

Chapter 3: Tell Me the News

Leski, as usual, cuddled Korix and I just as fiercely as we always did with her. She and Korix might have kept their relationship within the realm of the platonic whenever I wasn't involved, but they still loved spending time snuggling together.

And of course, I'd always loved any form of physical intimacy with my partners.

"Hi, Leski," I said. "How've you been, love?"

"Oh, you know. Fabulous, as usual," she said. "I got the solo for that Maliva piece I've been talking about, the one scheduled for next season's orchestral rotation."

Squeezing Leski, I nuzzled her shoulder while Korix, who'd probably already heard about this, ruffled her hair.

"Congratulations!" I said. "I know how much you wanted it."

Leski stuck her tongue out at me.

"Of course I wanted it. It's only *the* most coveted part in the musical world this year," she said before turning sober. "Do you think you can see me play?"

Pinching her nose, I gently jostled her head.

"You already know the answer to that," I said. "When you have it, send me the list of your concert dates, and I'll work one into my schedule."

Somehow.

Leski swatted my hand away, rubbing her offended skin.

"I will," she said before making a face. "There's... one other thing. You probably won't like it. *Shukusen* Talira wants to see me later this week."

The room went still, turning the crackle of its flames into a deafening noise, and I couldn't move, couldn't breathe.

After her first two decades in Kolb, working as an operative, Leski had switched her focus to writing security processes for the House. She was happy there, but over the last two years, Talira had been pushing for her to advance in Strata, which wouldn't normally be a problem. This elevation, however, would push Leski into the ranks of the high Strata, somewhere missions could be forced on her.

“You didn’t tell me about this,” Korix said.

“Because it might not be what we think, and I didn’t want to stress either of you,” Leski said. “Remember, my loves. I can take care of myself. You don’t need to shield me from Talira. That’s what we agreed, right? We’d trust each other to handle our shit until someone asks for help?”

Swallowing the stranglehold on me, I hid my face on Leski’s shoulder, breathing her in.

“Ok. You tell us the second you need us, though.”

Leski lightly smacked me.

“Of course I will, dumbass. That’s what I promised,” she said. “Now, let’s shove that unpleasantness to the side. Other things require our attention like... Ko? Will you tell him about the project you started?”

Cautiously, I lifted my head from hiding, narrowing my eyes at Leski’s mischievous grin, but when Korix shifted beside her—his version of a squirm—I zeroed on him.

“Project?” I said. “You decided to take up a hobby one hundred years after Talira released you from the role of the *Lokke Vitras*?”

“I was making up for almost four centuries of service,” Korix sourly said. “Having the role for yourself now, can you blame me for wanting to do nothing but read, cook, and date?”

“No...”

I really, really couldn’t.

“So, what’s the project?”

Coughing, Korix muttered something unintelligible.

“I’m sorry. Mind repeating that?” I said. “I don’t think I heard it through the shock of seeing you embarrassed.”

He glared at me, and the tick that he got when he was annoyed started up, which had me biting my lip. Mother Time, inducing that look was always the highlight of my week.

“He’s writing a book,” Leski said.

I glanced between her and Korix.

“A book,” I repeated. “Really? *You*?”

Hunching on himself, Korix said, “Is it that hard to believe?”

“Not at all! Quite the opposite, in fact,” I said. “It’s just...”

Chewing on my lip, I cocked my head.

“I see you now and as you were, regularly kicking my ass in combat training, and the contrast...”

I trailed off as Korix clenched more tightly around himself. Damn it, he was closing off.

“All I’m saying is that I’m glad you’re healing, Ko. More than is reasonable,” I said, giving him a slight smile. “I look forward to reading your masterpiece once it’s finished.”

Korix snapped his mouth open, but no words emerged from him, only a soft squeak, and grinning, I marked the memory in my array, to be stored with so many other precious moments with my partners. I swore to Mother Time; he knew what I was doing because he clicked his teeth together before swooping down on Leski.

“You and I will have a word later,” he said.

Wriggling in place, Leski said, “Oo, scary.”

“You should be scared, small one,” Korix growled.

Hell, why couldn’t I stay with them all the time? Barring dates, of course. Times like this, with them teasing each other and me a delighted observer, I wanted to take the role of the *Lokke Vitras* as well as the society that had created it and burn it all down.

But I couldn’t.

And I couldn’t stay here. I’d made a deal with Talira: I served as her *Lokke Vitras*, and as a consequence, I didn’t have to swear loyalty to a House. When leaving Cambris and Liala’s apartment, I’d bordered on breaking that deal. The hours that I’d spent getting home and communing with my partners had tilted that balance, and Leski had yet to explain why she’d summoned me here.

So, clearing my throat, I said, “Love, you said that you have news?”

Korix and Leski’s banter broke off while a blank-eyed lack of expression—one I’d come to hate—fell over them.

“You have to go, don’t you?” Korix said.

Hissing, I said, “Not... immediately. But soon, yes.”

“Good. That means you have a little time,” Leski said. “Maybe it’ll be enough for you to enjoy this. So...”

Clicking her tongue, she swiveled to face us, and after we exchanged a glance, Korix and I climbed out of the pillows to match her height. She took our hands.

“There’s a reason I’m not especially worried about Talira pressuring me into elevation,” she said. “I had a meeting with *shukusen* Marza today.”

Once more glancing at Korix, I was glad to see that I wasn’t the only one who was baffled.

“What did she want?” I asked.

“Oh, come on.”

Leski rolled her eyes.

“You’re smart enough to figure it out on your own, boys. Put those brilliant brains to work,” she said. “You get one more hint. It has to do with something that we decided thirty years ago.”

Hell, how was I supposed to remember everything we’d done that long ago? So much had happened in the time since that the specifics of one year had become hazy, at best. Still, I tried.

A meeting with Marza. What did my Leski of House Kolb have to do with the *shukusen* of House Drav? When it came to purpose, the two Houses were on opposite ends of the spectrum. Kolb was centered on necessary violence while Drav concerned itself with...

Population control.

My mouth had gone dry, so much so that I had to swallow a few times before I could speak.

“She approved our application?” I asked.

Nodding, Leski said, “She wanted to tell me herself so she could once more express her reservations. Probably too afraid to do it with anyone but me.”

I clenched my hands in my lap.

“That bitch!”

“Zae! Curse a *shukusen* later,” Korix faintly said. “Focus now.”

I was a little scared to continue down this path. What would happen if I touched the knowledge that was already sparking flames in my heart? Our application for a child, submitted so long ago that I’d buried remembrance of it, had been approved.

Which meant I was going to be a dad.

“We’re going to be parents,” Korix said, echoing my thoughts.

While Leski watched us process this realization with a shit-eating grin, the shocked hush of it pulsed around us. I didn’t know what to call this furious buzz of energy inside of me, making the skin on my face a paper-thin covering for the build of heated blood in them. If I held it in my heart, I would become a supernova, bursting from purely euphoric exuberance, so I let it out.

With a whoop, I raced around the library, trailing my fingers over the spines of the books that I could read to my child as they grew up. My laughter resonated in the room, delighted peals that returned to me through the sparkling glow that was overlaying the world, and when I reached the side table, I downed my long-turned-tepid whiskey sour, adding its warmth to what was threatening to split my lips wide.

Coming around the sofa, I tackled Leski, peppering her with kisses while she laughingly pushed against me, and when I came up for air, I found Korix—sitting beside us with a rare, contented smile on his face—before dragging him down with us. We were a pile of limbs and laughter and love, wrapped in the fulfillment of a goal that we'd fought to achieve over the last fifty years, thirty of them spent waiting. Twice as long as most Lutovish citizens, all because of who I was.

But it didn't matter. Months from now, we'd come home from House Drav's headquarters with a little bundle, made from two of us but child to us all. A small human to guide and love.

Mother Time, we had so many logistics to work out, but that discussion could wait. For now...

"How are we celebrating?" I asked.

We were draped over one another while the frantic energy in me had been reduced to lazy warmth, and I ran my fingers through Leski's hair, further loosening it from its ponytail.

"I could make us a nice dinner. Or maybe a cake," Korix said before propping himself on an elbow. "But... don't you have things to do, Zae?"

Right. The role I was supposed to devote my life to.

Making a face, I said, "I don't suppose either of you feels like coming with me."

Scrambling out from under my legs, Leski hung over me.

"Are you asking us to go on a mission with you?" she asked.

"...Yes?"

Sighing, Leski lifted her eyes to the ceiling before bending to kiss me.

"Zae, you're an idiot sometimes," she said against my lips.

When she straightened, Korix was standing over her with his hands on his hips, a picture of heart-stopping appeal.

"Of course we're coming," he said. "Missions with you are some of the best parts of our lives, remember?"

What had I been thinking? This was my wife and life partner I was talking to, not Talira or a lower Stratus who'd find my request odd.

“Where are we going?” Korix asked. “Anything special we should bring?”

Uh...

I hadn't had a task in mind when asking for help, fully expecting them to refuse my request, so it took me a minute to pull up my to-do list. Meanwhile, Leski scooped closer to me, practically vibrating with excitement, while Korix watched me with a fond tilt to his lips.

It was distracting.

I had yet to receive a report from Elrin on the missing persons investigation, so I picked the problem of next highest priority.

“Ibis. Sorry, Ko. I know you don't like going there. You shouldn't need anything extra,” I said. “Are you sure this is how you want to celebrate us bringing a child into the world?”

Leski dropped into seriousness, laying a hand on my cheek.

“Zaeden. Love. All of us are House Kolb or at least associated with it,” she said. “This is how we celebrate.”

Behind her, Korix nodded, and I released a long sigh before sitting up.

“All right. Let's head to Ibis, then.”

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