

Chapter 8: Attracting Unwanted Attention

“-haven’t seen someone show such promise in ages, Talira. He’ll work well. Start the process.”

Why did that... voice sound-?

“We can discuss it after you get home.”

Oo, she was... tense... I-

“In the meantime, get my grandchildren to Zoln. Alive, please.”

“Yes, my *shukusen*.”

How did I... know-?

The acrid scent of sterilization rushed into my nose when I woke up.

When. I. woke up. I was alive. Holy shit. How?

“-asleep. I- I’m grateful we had help. If I can ever do something for you...”

Feena!

Slowly, I opened my eyes, wincing while my array adjusted my pupils to fight the ridiculous amount of light around me. A plain, tiled ceiling greeted me, and when I oh-so-carefully moved my head on my pillow, I saw IV lines running toward my arm and a mass-produced blanket covering my body.

I was lying in a hospital bed. How the hell had I reached a hospital before my body failed on me?

My sister was sitting on the bed beside mine, perfectly healthy. Alive.

I’d accomplished what I’d set out to do, and for now, I let relief take root. It seemed like a just reward for saving her.

A man was standing beside the bed, angled toward Feena with his arms crossed behind his back. His features looked a little off, smeared from the ones I remembered, but I recognized Garreth. He’d... saved my life, absolutely *annihilating* that *ii*.

The *ii*... Despite what she'd done to me, I... hadn't wanted to see her dead. Strange.

With a mental headshake, I focused.

I'd never seen anything like what Garreth had done. Obviously, he wasn't a Tenth Stratus of House Zan. Was he on a deep-cover mission here? If so, how badly had I fucked it up for him? Also, how the hell had I *happened* to kidnap a House Kolb member while he'd been using a Zan persona?

"Don't offer me a favor, Sixth Stratus," he told Feena. "You don't know who I am, just that I found saving your brother's life convenient."

Feena's face fell. I had no doubt that she wanted to clear the debt she owed this man, and if he wouldn't accept a favor from her, she wasn't sure how she could do that.

"He's right, Feena dear. Don't put yourself at the mercy of someone you barely know."

Between my sister and 'Garreth', an image of Talira, my grandmother and House Kolb's *shukusen*, was floating. From here, I couldn't see much of her, only the back of her head, but I knew her stern features well.

"Let's focus," she said. "I'm glad to know that Zaeden's stable, the reckless idiot, but that's not why I requested this connection. Mission reports, please?"

Feena shifted on her bed, growing tense when Garreth nodded for her to start.

"I tracked my assigned target toward the Upheaval's origin point, using information on newly scouted trails provided by a friend here," she said. "It got me through a few difficult crossings more quickly than normal but I..."

Flushing, Feena ducked her head.

"I started relying on it and my array's alerts more than my own sight, which was enormously stupid, I know."

No wonder she was embarrassed. Hell, she should be. Even the unHoused knew that unless one must, depending entirely on tech was a bad idea.

"The *ii* got the drop on me," Feena continued. "It triggered a rockslide. I took a few shots at it before it sprinted out of range, but from what I could tell, none of them landed. I thought I was dead, but then, my idiot brother showed up with him."

She jabbed a finger at Garreth, who was standing motionless at her side. Like a statue.

Also. Why did people keep calling me an idiot?

"Zae convinced me to let him continue the mission in my stead, which again was stupid, but-"

“House before family,” Garreth said.

Pausing, Feena darted a glance his way with a tick starting at the corner of her mouth.

“Yes. *That*,” she said. “Zaeden ran off, and once he was clear, this man—”

Again, she pointed at Garreth.

“—who has yet to share his true name or Stratus, by the way, shattered the boulder that I’d been working for hours to break, quickly treated my injury while telling me to stay put, and raced after Zae. I don’t know what happened with the *ii*, but he brought my brother back, barely clinging to life. Fucking ignored my questions about what had happened.”

Gasping, Feena gritted her teeth, slowly loosening the fists that she had clenched in her lap.

“He’s my little brother. Of course I lost it when I saw him like...”

As she fell silent, Garreth sighed.

“I got them onto the transport, stabilized them, and activated stasis until we returned here,” he said.

Stasis? But I thought I’d heard something before waking up. Had it just been the imaginings of a dying mind?

Stasis would explain how I’d gotten here before dying, though. After passing out, I’d had maybe... a handful of minutes left. I would have barely lasted long enough to reach the transport, let alone making it to Zoln.

“Ok. Given the extraordinary circumstances, clearing this up with *shukusen* Arion shouldn’t be too difficult. We might even get lucky enough to avoid blow-back from it,” Talira said. “Even still. Feena, dear, you and I need to have a chat when you get home.”

My sister winced, as well she should. Lectures from our grandmother were never fun.

“Moving on. Our resident savior,” Talira continued. “What are we going by this time? Garreth?”

He inclined his head.

“Give me as much of your report as you can in present company.”

“Of course, my *shukusen*,” Garreth said. “Identity of target relatively certain. Details already sent to your array. I leave her fate in your hands. Current persona in House Zan thoroughly burned. Given a day, I can switch to another and return to deep cover as you require. Your orders?”

Damn. That had been... precise. Short. This Garreth was nothing like the man I’d met, but then, I should have expected as much from a House Kolb operative.

Clicking her tongue, Talira said, "And your personal status, 'Garreth'?"

"Irrelevant," Garreth said, "but since you've asked, it's acceptable for the moment."

Well did I know the weighty silence that fell after this declaration. How many times had I withered under the scathing glare that Talira was surely giving him? Yet, he stood impassive.

"Your orders?" he repeated.

"Ensure my grandchildren leave Ostiu safely," Talira stiffly said. "Then, come home. We have much to discuss in person."

Bowing to her, Garreth said, "Yes, my *shukusen*."

He strode for the hospital's exit with me watching him the whole way. Was this what I'd become in my efforts to gather scraps of freedom to me? An unthinking automaton, only moving to the orders of my *shukusen*?

Before leaving, Garreth paused, glancing at Feena and Talira, and after seeing them occupied with one another, he turned to me, deliberately meeting my half-closed eyes, and winked. As my heart flipped in my chest, I watched him slip out the door, unable to move or breathe or think.

He'd known I was awake? Why had he let me eavesdrop on that conversation for as long as he had?

Why did something draw me like a magnet to the door he'd disappeared through?

Feena and Talira made their farewells, and once the projection had faded, my sister dropped her head into her hands. Mother Time, she looked stressed. How much of that was due to her mistake, and how much had I caused?

I didn't understand what had made her mess up as badly as she had. I knew my sister. I might have never gone on a mission with her, but I knew she was talented. She wouldn't have risen to Sixth Stratus so soon after her House naming if she wasn't.

After all, Kolb was necessarily stringent on who got elevated each year. With each Strata that one progressed closer to the top, more dangerous missions might come along, and the majority of those in the upper Strata had to declare someone competent enough to handle those missions before they could advance. So, how had Feena, who'd jumped two Strata in three years, landed herself in this predicament?

In the end, it wasn't my place to question her, and honestly, I wasn't inclined to do that. My sister was alive. Seeing her sitting on the hospital bed beside mine was more than enough for me.

Saying that, I thought it was time for me to 'wake up'. So, these warm and wonderful emotions that I'd been swimming through for the last few minutes must be purged while I donned my persona. For some reason, doing this was exceptionally difficult this time around, but once I'd accomplished

it, I shifted in place and changed my breathing rate before fully opening my eyes.

Slowly, I looked around, taking in details that I'd missed earlier, while mapping the room. One never knew when one might need to make a hasty escape.

Lifting my hand, I winced at the IV stuck in it—never had liked that insertion point—and this got Feena's attention.

"Zae!" she cried.

She'd raced to my bedside before I could turn her way, clinging to its edge, and damn, her face was a mess when it was this close, flushed with her eyes bloodshot and her nose red.

"Hey," I said, "you look good."

She truly did. After the mountains, any view of my sister was fantastic.

With a hesitant chuckle, she swiped at her nose.

"I look as good as you do," she said. "How do you feel?"

"Fine. Why-?"

I pursed my lips as if just now remembering the events of the last few hours before resting my fingers on my chest. It was, as expected, whole with no bandages wrapped around it. The only reason I was hooked up to an IV was to replace any fluids that I might have lost while bleeding out, and I'd probably woken up in a hospital bed instead of a more comfortable room so this place's professionals could monitor me. Rapid regeneration drugs sometimes caused unpleasant side effects, although that was rare.

"What happened?" I asked.

I remembered everything, of course, but I was interested in what Feena would tell me. Storm clouds gathered on her face while she slid her gaze away from mine.

"You were hurt. Badly," she said. "You almost d-"

She choked on the word, so I provided it for her.

"Died? Yeah, I remember that much," I said. "The fight. The injury to my calf. Mother Time, I should have deadened the pain receptors around it. That would have made me faster. Could maybe have kept the *ii* from turning my lungs into a honeycomb too."

Feena made a funny noise, something between a sob and a laugh.

"Only *you* could wake up from something that awful and analyze what you did wrong," she said.

Cocking my head, I said, "Of course. How else will I learn from my mistakes? I'm curious how I survived, though. Last I remember, the mage was standing over me."

"Oh. Um."

Biting her lip, Feena started playing with the blanket draped over me. Had someone told her to keep the truth to herself?

"That House Zan technician you kidnapped?" she said. "He was actually a House Kolb member on a deep-cover mission. He saved your life."

"Wow! I must have a nose for people from Kolb," I said before making a face. "Oh, shit. Did I ruin his mission?"

"I think so," Feena said. "Don't worry about it, though. He didn't seem upset. In fact, he looked pretty amused by the whole situation."

Oh, good. I hadn't pissed 'Garreth' off. From the brief glimpse I'd caught of that man's true nature, I knew I didn't want him as an enemy.

"How high stratus do you think he is?" I idly asked.

Shrugging, Feena said, "No clue, but I'd guess fairly high. Third or maybe Second."

Which meant I'd never see him again. It was probably a good thing, considering my aspirations to remain unnoticed in the middle Strata's ranks, so why did my heart twinge at the thought?

"Mother Time, Feena," I said, "the things I said to him..."

Oh, fuck. *The things I'd said to him.* The peek I'd given him into my heart's desire. Please, for the love of anything that might be holy, say that Garreth forgot about me.

Feena laughed at my distress, ruffling my hair.

"Don't worry," she said. "If he gives you trouble for your exceedingly House Kolb behavior, you can mention it to our grandmother, and she'll put him in his place."

Maybe she would for most things. Not for what I'd confessed, though.

Before I could consider this problem too much, the hospital door sprang open, letting Pheniks shuffle through it. His nervous habit, repeatedly picking at the back of his hand, had appeared, and after one glance my way, he decided that the rest of the hospital room was much more interesting, crossing to Feena and me at a snail's crawl.

When I exchanged a glance with my sister, we both suppressed sighs, but as my brother stopped at the foot of my bed, I threw on a beaming smile.

“Hiya, Phen!” I brightly said. “Where’ve you been? I’ve been looking for you.”

Pheniks hugged himself, stopping his pick at his skin.

“They wouldn’t let me come in until now,” he said. “I wanted to be here when you woke up, like Feena, but they wouldn’t let me.”

Oh, boy. He’d be a veritable ray of sunshine for the next few days.

Unless I changed that.

“Pheniks,” I said. “Come here.”

I patted the side of the bed opposite Feena, and he inched toward it like a child caught with their hand in a cookie jar.

“Zae, I’m sorr-” he started.

As soon as he was in range, I lunged, hooking my arm around his neck. Dragging him down to the blankets, I ground my knuckles into his scalp, sending an unpleasant prickle radiating from my IV’s needle, and shouting into cloth, Pheniks slapped at me. With a laugh, I released him.

He stumbled backward, rubbing his head while glaring at me, and I grinned at him. Meanwhile, Feena had one arm crossed under her breasts while she’d raised a hand to cover her snickering.

“You are such an asshole,” Pheniks growled. “I come in here, worried sick about you and Feena, and-”

“And now, you can see that you don’t need to worry,” I interrupted. “I’m fine. Feena’s fine. Everything will be ok.”

Frozen, Pheniks stared at me for a moment, but when I patted my bedside again, he flopped onto it, jabbing my chest where stone had been poking through it not long ago.

“You’re still an asshole,” he said.

I lifted my hands in surrender—

“Granted.”

—and sinking onto the bed, Feena covered our hands with hers while glancing between us.

“I love you two. Thank you for working so hard to save my life,” she said. “Don’t do it again.”

I affected a look of shocked indignation.

“We’d never,” I said. “Right, Phen?”

With a small smile, Pheniks said, "Right."

Feena rolled her eyes.

"I mean it, idiots," she said. "I'd never forgive myself if something like this happened again."

"And we'd never forgive ourselves if you were hurt when we could have helped," I snapped.

Mother Time, what had that been? I fought to retain more heated words while Pheniks spoke up.

"You can't ask us to ignore you when you're in danger," he said.

"Because when that happens, I'll come save you," I said. "Every time."

I was surprised to find that I'd meant that. Something about this should bother me, having me frothing at the mouth to fix it, but after what had happened in the mountains, I couldn't make myself care.

Feena caressed our cheeks with gleaming eyes.

"You're sweet," she said.

She'd probably wanted to say more than that, but the chance for it was erased when the door again slid open, letting Nyco hurry through it. He looked frazzled with bits of his hair standing on end, and I briefly wondered how my choices had impacted his standing in House Zan.

"Feena, a strangely intense guy just pulled me away from work," he said. "He said that if you and your brothers were to reach home safely, I have to get you through border control now."

My sister caught my eye.

"Garreth," we both said.

After she'd risen from bed, I threw the blankets off of me while ripping out my IV.

"What's going on?" Pheniks said. "Who's Garreth?"

Nudging him off the bed, I swung my legs over its side, pausing to let the room stop spinning before getting up.

"Don't worry about it. All that matters is that we're going home," I said. "I hope someone has a change of clothes for me. I can't go wandering down public halls in this flimsy thing, not if we want to avoid drawing attention our way."

I plucked at my hospital gown to emphasize what I'd said. By her bed, Feena pulled something out of the pack that was sitting at the foot of it before tossing it my way, and catching it, I smirked at the high-style outfit that I was clutching.

“Nice,” I said. “Who do I have to thank for this sudden interest in fashion?”

“Just put it on, ya bastard.”

Chuckling, I started changing, despite other people’s presences in the room. Nyco and Pheniks awkwardly faced away from me, but I hardly registered their discomfort.

This trip to Ostiu was over, and while I might not have fully accomplished my goal in coming here, I was reoriented once more. Boredom was gone. Focus was mine. Emotions were, for the most part, banished to their relegated place beneath my held persona. I was ready to leave.

I was ready to travel to Lutov and its capital. I was ready to undergo my House naming, accepting my shackles.

But I was also prepared to fight them. I wouldn’t surrender to the House system. I wouldn’t despair of reaching my heart’s desire, as I had done for the last nineteen years.

I would gain my freedom, even if it took the rest of my life.

TTS Chapter Eight

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