

# Chapter 61: Minimal Progress

Leaving Feena and my mother behind, the rest of us traveled to House Drav's headquarters in silence, although we mumbled apologies to one another when one of us weaved into another person's path. This was most notable when I had to catch Damari after they tripped over their own feet. If they realized how much I'd tensed on feeling their body trembling, they didn't say a word, but I spent the rest of the trip watching them stumble along, biting my lip. Damn, but they were tired.

After reaching the appointed tower, we split up. Leski, Korix, and Baely wandered off for a stroll around the park, Damari hurried toward the scientists' lab, and I followed a receptionist's directions to a room near the top of the tower, straightening up my appearance as I went.

When I arrived, almost all of the *shukusenth* and First Strata had gathered together. I'd never seen such nervous energy in them before. They were jumpy, letting their eyes rove over the room, and seeing this, I was reminded of House Kolb operatives who'd come home after their first taste of combat.

Finding Talira among them, I meandered her way, making greetings when I must. This happened more frequently than I'd expected.

After the mistake I'd made, I was amazed that these people could stand to be in the same room as me, let alone say hello, but then, so far as they knew, I'd never made a mistake, and everything was under control. It was just another gram of pressure on the already unbearable load I was carrying.

When I reached Talira's side, I touched her elbow.

"My *shukusen*, I am present, as ordered," I said.

Turning to me, Talira threw her arms wide, smiling.

"Ah, my *Lokke Vitras!* There you are," she said. "Now that you're here, we can begin."

Somehow, I kept from frowning. What did she mean, we could begin? We were missing a *shukusen* ... one besides Sanya, at least. Hell, her absence would be weird.

No one else seemed to find Talira's proclamation strange, though. They hurried to their places while I moved as slow as a glacier in comparison. I was missing something. What was it?

"I have good and bad news. We'll start with the bad," Talira said as she took a seat. "As most of you know, *shukusen* Orin took a turn for the worse this morning. Fortunately, his First Stratus got him into stasis quickly enough to save his life. Nicely done."

She nodded to the man who was standing behind Orin's empty chair, and he inclined his head, accepting the compliment. Shifting her attention to the middle of the table, Talira swept at the air, conjuring an image of Orin in an amber capsule. Reports on his condition floated around it, and I winced as I read them. He should be dead right now. Damn. I'd just started liking him.

When people around the room started murmuring at one another, Talira raised a calming hand.

"Not to worry, my friends. Orin and by proxy, we will be fine," she said. "The experts investigating the neurotoxin in our bloodstreams say that once we clean this poison from our bodies, our arrays will be able to heal any damage that it's done while within us. That brings me to my good news, though. We're close to having a working antidote, but a final piece is required. To explain this, I'll have one of my experts join us."

Again, she gestured, and the room's doors opened to reveal Misah. With a frown, I watched her shuffle closer with her eyes fixed on the floor.

...Interesting choice by Talira. The other two scientists might be reprehensible people, but at least they had a modicum of self-confidence, something Misah seemed to lack. Perhaps the other two had thought that explaining their findings to the *shukusenth* was unworthy of their time.

Also, Damari wouldn't be happy, having to wait for their sister to finish up here.

Stopping between Talira and Pheniks' chair, Misah cleared her throat before lifting her hand to waist level. Clearing her throat again, she kept her eyes pinned on the floor as an image of a chemical formula and its molecular structure was projected above her palm, and hastily, Talira swiped the image of Orin away so everyone could see this new image.

"Here is what we've been studying for the last six days," Misah said with her voice trembling. "Using a small sample of willing and infected test subjects, we've been working on several antidotes, hoping that one of them might break what you see into smaller, more harmless pieces that the body can evacuate on its own. Unfortunately, we've run into a problem here."

She poked at the model, making it enlarge until only a portion of it was visible. On this portion, a fine, green mesh coated the neurotoxin's molecules, but unlike with most organic particles, this mesh shimmered, if only to a degree.

"We're not sure what this is, only that when an antidote comes near the neurotoxin, this sleeve repairs anything that's been damaged, like what our arrays do for us."

With a faint smile, Misah cupped her hand before brushing her fingertips along the model's underside, rotating it.

“It’s fascinating, really,” she said. “I’ve never seen anything reverse damage so quickly before, not even RRDs. Nothing we’ve introduced to an infected person’s system can keep up with its rate of healing.”

When she fell silent, I glanced over the *shukusenth*, cursing in my head. This explanation wasn’t making them relax. In fact, some of them looked like they were on the brink of a panic attack. Before that could happen, Talira rested a hand on the scientist’s shoulder.

“Misah, dear, tell them what you shared with me an hour ago, please,” she said.

Taking a sip of air, Misah shook herself.

“Right. My apologies. It’s just that one of my test subjects is approaching a terminal state, and I don’t know if I can deal with that...”

Trailing off, she bit her lip for a moment before shaking her head.

Poking at the green mesh, she said. “So, as you’ve probably surmised, this sleeve is all that’s keeping us from a working antidote. If we’re to defeat it, my fellow scientists and I need to study it, separated from the rest of the neurotoxin, but to date, we haven’t been able to pull the two apart. Fortunately, this morning, we identified a way to secure a sample of this molecular sleeve with nothing else attached to it.

“You see, in our tests, we’ve been getting strange radiation readings from the neurotoxin, ones that we couldn’t make sense of. We hadn’t seen readings like that in any habitable portion of Lutov.

“I’ve been trying to trace how the neurotoxin was formed, and as part of that, I was studying Cerullis’ requisition orders from over the last few decades. While I was reviewing those orders this morning, I figured out what those strange radiation readings are.

“For about twenty years, Cerullis has been consolidating their acquisitions from the Tainted Lands in their headquarters. Given that, we might be getting strange readings from the neurotoxin because a part of it originated in that irradiated place, the land where our last war concluded. If true and given how advanced the neurotoxin’s sleeve is when compared to anything else Lutov has seen, said sleeve might be alien in nature. Conclusion? The molecules making up this sleeve once belonged to those from beyond the stars.”

Thoroughly pleased with herself, Misah lifted her gaze to beam at us, but we only greeted her with gaping mouths and bugged eyes. Well, all of us but Talira and me. In this dense silence, Misah clenched her hand into a fist, making the model disappear, and coughed, folding her arms behind her.

“If it helps, we don’t think finding a molecular sample will be difficult,” she said. “My fellow scientists have mentioned seeing similar molecules in every alien artifact they’ve studied in the past. Because of its prevalence, they believe that what we’re looking for may be a basic building block for the aliens’ organic matter, like carbon is for us. Except that it would be more complex, of

course. Because carbon's an element and what we need is... a... molecule."

Misah bit her tongue—I could see her doing it—to stop talking. I couldn't blame her for wanting to fill the silence, though. It was tense enough.

"So... what you're saying is that you need us to find you an alien corpse," Pheniks blankly said.

Nodding, Misah said, "It would be a good start, yes."

*Start?*

Across the table, Raelle guffawed, slapping a hand to her mouth, while Pheniks slowly rotated until he was facing Misah.

"My dear, in the millennia that Zan's been venturing into the Tainted Lands, we've never encountered a body belonging to those from beyond the stars," he said, "and on the slim chance that they left anything like that on our planet, it's sure to have decomposed by now."

Scowling, Misah crossed her arms.

"How did Cerullis and *your own House* get their hands on the molecule, then?" she said. "It can't have come from nowhere, and as I've outlined, its origin point seems obvious. Neither Cerullis nor Zan could have manufactured it on their own."

Reddening, Pheniks opened his mouth to answer, but Talira stepped in before he could speak.

"We can't afford to argue over how impossible this request might seem," she said. "Right now, we have one *shukusen* who's trying to kill us, one who's in stasis, and four who are infected with something horrible. We'll take any path that might lead to an antidote, even if my experts will continue looking for an alternative while we do. Yes?"

Pheniks relaxed while Misah nodded.

"My test subjects need that antidote just as much as you do, so of course we'll keep looking," she said.

Smiling, Talira said, "Excellent. Misah, my dear, you should get back to work. Your test subjects aren't going to test themselves, yes? The rest of us will discuss how to get what you need."

Bowing, Misah said, "Yes, *shukusen*."

We waited until she'd left before breaking into pandemonium.

"How the fuck do you propose that we find an alien corpse, Talira?" Marza snapped. "Do you expect the members of our Houses to scour the Tainted Lands for you?"

“And if we agreed to do something so insane, how would we guarantee their survival?” Pheniks added. “Even this many centuries later, radiation levels in the Tainted Lands are still ridiculously high, hence the demarcation line. No one can be there, unprotected, for more than a day before RRDs can do nothing to save their life.”

As the other *shukusenth* nodded or murmured agreement, I mentally rolled my eyes. Even as tired as I was, the answer to their questions seemed obvious to me.

“We’ll break the search down. Start at the sites of our closet battles with those from beyond the stars. If the aliens left any bodies behind, it’s likely to be at a site like that,” I said. “One such battle was held near the ruins of Nasmi, although that one was small. We won’t find much there, but even still, it would be a good place to start.”

Every eye in the room, including Talira’s, turned toward me, staring for an interminably long time before I sighed and cocked my head.

“Have I said something unusual?” I said. “After the Ancients Crisis, I did some research into our war with those from beyond the stars. At the time, my lack of knowledge about the conflict was a problem, so I figured it might cause trouble again.”

Shaking her head, Talira twisted to face the others.

“I’ve done the same, and I suspect that a few of you have also done it, no matter the stigma attached to the subject,” she said. “So, out with it! Let’s hear suggestions for places to search.”

For a moment, no one said anything, but then, Raelle lifted two fingers off of the table.

“We could try Stralberg in old Roswines,” she hesitantly said. “It’s far away, but those from beyond the stars besieged that city for months.”

“Since it’s on the other side of the continent, that one may go toward the bottom of the list, but it’s an excellent suggestion nonetheless. Thank you, Raelle,” Talira said. “Anyone else?”

From there, people were more than happy to share their ideas, even the First Strata behind their *shukusenth*, and before long, we had a list to rival the one I’d just finished off. Apparently, in a war for survival, people fought a lot.

“This is too much,” Marza said, scanning the list that Talira had made. “We did this to narrow down the field of places we must search, and it’s only gotten wider!”

I’d argue that. Sure, with so many towns’ names floating in front of us, it might seem that way, but this was still a much narrower search radius than the entirety of the Tainted Lands. Even still, we’d never get through this list before the neurotoxin debilitated us, even if every able-bodied House member helped with tackling it, and I doubted the *shukusenth* wanted to give that order, as it would reveal our weakened state to the Lutovish populace. Unfortunately, I didn’t know how to further narrow the field.

“Fuck,” Raelle breathed. “We’re going to die.”

I didn’t think she’d meant for us to hear that, but we did, and it drew our attention to her like mosquitos to blood. She didn’t seem to notice, too focused on her clenched hands.

Here was where I should step in with an encouraging word for them. I was supposed to give every Lutovish, even these people, surety in all things, but for some reason, I couldn’t help but be petty this time. I watched these people grapple with the idea of death, something that I did on a near daily basis, and wanted to laugh at how panicked it turned most of them, even as I prepared to be the support they needed.

Pheniks got there first. Shaking himself, he turned to Talira with a grave expression in place.

“We could always ask *them* where to look,” he said. “I know contacting them usually isn’t wise, but with what’s at stake-”

Talira sharply shook her head.

“No. Trust me, Pheniks. Nothing good ever comes of asking them for a favor,” she said. “We’ll find another way.”

To my great surprise, the other *shukusenth* seemed to have followed that exchange. Some of them were speculatively watching Talira and Pheniks while the others had closed off. Thankfully, the other First Stratus looked just as lost as me, so maybe we’d stumbled onto a *shukusen* secret. If it was that, though, I should still know about it, even if I’d had to ferret it out for myself. Still, there was no time like the present to do that, even if asking about it now would reveal the fact that I’d been ignorant of this secret.

“Forgive me, my *shukusen*, but who is ‘them’?” I said. “And if they might know where we should look, why aren’t we asking them about it?”

Now, I was the lodestone of the room’s gazes while Talira rested her elbows on the table, burying her face in her hands.

After a moment, Marza said, “Really, Talira? You haven’t told him yet?”

As Talira tensed, I laid my hands on the back of her chair.

“The fault for my ignorance lies not with my *shukusen* but with me. I should have learned about this on my own, long before now,” I said. “Let’s correct that oversight now, shall we?”

After glancing at their First Stratus, the various *shukusenth* pursed their lips or sighed before Marza folded her hands on the table.

“There’s a... prison, we’ll call it, at the south-western tip of the Eastern Reaches,” she said. “A group of people, unaffiliated with Lutov or Ibis, have made it their home.”

And for the second time in three decades, a set of words from the past ran through my head.

*Our friends in the Eastern Reaches told me.*

*You've made a trip to the southernmost tip of the Eastern Reaches.*

And a more recent addition.

*I never said that the facility was run by Kolb.*

*Who, then?*

*A group unassociated with Lutov's Houses.*

"The Chosen," I said.

Had those words sounded faint to anyone else?

Frowning, Marza cocked her head.

"You've heard of them?" she said.

While I slowly nodded, Talira heaved a sigh.

"I've been fighting to keep this from happening for years," she said, as if to herself.

But then, she lifted her face out of her hands, shaking them, before twisting in her chair toward me.

"Marza's talking about the Chosen's base of operation," she said, "and in answer to your other question, horrible things inevitably happen to anyone who makes a request of them. So, if we decided to send someone to speak with them..."

...it would be someone semi-disposable. It would be me, ever Lutov's sacrifice.

Well, *fuck* me. I didn't know what to think about what Talira had suggested, but my beliefs about it didn't matter right now, did they? Pinching my nose, I lifted a hand to beckon at Talira.

"Give me the coordinates."

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