

# Chapter 80: The Worst Thing I've Ever Done

When Baely and I arrived at the dissenter's island, Korix was waiting for us with his hands folded in front of his waist and an easy smile in place. This stance wavered when our daughter emerged from the skycruiser, running so that they could engulf him in a hug.

"Hi, dad!" they chirped into his chest.

If Korix was stiff while patting Baely's head or if his smile seemed strained, only I should be able to notice it.

"Hi, sweetie," he said. "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

And he just *looked* at me.

Grinning up at him, Baely said, "I wanted it to be a surprise."

But then, the people who'd been waiting behind Korix started moving forward, and breaking his gaze, I hurried to greet them.

"Calia! Mother Time, you've done wonders with this place in such a short time!" I exclaimed.

As I embraced her, she laughed before gently pushing on me.

When I released her, she said, "Thank you, *Lokke Vitras*, but if it weren't for your life partner here, we wouldn't have gotten to this point so quickly."

Smirking, I glanced over my shoulder at Korix.

"Yes, he's always been handy like that," I said. "There's a reason I keep him around."

Coming to a stop at my side, Korix pulled me against him.

"If I recall correctly, you were the one who was 'being handy' for the first three decades after we met," he said.

But when he pressed his lips to mine, the kiss was cold and passionless. When he backed off, I play-swatted him.

“That was over a century ago!” I said before turning to Calia. “Now, would you mind showing me your lovely village? The *shukusenth* would like an update on the supplies you’ll need to reach self-sufficiency.”

With a bright smile, Calia said, “Of course. If you’ll come with me.”

We followed her into the midst of the buildings at her back. They truly had made good progress in the weeks since this project had begun. Around us, several shops and homes had already sprung off of the ground, and not far from here, I spotted the outline of a production facility on the horizon. I could see the potential here...

But I wasn’t thinking about this sanctuary’s future right now.

As if to frustrate me, my hallucination popped into being for the first time in several days.

“You should, though,” they said. “Not thinking about bad things is what got you here in the-”

Fuck the ‘I was *not* thinking’ phrasing. How about I *would not* think about this sanctuary’s future right now?

Slowly blinking, my hallucination shook their head and vanished, as had been the pattern over the last few weeks. Always, they prodded me about something I’d ‘forgotten’, complaining about my life-saving ability to just *not think* at times, before getting frustrated and leaving. It was... I didn’t know what it was, but in recent days, their appearances had been prompting an unnamable emotion in me, and my inability to identify it was annoying. But they weren’t important right now.

As Calia detailed her people’s construction plans for the next few weeks, I kept getting distracted by Baely and Korix. To anyone else, my life partner would appear attentive, fully invested in the conversation, but I could tell he was distracted. I was pretty sure I knew what was drawing his attention elsewhere, but again, that wasn’t something I could think about right now.

Meanwhile, Baely seemed fascinated by the village around her and its ‘renegade’ inhabitants. While on the way here, she’d chattered my ear off about this place, preoccupied with the idea that a group of people could become independent of Lutov and its Houses. I’d failed to interrupt her gushing, never pointing out how the exiled already held such a status. Not only had I enjoyed listening to her enthusiasm, but I hadn’t wanted to examine the feelings that it had been invoking in me.

In this moment, though, it was good to see her so happy, occasionally breaking into Calia’s explanation to ask a question. Once I was sure that those two could distract one another, I cleared my throat.

“Forgive me, but my *shukusen* is requesting a connection,” I said. “There’s no need to stop the tour, though! I’ll step aside, just for a moment, and catch up once I’m finished.”

Calia eyed me with suspicion, and after a moment, I grinned at her.

"I promise I'll be on my best behavior," I said. "You know me. You know I won't mess up this deal when it's at its most critical phase. Send one of your people with me if you're worried. I won't mind."

Deflating, Calia said, "You're right! I know. We'll keep going. Don't make me regret this, Zaeden."

"I'd never," I said, smirking.

With a huff, Calia turned on her heel to lead her group of dissenters and my daughter along, and I ambled between buildings until I found a secluded spot. Then, I leaned on a wall, banging my head on it, before closing my eyes. Korix wouldn't be long. Extracting from that group without raising suspicion would be like child's play for him, and I knew he had things to say to me.

Sure enough, a hand soon slammed into the wall beside my head, but I didn't open my eyes. I knew he'd be towering over me, just as I knew the exact look of fury he'd be showing. It didn't scare me. It didn't even hurt to know I'd caused it.

Mission mode. The thief of normal, human emotion.

"What is Baely doing here?" he hissed. "It's not safe, and- and this will destroy them!"

Did he think I didn't know that?

With my eyes still closed, I calmly said, "I needed to sell the story, and all of Lutov knows how protective I am of our daughter. By bringing them with me, I've ensured that no one will question my involvement in what's about to happen here, and *you know*, Ko, that we cannot be involved with this."

With a sharp gasp, Korix pulled his hand off of the wall.

"Sell... the story? That's why you...?" he said before clicking his tongue. "I'd forgotten what a monster the role of the *Lokke Vitras* can make of someone."

Ouch. That had actually stung.

Opening my eyes, I ran them over Korix. With his fists trembling at his sides, he was red-faced, and there was such fire in his eyes. In typically emotionless him, this look was beautiful. And about what I'd expected.

"Sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov over all," I said, slowly reciting the *Lokke Vitras* mantra before softening. "If you have a better way to handle this, I'm all ears. Trust me. I want Baely involved in this as little as you do."

On those last words, the barest sliver of what I was feeling shoved its way through mission mode, and I quickly looked away. I couldn't think about it, couldn't acknowledge...

I had to stay calm.

After a moment, Korix sighed, and I glanced his way in time to see him rubbing his face.

"I don't have an alternative for you," he said into his hands. "Mother Time damnit all."

I waited a good five seconds before lightly touching his arm.

"I'm sorry," I softly said.

Chuckling, Korix shook his head before letting his hands fall to his sides.

"Why are you apologizing? No matter how much you might protest it, you didn't choose this life, not really. I forced it on you, just like Talira did with me," he said. "It's one, messed up string of nasty cause and effect, and you've had very little control over it. You know it. I know it, and hopefully, Baely will too, someday."

Suddenly, my shoes had become the most fascinating things in my surroundings.

"Yeah," I breathed. "Hopefully."

Korix nudged my head up with a crooked finger, examining me for a moment before clasping the back of my neck. He kissed me, all comfort and no passion in it, even if his grip on me became painfully tight during this. Pulling away, he rested his forehead on mine.

"I know you've had a rough time lately," he said. "I'm... sorry for getting so angry."

He still had a hard time with apologies, even after this long spent free of my role.

"It's no excuse, but I've been struggling with a few of my own issues," he continued. "I hope you can forgive me for my outburst."

Chuckling, I circled my arms around his waist.

"There's nothing to forgive. You were right to get angry, and I'd have been surprised if you weren't," I said, "but I do think that we should have a check-in chat once we're done here. Not now, though. Kind of on a schedule, remember?"

Sighing, Korix nodded, bobbing my head with his, and stepped out of my embrace.

"Let's go."

I ignored how despairing those two words had sounded.

When we rejoined the group, Calia gave us an odd look, but Baely bounced up to us, all bright cheer and curiosity. I muttered a throwaway line, something reassuring I was sure, and gestured for the tour to continue.

And it did. I smiled and nodded and looked thoroughly intrigued by every improvement that these people had made to their home. Hell, this would hurt if I was letting myself feel it.

When a shadow fell over us, it came as a relief. Finally, this torture was almost over. I watched Calia and her comrades crane their necks to see what had caused this spot of shade, and when she saw the satellite hovering overhead, she snapped her head down, meeting my gaze.

"I'm so sorry," I said.

But I didn't have time for anything else. Grabbing Baely, I hauled them up and over my shoulders, and together, Korix and I took off for my skycruiser. He got there the instant before me, opening the door, and well-practiced in this routine as I was, I was offloading Baely from my shoulders a mere second after that opening had been made. I dove in after them with Korix right behind me, already reaching for the terminal. Reading my designator, it set off for the coordinates that I'd fed it as we'd landed earlier, taking off so quickly that the frame of my seat dug into my body.

Behind me, Baely starts babbling—

"Dad? *Per*? What...?"

—but I couldn't reassure her yet. Accessing the feed of a recorder on the satellite, I waited, watching, until a line of plasma fell out of the mass of metal and onto the picturesque village below. We were still close enough that for a moment, the world around us flashed blue while wind batted the skycruiser around like a cat would with a yarn ball, and when silence eventually fell, I heard Baely's teeth click together.

After ensuring that the satellite had done its job, I withdrew from the recorder's feed, twisting to where I could see Baely. They were drained of color with their eyes peeled wide open, and seeing this, a dull ache throbbled through my heart.

Swallowing hard, they said, "What... just happened?"

Korix and I exchanged a glance, unsure how to reply, because Baely already knew the answer to her own question. We'd told her about my disastrous party, held decades ago, so many times that she had to know, but shock was a bitch. It could make even the brightest of people stupid.

Raising his eyebrows, Korix inclined his head to me, and I suppressed a huff. I knew this was my mess to handle.

"I'm not sure, sweetie," I said. "When we saw the satellite, your dad and I just... reacted. There wasn't a lot of time to think, but based off of what I saw, I'd say—"

"Cerullis glassed that village," Baely whispered. "Because they... were traitors?"

Consumed by the idea, they were staring off into nothing, which was good. It meant they didn't see me wince.

"That's what I'd guess, yes," I said.

Leaning over the divider, Korix laid a hand on Baely's knee.

“Don’t worry, sweetie. Your father and I will figure this out,” he said, “and once we know who did this, we’ll bring them to justice.”

Stiffening, Baely fixed both of us with a glare and a snarl.

“You do that, dad. Make them pay.”

Patting her knee, Korix said, “We will. Now, get some rest. We’ll be home soon.”

Then, he fell into his seat, collapsing against the nearby door. I badly wanted to lean against him, enjoying the comfort of his warmth, but instead, I ensured that Baely had gotten preoccupied with something in their array—no matter how long that might have taken—before facing forward once more. There, I remained, frozen in place.

Make them pay, huh? I could start fulfilling that wish now.

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