

Chapter 47: An Ornerly Host

Niklaus led me away from the dining room. He took us on a convoluted route to his office, which made me wonder if he wanted to keep me from learning its precise location.

I reserved my curiosity about why he wanted to speak with me. What was the point in speculating on that when I'd learn the answer within the next five minutes?

We entered Niklaus' office, which was everything that I'd expected from a high Stratus—wood everywhere, more bound books, and every other example of plenty that one could want—and behind us, the door's lock thunked into place. Before he could address me, I was down on one knee with my head bowed.

"All honor and glory to one of the courageous few," I said before lifting my eyes. "Please, forgive me for not greeting you properly before. I didn't know you were a founder before our meal."

Sighing through his nose, Niklaus waved at me.

"Get up," he said. "If I wanted your deference, I'd have told you my status when you entered my home."

I'd figured as much, but my show of respect might derail anything antagonistic that he might want to say to me. Now that I'd been fed, I'd like to catch a couple of hours sleep before doing a more thorough search of this house, and I'd prefer it if I didn't have to deal with a cranky host before then.

As I stalked around the office, making a show of examining it, I thought my ploy might have worked, but alas, it wasn't destined to be.

"Who are you, really?" Niklaus asked.

Glancing over my shoulder, I found him leaning on his desk—

"I told you. I'm Garreth."

—before returning to my inspection.

"No. That's not your name," Niklaus said. "You said you're Talira's grandchild. She has three of those: Feena, Zaeden, and Pheniks."

"You can't be Feena. She was seen at the Founder's Day Ball, looking distinctly feminine in form, and transitioning the body to match a perceived gender takes more than two days, even with an accelerant to help."

“You can’t be Pheniks. I’ve met that boy. Not only is he House Zan instead of Kolb, but he comes nowhere near your social adeptness.

“And you most definitely can’t be Zaeden. No one’s seen him publicly for eleven years, and his official record proclaims him as missing. In House Kolb, that means dead, especially for someone so young.

“So, who are you? And don’t lie to me this time.”

Huh. I’d always wondered what Talira had transcribed into my public record after Korix had taken me out of my old life, although I’d never been curious enough to check it for myself. Still. Making people think I was dead without outright lying? That was good.

I was sure my status would change to deceased once I took over as the *Lokke Vitras*, but at that point, it would be true. Zaeden would be dead.

None of which solved the problem I was facing now.

“Niklaus, you owe *shukusen* Talira a favor, and she wants you to repay it by providing me with hospitality until I leave your lovely home,” I said. “Is that correct?”

“Well, yes, but-”

Rounding on him, I poked his chest.

“Are you showing me hospitality right now?”

Niklaus set his jaw.

“I deserve to know who’s sleeping in my home,” he said. “I deserve to know if my daughter or I am in danger by having you here.”

Leski. A woman with such promise. Was I threatening her with my presence?

No.

“You’ll find no danger in me,” I said, “and if I’ve brought it with me, I will protect your family from it.”

Snorting, Niklaus said, “Against *any* threat? Can you do that?”

I dropped my finger from where it had been resting with a smile tugging at my lips.

“I am capable,” I said.

With pretty much everything.

“My abilities, however, aren’t in question. Your repayment of a favor is,” I said. “Will you default on a debt, Niklaus?”

One of his eyes spasmed.

“I would never,” he said, “which means I’ll have to trust that someone as young as you knows what he’s talking about.”

I was getting... *extremely* sick of him implying that my physical age should have any effect on our situation. Given who I was, I had far more experience than him when it came to protecting people, and even if he was only aware of my association with House Kolb, Niklaus should know that. Why the hell should age count more than experience, especially when it came to this?

Still, as he groaned while passing a hand over his face, I contained my irritation, watching him wrestle with his dilemma without pity. There was a reason I’d never ask a favor of someone.

Finally, I gave Niklaus the last push he’d need to let me stay without protest.

“I can see how much this troubles you. I’m sorry to have caused it. It wasn’t my intention, believe me,” I said. “Let me collect my things, and I’ll leave you-”

“No! You’ll do no such thing,” Niklaus barked. “I was out of line, calling you into question like that. Please, stay for as long as you need.”

Retreating a step, I bowed.

“You are generous,” I said.

“Generous enough to realize that you’re probably exhausted, and I’ve kept you awake for far longer than necessary,” Niklaus said. “Go to bed, Garreth. We can speak further in the morning.”

“Thank you,” I said, “and a good evening to you.”

Niklaus said something to the same effect, but I relegated processing its specifics to my mind’s base operations, focusing on getting out of the main house as quickly as possible.

Ace was waiting for me in the guesthouse. His anxious panting had started up again, so sitting against a wall, I loved on him for a good five minutes. Once we were done, I had him jump on the bed in a fit of spite, wondering what Niklaus would think of having dog hair in his guest’s sheets, but I wasn’t letting Ace sleep on a hardwood floor.

With him squared away, I left him snoring on the bed to complete my typical nighttime routine: care for the body, set what traps I could, and resume the narration of my current book once I’d gotten settled in the pillows and sheets. After I’d turned the lights off, Ace shifted to lie against me, and with his body heat at my side and a soothing voice telling me a story, I could almost forget that two days had passed since our home’s glassing.

I also hadn't heard from Korix, and he'd said he'd only be gone for two days. Why hadn't he contacted me?

Almost, worry took me over, forcing me into an unwise course of action, but somehow—I really couldn't explain how—I squashed it, shoving it back down to reasonable, oh-Mother-Time-he-was-dead levels of anxiety.

After I'd managed that, my personal lullaby was enough to overcome any leftover fearful thoughts, and I drifted into dreams, ready to wake up in two or three hours.

Raucous tapping on metal drew me to consciousness. Still half under, I patted at the bed, searching for a weapon, and got fur and a rough tongue instead.

"The... hell?" I mumbled.

"Oh, mysterious guest!" someone sang. "Are you awake?"

A relatively unknown voice calling in such close proximity to me cleared sleep's last cobwebs out of my head, and I jerked off of the bed, nearly setting off one of my traps while scanning the room.

Sunlight was streaming through the windows.

I checked the time.

"What. the. fuck?"

I'd slept for *nine hours*. I hadn't spent so much time in dreamland since my first year under Korix's care.

Damn, what a waste of perfectly good dark hours, the most ideal time for sneaking through my unsuspecting host's home. What on earth could have made my body jump off its habitual track? Could last night's food have been drugged? I thought I'd have noticed if it had. Maybe...

My eyes landed on Ace, waiting for permission to jump down. When was the last time another living being had slept in the same bed as me? Korix never did, getting up before dreams could claim us. I could see why he left, if this was the consequence of sleeping beside a warm body.

Not that such sound slumber was an insurmountable challenge. If one simply set an alarm in one's array and-

"I'm coming inside."

Oh, hell. The reason I was awake.

"Please, don't!" I shouted. "I'll come to you. Just... give me a minute."

I flew through my ritual of disarming traps, hiding evidence of them as I went along. Once the room was safe for the average citizen, I shoved my arms and legs through sleeves and pant legs, all while tripping toward the door. It opened to an earnest, freckled face, and once it had, Leski cocked her head at me.

“Are you ok?” she asked. “You seem flustered.”

“I was just...”

Jerking my thumb over my shoulder, I glanced behind me and rethought what I’d meant to say.

“Never mind. Can I help you with something?”

“I wanted to invite you to have breakfast with me,” Leski said.

She leaned to the side, revealing a drone with two trays hovering in front of it.

“But if you need more time, I can wait.”

“Why would you think I need more time?” I asked.

Pointing at me, Leski said, “Your shirt’s inside-out.”

I glanced down—

“Oh.”

—and pulled the offending garment over my head, turning it right-side-out to a choked noise. Looking toward its source, I found Leski covering her eyes with her face flushed.

Crap. I wasn’t at home, and from what I’d experienced so far, this household was steeped in traditions that most people in Lutov had long abandoned. Like modesty.

“Maybe... you should meet me in the garden in ten minutes,” Leski said. “Will that be enough time?”

“Plenty,” I said, shrugging into my shirt. “Listen. I’m sorr-”

“Bring Ace,” Leski interrupted.

She jabbed a finger into my room before racing toward the main house. Stuck in the doorway, I slowly shook my head before facing Ace.

“The hell is wrong with me today, buddy?”

Whatever it was, I did my best to shake it off while getting ready.

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