

Chapter 76: A Drawn-Out Explanation

Talira's office went unnaturally still, and glancing between its occupants, I clicked my tongue.

"I suppose I'll repeat what we know first," I said. "The Ancients are a non-human race that we've somehow first learned about within the last few weeks. *They* can manipulate a human through their emotions, but other bodily functions, namely pain, can be influenced as well, all after *they've* obtained control of the brain. This takeover occurs during moments of emotional vulnerability."

Pheniks and Feena pointedly avoided looking at Korix. The *Lokke Vitras* shouldn't have weaknesses, and I'd poked at an enormous one in the man who currently held the role. They didn't want to stir the pot further, but Talira had no such problem.

"How did you let *that* happen?" she asked.

Korix's shift in posture was like an earthquake to me, no matter how small it truly was, but when he spoke, he sounded as controlled as ever.

"You know how. I warned you that something like this might happen years before I took Zaeden as my *kuvesk*," he said. "You sent me on a mission too quickly after the Crescent Incident, and yes, I should have told you about my situation, but you were the *Lokke Vitras* before me, my *shukusen*. You should have known that I wasn't ready for a mission without me having to share."

My siblings had never seen the *Lokke Vitras* speak with his superior when social expectations weren't guiding his behavior, so they gaped at Korix's borderline insolence. It was normal for me. Well, normal except for the fact that I was *sitting* on him.

Reaching up, I tousled his hair, and he relaxed a fraction, which had the daggers that Talira was staring at him reducing to mere scalpels.

"Maybe you're right. It doesn't matter for our discussion, though," she said. "Phen. Feena. Your brother said something about an avenue of investigation that you followed this morning?"

"You mean with Niklaus?" Feena said. "Yeah, we got some interesting information from him. Phen, you want to take this?"

At the mention of Niklaus' name, a jolt had run through Korix, which made me frown. Did he know the man? That might explain why Niklaus had always been more relaxed around me than most people were. How did they know one another, though?

Clapping his hands together, Pheniks scooted to the edge of his seat.

“According to our resident founder, these Ancients have, as we expected, been around for a while, but I don’t think we realized exactly how long,” he said. “Niklaus claims that he doesn’t know much about our enemy. He says that in the pre-Founding era, *they* were a known quantity, much like our understanding of gravity is today. Something that we’re aware exists but that no one, besides people like Lord Asher Cerullis, cared to learn about. Small subsets of the pre-Founding nations were fascinated with the Ancients, but this manifested more as... worship, treating *them* like gods, than scientific curiosity. The reason for their strange reaction? The length of time that the Ancients have existed.”

As Pheniks fell silent, a troubled expression took hold of him, and unease sent a ripple over my skin. When it came to problems, my brother never let anything but fascination rule him, usually at least.

Dreading the answer, I said, “Which is?”

Pheniks didn’t move, simply rubbing his hands together, so Feena took over.

“I’ll qualify this by saying that it’s unverified. We can’t know if Niklaus is telling the truth or if the Ancients lied to his people,” she said.

She made sure we understood before plunging forward.

“The Ancients have existed from the dawn of reality, from before humanity’s birth, from before the Collective’s formation.”

Feena grimly looked on as those of us with connections to the vaunted *Lokke Vitras* role absorbed the enormity of what she’d said. True to form, none of us showed the terror that we each must be experiencing, never moving away from neutral expressions except to blink.

The only indication of our shock was how long we were taking to respond, and as the pause stretched into awkward territory, I hummed, as if in contemplation.

“That’s... intimidating,” I said.

“*Intimidating?*” Pheniks said. “Zae, have you been hit in the head too many times? This is-”

“Manageable,” Korix interrupted. “My *kuvesk* and I will handle it, as we do with all threats to Lutov.”

I did *not* jerk incredulous eyes to him. How would we manage a problem this ridiculous? Plus, Korix had to know that he’d act only as a consultant on this extended mission. Terrifying as I might find it, I’d be in the lead this time.

I knew why he’d said that, though. At his words, Feena and Pheniks had relaxed to a degree, my brother more so than my sister. Our society was conditioned to believe that the *Lokke Vitras* was

invincible, and that conditioning was strong. Mother Time help them if they ever learned how fallible we were.

“Perhaps *shukusen* Talira has something that will help,” I said. “Did your people find anything useful in the wealth of information that I brought home with me?”

Wincing, Talira said, “They recovered relevant facts, yes. I don’t know how much it’ll help.”

“All information about our enemy is useful,” Korix said. “The more we know, the greater chance we have of finding an exploitable weakness.”

At that, I hid a smile. Oh, Leski would have a few choice words to say on that subject, but if she’d known where they came from, perhaps she’d understand my decisions while in the House Cerullis facility. Granted, my choices hadn’t been made solely because of what Korix had taught me, but she didn’t need to know that. Not any more than she already did, at least.

“Who cares about usefulness?” Pheniks asked. “I want to learn more about these fascinating creatures. Knowledge about them is its own reward.”

Several snorts escaped from the House Kolb members in the room, whether freely or into their hands, as they retained their laughter. I didn’t even try. Struggling to balance on my perch, I let delight ring from me, waving reassurances at Pheniks when he closed off.

“You’re amazing, little brother,” I gasped. “We’re sitting here, worrying only about our survival, and *you*. Mother Time, you see the wonder in the enemy we face.”

I shook my head.

“Whoever in House Drav approved our parents’ application for you, I’m grateful to them.”

Flushing a deep red, Pheniks mumbled something unintelligible, shooting his eyes to the ceiling, and at this display, Feena and Talira chuckled while Korix rubbed my side.

“*Shukusen*, maybe ease Phen’s suffering?” Feena said.

“I can make that happen,” Talira said. “We were discussing what my people found in Zae’s gifted info dump, yes?”

A chorus of affirmatives answered her with Pheniks’ only a little strained.

“Some of you may know this, but over the last three decades or so, House Cerullis has focused its studies on our planet’s atmosphere. I don’t know what started this fixation, but their discovery of the Ancients is what retained it,” Talira said. “From their reports, we think Cerullis first stumbled upon *them* about twenty-seven years ago. According to that House, *they* are beings of pure electricity contained by a shell of condensed water vapor, one that’s coated with a phospholipid bilayer. There’s more to it, of course, but for our purposes, the Ancients are incorporeal cloud people.”

Once she'd fallen quiet, Pheniks said, "*Fascinating.*"

As I observed the rapture spreading through my brother, I found myself jealous of him. He didn't see what we warriors did.

"How the hell do we kill them?" Feena asked.

The horror in her voice echoed in me, but I suppressed it, reaching for an answer, any answer, to her question.

"Could we dissolve their insulators?" I asked. "Without those phospholipids to shield it, their electricity would dissipate when it touched water vapor, right?"

Pheniks fixed me with the most condescending look that I'd seen in a while.

"Don't play dumb," he said. "You know that we can dissolve what amounts to a cell membrane. We just need the right combination of chemicals for it."

"Not with these creatures," Talira said. "*They're* too fast. Cerullis has tried to kill the Ancients thousands of times before, and during every experiment, *they've* laughed at the House's attempts."

"Well, what about- about-?"

Hushing, Pheniks chewed on his lip with a faraway look in his eyes, and the crater in my stomach bottomed out further. If my brother couldn't think of a solution for us, then...

"Killing off the Ancients might not be our only answer to this problem, and even if it is, discovering how to do it shouldn't rest on the five of us alone," Feena said. "We should focus on creative solutions. We know what the Ancients are and what *they* can do, but what's motivating *them* to attack now, after thousands of peaceful years? If we learn this, we could try negotiating with *them*. Maybe we can work together-

"That won't work," Korix quietly interrupted. "It's a wonderful idea, but... it won't work."

All eyes turned to him, even mine as I twisted in place. He didn't notice, lost in his head with his jaw clenched, but no one asked the question that I was sure we were all thinking. We waited for him to decide what to say.

"I remember it all," he eventually said. "Every moment that the Ancient played with me, I was aware. I-"

Narrowing his eyes, Korix cocked his head.

"It's difficult to describe," he continued. "Being under its influence was like having two versions of me, equally present, in my head. There was *me*, as I am now, but also..."

He closed his eyes, as if to more accurately remember, but I knew it for the attempt to deny pain that it was. I hugged his neck, resting my head on top of his hair.

Softly enough that only he'd hear it, I said, "Cold Korix."

I didn't have to tell him that it was ok or that he shouldn't feel guilty. It wasn't what he needed. He needed someone to prompt him.

"Yes, that's a good way to put it," he said. "A cold version of me."

When I unfurled from around him, Korix had opened his eyes again.

"So, two versions of me: one as I truly am and one of the Ancient's making," he said. "I was each of them, and I was both and neither, but at all times, I fought myself, whether as who I am now or as cold me. This turmoil is the only reason that Xygek isn't a bunch of smoking craters right now. But none of this is terribly important. I'm only sharing it so you'll understand how I know this.

"The Ancient that was controlling me would, at times, absent my body to commune with *its* compatriot in Lutov. That second creature is the one that's running the show, handing out orders and the like. *It's* also the only one that knows the full plan.

"I never uncovered more of the plan than the part I was to play in it, but every time my Ancient returned to my body, a faint impression came with *it*, one that strengthened over time. It was a curious sensation because although the Ancients don't have emotions like we do, something incredibly sad and desperate tinged the impression.

"I tried to reason out its cause for myself, but eventually, I just asked the Ancient what I was experiencing. And *it* told me what *they* want from us."

When Korix glanced at me, I remembered a conversation that we'd held, weeks ago.

Licking dry lips, I said, "A home and children."

With a nod, Korix said, "The way that the Ancients reproduce requires a place for *their* young to incubate until *they're* fully formed. This is usually done in the Source, *their* home, but in part because of our production facilities in the Eastern Reaches, that place is falling apart. The only other way for *their* young to mature is- is to implant *them* in another safe environment. Can you guess what that might be?"

"Us," Talira breathed with horror shining from her. "Holy shit, *they* want to use us like test tubes."

"*They* have a right to it too," Korix said. "It's what the Founders promised *them*."

Shooting to her feet, Talira shrieked, "Why would they have done that?"

"They were desperate," Korix said with a shrug. "You know the tales as well as I do. I don't blame them for making this pact, despite what we might pay for it."

Talira dropped into her chair heavily enough to rock it, but her shock only half-registered with me. I was too busy looking at the problem's many facets, turning it every which way. We were facing an enemy of terrifying capabilities, one that we couldn't kill, and not only did *they* have a powerful motive behind *their* hostile actions, but we owed *them* an enormous debt.

As I examined our mess, only one conclusion came to mind.

"We're fucked," I said.

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