

# Chapter 87: You Idiots

Finding Leski didn't take me long. When I stormed into my parents' garden, she was examining the arrangement of its azalea bushes, exactly where the recorder system had said she'd be. As I approached, she glanced up with her face brightening.

"Zae, hi! I didn't see you this morning," she asked. "Where did you go?"

"Out," I said, short and to the point.

I couldn't afford anything else right now.

By this point, I'd reached her, and after taking her hand, I reversed course, pulling her behind me.

"Wha-? Zae! What are you-?"

I ignored her, just as I ignored when she wrenched her hand free of mine.

"Do you know what's going on?" she asked.

"No idea," Korix said.

Sure, he didn't know. He wasn't the one who'd caused this fugue in me or anything.

Damnit, he should know by now that lying wasn't good for a relationship, especially not for the one that must form between him and Leski, but I didn't have the focus needed to berate him for his misstep. All of it was focused on the problems they were facing.

When we reached the apartment's front door, a drone was waiting for me, placidly floating in place, and I snatched what it was holding, barely taking the time to reinforce its usual routines before barreling outside. Thank Mother Time that it was so early in the morning, leaving walkways mostly empty and the sun yet to peek its head above the horizon. With that, I didn't have to check if Leski and Korix were following me as I marched toward our destination.

The walk didn't take long. After the shortest six minutes that I'd ever experienced, I was standing at the base of a familiar tower, looking up toward its apex. While I waited for the others to orient themselves, I let memories flood through me, remembering the last night that I'd claimed true freedom. No matter how bitter those memories were now.

Tonight, we had no need to race for the summit. After Korix and Leski had caught their breath, we took the same route that I'd used when Feena had undertaken this ritual with me: a lift. Only once Xygek was spread out around us did I let myself look at the people I cared for.

Confusion had taken root in them both, and while Korix had resolutely fixed his eyes on me, Leski was looking out over the horizon. I gave them a moment to quash any fears that I might have spawned, and once tension had leaked out of their bodies, I got started.

"Before we get to the reason I brought you here, let's discuss what connects you," I said. "I'm in a relationship with you both, and an understandable amount of hostility lies between you. If possible, I would prefer to address this now. So. Leski, you're unhappy about the violence that took place between *evushk* and me in the House Cerullis' facility. Would you like to talk about that?"

Crossing her arms, Leski shifted from foot to foot, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I don't- You expect me to-"

She huffed in exasperation.

"No, you're right. We should talk about this. But what do you expect me to say, Zae? That I'm ok with being near a man who nearly killed you a few weeks ago?" she said. "Sure, I had an... uncomfortable conversation with him earlier, one that explained things, but... I don't know."

She paused for a moment before continuing in a halting fashion.

"Granted, you've seemed different since he woke up. More... centered? Better. If the change I'm seeing is what this man does for you, then he's clearly a good influence. Given that and the circumstances of your fight, I know I shouldn't hold what happened against him, especially not when you've already forgiven him for it. Even still, I guess... I'm just scared of him, but what else should you expect from me. He's the *Lokke Vitras!*"

She cut off, biting her lip, all while I winced. No matter how much Korix and I knew that people were afraid of us, hearing someone talk about it always hurt.

"You're right to be afraid," Korix said. "After seeing me fight Zaeden, you must know that I'd find it easy to crush you."

What was he-? That was *not* helping!

"But I've never intentionally hurt an innocent, Leski," he continued. "I don't go out of my way to hurt anyone. Unfortunately, it's just a part of what I do. So, in another way, you have nothing to fear from me. Unless you want it, I will never touch a hair on your head. It's the least I can do after I failed your mother."

Bristling, Leski extended a finger toward Korix.

"And there's that!" she said. "How is it that you knew my mother? Hell, you visited her when I was a child. You were at her damn Dispersal, for Mother Time's sake!"

He had been? That was odd. Usually, only the deceased's loved ones and close friends were invited to the Dispersal of someone's ashes. Why had Korix been there for Laryse's?

He'd gone quiet, taking on an air I knew well. It meant we wouldn't be getting an answer from him anytime soon, and after a while of enduring this, Leski clicked her tongue.

"I see where Zae learned how to be an obstinate *asshole*," she said, "but never mind that. Will you at least tell me why I saw you at my home after she died? Were you... involved with that?"

"No!" Korix said.

With his eyes wide, he drew himself up, and his breathing momentarily hitched. Oh, shit. Was he about to lose it?

After a moment, he said, "I had nothing to do with your mother's death. Laryse was my-"

...His what? Partner? Friend? Either way, it put his side of Laryse's story in an entirely different light. No wonder he'd gotten so upset when it had come up.

Taking a calming breath, Korix said, "Your mother was one of the most wonderful people I've had the pleasure of knowing. In many ways, you remind me of her, although a vast swath of your personality is distinctly you."

When he gave her a small smile, Leski flushed, jerking her head to the side. Blowing hair out of her eyes, she quickly turned blazing eyes back on Korix.

"Ok. I believe you, which is good. I wasn't sure what I'd do if you'd murdered her, like I've sometimes wondered over the years," she said, "but if you didn't hurt her..."

Biting her lip, she glanced at me.

"Zae trusts you, even after everything you did, and you've been nothing but polite and respectful since then," she said, as if to herself.

For an agonizing minute, she stopped talking, merely chewing on her lip as she thought. Then, she said.

"That means I should trust you too, and *that* means we should wipe the slate clean between us, erasing our shared history. Nothing lies between us now. Not yet."

With a half-smile, she extended a hand.

"I'm Leski, unHoused, daughter to Second Stratus Niklaus," she said. "I'm pleased to make your acquaintance."

Korix seemed stunned. Rapidly blinking, he hesitantly took her hand before pausing, clearly unsure what to share with her. Content to stay on the sidelines to this point, I nonetheless recognized that I should step in now.

"You said you'd help me with this," I said. "She needs everything, so give her everything."

And slumping, the man I loved surrendered something that, over the course of several decades, he'd only given to me.

"I'm Korix, First Stratus of House Kolb," he said, "also known as the *Lokke Vitras*."

Leski's grin turned impish as she pumped Korix's arm up and down.

"Nice to meet you," she said. "In the future, let's only work toward each other's happiness."

I didn't wait for Korix to reply. With their conflict mostly resolved, I grabbed their wrists, drawing them to the safety railing along the edge of the tower's top. Releasing them, I slung my legs over it before patting the pole on either side of me. They exchanged a glance, but shrugging, both of them followed my example.

As soon as they'd joined me, leaving three sets of legs dangling into thin air, I offered what I'd taken from the drone to Leski.

"You'll need this," I said.

Given our mission earlier, Korix wouldn't require the same, and if Leski had been paying any attention during her House Kolb rotations, she should know how to do what I'd given her. Indeed, she slapped the P.I.G. to the back of her hand, even as befuddlement captured her face.

"Zae, what-?" she started.

Tangling my fingers in her hair, I pulled her to me, silencing her with a kiss, and when I backed off, her eyes had unfocused a sufficient degree. With my goal achieved, I rested one hand on her back while brushing the other across her cheek.

"I have words for you, but I need you to know that when I say them, I'm not lecturing you," I said. "Yes, I have more years to my name, but I'm not presuming to know better than you might. All I'm giving you is a piece of my own experience."

I made sure she'd heard me before moving on.

"So, here's what I have to say: Don't let anything restrain you, *especially* not your father. Live vicariously. Live the way you want, whether with him in your life or not, and never let anyone tell you how you should love."

A glistening sheen coated Leski's eyes, and she opened her mouth, but before she could speak, I shoved her. Flailing, she tumbled off of the railing, and I watched her drop until I spotted the flare of her repulsors. Only then did I turn to Korix, but he looked ready for me. His body was loose, prepared for a long fall.

Grinning, I cupped his neck, pulling him to where our foreheads were touching, before unleashing my frustration on him.

“Forgive my impertinence, *evushk*,” I said, “but fuck you for thinking that you can give up so easily. You say your mind’s breaking? Fight for it, and for the love of Mother Time, let others help you with that struggle. Don’t willingly leave the one who can never love you behind.”

And I waited, despite how far Leski was pulling away from us. I had to hear him say it.

“I’ll try, Zae,” Korix breathes.

It would have to be enough.

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