

Chapter 95: Rooting Through My Past

DO YOU SEE, BRETHERN? WE ARE ALWAYS VICTORIOUS!

Pheniks, Feena, and I chase one another across the Azuwell Plains with our giggles and shouts ringing in a quiet serenity. My sister is starting another round of lesson rotations tomorrow, so our parents have set us loose on the world, letting us wander as far from home as we want.

As usual, my brother has fallen behind, and after exchanging a glance, Feena and I slow down, spinning so that we're trotting backward. We make faces and stick our tongues out at him, and growling, Pheniks pumps his short legs faster.

Predictably, when he catches up, he leaps to tackle me while Feena laughs. With an exaggerated 'oof', I tumble as dramatically as I can, pleading for Pheniks to let me go once we've hit the ground.

"No!" he pipes up. "MY big brother, Zae. You stay! No leaving like mean Feena."

"Hey!" Feena shouts before grimacing. "Actually... you know what? He's right."

She drops into the grass beside us, and throwing my arms around Pheniks, I bury my nose in the top of his head.

"Not going anywhere, Phen," I say. "I'll keep you safe."

He was gone! He was gone! He was gone! He was-!

[So much pain here. How did you resist us?]

What...?

A blast of white-hot heat tore me through time again.

Easing the window open, I wait for a moment, listening for unexpected sounds. When nothing drifts to me, I swing into the house, rolling to spread my impact on the floor. Rocking to my feet, I lower the arms that I have spread, happy with my near-perfect entrance, and behind me, someone slowly claps.

Spinning, I have a knife brandished before I can find who's watching me. Dad grins at me with his teeth glinting, but no matter how pleased he appears, he still holds a hand out for my weapon.

With an exasperated sigh, I trudge to him, slapping the knife in place.

“Where did you sneak off to this time?” dad asks. “We don’t have any bars near the estate.”

I cringe at the reminder of how I came home in the small hours of the morning, extremely drunk, the last time we were in Xygek. I’m usually better at hiding it when I’m in that state.

“That was one time,” I hiss, “and if you must know, I’m practicing. I have an exam on stealth work during my next Kolb rotation.”

I don’t, actually, but he doesn’t need to know the real reason I’m scurrying around the house this late.

Dad examines me for so long that I’m worried he’s seen through my lie, but then, he cocks his head.

“Want some pointers?” he asks.

Why had he pushed me away? What was so wrong with me that my own father would-?

But he hadn’t, had he?

What was going on? I let the Ancient in and then...

There was a gap in my memory, which wasn’t terrifying *at all*.

Was the Ancient reenacting my worst moments by using my memories of the people involved in them? But... why would *it* do that? Did *it* need a greater hold-?

As if flexing a muscle, what had clamped my head in an iron grip squeezed, and a deep, internal ache jarred me away from the present.

I’m bored. Really fucking bored. Brenson, today’s House Drav instructor, is droning on about the process of maturing a zygote into a blastocyst in laboratory conditions, and I barely contain a yawn.

I don’t find the subject matter uninteresting, but when one has already studied it to the point of deep memory integration, listening to it explained as if we unHoused have never heard of artificial pregnancies is tedious. It doesn’t help that Brenson has the most dry way of explaining concepts

“Zaeden!” said instructor snaps. “If you find my lecture so dull, why don’t you explain the process for me?”

“Of course, Fifth Stratus.”

Internally sighing, I get to my feet and prepare to ‘stumble’ through the requested explanation.

Why... why would the Ancient replay that memory? It couldn’t invoke anything in me, just a... a...

Why was I having such a hard time with think-?

My brain wailed, protesting what I'd done to it.

For the hundredth time, ink splotches on the page, ruining my last two lines of work, and growling, I toss my pen across the room with my shoulders heaving.

I don't understand the point of this. Why do I need to learn anything more than the basics of handwriting when I have my array?

"Frustration, kuvesk? You should know better by now."

Jerking my head toward the door, I fight to ignore how my insides have shriveled at the sight of my evushk. He isn't supposed to be home yet!

Striding across the room, evushk retrieves my pen before returning it to me.

"Sit," he says.

I sit.

"Show me what you've been doing," he says.

I slowly and carefully form letters until evushk leans on the desk over me.

"You need to be more fluid," he says. "Pretend it's a painting, one that you're forming with words."

Gently resting his hand around mine, evushk guides my pen across the page for a line before releasing me.

"Do you see?" he asks.

I see that my mouth is dry, and with my heart fluttering, I badly want to twist in place so I can kiss him, but I can't do that. Instead, I give the expected answer.

"Yes, evushk."

And that was a happy memory, if a little bitter around the edges. What the hell was the Ancient doing?

Wait. Was *it*-?

Without warning, I gained awareness of my body, even if it was merely factual knowledge in nature. I noticed how its every muscle was strained with occasional twitches washing over them, and air was rushing against an over-abused throat. For the briefest of moments, I tasted the reason I was having this horrible of a reaction and immediately ran from it, retreating to the safest place I knew.

Gasping, I race after evushk with the angry shouts of our targets rising too close behind us. Atop the hill ahead, our exfil is waiting with its doors already sprung open, and on reaching it, I dive into the skycruiser while evushk pauses outside. Six zinging energy bolts means six targets dead, and he springs into his seat before the vehicle shoots into the air, even with his door still open.

An explosion threatens to pop my eardrums, setting the skycruiser shaking, and through its window, I watch flames gout into the air below us. As the cacophony dies, evushk gets his door closed before collapsing, and both of us catch our breath.

This is my fault. I should have planned for more time between when we planted the bomb and when we left, planned for the possibility that someone would stumble upon us, but I didn't. How do I acknowledge my mistakes and apologize without using the forbidden words 'I'm sorry'?

I can't sit here, deliberating. Getting my apology wrong will be better than letting evushk speak first.

I turn his way, only to find him watching me with something I've never seen before in his eyes. Wha-?

Snatching my shirt, evushk drags me halfway over the divider between us, and without ceremony, he presses his lips to mine, frantically holding my head in place. His tongue plays along the line of my mouth, and my thoughts stutter to a stop on a single question.

Holy shit. Does he feel the same way?

Fucking hell, I was right. The Ancient was rifling through my memories, probably looking for something that *it* could use. Why else would *it* allow the recollection of something like-?

[Why are you being so difficult? You're as bad as the Favored. How is your body's reaction to danger unable to touch you? You solid beings usually respond beautifully to pain.]

I was laughing. I didn't know if it was in my head or outside of it, but it was there: mirth pushing its way through the blockade of what was slowing my thoughts down.

Did the Ancient not understand the role of the *Lokke Vitras*? By working with the first of us so long ago, *its* people had created us, in a way. If *it* wanted to manipulate me via pain, *it* would have to crank up the notch a hundred-

It obliged.

Bodies lie at my feet, and I can't deny them. The two mothers and an uncle. The boys. The girl.

I can't tear my eyes off of them while my hands shake. Hands that killed this family.

"You didn't fail me," *Korix* says.

Numb, I lie on my bed, gathering the energy to rise from it. Details from my last mission keep obliterating my attempts, and only a sense of cold, deep inside of me, is stopping me from spiraling.

Absently, I look through my messages, and my fingers are set trembling when I find one from Feena waiting for me. Almost violently, I swipe it to center field, devouring her words with greedy eyes.

"The Ancients don't understand emotions, especially not love," Korix says.

My off-key droning competes with Kyllen in volume, and I rock in place with my favorite song by him serving as a lifeline.

Korix. Where's Korix? I need him, need to- to talk this awfulness out!

"In fact, love repels the Ancients," Korix says. "Remember, Zae. Use it."

No, no, no! Fuck no! The Ancient couldn't see these- couldn't-

What if it found a memory from after I'd rescued Korix? Those were the ones it didn't have, and most of them involved our feeble attempts to counter its people. It might glean something useful from them. How did I stop it from-?

I was blasted from existence.

Jayla grants me incredulity and resolve when she shakes her head.

"I'll tell you everything about the oppressor in our midst," she says.

She can't give me much, but I'm still glad that Korix and I stopped her earlier. She and everyone else who disagrees with Alezand's handling of the Ancients will be allies in the enemy's midst, an early warning sign for when chaos is about to begin.

[There it is.]

Oh... no.

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