

Chapter 55: Families Are Made to Frustrate

When I met Pheniks at his apartment, I said nothing to him. I said nothing as I led the way to a landing pad. I said nothing while waiting for him to climb into the skycruiser after me. I said nothing throughout the flight, staring at the Barasgami Mountains as the sun set behind them.

After crossing to the other side, I set the skycruiser down in an empty patch of the Southern Fells and got out without a word. Fortunately, Pheniks followed me when I strode into the dark.

Now, no matter how quiet I might have been to this point, the same hadn't been true internally. Questions kept popping into my head, most of which I abandoned when they emerged, but some stuck around.

How could you be so selfish?

Did you really vote against Cerullis' proposal out of revenge? I thought you'd forgiven me!

Where's my little brother, the boy who wouldn't have understood the bitterness that's overtaken you these last few years?

"Where are we going?"

The spoken-aloud question drew me out of my thoughts, forcing me to consider breaking the silence that had lain between me and Pheniks.

"Hideout," I gruffly said. "Not much further."

"Right! I got your message about that earlier," Pheniks said. "That's good, though. Walking through this crap is hard."

I rolled my eyes. Sure, as we stepped forward, grass might be pulling on our legs, but moving through it wasn't that difficult.

When I refused to comment, Pheniks said, "About what happened earlier..."

He trailed off as if expecting me to continue for him, but I had nothing to say. In fact, I hoped he dropped the subject. I had... *feelings* about it, and despite knowing it to be unwise, I had yet to process them. I wasn't sure what would happen if he insisted on hashing this out now.

The crunch of my brother's feet in the grass stopped, but I didn't slow my own pace. He could catch up once he'd gotten himself under control.

"Is that it, then?" he suddenly shouted. "You'll just ignore me for this entire trip?"

I focused on scanning my surroundings for danger and watching the ground, where I'd place each step. I didn't acknowledge what had blazed through me each time Pheniks had spoken.

"I would rather focus on the mission," I said.

Pheniks laughed, a little manically to my ear, before rushing in front of me, forcing me to stop. I examined his reddening face, pushing what was threatening to erupt from me deeper inside. Which was idiotic and really unhealthy.

"The mission," Pheniks hissed. "Why is it always the damn mission that comes first? Yes, I get it! You're the almighty fucking *Lokke Vitras*, and that'll always be more important than me and what I want. I'm learning how to deal with it, but come on, Zaeden. In what possible world is talking to me going to threaten your sacred mission?"

With my lips pursed, I took a calming breath through my nose. He didn't understand. He would never understand, even if I tried to explain it to him. Mother Time knew I'd outlined my methods often enough in the past, but it never stuck.

If we talked, the beast inside of me might break free of its cage, and if it did, if I gave in and did what I'd wanted to since first seeing Pheniks' face, it would have consequences. He might refuse to help me, despite what was at stake, and I needed him for this mission to be a success. This mission had to be successful if Lutov was to stay safe.

My reasoning was tangential, I was aware. The chance that my proposed scenario would occur was low, but when it came to missions, especially ones that were this important, I didn't take unnecessary risks.

So, I said, "I'm sorry. I don't have an answer for you."

And I pushed around Pheniks, once more headed toward my family's hideout. They'd be there when we arrived—my wife, daughter, and life partner—and I had to admit. I wasn't sure if I was more relieved by that prospect or jittery about having to explain what had happened. I didn't want to tell Baely that her short life might soon come to an end because of me.

In part. This had happened *in part* because of me.

"Why did you do it?"

For a second, I could only blink before frowning. Why the hell had I said that?

"You mean vote against the proposal?" Pheniks asked.

Jerkily, I nodded. I might as well get an answer now that the question was out there.

“I had my reservations about it from the beginning,” Pheniks said. “Why would I give Zan’s rival House more power by increasing their field of study?”

I opened my mouth to share what I thought about such short-sightedness, but Pheniks got there first.

“I’m not discounting the threat that Sanya has brought to our attention. We need to deal with it,” he said, “but I didn’t think that handing Cerullis the keys to outer space was a good idea. I mean, consider where that could lead, Zae! What if their space program took off? You should know how quickly people’s opinions about something can change, given the right impetus. What if we decided to colonize other planets or strip-mine asteroids in the far distant future? I know those scenarios are far-fetched, but I didn’t want to give one House the power over these things. There had to be another way.”

“So, you were conflicted,” I said.

Slowly, *oh so fucking slowly*, the fire blazing through me faded. Pheniks had given me a logical explanation for what he’d done, something I could understand. Something I could forgive. It would have been better for him to voice these concerns before striking down Cerullis’ proposal but-

“Yes, I was conflicted,” Pheniks said, “but still, I would have cast my vote in favor of the proposal if not for you.”

When I stopped short, my brother ran into me, backing off with a mumbled apology, but I didn’t fully hear it.

Turning to him, I said, “What?”

Sheepishly, Pheniks rubbed the back of his neck.

“What can I say?” he said. “It’s been years since the upset that made me a *shukusen*, but despite how we decided to resolve things then, something’s still felt off between us. I thought that if I ruined something you considered important, like you once did to me, it might even the scales between us.”

Shrugging, he threw his arms to either side before letting them slap to his thighs.

“It was a mistake.”

A mistake.

“Are you telling me that you put the lives of the *shukusenth*, of Xygek, of *my damn family* in danger out of some petty desire to get even?” I said.

Taking a step back, Pheniks raised his hands.

“I didn’t mean to hurt anyone,” he said.

Of course he hadn’t. He never did.

“My daughter, *your niece*, might die in two weeks because of you,” I hissed.

Damn, that had hurt to say with such fire burning alongside the words, but never mind that. I looked at Pheniks, and Mother Time, if I didn’t want to hit him. A tiny, unreasoning part of me wanted to wring his neck, but I didn’t go anywhere near him, keeping my feet glued to the earth.

Because no matter what he did, Pheniks was my little brother, and I’d protect him, even from myself.

He didn’t seem to have the same convictions. Rushing to me, he took hold of my collar, jerking me forward until all I could see was the spark in his eyes.

“I didn’t poison us,” he snapped. “That was Sanya, the crazy bitch who lost her damn mind because she didn’t get what she wanted-”

I shoved him away.

“She did what she had to because you lot wouldn’t listen to her,” I shouted. “Do you know how many times she tried to tell you-?”

“You’re seriously taking her side right now?” Pheniks shouted over me. “She’s the... hell, what insane term would you use for her? She’s *the enemy!*”

Oh, I should shut up. I should stop right now but...

“That doesn’t mean she’s wrong!” I snapped. “For the love of all that might be holy, how corrupt are you and this... this *whole fucking system* that you can’t see that! You’d rather that we burn than give up your damn power. Hell. Maybe- maybe I should join-”

I was so focused on letting my inner beast—who was I kidding? It was anger—roar through me that I didn’t see the fist coming for my face. It connected, sending me stumbling back a step, and I had no clue what stopped my reaction to annihilate my attacker. It kept me frozen for long enough to see Pheniks staring at his fist in shock. He’d *punched* me?

Rallying, he showed me his teeth.

“You should be more careful, *Lokke Vitras*,” he said. “If you’d finished that thought, I’d have had to report it to the *shukusenth*, and who knows what would have happened then? I’d hate to see Baely finish growing up without her beloved *per* to protect her.”

I tackled him. There was no thought behind it, just a crashing wave of raw emotion that propelled me forward. We hit the ground, and somehow, Pheniks, whose House Kolb training had long since rusted away, ended up on top. Stinging force slammed into my cheek, but when Pheniks went for

my face again, I caught his wrist, swinging my elbow at his jaw. That blow plus a twist of my hips—a move I'd long practiced—had him tumbling off of me, and in an instant, I was straddling him with one of his arms trapped between our legs and another in my hold. I reached for a hidden knife before glancing at my foe, and the world snapped for me.

This wasn't a hostile beneath me. I was pinning my little brother to the ground while going for a weapon to kill him. I froze, something that one should never, ever, ever do in a fight, and in that pause, Pheniks headbutted me.

What the hell?

Even as I collapsed backward, I was thinking this, but that question didn't stay with me for long. Pheniks wriggled out from under me, kicking me once he was on his feet. I scrambled away on all fours before springing upright, just in time for him to fall on me. He was relentless and furious with his strikes, so much so that it tested my ability to dodge them, but that was what typically happened when someone descended into the animal that inhabits us all.

We went like this for a bit, all while I waited for him to tire himself out. It had to happen at some point, but in the meantime, I blocked and whirled away from far more attacks than I'd expected. Where was he getting the energy for this?

Eventually, he stopped with his body trembling and his eyes wet.

"Hit me!" he screamed. "You should be hitting me! Why aren't you hitting me?"

Oh. I knew what this was: all of it, from the beginning of the conversation to now. I'd been where he was too many times to count. So, when Pheniks attacked me again, I caught his wrists before transferring them to one hold. Wrapping an arm around my brother, I pulled him to me, and he stiffened before sobbing into my shoulder, spreading moisture across my shirt.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm so sorry."

"I know," I said. "I'm sorry too."

Soon enough, Pheniks started squirming, and when I let him go, he stepped back, looking anywhere but at my face. Conversely, I no longer wanted to punch him. It was funny how a fight could resolve a conflict like this, if only slightly. Mother Time knew that certain types of actions, including brothers getting into a scrap like little boys again, worked better than empty words at times.

"This," Pheniks said, pointing at the ground, "never happened."

Nodding, I said, "Fine by me. What are we telling the others, though? We're close to the hideout, and when we get there, I don't want to wait for our arrays to heal us."

Shyly, Pheniks glanced up at me with a grin.

“We fell? Repeatedly?” he said.

Snorting, I said, “Sure. You try that. I’m sure Feena won’t see through our old excuse almost immediately.”

“And your family wouldn’t do the same?” Pheniks said.

As I resumed our trek, he trotted to keep up.

“Oh, there’s no way I’m hiding this from them,” I said. “Ko will take one look at me and know what happened, and he’ll tell Leski at some point, if she doesn’t pick up on it herself. As for Baely, she’s always been too perceptive, especially when it comes to what might have caused an injury.”

Pheniks was silent for a time, which I was grateful for. After such a tumultuous day, a spot of peace was nice, even if it would be short.

As the hidden entrance to my family’s hideout came into view, Pheniks said, “I really am sorry that I threatened-”

I flapped a hand at him.

“We can’t waste time on regret, Phen. Just help me fix it,” I said. “Besides, we’re here.”

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