

# Chapter 17: Heading for a Breakdown

Talira made me a whiskey sour as soon as I walked into her office. Shortly after I became the *Lokke Vitras*, she'd added the drink's ingredients to her sparse sideboard, not once harping on how I should stay sober like Korix had used to do.

Without a job or sneaking through Kolb's headquarters to distract me, I was shaking, and I'd tried to stop it. I had, but shivers rumbled over me no matter how much I fought to stop them. It was a miracle that I didn't spill my drink when Talira handed it to me.

She made no comment on my state, merely sitting at her desk, facing me. Folding her hands in front of her, she watched as I partook of her gifted medicine with not one word spoken. When I set an empty glass on top of her desk, she flattened her palms behind it.

"Tell me," she said.

I looked away, chewing on my lip. This was the right course of action, yes? I wasn't about to ruin my brother's life. Please, please, someone tell me he'd be ok.

"Zaeden," Talira said in a firm voice. "I can't fix it until you tell me."

I knew this. Squeezing my eyes closed, I took a deep breath, in and out.

"Your operatives were right about the weapon."

I forced myself to meet Talira's gaze with my throat working.

"Phen's involved," I whispered.

Without a word, Talira rose to make me another drink, and when she'd sat again, my story for the last month spilled out of me. I couldn't speak it like a report, didn't have the control for it, so details got messy. Feelings got involved. I cried when I told Talira what Pheniks had said about me, thinking I was someone else.

Not once did she judge me. She was an immovable rock, listening without her expression changing, and when I was done, holding my head in my hands, she reached across her desk to pull my fingers out of my hair.

"Ok. You did the right thing, coming in now," she said. "I want you to go home. Let me take care of the rest."

Lifting my head, I said, “Phen?”

Talira patted her claimed hand.

“I will do everything in my power to help your brother. He is my grandson, after all,” she said. “Go home, Zae-zae. Take a few days, like I promised.”

“I... will,” I said. “Thank you, *shukusen*.”

“Of course,” Talira said. “I’ll message you when I need you back. Say hi to Leski and Ko for me.”

I promised that I would, but once I was free of headquarters, I didn’t head to the Southern Fells like I should. Evening had come with people setting aside their work for the day, and I didn’t look like the *Lokke Vitras*. I found the closest source of dance music and proceeded to get thoroughly wasted.

Most of the next two days passed in a blur, and I caught only glimpses of it through my haze. Lots of dancing, to music I hated and songs that I loved. Taking a hit of *kalvna*, the drug that the children of Ibis so enjoyed, and fucking loving it. Drinking far too much and throwing most of it back up in secluded walkways. Flirting with way too many pretty people. Finding dark corners in bars to openly grope and do... other things with them, and going home with at least one.

In some ways, this behavior reminded me of my more relaxed personas, the ones I used with the partying crowd. Much as I enjoyed these sorts of things from time to time, they weren’t something I was fully comfortable with, not really and especially not with strangers. At some point, I briefly wondered if one of those personas had taken over, but mostly, I tried not to think about that. I tried not to think about *anything*.

All in all, it was an enormously embarrassing forty-eight hours for me, but I badly needed it. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d betrayed my little brother, no matter how far down the rabbit hole I fell, but the partying, the drugs, the sex? They dulled this pain, and when I came out on the other side, I didn’t feel like walking in front of a speeding ground transport, even knowing that need would soon return.

When I woke up in the early afternoon, two days after I’d left Talira’s office, I was curled up in Korix’s bed with his old apartment in Xygek sheltering me. I was desperately clutching his pillow to my chest while strangling one of Leski’s stuffed animals. Given that none of these things had been here before, I must have dropped by our apartment at some point.

Setting aside the pillow and the stuffed bear, I sat up, rubbing my eyes. I didn’t know why I’d returned here, out of all the places I could have gone. My unconscious mind must see it as the ultimate place of safety in this city. That was the only explanation I could think of. Whatever my reason had been, though, it seemed pretty obvious that I should head home.

Hopping to the floor, I glanced around, appalled to find no traps in the room. With a head shake, I made for the kitchen and poured myself a glass of water. Ace’s bed was still here, which was...

No.

With burning eyes, I stalked into the hall, leaning against a wall. Slowly breathing out, I sipped at my water, hoping to appease my body's need for it, and broke deep cover.

Messages flooded into my array, and I had it pick through them for any that had been sent from my various partners. As always after a mission like this, one or two of these people had decided that a relationship with me was too complicated for them, but fortunately, these break-up messages were polite for once. Most, however, just wanted to know where I was and why I wasn't speaking to them. I responded with a generic message before setting that group of senders aside, for the moment at least.

While my array re-scanned my messages for anyone needing my help, I headed for the hangar, wondering if I'd find any vehicles there. I'd rather leave straight from the apartment than find a landing pad. Something about having people around me seemed... too much right now.

My array returned from its scan with a few messages that fit my parameters, but I gave them not once glance, forwarding them to Talira instead. She'd said I could have a few days? I wasn't touching House business until she dragged me back in.

Now came what was usually the best part of breaking deep cover, but for some reason, I was reluctant to do it this time, so I put it off. A couple of skycruisers were collecting dust in the hangar, thank Mother Time, so I climbed into one, feeding it my estate's coordinates and my designator.

As it rose into the sky, I started the changes that would return my body to normal. Simple things like hair and eye color should be finished by the time I got home, but things like regaining my height and losing this flab would take time and exercise. I could accelerate the process, going into hibernation again, but... no. As a rule, I didn't do that unless a mission required it.

And I had nothing else to delay me. I made my requests, holding my hand out in front of me. Initial contact after breaking deep cover was always done through a direct connection, one that was accompanied by visuals. This way, they'd have a good idea of how I'd appear when I came home.

An image beamed from my palm: Korix with a *lot* of air traffic behind him.

"Zae! Have you...?"

As he trailed off, I tried on a smile. I'd forgotten to check how I looked before leaving the apartment, so I didn't know how much of a mark the last two days had made on me.

After examining me, Korix went blank.

"Shit," he said under his breath.

Like he hadn't wanted me to hear it. For the first time in a while, I didn't care that he'd cursed around me.

Turning aside, I said, "Yeah."

"Do you want...?" he asked.

Closing my eyes, I huffed, shaking my head.

"Are you in Xygek?" I asked. "That's odd for you."

"I'm doing research for my book," Korix said. "Zae. Are you sure-?"

"You still haven't told me what it's about," I interrupted. "Oh! Do you want someone to read your drafts? I'd love to do it."

He just stared at me, expressionless for a moment, before taking off with people on the walkway flashing past him.

"Right," he said. "I'm on my way home."

"You don't need to-"

The image of Korix moved to one side with a projection of Leski appearing beside it. She looked harried with paint smudges spackling her face.

"Sorry it took so long to answer," she gasped. "I had to crawl my way free of the nursery. Hey, love!"

She kept speaking, but I didn't hear her. I'd forgotten about our eminent kid. How the hell had I forgotten?

With a fist in my throat, I cut through Leski's diatribe, noting the worry building on her face.

"I'll be home soon," I said. "It's..."

I didn't know what else to say, so I cut the connections, curling my fingers into my palms.

"Fuck," I hiccupped.

Huddling in my seat, I fought everything that was ripping through me. For the first time in decades, I regulated my hormones for something other than a mission, but considering how little I changed their levels, it didn't help much.

I should have expected this. When it came to my work as the *Lokke Vitras*, I tended to have a cycle. First, I was fine, handling every vicious mauling of my soul without a problem. Then, it built to a teetering point, and I went dead inside.

And last, I broke. Sometimes, Talira would give me a few days to recover before I reached this point, but she'd been too late this time, and this time had involved family. I had always, *always*, ALWAYS been fragile when it came to those I loved.

Oh, Mother Time. What had I done to my little brother?

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