

Chapter 41: Of Course We Are, Dummy

When I returned to Feena, she looked grumpy rather than just acting like it. I cautiously approached her with my offering, keeping my eyes peeled for the fiery dragon that she sometimes became.

“Took you long enough,” she grumbled, tearing into her food.

“Sorry. I got distracted,” I said.

“I saw,” Feena said.

Swallowing, she pointed a fork at the refilling dance floor.

“Do you know who your dance partner was?” she asked.

“I didn’t think I needed to check her identity,” I said. “Why?”

Waving at me, Feena said, “Just be careful if you meet her again. Other than that, don’t worry about it. It doesn’t matter.”

Ok... I might find my sister’s warning more ominous if I had the slightest chance of running into Leski again, but given my life, that didn’t seem likely. Best to leave it be.

While Feena sucked down my gifted snack, I stayed with her. I couldn’t go near Pheniks, our parents, or Korix, and for some reason, I found myself... lonely. I needed someone I loved nearby.

“Have you read my message yet?” Feena asked once she’d finished eating.

Leaning on the cocktail table, I shook my head.

“Evushk and I have either been in Ibis or traveling all day,” I said.

“Is *that* what the pull on resources was for?” Feena asked. “Did Talira finally send you to deal with our latest crop of rebels?”

When I remembered what we’d left in Escad, my mood soured.

“You know I can’t talk about it,” I said.

“Right. Sorry,” Feena said, “and I’m sorry for snapping at you earlier. Just because my morning was shit doesn’t change today’s significance.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said. “I’m grateful that you and Phen sent me kind words earlier, but sooner or later, today must become like any other day for you two. Well, besides it being Founder’s Day, of course.”

“Zaeden...” Feena sighed.

A shadow fell over the table from behind me.

“Why is today so special?”

While I relaxed into a puddle on the tabletop, Feena stiffened, rigidly fixing her eyes above my head.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to come near one another tonight,” I said.

“No one can see me. I’m using a camouflage disk, one of the few techniques I haven’t taught you yet,” Korix said. “Why make missions easy for you when you could learn useful skills instead? For the moment, the only people I’m visible to are you and...?”

Sighing, I straightened from off of the table. I had no doubt that both parties in this introduction would know who the other person was, but I went through the process anyway.

“*Evushk*, this is my sister, Feena. She doesn’t usually act like the rabbit she’s mimicking now,” I said. “Feena, this is my *evushk*. He’s not nearly as terrifying as everyone makes him out to be.”

When Korix raised an eyebrow at me, I shrugged. Feena and Pheniks were likely to be part of my life for a long while yet. If he was to remain in it as well, he’d need to drop his icy mask when around them.

Taking a deep breath, Korix turned to Feena.

“Fourth Stratus,” he began.

Ugh, he was going formal with this? I elbowed him. Hard.

Korix flipped his head to glare at me while I donned an innocent smile, and across the table from us, Feena froze. She bounced her eyes between us while they filled with tears, as if she’d realized a horrible truth, and she took a step back.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she croaked.

She stumbled out of view, leaving me chewing on my lip. What had she seen to cause a reaction like that? Did she... know? How could she, having watched so little interaction between me and Korix?

“That woman you were dancing with earlier,” Korix said. “Do you fancy her?”

This was such an enormous change of subject that it took me a moment to switch tracks.

“Maybe? She certainly seemed charming enough,” I said. “I doubt it’ll go anywhere, though. You don’t exactly give me time to date.”

Korix didn’t react when I grinned at him, so rolling my eyes, I asked.

“Why?”

“I would advise caution if you court her, no matter how far into the future that might be,” Korix said. “Her father’s a founder, and therefore, has an old-fashioned view of relationships.”

My breathing paused as my thoughts screeched to a stop.

“A *Founder*?” I hissed.

As in one of the people who’d formed the homeland? One of the people we were celebrating today? Weren’t they supposed to be dead, moved on to the Collective? If one wasn’t, though, as Korix seemed to be implying, what sort of attention had I brought down upon myself?

“A founder, not one of *the* Founders. He wasn’t part of the six Houses that persist to this day, but he lived during the time of Lutov’s founding and fought those from beyond the stars,” Korix said.

Interesting. That would make him old, which was a strange concept to consider.

How long someone had been alive didn’t much matter in Lutov, not when it had no bearing on Stratus elevation or romantic relationships or... *anything*, really. What counted was how mature a person acted. That was all someone needed to determine if they were ready for the many different stages of life or their career, barring the time required to develop into an adult of course.

But if Leski’s father was that old, perhaps he could tell me more about the war with those from beyond the stars.

Also. Why did Lutov know basically nothing about that time period if someone who’d lived during it was alive to tell the tale? Had the man simply refused to share his knowledge, or had someone, at some point in history, decided to bury the truth about the war?

I didn’t get long to ponder these questions as Korix quickly continued with his explanation.

“He’s not a man whose ire you want to raise, so if you decide to pursue Leski, make sure you treat her with the utmost respect.”

Something fiery whipped through me as I met Korix’s gaze, but my voice emerged calmly when I replied.

"I am always respectful with my partners. They deserve nothing less. Don't you know this?"

His brow creased with something about what I'd said obviously troubling him, but Feena returned before he could share what it was.

"Please forgive me for my outburst..." she said before frowning. "What term of respect should I use to address you in this moment, honored sir?"

"None of them," Korix said, "and the amount of emotion you displayed is expected and *good* for someone of your Stratus. Don't be ashamed of it."

Storm clouds formed on my sister's face.

"Maybe you're right," she said, "but I have to reach higher. I have to get as high in House Kolb's infrastructure as I can before... well, before."

I'm sorry. Had Feena just deliberately withheld something from the *Lokke Vitras*? Was she trying to get herself killed?

"Continue with that thought," Korix said, as level as he'd been to this point.

But I knew him well enough to read that tone. Feena had better tell him what she was hiding. Now. I didn't know what I'd do if he ordered me to hurt her.

"Forgive me, but I cannot," she said. "Not even if you command it, precursor to the protector."

And... we'd dropped into something I probably wasn't meant to understand yet. It was a familiar enough sensation, given how often Korix and others like him had talked cryptically while around me in the past, but as I had then, I gave the conversation my full attention, despite my lack of understanding.

"You've made a trip to the southernmost tip of the Eastern Reaches?" Korix asked.

"Earlier today, yes," Feena quietly replied.

Wait, this morning? When she'd received her bad news? Also, why did Korix look purposefully sympathetic now?

"My condolences," he said.

Shifting in place, Feena said, "Thank you. I think."

In an attempt to keep her calm, Korix *slowly* rounded the table to take her hand.

"I mean it," he said. "If you need anything, ask, and I'll do what I can to help."

I'd never seen my sister so uncomfortable before. She clearly wanted to retreat from Korix, but she made herself hold still with a forced smile pasted in place.

“For now, it would help if you removed the distraction that is my little brother,” she said before hastily adding. “Please.”

Softly chuckling, Korix said, “That, I can easily do. I was just about done with this form of torture anyway.”

Patting my sister’s hand, he released her before turning on me.

“Let’s go, *kuvesk*.”

I silently followed him into an enclosed end of the Crescent and one of the offices beyond it. Once the door had fallen closed behind us, Korix made for the clothes draped over the manager’s desk, and I broke the silence between us.

“What was that about?” I asked. “I’ve never seen you act so human with anyone besides me before.”

Holding the outfit that I’d chosen in front of him, Korix cocked his head.

“This is one of those things I can’t tell you about yet,” he distractedly said.

“Because I’m not ready for it?” I asked, almost snapping the question.

Glancing at me, Korix said, “No. Because I have more experience with this. Because I say you can’t know. And... because your sister should be the one to tell you about it, if she decides to share. Do you understand me, *kuvesk*?”

Much as my insides shriveled while doing it, I had to nod. Our relationship might have become closer, but he was still the *Lokke Vitras* and my teacher, and those roles took greater precedence than anything else we might have.

“Yes, *evushk*,” I said.

“Good,” Korix said before softening. “Help me get changed?”

I’d accepted that secrets would always lie between us. What was one more, even if it involved my sister? Shaking it off, I stepped forward to take his jacket.

I’d provided a simple wardrobe change tonight. The tie came off while something more comfortable replaced the formal pants and shirt. They didn’t truly matter, though. Korix wouldn’t get the most important piece of his ensemble until we’d reached home.

Sneaking out of the Crescent gave us no trouble, but why should it? Security was focused on keeping people out, not in.

Once we were in the skycruiser with its coordinates set, we sat in comfortable silence for a good half of an hour before Korix lowered the divider between our seats. He slid to my side, leaning into

me.

"I wish I could tell you," he said.

Tell me what...? Oh. About Feena.

Sighing, I wrapped my arm around him, pulling him closer.

"It's fine, Ko. I get it," I said.

Humming, Korix nestled into me, stroking my leg, and I rested my body on him. What was found here, in each other's warmth, was comfort, the greatest form of it, and slowly, my tension leaked out of me. Sleep came calling like an errant lover.

Before it could take hold of me, Korix shifted in place.

"Earlier, you implied that we're partners," he said. "Am I right to think this?"

Sleepily blinking, I struggled to put my thoughts in order. Why was he asking me a question with such an obvious answer, especially when he knew that I'd need rest before we got home?

"Would we not drop everything if one of us needed help? Do we not work to make our individual lives easier? Is our happiness not the goal of us both?" I asked. "If so, that makes us partners, as far as I'm concerned."

"Zae..." Korix said before burying his face in my chest. "What you're saying is true, yes, but Lutov and Kolb will always come before the other person in this arrangement, at least for me. Doesn't that change your opinion?"

Fucking Houses. Fucking loyalty to the homeland.

Somehow, I kept my breathing rate even, and the unbridled rage and helplessness churning in my gut were leached from my voice.

"It changes nothing," I said. "Unless you object to it, I will think of you as my partner, Ko. Who else can I refuse to love as much as I do with you?"

Korix's chest fell still, and as he curled his fingers into my slacks, his breath ceased its beat against my skin. Shooting his head up, he circled an arm around my neck while his palm turned me to him, and when we came together, energy burned away my fatigue.

I slid my hands to the back of his head, keeping his lips on mine, and we kissed until I tasted salt and Korix insistently pulled free of me. His eyes were wet while tear tracks shone on his cheeks.

"No one has come as close to making me happy as you have," he said. "I don't know if we can ever directly speak of love. Much as I'd like to, I'm not sure I could ever love you as much as you refuse to do the same for me, but partner? I can call you that."

Damn. I'd never realized how important this was to him, never considered that he might not know how I felt. I leaned in for a gentle kiss.

"Ko, none of my partners have affected me like you do," I said. "Do you know when I last went with a steady, single partner for this long? Never. And yes. Some of that has been the lack of feasibility and the need for me to keep away from the general populace, but a lot of it-"

Cupping Korix's face, I held him steady.

"A lot of it is that you're too damn good. If you were anyone else, I'd probably have gone crazy by now. So, listen to me carefully."

I forced him to my eye level.

"You are my partner, and maybe, with time, you could be more. I see that much of a future between us," I said. "You are the man I would step in front of an energy bolt for, not that I expect you to let that happen. I'd like to be a part of your life for as long as you'll have me."

"You think I'll ever stop wanting you with me?" Korix interrupted.

The fire in his eyes burned me, but despite that, I smiled.

"I suppose you wouldn't, would you?" I said.

"Never."

Breaking free of my clutch, Korix lunged for me, and in the resulting pile of limbs, I had a hard time with keeping track of what went where. I knew his mouth stayed occupied with mine while the rush of its entanglement fueled my lock around him, and I knew his fingers grazed over my hips and waist for a while.

Considering this, things would have become much more heated, despite how little room we had, if our arrays and the skycruiser hadn't soon informed us of our arrival home. Reluctantly, we peeled apart, and once we were on the ground, I climbed onto the landing pad.

In the hangar, we caught one another's gaze over the top of rounded metal with both of us blazing a question there. Was it one we could answer, though?

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