

Chapter 42: The Perils of Fatherhood

I found Baely first. Sitting in a hall, she was leaning against the wall across from Leski's studio, and when I stopped in front of her, she smiled up at me. Thank all that was holy for that. If she'd looked at me with anything else, I'd probably have lost it again.

Still, I was well aware of the tension in the air. It made me stiff as I jerked a thumb at the door opposite us.

"Are your parents in there?" I asked.

Shaking their head, Baely sighed.

"You shouldn't say it like that," they said. "You're just as much my parent as they are, *per*."

And look what a great job I'd done with that. I couldn't let my past failings get to me now, though. Instead, I focused on being the father that my daughter needed in this moment.

She patted the ground beside her, and once I'd gotten settled, she laid her head on my shoulder.

"You didn't answer the question," I said.

Slowly, Baely nodded, which brushed her hair against my cheek.

"They seemed preoccupied, so I'm giving them space," she said. "I figured you'd find me soon."

"I see."

As if reading my disappointment, Baely giggled.

"Don't worry, *per*. From what little I saw of their antics, it didn't look intense," they said. "You'll get your chance with them later. If you're up for it."

At the reminder of my injuries, their body tensed against mine. Mother Time damn it all.

"About what happened today," I started.

I didn't know where to go from there, though. Which issue should I address: shattering their illusion of my strength or how I'd ducked out on them after their announcement? Usually, I'd apologize here, but knowing my daughter, she'd only find that insulting. Maybe I should leave the floor open

to her.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked. “I know seeing me injured must have been unpleasant, and the way I left you outside must have hurt. So, if you have any questions...?”

Straightening, Baely faced me, and I held my breath, wondering which issue they’d choose to address.

“*Per*, I’m not an idiot. I know what the *Lokke Vitras* does,” she said, “but I also know you.”

They rested a hand on my knee.

“You helped raise me, after all,” she continued. “I’ve known something like this would happen for a while. I’ve dreaded it, sure, but knowing it was coming made it slightly less... unpleasant, as you put it.”

So, they wanted to focus on that part. Almost, I left it there, abandoning a more painful discussion, but bracing myself, I moved forward with it anyway.

“And the rest?” I said. “Really, sweetie. You can ask me anything. I know I clam up on you about certain subjects, but you are always welcome to ask questions.”

Sighing, Baely looked away.

After a moment, she said, “Then... why? Why don’t you want to attend my House naming ceremony? Why don’t you even want to talk about it? I’ve been so confused lately...”

Mother Time, how I hated that. Gently, I took my child’s hand, making sure I’d caught their eye.

“Do you want the simple answer for that or a more thorough one?” I soberly asked.

For some reason, this made Baely laugh.

“Whichever you think is best, honestly,” they said. “I want to know everything because that’s how I am, but you’re my dad. You know how much I can handle.”

And that was the truth. Baely might be an adult now, but there was still so much I could never tell her about myself. Even still, because she was old enough, I could start opening up, if only a little.

“All right,” I said.

Spinning to face her, I settled into a more comfortable position, clasping my hands in my lap.

“The first thing you should know is that my reluctance about your House naming has nothing to do with you,” I said. “I’m happy for you, sweetie, absolutely ecstatic that you’ve reached this coming-of-age moment. Please, *please* know this.”

“Then, why...?” Baely asked.

"That's... a difficult question to answer," I said.

Hell, I wanted to look away right now. So much shame was welling up in me, but I fought it, forcing myself to maintain eye contact.

"It has to do with my past," I said. "I... haven't had an easy life. Growing up, my parents were always busy, so I was alone, left to fend for myself. Mostly. Feena and Phen helped with that but..."

Even if it was just the bare minimum of my past, I know I was sharing too much. Abso-fucking-lutely too much. Mother Time, look at the concern on their face! Time to back off.

"The point is that my childhood wasn't exactly happy," I continued, "and when I was younger, I quickly learned how to ignore that fact. Personas became my escape, my way of being 'fine', and over time, they hid me—the real me—from the world. They also hid some of my more dangerous viewpoints. One of those is about what happens during House naming ceremonies."

As understanding dawned on Baely's face, I nodded.

"You see the connection now. Good. Let me clarify it a bit more," I said. "When I was six, I realized that this opinion would get me into serious trouble if anyone ever noticed it so..."

For some reason I *could not* maintain eye contact while confessing this secret.

"So, I created a new persona, the most intricate and real one I've ever built. Once it was done, it erased who I once was, therefore concealing my dangerous viewpoints from the world," I said. "I've been masking that part of me ever since, and that isn't likely to change.

"Oh, *per*," Baely said. "I'm sorry."

Wrenching my gaze to her, I patted her hand. This wasn't ok. I shouldn't be burdening *my daughter* with my troubles... but she needed to know what I'd been acting so strangely. Given that, I hoped I'd walked the line between explaining enough and sharing too much. At the least, I could make my confession easier for her.

"It's fine, sweetie," I said. "Sometimes, life gives you a bad hand. I've made my peace with it."

For the most part.

"Besides, you know I'm happy now," I continued. "With your parents as my partners and you as my kid, how could that not be the case?"

Giggling, Baely said, "That's fair. So, is that why my House naming makes you uncomfortable?"

"Mostly," I said. "It's also a reminder of my own ceremony, but that's not important."

It really wasn't. There was no way in hell I was giving them more than a peek into one of the worst moments of my life.

Narrowing their eyes, Baely lightly slapped my leg.

“Don’t hold back now, *per*,” they said.

I just smiled at them, refusing to open that crack any wider.

“I promise I’m not. My House naming ceremony was a *loooong* time ago,” I said. “Besides it wasn’t much of one anyway. Your father interrupted it. Stole me from it to train me in his ways.”

When I put on a silly grin, Baely didn’t reciprocate, which made me worry. Even still, she didn’t seem horrified by what I’d said. She merely got to her knees so she could pull me into a hug.

“I get it,” she whispered in my ear. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Of course,” I said.

For a moment, we just held one another, but soon enough, we separated.

“Don’t worry, Baely,” I said. “I’ll be at your House naming ceremony, cheering just as loudly as everyone else once you’ve made your choice.”

No matter how much that might personally pain me.

“In the meantime, do you have any other questions for me?” I asked. “Or shall we interrupt your mom and dad?”

“I’m all out of curiosity for now. Let’s go inside,” Baely said. “You have to go first, though, ok?”

They feigned a sour face, and happy to have an unpleasant conversation behind us, I rocked to my feet, touching the wall for balance once I was there. Baely glanced at me with a question in her eyes, one I waved away. I should have taken a second dose of RRDs before coming here, but I hadn’t been this badly injured in a while. I might have forgotten my body’s limitations. Just a little bit.

Behind the studio’s door, my partners were wrapped around one another, but they hadn’t gotten into anything intimate yet. Korix glanced up when I entered, which had Leski releasing a disappointed sigh, and Baely clicked her tongue behind me.

“Oh, *please*, mom,” she said. “You’ll be fine for a little while longer.”

“Yes, yes,” Leski groaned.

Reluctantly, she turned toward us, quickly switching from petulant to concerned.

“Did you two have a good talk?”

Stopping beside me, Baely crossed their arms.

“Don’t know about good, but it explained things, so I’m happy,” she said. “And in other news... could you show me how to do that pirouette-arabesque-assemblé combination that you were doing earlier? I’ve been meaning to ask for another demonstration all day.”

With a grin, Leski said, “Sure, sweetie.”

She extended a hand to our daughter, and hugging myself, I watched them get into position. I still remembered a time when Baely’s head had only come up to Leski’s hip, and they would awkwardly copy their mother’s graceful movements. My daughter had never taken to music like Leski but dancing? They liked that, even if it had only been a passing interest. Not like their gardening.

Circling an arm around my waist, Korix extended a hypo to me, which I raised an eyebrow at.

“What?” he said. “You need it, don’t you?”

Chuckling, I took his gift, jabbing myself with it, and for a while, we watched the girls dance about the room.

“What did Feena want?” Korix eventually asked.

“Mm. She has something she wants me to look into,” I said, rubbing his side. “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Ok,” Korix said.

And nothing more. One of these days, I’d get used to how much he trusted me now. It had to have happened sometime, right?

“Did Damari leave?” I asked.

“Not long after you disappeared. They said something about getting home before dark,” he said. “Also, I was told to relay a sarcastic goodbye, but given the circumstances, I’ll spare you.”

“How kind,” I drawled.

It was too bad I’d missed them. I’d have liked to spend a little more time together before they’d left.

“How are you feeling?” Korix asked.

I heard the second question there, though.

With a half-smile, I said, “Much better, thanks. I’m still pretty weak, though, so you and Leski will have to go easy on me tonight. If we get up to anything.”

Korix turned to me with the most blank expression in place.

“If?” he said in deadpan.

Snorting, I said, "Fine. *When* we get up to something."

"Thank Mother Time. Even after a brush with death, I haven't lost the slightest piece of my Zaeden to the void," Korix said.

It was my turn to speak in deadpan.

"Yours?"

Softly smiling, Korix said, "Only when it matters."

He rested his palm on my jaw, letting me nuzzle it, before turning me to him, and when our lips met, I forgot how close I'd come to death this morning. I forgot how badly my body needed to rest. I forgot who else was in the room. I had only *him*. As always.

When someone cleared her throat, it dragged me free of that state.

"Welp. That's my cue to leave."

Oh. Right. Baely.

Wincing, I pulled away from Korix, only to get attacked by Leski's hug, and huffing, my kid made their way toward the door. Had we made them uncomfortable?

"I'm sorry," I said. "We should have-"

Snickering, Baely stopped short, shaking her head, before diverting her course to us. When she reached us, she joined the hug, burying her face in my shoulder.

"It's ok, *per*. Like I said, I know you," she said. "Near death experience plus having loved ones around plus *who you are* lead to one foregone conclusion, which is only natural, and I'm surprised you three have gone for so long without indulging in it."

Retreating from us, Baely clasped their hands behind their back.

"That being said, I don't want to be here when you eventually give in so..."

Tilting their head to the side, they grinned with their tongue pinched between their teeth.

"Good night!" they said.

Spinning, they skipped toward the door with our answering 'good nights' chasing them. Once the door had slid closed behind them, Leski shook her head.

"That girl is definitely our daughter," she said before focusing on me. "You talked to them?"

"I did," I said. "I'm sorry that I didn't before now."

If only I'd realized what had been going on several months ago, maybe today wouldn't have been so awkward.

"Why are you apologizing to me? I don't need it," Leski said, "and I don't need an explanation for your behavior this afternoon either. What I *do* need to know is what you two were starting without me."

Oh... how I loved her.

"What do you think we were doing?" I asked with a teasing grin.

"Oh, ho! Someone's feeling better," Leski said.

As she smirked, I pulled her to me.

"Mm...hmm," I said.

Leski laughed while burying her face in my shoulder, which made Korix chuckle.

"Same as always, huh?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "May we never change."

I had no more words after that. Gathering my partners to me, I lost myself to them.

Revision #1

Created 7 February 2025 21:29:53 by FatalisticFable

Updated 7 February 2025 21:42:51 by FatalisticFable