

# Chapter 62: Getting There

After the assembly had concluded, I wandered to the lobby of House Drav's headquarters in a haze. I wasn't worried about my new, supposedly 'horrible' fate, half convinced that past incidents of this phenomenon were coincidences, and I was used to getting served up on a platter like this. People perpetually threw me into situation that were sure to kill me. That wasn't why I was dazed. I was just *exhausted*, and my overworked brain was having a hard time with processing the twists and turns that the previous conversation had taken.

I had enough clarity of mind to send a message to my sister. Much as I might like to ignore this fact, she was Chosen. Questioning her about their base of operations would be wise, and while I was there, I'd like to have her at my side.

When I reached the lobby, I was so wrapped in my thoughts that I almost ran into Damari.

"Whoa! Careful there, LV," they said, steadying me. "You ok? You look like someone gave ya bad news."

Rather than answering them, I ran my eyes over my friend. They looked better and yet, somehow worse. While energy had been infused in their body, they were visibly trembling now, which made me wonder. Had they induced another artificial adrenaline burst? I'd thought they were heading home to sleep after meeting their sister. Or had Misah perhaps given them something to help with their own exhaustion?

With their smile slipping, Damari said, "LV?"

I smiled to reassure them that I was all right, although that didn't seem to work. As I moved to pat their arm, a crease formed between their eyebrows, and just in time, I remembered how much they disliked being touched, stopping halfway through the gesture.

"Let's find my family, shall we?" I said. "I'll explain what's happened once we're together."

"Sure..." Damari drawled.

They continued to watch me as we left House Drav's headquarters, making a quick circuit of the park outside. With the help of this place's recorders, pinpointing my family's location didn't take long. They were sitting on a bench, eating ice cream, and as we approached, Baely threw back her head and *laughed*.

With my breath catching, I stopped short, and even with my vision misting, I couldn't take my eyes off of my daughter. In their new attire, they were *beautiful* with laughter lighting them up so poignantly that I felt like I was in a chokehold. I saw Leski in the way they wrinkled their nose, but as usual, I ignored the obvious signs of their biological father's identity, focusing instead on how

happy they looked. After everything I'd done in my life, how had I been lucky enough to get a daughter like them? When would I eventually destroy them?

Slowly breathing out, I pinched my wrist, never removing my gaze from my family.

"You can't think like that," I said to myself.

"Like what?"

Reluctantly, I shifted my eyes to Damari.

"Like a fatalistic idiot who thinks everything's his fault," I said.

Cocking their head, Damari said, "But that's who you are, LV. Sometimes."

They stuck their tongue out at me, making me chuckle.

"True," I said, "but I'm trying to be someone else. That man's no fun to be around."

Damari gave me an odd look.

"All parts of you are fun to be around, even the pessimist who drowns himself in misery," they said, "but he's less fun than others, yes. So, let's get ya to your family before he makes an appearance."

As they took off, I softly smiled, hugging myself so I didn't do the same thing to them.

"You really are a fantastic friend, Damari," I said.

Snorting, they called over their shoulder, "Well, yeah. Duh."

With them already halfway to my family, I didn't get time for more than a single laugh before I had to catch up. As we approached, Korix, who'd been idly watching us, lifted a hand off the back of the bench, which alerted the others to our presence. While Baely grinned at us, Leski leapt to her feet so she could fling herself at me. I struggled to maintain my balance as she nuzzled into my chest, and Damari rolled their eyes.

"We were only gone for an hour, tops!" they said. "From this reception, you'd think it was a week."

Without pulling her face away from my chest, Leski punched at their arm, which they barely dodged, stumbling as they did so.

...Why did they look so unsteady?

"So?" they said. "Where's that explanation you promised?"

When Damari perched on the bench's arm, Korix scooted over to give them room, but they didn't take advantage of it, crossing a leg instead. Curling their fingers, they laid their chin on the heel of their palm, intently staring at me, and I suppressed a laugh at how serious they'd turned.

After looking everyone over, I said, "I have new orders, all from the recent assembly."

I proceeded to tell them everything, including where I was going and who I was meeting with, and as I talked, every face, save for Baely's, slid into the detachment that was typical for mission mode. My daughter, on the other hand, went white, slumping more thoroughly into their seat with each word, and I wished that I could make this easier for them, truly. If something went wrong over the next couple of days, though, it would be better if they heard this news from my lips than from their parents or a stranger.

"So, that's it. We need a sample of this molecule, and the Chosen might know where to find it. That's where I'm headed," was what I finished with. "Any questions?"

For a while, no one said a word, letting the park's natural noise fill the silence, until Baely leaned forward to take my hand.

Licking her lips, she said, "There's no one else who can do this? Someone who's reached a terminal point in their poisoning maybe? Or... I don't know. A criminal who's in stasis?"

With a sigh, I crouched in front of her.

"Honey. Even if there was someone else, I wouldn't want them to go. You know that," I said, "but you don't need to worry. This isn't the most dangerous thing I've faced in my life. I'll be fine. All right?"

Hesitantly, Baely nodded, but I still saw doubt in her eyes, which I hated. She was only twenty-five! She shouldn't be worrying if her dad would come home from a mission yet.

Hell. I'd done a shit job of shielding her from the truth of my life.

Hugging our daughter, Leski said, "I'd guess that you want us to stay here."

And her voice had been so empty. Mother Time, I despised seeing mission mode on her, on any of them! But that was where I needed them to be right now.

"How would you help me with this? It's a single meeting," I said. "I'd rather if you stayed here, ready to help me with the search once I have the information we need."

"I can accept that," Leski said.

Pulling our daughter to her, she rubbed Baely's arms, and I did my best to ignore the tears that were sliding over their cheeks.

"Even if you leave them here, you should bring me," Korix said. "I've met the Chosen before. I could ease you through the introduction, move the conversation along..."

He trailed off as I shook my head.

“Think, Ko. If I brought any of you along, you’d have to wait outside while I made my request of these people,” I said. “Speaking to them requires a certain security clearance level, one you don’t have anymore.”

Looking away, Korix swallowed before nodding, and I shuffled forward to lay my arms across my family’s legs.

“Listen to me,” I said. “I’ll be fine. After the last week, where we’ve been infected with a neurotoxin and deprived of sleep for far too long, I know that this supposed curse may seem daunting, but think about it rationally. When compared to everything else we’ve faced, this danger is nothing.”

And I grinned.

“So, stop looking at me like I’m a dead man! I need to leave so I can quickly return.”

Slowly, they relaxed, leaning toward me, and I gathered them close.

“I love you more than I can say,” I whispered into the safety of our embrace.

Then, I released them, popping to my full height. Kissing my palm, I laid it on each of their heads. Leski rolled her eyes as I touched hers.

“See you soon.”

As if ripping off a bandage, I turned, heading for House Kolb’s headquarters. I didn’t notice that Damari was keeping pace with me until a few steps into the walk.

“Upset that you didn’t get a teary farewell from me?” I said. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure to greet you when I get back.”

They didn’t laugh, though, keeping their jaw set as they stared straight ahead.

“Damari...” I drawled, “is something wrong?”

“You need a pilot,” they said.

Slowing down, I cocked my head at them.

“Yes, and I can find one in headquarters,” I said. “You should go home and get some sleep.”

They stopped short, nearly making me trip over myself, before meeting my eyes with the fiercest and most determined look I’d ever seen on them in place.

“You need a *good* pilot,” they said.

“Yes...” I said. “Just like you need rest-”

“Zaeden.”

My name, spoken by someone who rarely said it, snapped my mouth shut.

“You’re taking me with you,” they said, daring me to deny them. “I can be useful to you, and I don’t give a shit if I have to wait outside while you’re conducting your business. Take me with you.”

Oh, wow... Damari had never been this assertive with me. Bossy? Sure. Secure with their in-your-face attitude? Always. But telling me exactly what they wanted with no question of whether I’d refuse them? Never.

Licking my lips, I said, “You’ll have to sleep during the flight.”

“Obviously,” Damari said with an eye roll.

“Then... ok,” I said. “Thank you.”

With a snort, Damari brushed past me while beckoning for me to follow.

“Yeah, whatever, LV. Let’s go.”

Feena met us outside the entrance to headquarters.

“What’s with the summons, little brother?” she said. “I was busy.”

“And I’m sorry about tearing you away from your task,” I said, “but this is where I’m going next. Figured you’d want to come.”

I waved my location’s coordinates her way, and when she saw them, Feena’s eyes popped wide before she shot them my way.

“You’ve been summoned?” she asked with all of the world’s horror in her voice.

Summoned? What was that supposed to mean?

Frowning at her, I said, “No. I need to ask your friends a question, and since they don’t accept messages or direct connections...”

I trailed off as Feena scowled.

“The Chosen are *not* my friends, just... associates, if you have to use a label,” she said, “and what sort of question are you asking them? You’re not requesting a favor from them, are you?”

Waving off Feena’s suspicions, I stepped around her to head inside.

“Spare me. I’ve already heard about what happens to people who speak with the Chosen,” I said. “I don’t give it much credence. Look at how often I’ve asked you for a favor without a problem!”

“She’s Chosen?” Damari sputtered behind me.

When I glanced back at them with a raised eyebrow, they tightly closed their mouth, although they kept their eyes fixed on my sister.

“I’m not like them, though,” she said. “Right now, I’m relatively unimportant. My time to shine—if that’s what you want to call it—won’t come until much later. Talking to people who are more relevant to the present moment can have severe consequences, and Mother Time help you if you have to speak with *her*.”

I transferred the incredulous look that I’d had for Damari to Feena.

“Her?”

Flapping a hand, Feena said, “It’s not important. She probably won’t be at base, rarely is, but the point remains. This is a bad idea. Unless you have a compelling reason for it?”

Stopping at a lift, I input a floor destination, never taking my eyes off of my sister.

“I have a compelling reason,” I said. “Are you coming or not?”

Heaving a sigh, Feena hung her head.

“I’ll come with you, of course,” she said. “Don’t know how much help I’ll be, though. I can’t discuss anything about the Chosen unless I’ve gotten approval for it first.”

That was unfortunate. Oh, well.

“Then, you can make introductions for me,” I said. “Come on, Feena. You’re an intelligent woman. I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to help.”

When I stuck my tongue out at her, Feena swatted at me, and laughing, I avoided the blow, stepping into the lift.

Once we were in a strike ship, Damari didn’t let me settle into a seat in the back.

“Would you sit with me for this flight? Please?” they asked. “I could use the company.”

Which was how I found myself sitting up front while Lake Sonis rushed beneath us. A few minutes ago, Damari had curled up in their chair before falling into a deep sleep, complete with drool and snoring, and for a while, I’d watched them, marveling at the strange picture of peace and trouble that they were presenting. I wasn’t sure what sort of bad dream had their face scrunched up like they were in pain, but I wished I could make it better for them, even if waking them up seemed like a bad idea.

I should probably join them in sleep. For the last day or so, my eyes had been swimming in acid, and everything about me was *so sluggish*, but any time I’d tried to relax or drift away since boarding, something had yanked me back to the waking world. I suspected it might have to do with the complex bundle that I’d delayed with tackling since Sanya had started this disaster. It certainly

felt like my many sleepless nights in the months after I'd broken Pheniks' trust.

Hell, how had I let my emotional state get so out of control again? This was nothing like the barely managed chaos that I'd enjoyed for most of my life, instead steadily getting worse with every passing day and new challenge that I must face. It was almost, *almost* overwhelming.

In the end, I had to start a dream sequence. While not as restful as natural sleep, using one of them would be better for me than staying awake for the flight.

Damari woke me up as we were making a final approach to the Chosen's base. Below us, the sickly grass and barren rock of the Eastern Reaches had given way to the foothills of the Barasgami Mountains, and nestled between those rounded peaks was a facility similar to many others across Lutov, save for a single detail.

"Is that a *galnuka* around the building?" Damari asked.

It was, although this one was much shorter than most were. Instead of reaching into the heavens—as it should—it rose only a few meters above the building's roof, but despite that, a blue mesh of lasers and fluorescent particles separated the Chosen's base from the world.

"I hope you can contact these people, LV, because there's no way in hell I'm getting through that," Damari said, "and they've placed it so close to the walls that I can't go over it to make a landing. I may be a decent pilot but..."

They shrugged while I narrowed my eyes at our view. Why would the Chosen need a defense like this, considering how secretive they were about their very existence?

A knock on the door that separated us from the back had me granting clearance to Feena, letting her join us. I probably should have let Damari do that. Deciding who was in the front of a strike ship was a pilot's prerogative, and I'd just ignored that custom.

My friend was acting extremely sluggish, though, as if not fully awake yet. Drooped in their seat, they swiped at the air with hands that looked like they weighed far too much, but when they noticed my concerned look, they shook their head with a sloppy grin.

"Keep going," Feena told them. "They know we're coming, so the *galnuka* should drop right about... now."

As she'd said, the laser wall flickered out of existence while a hangar door opened in the wall behind it, and Damari brought us in to land with their face drawn into grim lines. Not that I could blame them for their unease. We were entering potentially hostile territory.

"Stay in the strike ship," I said. "Be ready to go at a moment's notice."

"You've got it, LV," Damari said.

Twisting to my feet, I patted the back of Damari's chair and followed Feena into the hangar.

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