

Chapter 2: Savor Happiness

When an alarm roused me, the Southern Fells' moors were racing below my skycruiser with the river that fed Lake Phiabe splitting them. Nestled in a crook of this snaking path of water, lights resisted the night, the only ones visible for as far as I could see.

An estate. *My* estate but I had trouble thinking of it as something that I owned. Everything in my life could easily be taken away from me. Everything technically belonged to House Kolb, provided in exchange for my service to them, which I'd always found funny for several reasons.

Chief of these was that these possessions, that land, this sprawling house? I didn't need it. It was nice, certainly, but I would be just as happy living in a poorly constructed home, like the exiled did, so long as my family came with me.

I landed outside, unsure how long I'd be there. If Leski only needed me to kill a bug—which she'd had me come home to do before, to my great amusement—I didn't want to wait while drones prepared the hangar for my departure.

When I stepped out of the skycruiser, a breeze welcomed me home, and the chill of it tugged on my lips, even as I shivered. Mother Time, I'd missed this place.

The building itself could go up in flames for all I cared. Someone I'd never met had planned its layout and appearance, done with only mild interference from Leski. She'd made sure that everyone had gotten the things we needed in a house, but everything else had been left to the architect. All sweeping lines and windows peeking through gaps—the style for the last several decades—I liked it well enough, but then, I'd never been the most visually inclined of people.

Stepping inside, I stretched, swearing for a second that I heard the sound of pattering paws and heavy panting. For the millionth time, I wondered if we should get another dog. I missed Ace. Intensely. And no other dog could replace him but...

There was something to be said for their ability to make one feel singularly loved, something that would be nice to have again. Not yet, though.

Shaking my head, I sent out messages—*I'm home!*—before heading for the kitchen. While munching on a snack, I wandered toward the one room in the house where I was sure to find at least one member of my family.

The library was dimly lit. It was the only place where flames provided illumination instead of artificial lights, and their warm, orange color flickered over the spines of the many books we'd collected over the years. Enough were here to fill the floor-to-ceiling shelves that lined two-thirds of the empty wall space. A few chairs were scattered around the library while a sofa sat in front of the fireplace, and on either side of it, pillows spilled into view.

Glancing at this scene, I frowned. I'd thought for sure...

As if amused that I could have missed it, a glass filled with amber liquid, resting on a side table, popped out at me, and I softly chuckled. No matter that he still scolded me about how I occasionally drank, one of these was always waiting for me when I came home. I padded to claim it, sipping at my whiskey sour with my eyes closed before once more relinquishing it to its relegated spot so I could find him.

With his body loose in sleep, Korix was sprawled in haphazardly arranged pillows with a book lying open on his chest, and at the sight of him, I bit my lip. His legs were folded under one another in an uncomfortable looking fashion, and he'd flung one arm away while clutching the book's edge and Mother Time...

How did he *still* do this to me, even after over a century together? Also, how damn lucky was I that he was in my life?

In two, quiet strides, I was close enough to straddle his legs. With a finger on his cheek, I eased him to face me, and hell, if my lungs didn't cease working at the wrinkle of his nose, the one that always came in the moments before he woke up. Grinning, I bent down to his lips, and when we touched, something melted inside of me. A piece of me had returned to where it was meant to be.

With a soft gasp, Korix opened his eyes. Still half-asleep, he was sluggish while wrapping his arms around me, but that was ok. I had what I needed for now: a kiss steadily growing stronger, my body bunching on itself to hoard the heat in me, my hands running over a man I knew so well that I greeted each hollow and rise of him like old friends.

So, when he tensed, I knew what to expect and went limp accordingly. A breath later, I was on my back with Korix on top of me and my hands pinned next to my head. Much as I didn't like this, I just grinned until sleep fled from him, leaving a question in his eyes.

"*Kuvesk*," he said.

"I haven't been your student in a long time, Ko," I said.

With his eyes widening, Korix released my wrists, letting me breathe easy again, but he didn't remove his weight from me. Straightening, he rested the back of his hands on my waist.

"How was your date?" he asked.

Mother Time, I wanted to buck him off of me so we could get back to kissing, but I knew what this was, the same as I knew the tension in him as intimately as I knew myself. So, I left my hands on my stomach with our fingers barely touching.

"Surprisingly good for once," I said. "How was yours?"

He hadn't gone on a date for a week or so, but I hadn't been home in that time, and we didn't talk about this part of our lives except when we were together.

When Korix curled his fingers into his palm, I suppressed a wince.

“It went well until she figured out who I am,” he said, “something that only happened because I... started seeing things.”

Fuck. No, that wasn't strong enough. *Double* fuck.

Cupping Korix's cheek, I brushed my thumb under his eye.

“I'm sorry, Ko,” I said.

He leaned into my palm.

“It's ok. If she couldn't understand that part of me, it wouldn't have been a good match,” he said. “I'll try again next week. A woman from Zan expressed interest.”

“Oo, a scientist? That might be fun.”

Shrugging, Korix said, “We'll see. But enough of that. How are you, Zae?”

I shrunk on myself, half-closing an eye.

“Can we have our check-in chat later, please?” I asked.

His face softened because he knew what my request actually meant.

“Of course.”

“Thank you,” I said, hooking my finger around one of his. “What about you? Anything you need to share?”

“It can wait,” Korix said.

“Ok.”

Using what I was holding as a jumping point, I slowly walked my fingers between the gaps of his, and he swallowed with his eyes starting to unfocus.

“Any idea why Leski called me home?” I asked.

Shaking his head, Korix licked his lips, trailing his gaze down the length of my body.

“I missed you,” I said.

His only response to that was a funny noise at the back of his mouth, and I inched my fingers a step closer.

“Ko,” I softly said.

He looked up at me with his pupils blown wide.

“Come here.”

I would never get tired of watching his flushed face lowering to mine, and he would never fail to know exactly what I wanted. His mouth ground into mine so hard that my head slipped off of a pillow’s edge, and distant pinpricks flashed over my scalp. I held him to me, but even then, we weren’t close enough. Weeks I’d gone without seeing my life partner, and I needed.... I *needed*.

Throwing my leg around Korix, I crushed his hips into mine, and both of us made noises that should never be heard from a *Lokke Vitras*. Slapping a hand beside my head, Korix turned forcefully insistent with his kiss, and I couldn’t help but smile at that. I loved it when my lips were puffy after I’d spent time with him.

Distantly, I heard the door hiss open—

“I knew I’d find you here! I- oh. Sorry.”

—and rolling off of me, Korix laughed at the look on Leski’s face. With her cheeks reddening, her freckles had almost faded, which was too bad. I liked them, liked kissing them.

She’d pulled her hair into a ponytail, exposing her neck and ears. Today, she was wearing shorts and a mesh shirt under her typical, knee-length coat. The outfit showed off her legs and waist, drawing attention to all the curves on her body, and as I took her in, my mind emptied with only *her* left behind.

Once more, I was reminded of how lucky I was. Doubly so.

“I... can... come back?” Leski said.

I didn’t know why she got ruffled like this. Leski had walked in on me and Korix hundreds of times before, the same as he had when I was with her, and every time, we responded the same way. With a grin and a smirk, we extended our hands in invitation to Leski, his life companion. My wife.

She returned our smiles, answering our unspoken question with a headshake.

“I don’t have the energy,” she said. “I’ll just watch, if you don’t mind.”

I turned to Korix. Everyone knew that Leski wasn’t asking me, slut for attention that I was.

Shrugging, Korix tried to roll on top of me again, but I was faster. I wrestled myself atop him, and pinning his wrists, I took my time running my eyes over my prize. The smooth dip of his waist where his shirt had pulled away from it. The arms that he was letting me hold down. The absolutely perfect face lifted toward me. The eyes watching me, waiting with such anticipation that it might intimidate me if he wasn’t him and I wasn’t me.

“Where were we?” I said.

Tilting his head to the side, Korix said, "Kissing, I believe. I definitely remember you suffocating me with your mouth. There might have been a leg thrown around me too."

...Why had I ever taught this man the art of snark? Clicking my tongue, I dove toward him, stopping just short of our lips coming together.

"You're an ass sometimes," I said.

Raising an eyebrow, Korix said, "So? You are too-"

I shut his lying mouth with my tongue in it, and his laughter rumbled through me.

From there, we fell into our typical pattern. Korix play-fought me. I pushed him into the floor. Kisses and the press of our bodies eventually weren't enough, and I released him, letting him run his hands over me while pulling my shirt over my head. More clothes came off, piece by piece, until nothing remained but skin and skin and...

Kisses sucked the air from my lungs with gasps flying from us unbidden, and always, ever, throughout, I could see only Korix. He was my world, and the world had made me an underwater vent with too much steam building behind it. I couldn't get enough of him, so when he pulled away to wriggle out from under me, I whimpered a little, fiercely biting my tongue when I heard it.

After rifling through my discarded clothes, Korix soon returned, climbing onto my thighs. Gripping the back of my head, he kissed me like he was afraid I'd break, rubbing his nose against mine as he backed off.

"Please," he said.

Mother Time, there was such begging in his gaze.

"Of course, Ko," I softly said.

I nudged his chin until he was turned my way. I wanted to see the moment when delirium made its claim on him, but then, I could hug him to me, pressing my forehead to his. I could steal kisses in between bouts of him tugging on my hair. I could fully enjoy it when he clutched me to him until he couldn't anymore, and after I lowered him into the pillows, he stared at nothing while every part of him was loose.

"Fuck," he coughed.

And I shivered. Korix never cursed. Never.

Except when I'd unwound the snarled ball of stress that was him. I loved hearing those filthy words come out of his mouth.

As he slowly settled back into his body, Korix searched for me, grimacing when I squeezed his hand.

“Oh, no. I didn’t mean to leave you...” he said, peeling himself off of the floor. “I can-”

And Leski was there, pushing Korix into the pillows.

“Stay down. Enjoy the glow,” she said. “I’ve got this.”

She toppled me backward and...

For the first time in weeks, I floated—that state that came when one’s mind wiped out—because of something other than pain. These two...

Sex with other partners was great, and I fucking loved it, but it was different with Leski and Korix. It was more... *more*.

When I came to, Leski was smooshed between me and Korix, and he was resting a hand on my cheek, watching me. He smiled when I focused on him.

“I missed you too,” he said in sub-vocals.

Straining my neck, I kissed his palm, but then, both of us turned to the partner we’d ignored to this point, snuggling into her.

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