

Chapter 77: Another Introduction

The people with me seemed to agree with my assessment. Around me, blanched faces stared into nothing, and I resisted the urge to smack them, especially Talira. She should know better.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“We have to fight anyway.”

Hearing Korix’s voice ring alongside mine, I grinned at him, needing to press my lips to his, but I refrained from it. For now.

“You’re right, of course,” Talira said. “Forgive me, my *Lokke Vitras*. Zaeden. For a moment, I forgot myself.”

Beside me, Korix said, “You’re a *shukusen*, Talira, not the *Lokke Vitras*. That role’s burdens are no longer yours.”

Talira cleared her throat.

“Yes, well. Let’s not focus on me. Now that we’ve discussed this subject into the ground, you need your marching orders,” she says. “For now, I want the four of you to relax. You can do more research if you like, but keep in mind that I want everyone fresh once I have a plan.”

“And what will you be doing?” Pheniks said.

Thank Mother Time he’d asked that question. Much as the rest of us might want to know, I doubted we’d have raised our voices.

“I need to consult with the other *shukusenth*. They should have a say in what we do, especially with regards to House Cerullis,” Talira said, “and I’ll accelerate my plans for our sister House.”

“Reasonable,” Pheniks said.

Slapping his knees, he got to his feet.

“If there’s nothing else, I’d like to return to The Library,” he said.

“Actually, there is one more thing.”

Joining Pheniks on his feet, Talira circled her desk and spread her arms.

“You and Feena give your grandmother a hug,” she said, pouting.

While my siblings made their farewells with many an eye roll, I reluctantly climbed out of Korix’s lap. Side by side, we waited until Feena and Pheniks had left, and then, Talira crossed her arms, tapping a finger on an elbow.

“I assume you already know what I’m going to say,” she said.

“I’m acting as the *Lokke Vitras* in name, but Zaeden has authority over me,” Korix said.

Bristling, Talira says, “Can you blame me? With the way you’ve been acting-!”

Korix lifted a hand to stop her.

“I agree with you,” he said. “Not that I’d argue with my *shukusen* if I didn’t.”

Barking a laugh, Talira relaxed.

“You’ve argued with me plenty before,” she said. “Why should now be any different?”

Korix just shrugged, dragging another chuckle from Talira before she turned on me.

“Do you understand what’s expected of you?” she asked.

“Keep the most dangerous man I know from getting into trouble. In other words, I’m supposed to do the impossible again,” I said. “I’ll handle it.”

With a grin, Talira sighed.

“Such flippancy! But I suppose I should expect that from you,” she said. “Now. I’ve had your parents’ skycruiser brought to the landing pad on the roof. No going through the front doors this time.”

That was a dismissal if I’d ever heard one.

“Thank you, grandmother,” I said. “I hope to hear from you soon.”

Korix said nothing, which was typical for him, but when I started for the door, he stayed where he was. Never stopping, I accessed a recorder that I’d modified years ago, one that would give me an instant view of its feed. Without the requirement of process cracking to breach it, I gained what I needed before stepping into the foyer, which meant Talira and Korix didn’t notice my intrusion, or at least, I hoped they didn’t.

Thankfully, the recorders in Talira’s office caught audio as well as visuals, otherwise, this exercise would have been pointless, what with them stiffening into mission mode as soon as the door closed. I could read hardly anything from their body language.

“Yes?” Talira said.

“The scan of my brain that you showed Zaeden,” Korix said. “Is it accurate? Not something that you used to influence him.”

My grandmother would have done something like that? She knew how I felt about Korix! She knew what a misrepresentation of his health would have done to me...

Of course she would have.

“It’s accurate,” Talira said. “I’m sorry for revealing your secret. I thought he knew, considering—”

“No apology necessary. I should have explained things to him before now.”

Korix paused for a moment before continuing.

“Are my contingencies in place?”

For a split second, Talira’s emptiness cracked, but it quickly reasserted itself.

“Look at me, Korix.”

I nearly jumped out of my skin. Besides the time when I’d first learned it, my grandmother had never called Korix by his name, not around me at least. He had a similar reaction, even minimal as it was.

Once she had his attention, Talira said, “I would never, in a million years, go against your wishes with this. Your contingencies are in place, but if you insist on following this course of action, might I suggest that you let yourself live a little before...? Before. Enjoy Zae-zae. Ignore everything I taught you when it comes to that part of your life. I was wrong to stifle your natural inclinations.”

For once, I couldn’t read Korix at all. He’d gone as empty as a human could get, and seeing it fluttered my heart, but not in a good way.

“Advice acknowledged,” he said. “Your orders, my *shukusen*?”

Sighing, Talira rubbed her eyes.

“Go home with Zaeden,” she said. “Stay with him until further notice.”

With a bow, Korix said, “Yes, my *shukusen*.”

Without another word, he marched toward the door, and I withdrew from the recorder, sucking on my lip. What had that been about?

When Korix emerged from the office, I tried to grab his hand, *my* hand, but he brushed past me before I could take hold of it. I didn’t think he meant to slight me with this. In fact, I doubted anything lay behind the near miss. He’d turned inward with everything on the outside relegated to

a lower level of cognizance.

This detachment continued throughout our short trip to the roof, only lessening after we'd climbed into my parents' skycruiser. Korix automatically reached for the console before remembering himself. If he didn't know the coordinates for my parents' apartment, I'd be surprised, but for things like this, I was supposed to initiate now. It was disconcerting.

Korix slumped while I inputted our destination, and we lifted into the air. Once we were on our way, I unabashedly stared at him, further abusing my lip with my teeth.

Why had he gone so quiet? Did it have something to do with his brain scan? He had yet to explain what was wrong with him or why he was so concerned about it. And what were these 'contingencies' that he'd mentioned?

Much as I wanted to ask these questions and solve the puzzle of him, I wouldn't, not today at least. From everything he'd revealed in Talira's office, it was obvious that he'd been through hell for these last five years, more so than normal.

These last five years.

"Ko?" I softly said. "I need to ask something that you might not want to answer. I'm sorry for it."

My fascination with him had transferred to the view outside, where shuttle and transport hulls were glistening in the afternoon sun.

"What is it?" Korix asked.

Getting the question out took me a couple of tries while my fingers tightened around themselves.

"Was any of it real?" I finally managed to say. "I know that what happened after the Crescent Incident was you. That first time we..."

The past flashed before my eyes, every beautiful moment of the night when our relationship's dynamic had changed. When we'd let ourselves acknowledge—if not verbally—that we loved each other.

"But everything after that," I continued with a lump in my throat. "Was all of it *him*? The cold you. The one who—"

Hurt me so badly.

"Please, Ko. I need to know if I was so blind that I didn't notice you weren't... you. I need to know how badly I failed you."

I strained my ears for his answer, which made the time spent waiting for it interminably long. Something clunked—the divider between us lowering—and a slide of cloth over leather ended with Korix's hip against mine. Reaching around me, he nudged my cheek until I reluctantly met his eyes.

“You didn’t fail me,” he said. “The Ancients may be masters at manipulating emotions, but *they* don’t understand them. *They* especially don’t understand anything associated with love. In fact, those feelings repel the Ancients, so every time you enticed me into your bed or reminded me of why I can’t love you, *it* fled from me. Those brief moments gave me the strength I needed to keep fighting. They’re why I lasted for as long as I did, and yes. All of it was real.

“Every kiss. Every discussion of our mental states that led to us lazily lying against one another or doing other things. Every time you gushed about a book that I’d recommended or I surprised you with your favorite meal. It was me, Zae. Everything.”

The lump in my throat was making it hard to swallow while the burn in my eyes had blurred Korix’s features, but I didn’t want him to see how much his answer had relieved me. If I did, it would show him how distressing I’d found the question.

“Well, good,” I said, sniffing. “I’m glad I didn’t make a complete fool of myself over these last five years.”

With a soft smile, Korix brushed his knuckles below my eye.

“You’ve never looked like a fool to me,” he said.

I wasn’t quick enough to stop my flush this time, so I tried to hide it instead, jerking my head forward. Korix only followed me, though. Even in our close confines, he found a way to straddle my legs, hunching so that he didn’t bang his head on the ceiling. I fully expected him to kiss me, but to my surprise, he simply laid his cheek on my shoulder with the tip of his nose brushing my neck. He ran his fingers through my hair while I circled my arms around his waist, resting my clasped hands on the small of his back.

“When do you think this need to touch one another will fade?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought I’d lost you. You thought you’d killed me. Those make powerful drives for increased affection, even for us.”

Trapped in warmth, I should be worried, looking to free myself from this position. In fact, if it had been anyone but Korix pushing me down, I probably would have been struggling to get out, but right now, I wasn’t inclined to try. With him against me, I was the most at peace that I could possibly be. I was home.

Speaking of which, maybe I should start *that* conversation, the one that ended with me telling him about Leski. At some point, I should probably confess my new feelings for him too.

“Ko,” I started.

He clamped his mouth on my neck, and a gasp cut off anything I’d wanted to say. When he stayed in place, I released one hand’s hold on the other, digging my fingers into his back.

“Nothing visible, Ko,” I said.

A slight nip of his teeth on my neck preceded the bite of them into my shoulder, quickly relenting. I jerked anyway, unexpected as that had been, and he laughed against my skin.

Fine. If he was going to be like that, I could play too. I waited until he'd lifted his mouth off of my shoulder with a pleased noise coming from him, but then, my fingers were in his hair, pulling him to me. As I covered his wince with my lips, I slid my hands under his shirt, raking my fingernails over his skin. He stiffened, and near-instantly, I relented, pressing him to me instead.

We walked a delicate line when deliberately doing these semi-painful things. Too much and we might enter mission mode, violently defending against a perceived enemy. I'd been *extraordinarily* lucky that it hadn't happened when I'd bitten him before, abandoning my usual caution by surrendering to instinct as I had. But nothing so calamitous occurred now.

We melted into one another with any space between our bodies unacceptable. I stretched in my seat, chasing Korix's lips when he came up for air, but he pushed me back down. He shuffled forward while I shimmied beneath him until we were pressed hip to hip, chest to chest, shoulder to shoulder.

But we didn't take it any further than this. It was enough to be as close as we possibly could in this setting.

Soon enough, the skycruiser landed, and I heard the last of its dings, the ones meant to warn us of our arrival. With a quiet chuckle, Korix sat up as much as he could, sweeping bright eyes over me. He was a mess with his hair sticking up in spikes and his clothing rumpled, but then, I was sure I looked the same.

I'd love to stay here and continue with this, basking in my own little bubble of safety, but I had responsibilities to keep, too many to count. So, sighing, I patted down Korix's hair, getting his appearance in order, and he did the same for me, collapsing into the seat beside me once we were done.

When he reached to open the door, I grabbed his wrist.

"Before we head inside, there's something you should know," I said. "Do you remember that girl I danced with at the Founder's Day Ball? The one you warned me about?"

Quirking an eyebrow, Korix said, "The pretty one, right? What about her?"

"She's staying here," I said, "with me."

For a split second, I could swear that Korix flinched, but if he did, it was gone so quickly that I doubted myself.

Smirking, he said, "I see. Couldn't resist you, could she?"

I rubbed the back of my neck.

“Actually, she did most of the attracting,” I said. “She helped me save you, for one.”

Korix’s smile turned brittle.

“She did? That’s... odd,” he said before shaking himself. “She was the unHoused woman you had with you, yes? The one in the middle of changing her features. I didn’t recognize her then, but with what you’ve said...”

When I nodded, Korix’s brittle smile softened slightly.

“I’m happy for you, Zae,” he said. “Let me know how you want to handle things.”

Yes... I’d never had a partner and someone I was... dating? I’d never had two people I was involved with meet before, always working to keep them separate in the past. How did one go about making an introduction like that?

“I will,” I said, “First, I have to make sure that she hasn’t run off. Talira would kill me if I lost her.”

I clambered out of the skycruiser, leaving Korix snorting a laugh behind me. When I scanned the hangar, though, my mood soured.

My parents were waiting by the door into the apartment, as they’d been doing every time I’d returned here in the last two weeks. Great. This would be interesting.

As we approached, the tense state that my parents had been holding dropped from them with mission mode donned in its stead. I’d never seen them like this, so empty and blank, and frankly, it made my skin prickle.

“Mom. Dad,” I said on stopping. “I have another guest with me. My apologies. I should have messaged you about him before now.”

“It wasn’t needed,” mom said.

“Our home is always open to the *Lokke Vitras*,” dad added.

They bowed to Korix, and when I glanced at him, I understood why my parents had gone so hyper-alert, besides the fact that *he* was in their home. He looked perfectly pleasant, presenting a congenial smile, but the warrior in me hissed at the sight of him. Why was he upset?

“Second Stratus Mira and Third Stratus Ximon. A pleasure to meet you in person,” he said. “*Shukusen* Talira often speaks of her son and his wife with pride and for good reason too. Your work in our House has always been beyond reproach.”

“Our thanks,” mom said.

Turning to her, Korix folded his hand in front of him.

“Ah, but we *have* met before, haven’t we, Mira?” he said. “A few decades ago, Talira sent you after me as a nudge to hurry my mission along. You did quite well in our fight before I took you down.”

Mom had fought Korix before? No wonder she and dad had always been afraid of him... and me. Huh.

Flushing, mom said, “High praise indeed, coming from whom it does. Please, First Stratus, make yourself at home here, and don’t hesitate to ask for anything that you might find lacking. We’re happy to serve.”

“Much appreciated,” Korix said. “If this is so, I’d like to ask a question.”

When his smile dropped off his face, my insides clenched.

Without waiting for my parents’ consent, Korix continued, “In our years together, Zaeden has often spoken of his brother and sister, but when you come up, he always brushes the subject off with a laugh, even knowing that I can see the hurt in his eyes. Why is that?”

I jerked toward him. What the *fuck* did he think he was doing?

“*Evushk*, far be it from me to tell you what to do,” I said, barely keeping myself from hissing, “but is this really a good use of our time?”

I followed this up with a message.

Please, let me handle this myself.

Before Korix could respond, dad laid a hand on my shoulder.

“No, the *Lokke Vitras* has asked a good question,” he said. “In answer, I’d say that for years, we’ve been horrible parents to Zaeden, letting fear rule us when we should have known better. We most assuredly need to make amends with him, but how we do that shouldn’t be decided by *the man who stole our son from us.*”

Ho.ly. shit. That had been brave. I knew Korix well enough to realize that he’d only respect a fit of harmless defiance like this, but dad didn’t. And still, he’d spoken up.

Korix took everything in, and I could tell he understood what a mistake he’d made in trying to defend me. I could also tell that he was enjoying the resulting drama from the faintest of smiles on his lips, something that had mom tugging her husband to her side.

“I suppose you can supersede my authority for this decision. You’re punishing yourselves enough for your mistake as it is,” he said. “And I am truly... sorry that taking Zaeden as my *kuvesk* proved necessary. I wish I could remain as Lutov’s *Lokke Vitras* until the homeland’s end, but unfortunately, that’s not to be.”

Had I ever heard Korix apologize before? The words had sounded forced from him, and I didn't mean that he'd found them distasteful. I meant they'd sounded quite literally forced, extracted from where centuries of required disuse had kept them buried.

"We... thank you, *Lokke Vitras*," mom said with a question in her voice.

When Korix dipped his head to them, I jumped into this break in the conversation.

"Forgive me, but where's Leski?" I said. "I'd like to check on her."

Like a dog with a bone, my parents leapt on the subject change.

"She's the reason we were waiting for you," mom said. "Something's come up, but when we tried sending you a message about it earlier, it wouldn't go through."

Which meant they'd sent it while I'd been in Talira's office. The security processes guarding that place were formidable. I should know, having cracked them before.

"And?" I asked.

"Leski's packing," dad said. "After Phen and Feena left for headquarters, her father insisted on seeing her. They got into another argument, and when Niklaus left, he told us that he was getting his daughter out of Xygek once he's finished his business here."

...He'd done what now?

"That bastard," I said, keeping my voice cheery. "Thank you for getting this information to me as quickly as you could, dad. Mom. If you'll excuse me?"

"Of course."

My parents got out of my way, which was wise on their part. If they hadn't, I might have run them over.

Once I was in the apartment, my rapid pace became a jog while I clenched my hands into fists.

"I'm going to kill him," I said. "How dare he... how *dare* he?"

"You really like this girl," Korix said beside me.

Glancing at him, I said, "Yes, I do."

Then, I broke into a sprint, hoping I could reach Leski before she made a mistake that she might regret.