

Chapter 48: I Should Have Explained by Now, Huh?

In the small room I'd rented, Gretchen and Luisa tangled ever tighter around each other, fighting to be the first to please her partner. Having already had my turn, I was watching this performance with someone's arm—it was hard to tell whose—draped over me. I was still amazed at how many people we'd fit into such a small space.

From among our two 'combatants', muffled cursing emerged, and I grinned as Luisa cried out, arching her back off of the bed, quickly followed by Gretchen collapsing on her. As Damian and Andrea started whistling and clapping nearby, I melted further into the straw mattress, completely at ease.

It had been a good couple of days, mostly spent secluded from the world, and I'd enjoyed my time with these lovely people. I'd even learned a few new tricks from them, ones I'd love to try for myself if time allowed. In moments like this, my life's complications drifted away from me. I was just a simple man, doing as he pleased, and nothing else. I wasn't the *Lokke Vitras*. I wasn't even 'Zaeden'. I was just... me.

Raucous knocking brought that illusion crashing to a halt. While my companions giggled, I climbed off of the bed and dressed, wondering if Raelle had finally sent a summons for me. If it was her, though, why would she do it this way? Sending me a message would have been much easier.

Ah, well. Better to play it safe. Requesting my rifle, I hid it behind my back, ignoring how quiet the room had gone, and eased the door open.

Talira was on the other side.

"Shit," I said.

What was she doing here? I'd never known my grandmother to leave Lutov, not once in the time I'd been alive, and she was here now? What did that mean?

Still, she hadn't attacked me yet, so I dropped my rifle, noting when the children of Ibis gasped at its dematerialization. At the noise, Talira narrowed her eyes.

"Are there people with you?" she asked.

Sighing, I hung from the door, knowing she'd have seen the heat signatures behind it already. Why would she ask me about my companions when she already knew about them?

“What do you think?” I said.

Pursing her lips, Talira said, “Get rid of them. We need to talk.”

Yeah, that was what I’d thought.

Straightening from the door, I said, “Sure. I’ll need a minute, though.”

With a nod, Talira leaned against a wall with her arms crossed, and I bit back another sigh. It had been too much to hope for privacy.

When I turned back to my companions, I was walloped by the fear oozing from them. I wasn’t surprised by it, unfortunately. While we’d been in this place, nationality and identity had been left behind, and reminders that I hailed from Lutov must have been exceedingly jarring for them. Still, I had to soothe their fears, so with a wince, I raised my hands, spreading my fingers wide.

“I’m sorry to have ruined our fun,” I said in the Ibisian tongue, *“but APPARENTLY, my grandmother needs to speak with me.”*

When I made a face, my companions snorted or tried to hide their laughter, and I was relieved that my return to a care-free state had relaxed them, even if it had been an act on my part.

“I’m afraid I have to kick you out now,” I said. *“Many apologies to you all.”*

Much groaning and complaining ensued, but my companions got ready to leave, and as they went, each of them stopped for a quick kiss from me. Luisa and Gretchen were the last ones in the room, lingering for as long as they could.

I felt for them, truly. Flosari had an entrenched belief that sexual and romantic relationships should only exist between people of opposite genders, which I’d always found curious. Where could such an illogical belief have come from? No other nation in Ibis held to it, just as surely as Lutov didn’t, so what had spawned a belief that had led to such hatred here?

Neither Gretchen nor Luisa kissed me as I left, although I got bone-crushing hugs from them both, but I didn’t blame them for this. Not only was I not their type, but I didn’t invite them to gatherings like this for sex. I liked them for who they were and for that alone. I enjoyed their company, and if they got to spend time with the woman they loved while they were here, so much the better for it.

After they’d disappeared, I held the door open for Talira, who entered with a wrinkled nose. The expression seemed warranted, considering the room reeked of sex right now, but I didn’t open a window to air it out, latching the door instead. If I was right, this conversation would require the utmost of privacy. Why else would Talira have come looking for me in Flosa, a city unmonitored by recorders?

For a long moment, she examined the room before whirling on me with fire in her eyes. It only made her voice’s emptiness more skin-crawling when she said.

“What are you doing, fucking random Ibisians?”

That... had been harsher than normal for her. Why was she so upset?

Also, none of the people who'd just been here had been *random*. I'd known most of them for at least a few months, but I didn't think pointing that out was going to help me with... whatever this was.

Lifting an eyebrow, I said, “Being myself? Is something wrong?”

Groaning, Talira threw her hands over her head.

“‘Is something wrong?’ he asks,” she said. “Of course there is! Mother Time, Zaeden. Our sterilization efforts among the Ibisians may be thorough, but sleeping with one can still result in consequences, if not progeny. What if Vaessa accuses you of giving more rations to those people than they were owed, throwing off the balance of power that the Houses have achieved here? Or what if one of your ‘companions’ learns a compromising secret during your time with them? They could blackmail you with it, and then, where would you be? Answer? *Fucked* because I certainly couldn't help you with it.”

She paused to catch her breath, but I didn't say a word in response. Something was going on here, something... strange. I'd never seen my grandmother so red-faced and yet expressionless, passionate and yet full of ice. Never mind how cutting her words had been so far. I was concerned about Talira, which was strange for me, and to this point, she'd at least refrained from questioning my character, if not my intelligence-

“And *how*, pray tell, could you take advantage of those people in the first place?” Talira said. “They probably thought they had to accept your advances, much like the Acrarish do. *Hell*, Zaeden, you-”

With one step, I was in Talira's space, towering over her with my hands curled into fists.

“I am many despicable things, but a man who could abuse people as you've suggested is not one of them,” I said.

Mother Time, I could swear my breath had made icicles in the air there, and given how much Talira had flinched, she must have noticed it, but I wasn't done.

“In the past, I've dated *children of Ibis*, as they prefer to be called, and grandmother mine? I know exactly how to go about doing it,” I said. “No matter how much we avoid talking about it, everyone in this room knew about the culture gap between us. They know that any relationship between us must always remain casual. They know that I'll never share more about myself than my name and other, superficial details. This is the price that we *both* pay for courting someone on the other side of that unbreakable line, and I may hate it, but I abide by it, for the good of both parties. And of course, consent is *always* the foremost thing on my mind, something I do my utmost to establish well before anything intimate can happen between me and another person. Call me an idiot as much as you like, but *never* presume to think that I would ever have sex with someone who didn't want it in return. Are we understood?”

As she realized exactly what she'd accused me of, something in Talira thawed, letting her features soften.

"Zae-zae," she said, "I didn't mean-"

"*Are we understood?*" I repeated, taking a step forward.

After closing her eyes for a moment, Talira looked up at me and nodded, and I relented, giving her space. Now that I'd driven the point home, there was no need to dwell on it.

"Now, what's actually the matter?" I said. "You haven't come into the field to berate me in a while."

Sighing, Talira sank onto the bed, presumably forgetting about everything that had taken place there, but when she started scrubbing her face, I decided not to remind her about it.

"You should have listened to me," she said. "I knew about Sanya's plans, you know. I had a scheme in the works that would have defused the situation without anyone noticing, but now, with the two of you kicking up dust, it won't work, and I... I'm afraid for her."

Ah. That was...

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I crouched in front of Talira while rubbing one temple.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?" I said. "I'd have dropped everything if you'd just said something."

Granted, she *had* tried to warn me off...

As if reading my thoughts, Talira snapped, "You should have done as you were told without an explanation."

Wow. What an unwarranted amount of hostility for a habit I'd always had. When I glared at her for it, she pulled her lips into an apologetic half-smile.

"As I should have known that would never have happened," she said, "but I didn't say anything because I'm protecting someone. I knew that if I shared my idea with you, you'd want to know more about it, and that would eventually have led to a revelation that no one's ready for yet."

She was right. I mean... look at me! Even as she'd been talking, I'd been mulling over how to ask about her plan. Now that I was no longer constrained by the role of student, that was just how I was, never content to let things lie.

Unless it was to keep someone safe.

"This person you're trying to protect," I said. "They're important to you?"

"I love them as if they were my own child," Talira said.

Considering how neglectful she'd always been with my father, I wasn't sure if that was a ringing endorsement, but I'd take what she'd said at face value.

"Ok."

Slapping my knees, I swiveled to sit on the edge of the bed, rubbing my hands between my legs.

"I've ruined your plan, and I'm sorry about that," I said. "How do we fix it?"

She'd have an answer for that question. Why else would she have come all the way across the water for this talk? She certainly wouldn't have done it just to scold me.

"We make sure this vote passes in Sanya's favor," Talira said. "If it doesn't, we work with her, hopefully forming another solution to our long-term problem."

Glancing at her, I weakly smiled.

"The issue with our sun?" I said.

Nodding, Talira said, "That's the one."

With a laugh, I threw myself backward, bouncing when I landed on the straw mattress.

Draping an arm over my face, I said, "How have two impossible disasters already happened while I've been the *Lokke Vitras*?"

"I'm grateful that they've only started in recent years," she said. "We didn't have the right person in place until now."

When I peeked under my elbow at her, my grandmother nodded, and I wished this lumpy mattress would finish eating me. There it was again, even a hundred years of mediocrity later. Why did people insist on holding me to such a high standard? I'd accepted that something was special about me. After the many times I'd had the fact shoved down my throat, how could I not?

I'd much rather prefer, however, if we ignored my so-called 'exceptional nature', at least for now. We could acknowledge it whenever it was actually needed.

"Can you get the votes we need?" Talira asked.

Groaning, I dropped my arm over my face again.

"Yes," I said. "It would help if your fellow *shukusenth* would talk to me, though."

"About that..."

I sat up in time to catch Talira waving toward me, and a second later, a message from *shukusen* Raelle popped into my array.

"I intercepted this after I got here, so any response you choose to give shouldn't be too delayed," Talira said.

Already halfway through reading the message, I leapt to my feet, gathering my belongings. I needed to get out of here, running to Vaessa's headquarters before Raelle disappeared again. Before I could leave, however, Talira pulled me up short.

"Once we're back in Lutov, we'll have to return to formality," she said.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Perhaps, but we can enjoy the lack of recorders while we have it, yes?"

Nodding, Talira laced her fingers in her lap, staring at them, all while I itched to leave. I needed to finish planning out my conversation with Raelle, but clearly, my grandmother had something more to say.

"Zae-zae..." she eventually whispered. "Good luck. And I love you."

For a moment, all I could do was blink at her. When was the last time she'd said that to me? I didn't know how to handle *those words* from her.

"I... love you too," I said. "I..."

Something else should go here. Right?

Snorting, Talira flapped a hand at me.

"Go," she said.

Oh, thank Mother Time.

With a half-bow to her, I raced through the door and outside. My journey to Vaessa's headquarters was spent ratcheting through ways I might secure Raelle's vote. Her House wouldn't gain much from Lutov's return to space exploration, and I doubted an appeal to her morals would work, so I turned to what Cerullis could use as a bargaining chip.

Vaessa had always lusted after the satellites that Cerullis managed, seeing them as an efficient means of controlling Ibis' population. Sanya could concede a few of them to Raelle, but I had *problems* with that idea. I wouldn't put it past Vaessa to glass an Ibisian town, just for the fun of it.

Cerullis had plenty of other resources to trade, though. Surely, one of those would be enough. And perhaps I could figure out another way to sway Raelle's opinion.

When I walked into Vaessa's headquarters, no one greeted me, which was strange. It wasn't totally out of the norm, though. If the members of a House knew I'd be visiting them ahead of schedule,

they sometimes preferred to pretend I didn't exist, although that only happened when they were unsure of my purpose there. So, I ignored these people's skittish behavior, attributing it to their need to avoid me.

When I turned down a second corridor and the people in it scattered, however, it tripped my danger senses. Was this a trap? If so, had I been right? Was Raelle concocting a scheme to oppose Sanya?

Until I reached the *shukusen's* office, I stayed on alert with my head on a swivel, but once outside of it, I forced myself to relax. Donning a carefree smile, I strode into the room.

But no one was inside.

Palming a knife, I scanned the office, noting no hostiles, but something in the desk quickly snagged my eye. A piece of paper had been tented on it—my note from before, I thought—and in blocky letters, a word had been scrawled across it: NO.

Well, fuck.

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