

# Chapter 15: The Dreaded Ceremony

A waking state came to me slowly with a gradual diminishment of vivid dreams leaving me blinking at a cloudy sky, framed by towers. Why could I see the sky-?

Last night's activities popped into my head, and I shot upright, frantically taking in the park around me. Rather pretty with its arranged flower beds and squat sculptures, it was mostly deserted with only a handful of guests present, all of whom were studiously avoiding me.

Had Feena left me here? I might have been...

What? Robbed, like what might have happened in Ibis? Why would anyone steal from me when the Houses provided for us all?

The Houses. Oh, shit.

When I called up the time, a message sprang into view.

*Payback for all the pranks over the years, it read. You'd better hurry. Good luck.*

Growling, I closed the message, and when I saw the time, my stomach bottomed out. Leaping to my feet, I requested a map of Xygek as well as directions to Acceptance Arena, more commonly known as the Crescent. Both items splashed into my array, and I nearly screamed out loud.

Twelve kilometers in half an hour with no shuttle routes between here and there? I'd be late for my own damn House naming!

I was going to *kill* Feena.

As I took off in a headlong sprint, I was grateful that no people were blocking my path. No matter how futile it might seem, I had to try reaching my destination before the proceedings started.

As soon as I stepped from grass to concrete, though, my easy passage ended. Mornings were busy in Xygek. At this time, people were always in a rush to complete House business or personal chores, and while the sun might have risen hours ago, heavy traffic's chaos had yet to relent.

Which meant every sidewalk would be crowded all to hell.

"Fuck it."

Darting through a cluster of people, I emerged onto the street, a span of asphalt that one only found on ground level, and was almost squashed by a transport.

Jerking away from it at the last second, I ignored the shocked cries rising behind me, swiping at the hands trying to grab my clothes, before hauling ass after the transport that had nearly killed me. I'd never catch up to it, but I needed to gain speed for the next part.

A steady drone of displaced air rose from behind me, and I pulled to one side of the road as another transport zoomed into view. Given how quickly it was moving, I was amazed that I managed to grab a hatch's handle.

On doing so, however, fire roared from my shoulder, adding to the transport's noise in my head, but thankfully, my arm dislocated, preventing it from getting ripped off of my body. By a stroke of luck, I gained a second grip before the first one failed, leaving my arm dangling like dead weight, and wasn't that just fabulous? Until someone helped with setting it or I found the time to do it myself, this injury wouldn't heal. I was stuck with these sparks in my vision.

Hanging off the transport, I queried for my ride's route to distract myself. The transport I'd chosen wouldn't pass as close to my goal as I might like, but if I was lucky, this maneuver would get me to the Crescent on time.

On the ten-minute commute to my exit point, I glanced through stored message with many a wince, distancing myself from how badly I wanted to hug my shoulder. My parents had sent me at least a dozen messages asking where I was, to which I belatedly replied that I was on my way. To the hundreds of generic congratulations I'd received, I sent thanks. Pheniks had been silent this morning, which was typical for him, but I sent him a message, asking for his help, and Feena... my sister got two words.

*Fuck you.*

My exit point was quickly approaching, and while I prepared my array to assist with my landing, I cursed under my breath. Leaning around the transport's edge, I marked my desired landing place, and after a second, my array provided me with the best trajectory to avoid permanent harm.

It would still hurt like hell when I arrived.

As I came closer to the point, I leapt off the transport, curling around my vitals, and on hitting concrete, I let momentum roll me along while people jumped out of my way. When I came to a stop, I gradually straightened. My vision turned white from each pull against angry road rashes, and after a quick glance at an alert that listed the damage I'd sustained, I closed it. These wounds should heal before I reached the Crescent.

People had crowded around me, exclaiming as they tried to help, but I shook them off.

"I want to join the Collective," I shouted at the top of my lungs.

Just like that, the people who'd been offering me aid returned to their business. If someone wanted to die in Lutov, no one would resist that decision, not here where death was so rare, where it had become sacred. So, I left the site of my touchdown in a hobbling run without a word spoken to me.

Soon enough, my peeled skin had been minimally repaired, allowing a return to a full-on sprint, and for a while, that was all I knew. The rush of air through my lungs. The push of energy to my legs. The burn in them and everywhere else. Distantly, I was aware of shouting for people to get out of my way, but it was buried at the back of my mind.

When the Crescent came into view, I checked the time, flinging forth a halting giggle on seeing that I had five minutes to spare. Even still, this lucky break didn't slow me down, and I started undoing my shirt's buttons, shrugging it off once I was finished.

Pheniks was waiting for me beside a door with a bundle in his hands, and when he saw me, he scrunched his face up. Returning to a walk, I blotted sweat off of my face and chest with my wadded-up shirt, shunting as much oxygen as I could to starved muscles.

"You've got it?" I asked, nodding to the bundle.

"Yes," Pheniks said. "Zae, are you-?"

"Can you help me with this?" I interrupted.

I showed him my shoulder, where pooled blood had spread from the injured joint, and Pheniks winced.

"Sure," he said.

Placing his burden on the stone steps, he went through a process that we'd completed far too many times before. Once my shoulder was back in place, it freed my focus from blocking pain, and I blessed Mother Time that I'd had help with setting the joint this time.

"Thanks," I gasped.

"No problem," Pheniks said. "You'd have done the same- Whoa! What are you doing?"

I frowned at him, noting him shielding his face with his hands, before pulling my slacks the rest of the way off. Again, I sponged sweat off of my skin.

"Changing clothes?" I said.

Why was he so flustered? I had to wear the outfit that we'd chosen for today's ceremony, and not much time remained before it started.

"Here?" Pheniks spluttered. "In public?"

Oh. Modesty.

Sighing, I snatched the bundle, left on the steps, to my chest.

“Would you rather I be late?” I asked.

“No!” Pheniks exclaimed. “I’d never! I-”

With my clothes mostly on, I pulled my brother to me.

“It’s ok,” I said. “You saved my ass. I owe you one.”

Pushing me away, Pheniks snapped, “No, you don’t. We’re brothers. This is the least I can do for you.”

He critically glanced over me while I finished with buttons and clasps, wiping my cheek and smoothing my hair down.

“As usual, you look fantastic, you lucky bastard,” Pheniks said. “Now, get in there, and good luck.”

Clapping his shoulder, I smiled before hurrying into Acceptance Arena.

As far as layout and styling went, this place was fairly simple, which I’d always thought was strange, considering its importance in Lutovish society. Built in the shape of a crescent, it had two layers: the outer one for lobby activities and the inner for House naming ceremonies as well as other social events.

Both ends of this crescent were blocked off for maintenance and service equipment while an underground passage connected the two. All that set the Crescent apart from Xygek’s other buildings was its single story and its composition from stone rather than glass.

My footsteps echoed in the outer layer as I raced across its empty width. A single, beefy man was waiting beside the closest doorway, presumably standing guard so no one could disturb the unHoused and their families during this most revered of ceremonies. He arched an eyebrow as I approached.

“Name?”

“Zaeden,” I said. “Look, I’m going to be late. Can we-?”

“You seat assignment,” the man interrupted.

A message with an image attached popped into my array, and when he held the door open for me, I licked my lips before bowing to him.

Mother Time, the silence that fell as I slunk into the cavernous space beyond! It tried to crush me into atoms, but despite it, I held my head high, rushing across mosaiced marble.

People, from the stands and from fold-out chairs in the center, stared at me, whether due to my tardiness or the strangeness of what I was wearing, I couldn't say, but I made the long journey to my seat like it was another performance with a smile in place and a swagger in my stride. As I folded into my assigned chair, I beamed at the people on either side of me before crossing my legs and placing my clasped hand atop my raised knee.

Only as people moved their attention elsewhere did this morning's proceedings crash in on me.

I was about to choose a House, pledging my lifelong loyalty to it. I was about to lose my status as an unHoused because my physical age had determined that I was ready for it.

I was about to lose my freedom.

Before this thought could deconstruct the wall between me and panic, a detail that I'd missed up to this point crawled into the forefront of my mind, and it halted my churning thoughts. Numb, I sent a message.

*Was your 'prank' this morning meant to distract me?*

I received a reply within seconds, as if my sister had had it pre-composed.

*Yes, of course, it read. Mother Time, Zae. I didn't mean to make you late. You're usually up at the crack of dawn.*

Oh. Oh, Feena.

*Everything worked out in the end, I sent. Thank you for what you did.*

I loved my siblings, Feena and Pheniks both. The risks they'd take to help me. The lengths I'd go to for them. May we ever remain as such, a trio united against the world not merely by blood but also choice.

The ceremony's proceedings passed quickly. I hardly paid attention to the speeches made at the beginning, giving vague recognition to the unHoused who mounted the dais before me. Rather than this, a question that I'd thought answered years ago, the one my grandmother had reawakened yesterday, rattled in my head.

Which House should I choose?

Only six people came before my turn on the stage with another nine to follow. House Drav truly was restricting population growth at the moment.

All this meant, however, was that someone called my name long before I was ready for it.

Gliding to the dais, I quickly climbed its steps, letting the pleasant glow of holding so many people's attention quell what was rising inside. The Houses' *shukusenth* were sitting in ornate chairs along the back of the dais while a person randomly chosen from the Lutovish populace stood

in front of them.

When I stopped at her side, she gave me a gentle smile.

“Zaeden, it’s time for you to choose how you will aid the homeland,” she said. “Approach the representative of the House in which you will best serve and become a citizen of Lutov.”

As prescribed, I turned to the row of *shukusenth* with a dry mouth, but all I could think about was how badly I didn’t want to choose. How badly I didn’t want to relinquish my freedom, such as it were.

Mom had been right, all those weeks ago. Standing here with the most important decision of my life in front of me, I knew exactly what I wanted to say.

But I couldn’t.

The words ‘no House’ hovered on my tongue with everything in me aching to let them loose, but in my mind’s eye, I saw what would happen if I let myself be so selfish.

I’d become an outcast, forced to fend for my survival. I’d be condemned to a truncated lifespan with less than a century mine to claim. I’d never see my family again, never secretly enjoy my parents’ passionate reconciliations, never listen with half an ear while Pheniks rambled about his experiments, never know that Feena would catch me when I inevitably screwed up.

But I would be free.

The *shukusenth* were staring at me with frowns in place while Talira shifted in her seat, and I realized that I was taking too long.

Steeling myself, I prepared to speak my intention before striding to my grandmother. I opened my mouth, and something that was wholly me and yet, utterly foreign seized control of my tongue.

“No-” I started.

A door slammed open with the noise of it cracking over the gathered crowd. They spun in their seats with twisted features, but after viewing the source of this interruption, that indignation transformed into either fear or awe, but in everyone, profound respect sprang forth.

Watching our newest guest stride toward the dais, I understood their reactions.

Everyone in Lutov knew those features: the black hair curling to his cheeks in waves; the piercing, brown eyes, leached of pigment until they looked gray; the sharp cheekbones and lanky form. And of course, there was his signature look with nothing but black allowed to touch his skin. Everyone knew the way he commanded a room’s attention when he wanted it, the way he moved as if every flex of his muscles was beneath his notice.

Everyone in Lutov knew House Kolb’s First Stratus. Everyone knew the *Lokke Vitras*.

In the Crescent's dead silence, he made no noise, drifting like a beautiful ghost through its stone stands and plastic chairs until he stopped in front of the dais. Unable to move or think, I blinked as he lifted his magnetic gaze to me, cocking his head. We stared at one another for an instant or an eternity. I couldn't tell which it was.

And all the while, shrieking alarms blared at the back of my mind.

"Come with me," the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Spinning, he marched out of the Crescents' inner layer, and it was as if a tether had attached my heart to the small of his back. Leaping off the dais, I loped after him while a part of me wondered what was happening.

A far repressed part already understood.

### **TTS Chapter Fifteen**

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