

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.

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