

Chapter 54: Why?

How I managed to stay on my feet was beyond me. I didn't have adrenaline to help me ignore the pain in my wrist, and without it, I usually couldn't take something like this without stumbling, only deadening my nerve endings after my initial reaction.

I didn't indulge in that relief now. The shrieking of my wrist was battling the angry snarl that had snagged its thorny branches throughout my body.

"What the fuck, *evushk?*" I growled.

With his rifle's muzzle painfully digging into my jaw, talking was difficult, but I did it anyway because I had to know.

"Why?"

Rather than answer me, Korix looked over my head.

"I told you he'd come here, just like I told you he'd get through your security measures without you knowing about it," he said. "If you'd left well enough alone, he would never have suspected us."

"As I've already said, I glassed your home because *they* demanded it," Alezand said.

"That's not why you did it, and you know it," Korix said. "You've never been sure of my loyalty. This is just another example of that distrust."

He shook his head with a huff.

"I suppose that doesn't matter. In the end, your little maneuver has worked in our favor. All significant threats have been cleared from the board."

"And we shall proceed as instructed, Favored," Alezand said.

Korix was *their* Favored? Oh, Mother Time, no wonder Niklaus had seemed both terrified and amused when I'd asked about his identity.

"What will you do with him?" Alezand continued, nodding my way.

Korix flicked his eyes toward me, and they were so cold, filled with the clinical detachment that he only directed at his targets.

"I have plans for him," he said. "For now, we'll give him the same hospitality that you gave me years ago. Is my cell still available?"

“Yes.”

“Then, we take him there,” Korix said.

Meeting my eyes, he tightened his hold on me, and my vision flashed white.

“Do anything that I don’t like, and I will end you,” he said.

And I believed him. Mother Time, he’d kill me if it suited him.

Almost, a ragged sob shuddered through me, but I stopped it. Suspended emotions. Went blank. This shock and anger and fear and grief? They weren’t helping me. I needed to figure out how to escape from this mess. I needed to alert Talira about what had happened.

I needed to know why fervently loyal Korix would betray Lutov like this. Because that...

That wasn’t him.

Oh, hell.

“Disarm,” Korix ordered. “Slowly, starting with what you can reach.”

While sudden giddiness and overwhelming despair eddied and flowed in me, I removed knives, pistols, and other weapons from my body, throwing them away from me. I started having trouble at my hips, and releasing me, Korix took a step back.

I watched him as I finished. Was I right? Please, let my suspicions be right. It was certainly backed by enough precedence.

Considering everything it would entail, though, did I want to be right?

Once I was done, I rose to my full height, spreading my arms, while waiting for my next instruction.

“Alezand, you can return to your post,” Korix said. “As for the peons you brought with you, one can collect Zaeden’s weapons while another will lead the way to the cells. The rest are dismissed. You—”

He poked my chest with his rifle.

“—turn around and start walking.”

Striding in the wake of a House Cerullis member, I made a map of our route from the warehouse in my head. I couldn’t send Talira a message yet, as they’d surely detect it, but if I could escape from the cell Cerullis had specially prepared for Korix—

Ha!

—I’d have the beginnings of a way out of here. Once I was under an open sky, I could contact my grandmother.

Hell, she'd never let me hear the end of this, if we survived it. I couldn't believe I'd fallen into such an obvious trap, but I'd trusted Korix, even when he'd shown signs that something was wrong. Even when he'd been walking around this place without a persona to disguise himself or a care in the world. Even when he'd sent my ally away.

Oh, fuck. Leski! Had she made it out of here, or had Korix sent that wonderful woman into a trap as well?

I hoped she was safe. I hoped she'd sent Korix's message to Talira, even if that had definitely been a ploy to draw more of Kolb's strength into a slaughter. If she hadn't escaped... if she was dead, I didn't think I could forgive Korix, even if I was right about what was happening with him.

Speaking of which, I should test my theory.

"Am I allowed to speak?" I asked.

"Why wouldn't you be?" Korix said.

He'd sounded distracted. I'd never actually believe that of him, but what could be pulling enough of his attention away from his circumstances for him to come off as vulnerable?

"Will you answer a few questions?" I asked. "I'm curious about what's subverted the *Lokke Vitras'* loyalty, and if I understood what caused something so unthinkable, I might be more open to switching sides myself."

Our guide stopped, nodding to the door beside her, but before I could probe the security processes surrounding the cell, Korix spun me to face him.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

Taking a deep breath, I said, "What's this about? I understand that some of it has to do with upholding the Founder's part of a pact, but *why*? What did *they* do during the war with those from beyond the stars to make you—of all people—believe that we owe *them*?"

Korix's smile was sharp.

"Besides saving us, you mean?" he said. "That was enough for me. If you want more detail, you'll have to pick through Lutov's records of the pre-Founding nations, although good luck with finding those anywhere but in The Library. I didn't think doing that was worth the effort."

Again, not like Korix. I'd never known a man more heavily invested in researching every aspect of an important choice before making it.

"Fair enough. Frankly, *they* had my sympathy after I learned that we owe *them*," I said. "You know how much I hate the idea of being in someone's debt."

With a soft laugh, Korix said, "That, I do."

“So with that said, I’m curious about what *they* want from us,” I said. “If *they* were advanced enough to resist those from beyond the stars, what could we possibly offer *them*?”

While he considered how to answer, I studied the House Cerullis member. She was shifting far too much, darting her fearful gaze too often at Korix. Distracted. I could use that, if given the chance.

“They want a home,” Korix whispered. “Children.”

“Then, why don’t *they* ask for that?” I said. “Despite our general feeling of overcrowding, we do have plenty of room in Lutov, room that the high Strata would happily surrender to satisfy a debt, and House Drav can help with kids.”

A spasm crossed Korix’s face.

“It’s not that simple,” he said.

“It rarely is. That’s why we negotiate, working together to help each other,” I said, “but I know that sometimes, that isn’t enough.”

“Yes,” Korix whispered.

He still looked distracted. In fact, I didn’t know how it was possible, but right now, he looked even *more* distracted than before, like he was fighting off something internally.

That was good. If he was as unfocused as he appeared, maybe I’d get an honest answer out of him for this next question, which I needed. It would determine exactly how devastated I might be in the next few days.

“So, *they* have a compelling reason for their course of action and a desperate need behind it as well. I can see why you joined *them*,” I said. “Question is, when *they* took you, was it before you’d have come to this decision on your own?”

Korix’s eyebrows leapt for his hairline before he raised a hand to cover his body-shaking laughter, which was disconcerting to view. His displays of emotion had almost always been minimal, so this explosion of it? It sent a shiver through me.

“You think *they’re* controlling me? No. I am the master of myself,” he gasped. “You taught me this, *kuvesk*. Every time you’ve spoken about freedom or making choices for oneself was another budding blossom in who I am today. My decision to join *their* cause, coming so soon after the fallout of the Crescent Incident, is because of *you*. Now, move.”

He backed me into the door, and while he fiddled with it, I saw my theory for the denial that it had been. I didn’t want to admit that Korix was gone, that another man I... loved had betrayed me.

So, I clung to hope, even knowing it was futile.

“Sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov over all,” I said. “Would you abandon a mantra that you’ve followed for your whole life?”

Shuddering, Korix leaned on the door frame so that his face was centimeters from mine.

“They’re pretty words,” he hissed through gritted teeth, “nothing more.”

The door slid along my back, and Korix shoved me inside, although I didn’t stumble far.

I couldn’t let him leave. If he went like this, then I’d know I’d lost him. I’d know that nothing we’d had was real. All that time when we’d been learning how to open up to one another, he’d been plotting this, the destruction of our home and everything that he’d taught me, and I couldn’t have that. I couldn’t!

I COULDN’T.

Not again.

I caught the door as it was closing, sending acid pouring from my broken wrist and down my arm.

“Please, Ko,” I said with my voice shaking. “Don’t do this. I- I need you.”

Again, Korix shuddered. Those vibrations flew through him so violently that he fell into me, and I struggled to support his weight, off-balanced as I’d been beforehand. He’d never hung from me like this before, like dead weight.

When he rallied, shooting his head up from my chest, his features had blurred, as if in the middle of a body shift, with a fine layer of mist or steam seeping out of his skin. He seized my shoulders, digging his fingernails into cloth and flesh, and his voice emerged strangled.

“You... have... to... stop... me.”

And I faced a potent depiction of pain, one I’d never wanted to see again. The examples I’d seen in Tatum and Fyester, so many years ago, had been enough for a lifetime. My overwhelmed mind hiccupped air into my lungs, and my hands trembled as I confronted the possibility of holding another husk of a person I’d loved.

Then, it stopped. And Korix straightened. And he laughed.

“Or at least, I look forward to watching you try,” he said, wiping his eyes.

Stepping outside, he had the door slam shut, and its locks engaged. I was left barely standing, taking tiny sips of air.

What had *that* been? What had it-? What-?

No.

Slapping my face, I shook myself. Now that I could do nothing for him, I couldn't think about Korix. I needed to escape.

So, I examined the tools that I had to work with, which was... nothing. I was in an empty cube of a room, six metal surfaces welded together. It wasn't claustrophobically small, a few meters in width and length all told, but besides floating, *useless* light globes, nothing was in here.

When I tried the door, I scrabbled my fingers along its smooth surface, gaining no purchase. Even an open palm failed to make it budge, not that I'd expected anything else.

Maybe I could melt my way out. Requesting my rifle, I waited for a beat before realizing that it wasn't forming. With a frown, I checked my array before stumbling into a wall, leaning on it to keep myself on watery legs.

I hadn't lost the ability to modify my body, and its augmented healing rate remained in place, as evidenced by the steady repair of my wrist, but using any other function in my array gave me errors. When I reached out for nearby recorders, I got no results. When I tried to send a message, it just bounced back to me.

They'd found a way to isolate arrays.

For a while, I picked at this notion because the concept of it floored me. Lutov had relied on arrays for so long that no one had attempted to subvert or sabotage them in...

Hell, I couldn't look up how long it had been.

A long time.

We had the Puppeteer, of course, but its architect had—from what I could remember—been one of the few people in Lutovish history to face execution. Not only had their death occurred soon after the Puppeteer's creation, but for centuries, access to those intimidating pieces of tech had been heavily regulated, to the point that possessing one was enough to get its owner exiled without a trial.

All of this was to say that isolating arrays, as *they'd* done, was something my people would never consider possible. The faintest breath of the idea would never cross our minds.

I didn't know what to do. It had been years since a plan had refused to come to me. The last time had happened after Fyester had attacked me, and just like then, I genuinely had no clue about how I should proceed. Maybe I'd think of something while I considered the problem further, but I doubted it.

Which meant I was stuck here.

Was this what had happened to Korix? Had he waited in this cell, perhaps hoping to overpower his captors when they came to feed him?

Was he even under their thumb, like I'd thought? Our last exchange had seemed like a clear indication of it, but he might have faked his distress to muddle me, getting me focused on him instead of my problems. Like I was doing now.

If *they'd* imprisoned Korix here, I didn't have the luxury of waiting it out like he probably had. I'd seen the weapons and aircraft in that hangar. Whatever Cerullis' plan was, it would start soon, and considering the type of weapons they had, it would be devastating. Korix and this House would be implicated in crimes against Lutov, and if the homeland survived their attack, I'd be sent to hunt them down. I'd have to kill another loved one because I was stuck in a fucking box.

Over the next few minutes, I might have thrown a temper tantrum. If I did, I didn't remember it.

The next thing I knew, I was panting in the middle of the cell with a raw throat and bloody knuckles. From what I could tell, a furious tumult, the one that had wiped thought away from me, was still rumbling inside, so I wasn't sure why I was aware.

Then, I noticed a new message in my array.

I didn't know how long I just stared at it. Maybe a quarter-hour had passed since I'd tentatively accepted that my array couldn't reach the outside world and something new had come in? Mother Time must favor me, although that probably depended on what the message said.

Opening it, I read its contents and sank to the floor, folding my arms around my waist as I bent double. I was laughing and crying at the same time, unable to control myself, and my tears blurred the message, even if its words were still circling in my head.

Hang on. Help's on the way.

The message didn't say who'd sent it, so I had no clue who was coming to my aid, but frankly? I didn't care.

I was the *Lokke Vitras* to come, and somehow, I'd gotten myself in such a fucked-up situation that a stranger would have to rescue me. The idea had me so forcefully rocking with laughter that I toppled into a sprawl across the floor.

But mostly, blissful relief burned my eyes. I'd get out of here, saved by one, and go forth to save all of Lutov.

Staring at a metal ceiling, I let myself simply breathe with no thought allowed in my head. I could make plans in a moment, but for now, all I wanted was to exist and enjoy this rare sense that everything was right in the world.

Everything was going to be ok.

TTS Chapter Fifty-Four
