

Chapter 80: For the Love of Another

Reluctantly, Niklaus started with his story.

“Before Laryse, I had a dull life. I served my liege, Avery Kirst, and the pitiful remnants of their most noble House, giving my all to see it rise from the ashes that the blasted two-tailed aliens had made of it. Even with that purpose, that pursuit of a most glorious goal, something was missing from my life, something I didn’t even know I wanted.

“Until I met Laryse. I know it’s said often about one’s partner, but in my case, she truly was the light of my life. Other women would come and go, tempting in their distraction, but Laryse was the only one who held my devotion.

“She was... a most wonderful wife. Always cheerful. Always the perfect host. A wild tigress in our bedroom. A demure flower in public. We matched each other well, or so I thought.

“After many years of what had seemed like blissful marriage, I noticed that Laryse had become unhappy. She’d taken up a hobby that I could neither understand nor endorse: advocating that we Lutovish loosen our hold on Ibis.

“I ask you: What need have the *bakava*, those primitive animals with their vile customs, for freedom? They require a firm hand if they are to achieve the heights of true civilization.

“And yet, Laryse had become enamored with the idea of letting them try this on their own. It brought shame down on me and the House that I served, which I couldn’t have. Kirst could never again waste away, as it once had.

“So, I tried to distract my wife. Early in our marriage, she had told me about her desperate desire for a child. I had never wanted the same, having seen the brats that House Drav—may they fall from grace—has produced over the centuries. If I was to share my genetic material with them—and hers!—I required them to improve their standards.

“Laryse, however, became more and more despondent, both over my encouragement that she find a new hobby and with what she saw as the death of a dream. So, I made my sacrifice, and several months later, we came home with Leski.

“As I continue with my tale, you must know: I do love my daughter, just as much as I loved my wife. I’ve only ever wanted what’s best for them.

“They, however, come from stubborn stock, and Leski, just like her mother, is easily misguided. We’re not to that point in the story yet, though.

“After Leski joined our happy home, Laryse improved for a time. She was a lovely mother, doting on our daughter at all hours of the day, and Leski, in turn, adored her. Mother Time, you should have seen them together! The glow that only they could bestow on one another was truly a sight to behold.

“It, apparently, wasn’t enough for my wife. She returned to her shameful activities after three short years. Not only that but she began sharing some of her stories from her time in Ibis with our daughter! I couldn’t, *wouldn’t* have that.

“So, I forbade Laryse from continuing with those activities. It hurt me to impose that restriction on her, oh yes! But it had to be done, for Leski’s sake.

“I thought my wife had done as I’d asked. I thought she respected me enough to honor my wishes.

“I was wrong. Laryse continued with her trips to Ibis, her wallowing with those lesser-than, behind my back. I found out about her indiscretion in the worst of ways. One of those who’d given me his Favor, that most sacred of transactions, attempted to disobey one of the commands I’d given him, all because of the rumors swirling around my wife. He thought I’d lost the nerve and will needed to keep him in line, and Mother time, if I didn’t show him how mistaken he was.

“From him, I learned about Laryse’s activities and worse, about her... *infidelity*. She’d whored herself out to one of the *bakava*, delighting in an animal’s carnal passions, *right under my nose!* I tell you. I WOULD NOT HAVE IT!

“But there was nothing I could do about it, not then. I waited. I watched for my opportunity. And all the while, I loved my wife. She had hurt me, yes, and for that, she needed to pay, but while there was still time, I showed my love how devoted I was to her and our child.

“Leski grew up well, if also rebellious. She loved play-pretending as a soldier from Ibis or a Kolb operative, just as much as she excelled in her music and dancing lessons. Laryse encouraged both of those traits, and I... allowed it.

“Then, my chance finally came. Another of the *bakavas’* incompetent rebellions came along, and to my delight, Laryse’s lover became embroiled in it.

“I contacted *shukusen* Talira. I gave her any tidbits of the rebellion’s plan that I could coax out of my wife. I didn’t realize how complicit she’d become with their activities until it was far too late.

“On one of her trips to Ibis, Laryse was caught up in a Kolb wipe of a rebellion safehouse. I was told that she died fighting at her lover’s side.

“I mourned her. How I grieved! But Laryse wasn’t quite finished with me.

“You see, Talira’s operatives had gathered evidence of my wife’s treachery, her involvement with the rebellion, over the course of our dealings, and conniving woman that she is, she quickly revealed this evidence to me, meaning to hold it over my head so that I would remain in her thrall. I could not let any whispers of treason surround me and therefore, my beloved House.

“The ploy worked for a while. That is how I know your *evushk* and why Leski may have seen him in the past. In the years after Laryse’s death, Talira would send him to check in with me, ensuring that I remained obedient and most infuriatingly, that Leski was well-treated.

“I would never harm my daughter! Even with all her faults, she is my pride and joy.

“Eventually, though, enough was enough. I made a deal with your grandmother. I would owe her a favor, which was more of a concession than you might think, and in exchange, Talira would erase Laryse, both the evidence of her treason and any record that she had once lived. Years later, Talira traded that favor for the refuge you needed from Alezand and the Ancients.

“Thus, ends the tale you require, most honored one. Is it everything you wanted?”

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