

Chapter 75: We Need to Talk

When we reached House Kolb's headquarters, Korix took one look at us before pulling Baely into a hug.

"What happened?" he asked over the top of her head.

I was halfway to answering when Leski barreled over me.

"Your student showed us everything that he's capable of," she snapped. "You should be proud."

Apparently, she was no longer in mission mode.

In shocked silence, Korix slid his cool, gray eyes to me, and I shrugged.

"I couldn't find another way," I said.

Maintaining his gaze was... Mother Time, it was impossible, but I did it anyway until Baely shifted in Korix's arms, breaking his hold on them.

"That's not fair, mom," they said. "I know what happened was hard, but you can't take it out on them. *It's not fair.*"

Sucking in a breath, Leski bit her tongue for a moment before sharply nodding.

"I need some space," she said. "If you need me, I'll be at the apartment."

Marching away, she quickly disappeared, leaving my heart aching. She wasn't the one who most needed my attention right now, though. When I turned to Baely, she engulfed me in a hug, burying her face in my shoulder.

"I love you, *per*, more than I can say," she said before lifting her eyes to meet mine, "but I'm going to stay with some friends tonight. I need some time to think. Ok?"

Smiling, I cupped my daughter's cheeks, brushing a thumb under her eye.

"I am so proud of you for knowing your limits and setting boundaries," I said. "Given that, of course you should spend as much time as you want with your friends, but can you please update me about where you are and if you're safe?"

With a laugh, Baely nudged my hands off of them.

"Considering I just got kidnapped, I think that can be arranged," they said.

Ignoring how much Korix had stiffened, I said, "Thank you. Have fun with your friends, and I love you too."

"I know," Baely said with a brilliant smile.

Whirling toward Korix, she made her farewell of him, but I wasn't paying attention to it, already heading back to the skycruiser. I had work to do.

Even still, I waited for Korix before leaving. I knew he'd need a more detailed report than the spotty information Leski and Baely had given him, and sure enough, he soon stopped beside me, crossing his arms with an eyebrow raised. I didn't bother with pleasantries, telling him the story in a cool and precise manner. By the end of it, he was pinching the bridge of his nose with his eyes squeezed closed.

"I should have been there to help," he said.

"Maybe," I said with a shrug, "but it's in the past, Ko. There's nothing we can do about it except give Baely and Leski what they've asked for."

"That's true."

Relaxing, Korix lowered his hand before looking me over.

"Are you headed out again?" he asked.

"In a minute," I said. "I was hoping you'd share how things went between Calia's people and the *shukusenth* first."

Maybe he'd also tell me what personal matter had been so important that he'd taken the risk of marrying Baely and Leski's innocence.

"That meeting hasn't happened yet. You know how ponderous these things can be," Korix said, "but Talira has reassured these dissenters enough that they gave us a second set of coordinates for safehouses."

"How generous of them," I said, rolling my eyes. "Well? Anytime you feel like passing it along would be nice."

I gestured at Korix, but he didn't move, watching me. After several beats of quiet, I clicked my tongue while resting my hands on my hips.

"What is it?" I said.

There had to be something. I knew this look of speculation better than most.

Cautiously, Korix said, "I... need you to do something for me."

Ok. I wasn't sure how much more I could pile on my plate right now but...

"What is it?" I asked.

Damn. Korix looked almost nervous now. What could possibly have caused that?

Licking his lips, he said, "I need you to take a break. A short one."

With my eye twitching, I drew breath to speak—he knew why I was pushing myself so hard—but he lifted a hand to stop me.

"Let me finish first," he said. "In the last four and a half months, you've worked yourself into a state of exhaustion nearly every day, been betrayed by someone you respected, nearly died, and lost the only friend you've made in your life, someone you haven't properly mourned yet. I am at a loss as to how you're functioning as well as you are, and Talira agrees. The only reason she hasn't ordered you to take a break is because she knows you won't listen to her, so instead, we're hoping you'll do that with me. Come home, Zae, just for the rest of the day. You've given the homeland enough security to rest, if only for a few hours, so please. Take a break so that once this is over, your family will have a recognizable version of you left."

Hell, he was speaking so logically right now, and I knew he was right, but- but I couldn't do what he'd asked. I didn't know why this was only hitting me now, instead of at another point over the last four months, but I wasn't seeking out House Cerullis fugitives solely to keep Lutov safe. I needed them gone for something much more important, to me at least. I was fighting to get justice for-

"Me?"

Stepping out from behind Korix, my hallucination flashed a sloppy grin at me.

"That's silly, LV. You have to admit it," they said, "but even if you won't do that, think about this situation with me. Even if we discount every other benefit you might gain, getting some rest might banish me from your life, and you *do* want that, right?"

How could they know what I wanted? Even I wasn't sure what that was right now. Sure, having a hallucination hanging around was... concerning, to say the least, but I also... I also didn't want to say goodbye to my friend again.

Even still, my hallucination was in my brain. They had to be, whether they were actually a hallucination or something else entirely, and that meant they were probably voicing my subconscious right now, the piece of me that had always guided me along the correct path throughout my life. Should I listen to it now?

Sighing, I said, "Fine. Let's go."

With his mouth open to continue arguing with me, Korix froze, cocking his head, before smiling.

“Never thought you’d let me win so easily,” he said. “Reminds me of old times.”

“Well, don’t get used to it.”

Stepping through my hallucination, I repeatedly poked Korix’s chest.

“I am *not* your *kuvesk*. Not anymore.”

“I know.”

Korix took my finger, lifting it so he could kiss the heel of my palm, and as I flushed, he turned away to lead us off the landing pad.

I was so wrapped up in the idea of rest that the walk passed beneath my notice. Hell, when was the last time I’d let myself relax in any way? At times over these last four months, it had felt like I was alert and primed for action even in the middle of my dreams.

Until we walked through the apartment’s front door, I forgot that a source of conflict would be waiting for me at home, but fortunately, as we made our way through the apartment, Leski was nowhere to be seen. Maybe Korix had messaged her to let her know we were coming, and if so, it had been a good idea. I didn’t want to avoid her right now, quite the opposite, but respecting her wishes seemed wise.

Korix took me into the spare bedroom, and on seeing the bed in there, I didn’t bother with removing my clothes. I stumbled to collapse face-first on it, breathing in the scent of clean sheets, and soon enough, Korix joined me, bouncing me in place. I rolled over, snuggling into his side.

“Thank you,” I said.

But then, my store of accrued exhaustion hit me over the head with a mallet, and I happily lost consciousness. I wasn’t sure if I dreamed that night. If I did, my unconscious ramblings were lost when I gradually woke up, roused by the smell of frying bacon.

Grinning, I yawned while clambering out of bed. Korix was cooking. All was right with the world.

In the kitchen, he was facing the stove with his back to me, so for a while, I watched him, leaning against the doorframe with my arms crossed.

“Are you planning on standing there all day, or will you help me?” he eventually asked.

Straightening, I chuckled.

“All you had to do was ask.”

After removing bacon from a pan, Korix slid it to another eye on the stove, pointing to a loaf of bread nearby. I toasted slices of it in the leftover grease while he got started with making caf.

“How long was I out?” I asked.

Koris gave me an incredulous look, at which I stuck out my tongue. Sure, I could have easily checked that for myself. Sure, I should have done that before getting out of bed, but what could I say? Sometimes, I liked meaningless small talk with the people I loved.

Shaking his head, Korix said, “Almost ten hours.”

Choking on a cough, I sank my spatula into the soggy bread hard enough that its halves were soon floating away from one another.

“Ten... hours?” I gasped. “This was supposed to be a short break. I- I need to go!”

Snatching my wrist, Korix took the spatula from me before fishing a slice of toast out of the pan.

“No. You don’t,” he said. “Break’s not over, Zae. Not quite. So, sit down and eat with me before I’m forced to take extreme measures to keep you here.”

Was that supposed to scare me? Because honestly? It did. Even now, I was uncertain of what Korix was capable of, and I didn’t want to see the wealth of his experience and skill brought to bear against me, especially if he was doing it with my best interests at heart.

Mother Time knew what that extra bit of protectiveness would evoke in him.

So, I grumpily acquiesced, plopping into a chair at the table with a frown. Besides, what harm could an extra quarter hour of idleness do?

Sliding a plate in front of me, Korix pointed at it—

“Eat.”

—before placing a mug of caf at my elbow. I did what he’d said, even if I also did my level best not to enjoy this *oh-dear-Mother-Time-it-was-amazing* meal. Soon enough, Korix sat beside me, and while I refused to talk to him, I couldn’t resist holding his hand when he placed it between us.

This was how Leski found us. Wandering into the kitchen bleary-eyed, she narrowed said eyes at us while grabbing some caf. I hurried to finish my breakfast before she’d finished preparing her cup, but by the time she came to stand over us, I wasn’t done. I shoved a last slice of bacon into my mouth while she stared, sipping her caf.

“Zaeden, we need to talk,” she said.

She glided out of the kitchen with nothing else. Exchanging a glance with Korix, I extricated my hand from his before hurrying after her.

We ended up in our bedroom with her sitting against the headboard, clutching a stuffed animal to her chest. Blank-faced, she took another pull of her caf while gesturing for me to join her, and after

I'd gotten settled, she handed me another stuffed animal.

Shit. This would be serious. Leski didn't get these out for anything else.

Oh, fuck. What had happened yesterday had been too much for her, hadn't it? She was about to tell me that we were done, that she was-

"So, first of all, I'm not leaving you," Leski said. "I don't know who hurt you so badly that you jump to that possibility first in situations like this, but that doesn't matter right now. I'm going nowhere. Ok?"

Biting my lip, I nodded, wondering when I'd started strangling the stuffed animal I was holding. It had been a while since we'd had a conversation that had required them. I'd forgotten how much they helped.

With a slow sigh, Leski finished off her caf. Setting it aside, she lifted her stuffed bear, touching its nose to hers, and stared into its eyes.

"I understand everything the *Lokke Vitras* is called to do, at least conceptually, but having it shoved in my face like that..."

Lowering the bear, Leski met my eyes.

"I didn't like it, and if I'm exposed to it again, I'm afraid of what might happen. So."

Looking away, she hugged the bear.

"I can't go on missions with you right now. In fact, I can't be involved in the *Lokke Vitras* side of your life in any way, I don't think," she said. "I'm not asking you to stay silent about it. Tell me about your missions as much as you like, but beyond that, I can't be a part of it."

Oh. That was...

With my fingers limp in my lap, I stared at them, trying to decide what to say. Leski was, in essence, rejecting a part of who I was. It was a part that I mostly despised, but nevertheless, this *hurt*, and I didn't want her to see that. I wanted her to share what she needed from me to be happy, and if I reacted unfavorably to this new boundary between us, she might not do that anymore.

How did I balance my needs with hers, though?

Lost in my thoughts, I didn't see Leski lunging for me until she had a hold of my head, and after searching my eyes, she clicked her tongue.

"That's what I thought," she said.

Releasing me, she stole my stuffed animal before throwing it in my face.

“This isn’t for forever, dumbass!” she said. “And I don’t hate what you do to keep us safe. The fact that you endure so much while staying *you* amazes me! I just need some time spent learning how to cope for when this happens again. If it happens again. That’s all!”

Again. Oh.

“I love you,” I said, ignoring how blurred my vision had become.

“I love you too,” Leski said.

Smirking, she wiped away a tear before gently kissing me. I could tell it had been meant as only a peck, a small bit of comfort imparted, but still, it had me pulling back with a shaky gasp before leaning in again, tangling my hands in her hair.

Hell, I’d missed this. The connections that one could find with another person were endless, all of them wonderful in their own way, but for me, this sort of physicality was one of the most fulfilling.

Grabbing Leski’s stuffed animal, I tossed it away so I could nudge her back onto the bed. I brushed my hands over her skin while she steadily stole the breath from my lungs, and here, we remained for a while, until someone cleared his throat behind us.

“I thought you had to go,” Korix said.

Groaning, I rested my forehead in the hollow of Leski’s neck while she laughed.

“Oh, hush, and get over here, asshole,” she said.

Humming, Korix seemed happy to follow his instructions, crawling over the bed toward us. Something deep inside of me exhaled at the mischievous grin on his face, even as I turned back to rest my head on Leski’s chest. Seemed I’d be taking an even longer break than I’d initially anticipated.

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