

Chapter 39: Aren't These Things Fun?

Korix looked ravishing at the moment. In black dress pants and a button-down shirt with a wine-red tie to accent it, he'd look amazing enough, but the coat he was wearing, falling to the calf with a shiny, black exterior and a lining to match the tie, only added to the ensemble.

It was like he'd chosen an outfit that would most accent his features. Against it, his eyes and hair were accentuated while his cheeks' natural color stood out.

I rarely got to see him in formal wear, and even if it was old-fashioned in taste, as tonight's event required, it still...

Damn. Kill me now for I had seen perfection.

"Stop looking at me like that," Korix said.

He was standing beside the skycruiser, occasionally flicking a finger through the air. Probably adding comments to my report on our mission. Considering he'd slept on the ride home and we'd rushed to get ready after landing, this was probably the first chance he'd had to look at it.

"You don't like knowing that I want you?" I asked.

I was leaning on the front end of the skycruiser with my chin in my hands and my body swaying as if I had a cat's tail.

...Interesting image.

Korix gave me a scathing glare, at which I smiled. Those didn't scare me anymore.

"We're not supposed to know one another, remember?" he said. "In fact, you know what? You should head inside. People will talk if we arrive at the same time."

And we didn't want that to happen.

I was, frankly, amazed that I still had anonymity in Lutov. The only ones who knew for sure that I was the *Lokke Vitras* to come were the *shukusenth* and my family. Bless my loved ones for keeping their mouths shut about that.

I had no doubt that other people suspected, namely anyone who'd attended my House naming ceremony, but to date, none of them had breathed a word of me.

So, yes, Korix was right. I should head inside.

Pushing off of the skycruiser with a sigh, I paused for a moment.

“Do try to have fun. Please,” I said. “And remember. I left your change of clothes in the manager’s office. Signal me when you’re ready to leave, and I’ll meet you there.”

Grimacing, Korix said, “I’d normally only stay here long enough to make my obligatory appearance, but for you, I’ll make an effort tonight. I know you like these things.”

I flourished a bow.

“Thank you, oh most generous *evushk*,” I said.

“Get out of here,” Korix groaned, waving a hand.

Chuckling, I trotted two steps into the dark before he pulled me up short again.

“Zae?” he said. “You look nice too.”

Damn right I did. I looked fucking stunning, and that was *not* reflected in Korix’s gaze.

Pouting, I said, “Are you sure? Because from where I’m standing, you could be looking at a pile of dirt right now.”

“You and your ego,” Korix said with an explosive sigh.

Lifting his head to the sky, he shook it.

“You are the most delightful sight that I’ve laid eyes on in decades,” he said, “and later, I’ll prove it to you.”

He met my eyes before I could stop my face’s flush, and his lips twitched.

“For now, join the party,” he said. “Enjoy the attention they’re sure to pay you.”

I’d stumble in my words if I spoke, so I dipped my head to him before moving once more into the night.

The park at the center of Xygek was quiet tonight with those uninvited to the ball too preoccupied with their own parties to sneak past this place’s formidable security measures. Korix had set us down not far from Acceptance Arena, so it didn’t take me long to go from the dark of nature’s night to civilization’s illumination.

The Crescent always prompted a queasy mix of feelings in me. Every time I saw it, I remembered how many lives I’d saved on a horrible day, so many years ago, and the warmth of this nearly had me vibrating with happiness and pride, but at the reminder of that day, the empty eyes of Fyester and several House Cerullis members stared at me and...

Hell, it still hurt like a newly inflicted wound, even this long after it had happened.

Tonight, the Crescent lit everything with its glow, making it a bastion against darkness. Tonight, people streamed toward it, clogging one layer of the security meant to keep the undesired away.

Tonight was the Founder's Day Ball.

In the far distant past, Lutov's Founders had formed a coalition to resist those from beyond the stars, and after years of war, they'd eventually pushed those alien beings off of our planet.

I'd always wondered how they'd done it. The events of that age had long been lost to time with only fantastical, obviously untrue legends left behind. The people of that era couldn't have been both as primitive as today's children of Ibis and advanced enough to have planes for flying in aerial combat.

I'd probably never learn how they'd resisted our enemy. My only chance at that lay in The Library, Lutov's most highly guarded store of knowledge, and I wouldn't have access to that place for...

Hopefully, for a while.

But that was for the future. Right now, what mattered was the result of that long-ago war. The day that six formerly hostile families had put aside their differences to handle a larger threat had been celebrated throughout the millennia, the one holiday recognized across Lutov.

Considering that, it was only natural that the event had become something of a spectacle with the greatest of the day's extravagances taking place here at the Founder's Day Ball. Only the highest of Strata and the most influential of people were invited to this. It had, in fact, become one reason why many Lutovish struggled to achieve elevation.

I'd never known that sense of desperation. As part of *shukusen* Talira's family, I'd been attending these balls since I was a child. Even the door guards, almost always the same from year to year, knew my face by now.

Seeing me coming, no one blocked my path when I swept through the people getting their identities checked. Their disgruntled murmurs put a smirk on my face as I strode into the Crescent.

Tonight, the place looked like a building from an entirely different era. The wall between the inner and outer layers had come down, turned immaterial to make Acceptance Arena's gathering space larger. Pillars and gold-leaf filigrees created points of interest along the other walls, illusions cast into guests' arrays. The dais and six *shukusenth* chairs, the focal point of House naming ceremonies, hadn't been touched, although someone had added a few ice sculptures and holographic light displays to it.

Several buffet tables, draped in the most ornate of fabrics, provided refreshments with volunteers manning most of them. The middle ground had been left open, although a few cocktail tables dotted it, but the central-most portion of the floor was home to the most dazzling combination of plants and tech that I'd seen in a while.

Around it, a dance floor stood empty, but with the lack of music in the air, its vacancy only made sense. Right now, only the dull roar of many voices filled the Crescent.

Along its edges, plainclothes security members were mingling with guests, and once I'd come inside, I sidled toward one of them: a woman in a skintight jumpsuit with a geometric pattern covering it. She barely acknowledged my approach, too busy scanning the crowd for trouble to indulge in that.

"I see you've also defied the tradition of wearing clothing from millennia ago," I said.

My sister hummed at me with frustration evident in her tone.

"I'm busy, Zae," she said. "Don't distract me."

"Didn't you recently get elevated to Fourth Stratus?" I said. "You should be able to handle a conversation while keeping watch for danger."

"Maybe with most people," Feena said. "Not with you."

Hell, that stung. Did she really think I'd attack her?

"I just need to know where the family is," I said.

"You don't already know?" Feena grumbled.

Ok. She was clearly upset about something. Sure, we hadn't seen each other much since Pheniks' House naming ceremony, but I'd kept in touch with her and our brother via messages and direct connections since then. Where was this hostility coming from?

"No, I don't," I said. "Have I upset you? You seem... unhappy with me."

Finally, she looked at me with her features softening once she had.

"It's not you," she said. "I got some bad news earlier, is all."

Oh, no. Bad news? Hopefully, it was something small but still.

"Anything I can help with?" I asked.

"Thanks, but I can handle it on my own," Feena said. "I appreciate you offering, though."

"Of course. I'm here if you want to talk about it."

Without bothering to reply, Feena slid her attention back to watching for trouble.

"Mom and dad are with Talira right now. She insisted on having some family time with them," she said. "Phen's with his House Zan buddies around the buffet table closest to the dais. He's been picking at its food all night, the lucky bastard."

I had my two points to avoid. They'd no doubt move throughout the evening, but over the years, tracking targets through recorders had become second nature to me. Keeping away from the rest of the family should be simple.

I didn't want to go near Pheniks because he was currently challenging for House Zan's First Stratus position, and an association with someone from Kolb, even family, would hurt his chances. I wouldn't become a stumbling block for my brother, not when he'd flown so far.

Every day, I thanked Mother Time that he'd listened to my advice about his House naming. I'd always known he'd excel if placed in the right setting, and watching him gain a sense of self-confidence since escaping from House Kolb's influence had been gratifying.

The reason I was avoiding my parents was much simpler. Over the years, they'd made it abundantly clear that they didn't want me in their lives. I didn't blame them for pushing me away, only wishing they'd see that their beliefs about me and my position were misguided, but that was unlikely to happen.

"Thanks, Feena," I said. "Do you want me to grab you something? Getting stuck on security detail is the worst, I know."

Perking up, Feena grabbed my arm.

"I'm starving," she said.

"Got it. Bring Feena food," I said with a chuckle. "Any special requests?"

Shaking her head, Feena released me.

"You know what I like," she said.

"That I do."

I bowed to her.

"I shall return shortly, honorable Fourth Stratus."

Her face soured before I whirled away from her, plunging into the thick of the party.

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