

Chapter 8: Care for a Thrall

Kase

None of my people, thralls or keepers liked it when my training required time outside of the citadel. Their uneasiness had always made me uncomfortable, so Jhi's relative enthusiasm for today's activities had been a nice change of pace. He was skipping along beside me, but I wasn't worried about the attention he might gain with his unusual disposition. I'd faced worse challenges than escorting a young boy to bid those he'd once known farewell.

For the most part, I stuck to the shadows, invisible to everyone who didn't know me well. The only reason Jhi could keep track of me was because his notes were intertwined with my strain. He could always find me now, no matter how well I hid, but that was life between a thrall and a mageling.

Still, the shadows kept me hidden from the average person, and luckily for me, Zoln had been built—in part—to help Shades with that effort. Ostiu's capital city provided shadows aplenty. The cramped nature of its buildings' arrangement and its location within a narrow valley cast it into a perpetual dusk, which was perfect for me.

Because I didn't need to seek the dark on this trek, I could more fully give my attention to my singing. Keeping it in pianissimo was always the most difficult part of these outings. Since I was *lii*ares, I unconsciously sang at a much louder volume than the *chanarii*, and they naturally gravitated toward it. To keep from making a disturbance while outside the citadel, I had to fight against an intrinsic part of me. I had to wrestle with it while remaining hyper-aware of whether I had it fully pinned.

I also had to keep watch for Empire soldiers today. Normally, my keepers would have prepared the way for a training exercise, keeping the *persha* occupied elsewhere.

I'd always found this practice silly. Not only could Empire citizens never hear the great symphony, poor things, and therefore, could never hope to pick me out of a crowd of Ostiums, but when my efforts to free Ostiu eventually led to encounters with enemy soldiers, I'd think having experience with fighting them might be a good idea.

Maybe I'd get what I needed today.

Since I'd taken of Jhi's notes, the boy had been languishing in my suite of rooms. The part of him I'd made mine, seized in a panic, had been more essential to him than I'd expected. He seemed like a ghost of himself: a waif, much like Xia when I compared her to Lyle's memories of her. I'd begun to worry that I'd somehow made the same mistake as him, losing Jhi's notes even though I hadn't

died, but every time I checked my strain of music, there they were, still integrating with it. My concern for the boy had begun to affect my studies, and having already run through all of my ideas help him, I'd asked Xia for advice.

"He needs to properly say goodbye to his old life," she'd said. "Take him somewhere familiar, *brilah*. Let him have time to remember what he was like when he was whole, and the faint memory of it will sustain him, reminding him of how he used to act and feel. If he's smart, he'll take those memories, going through the motions of what his old self did, and eventually, the pretense will become real."

So, this morning, I'd snuck out of the citadel with Aiko's help. She'd always been the one thrall I could trust to do that without first alerting my keepers to my 'dangerous' plans. She'd insisted on accompanying us, trailing us so she could help if needed, but I thought her presence was an acceptable price to pay if it kept my keepers in the dark.

They wouldn't approve of my plans for this morning, which was late night for me. They'd see it as overly sentimental, of working too hard to fix a broken tool, and I hadn't wanted to argue with them, even if I understood and somewhat agreeing with their logic.

So, I walked through Zoln without supervision for the first time in years. Nobody was prepared to catch me if I fucked up, and there was a high probability that I'd encounter the enemy before returning to the citadel. Knowing that, I wanted to skip alongside Jhi, even as my skin prickled under the false perception that dozens of eyes were on me. It was an... interesting sensation.

"This way, Kase," Jhi chirped.

The boy had perked up as soon as we'd left the citadel. After watching him go from a shuffling corpse to a happy child after we'd entered Zoln, I got the feeling that what dampened the song inside my home was having an adverse effect on him. If that was so, I wasn't sure what I'd do. Could I return him to a place that was obviously exacerbating his issues? If I didn't, could I risk leaving someone who knew my location, my thrall no less, in this city with all of its associated danger? Hopefully, Xia's suggestion for the day would work, and I wouldn't have to decide.

I followed Jhi down a walkway that was so narrow, my shoulders brushed its walls. On the other side of this, a burnt-out husk of a building sheltered a handful of people. The years since the war had long ago erased any ash or unstable remnants that had covered it. What was left behind could barely count as a refuge from Ostiu's cold, much less be called a home.

And yet, a dozen or so people were doing just that. With ratty blankets drawn over their shoulders, men and women huddled around a few small campfires. What at first appeared to be junk sat in chaotic piles along the ruin's edge, but upon closer inspection, that detritus became things needed to survive: bedrolls, water skins, small piles of food, and more. Empty bottles littered the ground between those essential items while many of its people sported evidence of *kalvna* use.

How many of the people here had been pushed into these circumstances by Empire prejudice and oppression?

Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly before nudging Jhi. He'd stopped short at the end of the walkway, biting his lip.

Go on, I softly sang to him. Say what you need to. I'll stay here.

Glancing toward me, Jhi frowned, probably because he saw nothing in the spot he'd heard me singing from.

"You won't come with me?" he asked.

Running my eyes over the boy's former home, I winced. Even this early in the morning with the sun barley cresting over the mountains, light bathed people and blackened wood, leaving few shadows behind. I could always ask to dark to follow me into that light, but doing that would give away my magic. I wouldn't mind the light exposure. The skin prickling I felt while in it was just a part of me, but I didn't want to risk that the cloak I was wearing might fail to conceal my features.

I couldn't tell Jhi any of this.

I think it's best if you do this on your own, I sang. Don't you?

Slumping, Jhi said, "Yeah, I know."

Don't worry. I'll be right here if something goes wrong.

Jhi flashed me a smile.

"Thanks, Kase."

He started toward the ruined building. Keeping an eye on him, I leaned against a wall, crossing my arms. As the first of the people in the ruin noticed Jhi, raising their hands in greeting to him, a figure dropped from the first tier of the building at my back. As always, her notes told me where she was, despite how stealthily she was moving.

"You're being unusually kind with this one, *pon liiares*," Aiko said. "May I ask why?"

Tilting my head back, I considered how to answer her. I didn't have to, as she was well aware, but Aiko rarely asked me for anything. So, when she did, I tried to accommodate her as best I could.

I almost gave her honesty, telling her about the fierce protectiveness I felt for this child, but I wasn't sure how she'd receive that answer.

Plus, I had my own concerns with it. Was this instinctive need to shield Jhi from harm something I'd experience with all children, or was it reserved for him, felt only because I took of his notes? I wanted to have an answer to that question before I shared a potential weakness with anyone, even Aiko.

He's strong, I sang instead. I'd like to cultivate that strength.

Even if she couldn't hear the specifics of my answer, Aiko seemed to have understood it anyway.

Bowing her head, she said, "You are wise, *pon liiares*."

No. Merely practical.

Shifting, I watched an older woman give Jhi something I couldn't see, and on receiving it, the boy threw his arms around her neck with his shoulders shaking. When he backed away, wiping his eyes, he put the item in his pocket before moving on to the others around him.

I wasn't sure how much time I should give him. If I had my way, he'd have all the time he wanted to make these goodbyes, but not only would my keepers discover our absence from the citadel soon, but my eyes were itching from fatigue. My typical bedtime had *long* since come and gone. When I was tired, my control of my singing tended to slip, and if that happened outside the citadel, it wouldn't be good for anyone here.

So, when I felt something with exceptionally potent ill intent, strong enough to trip even my weak Truthseeking, I was relieved, even as my guts tightened.

Jhi. Come here, I sang.

In the midst of those he'd known, Jhi stiffened. His face took on the curiously blank look that all my thralls wore when I gave them a command. Even still, he took the time to make hasty, final farewells, which was odd. I'd never had a thrall delay in obeying me. Seeing it here was refreshing, even as I silently urged him to hurry up. Whatever this hostile person or thing was, it was coming closer.

After he'd trotted to me, I took Jhi's hand, which made him jump, but of course it did. To him, a ghostly person had just taken hold of him.

This will feel strange, I sang to him.

With my warning given, I called to the dark, and it accepted Jhi into its embrace, granting him a hiding space. With both of us invisible, I pulled the boy down the walkway from before and into the crowded intersection beyond.

Never releasing my hold on him, I hurried back toward the citadel, putting as much distance between us and a source of hostility as possible. I didn't think that anger was directed at us, but it was better to keep away regardless.

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