

Chapter 52: Explain Yourself

It was too loud in this room. Around me, *shukusenth* and First Strata filled the air with their shouting, and as always, my far too observant brain tried to pick their words apart.

“Yes, she was telling the truth about the neurotoxin, you ignorant-”

“-playing at? Does that bitch think intimidation will-?”

“Was Kolb in on this? The *Lokke Vitras* has seemed supportive of her in recent-”

“Don’t be silly! He’s the-”

Each phrase rolled through my brain, to be analyzed and cached, and I was barely keeping ahead of the tide, fighting to... to *stay here*. Maybe if I could move my focus elsewhere, I could do that. What had helped with this in the past?

Right. Analyzing what had happened.

Unlike what one First Stratus had suggested, I hadn’t known about *shukusen* Sanya’s plan to poison us. No, the truth of this disaster was much worse. I’d trusted her, helping her with the proposal that had brought us here today and because of this, Lutov’s leaders had been infected with a neurotoxin while the threat of further contamination ate at the walls I’d raised around myself.

I’d made a gigantic mistake. And the *Lokke Vitras* did not make mistakes.

One by one, the room’s occupants turned toward me, but before everyone’s attention could zero on my presence, Talira grabbed my arm. She looked... upset. Flushed. A little addled. I couldn’t think of the right words to describe her.

I did think I was suffering from a mild case of shock right now, though.

Pinching her grip on me, Talira hissed, “What are you doing? *Go after her.*”

One blink later, her words registered, and I nearly groaned aloud at my stupidity. Instead of doing that, though, I shook Talira off and sprinted out of the room. How had I let myself get cast so far adrift?

Fortunately, *shukusen* Sanya—was she still a *shukusen*?—hadn’t gotten far. Collapsed into a windowed wall, she had a hand clamped over her mouth, barely muffling her sobs, and as I approached, I wondered if Teag’s death had finally caught up with her. He’d been her lover, and she’d just left his body behind.

That theory got discarded when I could make out what she was saying.

“WhathaveldoneWhathaveldone?”

I didn't know if that was a better or worse source for her distress.

“Sanya,” I said once I was close enough.

I wasn't sure why I'd given her a warning that I was coming. After what she'd done, she'd become my enemy—she had to be, *had to be*—but I couldn't see her as anything less than an ally still. Someone I... cared for, in a way.

At the sound of my voice, she stiffened, whirling on me with her face arranged into a calm mask.

“*Lokke Vitras*,” she said, “I thought you might come after me.”

“Then you know I have only one thing to say to you,” I said.

Sanya lifted an eyebrow as if I'd done something amusing.

“Do you mean ‘why’? I could ask a similar question of you,” she said. “Why haven't you allied with me? I know a part of you wants to. Why haven't you listened to it? And why have you murdered my- my First Stratus? He was only following my orders.”

Almost, her mask slipped there, but I ignored that. Growling, I took a step closer, which had Sanya darting her eyes to the rifle I was holding. Was she scared that I might shoot her?

Good.

“His name was *Teag*,” I snapped. “At least I have the decency to use the name of the man you loved, Sanya.”

This was, in part, why I was shaking like a leaf right now, even through mission mode's freezing bonds. Sanya might not know it, but we fought a similar battle against our society. The difference was that in that battle, I would never put my loved ones in mortal danger like she had. What had she thought would happen after she'd ordered Teag to release her neurotoxin?

Maybe she hadn't thought that part of her plan through, though. I should find out.

“How did you think I'd respond after you made Teag a threat while I was *standing in the fucking room*?” I said. “I didn't know what his orders were, only that they would likely put people in danger, and with the way things were going, I wouldn't have had time to incapacitate him. So, I eliminated the threat, something that Talira would have done in my stead if I'd refrained from it. Not that I need to explain myself after what you've done.”

Bristling, Sanya said, “At least I've tried to make our world a better place! I'll you've ever done is perpetuate a stagnant system, one that not only oppresses an entire population but does much

worse on a daily basis, most honorable *Lokke Vitras*.”

The mocking in those last few words should have slid off of my back. I was in mission mode, mostly closed off from my emotions, and similar things had been said to me before.

Instead, I jerked my rifle up and pressed it against her forehead, right where I'd shot Teag earlier.

“I am *trying*,” I hissed, “to peacefully change Lutov from the inside. I can't help it that the least harmful path to my goal will also take the most time.”

Something in Sanya's expression changed, and as she reached up to touch my wrist, she looked at me with such pity.

“Zaeden, significant change only comes through chaos,” she said.

And everything stiffened. My shoulders, suddenly rising for my ears. The muscles around my eyes, making them twitch. My finger on the trigger. Fortunately, that didn't tighten enough to send an energy bolt carving through Sanya's head.

I didn't understand why this was happening. Sure, a tiny part of my mind was screaming at Sanya about how every life, even those that some might consider evil, was precious, and I must do everything I could to save the ones I had any control over, but that piece of me shouldn't matter. What I felt could never matter, especially when I was facing the beginning of yet another shitshow.

So, taking a deep breath, I lowered my arm.

“We can't argue about this,” I said. “Please, Sanya. Work with me to fix this mess. Give me the formula for the antidote that we need, and I'll do my best to make sure you aren't exiled.”

With a grim smile, Sanya said, “Why would I do that? I have you and the others where I want you. So, instead of stabilizing the status quo yet again, why don't *you* help *me*? Let's change everything that's rotten about Lutov.”

I'd like to. Oh, how I'd like to. But...

“This isn't the way,” I said. “If you won't help me with fixing this, then you'll be nothing more than a threat to me.”

And not five minutes ago, she'd had a potent example of what I did to threats.

Sanya slowly shook her head.

“I wouldn't hurt me if I were you,” she said. “The key to the antidote is only found here, remember?”

When she tapped her temple, I laughed, cold and empty.

“You think you’re the only brilliant scientist in Lutov?” I said. “I doubt this antidote is so difficult to formulate that no one else can do it, especially in the time you’ve given us.”

“But you can’t take that chance,” Sanya said on my words’ heel. “As me why not.”

Unfortunately, I knew the look she was giving me now. Sanya was sure she’d won, but instead of gloating like most victors did, she just looked sad. Then again, that had been a theme throughout this conversation.

Reluctantly, I said, “Why not?”

“A little over a week ago, you went on a mission, tracking down a member of House Kirst who was smuggling contraband across the Southern Fells,” Sanya said. “From what I’ve heard, he severely hurt you before you killed him.”

How had she heard about that? The only people who knew about my recent mishap were the various members of my family and Damari, none of whom would have let this information slip. They knew the *Lokke Vitras* must remain indomitable.

Maybe my target on that mission had sent a message before he’d died, though. That could explain it. Maybe.

“What about it?” I stiffly said.

“That man was one of mine. He was smuggling a vat of neurotoxin to a concealed location near your estate, and before you killed him, he succeeded in his mission,” Sanya said. “Your family’s been infected, Zaeden.”

There was a beat of quiet as her words washed over me.

Then, I grabbed her arm, twisting her so I could pull the limb up her back. Pinning her in place, I ground her head into the window while retrieving a knife, and I dug its blade into the fabric covering her ribs. No energy bolt for this foe. I’d make her death slow.

Sanya, however, only laughed, or she did so as much as she could.

“There it is,” she gasped. “Now, I’m your enemy.”

She was right. To this point, the Sanya I’d grown to know—timid, resilient, fierce when it counted—had been overlaying the desperate woman in front of me now. I hadn’t wanted to let go of my... friend, but with this, she’d forced me to.

“No one hurts my family,” I hissed.

Nodding with difficulty, Sanya said, “I know. That’s good. I’ll need you to stop me, after all, but not yet. So, think about what you’re doing.”

Ending a threat to Lutov and the people I loved. Keeping them safe by... by erasing a possible means to cure them.

Closing my eyes, I let air seep through my teeth before stepping back, and Sanya peeled herself off of the window, straightening her clothes. After a moment, the fire in my gut had been contained, and I met Sanya's gaze.

"I won't stop looking for another way," I told her.

I wasn't sure if that had been about finding an antidote or changing Lutov, but Sanya glanced up at me with a knowing grin regardless.

"I hope you find one," she said.

With nothing else, she started for a lift, but before she reached it, she called over her shoulder.

"I'll be in touch."

Then, she was gone. Hanging my head, I rested my hands on my hips, considering everything that had happened.

"Mother Time damn it all," I whispered.

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