

# Chapter 49: He's a Surprise

Darting back around the corner, I shot out an arm, driving Leski into the wall beside me.

What was *he* doing here? Come on! What were the chances that Alezand would show up not five minutes after I'd received confirmation that he'd had a hand in my home's glassing?

"Zae-" Leski started.

Rolling to push her into the brick, I pressed a hand over her mouth.

"Don't say that name," I whispered.

Damn, those brown eyes had gone wide. With a wince, I pulled my hand away.

"Can you read sub-vocals?" I said.

When she nodded, I thanked my luck. Not many people outside of House Kolb opted to have that functionality added to their arrays, and holding this conversation via messages would have taken forever.

"I have reason to believe that your father's newest guest wants me dead," I said. "He's unlikely to be a danger to you or your family, but I don't know what will happen if he learns that I'm here. So, I need you to join your father and act like nothing's wrong. If your second guest asks about me, you must only refer to me as Garreth. Tell him I've gone walking the moors. He should believe that. Can you do as I've asked?"

I expected a swarm of questions or hysteria from her. Instead, I got concern tinged with fear.

"He really wants to... kill you?" Leski asked in sub-vocals.

Oh, how I missed the reverence that the average citizen paid to life.

"Me and someone I hold most dear," I said.

Her face hardened into sharp lines, even if worry also danced in her eyes.

"Then, I'll do everything I can to help," she said.

"Thank you."

I slowly freed her, watching for signs that she'd only been telling me what I'd wanted to hear, but shaking herself, Leski calmly walked around the corner.

Now, what should I do? Should I continue with my plan, or should I take this presented opportunity to spy on Alezand?

He had to have come here, so soon after attacking Korix and me, for a reason. The question was why.

In the end, I had Ace stay where he was before finding the closest entrance to the main house. While sneaking through the place, I tapped into the feeds of every recorder here, but when Niklaus and Alezand came inside, I cursed under my breath.

They were gesturing as if they were having a conversation, but the recorders weren't catching sound from them. Sub-vocals like what I'd used with Leski, it had to be, and these recorders didn't pick up on the subtleties needed to read them. I'd have to guess where those two were headed and hope they'd return to speaking aloud once they felt safe.

While most of my attention went to tracking them, I also kept an eye on Leski. Once Alezand and Niklaus had left her in the house's foyer, she paced there for a while with one hand to her forehead before throwing them both overhead and stalking off.

Meanwhile, I was fairly certain of where the other two were headed, so I sped ahead of them to get into position. The small sitting room, overlooking the garden, was well-lit and empty, save for a few chairs and most importantly, a line of built-in showcases along one wall.

With a running leap, I vaulted atop these, spreading myself flat. When entering a room, most people didn't look above eye level unless they were expecting an intruder, and if either of these men happened to look up when they came inside, an ornately decorative crenelation rose several centimeters above the top of the showcases. It didn't hide me completely, but with the shadows it created, the average eye would skip over the lump that was me.

Mother Time, what I wouldn't give for the camouflage technique that Korix had used at the ball, although I was grateful that he'd taught me how to blend in without it right now.

I went motionless in the split second before Niklaus and Alezand glided into the room, heading for a pair of chairs.

"*Avan*, I hate sub-vocals," Niklaus said.

"Careful. You're letting your age show," Alezand replied with a chuckle. "*Avan?*"

"You know, it wasn't that long ago that people on both sides of the water used the old word for life-"

"I'm aware," Alezand interrupted. "Can we please get started? I'm expected elsewhere soon."

Making a face, Niklaus poured drinks from the decanter on the table between them, offering one to Alezand.

“So, what’s next?” he asked.

Swirling the liquid in his tumbler, Alezand stared at his drink before downing half of it in one gulp.

“We need more weapons,” he said over his tumbler’s rim.

Weapons? He’d come here to ask for weapons? Why would Alezand think a House Kirst member could get him anything like that?

“More?” Niklaus spluttered. “What I’ve already given you could level Xygek! Years ago, I gave you a damn Dissolver, for Mother Time’s sake!”

Wait, *what?* That was...

Not much more unbelievable than finding Ibisian sympathizers in House Vaessa. Mother Time, I should remember to keep my mind open.

But with this in mind, it meant that Fyester, Tatum, and their compatriots hadn't been working alone so long ago. Having proof that someone else had had a hand in their crimes should bring me peace, but instead, I was set awlirl.

How had Korix missed this? Had he fallen so deeply into what was eating at his mind that he’d missed evidence of it? If so, why hadn’t he told me about his deterioration?

“You did as you were told because you must, just like me and my House,” Alezand snapped. “Ages ago, you and the others made a pact with something you didn’t understand. *They* would help you drive those from beyond the stars back to their home, and in return, you would one day give *them* what *they* most desire. Unfortunately for us both, the time has come to pay that price.”

“Rowan and the rest should never have gone to *them*. It may have taken longer and cost more lives, but we could have defeated our enemy on our own,” Niklaus said. “Hell, your predecessor, Lord Asher, started looking into *them*, hoping to find an advantage that we could use in case *they* betrayed us-”

“I don’t care to hear a history lesson right now,” Alezand said. “Like most of Lutov, I’d rather let your generation fade into nothing, content with our dramatization of it.”

“Even if it’s insultingly inaccurate?” Niklaus hissed.

Alezand chopped a hand through the air.

“All that matters is that the Founders did what they had to, and now, so will you,” he said. “Use your status as a founder, contact the friends you have in Kolb and Zan, and get my House more weapons. Otherwise, *they* may come to make *their* greetings in person.”

“There’s no need for threats, young one,” Niklaus said. “I know how *they* work, remember?”

The two of them fell silent, each lost in his own thoughts while I tried to wrap my head around what they'd said. Apparently, a member of Kirst, the House in charge of *education*—of all things—could get his hands on weapons. That fun discovery was easier to comprehend than the fact that this plot had something to do with Lutov's ancient history, with those from beyond the stars.

And what these two were suggesting contradicted everything that House Kirst taught about our war with those alien beings. If true, could it mean that the origins of the *Lokke Vitras*, mostly centered around that time, were just as false?

"What will you do with them?" Niklaus asked.

"The weapons?" Alezand said. "I don't know. *They* don't tell me anything. I just follow their orders, trying to avoid a visit from- from *their* Favored."

Both men shuddered, and Niklaus set his tumbler on the table.

"Is there anything else?" he asked.

"You know there is," Alezand said.

Slumping, Niklaus nodded.

"Leski. You want to check on her," he said. "Mother Time, I regret submitting an application for that girl more often than not. She's so rebellious and behaves not at all as a good daughter should, but Laryse wanted a child, and I loved that woman..."

Falling silent, he visibly swallowed before shaking himself.

"All right. You can join us for lunch, although it won't be for a few hours yet. Hopefully, that will work with your schedule. If so, you can enjoy my home's hospitality until then," he said. "I should warn you, though. I have another guest staying with me right now, here as repayment for a favor. He's House Kolb and high Stratus from what I can tell. If you'd like, I can refrain from inviting him to our meal."

I stopped breathing, certain that one of them would search the room after the reminder of a possible operative in their midst.

"A high Stratus Kolb member, you say?" Alezand said, tapping his lips before smiling. "You should have him come. I'm curious now."

Niklaus shrugged.

"If that's what you want," he said. "Now, may I return to my business, or did you have other inconveniences to bother me with?"

Rising to his feet, Alezand said, "Not at all, although I'd appreciate it if you stopped treating me with such hostility. I don't like our situation any more than you do."

“That doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like *you*, something I’m sure you can just as easily say about me, but I take your point,” Niklaus said. “Make yourself at home, *shukusen*. A drone will fetch you when lunch is ready.”

“Much appreciated,” Alezand said.

He left, and for nearly a minute, Niklaus sat motionless. Then, he hunched forward, clapping his hands over his mouth.

“FUUUUUUCK!” he shouted into them.

Vigorously rubbing his face, he got to his feet and shook out his arms. Putting his appearance in order, he strode out of the room, and through the house’s recorders, I watched him travel to his office while Alezand got settled in the library. Then, I rolled to the floor.

“This is bad,” I said.

Should I extract now? I had enough of a case for Talira to order an assault on House Cerullis.

Damn. One House fighting another, probably out in the open too. I hadn’t thought it could happen, but maybe if I was lucky, it wouldn’t.

But seriously. What was I thinking? Somehow, I’d stumbled onto a greater threat to Lutov than anything Korix had faced, and I wasn’t him. I wasn’t the *Lokke Vitras*. How was I supposed to neutralize such great danger? *How did I save us?*

“By taking it one step at a time,” I hissed at myself.

So, first. Did I leave with what I’d learned or stay, hoping for more details?

I wished I could just send a message to Talira from here, but if I did, one of my targets might note or intercept it. Without *Lokke Vitras* privileges, neither of them could break the security processes on my communications, not in a timely manner at least, but even knowing that a message had been sent from here to Xygek would put them on alert far sooner than I’d like.

And much as I might want to leave, in part so I could go find Korix *right fucking now*, I didn’t have enough information to do that yet. What I’d learned would probably rip the obvious enemy out of Cerullis’ heart, but nothing would be done about the mysterious *them*, the ones I had yet to identify. A group that had obviously been manipulating at least one Lutovish House for years.

I wouldn’t let *them* get away this time. No one else would die because *they* had *their* fingers stuck in someone’s brain. I’d find the culprit that was hiding behind Cerullis’ actions, and I would crush them.

Which meant I was staying for lunch. Which meant I needed to prepare.