

# Chapter 17: What the Hell Am I?

The face of the man shouting at me had been red for a solid five minutes now, and I was beginning to worry about his blood pressure. Should I get him to a hospital?

Also, why wasn't he regulating his hormones? I'd heard House Kolb members were good at that.

When he took a breath, I swooped into my opening.

"I'm sorry, but unless you have an override from your *shukusen*, advanced technology of any kind, weapons most especially, isn't allowed in Ibis," I said. "Shouldn't you know that?"

The man's mouth flapped open, which gave me more satisfaction than I cared to admit.

"I want to talk to your superior," he snapped.

Of course he did.

"You're welcome to it. I've sent you directions to her office," I said, "but unless I hear otherwise from her, these items will stay in the Travel Center until you've finished your visit in Ibis."

I waved a hand over a counter-top, covered in grenades of some sort as well as a host of other weaponry that I couldn't hope to identify.

"Fine," the man growled through tight lips.

Turning on his heel, he marched out of the inspection room, and I clicked my tongue. Members of House Kolb were the worst, arrogant snots who believed they were above the rules. Dealing with them always gave me a headache.

Piling the confiscated weapons in my arms, I hurried to deposit them in a lockup. They'd wait there until their owner got his irritating self back to Lutov, where he belonged.

Ibis was Vaessa's realm. The other Houses could keep the homeland. Mine would rule here, where we had *bakava* aplenty to serve our needs.

Once I'd finished with my final task of the night, I headed for my assigned lockbox. After I'd retrieved my things, I'd go home, there to spend a few hours watching a holodrama before bed. A perfect night to round out an awful day.

“Clarx!” someone shouted behind me.

Glancing over my shoulder, I waited until the woman who’d called for me caught up.

“Good evening, Sixth Stratus,” I said.

Rolling her eyes, Keaya said, “Mother Time, Clarx. Always so reserved. You need more fun in your life.”

Withholding from frowning at her, I resumed my trek with my hands held behind my back.

“Perhaps,” I said. “Do you need something, Keaya?”

Hopefully, she’d only want to exchange a few pleasantries before we parted ways. I couldn’t deal with her and the drama that inevitably accompanied her tonight, but of course, she refused to leave well enough alone, poking my shoulder instead.

“I told you call me Kea,” she said.

“Fine. Do you need something, Kea?”

Pulling in front of me, Keaya stopped short, forcing me to halt as well.

Tapping her lips, she said, “You’re even more uptight than usual, which is a minor miracle. What’s got you so bent out of shape?”

For a moment, I considered lying to her, hoping to get her out of my way, but how could telling her the truth hurt me? It would probably save me time in the long run.

“My last arrival of the day was a Second Stratus House Kolb member,” I said.

“Oh.”

Her face went sour while her lips shriveled.

“No wonder you’re so grumpy,” she said. “I hate those assholes.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said.

Stepping around her, I forced her to pick up the pace if she wanted to stay by my side, and it appeared that she did, more was the pity.

Keaya was wonderful on most days, but like she’d said, I wasn’t in the greatest of moods. I didn’t want to deal with the numerous conundrums that she forced me to confront about my life, not when a simple evening at home was calling my name.

“How shall we get you relaxed?” Keaya said, as if to herself.

After a moment, she nodded once, taking my hand to drag me after her.

“Kea! What are you-?”

My protests made a babbling echo in the hall until she turned us into a supply closet, meant for the *bakava*’s use. When we burst inside, one of them, a male, was inside, frozen in place with cleaning supplies in its hand.

“Out,” Keaya barked.

The *bakava* hesitantly edged toward the door, keeping its wide eyes fixed on us.

“NOW!” Keaya roared.

Her displeasure banished its caution. It tripped over itself to escape us, and once the door had slid closed behind the *bakava*, its locks thumped into the ceiling and floor.

Over Keaya’s head, I eyed the closet’s small confines, more than a little lost as to why she’d hauled me in here.

“What are we doing here, Kea?” I asked.

Spinning to me, Keaya rested one hand on her hip.

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re following a classic trope,” she said. “You’re going to fuck me in a cleaner’s closet.”

As she’d said this, she’d poked my chest and hers in quick succession, and with heat rising in my cheeks, I found myself speechless for half a moment. I was going to *what now?*

“We can’t,” I hissed. “We may have been... intimate in the past, but I told you that it had to stop. It’s highly inappropriate.”

I couldn’t believe that I had to remind her of this. In fact, I couldn’t quite believe that I’d found myself in this ridiculous situation.

“How is it inappropriate?” Keaya shot back. “We’re done with House work for the day, are in a secluded spot, *and* we don’t work on the same team anymore. No one can claim that we’re favoring one another on the job.”

Dammit, I couldn’t listen to her, not again. I needed to get out of here. Keaya appealed to something wild in me, always had. It was something I had to deny. I couldn’t give in to it again, no matter how much I might want to.

“And your husband?” I asked. “What would he think of this?”

Flushing, Keaya snapped, “He’d ask to watch. He’s not a prude like you.”

That one statement was enough to make my mind go blank, and at my side, my fingers twitched.

“A prude?” I said in monotone.

Throwing her head back, Keaya groaned.

“Yes, Clarx. Can we please, just once, skip this song and dance? Forget the rules. We both know what you want. We both know what I want,” she said. “Mother Time! Just fuck me already.”

Lowering her head, she snarled at me with sparking eyes, and the wild part in me responded to it. I teetered over an abyss, nearly regaining my balance, but when she snapped her teeth at me, I lost myself.

Quite a while later, Keaya laid a finger on my cheek to turn my gaze toward her.

“Good,” she panted. “You did good. How do you feel? Less tense?”

“Maybe a little,” I said.

I kissed her again, softly this time. It was always easier to show her this vulnerable side after she’d done everything she could to help me relax.

Unfortunately, a message slipped into my array while I was there, and on reading it, I jerked away from Keaya, leaving her reaching for me.

“No... not yet,” she said before releasing an exasperated sigh. “Well? What is it? What’s come along to interrupt us this time?”

“That bastard from House Kolb has gotten an override from his *shukusen* for his weapons,” I said. “I have to return them to him.”

“Make him wait,” Keaya said. “Stay with me. One more round. Please.”

I kissed the tip of her nose.

“Maybe later,” I said. “Why don’t you head to my place? Once I’m done with this annoyance, we can take turns insulting House Kolb.”

“You promise?” Keaya asked.

“I promise.”

Her shoulders rose and fell, but with thin lips, she nodded.

“All right.”

Collecting ourselves, we stepped out of the supply closet, separating without a word.

I returned to the lockup that I'd abandoned not a quarter-hour before, but on reaching it, I found my quested-after items missing. Frowning, I requested a feed of everything the room's recorder had captured since I'd left, and in it, I watched a lower Stratus member take the weapons, nervously glancing around before leaving.

What had she been *thinking*? One didn't take something so dangerous from its proper place. Despite hating their arrogance, even I'd admit that House Kolb members were the only people qualified to use equipment like that.

I made a request for my array to receive any further sightings of the thief, following in her wake once I had what I needed. I didn't know what I'd do when I located the woman, but I had to find her.

The task took me a while, far longer than I wanted to keep Keaya waiting, but eventually, I tracked my quarry to a warehouse, or Vaessa's version of one at least. She was meeting with three other people there with all of them clustered around her bounty, and huddled in the shadows outside, I listened to their conversation.

"This is excellent, Vray," a man said. "The children of Ibis should make good use of these."

"I certainly hope so," Vray grumbled. "Trailing the idiot who left them in lockup was hard. He kept slipping away from me."

"But you got what we needed in the end. Our allies will find these weapons helpful," another woman said. "We shouldn't stay gathered like this for long, though. Having everyone in one place isn't good for the plan, not with so many of us already compromised. So, take a few items, and let's get out of here."

As she'd been speaking, something deep inside of me had resonated with my situation. I didn't know what it was or why everything about the situation felt so familiar... until the persona of 'Clarx' slipped away, replaced with Zaeden, with *me*.

As soon as the switch was done, I was left shuddering at my behavior over the last four months. Hell, Keaya had been right. I *had* been a prude. The thought made me gag with my stomach revolting against me.

I was myself now, though, and my goal in Ibis was nearly achieved. I had only one thing left to do before I could go home.

Taking a deep breath, I strode into the warehouse.

## **[TTS Chapter Seventeen](#)**

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Revision #2

Created 19 November 2024 06:37:52 by FatalisticFable

Updated 19 April 2026 01:48:42 by FatalisticFable