

Chapter 11: Eavesdropping Is Usually a Bad Idea

With our guide gone, Fyester looked a little lost, so I flounced onto the bed, hoping to distract him.

“Well,” I said, “that was strange.”

“Mm,” was all Fyester would say.

I wasn't sure how to continue. Did he want more small talk from me? Could I skip that? How could I get his attention back to where it should be right now: on me, not the distraction I'd created?

Best to play it safe.

“So, what do you think of this place?” I asked.

Almost in concert with me, Fyester asked, “Are you asking me to join Kolb in a few days? Because I won't. You should know that.”

Well. His attention was *certainly* on me now.

With my mouth gaping, I stared at Fyester, a little hurt by his accusation.

“Fy, I would never influence your decision about which House you join. Not in a million years. More than anything, I want you to be happy with your work in the future,” I said. “But I also wanted...”

Dammit. I'd hoped to let this go unmentioned, keeping our current encounter as a surprising, one-in-a-thousand chance, but given what he'd just said, I wasn't sure if he'd believe what I was about to say, not unless I shared everything.

So much for my pretense with our guide, but in the end, it would be better for him to know how I'd gotten us here than to have him angry at me for a misunderstanding.

“Do you really think an emergency spirited our tour guide away?” I asked. “We're unHoused, and this is Kolb's *headquarters*. She wouldn't have left us alone here unless...”

Trailing off, I looked away, unable to meet his gaze.

“I brought us here so I could manipulate a system that I'm well acquainted with. I wanted us to have a nice setting for this part of what might be our last...”

Our last date. I couldn't bring myself to say those words, though.

I might have plenty of partners, but saying goodbye to one always hurt, not only because it was a farewell but because afterward, I'd have one less person I could be myself around. One less person who didn't require my developed persona when I was with them.

After hearing my explanation, Fyester shook his head with a huff, but then, he jumped on me, leaving his feet hanging over the bedside. At the sudden movement, I almost tried tossing him off, as my instincts demanded, but Mother Time, his face was close—the sight of it overriding everything else—and damn, if I didn't want to kiss him.

"Why didn't you just say that, you idiot?" he said with a laugh.

I couldn't help myself. If I strained my neck, I could just about reach his head, so flinging my arms around his neck, I kissed him like I'd been wanting to. It was hesitant at first, but that quickly changed. Soon enough, my body was insistently reminding me of my need for air while he was digging his fingernails into my shoulders.

Hell. At this rate, I might still have marks when we were done here.

Oh, well.

With a twist of my hips, I flipped us over, quickly getting settled on Fyester's stomach. I pushed my hands under his pantsuit's jacket, smirking at his gasp when I found skin, but when he tried to do the same with me, I stopped, raising an eyebrow.

"Excuse me. Did I say you could touch me?" I asked. "I know you've never had a problem with getting people's hands on you, but I like to say when you get that particular pleasure, and I haven't spoken those words yet. Right?"

With his eyes going wide, Fyester wordlessly dropped his hands to the bed, and leaning over him, I claimed his mouth with my own, tugging on his hair while reaching for the fastener to his jumpsuit. I smiled as he started squirming under me, enjoying how that struggle got stronger with every tug on his clothes.

But then, I pulled free, scrambling off of him so I could move toward the windows. As expected, Fyester released a half-exasperated, half-pleased groan behind me, although he made no move to follow me. Yet.

This, the flirt and tease, was a true part of who I was: me without personas to hide me and with emotions allowed in my heart. The version of me that I only shared with my partners, who would never risk my quest for freedom.

Turning to the bed, I arched an eyebrow on seeing Fyester still lying atop it, if propped up on his elbow. Needed more of a push to get up, did he? I could accommodate that.

As I started unbuttoning my shirt, I turned back toward the windows, and when I shrugged out of it, Fyester's breath caught.

"Fuck me," he whispered.

That had been quiet enough that I wasn't sure if he'd meant for me to hear it. Either way, I didn't care, not when I heard the bed creaking behind me. Soon Fyester was wrapping hesitant arms around my waist and trailing kisses along my shoulder.

Putting my lips as close to his ear as I could get them, I said, "Fuck you? That's the idea, isn't it?"

Fyester might snort at that, but still, I felt him shiver before he pulled away.

"That was just *bad*, Zae."

"Oh, I know."

As he came into view, I took one of his arms to guide him fully in front of me and backed him into the window-wall. The contact with its glass had him freezing for a split second, and I paused, wondering what was wrong, until I noticed him trying to glance behind him.

Was he afraid he'd fall from this height? He should know better. Even if I'd flung him into the windows—for whatever silly reason I might have wanted to do that—the force of his impact wouldn't have shattered the glass. It was designed to withstand much more strenuous pressure than one man's weight crashing into it. Plus, no tower in Xygek went without a protective barrier wrapped around the building, something to keep us humans safe in the unlikely event that the windows did break.

So, plummeting out of this apartment? Literally impossible.

Still, I planted my hands on either side of Fyester's head, kissing him to get his mind off of it. After a bit, I backed off, and he let out a shaky breath.

"Mother Time, you're such an asshole sometimes," he said.

"Yes?" I said, cocking my head. "I thought you liked that."

"What on earth could make you think-?"

He went quiet, but I couldn't blame him for that, considering how busy I was with yanking his clothes' sleeves off of him. As I pulled his outfit the rest of the way free, I smirked at his flushed face.

"Don't you dare lay a finger on me, Fy," I said. "I might have allowed it temporarily, but you still don't have full permission yet."

We were stuck there for a while. Fyester had his head thrown back while trying to dig his fingernails through barrier-wrapped glass. He gasped when I got to my feet, and raking my fingers through his hair, I pressed my body against his. Soon enough, though, I retreated again. This time, I took him with me.

My array helped with my fever-drunk guidance to the bed, projecting proper foot placement on my closed eyelids. I didn't pay nearly as much attention to that as I normally would, not that I could. The heat rising in me had already blasted through my focus.

It was so shattered that I almost ran us into the bedside, but the last-minute stop that I took to avoid that collision sent Fyester careening away from me instead, quickly jerking me after him. My training kicked in, and I used my retained grip on his arm to flip him mid-fall, jabbing my knee between his shoulder blades as we landed. When a pained grunt flew from him, I blinked, easing up a little.

Damn. That could have gone *much* worse.

Trying to shrug it off, I said, "Did I say you could touch me?"

"But... you kissed me," Fyester gasped.

Right. I had done that.

"Who said anything about kissing?" I said. "I asked whether you *touched* me without permission."

Never mind that he'd needed to do that if he'd wanted to keep his balance while stumbling here. That had never had a bearing on this game of ours.

"I'm... sorry, Zae," Fyester said. "Can I make it up to you?"

I clambered off of him so I could fumble with the buttons on my slacks.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll think of something to fix this."

I lost myself in the heady combination of desire and *need* and a thirst to merge with another that came when I was with a partner like this, but it was especially powerful today with Fyester. I had to lay in his arms for quite a while afterward because my legs refused to cooperate.

Fortunately, he didn't seem to mind. He cuddled up next to me, making snarky jokes to take my mind off my loss of control. Mother Time, he made fun of this apartment's next occupants in far too many inappropriate ways.

Still, by the time our guide returned, I could stand again, and both Fyester and I had cleaned the bedroom to a reasonable degree.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," she said as she entered the apartment. "Thank you for your patience."

“Not a problem,” I said.

“What he said,” Fyester murmured, leaning on me.

At his relaxed behavior, our guide almost lost her composure. Her lips were just begging to be allowed a smile, but she near instantly got a hold of herself, flattening them instead.

Good control on this one. I wondered what her Stratus was.

“Well, you’ve certainly been here for long enough,” she said. “Did you have any questions for me?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I believe I got my point across.”

I glanced at Fyester, who was rocking his chin on my shoulder while humming to himself. Good to know that he’d had a nice time too.

“In that case, we should leave this apartment so I can reset its security processes,” our guide said. “If you want, you can return to the lobby without me. I’m sure you can find your way there by yourself. You’ve been crawling all over this place since you were a kid, after all.”

That last comment had me snapping my eyes to slits. I’d decided that I *did not* like having a reputation of any sort within House Kolb, as it might impede my plans, and this was the second time our guide had implied that I might have one.

“I wasn’t aware that I was so famous here,” I said.

Laughing, our guide waved my concern away.

“Oh, you’re not,” she said. “It’s my job to learn what I can about potential House members before giving them tours, which is why they sometimes start later than the moment they’re requested. *Shukusen* Talira was particularly helpful for this one.”

Meaning my grandmother knew I was here. That was... hmm. I didn’t know if that was problematic or not.

“I see,” I said. “It seems thanks are especially in order for your time.”

“It was no problem, young one,” our guide said. “Much luck in your upcoming House naming.”

We left her so she could secure the apartment behind us. Back at the lift, I set a floor destination into its control before stopping Fyester from entering it.

“Can you meet me at this restaurant in say... half an hour?” I asked. “I have something small to handle while I’m here.”

I sent him a message with the place’s coordinates attached.

“Sure, Zae. It’s fair play after I made you wait this morning,” Fyester said. “Thanks for doing this.”

He vaguely gestured at the building around us.

“It was fun.”

“Of course,” I said. “Maybe we can do something similar later this evening?”

With a dreamy smile, Fyester said, “I’d like that.”

I kissed him goodbye, keeping my hand lifted in farewell until he’d fallen through the floor. Then, I headed for a lift that would have access to the *shukusen*’s office. Hopefully, I’d find my grandmother there.

When I was halfway to my destination, though, a voice—one I’d never thought I’d hear again—had me stumbling to a stop in the hallway. Barely breathing, I crept to the wedged-open door of an apartment ahead, cocking my head at the old-fashioned pen that was blocking its door from closing. I hadn’t seen one of those in-

“We’ve already discussed this into the ground, getting nowhere in the process,” Garreth said from inside. “It’s needed, Talira. You know it is.”

What was *he* doing here? Shouldn’t he be on a mission, or I didn’t know, wherever it was that high Strata went to spend their time?

“I do *not*,” Talira said. “We have time. We can find-”

“No. We can’t.”

Had- had Garreth just interrupted his *shukusen*?

Also, why was my grandmother down here instead of in her office? Unless something required her presence elsewhere, she was usually up there on most days. Was this a secret meeting between the higher-ups, and if so, why had they left the door open? They should know better. *I* knew better so...

Had one of them blocked the door on purpose?

“Please, Talira. I need you to truly listen to me about this,” Garreth said. “I’m making more mistakes than we can afford. If we’re to have another piece ready before I fail, I need to start preparations now.”

“Stop talking like that!” Talira snapped. “You’re not some- some cog in a machine!”

Silence filled the room, one with a weight that nearly crushed me into a wall.

“Forgive my impertinence, but remember who you once were. You’re letting emotions cloud your thinking, my *shukusen*,” Garreth said. “Consider our situation using only logic, and tell me I’m wrong.”

"I know you're right, you bastard," Talira sobbed. "It's just... why him?"

"He shows the greatest potential, more than I ever thought I'd encounter in my life," Garreth said. "I'm not sure I could find someone better in the little time we have left."

After another few seconds of quiet, he continued, if in a slightly sharper voice.

"My decision is made. In this one thing, you can't countermand it. We should--"

"I already said you were right," Talira said. "I already fucking agreed. Don't rub it in."

Once more, silence fell, but this time, I was confused enough to ignore its weight. What the hell was going on? I'd never heard someone talk to my grandmother like that before, and I'd certainly never heard her cry.

"I wish there was another way, but we both know there isn't," Garreth said. "Now, what are your orders for me, my *shukusen*?"

A shuddering sob ended my grandmother's weeping, and she coughed.

"You're to stay in this apartment until... until the end of the week. Only then may you begin with him. Until then, I have nothing that needs your touch, not now," she said. "Use the typical channels to request anything you might need."

"Yes, my *shukusen*."

Shit, my grandmother would soon be coming through the door beside me. I doubted she'd wanted me to hear that conversation, so as quietly as I could, I hightailed it toward a lift.

Fortunately, the one closest to me was already set to take me to the lobby, but once I was on the ground floor, I wandered to an out-of-the-way corner, unsure if I could maneuver through Xygek's crowds with so many questions buzzing in my head.

I didn't know what to make of what I'd overheard. Someone reprimanding my grandmother and telling her about his contradictory plans without her protesting? I'd think that person was the legendary *Lokke Vitras* if he weren't Garreth and if I hadn't known him.

I was in no way important enough for House Kolb's First Stratus to save my life. Plus, Garreth looked *nothing* like the *Lokke Vitras*. Sure, we Lutovish could change our appearance at times, but most people didn't take advantage of it, including deep-cover operatives. Maybe the *Lokke Vitras* would, though? Considering how well-known he was, he might need a disguise when in deep cover.

If Garreth had been... him, though, why would he have let me kidnap him? It made no sense. In what way had his faux kidnapping protected Lutov? That was supposed to be his solitary focus in life, right?

But if he wasn't my grandmother's First Stratus, who else could have gotten away with talking to her in such a dismissive manner? Another *shukusen*?

A couple of them, namely Alezand of Cerullis, were secretive enough that they didn't have a public face. I could see them having the balls to, in essence, insult Talira. Who else could do that to a former *Lokke Vitras*?

But could a *shukusen* have destroyed a mage like Garreth had?

Of course, there was always the disastrous possibility that Garreth was simply a House Kolb member who somehow held leverage over my grandmother, although I didn't see how that could be possible. As a former *Lokke Vitras*, Talira surely knew how to keep from getting blackmailed, and she'd been a *shukusen* for long enough that most people would hesitate at even considering such a suicidal undertaking.

I didn't know what to think, but at the moment, I couldn't ponder it further. Later tonight, I could pick at the conundrum, but for now, I needed to go. If I didn't hurry, I'd be late for lunch with Fyester, and that, more than anything I'd heard here, was completely unacceptable.

TTS Chapter Eleven

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