

Chapter 67: Why Am I Alive?

Throughout my life, I'd speculated about what the Collective would be like, but who wouldn't do that? Given what little we knew about it, who wouldn't, on occasion, think about one's existence after death?

From what little we did know, one's identity was incorporated into the vast collection of the deceased after death. What did that actually mean, though? What would it be like to exist as a near insignificant piece of a whole?

Not like this, I'd wager.

I felt like shit. Even half-awake as I was, I knew this, and Mother Time, please. Say this wasn't what death was like. Sure, I might deserve unending pain for the horrible things I'd done, but that didn't mean I was willing to accept it.

When I managed to open my eyes, only to be greeted by a bright light, I couldn't stop from tearing up, so relieved was I. For a long while, I just breathed, enjoying the rush of air through my nose, while assessing my surroundings.

Someone was talking nearby, but something—a closed door, maybe?—had muffled them to where I couldn't understand what they were saying. Right now, I didn't care to change that. There was a weight on my lap, but besides those two differences, everything was consistent with the many clinics that I'd woken up in over the years.

The smell of sterilized air and RRDs. The orange color in the bag, hanging over my head. The itchy fabric of the loose gown I was wearing and the blanket draped over my legs. The ridiculous soreness and entirely exhausted state of my body.

Not that I should complain. With how wrecked I'd been, I didn't know how I was alive. Rightfully, I should be dead.

Like Damari was.

From out of nowhere, the last few moments of my friend's life rushed through me. Every second of it was as sharp and clear as the first time around, and when I once more turned to help them, getting greeted by their empty body instead, I gasped, blinking at a tiled ceiling. The weight on my legs shifted, but I hardly noticed that, too caught in the memory.

Then, it was over, and I could no longer deny what I'd long been resisting. It didn't matter that every cell in my muscles was crying from fatigue. Shaking almost as badly as I had in the moment before I'd collapsed, I rolled onto my side, curling up on myself, and *wept*.

I knew people were here, witnesses to my breakdown, but that was ok. These moments, ones that Talira would have wiped from their arrays, were the only times when I could process the emotional fallout of the trauma that I endured, not that I'd ever have enough time. Recovery was not a ten-minute procedure.

Still, I did what I could here. Here, it was safe and far distant from the people I loved. I might lean on them to stay stable, but when it came to the worst parts of my life—*Engulfing self-hatred. Rage at my circumstances. Despair that I'd ever escape. Surety that I was doomed to repeat the cycle. I'd never break it. Never, ever. Fucking hell, my friend was dead, and it was my fault!*—I wanted them nowhere near me. They could never know about the pain that I kept buried, left so far below the surface that most of the time, I forgot about it. It would only hurt them, and that was the last thing I wanted.

So, here, where they weren't present, I sobbed into a fist that was wrapped in a blanket, taking ragged gasps when I must, and wished that I could scream the aching pulse in my throat away. It pushed against the back of my mouth but would never break through that barrier, stuck inside as it had always been.

Someone laid a hand on me. If the medics could overcome their shock over my vulnerable state, those kind people sometimes did this, and I soaked up their provided comfort. This time, it was enough to free my voice.

"Why? Why them and not me?" I gasped. "They- they were good, and I'm not. I can't. I can't. I can't."

I repeated those two words, and the hand that was on me rubbed my side while its owner made shushing noises. Another person ran their fingers through my hair. They did it in just the right way, calming me down fast, and something about that...

Whatever thought I might have had about that was quickly drowned beneath my pain.

For I didn't know how long, I was stuck like this, alternating between bawling like a child and babbling in stream of consciousness. A lot of what I said involved Damari, but some truly awful things got tossed into the mix too, things that elicited gasps from my observers. At the moment, though, I truly did not give a fuck about them.

Then, a door opened, and I knew it was time to pull myself together. That was how it always went. After a truly harrowing mission, Talira gave me time to unleash everything that I held deep inside, although she'd granted me much more of it than usual this time. That was... strange.

Once that time was up, however, she came into the room and said:

"How long have you lot let him lose it like this?!"

That... wasn't what she typically said. What-?

“The better question is why you’re in here,” Korix said. “I told you I’d let you know when he was ready to talk.”

Damn. That had sounded angry. I hadn’t heard that tone from him in-

Wait. Korix. *My* Korix.

He was here.

Suddenly, all of me was cold as I considered the next logical question. Who else was around me?

“You, better than most, should know that he can’t let himself cry, not unless he’s safe and more importantly, far away from us,” Talira said. “The longer you let this go on without him knowing you’re here, the worse it will be when he finds out. Also, in case you’ve forgotten, the longer he keeps his control lowered, the harder it’ll be when he has to raise it again.”

The hand on my side curled, which dug fingernails into my skin.

“As you said, I do know better than most,” Korix said. “I know that when I was him, you never gave me enough time to heal, always ordering me out the door before I was ready for it. I know that it was a huge factor in how I broke toward the end. And I know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I’m not letting you do that to Zaeden. You may be the *shukusen* of my House, Talira, but that won’t stop me from telling you when you’re making a mistake.”

Oh... shit. He *was* mad. On the rare occasions when this happened, it never ended well unless I intervened in time. So, puffing out a sigh, I sat upright, wincing the whole while, and folded my hands in my lap. Maybe if I kept my gaze pinned on them, I could stay in control.

“I’m right here,” I said. “Stop talking about me like I’m not.”

Then, I made myself raise my eyes, and my breath caught. They were all here. My partners, on either side of the bed. Baely, sitting at its foot with tear tracks on their face. Talira, by the door. Pheniks, lounging in the chair by the room’s only table. Feena, leaning on a wall with her arms crossed. Even my parents, although they were as far away from me as they could get.

For a moment, I saw Damari’s ghost among them, and the burn of this nearly dissolved me into an emotional puddle again. Somehow, I held it together, keeping my focus on my family. They were looking at me with similar expressions: relief mixed with unease, although on my parents’ faces, I found a tinge of the fear that I’d thought had long been forgotten.

Hell.

“So, how narrowly did I escape death this time?” I said with a nervous smile. “Must have been close to have everyone here at once.”

With her face souring, Talira opened her mouth to answer until Feena briefly squeezed her shoulder.

“Maybe we should avoid that subject while we have an unHoused in the room,” she said.

Every eye darted to Baely, who was swaying in place with a shaky grin. Did she know about Damari yet? Knowing Leski and Korix, they’d probably told her by now, and... I’d probably let it slip when I’d been breaking down. How could she be so calm, knowing they were- they were dead?

“Who, me?” Baely said. “But I already know what happened!”

Hopping to the floor, they started pacing, wagging a finger as if lecturing us.

“After landing near Xygek, *per* died as an emergency response team was closing on him. They tried reviving him, and when that failed, he went into stasis so the medics could pump him full of RRDs. He went through three rounds of stasis interspersed by time on life support, letting the RRDs work their magic, but even after that, he wasn’t responding. Everyone was fairly certain that he was gone, although another attempt at revival was made. If that third try hadn’t miraculously worked, the medics would have let his poor body expire, despite orders otherwise. You should take better care of yourself, dad.”

That last sentence had been the only one to have emotion in it, leaving Baely’s voice trembling, but everything else had been spoken with clinical detachment. Once she was finished, the rest of us stared at her without a word, which made her roll her eyes.

“What?” she said. “While the rest of you were freaking out, I reviewed *per*’s chart. I wanted to know how I should handle a situation like this when it happens again.”

When, not if. Oh... my heart.

Reaching for Baely, I said. “Sweetie-”

They pushed my hands back down, meeting my eyes.

“Don’t, dad. I’ll be fine,” they said. “You need to work on doing the same so I don’t have to worry about you.”

Chewing on my lip, I watched them for a moment, judging the veracity of their words, before nodding.

“Ok,” I said.

With that established, I collapsed into the pillows, but that didn’t stop Leski from moving behind our daughter. With tears in her eyes, she hugged their shoulders, rubbing them.

Time to move on.

“What I’m hearing is that I should be dead, but I already knew that. How wonderful it is that I’m not,” I said, “but we should focus on what’s important. Judging by my father’s presence here, I’m guessing that I brought you something useful, *shukusen*.”

My body's report that I was toxin-free confirmed that guess, but that hadn't been the point of what I'd said. I was hoping that Talira would let us handle business rather than dwell on my conversation with Baely or Korix's near insubordination. Based on how much she'd relaxed, I'd say I had nothing to fear in that regard.

"It was incredibly useful. With it, Misah and the others quickly formulated an antidote, and after we'd distributed it to those who needed it most, we began further production. We'll have more antidotes on hand soon," she said. "Oh! You've been out for a week, by the way. In case you were curious."

Like I wouldn't have checked the date and time as soon as I'd woken up.

With a headshake, I said, "So, we've solved our initial problem, which means Sanya no longer has leverage over us. Considering that, she must have been declared a fugitive. Have the *shukusenth* decided what they want done with her and her collaborators?"

Beside me, Korix stiffened, but it was slight enough that only Talira and I should have noticed it. Mother Time, I wanted to take his hand. The only reasons I didn't were my own body's tension and how much it would upset him. He didn't like it when I noticed his discomfort.

Talira seemed to share our unease. Making a face, she shifted her weight to her back foot, a defensive move all told.

"We shouldn't get into this now, Zae-zae," she said. "You could use more rest first, and we could *definitely* hold this conversation in a more comfortable setting."

She was right. I knew she was right. So, why was I lunging forward, barely keeping myself from snarling at her?

"Forgive me, my *shukusen*, but sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov overall. That's the *Lokke Vitras'* mantra, is it not?" I said. "Give me the information I need to do my damn job. Please."

Surprisingly, Talira didn't follow her typical routine. Usually, after I'd reminded her that she needed to be a *shukusen* before she was my grandmother, she got incredibly cranky, but this time, she pursed her lip, hugging herself.

Glancing at Korix, she softly said, "You see?"

Korix's face twisted so strongly that even a stranger might see the change in his expression, and after a deep inhale, he got to his feet before marching out of the room. Wide-eyed, Leski looked to me for help—Korix didn't usually get this emotional—but I had nothing to give her. After a moment spent waiting, she hurried after him, dragging Baely behind her.

As soon as the door had slid shut, Pheniks said, "Wow. That was heartless, Zae."

I shrugged—how else was I supposed to respond?—and this had Feena clicking her tongue.

“In case you haven’t noticed, Zae’s in mission mode,” she said. “He fell into it shortly after comforting Baely.”

“Which I don’t understand,” my father said. “How does someone go from catatonic because of a breakdown to-?”

He waved a hand over me, which I raised an eyebrow at. Really? I’d just had a brush with death, and that was the first thing he said to me?

My relatively limited change in expression must have unnerved my father because he shivered, which exhausted the minimal patience I had when with my parents.

“If I’ve scared you again, you could always leave,” I coolly said. “You’ve done it often enough before.”

Flinching, my father turned away from me, and I ignored the shock on my siblings’ faces, returning my attention to Talira.

“Will you give me what I need or not?” I asked.

Sighing, Talira deflated.

“The *shukusenth* want Sanya brought to us before we make a decision about her,” she said. “Her collaborator’s fates have been left in your hands, but as you track them down, you’ll have to keep in mind that they’ve been declared enemies of the state.”

Which would make my options for dealing with them limited. I could exile them, if I was feeling kind. Otherwise...

“Most of Cerullis’ members have scattered to the wind,” Talira continued. “They’re to be considered Sanya’s collaborators, but a central core of the House has stayed in Xygek. They claim that they had no knowledge of their *shukusen*’s machinations.”

Where had I heard that before?

“Do you believe them?” I asked.

Rolling her eyes, Talira said, “Hardly. Most of them were alive when Alezand drove Cerullis off the rails. I doubt they could be twice ignorant of something like this, but even still, I’ll leave them be, letting them operate with minimal oversight. They’re part of my plan to deal with their House.”

By the table, Pheniks shot upright in his seat.

“Deal with?” he said. “At the last assembly, we never decided how we’d handle Cerullis. You can’t make a move against them without our approval, Talira.”

Patting the air, Talira said, "And I'll do that before starting something irreversible. Right now, I'm just getting my pieces into place."

Mollified, Pheniks sank into his chair, and I cleared my throat.

"Anything else I should know?" I asked.

"Besides what's in the files I'll send you? No, there's nothing else," Talira said. "I still think you should rest another day, though."

Sighing, I threw the sheets off of my legs.

"What would be the point?" I said. "I can rest while on route to my first target. That's assuming you've already sent the lower Strata out scouting for me, of course."

Which let's be honest. She had, just like she'd known as soon as she'd stepped into this room that I'd be getting out of this bed within a quarter-hour.

That didn't mean this was easy for me. No. While swinging my legs over the bed's edge, I had to move in increments. Damn, this mission would be hell for me, in more than one way.

All the while, Feena straightened off of the wall.

"Wait. This mission's parameters," she said before spinning on Talira. "You're sending him out to be an executioner!"

Mother Time, the outrage in her voice! It made me chuckle while the others in the room refused to look her way.

"Yes, sister mine, that's part of the job at times," I said. "Despite everything that Lutov might think, I am *not* a good man. Don't you know this?"

"I-"

That was it from her, though. Hanging her head, Feena stared at the floor while I slowly changed.

Once I was ready, Talira said, "A skycruiser's waiting for you on the roof, but your family's probably on ground level. Will you stop to say goodbye?"

At that, I just laughed. Squaring my shoulder, I exited the room, ignoring every awful thing I was leaving behind me.

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