

# Chapter 67: Introducing Leski to the Family

My laughter filled the foyer, bouncing in the air around us, and as if a switch had been flipped, Leski lost her shocked fright with storm clouds replacing it. Getting in my face, she slapped my arms and shoulders, but even in this supposedly furious barrage, her blows felt pulled, as if she wasn't trying to hurt me.

"You. are. *such*. an asshole," she shouted.

Shaking my head, I lifted my eyes to the ceiling while collecting her hands.

"If you only knew how many times someone's called me that," I said.

"You probably deserved it every time too," Feena said.

Yanking her hands away from me, Leski spun to my sister before bowing.

"Please forgive me, Fourth Stratus," she said. "Mother Time, my behavior—"

"Is exactly what I'd expect from someone my brother spends time with. He tends to attract a certain type," Feena said, "a certain type I happen to enjoy."

Taking Leski's shoulders, my sister pulled her upright, all while she flushed cherry red.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance," Feena said.

"Same," Leski mumbled.

Glancing over her head, Feena said, "Does the other fella know about this? You know. The one we were just discussing?"

Huffing, I tossed bags over my shoulder before trudging toward the door. Hell, but my sister liked to get me in trouble.

"They've met," I said. "Briefly."

"Oo! How did that go?" Feena asked.

Sighing, I glanced over my shoulder at them: my sister with her mischievous smile and Leski with her befuddled expression.

“He said he liked her,” I said. “Can we go, please? Leski, I have your things, but we’ll need to get you more clothes in the morning. You can’t keep wearing that.”

I had no clue how she’d found Korix’s clothes or gotten past the traps around his room, but seeing her wearing his clothes, rumpled and distinctly too big for her, was disconcerting.

“Sorry. My clothes from yesterday sorely need cleaning, and I didn’t feel comfortable in yours,” Leski said. “I wandered around until I found something that was left lying out.”

Left lying...? Had the apartment’s drones started glitching again? It didn’t happen often, but Korix and I had been too busy in the last few years to do more than a basic review of their managing processes. Something might have slipped through the cracks.

“It’s not a problem,” I said, “but I doubt you’re comfortable in a shirt that’s sliding off one shoulder or slacks that you had to roll up.”

“Oh...” Feena said. “Are they-?”

The most venomous glare that I could summon closed her mouth before she could finish her question.

“Ladies. Let’s get a move on, if you please,” I said. “I don’t know about you, but I’d like a bed soon, a real one.”

I directed a significant glance at Leski’s makeshift campsite, and mumbling under her breath, Feena headed into a hangar that we’d left not long ago. I grabbed Leski’s hand to move her along.

Once we were through the door, I briefly considered taking one of Korix’s skycruisers rather than continuing in Feena’s, but transferring Ace from one vehicle to another seemed like a lot of work that would only stress my aging dog. Plus, arriving at our parent’s apartment in my sister’s skycruiser would probably relieve a modicum of anxiety for them.

Ugh. I still needed to ask whether my companions and I could stay with them or not.

The ladies kept wordlessly glancing at each other, as if holding an unspoken conversation, which confused me until they started playing an awkward dance of getting in one another’s way. Releasing Leski, I moved her to where she was headed for the front of the skycruiser.

“You two can get to know each other on the trip,” I said. “I’ll sit in the back with Ace. He probably needs the company.”

Spinning toward me, Leski clasped her hands in front of her face.

“Ace is here?” she asked.

In answer, I nodded to the skycruiser, where we could see a dog’s panting face through the back window. After that, Leski flew to the vehicle, and I worried that she’d take the seat I wanted, but

she hustled into the front, bending over its divider to ruffle Ace's fur.

Slowing down, Feena drew even with me.

"She saved your ass?" she said.

"Several times. Why do you ask?"

Feena cocked her head.

"No real reason," she said. "Only, her behavior now and what you described earlier make her a prime candidate for House Kolb, not that I'll influence her in any way. Her choosing Kolb would certainly make things easier for you, though."

When she elbowed me, I grimaced.

"I like her," Feena continued. "Anyway, we need to leave, and you need to let mom and dad know we're coming, if you haven't already."

"Are you questioning me?" I asked. "What happened to teaching me *Lokke Vitras* etiquette, Fourth Stratus?"

I'd meant that as a joke, even knowing that she wouldn't receive it as one, and as expected, Feena sobered.

"You're right. Please, forgive me, *Lokke Vitras*," she said.

Snapping a bow, she circled her skycruiser, and I bit back a sigh as I slid into the vehicle. Ace was too distracted by Leski to pounce on me, so I had a moment to get settled before a mass of fur and a rough tongue made their assault. By the time I'd calmed my dog down, we were in the air with Feena and Leski amiably chatting, and seeing that I wouldn't need to smooth the waters between them, I could no longer ignore the blank message that I'd left sitting in my array.

I didn't know what to say to my parents. The last time we'd truly spoken had been before Pheniks' House naming ceremony, and since then, I'd honored their expressed wish for me to stay out of their lives. How did I break a silence of years that had started like that?

I played with wording for a while before leaving the message as a formal requisition of quarters from a high Stratus House member. Sending it off at the highest priority, I set an alarm in my array before leaning into my seat with my hand on Ace and my eyes closed. When I started a dream sequence, Feena and Leski's voices chased me into a brief nap.

After we'd landed in my parents' private hangar, I let the others scramble out of the skycruiser first. They seemed to have hit it off, which made me glad. Hopefully, it would last.

I only gave myself thirty seconds to prepare, desperately running through ways to handle what was coming, but in the end, I climbed into mission mode, relying on my House Kolb training like I had

with my message. Better not to feel what was coming. Better to process the blow of it once my parents couldn't see how badly they'd hurt me.

On getting out of the skycruiser, I waited until Ace had jumped to the ground before presenting him with my palm.

"Glue," I said.

Obediently, Ace took up position, trotting at my flank as we moved across the hangar. As I approached, mom and dad finished greeting Feena, ignoring Leski. I couldn't blame them for that, though. Leski had faded into the background, ducking her head as she fiddled with her sleeve's cuff.

Mom noticed me first, which had her smile dying, and she dropped her hand from rubbing Feena's arm. Dad quickly picked up on his wife's strange behavior, and when his eyes landed on me, he went almost as blank as her. They watched me stride the last few meters to them with guarded expressions. Halting a safe distance away, I bowed to each of them.

"Second Stratus. Third Stratus," I said. "Thank you for lending us your home."

Short. Sweet. There was no need to draw this out for anyone.

They, however, didn't respond as social convention insisted that they should, just staring at me. I considered shifting in place, making myself look more human, but they'd see through that ruse in an instant.

Had I missed something? Perhaps they were upset, which I'd understand. They could afford to let emotions rule them. Should I apologize, then?

"I'm sorry to have intruded on your lives," I said. "I know I only bring you pain. As soon as this crisis is resolved, I'll leave you in peace."

With a gasp, mom pressed a hand to her mouth while dad frowned.

"I don't understand," he said. "Feena, you said you'd prep him. Why is he acting...?"

Their reactions were... unexpected. What was I to make of them?

Almost, I looked to Feena for an explanation but no. I'd make one more attempt to get an invitation inside. I needed a few hours of sleep if I was to help with research tomorrow.

"I'm behaving like this because for the moment, I'm the acting *Lokke Vitras*. I forgot to add that detail to my message, but I thought Feena would have told you about it before now," I said. "Did you not?"

When I turned to my sister, a frown formed on my face before I could clear it. She was glaring at our parents, and strangely, they were refusing to return her hostility.

“He’s in mission mode because what else would he be doing right now? You haven’t talked to him in *years*, all because you supposedly wanted to protect me and Phen from him, but considering how much we associate with Zae, that excuse is wearing thin,” Feena said. “I did a little prep, as you asked, but only the bare minimum, enough to get him here. You deserve to admit the real reason you’ve been avoiding him, fixing this colossal fuck up on your own. You’ve let this misconception continue for far too long.”

Whatever family drama this was, it had become troublesome, especially since it seemed to concern me. I’d rather avoid that subject for the moment so...

“If you don’t mind, can we delay this until morning?” I asked. “I need sleep and another dose of RRDs.”

“Rapid regeneration drugs?” mom faintly asked.

She lowered her hand with dad paling beside her. Why were they so surprised that I might need those? They must know I used them often enough to carry hypos of them on me almost all of the time.

“Yes?” I drawled.

“He almost died yesterday,” Feena hissed. “Almost *died* thinking you...”

She waved a hand at mom and dad before stalking away with a growl, and I bounced my eyes between her retreating back and our frozen solid parents. This had moved past troublesome to irritating and *inconvenient*. Why wouldn’t they invite me inside?

“If my presence is that much of a problem, I can find another place to sleep tonight,” I said.

No need to mention that as the acting *Lokke Vitras*, I could order them to house us.

“I’m sure that one of my contacts will-”

“No!” Mom cried with her voice choked, “Zae, no. Please, stay with us.”

Excellent. Something I could interpret as an invitation.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” I said. “My charge and I will retire for the evening. In the morning, I’ll introduce her and explain everything else I’ll need during my stay.”

Beckoning to Leski, I started for the door, always keeping my hands visible, but my effort to soothe my parents’ nerves only made it easier for dad to snatch my wrist. I kept myself from attacking him, but my stance shifted, something he could see based on how hard he swallowed. He, however, didn’t release me.

“I know you need rest, and I realize how precious your time has become,” he said, “but will you please give your mother and me a moment of it?”

Relaxing, I faced him.

“Of course,” I said. “My charge and I are your guests. The least I can offer you is my time.”

“That’s not-”

Dad looked away, keeping a firm hold on my wrist. It only loosened when mom laid a hand on his arm, and after he released me, she took a deep breath before meeting my eyes.

“Five years ago, your father and I made you think that we didn’t want you in our lives. We thought enforcing the distance between us would keep your brother and sister safe. We thought it would keep *us* safe,” she said, gesturing between herself and dad. “It was a mistake. You are our son, just as much as you’re the acting *L... Lokke Vitras*, and we love you. What would our lives be like if we cut you out? Neither of us could stand the idea of it, especially as time went on, but we let you believe that lie for years. At first, that was because we thought it would be easier for you if we never approached you again, and later, it was because we were ashamed and still-”

She bit her lip, and I knew the word that she’d withheld. Afraid. They were still afraid of me.

“We’re sorry, son,” dad said.

Sorry.

“I see,” I said.

He said *sorry*.

“I... This is a lot. I need time.”

They both looked so sad, but they nodded in acknowledgment.

After nudging Ace toward Feena, still waiting in the wings, I held out my arm for Leski, and when she looped hers around it, we left the hangar.

---

Revision #1

Created 23 November 2024 07:45:52 by FatalisticFable

Updated 23 November 2024 07:55:06 by FatalisticFable