

# Chapter 38: Two Visits

Korix had been right, as usual. Jak truly was a decent cook.

After enjoying a last bite of my meal, I leaned back in my seat with a satisfied smile, watching Damari tell an animated story while my family looked on. I didn't pay much attention to the tale's particulars, content to watch my friend's face morph between mock horror, anticipation, and a delight. I was always glad when they visited, not only because I enjoyed seeing them but because Jak *loved* his godparent.

As Damari finished their story, my child giggled, rocking back and forth as he clapped, and I smiled. Being here for that alone had been worth the struggle of getting up. It was definitely worth my continued fight to act like nothing was wrong.

Not that anything was actually wrong. I was weak as fuck right now, about to tip forward with every breath, and my chest ached everywhere I'd been shot, but these complications were temporary. With how little I'd needed to take them recently, RRDs had been working better on me than normal in the last few years. I might need another dose of them before leaving home, but either way, this pain would fade within a few days.

That didn't mean I wanted Jak to see it. So, I sat as if I was at ease and laughed at every joke, no matter how much it hurt, and I thought the act might be working. Jak was no longer darting glances at me, and skittish anxiety, present when he'd oh-so-carefully hugged me earlier, didn't hang quite so heavily on him,.

Wiping his eyes, he said, "Oh, that was good, aunclie."

"Glad you liked it," Damari said. "Nicely done with the cooking, by the way."

Lifting their fork, they took an exaggerated bite while rubbing their stomach.

"Thanks," Jak said.

But he also glanced at his parents, trying so hard to be subtle with it. Even still, we broke into various words of praise, which set a glow on our child's cheeks.

"I'm glad everyone enjoyed it," he said before grinning at Korix, "although I'm sure you have a critique for me, dad."

Shrugging, Korix said, "Only if you want it. It can wait, though. I'm guessing this meal wasn't all you have planned for the evening, and it's getting late. Unless they're staying with us, Damari will want to head home soon."

“And your *per* looks like he could use some rest,” Leski added.

I made a face at that. She was no doubt annoyed with me for leaving her out of my most recent mission.

“I’m fine for a bit longer,” I said, “but your parents are right. If you have something planned, you might want to do it soon.”

Wordlessly, Jak stared at us, as if judging our words and intentions, but neither Leski, Korix, nor I shifted under the weight of it. This was just something our child did sometimes, not that I could blame him. Given who we were, it was a wonder that he didn’t have more than a healthy dose of suspicion when it came to us.

“Ok,” he eventually said. “Auncle and I will be in my room for a while. *No monitoring me while I’m there.* We’ll meet you in the garden in fifteen minutes or so.”

With an indulgent smile, Leski said, “All right, sweetie. We’ll be there.”

“Have fun with whatever you’re doing,” I said.

Jak got out of his chair with Damari joining him.

“Fifteen minutes, all of you,” he said, pointing at each of us. “Don’t you dare disappear on me, *per.*”

Wincing, I nodded, which untethered Jak from the table, and I watched him and Damari leave, chewing on my lip. Mother Time, I hated that he’d had to add that last bit. How much pain had I caused Jak with this role I-?

Getting to her feet, Leski smacked the back of my head.

“No,” she said.

And that was all. Like she’d been scolding a dog.

Rubbing my scalp, I said, “What was that for?”

While Korix watched me with amusement, Leski started collecting dishes, making it easier for the drones to clear the table when they came to do that.

“You were feeling guilty, probably thinking about all the times you’ve had to leave us,” she said. “Stop it. And would you two please get off your asses and help me?”

“Right.”

Korix easily rocked to his feet, but when I tried to do the same, I fell back into my chair with a grunt, drawing my partners’ gazes.

Waving their concern away, I said, "I'm... fine. Just... lowering the disguise of normality for a moment."

If anything, that drew more worry onto their faces, anxiety that I ignored while climbing out of my chair. I was panting once I'd done it, barely staying on my feet.

Resting my hands on my hips, I said, "So. What do we think this is about?"

When I leaned over to grab some silverware, the room tilted at a wildly steep angle, so instead of taking a fistful of metal, I clung to the table to keep from falling over.

"Sit back down, you idiot."

Snapping my head up, I found Leski before opening my mouth to reply, but Korix had already pulled out a chair, insistently pointing at its seat. I made a face, but I did as I'd been told, although I had to accept Korix's help with it.

"Why did you have him come down here if he's having such a hard time with *leaning over*?" Leski asked, glaring at Korix.

Turning his back to her, Korix returned to what he'd been doing without a word, but Leski kept shooting daggers at him, knowing she'd get answers from him soon. I tried to calm my wife down by taking her hand, which didn't work. There was such fire in her eyes right now! If I hadn't known love was causing it, it might have frightened me.

"If I'm right about what's planned for tonight, Zae needs to be here," Korix said, "and that's all I'll say about it."

Hmm. Interesting.

"What do you think is going on?" I asked. "Is Jak in trouble?"

"I doubt it. If that kid was causing trouble, something horrible absolutely would have come first, and you know it," Korix said. "As for your other question, it's not my place to say. All I can give you is that tonight will be important for both Jak and Zaeden."

Leski crossed her arms, and as I opened my mouth to ask another question, I got an alert through my array.

*Someone's at the door.*

Slumping in my chair, I groaned. If this was another group of Lutovish who'd come to ogle at their *Lokke Vitras'* home, I might murder them. After Jak started House rotations, it had been inevitable that the thin layer of secrecy surrounding this place would disappear, but knowing this had made the people who occasionally showed up on our doorstep no less annoying.

"Did they at least give us their names this time?" I asked.

Yes, came the response. *Your guest is Second Stratus Feena of House Kolb.*

I sat upright, which was a mistake. Hissing, I clutched at my chest while scrambling to leave my seat.

“Let her in,” I said.

*Acknowledged.*

As I continued with my fight to get up, someone rested their hand on my shoulder.

“Let one of us greet her,” Korix said.

Shaking my head, I said, “I can handle this. Can you and Leski finish up here? I’ll meet you in the garden.”

“You’d better do that. Remember what our kid said. No running off,” Leski said. “And please, don’t stress yourself, love. We need you at peak health as soon as possible.”

Free of the chair, I lifted an eyebrow.

“Why?” I asked. “Besides the obvious, of course.”

Huffing, Leski rolled her eyes before turning to the table.

“You just came home. You know *exactly* why,” Korix said with a laugh in his voice.

Given how much he knew I hated him worrying about me, that was the closest he’d come to insisting I take care of myself, but even knowing this, I happily hummed and dipped my head to them, the closest I could come to a bow right now.

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

Leaving them, I hurried... or more, I *hobbled* toward the foyer, although I slowed down as I approached it. With a few deep breaths, a hypo full of stimulants, and some modification to my hormone levels, I got myself into a state where I could ignore my lingering pain. If I was lucky, Feena might not recognize the sense of euphoria that I’d artificially induced, but in the likely event that she did, it might hide everything else that was wrong with my body.

As I swung into the foyer, my sister had one arm crossed over her chest, tapping her foot while gesturing at the air. When visiting, she’d always found it annoying that guests had to wait here until one of us could retrieve them, even if she understood why we did that. Unlike our apartment in Xygek, we didn’t keep the estate perpetually safe for outsiders, and while most of the time, it *was* safe, none of us wanted to see what would happen if a guest wandered somewhere they shouldn’t be.

“Feena!” I said, spreading my arms wide.

With a smile, my sister turned my way, but before she could examine me, I was hugging her. She returned the embrace, squeezing me hard, and I fought to keep my knees from buckling.

“It’s good to see you,” she said before thrusting me away. “How’ve you been?”

Rubbing the back of my neck, I said, “Oh, you know. As well as I can be. Things have gotten busier, but that’s life.”

Feena, however, wasn’t listening to me, scanning my body with a frown. She’d noticed something was wrong and almost immediately at that. Of course she had.

“I’m fine. Had a scare earlier. I got through it, though,” I said before she could ask. “I’ll tell you about it later, but right now, I need to meet my family in the garden. Jak’s got something planned. Why are you here?”

Apparently, my sister wasn’t done looking me over. By the time she was finished, a shiver had begun its rumble beneath my skin, originating everywhere that her eyes had landed, but I shut it down. That had been uncomfortable.

“My thing can wait. I wouldn’t want to ruin Jak’s plans,” she said. “Can I...?”

She gestured toward an entrance that led deeper into my home.

“Of course!” I said. “Although...”

Holding up a finger, I turned aside while writing a message to my child.

*Your aunt’s here, it read. Can she join us, or would you rather if she waited somewhere else?*

Responding took Jak a while, long enough that I started worrying that something had happened to him. Maybe he was unsure of how to answer, though, reluctant to share his plans with Feena. Just as I resolved to check on him, a message popped into view, stopping me.

*She can be here, it read.*

And nothing else, which was strange. Jak loved his Aunt Feena, always energetic when she visited. Why was he being so short today?

“Jak is ok with you being there,” I said. “I’d have been a little concerned if he wasn’t but...”

Smiling, I waved toward the estate’s innards.

“Shall we?”

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