

# Chapter 46: What Next?

When we reached Feena's apartment, I hardly registered it, although I was surprised that my unconscious feet had led us here. Why here and not my home?

Once we were inside, Feena pulled ahead of me, guiding the way to her kitchen, and while I took a seat, she fiddled with her refectory. I ran my eyes over the pictures on the walls here, once again gratified to see so many children of Ibis smiling with my sister. I'd always wondered when she'd join the people who advocated for Ibisian rights, like I'd always wanted to do. Did she know how much I'd support that decision?

Finished with the refectory, my sister thrust a glass of amber liquid at me. A whiskey sour. She'd made me my favorite drink when she knew why I hardly touched alcohol anymore.

"Feena..." I said.

"It's just one drink, Zae," Feena snapped. "I won't let you have more, and trust me. You need it."

Sighing, I accepted the glass, sipping from it while she sat. *Mother Time*, that tasted good. For a while, we sat in silence, enjoying our indulgences, until Feena rested her glass on the table.

Twirling it between her hands, she asked, "Are you sure about this?"

Tiredly, I nodded.

"As sure as I can be," I said, "but the fact that I hold Sanya in high regard and the nature of this issue might be clouding my judgment. We both know I've always wanted to get off of this cursed rock. So, what do you think?"

How relieved was I for the opportunity to ask her that? Here, no recorders were watching, showing my uncertainty to others. I didn't have to be the *Lokke Vitras*. I could just be Zaeden, asking my older sister for the advice I so desperately needed.

She looked torn, though. Chewing on her lip, she stared into the distance before sharply nodding. As she opened her mouth to answer me, however, a direct connection established in my array, and I lifted a finger toward her, wincing in anticipation of what I'd soon hear.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Talira growled at me.

Yeah, that was about what I'd thought. She must have heard about my visit with Sanya.

"Well, hello to you too," I said. "Care to be more specific-?"

"I told you to *leave the Cerullis situation alone*," Talira snapped.

I raised my eyebrows. When mentioning Feena's concerns to my grandmother this morning, I'd never shared that Cerullis might be involved with that. At the time, I hadn't even known they were, so how did she? Was her suspicion simply coming from which headquarters I'd visited?

With a hissing inhale, Talira let it out through her teeth.

"Zae-zae, listen to me," she said. "Whatever your sister has roped you into, you need to drop it. Now. Do you hear me?"

Oo, I wanted to do what she'd said. I wanted to ignore this problem, handing it off to someone I trusted, but in the past, doing that had fucked me over too many times. In a way, trusting an authority figure had been what had started the Ancients Crisis. I was never letting a catastrophe that deadly threaten Lutov again. So, I set my jaw and said.

"Why? Is there a reason you're being so hands-off with Cerullis? And why have you shown *shukusen* Sanya such favor in recent years? Please, Talira. I want to do as I'm told, but first, you need to tell me why I should."

"No."

Tensed all to hell, I waited for her to say more. There had to be more because a direct refusal wasn't Talira's style. She suggested and subtly showed the way, or she turned sarcastic and hurtful, but it was never just 'no'. Even still, a solid minute ticked by with only silence to fill it, and I had to decide. Did I trust my grandmother? Was what she was hiding beneficial for Lutov and therefore, the people I loved?

Or had she made a mistake? She might not have the information that I did. If she did have it, could experience have shown her a better way to handle our current problem?

Really, though, the only relevant question was what good could come from me standing idly by in this matter. I was Talira's greatest weapon. Why wasn't she putting me to use? Sure, taking no action could be the best choice at times, but was this one of those situations?

Mother Time, I hoped I was making the right decision.

"I hear your words, my *shukusen*," I said, "and I will obey."

"Good," Talira said. "What will you be doing instead?"

I shrugged, even knowing she wouldn't see it.

"I might head home for the day. Spend more time with Baely before her House naming," I said, "or I might go to Ibis. There have been more disturbances in Flosa than normal lately, and I'd like to check on them."

"I see. Yes, those plans are good uses of your time," Talira said. "Keep me updated, my *Lokke Vitras*, and stay away from Cerullis. Do *not* make me tell you again."

She cut the connection while I was halfway through a response, and slumping, I drained what was left of my drink.

"What was that about?" Feena asked.

"Our grandmother, in all of her great wisdom," I said, broadly waving, "has ordered me to abandon the task the *shukusen* Sanya has given us."

Resting the glass on the table, I thumped my elbows onto it so I could rub my face, watching Feena through my fingers.

"And.... will you do that?" she asked.

"Well, that would depend on what you were going to say before that little interruption, wouldn't it?" I said.

Throwing myself into my chair, I crossed my arms. Hell, I could use a second drink. Seemed I could also use a reminder of why I rarely touched the stuff anymore.

"I think... I think that ignoring Sanya's problem would be a mistake," Feena said, "but I also think that my directive as a Chosen, now that I've shown you my findings, is to follow your lead."

Great. No pressure there.

"Then, we need to more *shukusenth* to pledge their votes to Sanya's proposal," I said. "Obviously, she'll vote for it, and once I've thrown my weight behind it, Talira will have no choice but to lean that way too. We can't show Lutov how much she and I disagree behind closed doors."

I rolled my eyes, but Feena didn't notice, too busy squinting at thin air.

"I should take Phen and Marza," she said. "Since Baely came around, things have been tense between you and Drav's *shukusen* and Phen..."

"Is an entirely separate disaster, I know."

Somehow, I shunted my thoughts away from my brother, focusing instead on how grateful I was to my sister. She'd suggested the course of action I'd wanted to take. I'd told Talira I might be headed to Ibis for a reason.

"So, that'll leave me Orin and Raelle," I said. "I can handle them, even if Raelle's always been cold with me."

I'd never been sure why that was. Had I insulted her in some way?

“Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll do fine,” Feena said. “You’re the great *Lokke Vitras*, after all.”

Fast as lightning, I swatted at her, but she was faster, leaving me smacking the air. Laughing, she pointed at my empty glass.

“Feeling better?” she asked.

Making a face, I said, “A little. Meeting with Sanya *might* have gotten to me. Thanks for noticing how much I needed it.”

When I shook the glass, Feena smiled.

“Sometimes, you make it fucking obvious, Zae,” she said. “So, a mission in Ibis. Will you bring Leski with you?”

Ah. That was why I’d brought us here instead of my home. Should I involve my wife in this massive clusterfuck?

“Not yet,” I said. “If it starts getting dangerous, I will, but not yet.”

Feena nodded with no judgment on her face.

“Are you headed there immediately, or will you take a break first?” she asked.

“We should make good use of the time we have, yes?”

When I stood, Feena followed suit before pulling me to her.

“Good luck in Ibis. I’ll start with Phen soon,” she said before thrusting me away. “You know the way out, right?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Of course I do, and don’t worry. I’ll take the hint. See you soon.”

With a cheeky grin, Feena pushed me toward the door, and sighing, I walked through it. Once I was outside, I requested a direct connection with Damari, which they quickly accepted.

“Hey, LV!” they chirped. “Didn’t I see you yesterday?”

“What a coincidence, yes! I think you might have,” I said before grinning. “Are you busy? I could use a good pilot.”

“Fortunately for you, I’m free,” Damari said. “Where are we headed?”

Mother Time love my friend for keeping their curiosity to themselves. If they’d asked what we were doing, I didn’t know how I’d have answered.

“Ibis, specifically Flosa,” I said, “and I should warn you before we go: Talira hasn’t approved what I plan to do there.”

“Ah, so business as usual, then,” Damari said. “Don’t worry, LV. If we get into trouble, I know to blame everything on you. So, where am I meeting you?”

Fighting a smile, I said, “Your favorite hangar in headquarters. Give me half an hour.”

“Sounds good! I’ll see you there.”

As soon as Damari cut the connection, I was requesting another one with Leski, and while waiting for her to answer, I wrote a message for Korix, letting him know where I’d be. I briefly considered sharing what Sanya had been doing over the last fourteen years, but in the end, I decided not to trouble him with it. Not yet. Whatever relationship he had with Cerullis’ *shukusen*, temporarily keeping this to myself seemed wise.

After half a minute, Leski accepted my request for a connection.

“You won’t like what I have to say,” I told her as soon as it had established.

After a pause, Leski drawled, “Ok...?”

Pulling to the side, I braced myself for the tirade that I expected would soon come.

“I have a mission, one that’s taking me to Flosari’s capital,” I said. “I need you to stay here-”

“Zaeden. If you think I’m letting you anywhere near danger without back-up right now, you’ve got another thing coming,” Leski said. “The last time I did that-”

“Love, it’s a diplomatic mission,” I said.

I gave her a moment to change tracks before moving on.

“I’m just talking to Vaessa’s higher-ups, but a situation is brewing in Lutov. I need you to stay here so you can help if it blows up,” I said. “Can you linger around Xygek’s Travel Center until I get back? I’ll get you dispensation to breeze through the Terminal if I need you.”

As I waited for her answer, I counted my breaths, and when Leski eventually replied, she sounded annoyed.

“I don’t like this,” she said.

“If it helps, I don’t either,” I said. “Will you do it anyway?”

Sighing, Leski said, “Of course I will. Is there anything else?”

“Not at the moment,” I said “just my usual need to tell you how much I love you.”

“I love you too,” Leski said with a chuckle. “Now, I know that tone. It’s your ‘I’m in a hurry but I don’t want you to see it’ voice. So, go on. Get to wherever you need to be, and stay safe while you’re there.”

Hell, I loved this woman.

With my vision misting, I said, “Thanks. I will.”

I cut the connection before sentimentality could unravel me even further. That had gone better than expected.

With preparatory conversations out of the way, I could travel to Kolb’s headquarters in silence, and wasn’t that a relief? It gave me time to process everything that the day had brought me so far.

I’d made a mistake. Mother Time, a part of me had known I should have investigated Harvel’s neurotoxin further, but I’d so badly wanted that fiasco to be over. At the time, I’d been wrecked from the events that had led to that man’s death—fuck, I’d murdered him in cold blood and for *no reason*—and I’d had a new, precious addition to my life. With that change, I’d had to adjust how I did things, learn new habits, and occasionally wish that my partners and I had never submitted an application for a child.

I hadn’t wanted to consider that the creator of such a monstrous weapons was still roaming free, but despite my hopes, said person existed, and she was a woman I’d befriended to boot.

I was still having trouble accepting that Sanya had anything to do with this. For Mother Time’s sake, she flinched when someone *raised their voice* around her! I didn’t want to consider the circumstances that might have bred such a fearful reaction in such a gentle woman. Or gentle most of the time, I guessed.

Given that and the examples I’d seen of her decency over the last two and a half decades, though, where had she devised this idea? How had she figured out a method to intimidate the Houses? Those were the types of things I’d expect someone ruthless to be thinking about, not someone like... her.

It disturbed me that I couldn't answer that question. Roughly shaking my head, I increased my pace toward House Kolb's headquarters.

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