

# Chapter 92: Waiting

As soon as I was out of sight, I took off at House Kolb speed toward the apartment's sitting room. When I entered it, I hardly slowed down, launching myself at the sectional sofa where Korix was sitting. While he grunted at my body's impact with him, the sweet sound of a violin fell silent, and hurried footsteps pounded toward me. Leski landed beside us, right as Ace dropped his front paws beside my ankles, and pulling himself away from me, Korix jostled my dog off of the couch. He rolled so that I was sandwiched between him and Leski, and there I lay, curled in a ball.

I didn't cry into Korix's chest, no matter how much I might want to. I just took shuddering gasps until the tide receded, and once it had, I sat up.

"I didn't mean to interrupt what you were doing," I said. "Please, pretend like I'm not here."

Again, my partners exchanged a glance, one I wasn't sure I liked, and without wavering in that gaze, Korix took hold of my shirt, tugging me to the side. I landed at an awkward angle with my head on his chest. While he smoothed my hair down, Leski got between me and the back of the couch, and once I'd rolled over, she rested her chin on my arm, staring at me like Ace was doing at our side.

We stayed here for a while, moving every so often but resting within the comfort of one another's arms. The entire time, Ace got spoiled by near-constant petting—unavoidable with my arm draped over the sofa's cushions—and every so often, he licked my fingers, as if aware of my turmoiled state.

Eventually, Korix sat upright, absently caressing the air, and I shoved Leski off of the sofa. Making a face at me, she returned to her violin practice. With my head in Korix's lap, my dog on the ground beside me, and Leski's music singing in the air, I found my center with my stability returning.

Feena ruined it.

Racing into the sitting room, she shouted, "Have you seen this?"

The room's holodrama plate lit up, displaying a woman wearing a grave expression. As she spoke behind a flashing ribbon of text, I got the chance to read 'Azuwell Plains' before the image switched to a simple building, half of which was resting on solid ground while the other half jutted out over a cliff face. Below this, the sea pounded against rock, and behind it, the distinctive, blue grid of a *galnuka* glowed.

"Is that-?" I started.

"House Zan's research station near the Tainted Land's demarcation line, yes," Korix said.

The one the lower Strata had identified as the workplace of Niklaus' rival.

At that and the tone of Korix's voice, I stopped breathing. It was the tone that he took in the moments before an unexpected catastrophe occurred. Occasionally, his centuries spent playing the role of the *Lokke Vitras* gave him a sort of precognition of such things.

True to that, the barrier around the research station flickered before its distinctive sheen died. This alone wasn't disastrous. Despite the station's precarious perch, it had enough support to keep its mass aloft, even without a barrier in place. When several explosions brightened the line where the building met the cliff's stone, however...

Slowly, the building started crumbling, and I watched with a crushed throat and burning eyes as half of it fell into the waves, dragging a good portion of the other half with it. Oh... Mother Time... This couldn't be happening. I couldn't- couldn't-

"How... many...?" I asked.

I'd already requested the list of the station's personnel by the time Korix answered.

"Two hundred and forty-six," he said, "although some of them will have survived."

Hell, he'd sounded empty.

"Two hundred...?" Leski squeaked.

All of us turned to her, this woman who still believed that everyone had an unalienable right to choose when they died. She absorbed the bleed-over of our horror, spilling it back to us from her eyes. Tears drizzled from them, but within a second, shock's glaze had taken up residence there. I wondered how much of that numbness I was showing right now.

"We could have saved them," I said. "If we'd joined the lower Strata in their search... If we'd persisted in looking for the missing explosions... If I'd done as I wanted this morning, they'd be alive."

"Zae..." Korix said.

Whirling on him, I lifted a finger in his face.

"Don't you 'Zae' me," I snapped. "You and Talira shouldn't have let sentiment or concern for our physical wellbeing keep you from doing what needed to be done. You should have acted like the *Lokke Vitras*. You should have let. me. do. my. job."

I slammed the heel of my palm into his chest so hard that he rocked in place.

"Now, people are dead. Innocent people, Korix!"

Knocking my hand aside, Korix took hold of my arms, shaking me.

“You’re not letting yourself get *trapped in a broken body*,” he growled. “You haven’t experienced what *they* can do. I have. I won’t let you willingly take on that pain.”

The only other time he’d been this angry with me was after the Crescent Incident, and if I weren’t seeing red myself, I might find this concerning. As it was...

“You won’t *let* me?” I hissed. “What makes you think that you can stop me?”

As his face darkened, Korix took a breath, but before he could shout at me, someone stepped between us. Tear tracks glinted at Korix and me as brown eyes shot daggers at us. Leski.

“Hundreds of people have died, and this is how you respond?” she said. “By fighting with each other?”

She couldn’t know, didn’t feel the weight of so many sparks of souls, hadn’t increased a number in her array by another two hundred and forty-six. Mother Time, I’d killed a lot of people but never... never so many at once.

“I’m more curious why the two men who currently hold the words ‘*Lokke Vitras*’ in their titles are yelling at each other rather than plotting our next steps.”

Snapping my head up, I found Feena behind Korix, looking down her nose at me. Shit. She was right. And so was Leski.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped back.

“I’m sorry, Ko,” I said.

Hesitantly, he nodded, obviously wanting to reply in kind, but expressing regret had become foreign to him after centuries of being denied it. Shaking her head, Feena took a seat in an armchair while Leski faced me, displaying the fiercest look that I’d seen on her in a while.

“Letting yourself get trapped in a broken body?” she asked.

“That doesn’t matter at the moment,” I said.

A snarl pulsed in the air between us as she opened her mouth with a sneer.

“Leski!” I snapped. “I’m sorry, but I can’t soothe your fears right now. I don’t want that to happen again.”

I pointed at a holodrama plate, where a building was once more tumbling into the sea, and when she reluctantly stepped to the side, Korix and I faced the picture.

“This horror has to be *them*,” I said, “but it can’t be the cascade. That’s planned to begin in Xygek, and our disaster lies as far from the capital as you can get. So, what is it? Niklaus’ revenge on his rival? A test run? And if it is that last one-?”

Korix interrupted before I could continue.

"It's more likely an attempt to draw out our emergency responders," he said, "and it's working."

He nodded to an image of a transport convoy that was speeding over the Preserve, presumably on its way to a demolished research station.

"We still have time," he said. "*They'll* want to ensure that our first responders are thoroughly ensnared with this mess before making another one."

"Which gives us what? A few hours?" I said. "I should go to House Cerullis' headquarters now and get those bastards thoroughly entangled with *me*."

"That might stop the Ancients for a time, but what about House Cerullis?" Korix said. "Those explosions came from the weapons that were once stored in their Southern Fells facility, the last ones unaccounted for. Given their plans, Cerullis has to have more left as well, and without a barrier to protect a building, the House's members can do whatever they want to it, as you well know. They could release poison gas in vent systems. Shoot rocket into exposed walls. Who knows what else?"

Sighing, I rubbed my forehead.

"I have options for handling Cerullis. Once I have the Ancients' attention, I could get Jayla to start her House coup," I said. "Or I could bargain with *them* to delay *their* plan. Without permission, *they* can only take over someone through emotional vulnerability, right? In exchange for getting House Cerullis to stand down, even if just for a day, I could offer my consent when it comes to taking me over, keeping *them* from fighting for control of me. You and Talira could get a lot done in a day. Now that we have a better idea of what the cascade will entail, you can prepare. Get ready for the fallout."

"What makes you think *they'd* take a deal like that?" Korix snapped, interrupting me.

"*They'd* have a hard time getting into my head. I'm pretty healthy when it comes to emotions," I said. "I could make it easy for *them*."

Turning to me, Korix raised an eyebrow.

"Your parents?"

Why was he bringing them up?

"Sure, that hurt," I huffed, "but I had a normal emotional response to what they did, and I dealt with it so it wouldn't become an issue."

Korix crossed his arms.

"Zae," he softly said, "you see the faces of the people you've killed on average citizens."

Wincing, I said, "Ok, I'll give you that. I still think *they'd* rather delay *their* plan than fight for me, especially since postponing the cascade won't upset it. Those emergency responders won't be leaving the site of our current disaster anytime soon. Besides, I have yet to hear you or Talira offer an alternative plan."

"We're working on something," Korix said. "Just--"

He ground his knuckles into his eyes.

"Will you at least wait until sundown? The emergency responders won't reach the disaster zone until then, so nothing else is likely to happen before then. Please, Zae."

I chewed on my lip, considering him.

"You and *shukusen* Talira are really working on something?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Then, you have until sundown," I said.

With the discussion complete, we turned to resume what we'd been doing before Feena had interrupted us, only to be confronted by her amused smile and Leski's anxious glare.

"What?" I said.

"Are you two always like that when planning a mission?" Feena asked, sweeping her finger over us.

Frowning, I said, "No. Usually, he tells me what to do, and I do it."

"That's not what I meant. I--"

Feena clicked her tongue, seemingly searching for the words she needed.

"While you were speaking, you cycled through the three known tongues, sub-vocals, and some kind of signing code that I've never seen before," Leski said.

My sister beamed gratitude for the help at Leski, which she barely caught. She was still trapped by worry.

"We... did?" I asked.

When they solemnly nodded at me, I glanced at Korix.

"Did you know we were doing that?" I asked.

"Yes. Keeping up with your switches can be exhausting at times, especially in recent years," Korix said. "You didn't know you were doing that?"

"I... No."

How had I not noticed?

"I only caught about half of what you said," Leski said. "Mind explaining to the audience?"

Yes, I very much did mind. Still, I'd answer her, but first.

Taking Korix's hand, I guided him toward the sofa once more.

"The summary? I have a plan for this mess that Ko and my grandmother don't like," I said. "I agreed to wait until later tonight before carrying it out."

Hauling Korix in front of me, I had him sit before climbing onto his lap.

"And what's your plan?" Feena asked.

"Not something you should worry about. It probably won't happen."

Liar. I was such a liar.

"You might want to leave the room, Feena," I said. "I plan to keep all three of us busy for a while."

She groaned, but I didn't hear much else. I pressed my lying lips to Korix's before resting my forehead on his.

"I truly am sorry that I yelled at you," I said.

"I know," Korix said before smirking. "Zae, regret has no place—"

"Finish that sentence," I growled. "I dare you."

Shoving her head beneath my arm, Leski got between us, oscillating on who to look at before landing on me.

"Will you be ok?" she asked.

Brushing a strand of hair out of her face, I cupped her cheek.

"Whatever happens, everything will turn out fine eventually," I said. "So, don't waste your energy on worrying."

Korix narrowed his eyes at me, but I ignored him, kissing Leski.

If we did end up using my plan and I surrendered to the Ancients... well. I didn't want to leave things, whether how I felt about them or any regrets I might have, unspoken between me and my partners. I also didn't want to think about that or my failure to save so many people who should have been under my protection.

“And so, my wonderful partners, we have several hours until sundown,” I said. “How shall we spend them?”

Seemingly abandoning his suspicion of what I’d just said, Korix fiercely grinned at me.

“With you,” he said.

Leski just jumped me.

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Revision #1

Created 25 December 2024 23:10:35 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 December 2024 01:02:55 by FatalisticFable