

# Chapter 72: Tying Off a Loose End

Before investigating Calia's safehouses, I had to finish my hunt for the targets I'd been trailing when she's requested the meeting. I was so completely focused on that task, one might say deliberately so, that I almost forgot the other chore I'd have to complete first.

As I rejoined her at the skyscruiser, Leski asked, "Where's Ko?"

Shit.

"Escorting some people to Xygek. It was part of the agreement we came to," I said. "Apparently, he has some personal business to attend to in the capital, but once that's done, he'll meet up with us, wherever we happen to be. In the meantime, I have a job to do. Will you be coming along, or would you rather go with him?"

Snorting, Leski said, "Goodness, Zae. If I didn't know better, I'd say you were trying to get rid of us, but that can't be right. You agreed that we could accompany you for a time, even if it was done nonverbally."

Sighing, I shook my head. She always got so smug after she'd trapped me with my own words or actions.

"I'm just presenting you with your options," I said. "If you've coming with me, you should get in the skyscruiser. I wish you could spend more time in this amazing place, but we have somewhere to be."

I followed my own instructions, and after a moment, Baely and Leski joined me. Reaching over, my daughter wrapped me in an awkward hug.

"Thank you, *per*," she said. "I never thought I'd see the Preserve outside of a sanctioned trip. Somehow, it's more beautiful this way."

Pinning a smile in place, I patted one of her hands on me.

"I'm glad you got to experience it," I said.

At least one good thing could come out of this pit stop.

With a happy hum, Baely slumped into their seat, and after I'd gotten us in the air, Leski lowered the divider between us to lean against me. For a while, she just snuggled into my side, but

eventually, Baely got distracted by something, freeing my wife's tongue.

"How bad will this next part be?" she asked.

Sighing, I said, "Well, love, I'm in the process of tracking traitors down, and once I've found them, I'll have to see what they know about their comrades before exiling or killing them. How bad do you think it'll be?"

"Great," Leski said under her breath.

I thought that might be it until she tilted her head up to meet my eyes.

"How are we handling Baely, then?" she asked. "When it comes to how dangerous this mission could be, I was planning on staying with her, far from any conflicts we ran into."

"I *can* hear you, you know," Baely said on the heel of those words.

Wincing, Leski pulled away from me to apologize, and I took the chance to get more settled. It was good to know that my partners had been thinking about our daughter's wellbeing when they'd insisted on accompanying me. Really, I'd expected no less of them, but hearing proof of it was nice too, even if I was mystified by Leski asking how we'd keep Baely safe now. The answer seemed obvious to me.

When she turned back to me, I said, "There's a village near my destination. I'll drop the two of you off before doing what I must. I'll pick you up once I'm done, and we can go from there."

Leski immediately scowled at me, but I'd expected that. Despite it being the most sensible path, she'd never enjoyed getting left out, especially after I'd promised her otherwise.

She drew her mouth into a thin line, and I braced for a lecture.

"No."

With nothing else, she faced forward, leaving me frowning.

"No...?" I drawled, raising an eyebrow.

There had to be more.

"You heard me," Leski said in a clipped voice. "No. You're not abandoning me at the first opportunity. No. You're not running off to handle something that stressful alone. I agree that our daughter should be our backup, and don't you dare protest, sweetie. You don't have the training that you'll need to handle everything that your father's work entails, but you can watch our escape route for us, and you can be ready to patch us up if something goes wrong."

Raising her hands, Baely said, "You won't hear me arguing. Despite how protective you two are, you don't smother me with it."

Again. My daughter was wise beyond her years.

I refused to consider the level of my wife's wisdom. Not now. I also couldn't argue with her, though.

Silently, I leaned back, intending to get more sleep, but Leski didn't let me, leaning over me with a snarl.

"If you trick me into staying with Baely, I might never forgive you," she said.

Sighing, I flicked my eyes to the side, unable to hold her gaze.

"Maybe," I said. "If you come with me, though, you'll definitely never forgive me."

"Why don't you let me decide that for myself?" Leski snapped.

I wouldn't change her mind. I knew that tone. She was adamant about coming with me, and I didn't want to decide if and how I'd abandon her with Baely. Fortunately, I didn't have to tackle that conundrum yet.

"We'll discuss it once we reach our destination," I said.

Without waiting for her response, I started a dream sequence.

Despite what the name implied, dream sequences weren't supposed to induce dreams, merely sleep, and yet, I found myself trapped in a nightmare. I was running from something horrific, but I didn't know what it was, and I couldn't afford to check. All I knew was the terror that was lapping at the walls of my mind.

Fortunately, this quickly ended. We hadn't been far from our destination, after all. The skyscruiser landed in the middle of a town with some of its residents already stepping outside, and behind me, Baely leaned forward to hug my neck.

"I'll explain things," she said.

Kissing my cheek, she shuffled out of the skyscruiser before flouncing toward the first set of people heading toward us. I turned to Leski, meaning to once more argue with her, but the look on her face stopped me dead.

Hell, she looked murderous. Changing her mind would be close to impossible, as would giving her the slip. I knew my wife's capabilities. She'd make me spend far too much time on losing her, time that I'd need to track my targets.

Knowing this, I looked at my situation logically, and I knew that I should bring her with me, but all of me decried this realization. Once she saw me as only the *Lokke Vitras*, doing one of the worst tasks required by my role, she'd never look at me the same way.

She'd forgive me for it. Maybe. But whatever milder image she might hold of me would be shattered forever, and I didn't want that.

So, I wouldn't let it happen. I could manipulate the situation so that at its end, she saw it in the right light. That *was* a key piece of what I did. Wasn't it?

"You do exactly as I say when I say it. You keep your opinions about how I'm handling the targets to yourself until after the mission's over, and you stay in mission mode the entire time," I said. "You promise to do these things, and you can come with me."

Leski must have understood how serious I was about this because she nodded instead of making a quip, like she normally would.

"I promise," she said.

"Then, let's get started."

By the time Leski and I had gotten out of the skycruiser, a small crowd had surrounded Baely. As individuals noticed me coming toward them, their excited conversation cut off in spurts.

Once I was close enough, I quickly identified this town's leader. Lutov's far-flung towns, the places where most of the middle and low Strata lived, operate largely outside of the Houses' control. Everyone here would still honor their House above their family and their personal considerations, but because the residents of each individual town had little impact on Lutov as a whole, the key players in the homeland's politics tended to think little of these 'backwater places'.

That didn't mean, however, that politics took a break here. Each town would have their equivalent of a mayor or a council, although those positions were loose in nature. Here, it belonged to a diminutive woman, someone I'd have overlooked if she hadn't been forcing herself to meet my eyes.

Because towns kept to themselves, I rarely operated in them. In fact, this recent hunt, which had seen me visiting several of them, was the first time I'd stepped foot in one for over fifty years, all of which was to say that my presence here was an anomaly. I was surprised that so many of these people had stayed in place, rather than hurrying back to their homes.

Swallowing hard, the town's mayor said, "Greetings to you, *Lokke Vitras*. How may we serve?"

That had been a bit formal, but I could work with-

"*Per!* I was just telling these people that I'll need a place to stay for a night. Maybe two," Baely said. "Do we need anything else from them?"

She glanced at our surroundings while I shook my head at her. Trust my daughter to lower a confrontation's tension, even if it had been done unintentionally.

I understood what she'd meant, though. This town was quaint. We'd landed in a square, one that was surrounded by shops with apartments above them and narrow, two-story homes. A community building stood at one end of the square, and near my skycruiser, there was a playground for the town's few children, peeking out from behind their parents.

Everything looked well maintained here, but it wasn't decked out in the opulence that the high Strata enjoyed. This was what Baely had gotten used to, and once our current crisis was over, my partners and I should encourage her to mingle with the lower Strata more so that she understood how privileged we were. But for now...

"If anyone here has a pair of bikes that they'll let me borrow, it would be helpful," I said. "Other than that, just make sure Baely's safe. That's all I need from you."

Nervously, the town's mayor nodded.

"Give us a moment, and it will be done," she said.

Inclining my head to her, I said, "My thanks."

And nothing else. In situations like this, using minimal words was usually for the best. If I made an effort to be social, it would only make these people anxious.

As expected, the crowd dispersed once they knew my intentions, taking Baely with them. She winked at me before disappearing behind a door.

I didn't have to wait long for what I'd requested, and once we had the bikes, Leski and I mounted them before taking off.

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