

Chapter Four: Dealing with Small Fry

Lyle

When someone became a thief in Flosa, they learned several important lessons, if they survived their first few weeks in the profession that is.

First of all, trusting anyone in the Warehouse District was one of the stupidest moves that one could make. Nearly everyone who was forced to live in that district was only looking out for themselves, and the few exceptions to the rule were usually too overworked and worn out to help those who needed it.

Second, the coppers in Flosa had no mercy. Maybe in the other nations' capitals, a new thief would get let off with a warning when caught. Here, how much or little experience a thief had didn't mean a thing. If a copper caught someone stealing, they were sentenced to death by the chair with no questions asked.

Third, no matter who a thief was, independent or not, they owed a portion of their haul to one of Flosa's major gangs. Usually, this meant regular visits to the headquarters of either the Roaring Whispers or the Thorns, the city's top two rivals.

For me, that had meant forming a working relationship with the leader of the Roaring Whispers. His gang *owned* the Warehouse District, and after moving here, I'd wanted to make this place my home for quite some time. Endearing myself to the bastard had been a requirement for that desire.

Lastly, as I'd said, gangsters, whether in Flosa or elsewhere, loved their theatrics.

As Russell Teague's men dragged me down the street to their leader's home, they went out of their way with trying to trip me or otherwise make the journey miserable, which I only found laughable. So long as the dark was around me, my feet would remain sure, even with a hood over my head.

I wasn't sure why they'd taken that precaution. Over the years, I'd visited Russell's home often enough. I knew the way there, but maybe these two didn't know that. Maybe they were new to the Roaring Whispers.

"Or maybe they're *idiots*, like I said," Gideon said beside me. "No, wait. That'd be *you*. Why are we doing this again?"

Because making Russell Teague wait was a bad idea. For now, keeping him appeased was necessary for the Plan. Even with his questionable ethics-

"You mean how he's scum, deserving of total erasure from the world?" Gideon said. "I can't stand working with him, knowing what he does to-"

Even with that, I wasn't ready to upset the precarious balance of Flosa's gang element. For that, the pieces were almost in place, but as with... what I'd done to my victim earlier tonight, I was waiting for the right moment to make my move. When engaging in something like the Plan, weighted caution was always best.

Besides, if I removed Russell before the time was right, who knew how much worse his replacement would be? At least with him, I knew what I was dealing with, and I had my... deterrent to keep him in line. For now.

"...Fine," Gideon said. "Fucking *fine*. Guess I'll watch your back while you deal with that evil shit. *Again*."

Within the safety of the hood, I rolled my eyes, carefully stepping over the loose cobblestone that my escorts had steered me toward. Thank *avan* we'd almost reached our destination.

When we entered Russell's home, light washed over me, and without the dark to guide my step, I tripped over myself while heading up the stairs. My guides seemed to get a kick out of this, snorting to themselves, but I let them have that, even after we'd returned to the shadows. I'd rather have at-ease, amused gangsters around me than soothe my pride by pissing them off.

Eventually, they pulled me to a stop, and I heard a door open.

"We got him, boss," one of my escorts said.

"Wonderful."

For too long, awkward silence rang until Russell clicked his tongue.

"Well? Push him into the light, where I can see him," he said. "I haven't got all night."

There was a grunt of surprise, and then, a hand on my back sent me stumbling forward. A familiar and rather unwelcome prickle started up under my skin, forcing me to suppress a wince. Fucking Russell Teague and all the ways he knew to bother me...

"Thank you, boys," the bastard said. "You can go."

I waited until the door had closed behind me before crossing my arms.

"Good evening, Mr. Teague," I said. "May I remove this ridiculous hood, or did you have some other purpose for it tonight?"

"I swear to *avan*, if he does, I'm going to..."

Gideon continued angrily muttering while Russell had himself a nice chuckle.

"No, no," he said. "You can take that off."

Thank *fuck*.

Perhaps faster than I should, I yanked the hood off of my head, and as I shoved it into a pocket, Russell raised an eyebrow at me.

"Problem, Lyle?" he said.

"Not at all," I said. "I'm-"

But then, I shut up. Oh *avan*. Gideon. He was influencing me, wasn't he?

"Kinda hard not to when you're drunk like this," Gideon said. "I'll back off."

That would be... helpful.

Taking a deep breath, I smiled at the sack of... at the man of dubious morality sitting behind the desk in front of me.

"I am fine," I said. "Perhaps a little tired. I was heading home when your men intercepted me."

Making a face, Russell said, "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to inconvenience you."

I was *sure* that he actually cared about that sort of thing.

"Please, do not trouble yourself over it," I said. "What can I do for you, Mr. Teague?"

"Well now. That's a bit of a sensitive topic," Russell said. "How 'bout we share a drink before discussing it?"

Gesturing to a nearby sideboard, he got to his feet, never letting me state my preferences, and while he followed through with his own suggestion, I glanced over his study again. Not much had changed here, but then, it rarely did. The strangely shaped room had shelves, filled with leather-bound books, lining most of its angled walls, and a giant, claw-foot desk rested against the only one free of them.

I was standing in the center of the room with a spotlight shining down on me, but despite how much I wanted to slink out from under it, I didn't move. If I'd been brought to this place, it was for a reason, and I knew better than to break this interaction's protocols. If I did, it would only make things more tedious for me.

Finished pouring drinks, Russell brought one to me, and I took a sip of it while he sat back down.

"You'd better not drink more, you massive moron," Gideon said. "You're already drunk. Don't push it here."

Yes, that would be wise.

Settled once more, Russell folded his hands on his desk.

"So, I hear you had a big score tonight," he aid. "Mind explaining why I'm just now hearing that you had a job lined up?"

Sighing, I shifted to my back foot while swirling my drink in its glass. It seemed tonight's confrontation would be more predictable than usual.

"The payout was not as big as you have heard, I am sure," I said. "We only made off with what will equate to three hundred years or so."

That was technically true. Of course, I'd left off how I'd stolen those years directly from my mark's timepiece instead of taking items that I'd have to fence, but Russell didn't need to know about that. Stealing from a timepiece without the owner's subconscious permission was supposed to be an impossible feat, and the fact that I could do it was a secret that I was still reluctant to discuss with my crew, let alone with a man I despised.

"Besides, it will not negatively impact your business. Given that, I saw no need to share my plans," I continued. "I meant to drop by in the morning with your cut, and that would have been the end of this job. I am sorry if my lack of consideration has caused you undue worry this evening."

I was about as sorry for that as he was about 'inconveniencing' me, and given how much he was frowning at me, I thought Russell knew it.

"I see," he said. "Seems all we have here is a misunderstanding, then. That's good."

If it was, why did he look so disappointed? Did he want me to have been at fault for something here?

Oh.... damnit. Was it time to stabilize this relationship again?

"Fuck that!" Gideon said. "I get why you're so *cozy* with this shit stain, but I swear, Lyle. If he acts put out and you pander to him instead of *fucking him up*, I will dedicate an hour out of each day to scream at your stupid face."

Well, ok. What was I supposed to do, then? My reasoning from before still held true. For the moment, I couldn't have the added complication of an angry gang boss on my plate, and replacing him wasn't possible yet.

With a frustrated huff, Gideon crossed his arms.

"Yeah, yeah. Makes sense or whatever," he said. "Do what you have to, just... keep what I said in mind."

So, in essence, he wanted me to find a compromise between debasing myself to Russell and keeping him appeased. I could do that. I was quite good at this sort of strategic manipulation, usually, but... Gideon probably wouldn't like the solution I'd use.

"Just fucking do it, ya insecure idiot, and I mean that with all love," he said. "The bag of feces in front of you is looking at you weird."

Which neither of us wanted.

"Even if this is merely a misunderstanding, it has been annoying for us both, I am sure," I said. "So, shall we make our apologies, material or otherwise, and leave it at that? Right now, I cannot give you your cut in totality. The funds from tonight's job are still being... processed, shall we say?"

Avan, I hated using misdirection like that. Yes, the years that I'd stolen earlier weren't available for use, the same as everything else in my personal stash. They'd remain in the midst of 'processing' until I reached the next stage of the Plan, but Russell would think I'd meant that my fence was taking their sweet time with paying me for what I'd stolen. He might ask for further details about that, and I wouldn't have answers for him.

Best to quickly move on.

"I can, however, give you a portion of what we owe tonight, and in the morning, Vaughn or Eliza will bring you the rest of our prepared cut," I continued. "As for how you can apologize, I would sincerely love to go home without further hassle. Your boys do so enjoy testing me when they think you have been insulted, Mr. Teague, and I would like it if I did not have to deal with their nonsense tonight."

As I clasped my hands in front of me, I carefully watched Russell's face. Would my proposal have the desired effect?

This man had always been... volatile—yes, that was the best way to put it—with me. We had mutual threats of destruction and history hanging between us, and while most of the time, that history ended with me as the victor of our verbal sparring, sometimes it backfired on me. I could never be sure if or when Russell would decide to test me.

Tonight, a smile as cold as mine crawled onto his face in response to what I'd said.

"I'll take it," he said. "Gimme what you got, Lyle."

"Fuck," Gideon whispered.

That... might have been an overreaction on his part. I couldn't tell yet, but I didn't get time to decide if it was. When Russell pulled a registrar out from a drawer, shoving it over his desk toward me, I had no choice but to step forward, rest my hand on it, and start handing out years.

What else was I supposed to do? Run and reveal a weakness to this predator? Fight and potentially get myself killed in the process?

No. Making this concession and risking any punishment that Russell might have planned was the best option here, and once that was done, I could go to the apartment, where I could recover.

As years trickled out of my timepiece, the typical weariness that accompanied sudden poverty lapped at my mind, and when I wasn't sure if I could handle much more of it, I drew back, curious how much of my life I'd given away.

Tilting the registrar to where he could see its display, Russell raised an eyebrow.

"Eleven months?" he said. "That's a bit low for a three-hundred-year haul."

"You gave him *eleven months*?" Gideon screeched, lifting his hands as if to strangle me.

Ah. Was that why the room was spinning? That was... unfortunate. I might have gone a bit overboard with my 'gift'.

"*You think?!*" Gideon hissed.

"As I said, this is only an advance," I told Russell, ignoring Gideon. "One of my people will be here with the rest tomorrow, exactly as I had planned before this meeting."

With pursed lips, Russell stared at me, and I wasn't sure what he saw—*avan*, please say that I wasn't swaying in place—but eventually, he nodded.

"I look forward to seeing them, then," he said. "Have a nice rest of your evening, Lyle, and... do get some rest, yes?"

He smirked, and as Gideon rumbled a growl, I resisted his imparted urge to punch this bastard in the face.

"Rest... what an interesting concept," I said. "Perhaps I will get to it soon, but I might first feel the need to get another drink instead. I would love to visit a pub before going home, somewhere more receptive to certain... stories."

As Russell went still, I returned my still-held glass to the sideboard, pausing with my head cocked once I was there.

"But no. Tonight, I believe you are correct. Some rest is called for," I said. "Good night, Mr. Teague."

I didn't wait for his reply. That threat I'd made? It had been a miscalculation, and if Russell had been even a little inclined to lash out at me before, it would be ten times more tempting for him now. I had to get out of here.

Unfortunately, this disobedient body of mine refused to indulge my haste. As soon as I was through the study's door, away from hostile eyes, it started trembling, and I had to graze my fingers along the wall to walk in a straight line. If that wasn't bad enough, the itch of the light on my skin had now become like a burning rash.

"Get into the dark, then," Gideon said.

He took my elbow, which only provided me with emotional support, but I appreciated it nonetheless.

"Working on it," I gasped.

When I reached the top of the stairs, the Tyrant was waiting there with his arms crossed.

"What idiotic mess have you dullards caused this time?" he asked. "You can't do anything right—"

"Not now!" Gideon and I snapped.

He, however, also lunged at the Tyrant, releasing my elbow, and at that loss of 'contact', I stumbled with my vision swimming. I felt the corner of a wall smacking into my side, but then, everything was movement and spinning, and I couldn't stop it! Couldn't!

The impact of my body against the door at the foot of the stairs slowed the rush of uncontrolled thoughts through my head, and for a moment, I simply laid there, staring at the ceiling through misted vision. *Avan*, what an enormous mista-

As pain overcame my dazed state, I choked—for the briefest of moments—on the scream that the body had unleashed, but before I could fully process what was happening, Gideon was beside me.

"I'll take that," he gruffly said.

With a grunt, he huddled on himself, and while he screamed between his knees, I patted the body down, flexing its fingers and toes. Nothing was moving in a distinctly wrong way, which meant that somehow, I'd fallen down a set of stairs without gaining a single significant injury.

"That's not a familiar situation *at all*, is it?" Gideon hissed. "Will you please get off your ass and go outside? We need the dark."

Right.

Scrambling to my feet, I glanced around, releasing a held breath on seeing that no one was nearby, and opened the door. I was a few steps away from the closest pool of shadows when a voice rose from the house behind me—

"Lyle!"

—and I stopped short. Whoever that was, he couldn't see me vanish into the dark, no matter how close that source of escape might be. With a last longing glance at it, I turned back toward the house, schooling my face into a blank mask.

The men who'd brought me here had stepped outside with one of them having raised a hand to hail me, and I internally groaned. Tonight had already been shot to hell with a series of missteps made on all our parts. I didn't want to know what other unpleasant surprises it might have for me.

Gideon stepped up beside me, hunching over the arm that he had wrapped around his waist.

"It's not like you have a choice," he grumbled.

No, I didn't. Not when the dark's typically blessed protection—something far too similar to tales of old magic—might get me killed this time.

As Russell's goons came closer, I said, "Did Mr. Teague need something else? I thought our business was—"

The rest of my words puffed to smoke as one of the men buried a fist in my stomach. His friend grabbed my shoulder, and the two of them dragged me into a—fortunately—well-lit alley. By the time they'd thrown me into a wall, I was floating far outside of my body, and catching himself on brick, Gideon simply breathed for a moment before swiping a hand over my mouth.

"Well, that was just rude," he said.

He didn't get to say more than that, though. Having already ganged up on me, Russell's thugs proceeded to pummel me... or Gideon, I supposed, with each of their punches a gift from their boss.

He did this sometimes, trying to assert his dominance, but the task was usually given to new recruits. That was for a very good reason, one they'd soon see.

But I couldn't consider that right now.

As each blow landed, I struggled to gain control again. I couldn't keep floating out here, far from the body. Not when someone else was hurting for me, but with each punch, I lost the strength to fight Gideon, and after a while, he started laughing.

"Give it up, stubborn bastard!" he shouted. "Compared to then, this is *nothing!*"

Rapidly blinking, one of Russell's thugs backed off while the other one took hold of my jacket, slamming Gideon into the wall.

"What was that, punk?" he growled.

With a grin, Gideon further devolved into manic cackling, only stopping when our current captor shook him.

"Oh... it was... nothing," he said before coughing. "Just... it's cute, seeing how badly you want Russell Teague's attention. *You* are pathetic peons to an especially pathetic man. You happily obey him when he tells you to bring your recruits to a... special introduction with him. You make me sick."

Hauling back, the man holding Gideon slapped him, bouncing my head against the wall, while his companion frowned.

"What's he talking-?"

But I stopped paying attention to those words or the fact that Gideon had started regressing through time because as he straightened off of the wall, blood dripped from the corner of my mouth, splashing to the cobblestones, and with my eyes fixed on it, he froze.

Fuck.

Growling, our captor violently released his hold on my shirt, leaving the body stuck in place.

"You dunno what you're-"

He shut up as the strings holding the body upright were cut. With my heart in my throat, I watched as it fell and curled on itself.

"P-please stop! *Please stop!*" Ruo wailed. "I- I'm sorry! I'm-!"

Hell no. No one touched that little boy.

I settled into the body with a jolt, clamping my lips shut. Oh... my everything ached. It wasn't the blinding pain that I should be feeling, making sparks fly in my vision, but still, it wasn't fun.

On hearing the silence around me, I sighed before rolling to my back with one arm thrown wide.

"Is that not what you wanted to hear?" I said in monotone. "Mr. Teague wants me broken, yes? Left sobbing in the dirt. Well, how fortunate for you. You have accomplished your goal. Now, if you would, please impart your final blows and leave. I would like to go home now."

Both men only stared at me, though, and with his eyes wide, the one of the fringe licked his lips.

"What's wrong with you?" he whispered.

Here was the reason why only newly inducted members of the Roaring Whispers got sent to beat me up. Who wanted to attack someone as unstable as me?

Sighing again, I said, "Nothing is wrong with me. You are simply not the worst monsters that I have faced in my life."

The man closest to me clicked his tongue.

"Fucking tough guy, huh?" he said.

Half-heartedly, he kicked the side of my head, and I rolled with the blow's imparted momentum, but otherwise, I didn't react to it. Lying perfectly still, I waited, and as always, Russell's goons said what they must to salve their egos before stomping off.

I didn't move until I could no longer hear their footfalls, but even then, I only crawled far enough that the dark could conquer the streetlamps' light. Once I'd collapsed in its embrace, Ruo slunk into view, crouching in front of me.

Hugging his legs, he said, "I'm sorry, Lyle. I saw blood. I thought-"

Wearily, I waved at him. None of this was his fault, and I certainly wasn't angry with him. I just hadn't wanted to see him hurt. In fact, I badly wished that I could hug him, showing him that he had done nothing wrong, but I was so tired...

"Then, go the fuck home," Gideon growled.

Right. I should do that.

Gradually, I got to my feet, although I failed miserably in my first few attempts at it. Once I was on them, though, I took a steadying breath and started trudging toward the apartment.

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