

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.

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