

Chapter 45: Surveillance Run

Ace and I left the guesthouse, circling the main building. At the first side entrance we found, I broke through its security processes before holding an open palm in front of Ace's nose. When he looked up at me with a sloppy grin, I blessed Mother Time that dogs' memories could be so short.

"Seek," I said.

He went alert, closing his jaw and lowering his body toward the ground.

Checking the feed of the recorder inside the door, I set it to hiccup on itself while I slipped into the house with Ace at my side. Together, we crept along halls and snuck into rooms, finding nothing of interest everywhere we looked.

The only oddity of note was the house's extremely old-fashioned architecture. I had to manually open nearly all of the doors and windows, which made for an interesting challenge. I'd never had to worry about something like squeaky hinges before, not on this side of the water at least.

I paused in a large chamber, filled with shelves, but a series of locking glass panes covered each of these bookcases. No matter how many interesting titles I saw here, it wasn't worth picking locks to get a closer look now.

Maybe later.

In the same vein, much as I might want to thoroughly investigate Niklaus' study, I didn't head that way. I was only doing a quick check for obvious danger, and ransacking that room would take time. Better to save it for if my host showed any signs of hostility.

Time was running short, so I made my way to the closest means of egress, satisfied for now that Niklaus meant me no harm. I'd found no poisons in his sad, little kitchen or elsewhere, and while I'd noted a few swords and gunpowder pistols around the house—again, an unexpected touch of ancient history—they'd all been on display, definitely not ready for use.

I could do a more thorough search of the house after my host had gone to bed, but for now, I had to meet him.

Nearing a window, I was in the middle of tackling its security processes when a sound that I'd earlier noted registered in my head. Someone on this floor was playing a piano. *Beautifully.*

Niklaus? I wouldn't have pegged him for the musical type, based on how he'd arranged and decorated his home. It could be him, but... I doubted it.

Maybe he had another guest here. I'd seen no sign of one, though, and if someone else was visiting, why would Niklaus have put me in his guesthouse while his other guest was sleeping under his roof? Maybe he meant to insult me.

The simplest way to answer these questions, of course, would be to follow the music to its source or find the pianist on the house's recorders, but I had neither the time nor the inclination to do that now. I'd ask Niklaus about it instead.

Opening the window, I stepped to the side, pointing through it.

"Jump," I said.

A heartbeat later, a mass of gray and black blurred past me, and once I'd climbed through afterward, I patted Ace's head.

"Good boy."

With the window latched, I made my way toward the path that led to the house's front door. Once there, I fished for the sliver of jerky that I'd had the refectory make while I'd been in Niklaus' kitchen, crouching so I could offer it to Ace.

I knew it wasn't the healthiest of treats for a dog, but he'd had a rough couple of days, and he'd done a good job while accompanying me through the house. He deserved a reward.

His good behavior carried over to this moment, where he stared at the jerky I was pinching between two fingers, never moving.

"Found," I said.

With his tail furiously wagging, Ace came forward to carefully take the treat, and then, it was gone, sucked down by the vacuum of a dog's never-ending hunger. I took a minute to thoroughly pet him, letting him know what a good boy he was, before rising from my crouch and holding a palm in front of his nose.

"Glue," I said.

Nothing about Ace's happy demeanor changed, but he padded behind me and to my left, maintaining this position as we strolled to the front door. Again, I knocked, but this time, a human greeted me.

A few centimeters shorter than me, Niklaus let his age show through his gray hair and wrinkles, which was unusual in a society with the ability to maintain a youthful demeanor. His display of age continued with his clothing choice. All of it was in muted colors with a styling from a few centuries ago.

Brown eyes critically looked me over before he beamed, reaching out to shake my hand.

“Welcome, welcome,” he said with the joviality in his voice catching me off-guard. “Please, come inside.”

He waved me into his home, and I stepped over the threshold, glancing over the interior as if seeing it for the first time. Brushing past me, Niklaus strode down a hall, presumably expecting that I’d follow.

It was a good assumption.

“When I received *shukusen* Talira’s request earlier today, I thought for sure that I’d be entertaining a brute, but you seem to have good manners, if also an unfortunate affection for an animal,” he said. “You must be high Stratus indeed, young man.”

Oh, boy. I could already tell that the next few days would be *frustrating*.

Also, young man? How did he know that, and why was he saying it like my age had some bearing on how he viewed me?

“Something like that,” I said. “I take that to mean you’re not House Kolb, then?”

“Mother Time, *no*,” Niklaus said. “House Kirst has held my loyalty for a long time now.”

Humming, I said, “Kirst rotations were some of my favorites when I was unHoused. Its members were kind to us.”

Glancing over his shoulder, Niklaus flashed a smile at me.

“So young and high Stratus too,” he said. “You must be quite talented.”

He had no idea.

Ignoring the man’s fishing attempt, I cocked my head while scrunching up my face.

“Is that... music?” I asked.

It was, although this time it was the violin that beckoned me to it. With Niklaus in front of me, that meant another, unknown person occupied the house, which I didn’t like.

“Oh, yes. That would be my daughter,” Niklaus said. “I should probably introduce you.”

Daughter? As in someone who lived here long-term? How had I missed signs of her in my recon?

With Niklaus leading the way, keeping thankfully silent, the violin’s singing swelled in volume. Whoever this daughter was, she claimed absolute mastery of her instrument, coaxing such lovely *emotion* from it that my heart stirred in response, and I had to remind myself that I was, for all intents and purposes, on a mission right now.

Niklaus eased a set of wooden, double doors open, and the song tumbled forth. He beckoned me inside, stopping beside the doorframe. Hugging himself, he watched his daughter with affection, and following the line of his gaze, I nearly tripped over myself, barely stopping a cough.

Standing in front of towering windows, Niklaus' daughter swayed in place with her white shift flowing around her. The evening's golden light shot through the windows in beams, making the darkened form under her dress stand out against its fabric.

With her eyes closed, she cradled her violin like a most precious child with each draw of the bow on its strings shifting her silver and purple locks around her face. She poured herself into her music, holding nothing back.

I was caught in it, trapped by the scene's beauty to the point that I couldn't acknowledge the obvious problem with who was standing in front of me. Not yet.

The musical piece reached its end with her bow raised in a final flourish, and she stayed motionless while the final vibrations from her violin's strings faded. Meanwhile, I started cursing in my head, wondering how I'd balance her with who I now knew her father to be.

"Beautiful as always," Niklaus said. "If you have a moment, Leski dear, I have someone I'd like you to meet."

Turning, she opened her eyes, and as they widened, Korix's warning from days before rang in my head.

I would advise caution if you court her. Her father's a founder.

Shit.

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