

Chapter 4: Almost There

I didn't know if leaving the *kalasa's* care this early was wise, but I wouldn't keep my sister away from her mission any longer than I must. In an *ii* hunt, timing was essential, hence my rush with the translator insertion itself.

As I followed the scientist's directions, however, I considered playing a quick prank on the House Vaessa members stationed here. Now would make the perfect time for it, what with me wandering through their facility unsupervised, but in the end, I didn't think it would be worth it.

What advantage would I gain, besides further solidifying my persona and perhaps getting a peek at sensitive information? What sort of trouble would I be in when House Vaessa inevitably tracked the prank to me?

No, it was best to resist that urge.

When I entered the lobby—a cavernous space with several doors leading out of it—Feena and Pheniks were sitting in chairs along the wall. My sister was anxiously scanning each entrance into this place with tight eyes while my brother lounged beside her, bored.

Mother Time, he could be oblivious sometimes. Didn't he see Feena's agitation?

When she spotted me, she leapt to her feet, and grinning, I spread my arms wide to keep her from rushing me, returning my hands to my pockets when I could.

"All done," I said as I joined them. "Where to next?"

"You're ok? Really?" Feena said. "We can delay for the afternoon, if you need it."

Throwing my head back, I groaned.

"As I've said multiple times in the last quarter-hour, I'm *fine*. You have a mission, Feena. You should get started on it as quickly as possible. So, how are we reaching Ostiu?"

She stared at me as if hoping the weight of her gaze would drag the truth out of me, and in my pockets, I balled my trembling hands into fists while making a funny face at her. Snorting, she relented, waving me and Pheniks toward a door with a barrier guarding it.

"We'll take a tube to border control, go through Zan's customs, and then, take another tube to Zoln, or you will. I'll head straight to where my target was last seen," she said. "This trip would have been so much easier if Zan would install some of their own beacons in Ostiu, but no. That House has to be too damn secretive."

“Feena...” I said, glancing around.

Fortunately, no one was close enough to have heard her complaining about another House.

“Yes, yes,” Feena sighed. “Let’s get out of here. Hurry along now. Zae’s already caused enough of a holdup. We can’t afford to waste more time.”

“But you just said-” I protested.

Glaring at her, I clicked my teeth together, and Pheniks started snickering.

“Thanks, Feena,” he said. “With that, you’ll be the target of his pranks for the next few weeks. Maybe I’ll get a break from them, considering he’ll inevitably forget his promise to stop.”

As I glowered at them both, they laughed, and for the briefest moment, I let their happiness shine a shaft of light into me.

Then, I ripped it out.

Sniffing, I said, “You won’t be laughing when your weapons jam in combat training or you wake up to googly eyes, stuck on your bedroom’s ceiling.”

I started for Feena’s indicated door, although I soon slowed down so she’d overtake me. When she did, she jostled my shoulder while swiping a hand toward the barrier that was blocking our progress, and it shimmered out of existence. We took the lift behind it into the earth.

Here, immaculately carved statues stood in the room’s corners with pillars bordering the track where the tube was waiting. The marble tiles leading up to it had silver flecks in them, and the wall opposite it displayed an intricate fresco, all of which made me wrinkle my nose.

Too opulent for my tastes.

Leaning into the tube, Feena fiddled with its console, looking as if she’d fall onto the rails beside the platform all the while. While she input our destination, Pheniks waited with me.

“How bad was it?” he quietly asked. “And don’t give me the bullshit answer you gave Feena. She’s been gone for long enough that she forgets certain things. Like when you have your hands in your pockets, it means you don’t want us to see them. Are they shaking?”

And sometimes, my brother was the complete opposite of oblivious. This fact slipped from my mind at times, and when I was reminded of it, he did it in the most inconvenient of ways.

“Maybe they are, and maybe you’re right,” I said. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. It’s over.”

“So, if I wanted to have a translator inserted, you’d tell me to go for it?” Pheniks asked.

I ran my eyes over him, noting his raised eyebrows and crossed arms. I remembered when years ago, he'd broken his arm in combat training, babbling about how much it had hurt even hours after his body had healed itself. I considered what a translator insertion procedure would be like without my cheats to help, and I winced.

"No," I said. "I don't think it would be a good idea."

He tilted his head with a sardonic grin and an 'I told you so' soon to pass through his lips, so Feena's call for us to join her came as a relief. Once we'd climbed into the tube, its lights dimmed while its glass canopy slid shut overhead, and after a short delay, it hurtled down its tracks.

Reaching Ostiu's border control would take a few hours, but as we zipped beneath the earth, neither of my siblings seemed inclined to talk, which was fine by me. I finished the last of my homework with the relative quiet of the tube helping me achieve the tranquil state that I worked best in. The occasional rustle from my siblings' shifting and the tube's shudders accented our silence, keeping it from descending into something uncomfortable.

Once my final work for House rotations was done, I found myself with free time again, and idly, I resumed the narration of the current book in my queue. Scrunching between my seat and the tube's wall, I listened as a soothing voice told a romanticized version of Lutov's war with those from beyond the stars, including the sacrifice of the first *Lokke Vitras* that had driven them away.

I'd always wondered if something besides her heroics had pushed those alien beings off of our planet. Based on everything I'd learned about them in House rotations, I found it odd that the innovations of humans alone, especially those from centuries ago, had been enough to force them into a retreat, but that was the line this book was trying to sell. I set my skepticism to the side while listening to it, if only for now.

I'd just gotten to the part where the first *Lokke Vitras* agreed to accompany our enemy to their home, leaving her fate as a mystery for the ages, when light built ahead of us and the tube slowed down. Soon enough, its canopy slid back, and as Feena leapt out of it, I climbed into the room beyond, jostling my sleeping brother as I did.

Someone from House Zan was waiting for us in the station. This place had a much starker appearance than what we'd just left, but its plainness made sense. Not many tourists visited Ostiu after arriving to Ibis, not when its other nations made much more pleasant destinations.

"Sixth Stratus Feena of House Kolb?" our welcome party said.

"That's me," Feena called.

She helped a sleepy Pheniks out of the tube before striding to the House Zan member.

"I'm here about your *ii* problem. Again," she said. "You know... you might want to keep better track of them. With so many of them going rogue in recent years, I'm on this side of the water more often than not these days."

“Perhaps we should,” the House Zan member said, “but let’s not discuss each other’s quality of work right now, shall we? If we did, we might be here for a while, and I’m sure you’d like to reach your destination quickly.”

“Would you look at that? Someone from Zan, Lutov’s most intellectual House, has a sensible head on his shoulders,” Feena said.

“Feena!” Pheniks gasped.

He was right to act shocked, but while I might display the same emotion, I didn’t feel it. After she’d climbed out of the tube, I’d seen Feena flutter her fingers at this man. I wasn’t sure what the gesture had meant, but he’d smiled when he’d received it.

Kind of like he was doing now. Glancing over her shoulder at us, Feena burst into laughter.

“It’s fine, you two,” she said between giggles. “This is Nyco. He and I are friends from way back when.”

Mystery solved. No wonder my sister had been acting so flagrantly ridiculous. She’d been trying to get a rise out of us.

“These are the pests I always complained about during our lessons, Nyc,” she said. “Zaeden and Pheniks. My brothers.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Nyco said.

“Same,” I said.

Pheniks merely crossed his arms, and with her face red and her body shaking, Feena nudged Nyco with her hip.

“See what I mean?” she gasped.

Shaking his head with his eyes lifted to the ceiling, Nyco patted the top of her head.

“Don’t you have somewhere to be, Feena dear?” he asked.

“Right. Of course.”

Feena coughed until she’d wrangled her laughter under control, but then, she strode to Pheniks and me.

“Sorry. I couldn’t help myself,” she said. “Please don’t hold it against me?”

“As if we could,” I said. “Right, Phen?”

With an explosive sigh, my brother lowered his arms.

“Right,” he said. “Why I was cursed with two idiot siblings, though, I’ll never know.”

I punched his shoulder, and rubbing it, he stuck his tongue out at me. Mother Time, I loved my-
No.

Emotions must remain at arm’s length.

“Ok, you two. I have to go,” Feena said. “Nyco will take you to Zoln and show you around. Enjoy yourselves. I should be back to join the fun before day’s end tomorrow.”

“Good luck,” I said.

Patting my face, Feena hugged us both before stepping into the tube again, and with a rush of air, it sped into a black tunnel, to be diverted to her destination further along the track.

“She’ll be fine,” Pheniks said to himself.

This was the first time our sister had shared that she’d be on an *ii* hunt before leaving to finish it. Of course he was worried. Any good brother would be.

What did that make me?

“Feena tells me that you two have never visited our lovely haven of Ostiu before,” Nyco said behind us. “I’ve planned quite the tour for you. Just wait until you see Zoln! It’s never what visitors expect.”

Another tube slid into place in front of us, and Nyco clapped our shoulders. At the unexpected blow, I barely kept myself from swinging him into metal.

“You ready for an adventure?” he said. “Maybe we’ll see an *ii* before your sister finishes with retrieving hers.”

That idea put a fire in Pheniks’ eye, and I bit the inside of my lip.

I truly hoped that Nyco’s proposed scenario didn’t play out. Dealing with the aftermath of a meeting like that might be troublesome.

I couldn’t show my reservation, though.

“Damn. Wouldn’t that be cool, Phen?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said before scrambling for the tube. “Let’s go!”

Chuckling, Nyco followed him, and I climbed in after he’d gotten settled. Once everyone was in place, we plunged into the dark again, and I resumed my book’s narration. A few more hours and I’d be standing in Zoln, a place I’d never seen before.

So far, this trip wasn't helping me like I'd hoped it would. I'd slipped at least three times since arriving in Ibis, although one of those instances had been deliberate. I'd like to blame their increased appearances on where I was: House Vaessa's stomping grounds, but I didn't know if that was the real reason for my mistakes. Either way, I was leaving it to enter Ostiu, new and fresh territory.

Would it be the answer to my problem?

TTS Chapter Four

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