

Chapter 39: Welcome Changes

I led the way through my home, wondering why my sister was keeping quiet. Usually, she'd be chatting my ear off about her job or dating life by now, but she was silent today, holding herself in a way that made me reluctant to start a conversation. I did *not* like how many discrepancies this day had brought with it.

Soon enough, we walked onto the terrace at the back of the house before heading into the garden. I loved coming here, where we'd imposed the smallest bit of another landscape on the Southern Fells. Keeping tropical plants healthy in this chill air required a lot of work, some of it done by drones and some by Jak, but I thought it was worth it. Stepping into a miniature portrait of Crinas, transported from across the water, was always a refreshing experience, even if I never wanted to stay here for long. Its artificial humidity could be a bit much.

We found Leski and Korix here, and Feena warmly greeted them, hugging them both. Once that was done, however, she turned severe, pointing at me.

"What happened to him?" she said. "I know it was bad, considering he's letting his pain show, and that means he'll downplay it when I wrangle it out of him. I'd rather avoid that struggle so...?"

While I groaned, lifting my eyes to the sky, Leski crossed her arms, pointedly staring at Korix.

Looking over our heads, he said, "Shot in the chest three times with the bolts nicking a few blood vessels. He bled out. Clinically dead for three minutes, probably one of the longest times he's been down and out. *Claims* he made a mistake when breaching a room."

By the time he was done, he looked like he'd be sick while I felt like I'd been shot again. The girls turned on me with an interesting mix of horror and fury in their eyes, and neither of them moved for far too long. Korix must not have shared the details of what had happened with Leski.

This was what I did to the people I loved. This was what I'd leave behind when the role of the *Lokke Vitras* inevitably killed me.

Yet, I couldn't bring myself to create distance between us. So long as they wanted it, *I would be with them*.

"Please, stop frowning at me. Aren't you used to these things by now?" I said. "Besides, Jak needs us, yes? We can't let my issues anywhere near that kid."

After another spell of uncomfortable silence. Feena again pointed at me.

"You are an *idiot*," she said before crooking her finger. "Come here."

As I crossed to her, I couldn't help but feel like a scolded child, even as my loved ones drowned me in touches and hugs. After her third time trying to crush me, Feena nodded.

"Right," she said. "Now, we can focus on Jak."

"That's great! They'll be down soon."

Ambling toward us, Damari flashed a smile at Feena before shoving their hands in their pockets.

"Ready for some advice?" they said.

I rolled my eyes.

"Of course we are. Please, regale us with your wisdom," I said. "How often did you help us get through teenage spats when Jak was growing up again?"

"Not as often as I expected. You three handled puberty better than most people do," Damari said, "but that's not important right now."

Puffing out a sigh, they fixed their eyes on the ground while kicking at it.

"So, advice. Your kid'll come out here soon, and when that happens, you shouldn't react to what you see," they said. "Follow their lead, and just... remember that your job as parents is to shelter and guard your child, not to live through them or project your expectations on their life. Not that you've done that to his point! I just think reiterating it is for the best."

Glancing up, they smirked at my sister.

"Same goes for you, Second Stratus Feena. Mouth shut."

Huffing, Feena nodded while I exchanged a glance with my partners.

"This sounds serious, Damari," Leski said. "Should we be worried?"

"Mother Time, no!" Damari exclaimed. "In fact, I've seen plenty of evidence that like most Lutovish, none of you will mind this sort of thing, but when it hits closer to home, people's reaction can be... stronger."

With that, I put the pieces together, which had taken me longer than it should have, but now that I knew what was going on, I didn't let my own feelings show. I didn't want to ruin this for anyone, but I did catch Korix's eye. Why had he thought this would affect specifically me, out of us all? I didn't see how it could, but maybe I was missing something.

"I think we can manage that," I said.

“Good!” Damari said. “In that case, talk amongst yourselves for now. Your kid'll be out here soon enough.”

Laughing, the others did just that, but I kept my focus on the path that led to the house, schooling my expression into the most welcoming one in my repertoire. Donning it didn't take much effort, but I wanted to make sure I was presenting it once this show got on the road.

Soon enough, I caught movement headed our way, and a few seconds later, my kid stepped into view. They'd changed out of the slacks and loose shirt they'd been wearing. Now, leggings and a baggy but distinctly fem cut sweater were hanging from them, and they'd styled their hair. They'd always kept it long, but it was now curled while make-up highlighted their eyes and cheekbones. As they came to a stop, silence fell, and they folded their hands behind their back, slowly twisting in place.

“So,” they said before clearing their throat. “So, I'm going by Baely now. I'd like it if you used 'she' or 'they' when referring to me, not 'he'.”

Looking a little lost, Baely trailed off before brightening and glancing up at us.

“Oh, yeah!” she said. “And I'm a girl, in case that wasn't obvious.”

I had a daughter!

After a moment of awkward silence, Baely frowned.

“Why aren't you saying anything?” they asked.

“Yeah, you can talk now,” Damari said. “I *swear* you lot are slow for how smart you are.”

While I shot a glare at my friend, Leski and Korix let emotion creep back into them as they spoke.

“*Finally!*”

“Thank. Mother. Time.”

Meanwhile, Feena hugged herself with shimmering eyes.

“Took you long enough, kid,” she said.

Baely looked more than a little shocked, staring at each of us with her lips parted.

“You *knew?*” they said.

Striding to our daughter, Leski took her hands.

“Sweetie.... can I still call you that?” she said, only continuing once she'd gotten permission.

“Sweetie, we knew gender presentation would be an issue for you since you were... what was it, Ko? Three?”

“Something like that,” Korix said. “We didn’t want to muddle things for you, so we stayed out of it, although we encouraged you when related topics came up. We wanted you to figure it out on your own.”

With their lip trembling, Baely just *looked* at them, and no matter how much I wanted to join in on what was about to happen, I stayed away. I couldn’t get squeezed all to hell again, not right now. When my daughter glanced at me with the briefest splash of uncertainty in her, however, I hurried things along.

“You look wonderful, Baely,” I said. “I’ll always love you, no matter how you choose to present yourself.”

Bursting into tears, Baely pulled Korix and Leski to them, and for a while they *lost it* on their more physically stable parents. Meanwhile, I watched, casually contemplating why Korix had thought I’d find this important. I mean... it was, *obviously*. But it wasn’t something that touched on a personal issue for me. I doubted my feelings about it were any different from Baely’s other parents.

Speaking of which, my child eventually extricated themselves from Leski and Korix to gently hug me.

“Thanks, *per*,” she mumbled into my shirt. “I love you.”

“I love you too, sweetie.”

While rubbing her back, I caught Damari’s eye over her head.

‘Thank you for this,’ I mouthed.

Faintly flushing, they wiggled in place with a grin. How much had they helped Baely with this issue? Korix, Leski, and I had done what we could for them, but not only had we wanted to stay out of their decision-making process, but we couldn’t relate. Damari could.

After a moment, I pulled Baely away.

“Can I ask where this is coming from?” I said. “No judgment of it, of course! I’m just curious what pushed you into taking this step.”

In slow motion, joy dropped off of Baely’s face, turning it into a blank canvas, and I frowned. Had I said something wrong?

Cautiously, she stepped out of my grasp before darting her eyes to her other parents.

“*Per*... my House naming’s coming up soon,” they said. “I wanted to look the way I feel when I choose a House.”

Their... House... naming? Something strong and utterly unfamiliar blasted through me, and rapidly blinking, I wavered, in body and mind.

Numbly, I said, "I... see. That... make sense."

How had I forgotten about this? Baely was twenty-five. Of course her House naming ceremony was happening soon. In fact...

When I checked my calendar, I was once more punched by something alien. *One month?* It was scheduled for one fucking month from now? How had this...? I couldn't have missed something so...

Mother Time, why were my thoughts so muddled right now?

Shaking my head, I cleared my throat.

"I'm glad you'll have that chance, sweetie. Looking the way you feel is important," I faintly said. "Can you give me a second? You can celebrate with your mom and dad for a minute, all right? I'll be right back."

I couldn't examine what the expression on their face might mean. Spinning on my heel, I marched away, listening as Feena filled the awkward silence behind me.

"Hey! Am I getting some love anytime soon?" she said. "I get it. Acceptance from parents is nice, but come on! Your favorite aunt's right here."

Wasn't she Baely's only aunt? And why did that simple fact seem so important right now?

Distraction. It was a distraction.

Absently, I noted how short my breathing had become. My heart was racing in my chest, and I was barely staying cognizant of my surroundings, all while also turning hypervigilant.

As I took the steps to the terrace two at a time, I glared at a crack in its railing, one that had suddenly become my world. That could be dangerous. I should fix it. I should...

Hell, was I about to have a panic attack? *Why the hell* had those been happening so much more often lately?

Couldn't think about what was happening! Couldn't think ... about it! Couldn't think.

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