

Chapter 28: Or Maybe a Decent Partner 2

I hurried us toward the closest public lift, half-hoping that Fyester would slip away while my back was turned. With so many sensitive topics to avoid, our coming conversation would be like walking through a minefield, and I wasn't sure if it would be worth it.

Once we were on the right tier, it was a short walk to the bar. Before we headed inside, I held Fyester back while my array projected a simulation of the place's interior for me, using heat signatures and other cues to form it. Once it was done, I only saw Rane, taking stock behind the bar, inside, and she wouldn't mind if I didn't provide her with Fyester's name or House.

Because there was something that I'd forgotten to tell him. This place was established House Kolb territory, where its members could get a drink after a hard day.

I didn't think Fyester would appreciate patronizing such a place, and if they'd been here, Rane's typical customers would have exuded nothing but hostility at him while we'd shared the same space as them. How fortunate that they were gone.

When we stepped inside, Rane tensed, but once she saw me, she smiled, dropping what she was holding to reach for a tumbler.

"Hi there, Zae," she said. "Will you have your usual?"

"Please," I said. "And a...?"

I lifted my eyebrows at Fyester.

"Surprise me," he said.

He was moving his head on a swivel to take in the bar, and I wondered what had him so fascinated. This place was a typical hole in the wall, dark and cramped, and while it wasn't filthy, it wasn't spotlessly clean either.

The only thing that made it different from other bars was the arrangement of the seating in it. The set up allowed for easy defense of the place in case of a hostile breach, all while keeping escape routes open, but someone from any House but Kolb shouldn't notice this.

"Any special requests?" Rane asked.

"Not tonight," I said. "We'll be in my usual corner."

She nodded, and I led Fyester to a table near the back door, subtly arranging him so he'd be behind cover if I needed to flip the table.

"Special requests?" Fyester asked as I sat.

"I'm not always in the best of moods when I come here, sometimes needing to get wasted because of it," I said. "When that happens, Rane lets me drink in her office. It's the only place that's secure enough for me to feel safe while deliberately losing my edge."

Besides home, of course, but *evushk* did *not* encourage drinking.

"Ah," Fyester said. "Does she know, then?"

Rounding on him, I stared until he started squirming.

"Know what, Fy?" I said in a dead voice.

Swallowing, he said, "That you're..."

He waved a hand over me.

"You are, right?" he said. "The *Lokke Vitras* came to our House naming ceremony and pulled you out of it. What else could that have-?"

Under the table, I squeezed Fyester's leg, and he, fortunately, shut up right as Rane stopped at the table with our drinks in her hand.

"Let me know if you need anything else," she said. "I've set the sound filter around this table to its highest setting, so if you want my attention, you'll have to wave."

"Thank you, Rane," I said. "As usual, you anticipate anything that I might need."

"Of course I do. I'm the best barkeep in Xygek," she said.

With a sniff, Rane returned to stocking her bar, and I removed my hand from Fyester's leg.

"She doesn't know, thinks I'm someone high enough Stratus to keep my status hidden," I said, "and I want it to stay that way."

I twisted toward Fyester.

"You don't know either. Do you understand me?"

"That you want it kept a secret? Sure!" Fyester chirped. "I can do that."

Taking a sip of his drink, he made a face.

"Ugh. This is awful," he said. "I love it!"

He downed half of it in one go, and smiling, I tasted my whiskey sour. Same old Fyester. Cheery and eager to please.

“So? You never answered my question,” I said. “How’ve you been?”

“Oh, wonderful! It was a little rough after our House naming ceremony because I was... you know.”

When Fyester looked away from me, my chest tightened.

“It affected my placement,” he said, “but I was quickly elevated. Just hit Sixth Stratus.”

“Congratulations,” I said over my tumbler’s rim. “You deserve that and more.”

Reddening, Fyester said, “Thanks. How’ve you been?”

Stressed. Beat all to hell more than I’d like. Exhausted in body and spark of soul nearly all of the time with blips of happiness at home all that kept me going sometimes. So jumbled in personas that sometimes I forgot who I was. Constantly on the move, in danger, or deep cover.

“Busy,” I said.

Something on my face must have betrayed what I’d retained because Fyester’s smile followed his gaze down to the table.

“Oh,” he said.

Quickly finishing his drink, he waved to get Rane’s attention, indicating that he wanted another of what she’d made for him, and she hastened to comply. We sat in tense silence until she finished, or that was how it seemed to me, at least. Fyester looked lost in thought, spinning his empty glass between his hands.

Rane must have sensed the mood because after placing a second drink on the table, she folded her hands in front of her.

“For you?” she quietly asked.

“I’m good for now, thanks,” I said.

Evushk might have gotten me drunk enough times now that I knew how to keep my mouth shut while in that compromised state, but I still liked to pace myself. It was easier to stay out of trouble if my drinking partner was further into their cups than me.

Watching Rane leave us, Fyester asked, “Are you sure she doesn’t know? You’ve told her you’re high Stratus, and you’re dressed all in black, like-”

“Rane sees plenty of people dressed like me every day,” I said. “Besides, I’m not usually wearing something like this in public. Can’t afford the attention.”

Sighing, Fyester leaned on the tabletop with his chin in his hands while his eyes ate me up.

“That’s too bad,” he said. “You look good in it.”

Heat rose in my cheeks.

“Thanks,” I mumbled, so unintelligibly that I barely understood it.

Springing upright, Fyester covered his mouth in mock shock.

“Mother Time help us. Zaeden’s gotten shy,” he gasped. “What other strange and unusual phenomena might we discover tonight?”

Almost beneath my awareness, I lashed out, lightly punching his shoulder.

“Shut up, asshole,” I said.

“There we go. Much better,” Fyester said, settling into his seat. “You aren’t so tense that you look like you’ll break.”

Wait. Had he just *manipulated* me? I might be more wary of him after such a skillful display if I weren’t so impressed.

“So, why are you in the city?” Fyester said. “It can’t be just to see me.”

“No, although perhaps I should have visited you before now,” I said. “I’m sorry I never let you know that I was alive at least.”

Raising a hand, Fyester shook his head.

“I knew I’d probably seen the last of you at our House naming ceremony,” he said. “It hurt, but it wasn’t your fault. At all.”

“Still-”

“Zae...” Fyester groaned. “I don’t want your apology. Answer my damn question.”

He might not want it, but did he know how badly I needed to apologize? In some ways, losing my partners had almost been as bad as my enforced distance from my family. I didn’t like to think about how many people I might have hurt by vanishing into thin air. I hoped I hadn’t been as big of an influence on their lives as I’d thought, that they’d shrugged my absence off and moved on, but I wasn’t naïve enough to think that I hadn’t hurt anyone. I’d missed them over the years, after all.

If Fyester didn’t want to listen to my regrets, though, I wouldn’t make him. I took another sip of my drink.

“I’m here for my brother’s House naming ceremony tomorrow,” I said.

Fyester went still, giving me the impression of someone who'd been struck by the first pangs of grief, and I narrowed my eyes. I knew the look he was wearing. I'd seen it in the mirror often enough after I'd had to make a horrible choice.

Why was I seeing it on him? Should I be worried, raising my threat level-?

"Pheniks is going through his House naming? Your scrawny, kid brother," Fyester said. "Damn, we're getting old."

He shuddered, and I laughed. What the hell had I been getting paranoid over? This was *Fyester*.

"We haven't even hit the one century mark, Fy," I said.

"True enough," Fyester said. "Still, it makes me feel old. Seems like yesterday that Pheniks was quizzing me about what my parents do for Cerullis. Made me quite uncomfortable."

"Phen's always been oblivious about people's... anything, really," I said. "It's why he's never kept a partner for long."

"Here's hoping he does well in the future that he chooses for himself," Fyester said.

"Was that a toast?" I said. "I think it was."

I lifted my tumbler toward him, and making a face, he tapped his glass against it before tipping his drink back with me.

While Rane brought us another round, I considered whether I should pry into a subject that I badly wanted to discuss. I had no right to ask Fyester about it, shouldn't have considered it in the first place, but I opened my mouth anyway.

"Speaking of Phen and his trouble with women," I said, playing with my tumbler, "how have you done in that arena? Are you seeing anyone?"

Fyester didn't seem the least bit bothered by my choice of subject.

"I didn't do so well for a while after you left, but I got back on my feet soon enough," he said.

"Went through a slew of partners until I found one who suits me. He and I have been seeing each other for a couple of years now, moved in together last month, actually. I still date other people on occasion, but while Jastin doesn't understand polyamory for himself, he's supportive of it, so long as I keep myself safe. It's been quite nice. I think I love him, Zae."

He made a face.

"I haven't told him yet, though."

My fingers ceased their fiddling while melancholy quirked a smile, of all things, out of me.

“You should,” I said. “Who knows what the future will hold?”

“Yeah, I know,” Fyester said with a sigh.

He slumped onto the tabletop with his arms crossed.

“For what it’s worth, I’m happy for you,” I said. “I’m glad you’ve found someone to love.”

Fyester looked up at me from where he was resting his chin on his arms.

“What about you?” he asked. “Do you have anyone special in your life?”

Unlike with Pheniks, I had no problem with misleading Fyester, when it came to this subject at least.

“I’ve been too busy for dating. The free time that I get is spent recovering from injuries, sleeping, or relaxing, if I’m lucky. Besides, I don’t have many prospects where I live.”

Snapping his eyes to slits, Fyester said, “Are you telling me that you haven’t gotten laid in six years? You? Really?”

This lie was much harder to speak than the first one had been.

Turning to the side, I said, “Besides for missions? No.”

A chair scraped across the floor, and when I jerked toward the noise, Fyester had scooted closer to me. He faced me with a grin, leaning his arm and head on my shoulder.

“Well, we’ll just have to fix that,” he said.

Beneath the table, he slipped his hand under my clothes, and my thoughts piled on themselves, even as I assessed for any danger around us if he continued. This had advanced *much* more quickly than I’d thought possible.

“Come home with me,” Fyester said.

Oh, thank Mother Time. That location would be much more secure.

These hazy thoughts swam through my mind, even as I gave the only acceptable answer to his suggestion.

“Ok.”

Rane smirked as we raced out of her bar, probably grateful for the opportunity to lock up, and I barely had enough time to wave at her before we were out the door. Tugging me along, Fyester only stopped for an occasional kiss, as if he was trying to hold my interest, but he didn’t need to worry about that. He’d thoroughly captured it.

When we burst into his apartment, a thought froze me solid.

“What about your partner?” I asked. “Will he be-?”

Tugging me inside with enough force that it sent me stumbling, Fyester pushed me up against a wall, which was surprising. He wasn't usually so forward.

“I already sent Jastin a message about my plans,” he said between kisses. “He's visiting his family right now. Lucky us.”

Ok. One issue addressed, and fuck, I couldn't focus, but I had something... something...

Holy shit, I'd forgotten how good Fyester was at kissing.

Taking his shoulders, I pried him off of me to catch my breath.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked. “After... everything, I didn't think you'd want to speak to me, much less-”

Fyester rested a palm on my cheek.

“Zae,” he said. “Please, shut up.”

My teeth clicked together, and chuckling, Fyester strolled deeper into his apartment, crooking a finger for me to follow. We passed through a rather nice living area, a bit cramped but luxurious, and I absently mapped escape routes out of it while watching the way Fyester moved in the low light.

When we reached the bedroom, I caught a glimpse of a rumpled quilt and far too many pillows before Fyester pulled me to him. His kiss was slow this time, low-burning, as if he was extracting as much from it and me as he could.

I could relate. Every slide of my hands along his skin was like running them over hot coals.

Clothes came off, piece by piece, and I took a moment to admire Fyester's body, letting the warmth in me build before stepping in with the intent to kiss him again, but he pushed a finger to my lips, guiding me to a seat on the bed. He climbed on top of me, and only then did he let me do as I'd wanted, leading me along in this dance.

It was an unusual position for me. I didn't typically follow, and I was usually much more... animated than this, but I didn't mind the change. It was interesting. New.

Plus, it was pretty difficult to protest when Fyester wrapped himself around me with his arms tucked under mine, his fingers curling in my hair, and every bit of skin touching. I couldn't protest when he fucking *kissed* me, exactly the way I remembered. When tongues made it hard to breathe. When I ground into him and he wriggled back.

“I missed you,” I said against his lips.

A shiver rattled through him.

“I missed you too,” he said.

If that was true, why had he sounded so sad?

But when he lowered me to the bed with his face flushed and pupils eating his eyes, I forgot fleeting concerns. Keeping his lips on me, he snaked his hand between us. He did every little thing that only time with a partner could teach, the knowing that was almost as good as learning someone new. I tried to do the same, but before I could rake my fingernails down his back, as he liked, something stung my neck.

Ice cold water doused the raging wildfire in me.

I knew that sensation. A shrieking part of me knew what it meant.

TTS Chapter Twenty-Eight

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