

# Chapter 46: Hello, Beautiful

Leski sucked in air like a dying fish, and from the corner of my eye, I caught Niklaus glancing between us.

“You!” she shrieked.

Wincing, I cautiously smiled, flicking two fingers in a wave.

“Me,” I said.

“Do you two know one another?” Niklaus asked.

Dragging my attention to him, a concerned parent, took more effort than it should.

“We briefly met during the Founder’s Day Ball,” I said.

“What are you doing here?” Leski shouted.

Her volume shot my gaze her way again. I was beginning to feel like a ball, getting batted between father and daughter.

“I needed a place to stay for a few days,” I said. “My...”

Did Niklaus know who Talira was to me?

Did it matter one way or the other? Leski knew I didn’t have a House, which meant I couldn’t call Talira my *shukusen* without distancing her, and I found myself strangely reluctant to tell her a lie.

I could deal with the fallout that might come from this revelation.

“My grandmother asked your father to shelter me until we can figure something else out.”

At my side, Niklaus jumped, pulling away from me. Probably requesting an identity check on me as well, and knowing it would be as blank as what his had returned as, his subsequent look of frustration curled my lips the slightest amount.

Mother Time, he was a founder...

That explained a lot of the questions I’d had over the last couple of days. Of the ones who were still alive, they were probably afforded more privileges than the average Lutovish citizen, hence why the identity check on him had been returned blank. Hence why Talira knew him.

“Forgive me, but exactly who are you?” Niklaus asked. “I probably should have asked before now, but I thought you might prefer anonymity if Talira sent you. A name would be nice, though, so we can properly address you.”

Leski brightened from her piercing scrutiny of me.

“Oh!” she said. “He’s-”

“Garreth,” I interrupted. “You can call me Garreth.”

Leski frowned, which only seemed to double Niklaus’ apprehension, so I fully faced him.

“Your drone mentioned something about dinner?”

I’d been looking forward to it ever since hearing that glorious word. The snack I’d eaten while sneaking through the house’s kitchen earlier had merely dulled my days-long hunger pangs. I’d only taken enough so that shaking hands wouldn’t make a fool of me while sharing a meal with my host.

“We’re having dinner already?” Leski asked. “Damn. I must have lost track of time.”

“Language, dear,” Niklaus absently said.

He held my gaze as if in challenge, and I met it with a pleasant smile. This man might be the oldest person I’d ever met, giving him plenty of experience in catching deceit, but if he knew that the name I’d given him was false, he couldn’t accuse me of it. Not yet. Doing so would be impolite.

A gasp broke our staring contest. With her hand to her mouth, Leski shone wide eyes toward my feet before sprinting at me.

As my reflexes activated, I slid out of her path, setting my stance for trouble, but I wasn’t her target. Falling into a crouch, Leski reached for my silent shadow, and for a moment, my heart seized in my chest while I scrambled to remember if I’d set Ace into an aggressive behavioral mode.

But when Leski rubbed his chest, he didn’t move from where he was sitting, slowly wagging his tail instead.

“Aren’t you beautiful?” she said before glancing at me. “What’s her name?”

“*His* name is Ace,” I said, “and if you wouldn’t mind, I’d prefer it if you leave him be for now. He’s working and doesn’t need any distractions while doing that.”

“Yes, Leski dear. Leave the dog alone,” Niklaus said. “You’ll get dander on your dress.”

Leski’s freckled face folded on itself, and I lifted a hand to stop her protest.

“You can give him all of the love and attention you want when he’s not working,” I said. “I’m sure he’d like the comfort. He’s lost a home too.”

Jerking her head toward me, Leski gaped with her lips parting, and rejecting her pity, I turned to her father. He wasn’t much better, though. With his face pinched, he looked slightly green, and when I cleared my throat, this picture of discomfort only eased a little.

“Dinner?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” Niklaus said. “Yes, let’s... If you’ll come with me”

He swept out of the room, but I paused before following him, gesturing for Leski to go ahead of me. Still crouched, she examined me through narrowed eyes.

“You lost your home?” she asked. “How did something like that happen?”

“More easily than you might think,” I said. “Please, Leski. Let’s not alarm your father.”

Making a face, Leski straightened, brushing off the front of her dress.

“My father could use more excitement in his life,” she said.

But she left the room.

As soon as she was out of sight, I rubbed my face. Korix had been right. The next few days would be a *blast*.

We took dinner in a dining room. Niklaus placed me on his left, which I found gratifying. After years of practice, I didn’t have a dominant hand anymore, and since most people in Lutov were right-handed, having full range of motion in the opposite—the hand no one expected—would give me a slight advantage right now.

Niklaus used the most formal of etiquette at his table. We waited beside our relegated chairs until the drones had brought our food out, only sitting once they’d finished. I had Ace lay behind me, unable to get him any further away from Niklaus without breaking him out of follow mode.

Here, practically every other Lutovish family would begin their feast, but Niklaus was a founder. He came from a time with much stiffer social norms.

So, I didn’t lift my utensils off of the table or take a single bite of the food in front of me. Folding my hands in my lap, I gave the head of this household my full attention, which he seemed to find surprising. Even still, he swirled the wine in his glass before sipping it and tasting his food. Lowering his glass and utensils, he nodded.

“Satisfactory,” he said. “Let us share in the bounty spread before us and enjoy one another’s company.”

“Gratitude to the provider,” I said.

Hearing my voice mingling with hers, Leski rapidly blinked, but Niklaus seemed pleased.

Finally allowed to do so, I dug into my food and suppressed a disappointed sigh. This dish was good. Of that, there was no doubt, but it tasted heavily of refectory preparation. Korix and I could blow it out of the water with the simplest of our meals.

Perhaps I could persuade Niklaus to let me cook for him while I was here, assuming I could find the ingredients I’d need. Doing it wouldn’t be the same without Korix at my side, though.

How was he? Was he safe?

Hell. These thoughts were making my eyes burn while my chest felt like it was collapsing on itself. So, no matter how much I hated doing it, I took everything Korix-related in me, shoved it deep down inside—in the place where my emotions went—and threw a lock on it.

“Garreth, what is it that you do to advance your House?” Niklaus asked.

In the middle of a bite, I took my time with chewing and swallowing. What a way to start a conversation. If he continued with personal questions like this throughout the meal, speaking only the truth without giving myself away would be difficult.

“I do nothing for a House,” I said. “But for Lutov? I do many things, most of which are inappropriate topics for this table.”

“Ah, yes,” Niklaus said. “We should shield Leski from House Kolb violence.”

That... hadn’t been what I’d meant at all. Where in the *hell* had he pulled that conclusion from my words?

“Why would you think I need protection from it?” Leski asked. “I go through House Kolb rotations, the same as any other unHoused. I know what they do.”

“True,” Niklaus said with a nod, “but the general instruction you receive during rotations is different from the nitty-gritty details of a Kolb mission. Isn’t that right, Garreth?”

Wow. What a disdainful tone. He *really* didn’t like House Kolb, did he?

“During missions, many things occur that aren’t taught to the unHoused, yes, but everyone relies on the basics. I couldn’t tell you how many times a simple disarm has saved my life,” I said.

“Mother Time, Fifth Stratus Karise despaired of teaching me that technique during my rotations. How is she, by the way? Still as crotchety as ever?”

With a laugh, Leski nearly choked on her food.

“Yes!” she said. “I swear. If she ever stops frowning, it means the world’s ended, and we’re all doomed.”

I chuckled, even as I remembered when a phenomenon like that had happened. When she’d first shown my class how to do a disarm, I’d purposefully botched my initial attempt, having spent the week prior to that already practicing the technique.

After that first ‘failure’, Karise wouldn’t let me sit back down. She’d made me try to disarm my opponent again and again until I’d gotten frustrated enough to drop my pretense. Once my opponent had been on the ground with her stolen rifle pressed to her head, Karise had laughed as if I’d put on the funniest of comedy routines.

Turning to Niklaus, I said, “But I’m sure all of the Houses, even Kirst, keep some of their knowledge from the unHoused, yes?”

“You’re not wrong. Kirst keeps many things to ourselves,” Niklaus said. “But from what you’ve said, I’d guess you agree with my daughter. If not to shield Leski, why would you keep the particulars of your role to yourself?”

Hell, he wouldn’t let this go, would he? Carefully, I rested my fork and knife on my plate before folding my hands above it, purposefully hiding half of my face.

“Frankly, sir, most people find my efforts to better Lutov... unpalatable,” I said. “I’d rather not ruin a lovely dinner by discussing them.”

“I see,” Niklaus shakily said.

Did he? Please say that it was so because I truly didn’t want to continue with this topic.

What had this peek into my life made Leski think of me? She was giving me a strange look, one I was having trouble with deciphering. Not knowing what she was thinking put an unpleasant bubble in my stomach, and my skin prickled when I shifted my eyes away from her.

But then, Niklaus rallied, launching into another subject, and I could relinquish my focus on his daughter. For the rest of dinner, I participated in the group’s small talk to a minimal degree, enough to seem engaged but nothing more.

Despite having locked Korix away, he kept popping into my thoughts. How long did he mean to make me wait here? I wanted to be with him, working toward answers, not sitting here, listening to Niklaus talk about... Ibis?

“-don’t see why the *bakava* rebel as often as they do,” he said. “We’ve brought them civilization and security. Why wouldn’t they want what we offer them?”

Idly chasing food remnants across my plate, I asked, “Have you ever visited Ibis?”

Frowning, Niklaus pulled back a fraction.

"I-" he said before shaking his head. "Once. A long time ago."

"Then, of course you don't understand," I said.

Leski, having gotten as close to a slouch as current etiquette would allow, straightened while Niklaus raised an eyebrow.

"Are you one of the people who advocate for the *bakava's* freedom, then?" he asked. "I must admit. I didn't expect to find someone like that in House Kolb."

Damn... that was a lot of scorn for a group of people that caused little to no problems in Lutov.

"I don't participate in those social movements, no. Ibis doesn't concern me, not when I have more than enough to handle with Lutov alone," I said, "but I understand the children of Ibis' frustration. Yes, they may get our version of 'civilization' from us, but how do we make them pay for it? By forcing them into deadly wars at the whims of our high Strata? By becoming House Zan's unwilling test subjects? By enduring the hungry desires of our visitors to their shores? It's no wonder they rebel, time and again, against us. Any human would."

With a laugh in his voice, Niklaus said, "But they're not human. Merely *bakava*."

Why was I arguing about this with him? There was no point to it, not when he was so unlikely to change his position, and if I kept pushing, I might anger my host. So, I inclined my head to him.

"Perhaps."

Niklaus seemed pleased by my partial concession, signaling for the drones to begin cleaning up, and while they did, Leski caught my eye. With an elbow resting on the table, she cupped her chin, continuing with the unabashed stare that she'd kept up throughout dinner.

I didn't know what to make of her, but then, I didn't yet have enough variables to complete my analysis. I *did* know that she intrigued me, but I wasn't sure in what way. Was it merely curiosity about an interesting person, or was there something more?

With the table cleared, Niklaus rose from his chair with us joining him.

"Now that we've finished dinner, I was hoping that Garreth could join me in my study," he said. "Leski dear, would you mind seeing the dog fed while we talk?"

"Not at all," Leski said before turning to me. "Will that be ok?"

"It shouldn't be a problem. Ace is very friendly," I said. "If you could please come out where he can see you?"

While she rounded the table, I uncoiled Ace's leash from where I'd stashed it, clipping it to his collar. When she reached us, I handed Leski the lead while he watched, and a tail wag answered the unspoken command that had changed who he should follow.

“Once he’s eaten, you can leave him in my assigned quarters,” I said. “For a short period, he should be fine alone.”

Delicately holding the leash, Leski glanced between me and Ace.

“How do I...?”

“Just start walking,” I said. “He’ll follow.”

As if testing what I’d said, Leski took a single step toward the door, and Ace climbed as quickly to his feet as his old bones would let him. Soon enough, they were heading out of the dining room.

## **TTS Chapter Forty-Six**

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