said. "I know Lady Barbary's attendant. He doesn't want to admit that he likes me, calls me a miscreant all the time, but we talk, on occasion. From what he's said, I

gather Lady Barbary is quite the charity worker."

As he fell silent, the newly added voice to my collection wove an addition to the conversation, one unheard by everyone but me.

"You stay right there, miscreant. I have more questions for you."

And at my side, Ruo looked up at me.

"Why didn't we stay with her?" he asked.

I couldn't answer that right now.

"Believe what I have said or not. It is what happened," I said. "I owe Lady Barbary a life debt, one that I intend to repay soon, but for now, that is my explanation for you. I broke my finger while on the Barbary job. When I left his place two nights ago, Mr. Teague's men gave me a beating. That is all there is to it."

With a nod, Eliza finished her work on my finger, leaving me free to rub a salve into my bruises.

"So, where does that leave us?" she asked. "You mentioned you had another job lined up. Are we still doing that, or should we wait until after you've healed up?"

Right. I'd forgotten about that. With the next phase of the Plan having come, any minor jobs I'd gotten ready for us no longer matter, so I'd already let them go. My crew, however, didn't know about this change.

How should I go about telling them, though? And how did I move from there to sharing everything that the Plan was?

Groaning, Crazy Caleb collapsed on the table, stretching across it.

"Just let me do the sharing already," he complained. "You know I'll do a better job of it."

Yeah... no. I wasn't letting him take over for something as simple as this. I had to figure it out for myself.

"We will not be waiting, nor will we complete the job I mentioned before," I said. "It is time to move on from the petty thievery that we have done to this point. We finally have enough years in the stash to start accomplishing bigger things."

For a moment, my crew stared at me, as if unsure how to respond, and I might have found the situation more amusing if blood wasn't rushing in my ears.

"About the stash... I've been meaning to ask how much is in there," Vaughn said. "Whenever I make deposits or skim from it, it never shows how many years it contains."

That was another modification I'd made to the communal stash, if only because I couldn't let the others in my crew know the very information Vaughn was asking about. At least, I couldn't until it came time to share about the Plan.

"When I last checked the stash, we sat at *two thousand six hundred and forty-six years, four months, and seven days*," I said.

In the silence that followed this, the dark seemed to laugh. Defying the candle's flickering light, it brushed against my crew's flint eyes and sharp frowns, and at my side, Gideon flipped to face the threat, resting a hand on my shoulder.

I appreciated his offer of support, even if I knew that none of these people would actually attack me. It helped me remain silent until one of them spoke up.

"If we have so many years, why haven't we cashed out?" Eliza harshly asked. "With that much time, we could leave this life behind. We could-"

"We could, what?" I snapped.

I hadn't meant to interrupt her. When people were confronted with news they didn't like, it was best to let them vent their frustrations before explaining yourself, but Eliza was treading on a touchy subject for me. It was the same one that had caused my outburst with Zorana in her home's attic.

"We could retire to the country and live a life of luxury?" I continued. "We could get ourselves households of attendants and servants, exploiting others in the same way that we have been exploited? Is that what you want? Any of you? Because if it is, congratulations. You have achieved your life goal. Take your cut of the stash and leave us. Now."

Despite the disgruntled faces on all sides, no one moved, which surprised me. Maybe they hadn't understood what I'd truly meant.

"So, explain it to them in a way they'll understand," Gideon growled. "Use what I'm leaking to you, Lyle."

That I could do.

Slowly, I set aside my salve and washcloth, getting to my feet, and after resting my fingertips on the table, I kept my eyes fixed on its wooden surface.

"This is the moment where you will have to decide what you want. I am sorry to have sprung it on you so suddenly, but now that it is here, I cannot give you time to fully consider what you will choose," I said. "Tonight, you will make your decision. Take your money and leave me to finish my work alone, or stay and help me. It is up to you, but let me be clear. If you decide to stay, you will never get another chance to back out."

"If I ever see you wavering in your loyalty, I will put a bullet in your head, not because I want to but because everyone else's lives will depend on it. The work I mean to do is that dangerous. So, make your choice now, and stick with it."

After a beat of painful quiet, I made myself lift my eyes to my crew, and to my utter surprise, I found only determination in them. I'd thought I'd see outrage or some form of scoffing. Any normal person would have responded to a death threat in that way, but these three merely *looked* at me, two with their chins lifted and one with level curiosity.

Honestly, I should have expected as much. Knowing their stories and knowing them, my 'choice' had never truly been a decision for them. They'd take only one of my offered options.

So, in them, I saw their decision. Not one of them would leave me, much as I might have secretly wanted it. They'd stay by my side.

How I prayed that I wouldn't lead them onto a path of destruction.

With a sigh, I sat down while Gideon returned to his half-seat on the table's edge.

Folding my hands on top of it, I said, "If you mean to stay with me, then our first course of action will be to remove Russell Teague from the Warehouse District. Vaughn, you have been chomping at the bit to reveal our evidence of his... proclivities. It is time to do that."

"Finally," Vaughn said. "I'll get on it in the morning."

What he'd said was exactly what I'd expected from him, but in his tone of voice, I heard a pitch that I'd never thought to encounter with him: uncertainty.

"No," Gideon said.

Straightening from his seat on the table, he disappeared, flashing back into being behind Vaughn. There, he hovered over the bulkier man for a breath before looking up at me.

"That was fear, Lyle," he said. "Vaughn's afraid."

...Why would he be afraid? Revealing Russell Teague's secret had been Vaughn's greatest desire for years now. Why wouldn't he want to do it?

Unless he'd been misleading me. Unless... unless he was somehow involved with that sordidness.

No. That couldn't be right.

Could it?

Clicking his tongue, Crazy Caleb shook his head.

"Don't think that's it. If he was a part of that group, trust me. I'd know," he said. "Maybe he's afraid of what this new step will bring with it."

So... the big picture. How could Vaughn know that there was more to what I was planning than unseating Russell Teague from his throne? How could he know enough about it to be afraid?

"Is that the plan, then?" Gus said, breaking my reverie. "We throw our hat into the ring of Flosa's gangs?"

That almost made me snort while Crazy Caleb started *laughing*.

"This brat thinks that we'd ever stoop so low?" the Tyrant growled in his corner.

Ignoring him, I said, "No, that is not my Plan. You need to think more large-scale, Gus."

Said scout smirked.

"Great!" he said. "I just wanted to make sure we weren't messing with those assholes too much."

And why was that? Was he worried about how much a gang war might affect his access to *kalvna*?

"Can't focus on that, Lyle," Gideon said.

Even as he'd spoken those words, though, he'd remained intent on Vaughn.

"With Mr. Teague out of the picture, we will need a new leader of the Roaring Whispers, and while I have no intention of staying mired in gang politics, I do mean to interfere with who leads them," I said. "In other words, which of you would like to take the reins of the Roaring Whispers from their current, ignominious leader? It cannot be you, Vaughn. I need you elsewhere."

This change of subject took my crew by surprise.

With a squeak, Eliza said, "Wait, *what*? You want one of us to lead a gang? How the hell will we do that? We wouldn't have the support we'd need..."

"But you would," I said as she trailed off. "Over the last few years, I have been speaking with the independent crews who make the Warehouse District their home. Whoever accepts this position will find all the help they will need there. So, Eliza. Gus. Which of you wants the job?"

With a soft moan, Gus leaned on the table, clutching his temples.

"Oh... my head," he hissed before shaking himself. "Well, whatever the fuck you're planning, I can't be involved with the gang side of things. I'm too..."

He wildly waved while Eliza rolled her eyes.

"Reliant on the *kalvna* they provide? Yeah, we noticed that years ago, hon," she said. "Have you fallen off the wagon again?"

Gus looked away, refusing to answer her, and sighing, she turned to me.

"Guess that leaves me, then," she said. "You sure it's a good idea for me to lead a gang, though? I've got kids, Lyle. Will they be...?"

She roughly shook her head.

"Never mind that," she muttered. "The biggest problem with me as a gang leader is that others will see my kids as a weakness. You know that."

When presented with a position of power, of course Eliza's first concern would be for her children. Frustrating as it might be at times, how much she cared for them was also one of the things I valued the most about her.

"In most cases, your children might be a problem, yes," I said. "Tell me, though. In the years that you have been a part of my crew, have any of them come to harm while in the Warehouse District? Or have they lived peaceful lives, something unheard of in our neighborhood?"

I lifted an eyebrow, waiting for Eliza to work through what I was implying, and once she had, she gasped.

"*Avan*, Lyle. Thank you! You didn't have to do that."

I wasn't sure why she was so shocked that I'd kept an eye on her kids. Making sure my crew's loved ones were safe was just another part of my job as their leader.

"It's not shock, ya idiot," Crazy Caleb sighed. "She's grateful."

Oh.

"You are... welcome," I said.

As soon as that was spoken, though, I moved on, reluctant to dwell on what I was feeling.

"Once Eliza has taken her place as the leader of the Roaring Whispers, we can begin our true work, what I have been preparing for these last nine years," I said.

I couldn't get further than that, though. As soon as those words were out of my mouth, Gus burst into laughter, and while I stared at him, the Tyrant huffed in annoyance.

"Uncouth degenerate," he said under his breath.

"Hang on. I'm sorry, but *hang on*," Gus said. "You've been planning this for *nine years?! That would mean you've meant to take over Flosa's biggest gang since you were ten!*"

I was unsure why he found this so funny.

"Yes, in part. I had much bigger plans than that alone, but I began working toward this particular goal at around that age," I said. "If you could please control yourself, I would love to share the rest of the Plan with you."

Gus looked like he'd start cracking up again, but that got stopped by Vaughn, gently smacking him upside the head.

"Stop acting like a child," he said before facing me. "So? What's the rest of your plan?"

At that, I paused. He'd said the word 'plan' much like I thought of it: as if it were capitalized. That combined with the tense state he was in...

Did he know what I'd soon say?

"I think he does," Gideon said.

With a choked noise, he performed another disappearing act so he could return to my side.

Grabbing my shoulder, he said, "Lyle! I think he knows everything!"

And I thought Gideon was overreacting. Vaughn certainly knew more than he should but everything? I doubted it. If he knew who I truly was, he'd never have stuck around for as long as he had.

Even still, perhaps I should delay the full revelation of the Plan for the moment. Perhaps I should give Vaughn time to center himself. *Avan* knew how often I'd needed something similar in the past.

"First, we shall complete the job I botched last night," I said. "While Eliza is getting herself established as the Warehouse District's new crime lady, the three of us shall be robbing Lord Barbary blind."

Or we'd be taking a vast portion of his wealth at least. That job might have been one of the few I'd always known I'd enjoy, but having met his daughter, I was reluctant to ruin the man as badly and I'd meant to beforehand.

"Sounds fun!" Gus said. "I'm guessing you'll need me to talk to my contact in that household."

"Please," I said. "And Vaughn? You will have to play lookout once more. My apologies. I know how much you dislike that role."

Snorting, Vaughn shook his head.

"I'll deal with it," he said.

He was back to relaxed. Good. Maybe I could finish this awkward revelation now. Maybe I could finally... share the Plan.

Now that I was here, though, I found myself unable to move. How could I reveal this, one of my greatest secrets? I couldn't make myself that vulnerable. It would leave me hurt, broken and limping along, and if that happened, I didn't know if I'd have the strength to pull through it again.

As if aware of these thoughts, the dark leapt for me, gathering me in its comforting embrace, and while I found this normal—my friend had been doing this for me since I'd been a child—my crew found it much more disturbing.

Over the years of our association, they'd gotten used to the dark's smaller abnormalities, but this, a storm of shadows on all sides? It was too much for them.

They leapt to their feet or jerked back in their chairs, reaching for unseen weapons, but fortunately, once they'd established their own sense of safety, they stayed frozen in place. This gave me a chance to calm the dark down, silently singing its lullaby until it returned to a lulling lap at our feet.

"What... was that?" Eliza gasped.

Wincing, I rubbed my eyes until the Tyrant started growling insults at me, but then, I froze, lowering my hand so I could stare at it like the traitor it was.

Avan, the dark's reaction and this physical indicator of how stressed I was... how out of control was I?

That thought brought a hated voice to the forefront—

"That's always been a vital piece that you've lacked, Lyle: control. Without it, you'll never crush me, despite everything that you might wish."

—and at the sound of it, even the Tyrant flinched.

So, I took a deep breath, and I made myself rise from my chair, joining the others on their feet.

"Please, forgive me and my friend," I softly said. "You know that I have certain abilities that others cannot understand. In the past, I have trusted you with the vulnerability. What you do not know is how protective my friend, the dark, can be of me. Right now, it knows that I am... frightened of what I must now tell you, and because of that, it leapt to my aid. I am sorry to have distressed you."

After a moment, Gus cleared his throat.

"It's all right, Lyle," he said. "Just a little scare, nothing to it. Right, guys?"

He straightened his chair while the others muttered their own reassurances, but while Eliza also sat, Vaughn made no move to do so. He stared at me with something deeply unsettled in his eyes, even as he asked.

"What do you need to tell us?"

Oh, hell. He knew. Gideon had been right. Vaughn *knew*.

And he didn't want me to share this with the rest of my crew. Why?

"Does it matter?" Gideon growled. "I swear. If he means to stop us, I'll *beat the shit* out of him."

"As I will shout in his face," the Tyrant said. "No one tells me what to do."

"You idiots," Crazy Caleb started, rolling his eyes.

But he was interrupted by Ruo as he jumped to his feet.

"He is *Vaughn*," the kid said, glaring at me. "He just wants us to be safe, and what you want to say isn't safe. That's all."

Oh. Vaughn was worried for *me*. He wanted me to be happy.

Why did that feel familiar-?

"*Run, little brother!*" Maxton shouts. "*Live the life that you deserve!*"

With the breath knocked out of me, I shoved aside the lingering echo of my brother's voice, focusing on what its presence meant.

Because I knew what Maxton and Vaughn were trying to say, whether vocally or not. I understood the sentiment behind their words and actions but even still...

Who determined what I deserved? Was it a man who'd known me for over half my life? Was it my brother? Or was it me, knowing everything I was and everything I'd done?

I defied them. I defied them *both*.

Only *I* knew what I could do or what I was worth.

So, I smirked at Vaughn, squarely meeting his eyes as I drew in a breath.

"I have a confession to make. Ever have I let you and the others believe that I am a nobody, someone without a family name. That is a lie. I know who I am and where I come from."

At that, Gus and Eliza exchanged a glance while Vaughn's expression turned pained.

'Don't do this,' he mouthed.

I merely widened my smirk.

"My name is Lyle Cunningham," I said.

In the resulting stillness, a pin drop would have sounded like the crash of plates to the ground, and slumping, Vaughn dropped into a chair. Meanwhile, Gus frowned, seemingly oblivious to the older man's pain.

"Cunningham? As in... from the Cunningham family? Somehow related to PM Ephiram Cunningham?" he said. "No, that can't be right. Sure, when I worked for that bastard, I heard he had a couple of kids who'd died a few years ago, but... wait. Are you saying-?"

He cut off as I nodded.

"My father may have murdered my brother, but I survived," I said. "You are right, Gus. I am the PM's son."

No matter how much I might want to deny that fact, it was the truth. I might as well own it.

Gus and Eliza were looking at me like I was crazy, exactly as I'd expected them to, but that was ok. I had the proof that they'd need to believe me, hidden away from the world until it was required, and soon, I'd show it to them.

Once they'd accepted my identity, I'd have them leave my home without Vaughn. He and I would need to have a little... *chat*, one that the younger members of my crew couldn't overhear. For now, though, I couldn't think about that. I had to plough forward, heedless of what any of them might do.

I had to tell my crew about my life's work, the Plan that had guided me since I was nine, and based off of how the invisible people in the room were looking at me—most with pride and one with resignation—I'd say they were ready for it too.

"I am the Prime Minister's son," I repeated, "and I mean to bring Parliament, along with the rest of his governmental system, down on his head."

And at my first admission of this secret ambition, the dark roared its victory.

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