

Chapter 75: Once Out, Always Out

Walking into the room, Feena froze when she saw Korix and me before shoving Pheniks into the hall, shutting and locking the door behind him. Thank Mother Time for her quick reflexes. My brother seeing the *Lokke Vitras* and his replacement in such a compromising situation would have been... unfortunate.

As it was, I could only grin as I watched the crimson flush creeping toward Feena's hairline. Korix didn't look nearly as amused, sliding into the disturbing calm that always preceded his fall into mission mode. Catching his eye, I shook my head while buttoning my slacks.

"She already knows," I said, "and no, I didn't tell her."

A bit of warmth infused Korix, although he still looked poised to attack.

"How?" was all he said.

I snatched my shirt from where I'd dropped it, knowing the question hadn't been for me. Considering I was in the room, I was curious how Feena meant to answer it, and as expected, I caught her flicking her eyes to me while her posture stiffened.

"I didn't guess the nature of your relationship, if that's what you're worried about. I doubt anyone else suspects a thing," she said. "Our friends in the Easter Reaches told me."

The Eastern... Reaches? Feena wasn't doing a great job of clarifying things-

"Ah. I wasn't aware that the relationship between me and Zae had anything to do with that."

Halfway through donning my shirt, I jerked my head toward Korix, which almost tore its cloth. He'd returned to relaxed, or what would appear relaxed to me. With no other questions, he finished getting dressed as if no one else was in the room with him, and I could only stare until he glanced at my awkward maze of limbs and shirt. Rapidly blinking, I moved to correct the mess.

"The connection is tangential, but it exists, or so I've been told," Feena said. "My apologies for intruding. I should have expected-"

"Oh, stop," I groaned. "How many times have you walked in on me like this now?"

"Too many times to count," Feena said, "and I wasn't apologizing to *you*, ya brat."

“Hey!”

Finished with dressing, Korix skirted the room’s stasis field to cautiously rest a hand on Feena’s shoulder, squeezing it.

“You never need apologize to me, Chosen,” he said.

...Chosen? That was new. What was it supposed to mean?

Even knowing it would get me nowhere, I looked to Feena for clarification, and as expected, when she was done ogling Korix like he’d learned how to use magic, she shook her head to clear it.

“Thank... you,” she said before clearing her throat. “Forgive me, my *Lokke Vitras* and acting *Lokke Vitras*, but are you ready to return to the real world? I’d like to grab Phen, our House Zan brother, before he does anything stupid while out there alone.”

“Oh, hell,” I said.

Korix and Feena were out the door by the time I’d crossed the room, and when I joined them, my stomach clenched. My brother wasn’t waiting outside, but as soon as I began reviewing recorder feeds, I slapped my face, dragging my hand over my nose and chin. Korix was already moving, but still, I called over my shoulder as I turned to our right.

“This way.”

Two doors down, I swung into a room identical to the one we’d just left. Pheniks was standing beside an amber capsule, extending a finger to poke it, and racing to him, I slapped his hand down.

“*Don’t touch the stasis field, you idiot,*” I hissed.

“So, it is a stasis field?” Pheniks asked with his eyes still glued to it. “I wasn’t sure.”

“And you decided that touching it was a good way to find out? Do you know what would have happened if I hadn’t stopped you?” I said. “Damn it, Phen! You’re up for House Zan’s First Stratus position! You should know proper safety procedures by now.”

Grimacing, Pheniks faced me.

“You’re right,” he said. “I was curious. You know how I get.”

With my hands pressed to my head, I came close to screeching my frustration at my brother, but fortunately, Korix saved me.

“You’re exactly as I imagined, Second Stratus,” he said. “When we’re home, your brother often talks about his siblings. He’s portrayed you quite well.”

Rolling his eyes, Pheniks turned toward Korix.

“You could have said you brought-”

As he fell silent, he cocked his head, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh. The *Lokke Vitras*. Of course.”

Glancing back at me, he raised an eyebrow as if asking why I hadn’t said something, and I was punched so hard by the dread in the room that I thought I’d be sick. I didn’t feel it, of course. All of it was coming from Feena.

“Phen...” she said in a cautious tone.

With a frown, Pheniks said, “What? If he means to hurt me, I can hardly stop him, and I have no doubt that he has a similar temperament to Zae, otherwise our brother would have vanished ages ago. If so, he doesn’t want my deference, not that I can blame him. All that hero-worship must get exhausting. Although, I suppose I should greet him? Stop talking about him like he’s not here... hmm.”

Facing Korix, who’d been watching all of this in his stoic way, Pheniks marched to him, extending a hand.

“Hello,” he said. “I’m Pheniks, as you already know, and you’re the *Lokke Vitras*, as everyone in Lutov knows. It’s nice to meet you.”

Hesitantly, Korix took my brother’s hand to stiffly shake it, and with a huff, I crossed my arms.

“Stop holding back, Ko,” I said. “These are my siblings. They’ll be a part of my life for a long time yet. You might as well learn to relax around them, at least a little.”

With a sharp inhale, Korix glared at me, and while I shrugged, Pheniks glanced my way, wrinkling his nose.

“His name’s *Ko*?” he asked. “Huh. I thought it would be something more intimidating.”

Korix was teetering. I could see it. My years-long influence on him and the extreme stress of the last few weeks—days to him—threatened to demolish the indomitable defenses that guarded his true self, and I was determined to make them come down.

Lifting my eyes to the heavens, I shook my head, mouthing ‘brothers’, and one of the most beautiful sounds I’d heard in my life filled the room. For the span of two breaths, I reveled in it, this bouncing display of joy that I’d only twice enjoyed before, but then, I examined the results of my handiwork.

Feena was plastered against a wall with her rifle in her hand and her eyes bulging while Pheniks had scrunched his face up. They were both staring at Korix, who was supporting himself with a hand on the wall. Bent double over an arm, he was trying to control his body’s shaking, and simultaneously, my siblings tore their eyes off of this impossible sight, looking to me for help.

I just smiled at them.

With a desperate gasp, Korix slammed his back into the wall before sinking to the floor. He loosely sprawled across it with tears streaming from his eyes, and almost, he tipped to the side as well, but when his laughter diminished in intensity, I strode to stand over him with my hands on my hips.

A quiet that I found comforting descended, one that probably raised goosebumps on my siblings' skin, and after a moment, Korix waved for help up. I offered him a hand, but on taking it, he yanked on it, dragging me to my knees. Straightening, he threw his arms around my neck before kissing me. I was so frozen by shock that I didn't get to return it before he retreated, closing his eyes while resting his forehead on mine.

"I can never, never love you, Zae," he said.

"I know."

It seemed that with this secret shared once, we couldn't stop from doing it again. Much like we couldn't stop doing each other. Oh, well. We'd adjust. Again.

Taking hold of Korix's head, I kissed his brow before rocking to my feet. When I offered him help up this time, he got a cautionary look, but grinning, he only used my hand to haul himself to his feet. Once he was stable, though, I didn't let him take his hand back. It was mine now, and I was never letting go.

"Your siblings," Korix said.

Feena had crossed her arms and ankles, pressing her back to the wall with an indulgently annoyed look in place, but Pheniks looked outright pissed. Oh, hell. Please, say he wouldn't turn into an unwittingly judgmental asshole with this. I sometimes forgot how much of a propensity he had for that.

"You're sleeping together," he said. "Of course you are. If he put his mind to it, Zae could seduce the least sexually inclined person into his bed."

Ok. Not too bad so far. I glanced at Korix, and he grinned at me in a feral manner.

"I'd say there was a fair bit of seduction on both sides this time," he said.

Damnit, we'd just put this fire out! Why was he stoking it again?

Pheniks ignored Korix, trying to drill through me with his gaze.

"Is he the one you were talking about the other day?" he asked. "The one who makes you... how did you put it? 'Less of a shattered spark of a soul'. Right?"

When Korix raised his eyebrows, I stopped blood's rush to my cheeks before it could heat them. Embarrassment was *not* something that I let others see in me, not when I could prevent it like this

at least.

“He is,” I said.

And those eyebrows shot for their matching color at Korix’s hairline. I quirked one of mine, tilting my head.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t know,” I said in sub-vocals.

“Mother Time, I should have seen it.”

The anger in my brother’s voice dragged my focus away from Korix before I could see his response. Was Pheniks about to heap derision on us? Sure, he’d made comments about my lifestyle in the past, but he’d never meant for them to sound contemptuous. The relationship between me and the *Lokke Vitras*, however, might be something he disapproved of.

“Why didn’t I see it?” he growled, throwing his hands overhead. “I can see the connections needed to improve wait times for people idling in the Terminal but *damn romantic relationships!*”

Oh, right. This was my brother I was worrying about.

Moving toward Pheniks, Korix tugged his hand free of mine, but I let him have it. I’d claim it again soon enough.

Clapping my brother’s shoulder, Korix said, “You have my support. Once this mess is resolved, I’m not sure what position I’ll hold but-”

“I’m sorry,” Pheniks interrupted. “Support with what?”

Tensing, Korix pulled away from my brother before turning aside to pinch his nose.

“It’s like House Zan’s been made into a man,” he said. “Mother Time help us all.”

I barely kept from laughing. Even considering my limited interactions with my brother’s House, I knew Korix was right. Pheniks was the epitome of Zan.

Dropping his hand to his thigh, Korix said, “You have my support with your challenge. I’ll let Arion know the first opportunity I get. You’ll make an excellent First Stratus.”

“Ah. Yes,” Pheniks said. “Actually, I-”

Feena loudly cleared her throat.

“Fun as all of this had been, shouldn’t we get to *shukusen* Talira?” she said. “We need to start this meeting about the Ancients, right?”

I’d never seen someone tumble so quickly from happy to pained as Korix did at my sister’s words.

“We should, preferably before she sends the Second Strata after us. I’d rather not fight them again,” he said. “I assume one of you knows her location, so please. Lead on.”

Feena raced through the door as if hounds were chasing her, and with his face souring, Pheniks followed her.

When Korix crossed the threshold, I smoothly slid my hand into his, and as if he’d expected that, he swung me around the corner, hard enough that I stumbled into him before I could regain my balance. Passing my hand behind his back, he pressed its palm to his side before wrapping an arm around my waist.

Mm. This was much better.

We reached a set of lifts, and after putting the top floor into one of their controls, Feena stepped into it. As she rose through the ceiling, a message slid into my array.

Talira knows too, yes? it read.

I gave Korix a slight nod, and after a pause, another message came in.

I have no doubt you used that talented tongue of yours to argue our case.

Meeting his eyes, I displayed the most dazzling smile, and Korix snorted.

What did she say?

And finally, I wrote a response.

She’s letting us have a trial period.

Sighing, Korix squeezed my hand.

We’d better make the most of it, then.

He tugged me to the lift, stepping into it, and wasn’t this a relief? I could bring up the rear, as I liked.

At the top, Korix was there to take my hand as soon as he could. Pulling me to him, he kissed me, and this, being freely affectionate with one another in the open, gave me such a thrill that I briefly considered skipping the meeting that I’d persuaded my grandmother to call.

In the end, I peeled myself away from Korix, striding with him down a foyer lined with paintings, and to me, the floor felt like it was made of springs. Mother Time, I could swear that helium had replaced my innards because at the slightest nudge, I’d drift into the clouds.

My grandmother looked the opposite of how I felt. A still statue behind her desk, she was tapping its surface in time to my footfalls, following my path to her with a glower. Feena and Pheniks had

already found seats, which left me and Korix with...

One. There was one chair left. Was Talira punishing us for something, and if so, why not leave us with nothing to sit on?

As we came closer, I angled to stand behind the chair, like a good *Lokke Vitras* to come should, and Korix let me. At first. As he sat, however, he tugged me in front of him. Taking hold of my hips, he guided me down onto his leg before encircling my waist, ducking his head to scoop my arm around his neck. With a happy sigh, he nestled into me, and when I could think straight, I relaxed on him, kicking my foot along the floor.

"I see you're feeling better, my *Lokke Vitras*," Talira sourly said.

Humming, Korix said, "Much better, yes."

An odd look passed over Talira's face before she settled into cranky once more.

"I also see that I'm not the first to learn about you two," she said, eyeing me.

Before I could open my mouth to protest, Pheniks butted in.

"Actually, I found out about them maybe five minutes ago."

"And I've known for a while," Feena said, "but I didn't learn it from them."

At Talira's glare, I shrugged.

"They're family," I said. "Even if they hadn't learned about us in this way, I'd have told them unless you forbade it."

Hiding her face, Talira groaned.

"You're either going to be the best or worst *Lokke Vitras* that Lutov's ever seen," she said with her voice muffled. "Right now, I'm thinking it'll be the latter."

...*Ouch*.

"Much as I like the attention all of you are paying me, we should move into discussing why we've gathered this afternoon. The Ancients," I said. "Who wants to go first?"

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