

Chapter 64: Crossing the Line

An hour or two into the flight, I was still agonizing over whether leaving my family behind had been a good idea. Yes, this part of my plan might be dangerous, exceedingly so, but still, keeping them in the dark felt like a betrayal. Even so, I wouldn't have brought them with me for this, especially not Baely. No way in hell would I let her go anywhere near a heavily irradiated land, not if I could help it.

But then, the time when I could have included my family was gone. Damari got us through the *galnuka* that guarded the Tainted Lands, and beyond it, my connection to the network that held Lutov together was cut off. Until we crossed over again, I couldn't contact my family or anyone else in the homeland.

Soon after this, I clambered to my feet, intent on finding a radiation suit. A strike ship usually held a few of those, to be used in case of emergency. Sure, not many places existed where radiation levels were high enough to harm human physiology, but House Kolb was all about preparing for contingencies like that, which was fortunate for me today.

Grabbing a suit from a nearby crate, I started pulling it on. I was in the middle of wondering when Damari would join me when the strike ship shuddered around me. It was rough enough that I nearly lost my balance, and once I'd regained it, I frowned at the door separating me from the front of the ship.

"Damari?" I called. "Is everything ok?"

Nothing came from beyond that door, and as I crossed to it, another shiver rattled through the strike ship, sending me stumbling into a crate.

"Damari?"

When flying with my friend, I'd come to expect turbulence from time to time, but this seemed extreme. Frowning, I knocked on the door.

"What's going on?" I called. "Do you need help?"

But there was no reply for me, and I hovered, unsure if I should use my *Lokke Vitras* privileges to get through a door that my friend clearly wanted locked.

That was when I noticed how far the floor of the strike ship had tilted. We were descending, even with our position nowhere near where we should be, and besides that, it was quickly reaching an

angle that wasn't safe for landing.

As another shudder rattled through the strike ship, I cursed, forcing my way through the door. Damari got my attention for a breath—why were they slumped like that?—before I was at the manual controls, working to stabilize us.

“Give me control now!” I shouted. “Why are you flying if you're so sleep deprived-?”

A weak chuckle cut me off.

“Sorry... LV. Not... sleep deprived. Haven't... been...”

With my mind freezing, my body went on auto-pilot, correcting our trajectory, even as I craned my head toward Damari. They were practically *laying* in their chair, boneless, with their chest barely moving. Even with an oxygen mask over their face, I could hear them wheezing, just as I could see the blue color of their lips. I'd seen this before, although never in this context. Regardless, I knew what it meant.

“You lied,” I numbly said. “You've been poisoned this whole time.”

Weakly nodding, Damari said, “Moves faster... in me. Didn't want to... worry you.”

Spinning back to the controls, I started flicking switches, doing everything needed to prepare us for a speedy landing.

“Ok. Let's get on the ground,” I said. “We'll get you into stasis-”

“Can't,” Damari interrupted. “Emergency pods... in Xygek... to prepare for what's coming. Didn't know... until we left.”

That made sense. Of course the stasis pods on a strike ship would have been kept in the capital for the surge of people who'd soon need them. People like my friend, who *needed stasis now*.

Taking a deep breath, I said, “Fine. We'll drop me off, and I'll send you back on autopilot. After I get the sample, I can find my own way home.”

Damari softly snorted.

“Whatever... ya say, LV.”

Hear the fondness in their voice as they coddled me! Because they knew, just like I did. If hypoxia had already advanced this far in them, they had maybe ten minutes at most, probably much less. The long flight back to the capital... They- they wouldn't-

“Why would you do this?” I snapped.

I wasn't thinking about it. My eyes *weren't* burning. My chest *wasn't* so tight that I was having as hard of a time with breathing as my friend. Mother Time, why did the image that that thought had invoked make me want to laugh?

When they didn't answer, I growled, "Damari! Why would you insist on coming with me? Why not stay in the capital, where it's safe?"

I couldn't look back, couldn't check on them. What if they were...?

Fuck. Why wasn't the ground coming to greet us more quickly?

"Thought I... had more time," Damari gasped. "And you... when things get bad... you- you need... someone... to watch your back."

Oh, no. No, no, no. This couldn't be my fault. At that thought, something warm and distinctly wet started rolling over my cheeks.

"I'm the *Lokke Vitras*, you- you *idiot*," I said, ignoring how much my voice was shaking.

Ignoring the hand that was crushing my heart.

"I don't need help. I can handle everything that's thrown my way."

After a long pause, Damari said, "Zaeden. The *Lokke Vitras* isn't... indomitable. You... taught me that. You... need us."

And the ground finally met us. It was a rough landing all told, nearly jolting me off my feet. If he'd been here, Korix would have scolded me for it, but at the moment, I didn't give a single fuck about my proficiency with flying.

As soon as it was safe, I spun toward Damari, meaning to help them as much as I could, but when I saw them, I stopped short. The mask had fallen off of their face, on the ground from where it had slipped out of their limp fingers, and they were... they were *smiling* at me with blue-highlighted lips.

"No," I hissed through my teeth. "No, damn you!"

In two strides, I was beside them, searching their pockets for RRDs. What was the point of starting chest compressions if I didn't fix the damage that had already been done to their body first? Unfortunately, all I found were empty vials—

Mother fucking Time, how many RRDs had they taken? No. Ignore it. *Ignore it.*

—so I snagged a few from my own supply, jabbing them into Damari's carotid artery.

Crouching I ran my eyes over my friend. I couldn't do much more than wait right now, so—

They're GONE, roared a voice in my head, so like Korix's. Look at them, you foolish man! How many times have you seen death? You know what it looks like, and that's what you're staring at now.

—so! I started talking, hoping that my words would encourage my friend to fight.

“Come on, Third Stratus. You need to get up. Over the next few months, Baely will need their auncler, just as much as Korix and Leski will need you. Who else will help my wife if Ko has another fit?”

LOOK AT THEM! You think you can change what you see? That's stupid. So. damn. stupid. Accept your reality!

“Fuck you!” I snapped at the voice, swiping at my eyes. “Please. I... I need my- my friend. We are friends. Right, Damari? With... who I am, it's hard to tell sometimes. All I know for sure is that you are my friend, my only... only... You know that, right? Please, Mother Time, please say that you do.”

You've seen this before, except... with this vision of death, you're not looking at an unknown target, are you? That's not who you've killed. This is someone you love, and they're gone. You... we... I need to accept that. Damari is gone.

“You're gone,” I whispered. “Why am I talking to you? You can't hear me. You're gone, and I- I- I WAS SUPPOSED TO PROTECT YOU!”

We're wasting our time here. We need to go. We need to find a clue for how to make an antidote. We have to make sure this doesn't happen to anyone else.

Screaming, I squeezed my eyes shut while clutching at my head.

“Shut up!” I shouted. “Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!”

How had this happened? Damari had been- been laughing and making fun of me a few hours ago. *Why hadn't they told me they were poisoned?* I could have...

Have what? Made them stay in Xygek, to be put into stasis? They'd have found a way to come after me. That was just the way they'd... been.

Fuck. I couldn't do this. I had to- to think about the mission.

Given that, what should I do now? I was in the Tainted Lands. I needed to make a plan, but any time I tried to do that, my thoughts started slipping on themselves. So, I took a few sips of air, forcing myself to open my eyes.

And immediately, I fell into the base of the chair behind me, scrambling to get away from a holographic representation of my friend.

“You’re sure this time stamp will be right?” they said, speaking to someone unseen. “He’ll still be there to watch it? That’s a long time for him to sit around afterward.”

“I guarantee you that he’ll be there,” a strange voice said.

Wrinkling their nose, holographic Damari said, “All right.”

Then, they focused, looking straight at me with a smile.

“Heya, LV! Surprise!” they sang. “I bet ya this is a hell of a shock for you, which honestly? That would almost make this worth it. Your face when something doesn’t go according to your plans is priceless. Anyway, I just wanted to say a few things, and one of our friends from the Chosen is making that happen. Say hi, John!”

Damari glanced over my head, but when I followed their gaze, no one was there, whether physically or holographically.

“I’d rather not,” someone unseen said.

“He’s no fun,” Damari said, making a face. “Seriously! He got on my ship without permission, told me I was going to die, and insisted that I make a recording, set to play at this time. Supremely bad bedside manner, John.”

“Would you please get on with this?” the stranger said. “I have more important places to be.”

Raising an eyebrow, Damari said, “See what I mean?”

And they burst into laughter. Still stunned, I could only listen to that beautiful noise, enjoying it while it lasted.

“All right! All right!” they said. “I have a few things to say before I go. First, some logistics. I know you’ll have to destroy my body, LV. My death, the way it’ll happen... people could use it against you, and I don’t want that, so...”

They shrugged.

“Do what you have to.”

Hell, I hadn’t even thought about that, but they were right. I’d never noticed that my friend was poisoned. Such supreme obliviousness was a weakness that the *Lokke Vitras* could not afford. I’d have to pretend that it had never existed. How had this detail occurred to Damari when it was *their* death they were discussing?

“I don’t give a shit what happens to my belongings,” Damari continued, “but Misah... besides you and your family, she’s the only person I care about. Sure, we may be estranged... although that’s lessened in the last week of playing as her test subject. Huh.”

They turned thoughtful for a moment before shaking themselves.

“But anyway, Misah’s eccentric and off-putting at times, but she’s my sister. Take care of her, please. And finally...”

Leaning forward, holographic Damari stopped obscuring the motionless version of them that was sprawled in the chair behind their back, and it took everything I had not to see that copy.

“I’ve gotten to know you well over the years, LV. I’m pretty sure that I know what you’ll do after I die, and I’m not ok with it. So, I need you to listen to me.”

Reaching out, holographic Damari somehow managed to place their hands where they could ‘squish’ my face before going deadly serious.

“This is *not* your fault, Zaeden. No matter what you think, it is. not. Ok?” they said. “And if I ever find out that you’re beating yourself up over my death, I will find a way to come back from the Collective so I can kick your shapely ass. Understand?”

Even as I nodded and laughed, I couldn’t help the tears that were streaming from my eyes. What was this? Why had my self-control so thoroughly abandoned me in the face of *this*?

...Why was I wondering about that? Given every other lapse I’d noticed recently, this was the only one that seemed warranted.

“Good.”

Sighing, holographic Damari leaned back in their seat.

“Now, why are you sitting there, moping?” they said. “Get out there, and... always be the *Lokke Vitras* and more importantly, the *person* that you want to be, Zaeden. My friend.”

They gave me a crooked smile before disappearing, leaving only a corpse behind, and it was like someone had punched me in the solar plexus. I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t *think*. I couldn’t-

From a distance, I watched myself stand and close my friend’s eyes, but then, I checked out for a time. When next I was fully aware, I was in a radiation suit, standing in the Tainted Lands with a bag of supplies over my shoulder, and the strike ship was in flames behind me.

Part of me needed to stay behind, ensuring that Damari had a decent Dispersal, but most of me remembered their words. I had to get going.

So, putting one foot in front of the other, I began the trek to my destination.

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