

Chapter 42: Mm, So Many Distractions

Neither Korix nor I wanted to say something. If we did, our inevitable answer would become concrete, and having that uncertainty, that *energy*, floating between us...

Mother Time. It was both ridiculously tantalizing and enormously frustrating.

"You said you'd show me what you thought of what I'm wearing," I said.

If a skycruiser weren't standing between us, Korix probably would have knocked me to the floor then and there.

"I can do that later," he said instead. "For now, we have guests to greet. *Your* guests."

With a soft groan, I said, "We should probably make sure they're not getting into trouble. I made the restrictions on where they can go as apparent as possible but..."

"Humanity's curiosity has a way of getting people killed," Korix said. "You never explained why we're having a party here. I only went along with it because it seemed like a good test of your skills."

I'd wondered why ever-private Korix had agreed to let several dozen guests into his home. Using it as a test made sense for him, but if he felt confident enough in me to allow such an invasion of his privacy, then...

Damn, hand-off of his role must be getting close.

Why didn't he tell me these things? He knew that the only reason I'd stayed after the disaster with Fyester had been to free him from his position as the *Lokke Vitras*.

But I had an implied question to answer.

"I don't have a practical reason for it. It's Founder's Day, a time when everyone, including us, should have a bit of fun. I know you don't like public celebrations, so I thought something more private might be better," I said. "But a part of it's for me. I have few days as special as this left, so I wanted to celebrate it. Selfish perhaps but--"

I shrugged, slapping my hands to my thighs as I pushed away from the skycruiser.

“Yes, your sister mentioned that something was unusual about today, besides the obvious,” Korix said. “Neither of you answered my question about it.”

With a laugh, I headed for a door leading deeper into the estate.

“I’m not falling for that again, Ko. You’ve thoroughly taught me not to surrender information needlessly,” I said. “I’m not giving you something you already know.”

“But... I don’t know,” Korix said. “Not this time.”

Spinning, I spread my arms while continuing backward.

“Come on. You can’t expect me to believe that,” I said. “You know everything about me.”

Shaking his head, Korix said, “No, I don’t. I learned everything that I needed for your training but nothing more. I didn’t want to invade your life more than I had to. What does that have to do with today?”

I stopped short, dropping my arms. He actually looked confused, which alarmed me on a number of levels.

Maybe he was telling the truth. If he was, then... should I risk sharing? But why wouldn’t I?

“Today’s my birthday,” I said.

And Korix just blinked at me. No mild rebuke. No assignment of gardening yet to be done. I *hated* yard work.

“You were born on Founder’s Day?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Quite the fuck up on House Drav’s part, huh?”

Korix started shaking, and unsure what that meant, I hurried to him. Before I could reach his side, though, he hung off the skycruiser with uncontrolled laughter pouring from him between gasps. If I hadn’t been so shocked solid by this, something I’d never seen before, I might have been offended.

“Are you...?”

Unsure how to finish that question, I reached for Korix, and he sprang upright, taking hold of my head.

“They didn’t make a mistake,” he said. “For once, one of the Houses got something completely, utterly right.”

He brought me in for a firm kiss before thrusting me away again.

“Do you know how exceptional you are, Zaeden?” he asked. “I’ve never said anything because I didn’t want it to go to your head, but you amaze me. After reviewing your logic and intelligence

scores years ago, I knew you'd learn quickly, just as I knew you had an aptitude for what we do after Ostiu, but Mother Time! There have been weeks where you blew through my lessons before I'd prepared the next one.

"Eleven years of fighting and studying and working and you're nearly ready to become the next *Lokke Vitras*. It took me three times as long to reach that point.

"You exemplify Lutov with your life. If anyone deserves to claim Founder's Day as their own, it's you."

Each of his words settled on me like a stone, and I staggered beneath their weight. Korix had probably meant to pay me a compliment, but all I heard were the expectations I must meet, muted only by hysterical disbelief.

My whole life, people had told me that I was different—my parents, my partners, instructors when I'd been younger—but I'd never believed those assertions because I didn't feel different. During House rotations, I'd fit like a glove with my fellow unHoused. When with my family, I'd played a persona they'd enjoy. I'd listened to, learned from, and occasionally debated with my instructors, as any good student would, and I'd adapted my behavior in small ways to each of my partners' different needs.

Except with Korix. Besides those first few months, I'd only been myself with him...

Only been myself. I'd been playing parts for my entire life, and I'd done it so well that only one person had suspected me of faking. I was a chameleon, a ghost possessing a host of personas.

And even conforming to people's expectations, I'd stood out. Now, the *Lokke Vitras*, most beloved and feared and exceptionally capable of people, echoed a long line of astounded exclamations about my worth, one that had trailed me for my whole life.

I didn't want to be different. I wanted to disappear in Lutov's sea of humanity.

So, I shifted attention away from myself as much as I could.

With a nervous giggle, I asked, "Is this your way of saying happy birthday?"

There was that signature twitch of the lips, the one that had only spawned warmth in me over the years.

"Do you want those words from me? I can say them if you like," Korix said, "or you can let my actions speak for themselves."

"Since when have I preferred words over deeds?" I asked.

"That's what I thought."

Taking my hand, he led me away from the hangar and the uneasiness that had hung over me there. Before we stepped into an occupied part of the house, I pulled Korix to a stop, offering him an item from my coat.

“The last part of your disguise,” I said.

Korix took the mask with two fingers, dangling it in front of his face while I retrieved mine.

“I understand why I needed to change clothes, just as I understand why I should hide my features. They’re well known, to my dismay,” he said, “but won’t these masks make us stand out just as much as my face would? Also, why didn’t you have to change?”

“Are you complaining?” I asked.

After fixing my mask to my face, I threw the long tails of my coat back, which had blue illumination faintly splashing on the walls, and bent until Korix’s hips were a few centimeters from my nose. There, I stayed, looking up at him. Waiting for his reaction.

Red crept up his neck, reaching for his cheeks, and he cleared his throat.

“Why would I do that?” he said.

Shooting upright, I said, “I didn’t think you would. As for your question about the masks, put yours on and follow me. You’ll see why I’m having you wear one soon enough.”

With a sigh, Korix did as I’d asked, and we moved on. As soon as we stepped into the living room, however, he stopped short.

I knew why he’d done that. I’d never seen so many people in a normally still and silent room. Now, it was the opposite of that.

Drones were holding steady at the entrances to forbidden hallways while more of them flashed from one end of the room to the other. They collected glasses, discarded used napkins, and in general, cleaned up after the space’s occupants.

A handful of our guests were in here, wearing outfits infinitely more ridiculous than what we’d seen at the Founder’s Day Ball. Too much color contrasted with their surroundings’ monochromatic theme, and the state of dress here ranged from nearly non-existent to layers piled atop one another.

Multiple conversations interlaced into a blur with the drones’ whirring providing a background base. From another room, synthesized dance music—a style currently popular—thrummed, a trembling beat that disturbed this place’s steady hum.

Some people were dancing or swaying to this, a rush of activity that those sitting on the couch or the floor counteracted. They talked or kissed or caressed one another, the barest of movements when compared to everyone on their feet.

And all of them were wearing masks, concealing their features.

So, yes. I understood why Korix was struggling to move right now. Not only were several possible hostiles, none of whom we could identify, surrounding us, but this scene, pasted on top of the living room's typical air, was far more jarring than I'd expected.

Which wasn't to say that I disliked it. Far from that. A silly grin had planted itself on my face, and I doubted it was moving anytime soon.

"I don't like this," Korix said, as if to contradict my mood.

"Don't worry," I said. "The drones won't let anyone wander into private rooms. I wrote tonight's security parameters myself."

"That's not what I meant," Korix grumbled.

Hooking my arm around his, I patted it.

"I know."

I led him into another room, one that I'd planned as a quiet zone. Here, people were chatting in a murmur while snacking on refreshments. As I wandered around the space with Korix, I forced him to talk, gradually lowering that guardedness that he wore like armor, and after a while, he relaxed.

Only then did I start teasing him.

Over my many years of dating, I'd become an expert in this game, and though Korix was older than me, I was more experienced with romantic relationships. He might be the *Lokke Vitras*, but unless a mission or my training constrained him to his rigid role, he was putty in my hands.

This was how within the hour, I had him in a bedroom with four of our guests, and despite several dozen strangers partying under his roof, Korix's only focus was me. With the other four people sufficiently distracted, I returned his attention, running a hand over his shoulders and back.

"How are we doing?" I asked.

A small grimace flashed over Korix's face, one that he quickly smoothed away. His firm control had always loosened when he was distracted like this.

"I still don't like what you've done to my home," he said.

Arching an eyebrow, I drawled, "But?"

"But I suppose it's acceptable for one night," Korix huffed.

"Excellent," I said. "I'll keep that in mind for the future."

At my smirk, Korix fell still.

“I didn’t mean we should have more-” he started.

Laughing, I covered his mouth with my palm.

“I know,” I said. “Let’s focus elsewhere, shall we? You still haven’t rewarded me for how much work I put into my appearance tonight. I’m beginning to think you don’t like it.”

Flicking his eyes over me, Korix brushed my arm off of him, but rather than pulling me closer, as I’d expected, he stepped back. He had his head follow the same path as his earlier inspection, slowly dragging it up and down.

“Zaeden of no House, you spend far too much time teasing or working to irritate me,” he said. “Do you deny this?”

Confused, I cocked my head at him, noting that one of the couples nearby had broken off in their antics to watch.

“Why would I deny a truth?” I asked.

In a flash, Korix had hold of my coat, and he propelled me into the wall at my back. Dull pain flared along my spine, but hell, if it didn’t feel like bliss.

Pulling my mask off, Korix gently took hold of my jaw.

“And yet, you’re the only one in all of Lutov whose image is fixed in my mind,” he said.

His kiss pushed my head against drywall again, and I faintly tasted blood from where someone’s teeth had accidentally pinched a lip too hard, but I didn’t care. I was melting, fluid resin dribbling to the floor. We hit a mattress, frantic to resume where we’d left off in the skycruiser, and four sets of hands helped us strip stubborn clothing free.

In a cocoon of five people’s desire, I pupated, enduring all manner of delightful torment until I metamorphosed in a wash of ecstasy, a wonder that I’d ever be eager to repeat. Once all of us six butterflies had experienced the same, we blanketed one another before falling asleep with exhaustion sapping us.

I didn’t know what woke me up, but when I returned to consciousness, I stretched, checking the time. Morning had come, and over the next few hours, my guests would trickle back home, but that process had yet to begin, not in this room at least.

Wriggling from beneath a pile of limbs, I searched for Korix. He, predictably, had isolated himself in a corner with his back to it, but he’d stayed in this room, falling asleep with strangers nearby, because I was here.

A glow permeated me, and I gently pressed my lips to his forehead. I didn’t want to wake him up.

While I crouched with my chin on my knees and my arms wrapped around my legs, I watched the slow rise and fall of his chest until my stomach reminded me that I hadn't fed it in over twenty-four hours. I probably should have eaten something at the ball, but in all of the excitement, I'd forgotten to do that. So, I headed for the kitchen, after finding and donning my slacks of course.

I had to step around several sleeping people on the way, and hell, it made me giddy. Last night had gone exactly as planned, and while I knew something like this would never happen again for me, I'd experienced it at least once in my life. I counted myself lucky.

When I heard activity coming from around the corner, I slowed down, cursing Korix's refusal to install recorders on his estate for the first time. I didn't expect trouble, but visually checking an unexpected oddity was always best before ambling into view.

Plastering my back to the wall, I lowered myself toward the ground before peaking around the corner. Further down the hall, someone was messing with a drone, pulling out its innards. I'd find this alone suspicious, but I could swear I knew this person too.

While I racked my brain for where I'd seen her before, she retrieved something from her pocket and shoved it into the drone. After a few adjustments, she put it back together before turning to leave, and as she moved out of view, I remembered how I knew her.

Years ago, I'd picked Fyester up from one of his parents' social gatherings, accommodating his not-so-subtle attempt to escape its boring proceedings. When I'd arrived, that woman had been chatting with him, and while Fyester had introduced us, I couldn't, for the life of me, remember her name.

It, however, wasn't important.

That social gathering? Fyester's parents had held it for their fellow House Cerullis members, which meant that this woman was most likely conjoined with the House that I'd suspected of underhanded activity for years. I hadn't invited any of them to last night's party, so why was she here?

As soon as she'd disappeared, I was racing down the corridor. Seizing the drone, I pulled it apart as quickly as I could, and when I saw what she'd placed inside, I sucked in a breath.

My suspicions had been validated. How I wished they hadn't been.

For within this drone was the instrument of our destruction, and its timer was swiftly ticking down to zero.

TTS Chapter Forty-Two

Revision #2

Created 21 November 2024 06:56:35 by FatalisticFable

Updated 3 June 2026 20:51:42 by FatalisticFable