

# Chapter 79: Suspicions Validated

After three months of repeating it, I was getting sick of having this conversation. Over my palm, Leski's image wavered the slightest bit as she blew a strand of hair out of her eyes, and internally sighing, I waited for her to make the next move in this bout of verbal sparring.

"You're sure they're safe with you?" she said. "I know I keep asking that, but the last time they were with you on a mission, it didn't end well."

That was about what I'd thought.

"Yes, they're safe," I said. "Every time I have to fight, I leave them in a random, remote location before going in. Leski, you know as well as I do what while our job as parents is to keep Baely safe, we should also let her make her own decisions. She's been exceedingly insistent about helping me, no matter how often I've asked her if she wouldn't rather go home. It's gotten to the point that forcing her to leave me would probably be harmful."

Which were all things I'd said before.

Grimacing, Leski said, "I know that. I'm just worried, Zae."

Weren't we all right now?

"That's perfectly understandable, given recent events. I'm worried too," I said before grinning, "but isn't that what we signed up for when we applied to be parents?"

Giggling, Leski tucked a disobedient strand of hair behind her ear.

"That's fair enough," she said. "How are things besides that? Anything I can do to help?"

Since she'd retreated from the *Lokke Vitras* side of my life? Not functionally. Even still...

"Just tell me that you love me, you amazingly clever woman," I said. "I'm... at times, I just need a reminder that you support me, in all things."

Snorting, Leski said, "Of course I love and support you, silly. How could I not? You're the kindest and most giving person I know, besides perhaps Baely and Ko. Who wouldn't love that?"

"Plenty of people. Trust me," I said.

Besides, she was being too generous. Kind and giving? No matter how much I strove to be better, I was only those things when it suited me.

Leski raised her eyebrows with concern starting its splash across her face.

“Wow, someone’s going maudlin,” she said. “Will you be ok, love?”

After a vigorous headshake, I slapped my cheeks and smiled.

“You know me. I have to feel sorry for myself every so often,” I said, “and I’m always ok.”

Frowning, Leski narrowed her eyes at me.

“Yeah, ok. I believe that,” she sarcastically said, “but whatever. Where are you headed now? Can I know?”

“Unfortunately, no,” I said. “All I can say is that it will be closer to Xygek but...”

Chewing on the inside of my lip, I glanced over my shoulder at the public shuttle I was on. On this trip, I’d opted for this mode of transportation over a skycruiser because at times, exposing the ‘great *Lokke Vitras*’ to the general public was important, otherwise I started fading from their minds, in one way or another.

I was *clearly* the focus of this vehicle’s passengers now, though. No matter how much they studiously avoided looking at me, their stiff postures betrayed where their attention lay.

On the other side of the shuttle, Baely was hunched over a table, playing *phansha* with another woman. Slowly, they reached out to move one of their pieces, which made their opponent groan, but I had no sympathy for the girl. Baely’s identity should have been obvious when she and I had boarded the shuttle together. Did this girl think her *Lokke Vitras* wouldn’t teach his daughter the basics of strategy?

Shaking my head, I turned back to my raised palm and the depiction of my wife hovering over it.

“We may be coming home soon,” I said. “I only have two more locations to check, and after that, I’ll drop Baely off. I’m not sure how long I can stay, but we can at least check in.”

With her face brightening, Leski said, “How exciting! I’m looking forward to it. It’s too bad that Ko won’t be here, though.”

Ah, yes. Him. Nearly two months he’d been at the whole ‘construction of a sanctuary’ thing, and I hadn’t heard from him the entire time. Not a single message. It was like he’d gone deep cover, which concerned me. Since I’d taken his place as the *Lokke Vitras*, he hadn’t done any serious work for House Kolb, so why had he treated a supposedly diplomatic mission like it was something more critical?

“Has he contacted you recently?” I asked.

Shaking her head, Leski couldn't hide her troubled expression.

"And that worries me, Zae," she said. "Fragile as he's become over the years, he shouldn't be doing any intense mission work, not alone at least."

No. No, he shouldn't.

Shoving a summoned image of Korix during his last fit out of my mind, I said, "I'll check on him after leaving Baely with you. All right?"

"That might be for the best," Leski said.

With a sharp nod, I said, "Anything else? I'd like to get back to our daughter."

Cocking her head, Leski graced me with a fond half-smile.

"I'm all good," she said. "Have fun with Baely while you can, and keep them safe. I'll see you soon?"

"You will," I said. "I love you."

"Love you too."

Grinning, I cut the connection before curling my fingers into my palm. As I strode across the shuttle, people shied away from me, and ignoring that, I plopped beside my daughter as her opponent leaned forward, about to make her next move.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I said. "It'll open your *shukusen* up for attack in another two moves or so."

Jumping, the other girl fixed her eyes on me for a moment before leaping to her feet.

"I'm... going to get a drink," she said.

Shaking my head, I watched her go. Had she thought I'd bite her or something?

"Sorry to interrupt your game, sweetie," I said.

"It's ok. I already had it in the bag," Baely said. "I was only stringing it along because I liked looking at her."

While I stared, they yawned, stretching their arms overhead, before leaning against me. Were we about to enter the time of their romantic and sexual awakening?

I mean... it would make sense. Baely was twenty-five. That might be a little late to start the dating process, but stranger things had happened. Considering how indifferent they'd always seemed about that part of life, I'd never really thought about what that would look like for them.

Not that I needed to worry about my daughter. Korix, Leski, and I had taught her how to have a safe sex life *years* ago while also explaining what she should look for in a potential dating partner. When she eventually decided to venture into that side of her life, she'd be fine.

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders, I squeezed her while she yawned again.

"How's mom?" she asked on the tail end of it.

"Fine. Worried."

Snorting, Baely laughed under their breath.

"Of course she is," they said before looking up at me. "How long before we get there?"

"Unless something horrible happens, about an hour," I said.

Nodding, Baely nestled deeper into my side.

"Then, I'm taking a nap," they said.

And their body near immediately loosened into sleep. They must have started a dream sequence.

Hugging them to me, I settled into my own seat, watching our surroundings flash by through the window opposite me. The longer I continued to stare at it, the more the people below it shifted in place, but for once, I didn't care about whether I was disturbing them. In this moment, I'd found a rare spot of peace. I had my daughter safe and with me. I was whole in body and mind and only slightly fatigued to boot. Soon, I'd be done with an unpleasant task, one I'd started months ago, and while I might need a significant amount of time for recovery once I was done, I'd be able to relax, at least partially.

I was fully aware of the myriad and varied problems that I was ignoring at the moment, but to life, the Collective, or whatever else might be controlling my fate, please. Let me have this peace, just for a short while.

A good half hour passed like this, and I was beginning to drop off myself when a connection established in my array. It was Talira, had to be. She was the only one who could do this without my permission.

"Hello, my *Lokke Vitras*," she said. "I see you've almost finished with the task that I've assigned to you."

Stiffening, I gently shook Baely off of me before hurrying to the semi-privacy found at the other end of the shuttle. I knew that tone of voice. I hated it because it usually preceded her giving me an order that I'd struggle to carry out.

Like what Sanya had warned me might happen, weeks ago. Shit.

“My pleasure to have served, my *shukusen*,” I said. “How may I do so again?”

With a soft sigh, Talira swallowed loud enough for me to hear it.

“I’m so sorry, Zae-zae,” she whispered with tears in her voice.

Oh... fuck. Squeezing my eyes closed, I braced for what was coming, and after a long moment, Talira filled the silence.

“My *Lokke Vitras*. I have a new mission for you...”

---

Revision #1

Created 16 February 2025 00:33:35 by FatalisticFable

Updated 16 February 2025 00:41:05 by FatalisticFable