

Chapter 24: Goodbye Again

Unfortunately, I had one more stressor to handle before I could get started on this mission.

Leski and Korix answered my requests for connection almost immediately, like they'd been waiting for them.

"Love! Are you ok?" Leski asked.

Korix said nothing.

"I'm not hurt," I said.

"Well."

Leski heaved a relieved sigh.

"That's fantastic," she said. "Isn't that right, Ko?"

"Yes..." Korix drawled. "Fantastic."

Damnit, should I add his displeasure to the growing list of things going wrong in my life?

This series of events had started giving of the same feel as what I'd experienced during the Crescent Incident, decades ago, but I couldn't let thoughts like that overtake me. Mother Time say that I'd learned enough since then to ensure this wouldn't end so poorly.

"When can we expect you home?" Leski asked.

Rubbing my face, I said, "I don't know. I'm going deep cover again. Apparently, we haven't found the root of Lutov's recent problems."

I braced for their wave of indignation but got silence instead. That wasn't a good sign.

"I see," Leski said.

After another tense pause, I said, "I'm sorry. I want to come home-"

"It's *fine*," Leski interrupted.

Hell, she'd sounded like she was holding words back. I wished she'd just say them.

"Ko and I will continue making preparations on our end," she said instead. "Good luck on your mission, Zae. I'd love to stay and talk more but-"

“Leski. It’s ok,” I said. “You’re allowed to be angry.”

“And I AM!”

Her shout rang in my head, and hearing it, I squeezed my eyes closed, pushing back the moisture that was trying to escape from me. In the last two months, I’d been a terrible partner to them both but mostly to her. My outrage when I’d learned about Niklaus’ outburst at our party had left her to deal with Korix alone. After putting my brother’s fate in Talira’s hands, my inability to *keep my shit together* had caused far too much distress for her. For them both.

“But not at you,” Leski soon continued. “I’m upset that life has chosen to batter us in this way, not that your job is taking you away from us again. I love you, Zaeden. You are one of the two people I cannot live without, and you’re my husband. You’ll have to do something a hell of a lot worse to get me mad at you.”

Despite myself, despite how much I didn’t deserve her faith in me, I smiled.

“I love you too, wife,” I said.

“*Don’t. you. dare.* You know I don’t like you calling me that. Mother Time, you can be an ass sometimes,” Leski hissed. “I need to go. Talira’s given me busy work to complete, probably trying to distract me from you.”

“Probably,” I said. “I’ll see you soon, love.”

“One can only hope,” Leski said.

She cut her connection, and I was left with a partner who’d been notably silent throughout that conversation.

“Ko?” I cautiously said.

“*What* are you doing, Zaeden?” was what I got in response.

Oo. Yeah, he was upset.

“You’ll need to be a bit more specific for me,” I said.

Laughter, manic on the edges, tumbled to me, and the first prickles of unease pushed into my consciousness.

“Are you trying to kill yourself?” Korix shouted.

I rocked back on the bench, so unexpected was this. Korix hardly ever raised his voice, even a century after the role of the *Lokke Vitras* had kept him from doing it.

“Or maybe you’re simply that determined to follow in my footsteps,” he continued. “Do you know when I first started seeing things, *kuvesk*? Hmm? It came shortly after my version of what you’re experiencing. I refused to take a break, threw myself into my work, and broke as a result, and look at you! You nearly drained yourself of what you need to live, and not twelve hours after that, you took another stressor to the capital, there to almost bleed yourself dry *again*. The way you’re acting right now, I’d be surprised if you last another decade as the *Lokke Vitras*, not the centuries that Lutov may yet require.”

Once he’d fallen silent, I didn’t reply for a moment, waiting for my eye to stop twitching.

When it had, I said, “I am *not* your student anymore, Korix. I have learned every lesson that you can give me, including everything that can be understood from your example. *I know what I’m doing*, and you need to trust me.”

A minute passed with my heart beating to the time of the seconds between.

“I do. I trust you more than anyone else,” Korix ground out. “I shouldn’t have exploded on you. It’s just... Talira sent me copies of last night’s feeds, and you have no idea how much pressure built in my chest while I was watching them. I couldn’t breathe, Zae.”

I held my hands over my face, making my voice emerge muffled.

“I can’t imagine what that was like. I’m sorry you saw those, Ko.”

After a beat of silence, Korix said, “Regret has no place in you, Zae.”

And I groaned, slapping my thighs.

“Really? Must you say things like that?”

“Always and forevermore,” Korix said. “How else am I supposed to get a rise out of you?”

Flushing, I said, “*Excuse me*. Isn’t being the irritating tease my role in this relationship?”

While he chuckled, I ignored what this exchange had really been. There was a problem here, one we needed to address, but it couldn’t be now, when I was forever away from him and about to start a mission, so instead, we covered it up with jokes and teasing.

I wasn’t worried about it, though, knowing Korix would bring the problem up after I’d come home. Brushing issues like this under the rug for years wasn’t our style, not anymore.

“You’re right, of course,” Korix said, laughing under his breath. “You know that I can never love you, right?”

Our old habit warmed me, sending a slow seep of blood to my every extremity.

"I know. Just as much as I can never love you," I said. "You are the best and worst thing that's ever happened to me."

"Don't I know it," Korix said.

But I'd heard the strain in his voice. I wondered if he'd heard the same from me.

"I have a question before I go deep cover," I said. "It involves a group called the Chosen."

"Ah."

And nothing more.

"So, you know them?" I asked.

"I do. Unfortunately," Korix said. "Your sister finally got around to telling you?"

"She did. Ko?"

"Yes?"

I didn't know how to phrase this question, so I asked it without any padding to soften its blow.

"Why didn't you tell me? And... can I trust Feena?"

Could I trust my sister when my brother had just betrayed Lutov, no matter how unwillingly?

"I didn't tell you because it wasn't my secret to share," Korix said. "I wanted Feena to explain everything in her own time."

"That's... fair," I said.

Unfavorable, but fair.

"As for trustworthiness, I've learned two things over my time working with the Chosen," Korix said. "One is that everything they do is for the good of humanity and therefore, Lutov. You can put your faith in them."

On hearing his confidence, a kernel of anxiety loosened in me. My sister wasn't working to undermine what I did, not in this at least.

"And what's the second thing?" I asked.

Korix said nothing for the longest time, and something insidiously apprehensive crawled up my spine, rattling my bones as a result. Eventually, he answered me.

"Every Chosen I've known had died before their time. Horribly."

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