

# Chapter 59: Well, I'm About to Die 2

A mishmash of rotating colors abruptly halted with my head smacking into plastic, and my vision further blurred, jerking without permission across the ceiling. A high-pitched buzz took up residence in my ears, and I was having a hard time parsing why a flashing box with words in it was obscuring the shadow standing over me.

A muffled voice pierced through the world's ringing—

“We really should kill you.”

—and as a fuzzy shape took on a crisp edge, I smiled at a man. He was pointing something shiny at me, but the sight of him made me feel good. Why?

The man went rigid before dropping to the ground with another person replacing him. When I raised my head to follow the scene, a dull ache throbbed inside my skull, nearly felling me, and after it had faded, I thought I might be sick, but there was the man again, and a woman was crouching over him, pressing a box with a sparking end to the base of his skull, and he flopped and spasmed on the floor with his gray eyes bulging.

Why? Why-?

I was screaming at the woman. Why?

She rushed to hover over me with her face pinched. Why?

“What do you need?” she frantically asked. “How do I help you, Zaeden?”

Was that my name?

The woman- woman... I knew her. I did! Leski. Yes. Leski had asked me something. Something important. Something about fixing what was wrong with me.

Was something wrong with me?

Leski bore down on my side, and it hurt! Mother. fucking. Time, it *hurt!*

A horrible noise boomed in the air around me. What was that? I needed to help!

Leski clamped a hand over my mouth, which silenced the racket.

Oh. It had been me. I shouldn't be making noise. Right? That was why she was- was putting her smooth skin on my lips... mm. I liked that.

"RRDs" Leski said before focusing on me. "Do you need rapid regeneration drugs?"

Those sounded nice. Where to get them, though?

Leski swayed back while a sob hiccupped in the air, and I spied the man lying behind her. At the sight of him, a chill shot through me.

Why? Did I know him? Considering how much warmth and anxiety had spawned on seeing that slackened face. I had to.

What was his name. I had to know-

"Korix," I mumbled.

Leski jerked her head toward me, and I remembered her question. Somehow.

"*Evushk*. He'll... have... drugs... on him," I sleepily said.

With a gasp, Leski scampered on her hands and knees to Korix's side, roughly searching him. I wished she'd be gentler with him but I-

So weak. The back of my head slammed down, which made the fuzzy word boxes, floating in front of me, gain clarity. Like a story before bed, I read them, although the rate of my blinking slowed down as I did. Still, I fought to keep my eyes open. Sleep sounded like a bad idea.

This was what my bedtime tale said:

A wrist further fractured. A hand slashed all to hell. A scratched cornea. Holes through multiple organs and my leg. A gaping laceration in my side. Moderate head trauma. Severe blood loss.

"Ko will be pissed with me," I mumbled.

Pinpricks dotted my arms and neck, and the woman... Leski sat beside me, taking my hand.

"I should have made you leave," she said. "I shouldn't have let you fight the *Lokke Vitras*. Who could be worth enduring damage like this?"

Wasn't the answer to that question obvious?

"He is," I said.

Maybe she bit her lip at that. I thought it might be so, but I was too focused on fighting off sleep's siren call to notice. She and I danced with one another, much like I had with another woman not long ago. We twirled and twisted until we were twined one to the other, and with a cackle, she tried to tug me into her depths, but I wrestled against her hold. Slowly, I gained the strength to turn my

attention to the real world, even if threads of exhaustion were still hanging from me.

Sitting up, I took a sip of air. Fuck. Even over the years of my hellish training, I'd never been so thoroughly thrashed. My body had been pierced and battered so badly that even rapid regeneration drugs were struggling to repair it.

To be fair, the drugs that Leski had given me were probably the shitty hypos of it that Korix brought with him on missions-

Korix!

A burst of energy manifested from nowhere, suffusing me for the brief seconds that it took to reach my partner. When his artery leapt against my finger, I slumped on him for a moment with a ragged gasp my only concession to the tears in my eyes.

His heat... the smell of him... these called for me to sleep more loudly than what had tempted me before, but I forced myself upright, searching his body. I pulled his weapons free, tossing most of them into a faraway pile, although I snagged a few for myself.

When I found his sedatives and restraints, I used both on him. If I was remembering this right, Leski had shocked Korix into unconsciousness, which should keep him under for a few more minutes, but I'd rather not fight him again, not when our first round had caused so much damage.

So, he got a significant dose of sedatives, although I retained a few hypos for our coming trip. As for the restraints, I hooked him into them, using the most intricate pattern I knew. He'd still get free of them within a minute, but that was a minute I could use to my advantage.

With Korix relatively secured, I looked for Leski. I'd noted her absence on gaining limited mobility but thought it best to neutralize the threat before figuring out where she'd gone.

Getting to my feet was hell with the hangar spinning once the task was done, but after taking a few steps into its open floor, I spotted a familiar woman, hanging out the door to scan the hall beyond. We *had* made a lot of noise. She'd been wise to check for enemies.

When I sent her a short message, Leski jerked upright before glancing over her shoulder. A squeak flew from her when she saw me, and after she started sprinting my way, I returned to Korix's side. By the time she'd joined me, I had my elbows hooked under his arms, dragging him step by painful step toward the closest landing pad.

Leski stopped short with color draining from her cheeks.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

Rolling my eyes, I panted, "Getting the *Lokke Vitras* into a shuttle for transport. What does it look like I'm doing?"

Using a shuttle would mean leaving a borrowed skycruiser behind, and while I hated entrusting Ace to my processes, I knew they'd fly him to Feena soon. They had to because there was no way in hell I could reach my dog right now, not in my current condition. Not with Korix in tow. Not even if Leski helped me.

Which she did *not* look willing to do.

"Are you insane?" she hissed. "Not only is that man the worst traitor Lutov's ever seen, but he nearly killed you! Leave him, and once we're clear of this place, have *shukusen* Talira glass it. It seems like a fitting punishment."

Uh...

"Glassings don't work that way. Except in Ostiu, I guess," I said. "Authorizing one is a lengthy process."

The only reason Alezand had been able to glass Korix's estate was because his House controlled the satellites that caused those disasters.

"Why such vehemence for the *Lokke Vitras*?" I asked. "It seems... out of character for you."

She'd been nothing but compassionate with me.

"What I've listed isn't enough?"

Leski's face had contorted into a monster mask, and seeing it, I knew more had to lie behind her rage than what she'd claimed. I didn't have time to learn what it was right now, though.

"I need him alive. He can give us more answers, especially with this... Ancient—whatever that is—controlling him," I said. "Will you please help me get him into a shuttle?"

Stepping closer, Leski poked my forehead, pushing hard enough that my head snapped back, and with a soft groan, I almost lost my grip on Korix. *Hell*, that had made me nauseous.

"What is it with you and learning everything you can about a problem?" she snapped. "We know enough, Zaeden. It's time to take action—"

"I *am* taking action!"

My roar echoed in the hangar, and on its fading note, both of us were left taut as bowstrings.

"I am," I repeated as silence fell. "I'm taking a shuttle, flying it to Xygek, and bringing everything that we've learned to *shukusen* Talira. She's best equipped to know what we should do next. But I'm not leaving him. There is nothing in this world that can convince me to do that, so will you *please* lend me a hand? I'd like to get us in the air before the RRDs in my bloodstream taper off."

Leski drew her lips into a thin line while crossing her arms.

“Answer me one question,” she said. “Is he the reason you barreled headlong into danger? Is he the one you love?”

I didn't know how she'd concluded this. I'd never confirmed her conjecture, so why would she believe that love was driving me? Did my actions speak that loudly?

Lowering my head, I gazed down the length of Korix's slackened form, and I wanted to smack myself for how I'd been behaving. House Kolb training should have had me far away from this place hours ago. If he were awake, Korix would be lecturing me about my failure to do so, but here I stood, holding him and about to collapse.

Was this my way of resisting captivity? Korix had encouraged me to do that as part of my birthday gift. Did I strive for my freedom by helping the ones I loved? Were they how I fought?

Leski cleared her throat with her foot tapping, and sighing, I slumped.

“This is important, Leski,” I said before meeting her gaze. “I don't love this man. I can *never* love this man because if I did, it would make me compromised, and House Kolb can't have that.

“So, it doesn't matter that I breathe easier when he's near me. It doesn't matter that I'd go down, kicking and screaming, for him. I don't love the *Lokke Vitras*, and that is what Lutov must always believe. Do you understand me?”

I couldn't define the expression Leski was showing me. It was almost wistful, but disappointment lingered there as well. I didn't know what to make of it, which meant I didn't know how I might need to respond, and this put me on edge.

She, however, merely nodded before hesitantly gathering Korix's legs. When she touched him, something shivered over her, something I didn't understand, but then, I was much too preoccupied with getting us onto the shuttle to care.

Even without his weapons, Korix was heavy, and given my flagging strength and Leski's short stature, it took us several bursts of movement to reach the shuttle. Once we were inside, Leski dropped her hold, striding toward the aircraft's console, and I struggled to get Korix strapped into a seat before limping to join her.

Black bars had started edging into my view of the world, and everything was spinning. Rapid regeneration drugs were failing, leaving me nowhere near fully healed, but they'd done enough to get me to the capital alive, which was all I'd needed from them.

Still, I tripped over something while heading for the console, nearly faceplanting on its surface. Hanging from it, I input coordinates before crawling to a seat, clambering into it, and retrieving sedative hypos to rest on my leg. Hopefully, Leski would know what to do with them.

I kept fumbling with the seat's harness. Its buckles had turned oil-slicked in my hands, and clicking her tongue, Leski removed hers, crouching in front of me as we rose into the air. Stealing pesky straps out of my hands, she looked at me with a frown and a crease between her eyebrows.

“Who are you, Zaeden?” she asked.

A laugh bucked my body in my seat, plunging me into the black for a split second.

“I can’t. Not now,” I said. “Ask me again in Xygek.”

I *thought* Leski replied to me, but what she’d said was reduced to mush, much like I was to the world. Sleep, that sinuous siren, claimed her newest victim with glee, and I eagerly welcomed her embrace.

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