

Chapter 68: A Brief Loss of Control

I was only half-aware of tracing the path to my old bedroom, and a few steps in, a message from my sister slid into my array.

I'll take care of Ace tonight, it read. If you need to talk, I'm here.

I stopped short, staring at those words, and after a moment, Leski gently tugged on my arm.

"Zae..."

"Stay here," I told her.

Without checking whether she'd complied, I stormed down the hall and into a room on the far end, shutting off recorders as I went. When the door slid closed behind me, I had it lock and slowly, *slowly* let myself drop out of mission mode. I'd rather not stay cut off from my emotions for the entire time I was here.

Behind it, however, lay a pulsing wall of red, one that sheeted over my eyes until the washroom that I'd entered looked bathed in blood.

Five years.

"Five fucking years!"

I'd thought I'd been rejected. I'd thought my parents had discarded me after I'd become too burdensome for them, once *again*, and that had never been the case.

With my breath hissing through my teeth, I leaned on the countertop, pounding my fist against it every so often.

They'd let me believe that they disdained me for *five years*. How many social events had I attended with sick dread in my stomach because I'd known I'd have to avoid my parents? How many messages had I written them, leaving them unsent in my array?

Pulling them up, I considered erasing the file, shredding it as much as I could, but raging hurt welled in me, pushing at the back of my mouth. Mother Time, I didn't want to be this spiteful of a person but...

Five years!

I sent them all.

It didn't feel nearly as good as I'd thought it would. Instead of soothing me, knowing that they'd read about every vulnerable moment, every low point when I'd cried for my mom and dad, pushed that burning hurt from the back of my mouth and onto my tongue.

I was screaming, sweeping objects off the counter, spinning to punch a wall. I caught sight of myself in the mirror: red-faced with my hair wild and my eyes already puffy, and I saw a lost child, not the man I was. Not the *Lokke Vitras* to come.

Seizing the first solid object within reach, I hurled it at the mirror, and it shattered with its shards clattering to the counter and floor.

What was I doing? Mother Time, what was I *doing*? Why was I getting so upset about this after everything else that had happened over the last few days? After Korix...

Hell. Where was he when I needed him?

Someone pulled a hand from atop my head, and gasping, I snatched the other one to me, reaching for a knife. As I touched steel, however, silver hair swung in front of my face, stopping me.

"Leski," I sighed.

Rising from my crouch, I scrubbed at my eyes.

"I told you to stay put."

"And I did. Until you started screaming," Leski said. "Then, I came running and brute-forced my way in here."

With a soft laugh, I turned away from her.

"I didn't want you to see me like this," I said.

"Too bad."

Circling me, Leski dragged my hands away from my face, claiming them.

"Life has given you a thorough thrashing in recent days, and I've only made it worse," she said. "The least I can do is help you. I'll be here as you need me."

How... extraordinarily sweet of her. Most people would run screaming from the prospect of putting a mess like me back together.

One problem with what she'd said, though.

"What makes you think you've made it worse?" I asked.

Shifting in place, Leski said, "Maybe I can explain that while we continue to your room. You need sleep, right?"

Right. And rapid regeneration drugs.

"Hang on a moment," I said.

Rummaging in a pocket, I retrieved hypos and jabbed them, one after another, into my thigh. Their waste joined the broken glass in a sink, where drones could dispose of them when they came to clean up.

Once we were in the hall again, I took the lead, although I refrained from taking Leski's hand as I wished.

"You were saying?" I asked.

Leski dropped her chin to her chest, hugging herself.

"You're in a relationship with... you know who," she said. "Last night, I decided to be selfish, taking what I wanted, and sure, you reciprocated but..."

Releasing her clenched hold of her elbows, she rubbed her temples.

"I, in part, added relationship trouble to everything else you're dealing with, and I'm sorry for it."

Relationship... trouble?

"Why would you think you've caused a problem between *evushk* and me?" I asked.

With a sharp glance at me, Leski said, "Isn't that what usually happens in a situation like ours? Or is your relationship with him not as serious as I thought? No matter how much the idea might scare me, if I made such a catch as that frustratingly gorgeous man, I'd... but that's none of my business."

Frustratingly gorgeous?

Shaking my head, I focused on what she'd said, and oh. This would be fun to explain. Hell, what would she think of me once I'd finished? Would she stay accepting, like Feena had always been, or would she grow cold and distant, as had happened in the past? Either way, I had to tell her. I was honestly a little ashamed that I hadn't already.

"*Evushk* and I..."

Shit. How did I do this with her? She and I weren't on a first date, when I usually explained the sorts of relationships I liked. That was when I laid down ground rules, and having messed that up already, I wasn't sure how to proceed. I didn't want to hurt her. I... cared for this woman.

“*Evushk* is important to me as I am to him,” I said before taking a deep breath, “as we are to everyone else we date.”

Or at least, that was how I hoped it would be once Korix opened up again.

“We’re-”

“Polyamorous!”

Taking my arm, Leski pulled me to a stop.

“You’re polyamorous.”

Had that been a question? Also, how did she know about people like me? We weren’t that common.

“Yes?” I said.

Slapping both hands over her mouth, Leski burst into laughter, staggering so badly that she spun into a wall, and when I frowned at her, her shoulders only shook harder.

“Are you-?”

This had to be *the* strangest reaction I’d gotten to a confession like this.

Pulling her hands away from her face, Leski gasped, “The night I met you, I was attending the ball with Sulvan, one of my more serious partners. The day after that, I had to cancel a date with Kayel because my dad rushed us home. Do you see?”

“Oh.”

She was-

“You’re-”

Nodding, Leski grinned at me, and I found myself returning it with something far sillier.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say something earlier,” she said. “When I first noticed that I was attracted to you, our circumstances had become too hectic for me to share, and I honestly forgot to mention it later.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I didn’t tell you either.”

But given all of this, I could see why she’d almost turned me down last night. What an opportunity we’d have missed, and all because we’d forgotten to communicate with one another. I *really* needed to work on that.

“So, where does that leave us?” I asked.

Rolling her eyes, Leski said, "I thought that was obvious."

She made a running leap, and when I caught her, shooting one leg back for support, she tossed her arms around my neck, kissing me. After a blissful few heartbeats, she pulled away, resting her forehead on mine with the tips of our noses touching.

"Bring me to your room," she said. "Take some of your frustration out on me."

That sounded nice but...

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Last night, you seemed to want us focused on one another whenever we decided to... be together, and I'm most definitely *not* that right now."

With a soft smile, Leski said, "I know. But this is different. This is something I'll enjoy, and it could help you. It's not silly, like exacerbating your injuries would have been. Unless those are less healed than they've appeared tonight?"

"No," I rushed to say. "No, I'm... much better. Thanks."

Smirking now, Leski said, "Then, what's the problem? Come on. Show me to your room, Zae. Let's get all of this—"

Clenching her legs around my waist, she tangled one hand in my hair, pulling me into another brief kiss. She ran her other hand over what she could reach of my shoulders and chest, and that was all I needed to get pulled fully into the here and now.

"—worked out, yes?"

"Why wait that long?" I breathlessly asked.

My kiss covered her giggle, and half absorbed with that, I stumbled into the room beside us. There was little preamble here. Her borrowed slacks came off, she pulled mine down, and we tumbled to the carpet.

We didn't spend much time here either. The furious buzz of lust and need flowing between us didn't allow for leisurely enjoyment. We thrashed and tightened and flexed with everything done roughly. Everything was wrapped in greedy desperation and in some small part, selfishness. Each of us did what we wanted to the other, and fortunately, we were compatible enough that what started as self-serving became exactly what our partner needed.

It ended unexpectedly. Something I did—I wasn't sure what—pushed Leski from wide-eyed relish to rapturous elation, and the waves of her pleasure had me riding my own high. As soon as I started coming down from it, I rolled off of her, breathing hard.

I'd never done *that* before. During sex, I was usually much more focused on my partner, but caring only about myself for once had been... nice. Thank Mother Time that Leski had gotten something out of it too.

“That was interesting,” she said. “Nice interesting but... interesting.”

Yeah, I wasn't fully satisfied either, but it didn't bother me. Raising myself up on an elbow, I grinned at Leski with an eyebrow raised.

“Warm-up?” I asked.

“*Definitely* a warm-up,” Leski eagerly agreed.

I helped her with her clothes, curling my fingers through hers once we were decent, and as we raced down the halls to my old room, our giggles chased us.

In the morning, I'd introduce Leski to my parents, telling them to watch her, and they'd agree to every stipulation I asked for, treating my unHoused charge with a respect they'd never given to their fellow high Strata, but the night before....

That night, I got much less sleep than I'd planned on, but by Mother Time, if I didn't sleep well when I did.

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