

Chapter 40: Hints of Trouble

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Somehow, I made it into the house before I completely lost it. I sprinted for an enclosed space, one with no windows, and when I reached it, I slammed the door, engaging its locks.

I couldn't help but feel like someone was after me right now. I knew that wasn't happening—I was perfectly safe—but no matter how much I focused on this fact, it kept slipping away from me. I also couldn't help the need to flee that was creeping up on me, so I slammed my back into a corner before sinking into a crouch.

There. Now, I could see the whole room. Now, I was safe.

As I'd learned to do during previous panic attacks, I took deep breaths, counting each of them in my head. In: one, two, three four. Hold: one, two, three, four. Out: one, two, three four. Hold: one, two three four.

After several dozen repeats of this mantra, I was more clear-headed, if still a little dazed, but it was enough to slowly unwind my body. I didn't get up, merely sinking to the floor so I could work through what had happened. Why had I had such a strong reaction to Baely mentioning her House naming? And how had it snuck up on me like that? I should have known it was coming for years, but somehow, I'd been completely oblivious to it.

Slowly, I picked through the events of the last four months, fighting mental fog the whole time, and once I was done, I winced at what I'd found. How many times had I abruptly left the room when someone had mentioned the upcoming ceremony? How often had I swiftly changed the subject when it had come up? And when that had happened, how eagerly and quickly had I sunk my focus into the new topic? No wonder this new revelation had caught me by surprise.

Still, I should have at least been aware of what I'd been doing as it had happened, but instead, I'd gone through each of those steps unconsciously. I'd never truly thought about my actions. How had *that* happened? Usually, I was exceedingly deliberate with my choices and behavior.

Unless I was on a deep-cover mission. At those times, my personas took over, and some of them were *utterly ignorant* about almost everything that happened around them. I only understood the implications of what they'd experienced once their part of the mission was over.

This experience was similar. Vaguely. I hadn't been on a deep-cover mission in a few months, though, and I certainly didn't remember using a persona even once during that time. Even still, this set of behavior did more match something that they'd do, not me. Could... could they be poking

through, even when I wasn't in deep cover? Could my personas somehow be messing with my everyday life?

Wincing, I pressed the heel of my palm to my aching head. Oh, that idea hurt too much to think about for long. Fortunately, a knock on the door let me drop it.

"Who is it?" I raggedly said.

Korix's voice came through the door, strangely muffled.

"It's me."

Of course it was him. Who else would it be? Hell.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I let the door unlock, turning my face away as he came closer. He sat in front of me without a word, simply taking my hand.

"Are you all right?" he softly said.

Snorting, I said, "What do you think?"

Without replying, Korix brushed his thumb across my skin until I was ready to talk.

"Is Baely ok?" I said.

"Fine," was the only answer he'd give me.

But then, he probably knew I was trying to use that question to avoid the problem, snarled in our midst.

"I don't understand what happened," I eventually said. "It shouldn't have happened. I should have enough control-"

"When you're at home, you don't have to be in control, and you know that," Korix interrupted. "You can relax here. Mostly."

And that was probably why I'd just had a fucking panic attack in the first place. If I'd been anywhere else, it would never have surfaced into my conscious mind, left to simmer in the background.

Sighing, I opened my eyes, meeting his gaze with my guts clenched.

"Is this what you meant about today being important for me too?" I said.

Nodding, Korix said, "When it comes to Baely's House naming, you've been acting strangely. I thought her announcement might shove the issue into the forefront."

“Well, it certainly did that,” I growled before looking away again. “I truly *do not* understand, Ko. How do I keep losing control like this? It scares me. These lapses don’t happen often, but when they do, I always wonder if I’m starting to break like...”

After a pause, Korix said, “Like me?”

Wincing, I nodded. I hated putting it like that. Korix hadn’t *broken*. The pressure of this awful job had just become too much for him, and after how long he’d spent doing it, I couldn’t blame him for that.

“I don’t think you’re breaking, Zae,” Korix said. “I think you’re having a perfectly normal reaction to... this. Perhaps it reminds you of something from the past? Something bad.”

What could that be, though? We’d only been talking about a House naming ceremony, a perfectly ordinary event in the grand scheme of things. But considering my House naming ceremony had been less than pleasant, what with Korix stealing me away from it...

FUCK. No wonder I’d felt like someone had been after me!

Snapping my eyes closed, I said, “Hell. That’s it. The... problem.”

For a moment, I fought against the knot in my throat, but eventually, I cleared it.

“It’s just like when she turned six,” I continued. “When I was that age, I started using personas to hide myself so...”

“You worried circumstances would force her to do the same thing,” Korix said.

Hissing out a breath, I said, “Mother Time damnit all. I need to apologize to her.”

When I started climbing to my feet, though, Korix grabbed my wrist.

“No, you need to think about this,” he said. “You need to feel everything her House naming is prompting in you without shoving it under the rug again. She needs you to do that, Zae.”

He was right. Sinking back to the ground, I clicked my tongue.

“I hate it when you do that, you know,” I said.

But then, I turned inward. Baely was about to go through her House naming. Given... everything, how did I feel about this?

As soon as I examined the question, however, I knew the answer... sort of. I didn’t know the name for this feeling, howling like a gale inside of me, but hell, if it wasn’t familiar. How often had I raged at this disjointed helplessness... dread... despair... in the past? How many times had the conflict nearly killed me? A near-death was what it had always felt like, at least.

But now that I'd acknowledged it, I couldn't stay still. Leaping to my feet, I paced, trying to contain this turbulent energy, but before long, it became too much, and I spilled over. Something *other* seated itself in the core of who I was while I watched myself move.

With a growling scream, I grabbed the closest object, throwing it at a wall, and it shattered. Panting, I stared at its pieces while settling back into place.

"Fuck the House system," I said under my breath. "Fuck Lutov. Fuck me for my fear. Fuck *all of it*."

I'd repeated those words so many times in the past, but the fury never left me. As the storm faded away—

Not gone. Never gone. Just falling back below the surface again.

—I winced. I didn't know if I'd spoken quietly enough, and when Korix came up behind me, twining his fingers into mine, I blew out a breath, knowing he'd heard.

"What are you afraid of, Zae?" he said. "Baely won't have the same experience as you did, and you know it. *You* are the *Lokke Vitras*, and you, more than anyone, will know if and when you'll need a replacement. Even if you did need that right now, Baely is one of the least likely candidates to serve as your *kuvesk*."

I quietly chuckled.

"That's for sure," I said. "She's far too nurturing. Who knows which House she'll choose when she...?"

Eventually had to pick one. Eventually lost her freedom. Like me.

I'd never wanted this for her.

I couldn't change it.

I hated feeling this way.

Turning to Korix, I buried my face in his shoulder, holding back tears. Better to hold onto this fiery heat, burning in my eyes. Better to endure it than to let it out because if I let myself lose control right now, I wasn't sure how long I'd cry. I wasn't sure if the storm inside of me would surface once more, and more than anything, I couldn't let that happen.

Korix held me until I'd pulled myself together, and when I backed off, he said not a word about what he'd seen, just like I'd needed.

"When you're ready, Feena wants to talk," he said. "I sent her to your study."

Right. My sister.

Taking a deep breath, I gathered every emotion that had been pummeling me for the last quarter hour, and when I slowly breathed it out, I boxed knowledge of it away, letting myself forget this overreaction. Mostly. I'd still know it had happened, still be completely aware that I'd turned into a dramatic mess again, but it would feel distant. Like a dream.

Sooner or later, I should examine this again, analyzing exactly *what the hell* had been happening with me lately, but doing it now wouldn't help. If anything, I'd just get overwhelmed, and that was never wise. So. Let it stew. Let it lose its edge. Focus on the present.

On him.

"Thanks, Ko," I said. "For everything."

With a half-smile, Korix said, "Of course. Go see your sister, and once you're done, talk to Baely. She needs her *per* right now."

I knew she did. What a *joyous* conversation that would be.

"But then, come find us," Korix continued. "Leski and I will be waiting for you, whenever you're ready."

Thank Mother Time for that.

"I'll be there soon," I said.

But then, I left, heading for my sister.

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