

Chapter 64: Research: A Necessary Part of the Job

When I could think again, I frantically patted my body down while a buzz muffled my hearing. I had no memory of the trip here, which was *strange*. The ringing in my ears lifted enough for me to hear Pheniks coughing. Once I'd found him, I stumbled to rub his back.

Damn, this disorientation wasn't helping with the dizziness that had afflicted me all morning, making the world spin fast enough to upset my stomach. I barely kept my gorge down for the heartbeats it took for my view to stabilize.

"That was worse than normal," Pheniks gasped as he straightened.

"You don't say," I said.

I was only half-listening to him. As soon as I'd fought through my dazed state, I'd started scanning our surroundings, and I was... lost.

Really fucking lost. Where were we?

The beacon sat on a platform of limestone blocks, one that narrowed into a path toward a structure in the distance. To either side of this, white sand stretched until it hit a shimmering, translucent wall, much like the barriers wrapped around Xygek's towers. Beyond that barrier lay murky darkness. Some light existed, enough to outline vague shapes, but it wasn't enough to make out their details. That's what arrays were for, though.

After mine had made some adjustments, I could distinguish the floating blobs as fish and waving ripples as plant life, and after calling up a map, I clicked my tongue. We were at the bottom of Lake Voxmore.

"Holy fucking shit, Zae," Pheniks said.

I'd meant to make a snarky joke, hoping to distract myself from how much water surrounded us, but then, I looked where his eyes were pointed: toward the structure. When I viewed it with my enhanced sight, I couldn't help but join my brother in his awe.

Without a word, the two of us moved toward it, and what had seemed like a long hike from the platform passed in no time. When we stopped with our heads tilted back, I was gaping, just like Pheniks, and almost beneath my notice, I reached for my little brother's hand, squeezing it like I had when we were kids.

“Zae...” he said. “Is that...?”

“I think so,” I said.

The building in front of us was all smooth, curved lines with neon panels traced along every edge. These graceful lines looped and whirled until they grazed the barrier above, convoluting to the point that they made the eye ache. Even so, it was a sight to behold, fluidity incarnate.

Until it wasn't.

A shimmer ran over the structure while different images fought to superimpose each other. Two buildings, opposite in nature, occupied the same space, but when that struggle resolved, one defeated the other, and we were left with an obsidian tower that had spikes jutting from it. After a few seconds, it blurred and once more settled into something else.

Throughout our stunned glide to it, the structure had repeated this pattern, and not once had the same building appeared twice. Not once had what we'd seen matched Lutovish architecture in the slightest.

It was something I'd only read about in stories: a building made by those from beyond the stars.

“Holy fucking shit,” Pheniks repeated.

I thoroughly agreed with him this time, though. Any alien artifacts found on this side of the Tainted Land's demarcation line went to Houses Zan or Cerullis for study before subsequent slugging. Nothing we'd found to date, however, matched this.

“How do we get inside?” I asked.

Glancing askance at me, Pheniks snatched his hand out of mine, rubbing it.

“Do we still *want* to go inside?” he asked.

No. I would much rather run, screaming, back to Rane, but Talira had sincerely believed that I'd find useful information about the Ancients here. If I learned something we could use against *them*, not only would I potentially save hundreds of lives, but I might get Korix out of stasis sooner.

Days ago, I'd told him that I'd step in front of an energy bolt to save his life. Could I brave something that set my mind shrieking if it would have the same result?

“Want has no bearing,” I said. “I have to try, but I don't expect you to do the same, Phen. I won't think any less of you if you decide to go home.”

“Damnit, now I can't leave,” Pheniks said before squaring his shoulders. “Ok. Any ideas, or are we sprinting headlong at it?”

“Mm.”

Squinting, I watched the building once more shift before pointing ahead.

“Maybe that?” I asked.

Through each of the building’s changes, only one thing had stayed the same. At its base, an angled hatch, opal in color, persisted, always blending into the structure around it.

“Of course. For this to deserve the name *The Library*, it would need access to every possible source of information, right?” Pheniks said. “This building and its planar cousins would need an anchor point if they were to stabilize in our reality.”

“Ah. Yeah, that makes sense.”

When Pheniks whipped his head toward me, I rolled my eyes.

“What? I did almost as well as you in rotations with Houses Zan and Cerullis, remember? I don’t understand the sciences as naturally as you do, though. Over the last eleven years, keeping up with advances in those fields has been a pain,” I said. “Plus, understanding you and your random leaps of logic has gotten a *lot* easier since we were kids.”

Huffing, Pheniks said under his breath, “My genius of a brother.”

He started for the hatch, and shaking my head, I hurried after him.

When we reached it, we glanced at one another before taking hold of its handles, one apiece. On contact, we didn’t explode into chunks or turn into gibbering morons, so I yanked on my hatch door while Pheniks did the same, and we entered *The Library*.

I could swear that the outside of this place couldn’t contain everything we found inside, but there it was, rows upon rows of bookshelves, stretching so far away from us that I couldn’t see the opposite wall. In front of me, a wrought-iron staircase reached for the heavens and the earth’s core, and while I couldn’t see what lay beneath my feet, the balconies above us were visible, ringing the walls until they faded into shadows.

Every ten stories or so, a mirage-like arch of unknown purpose stood out from the shelved books around it while nearby portions of the balconies extended into the open air. Light orbs hung like stars throughout the space overhead, dipping to a spot just above the shelves on our level. At the end of each row, arrows and numbers indicated different subjects’ locations, and a pedestal, just inside the entrance, held a monitor, one that presumably explained how the numbering system worked.

Observing this vast repository of knowledge, I was dwarfed by the splendor of it, of course, but something else also squeezed my throat closed, shaking a word out of me.

“Shit.”

How were we supposed to find anything specific in this mountain of information?

Pheniks didn't seem to have heard me, tapping on his lips with narrowed eyes.

Turning to me, he asked, "A pocket dimension, do you think?"

And I burst into laughter. If anyone could make the connections needed to pull an answer out of this mess, it was my brother.

"Where do we start?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"Lutov's founding?" he said. "Maybe we can find something about the research Cerullis' Founder did on the Ancients. You mentioned Niklaus talking about that, right?"

"You think Asher Cerullis found a way to neutralize the Ancients?" I asked.

If only it could be that easy.

"Doubtful," Pheniks said, as if agreeing with me, "but to research a test subject like the Ancients, you have to gather information about it first. So, his experiments and therefore, Lutov's Founding seem like a good place to start, yes?"

I shrugged.

"Fair enough."

Neither of us suggested splitting up. Once we located the right shelves, we headed for either end of that row and got to work.

I measured how much time had passed by the number of books I'd skimmed. With my array highlighting anything of note, I finished about three of them in an hour, depending on their length.

Pheniks and I moved through row after row, always meeting in the middle with a headshake. It was infuriating. I glanced through so many books that I'd never heard of before, and in them all, I encountered passing references to Asher Cerullis maybe a dozen times. Not once did I find a reference to the Ancients.

I knew *they* were real. My occasional stumbles into the shelves served as a testament to the wounds that *their* Favored had laid open on me, or at least, I thought Korix had hurt me at *their* bidding. He could have been working on his own.

Shaking my head, I made a face. What was I doing? I knew what I'd seen. Every time I thought about it, I could hear Korix screaming in pain again, like it was *still* happening. Why was I doubting him like this?

When the hour crept toward midnight, I gathered Pheniks from his fascinated study on the cultures of the pre-Founding nations. He jabbered about that throughout our trek to the beacon, wildly gesturing at times, and worn out, I barely kept from snapping at him to shut up. He couldn't help it if he'd gone manic about a new and interesting subject.

One disorienting trip to Rane's bar later and I was *done*. I just wanted to go home and sleep but...

But home meant Leski and the conundrums associated with her.

Pheniks and I entered the front of the bar, and two steps into it, something barreled into my legs. I went through an increasingly wild set of steps to stay on my feet, and once I was stable again, I irritably noted the hidden snickers of the bar's patrons before glancing at my recent stumbling block.

A ball of black fur gazed up at me with a furiously wagging tail. Ace.

Dropping into a crouch, I clutched my dog to me, barely restraining a sob. Oh, Mother Time. I couldn't break down. Not here.

Pulling free of his fur, I swiped my hands along his sides, doing my best to stay gentle with that. Hell, why was I so frantic about making sure he was ok?

"Hey, buddy," I said. "Did you miss me?"

"He certainly did."

Standing over me, Feena had her hands on her hips, shining a faint smile at me. Why was I not surprised that she and Ace were here?

"He's been whining up a storm since he came to me, the little bastard," she said. "I couldn't take it anymore."

"Thank you for dealing with him," I said.

Waving a hand in dismissal, Feena said, "It was no trouble. Now, give me a hug."

Rising from my crouch, I bent over Ace to do as she'd asked, and comfort brushed against me, asking for permission to enter. Before I could invite it in, Feena pulled away. She waved at Pheniks, and grimacing, he joined us.

With my siblings around me, comfort took root, and the greatest sense of peace that I'd felt in a while spread through my body. Holding them close, I rocked Pheniks and Feena back and forth, and as he ran circles around us, Ace's tail whipped against my legs.

We were together again. Nothing could stop us.

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