

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.

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