

Chapter 51: The Enemy in Your House

Avoiding Leski for the rest of the day became the most annoying trial I'd endured in years. Having her constantly chasing me around the estate was bad enough, but when that effort failed, she plopped in front of the guesthouse's door and refused to move. I had to bypass my own security, set earlier this morning, to get inside so I could let Ace out.

All of which was... *irritating*.

I knew why she was looking for me. In her place, I'd want answers too, but now that she likely no longer needed my protection, I should fade out of her life, and it would be better if that process started today, even if it complicated my afternoon. It would hurt her less.

When night rolled around, however, Leski gave up, heading for bed, and once she was in her room, I stopped monitoring her. The recorder outside of her door would alert me if she left her room, but I wouldn't actively watch her anymore. I had more important things to do.

There were probably...

No. There were *definitely* easier ways to get into Niklaus' bedroom than the route I'd chosen, but in recent months, I'd gotten out of practice with my acrobatics, which the route I'd chosen would require. Plus, I deserved to do something fun after this evening.

The estate's main building was relatively plain on the outside: sheer walls with windows and little else to decorate them, which meant practically no handholds. What might normally be a problem, however, became less of one due to the many towering trees that Niklaus had planted near the house.

Jumping through the branches of one to reach the height I'd need took me maybe two minutes, and then came the leap for the roof. I nearly missed, and while I hauled myself over the roof's eave, my fingertips screamed about their newly torn state.

It was a rather embarrassing performance, all told. If he'd been here, Korix would have made me climb to the ground and start all over again. Fortunately, he was nowhere nearby.

Mother Time, I hoped he was ok.

Racing across shingles, I sucked on my fingers, minimizing any biological traces I might leave behind, while my body worked to heal the abrasions on them. By the time I was standing over Niklaus' bedroom window, I was out of breath and sorely missing my mag hook. It would have

made this process much easier but no... I'd had to have a challenge.

I hated it when poor decisions came back to bite me, especially when that happened so quickly.

Also, the piece of tech that I wanted had been vaporized in the glassing, like the rest of Korix's estate, and I hadn't had an opportunity to replace it. So, I supposed I couldn't have used a mag hook anyway, but who was paying attention to details like that?

After dropping to hang from the window's sill, I winced at my once more scraped to hell fingers, and wrenching the glass panes open, I flowed into the darkness beyond. Niklaus was peacefully sleeping in his bed, and seeing this unguarded image, I almost regretted what was coming.

Almost.

Once I was arranged, I sent a request for the room's lights to turn on, and with brightness splashing over him, Niklaus slowly came to awareness. When this was finished, he started thrashing, but he had a hard time of it with me sitting on his hips.

I'd often listened to stories where the hero waited in a darkened corner for their enemy to wake up so they could get answers, and I could see how that might be perceived as a threat. In my experience, though, nothing induced more terror in a target than having them wake up to a stranger pinning them to their bed with a gun's muzzle in their face.

The trick to this method was keeping the target subdued until they realized that they were helpless. Reaching that state took Niklaus quite a while, but when he did, he switched to indignation.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he snapped. "I'll report this to Talira if you don't leave right now! You'll be reduced in Stratus..."

I ignored him as he continued with his rant. This was a somewhat atypical reaction for someone in his situation but not unexpected.

"Last night, you wanted to know who I am," I said, interrupting his tirade. "Are you still curious about that?"

Niklaus screwed his face up while its hue reddened.

"So, you're not Garreth, as I thought," he spat.

I took a moment to wipe away the saliva that his enthusiasm had launched into my face, inspecting that hand for a heartbeat.

Distastefully flicking my fingers, I said, "No. My name is Zaeden."

I'd always found watching the process of realization in someone else an interesting experience. It did different things to everyone. For Niklaus, it made him go limp until he was like a corpse

beneath me.

“But... Zaeden is dead,” he said.

Clicking my tongue, I tapped my rifle on his skull.

“You’re not wrong. I am, in essence, not one of the living,” I said, “and you know what that means, don’t you, Niklaus?”

His jaw worked, but he said nothing, and after I’d given him a moment, I sighed.

“I’m the *Lokke Vitras* to come, which should scare even a founder like you,” I said, “because it means that I’m well within my rights to be here. If I decided to squeeze this trigger and end your life, I’d also be within my rights because you, good sir, have threatened Lutov.”

Niklaus had turned nearly as white as his sheets, convulsively swallowing until he opened his mouth. Probably to plead for his life.

“Fortunately for you, I need something you possess,” I said before he could get started. “So, I’m going to get off of you. I’m going to dissipate my rifle, and the two of us are going to have a civil chat. *You* will not call for help. You will not send any messages while we’re speaking, and you will not run away from me. I’m more than capable of countering these and any other cries for help that you may want to make, but I prefer to limit the amount of work that I must do. So, please. Answer my questions, and I’ll leave you be. Do we understand one another?”

Niklaus cautiously nodded, bouncing the metal circle of a gun’s muzzle on his head, and I hopped to the floor with my rifle gone before my feet had hit it.

“Excellent!”

When I smiled at him, Niklaus shivered, shuffling backward until his back had hit his bed’s headboard.

Clearing his throat, he asked, “What do you want?”

“You had a conversation with *shukusen* Alezand today,” I said. “I want to know more about what you discussed.”

“You’ll have to be more specific,” Niklaus said. “He and I spoke often this morning.”

Tutting, I said, “You know exactly what I mean, but since you insist...”

I assumed a replica of Niklaus’ bearing before gruffly speaking.

“So, what’s next?”

Shifting to something that more resembled Alezand, I continued in a simpering tone.

“We need more weapons.”

After one more change, Niklaus waved for me to stop.

“Ok, ok. Clearly you overheard us,” he said. “In a way, I’m glad of it. If *they* learn that this information was forced from me, then maybe *they* won’t hurt Leski.”

There was that vague ‘they’ again...

Wait.

“What do you mean ‘hurt Leski’?” I asked.

I’d thought the only threat to her was coming from House Cerullis. How else was she in danger?

“If you heard that conversation, then you know about the Ancients Pact, the deal that the Founders made to defeat those from beyond the stars, and how it’s come time to pay our end of it,” Niklaus said. “Well, even though I wasn’t a Founder, just a vassal to one, *they* expect me to fulfill the bargain, and *they’re* using Leski as leverage to keep me in line. For as much trouble as she brings me, I love my daughter, young warrior. I don’t want her to become a burnt-out husk.”

My mouth went dry.

“Burnt-out husk?” I asked, already knowing what my request for clarification would gain me.

“Yes. *They* can get into people’s heads before destroying everything that makes someone who they are,” Niklaus said. “You may have seen an example of this. A few years ago, several people tried to dissolve the Crescent during a House naming ceremony at *their* behest. The group was headed by... oh, what was his name? He had the strangest, purple eyes.”

He’d *led* those people.

“Fyester,” I said, “although the people who loved him called him Fy.”

Raising an eyebrow, Niklaus said, “Must have been someone special if you remember him.”

“I know the names of everyone I’ve killed,” I absently said. “A list of them steadily grows in my array.”

Leski couldn’t die like Fyester had. If she did, she would haunt me for the rest of my life, just as surely as he already did. So, how did I stop the threat to Lutov while also keeping her safe?

“How do *they* get in someone’s head?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” Niklaus said with a grimace. “Back in the day, Lord Asher Cerullis put far too much time and effort into a failed attempt at figuring that out before moving on to other experiments. I lost touch with him shortly before they became his focus, so when it comes to that side of things, I

don't know much."

Maybe Talira would let me rope Pheniks into this crisis. I was sure *shukusen* Arion wouldn't mind sparing my brother for a problem this significant, and if anyone could best a Founder in the sciences, it'd be him.

Getting his help was an idea for the long term, though. How did I delay this mysterious group for long enough that we could learn how to prevent *their* invasion of our heads? Or of more relevance...

"Who are *they*?"

Niklaus became prey before a predator. Rapid gasps were the only thing to flutter his still frame.

"I can't," he whined. "I'm sorry, but I can't. I've given you all the hints I can. Until Leski's safe, you'll have to figure out the rest on your own."

Interesting. A group that scared him more than I did.

It made sense. If *they'd* had the power to force Lutov's ancient enemy off of our planet, I was terrified of *them* too. This didn't help me, though.

"Niklaus, I'd like to help your daughter. Safeguarding Lutov and her citizens is my job, and that includes Leski," I said, "but from what I overheard, it sounds like *they* and the people *they* control mean to commence *their* plan soon. I need you to give me something that I can use to delay both parties. If I can gain us time, we can work to negate *their* hold on us. Fight *them* off."

A hysterical cackle was flung into the air before Niklaus could clap his hands over his mouth.

With wide eyes, he said, "You want to fight *them*? Even the Founders gave up on that. Or the sane ones did, at least."

"Do you have a better idea?" I asked.

Niklaus stared at me for so long that the passing seconds became insects, crawling over my skin, and sighing, I requested my rifle.

"Talk, or I'll make you."

He lifted his hands.

"If you hamper House Cerullis' progress, you'll slow *them* down," he said. "I don't know much about... any of this, really. *They've* only used my influence to get *them* weapons, but what I've procured for Alezand has gone to Cerullis' facility on the southeastern border of the Southern Fells."

"Ok. Good. I can work with that," I said. "Anything else I should know?"

“Only that *shukusen* Alezand and... their Favored—”

Niklaus hiccupped on a laugh.

“—will probably be there.”

Favored, like in the stories? Had those legendary warriors, the first *Lokke Vitras*’ closest allies, actually been agents of this unnamed foe? Enough time had passed since the war that facts about it, like who’d been allied with whom, could have gotten warped.

“I don’t suppose you’ll tell me who this Favored is, will you?” I said.

With a nervous giggle, Niklaus frantically shook his head.

“Thought not. That’s fine. I’ll make do,” I said. “For now, I want you to stay here and act like we never spoke, but once I’ve given House Cerullis and their masters something to think about, I’ll need you and Leski in Xygek. Give me your array’s access information so I can message you.”

Without protest, Niklaus waved it to me, and I paused, wondering if I was forgetting something. I badly wanted to ask him about Korix, but if he didn’t know what was going on with Cerullis as a whole, he wouldn’t know the lowly persona that my *evushk* would have taken in the House. Which left...

“I require a skycruiser,” I said.

“Please,” Niklaus said, “take whatever you need.”

With a sharp nod, I said, “I was never here, Niklaus.”

I left him there, probably still in shock from his rude awakening.

As the door fell closed behind me, something scuffed on the floor toward the end of the hallway, but I ignored it. Since entering the house through Niklaus’ window, I’d been monitoring this corridor, and no hostiles had come near it. The sound wasn’t worth investigating further.

After retrieving Ace, I found the estate’s hangar, and locating the fastest vehicle there, I got my dog into it before making a trip back to the kitchen for provisions. While doing that, I got ahold of the coordinates for House Cerullis’ Southern Fells facility before starting a report on my findings for Talira, although I wouldn’t send that to her until it was too late for her to stop my plans.

I continued working on it once I was in the air, snacking on stupidly salted popcorn while Ace looked on longingly. Junk food like this had always sped me through the boring, paperwork part of what I did, so when the situation called for it, I indulged.

Nothing changed for an hour, nothing except for me going through other snacks, but after a fourth stomach grumble rose from behind me, I relented in my feigned ignorance. When I next put my bag of chips down, I angled its opening toward the back of the skycruiser, and after a pause, a

hand snaked from behind my seat to grab at the snack. After it retreated, crunching sounds filled the air, and I took my chips back.

Picking through the bag's remnants, I said, "When you're ready, you should climb up here. We need to talk."

After shuffling for a bit, Leski stuck her head into the front before crawling to huddle in the seat beside me.

"Hi," she said.

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