

Chapter 81: The Fallout with Her

Leski was waiting in the hangar for us when we got home. If the outline of a familiar hallucination was standing beside her as well, I didn't pay it much mind.

As soon as we set down, Baely scrambled out of the skycruiser, sprinting to their mother, and at their impact with her, Leski rocked in place. Korix and I stepped into the hangar much more slowly, all while Leski watched us with a question and an accusation in her eyes, and the hallucination at her back refused to look at me.

Meanwhile, Baely couldn't stop babbling.

"-was awful, mom! So many people dead. How can that be real? I don't understand. I thought... I thought death was a choice but-"

"Shh, sweetie. It's ok," Leski said. "I know it's a lot right now, but it will be ok soon, all right?"

As Korix and I came to a stop, she never stopped staring at us, although she did briefly rub Baely's back.

"You know how you wanted to spend some time with your friends a few weeks ago?" she continued. "You may not want to see specifically them right now, but how would you like to visit your grandparents? Getting away for a while would be good, and I think they'd like to see you."

Sniffing, Baely lifted her face from where it had been buried in Leski's chest, and seeing the tears dribbling over her cheeks, my hallucination flinched, clicking their tongue.

"You think so?" Baely said.

Nodding, Leski said, "I do. Why don't you go pack a bag? I need to speak with your fathers, and then, we can head over there. Sound good?"

With another sniff, Baely hesitantly smiled.

"Yeah. I'd like that," they said.

Wiping their eyes, they skirted around Leski to enter the house, and after hesitating for the briefest of moments, my hallucination followed them. Between those of us who remained, another tense moment of staring followed, but soon enough, my wife followed our daughter's example, obviously expecting us to come with her.

Stuck in place, I said, "This is going to be a shitshow, isn't it?"

"What do you think?" Korix said.

We headed inside.

Leski led us to the sitting room where years ago, we'd announced Baely's imminent arrival, and after arranging ourselves, we sat in awkward silence for who knew how long before Leski leaned on her knees, rubbing her face.

"Please, tell me I'm wrong," she said. "I got the emergency bulletin a few hours ago, and... please. Tell me I'm wrong."

When I exchanged a glance with Korix, he lifted one shoulder the slightest amount, deferring the floor to me. Just fantastic.

Hesitantly, I asked, "Wrong about what?"

That was a good place to start, yes?

Peering above her fingers, Leski gave me an incredulous glance, and I deflated. She was right. Good place to start or not, that had been a dumb question.

Right now, I couldn't say anything else, though, because my hallucination had wandered into the room, coming to a stop behind Leski. Obviously finished with Baely, they crossed their arms, scowling at me, and I couldn't summon the words to dispel their displeasure. Why?

Shifting in place, Korix said, "What exactly do you want to know, love? You can't expect us to read your mind, much as we can usually do that..."

With my hallucination's eyes still fixed on me, Korix's voice quickly faded to fuzz. Deep inside, a flare had risen, whipping through me, and dragging my eyes to my wife, I watched her, staring at us in accusation, with my teeth clenched. Without thinking about it, I stepped into the flow of Korix's words.

"A few weeks ago, you told me to keep you out of *Lokke Vitras* business," I said with my voice clipped. "Has that desire changed? If so, I'm more than happy to explain myself to you. If not, you're asking about something you told me not to share with you. So, which is it? You can't have it both ways, Leski."

What had *that* been? Was I... angry for some reason? I'd certainly sounded that way while my hands, clenched in my lap, would indicate the same, but... why? And why would such anger pop up with her?

"You know exactly why, LV," my hallucination softly said.

I ignored them.

Even surprised as I was by my outburst, I couldn't relax, and Korix and Leski's stares, one of them concerned and the other unreadable, weren't helping with this.

"Just tell me if it was necessary," Leski said. "Baely was right. So many people dead, Zae... tell me there was a reason for it. A good one."

Ah... my hallucination had been right. I know what this was. I wasn't angry with Leski, not really. Irritated that she'd wanted to have this conversation before I'd had a chance to gather myself? Sure. Angry? No.

This painful mix of fury and loathing, burning me up inside, was reserved solely for me.

Mother Time, I hated being so self-aware at times.

"Self-aware, my ass," my hallucination huffed, turning aside. "It's only ever about what you want to know."

That was concerning. Not the time for it, though.

Unfortunately, when it came to Leski's question, I didn't know how to answer her. I supposed I could lie.

"Not a good idea, and you know it, LV."

I could lie. Telling Leski what she wanted to hear would be so easy, but... my hallucination was right. That wasn't our style. Besides, if I tried to do that, she'd probably see through it.

So. The truth.

"I don't know how necessary it was," I stiffly said. "In many ways, the reasoning behind my orders was sound, but I... didn't agree with it. I went along with it anyway, though, because I trust Talira when it comes to these things and... I'm actually not sure why I did as I was told. Habit? Duty? I don't know. I know that the dissenters posed a threat to Lutov, no matter how slight or vague. I know that it's my job to deal with threats like that, but that's all I'm certain of. I wish I could give you more."

Snorting, my hallucination said, "Uh-huh. Sure."

With that, they disappeared. Meanwhile, a host of expressions flew across Leski's face while it drained of color, but in the end, she went exceptionally blank.

"I see," she said.

And if any emotion clouded her voice or mind, I couldn't detect it.

Standing, she said, "Baely and I will stay with your parents for a while. I'll let you know when we'll be home as soon as I've figured that out."

Jerking each foot in front of the other, she moved toward an exit, and I watched her go with my heart in my throat. Was this it? I'd pushed my wife hard over the last year. Would this be the final shove needed to tear her away from me?

From us. Hell, Korix looked just as devastated as I felt right now.

When Leski stopped at the exit, glancing back at us, I almost burst into relieved tears at how much her face had softened.

"I do love you both," she said, "even still."

Then, she walked out of the room, leaving me and Korix in silence.

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