

# Chapter Five: Nightmares and a Nosy Associate

Lyle

My key shook as I shoved it into the lock, which was worrisome. The journey here had been difficult, a long hike with only the dark to serve as comfort. It had done its best, and I was grateful for its steadying help but...

I was *tired*.

Summoning strength from *somewhere*, I banged the apartment's door open, swaying in place for a moment before entering. I only made it one step inside, however, before my legs gave out.

"This is what happens when you're left with only one day in your timepiece," Gideon growled. "How're you gonna replenish it?"

"I have... some ideas," I panted. "Need to... rest for a moment... first, though."

Kicking the door closed behind me, I made my way to the apartment's wash basin. Using it as support, I hauled myself to my feet, barely catching a glimpse of blue eyes and dark curls in the mirror before yanking the medicine cabinet open.

With my hands shaking, retrieving the supplies I'd need became a struggle, ending with most of the cabinet's contents knocked onto the floor, but soon enough, I had my first aid kit in hand. Plodding to my cot, I dropped onto it and opened the box.

"Why're you doing this now?" Gideon asked.

When I glared at him, he defiantly jutted his chin out.

"*What?*" he said. "You've got a freakin' day to live, and here you are, about to stitch up teensy scratches-"

A voice from the past interrupted him—

*Stop squirming, buddy. We've got to treat this now, or it might get infected. Promise me you'll do it? Remember. Big brother's orders.*

—and as an inaudible laugh faded to silence, Gideon looked away.

"That is why," I said.

As I fixed myself up, Gideon said not another word, and by the time I was finished, I had nothing left to give, for now at least. I didn't bother with returning the first aid kit to the medicine cabinet. Collapsing into the cot, I closed my eyes, praying that nightmares would-

*Sneaking into the house is easier than I remember it being. Either Ephiram Cunningham has gotten lazy recently, or the bastard's waiting for me. Considering why I'm here, I'd bet on that last odd.*

*As I pad through the house, the dark helps me more willingly than it has at other times over the last week. Suddenly less grumpy, it helps me hide from the coppers in the halls.*

*The only place where I find light is in the fire that he's sitting beside. He has his typical glass of whiskey balanced on his chair's arm.*

*For a quarter hour, I watch him, waiting for him to do something, but he never moves, not even to take a drink. He just stares into the fire, as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders.*

*Asshole.*

*I'll give Ephiram a little credit. When I step into the firelight, he doesn't flinch. In fact, he doesn't even look at me, and once the silence between us has become uncomfortable enough, I sit at his feet, like I did so many years before.*

"Dad," I say.

*As it emerged, that hated word stuck in my throat, but it does what I want. The bastard deigns to look at me, and I draw away from what the firelight reveals.*

*Ephiram's hair forms an uncombed halo around his head, and with bloodshot eyes, he blankly stares at me. Hell, I forgot how much he looks like Maxton.*

*After what feels like an eternity, he croaks, "Lyle."*

*Not ashie? Failed experiment? Abomination? We're off to a great start.*

*Then, Ephiram takes a sip of his whiskey, and my stomach drops through the ground.*

"Where's mom?" I make myself say. "Are you still using her as proof that you don't hate the Ostiums?"

*He doesn't comment on my sarcasm, merely watching me as he nurses his drink. How can he sit there so calmly? I'm buzzing with energy, wanting so badly to knock the glass out of his hand. Barely keeping a scream in check, I'm pounding my fingers on my knees, but right now, this restlessness is good.*

*It's keeping me in the now, keeping... THEM away. I'm the best choice for this conversation. I am!  
And they know it.*

*Even still, I'm ready to start roaring unkind things at Ephiram—their influence—by the time he  
lowers his drink.*

*"Why are you here?" he asks.*

*Oh... that question makes me crave the knife hidden in my waistband, but for now, I don't reach for  
it. I need this asshole, much as that knowledge makes my stomach churn.*

*Taking a steadying breath, I say, "You know why. The coppers got Max-"*

*"The POLICE have APPPREHENDED your brother," Ephiram absently corrects.*

*And unable to stop myself, I leap to my feet with my hands curled into fists at my sides.*

*"You're got to help him!" I say, ignoring how much my voice is shaking. "If you don't, they... they'll  
kill him."*

*Shaking his head, Ephiram clinically runs his eyes over me, like he does when considering a new  
equine purchase.*

*"Your poor use of grammar disappoints me," he says. "I expect better of a Cunningham, even one  
like you."*

*Grammar. What the hell does grammar-?*

*No. I can't lose control right now, and judging from how much the shadows are roiling around us, I'd  
say I'm close to doing that.*

*"Dad," I carefully say. "You have to-"*

*Stiffening in his chair, Ephiram says, "I must do nothing. Your brother has fallen into a disaster of  
his own making, and now, he will suffer the consequences for it. That's the way our system works,  
and the system is perfect."*

*The sys... he wants to talk about the avan damned system now?*

*"Max did nothing wrong!" I shout. "He was just protecting me!"*

*Chuffing a laugh, Ephiram slumps in his chair, sipping his drink.*

*"Yes, that was his first mistake," he says, "or maybe it was mine in teaching him to have mercy for  
ashie scum like you."*

*Even years after fleeing this house, those words sting, and almost, I flinch from them. This time, though, the bastard wasn't criticizing me alone.*

*And no one badmouths my brother.*

*"Maxton," I say, enunciating each syllable. "His name is Maxton, in case you've forgotten, and he's not just my brother. He's also your son."*

*Lunging forward, Ephiram snarls, "I lost my only worthy son when he ran away with you."*

*Stunned, I can only stare at this man. This can't be happening. I know Ephiram is a cold bastard but- but he wouldn't let them do... THAT to his own child. He wouldn't...*

*But he would. Too enamored with his fucking system, he'd let his favored son die to protect it, and even as I slunk home, I knew that. It's why I brought a knife with me.*

*It's also why the dark has been so helpful tonight. My friend knew what I would do, even if I didn't. Not consciously, at least.*

*As I snatch the weapon free of its hiding spot, tears fill my eyes, so it's with blurry vision that I stab Ephiram, but even still, I can't afford to try again. Leaping into the shadows, I angrily swipe at my eyes, hoping I'll soon see an utterly despicable man bleeding out in front of me, but when my vision clears, Ephiram's calmly staring at the knife in his thigh.*

*Sighing, he pulls the blade free before tossing it away and pressing down on the wound left behind.*

*"I'm guessing you were aiming for the artery with that attack," he says, shaking his head. "That's always been a vital piece you've lacked, Lyle: control. Without it, you'll never crush me, despite everything that you might wish. But you'd better run away now, little abomination. Unless you think the police will stay out of this room for much longer, after all the noise you've made?"*

*Oh, avan. I've failed.*

*As I sprint into the hall, my father's laughter chases me. It's at my heels even as the world twists, but once this change has resolved, it kills that chilling noise, and as it dies, I fervently wish that it hadn't.*

*I'm lying on the ground, squeezed to the cobblestone by the wood planks of the platform above me, and through them, I can see a dreaded machine, resting beside a chair.*

*No. No, no, no! Not again!*

*Above me, the boards creak, and a set of familiar curls spills around the chair's headrest. Something unseen thumps against the wood, and words that have long been carved into my heart make their millionth cut.*

*"Run, little brother! I don't want you to see this! Don't let it haunt you. Live the life that you deserve, that I always-*"

*There is the smack to cut Maxton off. There is the voice, demanding that he be silent. There is the man with his drill. There is the first scream, the one that will sound like music when compared to what comes next. There is the needle-*

"Lyle!"

Someone was attacking me, roughly shaking the body, and snarling, I shoved the hostile away before scrambling onto all fours.

Had to keep us safe.

*Maxton!*

Where was the-?

*Fuck, I'd kill the bast-*

Gotta run, gotta run-

"LYLE!" a familiar voice shouted. "It's just Vaughn."

Oh. Not a threat?

"Not a threat."

Ok.

Licking my lips, I listened to the roar of my heartbeat in my ears and forced myself to take in my surroundings.

A single room apartment, bathroom and all, was all around me. I was in the place where I slept.

Light was feebly struggling through the parchment paper blocking the windows at my back. That meant day had come.

Gideon was crouched at my side, worriedly watching me with his hand on my shoulder. I wasn't alone. I had help. I was safe.

Good.

Now, what had he said? Something about Vaughn.

"Yeah, he's here, Lyle," Gideon said. "Looks like you scared the shit out of him too."

He glanced at a spot in front of us, and when I followed his gaze, I found Vaughn there, swaying away from me with his hands raised into view. Oh, hell.

"I am... sorry," I said.

But then, I had to stop, falling victim to a savage coughing fit. After only a heartbeat, I was irrationally worried that it would kill me, all while Gideon patted my back and muttered nonsense reassurances. Lowering his hands, Vaughn edged to the side of my cot, only sitting after I'd nodded.

When I could, I rasped, "Again, my apologies. I was having a- a bad nightmare-"

"I know," Vaughn said. "I've sat with you through those often enough. Did you think I could forget what one looks like?"

Glancing away, I shook my head, and Vaughn sighed.

"Anyway, I'm the one who should apologize," he said. "I should know better than to wake you up when you're thrashing like that, but... your face, Lyle. What happened?"

...My face?

When I brushed my cheek, I winced at the pain that my touch had spawned. That's right. I'd gotten the shit beaten out of me last night.

Last night...

Wait a minute. Why was I acting so relaxed around Vaughn right now?

"It's Ruo," Gideon said. "He's... not good. Needs some comfort, so he's trying to get it through you."

Oh... that made my heart hurt, even if I also wanted to smack Gideon upside the head. If Ruo needed help, then why was this idiot with me? Never, in a million years, would I trust that sweet little boy with the other two, so-

Groaning, Gideon said, "Yeah, yeah. I'm going. *Avan*. You try to help a guy..."

But then, he disappeared, leaving Vaughn staring at me.

"Lyle?" he said. "Are you all right?"

Stiffening, I shot to my feet and nearly fell back down. I was so weak, and already, minutes after waking up, the world was tilting back and forth, if only a little.

I couldn't let Vaughn see it.

As I headed for the wash basin, acting as if everything was normal, I said, "I am fine, and it is nothing. Last night, I had a run-in with Mr. Teague's men, but despite how it might seem, the

encounter was resolved to my satisfaction."

Technically, that was true. Russell would leave me alone for a while now, letting me focus on more consequential problems, and the price I'd had to pay for this spell of peace hadn't been unreasonable.

Or at least, I thought it hadn't been. I'd know if that second part was true soon enough.

As I bent to retrieve the items that I'd left sprawled across the floor last night, I peeked at my timepiece's readout, barely visible from this position, and nearly faltered in standing back up. *Nine hours?* How long had I been asleep?

Behind me, Vaughn had started talking, demanding a more thorough explanation about my encounter with 'that worthless garbage sack of a man', and if I hadn't still been reeling from the number I'd just read, I might have smiled at that. Gideon would love having another derogatory nickname for Russell.

I cut into Vaughn's spiel with a snapped, "What time is it?"

"Umm... three in the afternoon or so? I think," Vaughn said. "Why?"

Oh, thank *avan*. I'd have enough time to figure out what to do.

A wave of dizziness had me grabbing the wash basin's edge, and the next thing I knew, Vaughn was at my side, supporting me.

With his eyebrows drawn together, he said, "Maybe you should sit down."

"That is probably wise," I said.

Tugging myself free, I somehow made it to my table without stumbling, sinking as gracefully as I could into a chair. Vaughn joined me, if slowly.

"So," he said, "things went down with Russell?"

Sighing, I said, "Yes, and I do not have time to explain everything that happened to you. Here."

With difficulty, I removed my band from around my wrist, offering it to Vaughn, and he flicked his eyes between it and me, acting as if I'd cut off my hand. Suppressing a huff, I shook the band in his face.

"Take it," I said. "You will need it to access my lockbox, and seeing as how *I* need something from it and you have suggested that I should remain seated, you will have to retrieve my things for me."

Hesitantly, Vaughn plucked the band from me, holding it between his thumb and pointer finger, before cocking his head.

"Wait," he said. "Does this mean you're asking for help? You, the ever-self-sufficient leader of this crew, need my help?"

"Yes. I do."

Wasn't that a novel thing to admit?

"*Avan* save us all. Lyle's asking for help," Vaughn said, as if to himself. "The world must be ending."

"If you keep acting like this, I might never do it again," I said. "So, if you could please get started? Go to my shower."

With his lips clamped shut, Vaughn did as I'd asked, raising an eyebrow at me once he was in place.

"Pull off the shower's knob, and once you have, you will see a slot behind it," I said. "Insert my band into that slot."

Crinkling his brow, Vaughn followed my instructions, jumping when something near him *thunked*. One of the floorboards popped open a centimeter, and quizzically glancing at me, Vaughn finished prying it up, whistling when he saw what was inside.

"Nice hiding place," he said. "Is it a modification, or did it come with the apartment?"

"What makes you think I would answer that?" I said. "Now, if you would be so kind?"

When I gestured toward the lockbox, Vaughn got on his knees.

"Sure!" he said. "What do you need?"

"You will see several, rolled-up parchment papers," I said. "I require the one labeled 'Barbary' from among them as well as my tools."

Long had I anticipated completing this particular job, and while circumstances might have pushed the timing for it further ahead than I might have liked, I still intended to enjoy every part of it, including preparing its final plans.

"Got it."

Vaughn started pulling my requested items out of the lockbox, but after retrieving the first, he sat back on his heels with a laugh.

"You own books about the lost monarchs?" he said. "Why? I thought you hated them."

Damn. I'd forgotten how nosy Vaughn could be at times. Maybe I shouldn't have asked for his help.

"Just because I despise the lost monarchs does not mean I cannot learn from them," I said. "You have no idea how much inspiration I have taken from Elliot Lockhart over the years, and when I

was a boy, reading about Beatrice Danver's exploits taught me my first lessons in sneaking."

"Huh."

My revelation appeared to have stunned Vaughn. For a moment, he merely stared into the lockbox before shaking himself and resuming his task.

"I'm glad they've helped you somehow. Always hated how much harm they've caused the empire," he said. "Anyway, this is interesting! Sort of like getting a look into the vault of your mind. Like... what's this random chest for?"

He leaned forward to reach for something in the lockbox, and my heart, forced to a stop, painfully squeezed.

"Everything else is loose in here, so what secrets-?"

*"Do not touch the chest."*

I was on my feet—when had that happened?—glaring at Vaughn, and startled, he teetered in his precarious position, nearly falling into the hole, before steadying himself. Backing off, he shot me an incredulous glance, and I struggled to remember how I should respond to such a provocation.

I had become ice, frozen in time and suspended in emotion, which was problematic, but I knew how to reverse this state. I was simply having trouble with reaching that knowledge.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to startle you," I forced myself to say. "It is just that the chest... it is off-limits."

Even to me, most of the time. What was hidden in there was something that I couldn't know, not yet and perhaps not ever.

"Then, maybe you should have said something about it before having me dig through here," Vaughn drawled before sighing. "It's not a problem, though. Everybody has their secrets, right? I won't poke at yours. So, why don't you sit back down?"

Focusing on the lockbox, he finished his task while I sank into my seat, using what he'd said to shake off my frozen state. I was aware that it was a distraction, but why not indulge it if it broke me free?

So.

Everyone had secrets? Sure, that might be so, but I'd never liked being reminded of it. Each time this happened, I was plagued by a recurrent itch, one that bid me to uncover everything others had hidden. Usually, I could scratch this urge in innocent ways, such as by investigating the hidden lives of my enemies. That was how so many years ago, I'd discovered Russell Teague's secret.

At other times, though, I got caught up in sweeping paranoia, obsessively pouring over the lives of those closest to me until I was sure that I knew everything about them, and I couldn't let such a descent into madness happen now. It was both despicably invasive and a never-ending tsk.

Everyone had more dirty laundry than I could ever hope to uncover, and this was especially true for Vaughn. He'd always been private, and perhaps because I'd known him for so long, I'd always fought against pressing that boundary.

Even beyond that, though, I couldn't indulge in scratching that itch today. With nine hours left in my timepiece, I'd barely have enough time to refill it, if I was to do it the way that I'd like to at least.

Unless I absolutely must, I *would not* take from the crew's stash. That was meant for Vaughn, Eliza, and Gus: there for if they ever had an emergency. To me, dipping into the communal stash had always felt like stealing from my crew. Fortunately, I had other means of obtaining years at the moment.

When Vaughn dumped my requested items on the table, I broke the seal on the parchment sheet so I could unroll it, and smoothing it down, I poured over a map of the Barbary family's estate.

While I did that, Vaughn said, "You know... as you so eloquently pointed out last night, you pay me to protect you. How am I supposed to do that when you keep me in the dark about things like this?"

He waved at my face before collapsing into his chair.

"Trust me. When it comes to doing your job, I tell you everything you need to know," I absently said.

On reviewing this map, I had a plan—mostly—for refilling my timepiece, so I reached for my tools and the override apparatus in my pocket, never removing my eyes from the parchment. So long as nothing had changed since I'd last visited this estate, I'd only need to make one adjustment to the apparatus, and that wouldn't take long. Then, I'd have to wait for night to fall, and I could begin.

As I started picking the apparatus apart, I said, "I can feel your disapproving stare, and it will not sway me. I have told you everything I can, except..."

Right. The last thing needed to keep Russell happy.

"Mr. Teague has received an advance of eleven months from his cut for last night's job," I said, "although since it is now afternoon and no one has delivered the rest, he may disregard that advance. How bothersome."

Pausing in fiddling with my tools, I stared off into space, wondering how or *if* that factor might affect the minor plans I had running.

Shrugging, I continued, "Even if he does not, however, I would like you or Eliza to sweeten the pot this time, if only by a few years. Unless something changes, we will need him off of our backs for

quite some time."

After all, if everything went to Plan, the message that I'd left at last night's site of execution should have the desired effect, and I'd need to closely monitor the situation.

"You want to add years to Russell's cut after his men *pummeled* you last night?" Vaughn dryly said.

Lowering my apparatus, I glanced up at him.

"Yes. I am aware that such a move will show weakness, and normally, I would not do it, but these are not normal times," I said. "You will have to trust that I know what I am doing. Can you do that?"

Chewing on his lip, Vaughn stared at me for far too long, but eventually, he nodded.

"I trust you, Lyle," he said.

"Good," I said, returning my attention to the override apparatus. "Now, where are Gus and Eliza? You are probably here because of the meeting I mentioned last night. So, why are they not with you?"

From the corner of my eye, I watched Vaughn shift in place.

"They were," he said. "We were heading here together, but... when we got close, I heard you screaming through the door. I figured you wouldn't want them to see you having a nightmare, so I sent them away, and don't worry. I don't think they realized what the noise was."

Ah. That made sense.

"Thank you for that," I said.

And nothing more. I couldn't dwell on the weaknesses that Vaughn knew about me. In my current life, he was the only person who knew how little control I actually had, but I couldn't help but present a calm facade when around him anyway.

Fortunately, he tended to play along. Leaning his elbows on the table, he frowned at the floorplan spread between us.

"What are you planning, Lyle?" he said. "Don't tell me you're thinking of pulling another heist so soon. You need to rest."

He didn't want me to tell him what I had planned? I could happily oblige.

"I know what I need to do, Vaughn," I said. "It involves asking you to check on Eliza and Gus. I need you to make sure they are not worried. Tell them that something came up. Our meeting has been delayed until tomorrow morning."

Oo, Vaughn looked like he knew I was hiding something, but slapping the table, he got to his feet.

"All right. I can do that," he said. "Please, tell me you'll get some rest."

Resting my override apparatus in front of me, I smirked at him.

"Come on, Vaughn," I said. "You know that I will always do what I must to survive."

Snorting, Vaughn said, "That's true. See you tomorrow?"

"I will see you then."

Hopefully.

He left, and I was left alone with my plans to ensure that meeting actually happened.

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