

Chapter 12: Well, That Was Ominous 1

Islae didn't want me to leave. She wasn't being clingy, to my relief. I'd never been sure of how to handle her when she got like that. If I was right, she was just worried that we'd never see one another again.

It had been nearly a week since I'd come to Xygek, and now, I was standing with Islae outside of her apartment with the morning light beginning its peek between the towers. Nervously brushing her hands along my body, my partner maintained a non-stop stream of words, ones I was trying to listen to, but she wouldn't let me get any of my own in edgewise, and I needed to speak.

Eventually, I caught one of her wrists, kissing the heel of her palm.

"I have to go," I said against it. "My family's already going to kill me for staying over."

"I know. I'm sorry," Islae said. "And thank you for keeping me company. I needed it. You have no idea-"

She was about to launch into another nervous ramble. Cupping the back of her neck, I rested my forehead on hers, leaving our clasped hands between us, and she fell silent, nervously glancing at the people who were surely staring at us.

"It's just us," I said. "They don't matter. Only us."

Gradually, she relaxed against me, and I breathed a sigh of relief. I hated sending her into a panic attack.

Once she'd calmed down, I asked, "Now, what's wrong?"

As her eyes filled with tears, I started brushing them away before they could fall.

"This is it," she said. "After you leave, we'll never go on another date, never..."

"Never cuddle on your bed and watch *Favored Alan and the Sanguine*?" I asked.

Sniffing, Islae nodded, and I squeezed her.

"Why would we stop?" I asked.

Blinking at me, Islae said, "Because you'll choose House Kolb tomorrow, and I'm from House Kirst."

Of course. Houses, Houses, always the fucking Houses.

“So?” I asked.

When Islae wrinkled her nose, I chuckled.

“Why should I care about which House you belong to? All I want is to spend time with you,” I said. “Besides, Kirst and Kolb are allies now, right? So, why should we stop seeing each other?”

When she continued casting a doubtful look my way, I huffed.

“Look. If it’ll make you feel better, you’ll be my first date after my House naming,” I said. “Do you want to schedule it now?”

“No. You can send me a message like you always do,” Islae said. “Thank you, Zae.”

“Anything to make you happy, teacher,” I said.

I couldn’t help saying that. Technically, Islae was a teacher, what with her belonging to House Kirst, but she’d never liked it when I reminded her of that fact.

Jerking away from me, Islae swatted my chest.

“I. told. you. to stop calling me that,” she shouted.

Raising a feeble defense against her, I said, “Ok, ok. I’m sorry. I really do need to go, though.”

“Fine.”

Moving in again, I said, “May I kiss you today?”

Islae cocked her head before nodding.

“I think so.”

With her consent given, I did as I’d wished since the beginning of our date last night, if more gently than I might like. Islae might not enjoy much physical intimacy, but I hadn’t started dating her for that reason alone. I didn’t mind that sex was intermittent in this relationship. Other people, ones who enjoyed activities like that, could fill that need. I went on dates with Islae because I enjoyed her company.

When I pulled away from the kiss, I lifted her off the ground, twirling her, and she shrieked with laughter.

Setting her down, I said, “See you soon.”

“Mmhmm,” she said. “Good luck with everything over the next couple of days.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.”

While Islae entered her apartment, I started sprinting down her street, pleading under my breath for the morning’s first shuttle to be at the closest stop. Islae’s luck paid off. I made it inside the craft thirty seconds before it took off, winding through people to find a handhold.

Once I had one, I peered through a window into Xygek’s bustling airways. So many shuttles and transports and skycruisers clogged the space between towers, all at designated levels, that it could overwhelm the mind. I, on the other hand, had always found it soothing, which was something I needed right now.

The last few days had been hectic, more so than I was used to. I’d forgotten how many of my partners lived in Xygek. Finding time for all of them had been difficult.

I wasn’t complaining! Far from it.

I was, however, ready for a day quietly spent with my family, even if it meant returning to a persona that I’d abandoned since reaching the capital. Even if it meant holding my emotions at arm’s length again.

When the shuttle reached my stop, I hopped off of it to the surprise of everyone inside. What could I say? I didn’t look like high Strata material, thank Mother Time.

As I strolled down a markedly less crowded street than the ones I’d been walking over the last few days, heads turned my way, and I shoved my hands in my pockets, whistling an off-key tune while nodding at the people staring at me. Once I’d reached my parents’ apartment, I stepped inside unchecked, scuffing my feet in its empty foyer.

“I’m home,” I called, sending out messages as well.

While waiting for people to respond, I headed into the kitchen, having the refectory make me pancakes and eggs once there. I was enjoying my breakfast in a nearby room with my feet propped on a side table when Pheniks found me.

“You’re late,” he said.

“And you’re annoying,” I said, pointing with my fork. “What of it?”

Rolling his eyes, Pheniks plopped into a chair without another word. Feena arrived soon afterward, and rushing to me, she swiped at my raised legs.

“What are you doing?” she hissed. “Mom and dad are already irritated.”

Keeping my legs in place, I sucked on my syrup-coated fork for a moment.

“Are they back to fighting?” I asked.

“Yes,” my siblings said as one.

That explained their irritable behavior.

Sighing, I sat up properly, quickly finishing my food, and after a drone took my plate away, I glanced between Feena and Pheniks, trying to decide which of them would win the award for the most pinched face.

We heard them before we saw them.

“-always been too soft on him,” dad was saying. “Who knows how that will affect his placement?”

Great. They were arguing about *me*. It looked like today wouldn’t be as peaceful as I’d imagined.

My parents entered the sitting room, which stopped their sniping battle for the moment, and at their glares, I lifted two fingers.

“Hey,” I said. “Sorry I’m late. I missed my shuttle.”

Dad sucked in a breath with his nostril flaring, but mom slapped a hand on his chest before he could shout at me.

“It’s... fine, Zaeden. How have your last few days been?’ she asked. “How’re your friends?”

Friends. Hah.

“Good. They say hello,” I said. “How about you?”

“We’ve been busy,” dad snapped, “and worried.”

Damn, this knot would be difficult to unsnarl.

“I should’ve kept you updated,” I said. “I’m sorry about that, but I’m here now! What needs to get done today?”

That wouldn’t be nearly enough, but returning them to reasonably hostile levels would be a long slog, one I’d have to work on throughout the day.

“Well first, we have to choose what you’re wearing tomorrow,” mom said. “Then, the neighbors would like to congratulate you, and later tonight, we have a formal dinner to attend, which again, you’ll need to choose an outfit for. It must be properly respectful, Zaeden. After we eat, our host will be holding a ceremony, one to honor those who’ve joined the Collective this year and...

“Oh, I’m sure I’m forgetting something, but those are the most important of today’s activities.”

Fuuuuuck... *Why? Why, why, why?* This would be *torture*.

With a cheerful grin in place, I rubbed my hands together.

“Let’s get started.”

“Good to see you eager about something besides the people you’re sleeping with,” Pheniks said under his breath.

Air was sucked out of the room, taking motion from its occupants as well. My brother had come close to breaking one of Lutov’s most frowned upon social gaffs, almost as bad as asking an unHoused what they’d choose at their House naming.

No one expressed an opinion on someone’s sexual preferences or their presentation of gender. It just didn’t happen.

I, however, was used to Pheniks’ obliviousness when it came to this and all other things social. Feena and our parents matched his tastes, so he never made comments like this to them. I did not, and the rest of my family wasn’t around often enough to have observed my brother’s many blunders.

I’d never let them bother me, though, because he wasn’t making these comments out of disgust or hatred. Pheniks had a propensity for saying what was on his mind, especially when it came to something that he considered interesting or unusual.

Like me.

“Really, Phen, the way you put it, you’d think I’m only interested in sex,” I said, rather mildly.

Glancing at me, Pheniks frowned.

“That’s not what I-”

As he realized what he’d said, my brother winced.

“Hell. Sorry, Zae,” he said.

See? He never meant it.

“No problem,” I said before clapping my hands. “So! What are we starting with? And don’t say choosing an outfit for dinner. I’ve already got that covered.”

My family looked a little startled that I’d so easily forgiven Pheniks. Maybe I should tweak that behavioral pattern. I hadn’t thought it worthy of applying a pretense to, but maybe I’d been wrong.

“How about we look at your options for your House naming ceremony, then?” dad shakily said.

He gestured, and several outfits appeared from thin air, left hovering in place. I instantly knew which of these I wanted to wear, but I wasn’t sure how choosing it would go over, both with my family and with the people who would be gathered at tomorrow’s ceremony.

Most of the outfits were colorful and embellished with many a decorative button and clasp. They followed Lutovish standards: a garish display of the rainbow.

The last of them was black, no color at all. Strips of white highlighted its seams, the cuffs of its boots, and the stitched Vs in its shirt, but those were the only concessions that other colors had been given.

It was a slightly more formal and militaristic version of House-issued clothing, which was what I typically wore, and I loved it. I wondered why it had made the cut for my choices.

“Well?” Feena asked with a twinkle in her eye. “Will you try them on?”

Ugh. Did I have to?

“Sounds fun,” I said. “Are you lot staying while I change? You know I don’t mind an audience.”

Rolling his eyes, dad snapped his fingers, and the outfits disappeared.

“They’re in your room,” he said.

Hearing that, I pouted, pulling out all of the stops, but dad didn’t flinch. Damn. I knew I looked sickeningly adorable right now. Was dad immune to that trick now?

“You’re no fun.”

Flowing to my feet, I spun, pointing my finger accusingly.

“None of you.”

I left them behind, heading for my room, and when I entered it, my array cued a host of processes that I’d set to run when I arrived.

For several seconds, the lights bloomed to full brightness, banishing shadows from every dark cranny, before dimming to comfortable levels, and music—a collection by Maliva—resumed from the point where it had last been playing. A fresh, spring scent replaced any staleness hanging in the air, and above my side table, a cooler prepared a whiskey sour—my favorite—for me.

Ignoring the clothes that were floating like ghosts at the foot of my bed, I retrieved the drink, downing it in a few gulps. I’d need its support today.

After a period gone without it, stepping back into my persona was always difficult. Sometimes, it could take up to an hour before it had settled into place. I was fairly good at faking it until then, but with what my parents had planned for today, relying on skin-deep pretenses might not be enough.

I’d known that today would require preparation for tomorrow’s ceremony, but I hadn’t expected so much of it. All I’d wanted was to relax before making a decision that would determine the rest of my life, binding me to a House.

What I wanted, however, had never had a bearing on... well, anything.

I endured my private fashion show for my family, carefully watching their faces every time I entered the sitting room. They had a clear favorite out of my clothing choices, but as expected, it wasn't the one I liked. Before leaving my room for a final time, I ran a finger along its sleeve. It was too bad. I'd have looked stunning in this.

Once I returned to the sitting room, dad materialized the outfits in front of us again, and an animated discussion about which of them I should choose might have commenced if someone hadn't joined us at that moment.

From the entrance to the sitting room, Talira asked, "Am I too early for tea?"

"Mom! What are you-?" dad yelped before falling quiet.

I couldn't blame him for the outburst. My grandmother was usually too busy to visit us in person. Having her here rang an alarm bell in my head.

Meanwhile, my mother strode to her with her arms spread wide.

"It's good to see you," she said. "How can we help?"

Brushing past mom, Talira entered the sitting room, and I faintly smiled. For as long as I'd known her, my grandmother had had a sixth sense for when my parents were arguing, one I'd admired since I was a child, and she always expressed her displeasure with their conflicts in the most amusing of ways.

"Like I said, I'm here for tea," she said.

She gave the room a cursory glance, lingering on the floating outfits.

"Zaeden's house naming ceremony is tomorrow, yes?" she continued. "I thought we could share snacks and hot drinks in celebration."

"Wha-?"

Shooting to her feet, Feena did *not* look happy.

"You didn't do that for my House naming," she said through gritted teeth.

Folding her arms behind her back, Talira faced us three 'young ones'.

"If you'll remember, I was busy with an Ibisian revolt at the time, Feena dear. I'd have visited if I could," she said. "Zae's lucky enough to go through this process at a relatively peaceful time. So. Tea?"

Mother Time, why were they giving her so much trouble? Didn't they remember who she was?

Standing, I dipped my head to her.

“Tea sounds wonderful.”

Since I was unsure what capacity she was here in, I’d left off her title or a name, and from the lift of her eyebrow, I’d say she’d noticed this.

“Maybe we can take it in the garden?” I suggested.

The garden, where I’d have more room to maneuver if needed.

“A wonderful suggestion,” Talira said. “Thank you, grandson.”

So, she was claiming her visit was of a familial nature. I wasn’t sure if I believed her.

As the others bustled out of the room, I watched my grandmother chat with Pheniks. Did she know that I’d overheard one of her private conversations, something that had seemed quite delicate in nature? Was she here to ‘speak’ with me about it, and if so, what would our conversation entail?

As we ambled down hallways toward the garden, I managed to secure the position furthest to the rear, but when we arrived, Talira insisted that I sit beside her, negating my work. I listened to my family’s chatter through a haze, automatically laughing when Feena made a joke while we sat.

With the way Talira had positioned us, I couldn’t easily escape. Had she done that on purpose?

If required, I could get around my parents and sister, but I doubted I could avoid injury to either party while doing it, especially not with former *Lokke Vitras* Talira behind me. Pheniks probably wouldn’t get in my way, unHoused as he was, but if he did, he was no threat to me.

He’d never been a threat.

Once I was inside the apartment, fleeing should be easy enough, and after I’d joined foot traffic on the street, I could make plans from there.

As soon as I knew that my safety was relatively secure, I returned to the conversation, even as I queued a request for my rifle’s formation in my array.

Perhaps thirty seconds had passed. Feena was still glowing from having made us laugh while mom, dad, and Pheniks were relaxed, sipping from steaming teacups or nibbling on finger foods, and Talira...

Talira had eyes only for me, watching me as if I’d become the most fascinating person she’d ever seen. Her eyes were cold enough to make me shiver, but rather than doing that, I gave her a small smile.

As if in response, Talira snorted, slamming her teacup onto the patio table, before bursting into laughter. Considering she never lost control like this, *ever*, we stared at her like she’d gone insane,

but she just flapped a hand at us.

“Don’t mind me,” she gasped. “I just got Feena’s joke. Slow, I know.”

Never had I seen so many dubious expressions displayed in a gathering of people before, but my family let their doubt go, returning to stilted conversation. Their tension relaxed at the same rate as my forced plunge into my persona.

Within a few minutes, they were joking and chatting with the distinct addition of myself and Talira this time, and I was acting like the Zaeden they’d always known. I even managed to flick an acorn into Feena’s drink at one point, to her annoyance.

When our cups held only tepid tea and crumbs were littered across the patio table, my parents started glancing Talira’s way, obviously anxious about a possible upset to their schedule, but she didn’t seem to notice their worry, carefully setting her teacup on ceramic tiles.

“I’d like a private word with Zaeden,” she said. “We’ll only be a moment. You can wait for us in the sitting room while we chat.”

My grandmother, I decided, had a unique talent for flipping the mood of a get-together. As my parents stood, their smiles were tight.

Bowing to Talira, they said, “Of course, *shukusen*.”

Feena had left her seat by the time our parents had risen, but Pheniks was still lounging in his.

“I’m tired. Can’t I just take a nap here?” he asked. “I won’t listen to them talking.”

“No,” Feena shortly said.

Dragging our brother to his feet, she pulled him into the apartment with our parents having already disappeared inside.

Which meant I’d soon be facing my grandmother, the head of House Kolb and a former *Lokke Vitras*, all by myself. Great.

TTS Chapter Twelve

Revision #3

Created 18 November 2024 01:23:33 by FatalisticFable

Updated 19 April 2026 01:46:05 by FatalisticFable