

# Chapter 71: Their Traitors, Our New Allies

Something unexpected dragged me out of my dreams, but then, dealing with the unexpected had become my new normal lately. Ignoring my family's disapproving stares, I sat up, doing my best to shuck the exhaustion that was screaming protests throughout my body, and frowned at the connection request flashing in my array.

How had this woken me up? It had none of the typical danger signals that I'd been trained to subconsciously notice, the ones that roused me from sleep, attached to it, although I supposed the soft dinging that the connection request was making might have something to do with it.

I didn't know who was requesting the connection. In fact, the request had been passed through so many proxies that establishing their identity would be difficult, definitely more trouble than it was worth. So, the question was: did I accept the request or ignore it?

Meeting my family's eyes, I said, "Stay silent, please."

Then, I accepted the request.

"Who is this?" I snapped.

Requesting a direct connection while hiding one's identity was considered rude in Lutov.

"Zaeden? Is that you?"

I knew that tremulous voice. I'd hoped to avoid running into the woman it belonged to for a long while yet.

"Calia," I said.

Behind me, Leski gasped while someone shifted in place, but that was to be expected. So long as everyone was comfortable with it, I'd shared my romantic activities with my partners. They knew that I'd dated Calia. They also knew she was House Cerullis, although I wasn't sure if they knew she'd run from Xygek four months ago.

"It *is* you!" Calia said. "Thank Mother Time! We weren't sure if I'd get ahold of you."

...And why would she want that? Didn't she know what I'd been doing to people like her?

If she did, she also had to know that requesting a connection like this was risky. I'd already started tracing it in the hopes of locating her.

I couldn't say any of that, though. Instead, I asked her.

"We?"

"Me and some friends," Calia said. "If possible, we'd like to arrange a meeting. We have some valuable information for you and would like to make a deal for it."

Ah... that made sense. Bargaining. I'd been wondering when this would begin in truth.

"Where should I meet you?" I asked.

Because going along with something like this was always in my best interest at first. Either what these people had to offer would outweigh their danger to Lutov, letting me grant them mercy, or they'd leave a clue as to where they'd been hiding.

Calia stammered for a bit, probably surprised that she wouldn't have to do more to convince me, but she got herself under control soon enough.

"I'll send you the coordinates," she said. "We'll meet at mid-afternoon."

"So you know, I have backup with me right now," I said.

Best not to spook her or her friends, and hopefully, she'd hear the question in what I'd said.

After a pause, she said, "You can bring one with you. I'll see you soon, Zaeden."

She cut the connection, and wincing, I rubbed my face, waiting for the coordinates. Hell, this would be hard.

"Calia wants to negotiate?" Korix said.

I nodded, even if I wasn't sure if he could see it. I couldn't bring myself to speak right now.

"That's not a good idea, love," Leski eventually said.

Sighing, I said, "I know."

Then, the coordinates came in via a message, and I frowned. The location they were indicating was in the middle of the Preserve. How had a bunch of fugitives gained access to such a highly guarded area?

That was a question for another time. After feeding coordinates into the console, I once more collapsed in my seat and quickly fell asleep, despite the tense atmosphere around me. That tension had yet to relax when we arrived, although my family seemed a little shocked about the patch of land we'd stopped above.

“We’re here?” Baely asked as we set down.

Ignoring the doubt in their voice, I nodded while running through a check of my weapons. I sincerely hoped that this meeting wouldn’t turn into a fight, but still, I had to prepare for one, even if I did it in a way that my daughter could overlook.

I needn’t have worried about that. As we left the skycruiser, Baely gaped at her surroundings, not that I could blame her for it. The Preserve was breathtaking, an otherworldly place of nature. Even after a century of having it open to me, something about it always stole my voice, if only for a moment.

Clearing my throat, I drew my family’s attention to me, for the most part.

“Leski, stay here with Baely, please,” I said. “I’m allowed one companion for this, and it’s only going to be a talk. Little to no chance for danger. You should take advantage of such a rare chance to enjoy the Preserve. The two of us who’ve visited it before can take care of this chore.”

While Leski’s face went sour, Baely looked torn, and I knew they were weighing this opportunity against the chance that her dads might get hurt. So, catching her eye, I smirked.

“We’ve got this, sweetie,” I said, “and even if we don’t, you and your mother won’t be far away. I’ll message you for backup the second I see something suspicious. Ok?”

Slowly nodding, Baely said, “Ok.”

When I glanced at Leski, she huffed while shooing me away, and I blew her a kiss. Her answering groan chased me into the trees.

Walking through the Preserve was both unnerving and awe-inspiring, but then, that was what every forest was like for me. What else could it be? In a forest, enemies and monsters had so much cover to take advantage of, making it easier for them to sneak up on me. I had to be constantly on alert.

At the same time, who wouldn’t be made breathless when surrounded by so much untamed nature? The forests of Ibis and anything similar found in the Barasgami Mountains also had their charm, to be sure, but they almost always had civilization impinging on them. Here, nothing unnatural existed with none of humanity’s noise to mar it.

Or that was how it was until I heard a quiet conversation ahead. Thank Mother Time, I didn’t have to alert Korix to the noise. He’d already slowed his stride, softening his footfalls as we approached.

Because of that and my own efforts, the other group didn’t detect us when we came into view, but that was what we’d wanted. When entering a negotiation, starting with the other party flustered was always best.

Two women, a man, and an individual of indeterminate gender were waiting for us in the clearing. For a moment, I watched them talk amongst themselves, noting their drawn-together shoulders and tense postures, before clearing my throat. As one, they spun on me with some clutching their

chests, and I refused to examine what Calia's brief look of terror did to me.

"Apologies for startling you," I said with a rueful smile. "It wasn't my intent."

At the lie, my heart twinged, and it took me a second to realize why. I'd always hated lying to the people who were closest to me.

After collecting herself, Calia strode forward to hug me.

"Zaeden!" she said, pulling away. "Appearing from out of nowhere is just like you."

With one corner of my smile rising higher, I said, "Indeed. Good to see you, Calia. Care to introduce me to your friends?"

Mischievously grinning, Calia skipped backward with her hands clasped behind her.

"No. I don't think they'd like it," she said. "Besides, I doubt you'll introduce me to your companion."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "I didn't think he'd need an introduction."

Snorting a laugh, Calia slapped a hand to her mouth while her comrades exchanged glances.

"That's true, I suppose," she said before bowing to Korix. "All honor to our once shield and protector."

Beside me, Korix said nothing, just watching Calia as she rose from her bow, and I wondered what he was thinking. Did he disapprove of how casual she'd been with me, despairing of the circumstances that had made her lose her fear of the *Lokke Vitras*? Was he uncomfortable with her subsequent deference to him? Or was he satisfied that at least one of us was getting the respect that was 'due' us?

"Calia, get on with it," one of the women hissed. "I don't like this."

"Right!"

Clapping her hands, Calia held them in front of her face.

"My friends and I want to make a deal," she said.

But that was all. She wasn't well-versed in how negotiations went, and for some reason, her innocence paralyzed me. I'd be stuck here for far too long, staring at her while aching inside, before finding the strength to continue.

Fortunately, Korix saw this. He stepped closer to my side, and while he couldn't offer me comfort right now, I could still feel his intention to squeeze my shoulder or interlace his fingers with mine. It was enough.

"What is it that you want?" he asked for me.

And hell, if I didn't want to hug him for it.

The shocked expression that Calia had assumed when he'd moved slipped into confusion.

"Sorry, I thought that was obvious," she said. "We don't want to die, of course, but we also want to keep our arrays. In other words, we want you to spare us from your hunt, great *Lokke Vitras*."

She dipped into a quick bow toward me, which made me cringe, but I kept it off of my face.

"However, my friends and I realize that we could never be reintegrated into Lutovish society, not after the damage that's been done," Calia continued. "We'd like to set up a commune on one of the isles off of Lutov's east coast. It would be nice if the *shukusenth*, in all of their great wisdom, would grant us the supplies that we'd need to get our feet under us as well, but after we're stable, we'd cut contact with the homeland, if required. That's it, though! Mercy and a way to survive is what we're asking for."

A commune? Calia must have more friends than the people here. I'd like to ask her about that, but I doubted she'd answer the question.

Also, Mother Time... she was so obviously new to this that it was painful. Instead of making demands, she'd asked for what she wanted in the politest of manners, and hell, I wanted to rub my eyes or pinch my nose or in general, show how weary this interaction was making me of my damn life. How had I gotten into such a hostile situation with someone so innocent, someone I'd once dated?

Instead, I smiled and cocked my head.

"My, that's quite the list of demands. You're asking a lot from Lutov," I said, "and what do we get in return?"

For some reason, this question made the fugitives uncomfortable, although really, they should have expected it. In this sort of negotiation, one didn't walk away with everything one wanted without giving something in return.

"We can provide you with the precise locations of the people you seek as well as the coordinates to the safehouses that Cerullis has established over the years," the man among them soon said. "If you're lucky, you might even find our *shukusen* in one of them."

Sanya...

Ignoring the stiffening of Korix's form, I considered these people's offer. Accepting it would be good for me. Mother Time knew how badly I needed this hunt to be over with, and the information these four had offered would shorten it by a significant amount.

I wasn't sure if it was enough to warrant the concessions they'd requested, though. What would Lutov gain from this? A quicker resolution to a threat and a more swiftly recovered *Lokke Vitras*, neither of which should be scoffed at. Not at all. But would it be worth the establishment of an

independent, sovereign state so close to the homeland, one whose origin would be steeped in hostility toward us?

On consideration, I didn't think it would be. No. The better solution for now would be to keep from committing to anything until the end of this meeting. After it was over, I could track these four to their friends, and once there, I'd do what I must before continuing with the hunt.

I saw the hope on Calia's face, though, and it tore at me. It made me want to blow a hole in my face, so I hesitated, scrambling for a compromise between these extremes, which seemed fitting. That was what typically resulted from negotiations, right? A compromise?

Almost, I broke down into uncontrollable snickering, only stopped by Korix clearing his throat.

"You've proposed a complicated and significant exchange," he said before turning my way. "If the *Lokke Vitras* is amenable, I'd like to share my opinion about it."

Irritably, I waved for him to continue. Even understanding its necessity, I hated it when he conformed to the formality that almost everyone in Lutov showed me.

"With the greatest of respect, I'd suggest that some among our representatives accompany me to the capital. There, they can present their proposal to the assembly, where the *shukusenth* who lead us can decide on it," Korix said. "In exchange for such an opportunity, these representatives will provide us with a small taste of the information that they're offering, giving the *Lokke Vitras* a chance to verify it. In this way, we can test the waters of this arrangement."

Oh... I wanted to glare at him. It was a good compromise, one where both parties would be pleased and disappointed with the results, but there was one problem with it.

*Accompany YOU?* I sent to Korix via a message. *What happened to helping me keep Leski and Baely away from the worst parts of this job?*

Before he could reply, one of the women opposite us crossed her arms.

"I don't like this idea," she said.

Calia never moved her narrow-eyed stare away from Korix.

"I think that's the point," she said. "A moment so we can consult?"

When I inclined my head, she turned to her companions so they could huddle together, and I pointedly did *not* grab Korix's elbow so I could drag him into the trees.

"What the fuck?" I hissed from the corner of my mouth.

Shifting in place, Korix sighed.

“This is your best resolution to the negotiation, and you know it,” he said. “As for me accompanying them to Xygek, they’ll need my protection if they’re to reach the *shukusenth* without hassle, and you need someone you trust to watch them while they’re there. All of which you know.”

“Yes,” I hissed. “I’m a little unclear as to why *you* have to go with them instead of Leski and Baely. They could play escort just as easily as you.”

Korix was silent for a moment, all while Calia and her friends kept glancing over their shoulder.

I didn’t know what was stopping them from accepting his plan. Yes, it would be dangerous for them. Yes, it would demand a heavy price, but for people in their situation, the ability to address the *shukusenth* wasn’t to be taken lightly. Unlike me, whose sole purpose was to protect Lutov, the *shukusenth* were concerned with guiding the homeland as a whole. They were usually willing to take risks, ones that I’d never consider.

“I have something personal to discuss with Talira,” Korix said, “something I have to do face-to-face.”

Sucking in a breath, I snapped my head toward him. As a general rule, Korix didn’t go near Talira. From what I could tell, he didn’t hate her, no matter that he had every right to, but he still preferred to avoid her, and now, he wanted to speak with her in person?

“Can I ask what it’s about?” I said.

Facing me with his lips drawn thin, Korix said, “I’d rather if you didn’t. But I promise you that it won’t endanger Lutov, and it shouldn’t take long. I’d be surprised if you couldn’t shield our girls for the short time I’ll need to get back.”

As I searched his face, I knew he was telling the truth, or the truth as he knew it at least, and seeing that, I released a slow breath.

“Ok,” I said. “That might not matter if Calia and her friends don’t agree to your terms, though.”

They’d been arguing this whole time, but soon enough, their huddle broke apart, and Calia headed toward me with a disgruntled expression on her face.

“All right. We accept. I’ve already sent you a message with the coordinates to the first four safehouses,” she said before turning to Korix. “How are we getting to the capital?”

With a neutral smile in place, Korix said, “We’ll work that out after the *Lokke Vitras* has left. Let’s not waste his time.”

He glanced at me.

“Do you have what you need?”

Having already opened Calia's message, I nodded.

"It's sufficient for the moment, yes," I said. "Calia, I wish you and your friends luck in the capital, and... I'm sorry that it's come to this."

With her gaze turning soft, Calia sadly smiled.

"Me too. It was good to see you, despite the circumstances," she said. "I'd wish you luck too, but considering what you're off to do..."

When she vaguely waved, I crushed a wry grin before it could spread across my face. It wouldn't be appropriate right now.

Tilting my head in acknowledgment, I said, "Then, there's nothing more to say."

With that, I was off into the trees, putting as much distance between us as I could, and as expected, a message slid into my array before I'd gotten far.

*I can never love you, Zae, it read. Everything will be ok. Eventually.*

Snorting, I sent my reply before swiping the message away. Korix was right, I knew. Time might not heal all wounds, but it certainly lessened their severity, and with that, life could return to something resembling normalcy, no matter how much work that might take.

I wasn't there yet, though. Right now, I was in the middle of the storm, and I had to plunge into a conflict that might turn into a slaughter. I hoped that I could keep my wife and daughter out of it.

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