

# Chapter 58: Proof of My People's Evil 2

At the scientist's nod, I stepped into the lift, quickly descending, but when I stopped, I was sure something had gone wrong with its mechanisms, despite the solid ground beneath my feet. It was pitch-black in here! No one should be in such a place.

But when my array adjusted my eyes to the lack of light, using echoes and heat signatures to map the room in front of me, that theory was quickly disproven. Hesitantly, I stepped into a cave, staring wide-eyed at the people crammed into this space. After some awkward shuffling, the crowd rearranged itself, and fire, summoned at the front of it, had me blinking watering eyes.

Once I could see again, I couldn't think beyond a primitive, internal cry. From the awful scent that had hit me when I'd stepped out of the lift, I'd known I'd find something to haunt my nightmares here. Considering how often I'd run across scenes similar to this in the past, I was quite familiar with that warning sign. Even still, this... this was one of the worst I'd ever seen, and I was left scrambling to restart my brain from its stall.

So many mages had been stuffed into this cave, leaving only standing room for them. At the edge of the crowd, a few of them were holding their sleeping companions up against the walls, and they were *filthy* with the sharpest of cheekbones and the patchiest of hair. I didn't know where their waste was going—into a hole, perhaps?—and their lips were cracked and bleeding, making me wonder how long it had been since they'd last had water.

How- how did they live like this? How the fuck did anyone live like this and maintain their hold on reality?

Something about that question...

For a split second, disorientation jolted through my brain and body, and slamming my eyes closed, I fought to shake it off, wondering why this situation was causing such a strong reaction in me. I'd seen plenty of things like this before so why...?

As I peeled my eyes back open, a mental image of a Lutovish boy flashed through my mind's eye, partially registering in me, but then, I was confronted with horror again. These people...

This would not stand. I wouldn't let it continue. Spinning, I took a step toward the lift before a frail voice stopped me.

*"Wait!"*

For a moment, I froze. I didn't want to talk to these people, unfortunate souls who'd been trapped like this while on my watch. I forced myself to acknowledge them anyway. They deserved any morsel of attention that they desired. It was the least I could do.

*"You're the protector, yes?"* said a disheveled *ii* toward the front. *"The one who keeps the saviors safe."*

He'd placed such emphasis on the one word—*avaarien* or saviors—that I took a moment to wonder why he'd done it before answering.

*"I don't know about that,"* I replied in his tongue. *"I'm..."*

What could I give him, though? Should I provide him with a persona's name? That seemed wrong, for some reason. I didn't know when my personas had become so separate from me that even their names felt like another human being's, but at some point, that had become the case. So, for the first time in a while, I spoke the full truth of my existence to someone else. After all, none of these mages could share it with someone dangerous.

*"My name is Zaeden, no House, of Lutov, although most only know me as the Lokke Vitras."*

Nodding, the spokesperson for the *iisen* said, *"As I said. The protector."*

...What?

Before I could request clarification from him, the spokesperson continued as if oblivious to my confusion.

*"You wish to shout at our captors, hoping to improve our living conditions, yes?"* he said. *"While it's kind of you to want that, you cannot do as you desire. We singers are in our proper place, here until we're told that we may die."*

I drew breath to interrupt, but before I could, a finger was shoved to my lips. At the unexpected contact, I barely stopped myself from drawing a weapon.

*"I have words for you, words that you must hear, and then, you must leave this place, never to return until the end,"* the spokesperson said. *"Listen and leave, on pain of death by our magic."*

Was he *threatening* me? Why would he do that? More importantly, why was he talking to me like he knew me, and what the hell was going on?

Unsure what else to do, I nodded my acceptance of the spokesperson's ultimatum, content to play along until I figured this out. Grinning, he snatched his finger to his chest, clutching it like a prized possession.

*"The protector hears me! The first half of an impossible task complete!"* he said before confusion took over his face. *"What am I supposed to do next?"*

Another mage craned their body over the woman between them to whisper in the spokesperson's ear, and once that was done, he excitedly clapped.

*"Oh, yes! Two warnings. One for the now and one for the future," he said. "The first! Your daughter is wise beyond her years. Listen to them. The protector understands?"*

No. Definitely not. Not yet, at least. For instance, how did he know that I had a daughter? I doubted particulars about my life had traveled this far from Lutov. The longer I kept this person talking, though, the more pieces of this puzzle I'd gather, pieces that I could put together later.

So, I said, *"I've always known Baely is smart, so listening to them shouldn't be hard. What else do you have for me?"*

Eagerly nodding, the spokesperson stepped forward, crowding me toward the lift.

*"That's good. Good! Another task completed," he said. "The second warning. He needs you more than you know. Do what you can to prepare him for your loss."*

The spokesperson looked to me for an acknowledgment, but I didn't know if I could give one this time. At least with the first warning, I'd had an idea of who and what he'd been referring to but with this one...

Who was 'he'? And what did the spokesperson mean by 'my loss'? Was it meant to signify when I walked out of someone's life? It definitely couldn't be about my death, or at least, not a premeditated one like he was implying. I wasn't choosing to join the Collective anytime soon.

After a moment, the spokesperson said, *"The protector doesn't understand, but that's to be expected. All of the phansha pieces have yet to be put into play. But that's all! Every task is completed and-!"*

Blanching, he lifted his hands to stare at them.

*"I have nothing left to do," he whispered.*

Curling his fingers, he left one of them extended, trembling as he pulled it toward his chest. Before it could land, though, a woman snatched his wrist.

*"Not yet," she said. "Wait until he's left. He needs no more trauma inflicted on him."*

*"I-!"*

Licking his lips, the spokesperson lowered his hand.

*"Yes. I'll wait," he said before meeting my eyes. "You have your warnings. Now, go. And remember, Zaeden, no House. We will resist any help that you try to give us."*

I was... so confused, but in the end, it didn't matter. For the moment, I knew what I needed to. Kalaski was a cesspool of evil, down to its core, and if I survived Lutov's current crisis, dismantling this place would go to the top of my long-term checklist. With it being another House's institution, I had no illusions that I'd meet the goal anytime in the next century, but I could work toward it, alongside my equally impossible end games.

In the meantime, I wasn't sure how I could help these mages, and their insistence that they didn't need me to at least partially mitigated my guilt for that failure. In the time I'd spent with them, they'd demonstrated how unstable they were, and one couldn't reason with people like that, not until they felt safe at least.

But seriously. Warnings for the future? That was impossible. Still, I knew they'd stick in my mind for a while.

I must have taken too long with leaving because the *iisen's* spokesperson stepped forward again, coming close enough that I could feel his body heat, and he lifted a hand.

*"Leave, before I stop your heart with my Somadept magic,"* he said.

Swallowing hard, I nodded before backing toward the lift, and as it picked me up off of the ground, the spokesperson's voice chased me.

*"Oh! And when you see Sol, tell her that we, the faithful, have accomplished our part of her vision."*

Needless to say, I was shaken when I returned to where the scientist was waiting above. Thank Mother Time for my training, otherwise I might have shown them how unsteady my trip down the lift had made me.

"Get what you wanted?" they asked.

With a smile that I barely kept from shaking, I said, "Yes, thanks. Let's return to the tube now."

The scientist needed no further encouragement. We scurried through Kalaski, but I didn't notice our passage, too busy with working through everything I'd seen instead.

I was still doing that when we rejoined my companions. While I'd been gone, Pheniks had arrived, and when we entered the room, he was talking with the other scientist. Seeing that, the one who'd given me a tour raced to them, and I stormed toward my loved ones, but I said not a word when I reached them. Taking Korix's elbow, I tugged him to the side while the others stared.

"Did you know?" I harshly whispered.

Lifting an eyebrow, Korix said, "Know what? If it has something to do with these scientists, Zae, I'd remind you that someone else was running Kalaski until recently."

That was right. The change in management had come after I'd become the *Lokke Vitras*. Even as guilt slammed into me—the terrible things that had happened here were my fault—I slumped. Korix

hadn't been keeping this from me. I hadn't been sure what I'd do if he'd been hiding it, and I was glad that I didn't have to find out what it was because it certainly wouldn't have been pleasant.

Hesitantly, Korix touched my elbow, the one that was hidden from everyone else. Even now, he didn't like displaying too much affection in front of complete strangers.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

With a miserable smile, I said, "No, but you can't do anything about it right now. Let's focus on returning to Lutov so we can stabilize things. Once that's done, I'll take some time to recover. Promise."

Korix just watched me for a moment before engulfing me in a hug, effectively turning me into a statue. What was this? This was *definitely* a display of affection. What-?

"For whatever it is, I'm sorry," he whispered in my ear, "but I'm here for you. I will always be here for you."

Backing off, he walked back toward the others, leaving me frozen in place. *Hell*, how did he always know what to say?

I stayed here, reveling in this sensation, for the short time it took Pheniks to convince the scientists about leaving Kalaski, but then, we were in the tube again, heading away from a den of evil and toward home.

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