

# Chapter 43: Theories Based in Fact

Talira was making me stand for this meeting. I'd walked into her office, and not a single chair had been waiting for me on my side of her desk, which was how I knew she was truly pissed. She'd always used subtle signs to express her displeasure.

"Explain to me again how you let an Eighth Stratus get the drop on you. Slowly, this time," she said. "I must be missing something because with the way you've told the story, *you shouldn't have gotten shot.*"

Sighing, I shifted to my other foot, glancing over the view of Xygek behind my grandmother.

"You're right. I shouldn't have," I said, "but instead, I made a mistake, and it almost saw me dead. I'm fine, though. Besides, this isn't the first time I've courted death, my *shukusen*. You, more than anyone, should know that I will make mistakes. Eventually, one of them will kill me."

I shrugged, slapping my hands to my thighs.

"Such is the life of the *Lokke Vitras*. All we can do is keep me alive until I'm prepared to take over your role."

Which given that Talira knew how much I hated the House system, wouldn't be anytime soon. Getting to her feet, my grandmother circled her desk, and after staring at me for a moment, she hauled back and slapped me.

"Stop that, you insufferable moron," she hissed. "Self-pity? Morbid thinking? *Forgetting to check your damn corners?* You cannot afford these things, Zae-zae, and your family can't take your loss, not while your kid's so young."

Did she think I didn't know this?

Wiping my mouth, I said, "Of course. I'll be the first to admit that I'm the biggest of morons."

Sometimes, it was best just to let her win.

Sighing, Talira pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Only at times," she said before dropping her hands. "Come here."

She spread her arms, and I was forced into a hug with her. Soon enough, though, she retreated from me before leaving her office, indicating that I should follow.

We took a lift down a few floors, somewhere we'd encounter mostly high Strata. All that meant, though, was that the passersby would try to ignore our presence rather than keeping their eyes glued to us. I still spied the occasional wide-eyed stare from them, but it was nothing compared to what we'd have seen at ground level.

I was curious where Talira was taking us. Usually, she stayed in her home or her office, save for when social functions required her elsewhere.

That wasn't to say she was a shut-in, of course. If given the opportunity, she'd probably jump at the chance to walk in greater Xygek, but if I was the gun aimed at Lutov's enemies, Talira was the one pointing me the right way. She also dealt with the bullshit paperwork that any bureaucracy required, meaning she had as little free time as me.

We could be headed to my office. Supposedly, I had one around here, but not only had I rarely used it, but I didn't see the point of us going there.

In the end, her reasoning didn't matter. Decades ago, I'd stopped trying to figure out how my grandmother thought. Why was I making an attempt at it now?

"Is there anything else I should know about?" Talira asked. "Any other near-death experiences?"

"No," I said, "but Feena came to see me yesterday. She voiced her concerns about the events surrounding House Zan's recent reorganization."

I was curious how my grandmother would respond to this. Twenty-five years ago, she'd told me not to worry about Fifth Stratus Harvel's culpability in those events. She'd promised she'd have someone look into it, and I was curious if that had actually happened.

Clicking her tongue, Talira said, "This again? I keep telling your sister that these suspicions are paranoid, but every time I think they've been laid to rest..."

She shook her head.

"Like I've told her on multiple occasions, don't bother yourself with this, my *Lokke Vitras*. If there was a problem, I'd have told you long ago."

"As you say, my *shukusen*," I said.

I kept my gaze pinned to her back, though. Was she hiding something from me, or did I truly have nothing to worry about?

"Anything else?" Talira said.

“Not right now,” I said. “Lutov’s safe for the moment, although we both know that could change at any time.”

Stopping short, Talira whirled on me, and I barely stopped myself from bowling her over.

“Then, I have to wonder why you’re following me around like a lost puppy,” she says. “Shouldn’t you be doing your job?”

Oh. I see. This walk had been another form of punishment.

With my lips twitching, I said, “I shall depart your presence immediately, my *shukusen*.”

“Good,” Talira said, “but before you leave, heed me. I expect *you* to be writing my reports from the *Lokke Vitras* for a long while yet. Do you understand?”

That she loved me and was showing it in the only way she could? Yes.

Bowing deeply, I said, “I’m always at my *shukusen*’s disposal.”

“Wonderful!” Talira said, “You *shukusen* wants you gone now. So, shoo!”

Rising, I caught a glimpse of her wry grin before spinning on my heel. Once I was in a lift, I sent a message to Feena, and by the time I’d reached ground level, she’d provided me with a location for lunch: a hole-in-the-wall near Kolb’s headquarters.

Fortunately, I’d frequented this place often enough that the shop’s proprietors knew how to handle me. They ushered me to a private booth as soon as I arrived.

After a sound barrier had been raised around my booth, I slumped in my seat, prodding at my chest. I was almost back to normal, health-wise, but the remnants of my wounds were still sore. That shouldn’t be an issue, though. Considering my injuries weren’t hampering my movement, I wasn’t worried about the leftovers of my mishap, although that made them no less annoying.

Even with that on my plate, Feena had picked a good time to spring a request for help on me. As I pulled up my to-do list, I marveled at how short it was. I hadn’t had this light of a workload in forever, which had been nice. Among other benefits, it had let my dating life once more flourish.

Reminded of that, I pulled up my list of contacts, checking if I’d neglected any of them in recent days, but before I could start a message to anyone, Feena slid onto the bench opposite me.

“Have you ordered yet?” she asked.

“No. Wasn’t sure when you’d show up,” I said. “Now that you’re here, though...”

With a gesture, I retrieved this place’s menu, soon placing an order. I watched my sister make her own choice, and once she’d returned her focus to me, I folded my hands on the table.

“So?”

“I didn’t have breakfast this morning, Zae. I’m not talking about *that* until I have some food in my belly,” Feena said. “If you want a conversation, pick another topic.”

Seriously? She was going to make me wait even longer?

Really, though, that was fine because apparently, Feena had forgotten one important thing about our relationship. I was very good at playing this game she’d started.

“All right,” I said. “How’s life?”

Groaning, Feena slapped her hands to her face, which made me grin. Not only had my sister always hated small talk, but she disliked discussing her personal life, except under special circumstances. Those times usually involved alcohol, of which we had none at the moment.

“That’s right. I can be just as difficult as you,” I said.

“Understatement,” Feena said into her hands.

With no pity for her, I asked, “Does that mean you’re not answering the question?”

Sighing, Feena smacked the table between us.

“Life’s fine for me right now, as you well know,” she said. “If there were a problem, I’d have told you about it.”

“True,” I said. “Still, I had to ask. Are you still seeing that... what was his name? Fredrik?”

“No, we broke up last month. I’m single for the moment,” Feena said, “and before you say a word, you don’t get to give me dating advice. Not only am I your big sister, but our dating styles are too opposite for your advice to apply.”

Humming, I leaned on my elbows, cupping my face.

“I don’t know about that,” I said. “Some things transcend how many people someone dates. Like making sure you communicate with your partners.”

“You’re one to talk about communication and openness, Mr. I Have Too Many Secrets to Count,” Feena said.

“That’s true, but at the start of a relationship, I make sure a potential partner knows that I have secrets, ones I can’t share,” I said. “So.... communication.”

Leaning back, I spread my arms, and while Feena groaned, a drone brought us our food.

“Thank Mother Time,” my sister said.

I could only laugh at that. Something about frustrating my siblings had always been deeply satisfying for me.

“You have your food now, so you can start whenever you’re ready,” I said.

With an even louder groan, Feena threw her head back before proceeding to ignore me, at least for the first few bites of her meal. That was fine by me. It gave me time to enjoy my food as well.

Soon enough, though, Feena got to her story.

“So. The question of who asked House Zan for a weapon that broke the Concords,” she said. “Do you remember stealing a copy of First Stratus Teag’s ‘diary’ during that mission?”

“Of course I do,” I said. “How could I forget the night of the Pinpoint’s creation?”

The experiment that had led to the creation of an artificial wormhole near our planet was still a source of controversy in Lutov, even this many years later. If someone wasn’t protesting how many resources Cerullis had wasted on the ‘useless’ project, they were raising a fuss over its proximity to the planet or something equally as ridiculous. Because of this, I’d long ago despaired of seeing the experiment repeated.

“Did you ever read through that thing?” Feena asked.

Frowning, I said, “I scanned it. Saw nothing of note. Why?”

With a nod, Feena blew out a breath.

“That’s what I thought, not that I can blame you for missing what I found. Teag’s journal is innocuous at first glance,” she said. “I’m sending you some entries with the portions of greatest interest highlighted. Take a look at them.”

I opened the relevant message with a pit in my stomach, and as I glanced over my sister’s indicated passages, that sensation only grew. How had I missed this?

“Why does Teag keep mentioning our Fourth Stratus Elrin?” I said, mostly to myself. “I know that man fairly well. He’s not the type to betray his House, whether intentionally or not.”

“I’m surprised you focused on that, out of all the evidence I’ve presented to you,” Feena said.

Jerking free of my thoughts, I waved for her to calm down.

“Yes, the vague references to Zan and a ‘project’ are suggestive, and with that alone, I’d say we should investigate Teag,” I said, “but this bit about Elrin concerns me. Years ago, he oversaw a missing persons mission, one that I found important at the time. I helped him with it as much as I could, but even still, we never found those people.”

“You think Cerullis was involved?” Feena said.

Humming, I took another bite of my food.

“Maybe,” I said. “I find that hard to believe, though. Knowing Sanya as well as I do, I doubt she’d have approved of something so horrible. She’s much too decent of a person to have allowed it, and Teag’s too attached to her. He wouldn’t have kidnapped citizens for an unknown reason, especially if Sanya disapproved of it.”

I had no clue how those two had kept their relationship a secret for so many years, but I applauded them for it, even if I also wished they could share how they felt. They were in love. That much would be obvious to anyone paying attention, and it was why Teag would never do anything to make Sanya uncomfortable. At the same time, love made people do stupid things at times. I could see Teag abducting people if he’d thought doing so would keep Sanya safe.

I’d never think that of her, though. Never her. Over the last twenty-five years, she and I had worked together too often for me to believe her capable of it. If she possessed a treacherous or malicious bone in her body, I’d know about it.

Which was why I said.

“We should talk to Cerullis’ *shukusen* and see how she responds to this. Perhaps she won’t have a clue about Teag’s activities. Perhaps she’ll have an explanation for him. Whatever the case may be, there’s no harm in consulting with her.”

Drawing her eyebrows together, Feena said, “You may trust *shukusen* Sanya, and I understand why you do, but... what if she was the one who ordered the neurotoxin from Zan, using Teag as her go-between?”

“Then, I’ll have to question my instincts more than I already am,” I said, “but if I’ve misjudged Sanya, then I’ll deal with it. After the other *shukusen* I’ve dealt with, do you think I couldn’t handle a third?”

“I think...”

With a heavy sigh, Feena slumped before grinning at me.

“I think that if you let yourself try, you could do anything, little brother.”

If I let myself...?

Pointing at the remnants of my meal, she continued, “Are you going to finish that? Because otherwise, we should leave. Right?”

That would be wise, yes.

I should probably talk to Talira before interrogating another *shukusen*, but given what she’d said earlier and what Feena had shown me now, I thought she was hiding something from me, although I wasn’t sure what it was. Maybe she was embarrassed about missing this discrepancy. Maybe the

current crop of rebels in Ibis was keeping her preoccupied.

Whatever she was concealing, it couldn't hurt me or Lutov. That was impossible, but even still, I couldn't bring myself to request a connection with her.

So, instead, I scooped a spoonful of food off of my plate, taking a slow bite, and with a huff, Feena got up, leaving the booth and me in her dust. Laughing, I pushed my plate away before scrambling to follow her.

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