

# Chapter 86: Part One of a Partner's Past

We started our search for Sanya on the outskirts of Xygek. To my great surprise, Korix led us to an empty apartment there, but I didn't notice much more about it at first, too busy with my incredulous stare at him. Why were we here?

Seeing this, Korix chuckled before waving around us.

"Welcome to where I grew up," he said.

Where he'd... grown up? Even as I jerked my head to take in my surroundings, I was considering everything that implied. How long had this place been left uninhabited? Such a vast amount of space getting left unused seemed strange in overcrowded Lutov, but if anyone could get away with that, it would be a former *Lokke Vitras*.

Also, this was my life partner's childhood home. He never talked about his past. Why did this revelation scare me so badly?

Shoving that concern aside, I glanced over sheet-covered furniture with interest, squinting when Korix turned on the lights. I tried to imagine a child version of him playing in this room, but any image of it that I conjured quickly slipped away. Thinking of Korix as a young person hurt my brain.

In general, the place looked exactly like what one would expect in the home of a mid Strata. Roomy, but not cavernous. Nicely decorated, but not extravagant. Normal.

How had he come from this?

But when I returned my attention to the man in question, I wanted to smack myself upside the head for letting curiosity distract me. Korix was biting his lip with a distant look in his eyes, and I knew he was reliving some past event, if not one so traumatic as to cause a fit. When he noticed my eyes on him, he shook himself before smiling.

"Come on," he said. "If Sanya's left any clues for us, it'll be here."

He headed deeper inside, and I hesitantly followed, certain that I was intruding upon a place that I was never supposed to see.

As we moved through the apartment, I noted the distinct lack of photos in it. There were plenty of paintings here, but no family portraits like what we had in our own home. Why was that? Had Korix wanted to keep evidence of his past life so far buried that he'd destroyed any portraits found here,

or had his birth family never taken photos? If that was the case, why avoid something so innocuous? Maybe the reason had been something simple, like someone in the family had hated taking photographs, but somehow, I doubted that was the case.

The other thing of note throughout the apartment was the excessive number of recorders in every room. From what I could tell, they were all inactive now, but that begged the question. Did that mean they'd been in place when Korix was growing up? That might explain why he'd been so averse to adding that security precaution to our estate.

Soon enough, he led me through an old-fashioned door, one that was unregulated by processes, and seeing the immaculately neat room beyond it, I stopped short in the threshold. Glancing back at me, Korix snorted.

"Yes, Zae, that's right," he said. "This was my room."

Reflexively, I checked the door again. Without security processes to hold it closed, the only thing that might make it a barrier against the outside world would be a lock, but I saw nothing like that here, just a doorknob.

Now given, as a child, Korix probably hadn't had the same level of paranoia as he did now, but even still, I found this strange. If I hadn't been able to lock my door while growing up, I'd have found it exceedingly unnerving.

Everything else here matched my expectations, though. The bed was made in stupidly crisp lines with not a single pillow left askew, and similarly, everything else in the room had its place. Was it bad that I'd like to get out of my clothes and mess up that perfectly spread comforter with him?

Shaking the thought off, I stepped into the room. Korix had already powered the storecase beneath his desk on, looking through an activity log, so I circled the space, scanning it. When I reached a set of shelves, I plucked a trophy off of it with a smile.

"If you started cracking processes at such a young age, it's no wonder you've always been better at it than me," I said.

Never looking away from the monitor, Korix noncommittally mumbled something, and chuckling, I returned the trophy to its place.

"I'm surprised you focused on process work enough to get so many awards for it," I said. "Most mid Strata Kolb families aren't keen on that idea, valuing martial skills instead."

I didn't know why I felt the need to chitchat right now. Was I that uncomfortable with this situation?

Unfortunately, Korix didn't reply for a while, letting me complete a half-circuit of his room in tense silence before speaking up.

"I didn't come from a House Kolb family," he said.

Freezing, I craned my head toward him, well aware that I was gaping.

“What?” I managed to say.

Shaking his head, Korix straightened from his lean on the desk.

“That’s why no one disapproved of my fascination with process work,” he said. “It aligned well with my family’s chosen House.”

As he powered down the storecase, I struggled to find my words. Fortunately, I martialled them before Korix could head out the door.

“That’s not what I meant,” I said. “You’re telling me that you, the former *Lokke Vitras* of Lutov, didn’t grow up in Kolb?”

Glancing over his shoulder, Korix said, “I did not.”

And he walked out the door. I could only sputter for a moment because this little piece of history didn’t fit into what I’d have expected from my exceedingly House Kolb life partner, but soon enough, I was racing after him.

“So... which House...?” I said when I’d caught up.

Finishing the question was a bit too much for me right now, something Korix seemed to know based off of how much he was smirking.

“Cerullis,” he said.

Oh, hell. The House I’d just worked to disband. I opened my mouth to say... something. I wasn’t sure what. Maybe I wanted to apologize? Whatever the case, Korix preempted me.

“Before you ask, I chose Kolb at my House naming ceremony because there was a certain element of my family that I wasn’t fond of,” he said. “I eagerly took my chance at creating space between us.”

That was interesting. What did it mean?

Definitely not a question I should ask now.

Korix turned us into another room, but I only noted that it was messier than his before pinning my gaze on him.

“Why Kolb, though?” I asked. “Given the trophies I saw in your room, you’d have been just as welcome in Zan.”

“Simple, really,” Korix said.

He started a repeat of the search he’d performed on his old storecase while explaining.

“At the time, I was extremely motivated to protect the average citizen from the dark side of Lutov, and Kolb was my best way to do that.”

Well. At least that reason fit into my perspective of him, even if it did raise another question. How had young Korix even known that Lutov had a dark side?

“There it is,” he breathed.

When Korix opened a file on this room’s storecase, a brief series of images splashed onto the monitor’s screen, followed by a text-based message.

*Let’s see what you are now,* it read.

On reading this, Korix sucked in a gasp, making me conclude that the message had been meant for him, and when he hunched forward, I hurried to him so I could rest a hand on his back. After a couple of deep breaths, he gathered himself.

“I know where to go next,” he said.

He didn’t give me a chance to question him or explore the rest of his childhood home. Marching for the door, he was a puppeted doll, completely wooden save to throw a single line over his shoulder.

“I hope you don’t mind word-of-mouth stories because I’m telling one on the way.”

And my stomach dropped, because this? This behavior was more what I’d expected from him while we completed this mission.

I didn’t say a word, though, not as we retrieved a skycruiser or as we got into it. At the moment, it wasn’t my place. It was my turn to support him like he’d just done for me.

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The story began once we were five minutes into a trek with an unknown destination.

“Once, there was a perfectly innocent boy who lived what he thought was an ideal life,” Korix said. “Surrounded by loved ones and with his every need provided for, he was happy. It didn’t matter that he was rarely allowed to leave the safety of his home. He didn’t know if the world was as dangerous as his parents claimed, but he trusted them. They would keep him safe.

“And for seven years, this was all he knew. He thought his life was normal: that all fathers were respected, all mothers were timidly quiet, and all children automatically did as they were told. He was very good at that last thing.

“Despite what he'd been told, he also believed that the outside world was a bright and mystical place. Besides for the occasional social function, he never left the cocoon of his home, but he loved hearing stories about the outside world. He couldn’t wait until he could attend his first House rotation.

“Then, that time came, and it was everything he’d hoped for and more. In spite of how sheltered he'd been, he easily made friends—those supposedly legendary creatures—and his classes fascinated him. So many new subjects and unthinkable concepts were presented to him, and he loved it all.

“Eventually, however, that House rotation came to an end. He went home to his family, eager to share what he’d learned, and for a single afternoon, everything returned to normal.

“Unfortunately, this irrevocably changed when the day ended because on the fateful night in question, that innocent boy first met the monster.”

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