

# Chapter 37: They Got the Drop on Me

I wasn't going to make it. My blasted P.I.G. had given out too far from rescue, succumbing to the damage that my latest target had caused it, and as I stumbled forward, my vision kept blinking in and out of focus. If that weren't enough, the fact that blood was still leaking from me was... concerning, to put it lightly, and I still needed to surmount the security measures that I'd established around the refuge I was headed toward.

I *would* get through them, though. If I was to reach the RRDs I needed, I'd have to. Mother Time knew how quickly I'd run through the hypos I'd had on me.

After all these years, it would be just my luck to die on the tail end of a mission—and an easy one at that—with naught but a five-minute walk between me and my home. Hell, I'd only been tracking a target to the contraband he'd been smuggling!

As I reached the garden at the back of the estate, I marveled that my rapidly failing body had gotten me this far, even as I cursed what had forced me to bring evidence of my role to this place. When I'd made the decision to come here, I'd known I wouldn't reach another source of salvation in time, and I'd deemed the possible risk of exposing my family to my body's state less damaging than the pain that my passing would inflict. Hopefully, though, I could sneak into the house, stab myself with hypos, and sleep off their contained RRDs with none the wiser.

I made it through the garden without incident, although climbing the stairs to the terrace nearly had me tumbling back down them.

When I reached the top, I couldn't celebrate my success. I stopped short, weaving in place, while staring at my child. What was he doing here?

He was standing in front of a window, grimacing at his reflection, with a bouquet of flowers in one hand. Ever the nurturing horticulturist, my Jak. With the other hand, he pulled his hair out of its tail before prodding a cheek. Lifting a finger, he rested it on the distorted nose in the glass opposite him.

"Horrible is what you are. We're going to change that," he said, probably meaning for it to go unheard.

But I had yet to relax from a heightened state, and because of that, his words, a repeat of things that I'd caught over the years, clearly drifted to my ears. Perhaps I could blame my damaged body for the protesting noise I made in response.

This, of course, got Jak's attention, and when he spun toward me, I ducked for cover. Out of everyone in my family, he was the one I'd least wanted to see me like this. I only ended up tripping over non-responsive feet, though, barely catching myself on a railing, and at the gasp that rose in front of me, I winced.

"Per!" Jak shouted.

Oh, how that typically beloved word tore at me when it had been spoken this time.

"Don't worry. 'm ok,," I mumbled into the railing's stone. "Just need... rest."

After a beat of quiet, Jak growled, "Like *hell* you're ok."

Unable to move the rest of my body, I fought to lift my head, and boy, was I glad when I did that. My child was storming toward me, and in the confusing mix of expressions roiling across his face, I got a glimpse of the adult he'd become. Once he was at my side, he tossed my arm over his shoulders, lifting me off of the railing. With his help, I forced myself to move toward the house.

"What happened?" Jak asked.

How was he so calm right now? Usually, he didn't do well with disruptions in his life, preferring to shy away from sources of conflict.

"Was nothing... serious," I gasped, noticing how precious oxygen had become. "Just got... a little careless."

With his grip on me tightening, Jak said, "Damnit, *per*. I need to know what sort of injuries I'm dealing with."

Should I tell him how badly I'd been hurt? As he dragged me inside, I considered lying to my child. I had to shield him from the dangers of my life, but as I catalogued my body's condition, I wasn't sure if I could do that today.

Jak was already out of breath from how heavily I was drooping on him, and my extremities were going numb. That combined with my skewed sight and how much the hall was spinning had me surprised that I was still conscious. With these symptoms, I *had* to be bleeding internally, and that meant I should be out like a light right now, soon to breathe my last. So, I decided to be truthful.

"'s bad," I said, wanting to slap myself for how much my words were slurring. "Also. Language."

Transferring me to a drone, Jak snorted.

"Like you've ever cared about that before," he said. "Now, where are your emergency RRDs? I know you keep them around here somewhere."

So. Calm. I... never expected him to be so...

A stinging sensation in my cheeks had me blinking at my child's blurry face. As I registered the anti-gravity field the drone had caught me in, Jak smacked my cheeks again.

"RRDs, dad," he said. "Where are they?"

Shit. He didn't call me 'dad' unless...

But what... what he'd asked...

Who was supposed to be home right now?

"Ask yur father," I managed.

Then, I was gone. For a while, vague glimpses of my victims chased me, flickering in and out of view. They were different every time I caught sight of them.

"A number," they snarled at me. "We're just a number to you."

With that, they faded, and I was left staring at the back of my eyelids with the contents of a highly frequented file flashing on them. I must have opened it while sleeping.

Damn, that number was high.

After shoving the file to the side, I took a deep breath before opening my eyes. I was in bed, as expected, but it wasn't the one I shared with my partners. Considering my unfamiliarity with my surroundings, I must be in a guest room.

When a book creaked closed beside me, I made a face, keeping one eye closed as I turned toward the sound. Korix didn't look nearly as pissed as I'd thought he'd be. Sitting in a chair beside me, he had an ankle propped on his knee with a book held in his lap.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

Right. The reason I was lying here.

"Fine. I think," I said.

Grimacing, I pushed myself upright, scooting to rest against the headboard.

"Is Jak ok?"

"He's a little shaken, but he'll be fine."

Korix set his book on the bed before folding his hand on his raised leg.

"What happened?" he said.

Sighing, I banged my head on the wall.

"I made a stupid mistake. Didn't check my corners when entering a room," I said. "My target was in one of them. He shot me."

"A few times, from what I saw," Korix said, glancing at my chest. "Should I be worried?"

Oh, Mother Time, how much subtext lay behind that question, but the chief part of it didn't revolve around me. Sure, a lot of what I heard from him was, 'Will you be coming home like this more often now?' But a lot was also, 'Should I expect to see you training the next *Lokke Vitras* soon?'

I reached for Korix's hand, waiting until he gave it to me before smiling.

"Everything's fine," I said. "It really was just a dumb mistake."

Relaxing, Korix said, "Can't afford to be stupid, Zae. Not ever."

With a chuckle, I patted his hand.

"Don't I know it."

Nodding, Korix pulled away from me.

"I'm assuming you had no choice when coming here," he said. "Otherwise, you'd never have exposed Jak."

"Of course I wouldn't have," I said.

Despite how much I wanted to, I didn't ask about our child again. If there had been a problem, Korix would have told me.

Instead, I said, "Where's Leski?"

"With Jak," Korix said. "Why did you send him to me and not his mother? It's Leski's turn to stand in the *Lokke Vitras*' sphere of influence right now."

This was how we'd kept Jak sheltered from the stressful aspects of what I did. Of her other parents, one was kept separate from all things *Lokke Vitras*, but even with the need to keep our child safe, Leski and Korix had still wanted to help me with the occasional mission. So, they rotated between the role of full-time parent and full-time partner.

"I couldn't be sure that she was here," I said. "It was likely, yes, but I needed one of you right then. I figured getting Jak away from my declining state would be worth a short-term swapping of roles."

"And it was!" Korix said. "You're alive, and everyone is fine. So, please don't worry like I know you want to."

All right. That was great and all but...

Sighing, I said, "You know I can't do that. How bad was it, Ko?"

Korix looked away, unable to speak for a moment.

“You died,” he eventually said. “No heartbeat or breathing for a solid three minutes. I only got you back because I dosed you with my signature blend of RRDs quickly enough. I also gave you far too many chest compressions.”

Damn. That was...

What did it say about our lives that Korix was taking something as horrific as that in stride?

“I’m... sorry-” I started.

“Don’t, Zae,” Korix said before smiling at me. “This isn’t the first time you’ve tried to escape from the physical world. Don’t you remember how often I had to resuscitate you during your training?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “True. Sometimes, I thought you got a kick out of killing me.”

While Korix laughed, I watched him for signs that he was hiding something from me, but he showed me nothing. In the years we’d been together, I’d gotten pretty good at picking up on those, so I turned to the next subject of concern.

“Did Jak...?”

“See me working you over?” Korix finished for me. “No. I’d sent him to his mother before that happened.”

“OhthankMotherTime,” I said in a rush.

Tilting my head back, I squeezed my eyes closed so I could rub my face.

“He’ll figure out how closely I walk the line between life and death sooner or later, but the longer I can delay that realization, the better.”

Slapping my hands into the sheets, I shook my head.

“I’ll have to act like nothing serious has happened for the rest of the week,” I said. “Keep him from worrying too much.”

“Normally, I’d tell you that Jak will see through an attempt like that. He’s too perceptive,” Korix said, “but this morning, Damari showed up for a visit, saying something about their godchild needing them. They should distract him.”

“That’s lucky,” I said. “I know Damari takes their godparent role more seriously than most, but showing up out of the blue like that seems excessive. Maybe Jak asked them to come and forgot to tell us?”

Shrugging, Korix said, "Maybe. He's making a big fuss about dinner tonight. Said something about making it himself."

Oh, no.

"That'll be... interesting," I said with my voice tight. "Maybe I should keep resting, then? I wouldn't want to disrupt his special plans."

"Don't you dare," Korix said. "You may need rest, but a short trip downstairs won't hurt anything, and you know it. So, you'll come downstairs with me so you can eat every bite of what Jak makes, and you will enjoy it. He's not a bad cook."

Making a face, I said, "No. But he's not you."

Korix flashed a smile at me.

"No one's like me in the kitchen," he said.

"Or in a fight or in the fairy tale worlds you create," I added. "And Mother Time help anyone who tries to match you in bed. Besides Leski, of course."

The faintest of flushes rose in Korix's cheeks before he could quash it.

"You flatter me," he said, "but I'm glad to see you still have your snark. It proves my point about you attending dinner."

When he gave me a pointed look, I groaned.

"Fine," I said. "When is it?"

"Soon. You'd better get ready."

Of course it was soon. Rolling my eyes, I swung my legs over the bedside, moving too quickly for my body, it would seem. A wave of dizziness had me steadying myself on the bed, and I clenched my gut to combat the gut-churning ache in my stomach.

Hell. My wounds must have been severe if I was still feeling their effects now, long after RRDs had started their work in my body.

Resting his hand on my back, Korix asked, "Do you need help?"

I almost told him no. I'd put him through enough today, but Korix hadn't changed my blood-stained clothes before getting me into bed, and I should save my strength for the performance of normalcy that I'd have to put on soon.

"I think so, yes," I said.

Korix had gotten better about keeping his disapproval to himself. He said not a word as he helped me out of bed, which was good. Dealing with that on top of everything else seemed like an unnecessary complication, especially when considering how much disdain my grandmother would surely shower on me soon. Best to shove it under the rug, focusing on what was important. My child. My family. Our lives together.

I was home. The rest of the world and my cursed role as the *Lokke Vitras* could wait for a time.

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