

# Chapter 57: Something's Not Right

*Shukusen* Alezand showed no sign of leaving, and cursing in my head, I settled in to wait. Obviously, one of the people on the landing pad wanted something from the other, and I was curious which was which.

“What else needs to be finished before we can start?” Korix asked.

“Several cells in charge of collection and harvest need to get into position, and we need the final delivery of firepower from Niklaus,” Alezand said. “Once those conditions are met, we can begin the cascade.”

Korix nodded with distant eyes, and shifting in place, Alezand bit his tongue before speaking again.

“If I may, Favored,” he said, “are the terms that we discussed still acceptable to them?”

Rousing, Korix turned a mild gaze on Alezand, but the *shukusen* flinched nonetheless.

“In the coming days, those who have cooperated will receive better treatment than the vast majority, yes,” Korix said. “When this is done, Cerullis will be the last House left standing.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Alezand asked. “From what I understand, you and Talira are close. When it comes time for her removal, will you hesitate?”

Her *removal*? They were planning to kill my grandmother?

Of course they were. She was one of the five people with the greatest cause to oppose this scheme.

A twinge spasmed across Korix’s face, and he closed his trembling hands into fists. Wait. I’d seen this before-

He relaxed with a chuckle rumbling from him.

“I can’t afford to hesitate, not with my once *evushk*,” he said. “If I did, she would slaughter me.”

“So... you’ll kill her without a problem,” Alezand said.

A grunt flew from Korix, and he hunched the smallest bit. His throat worked, but something stopped him from speaking.

I *had* seen this before. It had happened several times between when I'd first run into my *evushk* here and the moment when he'd put me in a cell.

Straightening, Korix flashed a sloppy smile at Alezand.

"Yes, *shukusen*, I will," he said.

"Good," Alezand said. "She's the only one I'm worried about now that Zaeden's ours."

"Do *not* underestimate him," Korix said. "That man is more dangerous than all of House Kolb's Second Strata combined. If you don't take him seriously, you will die."

He had such confidence in me. Was that why he'd looked so relieved when asking me to stop him?

"Are you sure you're not overestimating him? Given that he's Talira's grandson, you could have a soft spot for him," Alezand said. "If circumstances require it, can you overcome your attachment to him? Can you end his life?"

A shudder rattled Korix violently enough that he stumbled away from the shuttle's hull. Claspings his knees, he gasped, lifting a fiery gaze to Alezand.

"I... will... never-" he croaked.

[*Leave us.*]

Rooted in place, I watched through frozen eyes as Alezand bowed to the shadows beneath the shuttle's wing, where I'd seen something hovering before. What the fuck had that been? It had sounded like a voice. Maybe.

But when I tried to remember what I'd heard, it slipped through my mental grasp. What sort of tech did that? Who the hell was I fighting?

Why was I not more pleased to learn that something real lay behind the outline that I'd seen, something besides my mind looking for proof that Korix hadn't betrayed me?

When someone wrapped their fingers in my shirt, I glanced back at Leski. Her eyes had ballooned with a twitch having started in her cheek, and her breathing was coming far too short and often. She jerked her head toward the exit that Alezand was disappearing through, but I shook mine, reaching behind me to squeeze her hand. Her lips went thin, but I didn't observe more of her disapproval as the... voice?

Yes. Voice.

As it spoke again.

[*Why do you resist us? You are Favored.*]

Panting, Korix pushed off of his knees, swaying in place as he stared at nothing.

“You... could never understand,” he said. “For how much... you manipulate them, emotions just aren’t within your capacity to comprehend.”

*[Is our displeasure not enough to make you reject this Zaeden?]*

At this, Korix clenched his jaw, and his face grew steadily ruddier while veins popped in his neck.

*[Speak!]*

Wincing, I pressed my hands over my ears—the voice’s booming command had rung so strongly in them—but I let myself have this reaction. Listening to the voice made my brain push against its containing bone, setting a dull throb loose in my skull, and this ache had only worsened as its volume had increased.

“NO!”

This roar, while not one to produce pain, jerked my head out of its hang. I’d never heard Korix like this: in distress but defiant. All for me.

Oh, my beautiful partner.

For a time, all I heard was Korix’s ragged panting, and all I wanted was to rush forward and stand with him against his enemy, but I couldn’t. I didn’t know who or- or *what* this voice was, but I knew that it could subsume a person’s will beneath its own. I wouldn’t willingly surrender myself to it, not when I was the only thing keeping Lutov safe from the damage that the *Lokke Vitras* alone could cause.

So, I waited and hoped that I could find an opening, a time when I could steal Korix away from this place with none the wiser. Including *them*.

*[Interesting. We didn’t expect such emotional variety and resilience from you. No matter, though. The cause can be dealt with.]*

Stiffening, Korix said, “Dealt... with?”

*[Yes. Come here, Favored. Now.]*

“N-!”

While his jaw locked, Korix jerked taut before toppling to the floor with a crack. His body spasmed to an unheard beat, almost like a seizure, but I knew that wasn’t right, not with my array giving me a perfect view of his face. He hadn’t gone absent like someone having an epileptic fit would. His bright eyes were too focused, and I tasted blood from where I’d almost chewed a hole in my cheek.

Going limp, he feebly tried to reach his hands and knees, but after getting halfway there, he only flopped to the ground again. I would have surged to him, taking him somewhere safe, if Leski hadn't wrapped her arms around my chest right then. Her cheek was wet where she'd pressed into my back.

[*Come here, or we will give worse to your Zaeden before his end.*]

It was like Korix hadn't heard the voice. He lay motionless while the lump of him rose and fell with each breath, and I was silently screaming for him to do what the voice had said, even as I pulled Leski off of me. I couldn't watch him in the grip of such pain again.

From where he was sprawled, Korix said, "Leave him alone, and I'll stop fighting you."

...What? Had he seriously just made that offer? Until his end, my Korix would serve House Kolb and Lutov above all else, and surrendering himself for me was the opposite of keeping the homeland safe. What was he thinking?

Unless...

Was he entrusting the duty that he'd upheld for his whole life to me? Did he expect me to stop him?

Of course he did. He'd practically begged me to do it.

[*Your terms accepted, Favored. A pact formed between—*] a garbled mess of sound [*—and you upon reassertion of control.*]

"And we all know how seriously you lot take pacts," Korix grumbled.

With a pained grunt, he reached his knees.

"May I have a moment or-?"

[*Now.*]

Sighing, Korix said, "That's what I thought."

He crawled beneath the shuttle's wing, sitting on his heels once there.

Spreading his arms, he said, "Anytime now."

Should I let this happen? *Could I?*

With a slow breath in and out, I shoved emotion below the surface for the hundredth time today. Whatever this voice was, taking control of Korix again would probably distract it. I'd strike then, and this awful series of events would end.

A wavering outline floated to a stop above Korix. Before he could blink or brace, it funneled into a thin line, and this flowed like a hazy strand of sand into his nose.

This was it. I needed to go now. I tensed to spring-

And Korix screamed.

I nearly fell on my face with my heart painfully skipping a beat. Korix never cried out like that. Not when he was irritated. Now when we were intimate. Certainly not due to pain. I'd seen him get burned so badly that his flesh had bubbled with only a slight grunt in response.

His scream wrapped around my mind with threads of it permeating all of me, and it didn't matter that this sound meant I could finally help him. I couldn't move, not with rust coating my every joint and a sedative infused in the core of every muscle.

When he fell silent, I could only blink while he got off the floor, stretching his arms and rolling his wrists as if testing them. Like something or someone else was wearing his body.

*Bastard.*

Leski again kept me from leaping out of cover.

"What are you doing?" she said in sub-vocals. "You can't confront the *Lokke Vitras*."

"I have to save him," I said, tugging on her hold.

With a small gasp, Leski recoiled from me.

"He's the one you love?" she said. "What-? How is that possible?"

"Zaeden..."

That sing-song voice cut through Leski's sputter, and we both went still.

"Where are you?" Korix called. "I know you're here. How long have you been watching?"

Shit. I'd lost the element of surprise, if I'd ever actually had it.

"I have to fight him now," I said. "If he knows I'm here, he'll never let us leave peacefully."

"How can you-?" Leski started.

I placed my palm over her mouth.

"Stay here. Remember?" I said.

With her eyes pinched, she nodded, and I crept toward the crate's edge once again.

“Come out, *kuvesk*,” Korix called. “Let’s have a showdown, you and I.”

That, I could oblige. Slowly exhaling, I stepped into conflict.

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Revision #1

Created 22 November 2024 18:49:56 by FatalisticFable

Updated 22 November 2024 18:59:48 by FatalisticFable