

# Chapter 9: The State of the City

## Kase

As Jhi and I hurried back toward the citadel, Aiko followed us on the rooftops, vigilant for danger. It was unsurprising, then, that she was the first to notice the shift within the song, originating from what we'd left behind. I felt it, of course, anticipating the change in the breath before it happened, but in that moment, I was more focused on keeping Jhi and myself concealed as we wove through the crowd.

I paid it the attention it deserved when Aiko stumbled. Pulling Jhi to my chest, I faced the swell rushing toward us with my teeth gritted. I released my own strain of music to push it away from us. Even still, when it arrived, every Ostium around us flinched and staggered, and I pressed Jhi's head to my shirt when he released a piercing wail, one that was audibly muffled but deafening in the song.

I restrained my own whine. A handful of notes, each irreplaceable in the great symphony, had faded to silence, and their loss left the song hiccupping for a span of time beneath most people's awareness. They noticed the resulting tonal shift, but of all the Ostiums I'd discussed this stutter with, I was the only one who'd heard it.

And this pause in reality's wandering music *hurt* to hear. Even as I clutched Jhi tighter to me, I lifted a free hand to my nose, quickly blotting the blood dribbling from it. No one, not even my thralls, could see how devastation like this affected me. I had to be strong for them.

The pressure in the great symphony relented, and while the people around us roughly shook their heads and continued about their business, Jhi went limp, emptily staring while his head lolled.

*Aiko!* I shouted.

Again, nearby people flinched, although this time they tried to find the source of their distress, but by that point, I'd dragged Jhi beneath a building's eaves. More quickly than I'd expected, Aiko joined us, looking rattled.

*Suggestions?* I asked.

Aiko took one look at Jhi and winced.

"The citadel is too far for us to reach before he revives, *pon liiares*, but he shouldn't do so in the open either," Aiko said. "We should find somewhere safe to hide until he's recovered. I know a good tea shop nearby. Its owner is trustworthy."

*A good idea, I sang. Lead us there?*

Snapping to attention, Aiko bowed in my general direction.

"Va, *pon liiares*," she said.

Keeping Jhi upright while also threading through a maze of people I couldn't touch was quite the challenge for me, but somehow, I managed the task. It helped that Aiko's tea shop wasn't far.

When I shuffled inside after her, something like electricity prickled over my skin, but for once, I was grateful for the light. When I stepped out of or into the dark, it could be an unnerving sight for anyone who'd never seen it, and so, I tried to do it in ways that others wouldn't notice. This time, I hadn't planned how to hide it, but walking into an establishment while its owner and patrons were still registering Aiko's presence was a prime way to make the transition.

Once the room's attention had shifted to me, an elderly man circled his counter, racing toward me with his hands outstretched for my burden. Something in my body language must have warned him about lending me a hand with Jhi because he slowed down. He lowered his hands while the pinched, distracted look that was already on the faces of the shop climbed onto his face.

"I've got him," I said in a rough voice, glancing at the boy, "but perhaps you could point me toward somewhere we might sit, *ishaaren*?"

"Of course."

The proprietor led us to a far corner, which had shadows flocking around it. While I might normally relish such a sight, it made me wince now. I couldn't enter those shadows until I was far from people who might see me vanish.

Fortunately, Aiko knew me well, so she took hold of Jhi, getting him into one of the darkened chairs. While she took a seat, I dealt with the shop's owner.

Bowing to him, I said, "My thanks, *ishaaren*. My little brother didn't take the recent disturbance to the bloodsong well. We came to the first place of refuge we could find."

The shop owner's gaze sharpened.

"Poor boy," he said. "Did he know one of those killed?"

Killed? The fade of someone's notes usually meant they'd encountered death, humanity's greatest enemy, and many people had fallen silent in the recent shockwave, hence why it had hit the Ostiums so hard. But deliberately killed?

"I'm not sure," I said. "My brother's always off playing in the ruins, and I'm usually the one to drag him home. He might have made friends while exploring."

With his face twisting, the shop owner hissed, "Damn the Ibisians. The three of you take as much time as you need before heading onto the street again. I'll bring you some tea, no charge."

Again bowing, I said, "You are kind."

When I rose, the shop owner had begun that curious dip that people took when trying to look under my hood, so I spun to the table. I slid into a chair as close to Jhi as I could get. When no commotion rose behind me, I assumed the old man had gotten the hint to leave me alone.

Keeping my hand hidden by my cloak's sleeve, I lay it atop one of Jhi's, left resting on the table. He was still catatonic, staring into nothing, and while I wanted to help him by diving into his head with my Mindbreaker magic, I didn't think that was a great idea with so many people around us.

"What did he mean, asking if Jhi knew one of the people killed?" I asked Aiko.

Much as I'd like to quit using my voice, I needed her to understand the specifics of what I'd asked, something she typically couldn't do with my singing.

"It probably has something to do with the increase of Empire soldiers stationed in Zoln lately, *pon lliares*," Aiko said. "While we were on the street, you may have noticed more of our people carrying any weapons they can?"

"I noticed a greater militia presence in the city, yes," I said. "The soldiers are the Empire's answer to that, then?"

Nodding, Aiko said, "They haven't been... kind since their arrival."

Of course they hadn't. Empire soldiers never were, but with the way she'd phrased that, I gathered she was implying that their recent abuse of power might be different.

"In what way?" I asked.

Shifting in place, Aiko turned her gaze even further away from me.

"They've been raiding ruins where the homeless are known to take shelter, their reason being, from what I understand, that people left idle are more likely to join our militia or otherwise cause trouble," she said. "At first, all they did was forcibly remove the homeless from wherever they were found, but recently, their commanding officer seems to have realized that all this strategy did was shuffle Zoln's destitute around the city. So, she's been eliminating the problem instead."

Eliminating...

"They're *murdering* Ostiums?" I hiss. "We're supposed to be Empire citizens now that their Prime Minister has forced that naturalization bill down Parliament's throat! How can they kill their own-?"

Aiko winced, and biting my tongue, I took a calming breath before I drew more of the shop patrons' attention our way.

"Why didn't I know about this?" I asked.

Shrugging, Aiko said, "If I were to take a guess, I'd say it was kept from you so you wouldn't get distracted, but I don't know the minds of those who oversee your training."

I had no doubt she was right. My keepers had always enjoyed controlling my life down to the last iota. How terrible was it that I wanted to unleash violence on them for keeping me in the dark about this almost as much as I did toward the soldiers who'd murdered Jhi's friends?

That little boy was the only reason I didn't storm out of the shop to begin the fight for Ostiu's freedom right then and there.

Squeezing his hand, I bit my lip. What I'd meant to help him had only hurt him further and in a devastating way, no less.

The shop owner returned to our table, distributing steaming mugs around it. I only half noted this, too wrapped up in my concerns for a child, but when the man lingered, I dragged my attention his way.

"Yes?" I said.

"I..."

The man shuffled a bit, glancing toward the ceiling before meeting my gaze. Or meeting it as best he could with my hood pulled so far forward, at least.

"Please forgive me," he said, "but are you ok? You seem... pale."

Good eye on this one. I wondered when he'd caught an inevitable flash of my bare skin.

Grinning, I said, "No need to worry about my feelings, *ishaaren*. You are, after all, giving us hospitality. In answer to your question, though, I'm fine. I have a condition that-"

"Kase?"

Forgetting the old man, I whirled on Jhi, exposing my hands to take his. No need to hide them if the only stranger paying attention to us already knew how lacking in pigment they were.

Jhi still looked dazed, even with his unfocused eyes pointing my way. Had he realized what had happened yet?

"Hey, Jhi," I said. "Thought you'd left us for a moment there."

With a frown forming in slow motion, Jhi said, "Why are you talking like that? It's not right. I need you to be right."

Flashing to days previous, I watched him screaming again.

*I'm not right. Please! I'm not right.*

Fuck it. Who cared whether a handful of average Ostiums learned about my existence. They couldn't do much damage with that knowledge alone, and Jhi needed me as I was, not hiding like this.

My control of my singing loosened, allowing the strain inside of me to increase in volume, and a collective gasp rose around us. I ignored it.

*Is this better?* I asked.

With a small sigh, Jhi said, "Much. Where are we? We were walking outside and then..."

Fog cleared from his eyes with pain crystalizing in them, and his notes began a swift climb into a shriek. Catching them in my strain, I let it hum around him, loud enough to match, while squeezing his hand.

*One of your friends gave you a gift while we were with them,* I sang. *May I see it?*

"A gift?" he said. "A gift. Oh. The one from-"

A gasping whimper suffused the shop's dead silence, and in that moment, the pain of the Ostium people seemed brought to life in a little boy's grief.

"Are they dead?" Jhi asked. "I can't hear them-"

*Jhi.*

My firm tone had the boy snapping his attention to me, breathless and wide-eyed.

*May I see what your friend gave you?*

Slowly, Jhi reached into a pocket. With his fist clenched around the item, he withdrew it, but once he'd rested his hand on the table, he revealed what he held, and a lump formed in my throat.

Before me, a wooden medallion, still blackened in spots, lay without a thong to complete it. On it, a rough outline of Zoln's silhouette, mountains and towers both, rose in bas relief from the background, but this was the city as it had once been. There were no gaps in the skyline where homes had once risen for the sky. The carving might not have been beautifully done, but anyone could see the care that had gone into it.

Hovering a hand over it, I asked, *May I?*

Mutely, Jhi nodded, and I lifted the medallion for a closer inspection. When I curled my fingers around it, I felt more ridges and depressions on the back, and flipping it, I read the characters found there.

*Jhiyuv Veif*, I said. *Is that your name?*

Again, Jhi nodded, although he shivered when I said his full name.

I could relate to that feeling. His parents must have been visionaries to veer from traditional Ostium naming like this. Instead of a pleasant arrangement of sounds, as most Ostium names were, they'd given their son a name with meaning, one with words directly from the Ostium tongue: *jhiyuv*, meaning freedom, and *veif*, meaning hope. He was literally called hope of freedom. How much pressure had they placed on him with two small words?

Brushing my thumb over the carving, I called to the dark, forming a dusky needle from it, and bore a hole through the top of the medallion with it. A shadowy knife helped me cut a strip of cloth from my cloak, and I tied it through the hole, loosely looping the ragged strip. At some point, we'd need to get him something less fragile to hang the medallion from, but this would do for now.

Finished, I set it on the table before sliding it back to Jhi.

*They loved you*, I softly sang. *How blessed are you to have known them? Let's not dishonor their memory by losing ourselves to grief. Don't deny that it exists! Never do that, but use it to make yourself a better person, someone they would have been privileged to know.*

Lifting my finger off of the medallion, I sat back in my chair, ignoring the eyes on me to give Jhi my full attention. The boy lifted his gift with trembling fingers, and his eyes glistened when they met mine.

"Thank you, Kase," he said.

I shrugged.

*I help where I can*, *Jhiyuv*, I said, *and in this moment, this is what you needed.*

Dropping his eyes to the medallion, the boy nodded, but he clutched it to his chest rather than hanging it around his neck.

"It's just Jhi," he said. "That's how you know me, right?"

He gave me the most crooked smile I'd seen in ages, and my heart twisted in my chest, even as I matched his grin with a brighter one.

*Jhi*, then, I said. *Are you ready to go home?*

When he nodded, I lifted a long-left-idle mug of tea, sipping from it before standing to face the room. The wordless shock and nervous... something I couldn't define that was directed my way—

finally acknowledged—nearly floored me. Was I truly *that* much of an anomaly? I knew *liiaresen* were rare, but this sense of awe seemed excessive.

Locating the shop's owner, I bowed to him.

"Thank you for the tea," I rose.

When I rose, the man visibly swallowed a few times before speaking.

"I'm honored by your words, *vas ii*."

Which made me frown. *li*? What was that?

Shaking my confusion off, I focused, reaching out for the minds around me. The task of finding so many of them without the typically unnecessary aid of physical contact was difficult for me, but I could do it... barely. Once I had hold of the strangers around me, I whispered my magic to them.

*Don't speak of this.*

As people across the shop flinched, I gestured for Aiko and Jhi to join me outside. The command I'd imparted wouldn't last for long—my Mindbreaker magic never did—but I'd been firm enough with it that we should reach the citadel before the tale of what I'd done here leaked.

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