

Chapter 36: Welcome to the World

Once we were inside Drav's headquarters, we headed for a receptionist, sitting behind a welcome desk. Guests from other Houses announced their presences there, getting the passes they'd need to access their destinations. When I visited these places, I usually ignored such stations, never needing what they provided, but when it came to this most delicate of undertakings, it was best to be polite.

Never looking up, the receptionist gruffly said, "Yes?"

Sometimes, though, keeping my rude comments to myself was a struggle, especially when I was already stressed. I was so grateful to my partners. When I opened my mouth to snap at this man, Korix squeezed my arm while Leski leaned on the desk, cupping her face.

"Hi there!" she said. "My partners and I received a message this morning. Apparently, our baby's handoff is today?"

Grunting, the receptionist waved at us, keeping his eyes fixed on what had him occupied, and a map flashed into my array.

"Go to the highlighted room, and stay on your outlined path. Don't make us escort you out on your special day," he said, "and congratulations."

Beaming, Leski said, "Thank you!"

Korix tugged me away, and only once we were free of the receptionist did I realize how much I'd bristled.

"I forgot how callous people from one House can be to those from another," I growled. "I'm sorry you've had to put up with that."

"Oh, don't worry about it! Usually, Drav members are much more welcoming, nurturing even, which makes sense," Leski said. "So, think nothing of it. Let's just get where we need to be."

Much as I might want to protest it, she was right, so I set my irritation aside, hurrying along the highlighted path.

I'd always found it strange that Drav, with its focus on population control, had a headquarters that more resembled Zan than Kirst, its complementary House. As we rushed down hallways, Korix, Leski, and I passed many a lab as well as several 'warehouses', full of petri dishes and carefully

controlled test tubes. Every time I saw this, the sight of so many fetuses—potential humans waiting for approval to exist—made me shiver, although I could usually control the reaction.

Not so today. Today, I knew my child had floated in that viscous liquid for months longer than they should have, all because of who their parents were.

When we reached our indicated room, the House Drav member in it was shoving a handheld monitor into her bag, muttering under her breath. She jerked her head up when Korix cleared his throat.

Shooting a glare at us, she snapped, “You’re late.”

“Yes, and we apologize for that,” Korix said. “Some of us were coming from more remote locations than the rest, and we wanted to greet our newest family member as a single unit.”

With a frown, the House Drav member scanned us before relaxing and sitting behind the room’s counter.

“You’re lucky. I find that desire admirable. Others? Not so much,” she said. “Please, sit down.”

She gestured at the chairs on our side of the counter, and as we sat, I glanced at Leski and Korix. Had their hearts begun fluttering with anticipation? Mine had, but they looked exceedingly calm. I shouldn’t find that surprising, considering Korix had once held my position and Leski had been an exceptional operative in her time, but for some reason, I was barely holding it together. Why was I the only one who needed to flex his hands, releasing tension, right now?

“Right,” the House Drav member said.

She pulled a monitor back out of her bag while tucking her hair behind an ear.

“I’m Eighth Stratus Siva, and I’ll guide you through today’s procedure,” she said. “First, we’ll verify your identity to ensure proper handoff. I hope you can forgive this precaution. We want to make sure your progeny goes to the right people.”

While she smiled at us, I internally winced, knowing exactly why this precaution existed. Years ago, someone had gotten the sickeningly brilliant idea of using identity forgery to steal children from their parents. After all, given how tightly Drav controlled Lutov’s population, children were... a valuable commodity.

Hell, considering something like that made me sick to my stomach.

In any case, that incident had taken me little time to resolve—unsurprising given the focus I’d put into it—and afterward, I’d insisted that Drav put measures in place to ensure it never happened again. It was good to see they’d taken my urgings to heart.

“You’ll find that we’re more grateful than offended,” I said.

With her smile growing, Siva folded her hands on the counter.

“Good to hear,” she said. “As for the rest of this procedure! Once we have legal formalities out of the way, we’ll step into the room behind me—”

She inclined her head to the door at her back.

“—and I’ll bring your baby to you. Any questions?”

Each of us shook our heads. The procedure seemed simple enough.

“Excellent! Let’s get started, then,” Siva said, sliding the handheld monitor to us. “Place your thumb in the glowing circle. Your array may inform you that an outside source is accessing your designator. Please, don’t block it. We scan designators for our identity checks.”

“Understandable,” Korix said.

Reaching for the monitor, he let this Eighth Stratus have access to one of the most private pieces of a Lutovish’s life. This show of determination helped me when, once Leski had followed his example, I had to do the same.

As the thumbprint whirl of my designator returned me untampered with, I breathed out, letting tension leak from me, until the edges of the monitor turned red. Frowning, Siva retrieved the handheld monitor while I cocked my head. What could have upset it?

“Fourth Stratus Rylan?” she said, glancing at me. “I’m sorry. Out of respect for your privacy, I don’t know who you three are, but even with that, this alert tells me you aren’t approved for a child. Are you sure this man is your partner?”

Groaning, I slapped my face, working through what had happened. Mother Time, that had taken me far longer than it should have. After making the necessary changes, I gestured for the monitor.

“Here. Let it read me again,” I said. “I just finished a deep-cover mission, and in my rush to get here, I forgot to adjust my designator. My mistake.”

Jerking toward me, Korix said, “You *forgot*? Really?”

Clicking my tongue, I wiggled my fingers for the monitor while glancing at him.

“Yes, Ko. I forgot. You can lecture me about it later if you really think it’s necessary and...” I said before wincing. “Hell. That came out harsh. I’m sorry. Even given how stressed I’ve been, I shouldn’t-”

Resting his hand on my cheek, Korix patted it.

“It’s ok. I shouldn’t have said anything, all part of that teacher instinct you want me to discard,” he said. “Although perhaps we should focus elsewhere for now?”

“Preferably before Siva calls for someone to throw us out,” Leski hissed. “I swear. You two can be so distractible sometimes.”

When I faced Siva once more, she was clutching her handheld monitor to her chest while leaning away from us, clearly unsure what to do.

“I think... you should leave,” she said. “I’ll have the baby sent to its proper parents, but you three...”

She kept talking, and I watched her lips move, analyzing my options. Honestly, though? I only had one.

When I’d learned about the anonymity that this process provided, I’d been relieved. If news of our good luck had been broadcast across Xygek, I hadn’t wanted to learn what might happen when the *Lokke Vitras* emerged from House Drav’s headquarters with his family, including the littlest one. I hadn’t wanted that publicity, neither for the risk it might bring or for an impingement on this most private of affairs.

Faced with this, though, I had no choice but to banish our anonymity, not that I’d been doing a great job of maintaining it before. Even if Siva could avoid accruing shame on us when sending our child home, leaving now would mean a delay in something that we’d waited long enough for, something I’d fought too hard for. So, when Siva shifted in place, about to call for help, I raised a hand, presenting her with my palm.

“I wouldn’t do that, my dear,” I said with a sigh. “Check my shared status. If you still think that we should leave once you have, we’ll go without protest.”

While her eyes glazed over, I turned to my partners.

‘Sorry,’ I mouthed.

They either smiled or shook their head before Leski claimed my arm, nuzzling it, and Korix ruffled my hair. I had one eye closed, grimacing, when Siva squeaked. Her mouth was open wide while her eyes had taken on a look I’d grown to hate.

Rolling mine, I said, “Yes, I’m the *Lokke Vitras*. Yes, you’re honored to meet me. I know.”

Leaning forward, I laid my hands on the counter, moving slowly so she didn’t spook.

“Siva. Right now, I’m just another nameless person, here for handoff,” I said. “I know it’s contradictory to everything you believe, but while I’m with you, I exist only for myself and my family. Please. For a spell, I need you to see me as just another man. Can you do that?”

Swallowing hard, Siva nodded, and I barely stopped myself from sighing. Despite her acknowledgment, she wouldn’t treat me as I’d requested. I’d met very few Lutovish who could, but hopefully, my entreaty would keep her functional until my family could leave this place.

Extending a hand, I said, "Monitor?"

She gave it to me, openly staring as I once more pressed my thumb where indicated. When I returned it to her, she barely glanced over it before returning her attention to me.

"Well?" I said after a moment.

Jumping, Siva blinked for a moment before shooting to her feet.

"Right," she said. "If you'll... if you'll follow me."

She swiped at the air, and the counter retracted into the wall while Siva wobbled to the door. We passed through it and into the room beyond, stepping into a space that had clearly been designed to induce a sense of comfort.

Three of the walls had been painted a soft blue color with wispy clouds near the ceiling, and the fourth was made entirely of windows, looking onto a courtyard with sunlight bouncing down to it. Brightly colored flowers dotted the grass, swaying between a pair of trees.

Inside, a small couch sat along the room's perimeter, and as if tailored for us, one of Leski's performances was filling the air. A holodrama plate rested in the center of the room while a pleasant scent smacked me in the face, making me aware of how awful I smelled. I couldn't change that, though.

When Siva directed us to take a seat, we did, converging on the couch while she stayed on her feet. Folding her hands, she started to speak before choking on herself, but after a few more tries, she got her words out.

"I have no doubt that you're anxious right now."

Flicking her eyes to me, Siva frowned, as if confused, before continuing.

"I assure you. That's normal," she said. "It's not, however, how you should greet your baby. While I'm retrieving them, you should find your center so you can be the comforting presence they'll need. Once I return, you can have as much time here as you like before going home. If you need the stimulus, the holodrama plate has a few flics loaded onto it, and if you'd like to go outside, touch this indentation—"

She pointed to a spot beside the glass wall.

"—and the windows will retract. Within the next week, you'll need to file pertinent details, such as a name, with Drav's records department, but then, you'll be done with us. I've already asked this, but if you have any questions, now will be your last chance to ask them."

After glancing at us, Leski said, "We're good, thank you."

"Very well," Siva said. "I'll return soon, then."

Bowing to us, she walked through a door, leaving us in silence, but none of us broke it. I didn't know about my partners, but I couldn't speak because of the storm of butterflies in my stomach. Shifting in place, I played with the hem of my shirt, and this, the first quiet moment I'd had this morning, was when I was hit by how lost I was about... *all* of this.

"Has Drav told you whether we have a daughter or a son?" I asked. "The tradition of waiting to find that out may have carried over from the time of the pre-Founding nations but..."

Taking my hand, Korix stopped my rambling.

"No, we don't know yet," he said.

"Ok," I muttered.

And I tried to keep my mouth shut. I tried to give them the time that they might need to conquer their own anxiety, but more quickly than they should have, my retained questions had me popping to my feet so I could pace.

"Have you thought of a name yet?" I said. "What am I thinking? Of course you have."

Without thinking about it, I started chewing on a thumbnail. I knew how unhygienic and unappealing that habit was, but when I noticed what I was doing, I couldn't stop it. Also, the room was starting to sway. Did no one else see that?

"What about how we'll handle having a baby with who I am? How will we keep them safe?" I said. "I've missed so much of the planning for this. *Just the damn planning.* How much will I miss in the future? Mother Time, applying for a kid was an insane decision. We should have—"

Someone snatched my wrist, stopping me short, and I glanced at my wife.

With a smile, she said, "Sit down, Zaeden."

I did as she'd asked—of course I did—but I couldn't stop moving. If I held myself still, the energy inside of me would build, and if it spilled over, I didn't know what would happen. I imagined it wouldn't be good, considering how much my chest was already aching.

Taking hold of my shoulders, Korix forced me to sit back, keeping his hand behind my neck once I was there.

Kneading it, he said, "Panic attack?"

Sucking in a breath, I froze before nodding. *That* was what was happening.

"Hell, I haven't had one of those in decades," I said.

Which explained why I hadn't recognized the signs. How did I calm one of these down again?

That was right. Take a deep breath in and breathe it out. And repeat.

“Don’t worry, my love,” Leski said. “Ko and I have been ready for this for weeks. Until you catch up, we can handle anything you can’t do.”

With a laugh, I said, “So, you’re not worried right now?”

“Oh, no! I’m terrified,” Leski said, “but I know that together, we can do this.”

She took Korix’s hand and mine, and linked with them, the vices on my chest and mind relented. We stayed like this for a long while. I didn’t know what was taking so long, but considering how many delays we’d already dealt with, one more didn’t bother me.

When Siva eventually returned with a rolling bassinet, I’d almost fallen asleep on Korix’s shoulder, but any inclination that I might have had for dreams vanished when he stiffened beside me. He and Leski were on their feet before I’d comprehended what was happening, and to my chagrin, I had to suppress a yawn while joining them. Once there, however, I joined my partners in a statue state, staring at the promise of joy that we’d been offered.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Siva said before backing out of the room.

Still, we couldn’t move, although I wasn’t sure why that was. Korix broke his paralysis first, striding toward the bassinet, but once he was standing over it, he turned, and tension fled from him while *the* most beatific smile pulled on his lips.

“Aren’t you beautiful?” he said.

Hesitantly, he poked a finger toward the bassinet, and tiny, waving hands lifted to capture it. A stunningly gleeful sound sent questing tendrils into my heart, twisting something primal, and I forgot to breathe. Was that my child’s laughter?

But then, Korix joined in with a chuckle, tugging his finger from side to side, and Leski was racing for them as if staying away for a single second more would kill her. When she looked into the bassinet, she sank to her knees, clinging to its side with her chin on her hands.

“Mother Time, he’s perfect,” she said.

A son! I had a son!

Squeezing my eyes closed, I pushed back the tears that were trying to escape from me. They might be happy tears, but in the last year, I’d cried far too much over horrible things. I wouldn’t do it now.

Because now, I was the most elated I’d been in decades. Hell, I couldn’t remember when I’d last fallen into euphoria because of happiness. Maybe when Leski had told me she was staying with me, no matter what, but this was a different type of happiness. This was warm and golden and made of a syrupy sweetness that I never wanted to surrender, but I slowly relinquished my grip on it, if only to open my eyes.

Korix and Leski hadn't moved, still struck speechless, and for a fraction of a second, I didn't think I deserved to be with them. As soon as the thought occurred, though, I rejected it, lifting the first of my heavy feet. My heart was in my throat when I reached them, although it was a pleasant sensation this time, and finally, *finally*, I got my first glimpse of my child.

The logical part of my brain noted the imperfections in his features—the too-close-together eyes, the jutting forehead, and more—all identifying makers, because *of course it did*. I'd been trained too well.

I, however, only saw my child's fingers and toes, the chubby arms, the tuft of brown hair, the freckles spread across his impossibly small nose, the hazel eyes that were bouncing between us with *such* trust in them. Those eyes locked onto the newcomer, and his baby babble shifted into a delighted key.

Hearing it, I couldn't help myself. I knew I should let Leski or Korix do this, but a desperately teetering part of me, crying out for a break, needed this. So, I bent forward, and I lifted my child out of the bassinet, resting him in my arms, and it was as if oxygen had flooded my suffocating spark of a soul. I was light as air, and in this moment, *nothing* could touch me.

I was immune to pain.

Curling over our baby's body, I kissed his forehead before pulling back enough to see him, someone who'd become my world.

"You are the most wonderful thing that's ever happened to me," I said, resting a finger on his cheek, "and I will keep you safe for as long as you let me. You will never know suffering or this world's many horrors. Not if I can help it. You will be happy..."

Blinking a few times, I came back to myself, lifting my head to find Korix and Leski watching me with fond smiles.

"What's his name?" I croaked, only now noticing how dry my mouth was.

Just as I noticed that I was *holding a fragile baby*. Me, who'd never done this before and probably should never go near children.

Perhaps seeing my rush of panic, my partners hurried to me, and Leski took our child out of my arms.

"This," she said, tracing the baby's cheek, "is Jak."

Hmm. I wasn't sure how I felt about that name, but given how often I'd been gone for the last few months, I didn't deserve much of a say in it.

Sliding behind Leski, Korix hugged her, hunching so he could rest his chin on her shoulder.

"And we will keep him safe," he said.

Laughing, I said, “Fair enough.”

I stepped forward to complete our gathering. In the background of my mind, my troubles—how much I’d been drinking, the self-harm, my shaky relationship with my brother, my faltering mental state, my sister as a Chosen—rumbled, but they could stay there for the moment. For now, I had the two people I most loved at my side. I had my son, quickly joining their ranks, and I had a month of respite ahead of me. Life couldn’t be better.

So, I met Korix and Leski’s eyes, and we grinned like fools before returning our attention to the fulfillment of a decades-long-held goal.

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