

# Chapter 31: Family Check-In

The state I was in concerned me. I wasn't fuzzy, and this evening's events had continued in a sequential manner, not in snapshots like they did sometimes, so I wasn't in shock. Instead, I felt... detached from myself.

I knew what I *should* be feeling right now, waiting in the library for my partners. I should be excited, nervous about the berating that Korix was sure to give me, eager to kiss them both. Instead, I was just... hmm. Not empty. That wasn't the right word. I was...

I was bored.

This should concern me, right? It was supposed to but...

Finishing off my shot of whiskey, I set my glass aside, Korix wouldn't be pleased that I hadn't adjusted my mood as he'd asked.

I heard them before they entered, but when they stepped inside, I didn't look up from the fire, which was why when Leski flung herself into my lap, it surprised me. She kissed me hard, *insistent* with it, and unable to do anything else, I held her until she'd had enough.

"You're back!" she gasped when she broke away. "Oh... I've missed you so much."

Snuggling against me, she rested her forehead on my shoulder, and I met Korix's eyes over her. Taking one look at me, he shook his head before sitting in the armchair furthest away from us. He knew. He always knew.

And so would Leski once she'd gotten over her excitement. Both of them had been with me for over half of my life. They, out of all of Lutov's citizens, were the only ones who could read me, no matter how good of a mask I was wearing. For reasons I didn't understand, I still hid my mental state from them at times.

"I'm glad to see you too," I said. "Unfortunately, I can't stay for long, love."

Leski fell still before shooting upright.

"*Shukusen* Talira's sending you on another mission?" she growled. "What happened to the month off that she promised you?"

Wincing, I shifted Leski off of my lap.

"I'll get it as soon as I've finished my current mission," I said.

“Current mission-?” Leski started.

“*Zaeden*. Have you come home while in the middle of a deep-cover mission?”

Slowly, I shifted my gaze to Korix, who seemed calm, and wondered why I cared so little about how upset he must actually be.

“I have,” I said.

Then, I turned to Leski, ignoring him.

“Has House Drav given you a date for our handoff?” I said. “I’ve been asking about it, but no one will give me a straight answer.”

“Probably because Talira’s told them to keep quiet,” Korix said. “She’s worried that you’ll-”

I lifted a finger toward him, keeping my eyes on my wife. She was chewing the hell out of her lip, fiercely staring at a bookshelf.

“Love. Look at me,” I said.

I only continued once she had.

“I want to be there when Drav gives us our child, even if it’s by watching via a recorder. Please, give me a date so I don’t miss it.”

I didn’t say a word about what I was truly afraid of. If I was right, missing our child’s handoff would change who I was, and not in a good way. It wouldn’t break me. I’d gone through worse than my current troubles before, but I was pretty sure that having another blow land before I’d healed from the last would drastically alter my personality.

Plus, I wanted to be there for our child. Regardless of how they’d never be able to intellectually remember that moment in later years, the feeling of safety that I could help impart would remain, and I desperately wanted to provide that for them.

Leski must see this. Releasing her lip, she got an incredibly determined look on her face.

“Sometime in the next two weeks,” she said. “We don’t have an exact date, but I will speak with Talira. I’ll make sure that she notifies you as soon as we know.”

Two weeks? So soon?

Cupping Leski’s face, I tilted her to where I could kiss her forehead.

“Thank you,” I said against her skin.

Making disgruntled noises, she pushed against my chest, and I backed off, happy to have what I’d wanted. Before I could leave, though, she pincered her fingers in my thighs.

“Uh-uh,” she said. “You didn’t wake us up to ask one question and disappear.”

“You’re right. I didn’t mean to wake you up at all,” I said.

Taking hold of Leski’s wrist, I removed her hand from me.

“And I need to go,” I continued. “If I have so little time to finish this mission, I’ll need to accelerate a few things.”

When I again tried to stand, though, Korix was in front of me, and with a single hand, he pinned me to the couch.

“No,” he said. “This has gone from concerning to ridiculous, Zaeden. You’re going to stay, and the three of us will talk through a few things, even if I have to *tie you down* for it.”

From out of nowhere, something ugly and awful raised its head, and I showed Korix my teeth.

“You think you can keep me here?” I hissed. “I’m not an inexperienced kid anymore, Korix.”

My tone had been harsh enough that Leski pulled away from me, but Korix didn’t even blink.

“I can make escaping from me inconvenient. Doing what we want will get you out of here more quickly than struggling will, and you know it,” he said. “Lutov won’t fall to pieces if you take the time for a single conversation.”

Snarling, I knocked Korix’s hand off of me, but I didn’t try to escape. Instead, I paced in front of the fire, dragging my hands through my hair, while my partners stared at me. Were they exchanging messages about how to handle what they saw?

Eventually, their silence became too much, and I stopped with one hand on my hip, throwing the other one toward them.

“Well?”

Neither of them said a word, which had me tapping a foot so hard that it shook my body. After another moment of quiet, I flung my hands overhead.

“What do you want me to say?” I shouted. “That you were right, Ko? Because you were! Work hasn’t helped me as much as I thought it would. That I’m drinking far too much? Because I am! Hell, you can probably smell it on me right now. That I’ve been cutting myself when I know- I know I shouldn’t?”

As I fell quiet, I scrubbed the heels of my palms into my eyes before dragging them to either side of my face.

“But I don’t need to tell you that, do I?” I said. “Feena’s probably sent you a message every time she’s walked in on me... or Damari. They’ve probably shared-”

“Damari has told us nothing,” Korix said. “When we’ve asked, they said they wouldn’t talk about a friend behind his back.”

That wasn’t surprising, actually. It fit their character well.

My partners were once more staring at me, though, and I wished one of them would say something. I wished one of them would *speak what was on their mind*. They must have thoughts about what I’d said, but since they wouldn’t talk and because I couldn’t bear the weight of their gazes, I faced the fire, gazing into its depths.

After who knew how long, I said, “I don’t understand why I’m like this right now. Sure, life’s been testing me lately, but I can usually roll with the punches. Sure, Phen was involved this time but...”

The crackling of the fire filled my ears while its destructive nature filled my mind.

“Besides that, it’s been five months,” I said. “You’d think this hurt would have faded by now. Yes, I can be overly dramatic, but this seems extreme. Doesn’t it? And Mother Time... I haven’t even touched on what my drama is doing to you. We’re supposed to support *each other*, not devote our time and energy to only one person. To me.”

A sigh rose from behind me, and a moment later, a small hand filled mine.

When I glanced down at Leski, she said, “Come here.”

She tugged me to the couch, where Korix was waiting, and after sitting me down, she forced me to lay my head in his lap. Kneeling in front of us, she carded her fingers through my hair. We stayed there for a while, long enough that I started to get drowsy, before Leski spoke.

“Zae, I love you dearly, but you’re being an utter moron.”

Snapping my eyes open, I squinted at her while she nodded.

“First of all, we do not pour all of our attention on you,” she continued. “You’re taking a lot of it right now, yes. I won’t argue that. How many times, though, have you and Ko helped me through a bad breakup? How many times have we gotten Ko through an episode?”

Flicking my eyes to Korix, I saw his jaw tighten, but I also felt him rest his hand on my stomach.

“We’re a team, working for each other’s benefit,” he said. “It just so happens that you’re the one in need right now. Don’t feel bad about that.”

Mother Time if I hadn’t already known what they were saying, but sometimes, I needed them to remind me.

“Ok,” I sighed. “Ok, I’ll accept that. You said ‘first of all’, Leski. Does that mean you have a follow-up?”

"I... do."

Damn. I'd rarely seen my wife this uncertain before.

Glancing between Korix and me, she said, "I'm not the best when it comes to the mental struggles you two go through. I just don't get it."

Breaking off, she bit her lip, and I reached for her hand, squeezing it.

"If you have a suggestion, I'd love to hear it," I said. "It can't hurt me."

I tried on a smile, surprised by how easy that was, but then, being with them had always helped me find my center, no matter how far off the deep end I'd dived. Seemingly reassured, Leski squared her shoulder.

"The core reason for your distress is that you think you betrayed your brother, losing him in the process," she said. "Well, maybe this is a silly question, but have you talked to him about it? It's been a few months, so he's probably not furious anymore, and talking's a good first step toward reconciliation. If you reach out and he rejects you, you could even begin forgiving yourself, having tried to make amends, and...You're laughing."

Oh, fuck. I knew that face. She was about to close off, never to offer another absolutely brilliant suggestion like this, and I couldn't stop snickering into my palm. For some reason, Korix's look of disapproval only made it worse. When Leski tried to draw her hand out of my grip, I squeezed tighter, shaking my head.

"No... It's- it's a... good idea. A wonderful... one," I gasped. "Only..."

Unable to control myself, I rolled toward Korix, burying my face in his clothes while howling with laughter. Calming down took me far longer than it should, and when I sat up, I swung my legs off of the sofa.

Wiping my eyes, I said, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have laughed like that. It's just... what you're suggesting? Talking to Phen? I was about to do that before Ko stopped me."

"Ah," Leski said.

Relaxing, she sat on her heels before cocking her head.

"Wait. It's the middle of the night," she said. "Why would you want to speak with him this late?"

"Zaeden means to interrogate him, of course," Korix said. "Right?"

When I glanced at him, he was stiff, resting his eyes anywhere but on me.

"That was the plan," I said. "He's holding onto info that might help me end this mission."

“You can’t!” Leski said, clasping my knee. “Interrogating Pheniks isn’t a good way to resume contact with him.”

Tilting my head to the side, I said, “You think I don’t know that?”

I patted her hand on my knee.

“Don’t worry. I can incorporate both issues in one conversation.”

Leski sucked on her lip before nodding.

“If anyone could do something so difficult, it’s you,” she said. “When will you go?”

“Soon,” I said. “First, I need to know if you want to talk about anything else and...”

I watched Korix from the corner of my eye.

“Ko and I need to discuss a few things. Don’t think I’m shooing you away, though. You’re welcome to stick around, if you like.”

Leski darted her eyes to Korix, clearly asking a question of him.

“You two *should* talk,” she carefully said. “Ko?”

Never moving a muscle, Korix said, “Mm. Could you check on our guest, love?”

As she slumped, Leski’s face fell, and I wonder what line of reasoning Korix had rejected.

“Yeah, I’ll do that,” she said.

While she climbed to her feet, I snatched her hand, hesitating before squeezing Korix’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” I said. “I should have come home long before now. Because I’ve seen you, I’ll be distracted when I leave, but trust me. That’s better than how I was earlier.”

“Happy to have helped,” Leski said.

Pulling her hand free, she held my head to her hip, and I wrapped an arm around her waist.

“I love you,” I said. “I’ll come home as soon as I can.”

“I know,” Leski said.

Claiming my hand, she brushed her lips along my knuckles.

“See you soon.”

