

# Chapter 1: Here We Go Again

Emotionally drained, I sprawled beside Cambris with her wife, Liala, on the other side of her. After spending quite some time piled in their bed, talking and laughing and sharing about our lives, we'd tiptoed along sleep's shores for a good quarter hour now with only the occasional comment keeping us anchored in the waking world, and despite the fact that I should have left the couple's apartment a while ago, I had yet to find the motivation to crawl out of bed.

This had been a good first date, something that hadn't happened in years. The title and role that were ever mine usually didn't let people break through their initial cautious awe of me, and no matter that this had become expected over the decades, it didn't lend to either party wanting another date. So, the fact that Liala and Cambris had treated me as 'Zaeden' and nothing else from the moment we'd met had been refreshing.

Even still. Rolling toward Cambris, I buried my face in her blonde hair.

"I need to go," I said into it.

With a disappointed sigh, she faced me, snuggling closer, and Liala propped herself up on an elbow to look over her wife.

"You can't stay?" she asked. "We know a great breakfast place nearby. It'd be good for the morning."

They'd be one of those dates, huh? The ones who made it difficult to get out the door.

"I wish I could," I said, "but I'm needed elsewhere."

Technically true. Someone always needed me.

"Maybe next time," I continued. "If you're interested in a next time, that is."

Liala and Cambris exchanged a glance.

"That would be nice," Cambris said. "Shall we schedule it?"

And here came the second reason that first dates usually flopped for me.

"I'm open to setting a date and time, but you should know that given my life, I can't keep to a strict schedule. I'm more likely to cancel on you than not," I said. "What I can offer instead is to put you

in my contacts. When I have a free moment, I'll send you a message at least twenty-four hours in advance, and you can accept the invitation to a meet-up or not. We can do this in addition to a scheduled date, of course."

Above me, Liala shrugged.

"A combo works for us. We know you're busy," she said. "When's your next tentative free time?"

That... wasn't the usual response to how my life worked, but again, everything about these two had been out of the ordinary.

"Two weeks from now," I said. "The sixteenth of Cuin."

Making a face, Cambris said, "I have a House thing that day. Sorry."

"Don't be!" I said. "I'm open the next Freinsday. Does that work?"

And so, the negotiation went until we found a time that would work best for all involved. For the first part of the date, only Liala and I would be together with Cambris joining us later, which wasn't perfect, but such was polyamory. Compromises were inherent in the lifestyle, just like a ridiculously packed schedule could be. I supposed that last one was dependent on how many people someone was seeing, though.

At the apartment door, I kissed both woman goodbye before flourishing a ridiculously extravagant bow.

"Thank you for a wonderful evening, ladies," I said. "I look forward to when we next meet."

With their arms around one another, Liala and Cambris watched me with mirth in their eyes.

"So formal," Cambris said. "Should we reciprocate?"

"Mother Time, no," I said. "Please. I get enough of that in my everyday life."

Smirking, Liala said, "Look, my love. I believe you've flustered him. What is that? Two times tonight?"

"Three, thank you very much," Cambris said.

Hell, I missed when teasing like this had been expected on dates, whether from me or my partner. Squeezing my eyes closed, I rubbed them.

"I can't stay," I groaned.

With a long sigh, Cambris said, "Fine."

Lowering my hands, I stared at the women and their distinctly different pouting faces over my fingers. Liala lifted two of hers off of her wife's shoulder.

“Until next time,” she said. “Don’t spread yourself too thin, ok?”

Ha! A little over one hundred years as the *Lokke Vitras* and I hadn’t learned that trick yet.

“I’ll do my best,” I said.

And I left.

Despite the early-evening hour, the deep dark of midnight had fallen on Xygek’s ground level with light orbs and neon signs replacing the sun. I headed for the closest park, somewhere I might find limited seclusion.

Sidewalks, no matter how light their foot traffic was, wouldn’t provide it, that was for sure. As I strode beside the street, slipstreams buffeted me while people scrambled to get out of my way.

Over the years, I’d done much to dismantle the enticing sense of mystery that surrounded the *Lokke Vitras*. Among other things, I’d made myself available to the public, acting like an average citizen, but people still treated me with extreme deference. It was exhausting.

When I reached a park, the few people near the entrance scattered when they took note of me, and I sighed under my breath. Determined not to disturb anyone else’s evening, I leapt and hauled myself up a tree, settling on a sturdy branch once I’d reached a sufficient height. Decently hidden, I pulled up my to-do list while making a face at its length. How was it that no matter how many items I removed from this, it never got shorter?

While I scanned it, I lifted my array from privacy mode. Even if certain messages—like those from *shukusen* Talira—could breach the walls that this mode built around me, I enjoyed having a way to block the flood of inane messages that I received on a daily basis.

As they streamed in, my array checked each sender against the short list of people whose messages automatically came to my attention. The rest were filed for later review, something I should do soon according to my to-do list.

While I moved that task closer to the top, I checked ‘date with House Vaessa couple’ off of it. Similar items lay further down, but I was nearing the limit of the personal indulgences I could afford this week. I needed something work-related to balance them out, so I paid more attention to that side of the list.

Some of what was there, like routine check-ins with various *shukusenth*, could wait for a while longer, but others should be addressed soon. For instance, in the last two weeks, a handful of people had gone missing along the border between the Preserve and Xygek.

When this had first come to my attention, I hadn’t thought much of it, content to let Kolb’s lower Strata look into the issue, but as of this afternoon, the potential victim list had reached double digits. That was something I should investigate, even if *shukusen* Talira didn’t assign the problem to me.

As I was plotting a course to the site where the latest victim had vanished, however, a message from someone on my short list slid into my array, dated from a few hours ago.

*If you can, I need you home after your date, it read. I have news.*

Was something wrong back home?

No, that was paranoia talking. My family could take care of itself.

Even so, Leski had said she needed me, so I'd go to her. Nothing on my to-do list required immediate action. Several items had a time limit on them, sure, but nothing needed to be finished tonight.

Dropping out of the tree, I requested a report of recent findings from Fourth Stratus Elrin, the man my grandmother had put in charge of the missing persons mission. Hopefully, I'd get a response from him before end of day tomorrow. I'd like to know if Elrin needed help as soon as possible, preferably before I'd handled what was happening at home.

When I arrived at the closet landing pad, I gave a drone my designator, and after receiving it, the drone sent a command into the clouds, one that had my skycruiser descending to a stop a few tiers above. I waited while the couple who'd been here before me got into their vehicle with both of them giving me odd looks.

Crossing my arms, I ignored them. I could wait my turn, damnit! Or I could when nothing was threatening the homeland, at least.

Once I was in my skycruiser, I settled into my seat, pulling up my latest book narration before wincing. I'd love to hear more of this story but...

I was running on almost fifty hours without sleep. Unless I must, I'd rather not waste an adrenaline burst, so the narration was returned to its file, and I started a dream sequence.

---

Revision #1

Created 26 December 2024 07:56:28 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 December 2024 08:05:17 by FatalisticFable