

# Chapter 60: A Heavy-Handed Boss

*Shukusen* Talira was glaring at me like I'd offended her highest sensibilities. I stood perfectly still in front of her with one arm crossed behind my back while supporting myself on an IV pole with the other, and all the while, I ignored what was floating beside me.

"Reckless. Irresponsible. *Sentimental*," Talira said. "For Mother Time's sake, it's like you've learned nothing since rescuing Feena, all those years ago."

I held my tongue, refusing to unleash the snarky responses dancing on it. They wouldn't be appropriate right now, only getting me in trouble.

"As the *shukusen* says," I said instead.

Something whipped my head to the side, leaving my cheek stinging, but after what I'd recently undergone, getting slapped like this was nothing. It did, however, almost knock me over, and the IV pole I was clinging to wobbled in place. As I straightened, I made a face at the orange-tinted liquid in its bag. I hated the more potent versions of rapid regeneration drugs. They left me woozy for days.

"Don't do that," Talira said, rubbing her hand. "Don't become like your *evushk*. It's bad enough that I'm losing him to his fight with—"

With a small gasp, she looked away.

"I can't have two of my heirs failing on me before I retire."

Cocking my head, I said, "You don't want to follow a protocol?"

"No," Talira said with a wince. "That's always been *his* thing, his way of resisting what's eating him alive."

She turned to the side, forcing me to acknowledge something that I wished had never existed. A long, amber capsule of viscous material was hanging in the center of the room with plastic tubes snaking from holes in the floor to the man inside of it.

Korix looked strange in a hospital gown, frozen halfway through a breath. I didn't like this view of him, so helpless and seemingly trapped, but it was for the best. He could easily escape from any form of imprisonment besides stasis.

Still, putting him in a stasis field made my guts twist while a sense of *wrong* brushed along the inside of my skin. It was reserved only for the severely wounded and the worst of criminals, murderers whose acts made even the highest Strata in House Kolb shudder. Korix shouldn't be in one.

But I couldn't focus on him.

"If you don't want to follow protocol, grandmother, then I have a question," I said, watching her from the corner of my eye. "What the fuck are we going to do? I don't know what these Ancients are, but considering that they've subverted a House and played a part in Lutov's ancient war, I'm a little lost as to how we can oppose them."

"We take it one step at a time," Talira said.

She faced me with a blank expression in place.

"First, we decide what to do with your *evushk*."

I seized up. When I turned to Talira, it was like I was moving through putty, and the room's hum went quiet.

"I assume you already have an idea for that?" I said.

Nodding, Talira reached inside her coat, withdrawing my worst fear from it. Flipping the pistol so that its grip faced my way, she offered it to me.

"The current *Lokke Vitras* has failed in the one aspect that's most critical to his role: loyalty to Lutov," she said. "It doesn't matter if someone is or was controlling him during his moments of treachery. He betrayed the homeland and therefore, can no longer keep it safe. Considering what he can do, we have only one course of action available to us. We eliminate him and elevate his replacement."

I couldn't lift my eyes off of the weapon that she'd presented to me.

With my voice filtering to me through a tube, I said, "What is it you're asking me to do, *shukusen*?"

Talira shook the pistol.

"Kill the *Lokke Vitras*, and by doing so, kill this version of yourself," she said.

A wail rose in me—*no! can't not again not after everything*—and from outside of my body, I watched myself swallow and reach for the pistol.

"As you command."

The weight in my hand fought to drag me into the planet's fiery core, but I resisted it, manipulating marionette legs and a disobedient IV pole until I was standing beside the peak of the amber

capsule. Korix looked so peaceful in it, and all of me screeched to throw the pistol at Talira's face before getting him out of there. Together, we could stand against her, right?

But not only was that desire unfeasible but I knew what my grandmother was doing. Probably.

So instead, I leveled the pistol at Korix, barely controlling my hand's tremor. If I squeezed this trigger, the bolt it unleashed would fly fast enough to rip through his brain before the stasis field interfered. Another loved one murdered by me.

My finger tightened.

"Stop!" Talira shouted.

Thank Mother Time. I'd been right.

Even still, the world froze around me. A vacuum took hold of the room, sucking sound and air into the void, and while my chest vibrated, I couldn't hear myself speak.

"*Shukusen?*"

She came through clear as a bell.

"I'm sorry, Zae-zae. Your actions in the House Cerullis facility seemed... excessive," she said. "I know you have certain inclinations, ones that aren't conducive to the *Lokke Vitras* role. I trained those same desires out of your *evushk* when he was my *kuvesk*, but I wasn't sure if he'd done the same with you. I had to make sure nothing lay between you. From what you've shown me here, nothing does."

I didn't know how I kept from turning the pistol on Talira, but I left it pointed at Korix as hot air hissed between my teeth.

She'd done *what* to him?

Fuck it. I knew what I'd told Leski, and hiding this relationship from Lutov as a whole, I could do, but I was sick of concealing this from someone who should have noticed it years ago.

And *damn* the consequences.

"I'm happy to have proven myself to you," I said, "but if I may?"

Furrowing her brow, Talira nodded.

"Thank you," I continued. "I'd like to know why it matters if I've developed an attachment to *evushk*, especially of the type you're suggesting. One of the reasons he's having so much trouble with his role is because for decades, he's had no one else who can relate to him beside you, and let's be honest. You're too busy to deal with someone else's needs, especially someone like him who'd require so much attention.

“So, tell me. What’s the harm in the *Lokke Vitras* having a confidant, whether secret or not, whose support might lengthen their stay in the role. What’s the harm in said confidant helping them? What’s the harm in him loving me?”

Everything about Talira screamed tension, and I knew that I was teetering on a tightwire. One wrong move and my life would become a nightmare again, so I said nothing. Did nothing. Waited.

Licking her lips, Talira said, “And vice versa?”

When I nodded, she gritted her teeth, drawing her shoulders together.

“In your proposed scenario, where do these individuals’ loyalties lie?” she said. “With Lutov or one another?”

After giving the pistol a significant glance, I said, “You already know the answer to your question.”

Even if I didn’t. I was sincerely not sure what I’d do if Talira ordered me to kill Korix.

She didn’t need to know that, though.

“Then...”

Rubbing her face, Talira released an explosive sigh.

“Then, stop aiming that pistol at him,” she said. “Return it to me.”

Lowering my arm, I traveled the few steps between us in a fog, but it was different from before. I was revisited by the exhaustion that I’d fought on arriving in Xygek, one that had deepened while getting hustled to the hospital in the depths of headquarters.

Hours had passed since then. I should be dead to the world by now, but the adrenaline burst I’d artificially triggered, to my medic’s dismay, should keep fatigue at bay for a while yet. My weariness now was coming from something else entirely: the release of great strain.

When I relinquished the pistol to her, Talira captured my wrist, moving faster than I’d thought possible without House Kolb speed.

“We will discuss this later,” she said. “I haven’t decided what I think about your suggestion, but your *evushk* doesn’t deserve to die over this foolishness.”

Foolishness.

I knew that a subset of Lutovish society wouldn’t approve of my lifestyle choices, especially the having multiple partners bit, but they would never stop me from living as I liked, just as they wouldn’t show me the depth of their judgment. Was Talira one of the people who thought polyamory and my lack of sexual preferences were unnatural, or did ‘foolishness’ merely apply to the *Lokke Vitras* making a significant connection?

I refused to believe the first option was true.

“Understood,” I said. “May we now return to the threat in our midst?”

Releasing me, Talira said, “Yes. The Ancients.”

Clasping an elbow, she chewed on her lip while her eyes went distant.

“Unfortunately, I can’t add more to what you already know,” she said. “When I query for information on them, it returns as-”

“Restricted, I know,” I said. “It’s restricted, even to you?”

Talira shook her head.

“But what’s hidden behind that last security layer isn’t much,” she said, “merely that *they* were integral in the war with those from beyond the stars. That the first Lokke Vitras and her Favored soldiers worked for *them*. That *they’re* not... human.”

Both of us shivered at this idea, pretending not to notice it in the other one.

“One report mentioned that books about the Ancients didn’t make the transfer from print to digital,” Talira continued. “We might learn more there.”

“So... The Library,” I said. “You’re sending me there?”

I kept myself blank while Talira considered.

Save for those that the high Strata owned, The Library was Lutov’s last bastion of physical books, similar in protection to the Preserve. So far as the average citizen was aware, however, it didn’t exist, and the information it contained was granted through a chain of proxies in each House. Considering The Library’s books had become brittle and easily damaged over the centuries, this precaution made sense in a way, even if it also smacked of knowledge suppression.

I’d wanted to visit The Library since I’d learned about it a few years ago, so it didn’t matter that this proposed trip would only involve research, which wasn’t my favorite activity. I would jump on the given opportunity. It would make a nice change after the last few days.

Even holding to perfect nonchalance as I was, Talira must see some sign of my eagerness because she gave me an indulgent grin.

“Yes, Zae-zae, I’m sending you to The Library,” she said. “You should be receiving its coordinates now.”

I’d already opened her message to scan it. The coordinates seemed familiar, but I didn’t bother with going through my mental index for where I’d seen them before. I’d remember once I headed that way. I was more concerned with a question of practicality.

“Can I share this information with anyone else?” I asked.

“As you see fit, yes. I have people going through the information that you brought with you from the Cerullis facility. Why shouldn’t you do the same on this front?” Talira said. “Please, be careful with who you choose to help, though.”

“I will,” I said.

I had only one person in mind for the job, but then, I doubted I’d need more than him.

“While you’re doing research, I’ll *cautiously* inform the other Houses of the situation. Hopefully, Cerullis is the only one the Ancients have breached,” Talira said. “I’ll also work on breaking your *evushk* free of his conditioning. I have a pretty good idea of where to start with that.”

I was a rabbit caught in a predator’s gaze. If I did more than breathe, I was afraid of what would happen.

Given our situation, I hadn’t thought that Korix would be a priority. Until this crisis had eventually concluded, I’d resigned myself to worrying about him, but apparently, Talira disagreed with my assessment.

She eyed me with her lips curled.

“We need all hands on deck, grandson,” she said. “Your *evushk* is my most powerful *phansha* piece. I need him to wake up, shake off what’s seized him, and join the fight.”

“I’m sure he’ll be happy to do that,” I said.

“Oh, I know he will, otherwise, I’ll never let him forget how badly he’s fucked this up,” Talira said with a chuckle. “Now, you, Zae. I have one more task for you.”

Of course she did.

“I’m at your service,” I said.

Snorting, Talira coughed into a fist.

“If I’ve learned anything during your time as the *Lokke Vitras* to come, it’s that you *serve* few people,” she said. “You’ll do as you’re told, but you only serve the people you love with your heart and spark of soul. In other words, you’ll make a difficult heir for me to handle.”

I... didn’t know what to say to that. Was it a compliment or an insult?

Shaking her head, Talira said, “Your task. The girl you brought with you to the capital? You’re to act as her guardian until we’ve resolved this crisis. Having her with us will put a check on Niklaus. If we’re lucky, it might even have him switching sides. Besides, she seems clever. I may have a use for her before this emergency’s over.”

Slowly, I folded one arm in front of me, making a fist around the IV pole. The boil that had sprung to life in my stomach required movement, and I was fighting for it to be anything other than leaping for Talira's throat. I wasn't sure why I wanted to attack her, considering I'd had similar ideas about Leski's usefulness in the House Cerullis facility, but it didn't change the fact that I was... angry right now.

"Please tell me she doesn't know she's a hostage," I said, surprised when it didn't emerge as a hiss.

"No, she doesn't seem like someone who'd find that idea intimidating," Talira said. "It's your job to explain why she's staying with you."

"Great..."

My answering smile was tight.

"I'll handle Leski," I said. "What about Cerullis? How are we preparing for their attack?"

"I have the lower Strata dealing with them," Talira said. "Honestly, I'm not worried about it. Now that you've alerted our House to the threat, Cerullis can't sneak anything past us."

I didn't think she understood how desperate those people were, but she was Kolb's *shukusen* for a reason. I'd have to trust her judgment.

"In that case, is there anything else?" I asked. "Or may I begin my research?"

"There isn't, and you may not," Talira snapped. "You've given me many a near heart attack over the last eleven years, but seeing you tumble out of that shuttle, unable to stay on your feet, was the worst of them, Zae. Go home. Rest. I'll keep Lutov safe for tonight. In the morning, you can return to saving us all. Oh. And remember to take that Leski girl with you."

Leski, the overly inquisitive woman who would probably keep me up all night with questions.

"I will," I said.

"Then..."

Breathing out slowly, Talira came forward to wrap me in her arms, careful not to jostle my IV. Staying quiet, she just held me, and I struggled to keep my body loose.

Talira was family, and I knew she'd never hurt me, not in a situation like this at least, but she'd sent Korix and me on too many harrowing missions for me to be comfortable in her embrace anymore. When she relented, stepping back, a part of me breathed a sigh of relief.

Standing tall, Talira donned the role of *shukusen* once more.

"You're dismissed, my acting *Lokke Vitras*," she said.

I blinked. Acting *Lokke Vitras*? What did that mean-?

Talira jerked her head toward the door, and wincing, I shuffled to it. Before leaving, I glanced at an amber capsule with my heart in my throat, and when I continued outside, it wrenched free of my chest to remain in the room left behind.

I had my orders. Watch Leski. Rest. Research. I'd get to them in that order, but first, I needed to stop by the hospital so I could have this drip of rapid regeneration drugs removed. I couldn't imagine what wandering through Xygek with one attached to me would be like.

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