

Chapter 55: Rescue From an Unexpected Quarter

What was taking so long?

This question echoed in me as I circled the confines of my cell with my hands plastered to my forehead.

I kept thinking to myself, *Everything's fine. It'll all be fine.*

Repeating those assertions wasn't drowning out the echo, though, and I swore to Mother Time, I was going to-

Where the hell was that sense of peace I'd had not long ago?

A couple of hours had passed since I'd received a message of hope, and I was still waiting in this cell. If I made another pacing pass around it, I was sure I'd scream.

What had happened? Had the person who'd sent the message gotten caught? At the thought of rescue being ripped away from me, I flinched, but I knew it was a possibility.

And who could have sent it in the first place? A deep-cover operative seemed most likely, but knowing Korix, he'd have rooted all House Kolb members out of this facility by now.

Mother Time, Korix...

No. I couldn't let my mind drift that way because if I did, I'd get stuck on a looping track of conviction followed by doubt. Was someone I had yet to identify controlling him? Or had he betrayed Lutov and me in truth?

Shaking my head, I forced my thoughts away from these questions. I couldn't answer them, not yet. Better to focus on the ones that were causing me much less stress.

Like my message sender's identity.

If a House Kolb member hadn't sent me hope, maybe it had been someone in Cerullis, someone who was unhappy with the direction that Alezand was leading them in. This explanation seemed much more likely since Korix probably wouldn't have identified them, not as easily at least.

It would also explain why my rescue was taking so long. If my message sender was from House Cerullis, I had no doubt that someone would catch them, long before they reached this place.

All this speculation told me was that I must once more rely only on myself, which left me with the conundrum of how I'd get out of this impenetrable cell, the one I'd already spent hours trying to escape from.

Hell. I'd be stuck here like I'd thought, helpless to stop the horrific violence that was soon to come. I wouldn't have a chance to stop Korix from getting further involved in something that would get him killed, crushing my hopes for saving him before they'd taken a step toward realization.

Freezing in place, I dropped to my haunches with my arms thrown over my head. Damn it, what was I going to do? I couldn't lose him. *What would I do?*

Something scraped outside the cell's door, and in my startlement, instinct took over. I hurried to the wall beside the opening.

Maybe this commotion had originated in my potential rescuer, but it could equally be a House Cerullis member who'd come to feed me, providing an opportunity for escape. I'd be ready either way.

The door slid open, and pressing as far into the wall as I could, I waited for someone to step through it.

"Zaeden?"

That whispering voice. I knew it.

Spinning around the doorframe, I grabbed Leski's shoulders—

"What are you doing here?"

—before pulling her to my chest.

After initially stiffening, Leski relaxed against me, returning my embrace, and I let myself bask in the fact that she was alive. After learning how deeply Korix had betrayed me, I hadn't been sure if she'd escaped this facility, and until this moment, I hadn't realized how much her safety had been weighing on me. If she'd died while helping me, I... I wouldn't have been able to live with myself.

But here she was, alive and well. *How?*

Giddiness infected the emotionless state that I must maintain during missions, and thrusting her away from me, I ran my eyes over her.

"Why aren't you far from here?" I asked.

Rolling her eyes, Leski said, "What? No 'Thank you for saving me from an obvious trap. How great is your wisdom' for me?"

She'd seen the trap before me. Her. An unHoused. Shit. How badly had I slipped up with this mission?

"Thank you, Leski," I said. "Why are you here? You should be in a skycruiser, heading away from this place."

"Yeah, I know," Leski said, blowing hair out of her eyes. "I overwrote your processes on the skycruiser. Don't worry! Ace will still reach those coordinates you set earlier. I just delayed your timer to give us some breathing room."

Good to know. My dog's safety had been buzzing about my brain at a slightly lower frequency than all my other worries, one more thing doing its damndest to drag me into panic. But if she'd overwritten my processes...

"How good are you at process cracking?" I asked.

With a laugh, Leski waved a hand over our surroundings.

"Good enough to watch everything that happened to you. Also, I got a message into this place, which was more difficult than I expected."

"The message was from *you*?" I squeaked.

Of course it had been. Why else would she be here?

Also, much as it made me cringe, I was glad she'd been watching me since we'd parted ways. It meant I wouldn't have to catch her up on our situation.

"Duh," Leski said in answer to my question. "Now, can we please get out of this hostile place, or must we continue standing here while I answer more inane questions?"

I was a little... no. I was a *lot* stunned by her right now. Did she know how impenetrable this cell was? I might have always been abysmal with anything process-related, but I doubted even Korix could have gotten a message out of this cell.

Korix.

"You're more than welcome to get out of here if you like. I encourage it even," I said, "but I have more work to do here before I can leave."

"Like what?" Leski said. "From what I saw, we have everything we need to stop this... whatever it is. What else could you possibly need to do?"

Save someone I cared for more than all the lives in Lutov? I couldn't tell her that, though.

"We know that Cerullis has something planned for the homeland, but what is it? When will they start their scheme? Where will it begin?" I said. "I'd like to have answers for those questions before

making my report, assuming you've already alerted *shukusen* Talira to our situation, of course."

Once she knew what was happening here, my grandmother would know exactly what I needed. If I looked for more information on Cerullis' machinations while waiting for reinforcements, it should get me closer to Korix, and as long as my escape from this cell remained undetected, keeping Leski safe should be easy enough, which would have been my only concern about staying.

This was all assuming that we could avoid my *evushk*, of course. If we ran into him unprepared, we were both fucked.

Huffing, Leski said, "Yes, I sent a request for help. I'm not an idiot. How do you propose we answer your questions, though? I won't hurt anyone, Zaeden."

"Who said anything about hurting people?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

Did she think violence would be my first answer to the problem we were facing here? That assumption was the most prevalent one in Lutov, but even still. I'd thought she knew me better than that.

"I suggest that we access this facility's stacks," I said, "like we were planning to do before the *Lokke Vitras* interrupted us."

Leski blanched.

"So, it was really him? I wasn't sure. That man's presence here seemed so... unbelievable. I thought I might have been seeing things," she said. "Hell. *He's* turned against us?"

I couldn't allow myself the panic she was displaying, couldn't contemplate how I'd soon be opposing the enormous skill of my *evushk*.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "So long as my grandmother knows we need help, we should gather as much information as we can while we wait. Save our backup the trouble. Yes?"

"I suppose," Leski reluctantly conceded.

"Excellent," I said. "Then, if you don't mind, I'd like out of this cell."

Jumping, Leski stepped to the side, and I stalked into partial freedom, shivering on obtaining it.

"Stay behind me and as close as you can," I said.

Uninhibited by a persona, finding a lift with access to the facility's sub-levels didn't take me long. We entered the stacks where the comforting whir of storecases surrounded us, and I headed for the closest station.

I didn't need the connectors provided here. My *Lokke Vitras* privileges could give me access to this place's data without them, but I didn't want to seem out of the ordinary to Leski. Plus, a physical

connection to the station would allow faster transfer of data.

After attaching pads to either side of my neck, I was inundated by the wealth of knowledge kept in this facility. Having read what privileges I held, this station and its storecases failed to hold anything back, and gaining so much information at once made my brain and array stutter. Fortunately, I had enough discipline to keep from groaning at the flood, gritting my teeth instead.

"This'll take a while," I said. "Can you get us more appropriate outfits while I'm working? There should be a changing room somewhere near here."

"Sure," Leski said.

As she departed, leaving me alone, I combed through my provided data with a small part of my attention ever paid to the feeds of the recorders around me. Doing that should give me a few seconds notice before someone barged into the stacks.

I monitored Leski's progress as well, and as I watched, I was once more impressed. To this point, she'd shown an aptitude for House Kolb work, but seeing her cautiously slinking through enemy territory solidified her potential for me. If I could, I should cultivate this resource for my own use.

As soon as that thought had crossed my mind, I made a face. I wouldn't judge someone's value based solely on the skills that House Kolb treasured, and I most certainly shouldn't be interested in... *collecting* someone, like a piece of art.

Shuddering, I set consideration of Leski aside for the moment, focusing on my newly gained data. I picked anything that might be useful from it, but separating the valuable from the mundane was difficult with so much information assaulting me.

After I'd made my selections, I started integrating them with my array, a process that would take a few minutes to finish. While it did that, I scanned the facility through its various recorders, hoping to find Korix or anything else that might help Leski and me.

So, I saw a House Cerullis member arrive at the cell that I'd recently occupied. I saw her enter it and recoil from its emptiness. I saw her send what must have been an alert after stepping back outside.

And I most definitely heard the alarms when they began blaring.

With integration complete, I yanked the connectors off my neck, ready to find Leski, but she'd already returned. She thrust a uniform at me before circling a block of storecases for privacy while changing. I could appreciate this as, for the first time in my life, I was self-conscious about taking my clothes off in front of someone.

I'd barely pulled the last piece of my uniform on when Leski barreled back toward me.

"Did you get what you needed?" she asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “I wasn’t particularly picky about what I stole.”

Humming, Leski said, “It’ll have to be good enough. Someone’s sure to check this place soon. We need to go.”

She had good instincts too. Damn, she’d make a good asset for House Kolb...

No. She was a *person*, not something to be acquired.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

We hurried to leave the stacks, but this goal was impeded by a House Cerullis member sliding to a stop in front of the exit, therefore blocking our path. Gasping, he hung off of the door frame, catching his breath, and for a moment, I thought he knew who we were. If he’d come to apprehend us, I’d have to hurt him, and I’d rather not do that, both because I didn’t like the idea of it and because I didn’t want Leski to see me subduing someone.

He only waved at us, though.

“Are you coming?” he said. “The Favored has commanded us to assemble.”

Leski and I exchanged a glance. I knew what she was thinking. We should get past this man and escape from the facility before he could raise another alarm, but he’d said the one thing that could keep me tethered here.

Favored. Meaning Korix.

If I could avoid it, I wouldn’t abandon someone I loved, no matter what the consequences might be.

“I’m right behind you,” I said. “Wyla needs to grab something first, but she’ll be along shortly too.”

Satisfied, the House Cerullis member took off, leaving me to face the most incredulous look I’d ever seen, blazing from Leski. I ignored it, following a stranger through a hostile location on the off-chance that my sentimentality worked out for me for once.

I didn’t expect Leski to come with me. I’d given her a way out on purpose, knowing that she could use the facility’s current chaos to escape from it. She’d snuck out once before, after all.

So, when she trailed behind me like a shadow, it spawned both terror and gratitude in me. Even inexperienced as she was, knowing she was at my back would keep me steady, and trust me. That was something I’d need over the next few hours.

TTS Chapter Fifty-Five

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