

# A People's Breaking

This series takes place immediately after the end of *Empire's Fall*. Even within the prologue, there are spoilers for the overall ending of those books. If you're ok with knowing some of a story's details in advance, feel free to read this before reading the other series. If not, you might want to wait until we've fully uploaded *Empire's Fall* before delving into this tale.

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# Shattered Family: An Adagio

# Prologue: Breaking Point

## Zorana

Trapped in the fog between dreams and waking, Zorana rolled to her side, reaching for the one she loved. Her palm slapped cold sheets, and for a single blissful moment, she thought Lyle had left to complete another job. For a moment, she almost groaned at his unexpected absence before letting sleep claim her again. Then, she remembered.

Curling on herself, she shoved her knuckles into her mouth while shards of grief wiggled in place, where they'd been imbedded in her heart. She forced her cry, both the audible one and the one that wasn't, back on herself, a harsh churn of acid that threatened to eat her from the inside out. Only once her sorrow had diminished, the shards of it falling back into a motionless ache, did she open to the bloodsong.

Even months after... *it*, the world's vast symphony limped along like a dog long abused by its master. Swells in its notes gave Zorana temporary hope of an eventual recovery, but these inevitably fell to the ripping discord that had ruled it since the loss of its beloved son. Since Parliament had executed the man many in Flosa and beyond had taken to naming the revolutionary. Since Lord Lyle Cunningham had died.

As always in recent days, Zorana shut out the bloodsong's rippling disharmony, reaching for the only thing that might bring her relief. Her beloved, the one to complete her song, had vanished from her life, but a near identical copy of his strain lived on in their son.

She understood that she shouldn't rely on her little boy to ease her pain. Even as young as he was, August sang his own melody of loss and befuddlement. How could Zorana add to that? But still, she sought his strain of music, the only thing that made her nearly as whole as she'd once been.

She quickly found it, letting its music unfurl her from her ball, but something about it sounded wrong. Distant. Muddled.

Climbing out of bed, Zorana padded across her bedroom and to the door, but before she could leave, Walter rose from his cot. Her attendant had taken to sleeping in her room over the months since... *it*, and elsewhere, Zorana had found herself trapped under his watchful gaze. She couldn't go anywhere without him at her side.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Zorana said. "Would you wake Vaughn up for me, please?"

"Of course."

While Walter raced to comply, Zorana made her way to the children's room. Having a lost monarch under her roof still raised a sheet of goosebumps over her skin. Zorana found it easier to think of her household's newest addition as Vaughn, Lyle's former attendant, than Victor Rothschild, absent ruler of the Ibisian empire. If she ever considered the latter while in his presence, she might transform into a gibbering mush pile.

Or she might fly into a screaming rage. *Why didn't you save my husband, oh famed warmaster?*

Zorana slipped into her children's bedroom on light feet, leaving its door cracked. Two beds filled the space's confines, one for Alice and one for August, but ever since... *it*, ever since Zorana had decided to keep her son awake, the siblings had shared a bed, taking comfort in each other's arms.

That seemed to be the case tonight as well. Only one set of sheets covered their indistinguishable lumps, and Zorana glided to it.

Alice's black curls spilled over her pillow with her eyelashes framing lids that hid striking blue. Her skin had flushed, probably from the heat of the blankets on her, and her lips were curved into a frown, an expression found on her face more often than not in recent weeks.

Her body was curved into an arch, and in the hollow that it cradled, Zorana expected to find her three-year-old son, an alabaster boy with loose muscles and a slowly moving chest. She expected to see bushy, white locks spread over his sister's arms and bleached skin scrunched into a ball.

None of that greeted her. Alice was hugging an empty depression, one that was still warm to the touch. Had August gotten up from bed? What could he possibly have wanted that he couldn't sing to his mother for it?

From the doorway, Vaughn whispered, "Problem?"

Lifting her hand off of the sheets, Zorana shook her head.

"August's not here," she said, "but it's probably nothing. I'm sure he's in the kitchen or a washroom."

"I'll check."

Once Vaughn had left, Zorana rested her hand on Alice's head. Did she dare wake her daughter up? It seemed a silly thing to do when nothing was wrong. Why disturb the girl's rest?

But when Zorana listened to the bloodsong, August sounded further away than before, as if his strain was echoing down a long tunnel. Why didn't this worry her? She should be swept into a panic over a deviation like that, but all she experienced was cool numbness, and upon examination, the cause for this seemed apparent.

*It* had hollowed her out. Besides grief, Zorana was an empty shell, and even her children had been unable to fill a hole lined with glass granules. She hadn't thought this state would be enough to negate what she should feel in this moment, but apparently, it was.

Without Lyle, she was broken.

What use had she, however, for panic or worry or fear? After everything life had stolen from her, what more could it take? It couldn't be crueler than it already had been.

The door banged open.

"He's not in the house," Vaughn gasped.

Blinking, Zorana tried to parse what he'd said. Not here? Where would August go in the middle of the night?

Outside the room, Walter ground to a halt, clinging to the doorframe.

"Xia's gone too," he panted.

Xia, Lyle's thrall. That woman had yet to rise from her near-comatose state, only aware when in August's presence.

When in August's presence.

"She's taken my son!" Zorana growled.

That was why he sounded so distant. Not because he'd muffled his strain but because it was moving away from the house. Why hadn't he cast a cry for help into the bloodsong? He did so love communicating through it. Was he still asleep? Why wouldn't he have woken up, though? Had Xia *drugged* August? Or had his trust in her merely allowed this to happen?

"That bitch," Zorana said.

She'd never trusted that girl, not since the moment Lyle had brought her home. Zorana had only tolerated her presence because her husband had unintentionally stolen from her notes, making him feel responsible for her. With the death of her mage, Xia seemed to have gone off the deep end, stealing a copy of the strain that she'd been bound to. She'd taken August so she could more fully partake of the comfort that he gave.

Like Zorana had done, if not to as much of an extreme.

Walter and Vaughn were watching her, as if waiting for her to shatter, and she wanted to shake them until *they* fell to pieces.

"What are you waiting for?" she said. "I can hear August; therefore, I can track him. We're going after my son."

Snapping to attention, both men scattered. Zorana made to go after them, but before she could take a step, a small hand took a fistful of her dress. Behind her, Alice was kneeling on the bed with bulging, blue eyes.

"Mommy," she breathed, "something's wrong."

Zorana gently pried her daughter's fingers off of the fabric of her dress, patting the back of the girl's hand.

"Go to sleep, silly monster," she said. "Everything will be fine."

"No!" Alice cried. "Don't you hear it? Something's wrong. *How do you not hear it?*"

What could she mean?

Zorana let the noise around her fall into her awareness. A motorcar a few streets from their townhome rolled over uneven cobblestones. Flames in the city's streetlamps flickered, and a breeze rustled leaves in a nearby park. All as it should be for such a late hour in Flosa.

Perhaps Alice had meant a sound in the bloodsong? But how could she have picked out *one wrong thing* from its mess? The symphony sounded no different from how it had been in the moment after Lyle's dying concerto had faded to silence, except...

Had August's strain stuttered? For the briefest of moments, Zorana could have sworn that a song as familiar to her as her own had hitched, stumbling over an unknown impediment.

That couldn't be right. One didn't stop singing into the bloodsong. Notes might become muffled, but silence only came with death.

And something wonderful and terrible *always* heralded the death of a mage like August: the release of a composition of their own making, given to ease the damage their absence would cause. Nothing like that was coming from August now. How could his strain have paused-?

It stopped.

As a second stretched into eternity, the symphony that reality was built on *wrenched*. a sudden halt like that of a person inhaling to prepare for pain. Zorana prayed that the exhale would never come, content to forever hover in anticipation.

But time cared not for the desires of a single woman. In front of her, her little girl's voice whistled as she screeched, a pathetic whine speaking of an accepted hurt too great to bear, and with hands seeking to crush her skull, she folded as if her strings had been cut. Still caught in the world's inhale, Zorana bent a stiff back, ran rigid fingers over her daughter's body, and brushed her numb lips over Alice's forehead.

And her exhale came in screaming sobs. Sinking to her knees, Zorana dipped into the bloodsong, deeper than she had in weeks. Desperation spurred her search, urging her to dive further and

further into the symphony, further even than the time of *it*. The time when she'd watched her husband as he was tortured to death.

As she fell, she didn't care how much damage she left in her wake. She didn't care how jumbled the music around her became. All she needed was a strain of music so similar to one that had already been taken. All she needed was her son.

"Gone, gone, gone," someone mumbled in the waking world.

"No, no, no," another whispered. "I hear- I can hear... mommy, it's ok."

And Zorana shot like a bullet from the bloodsong's depths, grabbing Alice's shoulders to shake her.

"Don't you say that!" she shouted. "Your brother is *gone*. Your father is *gone*. *Nothing* will ever be ok again!"

"ZORANA!"

Someone pulled Zorana off of her daughter, leaving Alice staring at her with glazed eyes and parted lips. Oh, no. What had she done?

"What happened?" Vaughn asked.

Energy was sapped from Zorana like years from a timepiece, and she sagged in Vaughn's arms, fleeing her body. From a distance, she watched herself lift an arm, pleading for her daughter's forgiveness, and her voice was filtered to her through a thin tube.

"August's strain went quiet. My son is dead."

A corpse wrestled its way free of Vaughn, brushing past Walter as it stumbled to its bedroom. Flopping into bed, Zorana stared at the ceiling, never truly seeing it.

She'd thought life could take nothing more from her. She'd been wrong.

# Chapter 1: An Unexpected Encounter

## Kase

The song was everything. Life and light, breath and belief, I needed it like the *chanarii* needed their hearts or their games to distract them from the song's lack.

Dancing through the shadows, I slipped, invisible, toward two of my keepers, seeking a moment away from home. A moment to myself. I had no intention of going far once outside, perfectly aware of how risky my behavior already was, but tonight, I needed to *get out*, to escape constantly evaluating eyes or the incessant need for purpose that my thralls demanded from me.

So, I called to the shadows through the song, and they flocked to me, my oldest friends coming to whisk me past the scrutiny of those guarding my chosen door. As always, the guards straightened to attention as I approached, unable to ignore how overpoweringly loud my strain of music was, but such was the plight of a *liiares* like myself. No matter how quietly I sang, the listeners would always hear me coming.

This knowledge didn't help them much, however, if they couldn't see me.

"Honored mageling, please return to your rooms," one of them said. "We can't guarantee your safety if you leave the citadel."

They pulled electric torches from their belts, probably hoping to light the shadows around them, and rolling my eyes, I sang calm to their minds. I breathed the lie that what they'd heard had been nothing, merely one of the distortions in the song that were so common here. As they relaxed, I darted around them and through the door. My alteration of their thoughts would only last for so long.

Once outside, I slumped on myself. Here, there was so much darkness around me that it shot sparks of delightful lightning under my skin. I released my hold on the shadows and for the briefest moment, stood frozen in place, listening.

The song was always so much louder outside my home, a symphony coursing through every vein in my body. In some ways, its unrestrained volume made *this* seem more like home than the building behind me, but I knew that feeling for the foolishness it was. The Ibisian Empire was always on the

hunt for *liiaresen* like me, and if they caught me, my end would not... be... pleasant.

Shaking off the summoned memory of a fate that would never be mine, I skirted the citadel behind me along the narrow terrace ringing it. Below, Zoln stretched up toward the opposite mountain slope with tapering towers dotting the valley between. Even sixty years after the war with the Empire, Ostiu, both in its capital and elsewhere, had yet to recover, as seen by the patches of blackened rubble mixed with intact buildings. It could be seen in the occupying force that still littered the city with their ugly encampments and constructed barracks.

Even so, Zoln's beauty shone through this. Waterfalls fed the many streams snaking through the valley. Their mist rose in a cloud that was supposedly as thick as the smog hovering over the other provinces' capitals. A mix of newfangled electric lamps and reliable paper lanterns hung across the skinny walkways between buildings or floated in the water's stream, and in the upper ring of the city, snow was piled on the ground and roofs.

Using both outside memories and my own experience, I scrambled up to my home's roof, hugging my knees once I'd gotten settled. A ghostly presence, summoned from a sectioned-off crevasse in my mind, sat at my back, wrapping incorporeal arms around me. Together, we watched the city where I'd grown up, and not for the first time, I wondered what the man behind this ghostly presence would have thought of Zoln. In his short life, he'd never truly left Flosa.

With him nearby and the dark around me, I was the most comfortable I could be in my home. Here, I wasn't the last mageling, hope of Ostiu, and I wasn't carrying a nation's expectations. I was simply Kase. Me. And I could listen and sing along with the song to my heart's content.

A new refrain, briefly blaring in volume, entered the song, and with a gasp, I sat bolt upright. I knew that string of notes better than most others I'd encountered, but still, I waited for confirmation, hoping I was right about it.

*Hello, most beloved,* drifted to me.

It was her! Shooting to my feet, I jumped to the terrace, flying toward the refrain's source. I shot a thin layer of ice—water pulled from the air and crystallized—in front of me while sliding and skating over it at ever increasing speeds, a delicate maneuver I'd mastered years ago.

All the while, I wondered how old she'd be this time. When she'd sung to me, she'd sounded about my age, but even if she was a child tonight, I'd be pleased to see her. As I flew around my home, I wove my delight into the song.

*Sol, Sol, Sol!* I cried with her name becoming the beat of my heart.

Rounding the terrace's far corner, I found her waiting, and as always upon a first glimpse of her, my breath caught, making my heart stutter as heat built in my face and belly. Moonlight flowed around the shadows Sol was standing in. Its milky cast accented the drift of white hair in front of her face, the float of the gossamer fabric she wore, and the twitch of colorless lips suppressing a smile as I came closer. She was beautiful and not merely because she was the only one in the world like me. She was the hand gently guiding me, the woman I loved.

Never slowing down, I snatched Sol about the waist, lifting her to spin over ice until I stopped us against a plastered wall. Hungry chords of welcome sang to me through the song as I pressed our bodies closer together. Lips intimately familiar with one another locked together while Sol took fistfuls of my hair, but I ignored how insistently she was pulling me away. If she really wanted me to stop, she'd sing the truth of that to me, sucking energy from my body rather than giving it as she was now.

So, I traced my hands along her shoulders, following the lines of her arms to my back. Once I had hold of her wrists, I tugged on them until she released her grip and then, held them against the wall behind her. Only then did I pull away.

I knew I couldn't keep Sol pinned like this. Whenever she wanted, she could simply vanish elsewhere to escape me, but we liked our little games, as evidenced by the pleased grin Sol gave me.

*Avan* but I wanted to dive right back in. It had been so long since Sol's last visit, but first...

*How much time do we have?* I hummed.

Sol's face fell: a small change but one that had my elated mood dropping too.

*Not long,* she sang.

Lifting an eyebrow, I asked, *Long enough for...?*

Damn, I loved her mischievous smile.

*If we're quick,* Sol said.

*I think we can manage that,* I said.

While singing to our bodies, I watched Sol's eyes start to dilate through my own distracted haze. From where she was touching me, energy crackled through me, and I leaned in for another kiss, a self-made muzzle on our audible noise. It was much like the one we struggled to keep in place on everything internally. Neither us wanted any unintentional music we might make to drown the other singers in the song.

Soon enough, the fight to keep quiet fell back to reasonable levels again, and while I was left resting on rapidly melting ice with my legs folded beneath me, Sol sat on my thighs while reclining against the wall. A fine layer of sweat had plastered her hair to her skin, and I brushed it aside to let the silver web in her eyes shine up at me. Bending forward, I brushed my lips along her forehead and cheeks and chin, reveling in the fact that she was here.

*Avan,* she was so rarely this close to me.

*Well?* I eventually said. *I'm guessing you didn't come here just for a spot of fun.*

Chuckling, Sol said, *That was more than a spot of fun but yes. I have words for you, a warning this time.*

The change in the tone of her singing had me pausing in my kisses, meeting her gaze with hooded eyes. Nothing good had ever come after her warnings in the past, but no matter how much I might not want to hear whatever was coming, I knew Sol would share her thoughts with me anyway. Best to be willing while hearing them.

*Ok. What is it?* I asked.

When Sol bit her lip, looking away from me, my guts started churning. This sensation only got worse the longer she delayed, to the point that I almost nudged her into getting started. After a moment, though, she took a deep breath and turned eyes that matched mine onto me.

*It's begun, most beloved, she said. Prepare yourself because from this moment, everything will change.*

With my eyes widening, I sucked in a breath, barely keeping from wincing when freezing air rushed through my nose. Even with me doing my best to limit my surprised expression, Sol noticed it and grimaced.

*What... is that supposed to mean?* I asked.

Shrugging, Sol said, *I've told you all I can right now. You know that.*

When she scrambled to her feet, I made no move to stop her, recognizing the steps toward the end of her visit in the moment they'd started. She cupped my cheek with her hand, placing a kiss on my forehead.

*You're going to be fine, for a little while longer at least, she said. I have to go, but don't worry. I'll see you soon.*

And she was gone with nothing but air where she'd once been and her refrain abruptly cut out of the song. Normally, its absence would have had me curled into a ball until I'd adjusted to a diminished symphony once more, but this time, Sol's warning kept me too preoccupied to notice the change. She'd never brought me such dire words before.

Eventually, I pulled myself together before making my way to the door I'd recently used. I'd love to spend more time alone on the roof, studying Zoln and tormenting myself with imaginings of what Sol could have meant, but I'd already spent too long outside, which meant my keepers were probably getting frantic.

I made no attempt to hide my passage through the door this time, keeping to the shadows when I could but enduring their absence when I must. When my skin started prickling, as it always did when I wasn't in the dark, I subtly gritted my teeth, but this was expected, a sensation that every Shade must learn to ignore at an early age.

If desired, I could ask the shadows to follow me when I passed through light, as I had earlier, or I could get it to smother those lights' sources instead. These abilities made my keepers uneasy, though, so I avoided using them unless I had to. Putting up with crawling skin was the least I could do for them.

"Honored mageling!" the guards yelled as I strolled between them.

I ignored the two, just as I ignored the sound of footfalls as one of them caught up with me, but they expected behavior like this. It was what I, as a *liiares*, was supposed to show all *chanarii*, no matter how I might feel about it.

*Avan* knew how I was supposed to act around the Empire's deaf populace.

Locked onto the incomplete notes of my *ravsinka*, I took the shortest route I could through my home's winding corridors to reach her. After Sol's visit, my thoughts were muddled. As I moved along, I even noticed myself gnawing on my lip, which I quickly stopped, and only one person could center me when I got like this.

"Kase!"

The man who claimed that voice was not the person I needed. Wincing, I did an about-face toward Yosai, and on seeing the frown on his face, my internal cringe deepened. With his arms folded behind his back, he strode toward me, leaving his plaited, blonde hair swinging with each precise step. He'd changed out of his typical black garb and into a colorful wrap that concealed his nightclothes, and when he stopped in front of me, I fought to meet the accusation in his sparking, brown eyes.

*What is it, Yosai?* I sang at him.

The man's frown deepened.

"We should *speak*, Kase," he said.

*But I am speaking- Oh, never mind.*

"What do you want?" I asked.

*Avan*, my voice had sounded strange, and hell... how did anyone stand communicating like this? It was *awful*.

"You stepped outside the protections wrapped around the citadel," Yosai said. "Have we failed to provide something you require? I only ask so that I, the one in charge of your education and safety, can more fully fulfill my service to you."

Yes, yes. Subservient behavior, masking an accusation. I'd like to get through this typical dance more quickly, please.

"It was nothing important," I said, "and I was only outside for a few minutes. I doubt the Empire's dogs could find me in so short a time. None of them can hear the song."

"The bloodsong, Kase," Yosai corrected.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Yes. That. Is my assessment inaccurate? Given all the variables, I thought my logic was sound."

Sighing, Yosai pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, you're right, The Empire soldiers stationed in Zoln wouldn't have heard you," he said, "but you won't always have every variable on hand, honored mageling. With that in mind, keeping to a more cautious course of action in the future is in your best interest, no?"

It was the start of an argument that he and I had gone through way too many times over the years. Throughout my training, he'd always advocated caution while I liked sticking with action, but I did *not* want to get into that argument again. Not now.

"I concede the point," I said with a slight bow.

As expected, my show of deference and easy concession rattled Yosai. I took advantage of this, racing for escape while my recently acquired escort kept on my heel. Unfortunately, Yosai recovered more quickly than I'd have liked.

"A moment more, Kase," he called.

As I glanced over my shoulder, I let my irritation bleed into the song.

*What?* I flung into it.

Yosai didn't protest my singing this time, merely moving his hands to clasp them in front of his waist.

"While you were outside, I noticed a change in your strain of music," he said, leaving his question unsaid.

For the love of...

"You know I like experimenting with my notes at times," I said. "Why are you asking about it now?"

Back when we were children, still learning who we were, Sol and I had decided that my keepers shouldn't know about her. Much as my life's circumstances were necessary, I didn't want her to deal with the incessant protection and observation that I experienced every day. Plus, there was the small problem of where she came from to consider...

Suffice it to say that I'd been 'messing with my notes' from a young age.

"Forgive me, but it wasn't necessarily your experimentation that caused concern," Yosai said, "more... the tone of it."

What was he...?

Beside me, my escort shuffled in place, looking anywhere but at me, and that subtle gesture of discomfort soon had me biting back a groan. Fuck. When we'd been greeting one another, either Sol or I must have lost control of our notes, and given the nature of that moment...

Well. This was embarrassing. Still, I maintained my level gaze at Yosai.

"As you never cease to remind me, I'm a man yet to grow into maturity," I said in a clipped voice, "and young men need certain things."

"Of course. I'm not arguing that," Yosai said while nervously massaging an old bullet wound in his thigh. "I merely wanted to remind you that you have thralls who could relieve that pressure-"

"No," I snapped.

Slowly, I uncurled my hands from the fists they'd made at my sides, and at my unusually emotive display, Yosai's eyebrows rose.

"Any and all of them would be honored-" he continued.

Finally spinning to face him, I shouted, "*I said no!*"

My roar, through both the air and the song, made Yosai flinch while my escort stumbled away from us. A drop of blood drizzled from both of their noses, and seeing this, I took a deep breath, forcibly reining in my singing.

"My apologies," I said. "If there's nothing else, I have somewhere to be before lessons."

And that was the only acknowledgment I gave to the horror swirling in my gut. Yosai indicated his approval of my tacit request, and I strode off with my escort behind me.

Once I was out of Yosai's sight, I shook my head. I hadn't lost control like that in almost a year, but at least this misstep had been small in nature. When I'd been younger, I'd nearly made the people around me bleed out more times than I could count; my temper tantrums had been so epic in nature. Those incidents had happened when my keepers had still been using silencers on me, though. Since they'd stopped doing that, I'd only come close to causing the same amount of damage one time, and I didn't like thinking about that incident.

When I turned into my suite of rooms, my escort stopped outside to keep watch until someone could come to relieve him. I wondered if the woman who'd been guarding my door earlier would be getting a lecture soon and if so, how bad it would be.

Marching down a hall draped in gauzy cloth, I kept an eye on the doors to either side of it, breathing out a sigh when they stayed closed. I did *not* want to deal with my typically exuberant thralls right now, and they must have picked out my desire through the song because not one of them peeked a head outside.

In my own room, a patch of its extensive shadows stirred at my entrance, and I skirted the light from the room's single candle to dive onto my mat, covered in pillows. Grabbing one of them, I pressed it into my face, growling into it before going limp.

*Ravsinka*, I breathed into the song.

Behind me, the candle went out, plunging me into blessed darkness, and through it, I felt a woman approach to sink onto my mat's edge. As soon as she'd gotten settled, I crawled to lay with my head in her lap, sighing when she started running her fingers through my hair

"Hard start to the night, *brilah?*" she said.

Rolling to my side, I buried my face in her stomach.

*I know it's stupid, spoiled even, that I'm already frustrated*, I said, *but I can't help it.*

"I know. It's ok. You don't always have to be strong, especially not here," she said. "How's your girl?"

Despite myself, I smiled with a held image of Sol brushing everything else away.

"I'm glad you had time with her," my *ravsinka* said.

*Me too*, I breathed.

Pulling away from her, I took a fistful of her blouse in one hand.

"Tell me a story, Xia-ni," I said.

When I was this agitated, only one thing could help me calm down: my Xia once more repeating a tale about the greatest man I'd ever known.

"Of course," Xia said, "Which family name shall I have him claim this time? Lockhart or Cunningham?"

When I shrugged, Xia chuckled.

"All right. Let me tell you the story of the revolutionary and how he outsmarted Crinas' governor," she said. "Lyle Cunningham had represented that province in Parliament for about a year when he first stumbled upon the corruption rife within its local government. As was his wont, he immediately took steps to correct it. When his request to meet the governor was accepted, Lyle traveled to the other man's estate, set in the middle of sprawling tea fields, with his attendant—

Vaughn—and me—his thrall—at his side. The governor greeted us..."

As she continued with the story, I compared her familiar words with the vast store of memories, lying in a part of my mind I only accessed with the greatest of care. I enjoyed the similarities between the two, laughing at the things Xia had perceived differently from how they'd truly been. After long enough spent dwelling in that part of my mind, the same ghostly presence from earlier came to sit opposite Xia, alternating his fingers with hers through my hair, and I lay there in a haze of contentment.

"With his scheme revealed to the public, the people of Crinas replaced the governor in the next election, and Lyle Cunningham was hailed as a hero. Again," Xia eventually finished.

And as always when I dared to enter these memories, I found myself circling the dark kernel that lay at their center. Without a guide to lead me elsewhere, I couldn't help being drawn to it.

*The Crinasiens love for him didn't help in the end*, I said.

Beneath my hand, Xia flinched while the ghostly presence opposite her abruptly withdrew.

"Sorry," I audibly said. "Sorry."

As the crevasse in my mind closed, I sighed, marveling at how much less turbulent I felt when compared to my state not half an hour before. Xia's ability to so greatly affect my emotions never ceased to amaze me.

*Thank you for the story*, I sang.

"Don't," Xia said. "Never thank me for anything."

Bending double, she pressed her lips to mine, a dry, passionless kiss, and I curled my arm behind her back.

When she pulled away from me, she breathed, "He would have been so proud of you."

With each word, her lips brushed mine while her nose grazed mine's tip, and remembering everything she'd ever done for me, I squeezed my *ravsinka*.

"I love you, Xia-ni," I said.

Bending further, Xia lowered her face to the side of my head with her breath hot in my ear.

"I love you too, August," she whispered.

While she straightened, I shivered on hearing the name that only she used for me. I didn't know why she used a different one for me or why I felt...

I couldn't describe how the distinctly Empire-in-origin name made me feel.

I also didn't know why Xia wanted this habit of hers kept secret from my keepers, but she'd sacrificed so much for me over the years. I could give the sanctity of the secret back to her.

It was what I'd do for anyone in my life.

# Chapter 2: What's Left Behind-The Professional

## Alice

Visiting Crinas had always felt like coming home. Never mind that here, Alice had once listened to the most breathtaking concerto she'd ever heard in the bloodsong, one whose consequences her mother had refused to explain at the time. Vaughn had eventually taken that burden from her, telling Alice about her father's fate, and both the mother and daughter loved him for it.

Despite that, she loved this province. Her father had given three years of his life to this place, and even seventeen years later, his touch remained in its villages and tea fields and plantations.

Moving between rows of plants, Alice hardly paid attention to her work. She knew her hands were moving through the leaves and tossing produce into the basket on her back, but most of her focus went to her fellow tea pluckers, to watching and analyzing their behavior. When the bell for the afternoon break rang, she lugged her nearly full basket toward the closest group of workers, pricking her ears as she approached.

"-liament should just give the ashies what they want," a woman was saying. "I don't understand why we fought to bring their nation into the Empire in the first place. We brought them progress and a better way of life, and what have they given us in return? Nothing but hostility."

A man beside the speaker nudged her, hastily clearing his throat, but Alice merely smiled at their closed-off, judgmental faces when they turned toward her. Those expressions were what she'd grown accustomed to seeing over the course of her life.

She felt their glares even as she moved toward another group. *Avan*, what she wouldn't give for her mother's Magsense magic at times like this. She'd love to hear what they were saying as she left them behind.

Fortunately, she recognized one of the people in the group ahead, which quickly distracted her from the ones at her back.

"Maddie!" Alice called, lifting a hand.

Sprawled in the dirt, the other woman looked down from her stare at the sky, grinning in greeting.

"Heya, Nell," she said. "Come join us."

"Not that you'll get long to rest," another added. "They've been cutting our breaks as short as they can over the last few months."

Sinking to the ground, Alice frowned, clasping her hands in her lap with her back ramrod straight.

"I thought the last round of Parliament's fines cleared that problem up," she said.

Guffawing, the man beside her said, "It sure did! For a few weeks. Now, they're right back at it. Where've you been to have missed all this?"

Alice shifted, sliding her gaze away from the man, and as she'd hoped, Maddie stepped in, swatting him.

"Her grandmother's sick," she hissed. "Didn't you know?"

"Ah."

A proper beat of respectful silence fell before anyone else spoke.

"I'm grateful to the revolutionary for freeing us from our timepieces, but times like this, I miss the Empire's old economy," a woman said. "Without our years, MP Cunningham's Restorer has become all but useless, and we could really use that invention of his right now."

Abruptly, Alice turned to the side, hoping they'd think her blinked-back tears were solely for that invention's lost potential.

"Has the plague truly gotten so bad?" she asked once she had control of herself. "I saw how few people were wandering about town when I arrived, but I didn't want to believe it had spread so far. Grandmother's sickness looks like it's a simple fever, thank *avan*, so I haven't been paying as much attention to the plague as I was before."

Maddie nodded.

"Our ever-benevolent employers have started screening for its symptoms among those they choose to work each day," she said. "I know that practice lessens the risk for contamination among us, but it's keeping money from those who most need it. The sick have got to eat too."

"And no one's offered to help them?" Alice asked with horror in her voice. "The plantation owners haven't stepped in? Our MPs?"

Snorting, a man said, "Sure. If you count the camps they've built for the sick as help. You haven't been to one, Nell. Cramped quarters, stagnant water, food left in the heat. They're basically places where the sick are expected to die."

"That's... awful," Alice breathed.

And about what she'd expected from Crinas' current batch of MPs.

"You're telling me," someone said.

Again, the bell rang, summoning the tea pluckers back to their work. Maddie rolled her eyes as it fell silent.

"See what I mean?" she said. "Short breaks."

She and Alice helped each other to their feet, soon separating to their separate corners of the field, and for a moment, maintaining her resolve to wait until the end of her shift before leaving took all of Alice's focus.

This... wasn't her father's Crinas. He'd negotiated for better working conditions between tea pluckers and plantation owners, had made clean water and plumbing available to all, and had generally improved people's lives. He'd loved this province, and they'd loved him right back.

To be fair, this wasn't her mother's Crinas either. Alice's mother had worked just as hard, if not harder, to carry on the work her husband had left behind, but despite how much respect the electorate gave her, she'd been the Empire's first female MP. Because of that, no one in Parliament took her seriously, even this many years later.

So yes, her mother had done as many great things here as her father. Alice usually focused on his contributions, though, because the throbbing pain found in the destruction of his work masked the much vaster, near crippling ache found in her core, and she couldn't think about that. Not yet.

She furiously worked through the field's rows, taking fewer leaves from each plant than were ready for plucking, but she was only doing this part of the job for appearance's sake anyway. If she disappeared halfway through her shift, it would look strange, which Alice couldn't have. So, she worked, all while straining her ears for the evening's final bell.

Boiling inside for everything she'd learned.

When the end of her shift *finally* came, Alice impatiently waited in line to have her gathered produce weighed, mildly surprised by the generous pay she gained as a result. At least that part of her father's work was still intact.

Clutching those coins to her chest, she headed toward the nearby village, chaffing about the need to walk there. Upon reaching it, cobblestones replaced the dirt road with a small cluster of buildings surrounding a public plaza. Circular in nature, it surrounded a modest fountain with the occasional motorcar skirting it, and one end was squared off to allow open access to the single government building found in every Ibisian village, no matter how small. How often had Alice spent time in one of these places as a child, itching to go outside?

Shaking her head, she entered to community center, threading through its halls until she'd reached the office of an aide to this district's MP. After knocking on the door, she received an invitation to come inside and slipped through the door, latching it behind her.

Glancing up from the sprawl of paper on his desk, Jonas made a face.

"Oh," he said with his nose wrinkling, "it's you."

He'd never forgiven her for breaking things off between them.

Flouncing to his desk, Alice sprang to sit on its edge before kicking her legs.

"How've you been...? What's your code name here again?" she chirped.

Ducking his head, Jonas hissed, "It's Matthew and not so loud! You'll break my cover."

"I doubt that very much," Alice said. "No one's anywhere nearby right now. I checked."

Taking a calming breath, Jonas leaned back in his chair with his arms crossed.

"What do you want?" he asked. "No, better question. Why are you here? And would you kindly get the fuck off my desk?"

Gasping, Alice raised a shocked hand in front of her mouth—

"Language, Matthew!"

—but she hopped down and into the chair facing him. Slouching deep into it, she folded her hands on her stomach.

"I'm in Crinas to take its pulse, like I do with all of the provinces each month," she said. "Things aren't going well here. We didn't know how bad the plague had gotten. Why haven't you said anything about that in your reports?"

"My job is to destabilize MP Moffat's power in this district," Jonas said in a growl. "The task's been more difficult than expected. I haven't had time to look into Crinas' other issues. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No."

Shifting, Alice crossed a leg over her knee.

"I don't expect you to do your job *and* mine, Jonas," she said.

He flushed, snapping his eyes to the side.

"Well, good."

Before the room's already stuffy air could turn awkward, Alice asked, "How are Uncle Gus and Aunt Eliza?"

Squeezing his eyes closed, Jonas lowered his head, and a hand tightened around Alice's lungs.

"Mom's well enough, happy even," Jonas said. "Gus..."

Sighing, he shook his head before meeting Alice's eyes.

"Don't worry about it. Gus will be fine," he said. "You gave me your reason for being in Crinas. Mind telling me why you're in my office?"

Alice almost didn't let Jonas distract her. She didn't want to drop this subject if something was wrong with Gus, especially if it was something she could help with.

But she saw the pain in Jonas's eyes, and the ache buried inside of her lurched in response. She pushed it down with difficulty.

Not yet. Not yet.

Flowing to her feet, Alice laid the wages she'd earned today atop Jonas's desk, leaving one finger on a coin.

"Can you see that this gets to whomever most needs it?" she asked. "You know this village better than me."

Nodding, Jonas said, "Sure. There are a few people here who could use the help."

"Good."

Lifting her finger, Alice wandered into the center of the room.

"May I use your office to get home?" she asked. "It's the only safe place I know in this village."

Jonas' face softened.

"Of course you can," he said. "I may be angry with you, unsure why you don't want us to be... *us*, but I'll still provide you with safe haven, no matter what."

With a smile, Alice said, "You're sweet."

Lacing his fingers together on the desk, Jonas gazed up at her with those soft, brown eyes of his.

"I miss you, Alice," he said.

And she cringed, not because of his behavior or what he'd said but because she knew how she must reply.

"I know," she said. "I'm sorry."

Reaching into the bloodsong, Alice found the snippet of it that was most familiar to her, and with her destination set firmly in her mind, she folded herself around those notes. For a time almost too brief to recognize, she shattered into a million-million fragments of herself, getting sucked along an

invisible string, but as soon as she'd noticed this state, she reformed with a slight pop from where the air had been displaced around her.

Someone else's living quarters had replaced Jonas's study. A narrow bed was shoved along the wall opposite Alice with a cot resting, cross-wise, at its foot. The most minimal of kitchens took up a quarter of the floorspace to her left, and on the right, a fireplace—almost always lit to ward off Flosa's chill—splashed flickering light over four armchairs, surrounding a coffee table. Besides gas lamps, one or two paintings of Ostiu's natural landscape adorned the room's plain walls. A small portrait of Alice's father hung above the mantle.

It was a painting that she sometimes hated looking at. Something wasn't quite right with it, something she could never identify. To be fair to its creator, the painting had been commissioned after her father's death, so the artist hadn't had much source material to work with. Even if the portrait was a bit off, though, Alice couldn't help but love everything about it: that genuine smile he'd only worn for his family; those blue eyes that had twinkled when he'd laughed, as he was doing in the portrait.

"Hi, dad," Alice said as quietly as she could.

She didn't want to speak any louder, not with the voices behind the door at her back raised so loudly. Removing her shoes, Alice stepped onto the carpet, wiggling her toes in it, and listened to the bits and pieces of the conversation that she could make out.

"Forgive... Cunningham, but how could... what an economy... thrive? We've done well... collapse... your husband destroyed... eventually we will... recession. It's already... Escad. Their superstitions... reluctant to accept the new currency, trading... must convince them to only use *revos* or... Let us handle..."

The voices fell silent, and Alice rolled her eyes.

Men. Ugh. Over the course of her life, Alice might have met many exceptions to the rule, but at times, she truly believed that most of the members of the male sex were domineering, haughty, and short-sighted thinkers, always trying to outperform one another. To be fair, most of the people she placed in that category were also members of Parliament or one of the Empire's many nobles.

Releasing a sigh, Alice shook her head. *Men* weren't domineering or short-sighted. Certain *people* were, but it was easy to forget that distinction when one was constantly surrounded by men acting like smug assholes.

"Thank you, gentle... your advice in... excuse me, the day... can discuss this tomorrow."

At the sound of her mother's voice, Alice wandered to her relegated armchair in front of the fire, curling into it after grabbing a book from the coffee table. Cracking it open, she propped it on her raised knees, absently paging through it while the social niceties taking place outside ended. Eventually, the door cracked open, and Lady Zorana Cunningham passed from her study and into her home on Parliament Grounds.

"Hi, mom," Alice said, never lifting her eyes from the book.

Zorana strode to her place across from her daughter, sinking into it with a groan, while Walter, her attendant, went to the kitchen, ever the silent ghost.

"You, silly monster, have perfect timing," she said.

*Silly monster*, a long gone, much beloved voice breathed.

And Alice clenched her teeth in her smile as a memory swept over her.

*He looks terrible, sweat-glazed and weak. A gash has been ripped through his face with glass granules embedded in it, and I can't stand it. I dive for my daddy, burying my face in his chest, and as he holds me, he brushes his broken fingers through my hair.*

"Don't do anything stupid," I tell him.

"I'll do my best, silly monster," he says.

He'd been such a liar.

Shaking the memory off, Alice widened her grin, trying not to show how much her mother's words had disturbed her, because while 'silly monster' had been her father's pet name for her, it was also her mother's. Sometimes, hearing it simply caught her by surprise.

Walter bent to set a tray, adorned with tea, on the coffee table. Everyone grabbed a cup to cradle it, Walter took a seat, and glancing at a still closed door, Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Uncle Vaughn?" she asked.

"He's busy tonight," Zorana said. "I'll give him your report later."

Scooping tea leaves out of her cup, she discarded them on the tray, all while Alice tried not to scowl. She didn't like it when their nightly meetings didn't follow the typical pattern. She especially didn't like it when Vaughn was the missing member of their little cabal. He'd always had a way of cheering her up.

"So, how's Crinas?" Zorana asked.

Making a face, Alice said, "May I speak freely? As your agent and not your daughter?"

When her mother inclined her head, Alice blew out a breath.

"Crinas is fucked up," she said. "Some of the wealthier plantation owners are pushing to gain access to the land in old Kester's irradiated zone, which is, of course, pissing everyone else off. Almost all of Crinas' labor laws are being broken in one way or another, and from what I hear, the MPs from the province aren't handling the outbreak of plague there nearly as well as they've been

claiming. It's-"

She rubbed her face.

"It's bad, mom," she whispered. "Everything that you and dad did for the province is holding the vultures in place, but it won't last much longer, especially with a plague making the electorate desperate. They're almost at the point where they'll vote the most incompetent candidate into office if he promises to fix Crinas' problems.

"I know things have started heating up with Ostiu again and Escad's on the verge of financial collapse, but in my humble opinion, some of the resources devoted to those two provinces should go to Crinas instead. Otherwise, we might be dealing with a revolt from them on top of everything else."

Lifting her head out of her hands, Alice discarded her own tea leaves, careful not to look at her mother or Walter as she did. She took a sip, savoring the flavorful blend of Crinas tea, while wondering how they'd respond to her news.

"I wish I didn't need to use you like this," her mother said. "If it could be managed, wouldn't you rather have a normal life?"

Selfish concern for her had *not* been a response Alice had expected.

She jerked her head up, slamming her cup onto the tray so hard that scalding liquid splashed over its lip.

"No!" she hissed while snatching her burned hands to her chest. "Helping to fix the Empire is how I want to spend my life. What else would you have me do? Sit around in a fancy dress, waiting to be married off?"

Her voice squeaked to a stop. Apparently content to ignore that, Walter rose to fetch a cold compress from the kitchen, which made Alice hang her head. She knew her mother wouldn't marry her off, no matter how many young men had come asking for her hand over the years, because Zorana believed a marriage should be founded on mutual understanding and love, like hers had been. She knew Alice could never love those who'd come to court her, not in all the ways that mattered to her at least.

So, she regretted making that implication, but she wasn't quite finished with what she needed to say.

"What I'm doing? Helping you create a new Empire?" she continued in a hoarse voice. "It's what dad would have wanted."

With her eyes jumping to the portrait above the fireplace, Zorana tensed, and while she gathered herself, Walter wrapped a cold compress around Alice's hands.

Faintly smiling at him, she said, "Thank you."

Bowing, he sat without a word, but that was Walter, silent and efficient. The consummate attendant.

"I will keep your advice about Crinas in mind," Zorana said, "and I'm sorry to have doubted you. As your mother, I worry about you, especially since you're the last—"

She stopped herself from finishing that sentence and just in time too. Alice doubted her mother wanted to get into their oldest argument again tonight, and to be honest, neither did she. The ache inside of her had been throbbing painfully today, and arguing over whether she was right about her brother's fate would only exacerbate that feeling.

"I worry about you," Zorana continued, "but I'll never stifle you, especially not when you make me so proud."

Alice's vision had misted over, so she saw her mother approaching her as a dark blur, quickly enlarging. Her mother brushed her hair to the side, pressing her lips into Alice's forehead, and they remained there for a moment, grazing her skin as they moved.

"I love you, silly monster."

Alice rocked forward, tipping the book out of her lap, to wrap her arms around her mother's waist.

"I love you too, mom," she said.

Pulling away, Zorana carefully dashed tears from her eyes.

"Go home now. Get some rest," she said. "*Avan* knows when I'll next need you."

With a crooked smile, Alice said, "Ok."

She reached into the bloodsong—

"Alice?" her mother added. "Tell the one you love I said hello."

—and laughing, Alice let that sentiment speed her home.

# Chapter 3: What's Left Behind-The Personal

## Alice

Her apartment was quiet when she popped back into existence. Frowning, Alice ran her eyes over its single room. When it came to functionality, the place was sparse: a kitchen with its table and chairs, a tub with two buckets beside it, an Ostium style mat with its rumpled blankets and pillows. This was exactly how she liked it, though. It perfectly complemented everything that filled the apartment's leftover space.

With several of them covered by half-finished paintings, canvases were leaning against the wall across from the kitchen, and a waist-high monstrosity of a table had an enormous piece of parchment pinned to it, showing off a half-finished draft for a Lord's new manor. More rolls of parchment had been shoved onto a set of nearby shelves, ordered from top to bottom based on how much distaste was held for each client.

The apartment claimed a single window, a tiny twin of the clockface on the other side of the building, and in front of this, an easel sat with a stool facing it. The seat's typical occupant wasn't there, and seeing that, Alice's heart fluttered in a distinctly uncomfortable way.

"Ana?" she called.

Had the artist gone into Flosa, and if she, had she gotten stuck in the city? Had someone harassed her again or-?

Someone wrapped their arms around Alice's waist, sweeping their hands beneath her sweat-stained shirt to cup and squeeze. As she gasped, a weight was rested on her shoulder while a strand of blonde hair fell into view.

"I appreciate your worry for me," a lilting voice said, "but could you please not sing it so loudly, my love?"

With those fingers moving over her skin, Alice knew her control on her tune in the bloodsong was slipping, but gaining control back would be exceptionally difficult with... with...

"Ana," she said, "if you want me to be quiet, you're going to have to- um... to-"

"To what?" Ana asked with a laugh in her voice.

She moved one hand to Alice's stomach so she could pull them closer together, which *was not* helping. When Alice didn't respond for several seconds, Ana softly laughed.

"To what, my love?" she repeated.

She'd breathed the question in Alice's ear, leaving her shivering, and twisting, she kissed Ana, although the other woman quickly withdrew.

"Uh-uh. You didn't answer the question," she said. "To what, Alice?"

Alice tried to give chase, but Ana only stepped away again with a teasing grin in place.

"To what, *pon liiares?*" she asked.

Frowning, Alice stopped short.

"Don't call me that," she said.

"Then, answer my question."

Ana reached up to gently brush a finger over Alice's lips and ear. *Avan*. Not fair.

Licking her lips, Alice said, "I'm a bit distracted right now. Your fault. So, if you want me to be quiet, you'll have to give me a second."

For a moment, Ana did as Alice had requested, even if she failed to remove her touch, before smirking.

"No," she said.

Taking hold of Alice's chin, Ana pulled her forward to impart a searing kiss. Her body followed; hips pressed to full hips as she grabbed the back of Ana's neck. She watched Ana's hazel eyes flutter closed, ran her hand up that smooth, freckled skin, and right when she'd gotten into the rhythm of their kiss and touch on one another, Ana snapped her eyes open, propelling Alice toward their mat.

Once on it with a curtain of blonde framing their faces, Alice started tugging on the buttons of Ana's shift, but the other woman quickly caught those hands, pinning them above Alice's head.

"Relax, my love," Ana said, pressing feather-light lips to Alice's cheek. "You've done so much today. Let me do the rest."

"No. We both get what we want, or neither of us do."

Ana's smile was bright enough to light the darkest corners of the Empire.

"And you wonder why I love you," she said.

While they prepared dinner together later, Alice paused in serving rice balls and pork cutlets onto their plates.

"You know I love you too, right?" she asked. "I don't say it much, but I truly love you, Ana Jin."

Shaking her head, Ana maneuvered around her, although she kissed Alice on her way to returning a washed pan to its cabinet.

"I've always known that, silly," she said. "You do so enjoy flinging your affection into the bloodsong."

Wincing, Alice said, "Sorry."

"You don't need to be," Ana said. "It's not sung loudly. I only hear it because I've become attuned to you."

With an evil grin, Alice said, "You certainly have. How much pleasure did we pull out of each other today? I couldn't keep track of it all, just--"

"*Avan* help me, your snark's going to kill me one day," Ana interrupted, lifting her eyes to the heavens. "Stop being... *you*, and come sit down."

They ignored the table with its parchments and pens. Padding across the mat on bare feet, Ana slid down the wall, holding her plate high until Alice had gotten settled in front of her. Wrapping her arms around Alice's shoulders, Ana flicked their discarded clothes off of the mat before taking a bite of her food.

"Mm. This is great," she said.

"Thanks."

Ana might have said something more, but Alice had turned inward. With nothing pressing left to do, she couldn't stop herself from stretching toward an ache, a hole, a never-ending pit that lay inside of her. It was a place where something more precious to her than words could describe had once lain, humming in perfect concert with her own song, and as always upon touching this lack, pulsing agony shot through her, the hurt of something essential's loss roaring its deafening noise in her head.

A clatter drew Alice back to the surface. She found Ana's plate resting beside her leg while the other woman's chest heaved against her back.

Fuck.

Setting her own plate aside, Alice twisted in place while rising to her knees, wincing as she wiped a small blood droplet off of Ana's face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry."

Ana laid a hand on Alice's arm.

"Stop. It's fine," she said before lifting reddened eyes to her. "It's bad today, isn't it?"

Dropping her hands between them, Alice silently nodded.

"Then, maybe we should sing to him before we eat," Ana said. "That way you can't surprise me again."

She cracked a smile, and blinking back tears, Alice leaned forward, pinning Ana to the wall.

Since his disappearance, Ana had been the only one who'd believed Alice about her brother. After August had been kidnapped, she'd tried to tell anyone who'd listen that he wasn't dead. Yes, his strain of music had stuttered and briefly stopped, but it had resumed, although it had been the faintest set of notes she'd ever heard in the bloodsong. She'd pleaded with her mother to listen for it, but upon doing so, Zorana had claimed that she heard nothing.

For days, Alice had begged for her mother, for Walter, for *anyone* to let her follow her brother's song. Only Vaughn had been inclined to help, but he'd refused to defy Zorana. So, she'd listened as August had fallen further away from her until one day, his strain had cut off again.

Alice hated remembering that day, hated how much pain she'd thrust onto others at nine-years-old. When she'd recovered from that blow, she could no longer hear her brother, not even his faint whisper from before, but she'd refused to believe he was dead. She knew what came before a mage's death. August had never sung a dying lullaby to the great symphony, and no one but Alice seemed to think this could mean something besides death had visited itself upon him.

Well. No one but her and Ana.

Leaning on her now, Alice kissed Ana's neck, breathing her in for a moment, before pushing herself back on her heels.

"Give me a minute," she said. "Why don't you tell me about your day first? Did you get out at all?"

Grimacing, Ana said, "I tried. Got halfway down the stairs before I started hyperventilating. It's fine, though. All my clients are willing to come to me right now."

Alice slid her palm to rest on Alice's cheek.

"I'll take you into the forest the next time I can," she said. "No people, the trees' canopy to block the sky, and fresh air. You'd like that, right?"

"I think so," Alice said with a small smile. "Maybe you can introduce me to your dad."

Flinching, Alice drew her hand to her chest.

"I should visit him soon. It's been a while," she said before nuzzling Ana's nose with her own. "He'd have liked you."

Ana flushed the deepest red that Alice had seen on her in a while, pulling in on herself.

"You think so?" she breathed. "Lord Lyle Cunningham, the great revolutionary, liking me?"

Chuckling Alice said, "Oh, I know he would have. He always had a thing for the pure of heart."

"I guess you'd know best."

Gasping, Alice planted fists on her hips.

"Ana Jin, are you calling me innocent?" she said. "Take it back."

"But you are," Ana said, repeating it when Alice continued glaring. "You are! And you've had more than a minute now, Alice. Our food's getting cold."

Taking a deep breath, Alice bit her lip before nodding. Scooting to the edge of the mat, she laid her head in Ana's lap, reaching back to twine their fingers together.

"When you're ready," Ana said.

So, Alice dove into the bloodsong. Her trajectory wasn't aimless, but she didn't rush with this subsumption. Once she was soaked in the great symphony's music, she curled around her tune, drifting in a sea of notes.

A well-known refrain wrapped onto the end of what she was singing. It never let its notes wander into hers. Instead, it bolstered Alice's strength and volume. Still, she only floated in place, waiting for the vast, musical ocean to take a breath, waiting for the perfect moment.

When it came, she unfurled herself, sending tendrils of her tune stretching into the bloodsong like fine cracks in broken glass, until she could reach no further. The glow in her chest shot along those lines, and she *sang*.

*August! Come home, little brother. I miss you more than I can say. I need you home. I need you to sing with me again.*

And she waited with every part of her listening. That strain of music so familiar to her, near identical to their father's but different in its own way, the one that fit into Alice's tune like the gears of a tightly wound clock. She'd find it. She would! One day.

On the world's surface, the floor rattled beneath Alice while Parliament's clocktower rang, and opening her eyes, she made herself gaze for as long as she could into beloved hazel eyes before allowing the wave to crash over her. Curling onto her side, Alice sobbed into Ana's thigh, and running her fingers through Alice's hair, the other woman said to her.

"I know, I know. It hurts. I understand. Listen to me, my love. Listen to my refrain. It's not the same as his, but please, hear the love I sing to you, Alice Cunningham. Hear me."

Eventually, Alice fell still, staring at Ana's smooth skin with a fist pressed over her mouth.

"Should I stop singing to him?" she said against it. "It's been seventeen years, and he's never responded. Every time I push into the bloodsong, I worry that I'll break it. It can never return to the disjointed mess that it was after my dad died."

"It won't," Ana said. "You may turn the symphony melancholic at times, but what you sing comes nowhere close to the screeching opus your parents sang on that day."

But would her search ever approach that state? Alice wondered at times if her daily-flung song to her brother was worth the risk of jarring the great symphony.

Shifting, Ana started pulling her upright.

"Stop with the brooding!" she scolded. "Where's my cheery Alice?"

Once she'd tugged Alice into a seated position, Ana shoved a plate at her, and Alice gave her a shaky smile.

"She stepped out for a moment," she said, "but she's here now."

"Good."

Leaning toward Alice, Ana pressed soft lips to her mouth, and sucking in her scent, Alice relaxed.

She could do this. Every day, she'd carry on her father's work. She'd fix this broken Empire, and maybe, one day, she'd find her brother too.

# Chapter 4: A Moral Dilemma

## Kase

I didn't want to do this.

In the citadel's ceremonial chamber, I sat on the place's only chair. Stone walls and a thin line of people formed a circle with me at its pinnacle, and in the center of this open space stood today's potential thrall. The little boy looked at me with such wide eyes while his notes warbled between terror and awe. Over the years, I'd gotten used to that strange mix of tones, sung to me from nearly everyone I met, but hearing it from someone so young pained me.

Turning to Yosai, standing to my left and behind me, I lifted an eyebrow.

"A child?" I said. "Why would you bring me someone so young?"

"Because his notes are strong, Kase. They'll bolster your strain significantly," Yosai said, "and after we explained what we wanted from him, he was more than eager to come with us. He has nowhere else to go."

Meaning the boy wouldn't be missed by anyone, one of the many homeless people who lived on Zoln's streets. Meaning he'd fall into silence if I refused him.

This was what they did to me. I understood the logic behind their actions. If I was to free us from the Empire, I must become an indomitable force, one that might—if we were *very* lucky—convince the enemy to leave Ostiu without committing us to another devastating war. One of the easiest ways we'd found to make me stronger, at least with magic, was by taking thralls so their notes could sing alongside mine in the great symphony.

I also knew that every potential thrall I refused failed to see the next dawn because my location's secrecy was paramount to my safety, and for this alone, I might take every one of them who was presented to me.

But taking new thralls had always... disturbed me. I'd never determined if the lick of shame along my insides, the sense that I'd violated someone, that came with every new addition of notes originated from me or him, the one whose life memories crowded a crevasse in my mind. He'd always regretted what he'd unintentionally done to Xia, especially since he'd known his loss would leave her a husk.

Unlike him, I didn't have my death planned out. I had no reason to believe my thralls would experience the same devastation as my *ravsinka*, the permanent erasure of the part of herself that she'd given to Lyle. So, my disgust could be his, not mine.

On the other hand, I hated what becoming a thrall did to someone, and I *knew* that thought was all mine. I'd taken dozens of thralls over the years, and all of them now looked to me for purpose. For fulfillment. They'd do *anything* I asked of them, and I did mean anything. I'd tested this a lot as a child, and every time, their alien need to please me had compelled them to follow my every command. They were like puppets, only living when I pulled their strings, and when considering this, I believed death might be a better fate than becoming a thrall.

None of this hesitation plagued me with the boy. As I fought to keep from glaring at Yosai while he gently smiled in response, I wondered if my keepers had uncovered one of my weaknesses, but how could they know the savage need to protect that rose in me around children? Small ones rarely inhabited this citadel, and my keepers didn't know that a ghostly copy of Lyle Cunningham with his famous compassion for the innocent slept in my head. No one did, not even Xia.

They had, however, always looked for ways to force me into taking new thralls, especially in recent years. I'd become more... choosy as I'd gotten older, which frustrated the hell out of them. Perhaps one of their observant eyes had noted unintentionally favorable behavior toward children from me. They'd certainly pried similarly buried desires, hopes, and pining wishes from me in the past.

"We'll speak of this later," I told Yosai.

He inclined his head, and as I faced the boy once more, I flowed to my feet. I couldn't close my eyes or take a deep breath in preparation as I might like. Too many people were watching me: my keepers in black and a few other scattered around the chamber's edge. They couldn't know how much my heart broke as I padded toward the boy or how much those shards twisted when he cringed away from me.

I crouched in front of him, bringing myself to his eye level, and for a moment, I just waited there. After he'd relaxed a little, I sent a first tendril of music to him through the song.

*What's your name?* I asked.

I wasn't sure if he could hear me or rather, whether he'd perceive the specifics of what I'd said. All listeners could hear my strain of music in the song, much like all could hear what emotions I bled into the symphony, whether intentionally or not. Those who could understand me when I spoke—truly spoke, without tongue or voice—were less common, although still prevalent.

Only one person could speak back to me in the same way, but she wasn't here.

"Jhi," the boy said and after a pause. "If it pleases the honored mageling."

So, he could hear me speaking. That was a plus.

With a smile, I said, *You don't have to be so formal with me, Jhi. I get enough of that from the stuffy people around us.*

Jhi darted his gaze around the chamber, probably noting the stiff postures and blank masks of our audience. When a giggle escaped from him, he slapped a hand over his mouth with his eyes wide above it. I patted the air to calm him down.

*Please. I beg you,* I said. *Simply be yourself around me. Can you do that?*

Slowly moving his hand down, Jhi asked, "Is that what you want?"

*It is.*

Jhi dropped his hand to his side, working very hard to relax—I could tell—and his effort widened my smile.

"I'll try," he said.

*And I can ask nothing more,* I said. *Will you sit with me?*

Folding to the ground, I gestured in front of me. Jhi hesitantly edged closer, trying to maintain a respectful distance while also honoring my professed wish, but when he eventually sat, our knees were touching.

Oo, bold. I hoped that would stick around afterward.

*Do you know why you're here, Jhi?* I asked.

Hugging himself, the boy said, "Kind of? That man over there said a mageling like the revolutionary lived nearby and that I could help him if I wanted. Are you a *liiares*, mister?"

My keepers, all around the room, shifted, probably disturbed by the kid dropping his previous term of respect, and on noting this, I suppressed a delighted giggle.

*Oh, I LIKE you,* I said. *In answer to your question, I am. Would you like to see my magic?*

The boy's breath caught before he slowly nodded.

*In that case, we'll start small,* I said. *Your intentions about today's plans are—*

*Avan,* I hated Truthseeking. It had always been the weakest of my *liiaresim* and *always* left me with a headache.

*—still undecided,* I finished once I'd managed to read the boy. *And...*

I pulled a small globe of water from the air to hover over my head and in a fit of mischief, asked the shadows around us to cap the torches that were bolted into the walls. After the chamber had

dropped into black, I heard water splashing nearby, followed by Yosai spluttering, and thanking the shadows, I bade them to relax. As torchlight made its hesitant return, it flickered over disoriented and irritated adults, but I had eyes only for Jhi's delight.

*I have a couple of other magic types too, I told him, but they involve the body, and I don't want to accidentally hurt you.*

Jhi's eyes had taken on the avid gleam that only the zealots among my keepers wore while his notes loudly jangled in the song. Sighing, I prepared for unwanted adulation and a return to formality.

"*Avan*, you're amazing!" Jhi blurted.

Oh. That... wasn't...

With heat rising in my cheeks, I scratched the back of my neck.

*You think so?* I asked.

"Of course!" Jhi said. "How'd you do it?"

Taking my free hand, he flipped it back and forth before leaning forward to peer into my eyes, as if seeking my method of magic there. All the while, I scrambled to find an answer to his question.

I couldn't tell him how easily most of it came to me, as natural as breathing. That might induce the worship I'd expected of him. I couldn't tell him how carefully I had to use it. If I directed more than the faintest singing at my *liiaresim*, it caused... bad things in nearby listeners, and learning that would return him to scared. So, I took the silly route.

Leaning back on my hands, I smirked at Jhi.

*I did it magically, I said. How else?*

Snorting, Jhi doubled over to giggle into his lap, and while waiting for him to control himself, I delivered a metaphorical slap to the people bristling on the sidelines. They might force thralls on me, but *I* got to decide how I made them mine. If that was to have a little boy treat me like a normal human being instead of a god, like they wished, then they could deal with it. Stiffening, they backed off, but I could still feel the resentment pouring off of them.

"Ok," Jhi eventually gasped. "What do you want from me...? What's your name?"

*You can call me Kase, I said.*

Nodding, Jhi asked, "What do you want from me, Kase?"

And now came the hard part.

*Do you know what a thrall is?* I asked.

"Sure," Jhi said. "Who in Ostiu doesn't know the stories...? Oh."

His face fell, taking my heart with it, as he contemplated the proposed scenario.

"Why do you want me?" he asked with stiff shoulders and his hands clasped in his lap.

I couldn't tell him that I didn't, that the idea of thralls made me sick to my stomach. In this moment, he needed me to be an all-powerful mageling, explaining to him why he was worthy of my attention.

*Your notes are strong and so, would make me strong,* I said, *but mostly it's because—*

I didn't want him to die.

*—you're brave. Not many have the courage to come as close to me as you have, and most find my magic disturbing or terrifying, not amazing. It's made my life...*

How to finish that thought?

Jhi's face screwed up, making something change in his notes, and after listening to them for a moment, I recognized the flavor of their beat.

*Lonely? Lonely? Lonely?* pulsed from him.

Damn. His notes *were* strong.

*Yes,* I said. *I'm very lonely.*

Even Xia expected something from me. No one wanted me to be near them simply for who I was. Instead, it was always something about my *liiaresim* that attracted them.

Humming to himself, Jhi straightened, staring at me as if trying to use his own Truthseeker magic.

"Will you hurt me?" he asked.

Oh, how that question stung.

*Never,* I said with my singing to him rigid. *I never hurt the innocent, not intentionally at least.*

A few people in the audience stumbled to lean against a wall while Jhi rocked back as if struck.

*Wincing,* I said, *But sometimes, I will do so without meaning to.*

Sniffing, Jhi dashed his hand under his nose, trying to hide the red glaze it had come away with. Even if it hadn't worked, I appreciated the boy's effort to hide what I'd done.

"Was that supposed to hurt?" he asked. "You'll have to do better than that, *honored mageling.*"

Lightning bolted me to the ground while the chamber went absolutely still. Had he... *challenged* me?

And laughter took hold of me. It bubbled and echoed in the stillness while I clutched my stomach.

Oh, this was bad. I wasn't supposed to show emotion unless I needed to manipulate someone, but I couldn't help it. This kid had pushed all the right buttons, and the welded shut door to the vault where I kept unrestrained Kase had flown open. Centimeter by bloody centimeter, I hauled it closed once more, and all the while, I worried about what my keepers might do in response to this mistake.

Whatever it would be, making Jhi my thrall had become doubly important now, but even still, I had to give him a choice in the matter.

*I really do like you, Jhi, I said, which is why I'm warning you that I don't know what will happen if you agree to my request. You may not be the same person after I take from your notes, so know that if you want to refuse, it won't offend me. In some ways, I'd celebrate it.*

"Why are you trying to argue me out of this?" Jhi asked. "I've obviously made my decision already."

And part of me rejoiced at that. But most of me wept.

*Then, give me your hand, I said.*

I didn't need the contact, but it seemed to help the other party in this exchange. When Jhi did as I'd asked, fear sparked to life in his eyes, something he quickly smothered. I squeezed his hand.

*I will never intentionally hurt you, remember? I said. This will be quick and easy, and once it's done, once you're mine, I will make sure you're cared for. I will keep you safe. You have nothing to be afraid of. I promise.*

Except what he might become as a thrall. Except the loss of a portion of the notes that made him who he was.

"Ok," Jhi said, squeezing my hand back.

With a quick smile, I said, *Now, we have to appease the stuffy people around us. They do so love their ceremonies. Repeat after me.*

"I, Jhi with no family, offer my notes to the honored mageling," Jhi said. "May he take of them as he wills."

He dipped his head, and it was my turn.

"I, Kase, also with no family name, humbly accept this generous gift," I said. "I will make good use of what I take, and you will forever be honored for your sacrifice."

*You ready?* I asked.

Lifting his head, Jhi nodded, and I dove into the song.

*Avan*, every time I did this, it felt like coming home, and I struggled to remember why I couldn't stay here. The tinkling notes, snippets of melody, and tunes dancing among the rest filled an empty part of me, one of the many that were locked in their crevasses and vaults, but this emptiness sat at my center. Hearing so many seemingly discordant bits of music weave and twine into the most mind-numbingly wonderful symphony almost, *almost* made me whole, or as close as I could get to that state.

This was the song, what others called the bloodsong. They chose this name because they believed the symphony was tied to the blood of the Ostium people, but that idea had always rung false to me. As many notes sang in the Ibisian Empire's portion of the symphony as the Ostium's. Once, I'd even heard faint trills from somewhere far distant, somewhere I'd never seen on a map, and these were only humanity's contributions to the symphony. Grass, stone, thought paths in the brain, what pinned us to the ground, *all* of these added their parts as well. *Everything* sang, not just the Ostiums. So, I didn't use the bloodsong as its name because that wasn't what the symphony was. It was the song of the world, and I refused to call it anything less.

And I'd joined with it for a reason, not simply to enjoy it.

For an hour here—a time that would seem like mere seconds outside—I listened, picking apart the music around me. This was always done in two parts, completed simultaneously.

Part of me analyzed how a brief shift to a minor key in part of the symphony made the whole of it echo with melancholia before it resumed its lilting wander. The rest of me simply felt it. A swell of rising notes nearby had me anticipating the finale of its grand crescendo, the sensation and sound of it running through me moments before it played in the song. The great symphony rang around me, and I was always a beat ahead of it.

I was seeking something specific in this rolling music, though, and soon enough, I found it: a pattering of notes interspersed with the others, one I'd attuned myself to while speaking with Jhi. Anticipatory, yielding, these notes must be approached with caution. Too often, I'd been hasty with my selection from what someone had offered, and the thrall I'd made had been an empty sleeve, only filled when I gave them something to do. I wouldn't make that mistake again, not here. Not with this boy.

So, I listened to him sing, tried my best to tie specific notes to how they affected his personality, and pinpointed the ones whose loss would do him the least damage.

Then came my least and most favorite part of the process. I sang my strain of music with its many added notes toward him, and his notes responded to it. Our music stretched toward one another, sound brushing against sound, and dear *avan*...

Doing this always skewed my focus. It was different for every person I touched. With some, I experienced a fuzzy warmth that quickly dispersed to nothing in me. With others, it was like touching an electric current: so much energy washing through me that it was almost too painful to maintain my hold.

With Jhi, a fierce protectiveness had me roaring inside. I had to shield these notes, keep them from anyone who might taint or silence them. I had to keep them from harm.

Including any I might give.

His notes had begun merging with mine. Cursing at myself, I ripped through my strain, forcing Jhi's notes in a diminuendo *away* from me. As our music separated, I frantically snatched the notes that I'd marked earlier, finding an acceptable place for them in my strain. They integrated, becoming mine, and it was as if a horse had kicked me in the chest.

Oh, I'd have to play with this addition to my strain of music later. Jhi's notes had made a change in it, the faintest shift in key, but unlike with *chanarii*, altering the notes of a *liiares* could prove enormously perilous, for *all* involved.

For now, I'd have to follow the pattern of personality that I remembered from this morning, at least until I could fix this. Unfortunately, I had something much more pressing to occupy me right now.

Withdrawing from the song, I found things in the chamber much the same as before. Sure, my keepers and the strangers in the wide circle around me were shifting in place, but everything else was surprisingly the same.

Everything except that Jhi's hand wasn't in mine. He was sprawled on his back across the floor. With his hands pressed to his head, he roughly shook it, and a scream, high-pitched and unreasoning, rattled in the air between us.

Between blinks, I went from sitting at his side to kneeling over him with no memory of having gotten there. Taking hold of his wrists, I pried his fists away from his temples, revealing empty, blue eyes.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I kept repeating this like a chant to myself, even as I sang to Jhi.

*What's wrong? I need you-*

His screaming jumped in pitch, and flinching, I clasped his tiny wrists in one hand while brushing the other through his hair, like Xia did with me when I needed help calming down.

"Jhi, I need you to tell me what's wrong," I said in a surprisingly soothing voice. "I can't fix it if I don't know what the problem is."

Slowly, life returned to a once empty blue, and as Jhi focused on me, tears formed in his eyes.

"I'm not right," he said. "Please, Kase, I'm not right."

Oh. I knew what this was.

Setting my jaw, I stopped my fingers at Jhi's temple.

"I understand," I said. "I need you to listen to my voice, all right? Just listen to me-"

I continued rambling as I slowly increased my singing's volume, distracting the boy until I could use my Mindbreaker magic on him.

*It's ok. Everything will be ok.*

I looped what I hoped wasn't a lie through Jhi's thoughts until his hiccupping sobs fell silent.

"It's ok," he dreamily said. "Everything will be ok."

I showed him my best fake smile, hoping it looked real to him.

"That's right," I said. "I'll make sure you're ok."

Then, my Somadept magic sent him under, there to dream until I woke him up. Doing that might take a while, though, because when I sat back on my heels, flames had formed rings in my vision, narrowing my field of view to pinpricks.

"Pon liiares?" someone said above me.

"Aiko."

With a slow breath out, I rocked to my feet, facing the woman behind me. Much shorter than me, I could always see the bump of her brown ponytail on the top of her head. I rarely got to see her similarly brown eyes, as she was almost bowing to me. My first thrall, she was usually the quickest to respond to my needs, such as when I'd summoned a handful of them for an unspecified task on surfacing from the song.

I gestured to the boy at my feet.

"This is Jhi," I said. "He's having trouble adjusting. I'd like it if he were taken somewhere secluded and comfortable, please. As soon as I have a moment, I come by to check on him."

*Keep him well-guarded,* I added.

Unlike Jhi, Aiko couldn't understand the specific words I spoke into the song, but she'd know what I'd meant to convey anyway.

"Va, pon liiares," she said, dipping her body further toward the ground.

Turning away from me, she flicked her fingers, and two more thralls, Yan and Ryang, pushed through the ring of onlookers to join her. With Jhi taken care of for now, I rounded on Yosai and the other keepers near him.

We needed to have *a talk*.

# Chapter 5: Expectations and Losses

## Kase

Somehow, I managed to maintain my calm demeanor as I advanced on Yosai, but I could swear fire was pouring through me as I spoke, scalding my tongue.

"*Do not* bring me a child again," I said, cheery despite the seriousness of my words.

Shuffling, Yosai flicked his eyes over my shoulder, and I resisted the urge to follow his gaze.

"Sentimentality?" he said. "Really, Kase? I thought you'd grown past-"

"How am I being sentimental?" I said. "I had reservations about making the boy a thrall from the start. How could I know what would happen if I took notes from someone who hasn't matured yet, whether mentally or in his personality? I thought it might cause excessive damage, permanently scarring further development, and it seems I had good cause to believe this. I have no wish to harm Ostiu's youth, the hope of our nation's future, *so no more children*. Do I make myself clear?"

Swallowing hard, Yosai dipped his head in acknowledgment, and applause broke out behind me.

To this point, I'd ignored the audience. People were always watching me, whether in lessons, martial training, or this *avan* awful part of my life. I'd learned to pretend they didn't exist long ago. If I hadn't done that, I'd probably have turned into an attention seeker or a nervous wreck. Thanks to my ghostly passenger's help, I'd known even from a young age that I wanted neither of those traits to develop in me. So, my mind had learned to filter the watchers out, which might, in this case, have been a mistake.

A group was clustered near the door: men and women dressed in the suits and dresses expected of Empire citizens. They weren't in the all-black, loose clothing that my keepers wore, which might have set me on edge in another setting. Fortunately for them, I knew these people, if only from photographs, and saw them for the allies they were.

With the rest of the room filing out behind them, Liao Guo, governor of Ostiu, and—presumably—his aides strode toward me while another man tried to slink in the shadows behind them. He wasn't doing a good job of it.

Tamai Ippei occupied the newly crafted position of treasurer for Ostiu, and while he might be terrible at sneaking, he'd outperformed everyone's expectations during the hectic transition from years-held-in-timepieces to coin-based *revos* as currency. I'd wanted to meet this man for a long time so I could ask some pointed questions about what had happened after my ghostly passenger's death, but upon seeing him, something...

I didn't know how to describe it. A brush of compulsion? A faint need to please? Perhaps something similar to what my thralls felt toward me. Whatever it was, it thrummed through me for a breath.

But then, Governor Guo had reached me with his hand raised, and I had to focus on him. Glancing at his hand, I cocked my head. Did he want me to shake it? That would involve touching him. He *had* seen what I'd done to Jhi, right?

Still, I'd started reaching for it when one of his aides jerked his arm down, leaving me with my hand half-raised. Awkward.

No matter.

I placed my raised hand over my heart as I bowed to him.

"Governor Guo," I said. "An honor to meet you."

And through the song.

*Can any of you hear me like this?*

When a woman near the back startled, I hid my smile.

Wincing, Guo said, "Please, don't show me deference, young man. You, after all, are *lii*ares. I should be on the ground at your feet. Alas, you'll have to forgive me. My bad back doesn't give me much range of motion anymore."

He rested a hand there, as if to demonstrate, and I broadly grinned at him.

*I hope you're taking notes, my dear.*

With a shiver, the aide from earlier scrambled to retrieve a pen, paper, and book from her knapsack.

"Of course. I'd never want to distress you," I said.

And silently.

*Sir, I may be young, but I'm not ignorant. I see through your bullshit. I don't want or need your deference, so in future meeting, please just cut the act.*

A choked cough had Guo glancing over his shoulder. I continued speaking while he was distracted.

"Why are you here?"

"To check on your progress," Yosai said as he joined us. "We've asked for a meeting with him several times over the last half year. This is the first chance he's had to visit."

"Your schedule and mine don't exactly match up," Guo said. "I'm usually asleep during your waking hours."

Dipping my head in acknowledgment, I said, "I'm aware that my sleep schedule is unusual when compared to the rest of the world. Such is the price of being a Shade."

Spreading my hands in front of me, I met the eyes of my secondary mouthpiece.

*If timing was truly an issue for meeting with me, all you need have done was ask for me to miss a few hours of sleep. I wouldn't have minded. I'd even have come to you, if required. As a Shade, exposure to light is typically undesired, but don't think me incapable of walking through it. In fact, it might be best if you presume to know nothing about me.*

*But I don't think timing caused your delay in visiting us here. The real reason was something else entirely.*

As the aide's eyes widened, I returned my hands to my side.

"You're here now," I said. "Have you had a chance to review my tutors' reports? I assume that those as well as what you've seen here will be enough for you to understand how my education has progressed."

"They have indeed! From what everyone here has insisted, you are one formidable young man," Guo said. "You've done well in your diplomacy, concealment, and Ibisian tongue lessons, or so I'm told. In fact, you seem capable with every skill taught here, save for one."

"And what's that?" I asked, hoping Guo would have the good sense not to speak it aloud.

"Infiltration for assassination purposes," he said.

Mentally, I rolled my eyes. Sharing your secret trump card's weakness with a bunch of aides and a treasurer seemed like *such a fabulous* idea.

"Yosai here tells me you've had a five in six success rate with elimination missions, which is unacceptable," Guo continued. "In assassinations, anything less than perfection is likely to see you killed, and you're too... unique to put yourself in such danger."

Turning to Yosai, I said, "Really?"

Meanwhile, I struggled to contain my temper so I didn't hurt my mouthpiece with my singing.

*You give me too little credit, Guo. I have mastered ALL of the skills taught here, except for assassination. After seeing my tutors' reports, do you think I don't know what my keepers have made of me?*

*As for the skill you find me lacking in, I don't see how it pertains to my purpose. If you think assassinations alone will wrest Ostiu's freedom from the Empire, then you're naïve. I have enough proficiency with assassination to complete what few jobs might occur during the coming war, but no matter how much we might wish otherwise, it will be a war, governor. Of that, you can be sure.*

*And I will be your weapon in it.*

"I had to tell him, Kase," Yosai said. "He's the Governor of Ostiu."

Yes. I was starting to get a feel for what sort of man might one day lead our nation. I sincerely hoped my initial impression of him was wrong.

"It seems you've learned my weakness, governor," I said. "I promise. I'm working to correct it."

"And I'm sure you will," Guo said with the most insincere smile I'd ever seen.

Waving to a now empty chamber, I said, "Perhaps I can show you something else while you're here?"

"Oh, no," Guo said. "I'd love to stay for another demonstration, but it's far past my bedtime. I should be getting home, as I'm sure the rest of my people would like to do as well."

He leaned to the side, revealing his aides—one of whom was still furiously scribbling—and Treasurer Ippei. I found it interesting that the diminutive man had come along on this trip, only to say nothing during our meeting. Was he accompanying the governor in an observatory capacity? That seemed strange.

Then, the unnerving sensation from before rolled over me again, and setting my musings aside, I pushed against it, dragging my eyes back to the governor.

"I understand," I said. "I hope you have pleasant dreams, and may I say how great of a pleasure it was to meet you, Governor Guo?"

Beaming, I extended the hand he'd almost taken earlier, and now realizing what might happen if he touched me, Guo eyed it with barely veiled suspicion. If he left me like this, however, he ran the risk of offending me, so he took hold, giving my hand one firm shake, before dropping it.

"It was nice to meet you as well, Kase," he said.

While he not-so-subtly wiped his hand on his trousers, I directed a few final thought at my mouthpiece.

*In conclusion, good sir, I know what you think of me. I know what you want from me, and I'm aware that I could kill you without blinking. So, in the future, can we skip the song and dance so we can get to the heart of the matter? Drawing these things out bores me.*

*Sincerely,*

*Kase, your weapon.*

*After a pause, I continued, I'm speaking to you directly now, my dear. Thank you for your work today. I greatly appreciate it and you, and to show that, I'd suggest that you leave my message in a place where he won't connect it to you. I don't think he'll take it well.*

The governmental party was almost out of the chamber, but still, the aide glanced over her shoulder to give me a nod, soon leaving me alone with Yosai.

"You don't like him, do you?" he asked.

"Whether or not I do has no bearing," I said. "He's Ostiu's duly elected governor. I must work with him."

Giving me an odd look, Yosai said, "Forgive me, Kase, but are you well? You're not usually so..."

"Agreeable?" I finished for him. "I'm fine, although I need to start my lessons twenty minutes later than normal today. Something went wrong while making Jhi my thrall."

Crinkling his brow, Yosai said, "That hasn't happened in a while."

I wondered if he was more worried about me or the boy when it came to that slip-up of mine.

"Don't fret. I was a little more distracted than usual today. It won't happen again," I said, "and we both know I can fix any damage done to my strain."

Sighing, Yosai slumped.

"Are you going outside again?" he asked.

I just stared at him.

"Can you promise you'll make it quick?" he said. "We haven't had time to prepare precautions like we do for your training in the city."

"Five minutes at most."

"Then, I'll tell you'll tutors you'll be late," Yosai said.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me. Just..."

He waved a hand at the exit.

"Go fix yourself."

I hurried into a hall and with a running leap, began my skate over ice-covered-stone, wincing all the while. When I used this technique, I knew someone would soon have to mop up behind me. Both for that reason and the evidence of my presence that it would become, I'd always hated leaving a trail of water behind me.

Maybe...

Half focusing on my balance, I reached for the ice behind me, and at my directed thought, it melted and evaporated, leaving no trace behind. Whooping, I hurtled around a corner. How had I never thought of this before?

Until I reached a door that led out of the compound, I practiced with this new *liiaresim* application, quickly realizing how difficult it was to manage water in all three states of matter while also maintaining my balance on ice. Quite a few times, I made a painful tumble across the ground before smashing into a wall.

I was healing up bruises, awkwardly bending to reach one on the back of my thigh, when I trotted toward the keepers guarding my chosen door. As their faces briefly soured upon seeing me, I flapped a hand at them.

"I got Yosai's permission this time," I called, "and I only need out for a moment. One of you can come with me if you like."

Neither of them spoke assent or denial, but as I approached, one held the door open for me while the other followed me outside. I stopped my advance toward Zoln at the terrace's edge, flopping cross-legged to its cobblestoned surface, and immediately dropped into the song.

While I needn't listen to it as a whole this time, I also didn't ignore it while focusing on my strain of music. Finding Jhi's notes in my perfectly crafted bit of song was easy, as they were the only ones that didn't quite fit. Locating a new home for them, however, looked like it would be difficult.

Adding new notes to my strain tested me at the best of times. I needed to either find a place where the new would perfectly match the old, which was ideal, or put them somewhere that wouldn't affect the overall tonality and cadence of my strain, and while I knew my strain of music well, the same wasn't true for my acquired notes' subtleties. Today, I had the leftover red haze of what had been forced upon me with Jhi as well as my conversation with Guo to contend with while completing this already delicate endeavor.

What seemed like hours later, I found a better spot for Jhi's notes. It wasn't perfect, but I had no other options. As they once more merged with my strain, I cringed in preparation for the gut punch that was a change in my original personality, but it never came.

Wonderful. I'd fixed that mistake.

I didn't often reward myself for accomplishing the many impossible goals typically set before me, but today, I let myself react to my success with nothing held back, releasing the dampener on my strain, and while I shuddered from the relief of this rarely allowed indulgence, other notes throughout the song approached near silence. So, no matter how much the selfish part of my mind screamed at me, I soon locked my singing into a muffler once more.

With my work in it done, I almost left the song then. I'd found quite early in life that lingering in it wasn't good for me, but right as I reached the break between song and not, a far-distant tune rose in a pealing cry of longing.

I went rigid.

Many holes perforated the fabric that was me. I had one chasm that sometimes held foreign memories, the ones that only became substantial enough to fill said crevasse when my ghostly presence showed himself. I had one that was a mystery to me, an ache that cried of something essential stolen. I had the reverse of one in my vault, containing the Kase who lived without restraint. I had one for the song, the vastest of them that only the symphony could fill, but another existed that was almost as deep, one that dragged on my spark of a soul almost as badly.

As I heard this far-distant tune, one I could swear I knew, the throb of that last hole eased for the first time in *years*. Lost in shock, I could do nothing more than dumbly listen to it until it began to fade. Only then did I realize how little time I had to find the singer of that tune.

Throwing myself into the song, I burst through notes without hearing them while a part of me railed about how utterly self-centered I was being. I didn't care. I plunged after that fading tune, stretching toward it. Pleading for it to stay.

And it was gone. Like a slingshot, the loss of it rocketed me toward the surface world, where someone was shrieking while distant shouts and groans floated from somewhere below. I should be concerned about this, but right now, I was far more occupied by the strange sensation draining from me, by the rake of claws gouging out a briefly returned piece of my soul.

When I could bear to focus again, two people were arguing over me. The door guards. Both had propped themselves up on a wall, nearly folded to the tiled floor.

Which I was lying on. They must have dragged me inside.

Shooting upright, I patted at my head before flying on all fours to my keepers, and once there, I took hold of their chins, turning their faces toward me.

Blood was trickling from their noses and eyes while blood vessels had burst in their sclera, but none of those same vessels had broken under their skin, thank *avan*, and while clearly addled, they could focus on me within a two second time frame. They'd be ok.

Tearing strips off of my black shirt, I thrust them at the guards.

"Use these. Staunch the bleeding," I said. "I'll get healers."

Before I could leave, however, one of them grabbed my wrist.

"We're fine, honored mageling. Can get to the clinic on our own," she said. "Check on your thralls."

She was right. My thralls always suffered the worst when I lost control of my singing...

Jhi.

"FUCK!"

The curse chased me as I raced for my room, preparing to do damage control.

# Chapter 6: Associates, Both Loved and Hated

## Alice

The hush of Parliament Grounds had different effects on everyone. For some, it came off as reverential, honoring the incomprehensible workings of an Empire, housed in one place. For others, it epitomized discomfort, leaving them needing sound to fill a great emptiness.

For Alice, it was normal. She'd grown up here, spending three years of her childhood running up and down these halls with her mother while her father had finished his work. Those childish shrieks and giggles had died in her ninth year, replaced by a silent perch on a bench with Walter at her side while her mother had shouted at angry men.

This quiet was almost as normal to her as the poorly hidden stares ever directed her way. The people who regularly filled these halls had become accustomed to Alice Cunningham's oddities, but those who made sporadic visits here *always* did double takes when she passed them.

She didn't much blame them for that. Alice knew how strangely she acted and appeared, but she'd stopped caring about making these people comfortable soon after they'd ordered her father's death.

So, she marched down the hall, not in a dress as was proper but in her bell-sleeved jacket, leather gloves, and dress pants, and the only color she allowed to hang from her body was black, the better to accent her Ostium pale skin and blue eyes. They would *know* who she was, at least in this place. When completing her work throughout the five provinces, the same MPs probably wouldn't pick her out of a crowd.

The only reason Alice was walking down these halls today, instead of vanishing to her destination as she might like, was to remind people that she existed and so that she'd have freedom of movement after the coming conversation. Only a select few knew what her role in the government was, but considering who she was and who she reported to, the people who didn't know tended to assume the position was powerful.

They'd taken to calling her the Empire's Ghost, given how she seemed to appear from out of nowhere throughout the five provinces. Many were the speculations as to how Alice did it, all while she did her damndest to make that special talent appear as normal and boring as she could. She

didn't want people to know any of her secrets, but that one—how she got around the Empire—was the most dangerous one for her. The one that could get her killed.

The punishment for the crime of using magic in the Empire was still death, after all, if not by the same method of execution they'd used in the past.

Alice had no official reason for visiting Parliament Grounds today. With her monthly check on the provinces done, she only needed to wait for orders from her mother, free to do as she liked in the meantime, but today, she wanted to ensure that she'd have the entire day to herself. She had plans.

Upon turning onto the corridor that her mother's office opened onto, Alice cocked her head at the sight of the secret police officers standing outside the office's door. What were *they* doing here?

They watched her approach with blank faces, and stopping in front of them, Alice rested her hands on her hips, inclining her head toward the room they were guarding.

"May I go inside?" she asked.

Exchanging a glance, the two shrugged, which had Alice biting back a sigh. Where were the secret police always so difficult?

Brushing through them, she strode into the room beyond, briefly pausing once inside. In contrast to her living quarters, Zorana's office was elegant, if minimalistic. Rather than a cozy den, one encountered all the makings of a grand chamber: tall ceilings, glass windowed walls, and all.

Not much furniture filled the space, though, merely a desk and a few chairs in front of it. In those chairs sat two people Alice hadn't expected to run into today.

One, she didn't find *that* surprising to find here. Vaughn had been an ever-present shadow throughout her life, even before her father's death fourteen years ago. Since then, he'd only hovered more, not that Alice minded. She loved her Uncle Vaughn.

The other one was... Alice didn't know how she felt about that woman's presence. Unwanted? Intrusive? This person had every right to be here, as she was one of her mother's greatest allies in Parliament, but Alice couldn't help the dislike she held for her.

Because Beatrice, the commander of the secret police, might not have condemned her father to death, but she certainly hadn't helped with preventing it.

When Alice stopped, all three people turned to her before relaxing into welcoming expressions, even Beatrice.

"Alice! Come in," Zorana said. "We were just discussing the news you brought home from Crinas. You can join us—"

"Actually, I had something else in mind," Alice interrupted. "I didn't expect Uncle Vaughn or the commander to be here. You usually take your lunch around now. I can come back later. Wouldn't want to disturb your meeting."

She spun for the door, meaning to make a quick escape, but Vaughn brought her up short.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said in a mock grumpy voice. "You're not disturbing our meeting, Alice, so get over here and give your 'Unky' Vaughn a kiss."

Flushing, Alice bit the inside of her lip, chewing on it. Over the years, Vaughn hadn't once let her forget how badly she'd butchered his name as a child. Even with that teasing, Alice couldn't stop a grin from spreading over her face when she faced him.

Vaughn had always been her confidant, quiet protector, and even drinking companion at times. He was everything she'd ever needed, family in all but blood. So, she hurried across the distance to him, hugging his head to her waist instead of kissing his cheek, as he'd probably wanted. He reached up to pat her back.

Releasing him, Alice turned to the woman who'd been critically watching her since she'd entered, shallowly bowing.

"Commander," she said.

"Alice," Beatrice said. "It's good to see you."

Was it really, though? Of all the spies flung across the Empire, Alice was the only one who operated outside the purview of the secret police, and despite Beatrice's protests about a 'possible breach in security', her status was unlikely to change anytime soon. Because of that, tension had always hung between the two, one that Alice had never gone out of her way to ease.

"I could say the same," she said with a tight smile.

Which was true. She *could* express pleasure about being in Beatrice's presence, but she never would. Still, Alice always strove to be polite with everyone she spoke, even those who made her want to jump out a window.

"What did you want, my silly monster?" Zorana asked.

Reluctantly, Alice tore herself away from a staring contest to address her mother.

"I wanted to know if you'll need me for anything today," she said. "I have plans that may make it difficult to get ahold of me, but if necessary, I can postpone them."

Leaning her elbows on her desk, Alice's mother folded her hands in front of her face, smiling at her over them.

"I think you've earned yourself a day off. Others can pick up the slack," she said. "May I ask what you're doing today?"

Looking away, Alice rubbed an arm with her lip getting sore from her incessant chew on it. She wasn't sure how fully she should answer her mother's question, not with Beatrice in the room, but if Alice thought that woman wouldn't learn about her activities today before night fell, she was being naïve.

"I'm taking Ana to meet dad," she said.

The invocation of a missing father, husband, and son dropped the room into a hush, reminiscent of what was found throughout Parliament Grounds, if deeper. Alice felt as if she were dragging her head through viscous gel when looking at her mother. What would she think of this development?

Alice was so distracted by trying to decipher her mother's expression that she jumped when someone took her hand.

"You're serious about this girl, aren't you?" Vaughn quietly asked.

At Alice's nervous swallow, he swept a thumb along the back of her hand, imbuing courage in her.

"I love her," she said. "I think I want to spend my life at her side."

Vaughn tightened his hand around hers while his eyes pinched.

"Oh, Alice. You've chosen the hard road," he said. "I'm so proud of you."

"Looks like changing that social norm needs to get moved up on the agenda, thank *avan*," Beatrice said from behind Alice. "Maybe we can finally return to the way it should be, how it was before Flosari's archaic customs took precedence throughout the Empire."

What on *earth* was that woman talking about? Alice had understood Vaughn's comment. The relationship she had with Ana was *heavily* frowned upon in the Ibisian Empire. But Beatrice? What social norm could she have been referring to?

"Go visit your father, Alice," Zorana said, "and know that wherever he is, he's brimming with approval for you in the moment. As am I."

Alice sucked in a breath with her eyes burning. Given her support over the last few months, she'd known her mother would be happy for her once she'd declared her intentions, but even still, a tiny, irrational part of her had been worried about the possibility of a mother's rejection. As for her father...

"Why do you think dad would have approved?" she thickly asked.

"Many reasons, most of them including his belief that people should be free to make their own choices without judgment," Zorana said, "but I believe the biggest of them would have been that

he loved his big brother very much."

Uncle Maxton, the man Alice had never met. Who'd motivated her father's quest to change the Empire. Who'd died, screaming, in a chair years before his little brother would.

"What does he have to do with what we're discussing?" Alice asked.

Shifting in his chair, Vaughn said, "Max was attracted to men."

Oh...

Wait.

"Really?" Alice breathed.

She wasn't alone in the family?

With his throat working, Vaughn looked away as he nodded, which had Alice narrowing her eyes. Had that been grief flickering across his face?

"Silly monster," Zorana said, dragging Alice's focus back to her. "Go get Ana. Have a nice time in the forest."

Chuckling, Alice said, "We'll see about that. Thanks, mom. Vaughn. Good luck with planning."

Facing Beatrice, she bowed again.

"A pleasure, as always."

"I'm sure," Beatrice said with a knowing grin.

But even that annoyance couldn't dampen the glow in her. Alice practically skipped down the halls with her sporadic laughter chasing the quiet away. They'd understood, hadn't rejected her, *and* she had the whole day free to spend with Ana. Never mind that they were planning on going somewhere that managed to both comfort and roil her heart.

Today was shaping up to be *amazing*.

# Chapter 7: Introducing Her to My Father

## Alice

When Alice burst into the apartment, Ana flinched on her stool, which left a streak of errant paint spoiling an otherwise gorgeous landscape.

Wincing, Alice said, "Sorry, love."

Never looking her way, Ana cocked her head at the painting.

"Don't be," she distractedly said. "I have a better idea now."

"Yeah?"

Stopping behind Ana, Alice rested her chin atop the artist's head, examining her work.

"Want to take it with us? The view where we're going is something special."

Going still, Ana said, "You got permission?"

"My schedule is cleared," Alice said. "I'm yours for the day, Ana Jin. Want to go hiking with me?"

She intently listened for the artist's reply, both audibly and in the bloodsong. So, while Ana reached up to squeeze her arm, Alice heard the shriek of terror that she released into the great symphony.

"Sounds like fun," Ana chirped.

And something inside of Alice cratered. Never removing her touch, she circled Ana to crouch in front of her, gripping her hands.

"*Don't* pretend with me," she aid. "You're allowed to be scared. You're allowed to say something's too much for you. I would never forgive myself if I stressed you out because I want us to leave our home. Please be honest with me, Ana."

"But I *am* being honest!" Ana said. "Yes, my skin's crawling, my heart's racing, and I'm on the verge of hyperventilation right now, but the idea of exploring the forest with you sounds delightful. I *won't* let fear conquer me. I *won't* be trapped here for my whole life."

Staring up at her, Alice sought any sign that Ana was putting on a brave face for her, but only grim determination showed itself.

"Ok," she said, "but I want you to remember that I can bring us back here the moment you feel overwhelmed."

Leaning forward, Ana brushed her lips over Alice's forehead.

"I know," she said.

*Avan*, Alice was so proud of her for trying as hard as she was.

"Then, let's go."

Reaching behind her, Alice laid a hand on the easel before finding a tune that was as implicit to her as her heartbeat.

Vanishing with other people had always felt different when compared to doing it alone. By herself, Alice only needed to focus on her destination while folding into the bloodsong. It never mattered if she'd visited the place before or not. She needed nothing more than a vague impression of it, and her magic filled in the rest.

When someone was with her, however, she had the additional challenge of dragging that person's notes through the bloodsong along with her. If she lost focus on those notes, she wasn't sure what would happen. She'd never done it before, but she could speculate.

On the rare occasions that Alice had lost focus on her destination while vanishing, she'd gotten dumped in a random location, sometimes in the middle of nowhere. She liked to think that a lost passenger would experience the same thing. Getting dropped somewhere unexpected would be awful, sure, but it was better than the only other alternative she could think of.

This wasn't to say that she found bringing a passenger with her difficult. Alice *rarely* missed her destination, and briefly weaving notes into her tune was intuitive. It was merely another complication added to a task she found so simple that she'd been doing it since she was a baby. Purportedly.

Her passengers, however, usually didn't find the experience as natural as she did.

As stippled sunlight pattered warmth on Alice's skin while a breeze drew a calming rustle from the trees' canopies, Ana gripped her tighter, woozily swaying in place, and the palette she'd been holding dropped into the twigs and dried leaves below them, thankfully landing paint side up. She shook her discomfort off in a second, but Alice knew from experience that it would have felt longer to her. Rising from her crouch, Alice folded her body over Ana so their surroundings were blocked

while she recovered.

"Are we there?" Ana asked.

"Almost. We have a short hike to complete first," Alice said. "Are you ok?"

"I think so. Give me some space, and we'll see."

Reluctantly, Alice peeled herself away from Ana, almost knocking the easel behind her over. She'd forgotten it had come with them.

Hugging herself, Ana peered at a sky that was nearly obscured by branches and leaves. Swallowing, she licked her lips, rotating her head, and Alice prepared to spring to her rescue, if needed.

"I think... I can handle this," she said after a moment. "It's uncomfortable, but... I don't feel as if the world's going to eat me."

With a small smile, Alice tugged Ana's arm free from their hug around her waist.

"Then, let's gather your things," she said. "I have the most amazing view to show you."

Chuckling, Ana said, "Better than our view back home?"

"Way better."

With Ana's things in hand, Alice led the way through the forest, taking a path she knew well. As they started off, something took hold of her throat, clamping down on it with greater force with each footstep she took.

When was the last time she'd visited this place? A few weeks ago? A month? Too long.

Alice would love to say that life's hectic nature had kept her away, that her efforts to help her mother had made coming out here difficult, but it wouldn't have been true. Visiting this place brought back memories, and even the best of them carried a tinge of melancholy now.

So, she dragged her feet the closer they came to their destination, to the point that Ana had to slow down for her.

"Oh," she quietly said after a while. "Caring for me is how you're coping."

Jerking toward her, Alice frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

"What was it you said earlier? Don't pretend with me?" Ana said. "You're hemorrhaging your fear into the bloodsong, love."

Shit.

Wincing, Alice pulled back on her singing.

"Ok, fine," she said. "Coming here is always difficult for me."

With her face setting, Ana stopped, lowering her canvas to the forest floor so she could loop her arm around Alice's.

"Then, we'll support one another," she said.

And with her canvas in her hand once more, she dragged Alice along, heading in the wrong direction. Alice allowed it for a while before gently pulling on the artist.

"It's this way."

When the forest broke ahead of them, Alice guided Ana along the tree line with both of them out of breath from their climb. She stopped at the edge, where canopy met the open sky and the forest floor soon dropped into a cliff, to give Ana a moment. She knew from experience how breathtaking this view was. Every time she visited, an echo of her first time seeing it hit her, those last blissful moments before she'd learned that her father was dead.

Below the drop off, the forest that surrounded the Empire's capital spread until Flosa's varied rooftops broke it up. From this distance, the city's perpetual smog layer was barely perceptible, a smudging of any distinct lines that might otherwise have carried this far.

The contrast between that urban setting and the wild around them reminded Alice of how unique life in Flosa was when compared to the other provinces' capitals. Here, the city fought what might seem like nature's stronghold while Daka, Acova, and Kestrat had nothing to impede their growth. Zoln, Ostiu's capital was another matter entirely, of course, but Alice would never consider that province a part of the empire.

Perhaps that was her Ostium blood speaking, though.

"You can set up here," Alice soon said.

At Ana's askance glance, she chuckled.

"I know you want to paint. What artist wouldn't after seeing this?" she said. "So, you set up while I say hello. I'll come get you when I'm done."

Biting her lip, Ana said, "Are you sure you don't want me...?"

With a smile, Alice rested a hand on Ana's shoulder.

"I'm sure," she said. "Let's limit your exposure to anything that might cause a panic attack, yes?"

At Ana's hesitant nod, Alice moved her hand to grab Ana's chin. She had to bend over a held canvas, but still, she pressed her lips to Ana's, drawing as much strength from the kiss as she could.

"I'll only be a moment," she said.

Leaving the artist to find a good position to work from, Alice strode toward the two precisely placed cairns lying under the open sky nearby. The closer she came to them, the slower her stride became until it felt like she was walking through a vat of honey, but far more quickly than she might have liked, she stood beside them.

"Hi, dad. Uncle Max," she said. "It's been a while."

They said nothing in response, giving no judgment or vilification, but of course they didn't. That didn't stop guilt from closing Alice's throat.

"I learned something new about you today, Uncle Max. Something that makes me wish I'd known you," she made herself say. "If you were alive, I wonder what advice you'd have given me, now that I'm planning to move forward with Ana. I'd guess you never told the world where your affections lay, else I'd have heard about it by now. So, probably no help with announcing our relationship, but perhaps you could have helped on other fronts."

"Did you know, dad? Uncle Max was your brother. Considering mom knows, I have to assume you did too, which makes me wonder when you found out and why you didn't tell me. Did you not have the time, or was it something you found so inconsequential that sharing it seemed wrong? Was I too young? Or were you ashamed of him? I find that last one hard to believe."

Falling silent, Alice tore her gaze off of the graves to check on Ana. She'd almost arranged her easel and supplies to her liking, so she took a deep breath, held it, and released it through pursed lips.

"I've brought someone to meet you today," she said. "She's important to me so... yeah. That's why we're here. I guess... I guess I'll go get her."

Fleeing ghosts, Alice raced beneath the tree's branches once more.

"Say everything you needed to?" Ana asked as Alice joined her.

"No. Never," she said, "but I don't think I ever will. It's kind of hard to have a fulfilling conversation when one party won't respond."

Alice's giggle emerged more manic and high-pitched than she'd have liked, but Ana pretended not to notice the edge to it. She took Alice's hand to kiss her knuckles, gazing at her over them.

"Then, why are you so nervous about introducing me?" she asked.

Wincing, Alice said, "You're right. I know. Let's..."

With nothing else, she tugged on Ana's arm, and the artist reluctantly followed her out from beneath the forest's concealing branches. Once a wide, blue bowl was arching above her, she flinched, almost freezing in place, but a squeeze from Alice seemed to give her strength. Setting her jaw, Ana stiffly followed her until they'd reached the cairns, and it was Alice's turn to tense.

"So, this is my Uncle Maxton," she said, pointing to the right-most rock pile. "I doubt you've heard of him-

"The progenitor's first child," Ana breathed, almost reverentially. "The one who provided the impetus and motivation required to see the revolutionary to his end goal. *All honor and glory to one so favored by time.*"

That had been... *much* more recognition than Alice had expected from Ana. She hadn't thought Maxton was so well known amongst the Ostium populace, but it did her heart good to learn she might be wrong.

After Ana had finished her moment of quiet respect, looking to Alice for more, she gestured toward the second cairn.

"And that's my... dad," she said, choking on the words.

Rather than greet a man who'd been her hero for years, Ana put her back to the grave, wrapping herself around Alice. As a breeze blew through their hair and leaves rustled behind Alice, they held one another. Ana understood how debilitating the loss of a loved one could be, even years after their death. Her own brother's murder haunted her to this day.

So, she provided Alice with much needed comfort, only addressing her hero once Alice had pushed her away.

"*Great revolutionary, my devotion to you,*" she said. "*I am Ana Jin, no one special, but your daughter has chosen to make me a part of her life despite that. I want you to know I will love and take care of Alice for as long as she'll have me. Thank you for all your sacrifices, blessed of time. A pleasure to meet you.*"

And silence fell. And Ana curled on herself, directing glances at a lightly clouded sky with increasing frequency. And Alice saw the woman she loved heading for a panic attack.

"Would you like to know how my dad would have responded if he'd been here?" she asked.

"I-

Ana forced her unfocused eyes on Alice.

"Yes," she said.

Nodding, Alice said, "He'd have hugged you, despite how much it might have pained him. Never did like touching or being touched."

So, that was what she did. Clasp Ana to her chest, Alice rested her chin on the artist's shoulder.

"And here's what he'd have told you," she said before lowering her voice and clipping each syllable. "It is my honor to meet you, Ana Jin. Over the last few months, I have seen how much happier my silly monster has been, and the source of that happiness is you. To me, that makes you extraordinarily special, a gem in our vast Empire. I look forward to calling you daughter someday."

For a moment, it was almost like Alice had channeled her father, if such a thing were possible. She hadn't felt his presence so strongly since he'd died, and once she'd finished, fat teardrops had begun soaking through the shoulder seam of Ana's dress.

For her part, the artist trembled in Alice's arms, clenching her back eventually.

"You really think he'd have said that?" she asked.

Pulling away, Alice wiped her cheeks before cupping Ana's jaw.

"He'd have *loved* you," she said.

Ana's eyes simmered as she bit her lip, obviously fighting tears. After two deep breaths, she shook herself.

"Of course he would have," she said with a laugh. "What's not to love?"

Alice placed a finger on the tip of Ana's nose.

"Exactly," she said. "Now, come on. Let's show these two brothers how we spend a day of leisure together."

Taking Ana's hand, Alice dragged her back to the safety of the forest and her easel. Ana visibly relaxed upon reaching partial concealment from the great expanse above, sinking onto her stool.

"Are you sure this is ok?" she asked. "Shouldn't we be... I don't know... more respectful? And what will you be doing while I'm working?"

"If there's one thing dad taught me, it's to always do what's best for your family, despite what social convention might say. Except if you need to hurt your family to change the broken society they live in, of course," Alice said with a soft laugh. "I'd like to think Uncle Max was similar. So, paint to your heart's content, my love, and when you're ready, we'll go home."

"As for what I'll do, I have no plans but to relax and watch a beautiful woman working in her element. Who knows? I might even brave interruption her with pleasant distractions... or try to, at least."

Flushing, Ana said, "Alice Cunningham, you behave yourself."

Plopping to the forest floor, Alice sank onto her elbows before sticking her tongue out.

"No."

Rolling her eyes, Ana turned toward her easel, and Alice focused on the way she moved her brush across the canvas rather than the reminder of the worst pain she'd ever endured at her back, one that only the loss of August's song had ever matched.

As the day progressed, Alice watched this moving portrait of the woman she loved, yes, but much of her was tied up in the bloodsong as well. She had yet to answer her question from days before, the one that had been circling in her mind for years.

When should she give up on her little brother? When should she accept that this ache ripping through a fundamental part of her was something she'd have to live with for the rest of her days, never to find relief?

As she pondered these questions, Alice cast out into the great symphony, hoping that maybe, just maybe, she'd catch a snippet of the strain she needed, a reason to continue, but nothing responded to her. She hadn't expected anything would.

Whenever her idle quest threatened to tip her into despair, she turned a torment of a different type on Ana. With a touch here and a kiss there, Alice made her mark on the artist's painting, every time Ana jerkily completed a brush stroke. A particularly long one heralded the moment when Alice tumbled Ana into the crackling leaves, there to participate in one of humanity's most potent displays of life while in Flosa's smallest graveyard.

After Ana had declared the painting finished and started packing up her things, Alice noted that Ana had left that same streak in place.

"Are you sure this is done?" she asked. "You'd have a perfect landscape here, if red weren't marking a line across the city."

"It *is* perfect," Ana said. "Haven't you heard of symbolism, Alice Cunningham?"

Rolling her eyes, Alice rested a hand on her hip.

"Of course I have," she said. "What's this supposed to symbolize, though?"

She gestured toward the painting, and wrapping an arm around her waist, Ana examined it with her.

"It's us and others like us," she eventually said. "It's you, blazing through this city, the center of the Empire, and changing what must be changed. Fixing what must be fixed."

"Ah, I see," Alice said with mock solemnity. "And what will you call this painting of symbolism?"

Cocking her head on Alice's shoulder, Ana said, "I don't know yet. The title will come to me as time and *you* progress."

"No pressure," Alice breathed.

Laughing, Ana swung around to face her.

"Of course not, my love," she said. "I'm only pushing you to improve yourself like you do for me, and you're never disappointed on the days I get stuck in the apartment, right?"

"Right," Alice said.

"So, why would I ever be disappointed in you?"

Alice choked on the reply she'd already prepared. How could Ana know the amount of work left before the Ibisian Empire that her father and now, she had envisioned could become a reality? Unless something drastically changed, she could work her entire life for a world where all were treated equally and allowed to live in peace, all while knowing she might never see her goal realized.

But Ana was telling her that this didn't matter. All she wanted from Alice was an attempt to better herself and nothing more.

"I love you," she said, "so much."

"I know," Ana said before caressing Alice's cheek. "Now, in that same vein, I'd like it if you vanished us just outside the city limits on our way back. I've gotten so far today. I'd like to reach a little further."

The warmth in Alice fled before the icy chill of her sudden apprehension.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I don't want to push your limits. Wouldn't it be better to end today on a high note?"

"Love. When do you think I'll next get myself out of the apartment?" Ana said. "You've helped me get through the door. Now, let's take advantage of the situation."

Raising a hand in front of her mouth, Alice fought down the burn in her eyes.

"You, Ana Jin, are the bravest person I've ever met," she said.

With a cheeky grin, Ana asked, "Braver even than your father?"

Scowling, Alice swatted her arm.

"Don't push your luck," she said, "and give me your hand. I'll come for everything else later."

"Not everything," Ana said while grabbing her painting off of the easel. "this'll stay with me, thank you!"

But she slipped her hand into Alice's, and they vanished to a spot outside of one of the gates into Flosa. While Ana recovered from her magic, Alice ran her eyes over a wall that had been here since before the time of the lost monarchs. Even centuries later, it stood strong, although signs of the patches made to it were obvious from the less weathered stone.

A few buildings usually filled in the wall's few breaches, enough of them to perhaps be called a town, but only a handful surrounded this gate, which only made sense considering what lay behind it. Similarly, getting through this gate had never posed a problem for Alice, one of the reasons she'd chosen it. She didn't want anyone wondering how and why Lady Zorana Cunningham's daughter had exited the city earlier today.

Once beyond the gate, Alice led Ana through the warehouse district with ease. She might never have ventured into the true origins of her father when she'd been young, not with both her parents adamantly shielding her from it, but since she'd started working for her mother, becoming the Empire's Ghost, she'd often visited this district. The people here knew and respected her. In some cases, they gave her their fear, although Alice had always tried to remain approachable.

So, she wasn't expecting to run into any trouble today. Nodding to those she knew, Alice kept half an eye on Ana. The artist had shrunk on herself, nervously pattering her fingertips on her rigidly folded arms, and she kept skipping her eyes across the crowd surrounding them. With every passing second, Alice expected to hear a cry for help from her, ready to pull her back to the apartment as soon as she wanted it.

Which was why she missed the thief's approach.

Someone *ran* into Ana, jerking the painting and her coin purse away from her. At their contact with her, Ana stopped dead with her eyes unfocusing and shivers running over her body.

Alice ignored the thief. What did they matter when compared to a loved one in distress?

She pulled Ana closer—

"Everything will be ok."

—before leading her into a nearby brothel. Fortunately, Alice knew this one's madam, who was already coming to greet them.

"Keep her safe and away from other people, please," she said, handing Ana off. "I'll be right back."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, Alice took off. She had no doubt that the madam would follow her instructions, leaving Ana taken care of for the moment. Most people who knew Alice here would jump at the chance to have her in their debt, something the madam would soon have.

That left Alice with the task of recovering her loved one's belongings.

Once she was in the closest hiding spot to the brothel, she entwined herself with her tune in the bloodsong, picturing her destination with gritted teeth. When she popped into an abandoned alley

not far away, she jogged to the end of it before plastering her body against the wall. As stomping footfalls approached, she lurched out of hiding, reversing her momentum as soon as she had hold of the thief's neckline. Swinging them around, Alice slammed them into the brick wall, although she was careful not to damage what they... he was holding.

"Give it back," she growled. "*Now.*"

The body beneath her grip trembled while the thief lifted brilliantly blue eyes to her, and Alice gasped. A boy. She was manhandling a *child*.

Not only that but he could have been a miniaturized twin of her father. All day, Alice had held an image of him in her head, her last view of him in the split second she'd caught of him dying in the chair, and now, that same glazed look was facing her.

"I- I'm sorry!" a high-pitched voice whistled. "I need the coin! My sister... we haven't eaten in two days."

That had probably been a lie. While Lyle Cunningham might have believed in the good nature of humanity, he'd also told his daughter many stories about his life as a thief and what people did when they were desperate. He'd taught her to be wary of others, no matter how good they might actually be.

Right now, Alice couldn't pay attention to that lesson. In front of her, she saw potential... her father, and she couldn't punish this thief. She released him, took a step back, and reached into her pocket.

"I'll trade you," she said. "The painting and anything else you lifted from your target for my coin purse, which is full of *revos*. It'll be a bigger haul than what you have right now; I guarantee you."

Slowly, Alice withdrew said item, and when the thief saw her bulging coin purse, his eyes widened to match that state. Hesitantly, he extended to painting and a much lighter purse to her, and after taking them, Alice gave him what she'd promised. He seemed to find this more surprising than her initial offer, taking the purse as if afraid it would vanish.

"I don't get it," he said. "You look like a noble... kinda. Why would you help me? I hurt your friend."

Alice considered telling him everything, every dilemma and aspiration she'd ever held, but she'd already made herself memorable enough to him. If she wanted to limit the chance of any influential people noticing her presence here, she couldn't pour her life story on this boy. Instead, she gave him the most truthful, generic answer she could.

"I'm helping you because you need it. Maybe if more of us lived consciously aware of how we affect one another, situations like this and places like the warehouse district wouldn't exist. Naïve, I know, but I can't give up on that dream, no matter how often I run into other people's selfishness."

Without hesitation, the thief replied, "*You are naïve.*"

Spreading her arms, Alice took a step back.

"Call it what you will," she said, "but you're free to go."

Suspiciously eyeing her, the thief backed down the alley until he'd reached a safe distance from her. Then, he took off, quickly disappearing.

With Ana's belongings in hand, Alice wasted no time returning to her. The brothel's madam had stashed her in a back room, and after Alice had promised to avoid her establishment for the foreseeable future, that woman left the two of them alone. Alice vanished them to the top of Parliament Grounds' clocktower, and once they were in a familiar setting again, Ana began emerging from her near comatose state.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she kept sobbing on repeat.

"It's ok, it's ok, it's ok," Alice always said back.

She spend the rest of the evening calming Ana down, which she didn't mind in the slightest. After all, what better use was there for her time?

# Chapter 8: Care for a Thrall

## Kase

None of my people, thralls or keepers liked it when my training required time outside of the citadel. Their uneasiness had always made me uncomfortable, so Jhi's relative enthusiasm for today's activities had been a nice change of pace. He was skipping along beside me, but I wasn't worried about the attention he might gain with his unusual disposition. I'd faced worse challenges than escorting a young boy to bid those he'd once known farewell.

For the most part, I stuck to the shadows, invisible to everyone who didn't know me well. The only reason Jhi could keep track of me was because his notes were intertwined with my strain. He could always find me now, no matter how well I hid, but that was life between a thrall and a mageling.

Still, the shadows kept me hidden from the average person, and luckily for me, Zoln had been built—in part—to help Shades with that effort. Ostiu's capital city provided shadows aplenty. The cramped nature of its buildings' arrangement and its location within a narrow valley cast it into a perpetual dusk, which was perfect for me.

Because I didn't need to seek the dark on this trek, I could more fully give my attention to my singing. Keeping it in pianissimo was always the most difficult part of these outings. Since I was *liiares*, I unconsciously sang at a much louder volume than the *chanarii*, and they naturally gravitated toward it. To keep from making a disturbance while outside the citadel, I had to fight against an intrinsic part of me. I had to wrestle with it while remaining hyper-aware of whether I had it fully pinned.

I also had to keep watch for Empire soldiers today. Normally, my keepers would have prepared the way for a training exercise, keeping the *persha* occupied elsewhere.

I'd always found this practice silly. Not only could Empire citizens never hear the great symphony, poor things, and therefore, could never hope to pick me out of a crowd of Ostiums, but when my efforts to free Ostiu eventually led to encounters with enemy soldiers, I'd think having experience with fighting them might be a good idea.

Maybe I'd get what I needed today.

Since I'd taken of Jhi's notes, the boy had been languishing in my suite of rooms. The part of him I'd made mine, seized in a panic, had been more essential to him than I'd expected. He seemed like a ghost of himself: a waif, much like Xia when I compared her to Lyle's memories of her. I'd begun to

worry that I'd somehow made the same mistake as him, losing Jhi's notes even though I hadn't died, but every time I checked my strain of music, there they were, still integrating with it. My concern for the boy had begun to affect my studies, and having already run through all of my ideas help him, I'd asked Xia for advice.

"He needs to properly say goodbye to his old life," she'd said. "Take him somewhere familiar, *brilah*. Let him have time to remember what he was like when he was whole, and the faint memory of it will sustain him, reminding him of how he used to act and feel. If he's smart, he'll take those memories, going through the motions of what his old self did, and eventually, the pretense will become real."

So, this morning, I'd snuck out of the citadel with Aiko's help. She'd always been the one thrall I could trust to do that without first alerting my keepers to my 'dangerous' plans. She'd insisted on accompanying us, trailing us so she could help if needed, but I thought her presence was an acceptable price to pay if it kept my keepers in the dark.

They wouldn't approve of my plans for this morning, which was late night for me. They'd see it as overly sentimental, of working too hard to fix a broken tool, and I hadn't wanted to argue with them, even if I understood and somewhat agreeing with their logic.

So, I walked through Zoln without supervision for the first time in years. Nobody was prepared to catch me if I fucked up, and there was a high probability that I'd encounter the enemy before returning to the citadel. Knowing that, I wanted to skip alongside Jhi, even as my skin prickled under the false perception that dozens of eyes were on me. It was an... interesting sensation.

"This way, Kase," Jhi chirped.

The boy had perked up as soon as we'd left the citadel. After watching him go from a shuffling corpse to a happy child after we'd entered Zoln, I got the feeling that what dampened the song inside my home was having an adverse effect on him. If that was so, I wasn't sure what I'd do. Could I return him to a place that was obviously exacerbating his issues? If I didn't, could I risk leaving someone who knew my location, my thrall no less, in this city with all of its associated danger? Hopefully, Xia's suggestion for the day would work, and I wouldn't have to decide.

I followed Jhi down a walkway that was so narrow, my shoulders brushed its walls. On the other side of this, a burnt-out husk of a building sheltered a handful of people. The years since the war had long ago erased any ash or unstable remnants that had covered it. What was left behind could barely count as a refuge from Ostiu's cold, much less be called a home.

And yet, a dozen or so people were doing just that. With ratty blankets drawn over their shoulders, men and women huddled around a few small campfires. What at first appeared to be junk sat in chaotic piles along the ruin's edge, but upon closer inspection, that detritus became things needed to survive: bedrolls, water skins, small piles of food, and more. Empty bottles littered the ground between those essential items while many of its people sported evidence of *kalvna* use.

How many of the people here had been pushed into these circumstances by Empire prejudice and oppression?

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly before nudging Jhi. He'd stopped short at the end of the walkway, biting his lip.

*Go on,* I softly sang to him. *Say what you need to. I'll stay here.*

Glancing toward me, Jhi frowned, probably because he saw nothing in the spot he'd heard me singing from.

"You won't come with me?" he asked.

Running my eyes over the boy's former home, I winced. Even this early in the morning with the sun barley cresting over the mountains, light bathed people and blackened wood, leaving few shadows behind. I could always ask to dark to follow me into that light, but doing that would give away my magic. I wouldn't mind the light exposure. The skin prickling I felt while in it was just a part of me, but I didn't want to risk that the cloak I was wearing might fail to conceal my features.

I couldn't tell Jhi any of this.

*I think it's best if you do this on your own,* I sang. *Don't you?*

Slumping, Jhi said, "Yeah, I know."

*Don't worry. I'll be right here if something goes wrong.*

Jhi flashed me a smile.

"Thanks, Kase."

He started toward the ruined building. Keeping an eye on him, I leaned against a wall, crossing my arms. As the first of the people in the ruin noticed Jhi, raising their hands in greeting to him, a figure dropped from the first tier of the building at my back. As always, her notes told me where she was, despite how stealthily she was moving.

"You're being unusually kind with this one, *pon liiares*," Aiko said. "May I ask why?"

Tilting my head back, I considered how to answer her. I didn't have to, as she was well aware, but Aiko rarely asked me for anything. So, when she did, I tried to accommodate her as best I could.

I almost gave her honesty, telling her about the fierce protectiveness I felt for this child, but I wasn't sure how she'd receive that answer.

Plus, I had my own concerns with it. Was this instinctive need to shield Jhi from harm something I'd experience with all children, or was it reserved for him, felt only because I took of his notes? I wanted to have an answer to that question before I shared a potential weakness with anyone, even Aiko.

*He's strong,* I sang instead. *I'd like to cultivate that strength.*

Even if she couldn't hear the specifics of my answer, Aiko seemed to have understood it anyway.

Bowing her head, she said, "You are wise, *pon liiares*."

*No. Merely practical.*

Shifting, I watched an older woman give Jhi something I couldn't see, and on receiving it, the boy threw his arms around her neck with his shoulders shaking. When he backed away, wiping his eyes, he put the item in his pocket before moving on to the others around him.

I wasn't sure how much time I should give him. If I had my way, he'd have all the time he wanted to make these goodbyes, but not only would my keepers discover our absence from the citadel soon, but my eyes were itching from fatigue. My typical bedtime had *long* since come and gone. When I was tired, my control of my singing tended to slip, and if that happened outside the citadel, it wouldn't be good for anyone here.

So, when I felt something with exceptionally potent ill intent, strong enough to trip even my weak Truthseeking, I was relieved, even as my guts tightened.

*Jhi. Come here,* I sang.

In the midst of those he'd known, Jhi stiffened. His face took on the curiously blank look that all my thralls wore when I gave them a command. Even still, he took the time to make hasty, final farewells, which was odd. I'd never had a thrall delay in obeying me. Seeing it here was refreshing, even as I silently urged him to hurry up. Whatever this hostile person or thing was, it was coming closer.

After he'd trotted to me, I took Jhi's hand, which made him jump, but of course it did. To him, a ghostly person had just taken hold of him.

*This will feel strange,* I sang to him.

With my warning given, I called to the dark, and it accepted Jhi into its embrace, granting him a hiding space. With both of us invisible, I pulled the boy down the walkway from before and into the crowded intersection beyond.

Never releasing my hold on him, I hurried back toward the citadel, putting as much distance between us and a source of hostility as possible. I didn't think that anger was directed at us, but it was better to keep away regardless.

# Chapter 9: The State of the City

## Kase

As Jhi and I hurried back toward the citadel, Aiko followed us on the rooftops, vigilant for danger. It was unsurprising, then, that she was the first to notice the shift within the song, originating from what we'd left behind. I felt it, of course, anticipating the change in the breath before it happened, but in that moment, I was more focused on keeping Jhi and myself concealed as we wove through the crowd.

I paid it the attention it deserved when Aiko stumbled. Pulling Jhi to my chest, I faced the swell rushing toward us with my teeth gritted. I released my own strain of music to push it away from us. Even still, when it arrived, every Ostium around us flinched and staggered, and I pressed Jhi's head to my shirt when he released a piercing wail, one that was audibly muffled but deafening in the song.

I restrained my own whine. A handful of notes, each irreplaceable in the great symphony, had faded to silence, and their loss left the song hiccupping for a span of time beneath most people's awareness. They noticed the resulting tonal shift, but of all the Ostiums I'd discussed this stutter with, I was the only one who'd heard it.

And this pause in reality's wandering music *hurt* to hear. Even as I clutched Jhi tighter to me, I lifted a free hand to my nose, quickly blotting the blood dribbling from it. No one, not even my thralls, could see how devastation like this affected me. I had to be strong for them.

The pressure in the great symphony relented, and while the people around us roughly shook their heads and continued about their business, Jhi went limp, emptily staring while his head lolled.

*Aiko!* I shouted.

Again, nearby people flinched, although this time they tried to find the source of their distress, but by that point, I'd dragged Jhi beneath a building's eaves. More quickly than I'd expected, Aiko joined us, looking rattled.

*Suggestions?* I asked.

Aiko took one look at Jhi and winced.

"The citadel is too far for us to reach before he revives, *pon liiares*, but he shouldn't do so in the open either," Aiko said. "We should find somewhere safe to hide until he's recovered. I know a good tea shop nearby. Its owner is trustworthy."

*A good idea, I sang. Lead us there?*

Snapping to attention, Aiko bowed in my general direction.

"Va, *pon liiares*," she said.

Keeping Jhi upright while also threading through a maze of people I couldn't touch was quite the challenge for me, but somehow, I managed the task. It helped that Aiko's tea shop wasn't far.

When I shuffled inside after her, something like electricity prickled over my skin, but for once, I was grateful for the light. When I stepped out of or into the dark, it could be an unnerving sight for anyone who'd never seen it, and so, I tried to do it in ways that others wouldn't notice. This time, I hadn't planned how to hide it, but walking into an establishment while its owner and patrons were still registering Aiko's presence was a prime way to make the transition.

Once the room's attention had shifted to me, an elderly man circled his counter, racing toward me with his hands outstretched for my burden. Something in my body language must have warned him about lending me a hand with Jhi because he slowed down. He lowered his hands while the pinched, distracted look that was already on the faces of the shop climbed onto his face.

"I've got him," I said in a rough voice, glancing at the boy, "but perhaps you could point me toward somewhere we might sit, *ishaaren?*"

"Of course."

The proprietor led us to a far corner, which had shadows flocking around it. While I might normally relish such a sight, it made me wince now. I couldn't enter those shadows until I was far from people who might see me vanish.

Fortunately, Aiko knew me well, so she took hold of Jhi, getting him into one of the darkened chairs. While she took a seat, I dealt with the shop's owner.

Bowing to him, I said, "My thanks, *ishaaren*. My little brother didn't take the recent disturbance to the bloodsong well. We came to the first place of refuge we could find."

The shop owner's gaze sharpened.

"Poor boy," he said. "Did he know one of those killed?"

Killed? The fade of someone's notes usually meant they'd encountered death, humanity's greatest enemy, and many people had fallen silent in the recent shockwave, hence why it had hit the

Ostiums so hard. But deliberately killed?

"I'm not sure," I said. "My brother's always off playing in the ruins, and I'm usually the one to drag him home. He might have made friends while exploring."

With his face twisting, the shop owner hissed, "Damn the Ibisians. The three of you take as much time as you need before heading onto the street again. I'll bring you some tea, no charge."

Again bowing, I said, "You are kind."

When I rose, the shop owner had begun that curious dip that people took when trying to look under my hood, so I spun to the table. I slid into a chair as close to Jhi as I could get. When no commotion rose behind me, I assumed the old man had gotten the hint to leave me alone.

Keeping my hand hidden by my cloak's sleeve, I lay it atop one of Jhi's, left resting on the table. He was still catatonic, staring into nothing, and while I wanted to help him by diving into his head with my Mindbreaker magic, I didn't think that was a great idea with so many people around us.

"What did he mean, asking if Jhi knew one of the people killed?" I asked Aiko.

Much as I'd like to quit using my voice, I needed her to understand the specifics of what I'd asked, something she typically couldn't do with my singing.

"It probably has something to do with the increase of Empire soldiers stationed in Zoln lately, *pon lliares*," Aiko said. "While we were on the street, you may have noticed more of our people carrying any weapons they can?"

"I noticed a greater militia presence in the city, yes," I said. "The soldiers are the Empire's answer to that, then?"

Nodding, Aiko said, "They haven't been... kind since their arrival."

Of course they hadn't. Empire soldiers never were, but with the way she'd phrased that, I gathered she was implying that their recent abuse of power might be different.

"In what way?" I asked.

Shifting in place, Aiko turned her gaze even further away from me.

"They've been raiding ruins where the homeless are known to take shelter, their reason being, from what I understand, that people left idle are more likely to join our militia or otherwise cause trouble," she said. "At first, all they did was forcibly remove the homeless from wherever they were found, but recently, their commanding officer seems to have realized that all this strategy did was shuffle Zoln's destitute around the city. So, she's been eliminating the problem instead."

Eliminating...

"They're *murdering* Ostiums?" I hiss. "We're supposed to be Empire citizens now that their Prime Minister has forced that naturalization bill down Parliament's throat! How can they kill their own-?"

Aiko winced, and biting my tongue, I took a calming breath before I drew more of the shop patrons' attention our way.

"Why didn't I know about this?" I asked.

Shrugging, Aiko said, "If I were to take a guess, I'd say it was kept from you so you wouldn't get distracted, but I don't know the minds of those who oversee your training."

I had no doubt she was right. My keepers had always enjoyed controlling my life down to the last iota. How terrible was it that I wanted to unleash violence on them for keeping me in the dark about this almost as much as I did toward the soldiers who'd murdered Jhi's friends?

That little boy was the only reason I didn't storm out of the shop to begin the fight for Ostiu's freedom right then and there.

Squeezing his hand, I bit my lip. What I'd meant to help him had only hurt him further and in a devastating way, no less.

The shop owner returned to our table, distributing steaming mugs around it. I only half noted this, too wrapped up in my concerns for a child, but when the man lingered, I dragged my attention his way.

"Yes?" I Said.

"I..."

The man shuffled a bit, glancing toward the ceiling before meeting my gaze. Or meeting it as best he could with my hood pulled so far forward, at least.

"Please forgive me," he said, "but are you ok? You seem... pale."

Good eye on this one. I wondered when he'd caught an inevitable flash of my bare skin.

Grinning, I said, "No need to worry about my feelings, *ishaaren*. You are, after all, giving us hospitality. In answer to your question, though, I'm fine. I have a condition that-"

"Kase?"

Forgetting the old man, I whirled on Jhi, exposing my hands to take his. No need to hide them if the only stranger paying attention to us already knew how lacking in pigment they were.

Jhi still looked dazed, even with his unfocused eyes pointing my way. Had he realized what had happened yet?

"Hey, Jhi," I said. 'Thought you'd left us for a moment there."

With a frown forming in slow motion, Jhi said, "Why are you talking like that? It's not right. I need you to be right."

Flashing to days previous, I watched him screaming again.

*I'm not right. Please! I'm not right.*

Fuck it. Who cared whether a handful of average Ostiums learned about my existence. They couldn't do much damage with that knowledge alone, and Jhi needed me as I was, not hiding like this.

My control of my singing loosened, allowing the strain inside of me to increase in volume, and a collective gasp rose around us. I ignored it.

*Is this better?* I asked.

With a small sigh, Jhi said, "Much. Where are we? We were walking outside and then..."

Fog cleared from his eyes with pain crystalizing in them, and his notes began a swift climb into a shriek. Catching them in my strain, I let it hum around him, loud enough to match, while squeezing his hand.

*One of your friends gave you a gift while we were with them,* I sang. *May I see it?*

"A gift?" he said. "A gift. Oh. The one from-"

A gasping whimper suffused the shop's dead silence, and in that moment, the pain of the Ostium people seemed brought to life in a little boy's grief.

"Are they dead?" Jhi asked. "I can't hear them-"

*Jhi.*

My firm tone had the boy snapping his attention to me, breathless and wide-eyed.

*May I see what your friend gave you?*

Slowly, Jhi reached into a pocket. With his fist clenched around the item, he withdrew it, but once he'd rested his hand on the table, he revealed what he held, and a lump formed in my throat.

Before me, a wooden medallion, still blackened in spots, lay without a thong to complete it. On it, a rough outline of Zoln's silhouette, mountains and towers both, rose in bas relief from the background, but this was the city as it had once been. There were no gaps in the skyline where homes had once risen for the sky. The carving might not have been beautifully done, but anyone could see the care that had gone into it.

Hovering a hand over it, I asked, *May I?*

Mutely, Jhi nodded, and I lifted the medallion for a closer inspection. When I curled my fingers around it, I felt more ridges and depressions on the back, and flipping it, I read the characters found there.

*Jhiyuv Veif*, I said. *Is that your name?*

Again, Jhi nodded, although he shivered when I said his full name.

I could relate to that feeling. His parents must have been visionaries to veer from traditional Ostium naming like this. Instead of a pleasant arrangement of sounds, as most Ostium names were, they'd given their son a name with meaning, one with words directly from the Ostium tongue: *jhiyuv*, meaning freedom, and *veif*, meaning hope. He was literally called hope of freedom. How much pressure had they placed on him with two small words?

Brushing my thumb over the carving, I called to the dark, forming a dusky needle from it, and bore a hole through the top of the medallion with it. A shadowy knife helped me cut a strip of cloth from my cloak, and I tied it through the hole, loosely looping the ragged strip. At some point, we'd need to get him something less fragile to hang the medallion from, but this would do for now.

Finished, I set it on the table before sliding it back to Jhi.

*They loved you*, I softly sang. *How blessed are you to have known them? Let's not dishonor their memory by losing ourselves to grief. Don't deny that it exists! Never do that, but use it to make yourself a better person, someone they would have been privileged to know.*

Lifting my finger off of the medallion, I sat back in my chair, ignoring the eyes on me to give Jhi my full attention. The boy lifted his gift with trembling fingers, and his eyes glistened when they met mine.

"Thank you, Kase," he said.

I shrugged.

*I help where I can*, *Jhiyuv*, I said, *and in this moment, this is what you needed.*

Dropping his eyes to the medallion, the boy nodded, but he clutched it to his chest rather than hanging it around his neck.

"It's just Jhi," he said. "That's how you know me, right?"

He gave me the most crooked smile I'd seen in ages, and my heart twisted in my chest, even as I matched his grin with a brighter one.

*Jhi, then*, I said. *Are you ready to go home?*

When he nodded, I lifted a long-left-idle mug of tea, sipping from it before standing to face the room. The wordless shock and nervous... something I couldn't define that was directed my way—finally acknowledged—nearly floored me. Was I truly *that* much of an anomaly? I knew *liiaresen* were rare, but this sense of awe seemed excessive.

Locating the shop's owner, I bowed to him.

"Thank you for the tea," I rose.

When I rose, the man visibly swallowed a few times before speaking.

"I'm honored by your words, *vas ii*."

Which made me frown. *li*? What was that?

Shaking my confusion off, I focused, reaching out for the minds around me. The task of finding so many of them without the typically unnecessary aid of physical contact was difficult for me, but I could do it... barely. Once I had hold of the strangers around me, I whispered my magic to them.

*Don't speak of this.*

As people across the shop flinched, I gestured for Aiko and Jhi to join me outside. The command I'd imparted wouldn't last for long—my Mindbreaker magic never did—but I'd been firm enough with it that we should reach the citadel before the tale of what I'd done here leaked.

# Chapter 10: Petty Revenge

## Kase

Once outside and in the shadows once more, I started off toward home at a near jog. We were moving so fast that Jhi almost tripped over himself to keep up.

Before Aiko could take up position on the roofs again, I snatched her wrist, never stopping our path forward.

*I would prefer it if my keepers didn't learn of our time in that shop, I sang.*

"I shan't say a word, *pon liiares*," Aiko said.

*I know, I said, and I appreciate it and your loyalty.*

When I released her, Aiko dipped her head to me.

"My honor to serve," she said.

She swiftly disappeared, and shaking my head, I reached for Jhi's hand once more. Thralls and their obsessive desire to please-

Something knocked into Jhi, ripping his hand out of mine right as I'd gotten a grip on it, and he stumbled, almost falling. While I steadied him, I caught a glimpse of someone running away from us at full speed, and I didn't need to look at the boy to know that his medallion would be gone.

Of all the shitty luck...

*Stay with Aiko, I told Jhi.*

I didn't stop to see if he obeyed me. Much as I hated it, he wouldn't have a choice in the matter, so cursing in my head, I shot after the thief before their head of hair could merge with the others around it.

Why would someone steal something so monetarily valueless as the medallion? Why the *fuck* would someone steal from a child?

As I chased the thief, Lyle's memories emerged from their crevasse in my mind. His days in the same profession as my quarry helped me predict how they'd move, and even though I was on the

opposite end of a chase he might have endured, his ghostly presence grew beside me, forming into a child this time. Soon, we were running together with a soft growl emanating from me while excited, silent whoops came from him. Given that, the boy beside me must be a version of him from before his brother's death.

We skidded around a corner, and sucking in a breath, I wheeled my arms, trying to stop. Without heeding my surroundings, I'd sprinted into the single part of Zoln that towering buildings weren't crowded around: the market. Here, only flimsy, cloth tents rose from the frozen ground, letting sunlight bathe them, and even this early in the morning, there was a *lot* of light here.

At my side, ghostly Lyle hissed, hunching on himself, but that was understandable. Throughout his life, he'd *rarely* been whole in body, and the more injured a Shade was, the more exposure to light affected us.

I didn't have that problem. Instead, I was caught in a fly trap. My heart raced when considering how many unknown people could see me.

Because even this early in the day, the market was crowded. Its merchant booths were stocked and staffed while customers swarmed between them. It was a miracle no one had seen me pop out of the shadows.

But the thief had plunged into that chaos. They'd taken Jhi's only reminder of his family.

Lyle and I straightened together, setting our jaws, and we entered the crowd.

I couldn't explain what came over me after entering the crowd. Every bit of my training in blending with others and staying unnoticed rushed to the forefront of my mind, yes, but it was as if a hand had reached into my body, moving my feet to avoid people's gazes, pulling my eyes to routes that were more concealed by tents and wagons.

Lyle's memories became mine for a brief span of time, uniting us in a shared driving purpose. Protect the young. Save the innocent. Help those who are most in need.

The merge faded as soon as we stepped out of the market, still hot on the trail of the thief. Lyle's ghost remained at my side, but he was no longer guiding me. A man once more, he joined me in another headlong rush, but there was no joy in it for him this time, only resolve, just as my anger had cooled to icy calm.

So, I stopped before the dark around me yielded to sunlight this time, scanning for a way to continue my pursuit without exposure. I wasn't terribly worried about jumping into the light if I had to, as the ally the thief had turned onto was currently abandoned, but that could easily change-

As if summoned by the thought, a group of men stepped into the ally from a set of stairs that led into a building's basement. Unfortunately, the thief had no way to dodge these people, as they nearly on top of the group. They ran into the group's leader, sending both people tumbling to the ground with a shout. When the thief rolled off of their unintended victim, I went cold as I realized who they'd inconvenienced.

With brown skin and dark hair, this group of men was Ibisian, and based on their uniforms, they were soldiers too. Oh... this thief was fucked.

Before they... she could flee, a soldier grabbed her wrist, yanking it overhead.

"What do you think you're doing, Ashie?" he growled.

He shook the thief, and with my hackles raised, I quietly hissed, right as Lyle tensed beside me. I *hated* that slur.

"I- I'm sorry," the thief stammered. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I'm in a hurry-"

"Not anymore, you're not."

The man she'd knocked to the ground got to his feet, rubbing his jaw. He eyed the thief before hauling back and slapping her. Almost, I took a step forward, but my ghost's arm shot in front of me while he shook his head.

He was right. I couldn't intervene, not yet at least. Even with my distinct advantages, five against two weren't great odds, not if I hoped to eliminate them all and *especially* when I didn't know if the thief could fight as well. It was best to wait. These soldiers might beat the thief but honestly? She deserved it, given the circumstances.

Lyle shot a sour look at me for that, but I was too preoccupied with the confrontation in front of us to acknowledge his displeasure. One of the soldiers had the thief secured, holding her arms behind her back while her victim had hold of her jaw, turning her head back and forth.

"What to do with you?" he said.

Clicking his tongue, he stepped back.

"Search her."

When someone came forward to follow the order, the thief started struggling for freedom, jerking on the man holding her while lashing out with flying feet. In response, her captor swung her into a wall.

"Keep fighting, Ashie," he hissed. "I *like* it when you fight."

The thief went still with a different sort of tension taking hold of her, and Lyle nearly matched her pose. I didn't know why he found the soldier's unspoken threat surprising. He'd had his own experience with Ibisian men's treatment of Ostium women and children. Things hadn't changed much since his death, not in this area at least.

Another soldier smacked the man pinning the thief upside the head—

"You planning on getting us double patrol *again*?"

—before searching what he could reach of the woman. Within a minute, he pulled something out of her pocket, lifting it to eye level with a pleased chuckle.

"What do we have here?"

A thick, black disk with unreadable symbols glowing from its readout—a fucking *timepiece*—glinted in the sunlight. Where the *hell* had the thief gotten her hands on one of those? After the switch to *revos* as currency, the only timepieces with years still on them had come from the nobles, who'd had centuries to spare, and they'd 'donated' their bounty to the Ibisian military, there to power Restorers as needed.

Shit. The thief had stolen from an Empire soldier. What had she been thinking?

"Where'd you get something like this, Ashie?" the soldier asked, dangling the timepiece in front of the thief's nose.

"I found it-" she started.

The man pinning her let up to whirl her in place, and when her back hit the stone wall, he drove his fist into her stomach.

"Don't lie to us, bitch," he growled.

"As if... I would... speak the truth to the... likes of you... Empire *persha*," the thief wheezed. "Kill me already. We all know that's what will happen here. Fucking uncivilized, deaf louts-"

A punch to the face had the back of her head hitting stone before she slid to the ground, and once she'd hit it, the soldiers took turns kicking her. They were shouting too, but I didn't hear what they were saying, just a roar, much like continuously crashing waves, in my ears.

They were killing her. Slowly perhaps, but she'd eventually die beneath their feet.

This was what the Empire did. No regard for life. Turning my people into less than animals. Driving us to desperation and then, punishing us for doing what we must to survive.

Sure, some Empire citizens were decent people, working toward humanity's benefit. I had to believe they existed, but I'd never met them. I'd only seen people like this: men beating a woman black and blue and-

They deserved to die, much like what they dealt out to anyone who opposed their oppression.

Lyle, who'd been watching me without motion to his point, deflated with something like defeat hovering over him. He quickly faded into his home in my mind's crevasse. I was sad to see him go—his ghostly presence had always been a comfort—but at the same time, I didn't want him to see what would soon happen here because-

Because despite his Ostium heritage, he was the only Ibisian I'd known to claim decency, and I didn't want him to watch me sully mine.

He wasn't real. I knew this, and yet, I craved his approval.

These soldiers should thank their revolutionary. He was the only reason they'd get a chance to live.

"Leave the woman alone," I called. "Even with her crimes, she has a right to a trial, like every other Empire citizen."

Five supposedly hardened soldiers spun toward me with their hands on their weapons while the thief groaned behind them. One, the man who'd made... unpleasant suggestions, drew his pistol, advancing toward me with it raised.

"If there's someone there, you should come out," he said. "It's not a good idea to sneak up on armed men."

"If it'll make you more comfortable, I'll do as you ask," I said.

Eyeing the woman, I crept into the light, holding my hands to either side, and all the while, I poured my wish for her to run when she could into the song. She almost convulsively tightened on herself at about the same time that the soldiers, to a man, took a step back with their eyes widening.

"How did you-?" the one pointing a gun at me asked.

He flicked his eyes from me to the dark splotch I'd stepped out of before squaring his shoulders.

"Neat trick, using shadows to sneak closer like that. Not something any honorable man would do, but we can't all be brave," he said, shrugging. "What's with the cloak, coward? No one wears those anymore."

Why did high-brow people almost always think that a perfectly good infiltration tactic like stealth was weak? Wasn't it better to kill one's enemy before someone saw you? It was at least efficient, requiring a single stab or shot instead of a drawn-out fight.

But that didn't matter. The thief had yet to rise from where she'd collapsed. How long must I delay her captors before she recovered?

"Will you take this woman to your commanding officer?" I asked. "She looks subdued enough for it."

Taking a step forward, the closest soldier steadied his aim at me while pulling his lips away from his teeth.

"That's none of your business," he hissed. "Who are you anyway? Lower the hood."

Sighing, I said, "I've committed no crime. Why does it matter who-?"

He cocked his pistol with another step taken.

"Lower. the. hood!"

Fucking Empire *persha*. Why did they always turn angry or indignant when caught in the wrong?

Turning my palms toward him, I said, "As you wish."

Slowly, so as not to spook them, I lifted my hands. By the time I'd touched my cloak, the thief had stirred, fighting to reach her hands and knees. She needed a little more time, so for the first time in years, I revealed my face while outside the citadel.

I didn't know what I'd expected after doing this, but it wasn't the wrinkled noses and sneers I received. I'd become spoiled by my keepers' adulation, apparently.

"What's *wrong* with you?" the soldiers' spokesperson asked.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "I have a medical condition, one you probably haven't heard of. Surely you know about those? They usually involve doctors and medicine... no?"

They merely stared at me, but each second they were distracted got the thief further down the alley and to a hiding spot. This was almost over. I only needed to occupy the soldiers for a few more seconds, and then, I could enter the shadows again. The soldiers would inevitably search for me and the woman, but eventually, they'd get frustrated and leave, provided the thief avoided detection. Once they'd gone, I could retrieve a stolen medallion, decide what to do with the woman, and return to my thralls. An easy end to a frustrating chase.

As if waking from a dream, one of the soldiers toward the rear shook himself.

"Just leave it, corporal," he said. "I'm tired after staying up all night *and* having to do an early morning wipe. Let's get this bitch to headquarters so we can get some sleep. And maybe a shower. *Avan*, it'll be another month before I get the smell of Ashie death out of my hair again."

The soldier with the gun clenched his jaw before relaxing.

"Fine. What do we do with him, though-?"

"It was *you*?"

I didn't recognize my voice, not with it sounding as if it had come from the end of a tunnel. I hardly even heard it, not with me choking on fire at the same time.

"*You* killed Jhi's family, tearing precious notes from the song before their time?"

Five faces, blurred by a haze, blankly stared at me as if I'd performed an unexpected magic trick. With my breath hissing through my teeth like steam, I latched onto the man closest to me while my head pounded in anticipation of using Truthseeker magic.

"Did you kill my people this day?" I snapped. "Empire citizens *you're supposed to protect.*"

For some reason, my target fought me. Maybe my weak magic was struggling to subsume his will. Maybe he'd suddenly realized what a threat I was to him and his companions, but either way, his complexion darkened while his jaw worked as he tried to stay silent.

"Tell me *now!*" I roared.

Half-aware of weapons being leveled at me, I had eyes only for my target's lips parting and his tongue working.

"Those were our orders," he wheezed.

Orders. He claimed they'd been following orders, as if that were an excuse.

"You should have ignored them," I shouted, "defied them, fought them! I don't fucking care. You don't *murder people* because someone tells you to!"

When I released him, my target stumbled away from me, waving his companions off, while he clutched at his throat.

"What are you?" he gasped.

What a good question. How refreshing it would be to answer it honestly for once.

"*I am a pissed off mageling,*" I growled.

And I reached into his mind, telling it that the soldier beside him was an enemy from his worst nightmare. While he spun with a scream, I directed to scythes made of shadows through the soldiers on my right, and as they connected, the bark of a gun rang from my first target.

When I reached for the water in the body of the man in front of me, *all* of it came at my call, leaving a dried husk to drop in its wake, and freezing it into a spike, I flung my new weapon into an already gut-shot soldier, who was shakily retreating from his newly turned murderous comrade. The makeshift projective buried into his chest with the tip of it peeking through his back as he fell.

Once he was down, my first target stopped, unable to move his gaze from the companion he'd shot. He was still stuck there when I laid a finger on him and stopped his heart.

Ten seconds gone and five men dead. Empire soldiers weren't as formidable as I'd thought.

A scuffle spun me to the thief. She was clambering as fast as she could away from me.

*Where do you think you're going?* I asked.

Freezing, she collapsed to the ground. Even through the fuzz and head clouding me, I took note of the blood drizzling from her nose and ears.

Something about that should bother me.

"I- I- I-"

*Give me the medallion you stole from the boy,* I said.

Leaning away from me, the thief gulped.

"What *are* you?" she breathed, echoing her tormentor. "You can't be a *liiares*. Magelings only claim one magic type..."

Storming to her, I bent down to seize her shoulders, shaking her.

***GIVE ME THE FUCKING MEDALLION!*** I shouted.

Wincing, the thief momentarily drooped in my grip. When she rallied, blood vessels beneath her skin and in her eyes had burst, giving her face a mottled look, and sucking in a breath, I straightened, wrestling the wild tiger that my strain of music had become under control again.

Damn. That had been close. I'd almost repeated an... incident from years before, one I refused to remember.

"I'm sorry," I breathed.

Coughing into a hand, the thief tried to hide the red droplets spackling her palm. She didn't do a good job of it.

"What do you want from me, *nalkev rlah*?" she rasped.

*Nalkev rlah...* meaning strong one? That was new.

"You couldn't hear me in the song?" I asked.

Frowning, the thief said, "You mean the bloodsong? I did hear angry singing from you. Is that what you mean?"

Interesting. She couldn't even gather meaning from what I'd said? I'd never meet someone who couldn't.

"No. It isn't, but it doesn't matter," I said. "You took something from a little boy earlier: small, round, and wooden. I want it back."

Without a word, the thief reached into a pocket, shakily offering the retrieved item to me. As soon as I'd taken the medallion, she snatched her hand back to her chest, but I ignored her, twirling Jhi's gift between two fingers.

"Why steal this?" I asked. "It holds nothing but sentimental value."

I hoped she gave me a good answer to this question. Fury was still nipping at me, waiting for the slightest opening.

Drawing her knees up, the thief huddled on herself while looking to the side.

"It's a compulsion," she said. "I never actually *want* the things I steal. I see something interesting and *need* to have it. I... wish I could resist what comes over me. I really, really do. But I can't."

She buried her face in her knees, and cocking my head, I wondered what to do with her. She wasn't too great of a danger to me, not with a shop's worth of people already knowing I existed, but something in me screamed to eliminate the threat.

How much of that was anger talking, though?

When I flopped to the ground in front of the thief, she tensed as if to spring, which was understandable. What must I look like with five corpses behind me?

Folding my hands in my lap, I took a deep breath.

"I'd like to help you," I said. "This compulsion... it sounds like something that's happening in your head, and I'm a Mindbreaker. If you'd like, I can try to take it from you."

Still as a rabbit, the thief asked, "Why would you help me? I-"

"Because I can," I interrupted.

I needed no further reminders of what she'd done.

"Because you need help, and I can give it to you," I continued. "Do I need another reason?"

I had one, but she didn't need to know what. We'd get to it soon enough.

After a beat of silence, the thief asked, "What would I need to do?"

"Let me put my hands on your head and stay still," I said. "That's all."

Unlike for my Somadept *liiaresim*, I didn't *need* physical contact for my Mindbreaker magic to work, not for a single target at least, but having it gave me greater precision and strength.

When the thief hesitantly nodded, I scooted forward until our knees touched, reaching out. With my fingers on her temples, I explored the neural pathways found within her head.

Mindbreaker magic worked like Truthseeker *liiaresim* in a way, one of the few where a *liiares* couldn't simply sing to the piece of the world they controlled. No, those two magic types relied more on feelings and intuition than action.

When using Truthseeking to determine whether someone was speaking the truth or a lie, one listened to the speaker, and something resonated in one's head or body when a falsehood was

spoken. Similarly, when singing to the mind, a *liiares* took in the presented roadmap of neural pathways, and when encountering something that was hurting a person's wellbeing, it felt *wrong*.

The thief had a cluster like this in the depths of her mind, a snarled tangle that was intimidating in nature. If I weren't so powerful with this magic type, I might have retreated from it. As it was, untangling it took me an embarrassingly long time, and once I was done, I wasn't sure whether those neural pathways would stay in their new pattern or spring back into a mess.

It would have to be good enough.

"Finished," I said.

The thief took a breath to respond, but I overrode her, lacing a thread of my magic through my words.

"Go home," I said. "Stay there until the city's coming chaos dies down."

"I should head home," the thief said in monotone. "Zoln will be a mess for a few days."

"Good."

Then, I blasted her with as much magic as I could.

*Forget me.*

When I lifted my fingers off of her, the thief toppled backward, blankly staring at the sky. She'd recover from the blow in a few minutes, too dazed to do anything but follow my implanted suggestions.

With her taken care of, I yanked my hood back up, but before I could leave, something made me pause. New notes had entered the song, a refrain that normally brought me nothing but joy.

It only caused pain this time.

"Hello, Sol," I said in a tight voice.

I couldn't let myself sing to her, not with my strain so barely under control right now.

*Most beloved,* she answered.

All of me screamed not to do it, but I turned toward the source of her singing, and the tension in my heart spread to my extremities on seeing her. Sol looked maybe ten-years-old today, and as a child, she looked down on corpses and trickling blood with a pained expression on her face.

I'd done that.

"I-"

*It was the right thing to do.*

Lifting her eyes to me, Sol forced a smile onto her drawn-thin lips.

*It was needed if you were to leave a calling card. Hopefully, it will be enough for them, she said. Please, don't waste regret on this. You'll need it for later.*

So, she'd chosen to be cryptic this visit. I stored her words for later review, even as I swallowed the yawning pit that had opened in my stomach and throat at their utterance.

"What-?"

*There's no time, Sol interrupted. Go home now, most beloved. NOW.*

She stared at me with her eyes so solemn in her child-like face. and hesitantly, I nodded. As soon as she'd seen the gesture, she vanished, cutting her refrain from the song, and gasping, I stumbled, reaching with a shaking hand for a wall. Damn it, *why* did it always hurt when she left?

It was worse this time because of how short her visit had been. I'd had no chance to talk with her, to play seek and find as she liked to do when she visited me as a child. Instead, she'd seemed frantic. Why was that?

Whatever the reason, it couldn't be good. I should do as she'd said and quickly, so in an uneven trot, I headed toward where I'd left Aiko and Jhi, leaving the mess I'd made of soldiers behind.

When I reached my thralls, they were huddled on the side of the walkway. Aiko was bent over Jhi, who was scrunched into a ball. Even from a distance, I could tell I'd used their notes too heavily when dealing with the soldiers, seeing as Aiko's face was stained red.

I shouldn't have lost control like that, not with two thralls in much closer proximity to me than the rest. How highly had I taxed them?

With her head shooting up, Aiko shocked me by meeting my eyes as I approached, jerking her head in a quick headshake. I didn't know how she'd heard my regret—my singing was in pianissimo again—but she was right. Jhi shouldn't see it in me.

Donning a cheery grin, I sang, *I'm back.*

Slowly, Jhi lifted his head from his knees, peering at what he'd see as empty air. I let the medallion tumble down its makeshift thong to stop in front of his tear-streaked face, and with his eyes brightening, he snatched it from me, pressing its carved surface to his chest.

*Found! Found! Found!* rang in the song from him strongly enough that his notes in my strain joined in, and I barely kept from grunting at the jarring sensation. Leaping toward me, Jhi wrapped his arms around my legs, pressing his face into my knees.

"Thank you, Kase!" he said in a muffled voice. "Thank you so much!"

*It was the least I could do.*

Bending to take his elbow, I pulled the boy to his feet.

*Let's go home,* I said.

"Hopefully unimpeded this time," Aiko said under her breath.

Raising an eyebrow, I watched her scurry up a wall and onto a roof. I hadn't seen her this assertive in years, but I liked it. Quite a lot, actually.

As we headed to the citadel, Jhi skipped alongside me, babbling about anything he found interesting, but I knew this cheerfulness for what it was. Soon enough, everything that had happened today would take its toll, but I let him have this moment. He'd need it.

Besides, I had my own problems to handle. There would be hell to pay from my keepers when we reached home.

# Chapter 11: A New Assignment

## Alice

Sometimes, Alice wished she could use her magic publicly, no matter what the consequences might be for herself or others. When she heard about a disaster that had occurred on the far side of Ibis, she wished she could have vanished there, getting relief supplies right to where they'd be needed, or if she'd forgotten an ingredient while grocery shopping, she longed for a world where she could make an instantaneous trip from home to a marketplace, removing many of the annoyances of a return trip. Once, during a hostage situation, she'd even vocally cursed the laws outlawing magic because they'd kept her from saving the victim.

Right now, she'd like to use her magic to scare the shit out of the men yelling at her mother.

"Are you *seriously* sending more soldiers to Crinas right now?" MP Washer hissed. "I know it's *your* province, but you can't believe their issues are more pressing than our economic concerns in Escad."

"James, please. We both know that the Escadese are only hurting themselves right now. If they want to continue bartering instead of accepting *revos* as currency, more power to them, for the moment at least. At some point, we'll need to address that problem if we don't want the practice undermining the Empire's economy," Zorana said, "but for now, people are *dying* in the sick camps scattered across Crinas, and if that doesn't move you, consider what our current hands-off approach might do in the upcoming election. How many of our fellow Innovationists represent various regions across that province?"

Clicking his tongue, MP Washer said, "You're missing the point."

Above the hands folded in front of her face, Zorana lifted an eyebrow.

"Which is?" she said.

"Look. We don't expect *you* to understand the problem," MP Atcher said from his colleague's side. "Someone of your—"

He ran his eyes over what he could see of Zorana's frame.

"—position doesn't have the... *time*, we'll say, to fully grasp the economic consequences of something like this."

Alice fought not to bristle at his implications while her mother lowered her hands to lie flat on the desk.

"Last I checked, only one person in this room has run a business for almost two decades," Zorana said. "A company, I might add, that's been one of the most profitable in the Empire for over half that time."

"And that's admirable, yes, but it implies a grasp of only microeconomics."

Wrinkling his nose, MP Atcher waved his hand as if to shoo away one of Zorana's greatest accomplishments.

"We need to think large scale right now."

Alice's mother had used to be one of the most passionate people in her life, someone who'd take great offense at these men's barely veiled insults, but her years serving in Parliament had helped her develop a thick skin.

With a small smile, she said, "Perhaps you're right, and in the coming months, we should discuss having someone more capable leading a committee to handle our problem in Escad. For now, however, a train full of soldiers and medical aid for Crinas has already departed the city. It would be foolish to bring it back now that they've gone, don't you think?"

After a moment spent blinking at her, MP Washer stiffly got to his feet with MP Atcher quickly following, and both men buttoned their jackets.

"If you won't see reason, there's no point in us staying here," MP Washer said. "With your permission, we'll take our leave."

Gesturing toward the door, Zorana said, "Of course. I wish you a good day, gentlemen."

They didn't deign to reply, and after the door had closed behind them. Alice circled her mother's desk to one of the chairs they'd abandoned. Meanwhile, Zorana hid her face in her hands.

"Well, I've lost those two's votes for the next few months," she groaned.

"I don't understand why they were so resistant to sending out emergency supplies," Alice said. "After you explained yourself, it seemed like the logical thing to do."

"Oh, silly monster. It has to do with money."

Her mother slapped her hands on her desk, turning tired eyes on Alice.

"Both of them have business interests tied up in Escad. If the people of that province continue to refuse using *revos*, they stand to lose a good chunk of their wealth."

Oh. Of course.

Slumping in her chair, Alice folded her hands on her stomach.

"And we all know that money's the only thing that matters to people like them," she said. "I'm sorry my suggestion has caused you so much trouble, mom."

Zorana softly chuckled.

"But it hasn't! I've meant to tackle Crinas—in so far as I can—for weeks now," she said, "but other problems have kept me from it."

Snorting, Alice said, "Really? Like what?"

"Oh, lots of things," Zorana said. "there's been a rash of unsolved murders running rampant in the capital for one, but my chief concern involves why I called you here this afternoon."

Murders in Flosa? Alice had heard that a few Ostiums had disappeared and that one of the missing had shown up dead. Was that what her mother was talking about?

Either way, it seemed problematic, and usually, something like this would be Alice's to handle. What could be contentious enough for her to get a different assignment?

"You're aware of the brewing conflict in Ostiu, of course," Zorana continued.

Despite that not being a question, Alice nodded. Any spy worth a damn would know how bad the situation there had been getting over the last few years, but Ostiu had always needed a broader touch, not the delicate changes that someone like the Empire's Ghost could make.

"I've been receiving disturbing reports from... people I trust there," Zorana said, shifting in place.

"Uncle Gus and Aunt Eliza?" Alice interjected.

She was still inside, waiting for her mother's answer. Was this related to Jonas' worry from his parents from days ago?

Pursing her lips, Zorana said, "I can't tell you where this information came from, but I can say that when you eventually arrive in Ostiu, you should probably visit my old friends first."

It *had* been Eliza and Gus! *Damnit!* Those two just couldn't stay retired.

Hissing out a sigh, Alice shook her head.

"All right. What sort of horror show am I walking into this time?"

At the question, Zorana became more uncomfortable than before, more than Alice had seen from her in a long time actually.

"After the last spot of unrest, Parliament sent Captain Ames and the soldiers under her command to Ostiu," she slowly said.

When she paused, as if waiting for a response, Alice crossed her arms, pretending she wasn't hugging herself in preparation for bad news.

"I've heard of her. She's a capable commanding officer from what I understand," she said. "Why? What's happened with her?"

Rubbing her face, Zorana said, "Ostiu happened. It seems to have broken her as it has with every other military leader we've sent there."

She slapped her hands to the desk's surface, grimacing.

"Captain Ames was doing well at first, keeping both the Ostium and Ibisian populations appeased," she continued, "but Ibisian property kept getting vandalized while supply caravans across the province began disappearing. Citizens from the greater Empire brought their complaints to Ames, and she handled them as best she could, relying on increasingly questionable methods to keep the potential dissidents subdued. Apparently, she may have crossed a line in the last two months."

*Avan* damn it all. Why couldn't Alice ever get a simple task, something that wouldn't end up turning her stomach while she was doing it?

"You need me to investigate what the captain's been accused of," she said. "Which is?"

Taking a deep breath, Zorana said, "Killing Ostium citizens."

For a moment, shock pinned Alice to her chair, letting her do nothing but stare at her mother, but once she'd shaken it off, she shot to her feet quickly enough that her chair rocked behind her.

"WHAT?"

Wincing, her mother nodded.

"I'm sorry, Alice," she said. "I wouldn't ask you to take care of this but--"

"No. This is something I *should* take care of," Alice growled before taking a calming breath and sitting, "but innocent until proven guilty, yes? Do you have the reports for me to review?"

Opening a drawer, Zorana pulled a folder out of it before offering it to Alice.

While she flipped it open, her mother said, "I'm sending someone with you as support this time. She knows about your *liiaresim*, so don't worry about using it. Once you're ready to go, you'll meet with her at that tavern you and Ana sometimes visit."

Already reading, Alice only grunted her acknowledgment, but skimming as she was, it didn't take her long to close the folder.

"Anything else I should know?" she said. "If not, I'd like to get started."

Her mother shook her head.

"Just be careful, my silly monster," she said, "and let me know when you get there?"

"Of course."

Standing, Alice leaned over the desk to quickly squeeze her mother's head to her chest. After releasing her, she gave Zorana a crooked smile.

"See you soon."

Zorana said something in response, but Alice didn't catch it. Already absorbed in the bloodsong, she had a split second to control her tune before popping into her home. Ana glanced up from her tilted table, dropping her smile when she saw Alice, but for the moment, Alice ignore her.

Stepping out onto the narrow landing at the top of the stairs that climbed the clocktower, Alice open the tiny closet found there, rooting around for the knapsack buried on its floor. It didn't take her long to pack everything she'd need. Even if this closet was *stupidly* disorganized, she'd done this often enough that her hands collected items without thought, all while she fumed.

When she entered the apartment again, Ana was wrapping up a gunny sack full of food for her. Turning her way with a grim expression in place, she placed what she'd prepared in Alice's waiting hand.

"It's bad?" she asked.

Alice nodded.

Wincing, Ana said, "I know you can't say what. Can I know where?"

Broken from her angry thundercloud, Alice searched this woman she loved, wondering if she should share. Ana got upset when she work in Ostiu, for good reason, but as always, Alice couldn't leave her in the dark when it came to the things she could reveal, not when Ana would otherwise worry about her.

"The homeland," she said.

As expected, Ana went stiff, looking away from Alice.

"That explains why you're so upset," she said.

"Hey," Alice said, nudging her chin until their gazes had met. "I promise you, love. I'm helping our people. Sometimes, it might not look like it, but I *am* doing everything I can to improve their lives."

Slumping, Ana said, "I know."

She took Alice's wrist so she could kiss the heel of her palm, looking up at Alice while doing it.

"You'll be safe?" Ana said against her skin.

With a half-smile, Alice said, "As much as I can be."

"Good."

Seizing her head, Ana kissed Alice hard, making her knees weak, before shoving her away so she could stalk back to the table.

"Go!" she called.

*Avan* above, Alice loved that woman.

After vanishing to the bottom of the clocktower, Alice made her way by mundane means to the tavern that her mother had mentioned earlier. She was curious who Zorana had assigned to her. Not many people knew about her magic, only those they could be *certain* wouldn't get her killed, whether accidentally or otherwise, and running through that short list, Alice wasn't sure who among them could be capable of sneak work.

Maybe Uncle Vaughn? He'd shown a surprising aptitude for all things covert in the time since... then, but even still, Alice didn't think he was good enough to match her. Who else could it be, though?

After stepping into the tavern, Alice took a familiar route to the bar while waiting for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She distractedly mumbled an order while scanning the place. Not many patrons filled it, and she didn't know any of them.

Puzzled, she cocked her head, leaning on the bar, and a shot glass slid to a stop by her elbow.

"A finger of brandy, neat," someone said. "I'm surprised. Considering how much your father and Ephiram liked Mad Gloom, I'd have thought you'd have a taste for it too."

Squeezing her eyes closed, Alice quickly downed her drink. Given who'd spoken, she'd probably need the alcohol's help to stay pleasant. But then, she turned on her support person for the next few days.

"Beatrice," she say. "*I'm* surprised. I thought you'd be too busy with your everyday work to help me."

Shrugging, Commander Beatrice of the secret police said, "I had some free time, and your mother asked me to join you. I obliged."

*Damn.* It was no wonder Alice had overlooked her until she'd decided to make her presence known. If she hadn't spoken to her, Alice would have discounted Beatrice as a minor MP's aid for the entirety of her stay here. How did she *do* that?

But Alice supposed skills like that were why Beatrice held the position that she did. Sometimes, she forgot the commander's prowess, but then, she got reminders like this.

"Of course mom did," she said, critically examining her companion now that the other woman had her attention. "She always worries when I go to Ostiu."

"Perhaps she fears that *charming* province will lure you into betraying her," Beatrice said with a wry grin.

"Riiiiight. That has to be it," Alice said, rolling her eyes. "Look. Are you ready to go? I want to get this over with."

Beatrice's grin widened.

"I'm sure you do," she said. "In answer, I'm just waiting for you to lead us to a quiet corner. I understand you need privacy for your... thing."

After the teasing from the beginning of her words, the disdain in that last one nearly bowled Alice over.

Wordlessly, she placed a couple of *revos* on the bar top before storming outside. Moving quickly, she got them into the closest abandoned alley before stopping short and spinning, hoping to make Beatrice stumble into her, but the commander merely pulled to a swift halt, still smiling that damn grin at her. When she extended a hand, Beatrice quizzically stared at it, making Alice start tapping her toe.

"I have to be touching you," she said. "Unless you *want* me to leave you here?"

Making a face, Beatrice said, "No. That would be bad."

She hesitantly rests a hand on Alice, and without delay, Alice folded them into the bloodsong, curious what the other woman's reaction to her magic would be.

Stoicism, apparently. When they returned to the physical world, Beatrice drew a single, slow breath, staring into the distance, but that was it. No nausea. No loss of balance. It was the most composed someone had been after Alice had used her magic on them.

She kept her eyes narrowed at the commander, wondering how the *hell* she was so calm, until the other woman glanced at her and waved ahead.

"Well?" she said. "I assume you got us close to a train station. We can use that to reach Zoln." Right. Why they were here.

Blinking, Alice took in the forest around them, spinning in a slow circle.

“That’s a good assumption,” she said. “The train station is... this way.”

At least, that was what Alice thought. Rolling her shoulders to loosen them, she set off with Beatrice behind her. Ostiu awaited them.

# Chapter 12: Punishment Framed as Consequences

Kase

I hadn't known what to expect from Yosai on returning to the citadel. I'd thought he'd launch into a lecture, or if I was lucky, he'd be too preoccupied with making sure I was ok to consider all the risks I'd taken this morning. As I stepped into the atrium with Jhi and Aiko behind me, many possible scenarios flashed through my head, and I did my best to ignore them. They could be helpful at times, but for the most part, speculation was far inferior to analyzing one's circumstances as they presented themselves.

So, I saw Yosai waiting for us outside the hidden door that led into the citadel and took it in stride. With a wry grin, I started toward him, ready to play my adventure outside off as simply that: a harmless escapade, but as soon as he'd caught sight of me, he turned on his heel, leaving the atrium without a word.

That... was unexpected. Huh.

What was I supposed to do now?

Follow him, apparently.

I knew we'd entered the citadel when Jhi gasped at my side, curling over on himself. Aiko helped him continue walking. When she surreptitiously glanced my way, I nodded. For now, we should get him somewhere private, a place where observant eyes wouldn't notice the child's sudden weakening.

So, when the next turn-off came, my thralls took it, but I continued after Yosai, concerned by his behavior. Yes, it was late for me. Yes, my exhausted body and mind were crying out for sleep, but I *didn't like it* when people acted completely out of character, like Yosai had done by *ignoring me*.

Eventually, I recognized where we were going and couldn't stop myself from freezing in place. It wasn't a reaction I could allow myself, not when one of my keepers might spot it, but even with an internal voice yelling at me to *get over my silly fear* and *keep walking*, I couldn't help but display every anxiety I had about this place.

It, after all, was where my keepers stored silencers. What I'd done this morning had been reckless, sure, but I hadn't thought they'd disapprove of it this much...

When Yosai came back out of the room he'd entered, he raised an eyebrow at me.

"If you keep standing in place like that, you'll be late for your lesson."

...Lesson? I hadn't thought one was scheduled for this morning. Usually, this time of day was considered late for something so demanding.

As Yosai resumed his trek down the hall, it freed me from my frozen state. Much as I might want to run after him, demanding answers, I forced myself into a calm walk, speaking not a word once I'd reached Yosai's side. Better to let him speak first.

After a moment, he said, "I apologize for springing this on you, Kase, but you were nowhere to be found in the early hours this morning. We received a letter from Governor Guo last night. After his visit last week, he's insisted that we revisit some of your earlier training, nervous that you might have forgotten what you've learned. I thought it best to comply with his request."

Well. It seemed that man hadn't liked the letter I'd written to him by proxy. Still, my earlier training?

Forcing my voice into neutral, I said, "Of course. Keeping the governor appeased is in our best interest. May I ask which lesson he wants me to revisit?"

"The same ones he found you lacking in when he visited, but with a twist," Yosai said. "You and I may know that one weakness alone wouldn't be enough to overcome your *liiaresim*, but the governor hasn't had enough time to learn to appreciate your gifts."

Stopping, he turned to me with a soft smile, squeezing my shoulder.

"Don't worry, Kase. He'll get there soon enough."

After patting my shoulder once, he stepped through the door at our side, and while I might hesitate for a split-second, I was quick to follow him.

The training room we entered was similar to many others I'd occupied in the past. Around us, electric lights lit a small staging area, and on beside the door, a table held many different types of weapons on it, which made me want to cringe. It was further evidence that my keepers meant to use a silencer on me today.

Beyond the staging area, the rest of the room was dimly lit and cavernous in nature. Unlike with other training sessions over the years, the landscape my keepers had set up here didn't look overly complicated. A couple of medium-sized platforms had been raised off of the floor with lashed-together planks serving as temporary 'walls' and 'floors', and a few barrels and other such objects were scattered across the ground, there to serve as cover.

"What's the scenario?" I asked, keeping my focus on the room's contents rather than the man at my side.

"Assassination of an entrenched army's commanding officer," Yosai said. "As part of your infiltration, you have made a false surrender to one of the man's lieutenants. In a few minutes, he'll be coming to search you and place you in restraints, just like you'd experience if this scenario were real. Once that's done, you will have approximately ten minutes to find your target, eliminate him, and get out undetected."

All right. So far, this training session seemed simple enough. Given its parameters and the 'terrain' in front of me, I'd already planned out several ways to accomplish my goal, which made this seem... too easy. There had to be a catch.

When Yosai turned to fully face me, I knew I was about to hear whatever that catch might be.

"Just before this point in our supposed campaign, your identity was exposed," he said. "Given this, the man who's captured you will have taken appropriate measures to keep you under his control."

I had half a moment to internally wince at Yosai's not-so-subtle critique of my recent behavior of course he'd see my jaunt into the city as nothing more than a risk of exposing myself before he pulled his hands out of his pockets, bringing them in front of front of him. When I saw what was in them, my thoughts abruptly stopped.

"You promised that I'd never have to wear one of those again," I pushed from my numb mouth.

Nodding, Yosai said, "And you won't! Not for long anyway. It will only be on for this training session. Governor Guo wants to make sure you remember how to work through all the complications this device presents for you."

That... made sense.

Licking my lips, I said, "And it comes off after the training session?"

"As soon as we're done here, yes. I promise, Kase," Yosai said. "Trust me. I know how badly a silencer affects you. I don't want you to deal with it any longer than you have to."

Only for a training session.

Only for a training session.

"Ok."

Only for a training session.

"Good."

Dropping the hand holding a terrible—evil, *shouldn't exist*—device to his side, Yosai stepped toward me, hesitantly resting his other hand on the side of my neck. He hadn't touched me like that in a while.

With a faint smile, he said, "You can do this, Kase. I wouldn't ask you to unless I knew you could."

*Why did you have to ask me in the first place?*

As I breathed out, I tried to leak the freeze I was trapped in and my stress out with that breath, and it worked. Mostly.

I stepped out from under Yosai's attempt at comfort, taking gulping strides to the closest table. Leaning on it, I focused on the weapons in front of me, picking out which ones would be the most useful in the scenario I'd soon be working through.

"Get it over with," I heard myself say in the background.

As I ran through different ways I could conceal a small blade on my person, I distantly felt someone brush my hair to the side. As I eliminated which of my tools would be too big or unwieldy for an infiltration method, I absently noted a thin sheet of cold metal and adhesive being pressed to the back of my neck.

My entire system jolted into a faint sense of electric *attention* when a multitude of wires sprang upright off of that strip, quickly creep-crawling their way into place beneath the base of my skull. I bit the inside of my lip in preparation and...

A spread-out pattern of pricks along my skin. No pain. Never pain. A foreign invasion of... *something*—lines? strings? webbing?—in my head that I'd never been able to describe.

The pseudo-wires stopped moving through my brain, settling into place.

And the song cut off.

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An exaggeration.

Roughly, I shook my head, reaching for a knife with a trembling hand.

That had been an exaggeration. The song was still there. It *had* to still be there, and I could... hear it. A little. I was pretty sure I'd die if I were ever fully pulled away from it. Even still, this was bad enough.

Because I couldn't sing. I *couldn't sing*.

*HOW DID ANYONE LIVE LIKE THIS?*

With a jerk, I brought the knife to my thumb, pushing the edge into the top of it until a pinprick of blood appeared.

It was enough. Slowly, I inhaled. Slowly, I exhaled. I straightened and faced Yosai.

"One final warning. The governor has insisted that we make this scenario as similar to the last war as possible," he said. "So, you might encounter one or two... oddities that you've never seen before."

I didn't know how to respond to that, not when I could barely parse his words in the first place. Aft4er a moment, Yosai merely nodded, presumably accepting that I'd understood what he'd said.

"I'll let you get ready," he said. "Five minutes, Kase."