

Chapter 47: Who Are You to Refuse Me?

I was still considering today's events when I reached my destination. Fortunately, Damari was the only person in the hangar, waving from the tail of a Packhorse, so I didn't conceal my sour mood.

As I approached, they chirped, "You look better! Bless those RRDs. Ready for a loooong flight?"

"As ready as I can be," I said, "Can I sit in the front this time?"

Already turning into the Packhorse, Damari paused, narrowing their eyes at me. I didn't usually like riding in the front, but I needed the company today.

"Sure," they said. "You ok?"

After considering my answer for a moment, I said, "No, but I don't want to talk about it right now. Maybe on the way."

"All right," Damari said with a shrug. "I'm all ears when you're ready."

They hurried into the Packhorse, and I once again blessed fate for the best friend I could have asked for.

The cockpits of Kolb's strike ships had always been unnerving for me. A metal walkway hovered in the middle of its glass globe, indicating the safe zone of the force field that bisected it. A semi-circular bank of switches and dials surrounded the chairs that sat on this walkway. Since most of the Packhorse's maneuvering was done through its pilot's array, those instruments were only here for emergency control of the aircraft.

None of this was what made my skin prickle, though. That wouldn't come until we were in the air.

While Damari settled into a chair, I took a seat in my own, pulling up everything Sanya had sent me. Once that was done, though, I frowned at the file's size. It was so small! Was Sanya holding out on me? This suspicion and a quick read through of the file occupied me through a good chunk of the flight around the globe, although what lay beneath our feet was never far from my mind.

That was why I was uncomfortable with riding in the front of a Packhorse. I didn't like having a reminder of how far above the ground I was. Today, though, the need for company had outweighed my visceral fear of heights.

Finished with the problem of Cerullis for now, I set Sanya's file aside, fighting to keep my eyes off of Damari. My preoccupation with them must have been obvious, however, because they were soon shifting in place.

"Something on your mind?" they asked.

"Not really," I said, "although I'm curious how your sister's doing. She'll be going through her House naming with Baely this year, right? That's always stressful."

Better to discuss that than any of my other problems.

Tensing, Damari said, "Misah's fine, from what I can tell. Why do you ask?"

Why indeed, especially after my recent... episode? Yes, episode.

It certainly helped that I was discussing Misah, not my daughter. For some reason, that was keeping my containing box intact. So long as we only focused on Damari's sister, I should be ok.

Turning away, I said, "I just wanted to check on her. From what I've heard, she'll make a brilliant scientist someday. I'd hate to see that talent wasted."

"Like that'll happen. Misah knows what she wants," Damari said with a snort. "What makes you think she'd make a mistake at her House naming ceremony?"

Damnit, even with the focus on a relative stranger, this conversation had quickly become as uncomfortable as the rest I'd held over the last two days. It wasn't quite bad enough to break everything open again but- but-

After a moment of silence, a hand landed on my shoulder, squeezing it.

"Hey, you don't have to answer that, you know," Damari said. "I've heard about your House naming ceremony. Never got to pick, did ya? Ko took you away before you had the chance. Is that why you're asking about Misah? Should I be scared that you'll swoop down on her like Ko did with you?"

Damari had tried to play that last question off as a joke, but I'd heard the fear behind it, and oh, how it pained me. I couldn't, however, let them know that I'd taken note of it. With a snort, I shook my head.

"From everything I've heard, Misah is entirely unsuited for House Kolb work, just like Baely, and besides that, I'm nowhere close to needing a replacement," I said. "And while Ko may have condemned me to a life I never would have chosen, in many ways he also rescued me during my House naming ceremony. He gave me time and an opportunity that I didn't know I needed."

Why had I said that? Was I trying to turn myself into an emotional wreck again?

For some reason, though, I was... fine right now. I was.... calm, which was strange. The camaraderie I'd always found with Damari must be helping with centering me, keeping me from floundering, and after our many years together, I wanted to share a trait that was integral to me as breathing. The story had been begging me to tell it since I'd started it with Baely.

Obligingly, Damari asked, "What do you mean?"

Turning to my friend, I wondered if I was about to mess this up too. Someone I'd trusted had *just* proven how deeply into the grips of questionable morality she'd go to achieve her goals. What if my perception of Damari was similarly as colored?

I spoke up anyway.

"At my House naming ceremony, I planned on making an... unusual choice, which would have been a mistake at the time," I said. "Because Ko showed up when he did, I got to make the choice I wanted without suffering disastrous consequences for it, although some might say that getting forced into the role of the *Lokke Vitras* is its own price."

I'd never thought about it like that. Sure, this perspective didn't change how horrible my House naming had been for me, but somehow, it made that event less... troubling. Less like something I'd want to avoid.

After giving me an odd look, Damari refocused on flying the Packhorse.

"Interesting. And complicated! Which is just like you," they said. "So? If Ko hadn't interrupted the ceremony, what would you have said back then? If you don't mind me-"

"No House," I interrupted, too impatient to let them finish. "I wouldn't have picked a House. I wanted to be free, which in a *very* tangential sense, I am."

Damari squeaked, and as if in response, the Packhorse jerked with its nose dipping toward the sea. This only lasted for a split second, though, as I quickly corrected our course, but then, I'd been prepared to do that from the moment I'd decided to share with them.

When I glanced at my friend, they were scrunched into their seat, turned toward me with their bugged-out eyes fixed on my face.

"You, the *Lokke Vitras*, aren't aligned with House Kolb?" they managed to say.

Oh hell. Had I made a mistake?

"No. Technically, I don't belong to any House," I said, "although I have to put on the pretense of loyalty to Kolb. Appearances are everything in our world."

Saying nothing, Damari continued to stare at me, and I'd begun to wonder if I'd need to fly us the rest of the way to Ibis when their body started shaking. Throwing their head back, they roared with laughter.

“Oh... that explains... *so fucking much*,” they gasped. “I shoulda seen it.”

“Um.”

I didn't know what to say. Did they need comforting words from me? The idea that someone might defy the Houses would shatter most Lutovish's world view. Considering that and how much people liked to stay away from uncomfortable things, Damari might need me to back off, distancing myself from them. Hell. Had I lost my only-?

Lunging forward, Damari grabbed my hands, and I barely suppressed my urge to jerk free of a possible hostile. I wasn't sure why they insisted on pulling sudden moves like this on me. They knew I didn't like them. But then, they squeezed my hands, focusing me on their earnest eyes.

“Relax. You haven't lost me, and I'm definitely not gonna run, Zaeden,” they said. “You want me to do that, you'll have to say something a lot scarier than you have.”

Oh, thank Mother Time.

When I nodded, they released me, and after an uncomfortable beat of silence, I shifted in place.

“So-”

“The *Lokke Vitras* without a House. It fits you well,” Damari says. “You really are amazing. Ya know that, right?”

Chuckling at the look on my face, they turned toward the horizon, gesturing at nothing.

“Now, give me control of my ship back, please and thank you.”

Once I'd done that, we returned to companionable silence. As the sun led the way in our race across the planet, I marveled at the fact that I'd had that conversation without my containing box rupturing. Given the subject matter, it should have done that.

Maybe I shouldn't question that too much.

When Ibis started marring the join of the water to the sky, Damari spoke up again.

“So, that's why you're worried about Misah? Nothing else?” they said. “I've noticed that House naming's stress you out. Always wondered why but...”

They shrugged.

“I've recently learned that it's because I project my own experience onto them,” is aid.

And had to wince at the admission. What did that say about me?

“Don't worry, though. Your sister will be fine,” I continued. “How could she not be with a wonderful sibling like you?”

At that, I expected Damari to blush and wriggle in place, like they always did, but they bit their lip instead.

"I don't know about that. In some ways, I've been horrible to her," they said, "but that's a topic for another time. No depressing conversations are allowed on my ship."

Mm, avoidance. How well did I know the urge to indulge in it?

With a wry smile, I said, "Fair enough. On to another topic, then! Once we arrive in Flosa, can you stick around for a couple of days, or are you needed back home?"

"I have nothing waiting for me in Ibis, but I'd rather not wait," Damari said. "Ibis makes me uncomfortable. Too... backwater. Too much..."

Trailing off, they looked away, and I nodded in understanding. I knew how much Damari needed their clean and orderly surroundings, and if they were using that as an excuse to avoid seeing examples of the abuse that Lutov daily rained on Ibis, I wouldn't say a word about it. Leave that fight to the people who were strong enough to continue it.

How was I supposed to know what personal battles Damari struggled with every day? I couldn't ask them to participate in another conflict, no matter how badly it might need its champions.

"All right," I said. "I'll send you a message when I'm getting close to extraction, then, although you shouldn't feel pressured to pick me up. I can always go through a Travel Center, if needed."

Rolling their eyes, Damari said, "I'll pick you up, ya idiot. Just give me plenty of warning."

"Can do," I said. "Thanks, Damari."

My friend made a noise in acknowledgment, but then, preparing for landing stole their attention. We didn't have an opportunity to speak after that. Once the Packhorse had touched down, Damari got swept up in registering our arrival while I greeted Vaessa's representative in the hangar. As I approached him, the man tensed up, and I internally sighed. This would be fun.

"*Lokke Vitras*, we weren't expecting you," he said. "What brings you to Ibis?"

"Nothing you need concern yourself with," I said. "I'm only here to speak with your *shukusen*. I know the way to her office, so unless I need an escort...?"

Much as I hated it, I'd always found that the haughty approach worked best with members of House Vaessa. It didn't hurt that this man looked ready to give me anything I wanted if it meant I'd leave him alone. Surprisingly, however, he hesitated.

"Please forgive me, *Lokke Vitras*, but *shukusen* Raelle is currently in Acova, treating with Acrar's royal family," he said. "She's not expected back for a couple of days."

Well, that had been a bald-faced lie. When I'd made a location request for Vaessa's *shukusen* earlier, it had returned the query with Flosa, somewhere close by if the provided coordinates were correct. Given how widely known my skills were in Lutov, this man had to know I'd catch him in his lie. I wasn't sure what he was trying to do with it, but for the moment, I'd play his game. Upsetting a *shukusen* wasn't wise, especially when one meant to ask a favor of them.

"How unfortunate," I said. "I'll have to indulge in Flosari's distractions until she's ready to see me, then. I can't wait to see what sort of mischief I can get up to."

As I gave the man a sharp smile, he shivered before bowing.

"Please, enjoy yourself until then," he said.

Forcing as much ice into my voice as I could, I said, "I will."

I brushed past him before he could rise from his bow, heading into the city. Why didn't Raelle want to see me? Did she know why I was here, and if so, did that mean she was part of a plot against Sanya?

Shaking my head, I rolled my shoulders, shrugging off thoughts of conspiracy. I couldn't do anything to change my situation, not with so many Lutovish active in their headquarters right now. While I waited for them to head home, I should tackle the snarled ball of stress and worry that had been building in my chest.

So, I took a walk.

Of Ibis' capital cities, Flosa was the one that tugged on my heartstrings the most, only matched by Kester in Crinas. Acrar's Acova and Escad's Daka were lovely places, testaments to their people's creative spirit, and as with everything in hidden Ostiu, its capital, Zoln, was a wonder, one that stole my breath at times. On the other hand, Flosa and Kester only exemplified the squalid lifestyle that we Lutovish had forced onto the children of Ibis.

The narrow streets between the city's buildings weren't paved. Instead, they were mucky with waste trickling down them. Mother Time, the smell here had always threatened to send me running for the fresh air of the forest outside of the city, and the sick, starving, or drug-addled languished in alleys and doorsteps, crying out for a crust of bread from passersby.

They never did the same for me, falling silent as soon as they saw me. In fact, wherever I went here, I brought an aura of uneasy quiet with me, but for once, this wasn't because of my role. No, the simple fact of my heritage disrupted these people's lives, and I hated that, not that it was unwarranted. How else did one respond to an oppressor that one had no hope of resisting?

Still, though, I hated their fear because I'd been here before, whether in disguise or camouflaged, so I knew how persistently upbeat the children of Ibis typically were. Don't get me wrong. They knew how horrible their lives were. It was written into the worry lines on their faces, but despite that, their relentless positivity shone through, and I found that—the *refusal to give up*—beautiful.

I wandered among the children of Ibis for a few hours, clearing my head and making plans, but as soon as a deep dark had settled over the city, I made my way back to Vaessa's headquarters. Retrieving a camouflage disk from a pocket, I stuck it to the back of my neck before initiating its presented process.

I'd always thought of this infiltration method as cheating, a belief that Korix had drilled into me, but honestly? Why make the effort of devising a more convoluted plan when something simple would work, especially on such a casual 'mission'? I wasn't even sure if it qualified as a mission.

With the camouflage disk's help, I strode down the hallways without trouble. Not many Vaessa members were in the building, but then, I'd expected that. After the various months that I'd spent in these people's midst, I knew their habits well.

As always, dull surprise registered in me at the visual reminder of how plain this place was. Most of the Houses were lavish with their headquarters, showing off in a way. Even Zan's headquarters in Ostiu was overly ostentatious, but this building was a warren of concrete tunnels and rooms.

On stepping into Raelle's office, I disabled its recorders, locked the door, and removed my camouflage disk, all while working my jaw. Mother Time, I hated the buzz that thing always spread across my body.

While keeping an eye on the hall outside, I sat in the *shukusen's* chair, searching her drawers for what I'd need, and once I'd found it, I spread a sheet of paper on the desk's surface while magicking a pen into my hand. Setting its tip on the top line, I grinned at the look that I imagined would spread across Raelle's face when she saw this.

Since few Lutovish outside of House Kolb knew how to write, most people found handwritten notes unnerving. I'd always enjoyed using them as an intimidation tactic.

My note was short and polite, but even still, Raelle should get the point. I knew she was avoiding me. I was also well within my rights to force a meeting with her when I liked, but I respected her enough to keep from doing that. She could decide when we'd talk, but that conversation *would* happen.

Finished, I left the office, sneaking out of headquarters as easily as I had with infiltrating it, and once outside, I rested my hands on my hips. What should I do while I waited? I could look into the disturbances that I'd mentioned to Talira but...

Why not take the break that I'd been offered instead?

"I wonder what Gretchen's been up to lately," I said.

Smirking at conjured memories, I shoved my hands into my pockets before ambling off with a whistle on my lips.