

Chapter 33: ...Brothers

When I reached House Kolb's headquarters, I entered as if I belonged, even with my status declaring me a member of Cerullis. Not many people would be here, so changing to my 'true' affiliation seemed like too much work, much like sneaking through the place would have been.

Having left my skyscraper in the park, I strode with purpose to the lobby's lifts, ignoring the stares directed my way. As I came closer, two Kolb members started strolling to intercept me. I waited for as long as I could before putting on a burst of House Kolb speed, avoiding them by a sliver of a second. If I was to reach Pheniks before Talira could stop me, I needed to eke every moment out of my anonymity, such as it were. Walking through headquarters as a Cerullis member might have tipped her off to my presence, but my display of this technique would alert her in an instant.

The Kolb members I'd avoided made surprised sounds behind me, and setting a floor on the control, I stepped into the lift. It shot me toward the House's unplaced apartments, and from there, it wasn't far to the one Pheniks had been assigned.

After I'd entered, I barricaded the door to the best of my ability. Even still, I doubted it would keep my grandmother out for long, but it would delay her, at the least.

With nothing else to distract me, I couldn't ignore the swarm of butterflies in my stomach. One room away from me, Pheniks was sleeping with each of his snores loud in an otherwise silent apartment, and I was here because I *needed* to make things right with him. He'd never trust me as he once had, but I needed him to forgive me. I needed him to be ok with moving on. As I ghosted into the apartment's bedroom, though, I prepared myself for a total rejection.

For a few heartbeats, I stood at the foot of his bed, just... watching him sleep, but then, I moved to the side.

"Phen," I said.

Wait. Could I still use my brother's nickname?

"Pheniks," I said, slightly louder.

When I rested my fingers on his arm, he shifted, unintelligibly murmuring, and with a sigh, I shook him. As soon as he was disrupted from sleep, I backed off, hoping to keep him from panicking.

My efforts didn't help much. As soon as my brother opened his eyes, he went stiff before plastering himself against the headboard. I didn't say anything, aware that he'd find my voice more intimidating than the quiet, but soon enough, recognition set in, and he relaxed with his nose wrinkling.

“What are *you* doing here?” he said. “And...”

He flicked his eyes to the side, probably checking the time, before returning his glare to me.

“It’s three in the fucking morning! What the hell?”

Yeah... that was about what I'd expected. Unfortunately, I had yet to decide how I'd reply to this outburst, and faced with its necessity now, I was left scrambling, ratcheting through options, while Pheniks tapped a finger on his leg. Eventually, he clicked his tongue.

“If you have nothing to say, you should get out,” he snapped. “What made you think I want-?”

“I’m sorry,” I interrupted. “I betrayed your trust. Didn’t protect you when I should have, and yes, I may have done those things because of this hated role I’ve taken, but it was still wrong. I’m sorry for it, Pheniks.”

For a split second, my brother seemed frozen in place, but then, he was looking down his nose at me.

“What do you expect me to say to that?” he asked. ““It’s ok, Zae. I understand why you ruined my life. Now, everything can return to normal’? That’s not going to happen.”

After taking a steadying breath, I said, “I don’t expect it to. I’m hoping that you’ll let us repair our relationship, but you can say or do anything you like to me, although I’d point out that your life hardly looks ruined.”

“Are you kidding me?”

Pheniks puffed up, lunging toward me.

“I’m stuck in the headquarters of another House, away from my work, and the few friends I had think I’m a traitor!” he snapped. “How is my life not ruined?”

Was... he... serious? He thought *this* was bad?

“Pheniks. You’re about to become the head of your House, a position that *you* asked for,” I said, barely keeping my voice calm. “Considering what you did, you deserve much worse than a months-long house arrest.”

With a laugh, my brother crossed his arms.

“We’ve covered this. I didn’t want to break the Concords-” he started.

“Which is admirable and the only reason you haven’t been exiled,” I interrupted again, unable to keep quiet. “Even still, *you did something wrong*, and you should suffer the consequences for it. I certainly have for my own misdeed.”

“And I suppose you think that gives you the right to judge me,” Pheniks said.

“No! Mother Time, no. I just-”

Breaking off, I scrubbed at my eyes, suddenly tired beyond measure.

“I came here for two reasons,” I said. “One was to apologize and beg for you to talk to me. I can’t stand being cut off from you.”

Seconds crawled by while Pheniks decided what to say. At this point, I was certain that rejection would be mine, so when my brother’s face softened, I was suspicious that an ulterior motive lay behind it.

“I haven’t liked it either,” he said. “Over the past six months, I could have used your advice far too often, and... much as I’ve been furious, I’ve also missed you.”

Oh, thank Mother Time.

“I’ve missed you too,” I said.

I didn’t know what to add to that, though. I wasn’t sure how I should act around him now, whether casually or not.

After an awkward pause, Pheniks said, “You said you have two reasons for being here?”

Hell. I’d barely gained my brother’s tentative forgiveness. How could I ruin that by prying his secrets out of him? I had other ways of getting the information I needed, and sure, they’d take time...

But that was time I didn’t have. My child. They were why I was doing this. I had to be there for them.

Even still, I wouldn’t be careless with how I questioned my brother.

Gesturing at the foot of the bed, I asked, “May I sit?”

“Go ahead.”

While I got comfortable, Pheniks shifted in place with his body language alternating between curious and piqued. Fuck, this would be a shit show. Folding my hands in my lap, I Took a deep breath.

“I’ve been in deep cover for the last six months, identifying the person who requested your neurotoxin from House Zan,” I said. “I’m sure you know this.”

Pheniks nodded.

“How informed has our grandmother kept you about my investigation?”

Shrugging, Pheniks said, “Not very, but then, I’ve been preoccupied with my own life.”

“That’s understandable, and perhaps when I’m free to do so, I can help you with your problems, if you’re inclined to allow it,” I said, “but that’s not why I’m here. I need your help, and trust me, I realize how much you should laugh in my face right now.”

Who asked someone they’d wronged for *help*?

“Ok...?” Pheniks said. “Why don’t you tell me what you need? I can decide for myself whether I’ll refuse you.”

Oh, I really didn’t want to do this.

With my heart in my throat, I said, “If you’ve learned any more information about my target since gaining your new position, I need to know about it. I wouldn’t ask this of you, but... my child’s handoff is coming in the next two weeks. If I can manage it, I’d like to be there, and I know how selfish it is of me to do this-”

“It’s not selfish, you dumbass!” Pheniks said, rolling his eyes. “Getting a kid from Drav is a big deal! I wouldn’t deprive you of it, even if you were my worst enemy.”

For a split second, the room and my brother’s face blurred before I could get ahold of myself.

“Thank you,” I said.

Shaking his head, Pheniks said, “It won’t be as much trouble as you might think. I planned on sharing this information with Talira sometime in the next few days.”

Speaking of our grandmother, why hadn’t she made an appearance yet? I’d thought for sure that she’d be here by now, but for the moment, that didn’t matter.

“I’ve sent you the relevant information,” Pheniks continued. “You can review it while I talk.”

As he’d said, a new message had popped into my array, and I opened its attachment while he moved on.

“I won’t lie. As soon as I gained access to Arion’s data, I went hunting for clues about who’d started this series of events. I’m not sure what I was planning to do if I found any, whether that would have been exacting my own punishment or not, but I decided against it.”

Which was a relief. If betraying my brother’s trust had broken me as much as it had, I didn’t want to consider what truly hurting him would do to me.

I couldn’t give that idea much thought, however. After looking over what Pheniks had provided, I had an idea of who our culprit might be, and if I was right, I wanted to smack myself for not figuring it out earlier.

“As you can see, I eventually located the correspondences that passed between Arion and your target,” Pheniks said. “They were well hidden, to the point that I can’t blame whoever trawled through Arion’s data for missing them, but I still found them for myself. Unfortunately, I couldn’t pull identifying information from the conversation, which is saying something. I’m pretty good at dragging traces of a message’s sender from it, but these must have gone through at least a dozen proxies. Whatever trace was left on them has been long buried.”

Fortunately for me, that didn’t matter. The diction and word choice in half of these messages were ones I’d seen before. It wasn’t definitive proof, but with it, I had a lead to follow, one that based on previous experience, should pan out in a day or two.

“I’m sorry. I know it’s not much,” Pheniks said. “Hopefully, it’s enough to get you started, though.”

“It’s more than enough. Thank you.”

Leaning forward, I lightly touched his knee.

“You’ve cracked this case open for me.”

“I’m... glad,” Pheniks tightly said.

He flicked his eyes between my face and my hand, and I removed my hand. This hadn’t fixed things between us. I should have remembered that, but I hadn’t.

It was a start, though. Now, I needed to build on it.

“Once this chaos has died down, I should have some free time,” I said. “May I visit again? I’d like to help with your transition.”

Looking away, Pheniks said, “I don’t see why not. It’s the least you could do.”

His words might have been harsh, but I saw his faint smile, and that loosened the knot in my chest.

“Of course,” I said, “and... after my partners and I bring our child home, I wondered if you’d visit? The kid would love to meet their uncle.”

Pheniks jerked his head to me with a sharp glance.

“They’ll be a *baby!* They won’t even know who I am!” he said before softening. “But yes, I’ll swing by when I have a moment.”

At that, I grinned like a fool. I couldn’t help it. This confrontation had gone better than I’d expected, and perhaps seeing my relief, Pheniks rolled his eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be acting on the information I gave you?” he said. “I’d like to get some sleep.”

“Yes, that’s wise,” I said, getting off of the bed. “Thank you for this. Truly.”

Crossing his arms, Pheniks slouched.

“It wasn’t a big deal,” he said.

“I was to me,” I said. “Good night... Phen.”

Perhaps he’d heard the hesitation in my voice because while I walked away, my brother might fling the covers back over himself, but he also tossed a reassurance at me.

“Yes, good night, Zae,” he said. “Mother Time, what an idiot brother.”

I chuckled at that, but when I exited the apartment and saw my grandmother waiting for me outside, the noise stopped in my throat. Talira looked... I didn’t know how to describe it. Pleased, yet exceedingly annoyed? Her face was bright red, but her eyes were shining.

“Walk with me,” she snapped.

So, this was where she’d been. Why had she waited for me to finish with Pheniks instead of storming into that room to stop our conversation?

When she took off, I meekly followed her, not that I could do much else. It didn’t take her long to speak.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

Glancing at her, I said, “My job?”

No matter what other comebacks I might have for her, I kept them to myself. When Talira got like this, it was best to play cautiously, if one wasn’t letting emotions cloud their focus, of course.

“You’ve broken deep cover,” Talira said. “Broken it more than you should have and before your mission’s complete. Why?”

I let loose a small sigh.

“I wasn’t getting anywhere with the methods I was taking, and despite what you and Feena might think, I’m aware of how concerning my behavior has become lately,” I said. “I was looking for a way to finish this mission so I can take part in a spell of much-needed rest.”

Stopping short, Talira spun on me.

“So, you admit that going on this mission was a mistake?”

With a nod, I said, “Readily.”

Talira must have expected me to deny it because while she opened her mouth, nothing emerged from it. After a moment of silence, I clasped my hands in front of me.

“Is there anything else, my *shukusen*?” I said. “I have things to do.”

Making a face, Talira rubbed it.

“Why do you make my life so difficult?” she said through her hands.

“That’s not my intention,” I said.

With an explosive sigh, Talira lowered her hands.

“I’m glad you and your brother have made up. He’s been a pain in my ass for months,” she said, “but you’re right. Go on, then! Bring me the man who’s made our last few months hell.”

So, she’d drawn the same conclusions as me. When had she plucked Pheniks’ data out of my array?

With a smile, I bowed to my grandmother.

“As my *shukusen* says.”

But then, I was off. We had nothing more to say to one another, and someone who’d broken the Concords required my attention.

Fortunately for him, he’d get a short stay of punishment. After all, I had to find definitive proof of his guilt before going after him.

Revision #1

Created 6 February 2025 21:25:35 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 February 2025 21:39:55 by FatalisticFable