

Chapter 70: A Family Intervention

Korix and Leski looked... I didn't know how to describe how they looked. I couldn't focus on their facial expressions because as I came closer, all I could see was *them*.

It had been four months since we'd last been together. Besides a single message to let them know that I was ok, I hadn't contacted them since starting this mission. They'd certainly reached out, but I hadn't had the energy to look through what they'd sent me.

So, it had been four months, and it didn't matter that they were surely upset with me. It didn't matter how tired I was or what I'd just left behind. I badly needed to throw myself at them, losing myself in the only two people who might understand.

Instead, I stopped at the edge of the road.

"How did you find me?" I asked.

Probably not the best place to start, but if there was a breach in my security, I needed to know about it.

On the skyscraper's nose, Leski winced, pulling in on herself, so I switched my focus to Korix. Based on that reaction, my wife hadn't been involved with locating me, along for the ride instead.

Straightening from his lean against the skyscraper, my life partner lowered his arms, just *looking* at me, but then, he sprinted my way. He was moving so fast that he blurred—shit, House Kolb speed—and I barely had time to dodge. Still, his blow glanced along the plane of my chest, imparting enough force to sway me in place, and as I recovered from it, I grabbed his extended arm, yanking on it to pull him off-balance.

He toppled—that had been easier than expected—but before I could pin him, he'd rolled to his hands and knees so he could launch himself at my legs. Clicking my tongue, I let him do it, falling in a controlled manner, just as I let him straddle my waist. When he went to pin my arms, though, he found one of them already raised with my rifle's muzzle hovering in front of his face.

"I don't have time for this," I hissed. "Stop assessing my condition so we can get this conversation over with. I need to get back to work."

With his face souring, Korix knocked the rifle away—

Why would he do that? It was unnecessarily dangerous. Why-?

—before lunging forward to press his lips to mine. I was frozen, lying motionless on the road, until he pulled away by the barest of slivers, clutching my cheeks.

“You,” he said, “are being extraordinarily foolish. In all of our years together, I never thought I’d see you acting like such an idiot. Stop it.”

Frowning, I ran through ways to handle this, looking for one that would satisfy him, but my tired brain only provided me with one reply.

“Get off of me, please,” I said in monotone. “If you’re done berating me, that is.”

With a sigh, Korix straightened, shaking his head before climbing to his feet. He offered me a hand, one that I ignored. Instead, once I was upright, I walked to the skycruiser and got into it.

I wasn’t too worried about getting Leski off its nose. If I knew her, she’d move without that persuasion, and sure enough, she slid to the ground while I was feeding coordinates into the skycruiser’s console. Before I could take off, however, a back door opened, and my partners got in. Glancing at them, I rolled my eyes before focusing on the road once more.

“You’ve proven your point. You’re worried. I get it,” I said. “I hope I’ve proven my point in that *I’m fine*. Now, I have work to do, so please. Get out. You can’t come with me.”

“Why not?” Leski said.

In my mind’s eye, I saw her jutting her chin out, and it almost made me smile.

“Because I said so,” I said. “That should be enough.”

I certainly wouldn’t tell them the other reasons I wanted them far away from me right now.

“Get out, please. I’d rather not force the issue.”

After a moment of tense silence, Korix said, “I told you this would be hard, love. He’s-”

“Don’t presume to understand my mental state, Korix,” I icily said. “I don’t know what your biggest fuck up as the *Lokke Vitras* was, but just because you’ve dealt with something similar doesn’t mean you can understand. Not fully.”

There was another pause, one where Korix sighed, and my tension skyrocketed.

“When was the last time you slept?” he eventually asked.

Wha...?

“What’s that got to do with anything?” I snapped.

On the heel of my words, Leski growled, “Just answer the damn question.”

Wow, she'd sounded murderous, not that I could blame her. I was aware that I'd been acting like an ass, both recently and over the last few months, but I'd done it for a reason. I wished they could see that.

"I got some sleep the night before last," I said with tight lips.

Clicking her tongue, Leski said, "Of *course* you did."

"And food?" Korix asked. "When did you last eat?"

What was this? Twenty questions? Did they think they were my mother?

Then again, my mother would never have acted this concerned about me, even when I'd been unHoused. After I'd been old enough to walk and talk, keeping myself fed and alive had mostly been my own job.

"I've been running low on supplies, so my last caloric intake was a couple of days ago, but I was planning on resupplying today," I said, "and in case you were curious, my bladder and bowels are working properly too, but I haven't had sex in months. Haven't had the time or desire for it."

If Leski or Korix had noticed the sarcasm laced into my voice, they didn't comment on it. What I'd said did, however, prompt something I'd been waiting for since getting into the skycruiser. The air above the seat at my side shimmered, and I watched without surprise as my daughter peeled a camouflage disk off of the back of their neck.

With their parents here, I'd known they wouldn't be far away. In a time of such crisis, Korix and Leski wouldn't have let them out of their sight.

Tossing the disk at my chest, Baely shoved a finger in my face.

"You are an *idiot*," she snarled.

Grabbing her hand, I laid it on the divider between us.

"Your father said something similar a few minutes ago," I said.

"Then, why won't you listen to him?" Baely hissed while strangling the air. "You have to take care of your body, *per*. It's the only one you'll get, and- and who knows how much it can take? If you'd entered the Tainted Lands like this, then- then you'd..."

Mother Time, I had so many things I wanted to say to them.

I wanted to ask how they were doing after the unexpected loss of their godparent, although I couldn't focus on that topic for long.

I wanted to know how their House naming ceremony had gone. If they were satisfied with choosing Kolb. If they missed their friends from House rotations who'd chosen differently.

I *so badly* wanted to apologize for missing it, even if at the time, I'd made sure to congratulate them for their entrance into Lutovish society. Hopefully, once this crisis was over, I could do something more for them.

I wanted to ask if they were happy with their current gender presentation and if they'd like to ask Maikle, who was in charge of my full body transitions, how to make any small modifications that they might want.

I wanted to know if they were safe and happy, although I was pretty sure I knew the answer to that already.

As their parent, though, I had to think only of their wellbeing and not what I needed to satisfy mine.

"You're right, and I know it," I said with a crooked smile. "Don't worry, sweetie. I know how to take care of myself."

"Liar!" Baely cut in with a snarl.

As I swayed back from the fierceness blazing from her, Leski leaned forward to lay a hand on our daughter's arm.

"He's not lying. Your father will never lie to you unless he must," she said before meeting my eyes, "but he will manipulate the truth or leave things out of his stories. So, yes. He knows how to take care of himself, but that doesn't mean he'll do it."

"I know," Baely said with a hiccup.

Behind their mother, they scrubbed at wet eyes with the heel of their palm, and my heart clenched.

"I love you, Baely," I said, "and I'm so sorry. I wish I could make it better but--"

"Then, let us stay with you," Baely interrupted. "If you want to make it better, let us help you, and stop ignoring us. You have no idea how many times I've seen mom crying on dad's shoulder or stumbled onto dad staring into nothing because you won't answer their damn messages. I know that things are hard right now and you're in a lot of pain, *per*, but seriously? You can't take the time to let us know you're alive? If you're that busy, then you need help, and in all of Lutov, we're the only ones who can provide you with what you need. No one else can see you cry without freaking out."

She inclined her head toward me, and I touched my cheek to intercept the tear that was racing down it. Jerking forward, I clenched my hands in my lap. My daughter was wise beyond their years, which made me proud, and I should do as they'd asked.

Was this what the *ii* in Kalaski had been talking about with his warning, so many months ago? Whether it had been or not, I couldn't listen to Baely for one very good reason, something I could never tell her about.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Please, get out. I've heard what you've said, and I will take better care of myself. But you can't come with me, not for this mission."

Hell, this silence was heavy, and when someone shifted in their seat, I winced, expecting to encounter a potent picture of their disappointment. Instead, Korix squeezed my shoulder.

"Please, Zae," he said.

And a message popped into my array. Knowing that it could only be from him, I opened it.

I remember what being in your position is like, you who I can never love. You don't have to shield me, and I can protect them, it read. I can be the barrier between them and every sordid thing that you might have to do.

Slowly breathing out, I let myself relax. Because the concern that Korix had addressed? That was why I couldn't have them with me. As with my hallucination, I couldn't show them the dark side of the *Lokke Vitras*, but my life partner was right. Not only had he already seen the truth of it, but if anyone could keep the girls away from it, it was him.

And I truly, *truly* could use their help.

So, I touched my hand to the skycruiser's console to prompt the beginning of our journey, leaning my chair back as we lifted into the air.

"I'm taking a nap," I said. "Don't wake me up unless it's an emergency."

None of them said a word. Instead, Korix hung his arms around my neck, resting his chin on my shoulder, while Leski ran her fingers through my hair. Her soft voice mixed with Baely's as I drifted into the first spot of untroubled sleep that I'd had in months.

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