

Chapter 6: Politics Are the Worst

Mother Time, I hated assemblies. They were pointless, a complete waste of time, but even still, the Houses' *shukusenth* and First Strata came together every month, rotating our meeting spot between the six headquarters.

Today, we were halfway up Kirst's tower, and its *shukusen*, Orin, was doing his damndest to wrangle Raelle and Arion, the leaders of Vaessa and Zan respectively, free of a heated argument.

"Nobody's questioning Zan's need for test subjects, especially ones with a similar physiology to ours," he said, "but Raelle's right. If you intend to focus so heavily on research into magic and the bloodsong, perhaps more resources should go to Vaessa instead of Ostiu."

Bristling, Arion said, "My people are barely getting enough as it is! How do you expect us...?"

And I tuned out. It was more of the same, the Houses squabbling to keep themselves in greater positions of power.

I understood what these assemblies were meant to accomplish, applauded the idea even. The Houses needed a space where they could air their problems with one another, but long before I'd earned my place here, these assemblies had become long meetings where the *shukusenth* only argued, and considering how little the First Strata got to speak, who knew why we were required to attend them?

Already bored out of my mind, I glanced over the room, fighting to keep from fidgeting. As Lutov's leaders, the *shukusenth* got the pleasure of a chair around today's table with their heirs standing behind them. My *shukusen*, Talira, looked as bored as I felt, sprawling in her seat while tapping a pen on the table. To her left at Marza, Drav's head of House, and I couldn't help the flash of resentment that rose at the sight of her, so soon after the reminder of how long she'd delayed my family's application for a child. Next to her was Orin, whose face was red and flustered, and Raelle was leaning over the arm of the chair beside him to shout in his ear.

I skipped over the person to Raelle's left, avoiding anything Cerullis-related when I could. When around members of that House, I had to pace myself. Screaming hatred still threatened to push me into attack mode, even this long after the Ancients Crisis.

Fortunately, the next person in the circle soothed that wrath. Not Arion, practically seething in his seat. No, my source of relief was my brother, rigidly standing at his *shukusen's* elbow.

He caught me looking at him, and with a grin tugging on his lips, he mimed a flapping mouth with the hand he had hidden behind his back. I raised an eyebrow.

You realize that's your superior you're mocking, right? I sent to him.

He answered with a slight shrug before I received his message.

So? it read. *What will you do about it, Lokke Vitras?*

Wincing, I sent, *You know I don't like you calling me that, Phen.*

I hated even the slightest reminder that I might one day have to harm my family.

Rolling his eyes, Pheniks returned his attention to the argument, one that was building into a conflict I might need to mediate, but I wasn't done with him. Bending over Talira, I pulled paper off of the pad she was using to take notes. I didn't know why she liked handwriting them instead of recording them in her array, but in this case, I was grateful for the oddity.

As soon as I moved, the room's heated hostility dropped to ice with every eye fixing on me.

"Excuse me," I said into the silence.

It took a while for the *shukusenth's* conversation to gain traction again, several tense heartbeats where I tore a strip off of my claimed paper and rolled it into a ball.

"Perhaps Arion has made a good point. We certainly don't want a revolt in Ostiu," Raelle eventually said. "If you let some of my people work from that nation, though, we could help with preventing a disaster like that."

Scoffing, Arion said, "As if you have such a great track record with preventing revolts."

And so it went.

As soon as our leaders had become embroiled in an argument again, I flicked my paper ball at Pheniks' ear. When it hit, he jumped before glaring at me.

Say you're sorry, I sent to him.

His face reddened.

For what?

Using my title instead of my name, of course, I sent.

With a huff, Pheniks faced the table once more.

Stop acting like a child, his message read.

I flicked another missile at him in response, and swatting where it had impacted, he jerked toward me.

Mother Time, Zae. Could you, for once in your life, act like you're supposed to?

From the set of his shoulders, I could almost hear the hiss that my brother wanted to unleash, so I stuck my tongue out at him.

No, I sent. Say you're sorry.

Oh, my fuck, really?

Almost fully turned my way, Pheniks gritted his teeth at me.

Fine, his message read. I'm sorry, Zae.

Someone cleared their throat, which had Pheniks spinning toward the *shukusenth*, and I did the same much more languidly. Nearly all of them were staring at us, but Talira was leaning on the table with her face in her hands, which I just *loved* seeing.

"Do our newest members have something to share?" Orin asked.

Coughing, Pheniks opened his mouth to apologize, but I cut him off.

"Not at all," I said. "I asked for clarification from First Stratus Pheniks regarding an appeal that House Zan made of me. You looked quite busy shouting at one another, so I thought I'd use the moment to make productive use of my time. Pheniks was only responding to me, as he should."

Silence reigned for a moment with Raelle and Arion turning purple in the face. The rest looked on with bemusement.

"I... see," Orin said. "Perhaps we should reconvene at a later date. Every issue we've raised this month has been something the Houses can work out individually. Unless someone has an item that affects everyone here?"

Most of the people around the table had nothing to say, indifferent to the proposed early dismissal, and I gleefully considered what to do with the extra time that I might soon gain.

"Um... I do, actually," a tremulous voice said. "If it's not too much of a bother."

Considering how rarely her voice was heard during an assembly, the *shukusenth* and their First Strata turned on Sanya with no small amount of surprise. For my part, I controlled my grimace as I focused on the new leader of House Cerullis.

I had no clue how Cerullis had regained so much of its power in the last one hundred years, almost all while under this woman's leadership. She shrunk under the weight of the room's gazes, attempting to merge with her chair, and I thought she might give up on voicing her issue, but

silently, her First Stratus stepped forward to rest a hand on her shoulder. His touch shuddered life into her frozen form, and she straightened.

"I'm officially requesting for our strictures on space travel to be lifted," she said. "Over the past several centuries, members of my House have been making alarming observations about our sun. We've recorded enough of them to establish an unmistakable pattern and-"

"I'm sorry. Did you seriously just ask to send people into space?" Arion asked. "Why, for the love of Mother Time, would you want to take up such a defunct field of study again?"

I would also like an answer to this question, if for the opposite reason as House Zan's *shukusen*. If Lutov stretched its fingers into the vast mysteries of space, I would love it, but considering how most of our society viewed that realm, I was curious why Sanya had taken an interest in it.

Almost everyone else seemed to agree with Arion's incredulousness, although Pheniks had cocked his head like he did when stumbling onto an interesting puzzle.

Stiffly, Sanya said, "Perhaps you'd like to look at the relevant data before dismissing my suggestion."

For a moment, all I could do was blink at her. In the ninety or so years since she'd become a *shukusen*, Sanya had acted as the timid newcomer, striving to make up for her predecessor's mistakes, so this example that she had a spine? I liked it.

Maybe it was time to let go of my ill will toward Cerullis. The House was far removed from what it had once been, after all. In fact, it was the only one that tended to work with the others instead of squabbling, which I'd have enjoyed more if my hatred hadn't blinded me to it. Huh.

Absently, I pulled up my to-do list, adding a visit with *shukusen* Sanya to the top of it.

"That would be wise," Talira said. "Why don't you send us your files, Sanya? We can review them and discuss your request at our next assembly. Acceptable?"

Slumping, Sanya nodded, and while the *shukusenth* returned to ignoring her, I watched her First Stratus gently squeeze her shoulder before retreating. Hmm. That was... interesting.

"Well, then," Orin said. "Unless someone else would like to spring a surprise request on us, I call this assembly adjourned."

When no one protested, those gathered broke apart. Various attendees clumped together for small talk or left, depending on their schedules. Getting Pheniks' attention, I jerked my head for him to join me, but he held up a finger before bending to murmur in Arion's ear.

"I hate these damn assemblies," Talira said, stretching her arms overhead.

"They do seem rather pointless," I said.

Standing, Talira gathered her things.

“That’s no excuse for starting trouble, my *Lokke Vitras*.”

As Talira turned to me, I shrugged one shoulder. She should be used to vexing behavior from me by now.

“What did you think of *shukusen* Sanya’s concern?” I asked.

“I’m not sure what to make of it yet. I’ll have to gather more details before forming an opinion. It’s definitely strange, though,” she said. “Your thoughts?”

“The same,” I said. “I’d like to look into it. Unless you object, my *shukusen*?”

Talira narrowed her eyes at me.

“Don’t you have enough on your plate?” she asked. “Your recent missions have been completed in a... sluggish manner.”

Considering who was around us and where we were, I had only one way to answer that question.

With a brilliant smile, I said, “I know my limits, my *shukusen*.”

“Do you, though?”

I snapped my head to Pheniks, silently willing my little brother to *shut up*. I might flaunt the typical *Lokke Vitras* decorum, but there were some things one just didn’t do in Lutovish society, like calling the person who held my role into question. Unfortunately, Pheniks kept talking.

“You’ll run yourself ragged without someone to keep you in check.”

With a tight smile, I said, “First Stratus Pheniks, I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

Frowning, Pheniks said, “Why are you talking so...? Oh, right. Shit.”

He rubbed the back of his neck before bowing to me.

“Please forgive me for doubting you, *Lokke Vitras*.”

Wincing, I lightly punched Pheniks’ shoulder.

“Get up. It’s all right,” I said.

When Pheniks shot upright, his face was still pink, and Talira shook her head at us both.

“Grandsons,” she said to herself.

Ignoring her, Pheniks said, “Did you need something?”

Damnit, now it was my turn to be awkward.

“Yes, actually,” I said. “I was hoping... That is to say, if you both have time...”

How the hell did I do this? I’d had parties at my place before, of course, but none had been like the one I had planned for tonight.

Raising an eyebrow, Talira drawled, “Yes?”

Fuck it.

“I’d like it if you joined me and my family for dinner this evening. Ko and I will be cooking, and Leski has entertainment of some sort planned,” I said. “I’ve already invited the rest of the family and a few friends. You’re the last two on the list.”

Both of them blankly stared at me, which I found surprising. I’d thought at least Talira would know what my invitation had actually meant.

“Rank of import from one to ten,” she said.

In other words, should she abandon her duties for the day?

Apparently, Talira’s typical omniscience when it came to me had taken a break today, although I wasn’t sure why she hadn’t guessed the purpose of tonight’s party. In answer to her question, though, I turned to her, pouring deadly seriousness from me.

“Ten,” I said.

She pulled back with a small gasp while Pheniks’ eyes widened. Not only had I never hosted a family dinner, but they must see how badly I wanted them there. They could see that they shouldn’t refuse this request, even knowing I wouldn’t blame them if they did. And they knew I’d never asked for them to attend one of my social events, not even the wedding between me and Leski. Not that my reticence had stopped them from attending most of them anyway.

“I’ll rearrange my schedule,” Talira said. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to request a few direct connections.”

She scurried out the door while the remaining *shukusenth* watched, and I turned to my brother. With a rueful grin, Pheniks clasped my shoulder.

“Of course I’ll be there,” he said.

And a knot in my stomach unraveled.

“Fantastic,” I said. “I’ll see you later tonight, then? I mean, I guess I will but-”

A message flashed in my array as Pheniks squeezed where he was touching me.

You will, Zae, it read. Go. Finish what you need to do.

Damnit, why was my family like this? I didn't deserve them.

"I thank you for your time, First Stratus," was what I said to Pheniks.

Thank you, little brother. I love you, was what I sent.

With a short bow, I raced around Pheniks and out the door. Notifying Korix and Leski about my availability, I waited for them to tell me what still needed to be done. While in the capital, I'd help them however I could before heading home, giving myself plenty of time to prepare.

Tonight must be perfect, after all.

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