

Chapter Six: Dying to Stay Alive

Lyle

Doing this job by myself should have had my heart pounding at the back of my mouth. As good as I was at thievery and as much as the dark might hide and help me, I wasn't invincible. For example, the dark couldn't muffle any noises I might make while doing a job, and I was making a lot of noise tonight.

Having lost my grip on the wall around the Barbary estate, I crashed to the ground, remembering to roll at the last minute, and drunkenly stumbling to my feet, I darted my gaze over my surroundings. Thank *avan*, no one in this place's security force was in sight, and heaving out a breath, I leaned on the wall while rubbing my forehead.

This was bad. I think... I think I might have started this job too late because I was *drained*, more exhausted than I'd been in a while, and that could only mean one thing. Holding my breath, I peeked at my timepiece's readout—

Twenty-three minutes and five seconds.

—and was kicked straight into the back of my head. Unlike most times when this happened, though, I couldn't resist the fog around me now.

I was going to die. *Shit*. Twenty minutes left and I was nowhere near this heist's mark. And no matter how much I might not have wanted to skim from it in the first place, I wouldn't have time to reach my last resort, the crew's stash, either.

Which meant... I was a dead man walking. Which meant... the Plan would go unfinished.

Oh, *avan*... I couldn't let that happen.

"Brace yourself," someone whispered.

A sharp lance of fire dragged me, kicking and screaming, back to the forefront. Biting my tongue, I kept from shouting, but I couldn't help my hunch over my hand, the source of this pain.

After a moment, I lifted it into view, and my eyes bulged at the sight of my finger, bent the wrong way. What...? How the fuck had this happened?

Raucous laughter jerked my head up, and when I saw the man that it belonged to, my heart stopped. With one hand on a hip, he was snickering into the other one, and on glancing at me, he doubled over, leaning on his knees to keep from falling over. As his body shook, the moonlight caught on the purple streaks in his hair, and I fought to ignore how form-fitting his clothes were.

"Crazy Caleb," I said.

As his laughter petered out, Crazy Caleb slapped a knee before straightening.

"Heya, Lyle," he said. "Long time, no see."

Bristling, I hissed, "We have not seen each other for a *very good reason*. Why are you here?"

With a gasp, Crazy Caleb covered his mouth.

"Ooohh... you're talking to me *out loud*? And on a job, no less," he said. "What an honor."

And I slammed my mouth closed. Right now, I was in enemy territory. Why was I making unnecessary noise?

"'cos I'm here, of course," Crazy Caleb said. "Did ya miss me?"

Striking a pose, he ran his hands down his body before bowing.

"I certainly missed you," he said before shooting upright. "That's why I broke a finger. It's a present! Should help you stay alert, right?"

A broken finger. As a present. Yes, that sounded about right for this idiot.

Swallowing a growl, I brushed past Crazy Caleb, hoping he'd disappear at the unspoken dismissal, but to my utter disappointment, he trotted to keep up with me.

"Been a while since you were in enough trouble to need me," he said. "I gotta say. That put me out a little, even if it's for the best. Oh! And before you ask, the others are fine. Unless they're needed, they'll be takin' shelter from the storm that is me, so to speak."

He softly chuckled, and *maybe* I'd have felt sympathy for him if my finger hadn't been screaming at me. As it was, I didn't respond to him, keeping an eye out for patrolling guards instead.

Crossing the estate's grounds took me far too long, so by the time I reached my projected destination, the number on my timepiece read *seven minutes and forty-six seconds*.

With a low whistle, Crazy Caleb said, "Is the number on that thing supposed to get that small, or am I just crazy in thinking that it's not?"

Avan... I hadn't seen my readout's number dip this low since-

"Give me one good reason to extend your lease on life, you worthless abomination."

With a sharply indrawn breath, I drew myself up, ready to fight, and all the while, Crazy Caleb threw his head back with a groan.

"Great..." he drawled. "The fucking voices are starting. As if you weren't batshit enough, now we have to listen to *that bastard*."

So, what I'd heard had been a voice from the past. Just a voice.

Slowly exhaling, I forced myself to relax so I could climb the tree in front of me. As I did, I wondered why Crazy Caleb had seemed to care about who'd been speaking. He hadn't been around for that part of our life.

"So?" Crazy Caleb growled. "That asshole hurt you and Gideon and Ruo and even the Tyrant. If I ever see that bastard, I'll kill him. No one, not even him, fucks with my family."

Here was a prime example of why I must always stay in control. Killing someone? That was inexcusable, pure evil. I wouldn't allow it.

"Sure. Focus on *that* bit," Crazy Caleb grumbled.

But then, I was at the top of the tree, and I had to concentrate on the next part of this job.

Unlike with the Watton's estate, no buildings had been constructed near this place's main house. I couldn't have pulled another 'bridge of shadows' trick from a neighbor's home, and while I could try doing that at the top of this tree, I doubted that I could trust the dark with such a difficult task at the moment. It had always been less... reliable when I was close to death.

So, I cocked my head with narrowed eyes, judging the distance between me and my access point.

Out of all the places that I'd been casing, the Barbary estate had been, by far, the best one for me to attempt tonight, but that didn't mean it would be easy. After all, Lord Claud Barbary was one of the most paranoid nobles in Flosa. Not only did he keep decorative bars on his home's windows with double locks on every door, but he retained an extensive security team as well. In addition, the walls of his house's first floor were composed of sheer plaster, leaving no handholds for an enterprising thief. The place did, however, have one weakness.

Every night, the lord's daughter left her bedroom window wide open, not merely unlocked like Ada Watton's had been, and unlike everywhere else around the house, a single tree had been left standing near this opening. Unfortunately, now that I was here, I wasn't sure if it was close enough for me to make the jump to that window.

Snorting, Crazy Caleb muttered, "And you call my plans risky."

I heard his implications, and yes, they were true. In the short time that I'd had this afternoon, however, this heist had been the best plan for replenishing my timepiece's years, that I could come up with at least.

Looking back on it, I most definitely should have skimmed a few hours from the crew's stash before coming here, but as a general rule, I hated doing that and not just because it felt like stealing from my crew. To me, it also felt like pulling vital pieces out of the Plan's construct, and the Plan was *everything*.

Also, I'd been arrogant enough to think that I could pull this impossible job off before my time ran out.

"Speaking of that, how about less self-criticizing and more saving our skin?" Crazy Caleb said.

I wasn't sure I could do that without getting caught, though. Look at the jump I'd have to make! I'd either screw it up or do something to alert the estate's security force to my presence, and knowing this, wouldn't it be better to die peacefully in this tree than in the chair?

From the past, a well-loved voice shouted, "*Live the life that you deserve!*"

Max... I'm sorry...

And with an exaggerated sigh, Crazy Caleb said, "Oh, for fuck's sake."

Without warning, I was shot far into the sky, watching my ant-sized body coil on itself before flying through the air. It hovered for two, dragging seconds before slamming into the wall, and its fingers smacked into the sill, digging in.

The spike of pain from the broken one jerked me back into place.

Avan DAMN it, Caleb! I'd been getting to the jumping bit!

I didn't have the energy to stay angry with him for long, though. Hauling myself up and through the window took everything I had, so much so that instead of gracefully landing on the other side, I flopped onto the carpet, adding to my already extensive collection of bruises.

Hell, that had made so much noise. Shouldn't this worry me?

"You've got bigger concerns right now, mate," Crazy Caleb said. "Check your readout."

Rolling over, I craned my neck to do so, hoping to save some energy for the next part, but once I saw the number on it, I let my head drop back with a thump.

Three minutes and fifteen seconds.

I truly was done for. Sure, I'd known that since trespassing on this estate's grounds, but I'd kept going, unwilling to give up. Now, though...

What was the point?

As I surrendered to the inevitable, the dark kicked into a flurry around me, a whirlwind that I watched through misted vision. It picked and plucked at my clothing, making me wonder how long it would continue agitating this body after I'd died, and no matter how loudly or well I sang its lullaby, it refused to calm down.

So, I murmured, "Shh, my friend. It is ok. We had a good run."

I had to do what I could to lessen the pain of my impending loss, both dreading and hoping to see four familiar people around me as I went.

When someone leaned into my field of view, however, it wasn't anyone I'd expected. Bushy hair surrounded the blurry features of a rather feminine-looking face, and a stranger said.

"Who on earth are *you*?"

Oh, hell. I'd been caught.

That was too bad. This dreaded consequence had come too late. Whoever the stranger was, she couldn't subject me to a worse torment than I was already experiencing, and knowing this was freeing.

Weakly, I laughed, even if it was rough enough to shake my body, and cocking her head, the stranger had opened her mouth when the sharp *rap-tap* of a knock broke through the crazed noise around us.

Jerking out of view, the stranger called, "One moment!"

Then, something took hold of my wrists, and I was haltingly dragged across the carpet until a bed came into view at my side.

In a blink, Gideon was standing over me.

"*What* is going on?" he demanded before dropping to his hands and knees over me. "Oh... no..."

His moan almost concealed the creak of bedsprings above me. The stranger cleared her throat.

"Come in!" she called.

In the crack between the bed's slats and the floor, I watched a far-distant door open, and as it did, light came in after it. That most hated of enemies rushed across the distance to splash over me, setting my skin into a crawl while something deep in the core of me started shaking.

This pulled Ruo into the world, leaving him centimeters from my face and dazedly blinking, while a man at the door said.

"Is everything all right, Miss Zorana? I thought I heard a crash."

My fault, that. I barely remembered not to laugh while Ruo struggled to rise onto his elbows.

"Lyle? Do you need me?" he said, slurring his words. "Seizure's coming."

Yes, I was well aware. Bruised and broken as I was, the addition of light exposure to my maladies had made that eventuality inevitable, and it didn't matter how close I was to death. That particular physical reaction had always overridden everything else the body did to stop a shut down.

Above me, the woman said, "It's nothing, Walter. I was getting cold, so I meant to close the window for a time and tripped while on my way to do it. I'm fine, though."

...She was hiding me. Why?

"Why does it matter, you- you *imbecile*?" the Tyrant hissed. "*What have you done?*"

"I see. In that case, I'll leave you be," the man at the door calmly said, in direct contrast to the Tyrant. "Unless I can get you anything?"

"*Avan* above, she's fine," Gideon wheezed. "Fucking leave! I can't hold this seizure back for much longer."

Aww... he hadn't needed to do-

"No, thank you, Walter," the woman said. "I'm sorry to have disturbed your rest. Please, sleep well."

"And to you, Miss Zorana."

The door closed, the light died, and gasping, Gideon collapsed on me before stumbling back to his feet, even as Ruo leaned closer, reaching for my face. I was already starting to shake, but somehow, I forced words through chattering teeth, even if they were mostly unintelligible.

"*Do not!* This is not for you."

The woman dropped to the floor beside me.

"Now," she said, "what kind of miscreant are you?"

That question, paired with our current circumstances, almost had me laughing again.

"The worst," I managed to gasp.

Sighing, the woman sat back on her heels, shaking her head, before reaching for me.

"Well, let's see what you have," she said.

She started tugging on my clothes, but for once, this didn't spawn something ugly in me. I was too preoccupied with the dark swirling around us—why couldn't she see it?—and the four people on all sides.

My friends. My family.

"Somehow, I always knew it would end like this," Crazy Caleb said, crossing his arms. "Not because of something I did but with us standing vigil while you died."

Stinging heat in my eyes soon had my vision blurring.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "Wanted to make... Max proud. He is the only one who was never scared of me. I *tried* to protect you..."

"It's ok. It's ok," one of them—I wasn't sure who—said. "You did your best. Now, we can rest."

And at the edge of the world, a woman gasped.

"Oh, *shit!*"

Was that a word a noble's daughter should say?

Before I could ponder this idea for too long, though, the world's details started sharpening again, and when I could focus on her, the woman slumped onto my chest.

"Thank *avan*," she said into my shirt. "I made it in time."

What did that-?

Groaning, Gideon stumbled into the Tyrant, who... propped him up, surprisingly.

"Can't... hold it..." he muttered.

Given that warning, I was prepared for what was coming. When the body seized up, I happily bowed out, surrendering to an unconscious state.

[Audiobook Chapter Six](#)

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