

# Chapter 10: Oh Look, I Have a Life

I met Fyester when I was fifteen years old during a House Kirst rotation. We'd immediately hit it off with our shared love of pranks getting us in more trouble than I cared to admit. Before long, mutual attraction had led to a deepening of our relationship and... well. It had been going strong ever since, hence why I was standing outside of his family's apartment, rapidly tapping my foot.

Fyester had always liked keeping me waiting with nearly two months passing before he kissed me for the first time. In most instances, I didn't mind giving him the time he needed, filling it with homework problems or other projects. Today, however, we were on a schedule, and I was worried that he'd make us miss the first bit of fun that I had planned.

Soon enough, he came to meet me, and almost, I discarded said schedule. Fyester's blonde hair bounced on his head, so boisterous was his step, and his loose jacket, coattails and all, hung over a tightly conforming jumpsuit, all of which sent a wave crashing through me. When his near-purple gaze landed on me, lighting with delight, I called up a list of overnights, stopped only by the promise of what awaited us later.

Besides, I could use some time spent adjusting to life without a persona in place before we got to that part of the day.

Scampering to me, Fyester swept me into a hug, kissing me, and damn... I could tell it had been a while since I'd last spent time with a partner. I was a bit dizzy when he released me.

"Hey, Zae," he said with a sloppy grin. "How've you been?"

"Bored. Lonely," I said. "I missed you."

Brushing my hand through his hair, I kissed him again, lingering this time, and when we pulled apart, Fyester's eyes were unfocused while he licked his lips.

"I can see that," he said. "Do we have plans for the day or...?"

I found it gratifying that I wasn't the only who was eager to bring our date to a satisfactory conclusion, but it made me more determined than ever to savor this.

"A bunch of House Zan members have a gathering scheduled soon, one that they're setting up nearby," I said. "I thought we might pay them a visit."

An evil grin spread across Fyester's face, making me shiver.

“Sounds great,” he said. “Let’s go.”

With him following in my wake, I smirked at how easily he’d conformed to my plans. Fyester came from a House Cerullis family, making it the one he was most likely to choose at our upcoming House naming.

While Cerullis had increased its hostile behavior toward Kolb in recent years, they and House Zan held a deep, abiding hatred of one another with their similar specialties allowing nothing less. Zan ever accused Cerullis of giving them too little research data for their projects, and Cerullis insisted that Zan pushed them too hard for results.

I’d never understood what had possessed Lutov’s Founders to entrust the scientific field to two different Houses. Surely, they went better together, but at the moment, separate was what they were.

I firmly didn’t think about what would happen to my relationship with Fyester once we were in rival Houses. Romantic partnerships between members of different Houses had worked in the past, but they were few and far between.

Our future together, however, was a problem for another day. For now, I had him, and my plans for today should be entertaining for us both.

The House Zan meeting was taking place on a neighboring tower’s platform. When we arrived, trees and bushes provided us with ample hiding spaces, and crouching behind a flowering hydrangea, I ran my eyes over the people spread across a field of grass. A nearby table held a variety of picnic foods, but our soon-to-be victims hadn’t started sampling from them yet, still finishing up with their meet-and-greet.

Pursing my lips, I silently cursed at myself. I saw no way to harmlessly disrupt this gathering, which was too bad. Fyester had always been more... animated after a prank.

When I turned to apologize, however, I found him shaking a vial full of liquid over a veritable mini lab, all spread at his feet.

Glancing over his skin-tight jumpsuit once more, I said, “The fuck were you hiding that?”

He just grinned at me, extending his mixed vial.

“Can you get this in their food?” he asked.

Could I get that in...?

“What do you take me for?” I sputtered. “A member of House Kirst?”

After all, people from a House dedicated to education would only balk at the proposed scenario.

The bastard’s grin widened, and he shook the vial.

“Prove it,” he said.

Scowling, I snatched what he was offering.

“I do this, and you have to be especially nice to me today,” I said, jabbing my finger in his face.

His eyes were dancing when I turned away, but of course they were. He knew I’d find his challenge easy, and that, in turn, meant he knew what was in store for him later.

Setting my array to watch the gathered House Zan members, I had it calculate the probable trajectories of the attendees’ gazes, making my way, step by faltering step, to the table. As often as I could, I hid my approach behind other people, refusing to rely solely on tech for this infiltration, but when one had nothing else, one should use one’s array. What was the point of them otherwise?

On reaching the banquet table without incident, I quickly moved along it, dripping some of Fyester’s concoction in each dish. After contaminating the last of them, I stored the vial, preparing to make my getaway, when a shadow fell over me.

Spinning, I was greeted by a giant of a man.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

Panic was stripped from me while the practices I’d abandoned outside Fyester’s home popped back into place.

“Oh, Mother Time. I’m sorry. Was I intruding?” I said, fidgeting. “I didn’t mean to. I just wanted... Oh, I don’t know-”

“Who are you?” the giant interrupted.

And his blank expression never changed.

“Oh! No one important,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. “I’m in the capital for my House naming. I’m pretty sure I’ll choose Cerullis when it comes down to it, but I wanted to see what Zan has to offer before making my decision. Again, I’m sorry if I’ve troubled you.”

As expected, this claim cracked the giant’s empty façade.

“I see. You’re welcome to join us if you like, but don’t feel obligated to. It looked like you were in a rush to head elsewhere,” he said. “And if you’re leaving, please. Take something with you. Never let it be said that Zan can’t be generous.”

It was a dare, and I knew it. I had to prove my story, or they’d replace this food, ruining our prank. So, I grabbed a fancy pastry off the table before taking a bite out of it.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I said with crumbs flying out of my mouth. “Thank you.”

While the giant distastefully swiped at the mess I'd made on his shirt, I slipped around him, moving as fast as I could toward Fyester. I already had my array scouring possible toxins from my body, but I'd like to have an antidote for whatever had been in his concoction as well.

As I approached, Fyester held out a vial to me, and after grabbing it and his hand, I chugged it down while dragging him behind me. Once we were a sufficient distance away, I tossed the vial into a recycler, and it shattered as I reeled Fyester in front of me.

I shoved him against a tree, pressing my body into his while our mouths crashed into one another, and my hands, already in his clothes, curled into fists to match the rise of heat in me.

When I pulled free of him, Fyester was more distracted than I'd seen him in a while, but even noting that, I dragged myself out of his gravity well, patting his cheek.

"Don't you want to see what happens?"

I led him a few floors above the platform, stopping at a set of windows that overlooked the park, and to the distaste of passersby, we plastered against the glass. We watched House Zan members sample from their banquet, snickering when a few of them soon clutched at their stomachs and outright laughing when several raced away, presumably for a washroom.

Oh, we were truly terrible for inflicting something like this on other people, but in this moment, watching Fyester's face glow, I couldn't bring myself to care. Collapsed on the floor, he curled his fingers through mine, and the way he was looking at me made my heart race.

"So, what's the plan?" he asked. "Are we finding an overnight? Going back to your place?"

He made no mention of his home, but to be fair, his parents might pitch a fit if I stepped inside of it, given my House Kolb heritage.

Winking, I said, "I have a better plan. Can you playact like you're undecided about your House naming for a while?"

"I think so," Fyester said with a frown. "Why?"

"You'll see," I said.

After drawing him to his feet, I led him down lifts, across plasma bridges, and on a single shuttle ride, but once that was done, we were standing at the foot of my intended destination: House Kolb's headquarters in Xygek.

"What are you doing?" Fyester hissed at me.

With a smirk, I forcibly dragged him into the lobby, heading for a weary-looking low Stratus member sitting behind the greeting desk.

“Hello. I’m Zaeden, unHoused,” I said. “I was hoping to get another tour of the apartment I might gain if I choose Kolb at my House naming. My partner’s having last-minute doubts, and I’d like to appease them.”

After I poked him, Fyester made a face.

“What he said,” he mumbled.

“An easy enough request to accommodate,” the woman behind the desk tiredly said. “Wait here while I request a tour guide’s presence.”

With a short bow, I said, “Thank you, ma’am.”

When she flicked her fingers at us, I pulled Fyester to the side.

“What are you doing?” he immediately repeated.

Finally, I had a chance to return the evil smile he’d given me earlier.

“I told you. You’ll see.”

He was quiet after that, and I was content to watch him and the lobby around us until a voice drifted our way.

“I hear you’d like a tour?”

The question had come from behind the greeting desk, where a woman with turquoise hair and yellow eyes was waiting for us.

“Yes, please,” I said.

Taking Fyester’s hand again, I headed toward our guide with a bright smile.

Waving at him, I said, “This is my partner, Garreth.”

*Garreth?* I’d needed a false name so Fyester wouldn’t get in trouble, of course. So, why had I defaulted to the name of a man I hadn’t thought about in days?

I. had. not.

By the time Fyester and the guide had exchanged greetings, I’d collected myself.

“If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you one of our temp apartments,” the guide said.

She took us to one of the lifts scattered across the lobby with members of all Strata bustling between them and the doors. I’d always found this place severe. Stark. Nothing decorative adorned it with everything utilitarian instead. I hoped Fyester got the same feeling because I wanted our arrival upstairs to have the same effect as it had had on me.

After our guide put our floor destination into a lift's control, I indicated that Fyester should go first while maintaining a white-knuckled grip on the woman's wrist. Shrugging, he stepped inside to shoot through the ceiling, and I released my hold on our guide.

"After you've completed your tour, I'd like a half-hour alone with him, if you're willing to accommodate that," I said. "I believe it will be necessary if he's to join Kolb."

Chuckling, the guide flapped a hand at me.

"I expected as much when you appeared on my docket. You're not the first to make a request like that, and besides, you've made quite the name for yourself, young one," she said. "Yes, I'll help you with your fun. Just try not to make a mess."

I had a reputation in House Kolb already? It made sense, given that I was Talira's grandson, but even still...

Wait. Was that good or bad for my plans in this House?

"Thank you?" I said. "I won't?"

"Oh, Mother Time, you're adorable," the guide said before stepping into the lift.

What was that supposed to mean?

Frowning, I waited until she was high above me before making my own ascent.

Once we'd entered an empty apartment, our guide went through the typical tour, explaining the protocol that every House followed. Until a new member received their placement, they stayed in their chosen House's headquarters, only expected to find a home afterward, but beforehand, they enjoyed their House's luxuries, and Kolb had many of these.

I swore to Mother Time, our guide moved through her tour as slowly as possible, showing off the various amenities in the kitchen and living room before finally leading us into the bedroom. With ample space, the room made its centerpiece, the bed, look dwarfed, which wasn't helped by the floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall.

At the sight of those, Fyester—to this point suitably awed—clasped his hands in front of his face before rushing to take in the view from half a kilometer in the air. While he was distracted, our guide lifted an eyebrow at me, and I rolled my eyes. She hid her resulting laughter poorly, and a message slid into my array.

*Remember. Not too much of a mess, it read. Don't get me in trouble.*

When I nodded, she assumed the most believable expression of horror that I'd seen in a while.

"Oh, Mother Time," she gasped. "I've got to- Oh, dear. That's not good."

Taking her cue, I faced her, frowning.

“What is it?”

With a distracted look in place, she said, “Something’s come up. I’m sure it’s nothing but...”

She cast a sharp glance between Fyester and me.

“Can I leave you two here for a moment?” she asked. “I won’t be long.”

I hesitantly nodded, and dumbstruck, Fyester joined me.

“Please, take care of your problem,” he said.

With a quick bow, our guide mumbled her appreciation before racing off, and I sent her my thanks, even as I sighed with relief. We could move on to the main event now.

*Finally.*

## **TTS Chapter Ten**

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