

Chapter 90: Resolution with Them

When it came to Damari's formal Dispersal, their sister had been exceedingly kind to me. She'd delayed it for months, all to accommodate my busy schedule, because she knew how badly I needed to be here. So, on arriving to it, I found Misah, leaving Korix trailing behind me, and once I'd reached her, I deeply bowed.

"Thank you for how long you've waited," I said. "I am in your debt."

The last year might have been mostly hell, but it had come with one, significant improvement. As I did something so far outside the bounds of Korix's view about the *Lokke Vitras* role, I didn't hear him click his tongue behind me, and his newfound faith in me warmed my heart.

That same faith couldn't be found in Misah. She dubiously eyed me as I rose from my bow.

"It was no trouble. Really," she said. "Damari would have wanted it."

And although I'd love to reject this idea out of pure self-hatred, I couldn't, not when I knew it to be true.

"Still. I feel as if I owe you a debt, and I would like to repay it now, if you don't mind," I said. "I have certain beliefs about owing anyone favors."

"That's an understatement," Korix said at my back.

Misah and I ignored him.

Shrugging at me, she said, "Whatever makes you comfortable, *Lokke Vitras*, but it truly wasn't any trouble."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "In that case, I would like to formally adopt you into my family, if you're amenable to it. By that, I mean the family I've chosen, not the one that I hold with *shukusen* Talira and my parents. Much as it pains me to say, you have no immediate family left, although you certainly have a lot of friends."

Pausing, I looked over the multitude of strangers around us, most of whom were here to support Misah. Damari certainly hadn't had this many people in their life, preferring to keep their company with only a select few.

“I don’t mean to patronize you with this offer. From what I’ve seen, you’re more than capable of taking care of yourself,” I continued, “but this is the only way I can repay my debt to you at the moment. Plus, Damari...”

Breaking off, I bit my lip, wondering if I should share this fact with my friend’s sister.

Once I’d decided, I said, “Before they died, your sibling asked me to take care of you, and I’d like to honor that wish.”

Thank Mother Time, Misah didn’t look flustered by my offer, like I’d thought she might. After a moment’s consideration, she dipped into a shallow bow.

“Then, I am honored to accept.”

Straightening, Misah extended a hand toward the gathering.

“Be welcome to this Dispersal, cousin Zaeden. Please, share your stories of the deceased, so that when we join them in the Collective, we may know them better.

She’d delivered that formal greeting well, unhindered by emotion, but that shouldn’t have surprised me. Unlike with me, she’d had months to grieve.

Returning her bow, I said, ‘Thank you, cousin Misah. I look forward to hearing your stories as well.’”

Because that was what a Dispersal was. For hours, those of us who’d known Damari swapped tales of the time we’d had with them, and as the sun approached the horizon, we gathered around Misah. She was holding a small cask filled with ashes, the remnant that I could find in a burnt-out strike ship.

Korix had *not* been happy about me returning to that place, especially alone. It had been one of the few times I’d disregarded his feelings about something. I’d be damned if I was going to leave my friend in the Tainted Lands, and the proof of my dedication was found in Misah’s arms now.

We were fortunate for this Dispersal. As Misah readied to scatter the ashes, a breeze, blowing away from the group, whooshed through us, and it quickly carried a cloud of my friend into the sunset. It was a beautifully poignant scene, all told, and I wasn’t ashamed to admit that at the sight, a few tears broke free of my control.

Then, it was over, and while other people left or made further plans, Korix and I looked for the two people we’d been avoiding to this point. We found them on the outskirts of the gathering, and when they saw us coming, they turned to lead us deeper into the surrounding planes, although Baely graced us with a brilliant smile first.

How I loved my daughter.

Once we were far enough away, we stopped, forming a circle without a word. We’d had plenty of meetings like this before, although in the past, the subject matter we’d discussed had never been

quite as heavy as what we must cover today.

After a moment, Korix lifted a finger from his crossed arms.

"I'll go first, but that's only because my issues won't be nearly as difficult to handle as yours," he said. "So, first. Personal problems. Obviously, I'm struggling with the loss of loved ones, the same as everyone else."

True. Even if we didn't count Damari, he'd lost Sanya, whether she was alive or not. In either case, the two siblings could never have contact again.

"Grieving the dead is always a long and arduous process, and everyone has a different path on that journey," Korix said. "I know it will be particularly difficult for you, Baely."

Tearing up, my daughter hugged their elbows.

"I miss Uncle Damari," they said in a small voice.

How I longed to hug them and tell them that eventually, things would get better, but Leski got there first. Considering how strained our relationship was right now, I wasn't sure how comfortable she'd be with physical contact from me, so I kept my distance.

"I'm here, whenever you're ready to talk," my wife told Baely.

And oh! Her use of 'I' instead of 'we' hurt.

With a sniff, Baely waved at Korix.

"Sorry, dad," she said. "You were saying?"

"You don't have to apologize, sweetie," Korix said, "but I will continue so we can get my issues out of the way. You can go next, if you like."

With a small smile, Baely said, "Sounds good."

And the ball was returned to Korix.

"Besides what I've already said, my only other problem is lingering guilt, something I... can't... handle anymore," he said before shaking himself.

I couldn't blame him for that, though. I knew how difficult admitting a weakness could be.

"Because of that, I've decided that save for special circumstances, I won't do missions for Kolb anymore," Korix said. "It's not good for me."

"I could have told you that," I said under my breath.

Korix shot a glare at me, but otherwise, he ignored what I'd said.

“Interpersonally, between us? My concerns will soon be addressed, I’m sure,” he said, glancing at me. “So, Baely? What have you got for us, sweetie?”

Claiming all of their parents’ attention at once usually discomfited Baely, at least at first, and this was seen in how they were shuffling in place now.

“Maybe I’ll sound a bit too knowledgeable about this, but I think I’m having an existential crisis right now? Maybe?” they said with a wince. “The last few months have taught me a lot about death and how much danger exists in the world. I don’t like knowing how easily the gift of life can be taken away.”

And I hated that. I’d known my daughter’s loss of innocence would start soon, but that didn’t mean I’d been looking forward to it.

“I’m also having a hard time with fitting my previously held images of you, as my parents, with what I know about you now. Even you, mom,” Baely said. “Please, don’t go all self-hating because I said that. I still love you, more than I can say. I’m simply struggling with the realization that you’re not perfect. You’re just as human as me or anyone else in the world.”

Look at that. My daughter was growing up and doing it well. Also, how glad was I that she’d added that bit about not feeling guilty? She knew us well.

“Lastly...”

Here, Baely went nervous again, darting their gaze between us.

“I’m worried about you three. Are you... ok? Or... or are you separating or-?”

They cut off, shaking their head.

“Don’t answer that. Not yet,” they said. “I only said something because the question’s been eating at me.”

And we’d get around to answering it as soon as the first part of our meeting was done. Honestly? I was worried about it too.

“But that’s all for me,” Baely said while flushing. “Who’s next?”

I caught Leski’s eye, raising an eyebrow, but when she glared at me, I sighed.

“I’m dealing with too many personal problems to count right now, but they all boil down to the fact that *I’m tired*,” I said. “A few weeks of peace will solve most of those issues, though, and unless some new crisis erupts, we’re due for something like that. In other words? Don’t worry about me. As for problems between us...”

How did I express how terrified I was of what was happening in my family?

"I've made a lot of mistakes recently, and it's caused all of you far too much distress. I'm sorry for that," I said. "I know things have changed between us, possibly in an irrevocable way, but still, I want you to know that I will do whatever I must to repair things between us."

At that, Korix simply sighed, but of course he did. Considering how often I'd already apologized to my family, he'd told me that he thought my regret was a bit overkill.

He didn't understand, though. Sure, I'd resolved to take care of more than them alone, but even still, my loved ones were everything to me. Maintaining their wellbeing was an integral part of who I was, and I'd failed them.

"I have nothing else, though," I say. "So... Leski?"

Even with the prompt, my wife remained silent, taking forever to gather her thoughts. When she opened her mouth, I was about ready to weep.

"All of my problems are interpersonal in nature," she said. "I'm fucking furious with you, Ko and Zae, for what you did. *You know what I'm talking about.*"

She paused to jab a finger toward us, and while Baely looked on with mystification, my heart fell through my feet. I'd been right. Things were over between us.

"But I also understand it, or I understand it enough to set it aside. I have to if we're to move forward," Leski continued. "Considering that, there's no point in dwelling on the past."

Or... not? Maybe?

"I'm also miffed by how little you've been communicating with me since I left, Zae," Leski said. "I know it's what you do. You like to give the wronged party space, which is wise, but for this long? Really?"

She was looking at me as if expecting an answer.

So, in the quietest and meekest voice I could muster, I said, "I'm sorry."

With her nose wrinkling, Leski waved away the apology as if it were nothing.

"We'll see how sorry you are over the next few months," she said, "but none of that is my biggest issue at the moment. No, that's... well. I suppose it's actually a personal problem, despite what I said."

Biting her lip, she looked away before taking a deep breath.

"I feel left out."

She met Korix's eyes and mine in sequence.

"I know that what I have with you will never match what's between you, separately," she said. "You two have a bond that goes deeper than marriage or the love that we share for one another, and most of the time, I'm fine with that. But I do feel left out, as I said. I think... I don't know. I suppose I could use more reminders that you're as committed to me as you are toward each other, going forward at least."

I'd had no idea she'd felt that way.

"We can do that," Korix said.

I nodded my own agreement, even as I added.

"Does that mean you're staying?"

With a strangled cry, Leski reached for me, which I naturally stepped away from.

"Of course I'm staying, you insecure moron," she shouted. "Over one hundred fucking years I've stuck with you, through so many trials, and you *still* question that? You have serious trust issues, you know."

Shit. Seemed like I'd touched on a nerve.

Licking my lips, I said, "I'll... readily admit to that."

"Don't get on his case too much, love," Korix said. "It's at least partially my fault."

This only made Leski glare at him, but Baely, on the other hand, burst into laughter.

"Sorry," she gasped after a moment. "It's just... I never had anything to worry about, did I? You three will be fine."

"Yes, honey, we will be," Leski said before eyeing me and Korix. "In time, we will."

But she spread her arms, and my family took the cue. We fell on each other, enjoying this release of the tension between us, and I never wanted to let them go. This? How they healed me? It was why I insisted on keeping them in my life, despite any additional trouble that having relationships might bring.

Eventually, though, we broke apart, moving onto the second part of these types of meetings.

"How can mom and I help you, dad?" my daughter asked.

Korix started answering them, but I was too stuck watching the three of them to listen. This was my family, always there for one another. Always fighting to work through our problems so we could be happy together. This was me, loving them with all of my heart. This was us, and for that, there was no addition needed. We were unique and special, if only to each other, and we needed nothing else.

This was us. Let it always be enough.

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