

Chapter 84: Politics Again

Unlike in the chamber I'd just left, a deadly quiet infected this assembly. Each of the *shukusenth* was perched on their seat, refusing to look at the empty chair in their midst. They'd done this for the last few months, but their avoidance of it was rigid now, a blatant denial of the reminder that their power could be taken away.

When we entered the room, Pheniks and I quickly took our place. Considering we'd been the only ones still missing, the assembly should have started then, but it took several minutes before anyone could find their voice.

"I can't believe that just happened," Marza eventually said.

I wasn't sure if her comment had been made for anyone's benefit but her own, but it at least got the ball rolling.

"Well, it did," Raelle snapped while crossing her arms, "and now, we have to deal with the consequences. How are we supposed to deal with such a large influx of new members into our Houses? To this point, those additions have been small, enough that it hasn't stressed our resources, but with this..."

Huffing, Pheniks leaned back in his chair.

"I'd assume that we'll split the remnants of Cerullis' resources, the same as its members, to cover them," he said. "Or am I wrong?"

At the mention of an unexpected gain in their Houses' apparent wealth, Raelle brightened while Marza licked her lips with her eyes shining.

"Then, the question is how we move forward with this split," she said.

With no question in her voice, Talira said, "That task should go to House Kirst. As well as being the most trustworthy among us, they're best suited for the job."

At that, every eye turned to *shukusen* Orin, at which he sheepishly smiled. Even weeks after his near-death experience, he looked worn and haggard, but that made sense. Apart from Talira, he was the oldest person here, and from what I understood, he'd been due for a standard telomere readjustment, which would have reset his body's age, before this latest run-in with death. Stasis and rapid regeneration drugs could only do so much to heal a body that was on the verge of expiring.

Even so, Orin did a decent job of projecting ease and capability to the rest of us, and hell, if I wasn't glad for it. Maybe the two of us would have a chance at a friendly working relationship in the

future.

“It’s true that Kirst still has the House rotation records of Cerullis’ members, and we can easily obtain the results of their placement exams within said House. Both sets of information will be essential when it comes to getting those displaced people into a new home,” he said. “The task would, however, be a stress on my House. We’re not equipped for much more than educating the young. Even with that, though, we’ll happily take on the task, but only if everyone agrees that it’s for the best.”

Snorting, Raelle said, “Please. I doubt anyone else wants to handle the problem.”

With my lips thinning, I glared at her—that had been rude—even while Orin deflated.

“As I said, we’ll accept the task if no one objects, which no one seems to,” he said.

He glanced around as if hoping someone would contradict him before shaking his head.

“With that decided, I was hoping we could shift our focus to an issue that I believe to be of greater concern,” he said, turning to my grandmother. “Talira, I don’t mean any disrespect with this. I’m sure we’re all aware that your actions during this crisis have been within your purview, but several of us here were wondering when Kolb intends to take a step back.”

So, Pheniks wasn’t the only one who’d noticed that. Based on the uncomfortable shifting of everyone around me, I seemed to have been the last to realize it, which damn. No matter how busy I’d been, that was still sad.

As if totally at ease, Talira leaned forward to rest her folded hands on the table.

“Kolb will return to normal operations as soon as this crisis is over, which it currently is not,” she said. “We still need to plug one, final breach in Lutov’s security: Sanya. Once she’s out of the picture, we’ll ‘take a step back’, as you put it.”

At those words, I stiffened, but fortunately, I wasn’t the only one to do so. My reason for it might have been different from the others, but their reactions hid the vibrant emotion that had spurred mine.

With her face turning nasty, Marza slapped her palms on the table.

“And when are these supposed threats going to end, Talira?” she growled. “So far as we can tell, you mean to hold us in perpetual terror of them, all so you can hold onto the power you’ve gained.”

Orin shot a hand out to rest over hers.

“What she means is how do we know that you’ll do as you’ve claimed?” he asked, keeping his voice carefully controlled. “It would reassure the rest of us if you showed some proof of these intentions.”

So, he saw it too. Before now, only Cerullis, with their satellites, had served as a counter to Kolb's power, and now, that House was gone. Not only that but control of their satellites was still in flux.

The other Houses had minor ways to check Kolb's power too, of course. For instance, if Drav ever refused to do their job, Lutov's rate of population growth would grind to a halt, which could be disastrous in the long term, and Zan had technology like clockwork fiends that would be annoying to eliminate. In both cases, however, Talira could send in operatives and other Kolb members to force the Houses into line. It might be bloody, but they could do it.

In essence, Talira held near absolute power in this moment. With it, she could use this opportunity to change Lutov in whatever way she saw fit.

Given this and that she seemed to agree with many of my societal views, why was I hoping that she didn't use her power? Changing Lutov in this way seemed... wrong. Why?

Softly chuckling, Talira relaxed into her seat, folding her hands on her belly.

"I hear and acknowledge your concerns," she said. "In answer, I promise that in the coming days, I will provide each of you with a short list of some of the operative working in your Houses, to do with as you will, and this will only be my first step in returning things to normal. Once Sanya has been handled, Kolb will once more return to the shadows. It's where we work best."

As the other *shukusenth* and First Strata considered this, a message flashed into my array.

Remember, Zae-zae. The goal is to change their hearts and minds, it read. If a new way of life is forced on Lutov, it'll never stick, falling apart too quickly instead. Real change requires patience, resolve, and the ability to see a true opening when it presents itself, which this isn't.

Ah. That explained my previous hesitation. Despite my resolve that Lutov's House system was wrong, the idea of forcing my worldview onto someone else made me feel dirty, almost as much as I did after a particularly brutal mission.

"Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but that's enough to satisfy me for now, and I'm not just saying that because Talira and I are family," Pheniks said. "Which brings us to the question of what to do with Sanya."

As he'd finished speaking, my brother's eyes, along with many others in the room, had drifted to land on me, and I silently sighed. Why phrase it like that? Why not simply order me to take care of this filthy bit of business? It would certainly help ease my conscience. Not that I deserved that.

With almost harsh bemusement, Talira said, "Is there even a question of how it'll be handled? Everyone here knows how we deal with traitors like Sanya, just as we know who will shoulder that burden so we privileged few can keep our hands clean."

Um... had she just... defended me, in a way? Had that been meant as a rebuke? Based on the many wincing in the room, I'd say that it had been.

“And we shall honor him for it and the many sacrifices he has made and will continue to make for us.”

Standing, Orin bowed to me, which... I didn't know how that made me feel, but when he rose from it, he returned to business.

“Unless another problem is urgent enough for us to address it in person, I propose that we end this emergency assembly, concluding any lesser business via messages and direct connections,” he said. “As with us all, Kirst has far too much on its plate to continue sitting around, discussing our plans.”

When he glanced around the table, no one objected to his proposal, so he nodded.

“Then, I call this assembly adjourned.”

He immediately strode for an exit, and while it took the others a moment to process this shift in circumstances, they soon followed, although Talira pulled Raelle aside before she could leave.

“If it's acceptable to you, my *Lokke Vitras* and I will use this room to wrap up a final piece of business, which will mean deactivating the recorders in here,” she said. “Will that be a problem? This is your headquarters, after all.”

After risking a glance at me, Raelle stiffened before shrugging.

“Do what you want,” she said.

She refused to look at me while hurrying past, and I briefly wondered what she might have seen on my face. From what I could tell, it could have been anything. I'd almost completely detached from myself, so I didn't know what was coursing through me right now.

But I'd soon get a chance to figure that out. Within a few minutes, the room had been emptied, leaving me alone with Talira.

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