

Chapter 71: Observing Social Niceties

Pheniks, Feena, and I arrived at our parents' apartment within the hour, not long after I'd left Niklaus there. I was hopeful that we'd catch him before Leski came home, especially when Ace barreled through the door on our approach. If she were here, she'd never have let my dog get distracted from her incessant petting.

But then, our parents stepped out after Ace, presenting bright faces despite the tension hanging between us, and that hope crumbled to dust. If mom was here, it meant Leski was too, and while my parents greeted Feena and Pheniks, I accessed the apartment's recorder system, seeking my charge. When I found her, my chest tightened, and I brushed through my family.

Pheniks said something soothing behind me, but it fell to a lower level of comprehension. I had a goal, one I must reach soon, and hell, if I'd let anything stand in my way.

When Pheniks caught up, I noted it, logging an increase in my allies' numbers. If the coming confrontation turned violent, the three of us could handle it.

I should probably feel guilty about brushing my parents off but honestly? I hadn't decided what to do with them. When in their presences, hurt and love battled for supremacy in me, which was a distraction I couldn't afford right now.

They, however, were my parents. I needed to resolve this dilemma so we could move on, but I couldn't bring myself to tackle the problem. How did I handle this?

By ignoring it, apparently. At least for now.

My siblings and I were quickly approaching the sitting room where I'd left Niklaus, and even through the apartment's soundproofing, shouting drifted toward us from it. When they heard that noise, Pheniks and Feena exchanged a glance.

"Plan?" my sister asked.

"Silent entrance, then follow my lead," I said.

"And if that leads to even more rude behavior?" Pheniks hissed.

He was obviously unhappy with how I'd treated our parents. Fortunately, Feena was there for support. Reaching around me, she smacked our brother upside the head.

“Not now,” she said.

Pheniks mumbled something unintelligible in response, which was further muffled by the argument ahead of us. At least, I thought it was an argument. I’d only heard one voice yelling so far.

Accessing the sitting room’s recorders once more, I double-checked its occupants’ positions before moving Feena to the other side of me. Holding a finger to my lips, I had the door slide open before leading the way inside.

With his body shaking, Niklaus had his back to us while Leski was standing in front of him with barely any of her visible. The only reason I knew that her chin was tucked to her chest was because of my secondary view of the world.

“-you know who you’ve put yourself in the hands of?” Niklaus was roaring. “Mother Time, girl, you had to know something was wrong with the man, and still, you ran off, willy-nilly, with him.”

He was berating her over *me*? Oh... it took more effort than it should to stay loose, calm, and out of sight.

I must have done a convincing job of hiding the threat that I’d become. Feena didn’t raise an eyebrow at me as she ushered Pheniks to stand against a wall.

“Now, both of us are at his mercy, and it’s *your fault*, stupid girl,” Niklaus continued. “If that wasn’t bad enough, I’ve heard you’ve gone on dates with several people since coming to the capital. Shame on you for your behavior. How much do you mean to disgrace our family?”

I’d been dunked in an ice bath. Had Leski lived with this for her whole life? If she had, I was surprised she was so well-adjusted, just as much as I *swore* to *Mother Time* that Niklaus wouldn’t have another peaceful day until his daughter stopped me from disturbing him. I would make it my personal mission to show this man what happened when someone treated their children so horribly.

“Damn it, Leski. You do things like this, and you remind me of your mother,” Niklaus spat.

In the recorder’s feed, I watched Leski shoot her head up.

“And how is that a bad thing?” she hissed. “At least mom loved someone enough to risk her life for him, even if he was a child of Ibis. I doubt you’d do the same for me or anyone else, father.

“You see, if you really loved me, you’d understand everything that makes me who I am, including the part of me that needs multiple partners in my life, and *you wouldn’t shame me for it*. You’d work through whatever’s making you resistant to my lifestyle and accept me.

“And yes. I know who Zaeden is. I know that sometime in the next decade, I won’t be able to publicly call him that with the *Lokke Vitras* having become his name, and you know what, father? I think I might be falling in love with him. Maybe.

“So, reconcile your dislike of him or... no. Treat me like I should be treated as your daughter, or get the *fuck* out of my life.”

Spinning, she stormed out of the room, and I might have enjoyed the mottled red color on Niklaus' face more if I hadn't been grappling with what Leski had said. She was falling in love with me? Two weeks had passed since we'd started our strange relationship!

Sure, people had fallen head over heels in much shorter spans of time before, but I'd thought...

Had she said that to aggravate her father, or had the heat of the moment pushed it into the open? If it had, would it matter? The truths that we never wanted to say usually emerged in the moments when we were the angriest.

What would I do?

Later. I had to deal with it later. Answers came first.

As loudly as I could, I opened and closed the door at my back, and when Niklaus faced me, I was moving into the room as if I'd just entered it.

“Good. You're here,” I said. “You've been withholding information from me, Niklaus.”

He blinked at me with a furrowed brow before going carefully blank. Again, he'd adjusted much more quickly to my presence than he should. Why was that?

“*Lokke Vitras*, I'm at your service,” he said “Forgive me. I wasn't expecting you. Who are your friends?”

I almost told him that he didn't get to ask me questions, that he could shove them up his ass, but before the words emerged, I switched tactics. A hostile approach wouldn't get me what I wanted. Niklaus required honeyed words to pry information out of him.

“These are my siblings,” I said. “Feena. Pheniks.”

I jerked my thumb at each of them.

“I'll let you get acquainted.”

Stepping to the side, I waved my siblings forward before taking a seat on the couch. Feena shot me the most neutral glare I'd seen in my life before stepping forward with her hand extended.

“It's good to meet you,” she said. “I've heard of your work in House Kirst...”

They continued with small talk, and when he was allowed to make it, Pheniks was much more enthusiastic with his greeting, but I paid them little mind. Since I'd given my siblings the responsibility of sweet-talking Niklaus, I'd gained an idle moment much more quickly than I'd been expecting, so I turned myself toward writing the most carefully worded message that I'd sent in my

life.

Do you want me to slap your father down? With my status, a reprimand from me might have greater effect, but I won't do it without your approval.

After a pause, Leski responded.

You heard our conversation?

Finding the closest recorder in the room, I smiled at it, waggling my fingers in a wave, and soon after, another message slid into my array.

That's embarrassing, it read. I can handle my father but... Zae. How much of that conversation did you hear?

Wincing, I wrote, *Everything after your father started berating you for associating with me.*

There was a pause for a handful of minutes, a time I spent congenially smiling at my sister while she glared at me. She really didn't like the position I'd put her in, huh?

So you heard what I said about my feelings for you, Leski eventually replied. Listen, Zae. I'm not yet sure whether those feelings are spur of the moment, a reaction to my father, or truly how I feel. I don't think I love you now, but I can see things going that way, if that makes sense, so...

Look. I didn't mean to put pressure on you. If you want, you can pretend that I never said anything. I don't expect you to respond until you feel the same way, if that time ever comes. So, focus on what you need to do, ok?

Closing my eyes, I held the warmth that Leski had spawned in the heart of me, just enjoying it for a moment, and after one slow breath, I let the world in again, grimacing when I saw my siblings beginning to struggle with Niklaus and his ever-present temper.

I sent off one more message.

You're amazing. Thank you.

Then, I shut off the room's recorders.

"Will you join me, Niklaus?" I asked. "I have things to discuss with you."

Niklaus seemed relieved when he sat across from me while Feena and Pheniks found seats as well.

"How can I help you, Lokke Vitras?" he asked.

Leaning my elbows on my knees, I steepled my fingers in front of my face.

"Continuing with what we were discussing earlier," I said, "was your wife part of the Ibisian uprising ten years ago?"

Again, Niklaus looked like he'd seen a ghost, and at my side, Pheniks shot me a questioning glance. He wouldn't understand what I was doing, but Feena did, based on her faint grin.

When in an interrogation, asking a question to rattle the subject before getting to the important ones could, at times, loosen the tongue, a strategy that would work well with Niklaus. That it would also get me more answers about Leski's mysterious mother was merely a happy circumstance.

"How did you...?" Niklaus said.

Straightening, I spread my arms.

"I am the acting *Lokke Vitras*," I said. "*Shukusen Talira* may not have fully elevated me, but do you think she would have given me this position if I couldn't handle it?"

In actuality, my question about Leski's mother had been a guess.

If she'd lost her life while helping a child of Ibis, it had likely been during one of that landmass' many revolts. Those were the only times when Lutovish citizens might get caught in the crossfire. When we'd been in the House Cerullis facility two weeks ago, Leski had implied that she'd known her mother, and the only revolt that had occurred within her lifetime had been the one from ten years ago, a year into my training.

At that time, Korix had traveled often, leaving me with assignments to complete. While he'd been away, I'd gone through a vast swath of my book learning—studying subjects like the intricacies of House maneuverings, higher sciences, and other secrets that the unHoused never learned—and when he'd been home, Korix had taught me how to dance and play various instruments, among other things.

Looking back on it, I could see why he'd focused on those skills during that year. I recognized the signs of stress in him that I hadn't seen at the time. I'd always wondered what he'd been doing while away. I'd figured it'd had something to do with the revolt, but I'd never been sure exactly what that could have been. Maybe I could ask him if- *when* he woke up.

Trembling, Niklaus said, "Yes. Laryse died in the uprising."

When I clapped my hands together, he jumped.

"Excellent! The man can share his secrets. I just have to *ask* for them," I said. "Tell me, sister. Considering what we learned this morning, should I have had to ask for the information I want right now?"

"No, brother," Feena said. "You shouldn't have."

"That's what I thought," I said, "but apparently, Niklaus here disagrees."

Throwing my arms across the back of the sofa, I crossed my legs, looking down my nose at Niklaus, and he shifted in place.

“What information have I failed to give you?” he asked.

With a cold smile, I opened my mouth to answer when I once more received a message.

I need you at headquarters. Now, was all it said.

Internally, I groaned. My grandmother usually had better timing than this.

Externally, I hopped to my feet.

“You’re a founder, Niklaus,” I said. “Figure out what I want and share it with my siblings. I have better things to do than listen to your story.”

As I strode out of the room, Pheniks’ voice rose behind me, and I sent silent thanks to my sister. My brother might be invested in dragging every secret out of his latest obsession, but given how she’d been acting at the beginning of that interrogation, Feena was probably less than enthused about me leaving her behind.

When I was halfway to the hangar, my mother stepped into the hall ahead of me, but as soon as she saw me coming, she ducked into the room she’d just left.

Clicking my tongue, I called, “Wait.”

I should start the process of resolving this problem. Otherwise, I’d never face it.

When I reached her, mom couldn’t meet my gaze, which was probably a good thing. Who knew what I’d do if I had her once-comforting eyes on me?

“I’m not sure how I feel about what you and dad told me,” I said, “but we can’t leave it hanging over our heads like this. The next free moment I have, we should talk.”

Hugging herself, mom said, “Whatever you want, Zaeden. We’ll do what we must to make this right.”

Did I want this made right?

“Ok, then,” I said.

Turning on my heel, I hurried away, but I couldn’t get far enough away to avoid the four, carefully worded energy bolts that she launched into my heart.

“I love you, son.”

Even as I pretended to ignore them, those words jangled in my head on my way to the hangar. They followed me all the way to House Kolb’s headquarters.