

# Chapter 61: Getting Home

I was so tired.

While this shuttle sped through the city, the light of the setting sun splashed over me in intervals from between the towers. The warmth of it felt nice, adding to the lulling sensation of riding in a vehicle, and I could barely resist it.

This was what happened when I was seriously injured. It was a type of exhaustion that was a hundred times more difficult to ignore than a lack of sleep and a thousand times more annoying. At least I'd had enough practice with the latter to pretend it didn't exist. Not so with what I was fighting now.

One thing kept me awake every time I slid into the edge of dreams, and it was a potent repellant. Leski's glare bored into my skull no matter how often I shifted positions, all while my danger sense from her wavered in intensity, if not volume.

I knew she had questions. Who wouldn't after the last... two days? Yes, two days.

After the time we'd spent together, she must have them, but she was smart enough to keep from asking them here, where the varied people of Xygek surrounded us, or in the room where I'd retrieved her. I wondered if she'd considered isolating the room's recorders so she could force an interrogation from me before we'd left. I was tired enough that I might have let her do it.

While the shuttle approached a stop on the middle tiers, I stood, hearing a gasp behind me, and without needing to look, I knew Leski's eyes were bulging. I did, however, use the vehicle's recorders to make sure that she followed me.

As we waded through the evening traffic of low Strata heading home, Leski drew in on herself, and I couldn't tell if her discomfort came from the type of people around us or their vast number. Stratus discrimination was extraordinarily rare across Lutov, but it did exist, mostly among high Strata who isolated themselves from greater society. I didn't know how often Niklaus kept his daughter on his estate, so she might fit into those categories. On the other hand, if she wasn't in the city much, she might just find the crowds unnerving.

Regardless, I was grateful for her unease. It forced me to take a slower pace, something I couldn't typically afford to do here. Even still, I desperately needed it.

As I approached the apartment, I donned a cheery smile, forcing a spring into steps that wanted to drag. Occasionally, I waved at people, getting mostly cautious nods in return. Some of them gave me enthusiastic greetings, though, and a few even called out.

"Evening, Clarx!"

Spinning around, I walked backward while grinning at the woman who'd just spoken.

"A good evening to you too, Raielyn."

I'd brought Raielyn in five years ago during House Vaessa's smuggling incident, but despite that, she good-naturedly stuck her tongue out at me before going about her business. The decisions she'd made in Ibis had gotten her stripped of House, but because I'd spoken for them, the *shukusenth* had allowed her and her companions to stay in Xygek rather than getting sent to the Eastern Reaches. After she'd been quartered near Korix's apartment, we'd become friendly, to a point, and she'd even consulted with me about how to form a committee that would advocate for the children of Ibis' rights.

I had similar stories for many of this tier's residents. The *Lokke Vitras* was tasked with safeguarding Lutov, *all* of Lutov. By keeping a finger on the pulse of the homeland's most lowly citizens, I hoped to improve their lives. If I helped them, ensuring that their needs and wants were met, I kept myself from getting a mission, one that would unleash more trouble on these people.

I only wanted to make their lives easier. Where I could, of course.

After crossing a plasma bridge to a residential tower, foot traffic dropped to nothing, and Leski loosened her body from its hunched state, glancing about with interest. There wasn't much to look at: a couple of trees, a small patch of greenery, and a narrow walkway with air traffic speeding beside it. One door lay on this side of the building, but another, the one for the hangar, engulfed the other half of it, carefully camouflaged to look like a continuation of the tower's wall.

As we approached, I slowed down, frowning my brow. Since I'd last been here, Korix had added new security processes to guard the apartment, and I was having trouble with them. Even given my terrible process cracking skills, though, I defeated them quickly enough that Leski didn't notice how much I'd been struggling. I didn't think.

When we reached the door, it slid open, and I automatically raised my hand, catching a grenade before the string attached to it could pull its pin. Beside me, Leski stumbled backward with a gasp, and raising an eyebrow, I watched her calm down while freeing the grenade.

"It releases suppression gas," I said, lifting the weapon. "Why would we demolish a part of our home when a non-destructive option would work just as well?"

I threw the grenade, underhanded, at her, and after making a precise catch, she froze. Laughing at the expression on her face, I beckoned her forward.

"Come inside."

While she decided whether to do as I'd asked, I cleared the entryway of other traps. At some point, I'd have to decide which of them to use while a guest was staying here, but making that choice wouldn't be difficult. Neither would securing the rest of the apartment for Leski now.

Or it wouldn't be difficult if the effects of rapid regeneration drugs didn't have me continually running into walls. I was lucky that I'd kept it together until we'd reached the apartment. By the time I'd finished with my task, the world was swaying, and I stumbled like a drunkard toward the kitchen.

Leski was there, having come inside not long ago. Damn, she'd tripped so many alarms while wandering around the apartment, but I supposed I should have expected that.

When I crashed into the kitchen, slamming my weight on a counter, she was running a finger across the stove with a frown, but she said nothing as I retrieved a glass, filling it with water.

"I'd offer you a drink, but *evushk* doesn't allow alcohol in his home. Mother Time, I could use a whiskey sour," I said. "Feel free to have as much water as you like, though."

Turning toward the table, I winced on spying the dog bed in the corner. Ace. Damn, what a heart twinge that gave me. Best not to stay here.

"Come with me," I said.

Grazing my fingers along a wall, I led the way, checking my messages as I did. The flood I'd half-feared to find didn't appear, which meant Talira must have buried how Cerullis had glassed Korix's estate, thank Mother Time. My family wouldn't have worried about me since then.

Well. Feena might have. I had two messages from her.

*Zae, Ace just showed up at my apartment, the first one read. Are you ok?*

The second one had come in a few hours after that one.

*Answer my message, little brother, it read. I swear to Mother Time, if you don't have an excellent explanation for what's going on, I'll flay you alive myself.*

I restrained my chuckle at this, even if I couldn't stop my smile. That was my sister all right.

*I'm fine. Ran into some trouble but I'm dealing with it, I wrote back. Will you hold onto Ace for a couple of days? I'd be ever grateful.*

Then, I turned to the message that I should have sent when leaving House Kolb's headquarters. Hell, if fatigue wasn't tripping me up. Talira had been right to send me home.

*Phen, if you have time, I could use your help with something, I wrote. Meet me at the attached coordinates tomorrow morning, and I'll explain.*

Did I have any other pressing tasks to finish before tomorrow? I was probably forgetting something, but if I was, I didn't have the brainpower to remember it right now.

Entering the apartment's sitting room, I wove to my usual chair in the corner, ignoring the one beside it. Instead, I focused on the view outside of a windowed wall, one that surrounded a third of the room. With the sun having finished its descent since our arrival, city lights spilled around the curtains that hung at even intervals along its length.

A holodrama plate took up most of the room's floor. Korix wasn't fond of holodramas, but we did have a few that we watched together. Several other chairs and one sofa surrounded the plate, there for when Talira or other *shukusenth* visited us in person.

A few lighting fixtures, bundles of colored glass surrounding free-floating orbs, hung from the ceiling, but besides these decorations, this room followed the stark style of Korix's estate. Or it had before the place had been destroyed.

As I sank into the chair's cushioning, I started a playlist. The classical music of Kyllen, a sadly singing composition of strings and brass, opened the set. More traditional pieces would follow it, those attributed to Maliva and Calrix, but this song was my favorite. Many had been the evening when I'd listened to it on repeat after an especially difficult mission. The melancholy that brimmed from its minor key had never failed to soothe the ache in my spark of a soul.

When Leski made to sit in the chair beside me, I shot an arm out over it.

"No," I said. "I'll get you another one."

Hauling myself out of newly discovered relaxation, I grabbed a chair, dragging it to face mine with difficulty. I collapsed when I sat, which had the back of my chair slapping the wall, while Leski sank into her seat. She held herself perfectly still there, gripping her knees while keeping her shoulders drawn together.

Watching her, I wondered how long it would take for her to get started. Weighing that against the difficulty I was having with keeping my eyelids from drooping, I pulled my legs up under me, preparing another artificial adrenaline burst. I'd rather not use a second one, but if needed, I'd trigger the command for it.

Folding my hands in my lap, I said, "You have questions?"

With a nod, Leski swallowed.

"I requested an identity check on you while waiting in Kolb's headquarters," she said. "From what I saw, you should be dead."

Smirking, I said, "That wasn't a question."

Leski shook her head slowly, as if dragging it through sap.

"You have no House. You've somehow pissed *shukusen* Alezand off enough that he wants you dead. You fought the *Lokke Vitras* and not only survived that but made a good showing during it. You know him, call him *evushk*. Teacher," she said. "Who are you, Zaeden?"

Sighing, I leaned back into leather.

“You want to start there?” I asked. “Not with why I showed up on your doorstep in the first place or what had made me seek refuge there?”

Leski stiffened her fingers, digging them into her skin.

“Who. are. you?” she hissed.

“Fine,” I said.

Maybe this interrogation would be shorter than I’d expected. That could be good, getting me into bed much sooner than I’d thought but... but...

Easing forward, I dropped my feet to the floor before leaning my elbows on my thighs.

“Leski. You have an amazing mind,” I said. “Don’t you already know the answer to your question?”

A shiver cascaded over her.

“I need to hear you say it,” she said.

Hiding my face in my hands, I rubbed my eyes. I hadn’t wanted her to know this. I’d liked being a simple mystery to her because once she learned this truth, she’d turn reverent or fearful. When people had found out about me in the past, there had never been anything in between. No one besides Korix and my family saw me behind what I was.

“Please,” I said. “I don’t-”

This was stupid. I should just say it, get it out.

“I’m-”

“Zaeden. You’re Zaeden.”

Even exhausted as I was, the jolt of my name on her tongue jerked my head out of my hands, and my breathing went shallow. Tensed as hell, Leski gave me a crooked smile.

“No matter what else you are, the core of you is Zaeden, a man I’ve come to know well over the last two days,” she said. “I rather like him.”

Her smile twitched while she flexed her fingers.

“All I’m asking is to know more about you,” she continued. “If you can tell me. If you want to share.”

I... Mother Time, she...

She was stunning. How had I not seen it? She was what I needed, a dose of everyone I was called to protect. And she wanted to see me, all of me. So, that was what I gave her.

“I’m a murderer. I’ve killed mothers, sons, and husbands. I put a bolt through the head of a man I loved. I am stained beyond redemption,” I said, “but I’ve saved lives too, every chance I get. I’ve kept the homeland safe so the average citizen can sleep without the nightmares that plague me.

“I am the *Lokke Vitras* to come, set to replace him when he deems me ready. Judge me as you will.”

And I handed the floor to her, but she looked... confused, which confused me in turn. There was no adoration or terror in her so... where was the disgust that I should see in their place?

“Why would I judge-?” she said, as if to herself.

With her face setting into hard lines, she glared at me. That was more what I’d expected.

“Once this is over, I’ll never see you again, will I?” she asked.

Deflating, I shrugged.

“Probably not.”

It had been nice while it had lasted.

“Then, I hope you’ll forgive me,” Leski said. “I know I don’t fit your tastes. I know this is *wrong*, but I have to-”

She bit her lip while I frowned. Fit... my tastes? What did *that* have to do with-?

Jumping to her feet, Leski leapt on top of me, pinning my legs while digging her elbows into my shoulders. She was attacking me? That was...

Unfortunately, this situation wasn’t new to me, even if it was unexpected now. How did I get her off of me without hurting-?

Pressing herself against me, Leski ducked, crashing her lips onto mine so hard that my chair rocked, and I froze. Didn’t fit my tastes. Her kissing me.

Oh.

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