

# Chapter 60: An Update

For the one hundred and forty-sixth time, I stared down the display of a cannister, identical to every other one I'd seen for the last six days, and knew that the slightest mistake could see thousands of people dead within a couple of weeks. Even so, I pressed my finger to the display, ignoring how badly it was trembling. Ignoring how much my vision was blurring. Ignoring how sluggishly my thoughts were running through my head.

Damn, I needed another adrenaline burst, but too little time had passed since the last one, and if I induced another one now, I knew the consequences I'd suffer. The line between staying healthy and preserving my mental clarity was a delicate one to walk right now.

As I finished with the cannister, its display powered off, and I scrubbed my eyes. Six days had passed since Talira had given me the list, and I was nearly through it. I had a few more places to search, and then, if I was lucky, I could get an hour's sleep before the next task dropped into my lap.

First, though, I had to touch base with the others. After sending a message, letting a clean-up crew know that I was finished here, I headed out. I was meeting with my support team at a nearby caf bar, and as I traveled there, I looked over my report on the neurotoxin's steady destruction of my body.

To everyone's relief, the poison's targeting of the peripheral nervous system alone had proven true, leaving a patient's brain and spinal cord largely untouched. Unfortunately, everything else about it, including its rate of progression, had been unpredictable at best.

To this point, I'd been lucky. I'd had some issues with muscle weakness and shortness of breath, but that was it.

Others hadn't been so fortunate. In our group alone, we'd had several bouts of confusion and dizziness, including the fainting spells associated with them, as well as chronic pain throughout the body, and my father was currently in the clinic at the base of House Kolb's headquarters, kept alive by a respirator.

After he'd collapsed, I'd visited him as soon as I could. I hadn't stayed long, couldn't with everything on my plate, but even still, I'd run into my mother while I'd been there. When she'd seen me, she'd fallen on me, weeping uncontrollably. It had been an uncomfortable experience, holding my mother up while my father lay half-dead beside us. I hadn't been thinking about it. Couldn't think about it, actually.

Just like so many other things in my life.

When I arrived at the caf bar, it had been cleared out, leaving only my support group behind, and fortunately, none of them were missing. We could begin immediately.

Before we did, though, and in the second before they noticed me, I examined them, this group of people that I loved with all my heart. They looked like shit with bloodshot eyes, ruffled hair, and a worn-down air hovering over them, not that I looked much better. In fact, every time I'd seen my reflection in recent days, my heart had stuttered for a moment, so disorienting was the image of a stranger staring back at me.

Then, Baely glanced up, smiling when they saw me hovering at the door.

"Per!" they called, waving me over.

At that, I grinned. Someone—I couldn't remember who—had been teaching my daughter that she should only call me by my title when we were in public, and every time she ignored that advice, I was so very glad.

When I reached the table, I bonelessly dropped into a chair, with not the least bit of grace. I was with my family, and I was *tired*. I didn't need to play the role of the perfect *Lokke Vitras* right now.

As soon as I'd relaxed, a drone dropped a caf with its accompanying meal in front of me, and when I frowned at it, wondering what the point of food was, Feena poked me.

"Eat," she said. "We already have."

"And you need to keep up your strength," my mother said.

Wincing, I nodded before picking up a fork.

"Reports, please," I said.

I had no idea how they'd understood me. Sleep had so muddled what I'd said that I didn't recognize my own words, but Damari started giving me what I needed regardless.

"North-east quadrant's clear, best we can tell," they said, slurring their speech a little. "I'm headed to Misah once we're done here. See if she needs anything."

When I nodded understanding, Leski reported on her progress, but I was only half-listening, watching my friend instead. I knew that out of everyone, they were the only one who hadn't been poisoned by the neurotoxin, but they were also unused to how hard we'd been pushing ourselves. From what they'd told me, they'd never used an artificial adrenaline burst before this fiasco had begun, so it didn't surprise me to see their hands were trembling when they reached for their cup of caf. That they barely avoided missing their mouth when raising it, though, had me narrowing my eyes. Had their sleep deprivation gotten that bad?

Then, their hand spasmed, making them drop their cup. Hot liquid splashed over the table and their lap, and hissing, they leapt to their feet while snatching a napkin off of the table. We watched

as they patted themselves dry, cursing all the while, and they only noticed our avid attention on them once the danger of gaining burns had passed.

“What?” they snapped, tossing their used napkin on the table. “Never seen a bit of clumsiness before?”

“Is that all it was?” my mother said. “Clumsiness?”

Jerking their head to her, Damari showed her their teeth. They’d never liked my parents.

“Yes!” they snarled. “What else would it be?”

No one spoke the obvious answer to that question—please say they hadn’t been infected—leaving us in an awkward silence until Korix shifted in place.

“Damari, we only want to make sure you’re ok,” he said. “Are you?”

For a few heartbeats, Damari hissed air between their teeth, obviously working on calming down, but then, they sat down again, rubbing their eyes.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” they said. “Very, very tired, but fine besides that.”

Was that the truth, though? I was half-tempted to demand their array’s report on their physical state from them, but that reaction seemed over the top for, as they’d put it, a bit of clumsiness.

“Well, if you and Leski have finished sweeping your sectors of the city, you’re free to get some sleep when you like,” I said. “Given that, do you still mean to visit your sister?”

Shifting in place, Damari wouldn’t meet my eyes, watching their twiddling thumbs instead.

“She needs me to bring her something, which yes. She’s made that request a lot lately,” they said, rolling their eyes, “but it shouldn’t take long, and then, I can get some sleep.”

Ah, yes. Misah and her penchant for pulling my friend away from their assigned task. I couldn’t complain since Damari had been keeping up with us over the last few days but still. I had yet to decide whether the young scientist had been more of a hindrance or a help to us.

Shrugging, I said, “All right. If you’re ok with that, I won’t protest.”

When I waved for Korix to continue with the reports, he crossed his arms.

“Baely and I have been finished with our sectors for hours, and you know it,” he said, “so don’t waste time on us.”

Years ago, Korix may have agreed to let me play the *Lokke Vitras* role as I liked without skepticism, but he still found ways to rebuke me at the oddest of times. Fortunately, I found these reprimands more amusing than anything else now.

When I turned to my mother, she grimaced.

“I’m nearly done, but there are two more sites in my sector,” she said.

Before I could reply in a scathing manner, Feena said, “And my report’s the same. I’ve got three left, not two, but I doubt finishing them will take us much time. What about you, Zae?”

I wasn’t nearly as close to completion as them, but then, I’d taken most of the locations on the list. Had I told them that when we’d begun this long task, though? It was hard to remember every detail of the last six days, which was strange for me. I should remember them in perfect clarity, like I usually did when on missions.

Then again, a lot of strange things had been happening to me lately, not just that. Panic attacks at the oddest of moments, followed by long stretches of time where those fear-laced spells were all but forgotten. Saying things that I’d never meant to speak out loud. All the oddities that I’d started noticing in the twenty-five years since my first dramatic break.

Not that I could do anything about that now. I didn’t have the time or energy or safety needed to address it, so for perhaps the thousandth time, I shoved it all deep-down again.

Shaking my head, I considered how to answer Feena’s question without embarrassing myself, but before I could decide how to do that, a direct connection established in my array.

“Zae-zae, emergency assembly in fifteen minutes,” Talira said. “Get to House Drav’s headquarters.”

And that was it. Well, *ok* then. As the days had progressed my grandmother had been getting increasingly short with me, but that had been a bit extreme.

Stretching, I got out of my chair while taking a last sip of caf.

“Sorry, everyone. Something’s come up,” I said.

I was a little nervous to find out what that something was. At this point, only truly good or truly awful news could spawn an emergency assembly.

“If you’re finished with your sector, remain on standby for further instructions,” I said. “Otherwise, keep up the good work.”

When I made to leave the caf bar, someone snatched my wrist, although that hold was quickly released.

“Uh-uh,” Damari said, wagging a finger at me. “I heard what your family’s been doing over the last week. I’m joining them. Wherever you’re going, we’ll come with you, and once you’re occupied with your job, I’ll visit Misah. Then, bed.”

Rolling my eyes, I sighed.

“Fine. I was headed to your sister’s location anyway,” I said. “So long as you remember that I don’t need a babysitter. That goes for all of you.”

I swept a finger over the group, including my partners and daughter, who were already standing, but they just grinned at me while Feena flapped a hand.

“Whatever you say, Zae,” she said. “Get going already.”

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