

# Chapter 72: Waking Him Up

I'd never seen the lobby of House Kolb's headquarters more deserted. A few people scurried between the lifts and the exit, but they couldn't number more than a couple dozen, and in its emptiness, a normally austere place, kept alive by activity, seemed like a grave.

As I crossed toward a lift, my footsteps echoed, and this had a few people tossing odd looks my way. When I'd visited this place in the past, I'd usually come through the landing pad on the roof, although Korix had made me sneak from the bottom of the tower to its top several times before. Even still, my face wasn't well known in the House that I'd soon help lead, only answerable to *shukusen* Talira.

She was waiting for me at the lifts with her feet shoulder-width apart and her arms crossed behind her back. If I was getting strange looks, she was getting stared at, but she must have taken that possibility into account earlier, considering how infrequently she came down from on high.

Once she'd spied me, the statue the Talira was showing to the world relented, and she strode toward me with a warm smile and her arms spread for a hug.

"Grandson!" she cried. "I'm so pleased that you've come to visit."

We were playing those roles, were we? It made sense, especially if she was holding my identity close to her chest, like a card yet to be played.

"It's good to see you," I said.

Returning her hug with enthusiasm, I forced myself to remain at ease while hiding my irritation. I knew she'd interrupt my activities quite often in the future, but not only was I unaccustomed to it now—not from her, at least—but what she'd interrupted today could be vital for Lutov's security.

Could I ignore my *shukusen's* summons if I was doing something crucial for my role's objectives?

I didn't have long to ponder this fascinating thought as Talira soon held me at arm's length.

"Look at you," she said, clucking like a mother hen. "How long has it been?"

A couple of weeks.

"Years," I said. "Sorry. I've been busy."

"I can imagine," Talira solemnly said. "Well, come on. Let's get you what you need. Maybe we can have lunch afterward?"

She set a floor into a lift's control.

"I'd be delighted," I said.

"Good, good."

Standing to the side, Talira waved me forward.

"After you."

Did she know how much I *hated* taking lifts first? The extra danger, even one this insignificant, wasn't something that I liked adding to everything else I daily shouldered. That plus having someone like her, one of the two people who could take me down single-handedly, at my back made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end. Even still, I did as she'd bidden with a smile, which was pretty much standard for me.

Rather than taking me skyward, as expected, the lift plunged me beneath the ground, and my frustration was wiped away in the face of the hope that had started bubbling in my heart. By the time I'd reached my destination, though, I was also chewing the hell out of my lip. Had Talira summoned me for the reason I suspected or for the revelation of my worst nightmare?

By the time my grandmother had joined me, I'd isolated the floor we were on from the tower's recorder system, which she must have known given her lack of warmth while examining me.

"You look better," she said.

"I feel-"

Talira jabbed a finger into my side, interrupting me, and as I glanced between it and her, I let my annoyance shine through.

"I feel better," I said, trying again. "Really, *shukusen*. RRDs can repair my body in two weeks. I haven't built up that much of a tolerance for them yet."

"I had to be sure, given what we're here to do," Talira said.

Even as all of me paused, breathless, for her to complete that thought, I ignored my grandmother's invitation to ask the question at the forefront of my mind. Instead, I flicked my eyes toward the ceiling.

"What was that about?"

"It's what I had to do when you came through the *front fucking doors*," Talira said. "Seriously, Zaeden? You couldn't think of a better way inside? Maybe one that wouldn't stretch my acting skills?"

With a half-smile, I said, "Oh, I thought of plenty."

Rolling her eyes, Talira started down the corridor.

“Sometimes, I forget how much of a snarky bastard you can be,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll never understand why your *evushk* had to choose you as his replacement, but I do know that you’ll be a pain in my ass First Stratus.”

Yes. Yes, I would be, but only because she liked it.

Trotting to join her, I strode at her side with a bounce in my step.

“Speaking of *evushk*, is he why I’m here?” I asked.

With narrowed eyes, Talira said, “What do you think?”

I thought that if I was right, I’d be happy sans worry for the first time since the Founder’s Day Ball. I’d be able to take on any foe, both the known and the seemingly insurmountable, without doubt or hesitation dogging me.

I couldn’t say any of that out loud, though.

“Does that mean Phen’s discovery was useful?” I asked.

“Incredibly,” Talira said. “Why don’t I show you how?”

She stepped into the room on our right, and following her, I glanced over dimly lit monitors embedded in counters, as well as a pair of rolling chairs sitting on the room’s far side. Most of the screens displayed charted numbers, some of which I scanned, but I was mostly occupied with the central-most images.

Three versions of a single brain were glowing in front of the chairs. The two on the outside looked nearly identical, although I didn’t know if these images were normal for a human. The one in the middle had a bright spiderweb permeating it.

Sliding into the seat beside Talira, I hunched over the images, staring for a moment, before falling back into my chair.

“*Evushk’s?*” I hesitantly asked.

Nodding, Talira pointed to each image in succession.

“His brain before capture, after you brought him home, and now.”

When had she gotten a scan of Korix’s brain before this fiasco had begun? Did she have one of mine? That was a disturbing thought.

“So...”

I splayed my fingers over the middle image.

“The white strings denote the Ancient’s influence.”

“That’s what we think. After Phen pointed us to your *evushk*’s brain, we found that mess waiting for us,” Talira said. “I don’t know how we missed it on our first time looking there. Perhaps we caught the Ancient controlling him by surprise that second time around.”

“In any case, I had our medics work their magic, and once they’d finished, mist—the Ancient, presumably—seeped out of your *evushk*. We sealed it in an air-tight container for further study, and after doing another scan, this was our result.”

She drummed a finger on the third image.

“Our tests show him returned to the state that he claimed before all of this. Mostly. We won’t know for sure if this is true, though, until we wake him up.”

Mother Time, how I wanted to focus on that last bit, but I wouldn’t let it overshadow any information Talira was withholding from me. Because she *was* withholding.

“Mostly?” I asked.

Sighing, Talira slumped before tapping a blank spot on the monitor. After a pause, she overturned her hand, and a depiction of the brain beneath it flickered into the air above. In this three-dimensional representation, what the flattened image had been hiding was revealed.

A rainbow, one that represented various levels of neurological activity, flowed uninterrupted from the back of Korix’s brain until it reached his frontal lobe, where mood and personality were regulated. Here, pattered splotches had eaten darkened holes through those colors, much like when paper absorbed excess ink.

“Shit,” I said.

Somehow, I’d kept my voice from wavering.

“And this is from after we removed him from the Ancient’s control,” Talira said.

When she tapped the monitor again, the hologram blinked with its image almost unchanged, except that the black spots had multiplied to an alarming degree.

I clung to the edge of my seat, digging my fingers into it, and despite myself, I couldn’t stop my jaw from slackening or my eyes from bulging. The first one was from *before...?*

Fortunately, Talira was too preoccupied with what she was holding to notice my reaction.

“This is a faster deterioration than what we’ve seen over the last hundred years,” she said.

Slapping my hands on the counter, I shot to my feet.

“Ok. What the fuck is wrong with *evushk*?” I said. “I’ve seen signs of it, obviously, but... Damnit, I need to know the specifics, or I can’t fulfill my duties as the *Lokke Vitras* to come.”

I’d tagged on that last bit, hoping it would make my outburst appear more appropriate for my role. From the way Talira was looking at me, though, I didn’t think it had worked.

“He hasn’t told you?” she asked.

When I shook my head, she curled her fingers into her hand, making the hologram disappear.

“I’m sorry. I thought he had, otherwise, I would never have shown you this,” she said. “It’s not my right to breach his privacy like that.”

“*Why not?*” I shouted.

Talira blinked in the face of my anger, lowering her hand into her lap.

“Zaeden, the *Lokke Vitras* has little that they can keep to themselves, despite the secrecy that surrounds the role,” she quietly said. “You’ve already experienced this with how thoroughly we’ve shared your training with the relevant parties, but when you replace your *evushk*, it won’t just be your training that’s shared. It will be your entire existence, and the *shukusenth* won’t be the only ones who learn about it. It will be all of Lutov and a few people in Ibis too.

“So, when something comes along that’s deemed acceptable for you to keep to yourself, you’ll cling to it so fiercely that giving the secret to another person will feel like relinquishing a piece of your soul. Do you understand?”

Gradually lowering myself into my seat rather than dropping like a rock required more willpower than I’d like to admit, and once I’d sat down, weariness crashed over me. As much as I could, I relaxed, becoming a portrait of peace, and approval briefly flickered to life in my grandmother. She saw my return to control as the answer that it was.

Folding my hands in my lap, I said, “So. Waking up *evushk*?”

“That’s the plan,” Talira said. “First, I’d like to discuss what you proposed when last we met.”

Great... I’d thought I’d have more time before this topic came up again. Apparently not.

“You’re a *shukusen*. I can’t exactly say no to you,” I grumbled.

Snorting, Talira said, “No, I suppose you can’t. Sometimes, I forget.”

Shaking her head, she scooted forward in her chair.

“For the last two weeks, I’ve been considering the idea of the *Lokke Vitras* having a confidant,” she said. “I’ve identified several of the plan’s merits and demerits, but in the end, the benefits outweigh its possible consequences. So.”

Clapping her hands, Talira rubbed them together, keeping her eyes on them.

“So,” she repeated. “For a trial period, you and your *evushk* may continue along your chosen path. I’ll be watching you, looking for any sign that your relationship has affected your roles. I’m not sure how long this will continue, but once I know that you were telling the truth about your loyalties, the trial period will end, and I’ll inform the other *shukusenth* about what you’re doing. Depending on their reactions, we will reveal it to Lutov. Knowing this, do you want to continue?”

Did I want to continue? Please. It didn’t matter what she threw at me. I’d stay by Korix’s side until he decided he was finished with me.

Shrugging, I said, “Your terms are better than I expected to get.”

With a soft laugh, Talira turned to the monitors once more, pausing to glance at me.

“For how much you claim to care for him, I’m surprised you haven’t visited him over the last two weeks,” she said.

Raising an eyebrow, I asked, “Who says I haven’t?”

Talira guffawed this time, pressing a hand to her chest.

“Fair enough,” she gasped when she could. “Let’s wake this bastard up, shall we?”

When she brushed the corner of the monitor, it switched to a view of Korix in stasis. As with every time I’d seen him like this, my heart lurched while acid surged to the back of my throat, but the reaction wasn’t as extreme this time. He’d be out of that amber gel soon, returned to Lutov and me.

Please, let it be so.

A gurney sat below the stasis field’s capsule with a medic standing beside it. Seeing her made me cringe. Once we were done here, Talira would probably have that medic eliminate her memory of this event. No one could know about the *Lokke Vitras’* weakness.

At a signal from my grandmother, the medic swiped at the air, initiating stasis release. After tubes and wires disengaged, the amber capsule lowered itself toward the ground, but when the bottom of it touched the gurney, its gel dribbled up and around its curved edges to gather at the top while Korix descended through it. When he was lying on the gurney’s padding, the capsule lifted, sucking away from its once prisoner as it returned to its typical position.

As soon as it was clear, the medic rolled the gurney out from under it, checking Korix’s vitals. I watched her run her hands over his body with time crawling by, and when she stepped away, my heart leapt into my throat.

Was he ok? Had something gone wrong? I needed someone to talk to me, damnit!

The stasis field's effects lifted, and Korix released the breath that he'd held for two weeks before taking another. This cycle repeated a few times before he came to consciousness.

He filled my vision, becoming all that I could see, and when Talira rested a hand on my knee, I dimly realized that I'd been jittering my leg. I didn't know whether I stopped the unconscious movement or not.

In the past, I'd seen a few people emerge from stasis, prisoners I'd needed to question for one reason or another. They'd usually woken up coughing and desperately seeking familiar surroundings or people.

Korix opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling, just breathing. My only sign that he was aware of his surroundings was the sudden strengthening of his chest's rise and fall until he curled onto his side, sobbing. Before the medic blocked my view of him, I caught his lips moving, speaking a string of words that my array translated for me.

"He did it. Mother Time, I can't believe he did it."

I'd fly to pieces; the pressure on my chest was so great. My eyes were pinned on what little of Korix that I could see, and I didn't move until the monitor powered down. Then, I turned to Talira, although her form was blurred and smeared.

"Well?" she said. "Go make sure it's him."

My throat was so closed that I could barely sip air through it, let alone force words free, so I didn't know how I choked out what I must.

"Thank you."

But then, I was out the door, moving so fast that my hands kissed the ground when rounding onto the hall, and I ran to Korix.

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