

Chapter 50: We've Got This

While Sanya found a spot to sit amongst the pillows surrounding the holodrama plate, I poured myself a glass of water, working through why I'd been so upset with her earlier. Why had I been so illogical when it came to Sanya over the last week? It made no sense.

With my glass in hand, I joined the *shukusen* on the ground, noting her stiff posture. Taking a sip of water, I waved at her.

"Well?"

Sanya opened her mouth before looking away, examining the billowing clouds of hydrogen and helium around us.

Waving at it, she said, "You never faked your enthusiasm about our work together, did you?"

That question pulled my lips tight.

"Never," I said.

Nodding, Sanya said, "It's sad, really. Given that and... other things I know about you, we could have been good friends, if not for recent events."

I let a surge of hurt wash over me, even as I considered why I was having such a strange reaction to what she'd said. Friends? Us? The only friend I'd had in my life was Damari but... but...

I'd been starting to think of her as one too. Shit. *That* was what was happening. I... I was *mad* at her because she'd hurt me.

Wow. That hadn't happened in a while. I didn't usually let people get close enough for them to have a chance at it. When I said nothing, too busy grappling with this dawning realization, Sanya shook her head.

"You probably don't feel the same way, which is fine," she said. "I'm aware that a relationship between a *shukusen* and a First Stratus, beyond one that concerns House business, is difficult to comprehend but--"

"And yet, you've had no trouble with starting something far more intimate with your own First Stratus," I said, barely keeping myself from snapping at her.

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back. Why had I revealed that I knew about those two's relationship?

“That... was uncalled for,” I said into the dead silence.

Sanya, however, just shook her head.

“Somehow, I’m not surprised you know about us,” she said. “Have you told anyone else?”

“Why would I?” I said. “Your personal relationship has no chance of endangering Lutov. Beyond that, it’s none of my business.”

Nodding, Sanya stared at her hands before inclining her head toward the sideboard.

“I’ll take that drink now, if you don’t mind,” she said.

“Go ahead.”

While she made herself something, I wondered where the hell Feena was. I needed her to rescue me from this increasingly uncomfortable conversation.

I’d also like to know how her meeting with Marza had gone. By a fluke chance, the *shukusen* had scheduled it at the same time as mine with Orin, and I couldn’t help but worry about how much longer Feena’s meeting was running. Sure, mine had been short because of Orin’s easy concession to my request but even still...

Sanya sat across from me once more, and after a couple of gulps from her glass, she set it down so she could meet my eyes.

“I want to explain something,” she said.

Hadn’t she been doing that enough lately? I didn’t know if I wanted to hear more of her excuses, but I didn’t have a polite way to stop her right now.

“Go ahead,” I gruffly said.

With a nod, Sanya steeled herself.

“Lutov’s resistance to reinstating a space program is impossibly strong,” she said. “You know this as well as I do, but I’m restating it now so you’ll understand.”

She had *no idea* how much I got that fact.

“I’ve known about the problem with our sun since I inherited the position of Cerullis’ *shukusen* from Alezand,” Sanya continued, “but it had been a known quantity for a while before then too. During his time leading my House, Alezand ignored the problem, relegating it to lower Strata who could monitor it.

“I, however, couldn’t do the same. I tried *for decades* to get someone’s attention about it, always working within our legal system as I did, but always, I was rejected. In the early days, I even tried

floating some requests for aid your way, but considering I never received a response, I think you ignored them. Not that I can blame you. I know why Cerullis took such a lower priority for you after the Ancients Crisis.”

She paused to take a sip of her drink, and while she did that, I closed my eyes, wanting to reach through time so I could shout at my younger self. How greatly had I contributed to this current tangle? By the time Sanya had returned her glass to the floor, though, I’d donned a neutral expression again.

“I continued like this for eighty years, fighting our people’s stubbornness by any means I could, although I tried to keep myself safe as well,” she said. “After so long with nothing changing, I realized that only dramatic action would get other people to see the danger we’re in.

“So, I started planning. I had Teag contact Arion, beginning the development of the tool that would make Lutov see, and all the while, I hoped that my legal efforts would miraculously work. Then, House Zan went through its changing of the guard, and shortly after that, you contacted me, saying you wanted to learn about my work.

“I don’t know what changed your mind about Cerullis, but I’m glad it happened, even if that change came too late. I’ve enjoyed working with you for the last twenty-five years. It’s given me hope that my drastic solution might not be needed, even if I never stopped working on it.

“That’s what I wanted to tell you, Zaeden. I am *deeply sorry* that I didn’t share any of this with you before now. I was afraid. I have... past experience with violent men, which has made me wary of even those who seem as virtuous as you, but that’s no excuse. I hope this apology hasn’t come too late to mend fences, but if it has, I’m thankful that you’ve continued working with me, even with how much I’ve damaged what once lay between us. And... that’s all.”

She looked to me for a response, but I didn’t have one. That had been a good speech, clearly rehearsed but also heartfelt. Had it been enough to earn my forgiveness?

All of this flashed through my head while I wrestled down a laughing fit. Sanya had been fighting our society like a she-demon because she hated how it worked. How highly could I relate to that? In recent years, how often had I contemplated taking drastic measures, all in the hope of making the slightest of changes? It was like she’d been testing the water for me, and I didn’t know what to think about that.

Behind me, the door opened with Feena walking through it, and with an exasperated click of her tongue, she locked it behind her.

“What’s *she* doing here?” she said.

“Apologizing,” I said. “Showing me she’s as human as anyone else, but she’s also strong enough to admit her mistakes.”

Apparently, Sanya’s speech *had* been enough for me.

“Oh. Well, that’s all right, then,” Feena sarcastically said with a huff.

An apology would never be enough for my sister, though.

“If you’d like, I can go...?” Sanya said.

She started getting up, only stopping when I touched her knee.

“No,” I said. “I’d rather not have two debriefs. If you wouldn’t mind staying for one of those, of course.”

“Why would I mind that?” Sanya said.

Meanwhile, Feena made a disgruntled noise as she flopped onto the ground beside me.

“Yes, I’m fine with it too,” she said. “Thanks for asking.”

Rolling my eyes, I handed her my glass.

“Here. This should make you feel better,” I said.

Sighing, Feena relaxed, sipping from the glass, but then, she froze.

“This is water,” she said over its rim.

“Indeed,” I said. “You looked dehydrated.”

Feena stared at me for a moment before throwing the glass’s contents into my face, and laughing, I blinked through water while she made herself a proper drink. After she used each glass and decanter, she slammed them back down, punctuating each of those noises with a word.

“*You are an asshole.*”

This only made me laugh harder. Through my hilarity, I was dimly aware of Sanya watching us with a smile, and I was glad that she hadn’t let yet another glimpse of my humanity rankle her. Eventually, Feena retook her seat, glaring at Sanya as she sipped at her drink. I decided to step in before the tension between them unraveled into something unpleasant.

“Right!” I said. “Feena, what did cranky, old Marza say?”

My sister gave me a scandalized glance.

“Zae, you can’t say things like that about a *shukusen*,” she said.

“I can when no one’s spying on me,” I said. “There’s a reason this room is so old-fashioned in style. No tech in this place! Besides the holodrama plate, of course, but it’s cut off from the network. I doubt anyone here has loosened the security processes that keep their arrays safe so... nothing to worry about.”

“Why-?”

When we swiveled our heads to her, Sanya cut off, blushing, but I raised an eyebrow, which forced her to continue.

“Why would you do any of that?”

“He’s the *Lokke Vitras*, of course,” Feena said before I could. “Or as our brother would put it, ‘Zae thinks with his House Kolb brain too much’.”

The reminder of my brother made me wince, and squinting one eye, I faced Feena.

“How is Phen?” I asked.

“Oh, fine. Busy. Hardly had time for me this week,” Feena said. “We have his vote, even if he seemed annoyed that you weren’t the one asking for it.”

“If Zaeden had done that, thought, it would have been disastrous.”

With our gazes again locked on her, Sanya raised her hands.

“What?” she said. “Someone would have to be blind to miss the antagonism between you two.”

Hell. I’d known that was pretty obvious to anyone paying attention, but still, having proof of it hurt.

As I swallowed the lump in my throat, Feena bumped her shoulder into mine.

“Moving on!” she said. “You asked about Marza, right?”

“Yes,” I said.

And if my voice had been thick while speaking that word, neither of my companions commented on it.

“She wouldn’t give me a straight answer. Kept talking in circles,” Feena said, “but I’m fairly certain she’s with us. Which leaves Raelle and Orin.”

The floor was handed to me, but I was ready for it now.

Leaning into the pillows, I said, “Orin’s vote is probably ours. He seemed rather eager to approve Cerullis’ proposal, in fact, but Raelle is against us.”

With a snort, Feena started snickering into a hand.

“How did you let that happen?” she gasped.

Narrowing my eyes at her, I crossed my arms.

“Have you ever had to get a hostile stranger to agree with you, especially when you’ve had little time to prepare the way? Doing it is close to impossible, not that I didn’t try,” I said. “I’ve been thinking of ways to change her mind since returning to Lutov, but I don’t have the leverage or the angle needed to bring her around. Never have figured out why she’s always been so negative toward me.”

“Oh, that’s easy!” Sanya said. “Raelle *hates* you. You have no idea how often I’ve had to listen while she’s complained about your work with the advocates for Ibisian rights.”

For a moment, I stared at the *shukusen*—how had she figured that out before me?—before collapsing into the pillows with my hands slapped to my face.

“Of course that’s why,” I groaned.

How had I not seen it?

“Come on, Zae. You had to know your political hobbies would bite you in the ass someday,” Feena said.

“I did,” I said through my fingers. “Didn’t think it would be over something like this, though.”

Shaking my head, I pried myself off of the floor while letting my hands fall into my lap.

“Not that Raelle’s vote should make a difference,” I said. “From what we’ve learned, we have four definite yeses, one maybe, and one no. Even if someone changes their mind at the last minute, the vote tomorrow should land well in our favor, which is a good result after a week of hard work.”

And it had been hard work. Scrambling across the globe, working through the system to get meetings with the *shukusenth*, walking the delicate line between asking for a vote and demanding it as the *Lokke Vitras*? These things were exhausting for me, which wasn’t to say that I hated them. I simply found problems that required a gun much easier to handle.

Flashing a smile at me, Feena said, “Definitely. Should we share a drink to celebrate? Sure, nothing’s set in stone yet but...”

While she spread her arms wide, Sanya cleared her throat.

“Isn’t... isn’t that bad luck?” she asked.

I exchanged a glance with Feena.

“There’s no such thing as luck,” I said, “only the circumstances that *you* create, whether for good or ill.”

Even saying that, I knew we shouldn’t be congratulating each other yet. I’d had too many guaranteed missions go sideways to think indulging in a celebration was a good idea, but what was the harm in simply acknowledging the work we’d done so far?

“All right,” Sanya said.

She still seemed nervous, but then, that was how she’d always been. I could only do so much to help her with it.

“Wonderful,” I said.

Given how badly I once more needed a break from my work, I couldn’t wait to get this celebration started. When I began climbing to my feet, though, Feena pressed a hand into my shoulder, keeping me on the ground.

“If you make us drinks, you’ll just pour yourself another glass of water,” she said. “I understand why you so rarely drink nowadays, but you need to learn when relaxing that practice is a good idea.”

Sighing, I nodded for her to get on with it, and after patting my arm, she left me and Sanya in a bubble of relative isolation. The *shukusen* kept picking at her clothes, grimacing every so often, and watching this, I felt the need to comfort her, even knowing how uncertain things were between us.

“Even if tomorrow doesn’t go our way, I’ll keep working with you until we’ve fixed this problem. You won’t have to deal with the consequences for your actions until it’s done,” I said. “You know that, right?”

With her nervous habit falling still, Sanya glanced at me while a sad smile spread across her face.

“I know,” she said.

Something about her response had felt... off to me, but before a sense of unease could finish clawing its way into my mind, Feena handed out drinks, and we descended into a night of drunken camaraderie.

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