

Chapter 73: Checking Assumptions

The full meaning of Talira's words didn't penetrate my thick skull until I'd almost reached my destination.

We had no evidence that this Korix was *my* Korix yet. She'd sent me to verify his identity, not to reunite with a loved one, and she'd been right to do it. I was, after all, the one who'd lived with him for the last eleven years.

That made it no less painful to slow my sprint, put my appearance in order, and request my rifle. With it in hand, I faced a locked door and blew out a breath. After reading my privileges, it opened, and I stepped into the room, detachedly scanning it for threats. The only one I saw was Korix.

In the time it had taken me to get here, he'd changed from a hospital gown to his typical black clothing, and he was sitting on the gurney, curling his fingers around its edge, while the medic fussed over him. Mother Time, I'd never seen him so distracted before. He had yet to assess who'd joined him, something he typically did the second someone entered the room.

"I've got it from here. Thank you," I told the medic. "Go see *shukusen* Talira."

She glanced askance at me, but on viewing my empty stare, she scurried away. Korix never moved, blankly gazing at nothing, which was concerning. From what I'd seen earlier, I'd thought the damage done to his brain wouldn't result in severe symptoms, but perhaps I'd been wrong. Either way, I waited by the door, guarding my avenue of escape.

"*Kuvesk*," Korix softly said.

Oh, good. His brain wasn't fried.

"*Evushk*," I said.

Sighing, Korix hunched on himself.

"I don't have a protocol for this," he said to his thighs.

Seconds ticked by with the silence between us as viscous as the stasis field outlining his body. When Korix moved, my fingers twitched on my rifle, but he only leaned back with the ceiling having become his fascination.

"Did she send you to verify if I'm free?" he asked.

I didn't have an answer for him. He should already know it.

"Of course she did," he said.

He shook his head, making his black curls bounce.

"Echo one seven zero whiskey charlie. That when my work is done, the Collective may never know the spark of my soul. Echo one seven zero whiskey charlie."

Blinking, I analyzed this strange string of words, and when I gained no meaning from them, I assumed he'd spoken them for Talira's benefit. Did that mean I could go? I didn't like occupying the same room as him when I was in mission mode like this.

"For you, *kuvesk*," Korix continued. "I know the secret desire that you've held for your whole life. I've known it from the moment we met, and I've not once spoken of it to another person. The only time I revealed it was when I wrote a note for you, one that I left lying in a gift you brought home years ago. It's one of the last things I did before... before this."

It was him! Only Korix knew the mistake that I'd made when openly speaking with him during his 'kidnapping'.

Unless the Ancient could read his memory. If *it* was still using Korix, *it* could be playacting right now, manipulating me with a pretty story.

Rubbing his face, Korix said, "It's the best I can do. Until this argument with the Ancients is settled or we learn more about *them*, you'll wonder if I'm me. You and Talira must decide if you want to risk letting me help, but if I'm going back into stasis, I'd prefer it if that happened sooner rather than later."

I could do nothing more here. Without a word, I walked out the door, not even a little upset that he'd never looked at me.

Talira was waiting for me outside, thank Mother Time. I hadn't been sure how I'd secure Korix while returning to her. At least with us here, he'd have a hard time getting past the door, if he tried to escape.

"What do you think?" she asked.

I thought that the next few weeks would be much more difficult than I'd expected.

Leaning against the wall, I said, "He made a good point. It doesn't matter what secrets he tells us. He won't gain our trust, not completely. Until we can be sure that we've scoured the Ancient from his brain, he's a loose cannon, one that could easily backfire on us. So, do you believe his expertise is worth the risk of him turning traitor again?"

"I asked what *you* thought," Talira said. "Don't turn the question back on me."

I thumped my head against the wall, making stars flare for a second.

“Right now, I can’t handle what we’re facing, even with the resources already at my disposal. It’s too much for me,” I said before drawing my lips into a thin line. “When everything’s said and done, though, all that matters is whether letting him run free will serve Lutov, and I think that it will, if only because I need him. I need his help, *shukusen*.”

Talira was quiet for a moment, probably considering my argument.

“You want his help, even if you’ll have to watch his every move?” she asked.

She wanted me to act as his warden? Me. His student and partner.

“Even then,” I said.

Squinting, Talira frantically scratched her scalp before throwing her hands overhead.

“All right. I’m halfway convinced that he’s telling the truth anyway, given what he said,” she said. “The code he recited for me is buried deep, specifically for cases like this. No *Lokke Vitras* would otherwise share their greatest desire, not out loud like he did at least.”

Greatest... desire? Korix didn’t want to join the Collective when he died? He wanted to just... disappear?

“What’s yours, by the way?” Talira asked. “Your *evushk* mentioned it while you were speaking.”

I was already frozen inside, and yet, her question still made me go cold. How was that possible?

Meeting her eyes, I said, “Something that I won’t share with you unless you require it, *shukusen*.”

Talira fluttered her fingers in a wave.

“Fine, fine. When you become the *Lokke Vitras*, I’ll learn it anyway, so it doesn’t matter if you tell me now,” she said. “So, what do we do next?”

She was asking me?

“I’d like Phen and Feena to join us,” I said. “Before I left base, I started them down an avenue of investigation that should yield results. It’s about time we collate what we know.”

Talira gave me a funny look, one that I didn’t understand. What did she dislike about my plan?

“You want to invite a member of House Zan into our headquarters for that discussion?” she asked.

Oh. One of these days, I’d remember that every person besides me cared about the House system.

“I want to extend an invitation to a young man who’s spent far more time on research than me in recent days, someone who’s more likely to concoct a plan from our gathered information than

anyone else I know," I said. "Don't deny Lutov a chance for salvation because it might come from another House."

"I- You're right."

Hell, Talira had sounded surprised. Why would anything I'd said have surprised her?

"Ok. I'll get my other two grandchildren here," she said. "Any other creative ideas for me?"

I wished I could say yes but...

"No. Merely a request."

Raising an eyebrow, Talira asked, "Privacy?"

Of course she'd known what I wanted.

"If that's acceptable."

"It is," Talira said before starting down the hall. "Please, remember where you are, though."

"I always do," I said under my breath.

Talira disappeared, but despite how much I wanted to move, I couldn't. Stuck in place, I was vividly aware of the reunion waiting behind the door beside me, and without emotions to distract me, I realized how difficult it would be. Part of me screamed to abandon it and run home to Leski, even with all of her associated problems, but I wouldn't let myself do that.

I loved Korix. Being with him was worth every hardship.

So, I stepped through the door.

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