

Chapter 82: A Peek into the Past

“Phen? You here?” I called as Korix and I entered the Library.

As the question echoed back to me, I was hit by a strong sense of déjà vu, probably from my visit here... this morning.

Damn, today had been a long one.

I sent a message to my brother, asking where he was, but also beckoned for Korix to follow me. There was a good chance Pheniks wouldn't respond to me. He was almost at the peak of one of his manic episodes, and when that happened, nothing except his current fixation existed for him. He might not even see my message.

So, I took us to the section of the Library where Pheniks had been spending most of his time. It was up a few floors and tucked away from the balconies. Two of the unnerving arches that led... elsewhere framed a handful of shorter bookcases here. The ethereal blue light in their metal frames aided the scattered orbs nearby in illuminating the shelves and tables between, all of which were covered with displaced books.

Pheniks wasn't here, but still, I sighed in exasperation and understanding when I saw a magnet pinning a sock to one of the arches. A long time ago, my brother had established this as his way of letting me know when he was, as he put it, 'entirely too preoccupied to deal with my shenanigans'. I think he took a little joy out of appropriating a signal most commonly associated with sex for something he considered more useful.

Still, he didn't use it often, just when he felt like he was on the verge of a breakthrough, so I was a little loathe to interrupt his activities, no matter what our plans might have been before. That plus my aversion to going through the arches might have had me dismissing this side trip as a waste of time, but this wasn't Pheniks' home, where everything he'd need to see himself through a manic episode would easily be within reach. If pre-prepared meals weren't a few steps from his workstation, he might forget to feed himself over the next few days.

So, I trudged over to the arch, unpinning my brother's sock from its surface. Glancing at Korix, I waved at the arched entrance.

“Have you been through one of these before?”

With a tight smile, Korix said, “Once, a long time ago.”

“So, you know what to expect.”

That hadn't been a true question, but Korix nodded anyway.

“All right, then,” I said. “Let's go.”

Bracing myself, I stepped through the arch and nearly stopped short on the other side, completely taken aback by my surroundings. What in the...?

Fortunately, I remained cognizant enough to make room for Korix before putting my full attention on the task of figuring out where the hell I was.

The first thing I noticed was that it was cold, worse than winter back home, worse even than perpetually snowed-in Zoln. Typically, I liked cold places, but this was *intolerable*. I was surprised that Pheniks, who loathed the cold, had opted to stay here rather than gathering any materials he might have needed before heading back through the arch.

I did my best to hide my discomfort, suppressing my shivering as much as possible, but Korix still saw it.

Of course he did.

Without a word, he reached into a pocket before handing me a set of thermal protection, even as he donned his own.

Narrowing my eyes at him, I said, “I swear, it's like you have some sort of summoning crystal or a separate dimension in your pockets sometimes.”

“It's just another facet of preparedness, *kuvesk*,” he said. “Nothing more.”

Not once did his expression change or his tone switch out of dry levity, but somehow, I knew he was teasing me. Huffing, I rolled my eyes.

“Come on.”

As I slapped my thermal protection on, I moved away from the arch, running my eyes over our strange surroundings. The stone walls and floors around us were broken up by intervalled, narrow windows, looking out over a frozen landscape. The glass in them looked to have been added later than the place's original construction, given the sporadic cloudy blobs and bubbles of it gathered around the sills and grilles.

Outside, I could see nothing but snow and the rounded roof of a single hangar in the distance. I wondered what sort of aircraft, if any, it contained.

Exposed cables ran along the ceiling, mixed in with the occasional industrial light. Korix and I followed these while looking for signs of recent activity.

When I requested it, our position on the world's map placed us on the northern ice caps, near the pole, which confused me. So far as I was aware, no one in Lutov or Ibis had traveled here in decades, at least not publicly. Sure, Cerullis had sent out the occasional research team past Lutov's borders, but that had stopped shortly before I'd taken up my current role, all due to that switch in focus that we'd recently found out about.

Humanity certainly hadn't built permanent structures up here, not in recorded history at least. Why do that when much more habitable environments existed on the globe?

So, why were Korix and I exploring a veritable fortress here?

The hallway we were walking down soon ended in a massive set of doors whose arched point nearly reached the ceiling of the two-story foyer we'd entered. One of them had been cracked open, a potential sign of my brother's presence here.

Korix and I followed his trail, although our search ended in the next room. The place was a visual example of our world's history throughout the modern ages. The bones of the place, the fortress' rough stonework and caulking, framed its more technological contents, but even these remnants of an early digital age paled in comparison to the present-day equipment surrounding my brother.

He was sitting beside a generator of some kind with its innards exposed and his hands deep within it. As Korix and I approached, I noted him muttering under his breath, and when he brought one hand up to scratch his head, it was covered in a greasy substance. When I stopped opposite him, he failed to look up, which made me sigh.

Korix raised his eyebrows, pointing toward another section of the room, and distractedly, I waved him off. I wondered all the while why a sudden sense of melancholy was washing over me on watching my brother.

"Phen?" I softly said, trying not to spook him.

Clicking his tongue, Pheniks said, "I'm busy. Go away."

Yes, I could see that. And I didn't want to interrupt him but...

"I just need enough time for two questions, Phen. I promise I'll leave you alone afterward," I said. "Please."

Tsking, Pheniks pulled his hands out of the generator, glaring at me.

"What?" he snapped.

I launched right into it, knowing he wouldn't tolerate any 'bullshit social practices' right now.

"Do you have enough food and water to get you through the next few days?"

Rolling his eyes, Pheniks said, "Of course. I brought some pre-packaged meals with me. We're not kids anymore, Zae. You don't have to keep me alive like you did back then."

Sure... because he'd never forgotten about his physical needs since then or anything.

Still, I simply nodded before asking my second question.

"Can Feena and I check on you while you're here?"

Grimacing, Pheniks said. "Sure. Just don't-"

"-talk to you. I know," I finished.

With a grunt, my brother went right back to what he'd been doing before I'd interrupted him, and I softly chuckled.

"Have fun," I said before turning on my heel.

Korix was flipping through a notebook on a nearby table when I joined him.

"He's not coming with us?" he absently asked.

"No."

"Well, I can see why your brother wants to give this place his full attention, at least," Korix said before meeting my eyes. "I think he might have stumbled upon one of the Founder's labs."

"What, really?!" I said.

I took the notebook from Korix, quickly glancing over a few lines, and nearly stopped breathing when I ran across a group of initials at the bottom of a report. Several of these held no special meaning for me but-

"A.C.?" I whispered. "Do you think that could be Asher Cerullis?"

Shrugging, Korix said, "Maybe. I was more interested in the crest on the front page. It's nearly identical to the one that the Founders used for their troops during the war. Is the Founder for Cerullis somehow more important than the others in our current circumstances?"

Right. Korix had been in stasis when the subject of Asher Cerullis had first come up.

"We have reason to believe that he spent a lot of time researching the Ancients when he was alive," I told him.

"Hmm."

With intensity, Korix glanced over the room, landing his gaze on the notebook I was holding.

“I see.”

Of course he did. This place could hold the answers we needed.

A heavy silence fell between us, and in it, I knew that each of us was fighting an itch to stay here. Now that I knew what this place was, I badly wanted to help Pheniks with his project but...

“It’s too bad that Talira *ordered* us to relax,” I made myself say.

“Yes,” Korix said through gritted teeth.

Given, she *had* said we could continue with our research,. That’s what staying here would involve, right?

But Feena was waiting for us back in Lutov. I... didn’t want to disappoint her.

Besides, Talira’s orders had implied that we should be ready for whatever she might throw at us over the next few days. Right now, I could handle an easy mission, sure, but I shouldn’t trust the fate of Lutov—which the mission to defeat the Ancients would involve—to my current, somewhat shaky mental state. Much as I might hate to admit it, I... needed to rest.

Ugh.

“Pheniks will be looking over things here,” I said, at least partially to myself. “I couldn’t tear him away now, even if I wanted to. Plus, we can always join him tomorrow morning.”

“That’s... true,” Korix said before meeting my eyes. “So, drinks?”

“Drinks,” I said, nodding.

With a heavy sigh, Korix moved toward the doors to leave the room. As soon as his back was turned, I stuffed the notebook I was holding into the back of my waistband, pulling my shirt over it.

Yes, I meant to get some rest tonight, but while doing that, I could let myself read through a fascinating set of scientific reports. It would be just like listening to the narrations of Lutov’s ancient war that I enjoyed when I had free time. That wasn’t work, right?

...Right.

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