

## Chapter 29: Just So

*“What happens when a god is no longer worshiped? Do they cease to be, or do they continue on in darkness?”*

*-Uru Farlight, Archaeologist, Anthropologist, and Delver of Lost Histories*

Phaeliisthia called for a break, and Kyrae and I handed her our weapons before joining Ssiina in mobbing around our sire. Even with how little time I’d spent in her presence since before I could remember, she was familiar. Ssiina had regaled us with more than a few stories of our sire, most of them from before our mother’s death.

“I can read now!” I preened, reaching hesitantly out toward Tyaniis.

She responded by pulling me into the hug with her and Ssiina, her golden eyes wet. “I’m proud of you, Issa. Truly, I am.” She ran a hand through my hair and I shivered, a sudden memory bubbling up to the fore.

Like looking across a river channel on a foggy day, the scene was vague. But it was warm, too. I looked from stern, golden-irised eyes down and across the green ones that mirrored my own. I couldn’t remember why I was crying, but my mother whispered sweet words to me. Small enough for her to hold, my tail wrapped around one of her arms.

I remembered fighting to stay angry about something until warm, strong fingers pushed their way through my hair. Now, out of the memory, they did the same, and I struggled to hold in my tears, turning my head to the side.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Kyrae fidgeting.

“Do you not wish to join, Kyrae?” my sire rumbled. “You are my daughter as well, even if your name is not yet recorded.”

I heard a few light footsteps, and then Kyrae crashed into us, between myself and Ssiina. Tyaniis laughed, and the atmosphere began to shift: less reverent and more simply familial. Kyrae was the first to talk about our past year of tutoring.

As she spoke, Ssiina and I recovered, my sister splitting her focus between me and her sire, a wide smile plastered across her face. After our elven sister, we each regaled our sire with our adventures, as well as with the difficulty of Phaeliisthia’s insane schedule.

Sire Tyaniis, in turn, told me more stories of my own early childhood. How I was shaping up to be a worse troublemaker than Ssiina. As for the past year? All Tyaniis would tell us was that she was taking the necessary steps for Kyrae’s adoption and my reentry into hssen society.

Similarly to our sire’s secrets, we didn’t tell her the location of our secret glade. Some things were best kept between sisters. Similarly, the moonflower cavern would remain a secret between Phaeliisthia and me.

And speaking of our erstwhile tutor, she disappeared for a time as we spoke, reappearing only when conversation had turned to mundane topics.

“Finished detailing your escapades and doubtlessly trying to turn your sire even further against me?” Phaeliisthia teased. “I jest, of course. Such a short time could not possibly be enough to make up for a decade lost.” She clapped her hands. “Yet I am a gracious host, and there is a meal ready and waiting for us in the manor.” She spun on a heel and left.

Behind her, Zinniz beckoned. We all untangled and while the others stayed back to finish a discussion about magic that went far over my head, I caught up to the servant first. He shot hurried glances toward both the direction Phaeliisthia had walked off in and my family.

“Thank you,” Zinniz said softly. “For behaving openly as yourself, I mean. Mistress has not been this happy in *years*, I assure you. Your presence does her good.”

*What?* Taken aback, I could only blink in response, and by the time I thought of what I wanted to ask, the others had caught up to us.

With a sly smile that mirrored his mistress, Zinniz led us inside and to the dining room. The long table was filled with already-prepared food: fruits—literally—of the post-rainy season were arrayed to create a rainbow of colors and smells. I ignored them and focused on the wonderfully prepared fish and fowl. Fruit was best when used as a glaze.

Sire Tyaniis coiled between myself and Ssiina, with Kyrae to my other side. Where she seemed larger earlier, she now seemed smaller than I remembered. *I guess I really have gotten a lot bigger.* The thought comforted me while I ate. I didn’t need to be big, but I was happy with my body for the first time in, well, memory.

“Issa.” Tyaniis glanced down at me; her tone was scolding, but her smile showed a newly-familiar warmth. “Mind your manners.”

I blinked at her and swallowed.

My sire frowned, eyes glancing at Phaeliisthia. “Is she still like this often?”

Phaeliisthia shrugged. “She ate the whole bird in *two* bites this time at least.”

Tyaniis’s eyebrow twitched to a background of giggles from my traitorous sisters. “And you do not correct her?”

My tutor smiled sardonically at me. “I am an ancient being of immense and storied power, but even I cannot do the impossible.”

Now I couldn’t help it. I snickered.

In an instant, Tyaniis turned to me and I wilted under her stern look of disapproval. Phaeliisthia may be terrifying, but I had forgotten my sire could be too. “Issa, dear, would you care to explain? I cannot very well debut you as my daughter returned and of age if you cannot learn manners.”

Kyrae snickered, so I elbowed her under the table. Ssiina snorted, and my sire’s mask cracked a little, the smile vanishing the instant it appeared. *Is she... is she struggling to stay angry?*

I decided to go for it. “Why would I have such a big mouth and take tiny bites? It’s inefficient.”

“You are right about one thing, daughter mine: you have a big mouth indeed.”

Behind our sire, Ssiina lost the battle to hold in a fit of giggles, covering her face with her mouth as she almost spit fruit back onto her plate.

“Ssiina,” Tyaniis said sternly.

In an instant Ssiina stopped, nearly choking with how fast she tried to recover her composure. “S-sire, I apologize, I—”

“I apologize for timing my jest poorly.” Tyaniis cut my sister off and I watched Ssiina’s golden eyes widen as big as saucers.

Meanwhile Kyrae wouldn’t stop snickering. I elbowed her again, but she twisted out of the way and kicked at my tail, right in the sore spot from the morning training, making me fight back a wince. From the head of the table, Phaeliisthia laughed politely into her hand, the sound tinkling like chimes.

“My, how unexpectedly catty of the *indomitable* Tyaniis.”

Instead of snapping back, my sire sighed and rubbed at the back of her neck, before breaking into a smile. “I’m trying! Too many years of being coiled up so tight, and I worry I’ve lost the ability to have fun.” She reached down and tousled my hair. “Though that won’t get you off the hook for eating like a wild animal, young lady.”

“But what about street food?” I pleaded, glancing down at the wonderful tray covered in carefully-laid-out fish.

“This isn’t street food.”

“So it’s okay if it’s street food?”

My sire eyed me suspiciously. “If it is street food, then you may eat it as others do, but only then.”

I picked up a whole fried fish and tossed it into my mouth.

Tyaniis sighed loudly. “*Setting, not preparation, Issa. You are my daughter and—*”

“That means she’s good at exploiting the glyph of the agreement?” Kyrae ventured, speaking up for the first time.

Ssiina giggled. “Sire, do you remember all the rules you made for me?”

Tyaniis’s face fell. “I do, yes, and I apologize for them.”

Ssiina paused, then smiled and pushed herself up to give our sire a quick hug. “I hope I can accept that apology soon. Do you remember all the amendments you had to make in order to actually punish me?”

Our sire winced. “Yes, I remember those as well. Don’t tell me both of my daughters by blood inherited that trait?” She looked at Kyrae, hard golden eyes playful. “Can you save me from my own spawn?”

Kyrae smiled wickedly. “No. I’m worse.”

“Jaezotl judge me.” Tyaniis chuckled. “Well done.”

I ate another whole fish.

“Issa, I will instruct Phaeliisthia to give you only fruit if you do not at least make an attempt.”

I gulped. “You—hssss... I I-like fruit! That w-would be fine!”

Tyaniis glanced down to my plate covered entirely in small bits of bird and fish remains and back up to me. “Really now?”

“Tutor Phaeliisthia!” I panicked. “I need the meat for sparring practice—and to get bigger, right? You’re not *forced* to obey her, right?”

Phaeliisthia neatly speared a small piece of fish with her knife, making me watch as she chewed daintily and swallowed. “I am beholden to no one.” Before I could sigh in relief, she continued, “but I believe such a punishment would be *most* entertaining.”

Frantically, I looked between my sire and my tutor, watching as they both smiled down at me. Gulping, I reached for the knife. Under careful watch, I speared a fish and broke it into smaller pieces. “Knives aren’t good at going through the bones,” I complained as I ate.

“As hssen, you are not expected to eat them,” my sire answered.

“But I like them!”

“Then eat them quickly when no one is looking.” Phaeliisthia responded, following the comment with a long drag from her mug.

“Phaeliisthia!” Tyaniis snapped her head at my tutor, who winked at me.

I seized the chance, picked up the fish bones, and gulped them down before my sire turned back to me.

Tyaniis closed her eyes, and let out a long sigh. “Ssiina, Kyrae: did either of you see anything?”

“No, Sire,”

“Nope!”

“I feel older already,” Tyaniis complained. A chuckle started from her, low and rumbling as it built into full-blown laughter. “Oh, I cannot *wait* to introduce you to my sister!”

“Do you mean the jii’hssen?” Kyrae asked as I started butchering another already bite-sized fish.

Sire Tyaniis nodded. “I do. I was considering taking you with me to meet her when I leave, even though I imagine such an action is premature.” She glanced at Phaeliisthia.

Our tutor shook her head. “I wish for more time with them.”

“Ssiina,” Tyaniis asked—*genuinely* asked—“would you be alright with delaying your coming-of-age debut until your training here is complete?”

“I would,” Siina answered immediately.

“Then I see no problems with maintaining the original agreement,” our sire concluded with a nod toward Phaeliisthia.

“Excellent. However—” She set her knife down and steepled her hands under her chin. “I have learned some troubling things about Issa’s curse.”

My sire glanced at Zinniz. The servant coiled ever-vigilant to one side of the table.

Phaeliisthia’s eyes followed Tyaniis’s. “My servants will not divulge what we speak of.”

“Good.” Tyaniis’s voice pitched lower, returning to a regal tone that sent a shiver down my spine. The jovial mood in the room cooled in an instant.

Under the table, Kyrae’s hand found mine, her fingers intertwining. From behind Sire, Ssiina gave me a knowing look. I’d told both of them already, of course.

Unfortunately, Uru’s journal had yet to turn up a definitive answer. What was most relevant were the passages about ancient deities and their long-lost sites of worship, some of which the author had explored with her wife. *Those* I had not yet told my sisters of.

I wanted to use my reward location to investigate one of them, and I would probably wait until whatever the Spring of All Life turned up.

*Hssss*, thinking so far ahead made my head hurt.

Phaeliisthia cleared her throat, pulling back up from my plate in front of me to the serpent dragon.

“As you know, Issa is linked to an entity, and that connection will consume her mind if... widened, so to speak. We also know that her powers place pressure on her to utilize them if she goes too long without or is placed under duress. What I have found is that the entity beyond, sapient or not, will threaten to consume Issa if she gains—for lack of a better word—its attention.”

My sire nodded, so Phaeliisthia continued, “Unfortunately, in training Issa’s powers such that she may control them and avoid widening the connection... we have found that the entity has grown closer to awareness regarding your daughter. If this trend continues...”

“She may be consumed without a chance to save her,” my sire finished somberly. Her hands tightened in front of her.

Almost hesitantly, I reached out one of my hands to hers. Ssiina’s hand joined my own, and together, we rested our hands on Tyaniis’s. Our sire relaxed, looking down first at Ssiina, and then at me with a sad smile.

“What can be done about it, Phaeliisthia?” Tyaniis asked, not turning her golden eyes from mine as they searched my face. “Have you discovered if it is possible to sever the link?”

“Without knowing more, we risk that Issa may suffer great, permanent harm to her psyche were I to try. I may well be able to succeed, but I do not believe it is necessary at this juncture. If we are careful, and Issa stays under observation, I believe she has... perhaps a decade, perhaps five years or fifty years until such an event comes to pass.

“But!” Phaeliisthia said in a clipped tone. “I believe there is yet another answer. To remove the connection, we may destroy or subsume the source. Issa should be the one to do so; she *needs* to be if we cannot destroy it.”

*What.* “You never said I had to do it myself!”

Phaeliisthia inclined her head in my direction. “Did I not?” she said, clearly aware she did, in fact, never tell me so clearly. “My apologies then, but would you not be keen to perform such an act?”

Slowly, I nodded. “If I could, I would—I guess.”

“Very well then; no harm done.” Ignoring the glare from my sire, my tutor continued, “Unfortunately, even my own vast library does not contain enough information to determine the source. I have gathered another resource—”

“Your surprise trip to Amaranth, I take it?” Tyaniis cut in.

“Just so. As I was saying, I have gathered another resource that may yet prove a bastion of practical information. However, I lack mystic information: such a being was likely worshiped, venerated, feared, or even simply *described* at some point, god or not.”

Under my hand, Tyaniis’s hands twitched, pulling tighter again. “You mean to access the archives of Hesuzhaa Jii’ssiisseniiir.”

Phaeliisthia placed a hand over her chest and scoffed. “I would *never* dream of violating my arranged neutrality with the Empire of Jii’Kalaga.”

“About your flight to Amaranth then...” Sire let the statement hang.

“A neutral force meeting with another neutral force with no further motive than an exchange of apolitical, non-theocratic information. I paid my proper respect when crossing the Hssyri as everyone does, and I flew well north of Ess’Sylantziis.”

“Fine. Who do you plan to send, then.” Sire moved her hands, grasping mine in one and Ssiina’s in the other. Around my other hand, Kyrae squeezed down.

“I don’t suppose you’d fancy an exercise of your sister’s influence?” Phaeliisthia quipped drily.

My sire hissed. “Do not dare, Phaeliisthia.”

“My point exactly! I intend to send your daughters there as students; an exchange if you will. Of course, I believe the best timing would be after Ssiina’s debut and their formal adoption. Unless of course you wish for me to create false identities for each of them.” She smiled a lopsided smile. “I already have names picked out *just* in case.”

“No.” Tyaniis shook her head. “Absolutely not.”

“Sire...” Ssiina trailed off.

“I will not have my daughters study at the Spring of All Life under pseudonyms.”

*Huh?* Ssiina's jaw dropped open. My breath hitched, and next to me Kyrae sighed in relief. More than a change of plans, a disagreement between our tutor and our sire was not something we wanted to witness.

"So you agree to send them there in search of the archives?"

My sire smiled wide, the tips of large fangs just poking out under her upper lip. "I do not condone the contravention of any laws regarding the Temple or Empire."

"Of course! It is only reasonable to assume that fair and proper access will be granted to your progenies."

"*Just so,*" Tyaniis nodded, mimicking Phaeliisthia's tune.

The serpent dragon snickered. "I presume you will have no issues delivering them in my stead? I have already sent word to Nok-Nok and I believe she will be able to secure the necessary recommendation should your adoption proceed apace."

I leaned closer to Kyrae and whispered, "Is Sire Tyaniis conspiring with Phaeliisthia?"

Kyrae nodded. "They are. And *shh*—I'm listening."

*They totally are, then. Our sire is actually going with Phaeliisthia's plan for us to get information from the archive at the Spring of all Life at any cost.* I didn't know why or *exactly* what the two were talking about, but the idea was equal parts thrilling and terrifying. As Kyrae asked and with a deep pout, I quieted down just in time to hear the end of their conversation.

"And so you will return in one year to take your daughters back, formalize the adoption, and deliver them to the Spring of All Life, correct?" Phaeliisthia smiled.

"Correct," Sire nodded.

"And then after their 'education,' they will spend the next three dry seasons here with me." Phaeliisthia's lips curled smugly.

*Don't we get a say in this!* Unfortunately, I knew from the look in Phaeliisthia's eye not to interject. That, and Kyrae's elbow in my rib which formed a sharp undercurrent of pain to the intense "don't you dare" glare Ssiina had fixed me with.

Truth be told, I didn't want to protest anyway.

"Per their consent, of course," Tyaniis answered carefully.

"Of course! Students?" Phaeliisthia swept her gaze across the three of us.

"If you will have us," Ssiina answered first.

"I accept," Kyrae followed.

"Sure, I guess," I shrugged.

Phaeliisthia tutted at my response. "And it looks like one of you will *need* that time. See, Tyaniis? Your daughters understand."

"I suppose they do. Although I cannot help but wonder as to why you are excited to have my daughters once again intrude upon your sanctuary. I recall you being reticent before."

"Wonder away, then Tyaniis," Phaeliisthia responded coyly, half-hiding her smirk behind a raised glass. She let the silence hang uncomfortably before she resumed. "I believe that is all the business I have for you. Let us continue this meal amidst a joyous atmosphere. Given my magnanimity, I have already prepared a room for you for the night, Tyaniis. I assume you are willing to spend another day or two here."

Tyaniis blinked in surprise. "I would love to, Phaeliisthia."

"Just so." She took another long drag from her mug, white eyes twinkling.

*She's up to something.* From the way Tyaniis's face seemed to lose a little color, I had a feeling the next few days would be very fun for us sisters, and perhaps less so for our sire.