

# Chapter 32: Addressing Our Problems

I watched Leski leave the library, and once she was gone, my hand fell away from Korix as swiftly as expression did from me. Even this many years later, an empty face was still my most natural state. Not that smiles and laughter felt unnatural! But I could only display this face with a select few people, and while Leski tolerated it on occasion, it made her uncomfortable. Besides that, I got the feeling that this might be the best mask to wear right now.

After several minutes of quiet had passed, I said, "Just say it."

Yet still, only the crackle of flames filled the air. I didn't make another move to change that, perfectly content to wait, and eventually, Korix fulfilled my expectations.

"You're not listening to me. Even now, I have more experience with what you're doing, but you don't *listen* when I warn you about potential mistakes," he said. "I don't understand it. You're smart enough to realize I'm a valuable resource, so why don't you take advantage of that? Why don't you listen?"

Hearing his words, I digested them, analyzing how they'd affected me. Then, I sapped irritation from me, like he'd taught me how to do years ago. I only spoke after I was empty of emotion.

"It's because you still think of me as your student. I'm happy to accept your advice, but the reason I'm 'not listening', as you put it, is because I don't always do as you say. I may be the *Lokke Vitras*, but I'm not you. I follow a lot of your practices, but some things, I do my own way, and I need you to let me try new things. I need you to stop believing they'll fail, just because I'm still your *kuvesk* to you."

I paused, giving Korix a chance to respond, but when he didn't, I forged onward.

"That's not why you're upset, though, is it?"

If he was surprised that I'd noticed, he didn't show it.

"No," he said. "That has to do with something else: what I asked after you told Leski and me about this deep-cover mission."

Clear as a bell, his voice rang from the past, screaming at me.

*Are you trying to kill yourself?*

Turning to me, Korix tucked one leg under the other, and clasping his hands together, he took a deep breath.

“Are you ready to join the Collective?” he said. “If- if you didn’t hold the position of the *Lokke Vitras*, would you have chosen to die those many months ago?”

Unlike with my irritation, I couldn’t swallow these feelings. Whipping my head to my life partner, I stared at him in horror. Was this what he’d been holding onto since then? Hell, he thought I wanted to leave him, and oh. Well did I know how that felt.

Reaching for him, I said, “Mother Time, Ko. I-”

He leaned away from me, fixing his eyes on his lap.

“Answer the question, please,” he said.

Dropping my hand to the couch, I swallowed.

“No. I don’t want to die.”

Korix tightened his grip on his hands while his shoulders drew together.

“Then, *why*, for the love of Mother Time, would you-?”

Breaking off, he cleared his throat.

“Why have you been... hurting yourself?”

That was a much harder question to answer.

“I’m not sure. I’m sorry. I wish I had an answer for you,” I said. “It started because I had the crazy idea that if I... did that, I could leak the evil in me away, and with that out of me, I could keep going. Since then, though, it’s evolved, and I don’t understand it anymore.”

With a strangled scream, Korix grabbed my arm, digging his fingers into it, and when his eyes met mine, they were wet.

“*I don’t like it, Zae,*” he hissed. “I don’t like knowing that you’re hurting so badly you’d- you’d-”

He gasped, pinching his fingers into my skin.

“I need you to be happy. I need you to be as safe as you possibly can be because you can’t go away, not for any reason,” he continued. “You- you can’t because I...”

Hiccupping on a breath, he took a few more before tremulously moving on.

“Yes, I have Leski now, and I love her, and I’d say the same thing to her if she were sitting here instead of you, but I can’t...” he said, gasping for a minute. “I don’t know what I’d do without you,

so you have to- you have to stop, Zae. You have to-”

Darting forward, I grabbed Korix’s head to kiss him, stopping his ramble. When I pulled away, I didn’t release my grip, making sure I was holding his gaze.

“I will, Ko. I swear it to you,” I said. “It’s done. Ok?”

With a sipping gasp, Korix nodded, and I released him.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to-”

“Don’t. Please.”

Hell. Given how many times I’d asked him to keep his apologies—the ones I’d always found unnecessary—to himself, one would think I could receive the same treatment. I didn’t like it, though.

Usually, Korix had no problem with hearing me say I was sorry, and it was jarring, knowing this had upset him so badly that he’d rather shove it into our past than fully resolve it. Given that, facing him right now would be a mistake, but still, I did it, intending to continue the discussion whether he liked it or not. I, however, turned only to find a funny expression on his face. He looked like he was holding back from saying something.

With my stomach sinking, I said, “Is there something else? If so, you should get everything out in the open.”

“There’s nothing else,” Korix said. “Trust me. We’re good.”

Frowning, I said, “Then... what is it? Please, just say what’s on your mind. I don’t know how much longer I can stay here.”

With a snort, Korix gave a small shake of his head.

“Which is exactly the problem,” he said.

“Wha-?”

Korix lunged for me, tackling me onto the couch, and before I could say a word, he’d occupied my mouth. Ah. Of course. He wanted a release of the tension that had been hovering between us.

For the split second that this realization took me, I enjoyed a wonderfully glorious kiss, but then, I was pushing on him.

“What are you doing?” I said with a laugh. “I have to go.”

Arching an eyebrow, Korix said, “Do you now?”

Skin slid against skin, and I sucked in a gasp. Frozen, I licked my lips, picking through hazy thoughts, while Korix twisted his lips into a teasing grin.

“We’ll have to be quick,” I said.

Korix beamed as he lowered his head to mine.

“That can be arranged,” he said.

Later, when I was getting dressed, he watched me, lounging where I’d left him. After a moment of contemplation, he leaned forward.

“I hear that you’ve been working in Cerullis’ ranks,” he said. “Should I expect trouble from that House again?”

Cocking my head, I slowed my fingers down on my buttons. Korix didn’t usually ask about my missions, content to stay out of *Lokke Vitras* business now that it was no longer his problem.

“No, Cerullis isn’t the issue, just one of their members,” I said. “Why?”

Shaking his head, Korix collapsed backward.

“No reason,” he said. “What do you think of their new *shukusen*? Is she...?”

Trailing off, Korix pursed his lips, probably thinking of the best way to end that question.

“*Shukusen* Sanya seems decent, which is rare among the higher-ups,” I said. “I actually like her to a degree, and that’s saying something.”

For some reason, that made Korix smile.

“So, she’s handling her new position well?” he asked.

Itching to get out the door, I glanced toward it.

“Um... she didn’t do so well at first, but she’s getting the hang of it,” I said. “I need to-”

“I know,” Korix said. “Get out of here, and please. Be safe.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Once I’d left the house, I walked across the moors toward where I’d left my skycruiser, marveling at how much lighter I felt. In many ways, Leski and Korix were a drug that was as addictive as slicing myself open.

Speaking of that, I should discuss it with Leski at some point. If Korix had found it upsetting enough to get as emotional as he had, I could only imagine how it had impacted her. In fact, once I was on my way to Xygek, I’d send her a message about it. I had no idea what to say, but I’d figure it out.

Soon enough, I reached my skycruiser, and as it climbed into the clouds, a hook in my heart ripped free, stealing the piece of me that would always belong to my partners as it went, but it was necessary. I should speak with Pheniks, and when I did, I hoped he had a clue for me because I needed to wrap up this mission. Sometime in the next two weeks, my family's new child would be ours. I had to be there when we welcomed them home.

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Revision #1

Created 6 February 2025 21:17:19 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 February 2025 21:25:26 by FatalisticFable