

# Chapter 43: I Made a Mistake

Over the course of several hundred years, House Cerullis, in their efforts to better understand our planet and what lay beyond it, had launched several satellites into space, the frontier that we Lutovish never dared brave again. With time, they'd made changes to what had once been solely observational devices.

Most of these additions had originated in House Zan. Of particular note, however, was the one that Zan used to put down rebellions in their testing grounds. The weapon fired a plasma beam powerful enough to annihilate an Ostium town, turning it into a glass-walled crater.

The control for such a weapon, the piece that pinpointed its target, was sitting in the drone that I was holding.

As soon as I saw this, I requested a direct connection with Korix, mumbling under my breath while I waited for him to accept it.

"Come on, come on, come-"

The connection established.

"Zae, where are you?" a voice stuffed with sleep asked. "What's going-?"

"Look through my eyes," I snapped. "Right fucking now."

Silence filled a time ticking by at the rate of the device in front of me. I didn't have enough of that to break through the control's security processes, not when even years into my training, process cracking wasn't my strong suit. I was hoping Korix, who was much better at it, could-

"Get Ace," he said, calm and collected. "I'll evacuate the estate."

Shit.

"Are you sure you don't want-?" I started.

An alarm blared from every drone near me, and people down the hall's length jerked free of slumber.

"This is an emergency situation," a soothing, female voice spoke in deafening volumes. "Please, head for the closest Travel Center as quickly as possible."

This warning looped on itself, and on watching the resulting chaos, I realized that Korix had given me the hard job. Gritting my teeth, I barreled through panicking people as they scrambled for their belongings and tripped over themselves to escape an unknown danger.

Once I reached a cordoned-off part of the estate, the bedlam died down, even if the alarm kept going, and I was able to sprint, unimpeded, for the kitchen. A timer in my array, synced to the one on the control, urged me to move more quickly, but I was glad for this needed haste. It didn't let me think much.

Right now, the only thing on my mind was how glad I was that Korix had told me to get Ace. That one of us would rescue my dog had never been in question, but I didn't know what I'd have done if he'd told me to evacuate our guests first, leaving me to worry the whole time about whether we'd safely pull him out of the house.

Skidding into the kitchen, I found Ace pacing in front of his bed with his tail between his legs. When he saw me, he slink-trotted across the kitchen to plaster himself against my calf, shivering, and I snatched his leash from its place beside the door.

Attaching it to his collar, I rubbed his back, purposefully ignoring how much gray was peppered in his black fur. This racket was probably doing *wonders* for his health.

"I know you don't like the noise," I said, "but we have to run through it now. Can you do that, buddy?"

I plucked his favorite ball from his pile of toys, and while it didn't garner me the fixed attention that it normally got, it did keep Ace somewhat focused. Now, I only needed to worry if he could keep up. He'd gotten sluggish in his old age.

After squeezing the ball so that a faint squeak rose over the alarm, I raced out of the kitchen, the only place where I'd felt safe for over a decade. Starting slow, I increased our speed until Ace and I were tearing through the house.

It seemed abandoned, which made sense. Our guests would have headed straight for their skycruisers after hearing the alarm.

Considering how many of those vehicles had filled the hangar last night and how many people we'd had in the house, I doubted any were available for us, so I headed for a door leading outside instead.

The Southern Fells' moors lay beneath their typical layer of morning mist, leaving their stillness and peace as a stark contrast to the last few minutes. That peace rankled me when added to my racing thoughts and bubbling stomach. To the adrenaline that was sending me into hyperdrive.

These things made me quick, though, more so than my typical sprinting speed, and poor Ace was struggling to stay at my side. He couldn't keep this up for much longer, which was a problem. Even at the rate we were traveling at, we'd never make it clear of the coming disaster zone before the timer hit zero.

Never stopping, I scooped Ace off of the ground, holding him firm and murmuring comforting words until he stopped squirming. Once he had, I fell into thoughtlessness, letting House Kolb speed zip us over the low hills.

When I snapped out of it, I'd reached the assembly point that Korix and I had established long ago for emergencies. A couple dozen vehicles had landed here, some belonging to Korix and some to guests, and a quick check on their statuses showed them in lockdown mode. That explained the lack of frantic people around me.

I set Ace down while scanning for Korix. He should be here, but I didn't see him.

Had he returned to the estate for something? I doubted he'd be so sentimental.

Unless someone was stuck in the house. Or if he'd left an item required for Lutov's security there.

With my heart in my throat, I turned toward the building, a dark blip against near-colorless grass. Above it, a satellite hung, a monstrosity so large that I could see it from the planet's surface.

A blue glow built at its base, and I took a step forward to search the estate for Korix, no matter that I'd never reach it in time, but something jerked me to a stop.

Ace's leash, still wrapped around my hand? No. That was-

The timer flicked to zero. A thin, white line shot toward the estate, fattening and brightening as it went. It seared my eyes, and in the next breath, a roar exploded in my ears. It was as if the voice of reality was protesting something wholly unnatural, and a gale billowed from the site of chaos, swaying me in place, before returning to a gentle breeze.

It faded with an echo of its brilliance blotting out a fraction of my sight. Soon enough, even that died, and left behind was a crater, maybe a kilometer wide, with glass walls reflecting the sunlight.

The ringing in my ears left me just as reluctantly as what had blocked my sight, but after a few seconds, Ace's barking penetrated it.

It was gone. Our refuge. My home. And Korix-

"That was overkill," a muffled voice said.

It was him. He was fine.

I hadn't seriously thought he'd be stupid enough to return for something, but having that small doubt relieved might have had me crying if potential witnesses hadn't been surrounding us right now. It would definitely have had me sweeping him into my arms.

As it was, I recognized that his fingers in my waistband were keeping me pinned in place, so I rocked back on my heels. Once both feet were firmly planted in the grass, Korix released me, and I resisted the urge to dig the heels of my palms into my eyes. Having him behind me was the only

thing kept me from losing it. Mother Time, I was so utterly, ridiculously glad that he couldn't see my face.

"This is my fault," I said.

"*Kuvesk...*"

"It's my fucking fault!" I repeated in a strangled yell. "I got your home destroyed. If I'd stayed true to everything you've taught me, if I hadn't indulged my desires, we'd be waking up right now or making breakfast while waiting for a mission."

"Doubtful," Korix said. "Calm down, *kuvesk*. You're worrying Ace."

Reaching around me, he plucked the ball out of my loose fingers, and it soared away with Ace reluctantly trotting after it. Korix rounded to my side, crossing his arms as he examined the crater in the distance.

"If whoever did this was willing to go to such extreme measures, they'd have found a way to get into the house regardless. They'd have planted the satellite's control whether we'd had a party or not," he said. "So don't blame yourself. It's counterproductive. Plus, the only things destroyed were possessions. Everything precious made it out."

He gave me a pointed look before starting toward a nearby tree.

"Come now. We should debrief."

Even with the command, I waited for Ace to return before following Korix with the fluff ball beside me. As we approached, he pulled something off of a tree branch, and I gratefully accepted my coat from last night. The moors were always chilly, but they were uncomfortably cold when one was half-clothed.

As I threw the coat on, I noticed extra weight hanging in one of its inner pockets. When I reached to investigate, however, Korix shook his head.

"Look later, once things have calmed down," he said. "You were meant to find it while gathering your laundry, but... plans change."

A gift? That was unlike him, but then, we'd both dropped our roles since leaving Ibis yesterday. We'd both let emotions freely flow and discussed personal topics, although perhaps not the ones we should have.

The Founder's Day Ball and subsequent party had masked it, but the pressure that we'd accrued over the last few months had reached a breaking point. I'd started seeing my victims' faces on random people, which was new, and I'd noticed Korix getting jittery in recent days.

Discussing what we meant to one another was well and good, but sometime soon, we needed to have another, halting talk about the damage that we'd taken because of the parts we played. We

needed to work out new practices that might help us handle our burdens.

Not now, though. Now, we needed to figure out who'd just tried to murder us, although I already had my theories.

Going rigid, I folded my arms behind my back, the same way I did for every mission report, but Korix waved for me to relax, folding to sit cross-legged at the base of the tree.

"No need for formality this time. This incident isn't official yet," he said. "Get comfortable, and help me calm Ace down."

My poor dog did look stressed, panting so hard that drool was dripping to the grass from his jaw. When I folded to the ground beside Korix, he padded to us, slowly wagging his tail, and collapsed between our legs.

Scratching Ace's ear, Korix said, "How did you come across a satellite's control in the house?"

"I stumbled upon a House Cerullis member fiddling with a drone while on my way to get breakfast," I said. "I have no idea how she got close enough to overpower one. The security parameters that I wrote should have had the drone playing keep away for as long as she chose to pursue it. I also don't know how she got into the house in the first place. I didn't invite her to the party."

"Maybe someone else did," Korix said.

"Who? You?" I asked. "No one else would have thought to do something so rude."

Staring at his hand, which he was running over Ace's back, Korix shrugged.

"People break social norms all the time," he said, "and she could have been someone's plus one."

"Maybe. I suppose it doesn't matter how she got inside, only that she did," I said. "I let her finish with what she was doing, hoping to keep from spooking her. Look how well that went."

I bunched my fingers in Ace's fur, and he shifted his head to my thigh, looking up at me.

"You did the right thing," Korix said. "You couldn't have known what she was doing to that drone, not without recorders to spy on her."

"Still. I thought I could handle whatever she was planting, but once again, my abominable process cracking skills fucked me over," I said. "Well, not me. Us. Hell, I've made us homeless--"

At House Kolb speed, Korix reached for me, making me tense, but all he did was lay a hand on my shoulder, briefly squeezing it.

"This is not. your. fault," he said, "and even if it had been and you did make us homeless, we'd only stay that way for a few weeks while a new house was built. As it is, have you forgotten about the apartment in Xygek? That can be our home just as easily as what we've lost. Mother Time,

Zaeden. The only things gone are possessions, easily replaced.”

He was right. I knew this, but letting go of guilt took more effort than it should.

“Fine,” I breathed.

With one more squeeze, Korix returned his attention to Ace, and for a little while, I bit my lip, doing nothing more than radiate as much reassurance toward my dog as I could.

“What do we do now?” I eventually asked. “Should I go after the woman who started this? She could tell us whether we have a single person to fight or if a House has turned against us.”

Not that I had any doubt about which of those it would be. After they’d *glassed our home*, it seemed pretty clear that something was wrong within Cerullis’ ranks. Maybe I could use Alezand’s invitation from last night to start investigating his House.

But Korix was shaking his head.

“Going after the instigator of today’s incident would serve no purpose. Once you share her appearance with Talira, other House Kolb members can find her for us,” he said. “It’s better if we’re proactive. I have a persona embedded in Cerullis. Maybe we can use it to get answers. First, though, we’ll wait for emergency services to retrieve our guests, avoid them once they arrive, and check in with *shukusen* Talira. She’ll probably want a say in what we do.”

“That does sound like my grandmother,” I said.

Thinking my head against the tree’s trunk, I closed my eyes.

“Anything I should know from the time you’ve spent as a House Cerullis member?” I asked.

“Only that their focus has shifted in recent years from a number of scattered fields to one of singular intensity on the planet’s atmosphere,” Korix said. “Besides that, everything’s as it has been for the last several hundred years.”

Huh. Why the fixation? The Houses usually spread their members as far across their designated specialty as they could, hoping to gain more power with it. What could have driven Cerullis to a single point of interest? Was something wrong with our planet’s atmosphere, and if so, why hadn’t they reported it?

“We should go,” Korix said.

Cracking an eye open, I spotted flashing lights on the horizon and got to my feet. I’d like to stay and ensure that these people were safe, but Korix was right about avoiding emergency services. If we stayed, they’d tie us up with questions, ones we’d have to answer if we were to avoid inciting suspicion, and considering our circumstances, time was of the essence. We’d done our due diligence by making sure that emergency services had arrived.

So, while their vehicles landed between others, still in lockdown mode, Korix and I slunk into the moor's mist with Ace trotting beside us.

### **TTS Chapter Forty-Three**

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