

Chapter 81: A Daughter's Fury

I was pretty sure that I was going to be sick. Opposite me, Niklaus looked so self-assured, as if he expected me to vindicate him because of what he'd shared. I'd never wanted to smack that look off of someone's face more than I did then.

When I failed to say a word, he raised an eyebrow.

"Well?" he asked. "Are you satisfied?"

No but then, I didn't think I ever would be with this man.

The specifics of his story weren't the motivation behind my sudden anger. Sure, he'd said or at least implied some terrible things, and in no way, shape, or form did I agree with his actions or his underlying philosophy, but I'd dealt with worse as the *Lokke Vitras* to come. *Much* worse.

This story infuriated me because it was partially about Leski. What it suggested about her upbringing... it horrified me, and confusing as I found it, a resonating pang of recognition had risen from within once I'd understood what she might have been through.

These things made me rage incarnate. They were why I couldn't move or speak because much as I might like to, I couldn't hurt this man, and right now, I didn't trust myself not to.

Thank Mother Time, Korix returned with his target before I had to decide what to do. Without a word, he secured the petite woman to the end of some industrial shelves before coming to take Niklaus' elbow. After he'd frog-marched the other man to another set of shelves, he returned to me.

I didn't know what he'd said to keep Niklaus still as a statue where he'd left him, but I was both glad and disappointed to see it. I *really* wanted to chase that man down right now.

Glancing at the rifle still trembling in my hand and the glare I was directing at Niklaus, Korix said, "He told you?"

I just *looked* at him, and he sighed while hugging his chest.

"I hoped he might," he said with his gaze pinned to the ground.

"Is it true?" I whispered.

Sharply glancing at me, Korix tightened his grip on his chest.

“No matter what he said, I didn’t kill her. Talira was gracious enough to keep me away from that mission because she knew Laryse was my...”

He trailed off, looking away, and I found enough focus to wonder about that. She’d been his what? Informant? Acquaintance? *Friend*?

Shit, that would make this so much worse.

“But the rest?” I asked. “Blackmailing Niklaus with the circumstances of Laryse’s death?”

“Yes, that part’s true.”

Before I could even consider how that confirmation had affected me, Korix hesitantly reached out to touch my arm, quickly dropping his hand once he had.

“I had to make sure Laryse’s daughter was safe,” he said. “Niklaus has never been... kind with his words, and he kept Leski isolated when she was home from lesson rotations. I had to make sure things were at least a little stable for her. It was the least I could do.”

“I see.”

That was... acceptable reasoning for Korix's part in all the shit I'd just heard.

Slowly, I took a breath, held it, and released it, and with it went all of the white-hot, pure *emotion* I’d been bathing in.

“This will make things complicated between the two of you, won’t it?” I said.

With the smallest of grimaces, Korix nodded.

“You can see why I was... concerned after you first danced with her,” he said. “I’m glad she makes you happy, but you couldn’t have picked a more difficult person to resume your dating life with.”

Literally *anyone else* would have been easier but...

“She’s worth the struggle to make this work,” I said. “Will you help me, Ko? I know you’ve never approved of my insistence on maintaining my emotional attachments but-”

His palm filled my vision, almost touching my nose.

“Zae, you’re the smartest person I know,” he said. “After the years you’ve spent with me, you know your role intimately. If you think you can have these relationships while also holding to the absolute objectivity that’s required of the *Lokke Vitras*, then who am I to argue with you?”

He thought too highly of me. Even I didn’t know if I was capable of what he was suggesting, but I’d stay in contact with the people I loved anyway.

Because Korix always forgot about one thing when it came to who I was. Despite my service to the Houses, I loathed them, and this made me more carefree with my duties than he'd ever be.

"Does this mean you'll help me?" I asked.

Sighing, Korix said, "Yes, I'll help with Leski. Of course I will."

"That's good," I said with a nervous smile. "It looks like you can get started with that now."

I nodded toward one of the doors, where a slight woman with silver hair had slipped inside. She was taking tremulous steps toward our prisoners in the corner, all while the rifle in her hand shook.

"Oh, no..." Korix breathed. "She must have overheard us."

I eyed Korix. Of course Leski had been listening to Niklaus' confession. There was a recorder in the chamber's corner, aimed right at where he and I had been standing as he'd talked, and Leski had mentioned using those to watch our confrontation.

...But Korix hadn't heard that bit, already out of the skycruiser at the time. Right.

Then, Leski jerked her rifle up, and Korix and I *moved*. As soon as I reached him, I jerked Niklaus to the side right before an energy bolt hit the shelves behind him, near where his head had been. Meanwhile, Korix had hold of Leski's wrist, pulling it and her rifle toward the ground.

"Stop!" he said. "It won't help. Trust me."

When Leski snapped her eyes to him, I could swear the heat in them would melt through Korix, but fortunately, he stood strong, unchanged in the face of her rage.

"Trust *you*?" she snapped. "Why *the fuck* would I do that?"

"Because I've been where you are!"

As that shout rang in the chamber, I rapidly blinked, trying to process what I'd heard. Where she was...? No, I didn't understand. What had Korix meant by that?

Leski still looked murderous, but she'd loosened her body, and this let Korix cautiously release his hold on her.

Lowering his voice, he said, "It hurts, doesn't it? Knowing what he did. The inability to comprehend how he could do something so monstrous to someone you both loved, something you couldn't imagine attempting. The pain that he's caused you by proxy. It feels like it's the whole world, like it's the only thing in existence. Like you'll never feel anything but that, and you have to release it somehow. All of that indignant wrath has to go *somewhere*, and to you, the best outlet for that must seem like him, right?"

Leski wrinkled her nose into a snarl.

“Who else?” she hissed through gritted teeth.

“It doesn’t help. If anything, taking revenge like that will only make it worse.” Korix said. “Besides, he’s not worth it. Why would you give him the honor of receiving your emotional work? You’re right to be angry. Of course you are! But don’t give any of that energy to the likes of *him*.”

For the longest of moments, Leski wrestled with this idea, but soon enough, she slumped, dissipating her rifle.

“You’re right about that at least,” she said. “My whole life I’ve tried to be a decent person and daughter for him, and the entire time, he’s been hiding this? I’ve wasted enough of my life on my father.”

Beside me, Niklaus bristled.

“Young lady, I-!” he started.

I painfully twisted my hold on his arm before he could get anything else out. His resulting yelp brought me more joy than I cared to admit.

“You must have forgotten the situation you’re in, Niklaus. It’s mighty suspicious, looking quite treasonous in its own right,” I said. “If I were you, I’d keep my mouth shut until I knew exactly how much trouble I was in.”

While Niklaus hissed at my obvious disrespect, he did seemingly hear the wisdom in my words, which might be a first for him.

“His situation is even worse than you might think, *kuvesk*,” Korix said. “I encountered some *interesting* evidence while collecting our second prisoner. It’s why returning here took me so long.”

“Oh, really?” I said while turning a cold smile on Niklaus. “Why don’t you sit down? It seems we need to have a long conversation soon, and as I’ve told you before, I prefer to limit the work I must do. Don’t make me chase you down.”

White as a sheet, Niklaus gulped while folding to the ground. I’d turned to join Leski and Korix when I received a request for connection from Feena.

After I’d accepted it, she opened with, “Uh... Zae? How many of these prisoners do you want me to keep an eye on?”

I could feel my eyebrows rising toward my hairline.

“Prisoners?” I asked.

As in more than one?

“Yes...?” Feena drawled.

At the same time, Korix said, "That would be the evidence I mentioned. Are you speaking with Fourth Stratus Feena? She should join us so we can more easily coordinate."

Wincing, I nodded at Korix while telling my sister.

"Come to us for now. The prisoners will keep until we've discussed the situation."

"All right. Be there in a minute," Feena said.

As she cut the connection, I hurried to Leski, taking her hand. The moment I touched her, she threw herself at me, burying her face in my chest. I held her as tight as I could, trying to remind her that she wasn't alone right now.

Freed from his self-imposed task, Korix stalked toward Niklaus and the petite woman, presumably to give us space. I was grateful to him for that. Much as the conflict between him and Leski wasn't nearly as dire as I'd first suspected, I knew they still had a lot to work out before they'd feel comfortable near one another.

After a moment, Leski started speaking into my chest. It was hard to pick out what she'd said, but I heard enough to understand what she was trying to convey.

"You have *nothing* to apologize for," I said while squeezing her. "If anyone should do that, it's me. I should have waited until later to ask Niklaus about your mother, not done it when you were watching us."

"No, no!"

With a wet sniffle, Leski pushed away from me, leaving her hand over my heart.

"I'm glad you did it," she said. "I've needed to know about this for years. I'm a little pissed that I only found out about it now, when my father had no idea I was listening."

"He should have told you what happened to your mother as soon as he found out about it," I firmly said.

Nodding, Leski said, "Yes, he should have. He should have done a lot of things."

She shot an ugly look at a spot behind me, and I wanted to smack myself for keeping her in the same room as the source of her stress. Gently, I guided her toward a door.

"I know this is a lot," I said. "Is there anything I can do to help? I'll probably be dealing with your father for a little while, but otherwise, I'm at your disposal."

Leski choked out a laugh.

"You've been so kind to me throughout this, Zae. I think I've put you through enough, considering it wasn't your problem to begin with," she said. "So, please. Don't worry about me. I know how to

take care of myself, although..."

She paused, stopping us outside of the chamber.

"I'd like to visit my partner, Kayel, if that's all right," she said. "He's nearby, and his status shows that he's available. I'd like to... I don't know. I guess I just need to blow off some steam."

"That makes perfect sense to me," I said. "Would you mind waiting here until someone can go with you to his place? With all of this—"

I waved a hand toward the room we'd left behind.

"—I'm worried that someone might try something unwise within the next few hours. I know you can take care of yourself, but it would ease my mind if you had some backup right now."

"I don't mind waiting," Leski said with a hesitant smile. "I need to talk to Kayel first anyway."

Breathing out a sigh of relief, I nodded.

"Thank you."

Framing Leski's face with my hands, I angled her head so that I could press my lips into her brow.

"I'll just be a few minutes."

Feena had made her appearance by the time I returned to Korix, listening intently as he explained what had happened.

"I see," she said when I reached them. "This is an... unfortunate situation."

"And fucked," I said under my breath.

Glancing at me, Feena said, "That too. So, what do you need from me?"

Before I could answer that question, Korix cleared his throat, pointedly meeting my eyes.

"So you know, I alerted Talira to the situation as soon as it started getting out of hand," he said. "She's sending several lower Strata here to bring in the prisoners. She also ordered me to convey a strictly worded reminder: that you and I are supposed to—and I quote—"Sit our asses down and fucking relax, you raging workaholics'."

While I groaned, Feena burst into laughter.

Wiping her eyes, she said, "Does that mean you're keeping your promise then, Zae? Because if so, we'll need to grab Phen from the Library before heading out for drinks. He and I weren't sure how long your little excursion would take, and you know what he's like when he's found a new source of fascination."

Completely fixated on it to the detriment of everything else in his life? Yes, I was aware.

"I need to take Leski to one of her partner's places first," I said. "Maybe we can meet--"

"Wait. Let me handle Leski," Feena said. "You two can grab Phen."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "What makes you think that's the best plan?"

Sighing, Feena hung her head while resting her hands on her hips.

"Based on the *very little* the *Lokke Vitras* has told me, it seems clear that Leski's going through a rough time right now," she said. "She could probably use some time with a pseudo-sister, if you know what I mean."

Oh. Yes, given how badly her *father* had failed her and how recent the knowledge of that failure was for her, it made sense that Korix's presence or mine might be temporarily problematic for Leski. In case Feena was right about this theory, I thought it best to go along with her scheme.

"So, you're with Leski while *evushk* and I handle Pheniks," I said. "That sounds like a plan. How long until the lower Strata arrive?"

"Soon enough," Korix said. "We can leave when you're ready."

Quickly, I glanced over the room once more. Korix had restrained Niklaus in the same manner as the petite woman, and the spilled explosives had been returned to their box, which he'd marked for retrieval. With those tasks done, there was nothing left for us here.

"Let's get moving, then," I said. "The sooner we grab Pheniks, the sooner we can all take a break."

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