

Chapter 12: Sure, I Can Leave Right Now

When I reached my floor, I found an unoccupied room, locking the door after I'd entered it. Making a running leap, I perched on a counter with my legs swinging before requesting a direct connection with Leski. She didn't accept for so long that I wondered if something had gone wrong at home, but eventually, her voice rang in my head.

"Hey, love," she said. "This... isn't a good time. Can you give me fifteen minutes?"

She'd sounded distracted: relaxed and on the edge of sleep

"Sorry, but no," I said. "I need to speak with you and Ko. Has he recovered enough for that? I'd like to loop him in."

"He's... mm... yeah, he's fine," Leski said. "Pulled himself together not long after-"

Her words fell to a yawn and Korix's name sleepily mumbled, filling in the gap about what was happening at home, and leaning on my knees, I hid my face in my hands. Even still, I requested a direct connection with him.

He accepted almost immediately.

"Zae, I hope you have a-"

"I'm going deep cover," I shouted before biting my lip. "I'm sorry. I wouldn't interrupt, but I'm outside alterations right now, and I don't- I don't know when I'll be home."

An uncomfortable quiet fell until I heard rustling and quiet grunts from them both as they disentangled from whatever cuddled position they'd been in.

"Ok," Leski soon said. "You have our attention."

"Talira wants me in Zan's ranks for a while," I said. "As always, I'll work to reach my goal as quickly as possible but..."

My extraction would mostly depend on chance.

Sighing, Korix said, "She's always had the most unfortunate timing."

Which made me wince.

“This one’s on me,” I said, “but even still, you need to know what’s going on. Typical deep-cover practices. No communication until I contact you. *Only Feena* can know what I’m doing this time, though. Talira didn’t give me permission to contact Phen.”

“Ouch,” Leski said.

“It’s fine,” I said. “I doubt I’d have done it anyway.”

They were silent a touch too long, and I knew they’d picked up on the same instability in me that Talira had noticed. Thank Mother Time, they said nothing about it, though.

“What do you need from us?” Korix asked.

Enough dregs of emotion remained in me to hate what I’d ask of them.

“Can you two handle preparations for our newest family member?” I said. “You’ll need to work out logistics for how we’ll handle... me and everything I am. Also, the house should be child-proofed and...”

I cut off for a moment, biting my lip, before exploding.

“Hell, why do I have to miss this? I want to be there with you. Helping. *Damn* this House system.”

Apparently, I had a little more than dregs for this topic.

“Ok. We can do that,” Leski said, refusing to comment on my outburst. “And we’ll leave a few things for you to do too. Ok, love? Small things that we can finish at the last minute, if needed.”

My vision blurred.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“We love you too,” Leski said, “even if Ko never admits it.”

Laughing under my breath, I shook my head.

“I can’t love him either, remember?” I said.

A happy hum came from Korix while Leski clicked her tongue.

“You two are so weird,” she said.

But then, we were here, at another of the worst moments of my life.

“I have to go,” I said.

I could see their tense smiles and shoulders drawing together, even though I was nowhere near them.

“Please, be safe,” Leski said in a tight voice.

“Remember everything I taught you, and you should be out of there in no time, kuvesk,” Korix said.

“Don’t insult me, my beautiful partners. This’ll be like every other time I’ve gone deep cover. I’ll be back before you know it,” I said. “I’m glad you’re feeling better, Ko, and...”

Even knowing they wouldn’t see it, I tilted my head to the side with a mischievous smile growing.

“Leski, you do what he says, if only when you're cuddling,” I said. “I expect you boss our former *Lokke Vitras* around like he’s yours everywhere else.”

“Zae...” Korix groaned.

Leski burst into laughter, though, and Korix was soon preoccupied with reminding her of who was in control right then. I listened to them for as long as I could before forcing myself to cut the connection.

That was it. Until this mission was over, I wouldn’t hear from them or any of my other partners. One would think that after so many times doing this, I’d be used to it by now, but a furious gale still howled loss inside of me, and I drowned myself in it.

Once I had it under control, though, I hopped off of the counter. The sooner I started this mission, the sooner I could break deep cover.

When I entered alterations, Maikle glanced up from behind his desk before leaping to his feet. The one true ruler of this space, answerable to no one in his domain, he made an awkward picture at the moment, in the middle of a full body transition. Minor adjustments, like what Damari did on a weekly basis, didn’t take long to finish, a few hours at most, but what Maikle had started could take months unless one used an accelerant, which was not advised.

Still, he did this to himself every few years, whenever the mood hit him, although he hadn’t transitioned to Evanline in decades. I secretly thought that he might have settled on a gender, which made me happy for him. Sometimes, people took centuries and hundreds of switches on the vast spectrum of gender or non before finding what was right for them. Not that there was anything wrong with persistent investigation or presenting as the gender that struck one’s fancy in the moment, but of those who experimented like this, most eventually chose one of the many options available to them.

“*Lokke Vitras*,” Maikle said, nodding to me.

“Hey, Maikle,” I said. “What’ve you got for me today?”

He followed me deeper into alterations, wincing while I sat on the bed of a hibernation tube.

“You won’t like it,” he said.

Oh, goody.

“Fortunately, I don’t have to like my appearance to do my job,” I said. “Just please say you’re not making me a woman again.”

“No,” Maikle hurriedly said, “I think we can both agree that doing that the one time wasn’t a good idea.”

Usually, I could handle the complete changes in appearance that came with deep-cover missions while still feeling like me but for that one...

It had been horrible. I’d felt like I’d been wearing someone else’s body, and if I caught a glimpse of it in the mirror, the jolt of seeing *not me* had been enough to send me spiraling for the rest of the day. My discomfort had been bad enough that Talira had almost pulled me off of that mission, to be replaced with a Second Stratus, but I’d stuck it out, although I’d raced to headquarters so I could get myself back as soon as I’d been finished.

What everyone had learned from that fiasco? I was very much a man. Also, living with a gender that one didn’t identify with? *Do not recommend.*

Maikle played with a holodrama plate, inset into a hip-high counter, and my appearance for the next few weeks shimmered into being above it. He was right. I didn’t like it.

“So, as always, we’re replacing your distinctive eye color with something else: hazel this time,” Maikle said. “We’re also, as always, trimming your height by a few centimeters.”

With an exasperated sigh, I settled back on my hands.

“You know, being taller than average is usually an asset,” I said, “but in this, it always comes back to bite me.”

“Forgive me, *Lokke Vitras*. I know a change in height can be difficult to adjust to, but it’s my job to make sure that no one knows who you are,” Maikle said. “Your height and eye color are the features that most people notice about you.”

Squeezing my eyes closed, I said, “I know, Maikle. Please, continue.”

“Ok.”

He turned back to his hologram.

“Your hair will be fully brown this time with no blonde mixed in, and you’ll need to keep it short,” he said. “You know how Zan likes their safety measures.”

“Yup,” I said, popping the ‘p’. “Intimately familiar with that.”

Even if Pheniks forgot to follow them all the time.

“In the same vein, we’ll be adding some... padding across your body,” Maikle said. “Zan members aren’t typically so...”

He trailed off, picking at the edge of the holodrama plate while eyeing me, and I raised an eyebrow.

“Toned?” I suggested.

Flushing, Maikle said, “Yes, that.”

Hmm...

“We’ll make several minor changes as well,” he continued in a rush. “Softening your cheekbones, enlarging your nose, narrowing your shoulders, etc. You can review everything in the modification file that I’ll share.”

He brushed his fingers through the air, making something flash into my array. I didn’t bother with looking at it. Maikle had handled my full body transition since I’d become the Lokke Vitras. He knew what he was doing.

Folding his arms behind his back, he asked, “Any requests for additions to my proposal?”

“None,” I said.

I never had one, but Maikle insisted on asking every time, just like he insisted on reviewing what he’d be doing before getting started. When he tapped on the holodrama plate, my soon-to-be countenance disappeared, and he pulled a hospital gown out of the cabinet beneath it, laying the bundle on the counter.

“In that case, I’ll give you some privacy,” he said.

Almost, I told him he could stay and watch me change, if he liked, but I restrained myself. This was one person I shouldn’t get involved with. So, while Maikle gathered supplies elsewhere, I stripped before switching the hospital gown on the counter with a pile of my black clothes. With my fingers lingering on them, I grimaced.

That was another thing I’d go without for a while. When I was pulled out of hibernation, the outfit waiting for me would be way brighter than I liked, enough to set my eyes aching.

“All done,” I called.

When he joined me, Maikle brought bags full of colored liquid, IV lines, and needles with him, and I made a face.

“Yay...” I softly said.

Glancing up from what he was holding, Maikle smiled, a gentle one that was meant to reassure.

“You’re in good hands, *Lokke Vitras*,” he said. “I’ll take care of everything.”

“I know,” I said.

I did! I didn’t care that my training was screaming for me to trust no one, not even a moan who’d had me at his mercy hundreds of times before. I wouldn’t listen to those instincts. Not here.

After Maikle had hung bags from their hooks at the end of the hibernation tube, I offered him my arm. One needle—primed to give me the chemical that would induce physical changes—went into the back of my hand, and the other—with its mixture of an accelerant and a sedative—went into the crook of my elbow.

A normal change to the body didn’t require the meds in the first bag, not when one’s array could handle the process automatically, but when one was using an accelerant, one *did not* want to be conscious for the process, which the normal method required. Something else must take an array’s place.

Almost as soon as the needles bit into my veins, I was woozy with the room flickering in and out of focus, but that was good. I needed sedatives that would hit this strongly, otherwise, the accelerant’s induced pain might kill me. What else should be expected when scrunching changes to the body, ones that should take months, into a week?

Maikle helped me lay on the hibernation tube’s bed before arranging the IV lines to his satisfaction.

“Comfortable?” he asked.

“As much as I can be,” I said, only slurring the words a little.

Nodding, Maikle played with the air, prepping the hibernation tube, but he paused before activating it.

“Sleep well, *Lokke Vitras*,” he said. “I’ll see you next week.”

I snorted. Everyone knew that one didn’t sleep in hiber-

An extended, plasma arch snapped into being above me. Its blue color was so bright that it made my teeth throb, but that color didn’t matter for long. As it registered, I shut down.

Revision #1

Created 12 January 2025 19:03:15 by FatalisticFable

Updated 15 January 2025 00:44:26 by FatalisticFable