

# Chapter 51: Or We Don't

I hated assemblies. I might have mentioned this before, but it was doubly true today.

Tension was rife in the air with the *shukusenth*, First Strata, and their aides standing in clumps around the room. As soon as the assembly began, House Kolb members would usher that last grouping out, but for now, they talked with the others, occasionally shooting glances at Sanya, Talira, or me. Today could be a historic day, after all, and we were the ones leading the charge into the unknown.

Stopping beside me, Talira touched my elbow.

“Relax,” she said through the teeth of her smile. “Right now, no one else will notice how tense you are, but someone will see it soon. Out of us all, you have to look the most confident today.”

Damnit. When had I fallen out of mission mode?

“I know that,” I said, “but thank you for the reminder, my *shukusen*.”

Nodding, Talira let her hand slip off of me.

“How much longer should we let them stew, do you think?” she asked.

With my head cocked, I took in the room’s drawn-together shoulders, darting eyes, and chewed-on lips.

“Not much longer,” I said. “Maybe make one more stir of the pot? If you think that’s wise.”

“I do.”

Striding off, Talira put on a bright face as she approached the clump with *shukusen* Marza at its center, but I stayed where I was, standing behind my *shukusen*’s assigned chair with an easy smile in place. I severely missed Leski, Korix, and even Damari in this moment. The last twenty-five years had spoiled me. I’d gotten used to having an ally at my back on shaky missions.

And this one was shaky. It didn’t matter that we had the votes needed to see Cerullis’ proposal pass. It didn’t matter that a failure today would have little consequence for me or Lutov, becoming a minor setback instead. Since I’d woken up this morning, an acute sense of danger had been hovering over me, and I couldn’t pinpoint what was causing it, the same as I couldn’t shake it.

Then, Talira was moving toward me, and I pulled out her chair while the other First Strata did the same for their superiors. As always, Pheniks was seated to Talira’s right, the customary placement of Zan’s *shukusen*. Mother Time help us if we forsook that tradition to ease the current tension

between Zan and Kolb.

Talira had never forgiven my brother for forcing her into approving his current placement, but unlike with me, she didn't have constant contact with him to help her forget it. Instead, it had been left to simmer for over two decades. During the few times when they were together, I'd always done my best to ignore the conflict between them, dipping my head to Pheniks as he sat instead. He returned the gesture, but then, he turned away, and that was it. He'd never shown me warmth when playing the role of *shukusen*.

Once the last of them had sat down, Talira folded her hands on the table.

"I call this assembly to order," she said. "Does anyone have an item to discuss?"

Without another word, everyone turned their attention to Sanya, and I had to smile. Sure, she had Teag's hand on her shoulder, helping to steady her, but she faced the other five leaders of Lutov with such fierceness, only emphasized by the afternoon's orange-tinted light around her.

"I won't be rude enough to assume that you don't know what my House has proposed," she said with flint in her voice.

And Mother Time, if it didn't make my heart swell on hearing it. Sanya had gone from a timid thing to this picture of defiance, and I found it breathtaking. What would I do when I must deliver punishment for everything she'd done?

"Our planet's plight should be clear to you. I've brought it to your attention often enough that I'd be shocked if it isn't, but for years, the problem has been ignored. I would like to change this," Sanya continued. "My House is requesting the resources we need to establish a space program. Its primary aim would be to get our people off-planet, but in the future, I'd like to usher spacecraft through the Pinpoint so we can study the alien structure that's destabilizing our sun. Our end goal would be to disable it. Given that the Houses have likely discussed this proposal *extensively* over the last week, I'd ask that we skip the tedium of a debate and get straight to a vote. Does anyone object?"

Sanya glanced around the table, and when no one said a word, she inclined her head to Talira.

"Then, I pass control back to this assembly's Head," she said.

And everyone's heads rocketed to Talira. Now that the lengthy speech to introduce a topic was complete, it seemed we were all eager to quickly resolve it.

With an easy smile, Talira said, "All thanks to the *shukusen* for bringing this urgent matter to light. For the vote, Kolb casts in Cerullis' favor."

Not that this was a surprise, given how much I'd been advocating for it. Still, it lit a glow in my heart that my grandmother had followed my lead in this matter.

The room's attention drifted to Orin, on Talira's left.

“Kirst casts in favor,” he said.

Well, thank Mother Time. I could still read people. Perhaps feeling my eyes on him, Orin shot a quick grin at me before turning to the woman at his side.

Inspecting her fingernails, *shukusen* Marza said, “Drav casts against.”

That caused a stir. Since their specialties were so similar, Drav and Kirst’s *shukusen* rarely ever disagreed on an issue, and seeing it happen now was a surprise, to say the least. Still, her contradictory vote wasn’t a disaster, so as attention fixed on Sanya, I gave her an encouraging nod.

“Cerullis casts in favor, of course,” she said, smiling at me.

So, she hadn’t lost her confidence. That was good because another known factor would soon be added to the pool.

“Vaessa casts against,” Raelle said.

Of course she did. Her vote had been so predictable that I was looking at Pheniks before she was done speaking. With her vote, that woman could potentially be dooming our planet to destruction, and she was doing it solely because she didn’t like me. Why should I honor her with a shred of my attention?

When it came to Pheniks, however, I had no doubt that he’d make the right decision. Even if family loyalty no longer guided him, I knew he was interested in Cerullis’ proposed space program, and Pheniks didn’t cast aside the things he found appealing.

So, when he met my eyes, I resisted the urge to make a silly face at him, smiling instead. Rather than matching this, my brother kept his mouth in a flat line, and steadily holding my gaze, he said.

“Zan casts against.”

At those words, time froze for me. I felt the smile slipping off of my face, much like I could hear silence thickening the air around me, but I was still trapped in my head, hearing Pheniks’ words bounce in it. I couldn’t have heard that right. It couldn’t... *couldn’t* be right.

But then, Pheniks smirked—did he think this was a *game*?—and I knew there had been no mistake.

“Well. A split vote,” Talira said. “We’ll have to revisit Cerullis’ proposal next month-”

A strangled shriek interrupted her. Slapping her hands on the table, Sanya shot to her feet, breathing hard, and when she lifted her face to the room, tears were streaming out of her eyes.

“I didn’t want to do this,” she said.

She looked at me with such pleading on her face, and as she drew another breath, one that caught on a sob, I requested my rifle.

"Teag," she said.

"Yes, my *shukusen*," Teag said.

He swiped his fingers through the air the instant before my rifle's energy bolt took him in the head.

Maybe he dropped to the floor. Maybe the other First Strata and *shukusen* started screaming while ducking under the table. If they did, I didn't notice. Having already taken note of Talira at my side, lifting her own weapon, I was already in my array, searching for what had changed, besides the obvious.

Because something had. I could feel it. A buzz in my ears. A hum in the air. What was that?

"Sanya, what have you done?" Talira snapped.

"What I had to," Sanya choked out.

I didn't know how she was still standing. If someone I loved had been killed because of my orders, I would be a sobbing mess on the floor right now, huddling over their body. I would be *incoherent*. So, how did Sanya, someone who was less well-versed in emotional control, only have a tremble in her hands as she pushed away from the table?

"This assembly has proven me right. Logic won't convince you about what must be done," she said. "If having the vaunted *Lokke Vitras'* backing won't work, that what will?"

The other *shukusenth* and First Strata had started peeking back into view, and the cold smile that Sanya rained down on them as a result at them shivering.

"Perhaps a threat," she said.

And her voice was *ice*.

"Right now, there's a neurotoxin circulating through the air around us, tweaked to nullify our array's healing ability," she continued. "Go on. Verify what I'm saying, if you like."

I didn't need to. I could already see my array's report on the chemical invading my bloodstream, just as I knew that the hiss I'd heard earlier had been a vat, releasing its contents.

"Over the course of several days, this neurotoxin will work its way through your bodies, dissolving your nerves until all that's left of you is a pain-swamped brain, trapped in a body it can't manipulate. If you're very lucky, your organs will give out before then." Sanya said before twisting her lips into a pained smile. "More vats of this toxin have been placed in the most densely populated sectors of Xygek. Some will have already unleashed their contents, but others will be held in reserve, to be secured once I've gotten what I need to save us all."

She paused, letting her audience process what she'd said before making her demand.

"Give me what I want. Guarantee that Cerullis will get the resources we need to demolish the alien structure that's threatening us all, and I will provide you with the antidote for the poison in your systems. And before anyone here gets any smart ideas, the formula for that is only located here."

Sanya held her fingers to her head in the shape of a gun before pulling the metaphorical trigger.

"According to my calculations, you have about 2.3 weeks to make your decision or stop what I've done, if you can. I trust you'll be quick about it."

Without another word, she spun, storming out of the room, and didn't once look at the body at her feet. Someone would need to clean that up before people started freaking out.

But I supposed they were already going to do that. As the room erupted into a cacophony of noise, I could only stand in place, staring at the door that Sanya had disappeared through. What had just happened? I couldn't...

Rapidly blinking, I tried to focus, even if wading through my muddled brain seemed... impossible right now. Apparently, my danger sense—going off since this morning—had been right. When would I start listening to it?

And when would the people around me stop shouting? Couldn't they see I was trying to...?

Why were they looking at me like that?

Wait. This feeling was familiar. Something similar to it had assaulted me a few days ago, when Baely had told me about her House naming ceremony. Was I in *shock*?

Sharp pressure on my arm had me turning to Talira. With her fingers pinching into me, she was red-faced, and something wild was in her eyes.

"What are you doing?" she hissed. "*Go after her.*"

Oh. Right.

Shaking myself, I took off running, tearing after a woman who'd become the worst traitor Lutov had ever seen.

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