

Chapter 50: A Meal with the Enemy

First, I secured Ace in the guesthouse, leaving him with an elaborate, treat-filled puzzle to solve. While there, I got myself properly attired for a meal with the enemy before leaving to find Leski.

After slipping into the room she was in, I soundlessly closed the door behind me. With hardwood floors, a high ceiling, and mirrored walls, this space felt enormous, which the piano music echoing in it only highlighted.

A rounded, wooden bar had been bolted to the mirrors, but Leski wasn't using it at the moment. In a black leotard and strange, ribboned shoes, she leapt and spun around the room, making something that must have taken ages to master look like child's play.

Ballet. That explained why she'd been so skilled when we'd danced at the ball. If she'd learned this obscure dance form, she must have run out of modern ones to study.

Leaning on the door frame, I crossed my arms and watched. Not only did I have the time to indulge in the observation of such rare art, but ingratiating Leski to me would probably make my efforts over the next fifteen minutes go easier.

I knew she'd seen me since I'd entered. Considering she hadn't stopped dancing, I had to assume that she liked an audience or that she at least didn't mind having one, and well did I know the dangers of interrupting an artist of any kind while they were working.

Eventually, she brought her feet together, lowering her arms, but despite the dance's conclusion, I didn't clap. I'd seen her grimace when applause had surrounded us at the Founder's Day Ball.

"I assume that's your work as well," I said, jerking my head toward where piano music was emerging into the room.

With a half-smile, Leski met my eyes in the mirror.

"How did you know?" she asked.

"I've heard you play before," I said. "You tend to linger on high notes, letting them ring, before continuing forward with greater force. If you haven't already, you should try a Maliva piece. It would suit your style."

Slowly, Leski turned toward me with her face unreadable.

“Do you play?” she asked.

Shrugging, I said, “I can if required, but I’ve never coaxed the music from the music, if you know what I mean. I’m better at playing technically or analyzing other pianists’ work.”

“And you can dance, *and* your high Stratus House Kolb. I think,” Leski said, frowning at that last part. “If you don’t mind me asking, how old are you? I’d like to know how long it will take me to master so many skills.”

“Um...”

Shifting in place, I licked my lips. What an awkward question. When it came to this subject, she’d provided the only sensible reason I could think of to ask about my age, but that made it no less uncomfortable for me. Even with that, though, I gave her the truth.

“I turned thirty-seven a few days ago. But you’ve already mastered many of your own skills, and you’re what? Twenty-five? You said your House naming is this year.”

Divert attention back to her as quickly as possible. It was better if she didn’t learn about my other proficiencies, whether those like dancing or the ones that were more useful to my trade.

“I’d hardly call myself a master of them but...”

Leski gave me a speculative look.

“You’re not here to compliment me, not when you’re dressed like that. After what you said earlier, I thought you’d be long gone by now. What happened?”

“I decided Alezand’s arrival was more fortuitous than a disaster,” I said. “Learning what he’s up to will be much easier here than in Xygek.”

“Yes...” Leski drawled. “Why does House Cerullis’ *shukusen* want you, a relative unknown, dead, by the way?”

The piano piece ended with its music fading into silence.

I had my theories about Alezand’s motivations, namely that he wanted the chief threats to his plan removed from the board, but I couldn’t tell Leski that. She’d want to know how I was a threat to a *shukusen*, and that, I couldn’t answer. Best to cut this line of questioning off here.

“I can’t tell you,” I said.

Leski snapped her eyes to slits.

“Because it’s House business or because you don’t want to?” she asked.

With a grin, I said, “A little of both.”

Barking a laugh, Leski rested a hand on her hip.

“I did strongly suggest that you tell me the truth earlier, so I guess I deserved that,” she said. “Fine. I won’t pry. Why did you come to me before investigating Alezand, then?”

“I wanted to make sure we’re on the same page,” I said.

“Yes, yes. I know you don’t want me exposing you,” Leski said, dismissively flicking her fingers toward me. “What else?”

This next part would be uncomfortable. It was something I’d do with Korix, but he wasn’t here, and I needed the reassurance, considering what was on the line this time. I’d work with who I had.

“You seem to be good at reading people,” I said. “Tell me. What do you see?”

Pushing off the wall, I gestured at my body, waiting for Leski to examine me. With a cocked head and pursed lips, she ran her eyes over my modified outfit.

I’d taken the sleeves off of the jacket—an alteration that by itself might kill Niklaus—before using them to create a crude, cowl-like hood, wrapped around my neck. With the few leftover strips of cloth, I’d created a flimsy holster at the small of my back. Its fragile state didn’t concern me too much, though, as the pistol it was holding required a thumbprint to fire, the only type of weapons I’d let hang from me in such an easily accessible place. Thank Mother Time I’d been wearing my usual assortment of weapons before the estate had been glassed.

I’d strapped knives down my arms, making my shirt’s sleeves bunch between them. The only other change I’d made to that piece of clothing was to mute its brilliant green color with a bit of charcoal.

I hadn’t touched one leg of my slacks, letting it fall to the ankle, but I’d removed the lower half of the second in a jagged line at the knee, exposing my combat boot and the second pistol that I’d shoved into it.

Finished with her assessment, Leski said, “I see the quintessential House Kolb member: loud and overly reliant on brute force.”

I flashed a smile at her.

“Obviously, you’ve never heard of operatives before.”

When Leski’s expression turned indignant, I raised a hand before she could retort.

“I’m sorry. That was uncalled for,” I said, “especially after you confirmed the image I’m trying to present.”

“You want to look like a dumb ape?” Leski hissed.

Internally, I winced. I hadn’t meant to piss her off.

“Yes. After what happened, I want Alezand to think that I’ve returned to basic House Kolb training, despite what he knows about me,” I said. “If he does, he’s unlikely to see me coming from another angle later.”

“Oh,” Leski said. “That’s smart.”

Shaking my head, I said, “It’s simple tactics, nothing more. Now, as for the last thing I wanted to discuss...”

I didn’t know how I should put this or how much I should share. This part was the least crucial of the concerns I’d had about Leski, and yet, I most wanted it to go my way.

“What is it?” she asked.

I’d just have to follow my long-trained instincts in this.

“What I’m about to request is strictly voluntary,” I said. “I need you to understand that.”

“Ok...” Leski drawled.

Gritting my teeth, I carefully said, “It would be beneficial to all parties involved if you came to lunch at my side.”

If she did, my implied protection might be enough to keep her safe from Alezand and his House, which I’d promised Niklaus I’d do. As for maintaining his safety, it was pretty clear where he’d made his bed.

Leski blinked at me, and I prepared to work around her refusal.

“Zaeden, are you asking me to this lunch as a date?” she asked.

...What?

“*Hell, no,*” I yelped. “If I were taking you on a date, we’d be doing something much nicer than attending a family-”

Sucking in a breath, I shut up.

What had that been? The *fuck* had that been? No one had made me lose control like that except for Korix... and perhaps a few of my partners in the past. Was I... *attracted* to Leski? Hell, that would be inconvenient.

I had been out of the game for a while, though. Maybe I’d missed the signs of attraction, even the ones coming from me.

But no... that couldn’t be it. She simply intrigued me. It had to be that, and because I found her interesting, I’d want her to have a nice time on a potential date. Which we weren’t doing.

So, why did she look so wickedly triumphant?

“Ok, sure,” she said.

It was my turn to blankly blink.

“You don’t want to know why I’m asking you to do this?” I said.

“Why would I need to know *your* reasons?” Leski asked. “Entering the dining room with you should be fun, if only to see the infuriated look on my father’s face. I so love seeing it.”

And why was that? Did she dislike her father that much?

Even still, thank Mother Time. I hadn’t been looking forward to sharing my theories about why Alezand was staying for lunch with her.

“In that case, you have about five minutes to get ready,” I said. “I received your father’s summons for us a while ago.”

“What?” Leski shouted.

She rushed for the door, pausing before going through it.

“How did you keep his message from reaching me?” she asked.

“Do you want an answer to that, or do you want to change?” I shot back.

Growling, Leski tore through the door with me on her heels, although I didn’t join her in her barrel down the hall.

“I’ll meet you outside the dining room,” I called after her.

That had gone better than I’d expected, although I wasn’t sure why I’d thought it might go poorly. Leski had been nothing but cooperative with me throughout today’s strange events. Why should now be any different?

I needed to stop focusing on her, though. Get my head in the next part of this game. It would be much more difficult than everything else.

When Leski and I entered the dining room, both Alezand and Niklaus broke away from what had seemed like a pleasant conversation with very different looks on their faces. Niklaus looked like his daughter had predicted, furious, while Alezand seemed... speculative.

Both men were already standing behind their chosen positions at the table, so Leski and I arranged ourselves behind the remaining chairs, but once we were in place, lunch followed the formula from last night’s dinner to a T. After introductions had been made, Niklaus and Alezand ignored me for the most part, talking solely with each other. My plans for this meal didn’t involve me speaking,

though. It was enough that I was here, displaying no fear, and besides, if I wasn't required to speak, I could more closely watch the proceedings.

I didn't see much. Everyone was hiding behind enforced manners with no one willing to rock the boat. Not until the end.

"If you don't mind, Niklaus, I'd like a moment alone with Garreth before taking my leave," Alezand said. "I'll come to say my farewells soon."

"Of course, *shukusen*," Niklaus said. "I'll wait for you outside."

As her father passed behind her, Leski raised an eyebrow at me, but I didn't respond to it. I'd already made my point when it came to her. Any further interaction might come off as affection, a potential weakness, so I was grateful when Niklaus took his daughter's elbow—that had seemed a little... rough—and dragged her out of the room.

Which left Alezand and me sitting across the table from one another. Neither of us spoke while drones cleared the table. I didn't because I had no need to, and he didn't because, well...

Once the last drone had left the room, Alezand said, "I assume you've isolated this room from recorders."

Yeah, that was what I'd thought. He wanted complete privacy. Also, what was it with people expecting me to be truthful today?

"I thought you'd want it that way," I said.

"I do," Alezand said.

When I gave him nothing in return, he squirmed a bit before continuing.

"Do you have something you want to say to me?"

Oh, so many things.

"The glassing of my *evushk's* estate," I said in monotone. "A House Cerullis member caused it. I watched her place the control for the satellite. Do you know how many people would have died if I hadn't been awake, *shukusen*?"

Wincing, Alezand said, "I didn't know. Maybe that makes me a bad head of House, but I had no idea what that Cerullis member meant to do. I only learned about it when she came to me yesterday, wracked with guilt. She's in custody, by the way, waiting for you to interrogate her."

If he was playing the ignorance card, he probably didn't know that I'd overheard his conversation with Niklaus or that I'd requested Jastin-become-Jayla's official record.

Good. I could push further, then.

"If I didn't believe you," I said, "if I invoked my right to take you as my prisoner and bring you to the capital, what would you do?"

"Come willingly, of course. I have nothing to hide. I'd even step down as *shukusen* if required. My First Stratus is ready to fill my shoes, but this is why I invited you to my headquarters at the ball," Alezand said. "Several people in my House have splintered away from the majority with Justin serving as their leader. Considering your personal connection to the man, I thought you might be able to solve the problem without involving your *evushk*."

Oh, I'd be sick. So many things in his little speech repelled me. The obvious lies. The attempt at manipulating me. The reference to Jayla as a man. *Using* her as a lure to his headquarters. It took more effort than normal to interlace my fingers on the table and project nonchalance.

"Ok. Say I believe you," I said. "Let's say you've lost control of a part of your House. How long before Cerullis is lost to this violent minority?"

"Maybe... two or three weeks?" Alezand said. "I can't say for sure. It's not my area of expertise."

I nodded in understanding, if perhaps not the type that he might think. It was likely that he'd unconsciously associated his supposed coup with his very real conspiracy, and if he had, he might have also given me a rough timeline for when he'd make his next move.

Maybe.

"This is a serious problem," I said. "Before I can leave here, I have things to handle regarding the glassing, but visiting House Cerullis' headquarters will be the first thing I do after returning to Xygek. Let's set a tentative appointment for say... two days from now?"

Alezand slumped in his chair.

"Oh, thank Mother Time," he said. "Perhaps now, I can fix this."

"You'll owe me," I said. "If you don't want me involving my *evushk*, that is."

Slowly nodding, Alezand said, "Yes. I will."

Slapping his hands to the table, he pushed away from it.

"I'm glad to have run into you here... Garreth," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I need to get home to ensure that everything's prepared for your arrival."

Flicking my fingers in dismissal, I watched the *shukusen* leave. He'd return to his people, believing me primed for the trap they had planned.

I wished I could have learned more from Alezand, prying his secrets out of him in whatever way I must, but it was better if he and those controlling him believed me ignorant of their machinations for now. He could leave this place unharmed.

After all, I had one more avenue of investigation left to explore here.

TTS Chapter Fifty

Revision #2

Created 21 November 2024 23:28:23 by FatalisticFable

Updated 4 June 2026 18:33:25 by FatalisticFable