

Chapter 57: Proof of My People's Evil 1

Forgive me for the interruption, Elliot, but there's something I should explain before we get into this chapter. You know where this past version of me is headed, just as you might have guessed who the scientists I'm seeking are. I am so sorry for bringing those utterly vile people into your mind again, but they are, unfortunately, a part of this story.

I've been struggling with how to handle this. Should I leave them out? Should I rename them, pretending that they were someone else?

In the end, I've decided to simply call them 'the scientists' while using gender neutral pronouns for them, making it clear who they are while also distancing you from them. Having spent the last year helping you deal with everything that they did to you, this seemed like the best approach.

And if it's not... it'll be one more reason that you should hate me. With my warning given, however, we should return to the story.

When we reached Zoln in the early hours of the next morning, Pheniks took us straight to House Zan's headquarters.

"If we're to have any chance of these people listening, then I need to freshen up," he said. "They only respect me because I've always presented myself as an unruffled *shukusen* when around them. All of which is to say that they're a handful to manage."

Knowing how important appearances could be, most of us didn't protest, although Baely looked confused by the detour. Were they wondering why we were delaying for a change of clothes after the rush to get here?

Fortunately, Pheniks had learned the art of a quick costume change. He only needed five minutes before leading us to a tube at the base of the tower. He loaded us into separate tubes, inputting an access code into them before they could move, but then, we were shooting beneath the earth to the lower tip of Ibis' crescent.

As we went, I occupied myself with thoughts of what would soon be undulating across the surface above. Mist, the result of the Upheaval that had once torn Ibis and Lutov apart, covered Ostiu to the west of Zoln. Traversing that fog was perilous as the mysterious phenomena attached to it

could get an unsuspecting traveler lost in it. It was better if I thought about how images from the past might lure me off of a safe path than to consider everything Pheniks had told me before we'd left Lutov.

After an hour, we arrived, leaving my companions rapidly blinking while their eyes adjusted. I'd had my array constrict my pupils before the tube had come to a stop, aware from past experience of the disorientation that was planned for visitors here, so I got a glimpse of the lab before everyone else. With its tiled walls and wood accents, the place reminded me of spas back home, but even before I'd known the extent of what happened here, a scene that should have been calming had always rung sinister to me. Now that I knew what happened here, I saw it for the cheap veneer of pleasantries that it was, a cruelty to the unsuspecting and an insult to anyone who knew better.

The scientists that we needed to retrieve were here to greet their *shukusen*, but since Pheniks' tube was still quite a way out, they examined us with clinical curiosity. Even having met them before, their disregard for the *Lokke Vitras* in their midst surprised me. Once, I'd been grateful for it. Now, it just made me more determined as I strode to them, and when I came close, I bowed.

"Honored Second Strata," I said. "I wondered if one of you might give me the pleasure of observing your progress while we wait for *shukusen* Pheniks. It need not be anything sensitive for your House. I'd simply like to admire the work of such brilliant people."

Stroking the egos of people like this was usually a good first step toward getting what I wanted from them. We'd see if it worked this time.

The scientists exchanged a glance.

"That can be arranged," one of them said. "Why don't you oblige our guest, darling?"

"I'd love to," the other one said.

When the second of them turned on their heel, I gestured for my companions to stay here before following the scientist. I knew that my loved ones, Korix and Leski especially, would want to stay by my side until this crisis was resolved, but for harmless tasks like this, they'd have to let me go alone.

Honestly, I found the situation a little funny. After a century with me as the *Lokke Vitras*, they must know that I could handle our current circumstances, no matter how overwhelmed I might be. Yet still, they insisted on helping, which I found endearing.

It was also frustrating as hell because I knew that with the distinct exception of Korix, I'd have to moderate how I solved our problems while around them. True, almost all of my loved ones were from House Kolb, mostly immune to the horrors of violence, but besides rare situations, they'd never had to question the morality of their actions, not on a grand scale at least. They'd never had to do something that could only be classified as evil. Every mission that might call for such a choice got pushed onto the *Lokke Vitras*. Onto me and at one point, Korix. Given that, I wasn't sure how long my loved ones could trail me before I had to do something that would make them spurn my presence.

Fortunately, that time wasn't now. As I trailed behind one of Kalaski's scientists, a door slid closed behind me, cutting off my view of my family, and the part of me that constantly worried about their opinions relaxed. We headed down halls—all of them brightly lit and immaculate—before turning into a room with a holodrama plate at its centerpiece.

"You'll have to forgive me," the scientist said. "I'd give you a live demonstration, but our current batch of test subjects is resting. Putting them through their rounds so soon after the last experiment might have them expiring before we've fully used them, and we wouldn't want to waste resources like that, would we?"

I had no idea how I kept my fingers from twitching while fixing a smile in place.

"No, waste of life is usually frowned upon," I said, "and a recording of your work will be fine. After everything I've heard about you, I simply need to see what you've done for myself."

Because the only other times I'd been here, it had been for a basic inspection, made at another House's request. On arriving, I'd accessed the place's network so I could pull the required data from its storecases before leaving. I'd never had the time to linger or investigate why I always felt uneasy here, and if what Pheniks had told me was true, I'd want to scream at my younger self for not acting on his suspicions.

Above the holodrama plate, a scene materialized: two reclining chairs with men sitting in them. The fact that they were secured to their seats by restraints raised my hackles, but I kept the reaction buried as I circled the holodrama plate so I could see what was dangling behind them.

That proved to be a mistake. My stomach lurched, nearly making me throw up, when I saw wires climbing up the back of each chair until they wormed through the hole that had been carved into each man's skull.

"What-?" I said, unable to utter another word.

If I did, my screaming protest might tear down the façade of respect that I'd raised with this scientist. Hopefully, they'd interpret the horror in my voice as curiosity or something similar.

Another person stepped into the scene, a woman with bleached skin and eyes with silver bordering her irises. An *ii*. Raising a hand, she curled her fingers, and water coalesced over her palm, forcing me to repress a shudder. Considering she could pull moisture out of the air, that was one powerful Hydroshifter. Other than displaying her magic, though, she did nothing else while the Ostium among the men gasped, straining toward her.

"The bloodsong," he said in his native tongue. *"The great symphony! It's been so long since I've heard it..."*

Meanwhile, the child of Ibis watched the mage with a look of intense concentration on his face, but several minutes passed with nothing else happening. Clearly, whatever the Ostium man was hearing, the other one didn't.

“Next phase,” came a muted voice from outside of the scene.

One of the scientists, I thought.

At the prompt, the *ii* grimaced before relaxing her hand, letting the water hovering above it splash to the ground. She gestured at the Ostium, and I watched, dying inside, as droplets beaded on his arm before shooting to float in front of the mage. This process accelerated until he was screaming with his arm withering, and the child of Ibis, who’d been shouting for it to stop, got a funny look on his face.

“*What is that noise?*” he whispered. “*It’s beautiful.*”

And the scene abruptly ended. As the image faded, the present-day scientist lowered the hand they’d raised to stop it.

“From this, we learned that the bloodsong may be connected to the relationships that form between any animal,” they said. “For this experiment, we let the test subjects mingle with one another, and the displayed specimens had become friends during their time together. It’s a pity, really. Soon after that experiment was concluded, subject A expired, and subject B ended its life within forty-eight hours afterward. We could have learned so much more had they endured.”

With difficulty, I maintained my pleasant smile, even as I breathed more deeply with each inhale, extinguishing the blazing fire inside of me. I should kill this scientist. Really, I should. Any benefit that they gave Lutov couldn’t outweigh the suffering that they’d brought to who knew how many people, and *those people deserved justice*, just as much as the scientist’s soon-to-come victims deserved freedom from their clutches.

But if I killed this scientist or their partner, two people that Zan valued so much, it would most definitely start a House war, even if the leader of the ‘enemy’ House would be my brother. In the face of what I’d done, he wouldn’t have a choice.

But if I killed these scientists, we’d never find an antidote for the neurotoxin that was threatening to decimate Lutov.

So, instead of requesting my rifle to blow a wicked person’s brains out, I turned to them with a smile.

“How interesting,” I said, “and I didn’t know that you had *iisen* here! Where do you keep them?”

I needed a distraction if I was to have any hope of quelling this fury inside of me.

“In a hole below the ground,” the scientist said. “Don’t worry. They’re maintained as well as any tool like them should be.”

With my smile twitching, I said, “I have no doubt. Still. If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to check on them. One never knows what a clever captive can get up to in their spare time.”

For their sake, I hoped that was the case here, and if I saw evidence of such a thing, I certainly wouldn't report it to this scientist.

"Fair enough," they said, "but then, we really must return to the tube. I don't want to keep my *shukusen* waiting for long."

As we once more moved down Kalaski's halls, temptation nipped at me. My reasoning for sparing this scientist's life was sound, but even still, I couldn't help feeling as if I'd greatly regret it someday. Perhaps instead of killing them, I could get them removed from their position in the near future? I liked the idea, but it would take time.

Having just viewed the evil that it had hid, the mask of relaxing tranquility that this place wore had further cracked. It was so riddled that I was amazed it was still holding together. I was grateful when the scientist stopped beside a lift, drawing me out of my thoughts.

Gesturing toward it, they said, "The mages are down there. You'll have to forgive me if I don't go with you. I prefer not to visit the *iisen* as they're... unhygienic, to say the least."

After a pause, I stiffly said, "I see. In that case, I hope you can forgive me for how long I may take down there."

The scientist shrugged.

"So long as *shukusen* Pheniks is fine with the delay, you can take as long as you want," they said.

"How kind," I said, barely biting back on sarcasm. "If you'll excuse me?"

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