

Chapter 83: One Man's Power

Later that night, I slipped out from under Leski's arm, cautiously disarming the alarms around my bedroom's door. I hadn't been able to sleep, unable to after the extreme busyness of yesterday. I *should* be exhausted. We'd been running back and forth across the city all day, and things had been so hectic. But there'd also been so many changes and developments, one of which felt particularly unresolved.

Niklaus. What had he been doing in that storage facility earlier? It had looked like he'd been gathering weapons again, but who had they been for? Cerullis? Some other party unrelated to our current crisis?

And where had he meant to send them? Where had he gotten them from? Could we close that leak in Lutov's security?

I wouldn't be able to truly sleep or relax until I'd gotten answers to those questions and the many others flitting through my mind. So, I'd decided to get them.

As I headed toward my parents' hangar, I checked on Leski and Korix, making sure they were asleep or otherwise occupied.

Leski was still as deeply unconscious as when I'd left her just a moment ago. She'd arrived here soon after Korix and I had returned from our time with Feena. Korix had stopped her soon after she'd come home, pulling her into a sitting room for a chat. Or I guessed that was what they were doing. Despite having access to the recorders in the room—Korix hadn't blocked them—I hadn't intruded on them, given how clear it was that they were having a moment in private.

Once they'd left that room, Leski hadn't wanted to do much talking with me, climbing into bed for cuddling and sleep instead. I couldn't blame her for that. Much as yesterday had been hectic for me, I knew it had been more so for her, considering how deeply its events had dug into her personal life.

Korix was... still awake. I didn't know why I'd expected he wouldn't be.

Last night, he'd been stoic and withdrawn while Feena and I had toasted his return. I could tell our celebration had pained him to a degree, even with me trying to minimize our focus on him. It hadn't helped that he'd refused to join us in our drink, although I'd expected that. In all the years I'd known Korix, I hadn't once seen him indulge in alcohol.

After we'd come home, he'd quickly excused himself, off to the bedroom my parents had offered him. He was there now, pacing a furrow into the carpet. Every time he passed the room's door, he'd pause for a moment before forcing himself forward once more, which made me smile. I had no doubt that he was struggling with the same problem I'd recently been facing.

Diverting course, I was soon outside his door, unsurprised in the least to watch him stop and face it in the split second before I knocked.

"Come in," he said.

I did so, grinning as soon as our eyes met.

"Are you having trouble sleeping too?" I asked.

He settled an incredulous look on me, and I laughed.

"Feel like running a couple, last minute errand with me?" I said. "Something that might help us 'relax'?"

Narrowing his eyes, Korix cocked his head.

"Niklaus?" he slowly said.

Yes... among other things.

When I nodded, Korix's lips twitched. He spoke not a single word about 'orders' or our 'duty', merely sweeping past me and into the hall.

"Sounds fun," he called over his shoulder.

Mother Time, I loved how in sync we usually were. I hurried after him.

It didn't take us long to reach House Kolb's headquarters. Once we arrived, Korix and I snuck through hallways and floors and lifts until we'd reached the holding cells where Niklaus and his associates had been placed.

A lower Strata was standing guard outside the area. When they saw us coming, their eyes widened while they snapped to attention, but that was the only sign of deference they showed.

"*Lokke Vitras*," they said without any hesitation or awe in their voice.

Briefly, they swept their eyes over me, but they made no comment about my appearance. Likewise, I said not a word, fully aware that having Korix take the lead here would get us what we wanted much more quickly. Fortunately, he'd also decided to ignore our disconcerting switch in station.

"I'm here to interrogate a prisoner brought in yesterday evening," he said.

He proceeded to give the guard a description of the petite woman who'd been with Niklaus last night. I didn't pay it much mind, already heading to an interview room. Korix joined me within a few minutes, and together, we waited in silence for our prisoner.

She arrived soon enough, gently tugged along by the elbow. After leading her to the chair across a wide table from us, the guard bowed to us and left, firmly closing the door behind them.

While the petite woman nervously glanced between me and Korix, I scanned her status in her array. Avaylan, Eighty Stratus of House Zan. She'd proudly proclaimed her chosen occupation as a landscape designer for the various parks across Xygek, which made me wonder what she'd been doing so far from any of them last night.

After a beat of uncomfortable silence, she cleared her throat.

"You're here to interrogate me, right? You should ask me about the fertilizer I've been using in my most recent project," she whispered. "I know I shouldn't suggest anything right now, but... please, start there."

She dramatically raised her eyebrows, as if trying to convey something with her facial expression alone, and I pursed my lips. Korix took a breath to answer her, but I spoke up first, certain I was missing something.

"Sure..." I drawled. "Why don't you tell us about that?"

When Avaylan glanced at Korix, as if asking for his permission, he waved for her to continue.

"Well, I'm sure you're both aware that certain types of fertilizer are among the many items restricted from the general populace," she said, nervously lacing and unlacing her fingers. "I typically use ones that are more organic in nature and therefore, more friendly to the environment, but a certain... client of mine has requested that I switch to one with a high concentration of ammonium nitrate on his estate. I had to get special clearance so I could access both that and the more... explosive material it's sometimes stored with."

...Which explained why someone from House Zan had been able to get their hands on that crate yesterday.

Considering how willing she seemed to give us answers to our obvious questions, why was Avaylan providing them in such a roundabout way? Why not straight up tell us what we needed to know?

"I see," Korix said, seemingly nonplussed by her indirectness. "And this client of yours. Did he mention why he'd requested the change? Or perhaps you can tell us why you felt obligated to listen to a man with much less expertise than you in gardening?"

Biting her lip, Avaylan nodded.

"I'll... try to explain," she said.

But she only sat there, fiddling with her fingers for several, tense heartbeats. When I purposefully shifted in my seat, she sucked in a breath, glancing at me, before making herself continue.

“My... client has recently gotten some advice about fertilizer from his... friend in House Cerullis. His friend likewise heard about this new technique from a *rival* in my House, someone they’ve been trying to *hurt* for decades.”

The emphasis she placed on those two words, paired with her even more exaggerated look of wordlessly conveying something, had me exchanging a glance with Korix.

“Interesting...” he quietly said. “What else can you tell me about this rival?”

Avaylan breathed out a sigh, relaxing into her chair with a hesitant grin.

“I hear he works at a facility where my House assesses alien tech,” she said. “I think my client may have sent his rival a gift there recently, but I can’t be sure.”

Oh fun. It looked like Korix and I might need to make another side trip soon.

“And his other question?” I asked, tipping my head toward Korix. “Why were you following your client’s advice?”

Damn, Avaylan had gone from relieved to nervous again in an eyeblink.

“I... I had to. He...”

Gulping, she looked away.

“A long time ago, I got myself into a spot of trouble and asked him to help me out of it,” she whispered, “but as you know... or no, never mind. Maybe you don’t. My client really likes it when he can control someone.”

Pausing, she met Korix’s eyes.

“Absolutely control them,” she said, “so that even their House no longer has a hold on them. He wouldn’t help me until... until that had happened. Yeah.”

My mouth had gone dry. Only one thing in Lutovish society—one socially acceptable thing, at least—could give someone the type of control Avaylan was referring to.

Stiffly, Korix said, “Niklaus holds your Favor?”

Emptying her lungs, Avaylan slumped, fixing her eyes on her hands in her lap. She refused to look up as she nodded.

A deep silence fell while I tried to wrap my mind around this revelation and everything it had spawned in me. Given how loosely regulated our economy was, favors might be the only pseudo-

form of currency that anyone took seriously, but there was a difference between owing someone a favor and giving them *your* Favor.

The first was a one-time transaction, given as payment for someone's help or advice. The second was an intrinsic part of a person, something you were only meant to give when you found another person or cause that you wholeheartedly admired. It was the only way to step out from your House's control, but giving someone else your Favor also wasn't done lightly, given how fraught with danger it could be.

Once the exchange was complete, it was permanent, something that would incur the worst of shame if the giver reversed it, and with it, the recipient gained total control of you. They could order you to do anything, up to and including ending your own life, and nobody could do a thing to reverse those orders.

Hence, why people usually gave someone their Favor only after that person had earned their trust or when in the direst of circumstances. What could Avaylan's 'spot of trouble' have been to have forced something like that from her?

Why did the idea that she'd done it make me both physically ill and so faint that I was afraid I might lose consciousness?

"And the others with you yesterday?" Korix said into the pregnant pause. "Same circumstances?"

"Yes," Avaylan said. "And they're not the only ones."

Shit. I hadn't seen how many people Korix had apprehended at the storage facility, but that didn't matter. It was bad enough that Niklaus, someone I found morally reprehensible, held one person's Favor. That he could hold so many of them...

Was this the source of power that Leski had mentioned her father had?

"How many?" Korix asked.

Looking up at us through her hair, Avaylan said, "I don't know the exact number, but it's a lot. A veritable army's worth."

"I see," Korix once more said. "How... unfortunate."

That was one way of putting it.

Still struggling to subsume an intense wave of *emotion*, I clung to silence, waiting for Korix to either ask another question or end this interview. After a moment, he sighed.

"Thank you for your cooperation, Eighth Stratus," he said.

He made a subtle motion at a nearby recorder, and the guard from earlier soon came to take Avaylan away. Once we were alone, Korix faced me, simply watching me until I felt like I could

breathe again.

“Niklaus can’t keep those people,” I eventually managed to say.

Without saying a word about the fight he must surely see in me, Korix nodded.

“And he won’t,” he said. “Given how deeply his crimes have gone, Talira will most certainly have him dissolve any holds on Favor that he has, and he’ll thank her for her mercy. He should be stripped of his House for this, at the least, but I believe it’s safe to say that losing his power will be a better punishment.”

“Good,” I stiffly said.

And knowing that horrible situation would soon be resolved let me release my tension in a rush.

“Good,” I repeated. “So, this ‘gift’ to a rival that Avaylan mentioned. I’d like to look into it. Make sure nothing disastrous is coming from that end of our conflict. We should start by locating where this rival works. Will you join me?”

I had an idea, besides relying on the lower Strata to find the information for us, for how to achieve that goal, and fortunately, it aligned perfectly with my second objective for tonight.

Raising an eyebrow, Korix said, “Do I have a choice?”

Right. Because I was supposed to be keeping an eye on him. And Leski.

“Ughh...” I groaned, leaning back in my chair. “Let’s just get out of here, yeah?”

Waving toward the door, Korix said, “After you.”

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