

# Chapter 5: When Fighting Together Is Love 2

As I glided onto the street, I hoped my desperate need for my partners' imparted comfort hadn't been shining from me as we'd spoken, just as I hoped it hadn't been why Korix had brought up our old game. There was a reason I'd been putting off my responsibilities for a few days now. It was the same reason I'd delayed a check-in chat with Korix earlier tonight.

Simply put, I couldn't take much more at the moment.

But Leski and Korix were helping me in my struggle for a healthy balance, whether knowingly or not. The promise of a child, my child, had also served as a life-line, hauling me back in. This, how they saved me, was the reason that I'd insisted on keeping my loved ones in my life, despite the disapproval of nearly everyone in Lutov.

Also, I was perfectly aware of how callous we were acting about tonight's soon-to-come violence. Unfortunately, there came a point in every life—or every life like mine—where the one living it simply could not acknowledge the harm they were causing anymore. For their own sanity, such a person learned to apply false cheer to their actions, forcibly ignoring how awful it was.

And of course, I couldn't do much to change tonight's wipe. The *Lokke Vitras* might hold more 'freedom' than everyone else in Lutov, but they were also the most bound by society.

In other words, yes. This role let me get away with a lot of bullshit, but there was a line that I absolutely could not cross, not without risking severe consequences. I already skirted it more than I should, and I *did not* want to throw my life away for a cause or a people who couldn't currently be saved. If their circumstances changed enough to give them a chance at gaining freedom from us, I'd consider helping the children of Ibis, but I couldn't make a move until then.

Crossing Daka didn't take us long, and when we reached the resistance's first safe house, I glanced over the small building. It looked like any other home in this city, but I knew better.

Vaessa kept a careful eye on Ibis' resistances, part of their duty to keep this continent stable, and I got a detailed report on them every month. Because of this, I knew which of these seemingly innocuous homes actually housed dissidents, for the most part.

I didn't presume to have identified them all. Children of Ibis were fucking *smart*, consistently coming up with new and clever ways to hide their activities from me and the homeland, but unfortunately, this worked in our favor. The safehouses that I didn't know about, the resistance members who slept with their families tonight, and the satellite hideouts flung across Escad? These

would serve as the base that the resistance could rebuild on, and we wanted them to do that.

Mother Time help me if House Vaessa decided they wanted to wipe all of the resistances out of their domain. I didn't think that was possible, not after the centuries that we'd allowed them to grow, but the *Lokke Vitras* was supposed to be one with the impossible. I would run myself into the ground trying to fulfill their expectations.

With my head canted to the side, I examined my current target while my array used the heat signatures found inside to project the location of the building's occupants into my vision. While I waited for Korix and Leski to finish their initial scans as well, I created a file to share with them. Currently, all it held was: K-100, L-100, and Z-100, but I expected those numbers to quickly change. A lot of people were waiting for us in this safehouse. More than I'd expected.

"Love, you take the front. Ko, you come in from the north entrance," I said over a direct connection. "I've got the upper floor. Move in on my mark."

"Confirm," they said.

As they slunk to their proper starting positions, I took off for the building beside the safehouse. At its wall, I kicked up it—once, twice—and on the last of these, I took hold of the roof's eave. Hauling myself up and over, I rolled to my feet, soundlessly sprinting for the safehouse.

When my feet had no more adobe to consume, I hurtled through the air toward my target building, curling my fingers around the straw and wood-beam base of its roof when I landed. Once atop it, I carefully crawled to the roof's peak, perching over a two-story drop.

On scanning the building beneath me, I noted that nothing significant had changed, and my partners were in position, waiting for me.

Closing my eyes, I took a slow breath in and out, boiling out apprehension and self-disgust and *feeling* from me until I'd reached the state that was most essential for everyone in House Kolb. Mission mode achieved.

With my eyes still closed, I said, "Mark."

Swinging off of the roof, I crashed through the shutters of the window below me, tackling the woman behind it. When we hit the floor, her breath whooshed from her, and seizing her skull, I smashed it into the wood slats until her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

On my feet, I stalked down the corridor. When a man emerged into it, I was waiting for him. I spun him in place, pushing him into a wall, before pressing my forearm into his neck. Ignoring his punches and kicks, I concentrated on where I was applying pressure.

Before he could slump into unconsciousness, he plucked a knife from somewhere on his body, desperately stabbing at my eye, but I quickly disarmed him. He drooped soon after that, sliding down the wall when I released him.

Palming a sedative hypo, I glided into a room where a couple, locked around each other, had somehow not woken up from the noise filling this safehouse, and two jabs later, the upper floor was clear. I hurried to a ladder, jumping through the hole at the top of it.

An analysis of my new surroundings revealed several unconscious people on the floor with Leski wrestling another one nearby. She had the fight well in hand, but another hostile was sneaking up on her with a sword raised above his head.

Without thought, I tossed my newly collected knife at him, and it buried to the hilt in his shoulder. Hissing, he stumbled, giving Leski enough time to finish with her opponent before turning on the next, all while I deducted five points from my score.

Panting, Leski shot a glare at me while rising from her straddle of the man.

“Only five?” she asked. “Shouldn’t it be fifteen?”

“Technically, I never drew that knife,” I said. “I got it off a resistance member.”

Leski looked down her nose at me until I deducted another ten points with a sigh. On the tail end of our exchange, Korix strode into the room.

“You two ok?” he asked.

“Fine,” Leski said.

“A little bruised,” I said. “I’ll live.”

Besides, these pesky injuries would soon be gone.

“Right. Everyone add up your body count and we’ll...”

Frowning, Korix glanced at me.

“How did you already lose points?” he asked.

With a grin, I retrieved my new knife, waving it in the air.

“Instincts are powerful things, Ko,” I said. “We should hurry up, though. We still have several safehouses left, and when Damari dropped us off, they seemed eager to get home.”

Wincing, Leski said, “And we *really* don’t want to upset them.”

“No, we don’t.”

So, we moved out, making a circuit of Daka. The numbers in my tally changed with every clash, but by the time we were finished, they stood at: K-95, Leski-75, and Z-80. The best part of the game had yet to come, though.

Jittering with barely contained glee, Leski asked, "So? Final body counts? Mine's twenty-one."

"Hang on," I said, lifting a finger. "Let me contact our ride."

I'd already sent a direct connection request, and until Damari accepted it, Leski viciously tapped her fingers on her thigh while Korix crossed his arms.

"Sup, LV?" Damari soon asked.

"We're all done here," I said. "Ready for pick up."

"Awesome," Damari said. "On my way. ETA three minutes."

"Thank you."

"Yeah, yeah."

When they cut the connection, I refocused on my family.

"So, you brought down twenty-one, which prospectively puts you at ninety-five points," I said, pointing at Leski. "What's your number, Ko?"

"Sixteen," Korix said.

At my incredulous look, he shrugged.

"I was taking it easy," he said. "What about you, Zae?"

How should I answer that question? If I told the truth, I'd win our little game, and I wasn't sure I wanted that. If we left our scores as they were, however, I'd have eighty points while they'd be tied with ninety-five a piece and...

What could I say? Something about a day devoted to their pleasure appealed to me on a deep level right now. Since I'd basically won, could I instead choose to lose?

Wincing, I said, "Twenty."

With a delighted giggle, Leski pattered her hands together.

"I win!" she chirped.

Shaking my head at her antics, I said, "So does Ko."

Hugging himself, Korix was watching me with a pleasantly neutral expression in place.

"Yes," he drawled, "we win."

"Which means we get to have you at our mercy soon," Leski said.

When she jabbed me in the side, I softly smiled, enjoying her unbridled enthusiasm.

“The next day I have free,” I said.

“Oh, it’ll be *so much fun*,” Leski said.

She had a faraway look in her eyes, probably imagining all the things she’d make me do, and huffing, I plucked her mag hook off of her belt, pressing it into her hand.

“Damari will be here any minute,” I said. “You can celebrate your victory once we’re in the air.”

She made a face at me but prepared herself anyway, and as I withdrew my mag hook, I noted that Korix was still watching me. When I cocked my head at him, he broke eye contact, and I got only a few seconds to wonder why he’d done that before the strike ship swooped over Daka, dragging us behind it.

I received a message from him while we were in the air.

*What was your actual number?* it read.

Trust Korix to catch me in a lie, even one as minor as this. Would I ever get something past him?

*Thirty-eight*, I replied.

After a pause, Korix sent, *That’s more what I expected*.

Was he angry? I hardly ever lied to him or Leski, even when doing that would be so much easier sometimes. The few times I did were similar to this instance, small things that only benefited them. That I chose to benefit them. They rarely benefited me as well.

As I steadied myself on the Packhorse’s wall with its hatch closing behind me, I tracked Korix’s stride to the alcove we’d occupied earlier.

*I’m sorry. Sometimes, I get tired of the expectation that I’ll be the best at everything, and I hate winning all the time*, I sent. *Still. I should have just said that instead of making it complicated*.

Glancing back at me, Korix gave a slight headshake before collapsing in his chosen spot.

“Are you two joining me or not?” he asked.

Leski skipped toward him, almost face-planting when the strike ship shuddered, and I followed at a much slower pace. When she flopped into Korix’s arms, he found me over her head, and his eyes crinkled at the look on my face.

‘Not upset,’ he mouthed before extending a hand to me.

With a weight lifting off of my shoulders, I sank to my knees in front of them, interlacing my fingers with Korix’s while pressing my lips to Leski’s mouth. Korix peppered her cheek with kisses, making

her giggle, and pulling away, I breathed the source of our joy into the hollow our faces made.

“We’re going to be parents.”

There was a breath where the three of us considered everything this would entail, our hopes and fears and desperately desired vision for the future, and then, Korix broke it with a huff.

“It’s about damn time,” he said.

As I shivered at the curse on his tongue, Leski laughed, pushing me over. I toppled beside Korix, and beaming, she put one knee between my legs and another between his before pulling them together.

“We’ll be great at it,” she said.

And while I was terrified of the opposite, I still knew this to be true.

With his hand in her hair, Korix dragged Leski down beside him, and while her yelp quickly became a pleased hum, I walked my fingers along her leg and hip, admiring the arch of them. I meant to make another trail along the inside of her thigh, but a voice snapped through the Packhorse’s belly, jerking us apart.

“I swear to Mother Time. If you make me clean up another mess on my ship, I’m never taking the three of you anywhere again,” Damari said. “I know you’re, like, *the* most sex-crazed people in Lutov, but fucking save it ‘til we get home. You know I don’t like excessive displays of affection.”

Which made it unfortunate that they’d befriended us. When together, my partners and I were almost always touching one another, and it was hard to remember that we should control ourselves around Damari.

With a wince, I said, “Sorry. Nothing more than light cuddling for the rest of the way home. I promise.”

There was a slight pause and then.

“I’ll pay as little attention to those recorders as possible, then.”

“Thank you, Damari!” Leski called.

Clicking their tongue, Damari said, “Whatever. Assholes, the lot of you.”

But they left us alone.

Rolling to my side, I settled next to Korix. I left my hand curled on his chest, near where Leski had sprawled herself. She brushed her fingers through my hair while talking with Korix, and I let their words bloom and fade in my ears, uncomprehending of anything but the deep sense of comfort that my partners imbued.

When I took up this mantle, I hadn't been sure what to expect. I'd known that my life would be hard, impossible even, but I'd been willing to endure it if it meant that Korix would be freed from a role that had been slowly breaking him. I'd been willing to hand myself over in sacrifice to Lutov, letting the spark of my soul be forever stained, but I hadn't known what my life would become.

It turned out that being the *Lokke Vitras* wasn't so bad.

The strike ship rocked around me. My partners' words hummed a song that only they could weave in the air, and with Leski smoothing my hair against my scalp, I let my eyes droop and fall closed.

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