

Chapter 44: Testing the Theory

On stepping inside House Cerullis' headquarters, I headed straight for the welcome desk with Feena by my side. She gave me a strange look for this, probably wondering why I'd stop here when I had the credentials needed to go anywhere in this tower. I didn't bother explaining to her that I liked cultivating the associations I'd formed in this House.

It didn't help that the receptionist stationed here today was a lovely woman, someone I'd sporadically dated.

"Hi, Calia! It's good to see you!" I called as we approached. "Is your *shukusen* here?"

I already knew that she was. Why would we have walked here if the person we needed to speak with had been elsewhere? Being polite had never hurt anybody, though.

"Oh, Zae! Hello," Calia said. "Yes, *shukusen* Sanya's here. Would you like to see her? It'll be a few minutes."

"That's fine. We don't mind waiting, for a time at least," I said. "Please let me know if it'll be longer than a half-hour, though."

"Will do," Calia said before hesitating. "Can we catch up soon? It feels like forever since I last saw you."

"That's because it's been two months, one week, and three days," I said, "and yes. I'd love to catch up soon. I'll let you know as soon as I have time, and hopefully, our schedules will align."

Giggling, Calia said, "Sounds good. I'll find you as soon as the *shukusen*'s ready to see you."

I dropped into an exaggerated bow, which made her laugh even harder, before finding a quiet corner where Feena and I could wait.

"You're dating her?" she said once we'd found one. "She seems..."

"Young?" I said. "That's because she is. Calia's House naming was only two years ago. What of it?"

After giving me an odd look, Feena said, "What? No! I was going to say 'not your type'. Why jump straight to age? Once someone's reached adulthood, it has no relevance."

Wincing, I leaned against a wall while crossing my arms.

“Yes, I know. And I’m sorry about jumping down your throat. I’ve been getting pushback about my dating habits recently, odd as that might seem,” I said. “There’s a reason for it, though Did you notice anything different about the way Calia was treating me? Not as someone she’s dating but as the *Lokke Vitras*, I mean.”

With a frown, Feena said, “She did seem a little... casual.”

“Exactly,” I said. “I’ve been entrenched as the *Lokke Vitras* for a while now, and we’re reaching a time where people from the younger generation are losing their fear of the position. It’s gratifying to see, but certain individuals don’t like the change. They especially don’t like that because of it, I’ve focused my romantic energy on a younger crowd in recent years, but really, those people should have expected it. Dating someone who’s not afraid of me is so much easier than the opposite.”

I shrugged.

“But this change in attitude has been slow to take hold of the populace. It’s not that common, even among the young, so if you haven’t noticed the shift, it wouldn’t surprise me.”

“I definitely haven’t, but now that you’ve mentioned it, it explains a few discrepancies I’ve noticed recently,” Feena said. “I’m sorry people are sticking their noses into your dating life again. That must be frustrating.”

Again, I shrugged.

“It’s my life. I got used to it a long time ago,” I said. “We should get comfortable, though. From what Calia said, we might be here for a while.”

“Right,” Feena sourly said.

She didn’t complain about this like she clearly wanted to, though. We fell into our separate worlds, working through our arrays or otherwise occupying ourselves. I didn’t know exactly how long Sanya kept us waiting, but when Calia gathered us, much less time had passed than I’d expected.

Why was the *shukusen* being so courteous? She and I might be friendly with each other, much more so than I was with other work associates, but she was still a head of House. Her schedule was usually packed, and clearing it for a meeting with me would have been a pain. As we took a lift to the top of the tower, I tried not to question my luck, and once there, Feena and I entered Sanya’s office.

Fortunately, this place had changed from when her predecessor, Alezand, had claimed it. Rather than a dark room, full of display cases, Sanya’s office was bright and airy with a sunroof letting light inside. This was good, considering the sheer number of plants growing here. Every time I visited, I found a new species of bush or flower in this place, and save for a scattering of furniture nearby, I could swear that I’d stepped into the Preserve.

And of course, there was Sanya. Unlike when timidity was forced upon her, the *shukusen* was in her element here. When she saw me coming, she spread her arms with a beaming smile, hurrying to give me a hug.

“Zaeden! How good to see you!” she said. “I wasn’t expecting a visit.”

As always, I returned her hug, although I wasn’t as enthusiastic with it as I would be with other people. Sanya had always been more wary of aggressive behavior than most, sometimes jumping if I moved too quickly around her. I wasn’t sure why that was, but doing small things to make her more comfortable took little energy from me. Why not make the effort?

“It was spur of the moment, I’m afraid,” I said. “Sorry if I’ve upset your plans.”

“Oh, please. I can always make time for you,” Sanya said. “Now, who’s your friend?”

I gestured to my sister.

“This is Second Stratus Feena,” I said. “You may have heard me mention her before?”

“Only every time I ask about your family,” Sanya said. “It’s good to finally meet you, my dear.”

Internally, I winced. Because I knew Sanya, I also knew that last tidbit hadn’t been meant to sound condescending. The *shukusen* was just awkward at times, which was part of her charm for me, but Feena didn’t take well to others looking down on her, whether intentionally or not. Fortunately, she only smiled while taking Sanya’s offered hand.

“Always a pleasure to meet a *shukusen*,” she said.

Again, I winced, knowing that to be a hidden jab. Feena had stopped caring about people’s Strata a long time ago, probably around when she’d been named a Chosen, and this meant she didn’t give a damn about Sanya’s position. The *shukusen* didn’t know that, though, merely returning Feena’s smile.

“Let’s take a seat,” she said. “Do you mind if we’re more informal today? I have some stuffy meetings later. We’re getting ready for this month’s assembly.”

“Please. You know how I feel about formality,” I said.

Laughing, Sanya said, “That, I do.”

She led us deeper into her office, and once plants had hidden the city around us, she and I sank into the grass with Feena shortly following us. Absently, Sanya started picking at our natural carpet, twirling plucked blades between her fingers, and I watched, waiting for her to make the first move.

“How’s your family?” Sanya eventually asked.

Which made me shift in place. Not only was I the only one here who'd established a family outside of the one I'd been born into, but I knew something more lay behind the question. Every time I saw Sanya, she asked about my girls, of course. Most of her attention was focused on Korix, though, and considering how often he'd returned the favor for her in recent years, I knew something lay between them. I'd never asked what it was, content to let them share it in their own time, but their behavior did leave me with questions.

Who was Sanya to my life partner? At some point, had she and Korix dated? Had he saved her life when he'd been the *Lokke Vitras*, or worse, was she related to one of his victims?

I knew she couldn't be his friend. He got out of the house so rarely that this possibility was nonexistent, and as far as I knew, his birth family was dead. So, how did she fit into his life?

Given how often both of them had avoided the subject, I was unlikely to find out any time soon.

"They're good," I said in answer. "My kid's House naming's coming up—"

Apparently.

"—and for now, Leski's focusing on House business instead of her music and dancing. In other words, everything's the same as usual."

And I waited, wondering if Sanya would fill the gap that I'd left for her.

As expected, she said, "What about Korix? Is he well?"

"Yes. Very much so," I said. "He just finished a final round of revisions on his book. Now, he has to decide whether he'll release it under his name or a pseudonym. I expect the decision will take him *a while.*"

Breaking into a laugh, Sanya slapped a hand to her mouth, highlighting how bright her eyes had gone, and I smiled at the sight. Why did seeing people happy always spark a warm glow in me?

"Oh, you know him well, but of course you do," she soon gasped. "I've never seen two people better suited for each other. In many ways, the two of you remind me of that old Ostium legend. How does it go? Some people have 'someone to complete their song'. Right?"

For that last part, she'd turned dignified, which made me want to grimace. Much as I wanted to, I wouldn't get into my opinion on how much my people belittled Ostium and Ibisian beliefs as she just had, especially not when she was a *shukusen*. Even if she was the most reasonable one I'd ever met, I couldn't be sure how well such criticism would be received.

"I've always wondered about that, you know," Feena said. "Sometimes, Ko and Zae seem to fit each other a little too well."

Snorting a laugh, Sanya said, "You said it, not me."

For some reason, that made Feena's eye twitch. Maybe she was annoyed at how long I was taking to get to the point.

As if to prove me right, she said, "If you'll excuse my frankness, *shukusen*, we didn't come here to discuss my brother's family."

"No, of course not."

Releasing her blades of grass, Sanya folded her hands in her lap, smiling at me.

"Why have I been honored by the presences of Kolb's First Stratus as well as one of their esteemed Second Strata?" she asked.

My sister looked like she was biting her tongue to keep from speaking, and I felt for her, truly. She'd done the work to get us here. She deserved to explain her suspicions, but unfortunately, she'd brought me with her to this confrontation. Much as we'd dropped formality and decorum to this point, we couldn't completely abandon it, and these customs demanded that I be the one to speak.

So, controlling my grimace, I opened my mouth.

"We're here about a mission I was involved with at the time of House Zan's recent reorganization," I said, watching Sanya's face. "Do you remember that period of trouble?"

If the *shukusen* knew where I was going with this, she didn't show it.

Frowning, she said, "Of course I do. Kolb accused Arion of breaking the Concords, and after presenting their evidence of this at an assembly, the other *shukusenth* agreed with them. At the subsequent trial, he was removed from his position and stripped of House while your brother took his place. Your family emerged from that conflict with great success! So many of you are in positions of power now, but that's not your point. What is?"

I wasn't sure if she'd brought up Pheniks as a distraction or not. Sanya knew how rocky my relationship with my brother had been over the last two and a half decades, but considering how public our lives were, who didn't know about the bad blood between us?

Was Sanya trying to change the subject? If she was, I couldn't indulge her in that, much as I might like to. I wasn't looking forward to the accusation I must soon make.

"That's true, but it's not the full story," I said. "What Kolb failed to tell the other Houses is that Arion was only an accomplice in that plot. During his trial, I was on a deep-cover mission in your House to find the mastermind behind our troubles, and after several months, I accomplished that goal. I thought the matter had been laid to rest, but Feena has brought new details to my attention, details that have called that assumption into question."

Telling her I'd made a mistake had been a calculated risk on my part. No matter how much I might fight to change the public's opinion about the *Lokke Vitras*, that struggle was only in its beginning

stages. The vast majority of Lutov, including Sanya, believed that I was invincible, ridiculous as I might find it, and this belief was one that I must carefully dismantle. Mess it up, and Kolb would lose an unacceptable amount of power, something that could devastate Lutov. That House was already struggling to maintain the peace here.

I hoped that showing Sanya this vulnerability would help her relax. When the time came, it could push her into opening up, assuming she had anything to share.

If she did, she was hiding it well. Cocking her head, she eyed me with puzzlement spreading across her features.

"I see," she said. "What does that have to do with me?"

When Feena shifted beside me, I rested a hand on her knee. She needed to keep quiet for a little while longer. Accusing a First Stratus of breaking the Concord was a delicate maneuver. Getting that accusation to stick on Arion had taken over six months, and while he'd been a *shukusen*, the same difficulty would be found here, if Teag was guilty of anything in the first place.

Given how brash my sister could be at times and considering how much I liked Sanya, I wanted to present this subject in a way she'd find palatable. Fortunately, I knew her well enough to do that.

"*Shukusen*. Based on the information I've learned, I believe your First Stratus might have been involved in the plot," I said. "Feena and I have come here so you can defend him, if you feel the need."

Short. Direct. To the point. As she'd always liked hearing bad news.

At my words, Sanya fell still with her face going blank. I couldn't see *anything* there, and this confused me. Not many people outside of Kolb had mastered this look so well, least of all someone like Sanya.

After a moment, she said in monotone, "I see. You have evidence to back this accusation?"

"We do," I said, nodding to Feena.

After my sister had sent the *shukusen* everything she'd already given me, we waited for Sanya to read it, and all the while, I examined her, wondering what she was thinking. After reviewing Feena's findings, would she draw the same conclusions I had? What would she think of her lover's betrayal, if it was one? Would she have an explanation to erase my doubts about Teag's loyalty to Lutov?

Please, say that she would. If there was one thing I abhorred about my role, it was when I was forced to tear loved ones apart.

Soon enough, Sanya refocused on me and Feena. She looked calm but not in a way that relieved me. The expression on her face only made prickles run over my skin while my fingers itched for a weapon, which...

Shit. Mother Time, let me be wrong.

“I’ll admit that this looks pretty damning,” Sanya said, “but your theory’s wrong, *Lokke Vitras*.”

“Oh?” I said. “How would you explain what you’ve read, then?”

Please, please, please, please, *please*...

With a sad smile, Sanya said, “Simply put, Teag isn’t the culprit you’re looking for. He was only following my orders, after all.”

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