

Chapter 78: Helping with Her Father

As we approached my room, we slowed down while a funny look passed over Korix's face.

"She's sleeping in the same bed as you?" he asked.

Somehow, it didn't surprise me that he knew which of these rooms was mine.

"Yes. It's easier to watch her that way," I said. "Plus, I sleep better when someone's in bed with me, something I almost forgot over the years, and for the last two weeks, I've needed that aid, what with all the research and worrying about you."

"I see," Korix said. "I-"

He stopped before I could sweep us inside, passing a hand over his face.

"This is so strange. I'm used to correcting your behavior when it contradicts what you'll become, but not only am I unsure about whether our current circumstances make me your *evushk*, but your arrangement with Leski seems to be working for you."

After waving a hand over me, he pinched his lips together, probably disapproving of my impatient shuffle from foot to foot.

With a sigh, he said, "It's not important right now. Should I come in with you?"

That was a good question. From a relationship standpoint, introducing Korix to Leski when she was upset didn't seem like a good idea, but having his support in there would most assuredly help me get through this. Having him at my back had always comforted me in the greatest of ways.

Also, Leski was technically under my supervision, a hostage of sorts. If she insisted on doing what her father wanted, I could use Korix's help with restraining her. Not that I anticipated or wanted it to go that way.

"As in all things, I could use you," I said, "but you don't seem comfortable with the idea. If you'd rather wait outside, you can, so long as you know I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Because he was as much my 'prisoner' as Leski was.

With a faint smile, Korix said, "Since when has my comfort been a factor in decisions like this?"

I'd always considered it, but in the past, my mission or role had overridden what either of us would have wanted. I didn't tell Korix this, though.

"I leave it up to you," I said.

But I was secretly relieved when he entered my room after me, quickly finding a corner to stand in. I was even more grateful when I saw Leski.

That wonderful woman was hunched at the foot of my bed with a packed bag beside her, holding her head in one hand while she petted Ace with the other. She was trying to keep her crying quiet, but it wasn't going well for her. The effort of it must have masked our entrance because she had yet to look up.

Ace saw me, though, hesitantly wagging his tail as he held perfectly still. When he saw Korix, he wriggled quite a bit, but even then, he didn't move. Damn. He must like Leski if he'd rather stay with her than greet us.

Edging toward her, I hovered a hand over her shoulder, unsure if touching her was a good idea right now.

"Leski?" I softly said.

When she jerked her head up, it knocked my hand to the side, and Ace bumped his nose beneath it before scurrying past. As soon as Leski laid her eyes on me, her face went red, screwing up with effort.

"Zae, what-?" she stammered. "I-"

Cupping her chin, I wiped away a tear.

"Are you ok?" I asked.

Closing her eyes, Leski chuckled to herself before loudly sniffing.

"Why do you do that?" she asked. "You come in here, see that I'm about to leave after what I said earlier today, and ask whether *I'm* ok. Not why I'm packed or what I'm doing. Whenever there's a problem, you always look to my happiness first, not your own. Why?"

What she'd said earlier...? Oh. That she was falling for me.

Nope. I wouldn't let that distract me right now.

"I... don't know," I said. "I do that?"

She must be seeing me through rose-colored glasses. I wasn't as selfless as she believed. I didn't think. It wasn't something I'd considered.

“You do,” Korix said.

When I glanced over my shoulder at him, he flashed a knowing grin at me, leaning against a wall while massaging the top of Ace’s head.

“You’re plenty selfish about other things,” he said, “but when it comes to your partners’ happiness, you give your all.”

Huh. That was... interesting.

“Why is he here?” Leski hissed. “He’s a *traitor*. He- he hurt you.”

Oh, shit. I’d forgotten about her animosity toward Korix, or rather, I hadn’t expected it to carry over from our time in the House Cerullis facility. Apparently, it had.

“*Shukusen* Talira and I woke him up earlier today,” I said. “We need his help, especially since our enemy’s no longer influencing him, but the small possibility that *it* still has a hold on him is why he’s with me. I’m keeping an eye on him.”

Hell, Leski was scary when she was angry. With her fair skin and freckles, the flush swarming over her face was much more vivid than it would be on another person, and against it, the silver in her hair glinted like steel in a forge.

“You. Keep an eye on *him*,” she said. “He wiped the floor with you the last time you fought!”

As if I’d needed that reminder.

This meeting of my partners was *not* going the way I’d wanted. Not only that but drama like this was the last thing we should indulge in right now. Unfortunately, I wasn’t sure how to get us back on track, but even still, I tried.

“Thank Mother Time you were there to save my life, then,” I said with a sardonic grin.

Leski didn’t hear me, though. She pushed past me, striding to stick a finger in Korix’s face. With a soft bark, Ace scrambled to get out of the way, but I didn’t blame him. I wouldn’t want to be in between them right now either.

“Because of you...” she hissed. “Because of you!”

Her finger crept closer to Korix’s eye, and as it moved forward, Leski spread the others until it looked like she was reaching out to him. He never retreated from this, just as he never looked away from her.

I wasn’t sure if he could, actually. Enough intensity was blazing from his eyes that the average person might perceive it.

“I didn’t want to hurt Zaeden. Every second that the Ancient manipulated me into attacking him, I fought *it*, but that doesn’t excuse what I did,” he said. “You’re right to dislike me, especially given the context of our association to this point, but please. Don’t ruin Zaeden’s happiness over something that we should handle solely between ourselves, not when he places so much care in maintaining yours.”

Sucking in a gasp, Leski released it in a hiss, lowering her hand as if it were on a marionette string.

“Not fair,” she said.

With a sad smile, Korix said, “I rarely am.”

I had *many* questions—how the hell did they know one another?—but before they could get into it again, I slid between them. Having both of them crowding me was... distracting, but I shunted that aside, focusing my attention away from newly concocted fantasies.

“Ok! I hate to interrupt,” I said, “but Leski, can you tell me what’s going on? My parents said something about a fight with your father.”

“Yes.”

Making a face, Leski returned to the bed, running her fingers over her bag.

“Your discussion with him freaked him out,” she said. “He told me to pack. Apparently, we’re going into hiding for a while.”

Hiding? Where did Niklaus think he could hide? Ibis? Sure, that landmass was much less monitored than the homeland, but two Lutovish would stick out like a sore thumb there, and no other place would make for a viable refuge.

“Is that what you want?” I asked. “If you’d rather duck out of this fight, I’d understand.”

Whirling on me, Leski shouted, “*Hell*, no. Lutov is my home as much as it’s yours, Zae. I want to stand in its defense, but... I also can’t defy my father. Not with something like this, at least. He holds more power than you might think.”

I didn’t doubt it. Live for as long as Niklaus had, and one was bound to gather power to oneself, unless that same person was incredibly incompetent, I supposed. Niklaus had never seemed like that, though.

And he’d use his power to take his daughter’s choice away from her.

With my fingers twitching, I said, “It seems we need to have a chat with your father, then. Remind him who he means to mess with.”

“I’m not asking for your help,” Leski said.

Oh, my determined warrior in training. Crossing to her, I slid my hands along her jaw.

“Good,” I said. “I wasn’t going to do it for you.”

I kissed her forehead.

“Would you like to come with me?” I asked. “This chat could get... heated, and I know that could be uncomfortable for you.”

For a moment, Leski went still, presumably considering the question, but soon enough, she gave a short nod, as if to herself.

“I want to come,” she said, “but I don’t want to confront my father. When we reach him, can I stay out of sight?”

Brushing my thumb over her cheek, I smiled.

“That’s a perfectly reasonable request.”

“Then... we should go now,” Leski said while making a face. “Before I change my mind.”

“It’s ok if you do, you know. No one here would think less of you for it,” I said, “but you’re right. We should go.”

As I led the way out of my room, I requested a check on Niklaus’ positional coordinates, as shown in the Lutovish network. Typically, people could only locate someone else’s array if that person had given the seeker access to it. If someone wasn’t on a person’s accepted list, the seeker couldn’t randomly check where they were, not anonymously at least.

But as with most things, my *Lokke Vitras* privileges granted me *much* greater access to... pretty much everything, actually.

As we headed toward the hangar in my parents’ apartment, Leski flat-out ignored Korix, hurriedly striding to keep him out of view, and once we’d reached a skycruiser, she climbed into the front of it without checking what our seating preferences might be. I glanced at Korix, curious about what his reaction would be, but he gave me nothing, merely settling into the skycruiser’s backseat.

What the *hell* was going on with those two?

After we’d lifted off, heading toward a building on the northern side of the city, I spent a few minutes considering whether I should just ask them that question. Maybe if we had their problem out in the open, we could resolve it.

Before I could open my mouth to try doing that, though, a message from Korix slid into my array.

I assume that by now, you’ve figured out I’ve known Niklaus and Leski for a while.

On reading that, it took me more effort than normal to continue facing forward instead of jerking my head to stare at him. I couldn't believe *he'd* been the one to broach this subject.

It was beginning to look that way, yeah, I wrote back. *You planning to tell me about that?*

Receiving his reply took a while, but I could see why he'd taken that time after reading it.

Unfortunately, this is another secret I can't tell you about, so there's not much I can share until you've learned the story through other sources. What I can say is that no matter what Niklaus may tell you, I never hurt Leski's mother. She was... a friend. Of sorts. And I was lucky enough to avoid the circumstances around her death.

That had to be one of the most carefully worded messages Korix had sent me in a while, but given its context, that made sense. The *death* of Leski's mother? Had he been involved in that?

Mother Time help me if that were true. I wasn't sure if I could reconcile him and Leski with that sort of history between them.

For now, I was determined not to worry about it. Since Korix wouldn't tell me more, I'd just have to... wait. See what came out over time. Maybe I could coerce an explanation out of Niklaus in the coming confrontation.

Soon enough, I had to focus on the world outside the skycruiser as it slowed to a stop at a nearby landing pad. On noting where we were, I frowned.

Unlike in centuries past, Lutov didn't have a true element of organized crime. Instead, people who wanted to break our laws usually did that on their own, usually in an attempt to better their position in life. There were, however, loose rings of people who operated within the gray area between legal and illegal, and those rings tended to center themselves here, in the middle tiers of Xygek's north-western tip.

What was Niklaus doing here? Leski had said he meant to complete some business before retrieving her. If said business was taking place here, then...

That was a bad sign.

After getting out of the skycruiser, I met Korix's gaze over it, and seeing a strange mix of resignation and mission mode already settling over him, I set my jaw.

Bending into the skycruiser, I asked, "Would you like to stay here, Leski? It would probably be more comfortable for you than waiting outside while we talk with your father."

The further we kept her away from the coming conversation, the better.

Hunched over on herself, Leski softly said, "I don't know..."

Without a word, I reached over to lower the front seat's divider before scooting to her side. Pulling her close, I just held her for a moment, waiting for her to relax.

"It'll be ok," I said. "*Evushk* and I will tell your father that he can't bring you with him into hiding. He can't argue with the *Lokke Vitras*, no matter how much power he might have. He can't take you away unless you want that."

"I don't," Leski harshly said into my chest. "Stop suggesting that I might!"

Nodding, I said, "Ok. Just remember you have freedom of choice here. You can go with us to confront him. You can wait outside while we do it instead. You can stay here, if that feels easier. You can ride along in my array's audio and visuals, if you like. Or you can take the skycruiser home, and *evushk* and I can take public transportation back once we're finished. Whatever you want to do is fine."

It took Leski a few moments to decide, but soon enough, she pushed me away so she could meet my eyes.

"You'd give me access to such a deep part of your array?" she asked. "It's not full permissions but still. Letting me see through your eyes is... a lot."

With a smile, I said, "Of course I would. You're too good of a person to hurt me through my array, and it would only be for a short time. I wouldn't leave that function open to access after we're done here."

"Well..."

Pausing, Leski blew a strand of hair out of her face.

"While I'm honored that you think so highly of me, I wouldn't feel comfortable with invading your array to that depth," she said. "So, could you let me know which building my father is in-?"

"Certainly," I interrupted, already sending her the place's coordinates.

Rolling her eyes, Leski continued, "I'll watch through the recorders around there, and I think... I think I'll stay here, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't."

Leaning forward, I softly kissed her before pulling back with a smile.

"This shouldn't take long."

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