

Chapter 88: Conflict

Resolution

I pulled Korix to me, pressing our lips together, and as I entangled my body with his, I tipped us backward, relinquishing our perch for a free fall. As we plummeted toward the ground, Korix shoved his hands beneath my clothing, and for a moment, I relived the rush that I'd felt during my first drop like this. Before the sensation could claim me heart and spark of soul, though, I pushed Korix away.

Wait, I sent via message. Much as I want you, I have to think about Leski too. I don't know how she'd react to... this.

Even twisting through the air as we were, I caught Korix's smirk.

Then, until we're on the ground, let's keep her from seeing it, was what I received in response. Unless you don't think you can control yourself once we're down there?

A chuckle flourished in me—he was onto something about my control, after all—and pointing my body downward, I raced after Leski's trail. Thank Mother Time that she was headed in the right direction. I could have corrected her trajectory if needed, but I was happy that I wouldn't have to. It let me enjoy this fall without worrying about her.

Korix and I spiraled through air traffic, dancing so close to one another that we might as well have been kissing, before one thing or another pulled us apart. When we eventually alighted on the grass below, I was having a hard time with remembering that anyone but him existed in the world.

Fortunately, Leski helped with that effort. Storming to me, she shoved a finger in my face.

"What was that?" she snapped. "You could have killed me!"

Taking hold of her finger, I said, "That was me reminding you idiots of things you should already know. Also, if I'd thought you couldn't handle a drop like that, I wouldn't have pushed you, although perhaps I should have given you a warning. Still. Should I have left you alone up there?"

I yanked her into my arms, kissing her palm, and fixing her eyes on that, she frowned.

"You're impossible to deal with, you know," she said.

"I'm exceedingly aware," I said against her skin.

Releasing my hold on her, I pulled away, stretching my arms overhead.

“And I hope you two have learned your lessons! I swear, you’re the most unlikely *kuveskt* that I ever thought to teach, but hell, if lecturing you wasn’t fun,” I said. “We should head back now, though. Talira told us to stay well rested, and while you might have been following that command, Leski, I *know* Ko and I haven't..”

When I brought my arms down, Korix grabbed one of them, holding it in an iron grip.

“Excuse me. Who did you just call your *kuvesk*?” he growled.

I donned my most cheeky grin for him, but before I could unleash any snark, Leski slipped in between us, sticking a finger in my face again.

"I don't need you telling me what to do about my father," she said. "Have you lived with him for the last twenty-five years? No. *I'm* the one that's put up with his bullshit. I'm the one that has to figure out how I feel about what he did to- to my-"

Cutting off, she bit back a sob, and I reached out to comfort her, even if I was a little confused what she was upset about. Yes, I'd briefly mentioned a couple of her options for future contact with Niklaus, but I hadn't meant to imply she should choose one of them over the other. Was that what she'd heard?

"I would never tell you what you should do about him," I said. "You're dealing with a lot right now, and I'll be here to support you, whatever you decide."

Leski's face went sour while her lips started trembling, and I couldn't tell if it was because she hadn't liked what I'd said or because I'd further brought her source of conflict into focus. Before I could figure that out, Korix jerked me forward, and I crashed into Leski, instinctually wrapping my arms around her.

I meant to twist myself to shield her fall, if we did happen to lose our balance, but as if to frustrate me, Korix took a fistful of Leski's coat. Along with his hold on my arm, he used that grip to steady us, and by the time we were stable once more, Leski was clinging to me with her face buried in my chest, sobbing. This sudden flood of tears was probably just a release of the tension that she'd accumulated over the last half hour and nothing more, but even still, I glared at Korix.

“What the fuck?” I asked in sub-vocals.

Shrugging he replied in kind, “You asked me to help.”

Patting Leski's back, I narrowed my eyes at him, refusing to lift my gaze until she pushed away from me.

“I'm sorry,” she said. “You're right about it all. It's just... I love my dad, even if with everything he's done. How sad is that? I have to be the worst daughter, no. The worst *person* for being so confused about all of this.”

Oh, hell no. Niklaus had already caused enough trouble in Leski's life. I wouldn't let this problem between them cause even more turmoil for her, especially not when it came in the form of self-loathing.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me, especially not when it comes to trouble with a parent," I said. "Unless I'm remembering this wrong, my parents had me throwing an enormous temper tantrum two weeks ago, and you had to pull me out of it."

"You did what now?" Korix said.

I shook my head at him, hoping to continue with my train of thought, but Leski turned to him with a mischievous grin in place, clearly relieved by the change in subject.

"He had a tantrum," she said. "Punched a wall, broke a mirror, and everything."

When Korix just *looked* at me, I sheepishly smiled, rubbing the back of my neck.

"I'd just lost you, ok?" I said. "But I know. I should still have better control of my emo-mph!"

Staggering a little, I struggled to stay on my feet and kiss Korix back, all while knowing a woman had been trapped between us. She, however, didn't seem to mind her situation, or she hadn't protested it, at least. Unmoving, she stayed quiet while I oscillated between whether I should push Korix away or not, but when I eventually gave in, opening my mouth to him, and a pleased sound from... someone—I wasn't sure who—hummed in the air between us, she started wiggling against me.

Reluctantly, I backed off. Before I could step away, though, Leski took hold of my shirt, pulling me down to her mouth, and I locked up, body and mind. What... was going on?

Retreating the barest amount, she clicked her tongue.

"Zaeden, if you don't kiss me back, I'll have to find someone else to help with this desire that *you* spawned," she said, "and I'd rather not do that."

For a moment, I could only blink at her, but when she rolled her eyes, about to turn away, I did as she'd asked. As always with her, I quickly got lost in it, but I wasn't too far gone to miss when Korix released my arm. Without thought, I shot my hand out, wrapping my fingers in his waistband. He wasn't going anywhere, damnit, not even a few steps away.

Unfortunately, he didn't seem to agree with my resolve, trying to escape from me, and the struggle of maintaining my hold pulled my attention away from Leski. Groaning, she broke our kiss to throw her head back.

"Mother Time, you two," she said under her breath.

She strode a few steps away before plopping into the grass. Glancing at us, she patted the ground beside her, and with my head cocked, I sat as she'd instructed. Korix reluctantly followed, and once

we were both on the ground, Leski clicked her tongue again, obviously frustrated with us.

“It’s like I have to do everything,” she said.

Getting to her knees, she tugged me next to Korix before shuffling to face us, and for a moment, she merely stared while sucking on her lip. Then, she displayed an evil grin. Oh, no. What was she-
?

“Perfect,” she said.

Then, she tackled us. Normally, a person of her size wouldn’t come anywhere close to toppling me or Korix, but with a grin, I let it happen, grabbing Korix’s arm on the way down. That added force pulled him backward along with us.

“You know...” I drawled, “if you wanted a cuddle pile, all you had to do was ask.”

“Shut up and snuggle me, you snarky bastard,” Leski said into my chest.

Laughing, I threw an arm around her before twisting in place, getting her between me and Korix. While I cuddled as close to her as I could, he raised himself up onto an elbow, watching us with his eyebrows drawn together. After a moment of this, Leski again groaned, slapping at me until I loosened my hold.

Craning her neck toward Korix, she said, “You too, scary man. Cuddle me. Now. Unless you don’t want to, of course.”

Korix lifted an eyebrow.

“What makes you think you can order me around?” he mildly asked.

“Necessity,” Leski said. “If I hadn’t changed something, both of you would have been awkward messes around me, which I *for sure* do not want, so here we are. And I hope to Mother Time that you never make me order you around again. I don’t like doing it.”

Confusion passed over Korix’s face until he saw the smirk on my face. Then, he went blank.

“I see,” he said.

“She’s also a tease,” I said.

“I see that too.”

“Hey! I’m right here,” Leski said. “Also. You.”

Awkwardly reaching behind herself, she poked Korix’s chest.

“Cuddles. Right fucking now. That or tell us you don’t want to so we can get back to our beds.”

When he didn't move, I decided to help Leski along, going deadly serious.

"Please, Ko. I know you like this sort of thing," I said. "It'll be good for you, and everyone here could use it after the last few weeks."

Lifting his eyes to the sky, Korix sighed, but he lay back down, and for a while, I closed my eyes, enjoying the rare opportunity of having two partners so physically close to me. Soon enough, we'd need to head home, but for now... for now, I let myself rest.

Korix and Leski talked in halting sentences, ones that became more animated with every minute that passed. During this conversation, Leski might have played the part of the teasing flirt, and perhaps Korix inched a little closer to her. I wouldn't know. In my haze of contentment, all I heard was the people I cared for interacting with each other. Happy.

They were happy. That was all I wanted.

Clutching them to me, I said, "It doesn't matter what Lutov or the world might need from me. You are the reason that I fight."

I didn't care if Korix stiffened at those words. I didn't care that I was unsure if I could fully reciprocate Leski's feelings. I didn't care what challenges I was facing, either with them or in a general sense. With these two people, I'd found a sense of family that I hadn't felt in ages, and I'd be damned if I was letting it go.

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