

# Chapter 48: Breakfast and Unwelcome News

As I got dressed, I reviewed my list of mysteries, the ones that had once more begun flocking to me.

A few days ago, someone from Cerullis had helped to destroy Korix's estate for unknown reasons. Reasons that I suspected had something to do with the attempt to dissolve the Crescent five years ago. This most recent scheme had happened the morning after Cerullis' *shukusen* had invited me to their headquarters, hoping that I could serve as a character witness for Jastin's elevation.

Did Alezand's request mean that he was once more in the dark about antagonistic forces in his own House? I couldn't decide which would be worse: that he knew and an entire House was poised against Korix and me or that he was incompetent enough to be ignorant of it.

Fortunately, I had a way to determine where Alezand's loyalties lay: requesting Jastin's official record. If that man truly was ready for elevation, it wouldn't eliminate the possibility that the *shukusen* had turned violent, but if the opposite was true, it meant that Alezand had lied, and that would tell me plenty.

Hell, it had taken me far too long to think of doing that.

Even with my *Lokke Vitras* privileges, though, receiving an answer to my request would take a few hours. Considering how highly we valued what little privacy we had, Lutovish records were the only digitized part of the homeland that humans still regulated. Because of this, requests like mine could get backlogged, and since I'd tagged mine with no priority changes, my *Lokke Vitras* privileges would only push it so far ahead in line.

I wanted that time, though, because the second set of mysteries that I'd stumbled into had offered a fresh, new avenue of investigation. A few hours delay on the information that I needed was unlikely to hurt anyone, and in the meantime, I could get to know Leski.

She was waiting on the garden's fringes for me, perched on a stone bench framed by rose bushes. Trays rested beside her with breakfast food on them, and as I came closer, she tucked a strand of silver hair behind an ear, adjusting one tray's angle.

"Are you ready to greet the day now?" she asked.

"Yes. Sorry about before," I said, rubbing my neck. "I-"

"Sit down," Leski said, pointing opposite herself.

She still hadn't looked at me.

Once I'd done as she'd said, I freed Ace's ball from a pocket, looking over the garden for a good place to throw it, but this space was rigidly organized with hedges all over, boxing us in. Poor Ace, gazing at the balls as if it were the center of his world, might have to go without the exercise that I'd had planned for him.

The ball was plucked out of my hand, and Leski *threw* it. It arched high overhead, hurtling deep into the garden, and Ace shot after it, crashing through every plant in his way.

I winced at the broken branches he'd left behind. This was why I'd meant to put the ball away. Who knew how Niklaus would respond to damage like that?

Leski, however, was bouncing on the bench, laughing as she pattered her hands together in front of her mouth, so maybe... maybe that man's wrath would be worth it.

"I'm glad you like him," I said. "He hasn't met many people, just me and my... teacher."

"Why's that?" Leski asked.

"Oh, we don't get out much," I said, "and before losing our home, no one came to visit either."

"That's sad," Leski sighed.

And she turned toward me. And my explanation that we liked our solitude flew out the window.

Ducking my head, I retrieved my plate, digging into a blueberry crepe, but when Leski made no move for her own meal, I slowed down my rate of consumption. Until Ace returned, she watched me. I could feel her eyes on my skull, even if I couldn't see them.

Soon enough, Ace trotted through a hedge, coming to drop the ball at my feet, but I nudged it toward Leski. She'd seemed to like throwing it before. Why not offer her another opportunity?

After taking the ball, she made no comment on the slobber surely coating it, merely throwing it in another impressive arch. Damn, she had a good arm.

Wiping her hands on her shorts, she asked, "Who are you?"

My fork froze mid-air. It seemed my stay here would follow a theme, at least when it came to me.

"What I mean is, are you Garreth or Zaeden?" she said. "One of those is clearly a persona, either the man you've shown my father or the one you've shown me. I'd like to know which it is."

I set my plate down, forcing myself to look at her.

"What makes you think I'll tell you the truth?" I asked.

Leski didn't move, but somehow, I got the feeling that she was looking down her nose at me.

"You won't lie to me," she said.

She wasn't wrong, but she couldn't know that yet. Why did she trust me now?

"My name is Zaeden," I said. "I don't want your father to know who I am, so with him, I'm playing the part of Garreth. Will you tell him?"

"If I did, what would you do?" Leski asked.

Shrugging, I said, "Discredit you as much as possible. Play it by ear if that didn't work. If absolutely necessary, I'd leave this place after erasing every trace of my presence."

Cocking her head, Leski stared off into the distance, sucking her lip, before nodding once.

"A good answer. An *honest* one," she said. "You pass."

Lifting her plate, she started in on her breakfast, reversing our positions.

"The last question was to see if I'd lie," I said in monotone.

Scuffing her foot through the grass, Leski nodded.

"That's..."

Mother Time, what was the best way to put this?

"Terrible? Manipulative? Cruel?" Leski said before softly laughing. "I know. I've been told as much often enough."

And she made no apology for what she'd done, something that she saw as deplorable behavior. Why did that make me smile?

"It was wise," I said. "Don't let anyone put you down for doing what you must to keep yourself and your loved ones safe-"

Ace burst into view, cutting me off, and thankful that he'd stopped me before I'd tumbled into a lecture, I took a turn with the ball, letting Leski eat.

Once I was done with my throw, I joined her, and within a minute, both of us had finished our food, although I continually scanned the garden for Niklaus while we did. He was sure to come looking for us soon.

Returning her plate to the bench, Leski tapped her fork on it while leaning toward me.

"You intrigue me, Zaeden," she said.

"Thank y-?"

A returned request shut me up. Tagged with the highest priority, it was the official record for Justin, and its arrival had come much earlier than anticipated, which started a slow creep of ice crystals along my gut.

Standing, I mumbled an excuse to Leski, calling for Ace while I created space between me and her. Only then did I open the report.

*Birth name: Justin, it read. Current name: Jayla. House: Cerullis. Stratus: First.*

It continued, detailing how Jayla had obtained her newly acquired position, but I barely absorbed what I'd read, already having the information that I needed.

Alezand had lied.

A First Stratus, which Jayla was, didn't get elevated. When their *shukusen* was ready to retire or move on to the Collective, they became the head of their House, but that wasn't considered an elevation.

Which meant *Alezand had lied*. Which meant he'd probably directed his entire House to the purpose of killing Korix and me so that he could proceed with his plans unimpeded.

Korix had taken off to infiltrate Cerullis three days ago, and not only did he not know what I'd learned but he hadn't contacted me either.

I'd been *fucking right* to be worried. SHIT.

Panic's flames threatened to consume me, but the gust of a deep breath turned them to embers, present but not hot enough to make me reckless. Absently, I rubbed Ace's head.

"We'll find him, and once we're together, we'll work through this, like we always do," I said. "Everything will be fine."

He nuzzled me, and spinning, I strode to Leski.

"Does your family keep a skycruiser on the estate's grounds?" I asked.

"Yes," Leski said. "Why-?"

"I need you to take me to it after I've collected my things," I said.

Once I was in the air, I'd contact Talira, updating her on what I'd learned. Hopefully, she'd know which House Cerullis facility Korix's persona had been assigned to.

In my wake, Leski struggled to keep up.

"Wait!" she called. "You can borrow a skycruiser if you need it, but my father will be furious if you leave without saying goodbye. He should be greeting our newest arrival right now, but if you delay

your departure-”

“Newest arrival?” I asked. “As in another guest?”

Hmm. Why hadn’t Niklaus told me about this? Had he just forgotten or-?

The question vanished from my head as I rounded a corner and the front of the main house came into view. By its door, Niklaus was chatting with *shukusen* Alezand of House Cerullis, my newest enemy.

## **TTS Chapter Forty-Eight**

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