

Chapter 52: Frustrating Women and Easy Missions

Finishing off my snack, I glanced over my stowaway and almost didn't recognize her, considering everything she'd done to alter her appearance.

She'd changed her hair color, for one. Not nearly enough time had passed to do that naturally, but its silver and purple hues had faded. A neutral brown now, it flared and stopped at chin length, softening her jawline, and this blurring continued over her face. She must have started a change to her features not long ago because they'd nearly reached the sweet spot between perfect clarity and too blurry to make out.

She also wasn't wearing her typical, eye-catching clothes. Instead, House-issued slacks and a shirt were draped over her frame.

Bending toward her, I caught a strand of her hair between two fingers.

"Artificially dyed?" I asked.

Blushing, Leski said, "It's good for last-minute social engagements where your hair color won't match your outfit. Since changing it naturally can take a while..."

I nodded, dropping my hold.

"When did you start dying it?" I asked. "That's a lengthy process too."

"In between sessions of searching for you," Leski said. "I figured you'd stayed at the house because several recorders' feeds kept looping, but I could never catch you."

So, that was how she'd kept showing up where I'd been not two minutes before! Clever girl.

"Good outfit choice too," I said. "You'll blend in."

"That was the idea," she said.

Leaning against the skycruiser's door, I crossed my arms, examining her again.

"How long have you wanted to be an operative?" I asked. "It's why you got so upset when I mentioned them before, right?"

Leski flushed a deep crimson while her mouth flapped open.

"I... That's..."

"Relax. I'm not asking which House you'll join," I said, "and I'm certainly not recruiting for one. No House, remember?"

"Yes, but I thought-"

Clicking her teeth together, Leski huddled tighter on herself.

"You're the most Kolb person I've met in my life, and you're past the age limit for an unHoused. How can you say that you don't have a House?"

I couldn't answer that question, so I merely stared in response, and eventually, Leski looked away.

"Will you send me home to my father?" she stiffly said.

When I lifted my feet onto my seat, I could barely see her over my knees. I stuck my hand into the back of the skycruiser, and Ace shuffled to where his head was laying beneath it, panting when I scratched his ears. While I did this, Leski relaxed, and only once she'd meet my eyes again did I speak.

"Do you want to go home?"

"No!" Leski shouted, sitting bolt upright. "I have to help, both you and my father-"

Sucking in a breath, she fell silent, but I just grinned at her.

"I knew you were eavesdropping. It's ok," I said. "How much did you overhear?"

"I heard that House Cerullis is planning something bad, and unsurprisingly, my father's involved," Leski said, crossing her arms. "I heard that I'm the reason he's in trouble, and no matter what I think of him, I won't let him suffer because of me."

"Which is why I left the skycruiser open while grabbing provisions," I said.

Like a spider, Leski skittered as far away from me as she could in our limited confines.

"You wanted me to come!" she shouted.

In the back, Ace lifted his head, but when I patted him, he settled again.

"No. In fact, I hoped that you wouldn't," I said, "but you deserved the opportunity to make the choice for yourself. Plus, you seem capable enough, if inexperienced. Mother Time knows how many times a complaining stomach got me in trouble when I first started with this. You should always eat something light before a mission."

Leaning my head back, I closed my eyes while Leski digested what I'd said, stilling my hand to rest on Ace's neck.

"I don't understand," she eventually said. "You're letting me... choose?"

"Of course. Freedom of choice is highly undervalued in Lutov. I offer it when I can," I said. "Now, if you're coming with me, you're to follow my lead at all times while we're in the House Cerullis facility. If I tell you to stay behind me, you stick to my heels. If I tell you to run for escape and leave me, you do it without question. This is the only way I'll bring you along, *my* choice. Understood?"

"Yes."

"Then, wake me up when we land," I said.

I still hadn't figured out why my natural sleep rhythm had gotten so messed up the last time I'd fallen asleep, and I was a little concerned that it would happen again, but at some point, I'd have to rest.

I also wasn't thrilled about making myself so vulnerable around a relative unknown, but if Leski tried to hurt me and my instincts failed to kick me into the waking world, I had Ace to guard me until I could do it for myself.

So, I turned myself off for a while.

Rather than a fist battering against a door, a gentle thump woke me up this time. We'd stopped moving with the rolling hills around us stretching into the mountains, and I turned to ask Leski why she hadn't woken me up, as requested, only to click my tongue.

She was slumped between her seat and the door with a trickle of drool dripping out of her mouth. Not even capable of staying awake when asked to do so...

I should leave her here. Who knew what kind of vulnerabilities she'd bring to us both? Considering how much she was snoring right now, I could probably complete the mission and return here before she woke up but...

I hadn't been any better at her stage of learning, and she needed this chance to help her family. Having backup, no matter how much of a rookie she was, would also be nice.

So, I carefully balanced a leftover popcorn kernel on Leski's upturned cheek before letting Ace know that he could have it. Stretching into the front, he eagerly took his unexpected treat, licking its perch once it had disappeared.

Leski shouted, trying to scramble upright, but a dog was in the way. By the time she'd pushed Ace into the back again, I was doubled over with laughter.

"You think you're so funny, don't you?" she panted, scrubbing at her cheek. "Well, I'll have you know that I do pranks too, and I'm damn good at them."

Leaning on my leg, I cupped my chin.

“Bet you I’m better,” I said.

“You keep thinking that, asshole,” Leski growled while glancing outside. “We’re here. Shouldn’t we get going?”

She climbed out of the skycruiser in a huff, and grinning, I watched her shiver with her hands shoved under her arms. I liked pushing her buttons.

When I spun to my knees, Ace had already flopped onto the backseat again, and I bit my lip when he lifted his tired eyes to me. My loyal, old friend. Why had someone uprooted his life now, when he should be spending every day relaxing in his den with his pack?

“I’ll figure this out, buddy,” I said. “The first step is here, so I have to leave you for a bit, but the skycruiser’s set to fly you to Feena’s place if I’m not back in a few hours. She’ll take care of you.”

I didn’t know why I was telling him these things. Perhaps I needed to reassure myself or soothe a guilty conscience. What House Kolb member brought their dog with them on a mission?

Ruffling his fur, I joined Leski outside, making sure to crack a window for Ace. Since leaving her family’s estate, we’d gained altitude, and subsequently, the temperature had dropped, not to dangerous levels but definitely uncomfortable. I’d always enjoyed the cold and the sharpening of the senses that it temporarily brought, but judging from her unhappy expression, Leski did not.

“Come on. A little exercise will warm us up,” I said.

Passing her, I settled into a jog. We weren’t far from our destination, but walking wouldn’t get us there until morning, and I’d rather infiltrate the place at night. When the sun went down, people usually got more alert, but a lot less of them moved about, which was something we’d need.

Leski might look like a House Cerullis member, but I didn’t know if she could act like one. Meanwhile, I could become anyone I desired, but I didn’t look like the part I’d need to play. I’d changed after lunch, but even still, I looked too Kolb.

When the House Cerullis facility came into view with its shining lights illuminating the base of the mountain behind it, I slowed to a stop, glancing over our goal while addressing Leski.

“Do you have any fleshed-out personas?”

“Several,” she said, “but none that I’ve put into practice.”

“Show me,” I said.

Shrinking on herself, Leski started wringing her hands, of all things, while darting her gaze between me and the ground.

“If... um, if it pleases you,” she said in a shaking voice. “My name is, um, Rosae, Tenth Stratus of House Drav. How- how can I help you?”

Decent. A little over the top, but decent.

“How about a persona that would pair with a high Stratus?” I asked. “Have anyone like that?”

Leski stiffened, looking down her nose at me.

“Are you asking me to conform to your expectations?” she said with a sniff. “Don’t make me laugh.”

“Perfect!” I said, clapping. “What’s your name?”

Clicking her tongue, Leski said, “Wyla, if you must know. I won’t stoop to telling you my Stratus or House.”

“Because you neglected to give the persona one, or because you wanted to make it flexible?” I asked.

Leski relaxed, grinning at me.

“The second, obviously,” she said.

“Then tonight, Wyla is a Fourth Stratus of House Cerullis, accompanying... Tobis, Third Stratus, on a surprise inspection of this facility,” I said. “Go ahead and don your persona, and don’t drop it until you’re sure it’s safe to do so.”

Flushing, Leski nodded before going rigid again, but before she completely dove into Wyla, I laid a hand on her shoulder.

“One more thing, and this is important,” I said. “This mission will quite possibly be the most dangerous infiltration that I’ve ever done. Because of that, you should know that there’s a good chance you’ll die here. We’ll be surrounded by desperate people while facing an unidentified enemy that has unknown resources, none of which is conducive to success.

“If you do die and I somehow survive, I’ll hide what’s happened to you from your father until the threat to Lutov has passed because I’ll need his help. If he learns that you’re dead, he’ll be too wrapped up in grief to do that.

“Knowing this, are you sure you want to join me? I wouldn’t blame you if you’d rather wait with Ace.”

Paling, Leski considered what I’d said for a moment before swallowing.

“If I came with you, would it help?” she asked.

“Likely,” I said.

I wouldn't give her anything besides the base truth, didn't want to influence her when it came to this decision.

Taking a deep breath, Leski slowly let it out before meeting my eyes.

"Then, I'm coming," she said. "I'm grateful for your honesty."

I'd half-hoped that the possibility of death, a concept that the average citizen found so repellant, would make her second-guess herself, but it seemed to have done the opposite, and for that, I was half-glad. I'd need an accomplice to sell the story I meant to tell, and entering the facility any other way would be taxing and dangerous. I'd also probably end up hurting someone, which I'd rather not do.

With an obligatory warning given, I wouldn't try to change Leski's mind anymore. I'd do my best to protect her, and anything I couldn't handle, I'd have to hope that she could escape on her own.

So, I told her, "When possible, honesty is always the best policy. Besides it usually being the moral course of action, telling fewer lies means fewer stories that you have to maintain."

"Huh," Leski said. "I've never thought about it that way, but you're right."

"Of course I am. I'm a Third Stratus researcher, remember?" I said. "Now, where's Wyla? She and Tobis need to leave if they want to spring this inspection on their unsuspecting victims."

Glancing at the facility, Leski grimaced.

"Must we walk all that way?" she said.

"The better to catch them unaware, my dear," I said. "Shall we?"

I offered her my arm, and after she took it, we strolled over the last stretch of the moors left between us and our destination.

While approaching the facility, I examined it. It was ugly, nothing like the House's more artful places of research, but we didn't need this one to be pretty, merely functional. Who on earth would care about another splotch of distastefulness dropped on these awful marshes?

Even still, I wrinkled my nose as it loomed over me. It reminded me of the production facilities on the Eastern Reaches. Every time I'd had the misfortune of visiting that polluted portion of Lutov, I'd regretted it. The place was so dreary.

When a checkpoint came into view, the woman on my arm squeezed me, and I glanced at her. If she removed those unfortunate freckles covering her skin, my assistant might be pretty, and perhaps she was in the middle of doing that, *finally*, because her features had blurred.

She'd chosen a poor time to start the process, though. The difficulty of identifying her might make accessing the facility problematic, but oh well. My Stratus alone should be enough to get us

through.

As I patted her hand, a man emerged from the checkpoint's booth, lifting a palm to shine its projected light on us.

"Halt," he called. "Identify yourselves."

"Tobis, Third Stratus," I called back, "and this is..."

"Wyla. Fourth Stratus," my assistant said with her voice trembling.

Frowning, I glared at her. Why was she shaking? We were here on official business. She didn't need to be afraid.

"Forgive my assistant," I said. "She's a skittish thing, and our flight here was rather bumpy."

"Yeah, travel to this part of the Southern Fells is like that," the guard said. "Your business?"

Flashing a smile, I said, "Inspection."

And groaning, the guard lowered his hand.

"Another one?" he said. "I know things have gotten tense in the House lately, but are so many of these *really* necessary? Twice in one week seems excessive, even with what's coming."

"Do *not* speak of that," I hissed.

Advancing, I got in the guard's face, leaving Wyla behind.

"What if I was a spy from Zan or, Mother Time forbid, a Kolb operative? You'd have told them that we have something planned beyond our normal operations, and *they* wouldn't have been pleased. Do you want to upset *them*?"

"N-no," the guard stammered.

"Then, be grateful that I won't report you," I said, "but only if you let Wyla and me inside without a fuss."

"O-of course."

The guard stepped aside, and I held my arm out. Once Wyla had taken it again, we swept through the checkpoint and into the facility.

I paused once we were inside. It had been a while since my last visit here, so I was fuzzy about where everything was located.

"Where should we go first?" Wyla asked.

“The stacks. All relevant data will be stored there,” I said, “and if someone’s already done an inspection within the last week, we shouldn’t have to trawl through too much information. Hopefully. I hate the stacks. It’s quiet there, even with its storecases’ ticking and whirring.”

“Then, we should get this over with,” Wyla said. “Let’s find a lift. Most places keep their stacks underground, right?”

Gracing her with a smile, I said, “I knew I kept you around for a reason.”

Now, if only I could remember where the lifts were. We wandered through the facility in concentric circles, searching for one, and only the occasional Cerullis member hurried through the corridors that we walked down. It was the dead of night, so I didn’t find their low numbers surprising, but the anxiety that I saw in everyone else was unexpected. Had something gone wrong?

Most of the facility’s labs were abandoned with their doors flung open to show off their test tubes and glowing monitors. Several dozen copies of this same scene made a long line down every hallway, so when their doorways hiccupped for a significant span up ahead, I quickened my step. Maybe we’d found what we sought.

When we reached that smooth wall, however, I slowed down until I’d stopped in front of the rectangular window embedded in it.

Beyond it was a hangar with all sorts of aircraft sitting on the landing pads that it contained. People scrambled around these vehicles, loading weapons into them.

Weapons that nearly filled the rest of the hangar’s empty space. Bins upon bins of rifles, pistols, and grenades. Bombs, from the purely explosive variety to ones that were much worse. Poison cannisters as tall as a shuttle. No Dissolvers or comparable weapons that I could see, though.

Still. That was a lot of firepower. More than I’d known we had.

“Tobis,” Wyla said. “The stacks?”

Shaking my head, I squeezed her hand.

“Thank you, my dear,” I said. “Seeing so much potential for devastation leaves me dumbstruck.”

“Which is understandable, but we can’t stand here, gawking. We have work to do,” Wyla said. “So, let’s do it.”

As we resumed our search, the cache behind us worried at my mind. I knew we needed it, but why? What did *they* expect us to do with it? These questions occupied me so thoroughly that I almost ran into someone when rounding a corner. Only my quick reflexes saved Wyla and me from a bad fall.

“My apolo-”

A black-clothed man with gray eyes and black hair stared at me with something unreadable running over his face. Holy shit, I'd almost run into the-

Wait. What was he doing here?

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