

Chapter 69: I'm an Idiot 1

Niklaus had changed since our first meeting. With sunken eyes and drawn-together shoulders, he jumped at unexpected noises, and finishing his tea, he lowered the cup with a slight tremor.

"I've done everything I can to help you," he said. "When can I see my daughter?"

Cocking my head, I examined him from head to toe. I believed him. He could do us no further good as a spy turned double agent. It was time to bring him in from the cold.

But first.

"May I ask a personal question?" I said. "You would be in no way obligated to answer it."

Shifting on the couch, Niklaus said, "I don't see the harm in asking."

With a nod, I bent to pet Ace, laying at my feet, and Niklaus didn't flinch. Yup. He was burnt out.

"You're not married," I said. "In fact, I found little evidence of a relationship serious enough to spawn a child in your recorded history, so I'm curious how Leski exists. Who is her other parent?"

I'd asked Leski the same question a few days ago as part of my struggle with my own parents. She... hadn't wanted to answer me. As soon as she'd expressed discomfort, I'd let it go, but she'd been withdrawn for two days, which I'd found concerning. What had happened to her second parent to cause such an extreme reaction?

Niklaus had gone still with his eyes' widened state accenting the dark bags under them.

"In what capacity are you asking this of me?" he said.

Good question. From the reactions I'd gotten to this inquiry, its answer seemed like something that I could use in my role, but that wasn't why I wanted to know it.

"I ask as someone who's concerned for your daughter and nothing else," I said.

Hanging his head, Niklaus tapped a finger on the sofa with every part of him rigid, and I thought he'd refuse to answer. Then, he defied my expectations.

"Leski's mother made a mistake that saw her killed, something that would have had grave consequences for my daughter and myself," he said. "Your grandmother erased her existence for me in exchange for a favor, one that she used for you."

Damn. No wonder Leski hadn't wanted to share. Had she been ashamed of what her mother had done, or had the pain of the woman's erasure kept her silent, though?

Unfortunately, now I was itching for the story's details, both for myself and so I could better understand the woman I was... dating? How had I not figured out what she and I were yet?

But I doubted Niklaus would give those details to me. Not now anyway.

"I see," I said. "Well, Leski is out right now. You can see her when she returns, although I don't know when that will be. Feel free to stay here in the meantime."

Rising, Niklaus bowed to me.

"Thank you, *Lokke Vitras*," he said. "I am grateful."

Ugh. I doubted I'd ever get used to that deference.

Also, Niklaus had adjusted much more quickly than most to what I was. Was that because he'd known me before I'd made the revelation, or had he perhaps dealt with one of my predecessors before? He'd been alive long enough that him knowing another *Lokke Vitras* wouldn't surprise me. If that was the case, I was curious about who it might have been. So many questions I could ask...

Now wasn't the time for a history lesson, though.

"Of course," I said, joining Niklaus on my feet. "You have full reign of the apartment. If you need anything, tell a drone, and it will assist you."

"I will," Niklaus said. "Good luck today."

Much as it pained me to act this way, I swept out of the room without another word, as my role required.

I'd need Niklaus' luck. We'd spent about two weeks searching The Library with no results, and it was driving me *mad*. I needed progress. I needed a sense of hope. I needed the mystery of the Ancients solved because when that happened, I'd have a means of protecting Lutov from *them* and a way to extract Korix from *their* grip. Please, let it be so because Talira's efforts to date had been unsuccessful.

When I emerged from the sitting room, Feena fell into step beside me.

"Ready for another day, surrounded by books?" she chirped.

"I swear. By the time this mission's over, I'm going to hate those wonderful things," I said.

Folding her hands in front of her, Feena leaned into my field of view.

"Oo, someone's grumpy," she said. "Problems with Leski?"

“No. The opposite, actually,” I said. “I’m just frustrated.”

Clicking her tongue, Feena said, “Careful, *Lokke Vitras*. You’re beginning to sound human.”

“Careful, Fourth Stratus,” I echoed. “You’re beginning to sound disrespectful.”

“And we wouldn’t want that.”

With a grin, Feena skipped ahead, and shaking my head at her, I followed. I knew why she was doing this. In recent days, my mood had taken a slow plunge from sour to terrible, and I was struggling to remain calm when provoked, which was saying something.

When in our parents’ apartment, Feena had made an obvious effort to cheer me up, and it had helped. This source of comfort did, however, vanish when we left, subsumed by Talira’s command to train me in the manners of the *Lokke Vitras*.

While on the way to Rane’s bar, we entered separate worlds. Worries usually occupied mine, and today was no different. It had been almost two weeks, and we’d seen nothing from House Cerullis. While in their Southern Fells facility, I could have sworn that they’d been about to make their play, but we’d heard not a peep from them. Had absconding with Korix truly pushed their plans back this far, or were we missing something?

“We’re here,” Feena said.

Nodding acknowledgment, I pressed my forehead to a window. Time for another exceedingly uncomfortable habit, formed in the last few weeks.

The vehicle had stopped beside a platform, far from any landing pads. Outside, people had paused in their commutes, staring at the anomaly in their midst, but when Feena opened a door, most of them broke away. In our structured society, no one liked seeing something this far outside of the norm.

My sister jumped to the platform with me on her heels, and we used the distraction of the skycruiser’s lift into the air to enter Rane’s bar. Even still, some people marked us, which made me uncomfortable. I liked my anonymity. It let me blend into the background, but the needs of this mission were steadily chipping away at it.

At least the patrons in the bar tried to ignore us. Even Rane only gave us the barest of nods as we headed into the back.

As usual, the transit to the bottom of Lake Voxmore left my head spinning for several, exceptionally vulnerable seconds, but once Feena and I had shaken it off, we hurried toward The Library. I hardly gave the structure a glance, heading straight for the hatch at its base. Even the fantastic became mundane if one had enough exposure to it.

“Phen?” I shouted into the vastness of The Library. “You here?”

With research into the Ancients having become his newest obsession, he usually was. Most of the time, he was deep enough inside The Library that my shout couldn't reach him. To be fair, that was occasionally impossible too.

During our time spent perusing The Library, we'd discovered that the mirage-like arches found throughout this place led to several different places across our world. Somehow, they transported the body to these destinations, much like a beacon did, but they did it without molecular dispersion happening in between.

Hell, if landing inside the Tainted Land's irradiated zone hadn't panicked me the first time I'd walked through an arch. Because of this, I'd refused to go through another one since, but Pheniks had yet to stop trying them, which sometimes interfered with our research.

Before I could prepare a message to summon him today, though, my brother stuck his head around a nearby row of shelves.

"Oh, good. You're here," he said. "I've found something."

As he vanished, my heart fluttered while Feena and I exchanged glances. Had I heard that right? Were we finally about to move toward answers? I couldn't get my hopes up, but as my sister and I hurried toward our brother, the pesky emotion unfurled in my chest anyway.

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