

# Chapter 44: Next Steps

After we'd walked for quite a while, enough to ensure that no one would interrupt us, Korix stopped, requesting a direct connection. He looped me into it while also preparing to project my grandmother between us. She'd always preferred visual communication over audio alone.

When Korix's palm began to glow with a projection imminent, I braced for Talira's entrance, which proved to be a smart course of action. Her image leapt into the air between us with her face stormy, and it only grew more so once she saw us.

"What the fuck is going on in the Southern Fells?" she snapped.

"Nothing of consequence, my *shukusen*," Korix said. "My *kuvesk* and I have it handled."

"The hell you do," Talira said. "I've received reports of a glassing near your location. Tell me what happened, or I swear to Mother Time, I will send a host of Second Strata after you again."

Wincing, Korix said, "Please. Don't waste the resources. My *kuvesk* will give you a report on what happened."

As my grandmother turned to me, I internally flinched. What did Korix expect me to say?

"Someone attacked us," was what I settled on. "We got away. Now, we're working to figure out who was stupid enough to try killing the *Lokke Vitras*."

Dismissing me like an annoying aide, Talira returned her attention to Korix.

"Someone glassed your estate?" she said.

Damn. I'd never heard my grandmother sound so hollow before.

"Yes," Korix said, "but it's hardly something my *shukusen* need concern herself-

"The *fuck* it is!" Talira shrieked. "What do you think happens to my standing when I can't keep my First Stratus, my *damn heir*, safe in the homeland?"

Korix had pulled away from her image, not that I could blame him. Talira had never been so furious around me before, but at least she was part of my family. I could only imagine what hearing such ferocity from one's former *evushk* was like.

"Forgive me, my *shukusen*, but you have nothing to worry about," he said. "My *kuvesk* and I can handle this without it reflecting poorly on you."

“Mmhhh. That seems likely, in light of what’s happened to your fucking home,” Talira said. “No, my *Lokke Vitras*. You will go to the closest estate to you and request refuge. I’ll prepare the way for you there, not that it should matter. Niklaus owes me a favor, so if you invoke my name, he’ll welcome you into his home, regardless of the difference in your Houses. Await further instructions while I work through this mess. Do you understand your orders?”

Keeping his hand level, Korix bowed.

“Yes, my *shukusen*,” he said.

“Good. Zae-zae?” Talira said, flipping to me. “Make sure he does as he’s told, ok?”

I inclined my head to her, which only made her face go sour. She knew from experience what that meant, but for the moment, she’d get nothing more than conditional agreement from me.

“Dammit, both of you will be stubborn about this,” she said to herself before focusing. “You have your orders. What you do with them is your prerogative.”

She winked out of existence, letting Korix lower his hand. For a moment, we stared at one another in silence, but soon enough, I broke it.

“So, what’s the plan?” I asked.

“You’ll take Ace to Niklaus’ estate like Talira wanted,” Korix said. “Wait there until you hear from me. I don’t expect that I’ll be gone long, no more than a couple of days.”

“You expect me to sit around, bored out of my mind, while you fix our problem alone?” I asked.

With his lips twitching, Korix said, “Oh, I doubt very much that you’ll be bored, Zae.”

My nickname on his tongue transformed my angry retort into a stutter, and before I could get myself back under control, Korix stepped closer to kiss me. When he pulled away, it was by a fraction.

“Check what’s in your pocket once I’m out of sight,” he said with his lips brushing mine, “and remember how much I can’t love you.”

Releasing me, he petted Ace before turning away.

“Wait!” I called.

But House Kolb speed had already carried him out of hearing range, and I was alone.

Well, alone save for one extremely loyal dog.

Scratching Ace’s back, I acquired the coordinates for the mysterious Niklaus’ estate. I’d known that other people had been living near us while I’d been training—to be expected in Lutov’s

overcrowded state—but I'd never visited our neighbors. When would I have found the time to do that?

This man's home was on the other side of the river that fed into Lake Phiabe, meaning a couple of kilometers lay between it and me, but I wasn't terribly worried about it. A distance like that should be manageable on foot.

For now, I avoided requesting an identity check on Niklaus. Under the circumstances, finding out everything that I could about him would be wise, but given what had happened this morning, I'd need a challenge to keep from worrying over the next day or so. Better to leave my soon-to-be-host's identity as a mystery, at least for a little while.

So, I started off, ignoring the weight in my pocket. As the sun finished its arch overhead, Ace and I passed through the Southern Fells' moors at a swift jog, and when that fiery orb eventually reached the mountains' crests, I started looking for a good campsite, building a fire once I'd found one.

For tonight, I went without food. Appeasing hunger pangs wouldn't be worth the effort of finding something to eat, and I wasn't yet concerned about my lack of food. By the time I reached my destination, hunger should have only a minor hold on me.

I felt bad for Ace, though. Not only was so much physical activity hell on his aging body, as evidenced by his flop to the ground when we stopped, but he didn't understand why we were going hungry tonight. Nestled against me, he whined from time to time, and I always responded by rubbing his back or sides or jaw, wishing I could do more.

Once he'd gotten settled and I'd made myself as safe as I could in such an open environment, I withdrew the addition of mass to my coat. It was a bound book, one I knew well.

Korix had been so pleased when I'd asked if I could add this to his library, shelving it in one of his most favored spots. Why would he have slipped it into my pocket last night?

When I absently flipped through it, a scrap of paper flew free of its pages, and I snatched it out of the air before mud could obscure its words. As I read the barely legible scrawl at the top, however, heat crept into my cheeks.

*No one will own me,* it read.

Damn, I'd been so naive when I'd written that, still idealistically believing I could somehow gain my freedom in this locked-tight society.

That one sentence was no longer alone, though. A much neater hand had added more to my childhood declaration.

*You were supposed to find this years ago, Zae,* it read, *but I've gotten tired of waiting. It's time to make this easy for you. Happy birthday.*

And below that lay an older entry.

*Is this your motivation, kuvesk? If so, I admire you for it.*

*So many people in Lutov are happy to live in their gilded cages while imposing a much harsher imprisonment on the children of Ibis, but you see the bars around you. Never forget that they exist and that you are chained to something you would never have chosen. And...*

*Never forget to resist it, Zaeden. Mother Time if I don't feel like a hypocrite for writing that, but my greatest desire is to see you live a happier life than I have.*

*So, yes, know that Lutov owns you, heart and spark of soul, but never, NEVER stop fighting it. If you do, maybe one day you'll be free like I never was. I pray to everything that might be holy that you find a way to break out of your cage.*

Lifting the paper scrap to my lips with trembling hands, I closed my eyes while breathing in a musty scent and the concern of someone who cared for me, and once I'd committed the message to memory, I fed the paper to my evening fire, watching it burn in a flash. Falling into the grass, I patted my stomach, and once Ace had lain his head there, I ran my hands through his fur, absently gazing at shining stars.

How many years had it been since I'd resigned myself to my fate? Eleven, if I counted from the time when Korix had made me his replacement?

And now, the man who'd started me on this path, one that was so free and yet tied in service to Lutov, had encouraged me to fight it. How could I do that without resigning Korix to more time in a role that was slowly breaking him? I pondered this conundrum as the moon climbed higher in the sky until even my body, accustomed to little sleep, surrendered to it.

The next morning, I continued in the same persistent slog toward where my grandmother expected me to go. Many thoughts bounced in my head as I climbed and descended rolling hills.

Had Korix once more assumed his deep-cover persona as a House Cerullis member? Had Talira made contact to chew him out yet? Was he safe?

And regarding my situation.

Who was Niklaus, and what House did he claim? Why did an identity check on him—I couldn't hold out any longer—return with nothing? Most importantly, why had Korix thought that I wouldn't get bored while staying with this man?

When I ran across water, I followed the riverbank north until I found a bridge. Wading across the river would have been much simpler, and Ace probably would have enjoyed it more, but I'd rather keep my appearance somewhat in order before meeting my host. After foregoing bathing for the last two days, I was already disheveled enough, which made me sick to my stomach. I could handle the privation and scruffiness that came with surviving in the wild, but when possible, I'd rather avoid it.

Which made spying a bump of human construction on the horizon all the sweeter.

Reaching it took a while longer, of course, with the sun about halfway to the western horizon as I made my final approach.

In terms of extravagance, Niklaus' estate ran somewhere between what Korix and my parents claimed. It had a main house plus two additional buildings nearby, and while no wall surrounded it, evidence of a garden peeked from the back.

The landscaping around the place felt similar to the Eastern Reaches' historical topography, from before production facilities' pollution had warped it, and the buildings' style of architecture rang old-fashioned in nature, which was strange.

Even though I'd sent notice ahead, no one stood ready to greet me. As I finished climbing into the persona of an impeccable guest, I knocked on the building's front door.

A drone answered it.

"Greetings," it said in a mechanical voice. "Please, forgive my master's absence. He likes to give his guests time to unwind from the stress of travel before saying hello. If you'll follow me, I'll show you to where you and your... pet will sleep while staying with us."

It drifted past me.

"O... k..." I said under my breath.

But I followed it. The drone took us to one of the adjoining buildings, and as we approached it, its door sprang open. Stopping, the drone rotated toward me.

"Inside, you'll find a wardrobe filled with clothes. Something in there should fit you. Please, feel free to clean up and change," it said. "My master would like to meet you for dinner, which is scheduled an hour from now. He would prefer it if the... beast remained here."

My smile tightened.

"I will keep your master's preferences in mind," I said, "but please inform him that Ace and I have recently suffered a loss. Considering that, I would prefer it if I didn't have to leave him alone for an extended period of time."

The lights on the drone blinked for several seconds while I patiently waited.

"My master says that you may bring your pet if you can guarantee its good behavior," it eventually said.

With a slight bow, I said, "Many thanks for your hospitality and understanding."

Having nothing further to say, I strode into the building, which looked to be a guesthouse upon closer examination. After the door had shut and locked behind me, I found all nearby recorders and rendered them sightless. Isolated, I had Ace sit at the door while I circled the building's interior in

search of anything that might cause me harm. Talira might have said that this man owed her a favor, but that didn't mean I trusted him.

Even if I had, I'd have performed a security sweep. I did the same thing every night back home, after all. Or I had.

Once I was satisfied that I was relatively safe, I set an easily dismantled trap outside the entrance to the washroom and got my appearance in order. This didn't take me long, no matter that I lingered in the shower for a moment, and with at least half an hour remaining until dinner, I was faced with a choice.

Did I stay where I was, appeasing my host? That would mean trusting that he had nothing nasty in store for me. Or did I risk displeasing him and go out for reconnaissance?

The decision was simple, really.

"Come on, buddy," I said to Ace.

### **TTS Chapter Forty-Four**

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