

# Chapter 1: My Life Before

As I took one wavering step after another on top of the garden wall, I cradled my precious burden to my chest, making my fingers a cage for their wriggling bodies.

One would think that after so many times making this crossing, doing it now would come naturally to me, but past experience didn't make the ground lie any less far below me. If I focused on it, my world narrowed down until my balance started slipping, and a fall right now would be... bad.

This had never stopped me from getting what I wanted, though.

When I reached my goal, I leapt onto the closest tree branch after my array had run through the calculations needed to do that noiselessly. Most of the time, I could do something like this without relying on that lovely bit of tech in my head, but I wanted to make sure I was a ghost among the leaves right now.

While creeping along my current branch, I found my target leaning against the base of the tree. The younger boy had his knees propped up, resting his hands on his thighs, palm up, and every so often, he swung one in an arch toward the other, probably reading one of those stuffy scientific reports he loved so much. Once I'd reached a decent position above him, I extended my cupped hands, already hearing the shrieks that were sure to come.

Before I could do anything, however, someone snatched my wrist, and I glared at the woman who'd come to interrupt my plans. As she dipped her head in greeting, her impish smile poked fun at me.

"Zaeden," she said.

She'd been kind enough to let my array catch her sub-vocal utterance, and showing her my teeth, I quietly snapped them together, at which she lifted a hand to cover her grin. I replied with a message, sending it to her array.

*Damnit, Feena, getting here took a lot of work. Please, let me have my fun for once.*

Cocking her head, Feena said, "For once?"

Mother Time, I couldn't decide. Should I growl at her, descending even further into a feral, animal state, or...?

No.

I smiled at her, letting my widened eyes work their magic, and after a moment, Feena shook her head with a sigh escaping through her nose. Almost, she released me, stopping at the last minute.

“Not on his head,” she said.

Snapping my eyes to slits, I gave her a flat stare, but when she freed my wrist, I shuffled to the side.

Returning to the position I’d been holding before Feena had interrupted me, I unlaced my fingers, pulling my hands apart, and the earthworms I’d gathered earlier this morning twisted and writhed in the air before plopping into the grass and fallen leaves below. One even landed on my target’s leg.

With a startled shout, he stumbled to his feet, swiping at his skin, and I burst into laughter. Freezing, my target snapped his head up, sending his blonde hair flying, so he could find me in the tree.

“Zae, you asshole!” he growled.

“Hiya, Phen-ah!”

Something had shoved into me, and no matter how hard I fought to maintain my perch, I couldn’t do it, toppling forward instead. Fortunately, I was cognizant enough to heed my array’s helpful warnings as I fell.

When a branch slammed into my waist, I had my hands ready to serve as a buffer, lessening the severity of the blow. It still fucking *hurt*, but no bones broke, which was a plus. Twirling over the branch, I tumbled once more.

With a few more grabs at twigs and leaves, I touched down on my feet, wheeling my arms to stay there. Stepping in front of me, my former target kept his face purposefully blank while jabbing the heel of his palm into my chest. At my impact with the ground, I coughed while my eyes started watering, and groaning, I curled onto my side.

Someone landed beside me.

“Hell, Feena,” I wheezed.

“You deserved that,” she said with a chuckle.

“Ugh...”

My sister flopped to the ground beside me, leaving my brother glaring at me with fire in his eyes.

“*Fine*,” I said before going deadpan. “I deserved to get pushed out of a tree.”

Satisfied, Pheniks dropped to the ground between us, as far from the earthworms as he could get, and thus, he completed the circle.

I'd always wondered how my parents had dragged permission for *three* children out of House Drav, especially ones as close in age as we were. With how regulated that House kept Lutov's population, most people didn't have siblings, let alone a pair of them.

However they'd accomplished the impossible, I was grateful for it. Feena and Pheniks meant everything to me, no matter how much I might torment my little brother.

Sitting up, I scrubbed my watering eyes while reading through my array's assessment of the damage I'd acquired. The tree and ground had bruised me a little, but since I'd sustained no other injuries, I should be healed up in a few minutes.

As expected.

Apparently finished with greeting our sister, Pheniks rested an elbow on his knee, propping his head up.

"When did you get home?" he asked.

"Just now," Feena said before plucking a blade of grass from the ground. "I saw Zae strolling on the garden wall while I was headed to the house. Figured I should see what our troublemaker was up to."

"You didn't get here fast enough to stop him," Pheniks grumbled.

"Who says she-?"

Feena kicked me with her pleasant grin never faltering.

"Ow!" I yelped. "For Mother Time's sake, it was only a prank! From how you two are acting, you'd think I did something worthy of the *Lokke Vitras'* attention."

Both of them whipped their heads to me, drawing their shoulders together.

"Don't invoke his name," Feena said.

Rolling my eyes, I patted at the air.

"All right," I said. "Sorry."

I'd never understood why everyone was so afraid of House Kolb's First Stratus. He was only a man, same as any other.

A highly trained, could tear someone apart in a second, man, sure. One set to become his House's leader when Talira stepped down, of course.

But still.

"So, you're home," I said. "What was your mission this time? Can you tell us?"

Leaning back on her hands, Feena stared at the clouds while chewing on her lip.

“Mage hunt,” she eventually said.

Frowning, Pheniks said, “You’ve been doing a lot of those lately.”

“I have,” Feena said. “*Shukusen* Talira’s been pushing me to become an *ii* hunter.”

Pheniks’ breath caught, and I joined him in staring at our sister.

“But... you’re only Sixth Stratus!” I said. “Mage hunters have to be Fourth or above!”

Rolling her head to face me, Feena smiled at what she saw.

“You think our grandmother’s forgotten about that? I think she wants to elevate me soon,” she said, “but I didn’t come home to talk House business. How’ve you two been? Any drama happening that I should know about?”

I didn’t want to drop this topic. In all of Lutov, *ii* hunters had the highest chance of- of dying while on the job.

Hell, even thinking that alien word felt wrong. Unless someone wanted it, no one should enter that most final of states, and yet, *ii* hunters failed to return from missions in droves.

But Feena had always been the most stubborn of us siblings, and that was saying something. If she’d decided to switch subjects, we’d do it, like it or not.

“Mom and dad aren’t fighting, if that’s what you’re asking,” I said.

“For once,” Pheniks added.

“Wonderful!” Feena said before wincing. “Does that mean...?”

Exchanging a glance, Pheniks and I made faces at each other.

“Yes, they’re being very... passionate with one another,” he said.

“Everywhere.”

“Hence, why we’re outside.”

“Just great,” Feena drawled. “Well, we can’t exactly judge them. They’ve never said a word when we’ve brought partners home for a rendezvous.”

When Pheniks flushed, ducking his head, I tried not to snicker. My brother had never been... subtle in that arena.

“But what about you two? Any changes?” Feena asked. “I know your House naming’s coming up soon, Zae.”

“Thank Mother Time for that,” I said. “I can’t wait to be free of House Kirst’s control.”

“Show respect, Zae. By educating the young, Kirst plays an important role in Lutov.”

Collapsing to my back, I raised a hand to block the sun.

“I know, and I appreciate what they do,” I said. “I even love learning what they teach. I just...”

Flicking sun-reddened fingers against a blue-and-white canvas, I searched for the words, ones that wouldn’t raise concern in my siblings, that would also fit what I felt.

I wanted to be free, a desire I’d always had. Throughout my life, its lack had grated on me, hidden by mischievous behavior and false cheer.

Of course, Lutov provided its citizens with many variations of freedom: the freedom to choose what one did with one’s life, the freedom to be who one was without judgment, the freedom to decide if and with whom one wanted to spend their life. But implicit in these freedoms was the understanding that the choices someone made must also benefit their House because one’s chosen House claimed a person down to their spark of a soul.

Everyone liked to phrase this as ‘owing one’s House loyalty’, but I knew better. I wanted to make choices solely for myself. I wanted to live out from under the Houses’ control. I wanted freedom.

But I’d never have it.

“I’m ready to move on with my life,” I said. “But hey! A few more weeks and I’ll do just that. You should hear what Phen’s been up to.”

My brother started yammering about a new experiment he’d begun while Feena indulgently listened, and I flung my arms to either side of me, closing my eyes.

What was I doing? Longing for something I’d never have? Taking joy in the persona I maintained? I hadn’t been taught to act like this, or rather, I hadn’t taught myself this behavior.

How I lived my life definitely wasn’t something that one could learn in Lutov’s educational system.

Because of our family’s position, my siblings and I had started our lesson rotations in House Kirst at an earlier age than most children would. I’d joined a group of older kids, and along with lessons from other Houses, we’d learned how to accomplish House Kolb’s primary purpose: protecting Lutov both from itself and from others. That training had centered itself in two areas.

In combat, our instructors had taught us that to responsibly wield House Kolb’s weapons, one must rely only on one’s training and occasionally, instinct. When running a mission, one could never indulge in emotions or an exercise of morality. These were the enemies that would see a House

Kolb member killed.

How we'd shuddered at the first few mentions of death. How quickly that reaction had faded.

In infiltration, we'd learned how to separate ourselves from our identity, becoming another person. We'd learned how to forsake the comfort of friends or family for extended lengths of time and how to construct a persona meant only to please one's target. When worming into another House's ranks, any slip in these practices could lead to discovery, and once one was burned, one was no longer of use to their House.

How the others had cringed at this idea. How quickly I'd learned to do the same.

My fellow students had taken these lessons, applying their surface meanings to their lives. I'd dove deeper.

Whether I liked it or not, House Kolb would one day become my life. I'd done well in my lessons with the other Houses, could join any of them I wanted, but Kolb was the only one that granted its members more than a teasing taste of true freedom. If I must choose a House, I'd pick one like that, hands down.

But if I'd belonged to Kolb with the personality that I'd had as a child, someone would have noticed how little devotion I had for the Houses. Its members were more observant of details like that, after all.

Therefore, I'd had to become someone whose very nature screamed Kolb, the epitome of their values, and their values shone through what they taught Lutov's children.

Responsible use of a weapon required detaching from my desires and feelings? To Kolb, I was the weapon.

If this was so, I had to become emotionless, analytical, operating only on facts, but I also couldn't act this way around other people, even House Kolb members. They would have found the change in me disturbing.

So, at six-years-old, I'd created the persona that I'd lived throughout the nineteen years since, and over time, it had erased who I'd been as a child. If I let it, it could *be* me, as it sometimes was when I slipped, but I could not be cheerful, as the persona required. I could not be fun-loving. I might enjoy pranks to a degree, but they must give me no real pleasure. I'd drained myself of feelings, and I intended to stay this way until maybe, someday, I could wrest myself free of the Houses.

But that hope, held secret even from myself most of the time, had little chance of fulfillment, and unless I achieved it, I must always pretend around the people in my life.

"-combat-" Feena said.

Shooting upright, I blurted, "What was that?"

Feena gave me an amused smile.

“I was asking Phen if you two would show me how much you’ve progressed with your combat training,” she said.

With his face souring, Pheniks said, “Do we have to? You know I don’t like-”

“Yes!” I shouted, springing to my feet. “Yes, yes, yes! Let’s go!”

## **TTS Chapter One**

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