

Chapter 7: Introducing Her to My Father

Alice

When Alice burst into the apartment, Ana flinched on her stool, which left a streak of errant paint spoiling an otherwise gorgeous landscape.

Wincing, Alice said, "Sorry, love."

Never looking her way, Ana cocked her head at the painting.

"Don't be," she distractedly said. "I have a better idea now."

"Yeah?"

Stopping behind Ana, Alice rested her chin atop the artist's head, examining her work.

"Want to take it with us? The view where we're going is something special."

Going still, Ana said, "You got permission?"

"My schedule is cleared," Alice said. "I'm yours for the day, Ana Jin. Want to go hiking with me?"

She intently listened for the artist's reply, both audibly and in the bloodsong. So, while Ana reached up to squeeze her arm, Alice heard the shriek of terror that she released into the great symphony.

"Sounds like fun," Ana chirped.

And something inside of Alice cratered. Never removing her touch, she circled Ana to crouch in front of her, gripping her hands.

"*Don't* pretend with me," she aid. "You're allowed to be scared. You're allowed to say something's too much for you. I would never forgive myself if I stressed you out because I want us to leave our home. Please be honest with me, Ana."

"But I *am* being honest!" Ana said. "Yes, my skin's crawling, my heart's racing, and I'm on the verge of hyperventilation right now, but the idea of exploring the forest with you sounds delightful."

I *won't* let fear conquer me. I *won't* be trapped here for my whole life."

Staring up at her, Alice sought any sign that Ana was putting on a brave face for her, but only grim determination showed itself.

"Ok," she said, "but I want you to remember that I can bring us back here the moment you feel overwhelmed."

Leaning forward, Ana brushed her lips over Alice's forehead.

"I know," she said.

Avan, Alice was so proud of her for trying as hard as she was.

"Then, let's go."

Reaching behind her, Alice laid a hand on the easel before finding a tune that was as implicit to her as her heartbeat.

Vanishing with other people had always felt different when compared to doing it alone. By herself, Alice only needed to focus on her destination while folding into the bloodsong. It never mattered if she'd visited the place before or not. She needed nothing more than a vague impression of it, and her magic filled in the rest.

When someone was with her, however, she had the additional challenge of dragging that person's notes through the bloodsong along with her. If she lost focus on those notes, she wasn't sure what would happen. She'd never done it before, but she could speculate.

On the rare occasions that Alice had lost focus on her destination while vanishing, she'd gotten dumped in a random location, sometimes in the middle of nowhere. She liked to think that a lost passenger would experience the same thing. Getting dropped somewhere unexpected would be awful, sure, but it was better than the only other alternative she could think of.

This wasn't to say that she found bringing a passenger with her difficult. Alice *rarely* missed her destination, and briefly weaving notes into her tune was intuitive. It was merely another complication added to a task she found so simple that she'd been doing it since she was a baby. Purportedly.

Her passengers, however, usually didn't find the experience as natural as she did.

As stippled sunlight pattered warmth on Alice's skin while a breeze drew a calming rustle from the trees' canopies, Ana gripped her tighter, woozily swaying in place, and the palette she'd been holding dropped into the twigs and dried leaves below them, thankfully landing paint side up. She shook her discomfort off in a second, but Alice knew from experience that it would have felt longer to her. Rising from her crouch, Alice folded her body over Ana so their surroundings were blocked while she recovered.

"Are we there?" Ana asked.

"Almost. We have a short hike to complete first," Alice said. "Are you ok?"

"I think so. Give me some space, and we'll see."

Reluctantly, Alice peeled herself away from Ana, almost knocking the easel behind her over. She'd forgotten it had come with them.

Hugging herself, Ana peered at a sky that was nearly obscured by branches and leaves. Swallowing, she licked her lips, rotating her head, and Alice prepared to spring to her rescue, if needed.

"I think... I can handle this," she said after a moment. "It's uncomfortable, but... I don't feel as if the world's going to eat me."

With a small smile, Alice tugged Ana's arm free from their hug around her waist.

"Then, let's gather your things," she said. "I have the most amazing view to show you."

Chuckling, Ana said, "Better than our view back home?"

"Way better."

With Ana's things in hand, Alice led the way through the forest, taking a path she knew well. As they started off, something took hold of her throat, clamping down on it with greater force with each footstep she took.

When was the last time she'd visited this place? A few weeks ago? A month? Too long.

Alice would love to say that life's hectic nature had kept her away, that her efforts to help her mother had made coming out here difficult, but it wouldn't have been true. Visiting this place brought back memories, and even the best of them carried a tinge of melancholy now.

So, she dragged her feet the closer they came to their destination, to the point that Ana had to slow down for her.

"Oh," she quietly said after a while. "Caring for me is how you're coping."

Jerking toward her, Alice frowned.

"What are you talking about?"

"What was it you said earlier? Don't pretend with me?" Ana said. "You're hemorrhaging your fear into the bloodsong, love."

Shit.

Wincing, Alice pulled back on her singing.

"Ok, fine," she said. "Coming here is always difficult for me."

With her face setting, Ana stopped, lowering her canvas to the forest floor so she could loop her arm around Alice's.

"Then, we'll support one another," she said.

And with her canvas in her hand once more, she dragged Alice along, heading in the wrong direction. Alice allowed it for a while before gently pulling on the artist.

"It's this way."

When the forest broke ahead of them, Alice guided Ana along the tree line with both of them out of breath from their climb. She stopped at the edge, where canopy met the open sky and the forest floor soon dropped into a cliff, to give Ana a moment. She knew from experience how breathtaking this view was. Every time she visited, an echo of her first time seeing it hit her, those last blissful moments before she'd learned that her father was dead.

Below the drop off, the forest that surrounded the Empire's capital spread until Flosa's varied rooftops broke it up. From this distance, the city's perpetual smog layer was barely perceptible, a smudging of any distinct lines that might otherwise have carried this far.

The contrast between that urban setting and the wild around them reminded Alice of how unique life in Flosa was when compared to the other provinces' capitals. Here, the city fought what might seem like nature's stronghold while Daka, Acova, and Kestrat had nothing to impede their growth. Zoln, Ostiu's capital was another matter entirely, of course, but Alice would never consider that province a part of the empire.

Perhaps that was her Ostium blood speaking, though.

"You can set up here," Alice soon said.

At Ana's askance glance, she chuckled.

"I know you want to paint. What artist wouldn't after seeing this?" she said. "So, you set up while I say hello. I'll come get you when I'm done."

Biting her lip, Ana said, "Are you sure you don't want me...?"

With a smile, Alice rested a hand on Ana's shoulder.

"I'm sure," she said. "Let's limit your exposure to anything that might cause a panic attack, yes?"

At Ana's hesitant nod, Alice moved her hand to grab Ana's chin. She had to bend over a held canvas, but still, she pressed her lips to Ana's, drawing as much strength from the kiss as she

could.

"I'll only be a moment," she said.

Leaving the artist to find a good position to work from, Alice strode toward the two precisely placed cairns lying under the open sky nearby. The closer she came to them, the slower her stride became until it felt like she was walking through a vat of honey, but far more quickly than she might have liked, she stood beside them.

"Hi, dad. Uncle Max," she said. "It's been a while."

They said nothing in response, giving no judgment or vilification, but of course they didn't. That didn't stop guilt from closing Alice's throat.

"I learned something new about you today, Uncle Max. Something that makes me wish I'd known you," she made herself say. "If you were alive, I wonder what advice you'd have given me, now that I'm planning to move forward with Ana. I'd guess you never told the world where your affections lay, else I'd have heard about it by now. So, probably no help with announcing our relationship, but perhaps you could have helped on other fronts."

"Did you know, dad? Uncle Max was your brother. Considering mom knows, I have to assume you did too, which makes me wonder when you found out and why you didn't tell me. Did you not have the time, or was it something you found so inconsequential that sharing it seemed wrong? Was I too young? Or were you ashamed of him? I find that last one hard to believe."

Falling silent, Alice tore her gaze off of the graves to check on Ana. She'd almost arranged her easel and supplies to her liking, so she took a deep breath, held it, and released it through pursed lips.

"I've brought someone to meet you today," she said. "She's important to me so... yeah. That's why we're here. I guess... I guess I'll go get her."

Fleeing ghosts, Alice raced beneath the tree's branches once more.

"Say everything you needed to?" Ana asked as Alice joined her.

"No. Never," she said, "but I don't think I ever will. It's kind of hard to have a fulfilling conversation when one party won't respond."

Alice's giggle emerged more manic and high-pitched than she'd have liked, but Ana pretended not to notice the edge to it. She took Alice's hand to kiss her knuckles, gazing at her over them.

"Then, why are you so nervous about introducing me?" she asked.

Wincing, Alice said, "You're right. I know. Let's..."

With nothing else, she tugged on Ana's arm, and the artist reluctantly followed her out from beneath the forest's concealing branches. Once a wide, blue bowl was arching above her, she flinched, almost freezing in place, but a squeeze from Alice seemed to give her strength. Setting her jaw, Ana stiffly followed her until they'd reached the cairns, and it was Alice's turn to tense.

"So, this is my Uncle Maxton," she said, pointing to the right-most rock pile. "I doubt you've heard of him-

"The progenitor's first child," Ana breathed, almost reverentially. "The one who provided the impetus and motivation required to see the revolutionary to his end goal. *All honor and glory to one so favored by time.*"

That had been... *much* more recognition than Alice had expected from Ana. She hadn't thought Maxton was so well known amongst the Ostium populace, but it did her heart good to learn she might be wrong.

After Ana had finished her moment of quiet respect, looking to Alice for more, she gestured toward the second cairn.

"And that's my... dad," she said, choking on the words.

Rather than greet a man who'd been her hero for years, Ana put her back to the grave, wrapping herself around Alice. As a breeze blew through their hair and leaves rustled behind Alice, they held one another. Ana understood how debilitating the loss of a loved one could be, even years after their death. Her own brother's murder haunted her to this day.

So, she provided Alice with much needed comfort, only addressing her hero once Alice had pushed her away.

"*Great revolutionary, my devotion to you,*" she said. "*I am Ana Jin, no one special, but your daughter has chosen to make me a part of her life despite that. I want you to know I will love and take care of Alice for as long as she'll have me. Thank you for all your sacrifices, blessed of time. A pleasure to meet you.*"

And silence fell. And Ana curled on herself, directing glances at a lightly clouded sky with increasing frequency. And Alice saw the woman she loved heading for a panic attack.

"Would you like to know how my dad would have responded if he'd been here?" she asked.

"I-

Ana forced her unfocused eyes on Alice.

"Yes," she said.

Nodding, Alice said, "He'd have hugged you, despite how much it might have pained him. Never did like touching or being touched."

So, that was what she did. Clasp Ana to her chest, Alice rested her chin on the artist's shoulder.

"And here's what he'd have told you," she said before lowering her voice and clipping each syllable. "It is my honor to meet you, Ana Jin. Over the last few months, I have seen how much happier my silly monster has been, and the source of that happiness is you. To me, that makes you extraordinarily special, a gem in our vast Empire. I look forward to calling you daughter someday."

For a moment, it was almost like Alice had channeled her father, if such a thing were possible. She hadn't felt his presence so strongly since he'd died, and once she'd finished, fat teardrops had begun soaking through the shoulder seam of Ana's dress.

For her part, the artist trembled in Alice's arms, clenching her back eventually.

"You really think he'd have said that?" she asked.

Pulling away, Alice wiped her cheeks before cupping Ana's jaw.

"He'd have *loved* you," she said.

Ana's eyes simmered as she bit her lip, obviously fighting tears. After two deep breaths, she shook herself.

"Of course he would have," she said with a laugh. "What's not to love?"

Alice placed a finger on the tip of Ana's nose.

"Exactly," she said. "Now, come on. Let's show these two brothers how we spend a day of leisure together."

Taking Ana's hand, Alice dragged her back to the safety of the forest and her easel. Ana visibly relaxed upon reaching partial concealment from the great expanse above, sinking onto her stool.

"Are you sure this is ok?" she asked. "Shouldn't we be... I don't know... more respectful? And what will you be doing while I'm working?"

"If there's one thing dad taught me, it's to always do what's best for your family, despite what social convention might say. Except if you need to hurt your family to change the broken society they live in, of course," Alice said with a soft laugh. "I'd like to think Uncle Max was similar. So, paint to your heart's content, my love, and when you're ready, we'll go home."

"As for what I'll do, I have no plans but to relax and watch a beautiful woman working in her element. Who knows? I might even brave interruption her with pleasant distractions... or try to, at least."

Flushing, Ana said, "Alice Cunningham, you behave yourself."

Plopping to the forest floor, Alice sank onto her elbows before sticking her tongue out.

"No."

Rolling her eyes, Ana turned toward her easel, and Alice focused on the way she moved her brush across the canvas rather than the reminder of the worst pain she'd ever endured at her back, one that only the loss of August's song had ever matched.

As the day progressed, Alice watched this moving portrait of the woman she loved, yes, but much of her was tied up in the bloodsong as well. She had yet to answer her question from days before, the one that had been circling in her mind for years.

When should she give up on her little brother? When should she accept that this ache ripping through a fundamental part of her was something she'd have to live with for the rest of her days, never to find relief?

As she pondered these questions, Alice cast out into the great symphony, hoping that maybe, just maybe, she'd catch a snippet of the strain she needed, a reason to continue, but nothing responded to her. She hadn't expected anything would.

Whenever her idle quest threatened to tip her into despair, she turned a torment of a different type on Ana. With a touch here and a kiss there, Alice made her mark on the artist's painting, every time Ana jerkily completed a brush stroke. A particularly long one heralded the moment when Alice tumbled Ana into the crackling leaves, there to participate in one of humanity's most potent displays of life while in Flosa's smallest graveyard.

After Ana had declared the painting finished and started packing up her things, Alice noted that Ana had left that same streak in place.

"Are you sure this is done?" she asked. "You'd have a perfect landscape here, if red weren't marking a line across the city."

"It *is* perfect," Ana said. "Haven't you heard of symbolism, Alice Cunningham?"

Rolling her eyes, Alice rested a hand on her hip.

"Of course I have," she said. "What's this supposed to symbolize, though?"

She gestured toward the painting, and wrapping an arm around her waist, Ana examined it with her.

"It's us and others like us," she eventually said. "It's you, blazing through this city, the center of the Empire, and changing what must be changed. Fixing what must be fixed."

"Ah, I see," Alice said with mock solemnity. "And what will you call this painting of symbolism?"

Cocking her head on Alice's shoulder, Ana said, "I don't know yet. The title will come to me as time and *you* progress."

"No pressure," Alice breathed.

Laughing, Ana swung around to face her.

"Of course not, my love," she said. "I'm only pushing you to improve yourself like you do for me, and you're never disappointed on the days I get stuck in the apartment, right?"

"Right," Alice said.

"So, why would I ever be disappointed in you?"

Alice choked on the reply she'd already prepared. How could Ana know the amount of work left before the Ibisian Empire that her father and now, she had envisioned could become a reality? Unless something drastically changed, she could work her entire life for a world where all were treated equally and allowed to live in peace, all while knowing she might never see her goal realized.

But Ana was telling her that this didn't matter. All she wanted from Alice was an attempt to better herself and nothing more.

"I love you," she said, "so much."

"I know," Ana said before caressing Alice's cheek. "Now, in that same vein, I'd like it if you vanished us just outside the city limits on our way back. I've gotten so far today. I'd like to reach a little further."

The warmth in Alice fled before the icy chill of her sudden apprehension.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "I don't want to push your limits. Wouldn't it be better to end today on a high note?"

"Love. When do you think I'll next get myself out of the apartment?" Ana said. "You've helped me get through the door. Now, let's take advantage of the situation."

Raising a hand in front of her mouth, Alice fought down the burn in her eyes.

"You, Ana Jin, are the bravest person I've ever met," she said.

With a cheeky grin, Ana asked, "Braver even than your father?"

Scowling, Alice swatted her arm.

"Don't push your luck," she said, "and give me your hand. I'll come for everything else later."

"Not everything," Ana said while grabbing her painting off of the easel. "this'll stay with me, thank you!"

But she slipped her hand into Alice's, and they vanished to a spot outside of one of the gates into Flosa. While Ana recovered from her magic, Alice ran her eyes over a wall that had been here since before the time of the lost monarchs. Even centuries later, it stood strong, although signs of the patches made to it were obvious from the less weathered stone.

A few buildings usually filled in the wall's few breaches, enough of them to perhaps be called a town, but only a handful surrounded this gate, which only made sense considering what lay behind it. Similarly, getting through this gate had never posed a problem for Alice, one of the reasons she'd chosen it. She didn't want anyone wondering how and why Lady Zorana Cunningham's daughter had exited the city earlier today.

Once beyond the gate, Alice led Ana through the warehouse district with ease. She might never have ventured into the true origins of her father when she'd been young, not with both her parents adamantly shielding her from it, but since she'd started working for her mother, becoming the Empire's Ghost, she'd often visited this district. The people here knew and respected her. In some cases, they gave her their fear, although Alice had always tried to remain approachable.

So, she wasn't expecting to run into any trouble today. Nodding to those she knew, Alice kept half an eye on Ana. The artist had shrunk on herself, nervously pattering her fingertips on her rigidly folded arms, and she kept skipping her eyes across the crowd surrounding them. With every passing second, Alice expected to hear a cry for help from her, ready to pull her back to the apartment as soon as she wanted it.

Which was why she missed the thief's approach.

Someone *ran* into Ana, jerking the painting and her coin purse away from her. At their contact with her, Ana stopped dead with her eyes unfocusing and shivers running over her body.

Alice ignored the thief. What did they matter when compared to a loved one in distress?

She pulled Ana closer—

"Everything will be ok."

—before leading her into a nearby brothel. Fortunately, Alice knew this one's madam, who was already coming to greet them.

"Keep her safe and away from other people, please," she said, handing Ana off. "I'll be right back."

Without waiting for an acknowledgment, Alice took off. She had no doubt that the madam would follow her instructions, leaving Ana taken care of for the moment. Most people who knew Alice here would jump at the chance to have her in their debt, something the madam would soon have.

That left Alice with the task of recovering her loved one's belongings.

Once she was in the closest hiding spot to the brothel, she entwined herself with her tune in the bloodsong, picturing her destination with gritted teeth. When she popped into an abandoned alley

not far away, she jogged to the end of it before plastering her body against the wall. As stomping footfalls approached, she lurched out of hiding, reversing her momentum as soon as she had hold of the thief's neckline. Swinging them around, Alice slammed them into the brick wall, although she was careful not to damage what they... he was holding.

"Give it back," she growled. "*Now.*"

The body beneath her grip trembled while the thief lifted brilliantly blue eyes to her, and Alice gasped. A boy. She was manhandling a *child*.

Not only that but he could have been a miniaturized twin of her father. All day, Alice had held an image of him in her head, her last view of him in the split second she'd caught of him dying in the chair, and now, that same glazed look was facing her.

"I- I'm sorry!" a high-pitched voice whistled. "I need the coin! My sister... we haven't eaten in two days."

That had probably been a lie. While Lyle Cunningham might have believed in the good nature of humanity, he'd also told his daughter many stories about his life as a thief and what people did when they were desperate. He'd taught her to be wary of others, no matter how good they might actually be.

Right now, Alice couldn't pay attention to that lesson. In front of her, she saw potential... her father, and she couldn't punish this thief. She released him, took a step back, and reached into her pocket.

"I'll trade you," she said. "The painting and anything else you lifted from your target for my coin purse, which is full of *revos*. It'll be a bigger haul than what you have right now; I guarantee you."

Slowly, Alice withdrew said item, and when the thief saw her bulging coin purse, his eyes widened to match that state. Hesitantly, he extended to painting and a much lighter purse to her, and after taking them, Alice gave him what she'd promised. He seemed to find this more surprising than her initial offer, taking the purse as if afraid it would vanish.

"I don't get it," he said. "You look like a noble... kinda. Why would you help me? I hurt your friend."

Alice considered telling him everything, every dilemma and aspiration she'd ever held, but she'd already made herself memorable enough to him. If she wanted to limit the chance of any influential people noticing her presence here, she couldn't pour her life story on this boy. Instead, she gave him the most truthful, generic answer she could.

"I'm helping you because you need it. Maybe if more of us lived consciously aware of how we affect one another, situations like this and places like the warehouse district wouldn't exist. Naïve, I know, but I can't give up on that dream, no matter how often I run into other people's selfishness."

Without hesitation, the thief replied, "*You are naïve.*"

Spreading her arms, Alice took a step back.

"Call it what you will," she said, "but you're free to go."

Suspiciously eyeing her, the thief backed down the alley until he'd reached a safe distance from her. Then, he took off, quickly disappearing.

With Ana's belongings in hand, Alice wasted no time returning to her. The brothel's madam had stashed her in a back room, and after Alice had promised to avoid her establishment for the foreseeable future, that woman left the two of them alone. Alice vanished them to the top of Parliament Grounds' clocktower, and once they were in a familiar setting again, Ana began emerging from her near comatose state.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," she kept sobbing on repeat.

"It's ok, it's ok, it's ok," Alice always said back.

She spend the rest of the evening calming Ana down, which she didn't mind in the slightest. After all, what better use was there for her time?

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