

Chapter 3: Never Play with High Stakes

Elliot

Elliot was packing when Cathrine called him downstairs. Since he was almost finished, he ignored her summons, intent on stuffing his belongings into a sack. Intent on avoiding the reason he was doing it.

When someone touched him, he flinched while putting his back to a corner. Not that he'd needed such a strong reaction. The only person here was Cathrine, watching him with her hand outstretched.

"What is it? I heard you a minute ago," he said. "Let me finish packing, and I'll come to say my goodbyes."

With a frustrated growl, Cathrine grabbed Elliot's arm, pulling him after her. She dragged him into the gathering space on the first floor. Usually, it was full of squabbling children or Cathrine and her tailoring supplies. Now, a single chair teetered on uneven legs here with their parents slumped against a wall nearby.

"Where are the boys?" Elliot asked.

"With friends," dad said. "Sit."

He pointed at the chair, and Elliot frowned. Did they want to make their farewells without suffering the chaos that his little brothers always brought?

"Ok, but we should make this quick," he said. "Once I'm done packing, I have to get you as many rations as I can before leaving."

Elliot's parents and Cathrine exchanged a glance.

"That's the thing, El," mom said. "You're not leaving."

What was she talking about? Had they not seen his tracker's color after the announcement? Were they in denial about what had happened?

"Yes, I am," Elliot said. "I've been drafted. I'm off to fight in a war none of us wanted. I'll probably die in it too."

Oops. He hadn't meant to let that last bit slip out. How had it escaped? Also, why had his voice taken on a shrill edge?

Crouching in front of him, Cathrine grabbed his hands.

"El. We won't let you go," she said. "We've discussed it and decided to take the risk. We'll hide you."

...What?

"Are you insane?" Elliot hissed. "The Hunters will find me, and when they do, they'll show no mercy. To any of us. Including Martin, Lucas, Orin, and Lionel. The children who are conspicuously absent right now."

"Don't worry about the boys," dad said. "You know they'd do anything for you."

"That doesn't mean I want to risk them!" Elliot said. "Or any of you for that matter. When the Hunters come-"

"They won't," Cathrine said, "or rather, it'll take them time to pinpoint your tracker. We live in a city populated by tens of thousands, and you live in a house of eight. With so many signals interfering with yours, the Hunters will be slowed down, and by the time they might have found you, you'll have learned how to disable your tracker."

"Disable my..."

Sputtering into silence, Elliot whipped his head between them. They were serious. They thought he could...

"That's impossible!" he snapped.

Avan, he'd sounded like a little girl there. Their... *insanity* had somehow turned back the years and changed his gender.

"El, nothing's impossible for you," mom said with a tired smile reaching for her tired eyes. "Think of everything you've made. The miniature clockwork circus you gave the boys last solstice?"

"That was simple! Gears and pistons and a modified monitor. What you're suggesting-"

Cathrine squeezed Elliot's hands.

"It's a puzzle, El. Only a puzzle," she said. "Can you solve it?"

Elliot latched onto that idea with such singularity that it should have scared him. He should have run upstairs, grabbed his sack, and headed for his assigned barrack. Instead, that plan and the events that had prompted it skittered out of focus. Only a puzzle and its pieces were left for him while Cathrine's question echoed in his head. Could he solve it?

He didn't own a wire or a display to experiment with and had no desire to slice open his hand, exposing the device within. But. He'd gotten ahold of a remote. He'd been working on changes to it for months. Could he complete the task that his family had proposed before the Hunters found him? If he could, what would come next?

He couldn't think about that part now. He needed to focus on the immediate problem.

So.

"Of course I can solve the puzzle," Elliot said. "What do you take me for?"

"A genius inventor," Cathrine said.

"A wonderful son," dad said.

"Someone who shouldn't be wasted in a war," mom said. "Now, go to your thinking space. Don't come down until you're finished."

"O-ok."

As Elliot fled from them, swiping his prickling eyes, he hoped he hadn't lied to his family. He knew he could disable his tracker. The question was whether he could do it in time.

Four days into his efforts and Elliot had nothing to show for it. With a wince, he waved the remote over his hand. And nothing happened. Again.

Growling, he tossed the remote at a wall, sighing when it burst apart. He'd never get it. He'd found the one puzzle that was too complicated for him, and time was running out for his family.

"No luck?" Cathrine asked.

Jumping, Elliot glanced at his sister, kneeling beside him with a tray in her hands. On it were slices of bread and two mugs, one filled with water and the other with mushy beans.

"You shouldn't feed me," Elliot said. "Without my rations, food must be running low downstairs."

Cathrine set the tray in front of him.

"If you don't eat, you won't be able to think straight, and you'll never solve the puzzle that way."

"I'm not sure I can," Elliot said.

Crawling around him, Cathrine gathered the remote's pieces and placed them by his knee. She pressed a slice of bread into his hand before planting a kiss on his cheek.

"You will, El," she said. "Get to it."

While she retreated, Elliot ate. He wasn't sure why his family had such confidence in him. Sure, he'd made a few interesting mechanisms in the past, combining bits and pieces of Lutovish tech to create something new, but they thought he could modify a *tracker*.

He understood simple tech, and a tracker was not simple, especially since it was a piece of tech combined with the human body. After four days and several months spent playing with his, Elliot had barely scratched the surface of its workings. He was almost ready to rip it out of his hand, risking its inbuilt kill command, if doing so would remove the threat he'd become to his family.

With his meal finished, he shuffled to the ladder, setting the food tray at its apex. He'd started turning back to his work when Cathrine's muffled voice floated into the crawlspace. Something didn't sound right about it, something Elliot couldn't identify, but when mom and dad's voices joined hers, he knew what was wrong. An unfamiliar note had blended into their typical timbre, one Elliot had heard from other people but never from them.

Panic.

Had Hunters finally come for him?

Hurrying to his corner, Elliot stuffed his pockets with anything he could use against them. If he could reach the room he shared with his brothers, he could sneak through its window, gaining a clear avenue of escape, and try to draw the Hunter pack away from his home. From there, he'd have to hope he could outrun pursuit and-

His sister screamed, sending his plans crashing to a halt. Without thought, Elliot dropped out of the crawlspace, glided down the hall, and crouched at the head of the stairs.

In the foyer, his family was gathered, most of them at least. Lucas was missing, but any worries Elliot might have entertained for his little brother were displaced by the man in his family's midst.

He was the strangest looking human Elliot had ever seen, stranger even than the Lutovish. Where they were typically pale, this man was *ashen* with barely any hue to his skin, and his hair was white. White like snow when it fell at year's end. White like an elder's hair but it wasn't brittle or frail. His looked thick, even clipped short as it was.

Elliot had heard tales of people like this in the Travel Center, one of the many secrets he'd gleaned when the Lutovish had spoken their tongue around poor, ignorant him. They were *iisen*, or *ii* when referencing one, and supposedly hailed from a nation called Ostiu, a place unmarked on Ibis' map. When the Lutovish had discussed these people, they'd always spoken a word—*liiaresim*—in tandem, and its mention had always come in a hushed, reverent tone, almost as if they feared it.

And someone bearing the visage of an *ii* was standing among Elliot's loved ones. Why him and not a Hunter pack?

"Elliot Lockhart," he said, so empty, so lost. "I must find him. Where is he?"

The *ii* had sounded like the people who sometimes stumbled out of *kalvna* dens, begging for the rations needed to get their next fix, and on a closer inspection, Elliot noted a sway in his stance, a shift that revealed the lump lying behind him.

With each glimpse of that lump, Elliot further recognized it until all he could see was Lucas, vacantly staring at him from the floor. What had made the little boy who he was had disappeared from his body, and seeing that, a scream built in Elliot's chest.

Before he could drag himself out of suddenly stuttering thoughts, the *ii* snatched Oran, dragging the kid against his chest.

"Tell me where he is!" he shouted.

He hovered a shaking hand in front of Oran's face while a whimper rose from the boy, and in response, Elliot flew down the stairs.

"Here!" he shouted. "I'm right here! Don't hurt him."

"El, no!"

His parents moved to stop him, but Elliot thrust a hand out to stop them, although that didn't seem to be what had quite suddenly fixed them in place. They were still struggling to reach him too fiercely for their halt to be voluntary.

"It's *you*," the *ii* breathed.

When he flitted his gaze Elliot's way, his trembling magnified so much that he almost lost his grip on Oran while recognition dawned in his eyes. Did this man know him?

"El-liot Lo-lockhart?" the *ii* asked with his teeth chattering.

"That's me," Elliot said. "Let Oran go."

"Oran," the *ii* repeated. "An innocent. Oran. Yes."

With his hand still raised toward his family, Elliot padded toward the threat, reaching for his brother.

"That's right," he said. "He has nothing to do with this. Let him go and take me."

"Find the hidden one. Bring him to us. Eliminate witnesses," the *ii* rattled off.

The twitches cascading over him fell still, and he turned his eyes on Elliot. Eyes that made him recoil. Eyes that he knew would plague his dreams.

A jagged, silver line surrounded irises as white as the man's hair with shiny offshoots tying that ring to his pupils. These alien eyes stared at Elliot, and in them, he saw so much anguish that it froze him in place.

"Eliminate witnesses," the *ii* breathed. "*Ooluv po.*"

He twisted the hand he'd been holding in front of Oran's face, stopping his whimpering, and once released, the little boy fell to the ground.

As did the rest of Elliot's family.

Elliot released the scream that had been building in his chest as he dropped to his knees beside Cathrine. He reached for his sister with shaking hands, but when he touched her, she didn't respond.

No.

She'd kissed his cheek not a quarter-hour before.

No.

She *couldn't* be lying here, so silent and still.

"Cat," Elliot whispered. "Cat!"

"Eliminate witnesses. Destroy all traces."

Snarling, Elliot tried to jump on the *ii*, to tear chunks out of that damn white hair, to gouge out those damn white eyes, but an invisible, heavy hand pressed down on him, keeping him in place. He bowed and bent beneath it until he was lying beside his sister, staring at his reflection in her glassy eyes.

"Destroy all traces."

From out of nowhere, fire blazed to life on the floor behind Cathrine, and seconds later, the acrid scent of cooking meat tickled through Elliot's nose. Heat, something rarely experienced in Flosa's persistent chill, became unbearable as his home was transformed into a blazing inferno.

It had come. The end he'd always feared. His family lay dead around him, and he'd be burned alive, held immobile by something he couldn't see or understand.

"Find the hidden one. Bring him to us."

The *ii* countered the force that had been pinning Elliot down with ease, flinging him over one slender shoulder. They burst through a blazing door and into the cool, night air, which turned Elliot's scream into a hacking cough, but the cry resumed as they moved away from the bonfire.

He fought to bite, to scratch, to do anything but hang from the *ii*, anything but scream his rage, but as his home disappeared around a corner, he gave up, letting tears blur his vision. Cold pinpricks blossomed on his skin from where the year's first snow had released flakes onto the city below, and Elliot's sobs loudly rang in the air, bouncing between the city's buildings.

"*Ooluv po*," the *ii* said. "*Jount, ooluv po*."

Those words skipped in Elliot's brain, like his body on the *ii*'s shoulder, until he lost consciousness.

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