

Chapter 20: The Terminal

In the Terminal, people popped into being around me with the same rattled look on their faces, but then again, most found molecular dispersion unpleasant. Who liked having every atom of their being pulled apart?

I'd done it often enough that my need to shudder after arriving here had faded, but Mother Time, if I still didn't hate it.

At least here, though, I didn't have to contend with a damaged body. The Terminal was where a person's consciousness rested while waiting for travel to their next beacon. Hence, nothing physical, like a pesky punctured lung, here.

There was also no differentiation, meaning everyone used the same avatar. The Terminal barely had enough processing power to hold so many people's sparks of souls, reduced to numbers, as well as countless rendered images of this place. It would need much more before its inhabitants could tweak their bodies in whatever way they wanted as well, but we weren't there, tech-wise. Maybe someday, but for now, people dealt with the bland body they'd received in this, the most complex piece of Lutovish tech in existence.

The Terminal itself was quite magnificent. Upon arriving, one stood somewhere similar to a grand Hall of Judgment's foyer. Black and white tiles formed a geometric pattern on the floor, stretching to a stone wall several hundred meters distant.

High overhead, panels with painted images of a cloudy sky decorated the ceiling. Pillars stood a few meters in front of the far side, and between them, small booths rested with their walls made of half brushed-steel and half glass.

Amusingly quaint automatons were sitting inside of them today. The comptrollers' image frequently changed, but most of the time, they looked like human beings of one sort or another. On especially busy days, people lined up in front of the booths, courteously trying to save other people time, but for now, the comptrollers sat alone until someone strolled up to them.

On the Terminal's near side, one could find all sorts of entertainment: holodrama theaters; scenario rooms; even overnights, if one was interested in having a rendezvous in a fabricated world, and both sides of this place reached for as far as the eye could see.

Stretching, I checked my place in the queue: 2,462. I'd be here for a while.

Now, if I were so inclined, I could claim medical distress and get pushed to the front of the line, but not only was I unconcerned about possible degradation to my atoms as they zipped across the world but...

I was a snarky son of a bitch.

He'd told me to come home. *He* had not, however, said how quickly I should do that, and I was reluctant to learn what *he'd* have in store for me when I arrived. Plus, if I waited my turn, it would needle *him*, and despite how much trouble it would get me in or how dangerous it might be, I loved doing that.

So, I headed for my favorite place in the Terminal.

When I stepped into the closest library, I scrolled through a list of books, found on the monitor just inside the entrance, until I'd picked one that sounded interesting. Noting its location, I ambled through shelves filled with stories and facts, and after retrieving my desired tale, I headed for an armchair, curling into it with the book resting on my knees.

And it was just that. A book. Hundreds of pages contained by its cover with the most delightful smell drifting from it when I rubbed a thumb over its paper edges.

I knew it wasn't real. Somewhere in the physical world, a storecase was feeding this information to my consciousness, but it *felt* real, and I adored it. Paper and ink books were so rare in Lutov.

With a contented sigh, I opened it to the first page.

I'd almost reached the end of the book when a pleasant, gender-neutral voice sounded in my ear.

"Zaeden, House undetermined. Please, follow the provided guide to comptroller one thousand, three hundred and twenty-six."

A softly glowing ball descended into my field of view, and I set the book aside with a grimace. I'd like to finish it, but if I did, it would keep the next person in line waiting, which would be rude.

The ball of light led me to a booth, vanishing as I approached it. Inside, a comptroller folded its metal-bladed fingers together on the desk.

"Good evening, Zaeden. How may I assist you?" it asked, cocking its head in a jerky fashion.

How entralling.

"I need to get to the Southern Fells Travel Center, if you please," I said. "Are any beacons open there?"

The comptroller ratcheted its head to its other shoulder.

"Indeed. I shall get you there straightaway," it said. "For your consideration. If you use the beacon that you've requested, you will experience a time change of almost twelve hours. It will be early morning there, which may be distressing for you. Are you sure this is your desire?"

Smiling, I said, "Yes please, but thank you for your concern."

“Naturally. In that case, we shall begin,” the comptroller said, “Before you go, may I ask if you have any suggestions to improve-?”

The automaton blipped out of its booth for a breath, and when it returned, it was sitting ramrod straight with its geared hands lying flat on its desk.

“Zaeden, you appear to be seriously injured,” it said. “Shall I bring emergency services to your location before you apparate?”

What... a... good question. How badly did I want to irritate *him*?

“If you did that, how long would it take in the real world?” I asked. “Oh, and how much time has passed since I arrived here?”

The comptroller shuttered the metal spheres that composed its eyes, slightly tilting its head.

“Outside of the Terminal, emergency services would take approximately five minutes to arrive where you will apparate, although it would seem like mere seconds to you,” it said. “Three hours, seventeen minutes, and eight seconds have passed since you first graced this place with your presence.”

So, *he'd* been waiting for a while, which meant *he'd* be annoyed either way. Might as well-

“Do it,” I said.

Let *him* handle emergency services when they showed up. Their inevitable shows of deference were sure to piss *him* off even more, and I had to admit. I was a bit curious whether the irritations I'd provided for *him* today would crack that ever-present, neutral expression of *his*.

“Done,” the comptroller said. “Your beacon is now prepared. We hope that you've had a pleasant stay in the Terminal.”

“Oh, I have,” I said.

The image of the comptroller sucked to a distant point, quickly replaced with a different view. Fighting through the disorientation that always came with having my consciousness shoved into its body once more, I noted black hair and gray eyes resting above brightly colored lips. I saw the pinch in them as well as faint movement in a typically statuesque body, and I made a face.

Because the *Lokke Vitras* was standing in front of me with his eyes drilling into my skull, and he was not pleased.

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