

Chapter 88: She's His Sister

We'd set down a while ago, but I couldn't bring myself to find out where we were. Throughout Korix's story, I'd hung on his every word, silently dying inside for him, and when he fell silent, it felt as if the rest of the world went quiet too.

I badly wanted to reach out and comfort this man I could never love, but something in his bearing held me back. He was a shaky house of cards, only requiring a single touch to fall apart, but fortunately, I knew what he needed in this moment. It was what anyone would need in his position: to finish the story. To have someone hear him, in every way possible.

So, I softly asked, "And what happened during that confrontation?"

Korix took a shuddering breath before turning to me with his jaw set.

"The boy killed his monster," he said.

He expected this to upset me, I could tell, and it did, if not for the reason he thought. How could the world be so cruel as to allow something like this story to exist?

But Korix was looking at me as if he was certain I'd run away from him, and I had to meet that unspoken challenge. So, I lowered the divider between us so I could scoot closer and throw my arms around his neck.

"Good," I whispered in his ear. "I'm glad."

For a moment, Korix stiffened, but then, he hugged me back with a whoosh of hot air ruffling my hair.

"Thank you," he said.

We held each other for as long as we could, and when we had to break apart, the story he'd told me got put to the side. I looked through the skycruiser's glass, taking in our location for the first time. We were at the border between Xygek and the Preserve, apparently. Why were we here?

"When we were kids, Sanya and I used to play here, getting out of the house in the brief moments we could," Korix said. "I was always a... curious child, we'll call it, and while that curiosity got me into plenty of scrapes when I was young, it also helped me, especially in this place. Because of it, I found an unauthorized way into the Preserve."

"What?" I snapped.

At that, Korix simply laughed while getting out of the skycruiser, and as had been the theme today, I scrambled to follow. He approached the fence that guarded the Preserve, and once he reached it, his body blurred, becoming mist as it passed through. Once he was on the other side, turning on me with a grin, I scowled at him.

“That can’t be how you got through as a kid,” I said. “You wouldn’t have had access to that process until you reached the high Strata, and you most certainly didn’t have the authority that you have now. You’d have needed both to bypass everything that’s protecting this place.”

“True,” Korix said.

But he didn’t speak a word more, only smirking on the other side of the chain link between us. He was going to make me ask?

“So, how did you do it then?” I said.

With his eyes twinkling, Korix said, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Really? After a moment, I growled, resisting the urge to stomp in place.

“Yes. That’s why I asked. I fucking *hate* using molecular dispersion,” I said. “Is it something I need to worry about?”

Sobering, Korix cocked his head, considering the question.

“No. I doubt anyone else would think to use my exploit, not even you,” he said, “and unless you require it, I’d rather not explain. With everything else I’ve shared today and what I’ll soon show you... with her waiting there... I need to hold onto some secrets, no matter how small.”

Oh. I knew what this was.

“It’ll be better if we get this over with quickly,” I said.

With his breath hitching, Korix looked away.

“I know.”

But then, that smirk returned to his face, if a little shakier than before.

“Coming?” he asked.

After initiating the process that began molecular dispersion, I too stepped through the fence, and together, we headed into the forest. If I’d found wandering through this place painful the last time I’d been here, this time was torture. This time, I knew with every step what we were here to do, and there was no avoiding what came at the end.

When we reached our destination, would we find Sanya there? In a way, this search had helped me with keeping my mind off of its inevitable conclusion, but now that it was swiftly approaching... now that it was almost here...

“What will you do?”

Picking up the pace, my hallucination got in front of me, walking backward.

“Sanya’s his sister,” they said. “You’ve known that for days, but you keep putting off the question of her fate, avoiding it like it’ll kill you. Well now, it’s time to face the music. You’ve used Korix to track down his sister, and knowing his story, you also know how important she is to him. So. Will you kill her, as the mission requires? If so, will you do it in front of him? Or will you let him decide how it goes?”

Vigorously shaking my head, I whispered, “I don’t know yet.”

My hallucination’s disapproval was almost as bad as Korix’s look of concern, but at least I could wave that last one away.

“You planning on sharing where we’re headed anytime soon?” I asked.

Sighing, Korix said, “The only safe place that I knew as a child. You’ll understand what I mean when you see it, and don’t worry. That will be soon.”

He wasn’t wrong. Within another quarter hour, we stumbled onto one of the crudest structures I’d come across in Lutov, but given the context of how it had been created, I had to admire its craftsmanship. High in the branches of a massive tree, Korix and Sanya’s safe space was large enough to contain a low Strata’s apartment inside of it, and while its materials were—as I’d said before—crude, composed of roughly hewn logs and rope, it was sturdy with plenty of openings in its walls to serve as lookout points. Pretty damn good for a pair of children.

Staring up at it, Korix seemed rooted in place, but when I moved toward the rope ladder that led into the tree, he called for me to wait. He was slow and hesitant in his steps, but soon enough, he’d mounted the ladder, and together, we climbed to a more stable surface.

“-become a copy of him,” a soft voice was saying as I reached my feet.

Having already gone inside, Korix was hidden from view, but I clearly heard him when he said.

“I am *not* our bastard of a father.”

Sanya merely chuckled at that, which forced me to take a moment before joining them. I had to suppress everything that her voice had raised in me.

“That’s *super* unhealthy, LV,” my hallucination said behind me. “You’ve got to stop ignoring these things.”

What did they know?

Requesting my rifle, I joined Korix inside, noting that he already had a weapon pointed at Sanya. She barely acknowledged my presence, reserving all of her attention for her brother.

“You could have stayed out of this,” she said. “Once the *Lokke Vitras* knew how we’re related, he could have easily followed my clues by himself. It might have taken him longer, but it would have been possible.

“But you had to get involved. Why? It can’t be out of some desire to help me. Years ago, when it became clear that the *Lokke Vitras* role was more important to you than me, you promised that you’d stay out of my life, that we would be nothing to one another, and for years, you kept that promise. Yet, here you are now. So please, brother dearest. *Please*, explain why you’re here. Explain why hunting me down as you have doesn’t make you like our father.”

With- with *tears* streaming over his face, Korix said, “I couldn’t love you, Sanya, just as much as I can’t love *him*. Why can’t you understand that? You always hated me for what I became, but I never wanted to be the *Lokke Vitras*, much like the sister I knew would never have wanted to do all she’s done. We’re more alike than you want to admit.”

Sanya reared back for a moment before snapping.

“And that excuses how you’ll kill me?”

Uh... what-?

“NO! Of course it fucking doesn’t, you frustratingly brilliant woman!” Korix roared. “No one here deserves forgiveness for what we’ve done, least of all me for all the ways I’ve hurt you.

“But I *am NOT* our damn father. Mother Time, Sanya. Do you think I take pleasure from this, like he would have? I hate it, and I will never be able to live with it once it’s done. You will always haunt me.”

Apparently, Sanya had no reply for that because silence fell, and glancing between the two of them, I rested a hand on my hip, tapping my rifle against a leg.

“Excuse me, but what the hell do you think you’re doing?” I said. “All of this—”

I waved at them.

“—it’s my job. *I’m* the dramatic one. *I’m* the one who scars my spark of a soul for no good reason, and I’m *definitely* the one who gets to carry a burden this heavy. So, Ko. Please do shut up and go outside for a moment. I have a decision to make, and all this shouting isn’t helping with that.”

Left gaping, Korix rapidly blinked at me.

“Zae-” he tried to say.

“GO. OUTSIDE.” I firmly said before softening. “Whatever I decide, I’ll make sure you have a chance to say goodbye before I do it.”

Oo, he wanted to fight me on this. I saw it in how stiffly he was holding himself, but with a jerky nod, he did as he was told *for fucking once*. With that taken care of, I turned on Sanya, this massively convoluted conundrum that was somehow contained in one woman, and for a while, we simply stared at one another while I struggled with choosing what to do next. Soon enough, though, my hallucination clicked their tongue, marching to stand behind Sanya.

“No more avoidance,” they said. “You may continue to ignore everything else in your life that you’d rather never see but this?”

They jabbed a finger into the top of Sanya’s head.

“You can face this.”

They were right. I could no longer delay my current nightmare. So, I trudged across the distance to Sanya and dropped to the floor in front of her, rubbing my face.

“You created a neurotoxin, experimenting on people made vulnerable by a wish to join the Collective,” I said. “You released this neurotoxin in Xygek, thereby endangering Lutov worse than any other known catastrophe, and it killed someone very dear to me.”

I glanced up at my hallucination, but they only met my gaze with a blank expression in place.

Probably believing the pause had been for her, Sanya simply said, “I did.”

She didn’t bother trying to excuse herself, which was good because I wasn’t done.

“Your actions have led to the deaths of hundreds and the dissolution of your House,” I continued, “not that I’m blaming everything I’ve done on you. I’ll readily acknowledge how complicit I was in the last few months. Even still, what you’ve done requires punishment, even if my position will keep those same consequences from falling on me, and I must carry out this execution.”

“Yes, this is true,” Sanya said.

And again, there was nothing else. Looking at this woman who’d caused so much misery, I could no longer contain myself.

“You *hurt* me, Sanya,” I hissed with my eyes watering, “hurt me badly, and you knew what you were doing before any of this started.”

With a solemn nod, Sanya said. “I did. I’m sorry, Zaeden.”

She was *sorry*? She was sorry for months of sleepless nights? For the accumulation of so much unnecessary blood on my hands? For forcing me to show Leski and Baely how horrible my role as the *Lokke Vitras* could be, driving them away as a result? For *killing Damari*?

“And there it is,” my hallucination whispered. “The reason you’ve been pushing yourself so hard and why you’ve been seeing me. You have to let this go, LV.”

But I COULDN’T.

Growling, I jerked my hand up, and Sanya leaned away from the rifle that was suddenly in her face.

“How could you do this?” I shouted. “*You were my friend!*”

With a long sigh, Sanya said, “And I still am. Months ago, I told you that I’d need you to end this, remember? I said it because it was true, of course, but also because it would make this part easier for you. Please, Zaeden. Shoot me, knowing it’s what I want.”

What should I do? Sanya was my friend, but she was my enemy. She was Korix’s sister, but she was a threat to the homeland. I had to kill her, but I couldn’t.

I couldn’t.

“So, let it go,” my hallucination said. “Let *me* go.”

Gritting my teeth, I closed my eyes, breathing in all of my turmoil, and after a soul-wrenching moment, I let it back out, slow as melting ice. Then, I met Damari’s eyes.

“I loved you, my friend,” I whispered.

And I shot them in the face.

They disappeared as the bolt passed through them before blackening the wood at their back, and as they dissolved into nothing, I drooped, ignoring the world around me. Please, let me do this, just for a moment.

Sanya brought me back.

“What... was that?” she asked in a tremulous voice.

And I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t know why I found this situation so funny, but I did, and my body *shook* with that amusement.

Eventually, though, I calmed down, wiping my eyes.

“So far as I’m concerned, I just killed you,” I said. “A single, powerless woman is no true threat to Lutov, and despite how much your crimes cry out for punishment, I can’t carry it out. Call me selfish or weak for it, if you must, but I can’t do that to myself or Korix.”

Getting to my feet was hell. All of my body’s long-accumulated woes were screaming through me, and once I’d reached my full height, I could barely summon the energy needed to stay upright.

Glancing down at a dead woman, I said, “Goodbye, Sanya.”

I didn't look at Korix when I joined him outside. Crossing my arms, I leaned against the wall beside him.

"And so far as you're concerned, I just left an unrecognizable mess of a body in there," I said. "Your job is to clean it up, however you see fit. Do you understand me? Just give me a yes or no answer, please."

When I made myself look at Korix, I didn't find the disapproval that I'd expected. Instead, he was watching me with shimmering eyes and a slack mouth, and after a pause, he dumbly nodded.

"Good," I said. "Whatever you decide, I need you home tonight. I'll need help with writing my report."

In other words, don't run away from me.

I didn't wait for his reply. After descending from the tree and leaving the Preserve, I got in the skycruiser and had it take me home. Once there, I stumbled to my room, collapsed into bed, and promptly fell asleep.

Korix woke me up when he cuddled up next to me, hours later.

"Don't get up," he said as he kissed my shoulder. "I have a story that needs finishing."

Yawning, I tried to put together what story he was talking about before promptly giving up and snuggling into him.

"All right," I said.

This time, it took Korix a good, long while to start talking, and throughout that time, he held me to him, breathing into my hair.

"The circumstances of my father's death drew quite a bit of attention to me, including Talira's," he eventually said. "She was the *Lokke Vitras* back then, so she didn't have much time for an anomaly like me, but even still, she checked in on me over the years, always while using a persona. This was how she chose me. When her *shukusen* decided to join the Collective, ordering her to train her replacement, she knew I'd be the perfect fit.

"So, you see, my father ruined my life in more than one way. He also tangentially got me trapped in a role that I abhorred.

"Even still, I have to thank him. Because I was the *Lokke Vitras*, Talira sent me on a sensitive, deep-cover mission, investigating reports of subversive activity in House Zan's ranks, and there, I met the second man who'd shape my life.

"I swear, Zaeden. I saw you outside the stacks on the day we met, and it was like the world lurched. I don't know how else to describe it, and the events that came over the next few decades

only solidified the suspicion that formed in me that day.

“You know how the Ostiums believe that everyone has someone who can complete their song in the unknowable symphony of the world? I believe that’s what you are for me, Zae. The one who completes my song.

“Even if you don’t believe in that mysticism, though, the fact remains that you have changed my life for the better. What I have with you makes up for every tragedy I’ve suffered in my life.”

When he went quiet, I rolled over so I could brush his cheek. I loved him. Three simple, little words. How I wished I could say them now. Instead, I rested my forehead on his.

“You mean the world to me too, Ko,” I said.

Sighing, Korix relaxed against me, and gradually, we fell asleep together. In the morning, we had a report to write, *shukusenth* to answer to, and our girls to reconcile with, but these problems could wait.

For now, this was enough.

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