

# Chapter 90: I Know What to Do

As if to echo my unease, Korix shifted in front of me, but we couldn't let it overcome us. If we did nothing, the Ancients won.

"We could temporarily neutralize *their* threat. Remove all of Cerullis' members who are under an Ancient's sway," I said. "I have someone in the House who could help us distinguish between them."

"Enough to thoroughly cleanse the House?" Talira asked. "And what do we do with the people we 'remove'? If we start killing them, the other Houses will move against us, and they have the numbers and tech needed to badly damage Kolb."

"It'd be the same if we imprisoned any Cerullis members too. Unless we put them in stasis, anyone with an Ancient in their head will have their brain fried, something that the others will blame on us. And you both know that if we explained a plan like this before executing it, the other *shukusenth* wouldn't listen. We'd be stopped before we could make a move."

Yeah, she was right, and those outcomes would be disastrous.

"How about quarantining the House, then?" I said. "We could tell the citizens that during their research, Cerullis has unleashed an alien disease, something that our arrays can't purge from the body. That would explain any deaths that the Ancients cause, although I doubt *they'd* discard of useful tools so easily, and while news of a plague might cause a panic, we could handle it."

But Talira was already shaking her head.

"It's an excellent idea. It would also, without a doubt, cause a war between the Houses," she said. "You don't fully grasp the precarity of Lutov's power balance. We may have been at peace for millennia, but many of the hostilities from before the homeland's founding have carried over to the present, and the last few decades have seen us skating over violence on the thinnest of ice. Our ability to take our aggression out on Ibis has been our only saving grace. Tipping us into a war wouldn't take much."

Groaning, I rubbed my eyes before pinching my nose. And people wondered why I despised this system.

"Well, that's two ideas from me," I said. "If either of you feel like chipping in, it would be *fantastic*."

They had nothing to say, though, and dropping my hands into my lap, I beamed my annoyance at them. I was the least experienced of us. I couldn't be the only one with an idea.

As I glared at them, however, I noticed how much tension had taken hold of Korix. He was huddled on himself, or he'd done so as much as his rigid control would allow him to, and a frown tickled at his lips.

"We could capture Alezand, see if we can reason with him-" Talira started.

"I've been withholding something," Korix said in a rush.

I paused in my comb of his hair while Talira stopped breathing, removing her hands from her desk. I had no doubt that she was brushing a weapon's grip under there.

"Pray tell me *what*, my *Lokke Vitras*, have you thought acceptable to keep secret in these turbulent times?" she asked.

Similar questions were running through my head. Until now, I hadn't realized how thoroughly my trust in him had been shaken. Yes, I was already dismissing the likelihood of another betrayal, but for a moment, a part of me had considered it possible.

Hugging himself, Korix found me above him.

"I'm your *evushk*," he said. "I promise you, Zae. I'm not the man who hurt you."

He watched me until I slowly nodded before lowering his head to Talira.

"The... *thing* in my head made some changes besides what you've already seen in my brain scan," he said. "*It's* not controlling me, but there's a... link—the best word for it—between me and *it*. I can... hear? Feel? I don't know how to describe the sensation, but that doesn't matter. What does is that through this link, I know what my Ancient is planning and wanting. *It* can't do much in *its* prison but *its* desires? Oo..."

Korix shuddered.

"The Ancients don't have emotions, nor can *they* comprehend them, but I'd translate what *it's* 'feeling' as a need to weaken Lutov and- and-"

A sharp gasp filled the silence, and after vigorously scrubbing his face, Korix turned to me, resting his hand on my knee.

"*It* wants me, *its* former puppet, or alternatively, you, the one who stole me, in *its* grasp so *it* can... hurt us, and I can only assume that same desire stretches to the other Ancients as well. Not much differentiation exists in *their* species."

A roar filled my ear, and from a distance, I watched myself lay my hand atop his. I'd attracted *their* attention. Not only that but I'd become one of *their* worst enemies, someone *they'd* focus on until

this was over.

I saw why Korix had kept this to himself. Sure, he probably hadn't wanted to distress me, but he also must have known the conclusions that I'd draw from what he'd shared, the only useful ones to be gained from this information, and meeting his eyes...

Yes. In them, I saw the knowledge of what I'd do. I also saw his plea for me to refrain from it, felt it when he squeezed my knee.

"Well, then. This would have been nice to know when you woke up from stasis," Talira said. "I'm assuming this 'link' only works one way. Otherwise, you'd never have endangered Lutov by attending our planning sessions."

"Of course it's one way, my *shukusen*. My primary purpose is and always will be to keep the homeland safe," Korix told her.

But to me, he said, *Please. Don't do this.*

The muffling roar in my ears dropped to silence with my decision made, and I brushed my thumb along Korix's hand.

"Maybe we can use this," Talira said. "If we release the Ancient that we're holding captive, perhaps we can-"

Breaking Korix's hold on me, I shot to my feet before striding for the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" Talira snapped behind me. "We're not done here."

"I'm doing my job," I said. "You and Korix can figure out what to do without me, right?"

"Probably not as quickly, but yes," Talira said. "Zae-zae, what are you planning?"

In front of me, the door slid open, but I stopped, glancing over my shoulder.

"Don't give me that, grandmother. You know exactly what I'm planning," I said with a sigh. "Korix says that the Ancients want him or me, and removing either of us would also weaken Lutov, meeting *their* second desire. Therefore, one of us can delay *them*, holding *their* attention for a short time, and we'll sorely need that time, *shukusen*. Between me and my *evushk*, my absence will cause the least damage, given my lack of experience, and when weighing that damage against the gain that we might achieve here, it's pretty clear which of those wins out."

With her face red and her eyes wet, Talira slammed her palms on her desk. I wasn't sure when she'd risen to her feet.

"So, you're going to what?" she shouted. "Walk into Cerullis' headquarters and surrender yourself to them? Let the Ancients..."

Something strangled her voice, and I looked to Korix for help, but he wouldn't meet my gaze, holding his arms tight around his chest.

"Isn't this what the *Lokke Vitras* is called to do?" I asked. "The first part of our mantra even demands it. Sacrifice self. I know I'm not the *Lokke Vitras* yet-"

"You might as well be," Korix said.

Shooting a glare at him, I said, "This is the right thing to do, our best option right now."

"NO!"

Jumping, I jerked toward Talira and snapped my eyes wide open on seeing tears rolling over her cheeks.

"You will not be a self-sacrificing moron. I read enough of those stories in my daily reports," she said. "I order you to be more selfish. Go home, and stay there. Your *evushk* and I will work this problem while you... think about what you're suggesting."

Internally sighing, I bowed to her.

"Yes, *shukusen*," I said.

Even as I rose to my full height, though, Korix was shaking his head.

"That won't stop him. He's unHoused. You're not his *shukusen*, and so, your orders mean nothing to him," he said. "Even if he were House Kolb, I'm not sure they'd mean much."

Clicking my tongue, I crossed my arms, tapping a finger on an elbow.

"Damn it, *evushk*."

Ignoring me, Korix said, "You need to tell him, Talira."

...Tell me what?

Swallowing hard, Talira hung her head, splaying her fingers on her desk.

After a long, tense silence, she said, "How long has it been since your House naming ceremony?"

"Since I started my training, you mean?" I said. "Eleven years, nine months, sixteen days, and... I wasn't supposed to go that far, was I?"

I'd guess the answer was no, based on the looks I was getting.

Slowly shaking her head, Talira said, "Almost twelve years, and look at you."

I obliged, glancing down at my body.

“Yes?” I said.

Squeezing her eyes closed, Talira took a deep breath before dropping into her chair and hiding her face.

“For the last nine years, I’ve dreaded getting your *evushk*’s reports on you,” she said. “With everything I know about you, I knew that you’d learn quickly. Your logic and intelligence scores along with your years of practice before you were chosen would allow nothing less, but I was wrong. You’ve advanced through your training at lightspeed, Zae-zae. If we weren’t in the middle of a crisis, I’d give your *evushk* the release he so desperately needs, elevating you, because you’re ready to assume the mantle. After only twelve years.

“Before you came along, do you know what the record was for the fastest of us to go through our training? Twenty-six years and we don’t talk about that *Lokke Vitras* much. Yes, she burned brightly, but her flame quickly died as well.

“Fourteen years separate the training that you’ve needed from what she did. Fourteen!”

Choking off, Talira dragged her fingers through her hair as she met my eyes.

“I’m afraid for you, grandson, just as much as you terrify me,” she whispered.

Korix’s words on my birthday had returned to haunt me, but this was worse. This was an assertion with facts to back it up. This was my grandmother speaking it, and I was stuck between breaths. If I moved even a fraction, I was afraid I’d further jump out of the mold that I’d made for myself. Sure, I liked people watching me, but I wanted to remain anonymous to them, someone to be admired and quickly forgotten. I didn’t want a reputation like this following me.

Besides, what did it have to do with my plan?

“What she’s saying is that you have something that’s worth as much as experience: potential,” Korix said. “Losing the *Lokke Vitras* that you could become would be devastating for Lutov. It would be just as bad as Talira’s loss or mine or the premature death of any *Lokke Vitras* who’s come before us, if they were here. Just as bad as the loss of any Lutovish to our enemy.”

“As devastating as them destroying the homeland?” I shot back.

Korix looked down his nose at me.

“All we want is a little more time before you throw your life away,” Talira said. “Give us until sundown tomorrow. If you *evushk* and I don’t come up with something by then, we can discuss your plan again.”

Discuss, meaning they’d try to argue me out of it once more. Still, what was the harm in waiting for a little while? House Cerullis and the Ancients hadn’t made a peep in three weeks. Not only that but we’d found most of the lost weapons, identified in a recent inventory. Given those two facts, what were a couple more days delay?

“Fine,” I said, heading back to my chair.

Talira shot her hand up.

“No. You won’t do any good in this discussion, not after you’ve already decided on a course of action,” she said. “You’ll go to your parents’ apartment, and if I hear that you’ve set foot outside of it before tomorrow evening, I will make your life hell, even if I’m not your *shukusen*.”

“Maybe you can take the time to speak with your parents. I’d love to have a few days where I don’t get a frantic message from Ximon about you.”

Yes... I should do that, especially if we ended up going with my plan. That would be fun. Then again, maybe I could get out of it.

“I’m supposed to help Phen-”

“Your brother can spend a day doing research without you,” Talira said. “Go home, or I’ll sedate you and take you there myself.”

I supposed I didn’t have a choice, then.

Once again, I bowed.

“Yes, *shukusen*,” I said.

I’d almost made it over the threshold before Talira continued speaking behind me.

“You go with him, my *Lokke Vitras*. We can continue our discussion via messages, and I don’t trust Zaeden to do as he’s told. He’ll run off at the first chance he gets.”

My foot, halfway through a step, heavily thudded to the ground, and I winced. She was right. Once I got bored, I probably would leave.

Shaking my head, I started toward a lift.

“I’ll watch him, my *shukusen*,” Korix said.

So, he’d watch me for signs of escape while I’d monitor him for signs of betrayal. It would be like the first year of my training all over again, that time when both of us had expected an attack from the other person.

“Good. Now, get out of here!” Talira said. “I have things to do.”

In my mind’s eye, I could see her flapping a hand at Korix, and when he caught up with me, I glanced at him from the corner of my eye. Was he afraid of me like Talira was? I didn’t know what to think of everything else she’d claimed, but if it meant that the man I loved was afraid of me...

Korix twirled between me and the lift, clasping my shoulders with the most serious of expressions in place.

“You were right,” was all he said.

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “Yes, that’s how it usually goes. What am I right about this time?”

A... holy shit, was that a...? A *mischievous smirk* climbed onto Korix’s face.

“Defying my once *evushk* felt good,” he said.

With a quick kiss, he released me, resting a finger on my nose.

“Don’t ever think about doing the same thing to me.”

He took a step into the lift, and once he’d disappeared through the ceiling, I could only blink at it with my lips parted, but soon enough, laughter nearly bowled me over. I clung to the wall, half-aware of Talira’s annoyed shout leaking through her office’s closed door. Every day that Korix stepped further out of his enforced shell was one full of lovely surprises for me.

Hell, I hoped someone crafted a better solution to our crisis than mine. I’d hate to leave someone so wonderful behind.

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