

# Chapter Three: Two Pitstops

## Lyle

As I strode through the night, the world swayed around me, but my friend kept me on my feet and walking in a straight line.

Not that maintaining an appearance of control mattered at the moment. When darkness was around, no one could see me—with rare exceptions—and this had been a long-held source of relief.

Walking through Flosa this late at night had always been one of my favorite pastimes. With most people in bed, it was always so quiet. I didn't have to ignore a flood of auditory sensations, all of which threatened to drown me beneath them. Why wouldn't I enjoy such a time?

That didn't mean that all city activity had ceased, of course. The occasional individual hurried down the street, heading home for the night, and obligatory groups of homeless people were clumped in vacant spots.

I skirted them, as I must, and when I reached a wealthier part of the city, I switched to avoiding coppers, out patrolling the streets. Yes, they couldn't see me at the moment, but honestly? When possible, I'd rather stay away from them. They enabled a broken system.

Gradually, the streets cleared of even those sorts of people, and all the while, my heart constricted in my chest. I hated visiting this place, but it served as a reminder for me, one that I needed.

I was surprised that Gideon hadn't shown his face again. When I was alone, he liked to keep an eye on me, especially when I was drunk, but maybe he knew where I was headed. Once I'd paid my crew, the next step of finishing a job was depositing extra years in my personal stash, which I kept somewhere... special.

Elsewhere, I'd set up a communal stash in a place that everyone in my crew could reach. While the two were connected, the codes needed to access the communal stash were keyed to all members of my crew, not solely me.

My personal stash was in a place that none of them would dare visit, somewhere I visited on rare occasions. It was a place that Gideon hated going anywhere near.

Then again, he might not want to deal with our... *friend*, who might show up while I was there. If so, I couldn't blame him for it.

As I approached, I let my lips draw thin, but besides that, I maintained an appearance of calm. The roar of blood in my ears? My lungs sudden need for air? I couldn't indulge in these things, not while I was in enemy territory.

When I reached my destination, I took a moment to examine it, making sure that nothing had changed, and as expected, a familiar face soon joined me.

"Exactly *what* are you doing here?" the Tyrant said.

When I ignored him, he sneered at me.

"I see. Being defiant, as usual," he said. "How tedious."

Without a word, I crossed the street so I could scale the wall of the estate opposite me. When I landed on the other side, I scanned the garden around me, looking for any newly added security, but across the manicured lawn with its many pruned flower beds, I saw not a soul.

Still, I reached out to the dark, paying special attention to its given warnings. Here, on this estate's grounds, was the one place I *could not* fuck up.

I also couldn't let current danger affect me, though. As I made my way through the gardens, I kept to a sure stride, holding my head high, and while the Tyrant was waiting for me when I reached the house, I was perfectly content to ignore him.

"This is foolish, you stupid child!" he snapped at me. "Even with your limited intelligence, you can't believe that I'm ignorant of your presence here tonight. I *will* find you."

Maybe so. If he did, I'd have to hope that enough time had passed since he'd last seen me. With that and how much had changed since then, the dark should be able to hide me, and if it couldn't, I could always run away from him. I was a lot faster now.

Skirting the house, I looked anywhere but at it. The dark would warn me if anyone inside was standing at a window, and besides, I wasn't setting foot in there tonight. My current objective rested in these outside grounds, and *fuck* if I'd enter that place unless I must.

When I reached my first stop on this foray—a seemingly innocuous tree—I scrambled up it, leaving the Tyrant red-faced on the grass beneath me, and soon enough, I reached a crook, high in its branches. Once I was in place, however, a frown took hold of my face before I could smooth it away.

With a tack pinning it in place, a sheet of paper was fluttering in the breeze here. What in the-? Had someone found this hiding place? I'd hate to find a new one.

Before I could consider possible replacements, however, the word at the top of the paper—*Ruo*—caught my eye, and slowly, I released a sigh. If *she'd* found this place, it wasn't a problem.

Shaking my head, I unpinned the paper, stashing it in a pocket without reading the note that it contained. I couldn't afford the distraction right now. Instead, I plucked a key, hanging nearby, from its twig and hurried to the ground.

When I joined him, the Tyrant said, "What have you got there, ashie?"

Without a word, I lifted the key into view before magicking it up a sleeve. As hoped, this display shut the Tyrant up, and I could make another quarter circle around the estate in peace.

Long ago, the owner of this place had built a garden shed in a remote corner of the estate's grounds, but it had been abandoned, left to slowly succumb to time and the weather. What need was there to maintain it when its purpose hadn't existed for eleven, long years?

Fortunately for me, it was still secure enough to serve my purposes.

After unlocking the door, I glanced over the shed's interior, noticing when my heart picked up its pace in my chest.

"It is ok," I said under my breath. "I am ok. *We* are ok. Nothing will hurt us here. Not anymore."

But then, I found myself crouching beside a small box in the corner, fumbling with it to reveal the disconnected registrar inside. My personal stash.

Transferring the leftover years from tonight's job, putting me one hundred and twenty years closer to the end goal, seemed to take forever, and once it was done, I raced out of the shed, abandoning caution in my haste to replace the key and escape the estate.

Once I was free of it, I frantically retrieved the bottle of Mad Gloom from earlier, yanking on it when it got stuck on a pocket's cloth, and as soon as I could, I drained what remained of it through shallow sips of air.

Why did I torture myself like that? *Avan*. What the hell was wrong with-?

Somewhere nearby, the Tyrant said, "Every time I forget how much you disgust me, you give me a reminder. Continue showing weakness like this, and crushing you will be easy, just like it's always been."

Almost, I threw the empty bottle in his face, but... he was right. For a moment, I'd lost control.

And I couldn't do that.

So, I took a deep breath, returned the empty bottle to a pocket, and squared my shoulders, facing the Tyrant.

"You can go now," I said. "I do not need you here."

His face twisted into an ugly scowl, but I only caught a glimpse of it before turning on my heel. With that chore out of the way, I could get on with the night.

What should I do now, though? I could go home, but if I did that, I'd have to wait for the alcohol in my bloodstream to finish taking effect before sleeping. It might already be affecting me to a degree, but its influence hadn't come close to an optimal level. With my drinking history...

Let's just say that it took *a lot* of the good stuff to get me where I wanted to be.

So instead, I wandered, letting my feet take me where they willed, and as I went, I scanned the note that I'd retrieved from a dreaded estate's tree. I didn't fully register what it said, but considering its words weren't for me, that was to be expected.

Soon enough, I arrived at a place that I hated to love. I wasn't particularly surprised by this turn of events. Even after making my deposit in the stash, I had ninety-nine years to use how I pleased.

To the rest of the world, such a sum would make me a man of middling means. With it, I could move out of my cramped apartment to a more comfortable home in a safer neighborhood, but rather than indulging in that idyllic dream, I found myself beneath a bridge with graffiti on its walls and trash scattered across the cobblestones between them. Under this uncertain source of shelter, ragged people had huddled around fire pits to ward off the night air.

Finding the Ostium children among them was the easiest task I'd undertaken tonight. When I was around them, the lullaby that I'd always sung to the dark swelled from a simple strain of music to a poignant symphony, and I could relax in it.

The lullaby constantly buzzed in my mind, and I'd never been sure why it found such kinship with these children. Over the years, however, I'd learned to accept this symphony for what it was. It and they made me feel at home, something that I'd learned to treasure, so why would I question it?

When I stepped into the light, it took the kids a moment to notice me, but after they had, they shouted.

"Caans riiver!"

When translated from the Ostium tongue, this phrase roughly equated to *year giver*, and I replied to the kids in kind.

"*Hello, my lovelies!*"

I dropped to my knees with my arms spread wide, and at the invitation, children threw themselves at me so they could hang from my shoulders and neck. Pulling one of their heads to me, I buried my face in his hair, kissing it, and squeezed the girl beside me.

As with the symphony's manifestation, I didn't know why my typical touch aversion relented when around these children. I'd never thought too deeply about it, simply reveling in something that I could so rarely experience comfortably.

Take a moment to enjoy it...

"The grownups are looking at us."

Sighing, I nodded in acknowledgment of Gideon's warning before pulling away from the kids. If I wasn't quick, I'd lose the chance to care for them before the adults pushed them out of the way.

As she stepped back, one of the girls rested her hands on her hips with a wry grin.

"*What did you bring me?*" she asked.

"*You know exactly what, Xia, and as always, you'll have to wait your turn for it,*" I said. "*Everyone, show me your timepieces, please!*"

Within three breaths, five readouts were shining from grimy shoulders, and I winced at some of the numbers that I read off of them.

"Ten hours, Xia?" I said under my breath before smiling at the kids. "Bands."

They thrust their wrists at me, and as quickly as I could, I touched each of the bands around them with my own, giving each child four years. I wished that I could share more with them, truly, but considering my limited supply and how many people were headed my way, that wouldn't be possible.

"You coulda deposited less in the stash," Gideon said. "They need the years more than us."

But doing that would have delayed the Plan. I... we couldn't have that.

With my smile tightening, I loudly said, "*Be careful with these. Don't spend them all in one place. XIA.*"

Said little girl blushed, and rubbing the top of her head, I nudged her chin. A smile started conquering the red in her pale cheeks, but then, my time with the kids ran out.

"Lyle. You're back," someone behind me said. "Done with the ashies yet?"

If I froze for the briefest of moments at the sound of that voice, I refused to acknowledge that fact. When it came to my interactions with this man, I was usually too busy balancing between floating toward the back of my skull and maintaining control to do that.

While I was still caught in this struggle, my mouth started moving without my permission.

"Hello, Lonnie," Gideon said. "Are you finished acting like an asshole yet?"

And I bit my tongue. Whenever we ran into Lonnie, Gideon always had a few choice words for him, words that I couldn't say. What he'd already spoken was all that I could allow him.

"Haha. Very funny," Lonnie said. "You got somethin' for me?"

Rising from my crouch, I said, "I have gifts for everyone here, not just you."

Turning, I once more looked upon a greedy, soul-suck of a man. With his beefy arms crossed and a mustache hanging above a frown, he met my ice-cold gaze without fear. *Avan*, how I hated him.

"Shouldn't be so unpleasant, Lyle," he said. "Remember. I knew where you're from and *what you can do*. I was here when your brother dragged you under here with the both of you broken and bloody."

As if I could forget that. Lonnie reminded me of it every time I returned here, and the proof of what he knew was found in how firmly he'd positioned himself within the firelight's circle.

With tonight's reminder, though, I felt myself drawing further into the back of my head because no matter how much I might hate this man, he also... he also...

*"-just this one time, kid. I promise it won't hurt, and the client won't even know your name. He thinks it's Caleb or something. You do this for me, and we'll always be square, even with your... problem. Yeah? Good. And remember. You can never tell anyone-*"

"NO!" Gideon growled. "Not gonna let him hurt us. Not again."

With his fists trembling at his sides, he'd lunged toward Lonnie, and as if in commiseration, the dark breathed around me. As the reach of the bonfire's light constricted, deeper shades of black swirled closer to Lonnie, and he retreated a step, even as I snatched his wrist.

He froze, but I merely rested my hand on his, giving him his due. He got three years, the same as what the other adults here would soon receive. Ostracized as they were, I could give the Ostium kids a little more, but if anyone else received a greater sum than Lonnie, the king of this fiefdom would banish that unfortunate soul into the cold.

Jerking the bastard closer, I said, "You should be grateful that I ever return to this place."

As if broken from a spell, Lonnie tore his gaze away from the dark, resting it on me.

"Why do you think I let your filthy ashies stay here?" he said with amusement. "You got a soft spot for those brats."

That was true. The kids were one of my weaknesses, but even years after figuring that out, I hadn't divested myself of them. For some reason, I couldn't do that.

"Maybe you are right. Who can say?" I said. "Now. Are we good?"

"Yeah. Have at the rest."

Snatching his hand to his chest, Lonnie once more glanced at the shadows around us before hurrying toward another bonfire. All the while, I worked to calm my friend down, singing it a soothing lullaby, but it only retreated when Gideon eventually relaxed.

Fortunately, none of the adults around me had reacted to this unnatural disturbance, too enamored with the slice of wealth and life that I represented to notice it. When they reached me, the flicker of hope on their faces, so rarely found there, washed the bad taste of Lonnie out of my mouth, and I began handing out years.

They stretched me thin with this visit. Tonight, more of them had congregated here than usual, so for the first time in a while, I let the number on my timepiece's readout dip below my hard limit of one year. By the time the last woman walked away from me, sobbing over her clutched-together hands, I was left with *eleven months, two days, and eight hours*. I hadn't been so low on funds in years.

Swaying in place, I ran my eyes over the recipients of a rich man's wealth, taking a moment to enjoy the glow in my chest. These people would live to see tomorrow because of me. Their survival made all my efforts worth it. If allowed, it could make me forget the end game.

"Can't do that," Gideon said. "Go home."

"I will," I muttered.

When a small hand slipped into mine, I almost jumped, barely controlling my startle reflex in time. Glancing down, I smiled at the mischievous smirk on Xia's upturned face.

"*Will you do it tonight, year giver?*" she asked. "*I want to see a magic trick.*"

Oh, sweet child. What I wouldn't give to see her innocence preserved.

Lifting an eyebrow, Gideon said. "You'll indulge her, even if it's dangerous?"

He knew that I would.

After patting Xia's head, I bowed to her.

"*For you?*" I said. "*I would risk such a mystical crime.*"

And why shouldn't I? Right now, no one was looking our way, and despite how similar my relationship with the dark might seem, it wasn't the magic of old. That didn't exist anymore.

So, I stepped into the shadow's embrace, and when I vanished, Xia squealed with laughter, pattering her hands together. The sight of her would be enough to soften even the hardest of hearts, so I turned away from her, striding off as fast as I could.

"Crilla le!" Xia shouted behind me.

*Thank you!*

For who knew how much longer, I continued wandering through the Warehouse District, but eventually, my delay had the desired effect. By the time I reached my apartment, I'd finally fallen

into a fully drunken stupor, a warm blanket that might muffle my nightmares tonight, and perhaps because of this, I didn't see the people lurking in the alley beside my home.

Gideon did, though. It was one advantage of keeping him around.

"Some idiots are standing in the alley," he said. "They look like Russell's people."

Fucking fantastic... I'd been hoping to avoid that man for another couple of days, or at least until morning.

"You could ignore them," Gideon said. "The dark's still hiding you. If you wait to go inside until after they've left, they'd never know we were here."

Sighing, I said, "No, I should get this over with."

I'd so been looking forward to a chance at decent sleep tonight.

Once I was close enough, I tapped one of the 'idiots' shoulders, and jumping, he spun toward me, drawing his friend with him. As he did, I circled around him, stepping into the light behind him and his companion.

"Can I help you?" I said. "I have not met you two before. Usually, when Mr. Teague wants a word, he sends Eldon to retrieve me."

If my first interaction with these two had startled them, my sudden appearance at their backs looked like it might kill them. While they slapped hands to their chests, glaring at me, I raised an eyebrow and crossed my arms. After a moment, one of the men licked his lips.

"Eldon's busy," he said.

With Eliza Watton. I knew that. I'd seen them together earlier tonight.

I couldn't say any of that now, though.

"Which left Mr. Teague with sending you," I said instead. "So? I am assuming he needs me. What are you waiting for?"

Sneering, one of the men said, "Mr. Teague don't *need* anyone."

But the other one reached for something on his belt, all while I kept myself from lifting my eyes to the heavens. Why did gangsters always feel the need to save face?

They also liked their theatrics. Hefting a small burlap sack into view, the second man pulled it over my head, and taking my arms, he and his companion dragged me into the dark.

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