

# Chapter 66: Protocol and Updates

“Why were you really in Rane’s bar?” I eventually asked Feena.

Because there was no way in hell that she’d been there by chance.

“Talira’s assigned me to you,” she said. “I’m your support team until this situation is resolved, acting *Lokke Vitras*.”

Nodding, I folded over Ace, scratching the base of his tail. That was about what I’d thought.

“How do you want to do this?” I said. “You could stay at the apartment with Leski and me, but that might be problematic in the long run.”

“I don’t know how best to run this mission, *Lokke Vitras*,” Feena said.

Flinching, I straightened, facing my sister.

“She’s using you to reinforce how she thinks I should act soon,” I said.

When Feena nodded, I dug my fingers into Ace hard enough that he lifted his head off of the platform, panting, and with an internal wince, I smoothed the spot I’d aggravated.

So, even my family believed that it was almost time for Korix to hand off his role, but after the last few days, I wasn’t sure I was ready for it. Cold and calculating, I might typically be, but I’d defied Korix’s long-preached need for me to abandon love.

This crisis with House Cerullis. The Crescent Incident with Fyester. When the people I cared for got involved in what I did, I didn’t handle it well, and I wasn’t sure how to resolve this issue. It wasn’t something I should consider now, though. Not in depth, at least.

“Fine,” I said. “I would hear your opinion on our sleeping arrangements, Fourth Stratus.”

“Of course. I agree with your assessment that the living space of the *Lokke Vitras* isn’t our best solution,” Feena said. “I humbly suggest that we impose upon the hospitality of Second Stratus Mira and Third Stratus Ximon.”

“Our parents?” I squeaked. “You want to bring them into this mess? Have you forgotten that they want nothing to do with me?”

Feena levelly stared at me until I sighed, lifting my eyes to the stars.

“Explain yourself, Fourth Stratus,” I said.

“We need to keep this problem between those we trust, meaning family,” Feena said. “We’ve agreed that your place of residence would present a unique set of difficulties for us, namely breaches in your security and the inevitable danger posed to anyone who stays with you.

“My place is a no-go. If we stayed there, no one could watch Leski while we’re out, and my security measures are, frankly, deplorable. Berate me as you will.

“Pheniks’ apartment... I love our brother, but do you really want to inconvenience a member of another House right now? Who knows what secrets Zan might gain if we stayed with him?

“I don’t know about you, but there’s no way in hell I’m asking Talira to house us. Which leaves our parents.

“As for your concerns, our parents are inherently involved in our troubles as the House Kolb members that they are, and no matter how much your presence may or may not distress them, they won’t refuse a request from the acting *Lokke Vitras*.

“Do you find fault in my logic?”

Banging my head on the bench, I closed my eyes.

“No, although I wish I did,” I said.

I didn’t like seeing my parents. I loved them, just as I understood why they didn’t want me in their lives, but their rejection still hurt.

“We should head there immediately,” I said. “Do you have everything that you’ll need for an extended stay?”

“I have some things in my skycruiser,” Feena said, “but I visit our parents often enough. I have basic supplies at their place.”

The flare of pain that this idea caused was strong enough that I had to take a calming breath. Why her and not me?

“Good. I’ll need to stop by the apartment for my things,” I said. “Plus Leski, of course.”

Oo, she wouldn’t be happy about how long she’d been trapped inside. That would be fun to deal with.

“Let’s get going, then,” Feena said. “Our high Strata parents might be accustomed to late hours, but pretty soon, everyone in Xygek will be asleep.”

“Not me,” I said.

“Well, duh, not you,” Feena said before hissing. “I mean, of course not, *Lokke Vitras*.”

So, she found this etiquette thing difficult too. While she got to her feet, I chuckled, but when I tried to follow her example, the world tilted, and I wobbled in place until Feena steadied me.

“What was that?” she asked.

“I don’t deal well with rapid regeneration drugs,” I said, “at least not of the variant they gave me yesterday.”

Feena’s grip on my elbow tightened.

“RRDs?” she asked.

“Mhmm. I suppose I should tell you the uncensored version of what’s happened over the last few days,” I said. “We should head for your skyscruiser while I do that, though.”

Pulling myself free of Feena’s grip, I waved for her to take the lead, and after eyeing me for a moment, she did. As we walked, I told her about the party that I’d hosted after the Founder’s Day Ball. I shared about how Cerullis had glassed Korix’s estate before getting into my subsequent stay with Niklaus, including all of its drama. Then, we reached my infiltration of the House Cerullis facility.

I had to take a break while we piled into Feena’s skyscruiser. My sister left the vehicle’s console open to me, and I input coordinates, but the vehicle refused to move until I’d attached my designator to the request. As soon as it had received that fingerprint whorl of numbers, however, we merged in Xygek’s air traffic, and I picked up where I’d left off.

Feena’s face went carefully blank when I told her about Korix’s betrayal. It stayed that way throughout my tale of how Leski had rescued me as well as our antics in the facility, ending with the fight and our flight to the city.

“So, yeah. Rapid regeneration drugs of the most potent kind,” I said, “although I haven’t fully healed, even with their help. I’ve been short of breath all day, and bandaging’s holding the gash in my side together, but none of these leftover injuries are bad enough to keep me in bed. It’s like *evushk*’s always warned, though. The more I let myself get hurt, the more quickly my body becomes immune to RRDs.”

At the look on Feena’s face—a bit of horror mixed with murderous intent—I shut up. Had I upset her somehow?

“I can’t believe he hurt you like that,” she said under her breath. “He loves-”

Her teeth clicked together while a sheet of ice fell over me. Tensing, I examined my sister through narrowed eyes.

“So, you do know. I thought as much,” I said. “How?”

Fena shivered, but I couldn't blame her for that. I only went this dead in tone and mannerisms when violence was imminent.

“I can't tell you, in the same way I couldn't answer the *Lokke Vitras'* questions at the ball,” Feena said in a small voice. “The only thing I can share is that no one else can learn about your relationship in the way that I did. Your secret's safe.”

Korix had never explained why he'd gone easy on Feena that night. He'd said I wasn't ready to know, and at the time, I'd accepted his claim. Did I still accept it?

Since the Crescent Incident, something had been controlling Korix. Had *it* told me to drop my questions at the ball, or had my partner spoken those words? If it had been the thing controlling him, did *its* protection of Feena mean she was in collusion with the Ancients as well?

Holding my breath, I forced myself to relax. I couldn't think like this. If I suspected everyone of betraying Lutov, I wouldn't get anything done, too paranoid to trust the people whose help I'd need. I should stay vigilant for erratic behavior, like what I'd ignored in Korix, but I wouldn't let fear rule me.

Which meant that I trusted Korix had known what he was doing when leaving Feena alone. Which meant I trusted her.

Relaxing, I sank into my seat before crossing my arms. I refused to look at my sister as I asked.

“And what do you think of it? Him and me, I mean.”

This, other people's opinions, was a large part of why Korix and I had hidden the romantic side of our relationship for years. What would happen if Lutov learned that its vaunted *Lokke Vitras*, ever distant and aloof, had what many people would see as a weakness? How would that perception destabilize the role?

And why wasn't Feena answering my question? Would she rather keep what she thought to herself?

Shifting in her seat, she asked, “Are you safe with him?”

Digging my fingernails into my arms, I gazed out over Xygek. This late, it was much less hectic on walkways and between towers than during the day, which didn't match my internal state at all.

“When he's himself, I am never safer than when I'm with *evushk*,” I said. “When he's himself, he'd never do anything to truly hurt me. When he's himself...”

I had to believe these things. I had to believe that *my* Korix hadn't almost killed me.

Feena lightly rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Ok,” she said. “Then, only one other thing matters. Does he make you happy?”

Flipping toward my sister, I glared at her.

“You know he does,” I said. “Didn’t you hear me earlier?”

Laughing, Feena said, “I did. Sorry.”

Pulling her legs up onto her seat, she propped her elbows on her knees, resting her chin on interlaced fingers.

“If you’re safe with him and he makes you happy, then what can I say but that I’m happy for you?” she said. “I mean, who am I to judge? I’ve been dating children of Ibis for years now.”

“To be fair, they’re ridiculously talented when it comes to romance,” I said. “I’ve only been on dates with one before but...”

I shrugged, and snorting, Feena burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t know why talking so seriously about one of your partners made me forget that you usually have others.”

“What?” I said with an eyeroll. “I love *evushk*, but I need more, same as him. All the same, I think...”

Oh... fuck. Why was I only realizing this *now*?

“I think he’s the one I’ll always come home to,” I said.

As her eyes popped, Feena said, “Holy shit, Zae. That’s... Does he know?”

Shaking my head, I leaned on my knees, tangling my fingers in my hair.

“Mother Time, what will I do if he doesn’t... if he doesn’t-?”

The skycruiser’s console chimed, and springing upright, I giggled on seeing the apartment’s hangar door in front of us.

“Perfect timing,” I shakily said.

Setting my internal storm aside, I gave the console my designator a second time, wiping all traces of the apartment’s coordinates from the vehicle while we landed. When I moved to get out, Feena cleared her throat.

“Should I...?” she said, glancing around.

She meant to ignore my emotional outburst too. Thank all that might be holy.

With a half-smile, I said, "You can come inside. I won't let you see anything sensitive. Just stay behind me, all right?"

"Can do."

Another suppression grenade guarded the door between the hangar and its foyer, and after I'd disarmed that trap, Feena examined it with fascination, which was good.

Because Leski was slumped in the foyer with a blanket tucked under her chin. Had she been waiting for me? Damn it, I should have gotten her array's access information so I could contact her throughout the day. How long had she been sitting here?

With Feena occupied, I glided to the other woman, crouching to shake her shoulder. Sleepily mumbling, Leski shifted while her hair swung in front of her face, and I considered letting her sleep. If I did that, though, she probably wouldn't appreciate waking up in a different apartment.

Maybe I should grab my go-bag first?

Shaking my head, I sent a drone to retrieve it and Leski's things before jostling her again. Her breathing rate changed, and she turned toward me, lazily blinking. Still half-asleep, she smiled at me.

"Zae," she sighed, "you're back."

Mother Time, the warmth those words evoked!

Then, the full force of Leski's presence filled her eyes.

"You're back!" she shouted.

She leapt at me, and I barely had time to catch her before we were crashing to the ground with her soft lips tightening certain parts of me to an uncomfortable degree. Hell, I wanted to keep kissing her but not in front of present company.

As gently as I could, I pulled Leski away from me, wincing at the fear and uncertainty in her eyes.

"Hello there," my sister said with amusement.

When understanding dawned, Leski scrambled off of me.

"Sorry. Sorry," she said.

Both of us ignored her. Feena shook her head with her hands on her hips while I gave her a rueful grin.

"You work fast," she said, using sub-vocals.

Snorting, I sat up while a drone dropped two bags beside me.

“Are we... going somewhere?” Leski hesitantly said. “Also. Um. Hello?”

“We’re just changing locations. Nothing to worry about,” I said, “and this—”

After reaching my feet, I clasped my sister’s shoulder.

“—is Fourth Stratus Feena of House Kolb. She’ll be helping us for the foreseeable future.”

“Oh.”

Relaxing, Leski stepped forward, raising her hand.

“She’s also my big sister,” I continued.

With a small sip of air, Leski froze, and the world held its breath, eager to observe what would happen next. Much like me.

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Revision #1

Created 23 November 2024 07:31:42 by FatalisticFable

Updated 23 November 2024 07:43:05 by FatalisticFable