

Chapter 9: Ruined Celebration

I decided that my emotions didn't matter. How I was feeling could never matter, so instead of digging into them, I pulled up a report that I'd received earlier today, the one I'd requested about the Preserve disappearances.

According to it, eleven people had vanished off the face of the earth since Drien, two months ago. Disappearances like this were common enough, part of the hidden underside of our 'perfect' society, but this many in such a short timeframe was noteworthy.

Fourth Stratus Elrin hadn't made much progress with his investigation, mostly because the other Houses were delaying their approval for him to search the Preserve. Considering how thoroughly he'd combed Xygek to this point, that vast expanse of forest was most likely where he'd find these missing people, whether as prisoners or corpses. It was at least his best lead right now.

As the *Lokke Vitras*, I could get him access. Since my elevation, the Preserve had become just another part of Lutov to me. Maybe tomorrow I'd bring him with me on an excursion.

Elrin had a few theories as to who was taking these people and why, but every time I tried to read them, I flashed to the scene that I'd left behind and what I'd said. When stopping that confrontation, why had I mentioned being normal, of all things? My family had never been normal. I should be used to that.

Sighing, I swept the report to the side, thunking my head against the wall. As always when in the Southern Fells at night, a wondrous, overturned bowl of stars caught my eye. Even with the house and party's light to compete with them, those pinpricks overhead were so bright.

Had *shukusen* Sanya meant what she'd implied in the assembly earlier? Would we one day reach beyond our planet again, all thanks to her poking at a subject that most Lutovish found laughable? Could I explore places that no human had set foot upon, the first *Lokke Vitras* since Rowan to take to the stars?

I banged my head on concrete again, chuckling under my breath. Like that would happen. As long as I held this role, I was bound to Lutov.

"Hey, little brother."

Pushing air through my nose, I shook my head, refusing to look at Feena.

"They sent you to bring me inside?" I asked.

“Well, you did have a bit of a temper tantrum,” Feena said, “and I’ve always been the best at calming you down, besides Leski and Ko of course.”

“I assume they’re handling the others?” I said.

As she leaned against the wall beside me, I caught her nod from the corner of my eye.

“I wish you’d told me this was your plan for tonight. I could have prepped Pheniks for it, kept him from making any stupid comments,” Feena said. “You looped me in on everything else.”

“I wanted it to be a happy surprise for everyone, which was silly in retrospect,” I said. “Our family doesn’t handle the unexpected well.”

“Forget them. Hey!”

When Feena nudged my shoulder, I dragged my gaze down to where moonlight was outlining her half-smile.

“You’re going to be a dad,” she said with glee.

A snort became a laugh, and I lightly shoved my sister.

“*You’re* going to be an aunt,” I said.

“And isn’t that just wonderful and *horrifying*?” Feena said. “Hell, are we grown up enough for children in our lives?”

“Ko, Leski, and I will be responsible for the kid,” I said, “but you’ll do great. They’ll love their Auntie Feena.”

Sarcasm had soaked those last two words, and rolling along the wall, my sister socked my arm, which hurt. She’d never held back with me. Rubbing it, I turned my attention overhead again, knowing she was watching me.

“What’s got you so fascinated?” she asked after a while.

Without moving my head, I watched her for a moment before speaking.

“You’ll probably think it’s stupid.”

With her lips twitching, she said, “Tell me anyway?”

My mouth became a thin line as I lifted my eyes to the stars.

“I’m thinking about space travel,” I said. “What would we find in that vast, unexplored expanse? Mother Time, I’d love to go out there, walk on other planets, come as close to our sun as I can. We’ve almost exhausted the secrets that our planet holds but out there...”

Raising a hand, I curled my fingers around a star, pretending I was holding it.

“What mysteries might we find, Feena?”

I slapped my hand to my thigh, but rather than making fun of me as expected, my sister kept quiet with a troubled expression in place. I didn't know what to make of it.

“Do you know the story of the five saviors?” she eventually asked.

That... was a strange question.

Frowning, I said, “Do you mean the children's story? Let's see. How does it go? The silver tongue, spy, lawmaker, general, and inventor aid Mother Time's most blessed in saving the world, right?”

Wincing, Feena said, “You fucked up the titles but yes.”

Ok...

“What does that have to do with space?” I asked.

Chewing her lip, Feena examined me as if deciding what to say, but when she opened her mouth to answer, a direct connection established in my array without my permission.

“Zaeden, get your ass in here *now*,” Talira shouted before cutting it.

“...Shit,” I said.

Because only one thing could have my grandmother so panicked right now.

“Problem?” Feena asked.

Nodding, I sprinted around her, unsure whether I was grateful or appalled to hear her following me.

The scene in the sitting room was everything I'd been afraid of and more. Our guests were huddled against the walls with only Talira and Leski able to move away from them. My grandmother was running interference, keeping everyone safe, but she was so occupied with doing it that she couldn't help Leski.

My wife was doing her best to diffuse the situation. When she had to move, she did it slowly, but that wasn't helped by Talira's frantic efforts. Still, she crept forward as quickly as she could, and her voice filled the gaps between other noises.

“It's not real, love. Look at me. You know me. I wasn't there. I'm here in this moment with you, Ko. Just take a deep breath for me. Please, love.”

Because Korix had fallen into his past, and once he was this deep into it, these techniques were the only nonviolent ones we had to calm him down.

They weren't working. Korix was standing in the entryway to the foyer, blocking it. White had drowned out the gray in his eyes, and with sweat rolling over his skin, his shoulders were heaving. He had a knife in one hand and a rifle in the other, and when I'd first gained visibility on the room, he'd been tossing his blade at someone. Blurring with House Kolb speed, Talira knocked it aside.

I saw all of this—panicked guests, House Kolb's *shukusen* pushed to her limits, and Korix's intensity—and I had a pretty good idea of what had happened. My grandmother and life partner had fought, and quickly learning he was outmatched, Korix had switched to containing 'hostiles', all while testing the main threat's abilities. It was what I'd do in his perceived situation.

The answer to how he was securing the entrance I was occupying was answered when energy bolts flew for my head. Diving for cover, I pushed Feena behind me.

"Shit," I snapped.

How had this happened? I knew social situations like this could trigger Korix at times, especially when he couldn't find an avenue of escape in a crowded room, but I'd thought we'd kept this party tame, or the parts of it that he'd been involved with at least. I'd thought he'd had enough anchors in our home to keep him in the present.

"Damnit!"

Something must have happened after I'd left, something more than the disaster that I'd participated in, but the reason for this break from reality didn't matter right now. Leski and I needed to bring Korix back down, and from what I'd seen, I didn't think we could use our normal routine.

When I opened a direct connection with my wife, I said, "Assessment?"

"I don't know, Zae. He won't look at me," she said. "It's worse than that time you took us to bring in that *monster*."

I winced at the reminder of that mission. I'd thought it would be simple: go to the suspect's apartment, apprehend him, and search his home for evidence.

We'd never needed to look. When we'd arrived, the proof of his guilt, every trophy he'd taken from his victims, had been displayed for all the world to see.

After I'd entered the room, I'd managed to shut the door on Leski, keeping her from seeing what had been inside, before violently throwing up, but Korix...

Our suspect hadn't made it into custody, and Leski and I had spent hours dragging Korix out of his closed-off state. It was the worst I'd ever seen him.

It was also why following that, I hadn't brought him or Leski with me on missions for years, only relenting when they'd started pitching fits about it.

And Leski thought this break might be worse? Holy hell... had we finally lost him?

I snarled at the yawning pit in my stomach and the wail in my head. No! Korix would be fine.

"If I talked to him, would it help?" I asked.

"Maybe, but we don't have time for it," Leski said. "Talira can't counter him forever, and more guests will soon pass through here, trying to go home. We have to keep them safe."

"Mother Time damn it all!"

"I'm sorry, love," Leski said.

"It's fine," I said. "Everything will be fucking fine."

I started digging through my pockets, glancing up when Feena rested a hand on my shoulder.

"Can I help?" she asked.

A hysterical giggle flew from me before I could bite down on it.

"Actually..." I gasped. "Actually, yes. Can you let everyone on the terrace know that the party's over? Have them skirt the house to their skycruisers, if you can, but with them drunk, that'll be hard. I know you won't be able to herd them all, but... they need to go."

"Will do," Feena said.

Once she'd disappeared around a corner, I banged my head on the wall, palming a hypo. I hated doing this.

Spinning, I marked heat signatures on the other side of the wall, watching them as I stuck my rifle into the sitting room. When I fired several bolts, most of them zipped over everyone's heads, but still, Korix jerked to the side before ducking, telling me that I'd successfully dissipated his rifle. His knife clattered to the floor as well, but by the time it had hit the carpet, I was in the sitting room with House Kolb speed racing me to Korix.

His reflexes were as fast as ever, of course. As soon as he registered me coming, he tried to dive for the knife I'd shot out of his hand.

Fortunately, Talira was just as quick as him. She arrived before me, grabbing his wrist to drag him upright. With a fistful of his hair, she pulled his head to the side, and I sank my hypo's needle into his neck. Talira released Korix before he could fight free of her, and I should have been focused on keeping him contained, but I was stuck in place, watching him weep. Watching him talk to people who were long dead.

"I'm sorry. I deserve your wrath. I do, but *I don't want to die*. Not yet. Not anymore. Please. I never wanted to kill you, any of you. Don't look at me like that. *Don't look at me-!*"

I couldn't understand him anymore, not with his words bleeding together, and as he started wobbling, Leski hooked her elbows under his from behind, right before he sagged. Together, we lowered him to the ground, ending with his head in Leski's lap, and I crouched in front of them, frozen in the face of my wife crying over our unconscious life partner.

Clearing his throat, Pheniks said, "Zae-"

"You should go home now, all of you," I interrupted. "I think we've had enough drama for tonight, don't you?"

I felt their judging eyes on me. On us. But the sound of shuffling feet indicated people were following my instructions.

Several of them stopped beside me before leaving. Mom kissed the top of my head while dad squeezed my shoulder. Talira told me to come see her in the morning. I got an encouraging message from Feena that I'd read later, and Pheniks apologized for what he'd said, which almost set me off. Instead, I took a deep breath, never removing my eyes from my loved ones.

"It's ok, Phen," I said, "but if you want us to stay close, you need to start thinking about what you say before you say it. It's not just me that your comments affect, and yes, they don't bother me. Much. But... I need you to start thinking about how what you're saying might hurt others. Ok?"

After a pause, Pheniks said, "Ok. I'm sorry."

Then, he left, and it was only me and Leski left with a deeply dreaming Korix.

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