

Chapter 23: Perhaps I'm a Good Brother 1

The skycruiser set down, and I sat, motionless, in it. I hadn't announced my arrival yet, uncertain how I should phrase the message. My family hadn't seen me since my House naming ceremony. What would they do when I walked through the apartment's door?

Rather than think about that, I glanced around the skycruiser, remembering when *evushk* and I had last used this one. We'd been headed home after completing a mission together, one that had gone poorly for us. He'd been where I was sitting now with me beside him, and after he'd input our destination's coordinates, the air between us had been so thick. I'd thought it was because of a mistake I'd made, so I'd turned to apologize, he'd taken a fistful of my shirt, and... well. I'd gained a fond memory.

The glow of it helped me step onto the landing pad, and after retrieving my bag to toss over my shoulder, I waved off the drones that had come to help. Despite *evushk's* warning, I'd packed only the items that I might need on a normal, daily basis, planning to raid my room for clothes, but now that I was here, I realized that my parents might not have kept my room ready for me.

If they hadn't, it wouldn't be a disaster. I might not belong to a House yet, but my Stratus, or lack thereof, would get me House-issued clothing from any store, and I'd always been most comfortable in those standard outfits.

Wonderful. Contemplation of that subject had gotten me to the door. Now, I needed to decide how I'd do this. How should I behave around my family now?

When I wasn't on missions, I'd learned to discard personas, even if I still kept my emotions on a tight leash. They weren't held separately like they had been when I was a child! But I controlled them, more so than most people did.

I wasn't on a mission right now, but my family had never seen me without a persona. How would they react to the real me on top of our years-long separation?

For a while, I stood in front of the door into the apartment, wrestling with this problem. Fear wasn't keeping me from making a decision. Rather, I didn't have all of the variables I needed, and because of that, I didn't know how to resolve this situation to where I achieved the best possible conclusion. Since I had the time, I'd like to figure it out before entering. I'd rather not fake my behavior when around the people I loved, but I didn't know if they could handle me anymore.

Eventually, the choice was ripped away from me. The door slid open—

“-out with your hands up. How’d you get the codes-?”

—and a rifle’s barrel was in my face. It didn’t matter that a tiny part of me screamed in recognition of the voice I’d heard. I reacted.

Smacking the heel of my palm against the inside of an elbow, I used my other hand to grab the attached wrist. When I jerked it up, an energy bolt singed my temple, and I twisted my hold. With its owner no longer holding it, the rifle dissipated.

Swinging my enemy’s arm around, I hurled them into the door frame, quickly followed by me pinning them in place. I rested a knife—plucked from its hiding spot—against a neck, pressing hard enough that only a little more pressure would open its jugular.

All done in five seconds. All done on instinct.

Then, my mind caught up with my body, and I dropped the knife. It skittered across the floor as I stumbled away.

“Dad? I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean.... wasn’t going to...” I babbled. “Mother Time, what’d I do? I’ll just- I’ll find somewhere else to sleep.”

Spinning in place, I headed for the skycruiser, tapping into nearby recorders to watch my back as I went. Habits ingrained by my training wouldn’t relent, even in the face of me attacking my own damn father.

“*Zaeden?!*”

Holy shit, he’d sounded strange. Had that been joy or fear that had choked his voice?

Didn’t matter. Tucking my chin to my chest, I raced for escape.

“Stop! What are you...?” dad called. “Zae, hang on one damn minute, please!”

I slowed down. Halted. Rested my hand on the skycruiser for support. Waited.

“What are you doing here?” dad asked.

And he cringed. He didn’t mean for me to see it, yes, but I was watching him through the hangar’s recorders. So, I saw him wince in anticipation of a blow.

Fear. While on the way here, I’d gone through the many possible scenarios that I might encounter when reuniting with my family, but in not one of them had I considered that they might be afraid of me.

I didn’t know why I hadn’t. It was the most logical reaction to an unannounced visit from the *Lokke Vitras* to come but...

They were my family. How could dad think I'd hurt him?

Wasn't that what I'd done, though?

Mother Time, the burn in my eyes was getting difficult to ignore.

Slumping, I faced my father with my hands clearly raised, exactly like I did when keeping a target calm.

"I'm not here on House business," I said. "Do you think *shukusen* Talira would send me to apprehend her own son?"

"I think your grandmother's done many terrible things in her life," dad said. "Probably more than you realize."

Oh, I was sure she had. She'd certainly sent *evushk* on enough missions that weighed on him to this day but not me. Never me.

"Phen's House naming is tomorrow, right?" I said. "I'm here for that. I'm here to see my family. I'm sorry I attacked you, dad. It was--"

"Instinct," dad interrupted. "Yeah, I gathered."

Pausing, he examined me for a moment before turning on his heel to march inside.

"Let's get you settled," he stiffly said. "Everyone's in the living room, listening to your brother jabber about some science thing. We'll say hello first. Oh. And if you could give the drones permission to move your skycruiser, I'd appreciate it."

"I don't think that's a good idea," I called.

While dad was already inside the apartment, I had yet to take a step. I couldn't bring myself to move, unable to believe how he was treating the situation.

If this was what I could expect from everyone in my family, I wasn't sure I wanted to cross the apartment's threshold. I'd still do it, if only to see whether Pheniks wanted me at his House naming ceremony, but given a choice, I'd rather stay out here.

Glancing over his shoulder, dad halted, frowning.

"Why not?" he asked.

"The skycruiser isn't mine," I said, jerking my thumb over my shoulder at it. "It belongs to *evushk*, and I'm not sure what sort of surprises he might have planted for any unauthorized users."

"*Evushk*? A teacher. Who-?" dad asked before his eyes widened. "Our First Stratus."

"Well... *your* First Stratus, but yes," I said.

While he was stuck on that thought, I forced myself to go into the apartment, so by the time he shook his head, I was standing beside him, adjusting my bag's strap on my shoulder.

"Is my room available?" I asked. "I know it's been a few years."

"We kept everything the way you left it," dad said. "Couldn't bring ourselves to..."

To what?

Hanging his head, dad wouldn't meet my eyes, which was a... strange reaction. Best not to analyze it, not with everything else I needed to process.

"Can I drop this off first?" I asked. "I can find my own way to the living room, which will give you time to speak with the others. Unless you think I should send them messages instead?"

"No," dad hastily said. "No, let me do it. Zaeden..."

The look on his face pinched my heart.

"I'm not here on House business," I repeated. "The family's safe."

Taking a deep breath, he nodded, trudging toward the living room without a word, and I watched him go until he'd rounded a corner, sending a message once he was out of view.

You didn't warn me about how difficult this would be, evushk.

I was almost in my room by the time he replied.

You needed to experience it for yourself. Feel free to make use of the apartment if you need it. I'll join you in the city soon.

Mother Time, he was being kind to me. It made me suspicious, but then, that was a near constant state when it came to evushk.

After reaching my destination, I did a cursory examination of the place before tugging a side table away from the wall, smiling to see that dad hadn't been exaggerating. If anyone had been living in my room since I'd left, they'd have noticed the hole that I'd knocked into the dry wall here.

Squeezing between the side table and my bed, I sat beside my old stash with my bag in my lap. I noted how badly the items inside needed dusting as I removed each of them.

Prepared kits for pranks.

I rarely pulled those anymore, not that I could. Over the last few years, my only possible targets had been *evushk* or my 'companions' while I was in deep cover. Maybe I could indulge in this old, favored activity while I stayed here. If I stayed.

A few sentimental gifts from partners.

My dating life had suffered in recent years. I'd needed my free time to recharge, leaving nothing extra for other people, and bringing such a lack of energy into a relationship wouldn't be fair.

Did any of my former partners remember me as more than a footnote in their lives? When *evushk* had chosen me as his replacement, it hadn't been highly publicized, meaning most of the people I'd cared about had probably never learned what had happened to me. I hoped I hadn't hurt them too badly by vanishing into thin air.

A go-bag.

The one I'd brought with me was much better equipped than the poor selection found in this one, but given my resources at the time, it wasn't too bad. With it, I could survive for a couple of days, which had always been the point. If anyone had found out about my aspirations for freedom, coming to exile me as a result, I'd have had the supplies needed to help me escape the city, but I didn't need this bag anymore. I was thoroughly ensnared in captivity.

A physical, bound book.

I didn't remember where I'd gotten this. Maybe I'd stolen it during one of my House rotations, when I'd had access to their limited libraries, or accepted it as a gift from a high Stratus partner. I supposed where it had come from didn't matter, though.

This, I'd take home. *Evushk* would like me adding a volume of my own to his already impressive collection.

A message, scrawled in my near-unintelligible handwriting.

Blankly staring at this, I almost crumpled it to toss it across the room. I hated the words on it, words that a child had thought were profound, words I'd been afraid of committing to my array, but this scrap of paper was my start. Once I'd written this sentence, my path had begun, and I couldn't easily discard it.

So, I tucked it inside the book, shoved that into my bag, and banged my head on the wall.

"No one will own me," I said. "Ha!"

Rubbing my eyes, I shook myself and replaced a pile of paltry belongings into my stash before adding my bag to it. After shoving the side table back into place, I had nothing further to delay me.

As I approached the living room, Pheniks' voice drifted out of it alongside occasional murmurs from the others, and I hovered outside of the entrance, taking a moment to enjoy the sound of family. I couldn't keep putting this reunion off, though, and who knew? Maybe mom, Pheniks, and Feena wouldn't have as strong of a reaction to me as dad had. So, I stepped into view and faced the room with gritted teeth.

Dad and Feena were standing in its most defensible corner with several objects between me and them, and a twinge speared through me when I noted my sister playing with a knife in the most

causal way possible. Mom was sitting with Pheniks on the couch, and while he was facing away from me, chattering nonstop, mom had draped herself over the couch's backrest so she could see the room's entrance, keeping her muscles deceptively loose. When I entered the room, everyone who could see me tensed, and I rocked to a stop.

Fuck me. *Fuck me*, why did it feel like someone had shot me through the gut again?

Mother Time, I couldn't do this. Seeing them like this, I was barely holding off a breakdown. If my little brother turned around and looked at me like I'd rip his head off, I would *lose it*.

So, with my hands displayed once more, I bowed to my family, these people I'd thought would always love me, and backed toward the exit.

Damn, I needed something comforting right now. Thank all that might be holy that *evushk* had offered up his apartment in the city. There, I could restrain this horrible hurt until it had faded to reasonable levels or until the *Lokke Vitras* arrived. Considering the circumstances, he might indulge me, participating in an activity that we both loved.

"What are you three staring at?"

Frowning, Pheniks swung his gaze over our family before landing it on me, and with a gasp, his eyes went wide. Hell, I wanted to run. I wanted to flee another rejection, but something held me in place while my brother's face morphed into... delight?

"Zae!" he shouted.

Pheniks vaulted over the back of the sofa, and before I could analyze the best way to repulse him, he'd pulled me to his chest, squeezing me while pounding my back. This additional abuse to my recently healed spine made it complain, but I barely noticed that.

Hesitantly, I made to return my brother's embrace, half-afraid that he'd come to the same conclusion as the rest of my family in the time it would take me to finish it. As I'd thought, he pulled away before I could get my arms around him, and panic fluttered in my throat.

"Mother Time, I'm glad you're here," Pheniks said. "I thought you wouldn't come."

He wanted me here. My brother was treating me the same as he had before the disruption to our lives.

I lost track of time, but I couldn't blame my addlement on an injury today. I'd been set into a swirling drift of wonderful, soul-wrenching emotions, and I didn't make a single attempt to escape it.

I was barely aware of holding Pheniks to me, doing my best to curl over him—Mother Time, when had he gotten so tall?—and refusing to let go, even when he started squirming. I was half-aware of him speaking.

“Zae? Zae! What are you-? Ow! Damn, when did you get so stro...? Holy shit, are you *crying*? What’s the matter? Wh-?”

But then, I overrode him.

“Did you miss me? Did any of you even think about me?” I gasped. “You were always on my mind. On every birthday. Every time I had to do something I didn’t... every time I limped home with my body broken and shattered. Every fucking day and you- you-”

Shrieking realization ripped through me, and I roughly released Pheniks, spinning away from him. Hunching on myself, I squeezed my eyes closed, rapidly clenching and unclenching my hands. When I could, I cleared my throat.

“My apologies, Pheniks,” I said. “You should be celebrating your House naming, and I’m not...”

Forcibly relaxing, I opened my eyes, leeching emotion from my voice.

“I shouldn’t have come.”

I took a step to leave, barely stopping myself from reacting with violence when someone took hold of my shoulder.

“You being here is the best House naming gift I could possibly receive,” Pheniks said. “Don’t go.”

I’d love to spend time with him, but I wasn’t sure how long our parents or sister would tolerate-

“Zae, I’m sorry,” Feena said. “Please, stay. Please.”

I’d gained an acceptable number of allies, enough to change my mind about leaving at least. All the same, I should warn them.

“I’m not the same person you knew. You might not like me now.”

“Mother Time, Zaeden, quit being ridiculous,” Pheniks said. “Find a seat and relax. I was just telling mom about House Cerullis’ most recent report on their exploration of the planet’s mantle.”

“That sounds...”

Boring as hell.

“Interesting,” I said.

“Right?” Pheniks chirped. “So, come on. Where would you like to sit?”

At the insistent tug on my shoulder, I turned to examine the room. Mom was on her feet by the fire, blocking access to Feena from me, and while my sister had moved out of the corner with her expression more welcoming, dad still had his arms crossed. Apparently, my parents had yet to be convinced that I was anything less than a monster, come to brutally murder them, but dad was...

kind enough to relinquish the defensible position he'd taken. As I passed him, I nodded my thanks before leaning against the wall.

Feena took up the spot that mom had abandoned beside Pheniks, and he resumed his explanation of the report. I half-listened, watching my parents creep toward me.

What could they possibly want?

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