

Chapter 77: I Should Get Some Sleep

Two months had passed, and once again, I found myself exhausted beyond measure. This time, however, I was in a fight. Not that this was unusual for me. I was exhausted while fighting at regular intervals. What made this situation unique had nothing to do with that. No. What was different this time was that while participating in it, an injury did something useful for me for the first time in my life.

As I moved out from cover, a gash in my leg, one that might see me bleeding out if I wasn't careful, had me stumbling the slightest bit, but it was enough to move my head out of the way of the energy bolt that had been coming for it. Instead, the bolt singed my hair, searing my ear in the process. I couldn't consider this miracle, however, as I was too busy struggling to stay on my feet to do that.

I couldn't believe I'd forgotten about that injury. Sure, I might have just received it, and yes, I was almost as exhausted as I'd been before making a fateful trip into the Tainted Lands, months ago. I was wandering through a thick fog, something that was impairing my thinking, but still, I should have remembered the wound.

There wasn't much I could do about either the injury or my forgetfulness right now, though. Grunting, I shot forward once more, advancing on the next bit of cover.

This should have been a simple scout and elimination hunt, but something—I wasn't sure what—had tipped my targets off to my arrival. They'd been prepared for me, and now, I was having to advance on them in skips and jumps. With them having dug into the safehouse, it was my only way to get closer.

Given what I was here to do, I couldn't blame them for their resistance. I'd do the same thing if I was in their position.

When I finally reached the safehouse, I paused by the door to catch my breath. According to my array, not many people were waiting inside, so this should be relatively easy. Why did I get the feeling that it would be anything but?

After taking a steadying breath, I burst through the door, downing two targets with energy bolts. I snatched one of their bodies on the way to the floor, pulling it in front of me. Using it as a shield, I took one, two steps, but then, I dropped it, twirling to stab a man's eye. To my surprise, he was quicker than me, batting at my arm before the strike could land.

No matter. I already had another knife aimed for his carotid, and this one landed. Jerking on the blade's handle, I sent blood spraying over the wall before throwing that same knife into the raised arm of a woman aiming at me. A clean hole, bored through her forehead, ended that threat, and I was left panting in an empty safehouse.

Maybe I'd been wrong about this hunt's difficulty.

After gathering my weapons, I looked over the bodies around me. Could I have played this out any differently? Perhaps, but these people had seemed intent on dying before letting me take their arrays from them. Still, maybe I should have tried talking-

A flash of heat between my shoulder blades knocked the breath out of my lungs, and doubling over, I fought to spin in place instead of falling on my face as my body demanded. The look of triumph on the face of the man behind me swiftly morphed into something else, all while I dumbly gaped at him.

Where had he come from? My array had reported...

Holy hell. Had I *seriously* just relied solely on tech during a mission? One hundred years ago, I'd given Feena shit for making such a rooky mistake, and now, here I was, doing the same thing as the *Lokke Vitras*. I really needed some sleep.

But the man in front of me was starting to recover from his shock, so I shoved that need aside, punching him in the face instead.

Finishing him off while he was reeling was easy, and once he was down, I was left with a dangerously deep gash in my thigh and a knife in my back.

Damn, Baely would give me hell for this, not that I wanted to return to my daughter in this state. I didn't have much of a choice with that, though. I might have a few hypos of shitty RRDs on me, but I'd left all of my good ones with them, and they were over a kilometer away.

Considering how badly I was already swaying, I should start heading their way if I didn't want to collapse, unconscious, before reaching them. Knowing my daughter, they'd soon start looking for me, worried about my delay, and I didn't want to panic them like that. It would almost certainly be worse than returning to them this injured. So, after sending a message to Talira, detailing this hunt's outcome, I set off.

Baely was getting better about hiding how much I'd worried her. When I reached her, she ran her eyes over me before calmly reaching for where she'd stashed my RRDs.

After letting her pull the knife out of me, I sank to the ground beside her, awkwardly leaning against the tree she was sitting beneath. While she jabbed me with hypos, I closed my eyes and rested my head against the tree's trunk. Now that today's safehouse had been cleared out, I should get some rest, letting these RRDs do their work.

I was on the dangerous end of adrenaline burst usage right now. If I induced another one anytime soon, there would be consequences, and besides that, my attention and focus were clearly suffering from how long I'd been awake. It was time to listen to my body.

"Can you keep watch for me, sweetie?" I asked. "I'm too tired to set traps, and I need sleep."

"Finally, he sees reason," Baely said under their breath.

Cracking an eye open, I smirked at the angry look on their face. Mother Time, they were glaring at the gash on my leg, one that was already closing, but once the RRDs kicked in, its current rate of healing would skyrocket. Was Baely watching to make sure that happened?

When I failed to reply, she said, "You don't want to sleep in the skycruiser?"

Relaxing, I closed my eyes again, shifting into a better position.

"I'm perfectly comfortable here. Why waste the energy of getting up, just for a bit of extra cushioning?" I said. "Besides, you like the open air, right? So do I. Let's enjoy it while we can."

Baely had nothing to say in response. After a moment, they fell to a seat beside me before resting their head on my shoulder. It was comforting, and that warm sense of contentment had almost ushered me into dreamland when my daughter decided to break the silence.

"You're going to die someday, aren't you?" they whispered.

And contentment was sapped from me. Peeling my sandpaper eyelids open, I craned my neck to look at Baely. She was fiddling with the hem of her sweater with her bitten lip barely visible from this angle, and I sighed. I'd been wondering when she'd bring this up.

"Yes, Baely, I'll eventually join the Collective. It's what happens to every human, even we seemingly all-powerful Lutovish," I said. "What's brought this up?"

But they hadn't heard my question, slowly shaking their head.

"That's not what I meant, and you know it," they said. "If I've learned one thing over the last few months, it's how fragile you are, *per*. Don't get me wrong. You're far stronger than most everyone else I've met, but that strength doesn't count for much when faced with everything you handle on a daily basis. Far too often, you've survived a sticky situation in these last few weeks by pure, dumb luck. What happens when that luck runs out? How long will it be before mom and dad sit me down to tell me you're not coming home?"

Damnit. Sometimes, it seemed like the only people who fully realized how human I was were the ones I'd never wanted to understand that fact. Why was that?

I'd opened my mouth, meaning to say something comforting, when a connection request flashed in my array. As when Calia had contacted me several weeks ago, I couldn't easily identify who was on the other end of it, and unfortunately, that meant I should accept the request. If another fugitive

from House Cerullis wanted to talk, I needed listen, especially right now.

Not far off of Lutov's east coast, Korix, Calia, and her people had started the initial construction of a sanctuary for House Cerullis' dissenters, and while it was in this first stage, additional outcasts could join the new community. Once its construction was completed, however, that window would close, and I'd like to get as many of Cerullis' dissenters to safety as I could before that happened.

Still. This was poor timing.

Gently squeezing Baely's hand, I slid out from under her before getting to my feet. Still on the ground, my daughter stared at me with her jaw set, which had me making a face.

"I'll only be a moment," I said. "We can continue this conversation when I come back."

Crossing their arms, Baely slowly leaned against the tree with their eyes pinned on me, and with a headshake, I started off.

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