

Chapter 18: A... Worrying Incident

With a shuddering gasp, I straightened in my seat. A blanket fell over my senses as I fumbled for the knife that was always stashed beside the console in these skycruisers. I had to let this awfulness, boiling inside of me, out. I *had* to relieve this guilt, so I set the blade's edge to my forearm and with a jerk, opened its containing skin.

And it helped. A little. As blood trickled from the wound, dripping onto my clothes, I watched, fixated, while waiting for my body to fix itself. Once it had, I reversed its work and hell...

Why did something this destructive make me feel so much better?

They found me like this. I wasn't aware of landing, held prisoner by a flashing blade and the heated flow of my worthlessness from each cut. I was so enthralled by it that I didn't resist when someone snatched the knife away from me, just holding my mesmerized eyes on flesh that was slowly knitting together.

Why did it do that? Why wouldn't my body let me have a shred of evidence about how much I disgusted myself?

"What do we do?" a subdued voice asked.

With a sigh, someone else said, "Everything we can."

A shadow passed over me, quickly followed by warmth taking hold of my wrists, and I was dragged into bright light. I followed an insistent tug, aware somewhere deep inside of what was happening, but I was ignoring that part of my brain, ignoring anything that would steal me from this blissfully numb ignorance. I'd turned myself off, and I *dared* someone to bring me back.

Clothes came off of me, piece by piece, and when my shirt was removed, a little sob filled the air.

"So much blood," someone said. "Why would he...?"

"I don't know," someone else murmured.

Fabric flopped to the floor while a wet rag was wiped over the stickiness on my body.

"Has... this... happened before?"

"No. Similar things but never anything this extreme."

With my body cleaned up, an outfit was wrestled onto me.

“What do you think happened? It must have been bad to...”

The silence stretched, and I listened to it, curious about what he’d say.

“Would you agree that protecting and supporting his loved ones is among Zae’s most central traits?”

“Oh, absolutely. Without the people he loves, Zaeden would probably self-destruct.”

I could imagine the pointed look he was giving her now.

“Oh... Oh, Mother Time. Do you think...?”

“I do. This deep-cover mission probably had him hurt someone he loves, most likely Pheniks, and you know how he is about his little brother.”

“SHIT! Mother fucking Time, damn it all to hell! What the fuck do we do?”

“I told you. I don’t know. Something similar happened to me when I was the *Lokke Vitras*, and my reaction was... not good. I was persistently drunk. For a week. It’s why I don’t drink anymore. Talira had to send all of Kolb’s Second Strata to snap me out of it, and even then, I wasn’t right. I didn’t fully recover for almost a decade.”

“I’m... so sorry.”

“It’s in the past. It doesn’t matter.”

Somewhere, one person hugged another.

“Still, we can’t let that happen to Zae. No one deserves to suffer like you did, least of all him. He’s too good... Not that you’re bad, Ko.”

“I knew what you meant.”

Someone hummed.

“Maybe... the nursery? Do you think seeing our progress with it would help?”

“It couldn’t hurt.”

Again, I was tugged along, and I should... feel safe. I should... feel whole and right. Even purposefully ignorant of my surroundings, I knew this. But I was just...

I was nothing.

“How are we getting him through this mess?”

“I’ll clear a path. You stay with him.”

Noise battered at my mind’s door, and the grip on my wrist tightened.

“Please be ok,” someone said. “Please, love.”

I was ushered somewhere bright and colorful. Such happy hues. What I was looking at must be nice.

“What do you think, Zae? We did what you asked. It’ll be a while before it’s finished, but it’s a start.”

Something warm caressed its fingers over my skin, matching the glow surrounding us. The sun? Why was its color more orange than yellow? Was it already evening?

“It’s not working. Why isn’t it working, Ko?”

“Stop, love. You cannot lose it right now. Zaeden will be fine. He just needs time. Help me get him on the floor, and we can just...”

“Hold him?”

“It’s all I have.”

I was sitting between the two halves of my home, and the comfort of it brushed up against me, beckoning. Cajoling. I wanted to indulge this request to dive into them and let everything fall away, but that would involve turning my attention to my surroundings. To be with them, I’d have to drop the safety of numbing ignorance, and I didn’t... I didn’t know if I wanted that.

“I haven’t eaten anything all day. Do the drones’ sweeps include this room again yet?”

He’d sounded lazy, like he was drifting off.

“No. Sorry. They kept knocking the paint cans over.”

She’d sounded like she was barely holding herself together.

“That’s ok. I can find one. Will you be all right by yourself for a few minutes?”

“I think so.”

“Ok. I’ll be right back. Everything will be fine, Leski.”

Oh... I knew that tone. It was the one he used when he was scared. I didn’t often hear it, but when I did, it worried me. Why didn’t it bother me now?

One half of my home left me, and the fingers of warmth on my body slowly retreated while an orange glow darkened. A single sob broke against my ears while damp heat pressed into my neck.

What was this? I knew this feeling. I *didn't like* it. My comforting cocoon shuddered, and I knew what was happening. She was crying.

That was *not* fucking allowed.

When I blinked myself into awareness, I drew my eyebrows together. Well. This room had changed.

Once a place where guests could sleep, metal cans now cluttered it with a tarp laid over its carpet. A half-finished painting of flowers and stars and... a castle—why was there a castle?—filled the wall opposite me, and to either side, boxes and cribs crowded an otherwise open space.

I was on the ground with my back against a wall, and for the life of me, I couldn't remember the specifics of how I'd gotten here. I remembered cutting the connection to Leski and Korix before curling into a ball. A few vague memories from the fugue between were hovering at the edge of my awareness too, but not much else came to me.

Sniffing drew my gaze to Leski, who was shaking against me, and my heart jumped into my throat.

"Love?" I said. "Are you ok?"

I pulled on her, and she assisted me by springing upright. Wincing, I wiped her cheeks free of tears, refusing to see her gaping mouth and wide eyes.

"Oh, Mother Time, you're all right," she said in a rush.

Snaking her arms around my neck, she held me tight, almost uncomfortably so, and frowning, I patted her head.

"Of course I am," I said. "I always am."

Tilting her head the bare minimum, Leski peered up at me, and I turned away from what I saw, making a sweep over the nursery instead.

"You and Ko were busy while I've been gone," I said. "Who's doing the painting? You?"

She *had* had paint on her face earlier.

"We both are. Maybe you can add something to," Leski said. "Zae, do you not...?"

When I glanced at her, she was biting her lip.

"Do I not, what?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

But she shook her head, pulling away from me.

"It's nothing," she said, "but I think you and Ko need to have a check-in chat."

My breathing hitched for a moment before I pushed Leski's head against my chest.

"Maybe," I said.

"*Maybe?*"

Shoving away from me, Leski clambered to sit on my thighs. She took hold of my cheeks, forcing me to meet her eyes.

"Zaeden. Love," she said. "You were *cutting yourself open.*"

And I just stared at her because what was I supposed to say? Sighing, Leski rested her forehead in the hollow of my neck.

"I'm not good at this part. You know that," she said. "So, I'll let you and Ko handle it because it's your thing, but I need you to promise me that you'll address it instead of burying it like you sometimes do. You scared the shit out of me. I don't ever want a repeat of the last few hours."

Damn, she knew how to get to me. With my cheeks still squashed, my voice emerged muffled.

"I... will speak with Ko."

"Speak with me about what?"

Korix sailed into the room, balancing three trays on his arms, and I narrowed my eyes at him. What did he think he was doing? He had to know that I'd caught him hovering for the last half of that exceedingly painful conversation.

"Zae," he said, "nice to see you."

I nodded at him, and carefully, he folded to the ground beside us, handing out trays. Leski climbed off of me, which had the three of us gathered for an impromptu picnic dinner, but before we could begin, a thought occurred to me.

"Have you heard any chatter about Zan in the last two days?" I asked.

My partners paused in reaching for utensils before they turned cheery grins on me.

"Why are you asking me?" Korix said. "I'm hardly ever involved in House business anymore."

Shrugging, I said, "You were in the city when I requested a connection. For book research, was it?"

"Ah," Korix said. "No. I heard nothing while in Xygek. Leski?"

Shifting in place, Leski fixed her eyes on her untouched food.

"Over the last couple of days, the House has come up a lot, yes," she said, "but I wasn't paying enough attention to remember the specifics. I was a little focused on this."

She waved at the nursery.

“Why do you ask, Zae?”

Why *had* I asked? Did I want to further torment myself?

...How sad was it that the answer to that was yes?

“Can’t talk about it,” I said. “Correction. I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

I stabbed my fork into noodles and cream sauce, aggressively twirling it, and pointedly ignored Leski’s nervous glance at Korix.

“What have you been up to for the last few weeks?”

After pointing at them with my noodle-laden fork, I shoved it into my mouth, barely tasting a dish that I usually loved.

“Besides working on this and missing you?” Leski said. “The usual. Nothing exciting.”

“I like the usual,” I said. “Tell me about it.”

So, they did. While we ate dinner, they talked, and I let their voices, their stories, their presences ease me further away from the cliff that I’d stood upon. When we were done, I gathered our plates, bringing them to the first drone I could find. Maybe calling one to me would have been easier, but I needed a break, much like I suspected Korix had earlier.

Their worry... concerned me. Had I truly been so bad off when I arrived home?

Stopping short, I examined my behavior from this afternoon, or what I could remember of it, and winced.

“Yeah...” I sighed. “That wasn’t great.”

And they’d seen it. I needed to get back in there and reassure them that everything was ok.

Revision #1

Created 16 January 2025 18:12:15 by FatalisticFable

Updated 16 January 2025 18:24:47 by FatalisticFable