

Chapter 3: How to Deal with Bullshit

During yearly lesson rotations, my stints with Vaessa, the House in charge of maintaining Ibis, had always been my least favorite. Mom and dad disliked Zan for reasons they wouldn't explain. Feena couldn't stand Drav for keeping Lutov's population low, and for some reason, something about Vaessa never failed to piss me off.

I didn't understand why that was. The House facilitated an outlet for my people's stress and aggression, the primary reason we hadn't fought a war amongst ourselves in centuries, but every time I found myself within Vaessa's domain, I struggled with suspending my emotions, what with the desire to punch someone around every corner.

Maybe it had something to do with the House's innate ability to attract the most sadistic and cruel of people. Maybe I resonated with the ground-down helplessness of Ibis' native population. I didn't know what the issue was, but I *hated* visiting Ibis because it was where House Vaessa reigned.

While I waited for Pheniks to finish his transfer through the Terminal, I tapped my foot in a staccato beat while trying to convince myself that I was only doing it to maintain my persona.

Even if this wasn't true, I was willing to forgive myself for it. I wouldn't escape what had disturbed my discipline until we reached Ostiu, and once there, I fully intended to recalibrate while within its borders. When we left, I'd have shaken off whatever was troubling me.

That was the hope at least.

Feena was standing near the entrance to our arrivals chamber, arguing with a receptionist. In the haste of our departure from Lutov, the override on Vaessa's typical search and removal of high-tech gadgets had yet to arrive, which had done wonders for my sister's temper.

She was throwing her weight around like a toddler would with their favorite toy, and while the receptionist was fighting to present her with an unyielding façade, anyone who was looking hard enough could see how much he was cringing away from her.

Behind him, a child of Ibis was waiting with a bucket and mop in hand. A female, it kept its head bowed, especially when it glanced up to find me staring at it.

Centuries ago, the children of Ibis and the Lutovish had lived side by side, equal in station, but a disaster had torn our societies apart, and ever since then, Lutov had claimed dominance. I'd always wondered how my people had won out over theirs or how they could submit to something that was

as good as slavery, even if no one would use that word. If I ever gained my freedom, I would rather die than give up that most precious of gifts.

Pastel green stopped splashing over the chamber's surfaces, and Pheniks apparated beside the beacon. After shaking off the wooziness that one always acquired during molecular transit, he padded over to me, keeping his eyes fixed on our sister.

"Problem?" he asked.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "The usual. Paperwork filed incorrectly. Wouldn't it be nice if we could ignore that bullshit?"

"Such privilege would come with great cost," Pheniks said. "I can only think of one person who pays it, and I don't envy him."

Ah, yes. The *Lokke Vitras*. So much trust was placed in whomever held that role with so many indulgences afforded to them because they were expected to serve as Lutov's shield.

I didn't know whether to envy or pity the man who currently held the position. Of all the Lutovish, he had the most freedom, but he was also our most tightly bound prisoner, if not to the Houses.

The receptionist arguing with Feena frowned, swiping his hand in front of his body, and while his eyes jerked back and forth, as though reading, his face soured. Closing the message he'd received, he fixed an insincere smile in place before gesturing for Feena to advance into the Travel Center, and huffing, our sister turned to us.

"Now that this annoyance is done, do either of you want a translator inserted before we leave?" she asked. "It could be useful. Possibly."

Even as she'd spoken the question, her face had pinched, which meant she was clearly hoping for us to say no. Given that, I wasn't sure why she'd asked.

"Why would I need to speak something besides our tongue?" Pheniks said.

He started toward Feena as if the question had already been decided, but I had other ideas.

"I'd like one, please," I said. "I always thought it was silly that we didn't receive one during our Vaessa rotations."

Stumbling, Pheniks glared at me after regaining his balance, but Feena merely eyed me.

"Are you sure?" she asked. "Translator insertion's—"

"—not pleasant, I know," I say. "If I'm joining House Kolb, though, I'll need one soon, right? I might as well get it out of the way now."

Deflating, Feena gestured from me to the receptionist.

“See it done,” she said. “Zae, we’ll wait for you in the lobby.”

“Sounds good,” I chirped. “I’ll see you there.”

Feena and Pheniks left the chamber with my brother mouthing ‘you’re an idiot’ at me before disappearing, and without any family members nearby, I could drop my constantly held persona.

So far as I could tell, the receptionist didn’t notice the change in me, but his obliviousness was just as well. Instead of reassuring him about what he might have seen, I could work on constructing a more appropriate persona for this place, although I wasn’t sure if I truly needed that yet.

“Come with me,” the receptionist said.

As I followed him out of the chamber, I got a better look at the waiting child of Ibis. Its clothes were threadbare, and while its appearance wasn’t quite gaunt, it was definitely getting there.

As I passed, it flinched, and at the sight, I fought to keep my face blank. Even if this child of Ibis served at Vaessa’s pleasure, it deserved better treatment than what I’d observed here implied. No one should be abused like that.

Perhaps this was my problem with House Vaessa. Perhaps their misuse of something... of someone bothered me.

I couldn’t say for sure, and I’d rather not consider it now. The situation set something boiling inside of me, and placing a feeling like that to the side could be... difficult.

Eventually, the receptionist led me to a lavish room with a reclined chair as its focal point. He waved me toward it with an upturned nose.

“A *kalasa* will be with you shortly,” he said before leaving.

A quick scan of the room revealed marbled surfaces and plasma panels embedded in counters as well as a rolling cart that looked medical in nature. I was sure there was more to the place, but after finding no signs of potential danger here, I let it drop from my awareness.

Alone, I considered what to do next. Pleasing the soon to come *kalasa* wasn’t terribly important, as I wouldn’t be spending much time with them, so instead, I turned my thoughts to the procedure that I’d consigned myself to.

Would it be worth it?

When I joined House Kolb, I didn’t know whether I’d be deployed to Ibis as often as Feena had been, but in the long run, the frequency of my visits here wouldn’t matter. Understanding the Ibisian and Ostium tongues was merely one more tool that I could use, and gathering such a significant resource would be worth the price to gain it.

When the *kalasa* arrived, I was sitting in the room’s reclined chair, bouncing my leg off of it.

“I’ve been told you want a translator inserted. Is this correct?” she said. “Not many visitors to Ibis choose to endure the process.”

“I’m aware,” I said. “Please, just get started. I won’t change my mind.”

Shrugging, the *kalasa* moved about the room, preparing her instruments while I kept watch with a wary eye. Save for my brother, I’d never liked the scientist types, haughty as they typically were, but between Zan and Cerullis, the two Houses centered in scientific endeavors, House Zan members were the ones who most rubbed me the wrong way, especially in Ibis.

Back home, at least a few constraints had been placed on what they could research, but here, they had Ostiu—a nation and its people—as their playground. During rotations with Zan, the House’s members would never say what they did in their hidden testing ground, so I’d always assumed it wasn’t good.

This distaste might, of course, have come from bias. Mom and dad had always spoken of House Zan with disdain, but I’d like to think that I’d outgrown the need for my parents to form my opinions in my stead.

All of this was to say that letting a House Zan member, especially one stuck in Vaessa’s territory, mess with my head made my every danger sense scream, but I’d signed up for this. I’d go through with the translator insertion, even if I’d also monitor the *kalasa*’s progress with a wary eye.

When she was finished with her prep, coming toward me with a monitor and an intimidating-looking syringe, I shook my head.

“I don’t want to be paralyzed for this,” I said. “I’ll risk taking damage to my eye.”

The damage wouldn’t stick around for long anyway, perhaps a day at most, but when a procedure that might cause harm was performed between members of different Houses—or no House, in my case—everyone got in a tizzy about making sure that blame couldn’t fall on them if things went wrong.

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” the *kalasa* said. “If you only knew how many people make that request of me...”

She tapped on her monitor, never looking up from it, and all the while, I considered how I could change her mind. My brainstorm only took me a moment; the solution was so simple.

Still swinging my leg, I crossed my arms with a huff.

“Look,” I said, all superiority and arrogance. “I’ll sign whatever paperwork you need to get what I want, ok? But I won’t put myself at someone else’s mercy.”

As the *kalasa* snapped her eyes up to me, her face twisted. Mother Time, that frown looked like it could split her cheeks in half.

“You’re a House Kolb kid, aren’t you?” she spat. “Fine. Sign the waver. Gamble that you have the self-control to keep still throughout this procedure. What do I care?”

Hell, if I didn’t love it when my chosen persona worked as planned. In this case, playing up the influence of my parents’ House on me had helped the *kalasa* overcome her caution, making her more careless about my well-being.

After all, because of what they did, everyone hated House Kolb. The other Houses would readily acknowledge that Kolb was needed to keep Lutov safe, but necessity didn’t equal likability. Normally, handling other people’s distaste for my family’s heritage was an annoying task at best, but it had worked in my favor here.

A lengthy legal document popped into my array, and while it performed a more thorough search, I scanned the waiver for discrepancies and hidden clauses. After I was satisfied, I attached my designator, a long sequence of numbers crushed into a thumbprint-like kernel, to the end.

When I focused on the surface world again, the *kalasa* was flicking her syringe, squeezing a silver droplet through its microscopic needle, and I used that time to deaden pain receptors and stop the production of the hormones that were known to cause fear.

Theoretically, these precautions should keep me from moving during the procedure, but they were rarely used. Too many people had gotten stuck in the resulting numb state afterward, lacking the self-discipline to reverse it, and this didn’t encourage others to follow their example.

After the many times I’d already done this to myself, however, I knew I didn’t have that problem. I understood how vital pain and fear were for survival.

In situations like this, though, having the ability to turn them off was nice.

The *kalasa* had me recline in the chair, and she slowly, carefully stuck her microscopic needle through my pupil, threading it beside an optic nerve until it touched gray matter. She dumped the syringe’s contained nanites there, setting them free so they could travel to my brain’s speech center. Once there, they’d fuse with the neurons required for me to hear the Ostium and Ibisian tongues as my own.

A similar procedure, one that granted us our arrays, was performed on every Lutovish citizen when we were small, but it was done early enough in a child’s development that no one explicitly remembered what might otherwise be a terrible experience.

I’d remember this one. The *kalasa* removed her needle, and blinking, I waited for a moment, holding off on activating pain and fear again. If I did it now, I’d probably tremble myself out of this seat. The procedure had surely induced a fear too great for me to distance myself from, and I’d like an alert from my array, telling me I was in perfect health, before returning to ‘normal operation’ as well.

“Are you all right?” the *kalasa* said. “I hate it when I nick something vital.”

"I'm fine," I said. "Just... give me a minute."

As I sat up, resting my head in my hands, the *kalasa* shook hers, moving out of view so she could discard her used syringe. While she did that, I slowly released the block on my pain receptors while also allowing my hormones to freely flow.

As I'd thought, I was shaking by the time I'd finished, but it wasn't body-jittering shudders, as it might have been before. Only a slight tremor had been rooted in my hands, and shoving them into my pockets, I hopped to my feet.

"Which way to the lobby?" I asked.

The *kalasa* looked up from a storecase, where she was making a record of the procedure, and when she saw me on my feet, her eyes popped.

"Sit down!" she said. "I have to monitor you for another ten minutes before you can go."

"And I have to meet my sister," I said. "Don't worry, *kalasa*. Your work was impeccable. Everything's working as it should, and if I find that there's something wrong with me later, you always have my signed waiver to protect you."

Mother Time, she looked like she'd licked a salt crystal. It appeared I might have made a long-term impression on a member of House Zan.

Oops.

"Take a left outside. Then, it's two rights, and the lobby will be straight ahead," she said.

"My thanks."

I bowed to her, and at the sign of respect, the *kalasa* froze in place with her mouth gaping open. It was still flapping as the door slid shut behind me.

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