

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 Crinasians 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.

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