

# Chapter 10: Recovery

Or that was what I thought until Damari crouched beside me and my partners.

“Looks like I was wrong about everything being fine,” they said. “Sorry ‘bout that.”

Softly laughing, I crawled to Korix’s side and dropped to the floor, patting the ground opposite me. Once Damari was sitting cross-legged there, they rested their elbows on their knees with their chin in their hands, chewing on their fingernails.

“When do ya suppose he’ll wake up?” they asked.

“Couple minutes,” Leski and I said together.

Making a face, she gestured for me to continue.

“Sedatives don’t work well on him after...”

“After what he was. Yeah, I get it,” Damari said. “Will he be... ok when he wakes up?”

Wincing, I raised my eyes to the ceiling, blankly staring at it, until Leski pulled one of my hands free of their clench together. When she laid its palm on Korix’s cheek, I brushed my thumb along his skin, smiling at his nose’s wrinkle even as my heart twinged.

“Most likely, yes,” I said, “but that’s not always the case.”

Damari vigorously rubbed their face before returning to gnawing on their nails.

“Damn. I didn’t know you had it so bad,” they said. “I mean, some of the older Kolb members get cranky sometimes but...”

Abruptly, they circled their fingers around mine and Leski’s wrists.

“I’m sorry. Let me know if I can do anything to help,” they said. “For you *and* him.”

My breathing hitched. No one had offered something like this. *No one*. Everyone who knew about Korix’s symptoms liked to pretend they didn’t exist, but Damari had offered to help, even after the violence that he’d displayed tonight.

“I’m... confused. Why aren’t you afraid?” I said. “Most people would be, but you’re not. You’ve never been afraid of me or Ko.”

Giggling cut me off while Damari rocked in place, but they waved at my befuddled expression.

“LV, I am fucking terrified of the both of you, have been from the moment you first asked for me as a pilot. You’re the most dangerous man in Lutov, easily capable of wiping out House Kolb if you wanted to. Why wouldn’t I be scared of you?” they said. “But...”

They turned serious.

“I see you, Zaeden. You are kind and good and have the biggest, most fragile heart, and despite the wonderful partners you have—”

They smiled at Leski.

“—you desperately need a *friend*. Mother Time, you stepped on my ship for the first time and practically blinded me with your bleeding ache for one. So, I determined that was what I’d be, no matter how much you scare me, and look at us now.”

Swinging over Korix’s body, Damari whacked my chest, and with a smirk, I rubbed the spot.

“You’re a better person than this world deserves, Damari,” I said.

With feigned embarrassment, they slapped their hands to their cheeks and swung themselves back and forth.

“Aw, thanks,” they said before turning on Leski. “What about you? Curious about why I put up with your shenanigans?”

“Besides because you like them?” Leski said with a lofted eyebrow.

“Excuse me, who likes getting pranked-?”

A low moan cut Damari off, and I frantically waved for my friend to get back. Leski and I huddled over Korix with another hypo a breath from his skin. Even still, I took turns with my wife in running my fingers through his hair while donning a fake, cheery smile.

With a grimace, Korix peeled his eyelids open, blinking at us with a frown tugging on his lips, and I held my breath.

“Why am I on the floor?” he asked.

Exhaling in a burst, I giggled alongside Leski, and we peppered Korix’s face with kisses while he protested. When he eventually pushed us away, he sat up, glancing around.

“Hello, Damari,” he said. “Where did everyone else go?”

“Home,” I said before my friend could speak, “and the drones have already begun cleaning up. The house is empty except for us and-”

“Me!” Damari said, fluttering their fingers in a wave. “I can go too if-”

“No!” Leski shouted.

At our stare, she shrunk on herself.

“It’s just... I...”

“She means that you can stay for as long as you like, which is true,” Korix said, “but I’m still unclear about what happened. The last thing I remember, I was speaking with Talira...”

A troubled look began its bloom on his face, but before it could spread too far, I took hold of his elbow.

“Leave it until tomorrow, Ko,” I said. “Everyone’s fine.”

He knew what had happened. The scorch marks and knives embedded in the wall, the report that his array had probably fed him about the remnants of sedatives in his blood, the memories that I had no doubt he’d already accessed. These painted a clear picture of what he’d done tonight, but sometimes, especially in recent years, his brain protected him like this, feigning ignorance of obvious knowledge.

And every time it happened, I let him indulge in it, at least for a little while.

“I’m tired,” Korix said. “The party wore me out.”

“Why don’t you and Leski go to bed, then?” I said. “I’ll come up in a minute, and we can snuggle for a while.”

One side of Korix’s mouth pulled into a smile.

“Sounds great,” he said. “What about-?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “I’ll take care of the traps, Ko. Go to bed.”

Leski was already standing, offering him a hand, and while she hauled him to his feet, she shot me a worried look.

‘I know,’ I mouthed.

Her lips twisted, but after my partners had said good night to Damari, she pulled Korix out of the room. Once they’d gone, I hung my head with my hands on my hips.

“What happened?” I quietly asked.

Sidling up beside me, Damari offered me a whisky sour, which I accepted without questioning where they’d gotten it from. I sipped it while they explained.

“After you left, Leski calmed everyone down before sending your sister off. Then, there was a lotta awkward conversation while we waited for you to come back, but eventually, Talira decided to

break the bubble that had formed around your partners. I'm not sure what they talked about, but she shot way too many concerned glances at Korix while they were speaking, which was understandable. He was visibly shaking by that point. With a fake excuse, I started toward them, hoping to get him out of the room, but Niklaus got there first."

Hissing, I winced. Niklaus. It was always fucking Niklaus. Even one hundred years after he'd last gotten in trouble and had so much power stripped away from him, he remained stuck in his ways, toxic, and inflexible to the extreme.

"He ignored Talira, which shocked everyone. No one does that to a *shukusen*," Damari continued. "Started tearing into his daughter. I wasn't close enough to hear the specifics, but from what I did catch, I'd guess he wasn't being... kind.

"Korix stepped in. Quite loudly. I believe his exact words were, 'Back off. Give her a chance to speak', and... Niklaus blew up, getting in Korix's face and yelling and... yeah, it was bad."

I could imagine. Korix had probably been clinging to the real world with his fingernails at that point.

"Leski and Talira tried to pull Niklaus back, and I was on my way to help, but before we could deescalate the situation, a couple of your party guests came through, probably on their way home. They were drunk and shouting, and after they left the room, one of them uncorked a champagne bottle. Probably intending to enjoy it while on the way home.

"It stole Korix's focus. He went completely white and started hyperventilating, and I could see him glancing over the room, as if identifying objects in it. Anyone with sense, Talira and Leski included, knew to step back and give Korix breathing room, but not Niklaus. He advanced until their shoes were touching and- and-"

I was floating far from my body, numb to the world, but even still, I needed to know.

"What did he do?" I asked with tingling lips.

Audibly swallowing, Damari said in a small voice, "Niklaus *hit* him, LV. He hit our former *Lokke Vitras*, who gave so much for..."

They'd sounded like they were about to cry, and I wished that I could comfort them, but all I could think was:

*Yep. That'd do it.*

And.

*Fucking HELL were we lucky.*

Draining my glass, I imagined hurling it into the fireplace, reveling in its shatter, but instead, I only wandered to a side table where I set it down, grazing its lip with my fingers.

"I appreciate the report," I said. "Stay here for a moment, please. I have to finish last minute... things."

A moment turned into an hour. I was aggressive with setting traps tonight, focusing on the minutiae of each. Whenever I found straggling guests, I shooed them home as politely as I could, and on nearing the foyer, I paused, hearing the click of phantom claws again. Mother Time, I could use Ace right now.

When I returned to the sitting room, Damari was hanging from a sofa's seat with their knees hooked over its back. Leaving their fingers hovering in front of their face, they grinned at me.

"Kept me waiting long enough, didn't ya?" they said.

Rubbing my eyes, I said, "Sorry. I needed to cool off."

Upside down, Damari sagely nodded.

"Understandable."

They swung their legs to sit upright, rubbing their hands together.

"So? Why am I still here?" they asked.

"Because you decided to wait for me instead of leaving," I said with a smirk.

Rocking back, Damari said, "Oh ho ho! Someone's feeling better."

"A little."

Leaning on the sofa's arm, Damari slid down it to lay on their stomach with their feet kicking in the air.

"In all seriousness," they said, "why am I here?"

"You're here because..."

Huffing, I stared at the join of the wall to the ceiling.

"Because you stayed," I said. "I told everyone to go home, and they did, although if she'd known what was going on, Feena probably would have waited as well. You ignored my command because you saw what I needed. That's why you stayed, not for anything else, and I... I can't begin to express how grateful I am for it, for braving the possibility of me taking the ugliness inside of me out on you."

"Hey."

Damari very carefully laid their hand on mine.

“That’s what friends do.”

Laughing under my breath, I said, “Is it? I wouldn’t know.”

But I dragged my gaze to Damari, who was swaying in place—never could keep still, this one—and softly smiling at me.

“Will you stay over?” I asked. “I understand if you have other plans or responsibilities, but if not, I’d like you here. Ko will be difficult tonight, and I could use the... help.”

Uncertainly eyeing me, Damari said, “I’ll get a separate room, yes? You can wake me up with a message.”

“Damari, who do you take me for? The most inconsiderate lout in Lutov?” I said. “Unless I need you, I’m not letting you within one hundred meters of my bedroom. I don’t want to scar you with images of me and my partners getting up to all manner of scandalous things. I mean, what if we’re kissing, or Mother Time forbid, have our clothes off, doing all manner of lewd things to one-”

“Ok, ok, stop!”

Shooting toward me, Damari slapped their hands over my mouth, but when I raised an eyebrow, they pulled free, an instant before I flicked my tongue out of my mouth.

“Mother Time, really?”

They glared at me, and I shrugged.

“This is who you befriended,” I said. “Now, come on. Let’s get you settled.”

For the entire walk to a guest suite, Damari grumbled behind me, and when we arrived, they didn’t wish me good night, merely slamming the door behind them, which sent me into peals of laughter, but those had died by the time I reached my room. I slipped inside, shuffling through the dark to our bed. It bounced when I sat down, and behind me, someone stirred. From the small hands pressed to my chest, I’d guess it was Leski.

Neither of us spoke until I’d slid between the sheets and gathered her against me.

Tracing her profile in the moonlight, I said, “How are you?”

“Stressed. Furious. Worried about Ko,” Leski replied. “Irritated about how long it took you to get here.”

“Sorry. I was showing Damari to a room,” I said. “I asked them to back us up tonight.”

Rotating to face me, Leski rested her chin on my shoulder.

“You did?” she asked.

I could *hear* her uncertain frown.

“You trust them with... this?”

This. The one thing neither of us discussed out loud.

“I do, actually,” I said, “and you know we might need the help.”

Leski hummed.

“If you’re sure,” she said before sighing. “Do you want first watch, or shall I take it?”

“No, I’ll do it. You looked like you needed sleep before that fiasco at the end,” I said, “but before we get to that, do you need anything from me?”

She was quiet for a long time, and I took the chance to look over Korix. He was already shivering with the faintest of noises coming from him, but soon, he’d be thrashing and whining. Only Leski or I could calm him down from that, and we reserved the safe cocoon of our bodies until it was needed.

A night of violent nightmares always followed a bad fall into his past, and after decades together, Leski and I had worked out a system that would keep Korix asleep throughout the night. Damari was here on the off chance that he woke up.

“I don’t know, Zae,” Leski said. “I thought today would be a joy, a wild celebration of new life and the rapture of sharing it with family, but... it’s been miserable.”

And I hated that. Shifting out from under her, I propped myself on an elbow, once more frozen in place and burning up inside at the sight of her. At her perfect nose. At her rash of freckles. At her eyes, pinched to the point that I swore it would kill me. She’d turned inward, lost to her misery, so I pressed a kiss to her forehead.

“Hey,” I said. “How can I make it better?”

Biting her lip, Leski said, “I don’t think you can, love.”

I knew the truth when I heard it, even if I didn’t like it. Still, I rubbed my hand along her stomach, glancing up at her with a question in my eyes.

“At least let me end tonight on the right note for you, then,” I said.

She turned her head to the side.

“I don’t know, Zae,” she said. “I... I don’t know.”

Nudging her face toward me, I kissed the tip of her nose.

“It’s ok to say no, my love. You know that,” I said with a wry smile. “It won’t hurt my feelings.”

“That’s not-!” Leski snapped.

Oo, that had been loud. Cringing, both of us glanced toward Korix, but besides a brief increase in the intensity of his shivering, he remained as he’d been.

“I mean I literally *don’t know*. My body’s giving me mixed signals,” Leski soon continued. “So, maybe... do what you like, but if I tell you to stop-”

“I’ll stop,” I cut in. “Of course I will.”

Taking her hand, I brushed my lips along her knuckles before peering at her with a smirk.

“But you have to promise to be very, very quiet,” I said.

Snorting, she nodded, and with a dubious glance, I shifted down our bed. When I disappeared beneath the sheets, she released a cascade of quiet cursing as she realized what I had in mind, and with the most genuine grin I’d worn all day, I got to work. Perhaps if I was lucky, the muffled gasps that I teased free now would make up for every terror-soaked noise that was sure to come later tonight.

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