

# Chapter 89: Questionable Disciplinary Action

Carefully, I lifted the decanter on my grandmother's sideboard and tilted it over my flask's narrow opening, watching the resulting trickle of amber liquid with my tongue caught between my teeth. I needed steady hands for this, couldn't allow a drop to spill, but when *someone* was glaring at me from where he was leaning against a glass wall, it didn't help with my focus.

"You shouldn't play pranks on your *shukusen*." Korix said.

"She's also my grandmother," I said. "Plus, she's used to it."

With a sigh, Korix said, "Zaeden..."

Resting an empty decanter on the sideboard, I capped my flask, raising an eyebrow as I did so.

"Yes?"

Korix just stared at me, and rolling my eyes, I exchanged one flask for another.

"Come on, Ko. In all your years together, you've never wanted to spread a little mischief at Talira's expense?" I said. "I know I did when you first started training me."

Crossing his arms, Korix looked expectantly at me, but I merely grinned at him. If he was going to use such an easy cop-out, he'd have to speak the words.

"*Shukusen* Talira was my *evushk* as well as the *Lokke Vitras* before me," he said, "and she was good at it. Better than me."

I knew this. He'd had me watch enough holodramas of her missions before.

"You didn't answer my question," I said, resting one hand on a hip. "If you've ever wanted to play a prank on my grandmother, you should do it now. Once we've handled this crisis, I doubt you'll spend much time in this room, and with me here now, she'll never blame this prank on you. After all, who has a history of being a troublesome brat?"

I extended the second flask to Korix, and he fixed his gaze on it with indecision rife on him. He clearly wanted to take what I was offering, but ingrained habits made that difficult for him. That was ok. I liked tempting him, in this and every other way, and over the years, I'd become an expert at it.

With a special smirk in place, I shook what I was holding, and clicking his tongue, Korix pushed himself off of the window, marching my way. He snatched the flask from me, popping it open while grabbing the decanter. Without hesitation, he transferred colored water from one container to the other, and slapping the emptied flask to my chest, he made to storm away, but I grabbed his wrist before he could.

“See?” I said. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Korix huffed, flicking his eyes away from me, and stashing the flask, I took his other hand, squeezing it with a half-smile.

“A little harmless defiance is good for the spark of your soul, Ko,” I said.

Blowing out a breath, Korix lifted his eyes skyward with a headshake.

“You’re such a bad influence on me,” he said.

“Yes,” I drawled, “but!”

Releasing my hold on him, I lifted a finger.

“I’m good for you too.”

Chuckling, Korix drew me to him, resting his chin on my shoulder.

“As I’ve said before, you save me,” he said.

I wrapped my arms under his, contentedly sighing. His warmth seeped into me, finding every worry in my head and ripping them out, and almost, I could forget why we were here.

In the window opposite me, though, I watched Talira stride into her office, stopping short when she saw us, and it all came rushing back in. She cleared her throat.

“Excuse me, my most capable of warriors, but we have work to do,” she said, “and I need a drink.”

Of course. Meeting with the *shukusenth*, as she’d just done, could be absolutely maddening.

Untangling from each other, Korix and I took our seats while Talira poured herself a drink. When she joined us at her desk, I maintained a straight face while keeping half an eye on Korix. I knew he’d never give us away but...

Sinking into her chair, Talira said, “Right. I hope you two are prepared for disappointment because I have nothing but bad news.”

With a grimace, she lifted her tumbler to her lips, taking a sip, and froze. Slowly, she lowered her drink, glowering at me, and I innocently batted my eyes.

“Zaeden, no House, you’d better not have gotten rid of my brandy,” she growled.

Cocking my head, I frowned.

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

Slapping her desk, Talira snapped, "*Grandson!*"

Grinning, I was fully prepared to continue protesting my innocence, but leaning over his chair's arm, Korix fished a flask from my pocket before tossing it to Talira. Catching it, she turned an incredulous stare on him.

"You knew about this and didn't stop it?" she said.

Settling back in his chair, Korix crossed his arms.

"Should I have?" he said. "I saw no harm in it, given that my once *evushk* would never fall for such a prank. Unless she meant to, of course."

Reddening, Talira made a choked noise, and I fought to keep my face blank, leaving laughter burbling in my head. Korix was having far too much fun with this.

"You... *Both* of you..."

Mother Time, I'd never seen Talira struck speechless before. It was a little frightening, actually.

"You did tell us to relax when we last saw you, my *shukusen*," Korix continued, as if oblivious of her growing outrage. "So far as I can tell, this is one of the ways that Zaeden best does that."

Talira clicked her teeth together.

Perhaps it was because I'd never expected violence in this room, typically a bastion of order, but I didn't track what happened over the next five seconds, only that something was happening, and I responded to it. When I'd next sat down, Talira was on her feet, pointing her rifle toward where Korix had been lounging. One of his poor chair's legs had been blasted into oblivion, toppling the whole of it.

Meanwhile, he looked down on the mess with a knife poised to throw in his hand.

"Was that necessary?" he said.

Shrugging, Talira had her rifle dissipate.

"I had to make sure Zaeden's influence hasn't dulled your training," she said. "And you!"

When she turned on me, I dug my fingers into my chair.

"Why are you still there?" she snapped. "I've read the reports on your training. You're better than this."

Wordlessly, I lifted the flask that she'd dropped on her desk mere seconds ago.

"I knew you two wouldn't kill each other," I said. "No matter how much you deny it, too many things connect you for one to endanger the other. Not over something this trivial at least."

Popping the flask open, I took a long swallow from it, watching Talira the whole time, before returning it to her.

Flopping into my seat once more, I said, "Can we please start this meeting, whatever it's about? Phen wants my help at The Library soon."

In the last week, my brother had become obsessed with the stronghold behind one of that place's archways, the one we theorized might have been a Founder's labs. Last night, he'd returned from it as I'd been leaving, babbling and jumping around like a rubber ball. In other words, manic as hell.

He'd insisted that I needed to go through that arch again—something about having me identify a vehicle in the hangar I'd briefly seen when I'd last been there—and after he'd promised to make the process as safe and comfortable as possible, I'd had no reason to refuse him. While I wasn't looking forward to helping my brother with something I'd rather never do, I also didn't want to have it hovering over me for longer than necessary.

So, if we could get this meeting over with, it would be helpful, but when I focused on them, Talira and Korix weren't showing me the indignation that I'd expected.

After they exchanged a glance, he said, "You see?"

"I do," she said.

Wait. See what?

Before I could ask what they'd meant, Talira sat, and Korix shook his head at the broken mess at his feet.

"What a waste of good furniture," he said.

And now, he didn't have a chair. Well, except-

"You can sit on my lap if you want," I said, "or I can move."

"Not necessary," Korix said.

Gliding in front of me, he folded to the ground before leaning against my chair and oo... those black curls lying *right there*. My fingers twitched.

With an exasperated sigh, Korix reached behind himself to grab my wrist, firmly pressing my palm atop his head.

"I sat here for a reason," he said.

I couldn't help my happy hum as I tangled my fingers in his hair, and at that, he relaxed more fully against the chair.

"You two are sickeningly adorable," Talira said. "Can you continue in this manner with the focus needed to absorb my news, or should I separate you?"

"We'll be fine," I said. "Tell us the bad news, *shukusen*."

Slumping, Talira retrieved the flask that I'd dropped on her desk, getting the drink that she'd needed since arriving.

"This morning, all of the *shukusenth*, except for Alezand of course, finally convened to discuss House Cerullis. For this first talk, I left the Ancients and our missing weapons out, hoping to avoid a panic, but I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have," she sourly said. "Their responses were predictable, as usual. Whenever there's a crisis—"

"—we're expected to take care of it alone," Korix finished. "It's a reasonable policy most of the time. Kolb is in charge of keeping the peace, after all, but for something this big..."

"The Houses need to collaborate," I hissed, "but no, that's not how this damn House system works."

They snapped their eyes to me with Korix tilting his head back for it, and I internally winced. Had I said that out loud?

"For once, I agree with you about this," Korix said. "If Lutov is lost because the Houses refuse to work together, you'd probably laugh, wouldn't you?"

I lightly slapped him.

"No. How could I laugh at so many lives lost?" I said. "Don't even suggest it."

But he just buried his face in my leg.

"What was I thinking? Of course you wouldn't," he said. "You aren't capable of something so callous."

Making a face, I massaged Korix's scalp while holding my grandmother's gaze.

"So, we can't expect help from Drav or the others," I said. "What are we going to do?"

"That's what I've been contemplating, and frankly, I'm at a loss," Talira said. "I'm hoping that the three of us together can birth an idea of some sort. Anything would do right now."

She was coming up blank? The greatest *Lokke Vitras* that Lutov had seen in centuries, one of the few who'd survived the role long enough to replace her *shukusen*? How could we solve this when she couldn't?

Apparently, this meeting was going to be a lot more frustrating and complicated than I'd anticipated.

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