

# Chapter 105: I Can't Believe That Worked

Waiting in the foyer of *shukusen* Talira's office, I examined her latest acquisition, another painting by Gaze. He'd done a masterful job of depicting a field's gentle rustle in the breeze with the shifting of its canvas' threads an achievement to admire.

"You said you'd come find me."

As Leski stopped beside me, I let a smile soften my features, never removing my gaze from the painting.

"I believe the technical phrasing included 'when I have a free moment'," I said. "You may have noticed how hectic everything's been over the last few days?"

That was an understatement on my part. When Korix and I had returned to Lutov via a beacon, we'd had to sit through so many interrogations, ones where we'd thoroughly explained ourselves to the *shukusenth*. That process had taken a good day and a half, all of which had felt like a waste of time to me.

Thank Mother Time for Talira's support of us. From what I could tell, it had been the only reason the other heads of Houses had believed our story over Alezand's protestations.

After that, events had followed as they should have. Alezand had been exiled. I'd still watch him for hostile behavior, unable to believe that we were done with him, but for now, I had to be satisfied with the *shukusenth's* judgment, no matter how much I ached to hurt him more. Jayla deserved it.

The rest of Cerullis was in chaos. Without a *shukusen* or First Stratus at the helm, no one in the House knew who should lead it, which had made meeting with them simply *wonderful*, and that wasn't even covering how to resolve the split between the people who'd sided with the Ancients and those who hadn't. Over time, it would work out, but for now, Cerullis was in the weakest position that it had held in centuries.

In the midst of this, I'd carved out time to visit Rane. Still in the hospital at the base of Kolb's headquarters, she was in a curious state. I'd never seen a woman so pissed off about what had happened to her and yet, deliriously relieved, all due to the lack of her position's necessity.

With The Library gone, her world had opened up. Hopefully, she could go home soon, but since an Ancient had ravaged her mind, Kolb's medics wanted to observe her for a while longer. Maybe while waiting to leave, she could figure out what she'd do next.

When in the hospital, I'd also visited Feena. My sister would be fine, eventually—the idiot had refused to use RRDs—but right now, she was pretty banged up from her five-on-one fight. I was told that she'd kept her opponents busy for a few hours, unwilling to kill any of them. When I'd asked her about that, she'd said that she hadn't wanted to end the lives of people who might have been as much under an Ancient's control as I'd been. Because of this, though, someone had had to fish her unconscious, nearly-dead ass out of the sea and fucking hell...

When we'd gotten home and I'd heard that news, Korix had had to physically restrain me from finding the people who'd hurt my sister and *making them pay*. I saw the logic behind both of my loved ones' actions now, but damn, if I hadn't wanted to rip into Feena and Korix at the time. Needless to say, my time at my sister's bedside had been strained, even as I'd smothered her with concern.

But visiting her and Rane had been the only indulgences I'd allowed myself since coming home.

Turning to Leski, I said, "Has my grandmother finished questioning you?"

We'd already gone through one round of these debriefings, but Talira had called for a second meeting with each of us, probably wanting to make sure that everyone would keep their facts straight in the future. At least, I thought that was why she'd summoned us again, although she'd probably had another reason for bringing me and Korix here.

As the first to face the *shukusen*, Leski had been in her office for far too long before switching places with Pheniks, but in response to my question, she nodded, facing me with her chin lifted.

"May we discuss my issues now, or should I wait?" she asked.

"Now is fine," I said. "I doubt Talira will invite me and Ko into her office anytime soon."

As I had near constantly over the last seventy-two hours, I checked on my new life partner. He was asleep in a chair, snoring, and I suppressed my mirth at the sight. I was used to him catching sleep when he could but never in so public of a place.

"When we were at the Source, you sent me away because you planned to kill yourself," Leski said. "You didn't want to hurt me, but you also didn't want me to argue you out of it."

Snapping my eyes to her, I said, "Yes."

Leski stepped into my personal space, jabbing a finger into my chest.

"You can't do that," she said. "If I'm to be your... if I'm to continue dating you, you cannot leave me out when it comes to things like that."

Oh, how that righteous indignation set me ablaze, in both a nice and distinctly unpleasant way.

"You're right, and I'm sorry that I did it when we were at the Source," I said. "It won't happen again. Ever."

Pausing, I considered how I should phrase the next part before deciding to just say it.

“And you’re my partner, not just someone I’m dating.”

Returning my attention to the painting, I smirked at Leski’s flabbergasted stuttering.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she managed to get out.

Instead of answering, I inclined my head to the swaying grass stalks on the canvas in front of us.

“What do you think of this?” I asked.

Glancing at it, Leski said, “It’s nice, I guess. Zae, what-?”

“Would you mind something similar hanging in the place you call home?” I asked.

When Leski went still, I patiently waited for her to form a response.

“I wouldn’t mind,” she eventually said. “Why do you ask?”

“I like Gazi paintings,” I said with a shrug.

Hopefully, that would be enough of an explanation for her.

“You’ll soon go through your House naming, yes?” I continued. “After it’s over, how would you feel about living, for a time, with Korix and me?”

With her breath going short, Leski resolutely continued facing the painting, despite her bearing’s obvious cry to turn my way.

“How long is ‘for a time’?” she asked.

“As long as you like,” I said, curling my lips.

“And Ko is ok with this?”

“When I asked him about it, he seemed enthused with the idea,” I said. “If you want, you can ask him for yourself.”

At that, she fell silent, and much as it stressed me, I let her have this moment. When it started running long, however, I relented, pulling her in front of me.

Meeting her eyes, I said, “This isn’t me saying that I love you. I don’t know how I feel about you, but I want to explore the possibility that lies between us. I believe that the best way to do that is by living in close quarters for a time. What do you think?”

For a moment, Leski turned inward, but then, she mischievously grinned at me.

“That it’s a great idea,” she said, “and I can’t wait to face the challenge.”

Mother Time, she was wonderful.

“In that case, why don’t you stay with us tonight,” I said. “Do you remember how to reach Ko’s apartment?”

“I remember which tier it’s on,” Leski said. “I doubt finding it from there will be hard.”

It wouldn’t, not with how much time I’d spent with its residents. They’d help her along, if she needed it.

“Then, I’ll see you there,” I said.

“I look forward to it,” she said with a fierce grin. “Good luck with the *shukusen*, Zae.”

“...Thanks?”

Damn, that knowing smile sent a shiver up my spine, but it was quickly erased by Leski’s sashay toward the lift. Watching her swaying hips, I was set adrift on possibilities for later tonight. Did she know what she was doing to me?

Behind me, the door to Talira’s office sprang open, and Pheniks hurried past me, muttering under his breath.

“Hell if I’ll ever say anything about how I disrupted the-” was all I caught before he stepped into a lift.

My brother’s continued existence was still spreading fingers of awe in me. I would never, *never* take a loved one for granted again. His perceived loss had fixed the lesson of their importance in my mind.

As if desperate to stop emotional thinking like that, Talira’s voice shot through her open door.

“I’ll next see my delinquent grandson and his *evushk*.”

Sighing, I stalked to Korix, poking him. Instantly awake, he raised an eyebrow, at which I nodded. When he was on his feet, I took his hand, and we faced my grandmother’s displeasure together.

---

Revision #1

Created 26 December 2024 07:27:53 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 December 2024 07:37:05 by FatalisticFable