

# Chapter 7: Let's Get This Party Started!

Nerves set in when our guests started arriving.

It was strange for me because I loved social gatherings like this. I loved the energy of people coming together to commune in one way or another. I loved the attention that was paid to me. But this time, my palms were sweating when I greeted the first guest to arrive: one of Leski's more casual partners.

I was on door duty since Korix was finishing dinner and Leski was running around the house, making sure it was secure. So, I made my rounds between a sitting room and the foyer, easing new arrivals into existing conversations while welcoming my family's partners and friends.

When blood family started arriving, my already sweaty hands started shaking, no matter how hard I tried to control them. These people flowed by in a blur.

Talira, who was polite enough to keep from commenting on the jitteriness that only she should see.

Niklaus, who I hadn't seen in decades. After so many years with them never talking, I wasn't sure why Leski had invited him. True to form, his face twisted when I bowed to him, the only way I knew to greet him anymore, and once social niceties were completed, he stalked to a corner where he could brood and sneer at our guests.

Feena, who clasped my shoulders and kissed my cheeks with a bright smile.

Mom and dad, who nervously accepted my hugs as if afraid I'd retract them. Our relationships had gradually improved since the Ancients Crisis, but like I'd told them, it wasn't the same. Stiffness infected everything we did. When we were together, I was constantly analyzing my behavior for hostility, and it was exhausting, as I knew it must be for them as well. Hence, why we didn't visit one another often.

Once they'd joined with the crowd, I slipped away to find an empty corner. After checking that I was alone, I shook out my arms before rubbing them.

I didn't know what was wrong with me. Behind my breastbone, my heart was leaping far too violently, and my mouth was way too fucking dry. It didn't matter how much water I drank; I was still parched. I hadn't felt this way since...

Since the wedding, actually. Despite how much Leski and I had considered the damn ceremony an imposition, we'd poured a lot of time and effort into it, and throughout it, I'd obsessively worried

about the things that could go wrong.

This dinner was the same, except I actually cared about how it went, and it was so fucking stupid. Whether these people enjoyed themselves tonight or not shouldn't matter. How they received our news shouldn't matter because I already had everything I needed on that front with Leski and Korix.

Where were they? I needed one of them, the two people I implicitly trusted, to tell me everything would be ok.

"Hey, LV! I thought I might find you here."

Taking a deep breath, I shoved these sticky feelings below the surface and turned on Third Stratus Damari with a smile. They advanced on me in their typical, aggressive manner with a bounce in their step, and I did a quick examination of them, always curious how they were presenting themselves. It changed near daily, and they'd never seemed to mind my scrutiny.

Tonight, loose slacks hung from their hips while a severe jacket with a fem cut concealed a plain shirt. Their hair—orange today—was cut *short*, shorter than most Lutovish liked it, and a strong jaw—that was new—accented their full lips.

Lifting an eyebrow, Damari said, "Like what ya see?"

"You look fantastic, as usual," I said as they came to a stop. "When did you get here?"

"Oh, maybe two minutes ago," Damari said. "I went looking for you as soon as I saw you weren't at the door. How're ya doing?"

I winced. Even after decades of knowing them, I wasn't used to how blunt my friend could be, especially when it came to emotions. Most people in House Kolb would rather pretend that feelings didn't exist, using cold formality to mask them, and I'd emulated that behavior since I was a child. If I was to fit in, I'd had to. So, Damari's insistence on acting otherwise could be jarring, if also appreciated.

"I'll be fine," I said. "You don't need to worry about me."

In a blur, Damari snatched my chin, turning my head from side to side, while ignoring the knife I'd palmed.

Clicking their tongue, they said, "You're lying."

Releasing me, they rocked back on their heels, folding one arm over their chest while pressing their fingers to their lips. Meanwhile, I returned my knife to its hidden sheath.

"And if I am?" I asked.

They just kept staring at me before sharply nodding. Stepping into my space, they tilted their head up with their blue eyes flashing, I held perfectly still, aware this wasn't an invitation—this was *Damari*, after all—but unsure what else they could be doing.

Resting their hands on their hips, they said, “Zaeden.”

All of my focus zeroed on my friend. They almost never used my name. Once they were sure they had my attention, they continued.

“Zaeden, tonight will be a blast. Everything will be fine, so please don't have a fucking panic attack in a fucking corner. Come join your party and have some fun.”

I took a shuddering breath. For how brash and colorful *Damari* could be, I forgot how perceptive they were, which was silly. It and their adequacy as a pilot were why they were so high *Strata*.

And they were right. I needed to let things happen as they would. Knowing how much preparation had gone into this dinner, a disaster was unlikely to occur. So, I slowly breathed out before cocking my head.

“Third *Stratus*, are you telling me what to do?” I asked.

Grinning, *Damari* skipped backward.

“I'd never,” they said. “The great *Lokke Vitras* would never need my help, perfect as he is.”

...At some point, I needed to figure out why they'd never been afraid of me.

“You're damn right I am,” I said.

With my chin loftily raised, I skirted around *Damari*, careful not to touch them, and stalked back toward my guests. When we reached them, my friend joined their crowded mush, somehow finding the empty spaces between clumps, but I kept to the edge for a moment, observing.

*Pheniks* had arrived at some point during my time away. On catching my eye, he grinned with a wave, which I returned, before resuming a conversation with one of my dating partners.

Glancing over the rest, I frowned. I'd known this, having reviewed the guest list, but it still bothered me that everyone here was an invite of either *Leski's* or mine. *Korix* liked his solitary life, or so he claimed, but I couldn't help a twinge of melancholy, knowing that he had no one to share our news with.

After finding him and *Leski*, I headed their way. As I approached, wandering notes swelled above their spoken counterparts, twisting into a definitive song, and I smiled. That was my wife. She couldn't go for long at a party without indulging someone's request for a performance, which was why I'd had the piano transferred here earlier today. Between people, I caught glimpses of her, swaying on the bench, with *Korix* leaning on the wall beside her, and I quickened my step.

“-sad really. All these people and no one’s here for him.”

Stopping short, I looked for the voice that had echoed my thoughts from not a moment before, landing on a mixed group. Given that I only vaguely recognized them, I had to wonder why they were here. Were they someone’s plus one or a few of Leski’s partners that I hadn’t met? Either way, they were watching my Korix and Leski with their arms crossed and a downward pull to their lips.

“Is it that surprising, though?” a sandy-haired man said. “I mean, he was Kolb’s First Stratus, yes, but he obviously failed to perform as demanded, considering he’s still breathing. No clue why the new *Lokke Vitras* stays with the old.”

This new one might just kick that bastard’s ass before the night was over.

Gritting my teeth, I tried to move away from a possible source of conflict, but something had glued my feet to the floor. I was helpless to do anything more than listen as a woman with carefully manicured fingernails spoke up.

“I hear he sees things.”

The group shuddered.

“Is it any surprise that he has barely any friend and no family?”

Holy fucking shit, I didn’t know how yet, but I was going to *hurt* these people who’d speak ill of Korix after *everything he’d done* for this society. Before I could move toward them, however, someone slid between us.

“Forgive me, young ones, but given what I heard, you must have misspoken,” Talira smoothly said. “My once *kuvesk* has quite a large family, if not the one he was born with. He has a sister in Second Stratus Feena and a brother in First Stratus Pheniks. He has me, which should scare the shit out of you, and if it doesn’t, you should consider the people who live under the same roof as him, one of whom is your *Lokke Vitras*. All of us love him in our own way, and we protect those we love. You will not disparage him in his own home.”

Hell, I wished I could see their faces. I knew the set of Talira’s shoulders and the barely contained violence that she was showing them. To this day, that expression scared me to death, no matter how much I tried to hide it.

“I think it’s best if you leave, don’t you?” Talira calmly asked.

I smirked at the sheepish retreat of the people she’d addressed, but that faltered when she glanced over her shoulder.

*Do you want me to hunt you down?* she sent in a message. *Because attacking the citizens you’re supposed to protect is one of the fastest ways to start me down that path.*

Ouch. That slap down had hurt. Holding Talira's gaze, I bowed, maintaining the posture once I was there.

*My apologies, shukusen, I wrote.*

Talira rolled her eyes.

*Stop that. Just remember who you are. Even if you're home, you carry a role and a title. Now, go to your life partners so I can get back to enjoying this party.*

Turning on her heel, she vanished into the crowd, and I straightened. How had I let myself lose focus like that? I knew this was home, the only place where I could fully relax, but right now, it also wasn't. Too many strangers were here for me to let my guard down.

When I reached the piano, Leski was still coaxing the most beautiful music from it, and with her fingers flying, she lifted her chin for a kiss, which I obliged. When I rose from it, Korix jerked his head toward where the confrontation had occurred.

"What was that about?" he asked.

Shaking my head, I said, "You don't want to know. Is dinner ready?"

I loved that he trusted me enough to drop a topic when I suggested it.

"Not quite yet," Korix said. "I'm having drones finish the last part."

Gasping, I flung fingers in front of my mouth.

"You *aren't*," I said.

"I know," Leski said. "I was shocked too."

"Is it that surprising?" Korix grumbled. "During your training, you'd finish meal preparations often enough for me."

Glee spiked through me, even as I rested a hand on my hip and donned my most severe expression.

"I'm sorry. Are you comparing me to a drone?" I said, pouring outrage into my voice. "I am much prettier than a drone."

The piano's music cut off as Leski bounced on the bench, giggling. In answer to my mischief, Korix slowly blinked once, but then, he stepped toe-to-toe with me, gripping the back of my neck.

"Yes, you are," he said.

He kissed me, full on the mouth, and I smiled.

Eventually, a drone floated into the sitting room, flashing until Korix acknowledged it, and the three of us congregated from where we'd wandered to socialize. Together, we led the way to the terrace.

We had too many guests for everyone to sit at one table, so several, smaller seating arrangements dotted the terrace's cobblestone with a glass and steel railing bounding them. A set of stairs led into our small garden, our only imposition on the Southern Fells' natural landscape. Beyond that, the moors stretched into the dark of night, and if the sun had been struggling to pierce through the mists always found here, one might see the glint of Lake Phiabe.

Our guests positioned themselves around the tables with some of them standing behind their chairs, but when I flopped into a seat, they relaxed. I resisted the urge to fidget while everyone made themselves comfortable, glancing over what lay in front of me in the meantime.

Drones had arranged food across the table, and it looked amazing. Damn, Korix had outdone himself this time. I hoped *someone* here would have the good sense to praise him for the effort he'd put into this, much as people had already complimented Leski for her piano playing.

One by one, our guests turned to stare at me, and I internally sighed. I hated the idea of a head of household, had always thought it demeaning to everyone else in the home, but in social gatherings like this, someone had to guide events. As the *Lokke Vitras*, this duty usually fell to me, and while I might typically enjoy the attention I received because of it, our current setting didn't foster such gratification.

I lifted the whiskey sour that had appeared since I'd sat down, scanning the people around me with a smirk.

"Let's get this started, shall we?" I shouted.

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