

Chapter 76: Something's Wrong Here

It took quite some time, but eventually, I extracted myself from the apartment, heading for House Kolb's headquarters. I thought it best to give myself the length of the walk to settle into the *Lokke Vitras* role once more, and after that was done, I had to admit. Korix had once again proven himself wise. After a night of rest and recuperation, I was ready to take on any enemy.

Except Talira.

She intercepted me on the way to my skycruiser, stopping me with her arms spread wide for a hug. Frozen in place, I darted my eyes over the high Strata around us, confused about what she was doing. When we were around other House Kolb members, she usually didn't play her part as my grandmother, but a hug was far too familiar of a gesture between the *Lokke Vitras* and his *shukusen*.

Clicking her tongue, Talira fucking *shouted*, "Get your ass over here before I kick it, Zaeden. Appearances be damned, just for the moment. I'm proud of you."

Hesitantly, I edged into her arms, and squeezing me, Talira placed her mouth near my ear.

"Follow my lead until we reach my office, or I really will kick your ass," she whispered.

Ah. So, she wasn't pleased with me. Was this an attempt to boost morale, then? From the uneasy glances directed our way, I'd say it wasn't working.

Clapping my shoulder, Talira tugged me along, heading toward her office.

"Who'd have thought someone could turn so many people traitor to their House?" she loudly said. "But doing the impossible has always been your forte, grandson. How fortunate that you have those skills, considering what Cerullis has become."

Wait. Was she trying to protect me? She usually didn't sing my praises like this, especially not where so many people could hear them.

But no, that couldn't be right. She had nothing to protect me from.

"Thank you... grandmama," I said.

Had anyone else noticed that slight hesitation? I knew Talira had, given her quick glance at me, but she didn't count. I wasn't putting on a performance for her.

“As always, I only did what I thought was right,” I continued, “and I’m the *Lokke Vitras*. Nothing is outside of my capabilities, so please, don’t praise me for this.”

Shaking her head, Talira patted my shoulder with a laugh.

“Look at you. Always so humble!” she said. “We have much to discuss, though. Join me in my office.”

Smiling, she stepped into a lift, one that would presumably take her to the top of the tower, and silently sighing, I followed her. Once we were in her office, she closed the door before banging her head on it with a quiet screech. Raising an eyebrow at this, I diverted my course from her desk to the sideboard. She’d be less difficult to work with if I got her a drink before she realized that she needed one.

“Problem?” I asked.

At that, Talira started snickering before bursting into uproarious laughter.

“So, so many of them,” she eventually gasped. “You have no idea.”

But then, she straightened, getting herself under control, before turning to me.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, though,” she said. “Thank you.”

Plucking the drink out of my hand, she settled into her typical seat behind the desk, gesturing for me to join her. Once I’d sat across from her, she steepled her fingers in front of her face.

“Did Korix tell you what I pulled out of your little group of dissenters?” she asked.

Nodding, I said, “A second set of safehouses, yes. He has yet to give me the coordinates, though.”

“That’s because he doesn’t have them,” Talira said before waving at me. “Don’t worry. I’ll send them to you before you leave, but I wanted to withhold them until I had the chance to update you in person. Things have been tense here, and there are some things I need to share that I couldn’t trust over a connection.”

“That sounds ominous,” I lightly said.

I’d been hoping to make her laugh, but if anything, my statement turned her even more serious.

“It’s certainly not great,” she said. “So, first of all, there’s been some unease over how you’re handling the fugitives. The other *shukusenth*, the ones who don’t know you well at least, expected you to kill far more of those poor people than you have. I’ve heard some of them wondering if you’re not secretly allied with Sanya, building her an army of exiled, and you know what they’re like. Speculation can quickly turn to suspicion, even without evidence to support it.”

So, the performance earlier *had* been an attempt to protect me, in a way. Still. What Talira was proposing...

"Why would they think that I'm anything but loyal to Lutov?" I asked. "Over the last century, I've only proven that fact."

Or at least, I thought I had. In some ways, it had been my goal, all done to keep as much attention off of my less-than-loyal activities.

With a snort, Talira shook her head.

"Really, Zaeden? You don't know?" she said. "You bring change, and the other *shukusenth* don't like it. It doesn't matter how loyal you appear to be. Because you don't fit into the mold that they've made for you, they'll constantly be watching you for betrayal, as so many other non-conforming *Lokke Vitras* have done in the past."

Well, fuck. I'd known that my 'defiant' streak was sure to gain me some of the *shukusenth's* attention at some point, but I hadn't expected it to be so soon. Still, so far as I knew, some among them were friendly to me, and I could cultivate those ties. Plus, I already had a powerful ally, or... was Talira my ally?

"And what do you think about this?" I asked, trying to radiate bemusement.

I didn't know if I'd managed it, considering how serious Talira was keeping herself.

"I know that you're planning to change Lutov, even if I'm not sure how far you mean to take that. I keep waiting for you to share your plans with me, but I know that won't happen for a while, nor should it, given our complicated relationship," she said. "Let me be clear, Zaeden. When it comes to this, I am watching you just as much as the others. There is a line that I will never let you cross, one I don't think you ever intend to approach, but until or if you do, I mean to sit back and watch you work. To this point, what you've done has only benefitted Lutov, and I look forward to seeing what else you can accomplish. Am I understood?"

With a dry mouth, I nodded. I'd always thought that Talira might know my secret goal, but this was as close as she'd come to outright saying that. It was good to know that, for the moment at least, she wouldn't get in my way.

"Do you have any suggestions for how I can alleviate the other *shukusenth's* concerns, besides changing my methods?" I asked. "I'm not killing people who don't deserve it unless I absolutely have to."

"Let me handle it," Talira said while flapping a hand. "You've got enough on your plate."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "And you don't as well? You seemed pretty frustrated earlier."

With a sigh, Talira sipped her drink before firmly resting it on her desk once more.

“Yes, but managing the *shukusenth* is one of my easier tasks,” she said. “I’ve been working with them for a long time. Predicting how they’ll act has become easy.”

Shrugging, I said, “Ok. Take them on if you want, but you’ll have to let me start messing with the politics side of this life at some point, if you ever want me to replace you that is.”

“Are you kidding? I’m not letting you get your grubby, little paws anywhere near politics. Not yet,” Talira said with a grin. “Maybe after we’re stable again but definitely not before then.”

Scowling, I slouched.

“Fine...” I sighed. “Now, what else did you need to tell me?”

Any trace of a good mood that our banter might have raised in Talira vanished. Making a face, she rubbed her eyes.

“Before you run off again, we should talk about Sanya,” she said.

I went cold, suddenly unable to move anything but my mouth. How could one name do this to me?

“Have you found her?” I calmly asked.

Ah. That was why. Despite... everything, I dreaded the moment when I’d be given a set of coordinates and told to go fetch. I knew what would happen soon after that.

“No. To my continual frustration, that girl still has an innate ability to hide, one she learned as a child,” Talira said. “No, I thought...”

Falling silent, she sighed.

“I should probably tell you how I know her.”

Or we could discuss this subject, one I’d anticipated with almost as much anxiety.

“I’ve been wondering about that,” I said. “You and Ko have certainly dropped enough hints to let me know that she’s more than just a former *shukusen* of Cerullis to you.”

Grimacing, Talira said, “Yes, I thought you might have noticed. Before you ask, I can’t tell you how Korix is connected to Sanya. After so many years of working together, I’ve betrayed his trust too many times to count. I won’t do it again.”

“Nor would I want you to,” I said, inclining my head in acknowledgment.

I was a little annoyed that his relationship with Sanya would remain a secret, but as had been said many times by many different people in the past, we take what we can get.

“As for me, I actually know Sanya through Korix,” Talira said. “Because of that, I can’t tell you how we met, but I can say that due to those circumstances, I’ve always felt responsible for her. It’s why

I advocated so heavily for her elevation to the position of *shukusen*, which was a mistake. I thought she was ready for the pressure associated with the role. Look how wrong I was.”

With my eye twitching, I couldn't keep the snarl off of my face.

“Sanya's choices are her own,” I snapped. “We... you can't be blamed for them.”

Hell, that had been a major slip up on my part. I hadn't been aware of how hurt I still was by Sanya's betrayal. Thankfully, Talira didn't comment on it.

“Yes, I know,” she said, “but that's the extent of my relationship with her. Even still, it could be a vulnerability when we deal with her, so I thought I should tell you.”

“And I thank you for it,” I said before pausing for a moment. “Korix's connection to Sanya. Will it be a problem?”

Talira went blank-faced.

“Ask him,” she said.

Shiit...

But that was a problem for another day.

“I will,” I said. “Is there anything else, or can I get back to work?”

I should do that. This 'break' had extended long past the time I'd allotted for it.

“No, we're done here,” Talira said. “I'll send you the coordinates for the second set of safehouses and Zaeden? Clear them quickly. Once this meeting between your dissenters and the *shukusenth* happens, I have a plan to handle the loyal remnants of Cerullis, one that I'll need you to take part in. Also, once the dissidents' proposal has been approved, I'm sending Korix to help them with their new commune. Given that, I can guarantee you that he'll need your help soon.”

Halfway through getting out of my chair, I froze, narrowing my eyes at Talira. Something in her tone...

“What do you mean?” I asked.

With a tight smile, Talira says, “What I said. Get out of here, my *Lokke Vitras*. I need Lutov free of fugitives.”

Oh... I did *not* like it when she hid things from me like this. Still, I finished getting to my feet and bowed.

“Yes, my *shukusen*,” I said. “I'll bring you a report once I'm finished.”

At her nod, I left, already writing a message to Korix.

Talira told me you're helping Calia and her people with their project. Can you handle that alone? I can join you soon, if needed.

Maybe something in his reply would leave a clue as to what Talira didn't want me to know about, but until I received it, I'd have to put the question aside. I had other problems to handle.

When I eventually reached my skycruiser at the tower's top, I was surprised to see Baely leaning against it. I didn't know how they'd gotten there without me noticing, but when they saw me coming, they straightened with a nervous smile on their face. Oh, this couldn't be good.

Despite that, I returned my daughter's smile.

"Hi, sweetie," I said. "How are your friends? I thought you were staying with them for a while."

Biting her lip, Baely tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

"That was the plan, yeah," she said before taking a deep breath. "Then, I decided that I needed to come with you more than I need space right now."

She paused, cautiously watching me, and I fought to keep my hands at my sides instead of rubbing my eyes.

"Baely..." I started, not sure where to go with this.

I couldn't endanger my daughter any more than I already had.

Throwing up their hands to stop me, they said, "Hang on. Let me explain before you say anything."

With a sigh, I nodded, but this only made them shift in place. Before I had to push them to speak, though, Baely started blurting their explanation at me.

"You're the *Lokke Vitras*, which is the most dangerous job in Lutov. I knew this, but until the last few days, I never truly understood it."

Rapidly blinking, she glanced away from me to look out over Xygek's skyline.

"I don't know what to think about how you killed all of those people. It seemed so easy for you," she continued, "but as I thought about it, I realized how simple it could have been for you to have died instead of them, and more than anything, I don't want that."

With a gasp, Baely vigorously shook their head before meeting my eyes.

"I want to help keep you safe, although I know I can't do much about that. I'm not a fighter like you, but I am good at first aid. Maybe... maybe you could bring me with you so I can patch you up if you get hurt. I could stay on the sidelines while you're doing your job—"

If their nose wrinkled while saying that last word, I chose not to see it.

“—and if there’s an emergency, you could message me. I want to keep you alive, *per*, just until it’s a little safer. Please, let me do that.”

I looked at my daughter, noting their red-rimmed eyes, and knew this for what it was. Baely had, in a way, had her world view shaken, and when similar things had happened in the past, she’d always focused on helping others. It was how she processed her problems, and with the subject matter of this upset, I wasn’t surprised that she’d focused those efforts on me.

Unfortunately, this meant that for a time, she’d put all of her energy into me, whether this way or through excessive worrying, and no matter how much I disliked the idea of bringing her along, it was better if she used this energy in a productive manner. Besides, I could keep her safe, especially with the restrictions she’d already proposed in place. If I couldn’t do that, Korix and Leski would probably kill me, but by that point, I’d probably want them to.

“If you promise to stay where I leave you over the next few days, you can get in the skycruiser,” I sighed.

Relaxing, Baely released the breath they’d been holding, and with a tentative smile, they followed their instructions, which was a good start. Still, as I rounded the skycruiser, I couldn’t help but think that I’d made a mistake.

This was only compounded by the message that I received while sliding into my seat.

I’ll be fine, Zae, it read. This is a diplomatic mission and an easy one at that. You should focus on your task for now, but when you’re done, yes. I could always use your company. Once more working together on a project could be nice, don’t you think?

Reading this, I scowled. Once more? He’d helped me with plenty of missions over the years, so why was he pretending otherwise in this message? When sending it, had he expected someone to intercept it, and if so, who? Or was he subtly telling me something else?

If he were any other person, I’d think I was overanalyzing a simple turn of phrase, but this was Korix. He wouldn’t say something so off-putting unless it had been meant as a hidden message.

“*Per?*”

At my side, Baely was watching me with a frown, and clearing my throat, I shook off my suspicions and doubts.

“Sorry, sweetie,” I said. “Let’s head out, shall we?”

They gave me the most hesitant of smirks, and I took that as the reassurance that it was. Thus prepared, I started us toward the first of many destinations.

Revision #1

Created 15 February 2025 20:52:02 by FatalisticFable

Updated 15 February 2025 23:18:23 by FatalisticFable