

Chapter 25: Perhaps I'm a Good Brother 3

The tower that we siblings were standing in front of had a much shorter profile on the horizon than the one Feena had told me to climb years ago, and rather than flat panes of glass for walls, this one had stone accents and balconies, among other things, to serve as hand and footholds. In addition, a sack of mag hooks was already sitting at Pheniks' feet, and still, he had his arms crossed while a yawn ruined his scowl.

He was much less enthusiastic with his protests than I'd been, looking between the sack and the top of the tower before asking.

"Why?"

Feena was getting frustrated, I could tell, so I stepped in for her.

"People in our family have been doing this for generations, right?" I said. "Each of them made a record of their time to reach the top, hoping to see what contributes more toward their speed. Is it body type or intelligence? We'd like to add your data to the pool."

"Hmm."

Pheniks rubbed his chin before jerking his head in a nod.

"All right," he said. "When does my time start?"

"As soon as you pick up the sack," Feena said, playing along. "It'll stop when your feet hit the top of the tower."

"Fine."

Before he grabbed the pack, Pheniks glared at us.

"I can't believe you two woke me up for this," he said.

Then, he was off, racing for the tower. We watched his progress for a while, steadily moving our eyes up.

"Nice idea, making this an experiment for him," Feena said.

“He would never have responded to a contest,” I said. “Why would he participate in something he knows he won’t win?”

Grunting, Feena said, “Is there a record of times?”

“I hope so, or Phen’s going to kill me,” I said, cocking my head. “You might have made it too easy for him, sister.”

Pheniks was already a third of the way to the top, and his considerable talent with calculating probability alone wouldn’t account for that much progress.

“Let’s face it, Zae. Phen’s not House Kolb material,” Feena said. “If he chooses our House, he’ll be low or mid Strata for his whole life.”

“Well, whichever House he picks, I hope it isn’t Cerullis,” I said. “If everything I’ve heard is true, that House is in for a rude awakening sometime in the next few years.”

Feena whipped her head to me.

“What-?”

But I held up a finger while my array gave me a distance estimate between Pheniks and his goal.

“We should go if we want to make it there before him,” I said. “We do want that, right?”

“Hell, yes,” Feena said, reaching for her bag of mag hooks.

With an innocent smile, I said, “How would you feel about making our climb more interesting?”

Slowly straightening, Feena narrowed her eyes at me.

“Why do I get the feeling I’m going to regret saying yes?” she said. “Ok. What are the stakes?”

“First one to the top gets three drinks with the loser whenever they want, no matter what the loser’s doing at the time,” I said.

“Except if it’s House business, right?” Feena asked.

My smile flattened.

“Yes,” I said, “except for that.”

If Feena had heard how dead my voice had gone there, she made no comment on it. She considered my suggestion for a moment before sticking her hand out.

“Stakes proposed,” I said as I took it.

“Stakes accepted,” Feena said with a quick handshake.

Once that was done, she jerked on my arm, and I let her force me into a stumble. Feena hauled ass for the tower, flashing up it once she'd reached its base, but I approached it more slowly, pulling my one mag hook from the pocket where I'd tucked it earlier. Squinting up the side of the building, I waited for my array to tag several viable attraction points along the top.

I was especially proud of this process as I'd written it myself. After a mission years ago, I'd needed something to do while waiting a day, alone, for permission to come home. While it might not be that different from other processes, used for extraction purposes, it had proven itself rather useful in its own way, and I was once more grateful for it, even if it would only win me a bet tonight.

After I'd selected one of my choices, I aimed my mag hook, the attraction between it and a point overhead set before magnifying, and I shot into the air, angling into wind gusts when they hit me. When I passed Feena, I had my tongue stuck out, and she shrieked after me. So, it was with a satisfied smirk that I flipped over the tower top's safety railing once my mag hook slammed into its attraction point.

I was sitting on it with my legs swinging when my sister reached the top. As she stormed toward me, I held my hand, palm up, toward her.

"Peanut?" I asked.

A single nut was waiting for her there, and snatching it from me, Feena hurled it into the night, panting when she spun on me.

Jabbing a finger in my face, she growled, "Using your bullshit high Stratus tech is cheating."

Gripping the railing, I leaned as far back on it as I could without falling, keeping a grin in place.

"Is it?" I asked. "I don't remember discussing anything like that while on the ground."

With fists at her sides, Feena glared at me more fiercely than before while her face turned red.

"If I pushed you right now," she hissed, "what would happen?"

"I'd activate my P.I.G and fly back up, probably laughing all the while," I said.

Leaping atop the railing, I pushed off of it, and with a flip, I landed nose-to-nose with my sister, keeping my arms outstretched.

"Did you miss me?" I asked.

For some reason, this made Feena's eyes fill with tears.

"More than you can know," she said.

Fortunately, Pheniks saved me from having to reply, reaching the top of the tower in a sweaty mess at that moment.

“Phen!” I shouted. “You made it!”

Casting a sour look our way, Pheniks finished climbing over the railing before tumbling to the floor. When he got to his feet, he brushed himself off.

“How long have you two been here?” he asked.

“Maybe a minute,” Feena said. “You did great, Phen! Amazing, actually.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Pheniks grumbled.

“She’s not,” I said. “She didn’t give you enough mag hooks to reach the top, not with them alone. You should have gotten stuck a few floors down.”

Pheniks’ face brightened.

“Oh... is that why they ran out of power?” he said. “I thought you’d forgotten to charge them. It’s a good thing I carry extra reserves with me, or one of you might’ve had to rescue me.”

Mother Time, when would he stop slinking in our shadows? When would he realize how brilliant he was?

“I never doubted you for a second,” I said, meaning every word.

Flushing, Pheniks ducked his head, kicking at the floor, and Feena started rummaging through her sack for the equipment that the two of them would soon need.

“So, I’m assuming we’ll compare results on the ground. How are we getting there?” Pheniks said. “No doubt the building’s locked, but surely one of you could break us in.”

“We could,” I said, “or we could take the fun way down.”

While Feena held two Propulsion Initiation Gears up, I activated my modified P.I.G., letting metal unfold from the backs of my hands and heels. Everything read ready in my array, but as always, I did a test lift to make sure each piece was working properly.

When I landed, I said, “All a go.”

Pheniks and Feena were still waiting for the P.I.G.s to unfurl.

“Damn, that was fast,” Pheniks said. “Do you wear this thing all the time?”

“No, of course not,” I said, scrunching up my face. “I had one with me. While Feena was waking you up, I placed its attachments.”

Frowning, Pheniks said, “Why did you have a P.I.G. with you?”

Striding to my brother, I ruffled his hair before placing a hand on his chest.

“I am the *Lokke Vitras* to come,” I said. “Preparedness is part of my job.”

I activated the propulsor on the palm pressed against Pheniks’ chest, and while I stumbled back a step, already ready for the discharge of power, my brother flew over the railing before plummeting toward the ground.

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Revision #2

Created 20 November 2024 03:02:54 by FatalisticFable

Updated 23 May 2026 17:23:51 by FatalisticFable