

# Chapter 41: Hints of Trouble

## 2

After I'd reached my study, Feena waited in a corner while I made the room secure. She only relaxed from her tensed state once I'd poured her favorite drink, offering it to her.

"So?" I asked, taking a seat behind my desk.

Unlike my sister, I didn't indulge in a drink. After what had happened before Baely's handoff, I refused to touch alcohol unless the situation called for it, like at a party or a similar event. Not because my sister was visiting.

She got settled, taking a sip from her drink before pointing at my chest.

"Will you tell me how that happened?" she asked. "Or will I have to live in suspense until you feel comfortable enough to open up?"

I crossed my arms.

"What do you want me to say, Feena?" I asked. "I made a mistake. Sure, that's supposed to be impossible, given who I am, but..."

With an eyeroll, I leaned back in my chair.

"Here we are."

"Please. I stopped believing 'the *Lokke Vitras* is invincible' bullshit decades ago," Feena said. "That's not why I'm asking how you got shot. I'm asking because we..."

Looking away, she bit her lip.

"The world needs you, Zae," she said. "You have to be careful."

Oh, goody. Another of her maudlin, ominous warnings.

With a nervous chuckle, I said, "The world, huh? I can see how Lutov might need the *Lokke Vitras*, but Ibis definitely doesn't. Besides, it might take a while, but someone could eventually fill my shoes. So, how am I needed?"

Sighing, Feena shook her head before meeting my eyes.

“You know what I meant. You’re too smart to miss it,” she said. “So, don’t play dumb.”

But I was so good at that! Apparently. I stubbornly held her gaze until she clicked her tongue.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s move on.”

“Yes, what do you need my help with this time?” I asked.

“Excuse me! Half the time, *you’re asking me for help*,” Feena said, “but given that I came to you this time, I won’t take offense at the assumption.”

With a head shake, I said, “Thank Mother Time for that. So?”

Dropping her gaze to her glass, Feena swirled the liquid inside of it, looking lost. Oh, no. What had she brought me today?

After taking a deep breath, she said, “It has to do with the Chosen.”

And I went still. Shit. The Chosen? I hadn’t thought about them since... since Baely had been born, actually. I’d secretly hoped that I’d hallucinated about them, considering I’d been drunk and weak from blood loss when my sister had shared that secret. That Feena was here because of them... it wasn’t good. I couldn’t run away from it, though.

Bracing myself, I said, “And?”

“Do you remember that disastrous mission we finished before Baely’s handoff?” Feena asked.

Mother Time, I hadn’t thought about that in years. The memory of how melodramatic I’d acted during it still made me cringe. I’d never figured out why I’d responded to those circumstances as badly as I had. Maybe the cause for it had been something like my current circumstances: the past coming to haunt me. I had acted in a similar fashion this afternoon. If it had been that, though, I had no clue what past event the days in question had been tied to. So far as I was aware, I’d never betrayed a family member like I had with Pheniks.

Maybe it had reminded me of what I’d done to Fyester? That was the most similar experience that I could think of. Either way, it didn’t much matter, not when Feena needed an answer.

“I remember,” I said. “Why bring it up?”

“Well...” Feena said. “Remember how suspicious I was of the ease with which we found proof of our target’s guilt?”

Oh.

“You found something to validate those suspicions,” I said.

Nodding, Feena said, "Over the last twenty-five years, I've been on-and-off investigating the events of those months, and in the last few weeks, I've run across evidence that a third party was using Harvel as a patsy."

At that, I flopped into my chair before remembering my injuries.

Containing my wince, I said, "That's just fabulous. I can't imagine how it'll look that I missed something like that so shortly after getting approved for a child. Damn, spinning a mistake like that in the best light will be hell. Are you sure you're right?"

I couldn't think about the other consequences that might have spawned from this. If I considered how long this proposed mastermind had had their hands on the neurotoxin's formula, my stomach bottomed out.

"Unfortunately, I don't have much doubt," Feena said, "but I won't explain why I'm so sure right now. That would take a while, and you, dumbass, need to get some rest soon."

"So, you'll leave me in suspense instead?" I said.

"Just for the night, silly," Feena said. "Talira will want an in-person report from you tomorrow, yes?"

Making a face, I nodded. I'd gotten a message from our grandmother before dinner, but I hadn't opened it yet. I already knew what it would say.

"While you're in Xygek, why don't you meet me for lunch?" Feena continued. "We haven't shared a meal in a while, and I can make my case while we eat."

A meal with my sister? That-

"Sounds amazing. I'll let you know when Talira's done with me," I said. "Is that all? Or do you have more tantalizing tidbits to tease me with?"

"Just..."

Feena bit her lip.

"I know you'll attend this year's House naming ceremony. No matter how much you typically like skipping them, you'll have to attend Baely's," Feena said, "but it won't just be her this year. Damari's sister, Misah, will be there too, remember? I thought I should say something since your friend didn't."

Right. Misah. I didn't know much about Damari's sister, just that she was the same age as Baely. My friend never talked about her, but still, I knew she *existed*.

Hell. That was two people in my life who would be honored in this year's ceremony. It was silly, but this reminder, so soon after everything else, truly painted a picture of how concerning my lapse in awareness had become. It almost pulled my box of awful back to centerfield as well, but

fortunately, that container withstood this wave, remaining solidly in place.

With a forced chuckle, I said, "Don't worry. I'll be there."

After all, I'd *apparently* had the time blocked out of my schedule since the beginning of this year. Given how blatantly I'd been ignoring the ceremony, I was curious why I'd taken that precaution, so long ago. Maybe I'd been subconsciously aware that I'd need the time.

"Well, then."

Tilting her head back, Feen drained her drink before getting to her feet.

"I should head out," she said.

"Seriously? You came all this way, just to tell me you were right?" I said. "You could have done that over a direct connection or hell, simply written me a message."

Slamming a hand on my desk, Feena leaned forward to stick her finger in my face.

"Listen, smart ass. Before I got here, I was planning on telling you everything," she said, "but when I first hugged you, you almost keeled over, which threw a kink in my plan. Didn't it?"

As I stared at her finger, my eyes crossed. She was too close for them not to, but I didn't shift my gaze away.

"It did," I said. "I'm sorry."

Feena drew a breath, clearly having expected a snarky response from me, and to her credit, I had considered giving her one. Instead, I enjoyed her look of frustrated confusion until she released an explosive sigh.

"Don't let it happen again," she said.

She marched to the door, and almost, I let her leave with nothing further said, but even knowing it would cause us pain, I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"How's Phen?"

Slowing to a stop in my office's threshold, Feena rested a hand on its doorframe.

"He's good. Just got back from Ostiu, but you probably knew that already," she said. "I saw him last month. He looked happy."

When she glanced at me, I nodded, clenching my hands on the desk.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "Thank you, Feena."

"Of course."

Then, she left, and I took a moment to collect myself. Since my brother had become a *shukusen* twenty-five years ago, my relationship with him had healed, to a degree. Unfortunately, the obligatory tension that was always found between a head of House and the *Lokke Vitras* had been making things difficult for us. Any hope I might have had that Pheniks and I would work together toward bettering Lutov had died long ago.

Look at the bright side, though! At least he talked to me.

Shaking myself, I hauled my body out of my chair. It was time to go looking for my family. I couldn't help but drag my feet as I did that, though. I wasn't keen on having the coming conversation.

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