

Chapter 11: One Tense Meeting

Talira made me join her in a public place for most of our meetings. I thought it was a reminder of our agreement, a way to get back at me for pulling one over on her decades ago.

Today, we were having lunch near the city's center, and I swore to Mother Time, my grandmother was lingering over her food on purpose. We'd been here for over an hour, making small talk, and I was having a hard time with keeping my leg from jittering. Even the distraction I'd given myself—matching every bite she took with one of my own—wasn't helping.

I needed to be on the Preserve's outskirts right now. This morning, I'd messaged Fourth Stratus Elrin to meet me there after lunch.

Which should have ended twenty minutes ago.

I needed to get started with this investigation, to solve it, although I wasn't sure why I'd become so obsessed with this task out of everything on my to-do list. Sometimes, I was hit with bouts of intuition like this, ones that screamed, 'This problem! Look into this, moron!'

"Is something distracting you, my *Lokke Vitras*?" Talira sked.

Snapping out of my thoughts, I cocked my head.

"Of course not, my *shukusen*. You hold my total devotion," I said. "Why would you think that you didn't?"

"You keep glancing at the doors," Talira said, pointing with a fork toward the exit. "Do you have somewhere to be?"

Damnit. Why did she do this to me? Her passive-aggressive streak made working together more difficult for us.

Making a face, I said, "Forgive me, my *shukusen*. I have something on my mind."

Taking another tiny bite, Talira waved for me to elaborate, and I barely stopped myself from gritting my teeth.

"I've decided to look into the swath of recent disappearances," I said. "They seem important, although I couldn't tell you why, and I was supposed to meet my contact for that mission not long ago."

“So, your agitation isn’t because of what happened at the party?” Talira asked.

For a breath, I was transported to this morning, when I’d held Korix down so I could give him another sedative. To leaving Leski with our non-responsive partner. To Damari saying not a word on the trip to Xygek this morning. Damn my role as the *Lokke Vitras*. Damn Lutov for needing it.

“Am I agitated?” I blandly asked.

Talira just gave me a *look*, and I sighed, slumping the tiniest bit.

“Last night isn’t helping my mental state, but most of my agitation is coming from how long lunch is taking,” I said. “I have things to do, my *shukusen*.”

“Well, you’ll have to drop them,” Talira said. “I have a mission for you.”

I didn’t know how I kept from clicking my tongue, sinking deeper into my chair, and crossing my arms. Of course she had a mission for me. I’d hoped her summons last night had been for me to report my recent activities to her, but I’d secretly known that something like this would be waiting for me when I returned to the city.

“Of course,” I said. “How may I serve, my *shukusen*?”

Talira lifted a hand, and a woman against the far wall fiddled with the air, making the noise from the other tables go silent.

“For the last few weeks, our operatives in Zan have been filing disturbing reports,” Talira said. “They think the House is in the process of developing a biological weapon that targets the peripheral nervous system.”

“Which is a violation of the Concords,” I said.

My voice had held no heat, even if outrage was sweeping over me in waves. The Concords, a set of loose laws, had been established shortly after the war with those from beyond the stars, partially in response to the travesties that had been perpetrated during that struggle. They weren’t often mentioned in current-day society because for most people, following these laws was easy. They served everyone’s best interest, by outlawing biological weapons for instance. I’d never thought I’d have to enforce them, but apparently, someone had decided to surprise me.

“Zae-zae. Honey. People have been breaking the Concords since they were first written,” Talira said. “An instance of it hasn’t happened for a while now, not since before you were born, but...”

She shrugged.

Sighing, I shifted in place, turning my head aside. Every year that I served as the *Lokke Vitras* chipped away at my belief in the good of humanity. People could be so... *evil* at times.

“So, you want me to what?” I asked. “Infiltrate House Zan and confirm this supposed weapon’s existence? That will mean going deep cover.”

It would mean an undetermined length of time when I couldn’t contact anyone in my life, most especially my family.

“I need to know if Zan’s going off the rails again,” Talira said. “I’m sorry to spring this on you so soon after you were approved for a child, but this is what I meant last night about timing...”

After several beats of quiet, I realized that she expected a response from me.

“It’s fine. Please, don’t apologize,” I said. “I’ve accepted that my life will never be my own, so something like this honestly doesn’t upset me anymore. It sucks, but we all have our parts to play in Lutov.”

Damn, her face had fallen. Had she wanted me to blame her for our circumstances? She controlled her life no more than I did. All of us were cogs in our society’s machinery.

“May I contact Phen while I’m in deep cover?” I asked. “I doubt he’d give me anything useful, too loyal to his House, but he might help in small ways.”

Plus, if Kolb was about to rain hell on my brother’s House, I’d like to give him a little warning about it.

“That’s not a good idea, not with how close you two are. You can’t practice objectivity around him, so no. Let me handle Phen,” Talira said. “Zaeden...”

She looked like she wanted to say something more, but I didn’t prod her for it. What would be the point?

I wouldn’t like investigating House Zan without Pheniks knowing about it. Sure, he might have acted like a jackass last night, but he was my little brother. I was supposed to keep him safe. It was what I’d promised him when we were kids. Was entrusting him to Talira’s goodwill keeping him safe?

She *was* his grandmother. I had to believe that she’d do what she could for him, even if she was also the *shukusen* for-

“Zaeden!”

Rapidly blinking, I focused on Talira, curious why she looked so concerned.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “Usually, you’d be flinging snark about as if it were a jar of glitter right now, and you most definitely wouldn’t be this calm about getting a deep-cover mission when you should be with your family. You’d put on an amazing show of it, but you’ve never been able to hide your buried fuming from me. I don’t see it now. What’s wrong?”

She was right, but I didn't know what to tell her. When looking at Talira, I could see her worrying if I was going the way of Korix, soon to need my own replacement. I didn't think I was headed in that direction, but as I considered what she'd said, I recognized how hollowed out I was. Even my agitation from earlier was gone. Was this how it had started for Korix?

"The last year has been... rough," I said.

Without permission, my eyes crept up until I was looking over Talira's head.

"I am... struggling. A little," I said. "I can handle it but..."

I forced myself to meet my grandmother's gaze.

"We've been here before. Sometimes, something breaks in me, and I've had enough. I just... stop feeling, but it shouldn't affect anything. The *Lokke Vitras* still stands strong."

While I'd been speaking, Talira had chewed on her lip, but now that I was finished, she sharply nodded.

"I hear you," she said. "Once this mission is over, I'll ensure that you have a few days to yourself."

Sighing, I said, "You can't go easy on me just because you think you broke Ko-"

She slammed her hands on the table, rattling our dishes.

"Shut the fuck up, Zae-zae," she snapped. "Do you know how much your training strained House Kolb? No matter how deeply it terrified me that you required so little time to learn the skills you needed, I also rejoiced at how short that time period was. I nearly had to ask the other Houses for *aid* while Korix was whipping you into shape.

"We aren't doing that again. I would rather stress the lower Strata in micro-bursts than for an extended length of time, one that would see more of them killed than normal. So, you will take the damn breaks that I give you, and together, we will preserve your mental health. Is that understood?"

I hadn't known the years of my training had been so difficult for everyone in House Kolb. Why hadn't Feena said anything about that? Had she been trying to protect me?

Talira took a deep breath as if she meant to further shout at me, so I hurried to answer.

"Yes, my *shukusen*."

Deflating, Talira said, "Good. That's good."

Was I supposed to say something more here? Usually, I was quite proficient with social shit like this, but every time I reached this low point, whatever gave me that talent, whether empathy or something else, flew out the window.

“Is there anything else?” I tentatively asked.

Jumping, Talira shook herself.

“No, we’re done,” she said. “Unless you’d like to finish your lunch?”

Looking down at gravy, congealing around long-gone-cold chicken, I shuddered.

“No. Thank you,” I said. “I’ll keep you informed of any developments.”

Pushing my chair back, I dropped my napkin on my plate before standing. With one arm behind my back, I bowed to Talira, but I didn’t cup my neck. Doing that and speaking the necessary words would give her my Favor, binding me tighter to her than a vow to her House might, and I was never letting that happen. Not with her. Not with anyone.

As I exited the restaurant, I temporarily stole the voices of the people I passed, but for once, this didn’t bother me. For once, I could use walkways and public lifts, my favorite means of traversing Xygek, without my skin crawling. Even the hush and halt of activity in the lobby of House Kolb’s headquarters did nothing to me. I took a lift to alterations, wondering how long it would take activity to resume behind me.

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