

# Chapter 93: Hope Given and Taken

I was busy with Korix and Leski when a message flashed into my array. Given the circumstances, I almost ignored it, but since it had arrived at the highest priority, I left off with what I'd been doing so I could scan its contents.

*You know the vehicle I wanted you to look at today? it read. Since you're so busy, I started without you, and while I was examining it, I found something, Zae. Something that can kill an Ancient! Meet me at The Library as soon as you can.*

Pheniks.

Jerking upright, I sat stock-still while Leski made unhappy noises on the floor, and as I read the message once more, something that I was afraid to name planted a seed in me.

A way to kill the Ancients. A way to fight back. I might see next year after all.

"What is it?" Korix asked.

Glancing at him, I had a hard time with answering his question. If I acknowledged this new feeling inside, how badly could it hurt me on the off chance that something went wrong? In the end, I forced the words out anyway.

"Phen found something," I said.

On the tail end of that, Feena burst into the room with a hand over her eyes.

"We need to go!" she shouted.

"Yeah, I know. I read it too," I said. "Give me a minute. Where are my-?"

Clothes landed in my lap, courtesy of a smirking Korix, and I stuck my tongue out at him. Now that I'd acknowledged hope, I couldn't spend any more time on reveling in it. I had to push all emotion aside, venturing into the shallow end of mission mode, so I could more quickly reach the conclusion of this new possibility.

"What did your brother find?" Korix asked me.

"He says-"

I paused to shove my arm through a sleeve.

“He says it’s something that’ll kill Ancients,” I said.

Korix had been on his feet before I’d finished speaking.

“Zae,” he said, “that could change-”

“Everything, I know,” I said. “We need to see him now.”

Grumbling under her breath, Leski scrambled on all fours to gather her clothes. Thank all that might be holy, she seemed to see the urgency of our situation as well.

“I suppose that’s a good reason to leave me frustrated,” she sourly said.

With a grimace, I said, “Sorry. I’ll make it up to- What are you doing?”

Somehow already clothed, Leski strode to my sister while looking over her shoulder.

“Going with you, of course,” she said. “Feena, dear, we’re decent.”

“Thank Mother Time for that,” Feena said, lowering her hand. “I already have the drones prepping a skycruiser, so we can leave as soon as you’re ready.”

Clicking my tongue, I tried not to sputter.

“Wait a minute!” I said. “Leski, you can’t-”

With a snarl fixed in place, she hissed, “If you tell me to be a good, little hostage and wait for you to return, I will do my damndest to break through your array’s security processes so I can *mess with it*. I’m coming with you.”

Remembering her work in the Cerullis facility—something that I’d thought was impossible—I swallowed. Hell. She’d probably breeze through my processes like they were nothing.

“Ok,” I said.

Perhaps if I limited the importance of where we were going, that would make Leski less suspicious of it. I had yet to tell her about The Library, and I’d rather not break that pattern unless I must, uncertain as I was about what the *shukusenth* would do if she learned that secret.

Unlike with her, I didn’t question Korix’s presence at my side. Not only did he, as House Kolb’s First Stratus, already know everything about The Library, but Talira had tasked him with watching me. He wouldn’t let me run across the city without him.

“If we’re quite finished?” Feena said.

With nothing else, she joined Leski in leading the way to the hangar while Korix and I trailed behind them.

“Are you sure about bringing her?” he quietly asked. “If any of the *shukusenth* decide she’s too untrustworthy, they may have you erase her memory of visiting The Library or worst case, kill her.”

He’d echoed my worries to a T, but of course he had. The only reason I had them was because of his training.

“I’ll deal with that if it becomes an issue,” I said. “Let’s focus on one problem at a time, yes?”

“So long as you’re aware.”

After we’d reached a skycruiser, the trip to Rane’s bar passed in tense silence, and when we arrived, the mood in the bar shifted. This place’s regulars had come to expect my visits here, but this time, I had the *Lokke Vitras* following me, and that was an anomaly. As we strode to the back, all motion in the bar ceased while calculating eyes watched us, and I inwardly cringed at the impression I must have made on so many Kolb members. They *would* talk about this.

Despite the attention being paid to us, I brushed a table near the back when we passed it, a ritual that I’d developed over the last few weeks. If Pheniks was right, maybe I could get vengeance for Fyester. I was hesitant to call killing the Ancients justice but vengeance? That might be nice to have.

Rane’s absence from the bar was slightly out of the norm. Over the last few weeks, she’d often expressed how much she disliked The Library’s beacon, meaning she usually spent most of her time out front, but at some point, she had to restock or otherwise handle the management side of the bar. Given that, she was probably in her office.

Since Korix, Feena, and I knew where we were going, our steps were sure and quick, but Leski took her time, going wide-eyes when we passed through the holographic wall. After a bolted door opened with a thunk, she gasped while her eyes shone with glee. How I missed the time when mundane things like this had seemed wondrous to me.

As we crowded into the chamber beyond, I frowned at a lump, lying on the floor, but when I recognized it as Rane, sprawled against a wall, I rushed forward. She’d been in here? She hated this room. What had happened? Was this a simple case of fatigue catching up with an overworked woman or...?

Shaking my head to calm my thoughts, I pressed my fingers to Rane’s neck, ignoring my companions’ shadows on the wall above us. Within a breath, her artery pulsed against my finger, and I released a held breath.

“She’s alive,” I said. “What do you think happened?”

When I turned to them, Korix already had a Puppeteer lifted into view while Leski and Feena were staring at it with revulsion.

“I’ll scan her array and figure it out,” he said. “You go. If this is Cerullis or the Ancients...”

Then, I didn’t have much time.

Nodding, I said, “Leski, you stay with him.”

I wasn’t taking her anywhere near something so potentially perilous, not until she’d completed the training needed to deal with it, but she looked like she meant to argue with me.

“You can’t leave-”

Taking her arm, I pulled her to Korix’s side.

“Stay with Ko,” I said. “Please.”

I didn’t know if she’d heard the desperation in my voice or not, but she hesitantly nodded, and I joined Feena, already waiting by the beacon. We touched its ring, and once my disorientation had passed, I glanced over this pocket at the bottom of Lake Voxmore.

Everything looked the same as always, although the line where dry land met the lake bed looked more shimmery than normal, and I slowly relaxed. Perhaps Korix and I had been overreacting to Rane’s collapse.

When I scanned the rest of this enclosure, I spied something moving at the base of the building that enclosed The Library, and after enhancing my vision, I grinned. Near the hatch into The Library, Pheniks was hopping in place, excitedly waving his hands over his head.

“If he’s acting this enthusiastic, he must have found something really interesting,” I said. “Anyway, we should-”

“Uh... Zae?”

Feena pointed to the side of a constantly changing building, and there, I found an earlier noted shimmer increasing in intensity.

And I remembered a report that I’d read weeks ago, one that had described the Ancients’ affinity for manipulating membranes and electricity. I remembered that these two substances were all that made up a barrier. I remembered how when watching a report on the recent disaster, the barrier that had surrounded Zan’s research station had inexplicably faded.

I remembered how the only thing separating us from the crushing weight of water on all sides was one of those precarious things.

Snapping my head down, I screamed, “Phen, run!”

My brother stopped jumping in place, cocking his head, and the barrier at the far end of this pocket failed. Starting near its apex, a shimmering spot—hundreds of meters wide—crackled open, and

through this breach, water pounded down on what those from the stars had built, making its constant transformation stutter.

I didn't care about that, though. With my heart stalling in my chest, I watched as a stone column broke off to land near where my brother had been standing with a sheet of water following it.

"Phen!" I cried.

I had to... *I had to help!*

When I moved toward a crumbling building, ignoring the wall of water rushing toward me, someone seized my wrist. My palm was slapped onto metal.

And I was back in the beacon chamber.

As an ashen-faced Feena apparated at my side, our companions glanced at us.

"Rane's fine—" Korix started.

I didn't care. Snatching myself free of my sister's hold, I started screaming... *something—*

"I have to go back!" a far-distant part of me realized.

—and slapped my hand on the beacon's ring.

But nothing happened. Of course it didn't.

"I'm sorry," Feena softly said, reaching for me. "Please—"

"NO!" I roared. "No, no, no, no!"

I slammed my hands on the ring, applying greater force every time, but with its counterpart destroyed, this beacon could do nothing. Absolutely nothing. Just like me.

Shouting, I spun in place, tangling my hands in my hair, and when I reached a wall, I banged my head on it, trying to erase burgeoning knowledge. It, however, wouldn't be denied.

Pheniks... My little brother...

Mother Time, I'd thought I could protect him from anything—bullies, his poor choices, even me—but I could do nothing against...

"What happened?" Korix asked behind me.

"The Ancients. It has to have been."

Damn, Feena had sounded dazed. Hollow. She'd saved my life but...

Hell. She'd had to choose between her brothers.

"They destroyed the barrier around The Library," she continued.

In the resulting pause, I could swear that silence had gained physical weight, crushing me into the stone.

Eventually, Korix said, "The Library is gone?"

"Yes," Feena whispered.

And with everything inside of me, I silently screamed denial of this fact.

"Ah. Did Pheniks-?"

A sob answered that question before it could be finished.

"I'm..."

Korix puffed out a breath.

"He was a good man."

Was.

That choice of words echoed in my head, even as I giggled at how clinically detached Korix had sounded. He'd always been awful when it came to comforting with words alone.

"We'll never know how to kill the enemy now," Feena faintly said.

I should explode on her for that—I *didn't need another fucking problem right now*—but her hysterical laughter mixed with my giggling and I—

"How will I tell our parents?" she gasped.

—I realized that my hope was gone too.

Like a switch, the terrible, sweeping pendulum of my emotions halted, and I lifted my forehead off of the wall. Behind me, the others talked in halting sentences, meant to soothe, but I was focused on one thing.

The Ancients had killed my brother. I might not have a way to make *them* pay, but I could keep everyone else I loved safe from *them*.

Fishing through a pocket, I found a metal disk lying at the bottom of it, haphazardly stored there with other tools this morning, and on returning my hands to my head, I rubbed them over my scalp, eventually hanging them off of my neck. When I pressed a disk to the base of my skull, I glanced through my newly provided processes, and after finding the place where I'd added Korix as an

exception days ago, I erased the addition. Hell, he'd kill me for this, or he would if...

Well. If.

Facing the chamber, I looked over these people, the ones I'd do anything for, and initiated camouflage, letting a buzz bury under my skin. As expected, Korix knew near instantaneously what I'd done. From where he was awkwardly patting Feena's back, he stiffened, whirling toward me.

"Zae, don't you dare!" he shouted.

I wished I could tell him how sorry I was and how much I loved him. I wished I could tell Leski how badly I wanted more time with her. I wished I could tell Feena that I didn't blame her for stopping my misguided attempt to save Pheniks.

I couldn't say a word, though. If I did, Korix would know where I was. He'd stop me before I left this chamber.

And I had somewhere to be.

The supply closet and its attached bar hardly made a mark on my senses, but then again, I was moving too quickly for them to register. Behind me, people cursed, and someone I loved called my name from a few steps distant.

Once I was on the walkway outside, losing Korix was easy, even with him on my heel from the start. After I'd done that, I still left my camouflage disk in place, despite the discomfort that it imparted. Korix would no doubt use the recorders between here and my destination to try pinpointing me, something that I couldn't let him do, and since he knew where I was headed, I'd have to take a route that would defy his expectations.

Even with these challenges, I... wasn't intimidated by the task. Huh. When had having Korix as an opponent become trivial to me?

As I reached a shuttle stop, I let that question rattle like ice cubes in my frozen being until a vehicle approached. Its doors opened, and I slipped, invisible, onto it.

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