

# Chapter 21: I'm Sorry, Brother

I hadn't gotten far with Pheniks' defense when the skyscruiser landed in our grandmother's hangar. Reaching over, I shook my brother.

"Phen," I said.

He woke up with sleepy murmurs, scrunching his face up when he saw me.

"Zae? What are you-?"

As remembrance crawled into him, Pheniks went pale, drooping.

"Oh. Right," he said. "Where are we?"

"Xygek," I said. "Our grandmother's apartment."

Nodding, Pheniks rubbed his face.

"So...?" he said.

"So, now we talk to her," I said. "Are you ready?"

Meeting my eyes, Pheniks said, "No. But I have to be, don't I?"

I couldn't offer him reassurances, no matter how much I might want to. I'd love to say that whatever happened, I'd keep him safe, but despite how I might lie to myself, I wasn't sure I could make him that promise. Not again. Look what had happened the last time I'd had to choose between him and something else of importance! So, I squeezed his shoulder and got out of the skyscruiser.

Talira was waiting for us in her kitchen with a bathrobe thrown on and her hair in disarray. Had she gone back to bed after we'd spoken, or was this an attempt to make Pheniks feel guilty?

When we entered, she was standing in front of her refectory with a finger tapping on an elbow, and as if timed for our arrival, it dinged. Opening it, she retrieved two mugs before offering them to us.

"Caf?" she asked.

Mother Time, she knew us well. Pheniks and I descended on her like a pack of hyenas, and once we'd taken what she held, Talira guided us to her kitchen table. While she waited for the refectory to make breakfast, we huddled over our mugs, refusing to meet each other's eyes. Even still, I caught Pheniks jumping when our grandmother slid plates onto the table, and I had to hide a smile.

Talira sat between us, and in response to her presence, Pheniks and I straightened.

"Shukusen-" my brother started.

"Uh-uh," Talira said, lifting her fork. "I'm your grandmother right now, Phen, and both you and your brother look like shit. Eat your food, and once you're done, we can talk."

Pheniks frowned at his plate.

"I'm not hungry," he said.

"It's cute that you think I care."

Smiling at him, Talira clicked her teeth on the tines of her fork before swallowing, and Pheniks reluctantly followed her example.

Meanwhile, I was already halfway through my waffles, but then, over the years, I'd learned to eat food whenever it was put in front of me. One could never know if or when one would get another meal.

Breakfast was quiet, and throughout it, I ignored the air of unease that was swirling around us, especially when I finished first. I sipped at the dregs of my caf until they set their utensils down, and while drones collected the dirty dishes, Talira rested her elbows on the table, rubbing her face.

"All right, Pheniks," she said. "Let's discuss why my people raided House Zan yesterday."

"Yes, let's," Pheniks said. "Would you mind explaining why you thought that was within your rights?"

Cocking her head, Talira glanced at me, and I shrugged. I didn't know why he was responding with hostility. After everything we'd discussed, I'd thought he was ready to cooperate.

"The reason behind it doesn't matter, considering what we found in Zan's headquarters, but I'll indulge you," Talira said. "My operatives in your House told me about your project, and on learning about it, I moved to end it, as is my right."

Slowly, Pheniks slumped in his chair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had to at least try... Loyalty to House isn't so easily discarded for me."

"We discussed this, Phen," I said. "You *are* being loyal to Zan or to Zan at its ideal, at least."

Pheniks rolled his eyes at me, but he turned to Talira.

“What do you want from me, *shukusen*?” he asked. “I’d like to make this right.”

“First Stratus, you should already know what I want,” Talira said.

Nodding, Pheniks said, “Everything.”

He launched into it: a detailed description of the neurotoxin, the process of making it, and how it had been developed. All of it was spoken in a dry voice, like my brother was reading a report, not talking about creating one of the worst atrocities that I’d seen in my time as the *Lokke Vitras*.

“I don’t know how much it matters, but I didn’t want to head this project,” he said at the end. “When Arion gave it to me, I considered coming to one of you with it but...”

He shrugged.

“House before family.”

Before innocent lives as well, apparently.

After a beat of silence, Talira slowly breathed out, laying her hands on the table.

“Given your cooperation now and your relative helplessness at the time of your crimes, I can lessen the consequences for you,” she said. “You’ll probably lose Stratus, and I have no doubt that your subordinates will be stripped of House, but whatever punishment is handed down, all of you should recover from it. At the very least, you won’t be exiled. We’ll need to-”

“That’s not good enough,” Pheniks said.

Sucking air through her nose, Talira shut her mouth while I snapped my eyes to slits. What the hell was my brother doing?

“From the lack of questions about it, I’m guessing you weren’t aware that this project originated outside of Zan. It was undertaken at the request of someone in another House,” Pheniks continued. “I don’t know who it was, but if you want me to tell you which House they claim, you’ll have to make me a better offer, both for myself and my subordinates.”

Talira’s face had emptied of emotion, and seeing that, a tiny voice started screaming in my head. Mother Time, what the fuck had my brother done?

“What makes you think I won’t use a Puppeteer on you, getting this information from you without your permission?” Talira asked with her voice cold. “You’ve given me enough of a reason to use it.”

“Only if using it is what you want, though,” Pheniks said. “I’m your grandson, and while I doubt that counts for much when compared to getting what you need, it’ll make conceding to my demands the easiest course of action for you.”

Something twitched in Talira's forehead and shit. Shit, shit, shit! I needed to derail this before Pheniks got himself killed.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"My subordinates left alone, for one. They had as little control over their actions as I did," Pheniks said. "I also want you to make me House Zan's *shukusen* after Arion's removed from power. I *do not* want something like this to happen again, but the only way to make sure it doesn't is if I'm at the helm. It's like you said, Zae. I know what's best for my House. I didn't believe it before but hearing it from you..."

I had not intended for my brother to take *this* from my encouragement. Holy hell, what was going on? I understood what Pheniks was saying about needing control to prevent another disaster, but even still... why was he, who'd abhorred becoming a First Stratus, asking for a *shukusen* position?

"And I want the names of the operatives who uncovered my project," Pheniks said.

For a split second, I stopped breathing while denial shrieked through me. Damnit. Why was he doing this?

"You presume much, grandson," Talira said.

If her voice had been cold before, now it was ice.

"Even if I agreed that accepting your demands would be easier than pulling this information out of your head, why should I believe it's important enough to sacrifice so much for it?" she continued.

Crossing his arms, Pheniks said, "It will save you the time and effort needed to learn the information for yourself, time when the person who requested my neurotoxin might develop it on their own. You can't tell me that's worth nothing."

Talira's lips thinned as she glanced my way, and from a faraway place, I had to wonder what this was doing to her, choosing between her grandsons. Because that was what she'd have to do. If she only revealed the names of the operatives who'd first alerted her to this project's existence, Pheniks would eventually learn that they'd never breached his department. After that, he'd come after Kolb, and as the *shukusen* he'd be at the time, there was no telling what sort of chaos he could unleash. To stop that, she'd have to tell him who'd actually discovered his neurotoxin: me.

"I'll concede to your first two demands. They benefit Lutov more than harming it," Talira said, "but I can't give you my operatives' names. I can't burn them like that."

Oh, thank Mother Time. She'd found an excuse that Pheniks might accept, letting his third demand slide.

"And I can't start as Zan's next *shukusen*, knowing that the people who endangered my House in this way might still be in it," he said. "It doesn't matter how many other operative you might have in place--"

His voice faded to fuzz. I looked at my brother, stubbornly insisting that Talira should satisfy his curiosity, and my grandmother, who had to contend with me being her *Lokke Vitras*, and I knew what she'd do. They'd argue for a while longer, pushing and pulling against one another, but neither of them would budge from positions that were so important to them. Because of that, my grandmother would choose to protect me, and given the situation... given her position of power right now, she'd have to destroy Pheniks to keep my secret safe. I couldn't let that happen.

So once more, I resolved to protect my little brother, no matter what it might do to me.

"It was me," I said.

Pheniks choked on a cough, whipping his head to me, and I died a little as he worked his mouth.

"I don't believe you," he said. "You're trying to protect her, fall on your sword like a good *Lokke*—"

"My choice for my happiness," I said before he could finish that hated title.

Something that I'd never wanted to see on a loved one flashed across his face, and I barreled forward before I could examine it.

"You added that to Zan's placement exam," I said. "Feena would be honored to know how much you valued our advice."

Pheniks clicked his teeth together with fire flaring in his eyes.

"*You* were Rylan?" he hissed. "Why, Zae? I know you. You can't have done this out of loyalty to your House. You've never cared about that. So, why-?"

"You're right. I've never been loyal to a House," I said, "but Lutov? Humanity? I am devoted to them, and no matter how much I love you, Phen, I couldn't let you unleash what you made on the world."

I was going to break. I absorbed Pheniks' bared teeth, his heaving shoulders, and the hurt in his eyes, and I knew, *I knew*, that if I stayed here for much longer, I would fly to pieces.

Facing Talira, I said, "May I go home, my *shukusen*?"

She wasn't happy with me either, but I didn't know if it was because I'd forced her into accepting Pheniks' terms or because I'd done something to further harm myself.

"You may," she said, "but we need to speak when next you wake, my *Lokke Vitras*."

"Of course."

On my feet, I bowed to them both and was heading for the door when Pheniks' laughter stopped me.

“You truly are the *Lokke Vitras*,” he said with acid on his tongue. “Nothing more or less. An embodiment, just like me.”

Hunching my shoulders, I took a few, slow breaths before leaving the kitchen with Pheniks and Talira talking behind me. The journey to my apartment went by in a blur, one that didn’t relent when I arrived, and once I was inside, I made myself a whiskey sour, letting it dangle at my side once I was done.

With that and a retrieved knife, I found a place that the drones could easily clean and settled in for a long waiting period. One that was filled with a repetitive habit rather than the sleep that I needed.

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