

Chapter 2: Friendly Competition

Grabbing hold of my siblings' hands, I hauled them to their feet so I could drag them behind me. Our parents' estate might be far from their House's training facilities in the capital, but they, as any good Kolb member would, had their own weapons chamber here.

As I raced through our home toward it, I kept an ear open for advance warning of our parents' antics, knowing that running across them while they were... busy would make my siblings uncomfortable, but fortunately, nothing impeded our progress, although Pheniks protested the whole way.

The estate's weapons chamber consisted of a smaller building, standing free of the main house. Unlike where we slept at night, this building's walls were made of stucco with narrow windows punched through them. The roof's corners lifted into points, and its door opened manually rather than doing it automatically as we approached. Supposedly, it had been constructed in a style from Ostiu, a favorite vacation spot for my parents.

I wouldn't know. I'd never been.

This foreign styling vanished inside with a white floor, ceiling, and walls replacing it. Dropping my hold on my siblings, I flicked through settings options in my array.

"So, what'll it be?" I asked. "All three of us, looking out for ourselves? The unHoused kids against a Sixth Stratus adult? One on one?"

Shaking out the wrist I'd been holding, Pheniks said, "I'm not doing this. Not today."

He stalked to a corner, letting it hug him.

"If you want to know how I'm doing with my combat lessons, you can request a report on it, the same as everyone else, Feena."

Shrugging, my sister faced me with a fierce grin.

"One on one then, *little brother*," she said. "Weapon preference?"

"Don't have one," I said, finishing up with the scenario's options.

I truly didn't care what Feena chose. Standard-issue Lutovish rifle or bow and arrow from Ibis, I had a basic understanding of all the weapon types typically put into use, never having seen a reason to

build a preference for one over the others. They all did the same thing in the end.

“Short swords,” Feena said. “Let’s go easy this time.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

With one last variable added, I extended an invitation to her array, and once she’d accepted it, our white room shimmered into a flat field of grass. Feena glanced around, swinging her newly acquired sword so she could adjust to its weight. Watching her, I did the same, no matter how unnecessary I found it.

“This landscape’s pretty simple,” she said. “Did you give up on the fancy battle scenes between the Favored and those from beyond the stars?”

“I’m tweaking those,” I said.

A lie. I’d been wanting to test myself against my sister since the last time she’d visited. Her placement within House Kolb would be ideal for me. I’d like to know if I met its standards, and using a blank scene for this fight would best serve that purpose.

“All right, then,” Feena said. “When you’re ready.”

She settled into a loose stance, and since she’d been kind enough to give me the time for it, I considered which of my pre-composed battle plans would work best here. It had been a while since I’d last seen my sister fight so...

I started with the basics: a lunge for her torso, some slashes at her sides. Everything I tried would have been a killing blow if she hadn’t dodged it with her blasted House Kolb speed, making her form blur at times. Hell, I was ready to have that tool at my disposal.

She attacked me too, of course, but I caught most of these strikes on the flat of my blade before shoving her away. The few blows I retreated from left stinging slashes in their wake. The scenario made my brain tell my body that it was injured, even if it wasn’t.

After this had continued for about a minute, I decided I’d learned enough from this. I could easily pose as a Sixth Stratus for as long as I wanted.

With that determined, I should let my sister run me through, ending the fight, but something in me had always refused to lose, especially when I had a clean way to defeat my opponent.

After queuing a request in my array, I dropped my sword right as Feena took another swing at me, and gasping, she fought to pull her strike, even though that was contradictory to House Kolb lessons. Even though these weapons weren’t real.

She teetered in place, almost falling into me, and I helped her efforts to straighten by punching her in the face. Stumbling backward, she clutched her nose with her eyes watering, and activating my earlier queued request, I raised my arm toward her.

My very real rifle formed in my waiting hand, and I squeezed its trigger, sending an energy bolt flying from it. It took Feena in the arm, and grunting, she lost control of her weapon, letting it fall from limp fingers.

I'd already moved, scooping my sword off of the ground, and with it lifted, I used its point to encourage her retreat from me until red seeped into the air around her, indicating that we'd reached the room's bounds.

"Zae!" someone shouted behind me. "Zae, stop!"

But I wasn't listening. My focus was on Feena and her matching green gaze while I waited for the fire of combat to die in her. Once it had, I stepped away but not before the barest flicker of fear sparked to life in my sister.

Pheniks rushed past me, reaching for the seared gouge in Feena's arm. After a quick inspection, he spun on me with his jaw clenched.

"What the hell, Zae?" he hissed.

For a moment, all I could do was blink at my brother. I'd known he wouldn't be happy about what I'd done, but I hadn't expected him to be *this* angry.

"The point of this was to display my progress in combat training, yes?" I cautiously said. "My instructors have always said that social rules and interpersonal connections have no place on the battlefield. You do what you must to survive. To win."

Shrugging, I terminated our session, which had white walls springing into place around us.

"Plus, that burn should heal in, what? Ten minutes, Feena?" I asked.

"Something like that," she said.

"There. No real harm done, although I'm sorry you were hurt," I said. "Should I have done something differently? If I've misinterpreted that lesson, I'd like to know before my House naming and... if I'm wrong, I want to know *why* someone hasn't pointed it out to me before now."

I made sure to infuse irritation, confusion, and concern in that question, and hearing it, Feena ruffled my hair, even though she was a head or two shorter than me.

"No worries. You did a good job," she said before glancing over her shoulder. "Stop sulking, Phen. I'm fine."

Glowering at me, my brother joined us, and I ducked my head to avoid his gaze.

"I'm sorry," I said. "How do I fix it? Do you want me to finish your House Vaessa homework for a week? Take notes on your experiments?"

Crossing his arms, Pheniks pursed his lips while he thought.

“No pranks,” he eventually pronounced, “for a month.”

I staggered as if from a physical blow.

“You- you wouldn’t,” I breathed.

“I would,” Pheniks said.

That thin-lipped, unattractive grin of his crawled onto his face, and despite how much it had always made me want to laugh, I acted as if it had intimidated me.

“Fine.”

“What about me?” Feena asked. “I was the one hurt.”

“You?” I said. “As way of apology, I won’t tell your fellow Sixth Strata that an unHoused bested you.”

Feena opened her mouth to retort before snapping it closed again and jabbing a finger at me.

“You’re an asshole,” she growled.

I smiled sweetly at her, even considered innocently batting my eyelashes, but before I could decide if that would be too much, a message slid into my array. When I swiped it to centerfield, my siblings did the same, but the reason for our cohesion quickly became apparent.

Welcome home, Feena, the message read. When you three are done playing in the weapons chamber, come to the dining room. Dinner’s almost ready.

“Great. Family dinner,” I drawled. “Want to go again? Keep ‘playing’?”

Touching her burned arm, Feena laughed.

“Once was more than enough for today, thanks,” she said. “You and Phen head on over. I have to change first. Mother Time knows what our parents would do if I showed up like this.”

She hugged us both before turning toward the exit. After she’d left, I stared at the door, chewing on my lip.

I should have let her win that fight. Now, she might tell who knew how many people about how her little brother had beaten her in a duel. Why hadn’t I let her win?

“Zae? Dinner?”

Jumping, I snapped my gaze to my brother, who was quizzically watching me.

“Sorry. I just- I don’t like that I hurt her,” I said. “I was operating on instinct, you know? I don’t like that House Kolb’s training has made violence automatic for me. Who knows what’ll happen once I’ve chosen them at my House naming?”

“Then, don’t.”

What was Pheniks talking about? When I frowned at him, he flushed, rubbing the back of his neck.

“All I’m saying is that you have five other choices. You don’t have to pick Kolb just because mom, dad, and Feena are members of it,” he said before turning an even deeper shade of red. “Stop looking at me like that! Let’s just go.”

He hurried out of the weapons chamber with me on his heels.

Pheniks could never understand why he'd confused me. I didn’t want to choose a House, but because I had to, I’d done it so long ago that I hardly remembered making the decision. That choice had made me who I was, and even if I’d wanted to, I didn’t think I could change.

I zoned out through most of dinner, mechanically eating what I was sure were delicious dishes. They were tasteless to me.

My family’s conversation became a buzz at the back of my mind with my ingrained persona rising to speak as needed.

Perhaps I should have been paying more attention, but I was bored and exhausted. All I wanted was to leave this place, listen to more of my current book’s narration in my room, and eventually fall asleep, but having Feena come home warranted a long family affair.

It was good to see her. I cared for my sister, no matter how thoroughly I tried to uproot such sentimentality, but she could have chosen a better day to make her homecoming.

I couldn’t pinpoint what had me so tired, and this inability... irritated me. I picked at it while dad asked Feena about the mage she’d brought in, while Pheniks stumbled over his words when describing his pet project, while our parents’ kisses made my siblings wince.

Had boredom caused this fatigue?

Since my last lesson rotation, I’d been steadily losing energy. A month with nothing in my life but leftover homework, my brother in the evenings, and my parents when they weren’t on missions had worn on me.

I’d been running in place, going nowhere, with nothing to distract me from the futility of my heart’s desire, and knowing that this served as a preview for the rest of my life, I’d nearly taken off for the irradiated Tainted Expanse several times in recent days. Better to die of that place’s miserably imparted poison than to live for who knew how long, trapped like one of the rats in my brother’s experiments.

To forever chase a desire that was just out of reach, to strive, to struggle, to serve, to-

Something warm was tented over my hand, and I realized that I'd clenched it. Glancing up, I found my mother beside me with her hand on top of mine and her brow crinkled.

"Zae, love, are you ok?" she asked.

Damnit, I'd slipped again. What was wrong with me today?

Had anyone else seen through the crack in my persona?

From what I could tell, it didn't seem likely. Dad was chatting with Pheniks while Feena bounced her gaze between them, leaving only my mother.

Covering her hand on mine, I said, "Everything's fine. It's just my House naming. I'm worried about it."

If anything, my explanation only wrinkled her face further, and she brushed my cheek.

"Don't let it bother you," she said. "When they call you to the dais, you'll know what to say."

"So I've been told," I said with a chuckle.

"So it will be," mom countered. "I promise."

Slowly breathing out, I nodded.

"Ok."

Patting my hand, my mother returned to the conversation, and I almost tuned them out again, but Feena said something that caught my interest.

"-come with me?"

"Come with you where now?" mom asked.

I perked up. Maybe a change in scenery could pull me out of this newly discovered, constant need to sleep.

"I was just saying that my next mission is starting in Zoln," Feena said. "I know how much you and dad love Ostiu. Maybe you two and the brats could come with me."

"Hey!" Pheniks shouted.

I flicked a spoonful of ice cream at her, which she deftly dodged, and while my mother glared at us, dad shook his head.

“We can’t. Mom... *shukusen* Talira’s got a mission for us,” he said. “We’re reporting to her tomorrow.”

“Then, let the boys come,” Feena said. “They’d only accompany me as far as Zoln, and I have friends in House Zan who can look after them while I finish my mission. From the information I’ve been given, it shouldn’t take me long.”

“House Zan?” mom said, making a face. “I don’t know, honey.”

“Please, mom?” Pheniks said with a bit of wheedling in his voice. “We visit Ibis during our House Vaessa rotations, but I’ve never been to Ostiu.”

He’d spoken that nation’s name with such reverence, and hearing it, I winced. Considering Ostiu was the scientific research citadel of our world's second continent, his fascination with it made sense, but another, less savory subject had always drawn him there too.

My parents knew this, and with the addition of that to their earlier doubts, they’d probably refuse Feena’s request, which I couldn’t have.

Something needed to change before my House naming ceremony or I truly would cross the demarcation line into the Tainted Expanse.

Scraping my chair along the floor, I shot to my feet, and the room’s eyes fixed on me while my parents briefly tensed in preparation of an attack. At least some people in my family had shown the proper response to an unexpected commotion like mine.

“Let us go with Feena,” I said. “Make it my House naming gift. Please.”

Cocking their heads, my parents dropped into thoughtful silence. A troublemaker, I might pretend to be, but I never asked for anything. If I needed something, I worked for it. Earned it. I didn’t let anyone put me in their debt and would never give anyone my Favor. Not even my family.

“I suppose we could allow it as a gift,” mom slowly said, “if that’s what you really want.”

“It is,” I said.

“Then, you’d better hurry and pack,” dad said with a heavy sigh. “From what I gather, Feena’s shuttle will arrive soon to pick her up. Right, dear?”

Seemingly pleased with having gotten what she’d wanted, Feena was lounging in her chair, hanging her arms off its backrest.

“In an hour,” she said.

That would give me time for...

“Shit!” I shouted, racing out of the room with Pheniks behind me.

“Language!” someone called.

Rolling my eyes, I glanced at my brother, and he beamed at me.

We were going. We were leaving! Lutov, Ibis, Ostiu, I didn't care where we went. As long as I could escape what had disturbed my self-imposed discipline.

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