

Chapter 5: A Distraction

Ostiu was fucking cold. I'd known this from multiple people's warnings on the subject, but there was a difference between knowing something and experiencing it for oneself.

I rather liked it. It brought a sharp clarity to thought, heightening every sense so long as one wasn't exposed to it for too long. When Nyco had offered us thermal protection on our arrival, I'd accepted it, but I had yet to don it whereas Pheniks had immediately let its viscous material creep over his body.

To that point, he'd been quietly cursing the cold, which I'd found amusing. He'd stepped into a nation that he'd longed to visit for years and on arriving, had gotten smacked with one of his least favorite things.

He seemed happy now, but that was probably because we were inside. Or maybe it was because of Nyco's current discussion topic. I couldn't tell.

"We store data on the Ostium population's genetic trends here," Nyco said. "Before submitting a proposal, anyone who wants to change our testing methods spends days poring over these archives to ensure that their suggestion will be both viable and helpful toward our long-term goal."

"Reliable production of *iisen*?" Pheniks asked.

"Indeed," Nyco said. "Feena said you were the most scientifically minded of your family. I can see that she was right."

With a beaming smile in place, Pheniks looked overly eager right now, flicking his feverish eyes over our surroundings. He was bouncing on the balls of his feet, and I took a moment to make sure he hadn't tipped into one of his manic episodes before returning to an inspection of the storecase stacks in front of us.

They looked much like the stacks back home: waist-high blocks with clear exteriors, all spread across a glass-walled room. Inside of them rested memory drives, which held the stacks' data, as well as cables that wrapped through every storecase, linking their many parts. These cables served as both a coolant conductor and the means by which data was transferred throughout the building.

Stations were scattered throughout the room, each with their monitors and connectors to verify a potential user's identity. Several people had these attached to them. They'd pasted the pads on the ends of the connectors to either side of their necks.

Individuals were also tending to the storecases themselves, kneeling or bending over opened blocks. I pointed to one of them, a rather pretty woman with a slight build and indigo hair.

“Who are they?” I asked.

Nyco paused in his explanation of how his House manipulated a nation’s genetic path, glancing where indicated.

“Oh, those are technicians. House members of Eighth Stratus or below,” he said. “They operate shuttles during emergencies and maintain any places that we don’t let the Ostiums come near. It’s a generally thankless position that’s nonetheless essential here.”

“Hmm,” I distractedly mumbled.

Pheniks drew Nyco back to the subject of House Zan’s experimentation, but cocking my head, I watched the technicians as they worked.

If I was ever sent here on a deep-cover mission, I’d most likely occupy this role, so I analyzed how these people behaved: their deference to the higher Strata around them and their quiet dedication to their job. It was easy enough to split my attention between observing them and making a list of the room’s possible breach points.

As I was doing this, a set of hazel eyes, almost leached of color, caught mine, and I paused in my examination. With plain brown hair and average features, the man staring at me was entirely forgettable, but then, he smiled, a tiny twitch of brightly colored lips, and my heart lurched. Internally flinching, I dragged my gaze away, desperate to find another point of interest.

What. the. fuck? I’d had many partners over the years, so I knew exactly what that twinge had been, but I hadn’t felt it since... my ninth lesson rotation, when I’d been annoyingly infatuated with a girl in my class.

Something similar had *never*, however, happened with a complete stranger. I must have found something about that man attractive, although I had no clue what it could be, and I didn’t like it when my brain acted irrationally.

Time to focus on something else.

“-bloodsong?” Pheniks was asking when I returned to the conversation.

Oh, hell. Here we go.

Shifting in place, Nyco shrugged.

“We don’t know how it works,” he said. “It’s not like the Collective, where we’ve had millennia to study it. We didn’t know the bloodsong existed until the Upheaval a few centuries ago. Since then, all efforts in Ostiu have gone to making more *iisen* and figuring out why the Upheaval created the first one, not on how they use their magic.”

“Can’t you just ask the *iisen*-?” Pheniks started.

Slapping my hand on my brother's shoulder, I squeezed it.

"Let's not offend our host," I said through gritted teeth.

The mystery of the bloodsong was a sore spot for House Zan members, to the point that the topic had become taboo back home.

"No, it's fine! I like that he's curious. It's a great trait to have," Nyco said with a smile. "I'll send you a few reports on the subject, Pheniks, but I'm afraid that the bloodsong just isn't my area of expertise. Besides, we can't talk about it now. We should find you somewhere to sleep! It's getting pretty late, no?"

Humming to himself, he started for a lift to the surface, and as I followed him, I could swear someone's stare was burning into my back.

Nyco found us quarters—a simple room that I'd share with Pheniks—soon enough. While my brother prepared for bed in the washroom, I lounged on top of the sheets, considering what I'd do this evening.

I'd like someone's company tonight—that incessant need for a stranger's touch coming to plague me once again—and for a moment, I let myself think about finding one of the technicians from earlier so we could get to know each other better. I was aware, however, that that wouldn't happen. For the time being, sleep was more important.

Once Pheniks and I were settled in bed, I had my array start a dream sequence, knowing I wouldn't otherwise sleep, but with its help, I didn't once wake up throughout the night.

In the morning, Nyco took us into Zoln. Before we could leave House Zan's headquarters, he warned us that the Ostiums were given more liberties than other children of Ibis, all part of an ongoing experiment. Because of this, he said that they might treat us rudely while we were in the city, and boy was he right.

As I trailed behind Nyco and my brother, our guide explained why Zoln had been built on such steep inclines, but I couldn't listen to him, couldn't relax. While we'd been walking down the city's paths, so many hateful glares had been flung at us that I'd started wondering if we shouldn't return to headquarters.

Pheniks and Nyco didn't seem concerned about the swirl of loathing that we were plunging through, and I was curious if they thought the kill command, set in each Ostium's tracker, would keep them from attacking us or if my companions were just oblivious.

Despite my constant state of vigilance, I had to admit that Zoln was ridiculously beautiful. The mountains soaring above us and the wonderfully foreign architecture on all sides bombarded my detachment, nudging me to let my awe spread, but even still, I resisted it, which I considered progress.

Except for the strangeness with that technician yesterday, I hadn't slipped up once since arriving here. Perhaps this trip *was* what I'd needed.

Ahead of me, Nyco jostled a female Ostium who'd failed to get out of his way. The basket propped on its hip tilted, letting wrapped balls of wool spill out of their wicker container. A few of them rolled into the creek flowing beside our path, and without thought, I leapt in after them.

FUCK, that was cold. I didn't know why I'd decided to *jump into freezing water*, but I was committed now.

With forceful strokes, I pushed through the creek's moderate current to gather what had been dropped. Once finished, I swung toward shore, eventually sloshing onto it several meters from where I'd started, and while striding back, I gathered other errant balls of wool, always careful to keep the dry balls separate from the sodden ones.

As I approached, the female Ostium looked like it would bolt, warily eyeing me, and I extended my retrieved items to it, grateful that I'd insisted on the translator insertion procedure as I did.

"My apologies for my companions," I said. *"They're..."*

I paused, seeking the right words to describe them, before shrugging.

"They're them."

The Ostium continued staring at me with something absent in its gaze, and sighing, I piled its wool into its basket.

Dipping my head to it, I said, *"Again, please forgive the interruption."*

And I thought that was the end of this strange encounter, but once I'd taken two steps after Pheniks and Nyco's disappearing forms, the Ostium spoke up.

"Why would you help this thrall?"

Glancing back at it, I said, *"I don't know."*

As I hurried to catch up, shivering from the cold, I wondered what I could have been thinking. Why go out of my way to help a child of Ibis? It wasn't my place.

Maybe I hadn't wanted Nyco's careless behavior to create more hostility toward us. That must be it. What else could have prompted something so out of character for me?

When I reached them, Pheniks scanned my soaked state with a raised eyebrow.

"Decide to go for a swim?" he asked.

With my teeth chattering, I stuttered, "I was helping the Ostium that Nyco nearly bowled over."

Nyco looked over his shoulder with a frown.

“Why? Disturbing one variable like that wouldn’t upset the overall experiment.”

Except I’d never considered these people to be variables or objects. I’d never considered them as *anything*, actually. They were just people, living on another landmass. Why should they be anything more?

“Didn’t want increased aggression causing an attack,” I said. “Trackers and kill commands will only curb the Ostiums’ anger for so long.”

Pheniks and Nyco exchanged a glance.

“House Kolb brain,” my brother said.

“I suppose it doesn’t matter. If you haven’t already done it, put on your thermal protection, and we’ll visit my favorite tea shop to get you warm,” Nyco said. “You can’t visit Ostiu without tasting its tea!”

When he started off, I did as he’d suggested. As I let viscous gel slip over my skin, drying me as it went, I wondered how Feena was doing. She should have found the *ii* by now. Had she successfully captured it, towing it to Zoln while her brothers trotted in her friend’s wake?

Or had she killed it? That result might be less optimal than a live capture, but it would be infinitely better than... than...

Feena would be fine.

The door to the tea shop jingled as we entered, and my array automatically corrected for the place’s excessively dim interior. After assessing that no threats were waiting for us here, I overrode that modification, intent on having an authentic experience, and as a result, the room dropped into near gloom.

Cramped, the shop had two, small tables shoved against a wall while a counter separated them from a wood-burning stove and a host of ceramic teapots. Candles were perched in alcoves up and down the plaster walls, giving the shop a romantic feel.

An Ostium child, a male, was sitting behind the counter, and as we came inside, it straightened from its slump across the counter’s wood. Such wide eyes accompanied its gasp while rigidity seized it, but then, it was off its stool and shooting around the counter.

“Honored guests,” it said, *“how can I help you?”*

Chuckling, Nyco said, *“It’s ok, Li. These gentlemen are friends of mine, not business associates. Is your mother home?”*

Relaxing, the boy straightened.

"Yeah, she's here," it said. "I'll get her for you, Nyc."

Rushing to open a door that the shadows had hidden, it raced up the stairs on the other side, and I circled around the shop, trailing my fingers along its many surfaces.

"You let it treat you with such familiarity?" Pheniks asked.

"Sometimes, ingratiating oneself with one's test subjects can lead to informative results, Pheniks," Nyco said. "I find it interesting to learn how long it takes them to trust me. Plus, making friends with the people who make one's tea is always a good idea."

"I see," Pheniks said. "You have an... enlightened approach to the scientific process."

Having half-listened to them, I wandered behind the shop's counter to inspect the proprietor's equipment. All of it was beyond primitive, but besides obligatory soot stains, this workspace looked immaculately cleaned and well-cared-for. Whoever owned this place must take great pride in their work.

"You know," I drawled, still focused on my examination, "based on the experimentation methods you've proposed, I'd think you have extensive House Kolb training. Everything you suggested is a basic infiltration technique as well. It's interesting to hear those skills applied in another context."

Pheniks and Nyco fell silent, which had been my goal. I doubted any Ostiums in this place knew our tongue—given how little we shared of it, it was rare for a child of Ibis to learn it—but on the off chance that one did, I didn't want my companions spouting potentially offensive drivel when our host arrived.

It did so almost as soon as I'd finished speaking, which was good timing on both our parts. Hopefully, this quick shift in focus would erase any indignation I might have spawned in Nyco.

The woman—Li's mother, presumably—read the room well. It didn't affect the same familiarity as its son, bowing to each of us in turn instead.

"Have you brought me more thirsty tongues, honored guest Nyco?" it asked.

Shaking himself, Nyco said, *"Yes, I have. Three of my usual, quick as you can, and I'll double your normal rations payment."*

With a quick bob to him, the woman said, *"Of course."*

It seemed a little disconcerted to find me in its workspace, but I quickly shuffled around it, and as it stoked a fire in the stove, I headed for the table that Nyco and Pheniks had claimed. Sliding into a chair beside my brother, I noted Nyco's set jaw and silently sighed.

"Please forgive me for my thoughtless words," I said. "I didn't mean to insult you. As Phen said, I fall into House Kolb's mindset more often than I should, and it makes me careless with social niceties. If it helps, I find your methods refreshing, especially when compared to everything else I

learned during my rotations with House Zan.”

After a moment where he refused to meet my eyes, Nyco visibly released a held breath before turning to me.

“Our lessons to unHoused children are made intentionally dull to weed out those who are unsuited for our field,” he said. “From what I understand, though, you did quite well when studying with my House.”

Rolling his eyes, Pheniks said, “He did well in *all* of his studies, the lucky bastard.”

“It’s not my fault that I find each of the Houses’ specialties interesting,” I said. “It’s also not my fault that you’ve breezed through your rotations because of your above-average marks with Cerullis and Zan while I had to work my ass off for what I received.”

“And yet, you got above-average marks from every House by the end,” Pheniks said.

“Again, because I worked my ass off.”

I truly had. Somewhere in my array, I had a record of how many times I’d used an adrenaline burst to stay awake so I could study. I couldn’t say what the exact number was off the top of my head, but I knew it was somewhere in the triple digits, something that would horrify my parents if they ever found out about it.

It wasn’t that I’d had a hard time with learning what my instructors had taught me and more that I hadn’t had enough time for everything. I could usually retain new knowledge after a couple repeats of it as well as a practical application, but absorbing everything that the six Houses had to offer during rotations was... a lot.

And my poor social life. Besides my rendezvous partners, I hadn’t had a friend since I’d been...

Since I’d been six, actually. When I’d crafted my persona.

I supposed, in a way, that my studies had helped me with keeping my distance from people. The only reason that my family was so close to me was because of our forced proximity and because...

Well. They were my family. No matter how much I kept myself separate from other people, they would always have a hold on me, as I would on them.

“All of the Houses appreciate a good work ethic, so the fact that you have one should help with your placement,” Nyco said. “Your House naming’s coming up soon, right?”

“In a few weeks,” I said.

“Have you given any thought to your decision yet?” Nyco said.

Fortunately, the shop's owner brought our tea to us at that moment, giving me time to consider my response. What Nyco had said came close to scandalous. No one asked an unHoused what they'd say on the day of their House naming ceremony. One of us might volunteer that information, if we wanted to, but requesting it was seen as a pathway to recruitment, pressuring a potential House member into a decision they wouldn't originally have made.

But as I took a sip of my tea, watching Nyco over its rim, I got the feeling that he hadn't posed his question as a feeler for Zan. He was trying to give an offense equal to the one I'd imparted, evening the scales between us. I approved of the tactic, even as I prepared to destroy it.

Resting my mug on the tabletop, I spun it between my hands, fixing my gaze on it.

"Of course I've given it thought."

Those thoughts might have come years ago, but I had considered it.

"It's a difficult decision, one that will define your life," I said. "I'm inclined to choose Kolb, as it's my family's House, but I've enjoyed my rotations with the others as well. How does one choose a different House, though, when it will come before your family for the rest of your life?"

By refusing to take offense and confessing supposed insecurities, I'd keep Nyco off-balance, forcing him to take an advisory role. As he hastily sipped his tea, I joined him in that, and catching Pheniks' wide-eyed stare, I winked. Snorting, my brother dove for his mug to hide his laughter.

While I waited for Nyco to recover, I let my drink warm me. This tea was bitter but flavorful, a strange combination of tastes, but my tongue seemed to like it. Why else would I keep going back for another sip?

"Choosing a House unassociated with your family is possible," Nyco eventually said. "I did it."

Pheniks and I jerked back, snapping our attention to him, and at our incredulous stares, he nodded.

"My family's split between Kirst and Drav, which isn't too unusual given their overlap," he said, "but I don't do well with children."

He grimaced as he said that last word.

"And children play a large part in those Houses' assumed responsibilities, so I looked elsewhere at my House naming. In the end, though, my drift to another House has worked out fine. My family acts the same as we did before. The single change I've seen is that we no longer discuss House business when we're gathered, but really, isn't that how it should be? The two kept separate?"

I'd never considered a division like that. House business, when it wasn't too high Strata for the people in the room, was an openly discussed subject in our household. I didn't know what to think about keeping another part of my life secret from my family, even if it was something that everyone agreed should stay that way. Doing so with one part of me was difficult enough.

Pheniks, however, seemed to find the idea fascinating. He was watching Nyco with a gleam in his eyes while shocked relief pulled on his mouth and eyebrows.

Hmm. I hadn't seen such an intense reaction from him in a while. Could I use something from-?

No. Fuck no. Pheniks was my little brother, and yes, I'd cut myself off from my emotions. Yes, I played a role around him and everyone else, but I *would not* manipulate him. Finding what meager bits of freedom that I could in House Kolb wasn't worth distancing my brother over.

"I'll keep your story in mind," I told Nyco, meaning to change the subject.

He, however, lifted a finger, scrunching up his face. His eyes bounced back and forth while he flicked his finger, as if scrolling. After a moment, color drained from him, and he snatched the edge of the table to keep from falling.

'Feena,' he mouthed, probably meaning for it to go unnoticed.

I saw it, though, carefully lowering my mug to the table as I did.

"Problem?" I asked.

Shaking his head, Nyco leaned on his elbows before rubbing his temples.

"A project I'm in charge of just went off the rails," he said. "I'm sorry to cut your tour short, but I have to handle this problem before it gets worse."

Pheniks was already on his feet.

"Of course!" he said. "We wouldn't want to interfere with your work."

When Nyco looked at me, I fixed a pleasant smile in place.

"No. We wouldn't want that."

After Nyco had given the shop's owner its owed rations, he hurried onto the street, taking Pheniks with him, but I lingered for a moment.

Bowing to the Ostium woman, I said, "*Thank you. Nyco made a good suggestion, coming here. Your tea was delicious.*"

And I was off, racing after my companions. The progress we'd made through the city reversed in a flash, and soon enough, Nyco was escorting us through House Zan's headquarters to the room where we'd slept. While we hurried down its halls, I took note of the number of people in each corridor and the placement of recorders while occasionally bouncing my gaze off the back of our guide's head.

He was keeping something from us, something about our sister. Was she hurt? Had the *ii* killed her, and if it had, were we meant to serve as unspoken hostages for House Zan with our status as visitors rescinded?

I couldn't consider any other consequences that might come from Feena's... death. If I did, I wasn't sure what would happen, but I knew that I wouldn't be prepared to help either of my siblings over the next few hours.

Once we were in our quarters, Nyco paused.

"Remember to stay here until I come for you," he said. "The high Strata don't take kindly to unHoused kids, especially one so close to his House naming, wandering around our most sensitive data unsupervised."

He gave me a sharp glance.

"We're not going anywhere," Pheniks promised.

With Nyco's glare yet to relent, I inclined my head to him, and he must have taken that as assent, given how fast he bolted into the hallway after receiving it.

In no way shape or form had that been a sign of agreement. If Feena was in trouble, I wasn't staying here, and damn anyone who tried to keep me away from my sister.

TTS Chapter Five

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