

# Chapter 86: Cheering Up an Asshole

The air around Korix hung heavy on the shuttle ride home, and given how much they'd pulled away from us, our fellow passengers must have felt it too. He didn't seem to notice, keeping his forehead plastered to the glass as he stared out at the city, passing us by.

I couldn't bring myself to ask what was wrong, not when something in his bearing screamed of a need for solitude. When we reached our stop, I was ecstatic to hop onto the platform, leaving the tension in the shuttle behind.

I'd already messaged Talira with our findings from our midnight excursion. She hadn't been pleased to learn that I hadn't followed her orders, but once she'd finished lecturing me about that, she'd agreed with the conclusions I'd drawn. Much as I wished it were otherwise, Korix and I had already finished our part in the investigation into Niklaus, his stolen weapons, and his 'rival'. We'd have to leave the rest to the lower Strata, at least for now. So... we had no other excuse to avoid an attempt at relaxing.

As we walked through my parents' front door, I wasn't sure how good either of us would be at it. I was certainly less rattled by yesterday's events than I had been on trying to sleep, but the mystery of it hadn't quite faded to something I could ignore.

And I was still at a loss as to what was bothering Korix. Plenty of theories had gone through my head, but all of them flew through one ear and out the other.

Korix had his bad moods, of course. Everyone did, but he was old enough and had kept tight control of his emotions for long enough that he could usually tell me when they happened, which I appreciated. It let me know when I should work on cheering him up.

What he was showing me now wasn't like that. He'd fallen into himself with no attempt to talk made and no cheery smile donned to let me know he'd be ok. He was almost... broody, which made me sick to my stomach to think about.

Without pausing to ask for guidance, Korix blazed through the apartment, a thundercloud in human form. That he knew this place's layout didn't surprise me. Apartments across Xygek were constructed in a similar fashion, after all, but I was curious why he was revealing his knowledge now. He usually held things like that to his chest for as long as he could. Was he just that wrapped up in his thoughts?

When he turned into the kitchen, my concern for him skyrocketed. I knew what he wanted—I was hungry too—but he wouldn't find the peace that he was looking for here.

Korix stopped inside the entrance, and while I joined him, he glanced over what would be his workspace.

"This is pathetic," he said under his breath.

I had to agree with him. All the filled this room were a table and its chairs, several out-of-place crates, and a refectory. Feena was standing in front of that last item, caught halfway through claiming her meal.

"Don't worry, Ko. I've gotten things ready for when you woke up," I said. "I figured you'd want a more well-stocked kitchen, and while I couldn't get appliances installed in time, we can make do."

Striding to the crates, I tapped one, grinning at him. He didn't move, merely staring at me, and rolling my eyes, I opened my acquisitions, starting from the top. As I ripped into the first one's interior, Feena cleared her throat.

"Um. Excuse me, but... what are you doing?" she asked. "I've noticed these things taking up space over the last few days, but I thought they held... I don't know. Weapons or something?"

Chuckling, I said, "Nope."

I pulled scaled and deboned salmon fillets out of the chilled space they'd been occupying, inspecting one of them through its rime-coated plastic. With only two days spent in the cold, it should be fine, but I'd always found it best to check food for rot, especially when fish was involved. With our arrays controlling our bodies down to its cells, food poisoning was basically a thing of the past, but if the disease wasn't caught early enough, its symptoms could still present for an hour or so, which wasn't pleasant.

Resting what I was holding on the table, I retrieved a bag of rice and some salad ingredients before opening another crate. In this one, I found a rice cooker and more importantly, knives. As I laid these items out, Feena stopped behind me, looking over my shoulder.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked.

"Cooking," I said, "or at least starting the process. It would help if my head chef would *get over here.*"

Flipping a knife so that its blade was pointing toward me, I offered the handle to Korix, who was still standing in the doorway.

"Why would you cook-?"

"Feena, my dear sister," I interrupted. "You're more than welcome to stay and watch us work, if you like, but right now, you need to give me space."

“O... k...”

She backed off, showing me her palms, and I thrust my knife toward Korix.

“Will you help me or not?” I asked.

Slowly, he took the knife, and I shoved a tomato at him. While he diced it, I started cooking some rice, all while grating ginger for a salad dressing. As always when it came to this activity, we fell into a rhythm with Korix taking the lead. I completed every menial task that he, as the master craftsman, couldn't be bothered to complete, and while doing that, I watched him from the corner of my eye, chewing on the inside of my lip. Not even this, his most favored coping mechanism, was helping.

While we worked, more family members trickled into the kitchen to watch us, and at some point, Feena retrieved her food, munching on it while leaning on a wall. Ignoring them was more difficult than I'd thought it would be. They were family, avidly observing what we were doing, rather than strangers, causally taking note of our activities.

Fortunately, I had aids to help with this, besides the puzzle of Korix of course. Our workspace was small with barely enough room on it for one cutting board and the rice cooker, let alone a place to prepare dishes as well. Having no appliances, besides the rice cooker, became a challenge as well. We had to get creative with dishes that might normally require a blender or food processor.

In the end, however, we finished making our impromptu meal, and as if emerging from a dream, Korix frowned at our audience.

“We didn't make enough food,” he said, as if to himself.

“Not to worry. My family was just leaving,” I said before glaring at them. “Right?”

Jumping as if caught playing one of my pranks, my parents dropped their fond smiles, mumbling apologies as they scurried out of the room, but Feena paused before leaving.

“Shall I retrieve Leski for you?” she asked. “The poor dear woke up just a bit ago, worried sick about where you'd gone.”

Hell. Leski. I'd forgotten to leave her a message about what I'd left to do, as I should have done before traipsing off into greater Xygek. Damn, I'd gotten rusty at this dating thing.

I, however, couldn't change the past. It was best to move forward.

“Will you let her know I'm back?” I said. “I'll check on her as soon as I'm finished here.”

“Sure thing,” Feena says. “Enjoy your... food.”

A snorting laugh followed her as she rounded the corner, and once she was gone, I returned my attention to the current object of my concern, only to find him staring at our used knives with

fixation. After directing the drones to deal with the dirty dishes, I flopped into a chair, balancing on its back legs.

“Well?” I said. “Will you tell me what I did wrong while in House Cerullis’ headquarters?”

I was ready to hear it. Mission review usually came next in this protocol, after all.

“What’s the point?” Korix said. “Soon, I’ll no longer be your *evushk*. The role’s been taken from me. So, what more do I have to teach you?”

While he filled his plate, I snapped my eyes to slits. Was this why he was so morose? With his plunge into despondency coming so soon after Jayla’s reminder of his ‘betrayal’, I’d thought it would have something to do with that, but I supposed the coming changes could be the cause too.

Sitting beside me, Korix started eating salmon-wrapped rice balls, and I let my chair’s legs thunk to the ground. Not going to wait for me, was he? That was different.

Without rising, I claimed what I wanted of our bounty, and as I took my first bite, I laid my hand, palm up, on the table between us. For a while, this was fine, but once I eventually noticed that no warmth had filled it, I glanced between it and Korix several times with my appetite gone. He’d never refused me this comfort, as it had always served as a lifeline for us both.

This paralyzed me so absolutely that Korix had gotten through half of his meal before I could think again. Curling my fingers into a fist, I retracted it, punching the seat between my legs as I grabbed his shirt and jerked him my way.

“All right. Spill it,” I snapped. “What’s wrong?”

No eyebrow was raised, and no amusement radiated from Korix. As he stared at me, I didn’t see the man I loved but a hollow shell that was masquerading as him.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Everything’s fine-”

I shook him. I didn’t mean to do it, but something had hold of me as solidly as what was holding his attention.

“Don’t give me that,” I snarled. “I know something’s wrong, and I swear. If you don’t tell me *what the fuck* it is, I will... I’ll...”

I didn’t know what I’d do, but whatever it was, it would drag Korix out of the mire he’d sunken into. It was helping no one, least of all him.

Sighing, Korix shifted his gaze to the refectory.

“You don’t want to know,” he said. “Not yet at least.”

Ah. He was trying to protect me, huh? Leaning forward, I laid my hand on his cheek, turning him back to me.

“Tell me anyway. Please,” I said. “Otherwise, I’ll focus on nothing else in my free time, and you know how badly I’ll need that over the next few days. Besides, don’t you know that helping you is one of my greatest joys in life?”

He searched me, for what I didn’t know, but he didn’t find it. Slumping, he slid his hands down my arm, pulling my palm off of his face. Gently, he lowered the resulting finger bundle into his lap and almost, started then and there, but before the words could come out, he bit his lip, tightening his hold on me.

“The brain scan that Talira showed you before waking me up,” he eventually said. “You asked me what the black spots on it were?”

Oh... shit. This conversation was about to take a swift downward turn, wasn’t it?

Swallowing hard, I nodded for Korix to continue.

“The truth is, we’re not sure what they are. Even millennia after Lutov’s founding, we’re still guessing at the specifics of how the brain works,” he said. “On a fundamental level, we know that the blackened portions of mine no longer give off electrical activity, which makes them virtually dead. What that means in practice, though? It...”

After squeezing his eyes closed, Korix rubbed his face, hiding his eyes.

“You know the episodes I have? What you call ‘falling into my past?’” he asked.

“Yes...?” I drawled.

I *hated* where this was going.

“First of all, that symptom is *not* exclusive to my physical condition. Everyone who goes through a traumatic event may eventually experience something similar, but even still they are also a symptom of those splotches. We know this because I’ve had so-called flashbacks that were caused exclusively by trauma before, and the ones you notice and comment on, the ones where I act out, feel completely different to me. They’re... more intense, and that’s all I’ll share about those differences. I don’t want to... scare you,” Korix said. “Some other symptoms of the splotches are...”

Swallowing, he shifted in place, dropping his gaze to our clasped hands.

“I’ve never mentioned this before because it’s typically a non-issue for me,” he haltingly said, “but I... see things, Zae. Fantastical things that aren’t there. And occasionally, reality just... skews for me, like I’ve been dropped into another dimension. I don’t know how else to put it. I can usually handle those symptoms, or at least ignore them, but when my past comes back to haunt me in full? You know what that looks like.

“And it’s only getting worse. Soon, I’ll be nothing but a violent, highly trained instrument of death, completely detached from reality, constantly reliving every traumatic moment of my past, and entirely lost in them. When that happens, I have contingencies prepared, something that will see the danger that I’ll become removed from the board. That’s what’s wrong. I’ve been considering that eventuality.”

With nothing else, Korix stopped his barrage, and for a moment, I just blinked at him. What was this inferno, licking at my thoughts? It had set my insides ablaze, and with my back ramrod straight, I sat perfectly still, unsure what else I could do. If I moved a muscle, I was afraid of what would pour out of me.

Meanwhile, Korix watched me with pinched eyes.

“Zae-?” he started.

Yanking my claimed hand out of his grip, I jabbed his chest.

“You mean to have someone kill you?” I hissed.

Glancing at my finger, Korix said, “Yes. Talira, most likely. She’s the only person who’s bested me in decades.”

I’d thought that when something like this happened—and I hadn’t been naïve enough to think that it wouldn’t—I’d scream in Korix’s face or rattle his bones. Instead, I’d become flesh covering an ice-block interior.

Calmly rising out of my chair, I walked out the door, leaving the meal that I’d barely started behind, and if my stride jerked from one step to the next, I didn’t acknowledge it. When he caught up, Korix hurried in front of me, walking backward.

“Zae, please,” he said.

“I’m not ready to talk to you yet,” I said.

The chill in my voice transferred to him, freezing him solid, and I roughly brushed past him. After a moment, the staccato beat of his footsteps followed me, which was good. Herding him along while also gathering Leski would have been annoying, which on top of everything else...

I just couldn't handle it. Things had gotten so *warped* when it came to the people I was romantically involved with. We needed to handle these problems, preferably before they spiraled out of control.

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