

# Chapter 4: When Fighting Together Is Love 1

From the many pilots available to me, Third Stratus Damari had been my favorite for years. I liked them for four reasons.

One: They were competent at what they did, no more and no less, and they were comfortable with that. For instance, our current trip to Ibis had been rather bumpy with turbulence battering against the strike ship. Unlike with Damari, the typical House Kolb pilot would be panicking about their performance right now, all while apologizing to me, which brought me to my second point.

Two: In the time I'd known them, Damari hadn't once told me they were sorry. They treated me like I was nothing special, which was fantastically glorious. It contributed to the reason for my third point.

Three: They were probably the only person, unrelated to me, who didn't judge their *Lokke Vitras* for having public relationships with loved ones. After all, relationships were a 'distraction', and the *Lokke Vitras* could not lose sight of their purpose, ever an unwilling concubine to Lutov, their mistress.

This exceedingly common viewpoint was the only reason why several decades ago, I'd married Leski. Without its pressure, the three of us had been content in our pledge of lifelong commitment but with it...

Of my two partners, Korix had learned how to discount people's opinions of him early on in life, but in our first few years together, Leski had had a hard time with ignoring judging eyes and stories whispered behind strangers' hands. The three of us had agreed that making my relationship with her legally binding—legitimizing it, in a way—might ease some of the pressure on her, and it had, to a degree.

It hadn't done the same for me, not that I much cared, but even still, encountering someone like Damari, who didn't give a shit what I did in my personal time, was so ridiculously rare that for our first few months together, I'd found them mighty suspicious.

These three points served as the basis for the only friendship I'd ever had, outside of my family.

"Getting close, LV. Might want to wake the fam up."

Damari's voice echoed in the belly of the Packhorse, especially between the supply crates where Leski, Korix, and I had wedged ourselves. With my wife snoring on my shoulder and my life partner

in the midst of a rare period of decent sleep, I hummed to myself, wondering whether I should do as Damari had suggested. I could leave them to dream, doing the job alone, but if I did, they'd kick my ass later.

Before I dragged them from sleep, though...

"Hey, you might get a message from me in the next few days, Damari," I said. "It's an invitation, ok? You don't have to come."

"Thanks for clarifying," Damari said.

I could feel their eyeroll from here.

"Wake up your partners, dumbass, and don't take too long on the ground. *Shukusen* Talira's gonna notice one of her strike ships gone soon. You want her waiting for us when we get home?"

And there was the fourth reason that I liked Damari. They didn't tell my grandmother that I occasionally brought Korix and Leski with me on missions. She would *not* be pleased to learn that particular secret of mine.

Making a face at a nearby recorder, I jostled Leski before carefully poking Korix. Considering how peaceful he looked, I didn't think he'd wake up in a violent state, but it was better to be safe with him.

"Hell, I drooled on you again," Leski mumbled.

Shuffling to her knees, she sleepily swiped at a wet spot on my sleeve, but I was only paying her half of my attention. Korix's eyes snapped open, and I kept my hands close to my weapons until his presence filled them.

"You good?" I asked.

"Hello to you too," he grumbled.

Despite his grumpiness, I relaxed. I wouldn't have to fight him until he snapped to the present again.

"You three slowpokes ready yet?" Damari said with their voice blaring. "Your drop's coming up in sixty seconds."

Wow... they hadn't given us much time to prepare. After hauling Korix and Leski to their feet, I glanced at a recorder, hurrying through a weapons check.

"Did I do something to piss you off?" I asked.

"Besides waking me up in the small hours of the morning to facilitate your weird-ass foreplay, you mean?"

“This isn’t...!”

With an exasperated sigh, I strode for the Packhorse’s hatch with Leski’s smirk catching my eye on the way.

“It kind of is,” she said in sub-vocals.

“Not this time!” I hissed through my teeth.

“Ok. I’ll give you that.”

With a chuckle, she pulled a length of cloth over her nose and mouth, leaving her hood down.

“Fifteen seconds, people,” Damari called.

At the hatch, Korix raised an eyebrow at me.

“When are you planning on sharing our objective?” he asked.

“On the ground,” I said, “where a certain *inquisitive asshole* can’t eavesdrop.”

“You wound me, LV,” Damari said. “Now, get the fuck off my ship.”

The hatch popped open, and I made a running leap out of it. For the space of a heartbeat, empty air accepted me like a long-lost brother before tossing me and my family toward the ground. Below us, the world was black with a dense cluster of firelight taking center stage.

That was our goal.

I was grateful that it was night, even if we’d had to take the long way to Ibis while chasing it around the globe. It hid how far we were above solid ground, which meant I didn’t have to quash an inevitable panic attack. It didn’t matter how old I got or how many drops I made. Heights fucking terrified me.

Once I was on the ground, I pulled my hood up, same as Leski and Korix, and congregated us between two buildings, somewhere people might overlook three Lutovish dressed like assassins.

“Why are we in Daka?” Korix asked. “Last time I checked, Escad was still the perfectly subservient nation that we force them to be.”

His tone was acid, burning me, and I winced.

“I apologized for bringing you to Ibis before we left,” I said. “I know you don’t like working here, but it’s where I need to be.”

“Ignore him, love. You know that hostility isn’t for you,” Leski said. “What’s the mission?”

Sighing, I rubbed my face, hiding it.

“Escad’s resistance is due for its once-a-decade cleansing,” I said, “but this time around, Vaessa doesn’t have enough information to use their trackers’ kill commands when wiping them out and... Mother Time, I hate my role sometimes.”

“Vaessa wants you to make an example of them,” Korix said.

I nodded. Hell, why had I brought them on this mission? I had plenty of others waiting for my attention. They might not be as high priority, but they still needed to be finished.

But when Leski wrapped her arms around me, I had my answer. I’d needed their support for this. Badly.

“You know...” Korix drawled. “Vaessa wouldn’t like it, but we could do this like we did the Zalfari wipe during year seven of your training. Make it a game.”

I barely contained a snicker at that memory.

“Oh, Mother Time, Talira looked like she was going to pop a vein when we came home from that one,” I said, “and you said... what was it again?”

“‘My *kuvesk* required practice with unarmed combat. He won’t be much of a *Lokke Vitras* if he can’t kill someone with his bare hands.’ Or something like that,” Korix said. “To be fair, you did need the practice.”

“And you told me not to kill anyone,” I said. “I understand why, though. Both of us were pretty heartsick then.”

Before either of us could get too maudlin over the far-distant past, Leski cleared her throat, wrinkling her nose above the cloth covering it.

“Mind cluing me in?” she said.

Whoops.

Squeezing her, I said, “Sorry, love. Korix is suggesting that we clean the resistance out non-lethally. Let Vaessa handle the unconscious Escadese we leave behind.”

“Meaning they’ll still die,” Leski said. “We’ll just rough them up first.”

I winced. How did she always find a way to put things in perspective?

“They were dead the second they joined a resistance,” Korix said. “Vaessa allows Ibis’ resistances to persist so they can draw out dissidents, but every ten years, the House triggers the kill commands in the rebels’ trackers. Sometimes, though, they assign the problem to the *Lokke Vitras*, and if they send Zae in...”

“It means they don’t know which people belong to the resistance,” I said, “which means...”

I waved for Leski to finish the sentence, and when she followed along our line of reasoning, as she'd learned to do over the years, her eyes widened.

"Oh. *Oh!*" she said. "Knock them out to complete the mission and if any of them wake up before Vaessa gets to them, they live."

Korix and I nodded while Leski giggled.

"Of course you two found a way to save lives during a mandated wipe," she said. "So, you mentioned a game. What is it?"

Shrugging, Korix inclined his head to me.

"Ask him," he said. "It was originally his idea."

When Leski raised an eyebrow at me, I explained.

"Everyone starts out with one hundred points. Every draw of a weapon deducts ten points, all unnecessarily inflicted injuries deduct five, and killing someone deducts fifty. At the end, we tally how many people we downed. The one with the most to their name gets twenty-five points added to their score. Whoever has the highest score wins."

"And what does the winner get?" Leski asked.

Meeting Korix's eyes, I smiled. This memory brought with it nothing but warmth in my core.

"One day in bed, the loser to serve at the victor's every whim, and I do mean all of them," Korix said.

"Oo," Leski purred. "Have you two played this game often?"

"Not as often as we might like," Korix said with his eye still glued to mine.

"And who, might I ask, won after the Zalfari wipe you mentioned?" Leski asked.

Tearing my gaze off of Korix, I grinned at my wife, wondering if my eyes were twinkling as much as I thought they were.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I teased. "So? Are you in?"

Tapping the side of her face, Leski said, "Hmm. Let me think. I might get the chance to have both of you at my mercy *for a day*? Hell yes, I'm in."

With a soft chuckle, Korix rubbed his forehead.

"Our poor kid..."

I swatted his shoulder.

“Hey! We can be discreet when we have to be and besides! With us as parents, our kid will have a comprehensive understanding of a healthy sex life,” I said. “That’s important, no matter how much people don’t like to think about it.”

“And if the kid doesn’t want a sex life?” Leski asked.

“Then...”

That was a good question, one I’d never considered before.

“Then, we make sure they know that’s fine too,” I said before making a face. “Mother Time, you two can be distracting sometimes. Can we go?”

“You’re the *Lokke Vitras*,” Leski said. “We serve at your command.”

At her tone, I sucked in a gasp with lightning zapping through me, leaving my fingers twitching. I could grab her, pin her to a wall, and kiss her. We had time. I could run my hands all over her body...

With a low groan, I shook my head.

“Did I say you were distracting sometimes? I meant all the damn time,” I said. “Let’s go before this mission turns into the three of us fucking in an alley.”

“Sounds fun,” Korix said.

Shutting off the world, I took a deep breath, and when I let it back in, their eyes were pinched with restrained laughter.

“I hate you both,” I sourly said.

“Aw... we love you too,” Leski said.

“Yeah, you remember that after I win this game, and you’re mine for a day.”

In an abrupt about-face, I left the alley, leading the way to our goal.

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