

Chapter 8: An Announcement

As I drained my drink, a mixture of cheering and laughter blended with the first chords of a whimsical sonata, featuring the Xygek Symphony Orchestra. Many pieces featuring Leski's performances would play throughout dinner, but once the plates and tables had been cleared away, we'd switch to something more appropriate for dancing.

For now, though, we kept the energy level low, and when people sampled Korix's cooking, inevitably gushing about it, I hid my smile at their astonishment. Who knew that home-cooked meals tasted better than what a refectory could prepare?

I might have engaged in small talk during the meal. If so, I didn't remember it. After that first whiskey sour, I proceeded to get thoroughly drunk, despite the weight of Korix's disapproval.

I didn't care what he thought. This first half of the evening was *my* part of tonight's festivities.

So, when only dirty dishes remained on the tables, I jumped to my feet with only a slight sway. As if on cue, the terrace's light orbs dimmed, turning violet and teal and all the other hues that were expected at a wild party.

There was a slight pause in the terrace's activity, one where Korix gathered everyone who wanted a quieter evening tonight. When his group passed me, his pinched eyes and the tremble in his hands pierced through the haze that was claiming my world, but when I cocked my head at him, he waved me off. I met Leski's eyes over other people's heads, catching my worry reflected back to me...

But by that point, the music had taken on a steady beat, and as it rose in volume, people rushed into a space cleared of tables and chairs. After finishing my drink, I jumped in too.

In Lutov, this was what happens when a group was comfortable enough together. There was no awkward shuffle as to who would first step onto the dance floor. We threw ourselves into it: jumping along to catchy songs, shouting the lyrics of those we knew, swaying and gyrating whether elegantly or clumsily. No one cared who could dance. We were a mash of bodies, set moving by the part of every human that responded to music we enjoyed.

Over and around us, drones flew, delivering drinks and snacks, and at some point, I switched from whisky sours to anything that would deepen the buzz in the air and in my brain. With people running into me near constantly, so much liquid spilled over my chin and fingers, and the cobblestones beneath my feet got sticky. My haze took on a shine, one that sparked and glittered

from the lights flashing around me, and time sloshed from one moment to the next, each one lengthening or skipping ahead as it pleased.

So many hands were on me with each of us needing someone's touch or at least, a dance partner, and I couldn't get enough of it. I kissed *so many people*, both Leski and random strangers. Even normally touch-averse Damari threw their arms around my neck to sloppily slide their mouth along mine, too drunk to care what they were doing.

At some point, Leski climbed atop a table on the edge of the terrace, and I watched, slack-mouthed, as she used her typically tame ballet skills to emphasize every curve of her body. Hell, it made me a live wire, and I probably would have stayed there all night if Feena hadn't dragged me away.

Together, we found our brother, awkwardly standing on the sidelines, and taking one of his wrists apiece, we pulled him into the mosh pile. With my siblings, I laughed and danced and teased and thrust drinks on them both, and we were all too drunk to care about appearances. We weren't high Strata or the *Lokke Vitras*. We were unHoused again, sneaking to a club together, young and full of promise with none of the world's troubles having come to scar us yet.

As with every time I'd gone dancing in the past, I slipped off with a pretty someone at some point. I didn't know their gender or lack of it until we were down the terraces stairs and I pushed her into a wall. I was making out with her when the timer in my array stopped, flashing in an annoying fashion against my closed eyelids, and groaning, I retreated from the woman.

"Time's up," I said. "Are you ok?"

Grinning, she wiped her mouth.

"Fine," she said. "My husband can finish off what you started."

"Good," I said, meaning it.

I kissed her once more before taking her hand, leading her back to the party. As we went, I filtered alcohol out of my bloodstream, silently cursing myself for the gradual return to a clear-headed state. Sending messages to the relevant parties, I stalked into a brightly lit house, wincing, and when my family and friend joined me, I led them to the sitting room where we'd started.

The others in my family were comfortably relaxed here, chatting or otherwise entertaining themselves. They seemed content, which loosened a knot of worry in my chest. I'd been afraid they'd get bored while waiting for the party animals.

When we filed inside, Kori looked up from where he was speaking with my parents before flying to Leski and me. I swallowed my anxiety, smiling at him while Leski glanced at me from the corner of her eye. When I gave her a slight nod, her body tightened, even as she beamed at our life partner.

"How was it?" Korix asked while he approached. "Did you have fun?"

Mother Time, his words were running into one another. It wasn't obvious enough that others would notice, but I'd been with him for almost my entire life. I took his elbow, which had him loosening his stranglehold of his chest.

"It was great," I said. "Thank you for indulging us."

Stretching to my tiptoes, I hovered my mouth beside his ear.

"Just so you know, Leski and I are pretty sticky right now," I whispered. "So, maybe keep your distance until we can shower."

As expected, this had Korix pulling us to him while I chuckled under my breath.

"You've had your fun, Zae-zae," Talira sourly said. "Mind telling us why we're here?"

Right. The other people in the room. Hopefully, Korix could hold on a little longer.

"We'd love to," Leski said. "I hope we weren't too much of an imposition."

"Not at all!" dad said. "It was nice to catch up with the family."

"Good to hear," I said.

Wrestling free of Korix, I swung around him, leading him and Leski to stand in front of those gathered. Somehow, I ended up in the middle of them with no idea of how. I hadn't planned it that way, but I didn't mind. Glancing between them, I put the chance to speak before my partners, but Leski only shook her head, lifting her eyes to the ceiling, while Korix squeezed me.

Mother Time, I loved them. They always indulged the hungry part of me that craved attention, even for something like this.

"As you might have gathered, we have news, an announcement even," I said. "I believe I told Feena and maybe Phen about this, but about fifty years ago, Leski, Korix, and I started discussing what we wanted out of life. My choices in this are limited, of course, but that didn't stop us from dreaming and eventually, making plans. So..."

Looking over the apprehensive faces turned out way, I bit my lip. What if they decided they wouldn't support us? This, I realized, was a large part of why I'd almost had a panic attack earlier.

"So, after two decades of deliberation, we submitted an application to House Drav, and it was recently approved," I continued. "In a few years, a little blend of us will be running up and down these halls."

There was a beat of silence while expressions of shock and horror bloomed around us, and my heart plummeted into the earth's depths. My worst-case scenario was about to come true.

When a crunch broke the dead quiet, however, every head whipped toward Damari. Jiggling a handful of nuts from the party in their hand, they finished chewing before broadly smiling.

“Cool!” they said. “Can I be the kid’s godparent?”

Mother Time bless my friend. I exchanged a glance with Korix and Leski.

“I don’t see why not,” Korix said.

Beaming, Damari wiggled in place.

“Awesome.”

“Wait. I’m confused,” Niklaus said from where he was hovering. “Why would the child need a godparent? The three of them—”

Damn, he always sounded so disdainful when mentioning my family’s arrangement.

“—aren’t like to decide they’re ready for death at the same time. This child won’t need someone to serve as a backup parent.”

Sighing under my breath, I shook my head. So damn sheltered.

“They’re House Kolb.”

That answer had come from everyone else, even Pheniks. Every kid born into a House Kolb family had a godparent named for them. It was rare for all of a child’s biological parents to die during the first twenty-five years of their life, but it did happen, and Kolb was all about contingencies.

On the heels of this, Talira said, “That *bitch*. Marza should have consulted with me about this. No.”

She snapped her eyes to mine, rising out of her seat with her finger lifted in accusation.

“*You* should have told me what you were planning,” she said. “I am your *shukusen*. You’re supposed to share shit like this with me.”

I knew that, but at the time of our application’s submission, I’d been busy. It had slipped my mind. And if I’d conveniently forgotten to mention the application over the three decades of its consideration, I’d done so for a reason, once I was afraid might be fulfilled now.

“You don’t approve?” I asked.

Would Talira take our child from us before they were born? Would my captivity as the *Lokke Vitras* prevent Korix and Leski from becoming parents? What would I do if it did? I couldn’t take that from them.

Talira gave me a funny look.

“What? Mother Time, no,” she said. “I think the *Lokke Vitras* having a kid is an exceptionally *stupid* idea, but you, Zaeden, are one with idiotic ideas at times. Over the years, I’ve learned to trust that you know what you’re doing. No, I’m saying that if you’d told be about this, like you should have, we could have worked with Marza on timing.”

“Oh.”

Yeah, that made sense. Only Talira knew the full picture of what was happening in Lutov. I had a decent view of it, but it wasn’t complete. She might have missions planned for me to undertake, ones she hadn’t mentioned yet...

Wait. She approved. No. From the twinkle in her eyes, she more than approved of us having a kid.

Hell, what was this warmth, bubbling inside?

“I’m a moron,” I said.

“Yes, you are.”

Finished with me, Talira sank onto her seat, and I had the most massive grin on my face while squeezing my partners too hard. Similar expressions were shared by nearly everyone in the room, and we quickly slid into the moment where we’d descend on one another, crying and laughing and hugging. It was my best-case scenario.

“I didn’t think Drav could use three gene pools for progeny creation.”

Staring at nothing, Pheniks was rapidly tapping his fingers on his lips, and at his words, the group’s mood once more crashed into a burning mess.

“They can’t,” I stiffly said.

Silently, I begged my brother to restrain his curiosity for once in his damn life, but of course, he didn’t.

Swinging his finger between my partners and me, Pheniks asked, “So, who’ll be the real parents?”

I... was going to kill him. I was going to rip him into itty-bitty shreds and scatter the pieces on the wind, and he’d deserve it.

Because feel Korix turning to stone beside me with all of him now visibly shaking. See tears springing into Leski’s eyes and the flare of hurt across her face.

Over my life, Pheniks had made many blunders when it came to my sexuality and lifestyle, and in comparison, this one seemed relatively minor. I didn’t care. I was fucking done. Finished, fed up, DONE. No more ignoring what he said about me because he didn’t mean it. It had been over one hundred and fifty damn years. He needed to learn.

Taking a steadying breath, I said, “We won’t know which strands of DNA will be used, and even if we did, it wouldn’t matter. As Leski will be our child’s mother, Korix and I will be their father. Now, Phen-”

“Unnatural. The whole arrangement.”

The heartbeat of a room, already slowed by shock, ground to a halt. All of us turned to stare at Niklaus, who seemed unapologetic for breaking one of Lutov’s most cherished social norms.

My dad responded first. With his lips pulling away from his teeth, he leapt over the back of a sofa, but mom caught his wrist before he could go any further. Feena was audibly growling, tumbling a knife through her fingers, and Damari had requested their rifle with its muzzle shaking at their side. Pheniks glanced at everyone in bewilderment, and while Talira hadn’t moved, I knew Niklaus would receive a severe lecture from Orin over the next few days.

The only ones who hadn’t reacted were the ones who’d been insulted. Leski and Korix looked dazed, which surprised me. They’d heard worse from other people about their decision to partner with me, and while I could understand Leski’s shock—this was the first time her father had expressed his opinions about us since the Ancients Crisis—Korix baffled me. Sure, he’d relaxed over our years together, but he was still my *evushk*, still the master of his emotions.

But Leski had probably invited her father to our party so they could mend fences.

But Korix had been displaying the usual signs of an eminent break from reality.

This wasn’t what was supposed to happen when someone shared that they were about to have a kid.

“For *Mother Time’s* sake, stop!” I shouted.

And every eye was on me.

Shaking my head, I said, “Fucking hell, people. Can’t we be normal for one night?”

...Where had that come from?

I couldn’t breathe. Jerking free of what was holding me, I marched out of a room with too little oxygen in it. I needed to get out, *out*, OUT!

Only once I was through a door and into the cool, night air did I consider why I’d run. Only then, alone, did I consider my feelings about the epic disaster that I’d left behind.

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