

Chapter 7: This Is Where It Gets Interesting 2

Eventually, an alert chimed from the console while our speed slowed to a stop, and tapping into the feeds of the transport's recorders, I lifted my hand, projecting what they'd captured above it.

Craggy mountain peaks and an abundance of pine trees lay below us. I saw nothing else, so I had the recorders zoom to the exact position of Feena's last known location. In a cleft, scorch marks painted stone, and my chest tightened at the proof that my sister had been there.

She wasn't here now, though. Biting my lip, I had my array scan for any nearby tech use, and for the longest five seconds of my life, it returned nothing to me. Then, I got a result.

Nudging Garreth, I waited for him to wake up before giving him more coordinates.

"Set us down here."

Once we were on the ground, I moved to usher Garreth along at gunpoint, but he jumped out of the shuttle without any prompting on my part. We hurried along together, although I never let my rifle dissipate.

Not until we came upon the rockslide, at least.

"No," I moaned. "No, no, no!"

And it didn't matter that I was on a mission. It didn't matter that the man I'd kidnapped was standing beside me. This was where my sister should be. She should-

"She should-"

Mother Time, what would I do? What would I tell Pheniks and our parents?

I was only half-aware of sprinting down the slope to a pile of boulders, only half-aware of circling them. A buzz had drowned out my thoughts, soon to become a screaming wail, but the single sound capable of dragging me out of this mire cracked against my ears: the zap of a rifle's bolt.

At first, I thought Garreth had somehow taken advantage of my deplorable slip of emotions, although I wasn't sure how he'd have access to a rifle. Only House Kolb members and the unHoused could summon that weapon through their arrays, but then, the noise had come from in front of me, not behind.

I practically flew through the snow until I reached the sound's source, and when I did, I dropped to my knees with relief and panic swirling into a confusing mix inside of me.

"Zae?" Feena panted. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping you! Obviously."

Because she needed it. A boulder with cracks radiating across it, originating in a large scorch mark, had pinned her leg to the ground, but it was hours from crumbling. This mess had probably breached any thermal protection Feena might have been wearing, and if left here alone, she'd have succumbed to the elements long before shattering this rock. Lutovish bodies could only heal so much by themselves.

Feena smacked my knee.

"You idiot!" she shouted. "How much trouble will you be in when we get back? What will-?"

She went quiet, lifting her gaze over my head before pointing her rifle there too.

"Who's this, little brother?" she hissed.

"Garreth, Tenth Stratus of House Zan," I said.

She lowered her stare to me with horror in it.

"You didn't," she whispered.

"He did," Garreth said, "but I can see that it was warranted. I'd like to help, if I can."

Feena raised an eyebrow at me, and I shrugged. It was her choice whether to trust him. I'd already done my part.

"All right," she said. "Start shooting at this thing. On the opposite side of me, please."

She offered Garreth a pistol, which he took.

"Of course," he said.

He wandered off, and once he'd disappeared, I rounded on my sister.

"Did you get it?" I asked.

Furrowing her brow, Feena asked, "Get what?"

I rolled my eyes.

"The *ii*. The mage you were hunting," I said. "What else could I mean?"

“Oh. No, the bitch got away,” Feena said. “Mother Time but my failure will reflect terribly on Kolb.”

Dammit, I'd been afraid that would be the case.

“No, it won't,” I said. “Give me everything you have on it. I'll finish the mission.”

“What?” Feena hissed. “No! You don't have the skills you'll need-”

Shushing her, I glanced toward Garreth's location until I heard another zap coming from there.

“Feena, House comes before family. Everyone knows this,” I said. “I've already heaped a huge amount of trouble on Kolb by coming to help you. I won't let a failed mission add to that.”

“But Kolb's not your House!” Feena sputtered.

Winking at her, I displayed a cheeky grin.

“Not yet,” I said. “Now, give me the damn info, Sixth Stratus.”

My sister's eyes were shining with such pride and fear, and I might have basked in the warmth of it if the mage's trail hadn't been going cold. I whirled a finger for her to hurry up, and with a laugh, she sent the report my way.

After a quick kiss on her forehead, I scrambled to my feet.

“Which way did it go?” I asked.

Feena pointed, and after a glance at the boulder, I started running that way.

I didn't like leaving my sister with Garreth, not when I didn't fully trust him, but he wouldn't leave my sister here. No House member, besides the ones who belonged to Kolb, had the stomach for killing when directly forced to confront it, which abandoning Feena would be.

Lucky them.

As I tracked the *ii*, my array was of enormous help. It detected any microscopic divots in the snow that the mage might have left as well as other environmental changes, calculating my target's probable path from these signs, but most importantly, it traced the leftovers of magic use for me.

The *ii* was moving toward the mountain's peak, and the higher I climbed, the thicker the snowdrifts grew around me while I got lightheaded from a lack of oxygen. Since the mage claimed Earthshaker, Vimian, Magsense, and Somadept magic, its flight up the mountain made sense. With the ability to manipulate both its body and its internal energy, it would fare better at higher altitudes than someone who lacked such skills. That plus its enhanced sight and hearing would make it a difficult target to catch.

Why had *shukusen* Talira given such a dangerous hunt to my Sixth Stratus sister?

Fortunately for me, I caught up with the mage before nausea from my high altitude could have my guts roiling.

"Why won't you leave me alone?" it cried. *"I've done nothing to you."*

It shouldn't have spoken up like that. Given the cue, my array pinpointed its probable location, and with my rifle in my hand, I crept toward the cliff it was crouching on, hoping to get a shot on it before a fight could start.

"You almost killed my sister," I said.

As soon as the words had left my mouth, I was racing away from the spot, wincing when I noted how the trees were dwindling ahead of me. I was wary of crossing a stretch of snow without cover, especially with a Magsense watching for me.

"She tried to kill me first," the *ii* shouted. *"And why would she do such a thing in the first place? Because the demons in Zoln told her to?"*

Demons?

Frowning, I scanned the shelf in front of me, a surprisingly flat portion of the mountain that a steep cliff was cradling. With a cliff face partially obscuring it, I could barely make out the mage's location on the other side of the shelf.

Still, I could maybe make the shot without exposing myself. It was worth a try.

Raising my rifle, I sighted down it, moving my finger to the trigger.

"Don't do it, boy. I'd rather not fight you," the *ii* said. *"You're what? Twenty-two? Twenty-three? That's barely matured for your people, and I don't like hurting young ones."*

For a moment, I hesitated. Why was I hunting this mage? For House Kolb? Didn't I want to be free of the Houses? Why was I doing their bidding before I'd even chosen one?

I could slip away now, heading toward the Upheaval's origin point. The Houses would never find me there, considering how often they lost *iisen* to that part of Ostiu. I'd be free.

But alone. The way I was now, I was distant from everyone in my life, but they were with me. If I ran from the Houses, I'd never see my family again. No more mom and dad. No more Pheniks. No more Feena. I'd never have another partner in my life.

And that was unacceptable.

"I don't have a choice," I said.

I squeezed the trigger, sending a bolt of light flying toward where the *ii* was hiding, and my array informed me of movement.

Shit.

I started running while stone streaked through the air behind me. The mage stayed where it was, content to keep the high ground, which was smart for many reasons. Not only was the spot more defensible, but the *ii* knew I couldn't come near it while it stayed there. If I did, it would use its Somadept magic to stop my heart or deaden the neurons in my brain.

Still, I abandoned the tress, needing a better angle.

A wall of stone rose in front of me, and I barely made the leap to stand on top of it before it blocked me off. As I left the ground behind, I released one, two, three shots—barely staying balanced from my rifle's recoil—before sprinting along the wall. I jumped behind it when earth spikes started flying for me.

Maybe I could trick the mage into giving me a lift into the trees. If I were in the forest's canopy, the danger of its Earthshaker magic would be lessened, and a gain of height would put me on the same level as it.

The wall behind me collapsed, and I got off another two shots before the air was clear of dust and puffing snow.

No, that plan would never work. The mage's control on the earth was too strong-

Something tugged on my calf, making an alert go off in my array. Whatever had just passed through my leg, it had made a hole in its muscle, clipping a tendon. Fuck.

While my body began repairs, I stumbled toward a cliff face, although the pain raking up my leg slowed me down. I had to get out of sight and give myself time. Racing toward an abundance of the weapon that my enemy favored raised screeching alarms in my head, but I needed-

Unbelievable pressure built in my chest as my heart shuddered to a stop, and my array shrieked of partial brain stem failure. Somadept magic.

Panicking, I reflexively pressed my fingers to my neck while retreating, begging for a pulse to leap beneath my touch.

And it did. Why would my enemy relent before killing me?

That question didn't stop me from backpedaling as fast as I could, of course, desperate to create distance between me and the mage. It must have moved. I couldn't have been stupid enough to otherwise get in its range, right?

"Please, give up!" the *ii* shouted. *"I don't want to do this."*

Yup. It had moved.

Lifting my rifle, I sprayed bolts in the direction that the voice had come from and received a hissing scream as a reward. Someone tumbled off of the cliff with snow cushioning its fall, and as it stumbled to its feet, clutching its shoulder, I aimed for the kill.

And couldn't take the shot. Why couldn't I-?

A night sky of supernovas bloomed in my chest while crackling agony overrode my thoughts, but I couldn't scream to ease it, couldn't breathe. With difficulty, I read an alert, telling me of shredded lungs and a perforated gut, and an unreasoning urge to laugh rose when I glanced at my chest.

Dozens of stone studs had punched through my skin, and with trembling hands, I reached behind me, closing my fingers around rocky tubes. An interlocked grid of tiny, stone spears. The mage had riddled me with rock.

"I'm so sorry," it sobbed. *"Please, it didn't want..."*

It came into view, a beautiful woman with tears shimmering in its ethereally white eyes. My murderer.

Because I wouldn't survive this. The damage wouldn't kill me as quickly as it would for someone like this mage, not with my body fighting to fix itself. If I were to survive it, though, I'd need someone's help, someone who might get me to a clinic or hospital before everything failed, but alone as I was, I would die. Gone to the Collective before my time.

The mage took another step forward, but to my *total* surprise, I felt no anger toward it. It had been the better fighter, and it... no. *She* had only wanted her freedom, the same as me.

Given that, she couldn't stay here, not when a House Kolb member would soon come after her with a vengeance. If she wanted to achieve the goal that she'd worked so hard for, she needed to run.

Before I could try choking that out for her, someone sprayed snow over my body in their abrupt stop, which meant they'd been using House Kolb speed. Had to have been. Who-?

A shriek preceded the resumption of stone's impossible flight through the air with the mage streaking away from us, but my rescuer, whoever they were, moved. Even as my brain struggled to keep me awake, I was aware enough to marvel at them. They dodged speeding pebbles and hopped over barriers before they'd started rising, and within five beats of my slowing heart, they'd taken hold of the *ii*. She was touching them, meaning her Viminan magic should be draining them of energy, but my rescuer appeared unaffected, quickly getting their hands in place to snap her neck.

She crumpled into the snow, which echoed a faint pang of loss in me, and they... no. With them standing still, I could tell that my rescuer was most likely a man.

He stood, unmoving, over the mage's body for a moment before jerking upright with his gasp rattling the stillness. Spinning my way, he raced toward me with a corona of black steadily erasing him. He only overtook my slip into darkness as my vision shuttered to pinpricks, and I recognized

him.

Garreth reached for me—

“I’ve got you, Zaeden.”

—and I was gone.

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