

Chapter Two: Completing Business

Lyle

I first heard the screams several streets away from where they'd originated, but then, it was hard not to. The city was quiet tonight, or it was here, in a wealthier part of it at least.

So, the sound of someone howling in pain? It stood out, making the hairs on the back of my neck stiffen. Beside me, Gideon stopped short, blanching, before he vanished.

Not that I could blame him for retreating. I'd like to do that too.

When Vaughn noticed the noise, he winced, turning away from it at the next cross street, but he stopped when I brushed past him, continuing toward the disturbance.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

And *avan*, if I hadn't heard the warning in his voice. Still, I didn't heed it, moving forward step by resolute step. I had to see this, had to face it once more.

Fortunately, Vaughn said nothing else, and while I was sure that he'd continue to the pub without me, I instead caught the sound of his footfalls at my back soon enough.

Within moments, the street that we'd been walking down opened onto a small square. Here was where we found that horrible noise's source.

I saw the platform. I saw the chair sitting on it, and all of me went dead. Shouldn't I be used to these sorts of things by now?

"Lyle..." Vaughn breathed behind me. "What *the fuck* are you doing? This is far enough. Let's go."

But I couldn't. There was something different about the scene in front of me tonight.

"You go ahead," I said. "I mean to pay my respects."

Vaughn drew in a hissing breath.

"This is a bad idea," he oh-so-carefully said. "You shouldn't-"

"Vaughn," I interrupted. "You go on ahead. Make sure that Eliza and Gus do not feel abandoned."

I didn't wait to see if he complied, instead stepping into the square. In front of me, I finally saw my opportunity, one I'd been waiting for.

A chance to make a difference.

"*Avan* damn it all," Vaughn breathed.

He said nothing else, though, and I watched through the shadows as he headed away. Before he disappeared around a corner, he looked back, shaking his head, and almost, this made me smile. He shouldn't be worried about me, and he knew it.

Because only darkness filled this square. No coppers were guarding the platform, and they hadn't set up the typical spotlights and monitoring equipment around it. For once, they'd left everything as-is, probably believing that no one would disturb such a grisly scene overnight, and typically, they'd have been right.

Unfortunately for them, I needed to see this. I needed to pad across the cobblestones, pausing whenever moonlight threatened to banish the shadows.

My friend only stayed with me because of the soothing lullaby that I sang to it. I wouldn't let that soft light hurt its abused counterpart, not while I was here.

When I reached the platform, I climbed onto it, joining the little boy who was already standing in front of the chair, and for a moment, I let Ruo be all that I could see: his dark curls, the stiffness in his narrow shoulders, and the small fists hanging at his sides.

His blue eyes, fixed on the chair.

Drawn by that gaze, I turned my own on the man sitting there. I started slow with my examination, first locating the death machine resting at his feet. From there, I followed a cable up the chair's side, imagining that I could see the pulses of electricity that it carried to its endpoint.

I couldn't see that awful needle from here, but even still, I knew what it would look like. They'd have peeled away the scalp on the back of this man's head, drilling a hole into his skull, and that sharp point would have been pushed through the hole until it was squarely embedded in his brain's pain center.

I didn't circle the chair to verify what I already knew, instead focusing on the man's face.

At one point, he might have been handsome. If that was so, I couldn't tell now, not with the pinpricks of blood pattered across his skin, oozing from his pores. It had been smeared where it had drizzled out of his mouth, and his eyes...

Quickly, I looked away, needing a break from that particular scene. I distracted myself with the restraints securing the man to the chair and how their leather had dug through his wrist's skin to the bone beneath. The same was probably true for his ankles as well, but his pant legs had hidden the evidence of it. Hell, his muscles were tightly bunched, straining to escape their fleshy prison, and so many veins had popped out across that dark canvas.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to again look into the man's eyes. They were empty, staring at nothing, and as I took the full picture in, a ghost from the past superimposed a memory over what I saw. Daylight briefly overcame the night, a crowd filled the square behind me, and in the chair, my brother tried to scream with a ruined voice.

"Max..."

Sniffing, Ruo turned away, hunching on himself, and I pulled him to me.

"I hate him. I *hate* him," he said into my hip. "This is *wrong*."

"I know," I said.

For a moment, I let myself have a visible reaction to a stimulus, reaching up to pinch my nose. Maybe it could hide the moisture pooling in my eyes.

When I lowered my hand, however, I'd squared my shoulders, stubbornly meeting that empty gaze.

"I do not know how you angered our lords and masters," I said. "Perhaps you stole from an MP. Perhaps you defied Parliament in another way, but whatever has landed you here, I applaud you for it. You rankled them enough to gain their ire, and that is a worthy accomplishment, even if you got caught in the process."

My voice broke, trapped in a stranglehold, and in the silence, Ruo squeezed his hold on my leg.

With a cough, I continued, "I am sorry. I cannot free you from this torment. If I did, they would never stop looking for me, and I cannot have that. The only way I can help you is to end this more quickly."

When I fell silent once more, Ruo peered up at me.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

I nodded, patting his back as I pulled him off of me. Hopefully, he'd know how badly I needed him to turn away right now.

As for this man, he probably hadn't understood a word I'd said, but that was ok. Those words had been sincere, yes, but they'd mostly been spoken to help me crouch, take hold of a knob on the machine, and turn it to its highest setting.

An inhuman noise rose in the night, so potently wrong that even my friend, the dark, flinched from it. It cut me adrift, flung so far away from the world that I wasn't sure if I could recover, but after only a few seconds, that awful sound ceased, letting the shadows swirl back into place. They helped me find my body, and hanging my head, I repeatedly scrubbed my face, fully bringing myself back, before pushing on.

Without thinking about it, I smeared my fingers along my victim's face, gathering the blood that I'd need, and once more crouched. Writing my message only took me a few swipes, and as soon as I was done, I jumped off the platform, glancing over the nearby buildings.

As expected, lights had started flickering to life in them, so I hurried out of the square, doing my best to ignore Ruo. Following on my heels, he was crying, little hitching sobs that twisted my heart, but I didn't know how to help him. How was I supposed to help with this when I couldn't even help myself?

After a while, Ruo said, "I'm scared, Lyle. What if- what if that happens to us? What if we get caught? *Avan*, Lyle. I can't. I *can't-!*"

"That man was caught because he did not have what we do," I said. "We have the dark, and it will keep us safe, like it always has."

How many times had I reassured myself of that over the years? Faced with a potent example of the consequences that I'd endure if the Plan failed, I was tempted to abandon it again.

Not that I could ever truly do that.

So, I repeated the one thing that had kept me firmly *here* and committed to my life's course, an assertion that at times, was only a denial of reality. Would I accept my reasoning this time?

Sniffing hard, Ruo said, "Ok."

I supposed I would.

When I reached The Leaky Tap, its cheery illumination was spilling onto the street, soon to rip the comfort of the dark away from me. This worn-down pub stayed open throughout the night with its slanted foundation and leaning edifice serving as a home for many of Flosa's crews, all those independent from the gangs at least. As a magnet for the city's less savory population, it proudly displayed the graffitied image of an MP, caught in the same position as my victim from before, with broken windows serving as widened eyes and a gaping mouth.

I'd never liked the presentation.

When raucous laughter escaped from those openings, it burst against my eardrums, and at that sign of the numerous people waiting inside, Ruo shivered.

Squeezing my hand, he said, "Have fun?"

And he disappeared, leaving me alone for the first time in a while.

Staring at the spot he'd just occupied, I blinked. Have fun? Me? Was that allowed? Was it even possible?

Shaking the remnants of Ruo's presence off, I forced myself into the light, shoving through the pub's door when I reached it. Tonight, the place was packed with many a patron clamoring for the barkeeps' attention. The bar itself gleamed with bottles, colored in every shade of the rainbow and containing all kinds of alcohol. I hastily turned my attention away from the sight of it before anything... unwanted could surface.

Even in this crime-ridden neighborhood, the obligatory mark of the empire's monarchs rested atop the doorframe, letting their five visages glare at patrons. At the bar, people tapped their bands against registrars, exchanging some of their timepiece's years for inebriating substances, and there was so much noise.

Music from the radios, scattered around the pub. Singing from patrons. So many different conversations, mixing into an indistinguishable roar. It was no wonder Ruo had left.

The worst of this, though, was the electricity that surged through the bare bulbs overhead. It sent my friend skittering beneath tables and into corners, and I wished that I could join it. Instead, I kept a blank look in place, hiding the prickling sensation of light as it danced over my skin.

As I headed for the staircase in the corner, people parted in front of me. One too many incidents of broken fingers had encouraged others to keep from touching me, much the same as they avoided my gaze. I strode through them without hesitation, only letting myself relax once I was through the crowd. With the space I'd gained, I could fight or run if someone attacked me.

The pub's loft enjoyed none of the electric bulbs that hung over the rest of it. Here, gas lanterns provided dim illumination, light that the dark could resist. With the shadows' return, the itching under my skin subsided, and I flexed my fingers, shedding another dose of tension.

In addition, not as many people were up here, and of those who were, most of them were less enthusiastic than their fellows below. Quietly chatting, some brave few among them nodded when they caught my eye.

My crew was waiting at a table in the corner, and for a moment, I watched them, taking the time to read their temperaments.

Vaughn, usually my crew's muscle, had shucked any sense of trouble that he'd gained in the square. He'd joined the others in their revel, downing a pint of ale to their delighted chanting.

As he did this, Gus, our scout, pounded his fist on the table while Eliza, our lookout extraordinaire, punched the air. With each shouted 'chug', the scars on her face twisted, briefly catching the firelight, but when Vaughn lowered his mug, they disappeared beneath the glow of her smile.

They seemed happy. That was good.

When he caught sight of me, Gus briefly blanched, slapping Vaughn's thigh, but as usual, the bull of a man refused to let me intimidate him. Relaxing into his seat, he patted the bench beside him with a silly grin in place.

As I approached, Eliza and Gus watched me with studiously blank expressions, tracking my every move. I wasn't sure why my presence prompted this reaction in them. I'd never gone out of my way to frighten them... or anyone, really. I simply lived my life, sometimes doing unpleasant things when I must, and apparently, that had been enough to spread the fear of me throughout the Warehouse District.

So, when I'd walked into this room, a monster had entered with me.

At the table, Gus spilled off of the bench to let me sit, and as I did, I noted his unsteady sway. Was he using again? If so, I'd need to have another round of *polite* conversations with his favored *kalvna* dealers, but... better to avoid that until I knew if I was right.

For now, I settled in my corner, propping my feet on the table to hide my view of its gas lamp, and folded my hands on my chest. If only I owned a hat, one that I could tip over my face, I could complete the picture of an at-ease gangster, which I'd always found funny considering...

Well. Considering.

Seeing that I wasn't ready to start our meeting yet, my crew resumed their conversation, gradually growing less stilted, and I listened to it with half an ear. They were discussing an upcoming sporting event between teams from Escad and Acrar, which meant that I barely followed the conversation.

I disliked sports. Such matches usually involved having too many people around me, all of whom were likely to get impassioned about the event's results, and unpredictability like that bothered me.

Eventually, stomping footsteps signaled the arrival of The Leaky Tap's proprietor.

"Lyle. Your 1872 Mad Gloom whiskey, neat, along with the bottle," he said as he came closer. "On the house, of course."

He knew me well, although... on the house? That was new. Did he know something that I didn't? Was he about to ask me for some dangerous favor?

No. That was paranoid thinking in the works again.

When I let my feet slip off of the table, they boomed against the floor's wooden planks.

"Thank you, Norris," I said. "That is... quite generous of you."

"Honestly? I heard you had a big score tonight," Norris said. "I expect to see you four often over the next few days, so one free bottle is no skin off my nose."

Ah... that explained it.

With a wink, Norris left us to our business, and raising my glass, I took a sip from it. When comforting warmth splashed into my belly, I almost smiled.

What luck! Norris hadn't watered this bottle down, like he did for most patrons' drinks. Maybe I'd have a chance at sleep tonight.

With this in mind, I drained my glass before filling it once more, ignoring my crew's eyes on me. Cupping my liquid escape, I once more ran through my planned speech. In it, I'd praise their skills while deriding our society's sad state, giving them the reassurance that at times, they needed from their leader. I always wanted to be what they needed but...

Sighing, I simply asked, "Who wants to get paid?"

The three of them slammed their wrists on the table, turning hungry faces toward me, and my guts painfully twisted. Why must our lives be like this, struggling for scraps of existence? Why had the lost monarchs made the years of their citizens' lives the Empire's currency, so many decades ago?

I couldn't consider those questions for long, so save for one exception, I doled out years as we'd earlier discussed. Twenty of them apiece went to Gus and Eliza while Vaughn received ten. When he checked his readout, our crew's muscle bristled.

"You gave me half, " he growled.

Had he already forgotten what I'd said on the roof? Maybe he'd thought I was joking.

Folding my hands on the table, I said, "Indeed. Your job is to protect us, all of us. You know that I need the shadows to do my part of our heists, but even still, you left details out of your report, or at least, that is what I assume happened. You have never been so forgetful in the past. If I had known that my entry point was so well illuminated, I would have called this job off."

Snapping her head to Vaughn, Eliza backhanded his chest.

"You didn't tell him?" she hissed.

At that, Vaughn had the decency to look chagrined.

"I knew he could handle it," he said.

"That is well and good. I am happy to hear that you have such confidence in my skills, but said confidence does not give me the safety that you are paid to provide," I said. "I told you that your oversight would cost you. In this crew, I do not reward slipshod work, as you well know. If you have suddenly taken issue with this policy, then please. Take your leave."

Oh, *avan*, please say he wouldn't do that. Not only would replacing Vaughn be exceptionally difficult if he did leave, but Gideon wouldn't be happy about it, and when Gideon was unhappy, he

found purpose in making me miserable.

I might have my own reasons for wanting Vaughn to stay as well, but if I did, I couldn't examine them now.

After a tense moment, Vaughn barked a laugh, which had Gus and Eliza relaxing.

"Sorry, Lyle. I didn't mean to snap at you. I had plans for those years, is all," he said, "but keep entertaining me like you do, and the loss will be worth it."

"Plans? What plans?" Gus said. "Do you have enough years to last you until our next job?"

I hadn't considered that. Vaughn had always seemed so careful with his years. I hadn't thought he could run out, and the thought that he might made me.... uncomfortable. I'd never wanted to see him dead.

Suppressing a need to squirm, I said, "He may skim from the communal stash if need be."

"Stop it, you two! You'll drown me with your concern," Vaughn said.

Slapping a hand to his chest, he rolled his eyes.

"I'm fine! Come now. Let's get this party started!"

And that, what he'd just claimed? It had been a lie. In this dimly lit room, the dark was only touching him in a few places, but it was enough for me to have felt the increased pace of blood rushing beneath his skin.

Why would Vaughn lie about this? Was he in some sort of trouble? If he was, could it endanger the Plan? Did he need help?

Repressing a frown, I tied a piece of the dark to Vaughn before putting his falsehood out of mind. With my friend riding piggyback on him, I could check on him whenever I liked, meaning I could investigate this discrepancy later.

Because Vaughn had been right. According to tradition, it was time to celebrate.

Given that, I slid the whiskey bottle to Gus. He poured himself a liberal amount before shoving the bottle Eliza's way, and once she'd filled her glass, it stopped at Vaughn. He, of course, only accepted a splash of the stuff, but that was just because our taste in alcohol had always been contradictory, as it was in most things.

But then, Vaughn rested the bottle on the table, and with a solemn air catching us in its chill clutch, the world hushed around us. As if in response to my mood, the dark crept from beneath the table, forming a hazy wall that went unnoticed by drunken patrons and my preoccupied companions. I saw it, of course, but just this once, I didn't calm it into hiding.

The dark was my friend. That it joined my crew in our most momentous tradition was only fair.

Raising his glass, Gus started the proceedings.

"For Ida!" he said.

He wiped his eyes as Eliza cleared her throat.

"For Adrian," she whispered.

On her words' heels, Vaughn said, "For Eleanor."

And as I joined my glass with theirs in the air, my hand trembled under the table.

"For all those lost in our Empire's system," I said.

For Maxton.

We clinked our glasses together before taking our medicine. Some of us did it with gusto while others winced, and once we'd finished, Vaughn slammed his glass down.

"Until the next time we rob from those pretentious bastards!" he shouted.

His cry caught the attention of other crews in the loft, and together, they released a roar, thudding their glasses against wood.

"HEAR, HEAR!"

The loft's occupants broke into song, and while persuading the dark to recede, I listened to the tale spinning through the air around me. They'd chosen a song about the last rebel who'd defied Parliament, which only made me cringe inside. As always, everyone had focused only on that man's heroics. No one liked remembering that his resistance had ended in the deaths of everyone involved in it.

Soon enough, though, that uncomfortable song was followed by one about the empire's lost monarchs, and I pulled my whiskey bottle toward me. With no one's eyes on me, I could drink straight from the bottle, refusing to let up until only a quarter of its contents remained. I'd like to sleep without interruption tonight.

Once I was finished, I nudged Gus.

"Let me out."

He hastened to clear the bench, and as I reached my feet behind him, I nearly stumbled, only stopped by the dark's efforts to steady my feet.

Turning to my crew, I said, "I hope you have a nice conclusion to your evening, but please keep in mind that we will be meeting at my place, midafternoon tomorrow. I have decided on our next job."

"Already?" Eliza said with her eyebrows drawn together. "Lyle. I'll need time with my kids at some point."

At that, I briefly wanted to snap at her. Couldn't she see how much harder and faster we'd need to hit now, if we were to accomplish... everything?

Still, I understood where she was coming from, and her dedication to her children was admirable. So, I forced myself to smile.

"Yes, another job," I said, "but do not fret, my dear. Your role in this next heist will be small."

This seemed to reassure Eliza. She nodded her acceptance, and with that out of the way, I pointed at each member of my crew.

"Midafternoon tomorrow," I said.

They gave their assent, and I let myself relax.

Glancing at the bottle by my side, Vaughn said, "What about you? Can you make it home alone?"

...Really? Why would he ask that?

"Vaughn," I said, "since when have I needed your help?"

Laughing, Vaughn said. "Fair. G'night, then."

"Good night."

I left them in the booth behind me, chatting and signaling for more drinks. As I made my way toward an exit from the pub, a familiar voice on the radio caught my ear, making me pause.

"-great empire has persisted through more hardships than anything we've encountered in these last few months," it said. "We'll survive this recent batch of unrest."

"Sure, sure," someone sitting near the radio grumbled. "That's easy enough for someone that fucking high and mighty to say."

Avan... it... it was him.

With difficulty, I turned away, rapidly blinking. I had to hold it together. Couldn't consider what I'd heard. Couldn't-

What had I been thinking about? And... did it matter that I couldn't recall?

When I reached the door, I glanced back, noting how other crews had crowded around mine. Between their clustered bodies, I caught sight of Gus' hands flying.

Great. He was probably sharing a story about tonight's job.

I hoped he remembered to keep his mouth shut about *certain aspects* of what we did. If those details ever got out, no one in my crew would live to see the next morning.

Given that, I was sure that Gus would be cautious with his retelling, so I pushed through the door, leaving it hanging open behind me.

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