

# Chapter 74: Bittersweet Reunion

When I eased into the room, Korix was sitting on the floor with his knees up and his head in his hands, and my stomach dropped.

“No, no, no!” I said, flying across the distance to him. “Don’t do that!”

Dropping to my knees, I tugged on his wrists, revealing a tear-streaked face. Holy hell, he was crying. I... How was this happening? What did I-?

“You’re not allowed to do this,” I growled.

Wiping my thumb along his cheek, I flicked a tear off of it.

“I forbid you from feeling guilty.”

Taking hold of his head, I tilted it toward me, forcing him to meet my eyes.

“I worked *too damn hard* to save you. You can’t lose yourself to self-pity now. I-”

Mother Time, I needed him.

As I swooped down, my lips came within centimeters of his before I was knocked flat on my back, and when I climbed to my feet, Korix was on the other side of the room with his eyes glistening and his face red.

“You don’t understand!” he shouted. “You’re too inexperienced to understand.”

“Ko.”

“I’ve betrayed everything I believe in. I endangered Lutov. I betrayed *you*.”

“Ko!”

“I *hurt* you. Really, truly hurt you, not like the necessary pain that I’ve given out throughout your training. I almost kill-!”

“KORIX! WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP?”

Flinching away from me, Korix closed his mouth, and I was seeing so much red that I almost didn't notice his reaction. Fire was roiling in my gut, and I wanted to strangle him, but hell.

How his hurt cut wounds in me.

"Mother Time, Ko. So, you hurt me. So, you endangered Lutov," I said. "Last time I checked, the homeland's still here, and *I'm still standing*. I will always get back up, so long as my spark of a soul remains with you."

"I-"

Choked, Korix looked like he'd protest, and a roar built in my ears, only matched by the one in my voice.

"Damn it! I don't care how guilty you feel about what you did to me. I have been sick out of my mind with worry for the last two and a half weeks because of you. I need you, Ko, and no one's watching us right now. Get over here, and *kiss me*."

Korix had fallen back a step with his face having gone slack, but I didn't relent. I glared at him with trembling fists until something passed over him. Until he sped to me in a blink. Until his warmth was around me and softness was on my lips, but his mouth was so insistent that I tasted blood in it, and my back arched.

"Please," I begged. "Mother Time, please."

Again, I was left in the cold with Korix several paces away from me, and as much as desire oozed from him, something about him read broken. Lifeless.

"No. Much as I want to, I can't believe you want this," he said. "You're not thinking straight. I won't let you do something that you'll regret-"

With House Kolb speed aiding me, I barreled Korix into a wall, pushing my forearm into his throat with my teeth bared.

"Don't you dare tell me what I want," I hissed.

And I roughly kissed him, smacking his head into the wall. Korix tried to push me away, but after stunning the nerves in one of his arms, I pinned the other one before pressing my lips to his again. He struggled for quite a while, but I never let up, doing what I could to communicate everything that was boiling over in me.

When he surrendered, I cautiously backed off.

"All right. I get it," he said. "I- Mother Time, this is distracting. Can I have some room?"

"No," I said, pressing my body further into him.

“O...”

His lips parted with his eyes unfocusing, and I smirked. Good. Maybe I'd gotten him to forget our problems, if only for a moment.

“Zae—”

Holy shit. Korix's voice briefly faded to fuzz at the sound of my name on his tongue.

“—don't know if I'm up for everything that you usually demand,” he was saying when I could focus.

“Oh, Ko.”

Releasing my hold on his neck, I cupped his face. With barely any space left between us, I leaned my forehead on his.

“You're always in control. When working. When at home. When with me,” I said. “Why don't you let me take over? Just this once.”

Lifting his hand, Korix trailed his fingers over my chin and ear and hair, and I shivered.

“Is that what you want?” he asked.

“Yesss...” I said with my jaw shuddering.

Closing my eyes, I leaned into his hand, and after a brief, blissful moment of pressure, Korix ripped it away.

“Then, take control.”

Never had three words mused me so thoroughly into the animal that inhabits us all. Growling, I took hold of Korix's hair and neckline, jerking on both, and I sank my teeth into his shoulder. I poured all of my repressed hurt through that bite, even as I dragged my palm over his chest and side and hip. Damn, it was all so *enticing*.

I only loosened my teeth's squeeze when I tasted iron, giving the briefest of glances to pinpricks of red before transferring that taste to Korix. Motionless to this point, he squirmed, or he did so until I slipped my hand under his waistband. Then, he gasped. While my lips contorted against his mouth, he clung to me, and fuck, if I didn't like that.

Backing off, I said, “Again?”

I heard Korix gulp with the lick of his lips wetting mine.

“Are you sure no one's watching us?” he asked. “I did my own check but...”

Talira's warning overrode anything else he might say, and untangling my fingers from his hair, I requested my rifle, making the most minimal of motions to shoot each of the room's recorders. And

all the while, I kissed Korix.

When I next gave him space, his eyes had dilated to thin rings of gray bordering blown-wide pupils.

“Mother Time, Zae,” he said. “That’s-”

When he said nothing more, I chuckled.

“I know.”

In some ways, being with Korix was easier than sex with Leski or any other person. I didn’t need to hold back, not as much at least. Once he was ready, I could fuck him to my heart’s content. Each of us knew what the other one needed without having to ask, and even if I still concentrated on him, I didn’t have to.

As Korix’s breathing went from erratic to ragged, he reached to spread his fingers over my cheek. That soft touch took a pent-up, ravenous ache in me and ruptured it, carrying me away in its flood.

It was everything I’d wanted. I was empty and yet full, satiated and yet, utterly and deeply needy with the most exquisite pleasure flushing through my body. It was heightened when Korix threw his head back to land between my neck and shoulder.

I was barely aware of sinking to my knees and back, barely aware of his body squeezing mine to the floor. It was all ok. I was fine, he was fine, and finally, we were together again.

This nearly equaled the weight of the problems piled on us.

With time seeping to a crawl around us, we couldn’t move, and I clung to Korix, expecting him to evanesce, to shatter and dissolve beneath the sway of what had ruled him, with each heartbeat.

I didn’t care that he was crushing me. It was better than breathing freely when he was gone.

I didn’t care that my hand, plastered against his waist, was sticky. It was better than wondering if I’d touch him again.

I didn’t care that my eyes were burning so badly that I was about to become an emotional, teenage boy again. I would become the fool if it meant that he stayed with me.

“Well, then,” Korix said.

The rumble of his voice into my body made me hold him tighter. He didn’t seem to notice.

“That was...” he continued. “Losing control to you is... nice. I don’t know if I could do such a thing with anyone else, but I’d like to try it again with you. If you’d like.”

He rolled off of me, and the ridiculous thought that he’d vanish if I wasn’t touching him had me scrambling on my hands and knees to follow him. Sitting up, Korix lifted an eyebrow, glancing

between my fingers, digging into his leg, and my face.

"I'm guessing you're not in mission mode anymore," he said.

"That wasn't obvious the second I walked in here?" I shakily asked.

Pursing his lips, Korix spread his legs, patting the ground between them, and I crawled to sit there, leaning back against his chest. He wrapped his arms around my shoulders, and taking hold, I buried my face in them.

I didn't know why I was so fragile right now. This spillover of panic and need went against everything that I'd been taught, but I couldn't bring myself to shove it below the surface. Not yet.

We stayed here for a while with me ever-hovering over the precipice of a breakdown. Every so often, I neared an unwanted pitch forward, and only Korix, tightening his arms around me, dragged me back from the edge.

"How do you know I'm me?" he asked.

He lowered his nose into my hair, letting his breath billow against my scalp.

"When you kissed me, how did you know that you weren't about to sleep with an alien being, using my body?"

At the end of that question, his voice took on a rough edge, and I came up for air, momentarily putting everything ripping through me to the side. When I considered our situation from his perspective, the resulting reflection made me wince. Even still, I had to be honest with him.

"As the acting *Lokke Vitras*, I cannot believe you're back until I find definitive proof to support it," I said. "I have to question everything you do, always believing that you're an Ancient that's manipulating the hell out of me."

I gave him a moment, certain he'd push me away, but when he didn't, I continued.

"As Zaeden, I just know. I don't know how else to put it. Something about the spark of your soul has always called to mine and... I know how contradictory that seems, given that I went five fucking years without noticing something was wrong... Shit."

Diving into the safety of his arms, I breathed him in, letting his scent relax me.

"I have my doubts, Ko. I'm not an idiot," I said, "but I *choose* to believe that you're telling the truth because what else am I supposed to do? Spend the rest of our lives wondering if my Korix is looking at me from those eyes, my Korix is telling me... I can't live with such worry. Can you understand that?"

The wash of air through my hair stopped, and the arms around me constricted until my bones ground against his. Had I upset him? What I'd said probably wasn't what he'd wanted to hear, but it

was the truth. I wouldn't lie to him.

"I never meant to hurt you," Korix said. "I remember it, Zae. The look on your face when you realized what I'd done. Ordering those House Cerullis members to kill you. My heart still stops every time I recall how deeply I drove my blade into your side. And now, there's this. I never considered the emotional wreckage that I'd need to help you get through. I'm... s-"

Slipping free of Korix's embrace, I slid down his chest until I could see him before pressing a finger to his lips.

"It wasn't all bad. I learned a lot while fighting you."

When Korix tried to speak, I pressed my finger harder against his mouth while a grin came to life.

"But more importantly, losing you, if only for a time, made me realize how much I... can't love you," I said, "and once this is over, I want to discuss something I've been considering over the last two weeks."

Lowering my finger, I waited for Korix to say it, and he obliged.

"What's tha-?"

"Also, regret has no place in you, remember?" I interrupted. "Shame on you for making me remind you, *Lokke Vitras*."

As mirth bubbled in him, he let it pour out of his mouth. Damn, I loved this view. Idly, I marked the memory of it in my array so I could return to it later.

"Zae, you- you-"

Smoothing his hand along my face, Korix took hold of my wrist, lifting it to kiss my knuckles.

"Do you know how much you save me?" he asked. "I should be long gone by now, but you... your presence, your light, and your hopefulness have sustained me for years. I can never repay you for it."

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath before lowering my hand.

"Talira has made you the acting *Lokke Vitras*? I should have expected as much, given everything," he said. "How's that going?"

"Not badly. Not... great," I said. "Can I ask you something?"

His earlier words, however sweet they'd been, had reminded me of a potential problem.

"You're always welcome to ask," Korix said.

"Ok."

Rising from my Korix-shaped pillow, I spun to face him, clasping my hands in my lap.

“Talira showed me something earlier, something she brushed off after realizing what she’d done,” I said. “The Ancients control people through their emotions by manipulating the production of hormones in the brain. So, for the medics to remove the Ancient inside of you, they had to take scans of your head.”

Korix had gone stiff with his eyes hooded. He knew where I was going with this, but I couldn’t stop. I didn’t care if this was something he wanted to keep private. It could affect us both, and so, I deserved to know about it.

Pulling the mentioned scan out of my array, I projected it into the air between us, pointing at the black splotches in it.

“What are these?”

With blood draining from his face, Korix swayed in place, steadying himself with a hand on the floor.

“Its progression has accelerated,” he croaked. “I thought-”

Swallowing hard, he flicked his eyes to mine.

“I should have said something before now,” he said. “I didn’t want to worry you before there was a problem but-”

Someone requested a direct connection in my array, and lifting a finger to pause Korix, I accepted it.

“Zae-zae, why are the recorders in your room reading nonfunctional?” Talira asked. “Do we have a problem?”

“No, *shukusen*. You told me to remember where I am, yes?” I said. “I was following your advice, shooting the recorders while doing... other things.”

A long sigh rattled over the connection.

“Those’ll be a pain to replace,” Talira said, “but that’s for another day. You might want to make yourself presentable, little ass. I sent your siblings your way not long ago.”

“...Fuck.”

Laughing, Talira cut the connection, and I frantically scanned the room for our clothes before scrambling on all fours to retrieve them.

“Does Talira know-?” Korix asked.

Shoving his slacks at him, I said, "Get dressed. My brother and sister are coming."

Clicking his teeth together, Korix jumped to his feet. We'd both started dressing when the door behind us opened.

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