

# Chapter 70: I'm an Idiot 2

Pheniks was, as usual, ensconced in a nest made of books, and as we came closer, he made room for us to sit. I could barely do so cross-legged, but I followed his lead anyway, wary of mentioning that I'd rather stand. My brother got finicky when he was this deep into a project, and irritating him when he was like this was a bad idea.

"So, since we were having trouble with finding any information on the era of the Founders, I went looking into old mythology," he said. "From before Lutov's Founding old."

He also wasn't one to ease into a topic.

"I figured, what the hell? It's not as if our logical subject choices have worked for us," he continued. "There's some, frankly, laughable stuff in here. Did you know that before Lutov's Founding, people used to believe in all-powerful entities that they called gods? These beings supposedly created and guided reality in what I found to be increasingly ridiculous ways. Can you imagine? Something with consciousness ensuring that *everything in the cosmos* continues as it should? Ha!"

Shaking his head, Pheniks chuckled to himself, which I found hilarious. For someone who harped on keeping an open mind when it came to what science could do, he was being exceptionally intolerant with this subject.

Even still, it wasn't why I was here, so I took a steadying breath.

"Phen?" I said as pleasantly as I could. "The Ancients?"

"Right! Sorry. Some of this is just fascinating..."

He trailed off at the look on my face, clearing his throat.

"I found references to a shadowy organization in these books, one that supposedly manipulated civilizations. It did that by fundamentally changing key people in governing positions. Given that, these references were all listed in books about conspiracy theories, of course," he said, lifting a book to shake it. "Most importantly for us, though, is that the organization was said to have existed since a time lost to history. Sound familiar?"

"It does sound similar to our situation," Feena said.

"Right? I dug into this, focusing on the time around our war with those from beyond the stars," Pheniks said. "Found bunches of interesting information. Apparently, prior to the war, the Houses held almost no power, standing as figureheads for grouping called 'corporations' whose sole interest was to accumulate as much currency as possible to themselves."

Now, that piqued my interest. The Houses hadn't always held dominance?

"That's not what Kirst teaches us," I said.

"I know! Like they never taught us that the pre-Founding nations relied on natural gases for power or how its people found the idea of contraceptives unnatural. They needed hundreds of schools to educate their young. So primitive. It makes me a little ashamed to have come from such a society."

He was diverging, letting his obsession jump him along connections that I'd have an increasingly hard time with following.

"Phen," Feena said before I could, "shadowy organization?"

"What?"

Mother Time, such befuddlement.

"Oh. Yes, yes," Pheniks said. "So, the people of the pre-Founding nations thought of this organization as a joke. Finding any discussion on it was difficult but this guy—"

He lifted another book, peering at its cover.

"Um... James Sullivan. Strange to have two names. I wonder if the Ibisians got the idea for that from this era.

"Anyway, he took a—wait for it—*scientific approach* to studying this organization, and shock and awe! In doing so, he developed a theory that might help his many-times-removed descendants."

Wow. Pheniks really didn't like these pre-Founding nations.

As he paged through his book, I frowned. Something lay in that, something I was missing, but before I could figure out what it was, my brother once more barreled into his lecture.

"Here's what Sullivan had to say," he said before lifting the book in front of his face. "'The hand behind our nation's most baffling decisions, hereafter named the Ancients, has a means of changing a person: their ideology, behavior, everything. I theorize that they achieve this change through the adjustment of a person's hormone regulation, among other things. In other words, the Ancients can manipulate our emotions.'"

That... made sense. It would explain some of the more nonsensical things that Korix had said during his conversation with the thing wearing his body.

Tossing the book to the side, Pheniks spread his arms over the rest of them, lying around him.

"My next step was to research human biology and the health studies completed in those times," he said. "Again, lots of interesting, *completely inaccurate* information here, but my studies eventually landed on something called 'mental disorders'. From what I read, many people in the pre-Founding

era took medicine to keep themselves sane and stable. They had all sorts of names to make their emotional weaknesses more palatable: bipolar disorder, clinical depression, post-traumatic stress disorder. Strange, right?"

I couldn't move. In my own studies, I'd run across the terms that Pheniks had mentioned. I knew what they were, and reading about them had given me comfort.

I wasn't alone! The people who'd suffered as I did might have died thousands of years ago, but they'd *existed*. What Korix and I struggled with every day was a normal, legitimate human condition.

So, hearing my brother deride my comrades in arms... the hurt of it drove straight to the heart of me.

"Anyway, that's how the Ancients get in," Pheniks continued. "I looked into every person suspected of experiencing this organization's influence, and while not all of them had fancy disorders ascribed to them, all of them experienced personality changes after moments of emotional vulnerability."

Oh... Mother Time. Pheniks just wouldn't let up, would he?

Korix had said that he'd served the Ancients since shortly after the Crescent Incident. After a time when his actions, among other circumstances, had led to me murdering Fyester. Had those events distressed him that badly? Was he in this deplorable situation because of his concern for *me*?

"And like Sullivan theorized, once an Ancient has latched onto someone's emotions, *they* have control of that person," Pheniks said. "After all, no matter how much we try to deny them, emotions rule us. We may rise above them at times, but they always win in the end, and in the rare moments when we do manage to defeat them? Well. Emotions are, for the most part, caused by hormones, right? Where are most hormones produced?"

"Lots of places but mostly... the brain," Feena answered. "The control center for every human. The Ancients take hold of that part of us."

Grinning, Pheniks nodded.

"So, when *they* can't control someone via their emotions, the Ancients can always do the same thing in a ridiculous number of other ways," he said. "I believe, however, that people can resist *their* influence, even if *they're* in a person's brain. Doing that keeps *them* from accessing all of the body's functions, but based on what Zae's said, *they* always gain the ability to cause-"

"Pain," I said.

Fyester, Tatum, Korix. Every person who'd been controlled by these... *bastards* flashed before my eyes. Their faces, when in the grip of the Ancients' influence, loomed large in my mind, and oh. I'd be sick.

"Control of the brain," I repeated. "That's why their neural pathways were burned out."

“What now?” Pheniks asked with his eyes gleaming. “Neural pathways?”

I must have forgotten to mention that part to him. Of course he’d latched onto it.

“Have you shared this discovery with Talira?” I asked rather than answering his question.

“Yes...” Pheniks drawled, “and Arion.”

Arion? Why would he-?

What was I thinking? Of course he’d told his *shukusen* about this.

“Good,” I said. “Is there anything else?”

Because I needed to be somewhere else. Anywhere but here.

Frowning, Pheniks said, “Not right now. What were you saying about-?”

“Great job, Phen,” I said. “If you’ll excuse me, I need a moment.”

Numbly, I climbed out of my brother’s haven, and as I hurried down the aisle, his questions chased me until Feena shushed him. Once I was out of sight, I leaned my shoulder against a wall, covering my face. Of all the answers we could have gotten to our questions, why did it have to be this?

“He doesn’t know any better. If he understood how you were struggling, our brother would take back everything he said.”

Feena. She was getting better at soundless movement. I hadn’t heard her coming until she’d almost been on me.

“I know,” I said. “Ignorance is humanity’s greatest enemy.”

She said nothing for a while, leaving Pheniks’ rummaging and muttering as the only disturbance to The Library’s silence.

“What shall we do next, *Lokke Vitras*?” she eventually said.

Chuckling, I pressed my hand harder into my skin. What could we do? What Pheniks had uncovered might be useful for Talira’s efforts with Korix, but how else did it help us? He’d been right, after all. Humans were emotional creatures. How did we defend ourselves against an enemy that infiltrated our ranks like that?

“We return to research,” I said, “and pray to everything that might be holy that we find something *helpful* in this ridiculous place.”

“Where should we start?” Feena asked.

Sighing, I dropped my hand and straightened my posture.

“Phen had luck with his studies on the pre-Founding nations, so we’ll look into their histories again,” I said. “When browsing through that portion of The Library, I noticed more of those awful arches clustered around it. Phen can explore them while we look through books.”

Nodding, Feena said, “Sounds good.”

She started for the closest staircase, but I didn’t move, locked in place by... something. It had hovered on the edge of my awareness since Pheniks had begun his explanation, a detail that I’d forgotten or overlooked. Something to do with the time before Lutov’s Founding. What could it-?

Niklaus. He was a founder.

“SHIT!”

With her foot on a stair, Feena glanced back at me, reversing course when she saw the look on my face, and from the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Pheniks running toward us.

“I’m such a fucking idiot!” I hissed through my teeth.

How much time could I have saved if I’d remembered this earlier? How much time had Niklaus wasted by keeping this knowledge to himself, knowledge that he must have known we needed?

“What’s wrong?” Feena asked as she approached.

“Niklaus,” I growled. “Niklaus is what’s wrong.”

Stopping beside me, Pheniks leaned on his knees, gasping.

“What does he have to do with anything?” he asked.

Snapping my gaze to my brother, I hissed, “He’s a *founder*. I was speaking with him a couple of hours ago.”

“Oh. Huh.”

Rising from his knees, Pheniks leaned away from us, stretching out his back, before marching toward The Library’s exit.

“Well, come on!” he called over his shoulder. “The man won’t interrogate himself, and I certainly can’t do it.”

Mother Time love my brother.

Fiercely smiling, I chased after him with Feena at my side. I *would* get my answers today.