

# Chapter 82: We Had to Do It

I couldn't move. If I did, I was afraid I might collapse into a puddle on the floor, and I didn't want that. Better to stay numb until this horrid feeling, the one I was blatantly ignoring, faded. Right?

Beside me, Korix said, "Mission's over, Zae. Shall we do dinner?"

He made no move to touch me, probably knowing that I'd lash out if he tried, while I considered what he'd proposed. A return to old traditions might be nice. Perhaps such a visit to the foundations of my training could stabilize me, so I nodded.

As we headed for the kitchen, Korix and I stayed out of Leski and Baely's way. I didn't know about him, but not only was I eager to avoid another confrontation with them but I had the distinct feeling that right now, my presence would only contaminate them in some way.

When we reached the kitchen, my hallucination was leaning against its door frame with their arms crossed. To avoid them, I awkwardly shuffled through the entrance, which earned me an odd glance from Korix, but other than that, I ignored the anomaly and their oddities. They sat at the kitchen table with their chin in their hands while Korix and I prepped dinner.

Even with them staring, however, cooking came as a relief, as it had always done. Something about working in tandem with someone I loved had been and would forevermore be the best balm for the spark of my soul, even if it could never heal everything.

Once we were done, Korix and I slid into our seats, and as they made room for us, my hallucination groused under their breath. With that, though, it was time for the next step in this protocol. As I stared at my food, I didn't know if I could complete it.

"We did everything right, but it was also all wrong," I eventually said. "How can I find praise for us in the act of something so horrible?"

Korix said nothing in response. He just laid his hand, palm up, on the table, and hiccupping on a barely restrained sob, I curled my fingers through his. Fuck, why was I being so emotional?

Squeezing my hand, Korix drew my attention to him, making sure I was holding his gaze before he spoke.

"Talk to me, Zae. Tell me everything."

With a bitter laugh, I shook my head.

"What can I say that you don't already know?" I said. "You have to be dealing with something similar."

Again squeezing me, Korix said, "Yes, I'm sure you're right. Even still. Please, tell me?"

With a sigh, I slumped in my seat, trying to decide where to start, and jabbing me in the side, my hallucination nearly made me jump. I didn't feel their finger, of course, but the sudden motion startled me nonetheless.

"Talk, LV," they said. "You know it always helps you."

Pursing my lips, I narrowed my eyes at them. Hadn't they just been upset with me? Why were they giving me advice now?

"Zae?" Korix said.

Shaking myself, I said, "It's all what you'd expect after a mission like that. Guilt. Shame. Hating myself, although the intensity of these things is much worse than usual. That's why I've detached so much, which you've probably already noticed. Also..."

Unsure about sharing this, I eyed my hallucination, but rather than giving me an answer to my uncertainty, they only grinned and wiggled in place, and I sighed again.

"I'm seeing Damari's ghost," I finished.

Korix briefly increased the pressure on my hand before letting out a breath.

"How long?" he asked.

"Since shortly after they died."

I refused to look at him, keeping my eyes fixed on my dead friend, and they stuck their tongue out at me.

"That took longer than I expected," Korix said under his breath.

When I jerked toward him, he waved away my incredulity.

"I didn't mean anything by that. Just noting my surprise is all," he said. "I started seeing my host of the dead within a couple of decades as the *Lokke Vitras*, although it has always been more literal for me. What about you? Is it like Damari's actually here?"

"Sometimes, it is," I said before shaking my head, "but most of the time when I see them, it's like I'm imagining what they'd be doing in that moment, even if that act also feels completely out of my control. They certainly seem to behave in concordance with how I'm feeling about myself, which is strange, but that's all I've noticed about them, even six months later. Silly as it is, I keep pushing addressing the issue of them to the side."

"Hmm."

Korix leaned back, although he kept ahold of my hand.

“Well, that’s good, isn’t it?” he said. “It means it’s probably under your control, at least in part.”

Much as I’d like to doubt that, I knew he was right. Every day, it might seem like my hallucination had taken on more self-autonomy, but even still, they didn’t seem as separate from me as, say, some of my personas.

Vigorously nodding, my hallucination said, “That’s true. I’m not like them. I’ll be gone as soon as you’re ready to let me go.”

Then, why weren’t they gone already? Damari was no longer here. I knew that. Mother Time, I’d accepted it. I had!

No. I couldn’t engage with my hallucination again, not even tangentially like this. Turning my back on them, I covered a bundle of fingers with my free hand.

“I hope you’re right, but in the end, it doesn’t matter. I’ll handle it, as always,” I said. “Why don’t you talk to me? Surely, you have something to share too.”

Like... maybe his connection to Sanya, although I wasn’t holding out hope for that. If everything about our current scheme went as planned, that woman would become our last loose end, making it imperative for me to know how he’d react when I confronted her, but given how long he was taking to talk about her, I was starting to think he’d never open up about it, burying it deep inside instead. That was his modus operandi, after all, one that I partially imitated.

“Yeah... it’s not ‘only partially,’” my hallucination drawled. “I swear you two are-”

And yes, Korix was looking at me like he knew I was changing the subject, wanting to avoid our current conversation topic. Still, he answered.

“Same as you, like you guessed. Guilt. Wishing I’d found a better way to handle this mess. There’s not much we can do about it now, though.”

Shit. No matter how much he might have tried to hide it, I’d heard the pain in his voice. And I’d caused that pain. If I’d just handled my shit months ago, as the *Lokke Vitras* should, he wouldn’t be struggling with this right now.

With a crooked smile, Korix reached over to brush my jawline.

“It’ll get better,” he said. “You know that, right? Just give it time.”

Yes, I knew this pain would fade, just as it had with every other evil thing that I’d been called to do. Still...

Nuzzling his hand, I said, “Sometimes, I need the reminder, Ko, same as you.”

When I met his eyes, I held that gaze, even while wanting to look away.

"It *will* get better," I continued.

It had to.

Korix's grip on me tightened, and he pulled me to him, pressing his lips to mine. The kiss was gentle at first, probably meant as a simple comfort to me, but before I could process what had happened, that changed. I was on my back with him hovering over me, and hell, that ferocity! How well did I know it.

"Ok," I softly said.

With that word, I wasn't simply giving him permission to do as he liked with me, although it was largely that. I was also saying that he didn't have to hold back this time. Not that he usually did, but right now, there was enough nasty emotion in us both that restraining ourselves might be wise. Even so, I told him not to do it, and after a pause, he echoed what I'd said.

So, when he dove down to kiss me, I wasn't surprised at the sharp pain that bloomed in my nose or the ache that throbbed in my teeth, making my eyes water. I also had no problem with putting all of my strength into tossing him off of me, going after him with all speed.

It was almost a fight, this little rendezvous of ours: a physical altercation and not one of the pleasant kinds. At times, he held me down so firmly that I couldn't breathe, and Mother Time knew how many scratch and bite marks I left on him. Hell, our arrays would be busy healing bruises for a good five minutes after we were done.

But that wouldn't happen for a while. For a while, we were stuck in these primal urges, giving and receiving the only form of punishment that was appropriate or the least bit healthy right now.

Even with that, I didn't feel much better once we reached a conclusion of sorts. Panting, Korix rolled off of me, and eventually, I propped myself up on the wall beside him, examining the room.

"What a mess," I said.

Making a face, Korix half-heartedly chopped at the air.

"I'll take care of it," he said. "You need to check in with Talira, should have done it as soon as you dropped me and Baely off. I didn't mean to distract you for this long, but... you seemed to need it."

"I did, so don't even think about taking the blame for the delay," I said with a rueful grin.

But then, I had to consider what he'd said, and with my lips going thin, I banged my head on the wall.

"Damn," I breathed. "Talira..."

I didn't want to see her, not after what she'd ordered me to do. Not when I was afraid of how I might react to her presence.

"You'll be fine," Korix said.

Nudging me to face him, he kissed me, gentle and firm, and when he pulled away, he brushed a thumb under my eye, softly smiling.

"I can never love you, Zae," he said. "Now, go."

He jerked his head toward the kitchen's exit, and with a sigh, I got to my feet and gathered my clothes.

The flight to Xygek was a special type of hell for me. Apparently, the pseudo self-harm that I'd participated in with Korix hadn't been enough for me because I kept finding my hand drifting for a knife, hiding in its familiar place between the divider and my seat. Every time I caught myself doing this, I hauled my hand back into my lap, tightly holding it, but that didn't stop me from trying again.

Faces kept flashing in my mind's eye, especially Calia's. Hell, I'd helped kill her. She'd been a wonderfully kind woman, someone I'd dated, for Mother Time's sake, and I...

Needless to say, I was shaky when stepping onto the landing pad at the top of House Kolb's headquarters. Thankfully, no one was there to see it. Night had fallen while I was on my way here.

I trudged through the dark toward a lift that would take me down one floor, unable to take my eyes off of the ground once I'd scanned the rooftop, and after I'd reached Talira's office, I leaned against the wall behind her desk with my arms crossed, blankly staring out at the view beyond. Seeing and not seeing.

At some point, I must have sent a message to Talira, letting her know that I was here, because I eventually noted her reflection in the glass, even with the black of night and city lights as its only background.

"Zae-zae..."

She should know better than to use that nickname with me right now. I didn't care to receive any comfort from her, whether in this moment or- or perhaps ever again.

"Did the other Houses believe our bullshit story?" I asked instead.

As Talira sighed, I watched her rest her hands on her hips and shake her head, probably frustrated with my behavior.

That was too bad.

“They did. After this last misstep of theirs, a majority of the *shukusenth* have called for a public hearing to discuss disbanding House Cerullis. That’ll be two days from now, and afterward, we’ll have another emergency assembly,” Talira said before wincing. “We do have one problem, though. Your brother suspects the truth, but convincing him to look the other way should be simple. I’ll promise Zan control over most of Cerullis’ satellites, and considering how easily those could keep Ostiu in line, the offer should satisfy him.”

And wasn’t that idea even more salt in already festering wounds?

Sliding my gaze back to the city, I said, “I’m glad everything’s concluding to your satisfaction, then, even if Phen’s being stubborn. Damn. This is the second time he’s caused trouble in a year. He’ll always be a problem for me, won’t he?”

The thought made me hug myself tighter, and joining me at the window, Talira hesitantly rested a hand on my shoulder.

“Siblings usually are,” she said.

Turning away, she examined the city that we both fought to protect, letting the silence speak for us.

After quite a while, she said, “You know what comes after the assembly, yes?”

I nodded, even as I fought off considering what she was referring to. Biting her lip, Talira once more faced me, leaning a shoulder against the window.

“Has Korix shared Sanya’s relationship to him yet?” she asked.

*Fuck.* That wasn’t good.

Slowly, I shook my head, and hanging hers, Talira kicked the floor.

“Mother Time damnit all, I was hoping he’d get to it before now,” she said, as if to herself, before peering at me, “but I can’t delay any longer.”

After sucking on her lip for a moment, Talira gestured to her desk.

“Take a seat,” she said. “I have a story, and unfortunately, it won’t be one that you’ll enjoy.”

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