

# Chapter 13: Well, That Was Ominous 2

I'd been left alone with House Kolb's *shukusen*, a situation that should and would have had my stomach roiling half an hour ago, but I'd fully disengaged from my emotions again. Finally.

Was this where she confronted me about eavesdropping on her? If so, what sort of reprimand should I expect, and if it was to be violent, why had she opened an avenue of escape for me by banishing my family?

These questions raced through my head as I bounced on the edge of my seat, affixing what I hoped looked like a dazzling smile onto my face.

"You said you have advice," I said. "What is it?"

But Talira simply stared at me over her pressed-together fingertips. As my persona dictated, I shifted in place after a while, and my grandmother flinched while air rushed out of her. Slumping, she propped an elbow on the back of her chair while pressing her hand to her forehead.

Hoping to better manipulate the situation, I ratcheted through words to find the best one that would describe her, quickly landing on one.

Defeated. Talira looked defeated.

"I've isolated us from all recorders in a one-kilometer radius," she said. "We're completely alone. Do you know why I've done this?"

Because she wanted to murder me with no witnesses around?

Cocking my head, I drawled, "No?"

"I've done it so that you can be honest with me, Zae-zae," Talira said.

Shit. She hadn't used that pet name in ages.

"Knowing this, can you promise me that you'll tell the truth from this point forward?" she continued.

I nodded, and sighing, Talira rubbed her face—

"Ok."

—before leaning on her knees.

“How long have you been holding this persona?” she asked, inclining her head toward me.

Almost, my emotions broke free of my control. Almost, I leapt to my feet and *ran*. She knew?

No. I couldn't, *wouldn't* believe that. Maybe she was trying to provoke something from me right now.

I drew my eyebrows together, carving a confused frown through my cheeks.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“*Damn*, it's good,” Talira said. “I'd believe it if not for-”

Rubbing her face again, she dug her fingers into her eye sockets.

“You promised you wouldn't lie, Zae-zae,” she said. “I know you've constructed this persona. After you wrecked his mission in Ostiu, my operative showed me a recording that he'd made while you 'kidnapped' him. I know that what you're presenting me with right now isn't the real you.”

He'd recorded me. Of course he had. I should have expected him to...

Wait. Had Talira seen the confession that I'd made to Garreth too?

It didn't matter. If she'd seen what I'd done in House Zan's Ostium headquarters, then she *knew*. It was surprising how much tension fled from me at this realization.

She didn't, however, know how much I separated myself from my emotions, so even though I let my persona fall away from me, I didn't let the wall blocking those pesky things come tumbling down.

Once my persona was gone, I shifted to match Talira's pose.

“You're wrong on one count. The persona is me, so far as I can tell,” I said. “Without it, I still enjoy my pranks. I'm still driven to be the best at everything I try. I still enjoy my studies and testing myself against worthy opponents. I still enjoy stories from before Lutov's founding, stories about our war with those from beyond the stars. It's all me.”

“With it, I merely add more exuberance to what I do, undermine my proficiencies, and display more emotion because I don't want other people to see who I truly am, who I've striven to become. I don't want to disturb my loved ones with a glimpse of that.”

“And who exactly have you worked to become?” Talira asked.

I paused. Wasn't that obvious?

“Someone whose loyalty will never be questioned,” I said.

No one could know how much I loathed the Houses.

“Will you tell my family?” I asked.

Talira recoiled from me, wrinkling her nose.

“No. It’s your secret to share,” she said, “although I think that *you* should tell them. They won’t judge you, Zae-zae. Or find you disturbing.”

I gave her nothing in reply, and at that, she sighed. She’d been doing a lot of that. Why?

“Ok, don’t believe me,” she said. “You didn’t answer my first question. When did you build this persona?”

Good. We’d returned to stable territory. I didn’t know why I’d deviated us from it in the first place.

“I was six-years-old,” I said, “which is why I say that the persona is me *so far as I can tell*. Its creation may have killed who I was before.”

Talira, however, seemed stuck on what I’d first said. With her forehead crinkled, she mouthed ‘six-years-old’ to herself.

Shaking her head, she said, “I suppose it makes sense. Your parents switched up your tutors around then, so both you and Pheniks attended early House rotations until they had that situation sorted. It makes sense that you’d have known about the concept of personas at such an early age. But you probably don’t want to talk about that time period.”

I really didn’t. I *hated* having people poke at the years around when I’d made the most significant decision of my life. If they remembered the instability of the persona I’d been forming back then or any other signals that might have pointed to what I’d been doing, it would be another clue leading to the secret that I must always hide. So, I kept my mouth closed, and soon enough, Talira moved on.

“That alone wouldn’t account for what you’re talking about. But! Your logic and intelligence scores have always been far off the charts. Maybe that played a part as well.”

“Logic and intelligence scores?” I asked.

Why hadn’t I heard about those?

When she met my eyes, Talira’s troubled expression melted into a smile. Perhaps she liked seeing something normal from me: curiosity.

“During lesson rotations, the Houses evaluate an unHoused’s ability to learn information, retain it, and apply it to their lives. The children can’t know about this test, or the results might get skewed, and those results are assigned a randomly generated number, one for each unHoused child. The only ones who know which number corresponds to which child are the *shukusenth*, and let me tell

you, Zae-Zae. After seeing your results, *all* of the Houses want you to join them,” she said. “Which brings me to the reason I’m here today.”

Finally, we’d get to that. I’d like to know whether I could cancel the request for my rifle, left was hovering in my array.

“Please, don’t be offended by what I’ll next ask,” Talira said. “I’m not trying anything underhanded with the question.”

“All right,” I said, preparing to defend myself all the while.

“Which House will you choose tomorrow?” Talira asked.

And I froze, but not for the reason she might think.

She didn’t know about the confession that I’d made to Garreth or that I’d overheard her conversation with him earlier this week, but then, I should have known that, given that she hadn’t already exiled me.

Also, I didn’t think she’d try to distract me with such a controversial topic before asking about a breach in her security. After seeing me without a persona in place, she had to understand that a tactic like that wouldn’t work. Therefore, she didn’t know that I’d eavesdropped on her. Interesting.

Did that mean Garreth had left the apartment's door cracked? Why would he have done that?

“Zaeden?” Talira said. “I’m sorry if I’ve offended-”

“You haven’t. Not much offends this version of me,” I absently interrupted. “In answer to your question, none. If it were up to me, I’d choose none of the Houses, but since society won’t allow that, I’ll choose Kolb, of course. Your House best suits me, grandmother.”

While I’d spoken, Talira’s face had drained of color, and after I’d finished, she painfully grabbed my knee.

“Don’t,” she said with wild eyes. “Pick any of the other Houses. I doubt it will stop what happens but maybe... maybe...”

She released me, letting me rub where her grip had bitten into my skin, before abruptly standing.

“I shouldn’t have done this,” she said. “Let’s just- let’s find the others.”

I followed her through my family’s apartment, resisting consideration of the questions that would most certainly soon consume me.

My family was waiting in the sitting room that we’d left not an hour ago with the air between them taut as a rubber band, set to snap. My outfit choices were still hanging in front of the couch and its flanking armchairs.

As we entered, Talira chirped, “All done. I think my advice was well received, or at least, I hope it was.”

When she glanced toward me, I eagerly nodded.

“I heard every word of it,” I said.

Talira’s face soured—she knew what I’d meant—but it smoothed out quickly enough that I wondered whether I’d truly seen displeasure there or not.

“Good,” she said. “I need to return to headquarters now, but it was nice to see you all.”

My family gave her halting farewells, and soon after, Talira headed toward the exit, pausing by one of the floating outfits as she did.

The one I liked.

She pierced me with her gaze, and I didn’t know what she saw, but she pinched the outfit’s black cloth, turning pensive.

“This one,” she said. “If he’s going to-”

She choked on her words for a moment before continuing.

“Wear this one, Zae-zae.”

As soon as Talira had swept out of the room, the tension between my family members lessened, but what lay in me did not. I split off a fraction of my focus, and while it dealt with my family’s incessant questions and eventually, our neighbors’ congratulations, I considered what my grandmother had said, rolling it over in my head.

She, as the *shukusen* of Kolb, had encouraged me to join another House. Why? Was danger waiting for me there, besides the obvious? Did she not want me? If so, could I manipulate the resistance she’d raised to my advantage?

Most importantly, though, why the hell had she thrown doubt on my decision on the day before I must voice it?

I surfaced from these questions for a brief time at the memorial after dinner, but once everyone had paid obeisance to the people who’d joined the Collective of humanity’s souls this year, I dove into them once more, seeking a resolution to Talira’s proposal.

I had yet to find one as I crawled into bed, but by that point, I’d decided to shelve my questions. I had to get *some* sleep, after all.

Despite the turmoil she’d thrown me into, I had to thank my grandmother for one thing. I hadn’t paid nearly as much attention to today’s social rigmarole as I normally would have. I was grateful

for that, even if what she'd suggested had me tossing and turning for quite a while before I sank into dreams.

I woke up to an alert from my array, but on checking the time, I knew my typical alarm hadn't roused me. It was a little past midnight, when everyone should be dead asleep, and yet, someone was creeping toward my bed. I tried to figure out who it was, accessing my bedroom's recorders and requesting an identity check on the intruder, but all I saw was a dark shape slinking toward me, and everything I sent to their array simply bounced off of it.

Maintaining an even breathing rate, I requested my rifle, finding a small amount of comfort in its formation beneath the sheets, and waited for the intruder to approach. I couldn't know if they were hostile yet, and I wouldn't shoot an innocent person.

As the intruder came closer, though, I let my rifle dissipate, resisting the urge to click my tongue. When she reached my bedside, my sister shook me, and I rolled over as if just now waking up.

"Feena?" I said after a moment. "It's the middle of the night."

Her teeth gleamed in my bedroom's low light.

"I know," she said. "Get dressed. We have somewhere to be."

We had what now?

Biting my tongue to keep from sighing, I rolled out of bed. This ought to be good.

### **TTS Chapter Thirteen**

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