

Chapter 45: Whether to Help

Feena started surging for her feet, but my fingers, hooked in her belt loop, sent her crashing back into the grass. The instant she hit the ground, I released my hold, snatching her wrist to keep her from lifting her rifle.

Never looking away from Sanya, I hissed, “Second Stratus, you will *follow my lead*.”

After a breath, Feena relaxed under my grip.

“Yes, *Lokke Vitras*,” she said.

Good. I hadn’t been sure if she’d listen to me. If she’d pulled rank as a Chosen—did that put her above or below me?—it would have been disastrous.

“Please forgive my sister, *shukusen* Sanya,” I said. “Even high Stratus as she is, she’s always been too emotional for her own good.”

Frozen solid to this point, Sanya slowly nodded in acknowledgment of what I’d said, not that I could blame her for her sluggishness. She’d probably never had to deal with violence before.

“Wonderful!” I said. “Now, if you could please confirm your admission of guilt for breaking the Concords, we’ll head to Kolb’s headquarters so Talira can speak with you. Unless you have something you’d like to add?”

Sanya shivered, and I wondered why. It wasn’t cold in here. Was she just now realizing what sort of consequences she might face for her actions?

“Mother Time, you’re terrifying like this,” she whispered. “I’ve always wondered why people say you’re the coldest *Lokke Vitras* that Lutov’s ever seen, but I see it now. Hell, you’re more intimidating than Korix was when he- when he wasn’t Korix, and that’s saying something.”

Oh. I was in mission mode. Of course she was reacting the way she had. When had I reached that state?

Shaking the question off, I raised an eyebrow at her seemingly unrelated tangent, and Sanya lifted her hands.

“Before you decide what to do with me, I’d like to show you why I broke the Concords,” she said. “I know that’s asking a lot, considering how thoroughly I’ve betrayed your trust in me, but please, *Lokke Vitras*. Whatever fate you choose for me after I’m done, I’ll happily accept, but let me have this.”

Was that why I was in mission mode? I'd *liked* Sanya. She'd given me hope that perhaps together, we could push Lutov out of its stagnancy, but if she'd 'destroyed my trust'—what little of it I might have had—then that dream was dead. Again.

And I'd long ago learned how to protect myself from something that would hurt me so badly.

Feena shifted beside me, and I cast these thoughts aside, considering the request the *shukusen* had made. Even in mission mode as I was, Sanya looked earnest to me. I had no doubt that she would walk into the Tainted Lands if it would get me to listen and- and-

Well. I *liked* her. Not had liked. Liked. She was timid but fierce, when she needed to be. She was innovative and willing to break the mold, if it got her what she needed. I could give her one damn chance.

"You have my leave to explain," I said.

At those words, Sanya slumped with relief, but Feena tensed under my hold.

"Zaeden-!" she started.

"Yes, Second Stratus?" I mildly interrupted.

Considering how tense the resulting silence was, I could only imagine the struggle my sister was undertaking to contain her temper.

"Forgive me, *Lokke Vitras*," she eventually said, "but... but this is a terrible idea."

Ha! Couldn't completely control herself, it seemed.

"I'll keep your opinion in mind," I said. "*Shukusen*, you may begin."

Nodding, Sanya started getting to her feet, and I shot my hand up, pointing my rifle at her face. With her breath catching, Sanya became a statue, swallowing hard before she could speak.

"If I'm to explain, I'll have to show you something in the sub-levels," she said. "*Lokke Vitras*, you know mw. I'm not an idiot. I know that if I tried to run, I wouldn't get far before you put an energy bolt in my head, and *I don't want to die*. I would much rather suffer the humiliation of exile. So, please. Let me do what I must to move this along?"

When I searched Sanya, I saw no sign of deceit, so I dissipated my rifle, making Feena suck in a breath, and waved for the *shukusen* to proceed. My sister and I followed her to the lift with Feena a seething ball of disapproval beside me, but once we were there, I stepped in front of Sanya.

"Which sub-level?" I asked.

"B-9," Sanya said.

With a nod, I said, “Feena?”

Relaxing, my sister set our destination into the lift’s controls before stepping into it, and I waited, giving her plenty of time to secure our arrival point, before stepping to the side. Holding my gaze, Sanya shook her head.

“I meant it, Zaeden. I won’t try to escape,” she said, “and I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about this sooner.”

She paused for a moment, although I wasn’t sure why she had. How on earth could I have replied to that? Eventually, though, I made Sanya uncomfortable enough to follow Feena.

When I rejoined my companions, I found them in the foyer to an area I knew well, if one that had been moved several floors below ground. While following Sanya, I glanced around Aeronautics, this place where I’d spent six months of my life, and caught Feena’s eye. What were we doing here?

We passed former colleagues while moving along, and although I drew eyes, it was because of who I was and nothing more. Feena, however, they knew. Whispers rose behind us, things like ‘Laylah’ and ‘damn Kolb operative’, and I winced at how tightly those comments drew my sister’s shoulder blades together. I’d always disliked this part of deep-cover missions.

Eventually, we stepped into a room with desks and storecases scattered around a holodrama plate, and as soon as she saw our group, the woman inside hurried to greet us.

“*Shukusen!* How can I-?” Second Stratus Janyka said before stopping short. “Laylah! I thought you’d moved on. What are you...?”

She trailed off, taking in Feena’s attire, and when I smiled at her, she gasped, falling back a step.

“Second Stratus, everything’s fine,” Sanya said. “Please, collect yourself and take your work elsewhere. I need this equipment.”

Still bug-eyed, Janyka nodded before fleeing the room. Mother Time, I *hated* that I had that effect on people.

How long would it be before she spread the news of what she’d seen? Enough people had seen me in the lobby earlier that the entirety of House Cerullis probably knew I was here by now, but the fact that I’d accompanied their *shukusen* to this specific department would have people watching me and my sister with extreme suspicion for the rest of our visit.

Sanya either hadn’t thought about this or didn’t care because without a comment on Janyka’s departure, she breezed into the room and turned on the holodrama plate when she reached it. An image of the sun—of all things—flickered into being above it, and after a moment, I cocked my head at its rotating mass. Why did it look wrong?

“My story is, unfortunately, quite similar to my predecessors,” Sanya said. “During the course of our research, Cerullis stumbled upon a phenomenon that could destroy life on this planet as we

know it. I'm guessing you see something's different about our solar system's star?"

"Yes," I said, squinting at the image.

What the hell was I missing?

"Don't feel bad if you can't distinguish the change," Sanya said. "It's subtle and so unbelievable that most people refuse to see it until someone points it out. Even after that, some people continue to deny it, no matter how many reports my House writes about it."

I was assuming she was referring to the reports that every House submitted to the others, sharing significant discoveries to acquire more resources. They crossed my desk at times, but usually, I only had time to glance over them before moving on to tasks more suited to my specialty. I left the in-depth reading to Talira. Considering how often I'd mentioned this in the past, Sanya knew about it, meaning that comment hadn't been aimed at me. Had she been deprecating Talira, then?

Stepping forward, Feena snarled at Sanya.

"And *what* is it?"

Damn, she'd sounded annoyed, not that I could blame her. This visit probably wasn't going the way she'd had planned.

Turning to the hologram, Sanya gazed at it with her arms crossed behind her back.

"Our sun is larger than it should be," she said.

Oh. Yes, that made-

Sucking in a breath, I jerked my head to Sanya.

"What?" I said.

In the next instant, Feena hissed, "*How?*"

Taking a deep breath, Sanya met our eyes before saying.

"We don't know. Not specifically, at least. Here's what we do have."

After she played with the air, the hologram of our sun zoomed in until only a portion of it remained in view, and against that background, a structure of alien design floated. It was unlike any satellite that Lutov had produced, although something about the protrusions hugging its exterior tickled at my memory. Something about the vehicle we'd used to resolve the Ancient's Crisis.

"What is that?" Feena asked.

"Again, we don't know," Sanya said, "but its origin seems fairly clear-"

“It was made by those from beyond the stars,” I quietly interrupted.

I was starting to see where this was going, and *I didn't like it*. Looking at this image, I was reminded of a time when I'd stood in front of a hologram like this, and the image of our sun had shimmered before jumping in size. At the time, I'd thought that I'd lost my brother while an Ancient, an enemy of those from beyond the stars, had been in my body, trying to kill me, so I'd mostly forgotten about what I'd seen. Until now.

Were those events related to what I was currently looking at, and if so, how long had Cerullis sat on this problem?

“Trust you to see it so quickly,” Sanya said. “The best we can tell, that structure—whatever it is—is adding mass to our sun. You can guess the possible consequences of that, *Lokke Vitras*.”

Numbly, I nodded. If left alone, such a change in a star, the origin of so much energy that it baffled the mind, could wipe out life on our planet, *at the least*.

“We theorize that after the Ancients defeated them in the war, those from beyond the stars left that structure as a parting gift, their final revenge in a way,” Sanya said. “It's working slowly, so we have a few centuries before our sun reaches a tipping point but...”

That didn't mean we should ignore the problem.

“Why would our old enemy do something like this? Why not choose a quick method of revenge?” I asked, mostly of myself. “By making the process progress so slowly, did some among them hope to give us a chance, or are they taunting us, sure in the knowledge that we can't stop their plan?”

“Does it matter?” Feena said. “If what you've shown us is real—and I'm not sure it is—then it must relate to why you broke the Concord. You should finish explaining that, *shukusen*.”

I already knew what Sanya would say, though.

“She commissioned the neurotoxin as a last resort,” I said. “If worst came to worst, it would force the other Houses into working with Cerullis while they researched this structure. Considering our circumstances, they'd probably end up needing it too. All of that makes sense to me.”

While Feena glared at me, probably wondering what I was doing, Sanya relaxed, but if she thought I'd been swayed to leave things along, she had another thing coming. I wasn't done yet.

“Which leaves the question of why you kidnapped so many people while having the weapon developed. Given how often Teag mentioned Elrin's missing persons mission in his journal, it follows that they're a part of this somehow,” I said. “Were they your test subjects? Did you unleash your neurotoxin on them?”

A weapon to dissolve someone's nervous system. What would that feel like while it killed you?

Perhaps Sanya had heard the hidden violence in my voice because she gasped, clenching her hands until their knuckles turned white, while tears sprang into her eyes.

“Yes,” she simply said.

Before the impact of her words could hit me, though Sanya gestured at the air. An image of an alien structure, floating around the sun, was replaced with the visage of a pretty woman, and I stopped breathing. How many times had I stared at that face while scanning Elrin’s reports?

“My name is Valef, and I am a Seventh Stratus of House Drav,” she said. “After ninety-six years of life, I’ve decided that I’m ready to join the Collective, but rather than taking the easy way out, I want to use my life’s end to advance a worthy cause.

“If you’re hearing this, *Lokke Vitras*, know that I’m honored by how diligently you’ve searched for us. First Stratus Teag has kept us apprised of your investigation into our disappearances, and after hearing about it, my companions and I suggested that he make these recordings so you’ll understand.

“None of us were kidnapped, and any horror that we’ve undergone here was done with our permission. First Stratus Teag and *shukusen* Sanya have been careful about making sure that this is what we want. After hearing what they had to say, however, how could we do anything less than agree to help?

“I don’t know about the others, but your example has inspired me to make this choice of self-sacrifice, *Lokke Vitras*, so please. Whoever brought you here, listen to them. Help them, and only enact justice for us after our goal has been achieved.

“Thank you for listening to my words.”

Her image winked out, but I still saw the ghost of it every time I blinked. Hell, I needed to breathe, but I couldn’t focus on that life-essential task. My mind was too fixed on Valef’s words.

Your example has inspired me...

“I have one for them all,” Sanya said.

Closing my eyes, I turned away, noting Feena’s soft sob.

“You manipulative bitch,” she whispered.

“Yes,” Sanya said. “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know how long it took me to collect myself, but when I turned back to her, Sanya had moved closer.

As if already knowing what I’d need, she said, “As soon as the world’s safe, Zaeden. Teag and I will accept whatever punishment you think we deserve as soon as it’s over.”

Why? *Why* did I still trust her? Why did I still *like* her?

Licking my lips, I roughly asked, "What do you need?"

I half-expected Feena to protest that question, but she just hugged herself, looking away. Did she think I was making a mistake? Would she say anything if she did?

"An assembly is scheduled for the end of the week," Sanya said.

Nodding, I said, "I'm aware."

"At that meeting, I plan to put our proposal to reinstate Lutov's space program to a vote," Sanya said. "I need it to pass. Can you make that happen?"

Who did she think she was talking to?

"I can," I said. "For that, though, I'll need all of your research into what's destabilizing our sun as well as your reports on the experiments you've run. I'll also need copies of the... recordings."

She'd know what I meant.

"Of course," Sanya said, "and if you need anything else, please contact me directly. I'll answer you, no matter what I might be involved with."

"You'd better," Feena said under her breath.

Ignoring her, I said, "My thanks, *shukusen*. If it's all the same to you, I'd like to get started now. My schedule has suddenly filled up."

"Please," Sanya said, gesturing toward the door.

After a bow, I hurried out of the room with Feena on my heel, and as we left, I never saw my surroundings or the people nearby, surely staring. I navigated out of the tower on instinct alone, and only once sunlight was warming our skin did Feena break the silence she'd maintained.

"Are you ok?" she asked.

Was I? Mission mode was making it hard to tell.

"I will be," I eventually said.

I had to be.

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