

Chapter 85: An Ally on the Inside

Even with an undercurrent of worry following her, Jayla looked good, much better than she had as Jastin, but then, I'd only met her once before she'd transitioned, and that meeting hadn't... gone... well.

Why was I doing this again?

Once we'd reached an abandoned hallway, Korix revealed himself to the First Stratus, sending her spinning away from what would seem like a man appearing from thin air. Pressing a hand to her chest, she leaned against a wall, gasping.

"Favored," she said. "Forgive my surprise. I thought that Kolb had taken you prisoner."

"They have," I said.

Grimacing, I lowered my camouflage, and Jayla's body went through a peculiar progression of tensed to relaxed, all while her face soured.

"You," she said with distaste.

Sighing, I said, "Me. May we speak with you privately, First Stratus?"

Furrowing her brow, Jayla flicked her eyes between me and Korix, and disquiet fell over her. The only other time I'd seen her, the *Lokke Vitras* had also accompanied me. Considering that during that encounter, I'd told her Fyester was dead, her confusion now didn't surprise me.

"My office isn't far," she said. "It should work, depending on why you're here."

I ignored the unspoken question, gesturing to her.

"Lead on."

With every step we took, Jayla drew her shoulder closer to her ears, and by the time she pulled us out of the hallway, she was bristling like an upset cat. Hell, this would be fun...

Her office was smaller than I'd expected, only containing a desk with a chair on either side. To the left and right of this, built-in display cases lined the walls with various trinkets resting on their shelves, and a landscape of a vista had been painted along the far wall.

While Jayla took her place behind the desk, I sank into the room's second chair with Korix at my back. I didn't like this position, would much rather take the less vulnerable option of standing, but right now, maintaining appearances was more important than my safety or comfort. From Jayla's unconscious shifting, I'd say my efforts were working.

What did she see in me? Was I only someone who'd cowed the *Lokke Vitras*, or was there something else as well?

"Obviously, you know me," she said, "and obviously, I made a mistake when I failed to catch your name the last time we met."

"What else were you supposed to do?" I said. "I'd brought you horrible news. Why should you have cared to learn about me?"

With a cough, Jayla said, "Regardless. May I know your name now?"

"That will depend on how you answer my questions," I said. "For now, all I'll tell you is that *shukusen* Talira has given me the task of dealing with the threat in our midst. I want to know everything you can tell me about the Ancients' designs for your House."

I had no intention of asking about Niklaus. Unlike Alezand, who'd held an overheard conversation with Niklaus about our stolen weapons, I didn't have any solid evidence that Jayla even knew the older man. If I thought it necessary, I might ask her about him later, but for now, it seemed best to focus our conversation on one area of conflict.

Swallowing hard, Jayla settled deeper into her chair.

"I'd love to tell you everything, but my loyalty to my House won't be broken," she said. "I trust that the Favored is pleased with my answer."

Did she think that Korix was testing her?

Turning to him, I said, "*Evushk*, she believes you're still complicit with the Ancients."

"It does seem that way, *kuvesk*," Korix said.

"Suggestions?"

"You know what I'll say," Korix said. "Give her one of your guarded truths. If she proves herself untrustworthy, we have many options to keep her from sharing it."

Humming, I returned my attention to Jayla, but her narrowed eyes kept me from speaking.

"You're his student?" she asked. "That makes you..."

Resting my elbows on the chair's arms, I folded my hands on my stomach.

“The next *Lokke Vitras*, yes,” I said.

I endured her scrutiny for a while, curious why my revelation had had no effect on her, before pressing into painful territory.

“Concerning Fyester,” I said.

A soft whine interrupted me. As she hunched in her chair, Jayla turned her face away from me, and I internally cringed at this evidence of the damage I’d scored on her. Hell, she must have loved him. I couldn’t stop now, though.

“Concerning Fyester,” I repeated over Jayla, “did you look at the autopsy report that we provided for you?”

Pulling her knees to her chest, Jayla murmured something that might have been an affirmative.

“Then, you know how he died,” I continued.

Hugging her legs, Jayla took a few, deep breaths before glaring at me over them.

“You mean besides the energy bolt that you shot through his head?” she said. “Yes, I know, although I’m not sure what could have caused damage like that to his brain.”

The gut-punch that her words had delivered caught me off guard, and while I didn’t drop out of mission mode because of it, Jayla frowned at me as if I’d done something odd.

“That surprises me,” I managed to say. “I thought for sure that Cerullis’ First Stratus would know what a person’s neural pathways look like once an Ancient’s finished with them.”

Sucking in a breath, Jayla sat bolt upright. Her eyes glittered with something that I couldn’t name.

“I was right, then?” she asked. “*They* got to Fy before he died?”

His nickname on her tongue sliced through my thoughts, leaving them fluttering in my head. It hadn’t sounded wrong, merely unexpected, and frozen as I was, I could only nod in answer to her question.

“I knew it!” Jayla said. “He was so distant, almost cagey, for those last few months. I knew something was wrong, worried that the enemy in our ranks had taken a fancy to him. Then, I got a message saying that he was planning on having a partner over, which was strange. Before that night, he hadn’t dated anyone else for far too long, and his message was the last that I heard from him. Well. Except for when you...”

Her frown tipped from befuddlement to consternation while her nose wrinkled, and behind me, Korix shifted. His slight movement, more than anything else, put me on guard, and I watched Jayla for signs of hostility, but all I saw from her was hugely widened eyes before she spoke.

“You’re him, the partner Fy mentioned that night. Zaeden, right?”

My insides withered because something non-conducive to my role had occurred. Someone in a position of power, unassociated with House Kolb, had learned my name. What should I do? Jayla wasn’t likely to keep this secret to herself, and I couldn’t keep her quiet without resorting to extreme measures, which I’d rather not do.

But... why was I worried? After becoming the *Lokke Vitras*, I had no intention of cutting ties with my siblings, and at some point, someone would put together who I was from that association alone. After that, the name ‘Zaeden’ would be known across Lutov, which meant it wouldn’t be a secret to keep. So... nothing to worry about. Right?

“Mother Time, it *is* you,” Jayla said. “Fy told me so much about you.”

Her expression turned severe.

“What happened?” she snapped. “Why did you kill him?”

Had... had I not share the details of her partner’s end? Damn, why couldn’t I remember whether I had? It was information I’d normally have given her but...

It didn’t matter. I could tell her now.

“Fyester and I ran into each other on the night in question, although I’ve never been sure about how much of a coincidence that was,” I said. “We went out for drinks to catch up, and he invited me back to his... your place. When we reached your apartment, we... well. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about that part of the night. I wouldn’t.

“Fy knew what I was, putting it together from context clues, and while we were... intimate, he attacked me. I fought him off, and once I’d subdued him, my *evushk* took over.”

I jerked my thumb at Korix, resisting the urge to check if he’d maintained his blank façade. I’d be astonished if he hadn’t.

“The next day, *evushk* called me to a cabana on Lake Voxmore’s shore. He had Fy restrained there in the hopes that I could extract intel from him about a scheme that he was involved with. I couldn’t do it.”

Maintaining Jayla’s gaze went from difficult to impossible. My eyes, constantly roaming away from her to this point, drifted to the ceiling, there to stay.

“*Evushk* took my place, gaining the information that we needed to save hundreds of lives, but in the process, the Ancient that was controlling him did... that. What you saw in Fyester’s autopsy report,” I said. “Before I abandoned him to die, Fy had begged me to free the spark of his soul... afterward, so when I came back inside and he was...”

The past draped over my view of the world. I could see it all again and oh, Mother Time. I’d be sick.

"I did as he'd asked," I said.

Forcing myself to meet Jayla's eyes, I tried to ease the story's blow.

"He was very brave," I said. "Even knowing what was coming, he did what he could to help us, something that my *evushk* and I have always been grateful for."

With her face creasing, Jayla examined me, which left me wondering what she was thinking. Had sharing this story helped her, or had I only picked open a scabbed-over wound?

"You loved him," she eventually said.

Hesitantly, I nodded, and everything about her hardened into place. Doing what I could to hide it, I braced for her scathing words.

"He loved you too."

Wait, what? Had... had I hear that right? I couldn't have. But when I frowned at Jayla, she nodded.

"Fy talked about you all the time," she said. "He missed you, even years after you disappeared."

Oh. Oh, how my heart ached.

"When he told me that he loved you, I got the feeling that I was the first person he'd shared that with," I said. "You were the only part of this world that he regretted leaving behind."

Jayla slapped a hand over her mouth, raggedly breathing around it.

"All these years I've hated you," she said, "and all this time, you gave Fy mercy, not- not-"

I... didn't know about that, but if the misconception got me answers, I wouldn't dispute it.

"What else were you supposed to believe, especially with the information I gave you?" I asked.

"I..."

Shaking her head, Jayla set her jaw.

"I'll tell you everything I know about the oppressor in our midst," she said. "I've opposed the bastards since Fy's death, striving to gain greater trust with *them* so I can wreak havoc in *their* ranks, but even still, I don't know much."

That was disappointing, if also expected. Still.

"Give us what you can," I said. "Especially anything to do with the weapons your House has received in recent days."

She told me what she knew, but several minutes later, I'd learned nothing new about House Cerullis' role in this attempt at a takeover, and apparently, Alezand had kept Jayla unaware of his House's involvement in the illegal acquisition of weapons. I wasn't sure how that was possible, but... I wouldn't be surprised if the *shukusenth* remained secretive about schemes like that with even someone as close to them as their First Stratus.

Even with the lack of clarity about the Ancients' overall plan, I gained one advantage from approaching her.

"Not all of my House agrees with our *shukusen's* plans, even if we understand the pressure he's under," she said. "If and when you unravel this conspiracy, you'll have our support."

Before I could express my gratitude for that, Korix stepped into the silence.

"That's well and good, but how are we supposed to trust you, given all that you've shared about Cerullis' plans?" he said. "My *kuvesk* has given you cause to trust him, but you have yet to do the same. In fact, you've done the opposite. How can we expect that you won't betray us like you've done with your House, where your loyalty should always lie?"

Guffawing, Jayla rocked in her chair.

"You doubt *my* trustworthiness?" she said. "That's rich. How deeply have you betrayed Lutov and your House, oh most vaunted *Lokke Vitras?*"

Gritting my teeth, I shot forward to tell this woman exactly how much Korix had sacrificed for her and every other Lutovish citizen. Only his hand on my shoulder, gently squeezing, stopped me.

"I hear your words and accept your rightful outrage," he said, "but my question remains."

A new note had entered his voice. It was the same one I'd heard while in House Kolb's headquarters yesterday morning, and always, it had come after someone had mentioned the dark spots in his brain. The hairs on the back of my neck rose, and I dove through the feeds of this study's recorders until I could see Korix. In him, I found nothing to substantiate this roil in my guts but...

"What would it take to prove my loyalty to Lutov rather than my House?" Jayla asked.

I took over before Korix could suffer more from this exchange.

"Keep me notified of sudden changes within your House," I said. "I've sent you my array's access information. Have you received it?"

"I have," Jayla replied. "Is there anything else I can do?"

Having an inside woman within the ranks of the enemy's puppet was more than I'd expected to gain from this confrontation. It almost made up for our failure when ransacking *shukusen* Alezand's office, but still, I couldn't help asking for more.

“I don’t suppose you can help us get out of here?” I said.

I half-expected Jayla to laugh at me, but she brightened instead, springing to her feet so suddenly that her chair almost toppled behind her.

“I can, actually,” she chirped.

At her gesture, the painting opposite us dissipated, leaving behind the top of a lift.

“My private bolt hole,” Jayla said. “It’s been in the First Stratus’ office for ages, known only to them and their *shukusen*, but Alezand’s away right now, unable to stop your escape. If you take the lift, you’ll find yourself at ground level behind a concealed door. From there, you’ll be on your own.”

She knew how to earn a House Kolb member’s trust. Escape routes were sacred to them, and while I knew they weren’t as important within the other Houses, an instinctual part of me admired Jayla for sharing this secret.

“We can get away safely once we’re free of this place,” I said.

Rising, I extended my hand to Jayla.

“Thank you for your help.”

She took what I’d offered, holding my hand rather than shaking it.

“It’s what Fy would have wanted,” she said. “I’m sorry for my hostility toward you all those years ago, Zaeden. You only did what you could to help the man we loved, and I treated you like garbage for a kindness I never could have given.”

“I... never blamed you for it,” I said.

I had nothing else to give Jayla, no matter how much her searching gaze begged for more. Eventually, she released me, gesturing toward her bolt hole.

“I’ll notify you if I notice anything suspicious,” she said.

Bowing, I said, “We thank you.”

With nothing more, I circled the office until I stepped into the lift, trusting that Korix would follow me. On the way down Cerullis’ headquarters, I unpacked everything that Jayla had resurfaced, every bittersweet memory of Fyester, before bottling it up again. So, when Korix joined me in the park outside, I was returned to my natural state.

“Well! That was interesting,” I said. “Thanks for joining me.”

“Mm.”

I got nothing more, which was strange. If Korix wasn't up for talking, he usually told me, but this time, he merely strode toward a shuttle stop, acting as if I wasn't at his side. Like he had when leaving House Kolb's headquarters earlier. I'd never figured out what had been wrong then. What the hell was going on?

With my narrow-eyed gaze pinned between his shoulders, I ran through a list of reasons why he might be acting unlike himself. If I could identify the cause of this change, maybe I could prepare for the shitstorm that was sure to come with it.

Somehow, I doubted I'd manage that, but still, I considered it as we reached the shuttle stop and boarded one that would take us toward my parents' home

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