

Chapter 65: The Unstoppable Trio

When I extracted myself from my siblings' embrace, I was aware of how many people were staring at us, but I didn't care.

Clasping Feena's arms, I asked, "How've you been?"

She shrugged.

"Oh, you know. Busy," she said. "I saw you only a few days ago, Zae."

Right. After everything that had happened, the Founder's Day Ball seemed like it had happened in the far distant past.

"I meant in general," I said. "We didn't get to talk much at the ball."

"The *Lokke Vitras* did whisk you away rather quickly, although I suppose it was at my request. If you want, we can talk more in-depth now," Feena said. "Phen, will you join us for a drink? You can ignore the *exceedingly rude* House Kolb members around us. They forget who your family is. Considering Rane finds your presence acceptable, they should too."

As she glared at the bar's patrons, memory slammed into me from the side. Hard. Laughing up a storm, a flickering Fyester dragged a naïve, younger me out of this bar.

"Not here."

With my voice cracking like a whip around them, both of my siblings jerked toward me. If that weren't bad enough, I'd been so loud that several patrons tensed, going for their weapons before they realized that I wasn't a threat.

"Zae-" Feena started.

I didn't let her finish. Storming through the bar, I only checked that Ace was following me before exiting it. Once I was outside, I leaned on the wall beside the door, refusing to consider what I'd just done. Instead, I scratched my dog's ear while waiting for my siblings.

Barely anyone was on this platform, and considering how late it was, finding people in Rane's bar might have surprised me more if I hadn't known about the crisis that was trickling its way through House Kolb's Strata. I suspected the barkeep would be busy over the next few weeks.

When my siblings joined me, they eyed me with caution while Feena summoned the courage to lay a hand on my shoulder, and I scrambled for a way to explain my behavior.

“You don’t have to say anything,” Feena said, in tune with my thoughts.

But I shook my head. It would be good to share this with someone who hadn’t been a part of it.

“That bar holds my last good memory of a man I loved, more than I realized at the time,” I said. “Despite how good it is, I can’t remember it with anything but pain. Everything that happened afterward... it tainted something that should have been wonderful for me.”

Falling silent, I chewed on my lip, unsure whether I should add more to what I’d already given them.

“What happened?” Pheniks asked.

Feena elbowed him, directing an apologetic glance at me, but shaking my head, I blew out a breath, hugging myself.

“I killed him,” I said.

Pheniks recoiled the smallest bit, as I’d expected, but Feena went very, very still. I didn’t know what to make of her reaction.

“He asked me to do it,” I continued, “and it was done as part of my duties, but the grief and guilt and self-hatred that spawned from what I did ripple across everything I remember about him now.”

I couldn’t look at my brother. I didn’t know what my confession had done to him, but he wouldn’t understand. So, I met Feena’s eyes.

“He was my first,” I said.

Something shifted in her, letting a need to embrace me blaze forth, but she was House Kolb too. She knew how much her attempt to comfort me might instead crumble the brittle strings keeping me aloft.

Instead, she reached for my hand, interlacing her fingers with mine, and smiled.

“I know a great noodle place nearby. It should be open,” she said. “Interested?”

Hesitantly, I nodded, and we both glanced at Pheniks. He was still staring at me with pinched eyes, but he inclined his head.

No one spoke as we strolled over walkways and plasma bridges with Ace at my heel. Soon enough, we reached Feena’s suggested restaurant, and she went inside to order for us. All the while, Pheniks watched me, and I avoided his gaze, absently petting Ace.

When Feena returned with a bag exuding heavenly scents, she led us to a bench a little further along. My siblings took their seats first, and once they were comfortable, I sank to the ground between them while Ace lay beside me with his head on my leg. Feena handed out food, and as I took a bite, I fluttered my eyes closed. Almost as good as what I'd gotten used to with Korix.

"I'll start since Zae gave us part of his story already," Feena said between mouthfuls. "So, first. Work. I don't know if I've told you, Phen, but I hit Fourth Stratus a few months ago, and as soon as I did, Talira made me an *ii* hunter."

I couldn't see Pheniks' reaction to this revelation but for me? It was funny, actually. A prospect that had once horrified me now only made me nod in acknowledgment. Damn, I'd been such a sheltered kid.

No. All of Lutov was sheltered, save for a select few.

"Since then, I've been in Ibis more often than not," Feena continued. "Surprisingly, I've enjoyed myself. Ibisian culture is fascinating, and I've liked learning about it. I've even dated a few of them, although they call it courting there."

"You haven't!" Pheniks interrupted.

Rolling her eyes, Feena said, "Yes, I have. Don't worry. I've been careful when it comes to consent for everything."

"That's not why I-" Pheniks started.

"I don't have much else to share besides that. My life's been relatively simple," Feena said over him. "If we have time, I have a few funny stories to tell, but for now, I believe it's Phen's turn."

"Ugh."

Beside me, Pheniks bobbed his leg on his knee, and fascinated, Ace watched it.

"Fine. I'll go," he said. "First. House Zan is so much easier than Kolb. I can't believe how little trouble I've had with flying up the ranks, but this last hurdle..."

Falling silent, he stilled his fidgeting.

"I don't actually want to be First Stratus," he eventually said, "but I caught Arion's eye with a project that I headed a few months ago, and once he started singing my praises, I didn't have much of a choice. Zan may be easier to advance through, but the Strata are brutal. If I don't win out in this contest, I'm likely to regress, and I've gotten used to Second Stratus privileges. I know my issues are nothing when compared to yours but-"

Reaching up, I squeezed my brother's knee.

“They’re no less valid,” I said. “Doesn’t matter how small or large they seem in comparison, they’re a struggle for you, and we’ll support you through them.”

After a pause, Pheniks patted my head.

“Thanks. I appreciate that,” he said. “Anyway. Outside of House business, which I won’t discuss, nothing much has happened in my life. I have friends, but we’re not close. I’ve also been on a few dates, but those relationships usually end once the other person sees how much time I spend at work. They’re right to leave, of course, but what am I supposed to do? I find my projects more interesting than anything a partner might have to offer.”

At that, I suppressed a smile. I’d always wondered about my brother. He’d never found anyone attractive, only dating when he needed something, whether of a sexual nature or not, from the other person.

I knew a minority of the population considered intimacy and romantic relationships an unnecessary indulgence, but I’d never been sure if he fit into that group. After all, he did enjoy sex, if our unHoused years were anything to go by. Although... I wasn’t sure if that precluded him from said minority. Probably not.

“What about you?”

Feena nudged me with her foot.

“You shared a piece of your life with us already. Ready to give the whole story?” she asked.

I didn’t know if I should. Some of the things I’d done... they were enough to change a person’s perception of me.

“Are you sure you want to hear about it?” I asked. “Given what I am, do you want to know anything about my life?”

Silence reigned for one... two breaths, but then, Pheniks clicked his tongue.

“Is hiding it any better?” he asked. “I hate having to walk on eggshells around you.”

That was a good point. How draining had it been to avoid certain topics with my siblings?

In the past, I’d done that because I’d thought my role required it, but since Korix had left me a note in a book, telling me to resist, I’d been struggling to decide what that meant. Sitting with my siblings on either side of me, the choice was taken from with, with regards to them at least.

“It hasn’t been all bad,” I said.

I told them everything, leaving only the most graphic details and the story for the last few days out. They learned about the people I’d saved along with those I’d condemned. They learned about a number in my array that was steadily increasing, the count of how many lives I’d ended. They

learned, if they hadn't already known, about how broken our supposedly perfect society truly was.

The last bit, the personal, I almost kept to myself, but my siblings had made themselves vulnerable to me. I should do the same.

"I've found someone," I said. "He is... perfection, exactly what I need in most regards. I love him, but it's different from what I've professed for others. He makes me whole, less of a shattered spark of a soul. I can see myself spending my life with him if..."

If the Ancients let him go. If he once more became who he truly was.

"If he returns to me," I said.

Please, Mother Time, let it be so.

My siblings were quiet above me, and I worried that I'd shared too much with them. When Pheniks slid to the ground at my side, throwing his arms around me, with Feena quick to follow, I locked up, and the pressure and heat in my chest made it difficult to breathe.

The reaction was understandable, I thought. They accepted me. They loved me, even now.

Burying my face in their arms, I surrendered to the storm that had been raging inside since I'd learned how much trouble Lutov was facing. Since I'd learned how much of a fight I must put up for Korix. I soaked their sleeves while my sobs rang over an empty platform, and when I could, I squeezed them to my sides with my face hidden.

"Do you know how much you support me?" I asked. "Every time I get a message from you, I pore over it until its words and cadence are imprinted on my mind. Your random tidbits and check-ins have carried me through the worst moments of my life, and I don't know how I can repay you for that."

They were silent for a while, just holding me, until Feena cleared her throat.

"You could reply more often," she said. "Mother Time, you don't know how many hours I've spent worrying about you, only to get an answering message days later!"

"Ha!"

Lifting my head, I wiped my eyes.

"You're right. I should," I said. "I'm sorry."

Bumping his shoulder against mine, Pheniks said, "I'm glad you've finally gotten back in the game. You were starting to worry me. So? Who's the lucky man who's claimed your affection?"

Feena tightened her arm around me, and from the corner of my eye, I watched her jaw stiffen as she swallowed. Curious. Over the years, she'd gotten better at smoothing emotions off of her face,

even when free of missions, whereas my skills in that area had deteriorated *apparently*.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen something like this from her either. At the Founder's Day Ball, she'd reacted strangely too. Did she-?

"Zae?" Pheniks asked.

Shaking myself, I said, "Sorry. You've asked me a difficult question, one I'm not sure I can answer, but..."

Depending on Talira's reaction to the revelation I'd made earlier, maybe Korix and I wouldn't need to keep our relationship secret anymore, not from the people we cared about at least, and that idea...

"He's *smiling*. Unintentionally," Pheniks hissed at Feena. "Should I be scared?"

"It's nothing," I said, patting his leg. "Only, that situation may soon change. If it does, you two will be the first people I tell about my partner."

"Good enough for me."

Extricating from us, Pheniks leapt to his feet before brushing himself off.

"My turn to apologize, but I need to sleep if I'm to juggle this research project with my House business," he said. "You do still want my help, right Zae?"

He *would* be abrupt with his desire to leave, making his goodbyes as soon as everyone had finished sharing, but that was just him. Pheniks, my socially awkward, oblivious brother.

"I would love it," I said. "If you can manage the workload, of course."

"Oh, I'm sure I can, especially if our grandmother speaks with my *shukusen* as you claimed," Pheniks said. "See you tomorrow, then? I'll let you know when I can drop by."

"And I'll let you know if my plans change," I said.

"Great!" Pheniks said. "Goodnight, you two. It's been... wonderful, actually, to spend time with you again."

"Night, Phen."

When he glanced back on his way to a lift, I raised my hand, and for a while afterward, I ran my fingers through Ace's fur, enjoying the feel of him breathing against my leg. I'd need to speak further with Feena before heading home, but for a moment, I just let myself relax.