

Chapter 63: Aren't Coincidences Fun?

When my alarm dragged me to wakefulness, I groggily silenced it, struggling to remember where I was or why someone's arm was hanging over me.

Someone's arm...

With a sharp inhale, I stopped myself from any sudden movement, and all the while, every glow-infused moment from last night trickled into my brain. That wasn't a stranger pressed against my back. It was Leski.

Holy hell, I had no memory of falling asleep last night. I'd closed my eyes and entered dreamland, which had never happened to me before, but... I rather liked it.

As noiselessly as I could, I rolled toward Leski, biting my lip to keep from laughing once I'd faced her. Her mouth was half-open with a wet spot on the pillow beneath it, and an unguarded look had taken hold of her face. Even with this, a furious kernel of warmth burned in my chest at the sight of her, and biting my lip, I brushed an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

What were we now? Partners? We weren't well enough acquainted to call each other that, I didn't think, but I wanted to know her more.

So, were we dating? Saying that felt strange when I was supposed to act as her guardian now. Although... in essence, that simply meant I was keeping an eye on her and nothing more.

I'd consider the question as the day progressed. For now, however, I had somewhere to be, somewhere I'd dreamed of visiting for years.

When I rolled out of bed, my body reminded me of how much it hated me. Wincing, I pressed a hand to my side, even as I caught my woozy stumble on the nightstand.

Fuck rapid regeneration drugs. Fuck the circumstances that had made Korix hurt me this badly.

Taking a shaky breath, I straightened, doing my best not to stumble as I shuffled out of my room. After a quick shower, I was out the door, leaving a note for Leski about where I'd be and when I expected to be back.

It was early enough that Xygek's walkways weren't too crowded, so I didn't use one of Korix's skycruisers for the trip, even if that would have been better for the healing process. When in the city, I'd always enjoyed using public transportation over a private vehicle. It was slower but much

less isolating. The high Stratus kid in me would always see visiting the city as a chance to mingle with the diverse people of Lutov.

On my long shuttle ride, I checked whether Pheniks had replied to my message from last night. I found nothing, but that was typical for him. He had trouble with replying to messages, especially when he needed to confirm a meeting.

Feena's silence was more concerning. For a moment, I toyed with the idea that *shukusen* Alezand or a House Cerullis member had gone after my sister. Should I check on her?

No. Feena was more than capable of handling herself. She didn't need my concern.

After disembarking from the shuttle, I wandered to a quaint café a few platforms over. Stepping inside, I scanned tables until I found Pheniks and chuckled under my breath.

All of him was jittery, including his foot, jumping beneath the table, and his fork, tapping on its surface. Occasionally, he waved at nothing, probably working through his array.

I was glad he'd come.

When I slid into the chair opposite him, a menu flashed into my array, and I made my selections from it, smirking at my brother's glower.

"It's good to see you, Phen," I said. "Have you already eaten?"

"I have. An hour ago," Pheniks snapped. "Why am I here? This better not be a prank."

Wincing, I said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to make you wait. I was sleeping off some potent RRDs."

Closing the menu, I folded my hands on the table, cocking my head at my brother's sudden stillness.

"Are you ok?" he asked.

Oh. Duh.

"I am now," I said with a crooked grin.

"Good, I suppose," he said. "Mind telling me why I'm here? I hope it's something quick. I need to get back to headquarters. Someone's sure to have noticed my absence by now."

"Don't worry about that. Our grandmother will smooth things over with Arion," I said. "This won't affect your bid for Zan's First Stratus position. In fact, it might help you."

Pheniks' frantic motion slowed down a little.

"How so?" he asked.

“Hang on. Let me have a bite first,” I said.

A drone floated my breakfast in front of me, and I happily hummed as I spooned scrambled eggs into my mouth, followed by a sip of bitter caf. Lowering the mug to the table, I cracked my knuckles.

“Ok. Short answer to your question? I need your help. The long answer requires an explanation,” I said. “Do you remember how something interrupted your House naming ceremony years ago? Yeah, that was my fault. Sorry.”

I continued with the story, censoring it when required and pausing for brief food breaks. I knew I had Pheniks hooked when he leaned on the table with an avid gleam in his eyes, but I didn’t stop once he was mine. He’d need every detail if he was to help. The tale took close to an hour to complete, and when I fell silent, Pheniks turned inward.

“Intelligent beings other than humans on our planet,” he said to himself.

I let him process for a few minutes before shifting.

“Will you help me?” I quietly asked.

Jerking free of his thoughts, Pheniks gave me a funny look.

“Zae, I’d have helped if you’d needed me to—I don’t know—fight some rebels or something, and you know how much I hate fighting. Why wouldn’t I help with this?” he said. “I had to make sure that your request wouldn’t hurt my House first.”

I... hadn’t considered the fact that my brother was a member of Zan when contacting him. It had never crossed my mind.

“I wouldn’t ask you to betray your House,” I said. “I’m only interested in the safety of Lutov as a whole.”

The individual Houses, including Kolb, could go fuck themselves.

Shrugging, Pheniks said, “I didn’t think you would, but for years, we’ve had limited contact. I know it’s the best you can do, but... I had to be safe, ok?”

“Fair enough,” I said. “Thanks for coming when I needed you.”

“No problem.”

Grinning, Pheniks lunged forward to slap the tabletop.

“So. The Library,” he said. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know,” I said, motioning for the nearby drones to start their cleanup, “but I have directions to it, so let’s find out together, shall we?”

We left the café at a run, but as we came closer to the site of my provided coordinates, I slowed down. Pheniks threw repeated, concerned glances at me, and the jostling of the people around us got steadily rougher, but when I saw where my array was taking me, I stopped short while my mouth went dry. I knew why these coordinates had seemed familiar yesterday.

“Is something the matter?” Pheniks asked.

“No,” I faintly said. “I haven’t been here in a while, is all.”

Shoving through the crowd, I entered the bar in front of us with my guts clenching on themselves. As the door slid shut behind us, the patrons inside stared, but I hardly noticed, focusing my attention on a table near the back. I did note when Pheniks started shifting in place, though. In answer to it, I met the calculating gazes facing us and said.

“He’s with me.”

Our entrance together should have made that obvious, but these weren’t the type of people who made assumptions.

Quiet as a mouse, Pheniks followed me with his shoulders nearly touching his ears. When I stopped at the bar, a tumbler slid down it toward me. A whiskey sour. She’d remembered.

“Hello, Rane,” I said.

The hollowness of my voice dragged Pheniks out of his nervous huddle while a frown deepened on his face.

“Hello, Zaeden.”

Rane looked good, not that I should have expected anything less. Five years might have come and gone since I’d last visited her establishment, but a span like that was nothing in Lutov.

Placing a drink on the bar top, she glanced significantly at the one I was holding, and I lifted it with numb fingers.

“To all those lost,” Rane belted out.

In the bar’s quiet, the toast had been deafening, and at it, glasses clinked behind me while voices repeated her words. I mirrored the rate of Rane’s lifted tumbler to her mouth, taking a sip from mine before resting it on the bar top’s tile.

“I’m sorry about Fyester,” she said.

Sucking in a breath, I looked away while blinking at the sudden burn in my eyes. How did she know about that? Also, would the reminder of him always hurt this badly?

“So emotive for someone in your position. Why aren’t you in mission mode?”

Whipping my head to Rane, I narrowed my eyes at her. Did she know?

“Should I be right now?” I asked.

Raising an eyebrow, Rane said, “Shouldn’t you always be?”

“My opinion on that should be obvious,” I said. “Are you my contact?”

If she knew who I was, I didn’t want to draw attention to it or examine what that meant for our previous interactions. I couldn’t let her distract me, especially not with a debate over how the *Lokke Vitras* or their replacement should behave.

Rane crossed her arms.

“Contact for what?” she asked.

Why was she being difficult with this? I didn’t see the point.

Sighing, I said, “You *know* what. Don’t make me speak it out loud, in front of all these people.”

I’d rather not kill anyone today, and I got the feeling that the secrecy of The Library’s location played a part in keeping Lutov safe. Given that, I didn’t want to gamble on the *shukusenth’s* reaction to people overhearing this conversation.

...Maybe they’d just have the memory of it erased from those people’s arrays. Yes, that seemed much more likely, if still unideal. Hell, I needed to stop jumping to the worst conclusions about things.

“What about him?”

Rane jerked her head toward Pheniks, who was watching our conversation with curiosity.

“He’s here to help me,” I said. “Do you have a problem with that?”

With a half-smile, Rane shook her head.

“Talira shared the situation. I know you have special dispensation to share this secret as you see fit,” she said. “All right. Follow me.”

She led us deeper into the bar, toward where I’d gotten thoroughly drunk in years past. As we passed the table that I’d once claimed in this place, I didn’t pause, merely brushing my fingers over it while we moved along. If the ghosts of two men laughed on the other side of it, I didn’t notice.

When Rane turned into a supply closet, I restrained a nervous chuckle, relieved that she hadn't taken us to her office. If I'd missed a secret entrance to a hidden library in that room, I'd never have forgiven myself, considering how much time I'd spent there.

In the back of the closet, Rane approached a plastered wall without slowing down, but rather than bouncing off of it as I'd expected, she strode through it. A hologram?

As I followed, encountering no resistance as well, I nodded. A hologram.

Beyond this, our surroundings looked more like the entrance to a hidden secret. A short, dark entryway ended in a heavy door with bolts across it. Rane waved toward this, probably exchanging her designator with it, and with a clunk, it made the way clear for us. Stepping to the side, she waved us into a chamber with a single item in it.

"A beacon?" Pheniks said, circling the item. "Is The Library not in Xygek?"

With a smirk, Rane said, "Smart man."

Striding to us, she spread her fingers, hovering them over the beacon's ring.

"A warning. When you touch this, it will take you to a spot outside of the place you seek," she said. "Since the beacons here and there exist in a closed loop, you won't stop at the Terminal, which can be disorienting if you don't expect it."

"I can imagine," I said. "Are you not joining us?"

Rane slapped a hand to her mouth, barely covering a tittering laugh.

"I may be this place's guardian, but that doesn't mean I enjoy visiting it," she said. "Spend a couple hundred years shackled to a single location and you lose interest in it, no matter how fascinating it might be."

With that, she hurried to leave us, although she paused by the door.

"Stay as long as you like, but I'd recommend that you keep track of the time. Remember, you can always return here," she said. "When you're finished for the day, use the beacon on the other side to come home."

"Thank you, Rane," I said.

Dipping her head to me, she said, "Of course."

In a dozen heartbeats, Pheniks and I were alone, grinning at each other, if for different reasons. I couldn't wait for a wealth of bound books to surround me, and Pheniks would soon have access to all the information he could ever want. I didn't know about him, but thinking about this had giddiness bubbling inside of me, pushing everything I'd incurred while in the bar to the side.

“You ready?” I asked.

He nodded, and we touched the beacon’s ring.

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