

Chapter 23: My Sister Is Special

With my lung's contents bursting from me, I lowered my rifle.

"Damnit, Feena, you can't do that," I said. "I almost shot you."

My sister just grinned at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"No, you didn't. Your finger wasn't even on the trigger," she said. "Poor form if you know an enemy has invaded your home."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "Are you really going to criticize *me* about something like that? And why are you here? What's with the drama?"

"The 'drama'—"

Feena made air quotes.

"—is for fun. Come on, Zae. You haven't once wanted to recreate this classic thriller scene before? It comes up in holodramas often enough."

I blinked at her, a slow shuttering of my lids over my eyes.

"No, I haven't," I said. "I prefer more efficient means of intimidation."

Throwing her head back, Feena groaned.

"Of course you do."

A drone floated into the room with a requested whiskey sour in tow. I'd been drinking a lot of these lately. Maybe I should slow down, keep myself from acquiring too much of a taste for them. Not yet, though.

Accepting the glass, I said, "And you're here because...?"

"I'm offering my help with this deep-cover mission of yours," Feena said before shrugging, "if you want it."

I could swear I'd been gut-punched, sick to the heart of me, and my eye twitched.

“Did Talira send you?” I asked. “I’m not so bad off that I need a babysitter.”

Also, how had she found out about my mission and gotten here in such a short time?

With her face furrowing, Feena said, “Why would you need someone watching you?”

“I *don’t*.”

Spinning, I marched out of the room. If my sister insisted on staying here, I’d rather not speak with her in my bedroom, not with its mass of stuffed animals on Leski’s side of the bed or Korix’s stark neatness on the other. I didn’t need a reminder that I still had to tell them about this mission.

Feena followed me, but she stopped when we passed the washroom.

“Zae, what’s this?” she asked. “Was there a fight here? In your *home*?”

Glancing inside, I noted that the drones had almost finished cleaning up.

“No,” I said.

With nothing more, I moved on, taking us outside, but when I sat on the courtyard’s bench, Feena stayed on her feet.

“Why was there dried blood on your washroom’s floor, little brother?” she asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it, although...”

Pausing, I examined Feena’s tensed shoulders and pinched eyes. Was this anxiety solely for me or...?

“Have you heard about our brother yet?” I asked.

Feena’s face soured.

“Yes, I’ve heard,” she said, biting off the words. “That little shit got off easy. He should worship the ground Talira walks on for the next few decades, considering how far in Stratus he should have regressed.”

She thought he only deserved a regression in Stratus? Did she not know what Pheniks had done?

“Feena, if Talira hadn’t stepped in, Phen would have been exiled,” I said.

When Feena’s face drained of color, I jumped to my feet so I could help her flop onto the bench.

“Hell,” she said.

Nodding, I hugged myself.

“He broke the Concords,” I said.

“*Hell*,” Feena repeated.

Thank all that might be holy that she didn’t question how I knew that.

“I always knew he’d get in trouble like this one day,” she faintly said. “Just... not so soon.”

I didn’t reply, letting her process. While she did, I kept my mind blank, refusing to revisit a set of cutting words that I’d never forget.

“We can’t do anything for him now,” Feena eventually said.

She shook herself.

“Talira didn’t send me. In fact, I’m not on a mission at the moment, taking some time for myself instead,” she continued, “or that’s what I told my fellow Second Strata, at least.”

If she hadn’t learned about this mission from Talira, then who’d told her about it?

“Mother Time, Feena. Requesting time for yourself like that will have cost you a lot,” I said. “Why use it to offer me help?”

Pursing her lips, Feena turned to me before taking my hands.

“Because you’ll need it,” she said.

I giggled, although her serious demeanor raised goosebumps on my arms.

“Why would you think that?” I asked.

“Because...”

Going distant, Feena chewed on her lip for a moment before sighing.

“Because it’s what I was told,” she said.

With my reflexes activating, I jerked my hands to my chest, but I stopped myself from attacking a possible threat, waiting for the explanation that Feena knew I’d need.

“Do you remember the Founder’s Day ball before you and Korix went public with your relationship?” she asked.

“Of course I do,” I said. “The Ancients Crisis started soon after that.”

Blowing out a breath, Feena nodded.

“Do you remember how I said something that should have had Ko grilling me for further clarification, but he didn’t?” she asked.

It had been years since I’d thought about that but...

“Yes. You called him the precursor to the protector, and he just... let it go. I thought it was strange at the time,” I said. “When neither of you deigned to explain it after I became the *Lokke Vitras*, I thought it best not to unearth the mystery. Does it have something to do with your ‘being told’ to help me?”

“It has everything to do with that,” Feena said, “and I’ll explain it all but first...”

She examined me for long enough that I shifted in place, but then, she dropped to the ground at my feet.

“You’ll have a kid soon, right?” she said. “And children demand stories from their parents at one point or another. Knowing you, you’ve probably thought about this, which has subsequently led to you freaking out about it even if you won’t show it. Why don’t you practice on me?”

Frowning, I wondered how this change in subject related to what Feena had been sharing. I knew it had to, otherwise she wouldn’t have diverted like this, but I didn’t see the connection. Even still, I’d play along. What harm could it do?

“All right,” I said. “What story am I telling?”

A stupid amount of energy infected Feena as she plunged her fists between her crossed legs.

“I want to hear the legend of the five saviors,” she chirped, every bit a child.

I narrowed my eyes at her. Hadn’t she brought this tale up at my party a month ago?

Bouncing in place, my sister started clapping her hands in front of her face.

“Sto-ry, sto-ry, sto-”

“Ok!” I said. “Impatient much?”

Grinning, Feena said, “Most children are.”

Goody...

Pulling the tale from memory took me a moment. Having my array retrieve a copy of it probably would have been faster, but then, it wouldn’t have been *my* legend of the five saviors, the one our teachers had told me and my siblings while growing up. Once I was ready, I leaned on my elbows and started.

“In another world, an evil empire ruled over five nations that weren’t theirs. The empire’s citizens did wicked things to the people who lived in the five nations. They did this for so long that the people of the five nations lost all hope of finding freedom again.

“Into this time, five people were born, one to match each nation. For years, they fought the evil empire, eventually pushing their enemy out of their home. To do this, they used the skills they would be named for.

“The negotiator charmed the empire with her honeyed words. The spymistress revealed the empire’s secrets for the world to see. The inventor used the empire’s own tech against it. The warmaster fooled the empire on the battlefield, and the legislator cleaned up after his friends, returning the five nations to order.

“After the empire left the five nations, the saviors—as their followers began calling them—and the empire’s agents continued fighting for so long that people forgot why they’d started in the first place, but even still, the two sides struggled, each to win out over the other.

“In the midst of this, a threat arose, one that would destroy not just the nations and the empire but the world itself. Fear of this threat drove the two enemies together, but even working as one, they could do nothing to stop it, and all seemed lost.”

I paused, a little unnerved by the rapt attention that Feena was showering on me. Her eyes were shimmering, and she was leaning toward me as if eager for my next words. Why was she getting so worked up about this story? During lesson rotations, we must have heard it a thousand times or more.

“What happened next?” she asked.

Licking my lips, I continued.

“During this time of darkness, a hero was born: Mother Time’s most blessed. With the help of the five saviors and the empire’s tech, he used his magic to defeat the threat for a time, delaying it until those left behind could create their own salvation.

“And thus, dear children, we learn that we must always look beyond our current problems and to the future...”

With a frown, I narrowed my eyes.

“Then, there’s something about relying on others as needed while also using your own strength. I think. I usually stopped listening when the storyteller got to the morals part of the tale.”

Laughing, Feena said, “That sounds about right for you.”

After wiping her eyes, she climbed onto the seat beside mine before patting my back.

“You’re not bad at that.”

“High praise indeed,” I said, keeping my lips from twitching. “Have any pointers for me, or will you tell me what that was about? Why’d you have me tell that particular story?”

Feena opened her mouth before looking away. I wondered if I’d have to poke her to get an answer, but eventually, she forced the words out.

“It’s not a story,” she said. “It’s a possible timeline, one whose events have been shared so often that they’ve become a legend.”

I could feel my head cocking, but I couldn’t stop myself from doing it. Possible... timeline?

“What does theoretical quantum mechanics have to do with anything?” I asked.

“I’ll get to that in a second,” Feena said. “We have one more diversion to make before I do.”

Sighing through my nose, I lifted my face skyward, shaking it.

“Well? Get on with it,” I said.

“As you say, most vaunted one.”

Snapping my head down, I glared at Feena, but she merely grinned at me before continuing.

“So, you know how after an mage hunt, Talira sometimes has you hand the mage over to an *ii* hunter rather than a House Zan *kalasa*?” she asked.

“Yes...” I drawled. “It’s usually done with the more dangerous ones.”

“Indeed. Nice observational skills,” Feena said, nodding. “Well, once you’ve gone on your merry way, we *ii* hunters take those powerful mages to a facility hidden in the Eastern Region.”

I went stiff while voices from the past whispered in my head.

‘Our friends from the Eastern Reaches told me about you.’

‘You’ve made a trip to the southernmost point of the Eastern Reach3es.’

All said in reference to the mystery that Feena had first brought up. I- I might see the connection between these disjointed subjects, and considering it made me a little sick to my stomach.

“Are we hoarding mages?” I asked, rather than voice my suspicions.

Wrinkling her nose, Feena said, “No. I never said the facility was run by Kolb.”

“Who, then?” I asked.

I couldn’t see Talira putting powerful weapons like *iisen* into the hands of any House besides Zan, and that exception was only allowed because Zan was in charge of Ostiu and all the mages born

there.

“A group unassociated with Lutov’s Houses,” Feena said.

When I bristled with a sharp inhale, she lifted a hand.

“I know. From that description alone, your heart’s probably racing with every sense heightened because it’s something you’ve always wanted. Am I right?”

Feena had no idea. She was right, although I wasn’t sure how she knew about that. I’d never told her about my lifelong goal. What she was describing did sound like a wet dream for my younger self, and because of that, my mouth had gone dry with such *yearning* in me.

But mixed with it was something so bitter that I was having trouble swallowing the sob stuck in my throat. I nodded anyway.

“It’s not what you think, Zae,” Feena said.

She dropped her gaze to her hands in her lap.

“Trust me. It’s not.”

“So, explain it,” I hissed through my teeth.

She glanced up at me, rubbing her thumbs together.

“A long time ago, the facility was operated by House Kolb,” she said. “Keeping dangerous mages away from the populace falls under the peacekeepers’ purview and killing a mage when it could still be useful seems stupid, right? That was how we justified it to the other Houses, at least.

“Anyway, several centuries ago, a girl *ii* just... showed up in the facility. After a bit of shock, she was taken into custody, and while testing her abilities, the Kolb members there learned that she had a type of magic we’d never seen before, one that hasn’t been encountered since.”

Stopping, Feena watched me with hooded eyes, as if she already knew the conclusions I was drawing.

Swallowing hard, I said, “Time manipulation.”

Feena gravely nodded, and I shouted at the screaming voice of fear in my head to hush.

Forcing words out of my mouth, I said, “Are you pulling a prank on me? This isn’t *payback* for...”

I trailed off because Feena had been speaking at the same time as me, mirroring my every inflection and cadence. How could she-? She was actually serious?

“Don’t think about it too hard, Zae. If you do, it’ll mess with your head, and we can’t have that,” she said. “All you need to know is that learning about this mage’s ability caused the formation of

the group that I was telling you about. Their purpose is to ensure that we stay on the correct timeline.”

Well, my head was *absolutely* spinning now, but Feena was looking at me with such searching eyes, begging me to understand.

“Ok, I can... I can focus on the group and not their origin,” I said. “What does it have to do with you?”

Wincing, Feena said, “I’m one of them, have been for years.”

Mother Time, I really would be sick. It was like my sister was intent on punching me in the stomach with her revelations.

“Oh! And we’re called the Chosen,” she continued.

That wasn’t an ominous name *at all*. Squeezing my eyes closed, I rubbed my forehead.

“They want you to help me?” I asked. “Why?”

“No clue!” Feena chirped. “Honestly, Zae, I just do as I’m told. If I don’t, I know the consequences, and I won’t be the one who brings that on the world.”

Peering at her from beneath my hand, I said, “Consequences?”

She shook her head.

“I can’t tell you but trust me. It’s not something you’d want to know about,” she said, “and if you’re concerned about me withholding information from you, feel free to verify with Ko or our grandmother that it won’t harm Lutov, although you should refer to me as ‘a Chosen’ when it comes to Talira. She doesn’t know I’m one of them.”

“I’ll... do that,” I said.

All of this—the Chosen, time manipulation, the five saviors being real—had me a little numb, leaving my brain working too hard to process new information. I needed space.

“Why don’t you...?” I started before rubbing my eyes. “If you’re going deep cover with me, do you have a persona prepared?”

“I need to establish my base in House Cerullis but yes,” Feena said. “I’ll be ready to go by this evening.”

“You should get started on that, then,” I said. “Go inside. I’ll join you in a moment.”

“All right.”

Biting her lip, Feena looked like she wanted to say something else, but silently, she got to her feet and wandered into the apartment. I couldn't do much more than stare at my hands for a time, unsure what to make of my sister's claims, so outlandish and unbelievable, but at least they'd distracted me from Pheniks.

Hell. When had my siblings become sources of contention in my life? I could swear there'd been a time, not long ago, when they'd been my support, my strength when Korix or Leski couldn't be, but no matter how short of a time had passed since then, it felt like those circumstances lay in the far distant past.

It didn't matter. Like I'd told my grandmother, I needed to throw myself into my work. I couldn't focus on the oddities and stressors in my world.

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