

Chapter 27: Or Maybe a Decent Partner 1

Xygek's ground level was reserved for the middle Strata: Sixth through Eighth. Most people in those Strata weren't afforded the luxury of a skycruiser, and while walking and taking shuttles were easy modes of transit in the city, they weren't the fastest.

On the other hand, the cycles that most middle Strata owned could zip around city blocks like their flying cousins, but only if they had enough room to do so, something they wouldn't find in the crowded tiers above. Ground level, however, offered space aplenty.

Ground level also had easy access to Lake Voxmore and the many cabanas that lined its southeastern shore. In addition, decent clumps of nature blocked out the towers here. While the city might be impressive, looking at nothing but metal, day after day, gradually dampened the spirit, and the greenery found here helped to alleviate that.

Meanwhile, the middle chunk of the city's tiers was relegated to the low Strata: Ninth through Twelfth, and people who'd been stripped of House. Since cycles didn't have room to maneuver there, getting anywhere took much longer than on ground level or the upper city, and although those tiers did have parks, they weren't as plentiful or large.

And of course, the high Strata claimed the heights.

Honestly, there wasn't much difference between the tiers. They were all lovely in their own way. Ground level and the upper tiers just had a few additional benefits, small rewards given to those who had the aptitude or work ethic needed to advance in Strata.

Everyone in Lutov, even those who'd been stripped of House, was cared for. Everyone was given what they needed to live comfortably.

Well. Everyone but the exiled, people whose crimes were great enough to have their citizenship revoked or who wouldn't advance Lutovish society in one way or another. Like, for instance, a boy who might refuse to choose a House.

Absently strolling along ground level's pathways, I dodged the people meandering down the streets at this midnight hour, digesting the day's events. My homecoming had been a whirlwind with a surprise around every corner, and I'd anticipated none of it. I couldn't remember the last time I'd had to bend and stretch my behavior so much because my targets hadn't behaved as expected. I didn't like the sensation.

Of course, today's targets hadn't actually been *targets* but my family, and I'd gone into the situation unprepared, having done no research and chosen no persona because of who they were. I hadn't thought six years could change the family dynamic. I hadn't thought I'd need to use a persona with them.

I still wasn't sure if showing them the real me had been the right thing to do. I wasn't sure what I should do tomorrow.

So, I wrote a message.

That went well. I think, it read.

I sent it at the lowest of priorities in case *evushk* was asleep. There was no need to wake him up over my dilemma, although he probably wouldn't mind if I did.

While I waited for a reply, I stopped at a street-facing shop that was closing for the night. The vendor gave me the last of her meat pockets, and as I thanked her, waving farewell, I wondered which House she belonged to.

People who didn't fit into the Houses' specialties were, in essence, turned over to the community for its use, and said community decided how these people could best fill the many jobs that the Houses didn't govern. But these misfits still claimed a House, any of them except for Kolb.

Then again, the other Houses weren't like Kolb. With that House, one's Stratus determined one's job, ensuring missions were completed by someone who could do them.

The other Houses let their members choose how they'd work to benefit Lutov. Stratus merely determined the amount of House-specific information that a member had access to. Yes, the hard working and talented were usually the ones who held a higher Stratus level, but those same high Stratus members might work the most menial of jobs.

With Kolb, though, a member could refuse elevation to a higher Stratus, a member could hop about Lutov as much as they damn well pleased, and a member could refuse assigned missions, although that freedom got taken away the further one was elevated. House Kolb members had the most say in their lives, if not their jobs.

Unless one was high Stratus.

A message blinked into my array, and I swept it into center-field.

It did go well. I saw everything. I'm happy for you, kuvesk.

On reading that, my step faltered. Everything? He hadn't monitored me that extensively since my first year with him. Had he been worried I'd say something that I shouldn't?

Did I share too much? I didn't know what else to say.

After sending that message, I took a bite of my meat pocket. It had gone cold, but even still, I devoured the rest. The taste of it came nowhere close to *evushk's* cooking, but there was something about city food that couldn't be replicated.

Besides, I'd had much worse fare than this before.

The reply to my message came in.

No, you gave out exactly as much information as you should have. I wish you hadn't needed to share anything about me or your training, but I knew it might happen when I sent you to Xygek. I also knew you wouldn't share more than you must.

Frowning, I deposited my waste into a recycler before shoving my hands in my pockets. If he'd thought I could keep my mouth shut, then why had he been watching me today? He had to know I could have gotten away from my family, if the situation had taken a turn for the worse. So, why...?

I stumbled when a theory hit me.

Evushk, you offered me the apartment to use if needed. You did it so readily that I'm curious if before I left home, you thought I might need it. Were you worried about ME today and how I'd handle my family's possible rejection?

I chuckled as I sent the message. He probably wouldn't appreciate my snark this late at night, but I couldn't help myself. The idea was ridiculous, after all. In the six years that I'd known *evushk*, I'd never seen him show emotion except... except when it didn't matter.

Purple light splashed over me, and I breathed in the night air. I was glad it was late. When getting ready for tonight's activities, I'd changed into something more comfortable, an outfit that wouldn't blend well with Xygek's colorful crowds. Feena and Pheniks hadn't commented on it, probably assuming it was stealth garb, but if it had been any earlier in the day, strangers would be staring at me right now.

It might have taken me months, but after *evushk* had whisked me away from my life, I'd gradually stopped using my persona around him, including how much it had striven to match Lutov's fashion trends. My attire had switched to a black palette like his, if a little more body conforming.

He'd asked me once if I was mimicking him. That had been the first and only time I'd laughed at something he hadn't said in jest.

I just liked black. It looked good on me, accenting every feature, and didn't make my eyes hurt like bright colors did sometimes. I was comfortable in my lack of hue, so black was what I wore.

As I walked into the light of another shop's neon sign, its red color washed over my wrists with a black cuff bordering it, and I flashed to a scene where I'd held my blood-soaked hands in front of my face, having failed to save someone *evushk* had wounded. My lungs filled with acid, and quickening my step, I hurried out from under the sign, even if the image it had invoked didn't relent in its invasion of my mind.

A message's arrival saved me from a silently shrieking descent into self-loathing.

Breaking away from family is one of the last steps in a potential Lokke Vitras' training. While it wasn't the only reason why I sent you to the capital, I still knew that yours might abandon you with this visit, so I had the apartment ready, just in case.

Ah. That made much more sense than what I'd been thinking, although it had taken him long enough to send a reply. I took just as long with mine, considering how to phrase it while meandering into an open space with no towers overhead.

You think they'll distance themselves? My siblings didn't seem inclined to do so.

Unsure if I'd want to read his answer when it arrived, I focused on the world beyond my array once more.

"Huh."

I was standing in the center of the city with no idea of how I'd gotten there. Acceptance Arena lay somewhere in the park at my back, and the Houses' headquarters rose on all sides, but the one I was facing confused me.

Cerullis. Why would my unconscious feet have brought me to the seat of power for Kolb's most antagonistic sibling?

Slowly, I lifted my head, inspecting the building. It rose so high into the air that I momentarily wobbled while seeking the top. From the base, concrete covered its lower floors, tapering into a tower's typical glass walls a fourth of the way up. Why had Cerullis kept an old-fashioned façade at the base of their headquarters?

Shaking my head, I skipped over windows and the illumination behind them, looking for the definitive mark of every House's headquarters in Xygek. There. In the glow of the city's light, gold glinted where rings of it were embedded in the building.

For how many times I'd visited Xygek, one would think I'd have seen this tower by now, but when I was in the city's center, I was usually headed for House Kolb's headquarters on the other side of the park, at least a kilometer away. Seeing it for the first time, I wasn't surprised to learn that Cerullis' tower wasn't much different from the others across the city, just like its members were the same as any other Lutovish. I didn't understand why Kolb was so gung-ho about hating-

A message sprang into my array right as someone jostled me hard enough that I had to spin to stay on my feet. Setting my stance, I got ready to draw a weapon if needed, but only babble greeted me from my accoster.

"Oh, hell. I'm sorry! I got lost in reviewing my presentation for tomorrow. I didn't see you!"

I knew that voice.

Its owner got to his feet with many a wince while loose strands of blonde hair fell out of their knot at the back of his neck, and once he'd recovered enough that his purple eyes landed on me, my mouth went a little dry, but mostly, I was internally groaning. I couldn't handle another emotional reunion today.

He froze halfway through brushing himself off, and I waited for him to make the first move.

"Zaeden?" he breathed.

He'd sounded... how had he sounded?

"Hey, Fyester," I said. "How've you been?"

Taking a step toward me, Fyester hesitantly lifted a hand, which made me tense, but he only brushed my cheek like he couldn't believe I was real.

"You're ok," he said.

Oh. I could work with this.

Evushk's message, crowding into my view, got pushed into my unread pile. I'd get to it as soon as I was done here.

"You look good, Fy," I said.

He was exactly as I remembered him, if with longer hair and worry lines around his eyes. Why hadn't he gotten those smoothed out?

"So do you," Fyester said.

Pushing me away, he ran his eyes over me.

"Damn, Zae, how did you get even more-?"

When he flushed, I grinned.

"Hazard of what I do," I said.

Slumping a little, Fyester said, "Oh. Is that... why you're here?"

Shit. Would people always be this suspicious of my intentions?

"No. I was out walking. Couldn't sleep and my feet took me here," I said.

"Ah."

With Fyester shifting in place, the quiet between us rapidly plunged into awkward territory, but I didn't know how to remedy that. I couldn't spend any time with him outside of an inelegant hello,

not with so much unresolved drama lying between us.

I should head for my parents' apartment. I should *not* take this further.

Did I dare do it anyway?

"Look," I hesitantly said. "Why don't you get a drink with me? We can catch up."

Fyester frowned.

"I don't know," he said. "Are any bars open this late?"

He wrinkled his nose in that endearing way that once told me he was concentrating on solving a problem, and I caught myself smiling. I smothered the expression as soon as I'd noticed it.

"One is. I know its lovely owner, so I usually get her best stuff," I said, "but if you'd rather go home, I'll understand. I'm sure you need your sleep."

I wouldn't need to find my own bed for a while yet. After years where I'd gotten little of it, sleeping for more than four or five hours at once felt strange. I usually caught what else I might need in patches throughout the day.

"I can come in late tomorrow," Fyester said. "Mother Time, I haven't seen you for years, and we happen to run into one another? I'm not letting this opportunity go."

With a half-smile, I said, "All right, then. Follow me. The place isn't far."

TTS Chapter Twenty-Seven

Revision #2

Created 20 November 2024 07:55:08 by FatalisticFable

Updated 24 May 2026 00:25:55 by FatalisticFable