

# Chapter 89: When Victory Feels Like Failure

Writing up the report didn't take as long as I'd thought it would, if only because Korix had made it easy for me. After requesting the clean-up of a body from Talira, he'd left the Preserve, but before a crew could arrive to comply with the request, an electrical failure in a nearby facility had caused a fire in the woods. This freak accident had consumed any trace of a hut in the trees, although thankfully, long-established safety protocols had kept the fire from spreading too far into the Preserve.

By the time anyone could check on Korix after that, he'd reached an island that had once housed a commune for the Cerullis' defectors, there to pay his respects. The log on his skycruiser had placed him nowhere near the facility that had started the fire, just as its recorders hadn't stored any images of a visit that he might have made there.

If he'd abandoned supplies on the island when he'd left it, I couldn't find proof of it, not that I looked too hard for that. Throughout the investigation that followed the end of our mission, I chose to believe that Sanya was somewhere in our wide world, free to explore it to her heart's content.

I wasn't sure if I'd done the right thing by leaving her fate in Korix's hands. From a purely logical point of view, I should have at least taken her array from her, the same as what I'd done to her followers, but... but...

Look. If I'd learned anything from my giant mess of a fuck up, it was that I needed to take better care of myself. For my whole life, I'd lived for my loved ones: their approval, their safety, their happiness, and yes, these things were worth striving for.

But not when it came at the expense of my own happiness, much as that never seemed to matter, but more importantly, *other people's lives*. I couldn't keep using love or my—admittedly—relative helplessness to excuse my actions.

Mother Time, something had to change. I had to find a way to heal.

When it came to that goal, check-in chats with Korix and indulging in a family were definitely a nice start, but in the end, all these things did was keep me stable while I endured a life of ongoing trauma, visited both upon myself and others.

And I needed to get out.

That was the prime lesson of this long string of events. I could no longer complacently stay in a role that was slowly—*so agonizingly slowly*—killing me. I had to find a way to escape it. I had to look at my own damn life and everything I wanted to accomplish with it, and I had to fight for it, even if it destroyed me.

Even if it hurt my loved ones, much as I'd never wanted that.

But I'd been talking about the aftermath of House Cerullis' dissolution.

Over the next few days, the Houses diligently investigated the fire, but all collected evidence firmly indicated two things: that Korix had had nothing to do with it and that Sanya was dead. In the end, this evidence was enough to convince even Talira of these facts.

As for my doubts, the only reason I had them was because of Korix. He might act like the wronged and grieving brother, but I could literally see how much lighter he felt. There was an ease to him that in the past, I'd encountered only on rare occasions.

After a few days, things calmed down enough to hold a commemorative ceremony for all those lost in the last year, and this was what Feena found me avoiding on the afternoon in question. I'd been reviewing a list that House Kirst had provided me, one that detailed the initial placement of former Cerullis members, and when I noticed her approaching, I watched with pinched lips.

Since Sanya had 'died', my sister had been trying to get ahold of me, and I'd done my best to elude those attempts. It looked like she'd finally caught up with me, though.

"Thought I'd find you here," she said once she was close enough.

Swinging her legs over the railing I was sitting on, Feena perched beside me, glancing down the side of a tower.

"Uh-huh," I distractedly said. "And how many of the other nearby rooftops did you check before lucking out here?"

Laughing, Feena said, "A few. You're a hard man to find at times."

"Especially when I don't want to be found."

I pointedly glanced at her, but she merely smirked in response. When she didn't continue with the conversation, I returned to inspecting my list.

Based on Kirst's current progress, the distribution of former Cerullis members into the other Houses' ranks was almost complete, and once that was done, we only needed to decide the fate of their old headquarters before we could put this unpleasantness behind us. I was eager to do that, even if it would take a while for Lutov to accept our new normal.

Damn. If dismantling one of the Houses had been this difficult, requiring such a significant catalyst to start it, what would doing the same with the other five be like? Was there any way to make the

process less painful next time?

“Five Houses. It’s so strange,” Feena said, as if echoing my thoughts. “Makes sense, though. Five Houses to match the five saviors, when they eventually come along.”

Nope. I refused to discuss the ominous bullshit that had been surrounding my sister lately, and she must see it. After a moment, she moved on.

“I’m guessing you’re not attending the ceremony,” she said.

“That’s a good assumption,” I said.

Lifting her palm, Feena quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Watch it together?” she asked.

I grumbled something placating at her, too grateful that she’d diverged into this topic to protest it. An image of a stage got projected over Feena’s hand, and for close to an hour, she watched the opening proceedings while I paid them barely any mind.

I couldn’t listen to those speeches. The people being honored in them were my victims, and right now, I couldn’t stand seeing their faces, not even in my mind’s eye. I’d barely started recovering from the events of the last year, and so, I could not indulge in this chance to regress. I couldn’t become the disaster of a man I’d been toward the end of them.

I still didn’t know how the Rylan persona had taken over in that time. Maybe over the next few months, I could figure it out.

Soon enough, though, the ceremony drew my attention to it. Someone was calling me to the stage, and while the silent seconds ticked by, I watched the *shukusenth*, especially Talira, grow increasingly uncomfortable in their chairs.

“That’s right, assholes,” I said with grim satisfaction. “I’m not coming.”

I’d told them I wouldn’t accept recognition for my role in this catastrophe. Only Talira knew how involved Koris and I had been in a *certain part* of those events, but even if the rest of the *shukusenth* were ignorant of that, they shouldn’t bestow any honor on my other actions. The people of Lutov might be in awe of their *Lokke Vitras*, but most of what I tackled for them was done in the shadows. Its details must remain murky, not clearly brought into the spotlight, as the *shukusenth* might like.

And perhaps... perhaps I wasn’t ready for other people to see those deeds. Soon, maybe I’d shine a light into those dark places but not yet.

Eventually, my lack of presence got too awkward, and Talira stood to accept recognition in my stead. She made a pretty speech about the sacrifices of the *Lokke Vitras* and how worthy of a successor I’d been and blah, blah, blah. I hardly paid attention to it.

Talira might still be on my shit list. Just a little.

When the ceremony ended, Feena lowered her hand, grabbing the railing so she could lean back.

Peering at the sky, she said, "Well, that was painful. Well done, Zae."

"We shouldn't have focused so much attention on the gory details of what happened. It's a mockery of those who died," I said. "Yes, we should mourn those who are gone, but we should also honor them by changing our ways. We should make sure something like this never happens again but no. Apparently, that's asking for too much."

Feena swayed away from me—

"Whoa. Grouch much?"

—before lunging forward to hug me.

"It'll be ok, Zae," she said. "This trial is over, and for a while, we'll have peace. You should enjoy it while it lasts."

Much as I wanted to bite my sister's head off for going cryptic again, she'd had a good point.

So, slumping, I said, "I'll try."

"Great!"

Slapping my back, Feena pulled away, and I groaned at the mischief on her face. Apparently, it was time to address the reason I'd been avoiding her for days.

"Mom and dad want to know when you'll talk to Leski," she said. "Seems that girl's finally gotten moody enough to bother them."

Yep, that was what I'd thought.

"I'm sorry about that, but I don't think we should talk quite yet," I said. "Out of this whole mess, I have one more hurdle to cross, and I can't fix things with Leski until it's over."

With her face softening, Feena said, "You mean the Dispersal?"

When I nodded, she sighed.

"Ok," she said. "I'll let mom and dad know."

Needing to change the subject, I asked, "How's Baely?"

"Fine. Beautiful. Missing her *per*," Feena said. "She's started seeing some girl from a House Drav family."

That caught my attention.

“Really?” I said. “Looks like I’ll have to resolve things with Leski more quickly than I’d like. I’d hate to miss my daughter’s first foray into romance.”

Snorting, Feena punched my shoulder.

“Don’t push yourself. From what I can tell, they’re taking things slow.”

As they should.

But then, Feen wrapped me in a side hug, and we spent quite a while watching air traffic buzz around Xygek’s towers. When my sister eventually stirred from her reverie, she squeezed me before dismounting the railing.

“I’ve got to go.”

Before she disappeared through the roof’s door to a stairwell, though, she glanced back at me.

“Will you be ok, Zae?” she called. “I know it’s been a rough year but...”

She didn’t finish that thought. It was a good question, though.

After everything that had happened, things felt different for me now. I understood the full meaning of the *Lokke Vitras* role, including what it was at its heights and its most sordid moments. I understood how much it was harming... well, everyone. I understood exactly how difficult my dream of gaining freedom from the House system, both for myself and Lutov, would be.

I was no longer certain about whether I’d ever achieve that goal.

That didn’t mean I’d stop trying, though. So, I put on my best smile for my sister and said.

“Don’t worry, Feena. Whatever comes my way, I’ll always be fine in the end.”

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