

Chapter 53: Crisis Mode

Turning on my heel, I headed back toward a room full of self-important people, all of whom were furious with me. I hadn't gotten far before a message from Talira popped into my array.

Stay away. Your presence will only make things worse, it said.

That was... smart, actually. She'd have an easier time calming everyone down if I wasn't there to draw their anger like a lodestone.

It did leave me with the question of what to do with myself, though. This was one of those situations where I was supposed to wait for the *shukusenth* to provide direction. They had a better view of the big picture than me, but even with that, I tended to ignore them, getting started with a mission's prep work until I had more information.

Today, though, I couldn't do that. Standing in the middle of a hallway, I was stuck in place because this current danger to Lutov was, in part, my fault. I wasn't silly enough to think that everything should be blamed on me, but I'd definitely had a hand in it. Worse, because that hadn't been intentional on my part.

I was the *Lokke Vitras*. I was supposed to keep the homeland safe, not get manipulated by a friendly face into poisoning its leaders. I couldn't trust myself to make a decision when my thoughts were whirling like a tornado, refusing to *fucking stop*.

So, I did the only thing that might clear my head. Taking a lift to ground level, I stepped out of House Kolb's headquarters and started walking.

It was a nice day outside with the sun dipping behind the towers. Elsewhere in the city, an early evening would have descended, but the day was nowhere close to over yet. A few hours remained before people started heading home for the night. This made foot traffic sparse, which was good. I didn't have the focus needed to stay alert for threats when in a crowd. Even the scattered groups of people nearby were taxing me at the moment.

It didn't help that they looked normal. As they rushed past, a group of friends jarred me with their laughter, pushing and jostling one another. Up ahead, a man had a child—what a rare sight—on his shoulders, and that small one was holding her arms out, giggling as her ride wove her back and forth.

All of them could have the neurotoxin circulating through their bloodstreams. All of them could have weeks to live. Or they could be perfectly healthy. I had no way to tell.

At least I knew what was happening in my own body. Pulling up a report on the toxin's progress, I shrunk it to fit in the corner of my vision, there to stay until we could unravel this problem. Or until

the neurotoxin killed me.

Strange thought, that. Not the dying bit. I faced death every day of my existence, but the idea that I might die because my body failed on me without an injury to prompt it? *That* was something I'd never thought of before. Considering how often disease killed the children of Ibis, they'd probably laugh at how incredulous it had made me now.

Maintaining a report on my body's declining state might not help my mental health in the long run, but right now, it and the walk had helped with steadying me, a first step taken. What next?

Well, that was obvious. Once I'd made my requests for connection, it took a couple of seconds, but Leski and Korix accepted them within heartbeats of one another.

"Zae, what's going on?" Leski said. "Headquarters has gone on lockdown, and no one will tell me what's happening. Also, where are you?"

Lockdown. That must have happened after I'd left. Why would Talira have made that call, though? She had to know Sanya had gotten outside before the order had come down.

I must have taken too long with answering Leski's question because Korix's soothing voice soon filled the connection.

"I'm guessing the assembly didn't go well," he said.

Stopping short, I bit down on manic laughter, blinking at nothing until I had it under control.

"No. It did not," I eventually said. "I'm so sorry to do this to you, my loves, but we have an Ancients-Crisis-level situation at hand, so I need you to listen to me."

I paused for a breath on the off-chance that one of them needed to interject, but they said nothing. I tried not to extrapolate meaning from that.

"Ko, get Baely to our hideout on the other side of Lake Phiabe," I continued. "Leski, as soon as you can leave headquarters, I need you to meet them there, and before either of you protest, I'm not in danger."

Besides from the neurotoxin that was slowly dissolving my nerves, at least.

"I'm staying in Xygek long enough to touch base with Talira," I said. "After she's given me my orders, I will join you. I'll explain everything, and we'll go from there. All right?"

After I'd started talking, I'd heard footsteps on the other side of one connection, so it didn't surprise me that the next words spoken weren't directed at me.

"Baely, grab your go-bag for me," Korix said. "We need to leave."

"Dad? Wha-?"

I could barely hear my daughter's voice, although it was growing steadily louder.

"What's going on?" they said.

"I'm not sure yet, but don't worry. We'll be ok," Ko answered. "Your parents are listening over a direct connection. You should tell them that you love them."

"I... I love you, mom. *Per*," Baely said. "You're scaring me, dad."

And didn't that burn me?

"I know, honey. I'm sorry, but we need to go now," Korix said. "Zae, anything else we should know?"

Mother Time bless him for always knowing how to handle unexpected crises.

"That's it for the moment, "Good luck. Tell Baely-"

"I will," Korix said, distracted by something. "I'll do it for both of you."

He cut the connection, which was good. I'd been starting to lose the clear-headed state that I'd achieved. As if to help me with retaining it, Leski cleared her throat.

"Zae, tell me everything will be ok," Leski said. "I don't care if it's a lie. I need to hear it before I can get started."

"Everything will be fine," I said with no question in my voice.

Hell if I could tell whether I believed that, though.

"We will get through this like we have with every other upset in our lives," I continued, "and even if we can't, we will survive, so long as we have each other. Right?"

After a beat of silence, Leski released a held breath.

"Right," she said. "Thank you, love."

"Of course," I said, "Now, get out of Xygek. And I love you."

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

When the connection cut, I focused on the world outside of my array, wondering where my wandering feet had taken me. A relatively open space surrounded me, one of the city's parks presumably, but something about this one seemed familiar...

About a century ago, I'd made a drop into this park with Leski and Korix. Eleven years before that, I'd done the same with Feena on the night before my House naming ceremony. Why had my feet taken me here?

While I tried to answer that question, I headed to an empty bench before collapsing on it. As I sent out messages to the rest of my family, telling them to converge at the designated location, I was still puzzled by the mystery, but it was only as I finished writing these messages that I realized what the question was: a last defense mechanism.

At first, I'd had my walls—mission mode blocking off emotions—to keep my safe, but that had quickly failed. Then, a spot of physical activity and the preparations needed to guarantee my family's safety had kept my mind occupied. That was done now, though, and without my defenses to protect me, what was hidden below the surface could emerge, full force.

Curious, then, that I did nothing more than sit, waiting for Talira to contact me. Numb. The perfect, little soldier.

Ha! Sanya would have laughed at that.

If a tear spilled over my cheek at that thought, I didn't notice or care.

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