

Chapter 29: Restlessness

For what seemed like the thousandth time, I read the fifth line of this process again, somehow keeping my eyes from crossing. Pressure was pounding behind my skull's frontal bone, growing more intense with every moment, and my muscles were so cramped that I was afraid of what would happen when I eventually moved. Meanwhile, Laylah was happily humming behind me, swaying in place. She bumped into me again, and I barely avoided snapping at her, biting my tongue at the last minute. She didn't deserve my wrath, just because I was in a foul mood.

Five and a half months had passed since the last interesting event in my life: the creation of the wormhole hovering in our planet's vicinity. Or its vicinity on a cosmic level, at least. As everyone on our team should have expected, the rest of Lutov hadn't been happy about Cerullis running such a 'risky' experiment without prior authorization, citing something about our overuse of allocated resources for that month to justify it.

What that meant for my team? We'd been put on hold, waiting for Krish to give us a new assignment.

Which also meant that I'd been stuck reviewing processes for other teams, and it had been *maddening*. Both my talent and Laylah's were being wasted because Cerullis had to bow to the other Houses' fear. I was beginning to see why Harvel insisted that they were our inferiors, even if I still vehemently disagreed with him.

When the characters on my monitor started merging together, I rubbed my eyes before releasing an explosive sigh, slapping my palms on the desk.

Glancing over her shoulder, Laylah said, "Problem, Rylan?"

I shook my head.

"I don't know how much more I can get done tonight," I said. "I've been staring at this process for half an hour, and I still can't figure out what's wrong with it."

"You *have* seemed distracted this afternoon," Laylah said, tapping on her lips. "Time to go home for the day?"

Oh, thank Mother Time.

"Unless you have something more you need me to do," I said.

"No, I've got everything under control for now," Laylah said. "You go ahead. I should listen to this last recording, but maybe we can go out for drinks later?"

With a smile, I said, "I'd like that."

"Great! I'll see you later, then."

After packing up, I rushed out of headquarters, unwilling to engage in the torture of social obligations tonight, but once I was outside, I slowed to a stroll because why wouldn't I? The sun felt nice on my skin, and as a random face in the crowd, I didn't have to worry about someone staring at me.

I almost didn't go home. The last few months had been disturbing in that I... I'd been losing time. Mother Time, that still felt wrong to admit, even if only to myself. It had been happening for a while, actually, but I hadn't noticed it until the last few months, and I had yet to figure out what was wrong, although I was fairly certain of the cause.

When I'd picked up on the anomaly a few months ago, I'd maybe, sort of, kind of, gone on a paranoid bender for a little while, although it probably hadn't been obvious to the outside observer. To them, I'd probably seemed a bit more irritable than normal, but in my own head, my life had been a mess. The only reason I'd stopped freaking out about this seeming fault in my mind was that it hadn't negatively impacted my life. No one had commented on strange behavior from me, and in the last four months, I'd gotten enough recreation time before it happened to keep from cracking. Or cracking more than I already had, I supposed.

So, why should I worry about this problem, especially when I couldn't control it? Better to keep it firmly out of mind, when possible.

As usual, when I entered my apartment, an alert flashed into my vision, but I dismissed it without reading its contents. Those alerts were what triggered my episodes of lost time, or that was what I thought, at least.

Pulling my shoes off, I padded into the kitchen, cuing the refectory to make me dinner. While it worked, I retrieved a tumbler, meaning to fill it with whiskey. Yes, I was meeting Laylah for drinks later, but she'd forgive me if I got a head start on that, considering the day I'd had.

At the apartment's mini bar, I frowned, eyeing the empty bottles lying on it. Hadn't those been full when I'd gotten home yesterday? Was this part of my lost-?

I couldn't think about it.

After disposing of the empties, I lifted a bottle to pour myself a finger of its amber liquid, but the sheet of paper beneath it caught my eye. Someone had handwritten a note on it, and each of the displayed words changed in size, as if the writer had had a shaky hand. With my skin crawling, I retrieved the paper to throw it away, but my name, written in big, blocky letters, made me pause.

Mother Time, I shouldn't read this, but as I sank onto the bed with the whiskey bottle in my hand, I couldn't help myself.

RYLAN, YOU STUBBORN BASTARD,

Give me my fucking body back, or you're going to be in so much T.R.O.U.B.L.E. I can't even-

With a sigh, I stopped reading, letting the note float to the ground. After taking a pull from the whiskey bottle, I flopped onto my bed. Mother Time, Rylan's stubbornness was becoming an issue, but... I couldn't focus on that now.

Time slipped me by. I only let it creep back into my awareness when I heard Feena come inside.

"How does it already reek of alcohol in here?" she said.

I couldn't bring myself to say anything, which had my sister clicking her tongue. Coming to stand over me, she snatched the bottle away, holding it up to check the level of the liquid inside.

"I only took a sip," I said. "Enough to last until you got here."

Huffing, Feen replaced the bottle on the mini-bar.

"Should I contact Damari?" she said.

"No."

Rubbing my face, I hauled myself off of the bed's sheets.

"I'll be fine tonight."

Feena stared at me like she didn't believe me, so I slapped my cheeks and smiled at her.

"I promise, Feena," I said.

Without a word, she took a seat at the kitchen table, where we did our evening debriefs, but I didn't join her, pulling my leg under me.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Do you seriously think I ran across an interesting tidbit in the bullshit work that Krish has me doing?" Feena said.

Sighing, I looked down at my hands, folded in my lap.

"No. That was too much to hope for," I said. "Hell, we should have infiltrated another team. When choosing this one, I didn't think that what they were doing would prompt so much outrage."

"Being on lockdown for so long has sucked, made worse by our inability to switch teams," Feena said, "but that hasn't stopped you from running off in the middle of the night recently."

"Like my late-night excursions have done us any good. Whoever requested this neurotoxin has erased their tracks," I said, flexing my fingers.

With a groan, Feena dropped her head onto the table.

“What will we do, Zae?” she said. “I don’t know how much longer I can take this stagnancy, and I know you’re long over it.”

“Not that what I want matters, given who I am,” I said, “but don’t worry. I might have a plan to get us home soon.”

Until now, though, I hadn’t wanted to use it. Not only could it be reckless, but it might pose certain... difficulties for me.

Lifting her face off of the table, Feena propped her chin on it.

“What’s that?” she asked.

Clenching my hands together, I said, “Since we started this, you’ve gotten the occasional report from Talira too, I’m guessing?”

“Yeah,” Feena said. “They’re sporadic as hell, but yeah.”

“So, you know that ever since the assembly that granted him provisional control of House Zan, Phen’s been acting funny?” I said.

Feena went still, not even breathing, and I had to look away. I knew that when it came to Pheniks and me, the pressure for her to pick a side had gotten intense, which had made me reluctant to discuss my plan with her, but she needed to know about it now.

“You’re going to talk to him?” she said.

When I nodded, a confusing mix of expressions crossed her face.

“Will you be going as his brother or the *Lokke Vitras*?” she asked.

I gripped my hands together so tightly that my knuckles strained against my skin.

“Probably both,” I said, “but it might not happen for a while. I need to make a few enquiries before I decide if I’ll approach him.”

Sitting up, Feena crossed her arms.

“As your sister, I think this is a stupid idea, Zae. Phen won’t appreciate the first contact between you since then being an interrogation,” she said. “As a member of House Kolb, I don’t think you have much of a choice with this. You’ve read our grandmother’s reports, the same as me. You know that the *Lokke Vitras* can’t linger here for much longer, not if you’re to keep the month that Talira’s given you.”

“This mystery needs to be solved first, though,” I said. “We can’t leave a dangerous weapon in the hands of a subversive element.”

We sat in silence for a moment, considering the conundrum, until Feena shook her head.

“Well, that’s a problem for another day, and this one is over,” she said. “What are your plans for the evening?”

Lifting a hand, I raised a finger from it for reach task that I rattled off.

“Write my report for Talira. Figure out another way to get damn Rylan back below the surface, where he belongs. Once that’s done, I’ll see if anyone’s looking for a one-off date nearby, and then, either go on said date or listen to my current narration until I fall asleep.”

I hated lying to my sister, but she couldn’t know my real plan for this evening.

Slowly nodding, Feena said, “Sounds good. If you need me, I’m right next door, and... try to go easy on the whiskey?”

“I have no intention of drinking tonight,” I said. “Go to bed, Feena. Rylan will meet you at the usual spot in the morning.”

With a long sigh, Feena said, “Ok.”

She climbed to her feet, pausing with her fingers pressed into the tabletop.

“I love you, Zae,” she said. “Good night.”

“Love you too.”

And she walked out the door.

Revision #1

Created 6 February 2025 20:10:24 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 February 2025 20:24:28 by FatalisticFable