

# Chapter 59: Let's Get Started

I was impressed by the lab that Talira had confiscated for the scientists to work from. Deep in House Drav's headquarters, it had all of the equipment that they might need and more, and the two we'd retrieved from Ibis must agree with my assessment, given how quickly they scattered to inspect it once we were inside. Having left my family in the park, I entered behind them, noticing Damari standing in a corner with a pretty, blonde woman, and on seeing me, my friend lifted a hand before nudging his companions toward me,

"LV! How good to see you in these trying times," they cheerily said.

"So, my grandmother has shared the situation with you. Good. I'd hate to explain myself again," I said. "Who's your friend?"

"So serious!" Damari said before elbowing the woman as their side. "Don't worry, Misah. He's not always like this."

Turning to the blonde, who was picking at a sleeve with her eyes fixed on the ground, I forced myself to relax from my focused state, smiling at her in a disarming way.

"You must be the sister Damari's always yammering about," I said. "From what I've heard, you're quite the inquisitive scientist."

Misah peered up at me from beneath her bangs, and I thought she'd be too shy to respond. Boy, did she prove me wrong.

"From what I hear, you're quite the scientist yourself," she said. "Or was it that you're an insatiable prankster? I can never remember. Those passions are too similar."

Sucking in a breath, I blinked at her for a moment, and after holding my gaze for the briefest of heartbeats, she darted her eyes back to the floor. The quiet ones usually had a bit of spunk hidden somewhere. How did I always forget that fact?

Dipping into a shallow bow, I said, "Well met, Misah. Your sibling's praise hardly does you justice."

"Hey!" Damari protested.

They didn't get the chance to say anything more as my grandmother strode into the lab at that moment. After observing the room, lingering on where the scientists from Kalaski had already begun working, she nodded before heading toward me and the siblings.

“Good job getting those two here,” she said. “I see you’ve already met Misah.”

“I have,” I said. “She’s charming.”

Looking down her nose at me, Talira said, “Zae-zae, this is one person you cannot take to bed with you.”

As Misah’s head shot up and Damari tensed, I fought to keep from slapping my grandmother. Why would she say that?

Rather mildly, I said, “I can’t compliment a woman without wanting to fuck her?”

Hopefully, my crude way of putting that would make Talira recognize her misstep, but she only chuckled.

“Good. You’re feeling better. With the way you were before, you might have shut down instead of getting indignant, as you rightfully should,” she said before facing the others. “Forgive me, Misah. Damari. I had to check on the mental status of my *Lokke Vitras*.”

“You could have picked a better way to do it,” I grumbled.

Damari crossed their arms until Misah lifted a fist to clear her throat.

“I understand,” she said. “Despite the preconception otherwise, men can be quite emotional creatures at times.”

At that, I snapped my head toward her so fast that I worried it might give me whiplash while Damari shrugged at me. Talira burst into laughter.

“Oh, I’ll *like* you, won’t I?” she says.

I wasn’t sure if I would yet. Time would tell, as it did in all things.

As she recovered, Talira wiped her eyes.

“We should get to work,” she said. “Misah, if you could return to your samples? Damari, you can help her, but you, my *Lokke Vitras*. You come with me.”

Without another word, Talira marched out the door, and rolling my eyes, I heaved a heavy sigh. Smirking at me, Damari mouthed ‘Good luck’ before going after their sister, who was already halfway across the lab. This left everyone too busy to see me dragging my feet as I followed my grandmother.

Talira led me into a room where new parents would typically greet their child, and I struggled to repress happy memories of Baely’s handoff while sitting beside her on a couch. Thinking about that didn’t seem right at the moment.

“Yes?” I stiffly said.

Having delivered what I’d been dispatched to retrieve, I’d known a conversation with Talira was eminent, but even if I should be calm while having it, I couldn’t help how miffed I was with my grandmother. The comment she’d made in the lab had been the second time she’d called the morality of my sexual proclivities into question in as many weeks, and *I wasn’t ok with that*.

“Don’t give me the sullen routine,” Talira said. “So, I said something that you found upsetting. Get over it. We’re currently dealing with too big of a problem to soothe your hurt feelings.”

She was right. I knew it, but that didn’t magically change how I felt. Fortunately, I’d gotten very good at hiding my emotional state. After taking a deep breath, I turned toward Talira with my hands folded on my knees.

“Do you have orders for me, my *shukusen*?” I asked.

Lifting a finger, Talira said, “First, an explanation.”

She settled into one corner of the couch, steepling her fingers in front of her face.

“When you went after Sanya at the assembly, you left me quite the mess to fix,” she said. “We have no idea where she is, by the way. She slipped away while we were arguing. I don’t suppose you know where she’s gone, do you? We need her in custody before I can move forward with my plans for Cerullis. If you don’t have any ideas, I’ve already set the Second Strata on locating her, but any information that you could provide would still be useful.”

Touching on my memories of Sanya was painful, more so than I’d expected, but when thinking about our many conversations over the years, I came up with a suggestion.

“The Preserve. That’s a large swatch of ground to search, but she’s mentioned it several times in the past,” I said. “Something about a hideout? Somewhere safe that she could go when her life became too much.”

For some reason, this idea turned Talira sober, reminding me that she’d known Sanya for a while, much like Korix. Was the other *shukusen*’s betrayal distressing her as much as it was with me?

“I’d forgotten about that,” she said before shaking herself. “It’s a good place to look. Thank you. Now, about the *shukusenth*’s reaction to this debacle.”

Wincing, I shifted in place, preparing for the blistering sarcasm and bad news that Talira was sure to rain on me.

“I’ve handled it,” she said. “We’ll have no trouble from them.”

And I froze, fighting to switch tracks from my expectations.

Chuckling, Talira said, "You thought you'd have to handle a shitshow there too, didn't you? Zae-zae, I've been a *shukusen* for a long time. Mother Time, it feels like forever sometimes. I know how to handle the cranky youngsters who hold the same title as me."

The derision in her tone threatened to send me into peals of laughter, and I coughed into a fist to quell it.

"How did you do that?" I asked. "If you can share, of course."

Flapping a hand, Talira said, "I won't bore you with the details when your attention should be focused elsewhere. Suffice it to say that the other *shukusenth* believe that you recently sided with Sanya as part of a mission to root out corruption in her House. They think the situation's under control and that the neurotoxin Sanya released was the only sample that she had available to her."

When she stopped, glancing at where my mouth was hanging open, I slowly closed it.

"That last part seems unwise," I said. "If our scientists can't engineer an antidote soon, how will we explain it when people across Xygek start complaining about the neurotoxin's effects?"

"I guess you'll have to do something about that before it happens, won't you?" Talira said, lifting an eyebrow.

She swiped at the air, and in the next instant, a message with an attachment popped into my array.

"That's a list of places where a neurotoxin cannister could have been stored, compiled from the day-to-day activities of Cerullis members and their affiliates," she continued. "Obviously, we can't do anything about the cannisters that have already been opened. I have people set to handle that, but for any of them that are still armed, you and the rest of our merry group will neutralize them. I've sent your family after the first of them, minus Baely of course."

Well, thank Mother Time for that. Bringing my daughter to the periphery of Kalaski had been one thing. Putting them next to such a dangerous material was another, although...

If Sanya had been telling the truth when we'd talked earlier, my daughter had already been infected.

"Did you ask her if that was what she wanted?" I asked. "Knowing Baely, she'll be furious if she's left sitting around, waiting for others to finish the hard work. Plus, she'll want to avoid any delay to her House naming ceremony."

Even unlikely as that was to happen. Given current circumstances, Baely might not go through that coming-of-age event for quite a while. Or the *shukusenth* might push for it to happen anyway, hoping to deflect the average citizen's suspicion from our perilous situation. If that occurred, I might not be able to keep my promise to my daughter. I might not have time to attend their ceremony. I wasn't sure which of those circumstances I most hoped for.

Giving me an odd look, Talira said, "I... can ask, I suppose."

Nodding, I slapped my knees.

"In that case, I should get started," I said. "This list is *long*. Even with help, clearing it will take me a while. I anticipate many a sleepless night ahead of me."

"Don't push yourself too hard. Most likely, the neurotoxin will work more quickly in a weakened body," Talira said, "but you've probably already taken that into account. Good luck, my *Lokke Vitras*."

After getting to my feet, I hesitated before making my goodbyes, tempted to share everything I'd experienced in Kalaski with Talira. Not only was she probably aware of what happened in that awful place, though, but if I raised a protest over it, she'd easily conclude that I meant to eventually dismantle the place. She knew me that well, and I wasn't sure if making her aware of that goal was a good idea yet. Later, after I'd laid the groundwork, I might, but not now.

So, I merely inclined my head to her.

"Best wishes in keeping the *shukusenth* happy during this crisis," I said.

Snorting, Talira waved me away, and I left the room, reviewing a report that had been hovering in my vision for days. Very little had changed in it, but I knew this wasn't destined to last long. Even still, I kept it hovering, although I put it out of my mind as I did.

Preparing a series of artificial adrenaline bursts, I pulled up a list of possible neurotoxin storage places before heading for the closest one.

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