

Chapter 91: Setting Boundaries

When we reached the apartment, Ace barreled through its door to me, but like the good boy he was, he didn't indulge in his obvious desire to jump on me. Instead, he wove back and forth, excitedly hopping, until I acknowledged his existence, but once I had, he switched his attention to Korix.

It was good to see him adapting to new circumstances. For a little over eleven years, he'd had the same routine, and I hadn't been sure how he'd react to a disruption of it.

Leski followed in Ace's wake, grabbing my head to kiss me. Wrapping my arms around her, I squeezed them while dumping my accumulated tension. Damn, but coming home to this had been nice over these last few days.

As usual, when we broke apart, Korix was awkwardly standing beside us, lifting his eyes over our heads. I'd asked him about that, wondering if he was comfortable with me kissing Leski when we were around him, but he'd insisted that the strain I was observing in him wasn't a reaction to our affectionate displays. He'd just gone so long believing that attachments like ours were anathema to who he was that he instinctively rejected them. At first. A tiny part of me screamed doubt of this claim, unsure whether I was treating my partners as they deserved, but I believed him, if only for one reason.

Momentarily finished with me, Leski leapt at Korix, hugging him. As he did whenever I attacked him like that, Korix froze up, but Leski kept squeezing him until he relaxed, returning her embrace just as fiercely.

I wasn't sure what was going on with those two. Definite fondness lay there now, but I didn't know if they were attracted to one another or if I was all that linked them.

Not that it was any of my business. Those two could figure out their relationship on their own, thanks very much.

"Leski, have you seen my parents?" I asked.

"They're in their room," she said into Korix's chest. "Why?"

Breaking free, she eyed me, and I shrugged.

"I need to talk to them," I said.

They exchanged a knowing glance, which... hmm. I didn't know what to think of that. It implied a collusion of sorts, and having my partners working together for my perceived benefit didn't sound fun.

Also. When had I started thinking of Leski as a partner instead of someone I was dating?

"Where can I find you once I'm done?" I asked. "Ko, I assume you'll need somewhere for your work?"

"That would be best," he said. "I was planning on using the apartment's sitting room unless someone needs it."

"I doubt anyone will. Feena won't be back until mid-day, and depending on how our conversation goes, my parents... they won't disturb you," I said. "Leski?"

Cocking her head at Korix, she said, "Unless it will bother you, I'd like to be in the same room as you, but I should warn you. I need to practice. I haven't touched my violin in almost a week."

With his hands behind his back, Korix faintly smiled.

"I wouldn't mind," he said. "I've been looking forward to hearing you play. Zae says you're quite good."

Blushing, Leski hid behind her hair.

"Then, I guess I'll perform for you today," she said.

"Excellent!" I said, glancing toward the apartment's door. "Excellent."

Mother Time, I didn't want to do this. Still. It must be done.

So, I absently said, "I'll see you soon."

And I headed out of the hangar. Behind me, Leski and Korix said something in farewell.

I didn't hear it. Forcing one foot in front of the other, I made it into the apartment, although its familiar halls felt like corridors in an enemy's home today. Knowing that Korix was watching me through the place's recorders helped. I wasn't sure when his habit of monitoring had become a source of comfort for me.

When I reached my parents' room, I didn't override its lock or storm inside. Who knew what they were doing in there? While stumbling onto their more intimate moments had never bothered me, I knew it embarrassed them, and we didn't need extra stressors today. Plus, you know, invasion of privacy.

So, instead, I sent them a message, letting them know I was here. I didn't have to wait long before the door slid open with dad hanging from its frame, panting and disheveled.

“Zaeden,” he gasped.

What was I supposed to say? Did I start with hostility, as I so badly wanted to? Did I fall into formality to shield myself?

No. Let’s make this easy for everyone.

Prodding a sloppy smile onto my lips, I chirped, “Hey, dad! We should talk.”

Frowning, dad said, “Of... course. Let me move your mother along, and we can go...”

He seemed at a loss as to how he could finish that sentence, so I stepped in.

“How about we use the garden?” I said. “It’s open with several escape routes available, which should make everyone comfortable. I think.”

“That’s... not a bad idea,” dad said, “considering-”

Again, I saw fear flicker in a parent, and I sucked air through my teeth, dropping my smile while my hands folded into fists at my side.

“I won’t hurt you or mom or anyone else in this family,” I hissed. “What will it take for you to believe that? Why would the thought have crossed your mind in the first place? Hell, you’re the ones who decided to associate with me again, baffling as I find it. Why would you do that if you’re still so afraid of me?”

Damn, why was he making this harder than it needed to be? I was already tempted to abandon this conversation and leave things as they were between us. I didn’t need anything else to shove me away.

“I- You’re right,” dad said.

Pushing off of the doorframe, he lifted his hands in appeasement.

“I’m sorry.”

I had so many things that I wanted to say. Things like ‘You’re apologizing a lot these days’ or ‘Why should I care?’ Instead, I consciously loosened each muscle, and while I smiled, I wasn’t sure if it was as carefree as it had been before.

“I know,” I said. “I’ll meet you in the garden.”

I hardly registered my walk there, not with my mind in a haze and everything going cold. The cheery Zaeden that my parents knew might be the part that I chose to play with them, but it would be a persona and nothing more. Inside, I’d stay numb because I couldn’t let them hurt me again and...

I wouldn't let them see me break down. I. would. not.

Honestly, it felt strange to be in this position in the first place. I'd seen a lot of children hurt by their parents, and rarely had the parents apologized for what they'd done. Then again, most people didn't want to admit to their faults...

It was just strange. I'd never thought to receive an apology from them, not for this or anything else they'd done. It was surprising how much something that should have felt nice could instead feel so terrible.

When they arrived, I was examining mom's rose bed. She'd always had an affinity for plants, but roses were, by far, her favorite flower to work with.

I liked them because of their thorns, always had. With them, I could use a broken bit of stem to prick my thumb while hiding it in my pocket. Those sharp stabs had always helped me manage stressful situations when I'd been younger. Right now, they were keeping me from exploding into an angry mess.

Without a word, we took a seat around an unlit fire pit, and I was faced with a quandary. In this situation, what would the Zaeden they knew do?

"So," I said. "Five years."

Wincing, dad shifted in place while mom sat stock still.

Cracking a weak smile, I asked, "What have you been up to? Go on any interesting missions?"

Mom squeezed her eyes closed.

"We shouldn't get distracted right now," she said.

Ok, then. If they wanted to get straight to the point, I could oblige.

"You rejected me. For years," I said. "I'm a little unclear what you expect from me after that."

I refused to see their flinches or the tears that sprang to life in mom's eyes. At times, the Zaeden they'd known could be as cold as I was right now.

"We don't expect anything," dad said, "but whatever you're willing to give, we'll be happy to accept. And if that's nothing..."

"Then, we'll survive. It would be what we deserve, after all," mom finished for him.

Would it, though? Would it *really*? For something like this, I didn't think so and... and...

Why were they being so remorseful right now? It was contradictory to everything I'd ever learned about human behavior.

Maybe they thought I'd eventually become spiteful toward them, and considering what I'd one day become, they'd decided to try currying favor now, when I might still forgive them. Maybe they thought they could use a powerful connection in the future, although with Talira in the question, I didn't see why they'd want something like that from me.

And why apologize for this, out of everything...?

I shook my head, trying to focus my whirling thoughts. Perhaps it was best if I didn't start with what I was willing to give them, considering how that might end. Perhaps it was best to dig straight to the heart of our problem.

"I understand what you did. When you made the decision to distance yourselves from me, it might even have been the right call," I said. "You didn't know how I'd play the role of the *Lokke Vitras* or how thoroughly I'd refuse to surrender my loved ones, and after you saw how little this role has changed me, you reached out, no matter how late that might have come.

"I can't, however, forget what's happened. What you did will ever hang between us, and because of that, these relationships that we hold have been irrevocably changed. I don't know if I'll ever love you in the same way."

Shrinking on herself, mom reached out for dad, and he clutched her like she was the only thing keeping him afloat. I watched this, and my anger feasted on a scene of pain, so much less than what I'd endured. I let these furious emotions fill me until they overflowed, almost choking on them.

Instead, I breathed them out.

"But I do love you. You're my parents, for Mother Time's sake," I said. "I choose to love you. I choose to forgive you because what good will holding onto hate do me? I don't want to be whiplashed by pain every time I think about you.

"This, however, doesn't mean that things are immediately better between us. I probably won't visit either of you for a long while yet. I will invite you to significant events in my life because I won't deny you that, and you may always ask to see me, but I reserve the right to refuse. If you want to stay in my life, those are my terms."

Falling silent, I ground my knuckles into my hand's carpal bones, refusing to show any other sign of what was blazing through me. Since arriving here, how many times had I talked through these conditions with Leski? Not once had I gone to Korix because he couldn't relate but Leski? She had *Niklaus* for a father.

Talira had been holding that man in one of House Kolb's temporary apartments at headquarters. Over the last three weeks, she'd been forcing him to divest of every Favor he held from other people, slowly lessening his grip on the power he'd once had. She'd told me that soon, he'd only wield the typical amount that a Second Stratus like him could have, and I was glad for that.

We might have negated the damage he'd done by giving Cerullis weapons—while we hadn't located all those missing, we'd found the ones he'd supplied at least—but I wanted to cut off any other sources of influence that he might have now. Hopefully, it would both lessen any work he might cause me in the future and keep him from intimidating Leski into doing anything she'd rather not.

I wrenched my thoughts away from Niklaus when my mother opened her mouth to speak.

“We accept,” she said. “Of course we accept.”

Mother Time, their eyes were bright. The sight turned my stomach, and I had to remind myself that I'd chosen forgiveness, not hatred. I knew my feelings toward my parents wouldn't fade overnight, but when looking at my options for resolving this conflict, I'd picked the one that would cause the least damage to everyone involved. I'd abide by my decision.

Even if I still didn't fully understand why something this improbable had happened in the first place.

“I'm glad to hear it,” I said before slapping my knees. “Now, would you stop cowering around me while I'm here? This is your home, after all.”

“We'll do our best,” dad said.

“May-?”

Stopping, mom licked her lips.

“May we hug you, Zae?”

And the air I breathed was ice.

Standing, I said, “It's Zaeden. But yes, you may.”

They descended on me as if long-starved of my presence, which they had been in a way, and I just... stood there. I couldn't return their embraces, but I did let them pull me close and rub my back or hair. Quickly enough, however, I cleared my throat, and they backed off.

“I have things to do,” I said.

What a big, fat fucking lie. Mom smiled like she saw through my bullshit.

“Thank you for speaking with us,” she said.

“You're... welcome,” I said with the words pulled from me like teeth out of a jaw bone.

I had nothing else to give them.

