

# Chapter 14: Rituals Are Dumb

As I got dressed, I considered how best to ask the question on my mind. In the end, I decided to just say it.

“What the fuck, Feena?” I growled. “This couldn’t wait until morning?”

Her soft laughter floated in the air between us.

“Nope.”

The pop on that ‘P’ was like fireworks bursting in my room, an old-fashioned source of entertainment recreated in close confines.

“Fine,” I snapped. “I’m dressed. Let’s go.”

At the door, Feena twisted to rest her palm on my chest.

“Quietly now,” she said. “You mustn’t wake mom and dad.”

“I mustn’t?”

Feena slipped into the hallway without acknowledging my protest. We slunk through the apartment with not even the whisper of our clothes against our skin coming from us.

When thinking about what my sister had said, I realized that she probably didn’t know how often I’d snuck out of our home in the past. Granted, I’d mostly done that at the family estate on Lutov’s northern coast, but I’d gone out on the town, unnoticed, here too.

Some of the times I’d stolen away from home had been for homework assignments, and others had been to meet with partners, but most of the time, I’d done it just for practice. Obviously, I’d made a few of those forays so that I could better blend with House Kolb members when the time came, but as I’d told my grandmother earlier, I’d always had a compulsion to be the best in everything I tried, no matter how ridiculous that might seem.

I didn’t know if I was the best sneak in Lutov, but I was certainly better at it than Feena. Not that I’d tell her that, especially when she was proficient enough as it was.

When we passed Pheniks’ door, I sent my sister a message, asking if we should include him in whatever we were doing. What she sent back was, predictably, mysterious.

*His time will come*, it read.

I rolled my eyes. So dramatic.

Once we were on the street, Feena led me along, refusing to say a word, but I reflected that silent treatment right back at her. If she wanted to wake me up in the middle of the night, hours before my House naming, she could take all social responsibility during...

What was this? A hazing? A family tradition? I wasn't sure yet.

We stopped on a platform close to the apartment, where our tier skirted a tower, and Feena pointed at a nearby tree, at least four times my height, that was standing between us and a sheer, glass wall.

"Mag hooks are in a pack, hidden in those branches," she said. "Let's see if you can reach the top of this tower more quickly than me."

For a moment, I just blinked at my sister.

"*What?*" I eventually snapped. "Why would I do something...?"

Feena grinned at me in a self-satisfied manner, and I threw my hands over my head.

"Fine. I could never resist a challenge like this. Well played," I said. "Still. What you're asking for..."

Running my eyes up the tower's length, I requested a height estimate, and when I read what my array returned, I winced.

"Unless a shit ton of mag hooks are in that tree, reaching the top will take hours," I said. "I'll have to calculate the locations of optimal attraction points to conserve the hooks' power, not to mention finding paths that'll keep me out of wind drag and- and-"

"Yup," Feena said, "*and* I've done this a few times before."

Meaning she already knew which points and paths would get her up the tower fastest. Hell. I'd never reach the top first unless...

Wait a minute.

Somehow, I kept a smirk off of my face as I glared at Feena.

"Why?" I asked. "What's the point of this?"

"I'll tell you at the top."

Sticking her tongue out at me, Feena raced for the tower, scooping a previously unseen pack from behind a bush on the way. I watched her go for a few seconds before striding to the tree.

Climbing it and finding my provided tools gave me no trouble, which was one reason why I'd taken the time to retrieve them. I'd also never been one to discard something useful, and the idea of leaving evidence like this behind made me cringe.

Dropping to the grass, I headed for a wall that reflected Xygek's brilliance, but rather than using my bag's mag hooks to pull me up its side, I circled it until I found a door, which... was locked.

That was strange. Places like this were usually open to the public at all hours of the day and night. Had Feena expected me to try this?

No matter. Its security processes were moderately difficult to bypass, but still, the task didn't take me too long. Soon enough, the doors slid open, and once I was inside, I made a brief stop at a convenience store before heading for the tower's lifts.

I was halfway through a bag of peanuts by the time Feena reached the top. Throwing a leg over the safety railing, she scanned her surroundings with a faint smile flashing across her face when she saw me. Trotting my way, she slid down the wall that I was sitting against, and when she lifted a hand, palm up, in front of me, I set another bag in it.

"Peanuts. Nice choice," she said. "Good for energy."

I hummed my agreement, and together, we finished our snack.

"Did you take a lift?" she asked once we were done.

"That depends," I said. "If I say yes, will you lecture me about breaking the rules?"

Snorting, Feena said, "Hardly. I'd praise you for taking the most logical and efficient route to reach your goal."

"Then, yes. I did," I said. "Why are we here, Feena?"

"I actually don't know," she said.

When I scowled at her, she chuckled.

"I don't," she repeated. "It's a tradition that the family has been passing down for centuries. The last of us to go through a House naming takes the next one to this tower on the night before their ceremony. Personally, I think it's our way of reminding the unHoused that while House may come before family, your family is important too. When you need us, we'll be there for you, and nothing can stop us from helping you."

"Except for House," I muttered.

Feena grinned like I'd said something profound, and I was mildly tempted to point out how she'd missed the derisiveness in my words.

“Except for House,” she agreed.

Jumping to her feet, Feena brushed off her hands before offering one to me. Once she’d hauled me to my feet, I followed her to the roof’s edge, where she pulled two bundles out of her pack, handing me one.

“You’ll need this,” she said.

As I examined what I was holding, my lips twitched.

“Are we flying down?” I asked.

“Just put it on,” Feena said.

Making a face at her, I placed a thin, metal spiderweb against the back of my hand before activating it, and the frame of a Propulsion Initiation Gear, or P.I.G. for short, unfolded around my body. The device stiffened while a host of new processes flooded into my array, and after it had filtered through this new data, I requested full-body motion from the P.I.G., banishing my body’s unnatural stiffness.

Even with that, I felt heavier. The frame used a portion of its power to float a micrometer above my skin, but it was still a ton of metal added to my frame.

I also requested that the P.I.G. project its controls into my array, and once that was done, a glowing ball rested under each of my hands. After a quick test, I got myself into a stable hover before dropping to the floor once more.

“All a go,” I said.

Feena raised a hand, giving me nothing else in acknowledgment, and in a display of excessive rudeness, I swiped my thumb down the back of my neck, making her laugh.

“Come on, asshole,” she said while climbing over the safety railing.

Perching on it, we stared at Xygek and our small portion of its air traffic, laid out like a grid, and I ignored the panic climbing up my throat. Mother Time, I hated heights.

“When you did this, did you take the lift?” I asked, trying to distract myself.

I caught her nod from the corner of my eye.

“But I depleted half of my mag hooks first,” Feena said. “Dad beat me to the top.”

Unsure what to say, I kept my mouth closed, and after a moment, my sister turned to me with a sober expression in place, laying a hand on my back.

"I think that if you let yourself, you could be one of the greatest House Kolb members Lutov's ever seen," she said, "and even if you don't choose Kolb tomorrow, you'll be excellent in whatever you do. You have a light inside of you, Zae. As the Ostiums would say, 'the spark of your soul outshines everyone around you', but you've always smothered it, doing it so well that I forget it exists most of the time. I wish you wouldn't. You were born for more than a mediocre existence. Use your light to guide Lutov into the future."

Oh... fuck. My emotions railed against the wall that I'd raised between me and them, and I didn't realize some had broken through until a tear rolled down my cheek.

"Feena," I said with my voice choked. "I-"

I wasn't sure what warned me. All I knew was that the pressure on my back suddenly increased, and I twisted in the second before my sister finished shoving me. I snatched her rapidly diminishing wrist, and with a jerk, she toppled off of the safety railing, leaving both of us hurtling toward the ground.

Feena's joyous laughter rose above the howling wind while she pulled me to her, and her lips brushed my ear when she spoke.

"I love you more than I can say, little brother. Now, follow me."

She pushed us apart, and while I twirled to face the ground, she nosedived, pulling ahead with the propulsors on the soles of her shoes flaring. In the time it took my P.I.G. to respond to my commands, she became an almost unrecognizable splotch, but once I could, I dropped after her at reckless speeds, laughing.

I was laughing. At this height. For no reason. With no one to see my performance.

This realization didn't stop it from happening. As I zipped and dodged through air traffic, my body shook with it, and something wild and uncontained churned through me while my array warned me of elevated dopamine levels.

I batted the alert aside, darting like an Ostium Operair through zooming vehicles, reacting to my array's every last-second calculation, riding a high I hadn't felt in ages.

Chasing my sister through the sky.

She took us to a large park on ground level, a sprawl of greenery that was impossible to achieve on the tiers above us. When I made my landing, I stumbled, whirling my arms to fight my body's wobble.

Glancing up from removing her P.I.G., Feena said, "Regulate your hormones, Zae."

"I know, I know," I said. "Just... give me a second."

As I followed Feena's example, making metal fold toward my hands, I filtered dopamine out of my bloodstream, and the silliness that had lifted my heart while I'd been in the air dissipated. I gave my sister my P.I.G. before dropping into the grass.

Except for during extreme situations like a translator insertion procedure, I... disliked regulating my hormones. I understood why it was a vital practice for a House Kolb member. It provided an easy way to control one's emotions, but usually, I didn't need that help, and when hormones were regulated or outright removed from the body, it created as many adverse side effects as it did positive ones.

Take, for instance, my body's craving for what I'd stolen from it with a drop into depression looming because of that. Even if shrugging off these side effects was easy for me, I didn't like that I had to do it.

Feena plopped into the grass nearby, touching the tops of our heads together.

"Congratulations," she said. "No matter what happens tomorrow, remember tonight. Remember that your family loves you."

"Remember that my family's insane?" I asked, folding my hands on my stomach.

Chuckling, Feena said, "That too."

She seemed content to lie here in silence, so I let my attention wander across another view of Xygek, this time from below. I soaked in the lights that illuminated each tier's walkways and the shadowed chunks of towers between them.

Picking out sporadic parks, mixed in with glass and metal, I wondered how we'd landed in a part of the city that had few flying vehicles clogging its airspace. Without them, the night sky loomed large with a significant patch of black showing between the towers, and frowning, I had my array focus on what lay beyond Xygek's many lights, filtering them out.

There they were. Sparkling diamonds scattered across the void. Stars that might or might not have habitable planets circling them.

"Why do you suppose our ancestors stopped researching space travel all those centuries ago?" I said.

"That's..."

Rising to an elbow, Feena looked down on me.

"Why are you asking?"

Shrugging, I said, "A passing thought. I think about it when listening to narrations about our war with those from beyond the stars. During it, our ancestors must have investigated space while looking for a way to defeat their enemy. Why abandon all of that research after they won? Think

about it, Feena. We reach for such great heights in every other field, and yet, we've never left this planet."

"If you've listened to narrations about Lutov's oldest foe, then you know why we haven't," Feena said. "The last time we tried space travel, those from beyond the stars nearly wiped us out. It's no wonder our ancestors gave up on studying them. Similarly, they stopped all research about space. We don't want to piss those alien beings off again, do we?"

"I know," I said with a sigh. "Doesn't make me stop wondering, though."

Sometimes, I couldn't help but wish that I could leave this planet, Lutov, and its rigid society. Sometimes, I couldn't help but want to reach toward the stars.

"Maybe keep those thoughts to yourself, silly," Feena said. "It could get you in trouble."

Flicking my nose, she settled into the grass again.

"Try to relax, Zae. Once we've rested a bit, we'll go home."

Home, where I'd have to compensate for the sleep that I'd lost while on this jaunt.

Still, I did as Feena had said. Relaxing every muscle, I let my thoughts wander, and before I knew it, I'd fallen asleep in the middle of a public park, *the* safest place I could possibly be.

## **TTS Chapter Fourteen**

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