

Chapter 49: An Unexpected Compatriot

“You must promise to keep this to yourself,” Orin said.

Having never seen Kirst’s *shukusen* so serious before, I inclined my head toward him, fighting not to frown. Would this meeting end with yet another rejection?

Since coming home yesterday, I’d been trying to figure out why *shukusen* Raelle had denied my unvoiced request, seemingly without provocation, but I’d come up with nothing. I had no clue how I’d pissed her off, which meant I couldn’t change her vote, and now that I was here, sitting across from Orin, I wondered if I was about to have a repeat performance.

Had I lost the ability to manipulate people? While on a personal level, such a loss would be exhilarating—how I’d love for a conversation to be unpredictable or to never need such disgusting tactics in the first place—it would be devastating for me as the *Lokke Vitras*.

Leaning forward, Orin beckoned me closer, and I obliged, queuing a request for my rifle in my array. I doubted he’d attack me, but it paid to be prepared.

With his eyes twinkling, Orin whispered, “I’ve always loved the stars, wanted to see them up close since I was a boy.”

Giggling, he sat back in his chair while I straightened with a grin. What a way to tell me that Sanya had his vote.

“May I share a secret in return?” I said.

When Orin spread his hands in front of him, I hid my face behind steepled fingers.

“I have a similar wish,” I said. “You should see my library back home. My partners and I have collected so many books about space...”

Orin’s mouth dropped open, and I firmly kept my own in a straight line—*don’t smirk, don’t smirk!*—until he closed his.

“That’s... *wonderful!*” he breathed. “Might I see it someday? I’d love to know if... but no. I could never intrude on the privacy of the *Lokke Vitras*.”

Exactly what privacy was that, pray tell?

"You're welcome anytime," I said. "Just give us some warning."

"Well, then."

Orin took a breath before slapping the arms of his chair.

"I've never been happier to take a meeting with you, *Lokke Vitras*," he said. "I look forward to browsing your library soon."

Finally, I let myself smile, reminded once more of how close this man came to the manipulation skills of House Kolb's best. That had been the most subtle dismissal I'd heard in a while. There was a reason I'd always liked Orin.

Getting to my feet, I extended a hand.

"It was indeed a pleasure," I said. "I'll see you at the next assembly?"

"It should be interesting," Orin said, giving the most neutral of answers to my indirect query.

But he squeezed my hand in reassurance. This let me travel to where I was meeting Feena with a bounce in my step.

The assembly in question would convene tomorrow afternoon, but still, evidence of it flurried across the park at the center of Xygek.

Somehow, the importance of this month's meeting had spread across the city, and this had low and mid Strata scurrying between its towers, carrying messages and the like.

I'd received my own message from Korix after arriving in Lutov. Even as I'd thanked him for delaying with it so I could focus on Raelle, I'd opened it, reading its single line of 'Good luck' with a smile. Soon after that, Leski had requested a direct connection with me, and we'd worked through details for the next few days. Tomorrow, she'd be on standby in Kolb's headquarters, in case things turned to shit. Knowing that she'd be nearby had calmed down my nerves about the meeting.

As I reached where I was meeting with Feena, I cocked my head at who was waiting there instead. That wasn't my sister.

"Forgive me, Zaeden," Sanya said. "Over the last few days, I've been keeping track of your progress. I thought you might pass this way, so I've been waiting here, hoping we could speak."

"You could have sent me a message," I said.

Sanya winced at how abrupt I'd been.

"True," she said. "I didn't want to attract attention from anyone who might be watching us by directly messaging you, but it appears that by coming here, I've still drawn eyes to us."

A lot of people were staring our way. Sighing, I waved for Sanya to follow me.

“Come on,” I said. “I know a place where we can talk.”

As we moved along, I sent Feena a message about the change in plans, although I was constantly aware of the ally-turned-enemy at my back as I did. What did she want to talk about? Did she expect an update on my work from this last week? I didn’t know if she deserved one, even if she had the leverage needed to extract one from me. Besides the single fact that *I was working with her*, I’d told Sanya about far too many of my sensitive issues over the years. With them, she could force me into a minor task for her, although nothing she had could pressure something drastic from me.

Given that, why hadn’t I been keeping her appeased? Even if I didn’t consider the personal details she knew about me, she’d had the formula for a deadly neurotoxin in her hands for the last twenty-five years. How many vats of it might she have produced in that time?

Hell, she could probably infect all of Lutov with it, and I’d just been... ignoring her, which was entirely out of character for me. Why had I done that? Was I truly that distracted?

As I turned into a bar, I tamped down on the surge of ugly emotions that those questions had spawned. They should be examined, yes, but first, I needed to navigate through the dark dive I’d led Sanya to.

Fortunately, this place’s proprietor was behind the bar, and as soon as she saw me coming, she reached for something behind the counter while I threw my arms over my head.

“Rane! How good to see you!” I shouted, loud and enthusiastic.

Emotional, like the once caretaker of The Library had always insisted I shouldn’t be.

Something whizzed toward me, and reflexively, I reached out to catch what Rana had thrown. Goodness. She’d been aiming for my face that time! As if unphased, I bounced a set of keys in the palm of my hand.

“Thaaaaanks, my dear!” I sang, already moving toward a door in the back. “My favorite Third Stratus. The *best* of barkeeps!”

I kept up the string of compliments as I headed across the bar, ignoring the eyes on me. It was better if these people were focused on me instead of Sanya. As soon as I was through the door, however, I dropped into my typical demeanor, which left the *shukusen* staring at me.

“What?” I said.

“I’ve never seen you working,” she said. “It’s...”

She had nothing else, but of course she didn’t. Most people didn’t.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Trust me. I can do much more than act happy when I'm not."

Before she could respond, I pushed through an old-fashioned door to our right, barely checking to make sure she'd come with me. She stopped short in the room's threshold, not that I could blame her.

Decades ago, Rana had decided that she wanted to stay a barkeep, even without The Library to guard, and at the time of her new place's construction, I'd asked her to set a space aside for me, an additional safe place I could go in case of emergency. While the requested space was tiny, it felt cozy rather than cramped.

What had likely stopped Sanya short, though, was the scenario that had started beaming from a holodrama plate when we'd entered. It was one of my more convincing ones, placing us in the middle of an interstellar nebula.

At first glance, it could be disorienting. Even with gravity keeping one firmly pinned to the ground, the scenario could make one feel as if they were drifting in the dust of a star's birthing ground.

I ignored that disorientation, heading for the sideboard taking up far too much of the room's space.

Gesturing to it, I said, "Drink?"

"I..." Sanya started before clearing her throat. "No, thank you."

"Fair enough," I said. "Make yourself comfortable, then."

I turned to my task.

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