

Chapter 56: Explaining My Mistake

Glancing at the empty moors around us, Pheniks frowned.

“We’re here? But there’s nothing... wait. Isn’t this where someone’s estate was glassed a century ago?”

Fortunately, I banged my foot into a distinctly metal portion of the ground at that moment, shutting him up. After all, he was right. We were standing on the ground where Korix’s estate had used to rest.

But we had security measures to get through.

As other family members had approached this place, Korix would have met them along the way, verifying their identities, but that precaution wouldn’t be necessary for me. Long ago, Leski, Korix, and I had established the perimeter around this place, and its security network was strong enough that besides the three of us, only Talira could crack it. Still. That didn’t mean we abandoned all safety measures.

When a connection request flashed in my array, I accepted it, and it quickly established.

“What name did you first know me by?” Korix asked without preamble.

With a faint smile, I said, “Garreth, of course. You have no idea how often that name was on my lips in the weeks after-”

“It’s definitely him,” Korix said, probably to someone else.

As the connection cut, I chuckled, stepping back so that the panel beneath my feet could open.

“What was that about?” Pheniks said.

“They were making sure I’m me before letting us in,” I said, swaying in place.

I couldn’t help it. Having all of the people I loved in one, safe place? Despite our circumstances, it made me insanely happy.

“What about me?” Pheniks said. “How do they know that I’m me?”

Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I said, "You think I wouldn't have noticed if something was off about you?"

Sure, I hadn't noticed the same thing in Sanya recently, but Pheniks was my brother. He'd never been able to hide things from me.

"Well... no," he said.

"Then, why would they need to check your identity?" I asked.

When the panel in front of me opened, I descended the ladder that it had hidden, knowing Pheniks would be quick to follow. At the bottom, warm light greeted me, and I relaxed, taking a deep breath of home before turning.

Korix was there, hugging his elbows as he ran his eyes over me. He stopped on my face, lifting an eyebrow in question, and I shook my head. My fight with Pheniks wasn't something he needed to worry about.

At the end of the hall, Leski and Baely were hanging from a doorframe, and when I smiled at them, they relaxed, if only minutely. As soon as Pheniks stepped off of the latter, that went away with excitement lighting Baely's face while Leski scowled. She'd never liked my brother.

"Uncle Phen!" my daughter shouted.

She ran to him, barely giving him time to prepare before launching herself at him. From what little I'd seen, she must have decided on some body modifications. At the least, her facial features had started softening. Not that it was any of my business! My daughter could decide what, if anything, they wanted to do with their body.

When Pheniks caught them, he shot a foot back to maintain his balance, but this only made him laugh.

"Well, hello there!" he said. "How've you been, little one?"

"Great! Or I was until earlier, I guess, but that's ok!" Baely babbled while pulling away from Pheniks. "It's so good to see you-oh your face!"

Hesitantly, she grazed a hand over a red splotch on Pheniks' cheek, and with a wince, he pulled her fingers off of him.

"It's all right," he said. "Nothing time and my array can't fix."

The fiercest of expressions planted itself on Baely's face, one that made me smile. If Pheniks had thought he was in trouble before, he was about to learn differently now.

"Not good enough," Baely snapped. "Come on. I'll fix you up, and you can tell me what happened."

Reversing Pheniks' grip on them, they marched deeper into the hideout, tossing a 'Hi, *per!*' over their shoulder as they went.

"Hi, sweetie!" I called back. "Don't hurt your uncle, please."

As she made a noncommittal noise, Pheniks glanced back at me in a panic, and I snickered as they disappeared. Oh... I already felt better.

"So?"

I glanced at Korix while lifting an arm for Leski to slide under.

"You're obviously not hurt, not significantly at least," he said, flicking his eyes to my split lip. "So, why are we here?"

Sighing, I looked away. This would be difficult.

"We should get comfortable first," I said.

I led the way into the hideout. Past the doorway was a cozy cave of a room, stuffed with chairs, pillows, and a few lamps. A small kitchen took up one corner with a hallway beside it, one that led to a set of bedrooms. Baely had Pheniks sitting on a chair near the kitchen's counter, applying a salve to his red marks, and on a sofa near the entrance, my father was perched with Feena beside him. Given that, I had to assume that mom was in one of the bedrooms.

My father's presence here surprised me. I'd sent my parents the same message about meeting here as I'd done for my siblings, but I'd thought for sure that he'd ignore it, trusting in his mother's safety precautions over mine. She was a *shukusen*, after all.

I wasn't sure what to think of having him here. Obviously, I was glad that he and mom were safe, but I didn't need the added stress of walking on my tiptoes around them on top of everything else. Maybe I should ignore them until the crisis had passed? That would make a nice turnabout, given how absent they'd been throughout my life. At the least, it was what I was doing now.

Fortunately, Feena didn't seem upset when I strode past her without saying hello. She and I should have a chat about everything we'd done last week while trying to get the *shukusenth* on board with Sanya's proposal, but first, I had to brief my partners on the situation.

Once we were in a bedroom, I collapsed on its bedroll while someone else locked the door. Leski and Korix sank to the ground in front of me with concern on their faces, and biting my lip, I took their hands.

"First of all, I love you, and I'm sorry," I said.

If anything, what should have been a reassurance tensed them further. Leski even leaned away from me because I never said the words 'I love you' to Korix. Sometimes, I got close enough that I might as well have said it, but I never spoke it outright. The only reason that I'd done it now had

been because while I'd directed those words at both of my partners, they could have been meant only for Leski.

"Don't be sorry when you haven't explained yet," Korix said.

Making a noise of agreement, Leski reached out to brush my split lip.

"You got in a fight with your brother?" she asked.

With my face going blank, I said in monotone, "No, I fell. Several times."

Then, I grinned, grabbing Leski's hand so I could kiss her palm.

"Don't worry, love. Everything's fine, at least in that part of the world," I said. "Everywhere else, though..."

Releasing Leski, I met Korix's unreadable eyes.

"I fucked up," I said.

Something flashed across his face—fear maybe?—but he nodded in understanding of what I was really saying.

"Just tell us," he said.

He was right. They needed to know how bad the situation was. I might as well get it over with.

So, I explained everything, starting from a week ago. They took it pretty well—even the being poisoned bit—although Korix shot to his feet, pacing to rest his forehead on the door, when I detailed everything that Sanya had done.

I'd expected this, though. I might not know what sort of relationship lay between those two, but it was clear that they'd been close at some point. Still, I hadn't expected to see something this expressive from my normally non-emotive life partner. Once I'd finished, he was still at the door, and I couldn't stop staring at him. Why was he so upset about-?

"So, we have two weeks to live unless these scientists you're looking for can craft an antidote," Leski said.

Dragging my eyes off of Korix, I crookedly smiled at my wife.

"Sounds about right, yes," I said.

"Then, why are we still sitting here?" Leski said before glancing over her shoulder. "Ko, get Baely ready, and tell the rest what's going on. I don't know who among them, if any, will want to join us, but either way, they deserve to know the situation. I'll handle him."

Nodding, Korix dragged himself off of the door, leaving the room without looking at us, but I'd dropped the mystery of his strange behavior in favor of glaring at my wife.

"I'm sorry. How many people do you think will be joining us?" I said. "You, I understand. Of you and Ko, you're the one who's living in my world right now, but our daughter is staying right here. We have to keep them safe, Leski."

"And visiting Ostiu while under the protection of the most dangerous man in Lutov is oh so life-threatening," Leski said, rolling her eyes.

When I tried to retort, she swiveled to her knees, smashing a finger to my lips.

"No. You hush for a moment," she said. "If we only have two weeks to live, I'm not forcing our daughter, who adores her *per* and is stronger than she looks, to hide. She will *live*, Zae. She will go with us to save the homeland so that if we die, she has something to be proud of. Also, if you think Ko and I won't drop everything when you're so clearly overwhelmed, then you're a fucking idiot. Please. Be reasonable and accept the help. I'm going to remove my finger now. When I do, I'd better hear only sensible words coming out of your mouth."

As she'd said, she lifted her finger, revealing my scowl, but she didn't find my petulance as amusing as she normally would. She stared at me with her mouth pulled into a thin line until I sighed.

"I hear your reasoning," I said. "I'm not sure if I agree with it, but I learned a while ago that I should capitulate when you get like this. You'll do what you want anyway."

And if the situation got too dangerous, I could always sneak away from my companions. The only one who might notice me doing that was Korix, and he'd understand.

"Good. I'm glad that's decided," Leski said. "Now for the other half of handling you."

Unbuttoning her shorts, she pulled them over her hips before tumbling backward so she could pull them off of her legs, all while I watched with my head tilted. When she noticed that I hadn't moved, she lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, come on! Get those slacks off," she said. "We don't have much time."

"Leski..." I said. "I don't think-"

"Yes, *obviously*," Leski said with a huff. "If you were thinking, you'd see the snarled ball of feelings that you are right now. You'd see that staying in this state will only harm Lutov and us, and you'd know that there's one, quick way to *temporarily* fix the problem."

With a bemused smile, I said, "I hardly think that meaningless sex is going to help me."

"For the love of- you are such an idiot!"

Climbing into my lap, Leski kissed me, soft and tender and so full of love that I couldn't help but relax into it. When she pulled away, she brushed a thumb under my eye.

"It wouldn't be meaningless. It would be me, offering you something that you need, because I want to do that and because I love you, you ridiculous man," she said. "Now, would you please get on with fucking me? We need to leave soon."

With a sigh, I curled a strand of her hair around my finger.

"That has to be the worst come-on line I've heard in my life," I said.

"Are you kidding me-mph?"

A handful of minutes later—Mother Time, if we weren't attuned to each other—we walked into the hideout's common room. As expected, it was relatively calm with people clutching their go-bags in preparation of leaving.

As Korix joined us, I hissed, "All of them are coming? Are we traveling with an entourage now?"

"Apparently," Korix said with a faint smile.

He seemed better, but that didn't surprise me. Activity always helped after an emotional upset.

"Even my parents?" I said.

Shrugging, Korix said, "They seemed adamant about helping. I told them they could do that by staying safe, but they only laughed at the suggestion."

"Ugh..." I groaned.

Korix didn't respond to my obvious distaste. If it wasn't difficult enough that my parents and I were... not close, his relationship with them had always been strained as well. They blamed him for my ascension to the role of the *Lokke Vitras*, even after I'd explained that he'd offered me a chance to escape it. I had chosen to stay and take up the mantle.

They didn't see it as my choice, though, more that Korix had manipulated me into the decision. It was one more reason that I struggled with maintaining my calm when I was around them. Even still, I loved them.

I did! They'd taught me many lessons that had improved my life and given me a... decent childhood. I supposed. Maybe it hadn't been so great, but I didn't want to think about that right now.

Even with that, though, they were good people, individuals I'd normally like to spend time with. Unfortunately, there was too much history between us for that to be feasible.

Lightly touching my elbow, Leski said, "They can watch Baely."

And there was the second reason that my relationship with my parents wasn't in shambles. Unlike a certain *shukusen* I could mention, Mirah and Ximon were excellent grandparents, and my daughter loved them. So, I put on a false smile, accepting the fact that they were coming with us.

Along with everyone else. Hell, why had I agreed to this?

Striding into their midst, I said, "All right. We're headed to Ibis. I know it's late, but timing's everything right now. You can sleep on the way. For this part of the journey, I don't care how you get there, but once we arrive in Flosa's Travel Center, we'll stick together. Clear?"

Everyone around me murmured agreement, although when Feena caught my eye, I nodded. We'd talk while on the way.

"Let's get out of here, then," I continued. "Safe journeys to you all."

Fortunately, most of my family, including my partners, responded to my dismissal, moving toward the exit so I could bring up the rear. Pheniks decided to linger, sidling toward me while people filtered up the ladder.

"You look better," he said when he was beside me.

Remembering Leski's efforts to get me to this state, I smiled.

"We'll see how long it lasts," I said. "Baely did a good job of patching you up."

Touching his cheek, Pheniks said, "Yes. She's always had a talent for healing."

He fell silent, keeping quiet until we were alone in the hideout.

"Zae, these scientists we're retrieving?" he said. "There's something you should know about them."

Of *course* there was.

"If you tell me they eat babies or something equally as evil, we might have to revisit that tussle we had earlier."

From the corner of my eye, I watched Pheniks cross his arms, as if he was protecting himself.

"No, no! It's nothing like that," he said, "but when it comes to their research, their methods can be a little aggressive, and... I just want you to be prepared for what you might see."

Finally, I turned to my brother, wondering if the peace we'd just achieved was about to be ruined.

"Tell me what I'm walking into, then," I said.