

Chapter One: This Is Me

Present Day

Lyle

Tonight's plan was shaky at best. As I stood on a roof, five stories above the cobblestones, I could readily acknowledge that fact, even if it pained me. I'd never liked leaving a heist's outcome to even the smallest of chances, but I'd had to do that tonight.

Beside me, Gideon kicked at the roof, hugging himself.

"I miss Max," he said. "*He'd* have known what to do."

Somehow, I kept myself from flinching, instead stepping forward so that my toes dangled over the roof's edge. When I looked down, a zing of euphoria, so atypical for me, rushed through my body, banishing the twinges of more unpleasant things back below the surface.

I didn't, however, let this euphoria show on my face. I'd never done something like that, and I never would. Even when I was alone, I couldn't show my internal state.

Of course, I wasn't alone at the moment, and as I balanced on the balls of my feet, the sudden inrush of air through Vaughn's nose *almost* made me smile. He was huddling on another roof a block over, keeping a lookout for coppers, but his every breath—every pulse of blood under his skin—was sent to me through the shadows around him.

While annoyingly boisterous most of the time, Vaughn was usually still as stonework when on a job, making the fact that I'd drawn a response from him now all the sweeter. I had to get my revenge on him from *somewhere*. He needled me often enough.

This was why I had a hard time with keeping my face blank as I straightened, shoved my hands into my pockets, and stepped off of the roof.

Before I'd dropped a meter, the night's dark formed a solid surface beneath my feet, stretching a thin sheet of it in front of me, but even still, in that brief moment of my fall, Vaughn had nearly made his own tumble to the ground. With a cry becoming a yip on his tongue, he barely stopped himself from leaping out of cover.

I didn't know why he had such extreme reactions to my antics, even after years of knowing me. He'd seen my walking on a shadowy bridge often enough.

As I strode above a hazily illuminated street, Vaughn moved his lips, enunciating his words so that I'd see their movement through the shadows.

"You did that on purpose."

I ignored him. If he wanted to think that, I couldn't change his opinion, and that wasn't merely because this time, he was right. For as long as I could remember, people had been making assumptions about my intentions and goals, and though these theories were usually wrong, I'd never seen fit to correct them.

Why should I make the effort? *I* knew what I wanted. *I* knew the Plan. That was enough.

Below me, the street's cobblestones surrendered to an estate's manicured lawn, and across it, the Watton's private security team moved in their predetermined patterns, exactly as I'd mapped them.

As always, they kept their eyes fixed on the shadows around them. None of them looked up, but even if one of them had, they wouldn't... *couldn't* see me.

I called the dark my friend for a reason, besides the obvious one that is.

"Should still be careful, though. Right?" Ruo said.

He was sitting on the estate's roof, swinging his short legs over the edge, and as I dismounted my bridge, letting it dissolve behind me, I glanced at him. He grinned up at me with *such* a spark in his eyes, forcing me to drag my gaze away. I was glad the kid was happy, but when in enemy territory, I couldn't focus on him as much as he deserved.

Silently, I ran over shingles to the wing where my mark would be sleeping, and once there, I laid on my stomach, peeking down the wall that I'd need to climb. Almost immediately, I ducked back into cover, silently cursing.

Getting to my access point—Lady Ada's bedroom window—wouldn't be a problem. I'd made similar climbs so often that I could do this one in my sleep.

No. What had me chewing on the inside of my lip had nothing to do with how I'd get inside the house but instead, with a missed detail.

When relaying his report earlier, Vaughn had failed to mention that a floodlight was aimed at this side of the building.

Even for a normal thief, this would be problem. We operated in the shadows for a reason, but my particular... situation made light slightly *more* than a simple problem, and Vaughn knew it.

"Bastard," I muttered.

"Don't say that. Besides the occasional prank, Vaughn's good to us," Gideon said. "You shoulda checked this out for yourself."

Great. *That one* was back.

Slowly shaking my head, I glanced toward where Vaughn was keeping watch. He was probably laughing right now, but no matter how much I wanted to *strangle* him for tonight's prank, I couldn't. Not yet.

So, instead, I oh-so-gradually lowered myself over the roof's edge, and as always, every incremental centimeter of skin that I exposed to the light strengthened the prickle that was running across it. *Avan*, it hurt, but unlike with most other types of pain, this was one that I couldn't shake off. I'd never learned how to do that.

Once I was dangling by my fingertips, I let go, kicking my feet free of stone while dragging my fingers along it. They soon slapped into a window's head, and I caught its sill with my boot's toes.

All as expected.

Unfortunately, the next part of the plan proved itself more difficult than I'd thought it might. I fumbled with the window's glass panes, tugging on the lip, while curses rang in my head.

Why wasn't it opening? I should be inside by now. In half a minute, the security force's next patrol would wander across the ground beneath me, and yes, they probably wouldn't look up here—no one ever did—but the chance of exposure sent an itch over my already crawling skin.

Damn this shaky plan.

"Oh, for the love of—" Gideon said before clicking his tongue. "Let me help."

Yeah... I should do that.

With my lips tightening, I loosened my control the bare minimum, watching with detached curiosity as my fingers dug deeper beneath the window panes' lip. They flexed, surging with a strength that I didn't have, and the window *flew* open. Before I could panic, Gideon stopped it from shattering against the wall, but then, that shouldn't surprise me. He'd always had faster reflexes than me.

Still, thank *avan*. My crew's inside source *had* been correct. Lady Ada kept her window unlatched at night.

As I slipped into the comforting embrace of the dark in the room beyond, my heartbeat slowed in my ears while the crawl across my skin subsided. Sucking blood off of my fingertips, I dropped to the floor, glancing around.

Lady Ada's bedroom was about as extravagant as I'd expected for a noble's daughter. Intricately woven, Ostium rugs covered the room's floorboards, which had been crafted from the trees of Crinas' distant jungle, and that same wood continued up the walls into waist-high baseboards.

Above this, columns separated the walls' frescoes into panels, and far too much furniture was dotted along the room's perimeter, including the four-poster bed that dominated it.

Avan love how the dark enhanced my night vision.

Finished with my fingers, I crept toward a canopied enclosure, curious if the rumors about Lady Ada were true. While I drew the curtain aside, Gideon ambled around the room with his hands in his pockets, making suggestions for possible, nick-worthy items, but I barely paid him any mind. He knew that we weren't here for that sort of wealth, much as it might annoy him. Instead, I kept my lips in a flat line, no matter how much what I was seeing had me smirking inside.

I'd been right. Eldon, the second in one of Flosa's most successful gangs, was curled against the ever-stunning Ada Watton. I was quite familiar with this man, seeing as he was the one who retrieved me whenever his boss required a meeting, but seeing him vulnerable like this...

Part of me found it hilarious. How would Eldon take it, learning that I knew about his affair with the daughter of a rival gang's client?

But most of me went to suppressing my growl while I kept my nose from wrinkling. Tonight, my crew and I might be risking our lives with this heist, given that death by the chair was guaranteed if we were caught, but with this relationship, Eldon risked starting a gang war where *many* more lives would be lost. It was unconscionable.

But this was what happened when someone let love rule them, I supposed.

"You'd know that best, wouldn't you?" Gideon said.

Avan, there had been such loathing in his voice, and it almost made me flinch because he was right.

I'd never make that mistake again.

Gazing upon this scene, I was tempted to reach for my override apparatus, lying in a pocket. Draining the years in these people's timepieces, their life energy made manifest, would be so *easy*, but... it wasn't why I was here.

Why would I take a piece of Ada's life, a girl whose only crime was to be the descendant of a lost monarch's ally? And if I stole Eldon's years, his boss, Russell Teague, would kill me, and he'd only make my death quick if he was feeling generous.

No, tonight's mark had no such strings attached to them, and denuding them of their wealth would have a much greater impact on society.

"And that's the important part, right?" Gideon said, rolling his eyes.

Hell, he was acting crabby tonight. What was his problem this time?

I'd figure it out later.

Lowering the canopy, I glided to the wall beside the bed, laying a hand on it with my eyes closed, and reached out to the dark.

Sometimes, my friend was quick to respond, like it had been when relaying Vaughn's reaction earlier. At others, it was slow and sinuous, taking its sweet time, but I could be patient. Considering the life I led, I had to be.

In the room next door, the shadows breathed in time to the sway of the moonlight through the tree's branches outside. They flinched from that ghostly illumination, a dog long wounded by a cruel master, and only the sound of my soothing lullaby gave them the courage to expand, creeping over the room's floor and bed and the lump that was lying on it. The dark caressed this sleeping man...

No. That was a woman. And she was alone.

Did that mean that her supposed lover had risen for a midnight snack? That would be unfortunate.

"Shaaaky plaaan," Gideon sang.

Which was why I'd prepped backup plans for snags like this. Having a backup was *always* for the best.

Relaxing my hold on the dark, I snapped back into Lady Ada's bedroom before heading for the door. I left the young woman and her paramour peacefully snoring behind me.

Once I was in the Watton's estate proper, finding the kitchen—the best starting place for my search—was simple enough, but then, it should be, given how much time my crew and I had spent mapping this place's floorplan over the last few weeks.

Before entering the room, I located every source of illumination inside—fireplace and ovens and candles alike—and stepped into the deepest shadows available to me. As I emerged from the stairwell, however, a cleaning girl, one I hadn't noted, came hurrying around the corner, and even with her body's natural instincts helping her to avoid the hidden threat that I was, I had to clumsily spin out of her path, colliding with a nearby wall as I did. With only a slight wobble to her precariously balanced mop and bucket, she continued on with none the wiser, although the incident sent Gideon into peals of laughter.

"Nimble," he gasped, "Truly, you're a paragon of grace."

'Shut *up*,' I mouthed at him.

Mentally, I was already cursing myself for the near disaster. I didn't need Gideon's help with my self-criticism.

Besides those two reactions, though, I didn't let the mistake affect me. With Gideon joining me, I leaned against the wall, crossing my arms while I glanced over the surprisingly busy kitchen.

This late at night, most people wealthy enough to retain a household staff would have long ago let them retire for the evening. Not the Wattons, apparently.

Here, a gray-haired cook was screeching at her frazzled assistant with both of their faces reddening, and several young men were lounging around a table, chatting as they shined shoes. In their midst, Lord Cyrus Watton sat, picking at a plate of fruit, with an older gentleman at his side, making marks in a thick tome. He was most likely doing figures for the household's budget.

Target located.

Now came everyone's least favorite part of a job like this: waiting. Most people in my profession hated it because prior plans or boredom or loved ones would have them itching to move on, and such impatience had made many an otherwise capable thief shuffle in place or make some other mistake.

Not me. My life was my work and the Plan, so I watched my mark for minutes or perhaps hours. How long it took didn't matter to me. Without something to goad me, I never made a move before an opportunity presented itself.

So, when Lord Watton eventually finished his snack, leaving the kitchen, I didn't follow him. I stayed where I was, leaning against a wall and waiting.

Waiting.

Soon enough, the man with the tome, the Watton family's steward, snapped his book closed, tucking it under one arm as he got to his feet, and this had me pushing off of the wall.

"*Finally*," Gideon growled.

He'd always been more impatient than me.

I followed the steward out of the kitchen on silent feet, but when he turned onto the hallway that led to his bedroom instead of heading to his mistress, Gideon threw his head back with a groan.

"Of all the piss poor luck," he said.

I merely raised my eyebrows at him. That the Watton's steward had chosen this one night to stay in his own bed instead of visiting Lady Watton's was quite unfortunate, but it also changed nothing. When making tonight's plan, I'd accounted for the possibility.

"It'll make getting out of the house more difficult," Gideon said.

Maybe, but that would come later.

For now, the steward had reached his room, and as he turned into it, I nudged Gideon, my way of asking if he was ready. The next part was his job.

Maybe Gideon laughed as I drifted toward the ceiling. I wouldn't know, busy keeping watch for him as I was. If anyone stumbled upon us while he was doing his job, it could get messy for us.

So, I didn't see how close the steward came to lighting a candle before we reached him, and I didn't hear his strangled shout when Gideon put him in a chokehold. Their struggle didn't take long, but why would it? With this room so dimly lit, the steward couldn't see his attacker, and that made resisting us all the more difficult.

Finished, Gideon easily lifted him onto a straw mattress before stepping aside, and settling back into the body, I slowly let out a breath, swiping at the sweat beading on my forehead. Kneeling beside the bed, I retrieved my override apparatus while tugging the steward's jacket and shirt aside.

The glow of the numbers on his timepiece's readout only added to the dim light from further down the hall, and at that, I made a face. Too much of that nonsense. For this job, shutting the door would be better than trusting in the shadows' protection.

I let Gideon do that while regarding the steward's timepiece. In a green glow, its readout's numbers read: *five years, four months, and one day*. A tidy sum.

It wasn't the truth, though. Returning to my place beside the bed, I rested my override apparatus beside the timepiece's readout, and after a brief flicker, its numbers resolved into something much more expected.

Two hundred and seventy-six years, eleven months, and twenty-four days.

"That's more like it," Gideon said.

Grabbing the steward's hand, I pulled it to where I could touch my band to the one around his wrist before pushing the button on his readout. My apparatus overrode the check that his timepiece made of its owner's willingness to relinquish his years, and carefully, I watched as the numbers on it counted down, a slow process all told. I should really work on that.

"Have to finish tonight's heist before we can tinker, Lyle," Gideon said. "Do you think this bastard will report what we've done? We don't want the coppers coming after us."

He had his eyes fixed on the door, ready to take over if it opened, and in answer to his question, I shrugged. Sure, this steward might be tempted to report my theft in the morning, given how many years I was stealing from him, but I doubted he would for two reasons.

First, the years I was taking weren't rightfully his. He'd been skimming from the Watton's accounts, so if he reported them missing, he'd get in trouble too.

Second, what would he say when asked about the crime? That an invisible man had jumped him? No one would believe that story. Such magical nonsense hadn't been seen in decades.

The steward probably wouldn't report the theft until the Watton's altered finances forced him to.

"You don't think he'll let anger control him?" Gideon asked. "He could lash out, despite the consequences."

But he wouldn't. I'd been watching this man for a while now, getting a read on his personality, but even if I hadn't done that, I'd have known if he were that temperamental of a person within seconds of encountering him. Detecting anger in people was a specialty of mine.

Snorting, Gideon said, "Fair enough."

Once the steward's readout displayed the same number as it had when I'd first revealed it, I laid his arm across his chest and left the room.

Like Gideon had said earlier, escaping the estate from this part of it might be more difficult than doing so from Lady Watton's bedroom, but the task *was* manageable. Sticking to the dark, I padded my way to the closest exit point, pausing with I saw that the room between it and me was brightly lit. Should I risk exposing myself here?

At the question, Gideon started grumbling protests under his breath, as he always did for such things, but I ignored him. Wouldn't exposing myself for the five seconds needed to reach the windows be better than hoping no one stumbled upon the mess I'd left behind?

Or *avan* help me, what if the steward woke up during the time I'd need to reach another exit? In a heist, getting out of a mark's home *quickly* after concluding one's business was essential.

So, I strode into the room, moving as swiftly as I could. I was halfway across it when a squeak burst into the air behind me.

At this unexpected noise, long-honed instincts took over. Flopping to the floor, Gideon rolled for the closest source of cover while blood filled my mouth from a nearly bitten in half tongue. Even as he reached his hiding spot, I fought my way back into the body.

In a flash, I was on my feet and across the room. I pressed my hand over the gaping mouth of the girl who'd snuck up on me, and as soon as I could, I dropped to one knee, hoping to reduce the threat that she might see in me. Swallowing blood, I grinned, although I made sure to keep my stained teeth hidden.

"Shh. Everything is ok, sweetie," I said. "I would never hurt you."

In response, the cleaning girl scrunched her face up while biting my hand, but this just widened my grin, even if Gideon hissed a pained curse behind me.

"Ferocious. I like it," I whispered before jerking my chin at her chest. "How many years do you have, kid?"

The girl drew her eyebrows together, but after a pause, she hesitantly tugged her neckline to the side. Glancing down, I looked over her readout.

One month, eight days, and eleven hours.

"Damn," Gideon said.

I had to agree. Her timepiece was running on fumes.

As if to remind me of how rude I was being, the girl nipped me again, and I softly chuckled. What a feisty little gremlin.

"If I give you a few years, will you let me leave?" I asked. "I just want to go home."

Raising her eyebrows, the girl glared at me, not that I could blame her for her suspicion. How could she accept an offer like that from someone who'd invaded her workplace, therefore threatening her source of income?

"Go on. Put your band on mine," I said. "I will not move."

Slowly, *so slowly*, she did as I'd asked, and while she did, Gideon clicked his tongue, storming around her so he could hang into the hall.

"No one's coming for now, but come on, Lyle!" he said. "Hurry up!"

Couldn't he see that I was going as fast as I could?

When the girl had touched her band to mine, I removed my hand from the back of her head so I could slide it beneath my shirt. Pressing my readout's button, I held it for a few seconds, giving her about seven years. A veritable fortune for someone like her.

Once I was done, I retreated in increments, keeping my hands visible while the girl checked her readout. Then, she lifted shimmering eyes to me with her lip trembling, and I fought the itch to cover her mouth again.

But she didn't start crying, thank *avan*. Good girl.

"You can go," she whispered.

"Why, thank you," I said, softly clapping my knees.

As I straightened, Gideon ran into me, and turning to follow him, I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Why was he always in a rush? Why couldn't he trust that I knew what I was doing?

For tonight, though, he did have a point about timing, unfortunately, so I hurried across the room to the windows. Opening one, I'd nearly dived into the dark, eager to return to my friend's embrace, when the girl's voice stopped me.

"Mister. Thank *you*."

Glancing back at her, I tipped an invisible cap before tumbling out of the window, and as I raced across the estate's grounds, the cleaning girl latched it behind me.

When I reached Vaughn's hiding spot on the roof, I started sprinting across its shingles without calling a greeting. He didn't see me coming until I was halfway to him, but once he had, he turned toward me with his arms spread wide.

"What took you so long?" he asked.

And I punched him in the jaw. Reeling, he stumbled toward the roof's edge, but before he could trip over it, I caught him, keeping him from a deadly fall.

"The next time you consider leaving a detail that could get me killed out of your report, I would advise that you *do not*," I hissed.

Vaughn only laughed. Clutching my hand in his shirt, he *roared* with it, and baring my teeth, I loosened my grip on him.

"Lyle!" Gideon shouted.

He didn't understand. Vaughn needed to know exactly how unwavering I was in keeping myself and therefore, all of us safe. Forgetting to mention a spotlight, like this man had done tonight, was a mistake that no one in my crew could afford to make. It could get us killed!

"I'm sorry," Vaughn gasped. "I hardly ever get to see you mad. I couldn't resist a chance at it.

See... me... mad? Was I...?

A small hand clutched my pant leg, and I glanced down into Ruo's solemn face.

"Don't be like *him*, Lyle," he said.

...Fuck.

Sighing, I yanked Vaughn onto the roof, and after stumbling to a stomp, he clutched his stomach.

"So?" he said. "Are you angry? Please, tell me you're angry."

Right now? I didn't think I was. As Ruo had reminded me, anger was... not allowed, but then, few emotions were.

With a cold smile, I told Vaughn, "Your thoughtless oversight will cost you a portion of your cut."

Instead of sobering him, as I'd thought it might, my pronouncement had Vaughn punching the air.

"Yes!" he shouted. "I knew it!"

I lightly slapped him.

"Keep quiet, you insufferable moron," I said. "The coppers might still come."

Rubbing his cheek, Vaughn chuckled.

"I doubt it," he said.

I didn't know how he was so sure about that, but for now, I didn't question him. I spun, heading for a service ladder.

"I am not angry," I called behind me.

When we reached the ground, Vaughn leaned on his knees, heaving at the air.

"Even if you're not," he gasped, "you need a drink."

At that, I could only stare at him. Why did Vaughn always suggest alcohol as a means of appeasing me? It wasn't *my* thing, although I sometimes used it as a sleeping aid.

"I do *not* need a drink," I said. "I need to meet with the rest of the crew so I can distribute everyone's cut."

"Oh, loosen up," Vaughn said.

Straightening, he threw an arm around my shoulders, and both Gideon and I went stiff. What was he doing? Vaughn... he knew me...

"He should know better."

And somewhere far distant, I heard a voice screaming awful things at me, but before I could silence it and *get control again*, Vaughn remembered himself.

"Right. No touching. Sorry," he said.

With his hands raised, he backed off before cocking his head.

"Well, if you don't need a drink, I do," he said. "Plus, I told the younglings to meet us at The Leaky Tap earlier."

Oh, thank *avan*. Whatever he'd just seen in me, he'd decided not to ask about it.

Internally shaking myself, I said, "That pub is not an appropriate place for us to conclude our business."

"Come on, Lyle!" Vaughn said, pouting. "Indulge your friend! Just this once?"

For this, I had no reply, as he well knew. With a cheeky grin, he turned on his heel, shoving his hands into his pockets, and whistling a cheery tune, he led the way out of the alley.

Crossing his arms, Gideon watched him go.

"He knows he's not our friend, right?" he said.

"I do not know," I muttered in reply.

I certainly hoped he did. Vaughn was a work associate, nothing more. Sure, he'd stayed with me far longer than most others had, but nonetheless, he was merely an associate. I couldn't afford to have more than one friend, one thing that would remain loyal to me no matter what.

So, as Gideon and I followed Vaughn down the road, he loped through pools of the streetlamps' light while we slunk in the shadows, where we belonged.

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