

Chapter 34: On the Hunt

When I reached Feena's apartment, I entered it without announcing my presence.

"Get dressed, dear sister," I called. "We have places to be."

With a snort, Feena lifted herself out of her bed's sheets, but when her bleary eyes focused on me, she groaned, burying her face in her pillows. I listened to the unintelligible mumbling that followed with amusement.

"What was that now?" I said. "I didn't catch it through so many layers of cloth."

Slapping both palms on the bed, Feena shot upright.

"I said, what the *hell*, Zae?" she snapped.

"Hey, you told me you were right next door if I needed you," I said before shrugging one shoulder. "I need you."

With her eyes narrowed, Feena said, "I meant for you to come find me if you needed help getting through a rough spot, and you look the opposite of unstable. So, what's going on?"

My half-smile became a full-blown smirk.

"I have a lead," I said.

After blinking at me for a moment, Feena leapt out of bed before gathering her clothes.

"Why didn't you lead with that, asshole?" she said. "I swear. You always make things so much more difficult."

Chuckling, I turned aside while my sister got dressed, and once she was done, she punched my shoulder while passing me. I rubbed the offended spot as I followed her, but once we were outside, I took the lead.

Trotting beside me, Feena drawled, "So...?"

With a thought, I sent her everything that Pheniks had given me.

"Look familiar?"

I wasn't sure she'd recognize what I'd seen. After all, she might not have read the messages needed for answering me yet.

Clicking her tongue, Feena said, “Harvel. Of course. *How* did we not consider him as a suspect?”

“I did, actually, but after a cursory investigation, I ruled him out because he’s Fifth Stratus. I’m not looking down on him when I say that. It’s just... most of the time, a *shukusen* wouldn’t take someone of his Stratus seriously, not when it comes to crimes this momentous,” I said. “And you shouldn’t condemn him yet, Feena. We don’t have definitive proof that he’s guilty, just a lot of suggestive messages.”

“You’re right, of course,” Feena said.

We continued in silence for quite a bit more, but as we approached Harvel’s apartment, my sister jerked around to face me.

“How did you get so many of a *shukusen*’s messages, Zae?” she said. “You haven’t had enough time to steal them so... did you see our brother *tonight*? You said that wouldn’t happen for a while.”

As she scanned me, gnawing on her lip, I laughed.

“Relax. I’m fine,” I said, “and as for what you’re really asking, everything’s ok. Phen’s planning to visit me after my kid comes home, which will be sometime in the next two weeks.”

When Feena stopped short, I continued for a few paces before glancing over my shoulder at her. My sister had her gaze pinned to the platform beneath her feet, flexing and relaxing her hands.

“That’s why you’re in such a rush,” she said.

Cocking my head, I said, “Yes? If Harvel *is* our target and we bring him in tonight, I can go home. I can be with Leski and Ko when we get to hold our baby for the first time.”

Taking a sipping gasp, Feena lifted tear-filled eyes to me, and I furrowed my brow. How could anything I’d said have upset her? She rushed me, ignoring the prick of a dagger’s tip against her back when she engulfed me in a hug.

“Congratulations!” she said.

Slowly, she twisted me back and forth before releasing me, although she maintained her grip on my arms.

“I know why they told me to help you now,” she said. “Come on! Let’s finish this.”

Clapping my arms, she hurried off, but following her took me far too long, caught in my stunned state as I was. Feena hadn’t mentioned her role as a Chosen for months, and with how often I’d set aside thinking about it, this reference to it had me reeling. A long-forgotten voice let loose a shriek inside—

My sister’s going to die!

—and I shut it down with difficulty. Swallowing hard, I spun to race after her.

When we reached Harvel's apartment, I knew something was wrong. The door had been left gaping, and when we stepped inside, I noted the knickknacks that had been knocked askew and the drawers left hanging open.

"Well, this doesn't look good," Feena said.

She already had her rifle in her hand while I was loosely holding some tranquilizer darts. If possible, we should bring Harvel in alive. Whether or not he was our culprit, he should be questioned, either about his behavior or to learn if he'd developed the neurotoxin on his own. If he hadn't, we needed to locate his compatriots. If he had, we'd need to know where he might have hidden any stashes of the neurotoxin.

Unfortunately, as we moved through the apartment, I concluded that capturing my target would take a while. His place was empty with the interiors of cabinets bared for all the world to see, and one section of the washroom's floor was covered in glass. After we'd made sure that we were alone, Feena and I holstered our weapons.

"Someone left in a hurry," she said.

With my lips drawn tight, I nodded. Damn. I'd sincerely hoped that we'd be finished with this soon.

"Look for any clues about where he's gone," I said.

Glancing at me, Feena said, "Really, Zae? Is *that* what we're supposed to do next?"

But she smiled as she moved into the living room. I went looking for a storecase. It was unlikely that Harvel had left his escape plans on it, but we'd need the data on it either way. Better to pull it before starting my own search.

Finding the man's study didn't take me long, but when I stood in its threshold, I hesitated. Earlier, I'd only glanced in here, checking for hostiles, but now that I was paying attention, various alarms around the room's perimeter, including one that was meant to alert its owner to a rifle's formation, were obvious.

"This keeps getting better and better," I said.

After bypassing the alarms, I stepped into the study, examining it with a keener eye. This was why I noticed the reduction of the room's size. Most apartments across Xygek were cookie-cutter in nature, and I was familiar with the majority of their floor plans, which was how I knew this study's back wall was a meter and a half too close to the door.

"Feena!" I called.

I was searching for something that would open a hidden compartment when my sister caught herself on the doorframe, out of breath.

“What is it?” she said.

Pointing at the desk, I said, “Can you comb through his storecase, please? I didn’t think he’d hide anything useful on it, but if he’s using such an obvious hiding spot, he might have- yes!”

When I put pressure on an indentation at ankle level, the suspect wall dissipated, much like a rifle would. Behind it, several vats, similar in style to the ones I’d found in House Zan’s headquarters, sat. Unwilling to jump to conclusions, I rested my fingers on one of the vat’s readouts, but when it lit up, my heart again flipflopped between the clouds and the bowels of the earth, exactly like it had the first time I’d read this combination of characters and numbers. Among other prompts and menus, the chemical formula that had started this months-long catastrophe waited to be viewed.

“There you are,” I said.

Now, we only needed to find Fifth Stratus Harvel and alert Talira, and finally, *finally*, I could take a break.

“Got something,” Feena said. “I think.”

When I turned on her, she was frowning at a hand-held monitor.

“What do you mean ‘you think’?” I asked.

“I mean...”

Sighing through her nose, Feena glanced up at me.

“Doesn’t this seem a little too easy?” she said. “We go six damn months without a clue, and now, we have that—”

She waved at the vats.

“—and this.”

Inclining her head toward the monitor, Feena extended it to me, and taking it, I glanced over what she had pulled up. Apparently, Harvel had reserved a cabin the Barasgami Mountains for the next year, starting tomorrow morning. After copying the location to my array, I dropped the display onto the desk with a thunk.

“Honestly, Feena? I don’t care how easy this was,” I said. “I plan to bring Harvel in and take a much-needed month off. If after that, Talira tells me that she has concerns with what we’ve unearthed tonight, I’ll happily look into it further, but not until I get my head on straight. Ok?”

Making a face, Feena said, “Yeah. Yeah! I’m sorry, Zae. I just-”

“Don’t apologize. You have good instincts,” I said, “but we have one of the few people that I’m actually *eager* to bring in out there. Shall we ruin his morning?”

With a fierce smile, Feena said, "Let's."

Which was how we found ourselves in a skycruiser above the mountains an hour later. We landed a kilometer from the cabin, spreading out when our feet hit the pine needles spread across the ground.

If Feena and I hadn't been here on a mission, I might have enjoyed moving through these trees more. With the sun starting a first blush in the sky and a chill breeze rustling through the leaves, this place made for a nice setting, somewhere I might like to spend time alone. Hopefully, we wouldn't have to introduce violence to it.

While making our approach, Feena and I scrunched closer to the ground while I had my array make out the cabin's interior for me. The occupant's heat signature placed him near the structure's front door, sitting on something, and from the noises I could hear, he was watching a holodrama.

Meeting Feena's eyes, I said in sub-vocals, "Secure the back door."

Nodding, she disappeared behind the cabin, and I made my way to the window closest to my quarry. Halfway there, however, Harvel got to his feet, strolling toward the washroom near the foyer. He couldn't have seen me or Feena. We'd been careful while approaching, and I'd have noticed any traps that he'd set to trigger. Right?

It didn't matter. All that had changed was where I'd intercept my target, so I adjusted my path accordingly. As I crept to the front door, though, Harvel broke into a sprint, coming right at me. He was close enough that I barely had time to request my rifle before a sheet of metal slid to the side, and he nearly bowled me over. *How the hell* had he known where I was?

By the time I'd recovered my balance, Harvel was already in the trees. Mother Time, he was a *fast* fucker.

"Feena, runner!" I shouted before sprinting after him.

As he fled, Harvel left behind plenty of markers, which made tracking him all the easier. It was a nice change of pace, considering I'd never liked relying on my array to hunt down a target. Given his recklessness, I should have him in custody within the hour, despite his early detection of Feena and me.

Where was my sister? She should have caught up with me by now. I gave that question cursory attention before focusing on the chase.

House Kolb speed aided me with this, but I could only use it in bursts. Anything longer and I'd have to enter a thoughtless state, which wasn't conducive toward anything intellectual. Like tracking.

Consumed by the need to *find this bastard* and *get him to Xygek*, I almost didn't notice the request for connection when it popped into my array. I thought about ignoring it. Considering it was from Talira, though, I didn't have much of a choice in the matter.

“What?” I snapped once I’d accepted.

“My, someone’s testy,” Talira said. “Did I catch you at a bad time?”

Vaulting over a fallen tree, I said, “Chasing down my suspect right now, *shukusen*.”

“Oh. Maybe I shouldn’t tell you my news, then. Save it for later,” Talira said. “How much longer will you be?”

“Maybe an hour,” I hissed through gritted teeth.

“Hmm.”

Dodging a low-hanging branch, I contained my irritation while she decided what to do, and soon enough, she sighed.

“This can’t wait that long,” Talira said. “First, though, you should know that Ko told me about your visit with him and Leski last night. Why did you ask me to enforce your damn rules if you plan on flouting them like that?”

“I needed to ask a question,” I said. “Did your request a connection just to berate me, *shukusen*? If so, can it wait until-?”

“No, you impatient ass. The news I have for you is about the question that you asked them,” Talira said. “A House Drav member contacted Leski about five minutes ago. They’re ready to hand off your kid. Your partners are on their way to Drav’s headquarters now.”

With my breath hitching, I had to slow down if I didn’t want to fall. Today? Really? Why did it have to be *today*?

“Zaeden?” Talira said.

And I realized that she’d said my name a few times.

“Understood,” I said. “Is there anything else, or can I finish this mission?”

With another sigh, Talira said, “There’s nothing else. Good luck, my *Lokke Vitras*.”

The connection cut.

So. Despite all my efforts, my worst fear for these past six months would be realized. I wouldn’t be there when my child was welcomed into the family. I wouldn’t see Korix or Leski’s faces when a House Drav member relinquished our baby into their arms. I wouldn’t look at that small face and kiss their tiny palms, knowing that this precious life was, in part, mine to love and guide.

I was so distracted by these thoughts that I didn’t see Feena until she was careening into my side. Tripping, we fell to the forest floor, rolling to spread the impact, but once my momentum had

slowed, I was on my feet, ready to rip into my sister.

Or I was ready to do that until I saw the tripwire that was strung between two nearby trees, one that was set to drop a grenade. A trap? Mother Time, how prepared had Harvel been for us?

Then, I had to consider how I'd let myself get so careless that it had almost gotten me killed.

"Be careful, Zae!" Feena panted, still not the ground.

Without a word, I offered her a hand, hauling her to her feet, and we took off once more.

This needed to be done. I couldn't be defeatist, thinking that my chances of a happy ending were gone. While there was still hope that I could reach Xygek on time, I would fight to get there, and damn the odds.

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