

Chapter 87: Resistance and a Continued Story

Our next destination was on the other side of the city. As we set down, I wondered why Korix had brought us here. As far as I could tell, it was just another of the many House Kolb training facilities spread across Xygek.

Perhaps aware of my many questions, Korix simply said, "I came here to escape."

Without looking at me, he got out of the skycruiser, and while he headed into the building, I didn't move, watching him the whole time. This story he was telling me... it was obviously his, no matter how much he was trying to distance himself from it, and I *didn't like* where it was going.

I was also not enjoying how, to this point, I'd simply been along for the ride on this hunt. Even before starting it, I'd known I likely wouldn't contribute much to it, but so far, I'd added nothing. Whatever the flashing images on that storecase had relayed to Korix, I hadn't seen it and my utter reliance on him for this task...

It broke my heart, but then, that had been a common theme for me over the last six months.

From out of nowhere, my hallucination stepped into view outside the skycruiser, slamming their hands onto the front of it, and jumping, I scowled at them, which only made them smile.

"Hurry up, LV!" they called through the glass. "He's leaving you in his dust."

That was right. If I couldn't help with this hunt, the least I could do was be with Korix as he endured it. So, I peeled myself out of the skycruiser and chased after him.

As always when in populated portions of Lutov, people stared at me, surreptitiously or otherwise, and yes. Typically, this didn't bother me. Much. Spend a century dealing with anything you find unpleasant, and you get used to it.

Today, though, I couldn't ignore it. By the time I got into the training facility, my skin was itching from a persistent crawl, and I was fighting the urge to duck my chin to my chest.

Was it simply because of the task I was completing today, or was my sudden discomfort due to something more concerning? I was fully aware of how much the Rylan persona had taken over this morning, even if I couldn't focus on its strangeness now. At some point soon, I'd have to work through it in full, figuring out why and how the swap of control had occurred, but for now, I'd have to question whether his presence was lingering with me, influencing my experience of the world in a more passive way.

When I caught up with him, Korix was stiffly questioning a rather nervous looking man, someone who worked here from what I could tell.

“-none of the simulation rooms are unoccupied?” he was asking as I approached.

“N-no,” the nervous man stammered. “This time of day is usually pretty busy so-”

He cut off as I came to a stop beside Korix.

“What are we looking for?” I congenially asked, ignoring the worker.

“She’s left another clue here. I know it,” Korix said. “It’ll be somewhere safe. Hidden. Possibly somewhere unused or abandoned. She’s always liked places like that, places where no one could find her.”

“Ah.”

Damnit. The more details that kept popping up during this hunt, the more uneasy I became with it.

Turning to the nervous man, I smiled, trying to set him at ease.

“Is there anywhere like that here, not just a sim room?” I asked. “Or perhaps one of those has been regularly booked by people from another House?”

I’d heard what Korix had said, but while he might have known Sanya best long ago, I’d spent more time with her in recent years. His described need of hers to hide certainly fit with the woman I’d come to know, but it wasn’t complete. From what I’d seen, Sanya had also learned the value of allies since she and Korix had been close.

At my question, the worker relaxed, even if the grin he directed at me was still nervous.

“Yes, *Lokke Vitras*. For the last few months, we’ve had a group of individuals from various Houses meeting in one of our sim rooms every day, usually in the mid-afternoon,” he said. “I always thought it was strange. Zan members don’t usually hang out with people from Drav.”

Yes, a situation like that was strange, something that someone should have reported a while ago, but I wouldn’t berate this man over it. Who knew why no one had mentioned the anomaly?

So instead, I asked, “Which room?”

After receiving an answer, Korix and I headed to our new destination. When we arrived, said space was full of various House Kolb members, so Korix and I set up to stake it out. I kept expecting him to continue with his story while we waited, but he kept quiet, and I didn’t press, simply leaning my head on his shoulder.

Hours passed in this silence, one that was both safe and vastly uncomfortable at the same time, but eventually, people from Houses other than Kolb started filing into the indicated room, replacing

its former occupants. After the last one had entered, we waited for a time, making sure everyone had gathered, before making our move.

The fight that ensued was bloody and *frustrating*. I didn't know how so many of Sanya's allies had escaped from my recent wipe, although these people's affiliation with Houses other than Cerullis might have something to do with it. Either way, they were fanatical in their struggle to escape, refusing to listen when Korix and I gave them the option of surrendering.

As the last of them fell, we stood, panting, among the bodies, and I looked myself over. We'd need to search our opponents and get out of here before too much of a tizzy erupted, yes, but as part of that last point, I needed to know how much evidence of the fight had been left on me.

Once I finished that inspection, I winced. Far too much blood had been sprayed on my clothes while the charred leavings of an energy bolt had blackened one sleeve, and from what I could see, Korix was in the same state. There was no way we could get to the skyscruiser without someone taking note of us, which would be just *wonderful*.

Drawing attention to my activities always made covering them up more annoying. Instead of ignoring what had happened, the Houses that I might have 'wronged' would cause a fuss until I'd explained myself, which in some ways, was good. There should be some consequences for the many awful things that I did. That made it no less irritating, though.

Beside me, Korix clicked his tongue, drawing me out of my thoughts.

"Just got a connection request, visual format," he said. "She must have been watching."

He lifted his hand, and above his palm, an image of Sanya formed. I couldn't tell where she was, but wherever it was, it was rustic. The craftsmanship of the dwelling around her reminded me of ones I'd visited in Ibis, and through the window at her back, I could see greenery, so rare in Lutov. Did that mean she'd crossed the water?

With thin lips, Sanya fixed Korix with a piercing glare.

"I see you've gone the way of *him*," she said.

Swallowing hard, Korix said, "I-"

But Sanya merely cut him off.

"Well, you know where I am now," she said. "Come and get me."

The image fizzled out, and after blankly staring at his hand for a moment, Korix dropped it with a growl. Roughly scraping his head, he started pacing, cursing up a storm, and I let him have this reaction for a bit before stepping into his path.

"Ko, I'm sorry, but if you know where we're headed, we need to leave," I said.

Stopping short, Korix nodded while rubbing his face.

Lifting red-rimmed eyes to me, he said, "It wasn't supposed to end this way."

And I replied, "I know."

Because what else was I supposed to say?

We left the bodies where they'd dropped, although I informed Talira of what had happened, and as I'd expected, people most definitely paid attention to us as we walked through the training facility. It set my skin crawling once again, so much so that reaching the skycruiser was almost as relieving as coming home from a mission would be.

But then, Korix input a destination into the console, and we were off.

It took him longer to start with his story this time.

"So, the boy met the monster. Later in life, he would wonder why it took that man seven years to turn such unfathomably vast ire on him. When he was younger, the rest of his family may have distracted the monster on occasion, but surely, that wasn't enough. Surely, he should have noticed the evil in his home before then.

"Did the monster delay because the boy was his son and the rest of the family... wasn't? Was it because the boy had always been so obedient and eager to please? Was it because until that first House rotation, the monster had total sway over him? These questions would haunt the boy in the years to come, but for a long while, greater concerns occupied him. Very quickly, he learned what times of day were safe and how to disappear when the monster came home. He learned how to make convincing excuses to get out of activities with his friends, any time he was in less-than-optimal shape.

"He learned the importance of *control*. Make one mistake, and your life becomes hell. This lesson was drilled into him so many times that it soon constantly played in the background of his mind.

"Over the years, he sometimes wondered how no one noticed what was going on at home. Sure, his array healed his bruises quickly enough, but no normal boy goes catatonic when someone barely raises their voice at him. No normal boy becomes an animal during sparring sessions with House Kolb, taking advantage of the situation to transmute the violence found at home into something else.

"So, how did no one notice? Maybe some people did: the instructors who constantly reminded him that they were there to listen and the like, but if they picked up on the signs, they never raised a hand to help.

"The boy endured this for eighteen long, arduous years, doing everything in his power to protect the others in his family from the monster's ire, but finally, *finally*, a long-awaited day arrived, and he escaped from that house of horrors.

“For a while after that, the boy spent most of his time learning what a normal life was truly like. He advanced in Strata, gained a healthy social life, and found out that he was polyamorous.

“That infuriated the monster, which made the boy giddier than he’d ever been in his life, even if it had adverse side effects for the rest of his family. The boy hated these side effects because, you see, throughout this period of happiness, he’d still striven to protect the rest of his family.

“Eventually, the day came when he could no longer do that. On that most normal of days, he received a request for connection from the only other person who’d escaped the house of horrors, a connection where he heard only screaming, and when it was cut, it was like he lost time. One moment, he was in House Kolb’s headquarters, and the next, he was barging into her home.

“He found her wheezing on her kitchen floor, moments from dying, and something snapped. After calling for emergency services, he went to confront the monster.”

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