

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 *liiares*. 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.

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