

Chapter 26: Perhaps I'm a Good Brother 4

Clicking her tongue, Feena whacked the back of my head.

"Inspiring speech?" she snapped.

"He'll get it on the ground," I said. "Same park as before?"

"Yep."

Together, we vaulted into the open air, pushing our P.I.G.s so we could close the distance to Pheniks. He was flailing, obviously in the grips of panic, so I cut power for a moment to snatch him to me.

Focus, Phen, I sent to him.

Once he'd stopped struggling, I dispatched another message.

Follow us.

I took the lead, dropping through air traffic without my array's help. The visceral fear that I always felt this high up had become an irritant in my head rather than something debilitating, but with too many drops completed over the years, the ecstasy I'd once felt while doing this had faded as well.

Even still, I'd admit that soaring through Xygek was quite beautiful. I fell between towers, and only the sheer impressiveness of the city kept me from getting bored.

Or maybe that was because I'd distanced myself from emotions like boredom. Or I could have unconsciously regulated my hormones.

I couldn't tell what had turned me so numb. When it came to this drop, though, my only wish was that Pheniks got a taste of the joy that I'd once had, even as I worried that he'd only let panic and anger rule him.

Once I'd landed, I scanned the park while my P.I.G. retreated to its attachment points, and when my siblings reached the ground, Pheniks leaned on his knees, panting, which made me wince.

But then, he sprang upright, shaking his fists in front of his face with twinkling eyes.

"That. was. *awesome!*" he shouted. "I never want to do it again, but fuck! That rush!"

Twirling in place, he collapsed with his chest heaving, and hugging my elbows, I let warmth swirl in me before catching Feena's gaze and glancing down. In half a minute, all of us were lying in the grass, making a three-pointed star with our heads at its center. For a while, we enjoyed the silence, but it couldn't last.

"So, what was that about?" Pheniks asked. "Or was it just to make me lose sleep before my House naming?"

And the floor was unintentionally given to me.

Ever since *evushk* had asked if I wanted to attend Pheniks' House naming ceremony, I'd known this might happen, and I'd given serious thought to what I'd say, but after our little tradition—after seeing how Pheniks had handled it—everything I'd considered had become useless. I needed time to gather my thoughts, so I provided him with a distraction.

"We'll get to that in a moment. Let me catch my breath," I said. "In the meantime, here's my House naming gift to you. You may ask me *one* question about what my life has been like for the last six years, and I will answer it as honestly and with as many details as I can."

I knew he must be curious about that. Pheniks had always loved learning about anything that he found unusual, which he probably perceived my new life to be.

My siblings gained enough height to peer down at me.

"Really?" Pheniks asked. "Isn't your stuff super confidential?"

"It can be," I said. "So, I suggest that you avoid asking about my missions."

Pheniks looked thoughtful, staring at something in the distance.

"What's it like?" he eventually asked. "Being who you are, I mean. When you're not off saving Lutov, do you see many people, and how do they treat you? Do you like it?"

He'd asked much more than one question, but since they all ran in the same vein, I let it go.

"When we have no missions, *evushk* and I mostly keep to ourselves on his estate," I said, "although if we need to get out, we might hike to Lake Phiabe."

"Wait. Lake Phiabe?" Pheniks interrupted. "In the Southern Fells? Why would the *Lokke Vitras* live in that wet, miserable region of Lutov?"

I snorted. Of course Pheniks would agree with the most commonly held opinion of the place that had become my home.

"I like it. There's something... lonely about the land, something that calls to us both," I said before pausing. "Anyway, I don't often see other people because *evushk* keeps me away from social events. For now, not many Lutovish know about my identity, and we want it to stay that way for as

long as possible.

“During the few times I’ve been in public with him, people don’t do much more than stare, but of course they do. What else would a citizen do in the presence of the legendary *Lokke Vitras*?”

“I’ve always found that attention... interesting. The operative in me hates it but other parts...”

Shrugging, I fell silent. I didn’t know if I could share anything else, but Pheniks seemed satisfied with my answer.

Cocking his head, he said, “You’re lonely? That’s unusual for you. Are you not seeing someone? Or *someones*, I guess.”

I blinked. Out of everything I’d said, he’d fixated on that topic? He’d asked the most dangerous question that he could of me right now.

“You’re right,” I cautiously said. “It is unusual for me.”

“So, you *are* seeing-?”

“Don’t ask it, Phen,” I said.

“But I just-”

Spinning to my knees, I towered over my brother. He didn’t know what he was asking, didn’t know how if even a breath of it reached my enemies’ ears, it could see me killed, but it didn’t matter. I had to squash Pheniks’ curiosity before he escalated this.

So, I pretended like he’d hit a nerve. Clenching my hands into fists, I bared my teeth.

“Don’t ask,” I snarled.

The smallest spark of fear sprang to life in him, which I hated seeing, but what else was I supposed to do? Let him know something so life threatening?

Feena carefully circled my wrist with her fingers.

“He only wants to know if you’re happy,” she said.

Happy? What did happiness have to do with anything?

Relaxing, I sat cross-legged between my siblings, rubbing my eyes.

“Sorry,” I said. “That’s a sore subject for me.”

“I can tell,” Pheniks said with a nervous laugh. “Feena’s right, though. I only want to know if you’re ok. So, are you?”

That was a question I'd never thought to ask myself, so I took a moment to ponder it now, even with Feena and Pheniks shifting beside me.

"Sometimes, I am. Sometimes, I'm not," I said with a shrug. "The same as all humans."

"But overall?" Feena asked.

Damn, they wouldn't stop poking at this would they?

I lowered my gaze from my siblings' faces, watching as I dug my fingernails into my palm.

"Sacrifice self. It's the first part of the *Lokke Vitras* mantra. Whether or not I'm happy has no bearing because I do not matter. I'm a tool and a shield for Lutov with my identity drowned in my role, and tools don't have feelings," I said. "I'm not the *Lokke Vitras* yet, though, so I suppose I should answer your question, but the honest truth is..."

As I slowly released a breath, I uncurled my fingers, and through the hair falling into my eyes, I looked up at my siblings.

"I don't know," I said.

For a moment, they couldn't move from the horrified statues that they'd become, and I couldn't speak to comfort them.

When I'd broken free of what had frozen me, though, I said, "Don't look so glum. I'm alive and well enough. What else matters? Let's set this depressing subject aside. I've caught my breath. Phen, you wanted to know the reason for our little tradition?"

"But... Zae!" Pheniks sputtered.

I shook my head to stop further protests.

"Tonight is supposed to be about *you*," I said. "I'm sorry I dragged attention to myself, even if unintentionally. My problems will be here next week, but you're about to go through your House naming, something that will only happen once in your life. So, please. Let us make you our focus."

Pheniks glanced at Feena, and she nodded at him with a smile, but her fierce grip on my knee told me we weren't done with this conversation. For a time, I'd have to avoid her, then, but that should be easy enough. I'd been doing it for the last six years.

"Ok, then," Pheniks said. "What's with the climbing and falling?"

"For a while, I think it was just a spot of fun, something to relieve tension before an incredibly serious event," I said, "but Feena and I started a new tradition during my House naming, one where she told me something that I needed to hear, and now, it's my turn to do the same for you."

Pheniks had drawn away from me, perhaps afraid of what I'd say, but he should be. No one liked hearing the truth, especially about themselves.

"Hit me," he said with a quavering voice.

I faced my brother, clasping my hands in my lap.

"Pheniks, you have one of the most brilliant minds I've come across," I said. "You solve problems in ways that no one else could conceive of and make connections that no one else would. You are the mind that overshadows our family's martial skill and—"

Leaning forward, I rested my hands on his shoulders.

"—you would be wasted in House Kolb."

While his face drained of color, Pheniks worked his jaw, trying to speak, and I waited for him to decide how he'd respond.

"I'm capable enough for Kolb," he said.

Nodding, I dropped my hands back into my lap.

"You are. You'd probably make it to Fifth or Sixth Stratus in that House," I said, "but you wouldn't be happy."

"You just said happiness doesn't matter," Pheniks snapped.

"For me, little brother," I said. "For you, it is everything."

"But- but-"

Seizing his arms, I forced him to meet my eyes.

"Listen to me," I said. "Your family will always love you. Your family will support the decisions you make. Your family will be proud of you, no matter which House you choose."

"But... Kolb is..."

Pheniks slid his gaze off of me.

"No matter which House, Phen," Feena echoed at my side.

I tightened my grip on his arms, and he winced, but I couldn't loosen my fingers. This was too important. He had to know. He had to have what I'd never received.

"Tomorrow, you will make a decision that will be yours and yours alone," I said. "Don't let anything, not family, not so-called obligations, not..."

In my mind's eye, doors banged open, and the *Lokke Vitras* came to claim me.

"Nothing should influence you. Choose the House that will make you happy, and *fuck* everything else. Do. you. understand. me?"

"I do, Zae. Let me- Ow! Let me go, please."

Jumping, I returned to the present, where my brother was grimacing and I was clawing into his arms. When I released him, he rubbed where I'd been holding him, and I knew I'd left fingermarks behind.

"Sorry," I said. "Seems all I can do is apologize tonight."

With a faint smile, Pheniks leaned forward to cuff the back of my head.

"Stop it," he said. "You only wanted to make sure I was listening, and I was. You told me what I needed to hear. Thank you. Really, Zae. I was worried that I'd get abandoned if I strayed from the family's House."

"Never," I said.

"And thus, the tradition continues," Feena grumbled through a yawn. "You done?"

Why was she so abruptly asking-?

Oh. Duh. They were probably exhausted.

"Will you get Phen home?" I asked. "He needs to be somewhat rested before tomorrow, yes?"

"What about you?" Feena said.

Mother Time, it was cute that she'd worry about me like that. Leaning back on my hands, I smirked at her.

"I'll be all right," I said. "I'm going to take a walk. Clear my head after... everything."

I waved overhead, and after a long, piercing stare, Feena nodded.

"Come on, Phen," she said, climbing to her feet. "Our P.I.G.s won't have enough juice to get us to our tier, so we'll have to use lifts and plasma bridges."

"Like regular people?" Pheniks gasped in mock horror. "How dare you suggest such a thing!"

He accepted Feena's help up, and together, they looked down at me.

"We'll see you tomorrow?" Pheniks asked.

"Unless something comes up, yes," I said. "Good night, my wonderful siblings."

They mumbled their own farewells, and I watched them stroll across the park. As expected, they started chatting once they were out of a normal person's hearing range.

"I'm worried about him," Pheniks said.

"So am I," Feena said, "but this is Zaeden we're talking about. He'll be fine eventually, right?"

"Maybe. You know he's always been a little more... blasé when it comes to things that are hurting him," Pheniks said. "He did a good job tonight, though. Tomorrow doesn't seem so bad now."

"I'm glad to hear it," Feena said, hugging him from the side. "What, no words of praise for my performance?"

"I was... You..."

Pheniks' sputtering voice quickly fell into an indistinguishable murmur.

For a while, I didn't move, keeping my eyes centered on where they'd disappeared while trying to get a handle on everything that this long day had created in me. My motionlessness wasn't helping with those efforts, though, setting my knee jittering against the ground, so eventually, I stood, stretching, and restlessness pushed me into the city.

TTS Chapter Twenty-Six

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