

Prologue

Lyle

Nine Years Ago

The blow came from out of nowhere. One moment, I was racing down an alley, worrying about getting home in time, and the next, something slammed into my side, sending me sprawling.

As I hit the ground, added weight drove the air from my lungs, making my eyes water, but I hardly registered these things. Instead, I was frantically scanning my surroundings for shadows that I could hide in, a well-practiced exercise that left me wincing. Only daylight surrounded me, blocked by three, vaguely human shapes.

Great. This was just what I'd needed.

Out of sight, Gideon clicked his tongue.

"Shoulda checked your corners, dummy," he said. "Why'd you leave the dark anyway? That was stupid."

If I could have, I'd have rolled my eyes, but I was too preoccupied with keeping tears from falling for that, and Gideon knew it.

"No choice but to give up now," he said. "It'll go better for us that way."

I *knew* that, but when someone tugged my shirt's collar to the side, that knowledge flew out the window. Hissing, I started squirming, trying to slap my captor, but he just grabbed my wrists.

"Hold still, ashie," he growled. "Don't make me hurt you more than I already have."

Right... like he wouldn't do that anyway, no matter how easy I made this for him.

I drew breath to shout for help, but before I could get the scream out, someone smacked me *hard*, and through stars, I watched a man straighten above me. Again, he tugged at my shirt's collar, and I started scratching any part of him I could reach, even as he brushed my hands aside.

Clicking his tongue, he said, "He's got nothing, lads. Not enough to force it, at least."

Oh, thank *avan*. They wanted to *rob me*. That was all.

"Just take what he's got," another man said.

Scoffing, a third voice said, "Hell, Joshua. He's just a kid! An ashie, sure, but still. I won't make a kid drain his own timepiece."

"Besides, it'd be too much trouble," said the man on top of me. "He dropped some apples when I jumped him. Let's take those and go."

Vaguely, I heard someone murmur unhappy agreement, but then, something *slammed* into my face, and clutching my nose, I was too busy fighting to breathe to notice anything else. When I could focus again, the alley was empty... or at least I thought it was, and I'd been left lying on my back, panting at the sky.

Before I could get up, a face I knew as well as my own came into view, Leaning on his knees, Ruo solemnly watched me for a heartbeat before frowning.

"You ok, Lyle?" he said. "Need my help?"

Coughing a laugh, I waved him off.

"Nah, we're good," I said, barely containing a wheeze. "Go back to sleep."

Gideon snorted at that, but with his face brightening, Ruo nodded, retreating. With a groan, I rolled over, forcing myself to my feet, and once I'd reached them, I checked the alley again, making sure I was alone.

I wasn't, of course—not really—but then, I rarely was. Ruo was gone, fortunately, but Gideon was leaning against the wall opposite me with his arms crossed. Scowling at me, he shook his head.

"How was *that* giving up?" he said.

Like he'd have done any better.

Glaring at him, I patted myself down, checking for injuries, but thankfully, most of the body was unharmed with just a couple of bruises on it.

Rolling his eyes, Gideon said, "Hurry up! Maxton's gonna be worried."

"I *know* that," I muttered.

But I trudged toward the end of the alley, taking deep breaths to bury my pain as I went. By the time I was on an open street, I could walk with confidence, and at the next turn, I started running.

Avan, I'd be so late. Not good.

When I reached the apartment, I stopped outside, checking my appearance in a cloudy window, and made a face. The visible evidence of my bruises might not be showing yet, but my cheek was

scratched all to hell, and the skin around my eye had started welling.

"He's gonna know," Gideon grumbled.

"Obviously," I whispered.

What exactly did he expect me to do about that, though?

"Might as well get this over with."

Sighing, I slunk into the apartment, hoping beyond hope that I could find somewhere quiet to hide before someone noticed me, and for a moment, I thought that might be possible. This afternoon's meeting had already begun, leaving friends and business associates crowding the sitting room.

So many people! Dozens of men and women were chatting here, and they sounded so angry! That anger wasn't because of me. I'd just gotten here, and I *knew* that these people were safe, but even still, I started falling away, drifting toward the top of my skull. Fortunately, I caught it happening this time, and with a sharp headshake, I managed to get centered.

I refused to lose control right now.

The room's occupants—the various member's of Maxton's crew—seemed focused on one another, and seeing that, I hoped that I could glide through the room's concealing shadows to the kitchen, where I could eavesdrop. After all, out of everyone here, only my brother could see me while the dark surrounded me.

But then, Maxton looked up from where he was talking with his second, and when he spotted me, he snapped his mouth shut with his jaw going tight.

"Damnit," Gideon said.

Already caught out, I abandoned all attempts at hiding, shuffling from foot to foot beside the door, and after finishing his conversation, Maxton headed toward the kitchen, beckoning for me to follow without checking if I had.

That was good, though! If I pretended that I hadn't seen my brother's invitation, maybe I could avoid him for now, staying in the bedroom until after the meeting was over instead.

With that in mind, I meant to move that way, but without permission, the body turned toward the kitchen, following Maxton. That was when I noticed how fuzzy the world had become.

I'd lost control. Great.

Still, I'd rather not wrestle it back yet. If we were talking to Maxton, Gideon would do a better job of it than me, so instead of fighting with him, I watched from a point on the ceiling as he walked me to a chair at the table.

Maxton was standing in front of our wood-burning stove, fixing tea. As Gideon sat, he didn't look away from the kettle, waiting for it to whistle, but once it had, he brought two cups to the table.

Seeing how much steam was billowing from them, I absently said, "That'll be hot, Gideon. Wait a while before touching it."

I didn't know why I'd reminded him about that. Gideon might not feel much physically, but he'd had enough tea to know that it was typically hot. Still, I'd said it, and as expected, it made my lips twitch, but Gideon didn't reply as Maxton set a cup beside my elbow, sitting in the other chair.

"What happened?" he quietly said. "Are you hurt?"

Glancing away, Gideon said. "Everything's fine. 'm fine."

For how blunt he was the rest of the time, he sure was shy around Maxton, which was shown by how he kept my eyes fixed on my twiddling thumbs, and for a while, Maxton merely watched me. Then, he shifted in place.

"Was it another fight?" he calmly asked.

So calmly. He was always patient with me, but the question was enough to jerk my head up.

"No!" Gideon said with wide eyes. "I got jumped. Must've seen my eyes 'cause they called me ashie."

With his face hardening, Maxton hissed, "Fucking prejudiced *assholes*."

But when he saw how much Gideon had tensed, he relaxed, leaning over to gently move my shirt's collar to the side. With my timepiece revealed, Gideon bit my lip, swallowing hard, but my brother just looked relieved.

"They didn't take anything. Good," he said, "and it doesn't look like they hurt you too badly, which is even better."

Closing his eyes, he sighed before smiling at me. He nudged my chin so that Gideon was facing him.

"Hey. You're ok," he said. "You're safe. He's not here."

For the briefest moment, I zoomed back into the body, which sharpened the world into the clearest of pictures. I took in my brother's grin, fixing it in my mind, even as I said.

"I know."

But then, glass covered the world again, and I was set adrift, if still tethered to the body.

"I was *stupid*," Gideon said, hiccupping on a sob. "Shoulda stayed in the shadows, but I thought I was alone."

"Hey. It wasn't your fault," Maxton said. "You can't blame yourself for someone else's greed or prejudice."

Hugging my chest, Gideon huddled over my arms.

"Yeah," he whispered.

But he said nothing else. He knew better than to try to convince Maxton of the truth.

"Did you get a good look at them?" my brother said. "I could see someone to... persuade... them to change their ways."

Gideon shook my head.

"Didn't see nothing," he mumbled.

"Ok," Maxton said.

For a while, they sat together in silent companionship, and I was happy with that. I didn't mind hanging in my corner of the ceiling, watching my life pass me by, so long as my brother was with me, keeping me safe.

Soon enough, though, this peace was disturbed by a man leaning through the kitchen's door.

"Just letting you know Vaughn's here, Max," he said.

And I snapped into place. Vaughn? Out of everyone in my brother's crew, Vaughn was my favorite!

When he saw me perk up, Maxton laughed, slapping his knees.

"All right! I'll be there shortly," he said before inclining his head toward the table. "Don't forget your tea, buddy. Drink it up, and you can join us."

With a solemn nod, I reached for the cup, blowing across its surface while Maxton followed his associate into the sitting room.

Once the tea was cool enough, I gulped it down. I didn't have time to waste. Now that Vaughn was here, the meeting would start soon, and I wanted to be there with everyone.

I couldn't wait to hear the plan for next week's heist.

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