

Chapter 79: That's... Super Suspicious

I closed the skycruiser's door and headed off, waving for Korix to follow as I did. Not that he'd needed the prompt. He'd already been moving by the time I'd turned around.

As always, people stared as Korix and I moved across the tier, although most of the attention went to him. Unfortunately, that attention seemed even more intense than usual. This, combined with what we knew about this area of Xygek, had Korix much tenser than usual, which made me wince.

"Sorry I couldn't get us closer," I said under my breath. "I'd have set us down right outside the storage facility entrance, if I hadn't thought it would alert Niklaus to our arrival."

Shaking his head, Korix said, "Don't apologize. You did the right thing."

"That doesn't change the fact that this *isn't helping* with either of our mental states," I said before laughing.

Korix watched me from the corner of his eye until I'd calmed down.

At his raised eyebrow, I said, "Technically, we're disobeying orders right now, you know. Talira told us to relax."

To my shock, that comment prompted a smile, of all things, from him.

"That's one of the only perks of the *Lokke Vitras* role, *kuvesk*," he said. "Sometimes, we get to ignore orders, if that means keeping Lutov safe."

So, the notion I'd considered earlier today had been right. Good to know.

"You're right, though," Korix continued. "Once we're finished with Niklaus, we should carve out some time to... relax."

Mother Time, he'd said that word with such distaste, but I understood his reaction. It was hard to take time off when you knew that doing so might get people killed.

"That's the plan!" I brightly said before grimacing. "Unless something else comes along to ruin it."

Knowing my luck, that was almost guaranteed. I hoped that, for once, things would go my way over the next few hours.

As we approached the storage facility where Niklaus was located, I looked to Korix for instructions on our plan. It took several seconds of staring at his unchanged profile to remember that technically, I was in the lead this time. I needed to be the one with a plan.

Hell, that was a disconcerting thought.

Still, it wasn't that hard to do. Before we could enter the facility, I held up a hand for Korix to pause, requesting a connection with my sister all the while.

"Hey, Zae, where are you?" Feena said as soon as she'd accepted. "Phen and I were planning on forcing you into a mini celebration of your partner's return, what with Talira basically ordering us to take a break. Although... are you out with Leski? We can't find her at the apartment. Oo! Are you introducing her to the *Lokke Vitras*? How's that going?"

I winced. What a string of information and questions coming at me, all at once.

"Actually, I'm in northwest Xygek, about to have a conversation with Leski's father," I said. "I might need backup before the end of that, so... I was hoping you'd join me."

After a long sigh, Feena said, "Zaeden. You aren't supposed to be working right now."

"I know, but Niklaus has been harassing Leski all afternoon, which I can't have. I'd like to address the issue now," I said, "but after we're finished, maybe we could meet up with Phen for drinks."

There was a long silence and then.

"Fine. I guess that's a decent reason to continue *wearing yourself out*, but I swear, Zae. If you don't follow Talira's orders after this..."

"I've got it! Message received and duly noted," I said. "I'll send you the coordinates for my location."

"And I'll see you there," Feena said before cutting the connection.

When I faced Korix, he had both eyebrows raised.

"Asking for help?" he asked.

I could practically feel the skepticism and disapproval coming off of him.

Rolling my eyes, I said, "That was Feena. She's been my support team for the last two weeks. Plus, this isn't an official mission, *evushk*. It's not like someone untrustworthy will find out about it."

Except Niklaus but I didn't think he was the type to share a seeming humiliation with other people.

Korix nodded with those incredulously raised eyebrows coming back down.

"And the plan?" he asked.

Shrugging, I said, “We go in. I scare the hell out of him before reminding him of his place. You reinforce my performance however you see fit.”

“All right,” Korix said. “I’ll follow your lead.”

I suppressed the shudder that wanted to roll up my spine on hearing those words. This situation was so *strange*. I’d been in charge of my own missions before. Of course I had! But that had never happened when I’d had Korix with me.

The change was... I wasn’t sure. Unnerving. But also... good?

I tried not to think about it as I led the way into the storage facility. A handful of people were here, probably finishing up with their work for the day. It was getting fairly late, but still, I wasn’t surprised to find stragglers here.

Lutov and the Houses didn’t have a prescribed work schedule, like we sometimes enforced in Ibis. While most people enjoyed completing their daily pursuits throughout the morning and afternoon, some preferred the isolation found in the evening for their work.

Korix and I avoided these people as much as possible. As we approached the relatively large chamber where we’d find Niklaus, we split up with him heading for the room’s closest entrance while I trotted up a set of stairs into the space’s raised catwalks.

In the chamber, Niklaus was engrossed in conversation with a petite woman, who was listening to him with crossed arms and a look of thinly veiled disgust. Unfortunately, their conversation ended before I could get close enough to overhear it, and the woman stalked off, presumably to complete whatever request Niklaus had just made of her. Tempted as I was to follow her so I could figure out what Leski’s father was up to, I ignored her, getting into position instead.

As soon as the chamber was empty of everyone but Niklaus and myself, I dropped to the floor, rolling to spread my impact with it, and as I returned to my feet, I tackled the other man, landing with my knee between his shoulder blades and my rifle’s barrel against his head.

“Niklaus! Good to see you,” I said. “I heard an interesting rumor about you today. You’ve decided to take your daughter into hiding with you, huh?”

He tried to respond, but his stalled diaphragm would only allow him a choked sound. On hearing it, I pressed down harder on him.

“No, no! There’s no need to say a word,” I said. “I’m just here to remind you about who you mean to fuck with. So, in case you’ve forgotten, you’re in no position to take what’s mine, and right now, Leski is under *my* protection. You force her to do anything she doesn’t want to do, and I will hunt you down. You’ll run to the ends of the earth, finding refuge when you most need it, but right when you feel safe again, I’ll be there, waiting for you to wake up with a rifle in your face.

“You’ve been there once before, haven’t you? Well, if there’s a second time, I won’t be nearly as merciful to you as I was back then.”

Growling under his breath, Niklaus again tried to speak, but before he could get a word out, Korix melted out of the shadows nearby. Crouching, he hung his wrists over his knees, cocking his head, while the other man turned to stone beneath me.

“Hello, Niklaus. It’s been a while,” he said. “I’d ask how you’ve been but...”

With a smirk, he pointedly ran his eyes over Niklaus’ pinned state.

“Also, in case it wasn’t obvious, if my *kuvesk* is too busy to find you in the proposed scenario, I’ll come after you instead,” he continued. “I’ll soon be coming into more free time than I’ve had in a while, and not only do I like Leski, but I owe her a debt. Then again, you already know that, don’t you?”

How did Korix owe Leski a...?

Not now.

With our threats made, Korix and I hopped to our feet while I hauled Niklaus upright. Rounding to face him, I amiably smiled, folding my hands behind my back.

“Now, is there anything we can help you with?” I asked. “Leski mentioned you were completing some business in the city. It sounded rather urgent.”

Clearing his throat, Niklaus tugged on his shirt’s hem, straightening it.

“I don’t want anything from you... *either* of you,” he stiffly said. “You’ve made your point. I won’t go near my daughter without your say-so. So, please. Leave me be.”

Surprisingly, he seemed to mean that. I was a bit shocked that he’d give up control of his daughter so easily, but I wouldn’t protest getting what I’d wanted so easily.

Although... something about this felt *too* easy.

Narrowing my eyes, I said, “Are you sure? If you wanted, my *evushk* and I could help you finish your task here much more quickly, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yes, that’s true...” Niklaus started.

But he snapped his mouth shut as Korix came to a stop behind me.

“You...” he hissed. “You shouldn’t have anything to do with this. Once I finished my business with Talira years ago, you agreed to *stay away* from Leski.”

...What?

“Perhaps.”

With that one word, Korix raised the hairs all over my body. He'd sounded somewhere between murderous and amused, and that wasn't a safe place to be with him. Niklaus didn't seem to have heard the tone in Korix's voice, given how livid he looked, and I wondered if I'd soon need to stop a fight between them.

"If keeping my distance from Leski was something I agreed to, it's no longer a concern, considering our circumstances," Korix said. "Besides, we both know your daughter is more perceptive than the average person. She knows about my visits, Niklaus. I think she might know about your deal with Talira too, something I'm sure you don't want her learning about."

"I-" Niklaus started.

For some reason, nothing more than the click of a dry throat came from him after that. Before I could wonder why he seemed so intimidated, he took a step back, glancing between us.

"I had to-" he tried again.

A crash from behind us interrupted him. Whirling toward the sound, I raised my reformed rifle toward the petite woman from before, who was sprinting through an exit from the chamber. The box on the floor behind her, which she must have dropped, explained the noise. That must have been what Niklaus had sent her to retrieve.

When I saw what they box had contained, I fought an urge to both freeze and sprint after the woman to apprehend her. Old-fashioned blocks of explosives lay scattered across the floor between me and the door that she'd escaped through. Niklaus had asked the woman to get him *explosives*?

Korix took off after our new target before I could take a single step. As he flashed out of the chamber at House Kolb speed, I turned back to Niklaus, intent on keeping him contained. He was poised to bolt, so I stepped closer, pressing my rifle into the space above his heart.

"Don't," I simply said.

Thankfully, Niklaus froze, which made my job a thousand times easier.

For a moment, I considered simply waiting until Korix returned with his target. Together, we could interrogate both her and Niklaus about *what the hell* was going on here. It seemed he'd been up to something much more illegal than I'd assumed.

But as I thought about doing that and nothing more, I realized the opportunity I'd stumbled into, something that Korix had suggested I find on the way here.

When I turned a cold smile on Niklaus, he flinched, drawing in on himself.

"Considering the conversation we just had, it seems obvious that you and my *evushk* have *much* more history that I'd have expected. Just as obviously, this history seems to concern your wife, someone I find myself increasingly curious about," I said. "I want to know the story between you

all, and you—”

I shoved Niklaus back a step.

“—are going to tell me all about it.”

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