

Chapter 40: Two Random Encounters

Even though it was still early, people had filled the Crescent, and clumps of them were congesting normally easy to traverse pathways. While I ducked and dodged my way through them, I admired the wide range of aesthetics presented tonight. Almost everyone was wearing the suits and dresses that had been popular in millennia past, but their cut and color varied wildly, although the typically vibrant Lutovish rainbow was muted tonight.

While I approached a nearby banquet table, music rose from behind me with a shift in the crowd moving it toward the dance floor. What a stroke of luck. As space opened up around me, I relaxed my guard the barest amount.

After the many years that I'd trained with *evushk*, I was no longer comfortable with having this many people around me, doubly so when I had little room to maneuver. It had sapped a fraction of my love for these events from me, and knowing that Korix had balanced this anxiety with possible fun for centuries, I could understand why he was so reluctant to attend social gatherings like this. Would I be like him when I reached his age?

There was no point in worrying about that now. Better to seize every moment of happiness that I could find instead, holding them close to my heart.

Humming along with the music, I breezed around my food selections, weighing each option. I saw plenty of delicacies that Feena would love here. I also saw things she'd hate. Was watching her face screw up with distaste worth making a second trip through the crowd?

"You're Talira's grandson. Zaeden, right?"

With my decision made, I took a plate from its stack while considering the man at my side. I knew him, but in this context, I wasn't sure if I should.

"That's me," I cautiously said.

When I began making my way down the table, my new shadow followed me.

"I appreciate you respecting my wish to stay anonymous. I'll do the same for you in return," he said. "You're welcome, however, to use my name."

Forcing my hands to remain steady, I reached for one of Feena's favorites.

"How can I help you, Alezand?" I asked.

Ever since a Dissolver had nearly destroyed this place, I'd... disliked occupying the same room as House Cerullis' *shukusen*. After that incident, Korix had thoroughly investigated both him and his House as soon as we'd returned to duty. His conclusions once he was finished? Either what had controlled Fyester and the incident's other culprits no longer existed or we'd misjudged what we'd seen. Fyester and the rest had planned the downfall of Cerullis' sister Houses alone.

Now, I trusted Korix. If he told me to cross into the Tainted Expanse, I'd do it without hesitation because he wouldn't risk me without a good reason, but I knew what I'd seen before Fyester died.

Korix said that I'd let my love for him color my memory of my last moments with him, and maybe he was right. It didn't lessen my suspicion or aversion for Alezand.

"How about we start with you giving me your full attention, young warrior?" he said.

Carefully, I rested my plate on the table before facing him.

For someone striving to keep his identity hidden, Alezand stood out appearance-wise. He'd tinged his skin blue with darker splotches serving as freckles while his eyes' pupils completely ate their irises, and no hair peeked from his scalp. Add to that the silver of his eyebrows and one had an unusual physique to examine, and that wasn't touching on what he was wearing.

"My apologies," I said. "I wasn't trying to offend you."

Surprise cascaded over Alezand's face.

"Oh, no!" he said. "I wasn't offended, and you weren't doing anything wrong. I just wanted to make sure that you hear what I have to say."

Did he not understand what I was? Every word he spoke would be recorded—in my memory, not my array—for later review. I'd have done the same thing whether I'd been focused on him or not.

Mother Time, I'd forgotten how annoying dealing with members of any House but Kolb could be.

"I'm listening," I said.

Alezand shifted in place, nervously rubbing his hands together.

"Have we been introduced before?" he asked.

"I've seen you at House assemblies," I said, "but no, we haven't. Not properly, at least."

Grimacing, Alezand said, "I'm sorry for that. I should have done so before now, considering how often we'll be working together in the future."

May it be less rather than more.

“Considering how busy you are, I expected the delay,” I said. “Forgive me, but do you need something from me? I promised my sister relief for her empty stomach.”

When I gestured at my abandoned plate, Alezand winced.

“Mother Time, I didn’t realize. I’m sorry,” he said. “I only wanted to invite you to my House’s headquarters when next you can come. I have a few items to discuss with you. Nothing to do with politics! Among other concerns, we’re considering a member of my House for elevation. I’d hoped to get your input before making a decision about that.”

“Do I know them?” I asked.

I hadn’t associated with many Cerullis members since... then. Why would Alezand think I had an opinion on his candidate?

“You’ve had dealings with him in the past, I believe,” he said. “Jastin, Fifth Stratus?”

The name was a slap in the face. Sent reeling by it, I struggled to keep my turmoil behind a pleasant mask.

Once again, I watched myself share Fyester’s fate with Jastin. After I’d told him that I’d brought his partner peace, I watched him leap to attack me, only stopped by Korix intercepting him. I heard my *evushk*’s barked command to let him handle the rest. I felt the sickening guilt and pain that had left me sobbing in the skycruiser while waiting to leave.

Did Alezand know who Jastin was to me?

“I can’t promise to be impartial,” I said.

“Of course not,” Alezand said with a smile. “Who’s impartial about anyone they know?”

“So long as you’re aware,” I said. “I’ll visit soon. Was there anything else?”

Showing me his palms, Alezand shook his head.

“That was all,” he said. “I’ll let you get back to the celebration.”

“Thank you,” I said. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Oh, how lies rolled like truths off of my tongue now.

“To you as well,” Alezand said.

Cerullis’ *shukusen* inclined his head to me before merging with the ball’s guests, and I watched him go until he’d disappeared. What had that been about? Except for Talira, none of the other *shukusenth* had gone out of their way to speak with me, making it their general policy to ignore my existence. Anything out of the ordinary like this put me on edge.

Did Alezand know that I suspected him and his House of something underhanded? But how could he? I hadn't voiced those suspicions to anyone, not even Korix, in years.

Hopefully, I could learn more when I visited Cerullis' headquarters, and maybe, just maybe, I could inquire about the events that had led to the Crescent Incident, enough to satisfy me that Korix's conclusions were as correct as I knew them to be.

When I returned to filling Feena's plate, a hush fell over Acceptance Arena, spreading until only music disturbed it, and I hid a smile. Korix had made his entrance. How badly was his skin crawling beneath that empty facade that he always presented? He never had liked people paying attention to him, the poor thing.

By the time I'd finished with Feena's plate, the ball's activities had resumed, leaving Korix purposefully ignored unless someone had business with him or he initiated a conversation. He wouldn't do the second thing, save for what was needed for appearances. I swore to Mother Time; he'd have more fun at these things if he tried to participate.

Shaking my head, I braved the tight confines of milling men, women, and other people with my bounty held close to my chest. With the crowd spreading onto the dance floor, the press here had lessened somewhat. Pockets of breathing space were sprinkled across this cluster, lingering around the edge, and I took a path through as many of those as possible, using the time needed to cross them to assess for hostile behavior.

Damn. I was getting paranoid.

While I was moving through one of these pockets, someone stepped into my path, and I rocked onto my toes to avoid running into her. Short, she looked up at me with the fiercest expression on her face, narrowing her eyes at me with her lips pulled into a fierce frown.

The silver crown of her hair melted into a soft magenta at its ends, hanging in a bun below her ear, and a rash of prominent freckles over her nose and cheeks continued down her neck and over her shoulders. Presumably, they added delightful character elsewhere as well, but her attire for the evening kept that hidden.

A white leotard with lace at the neckline accented her well-defined figure while black thigh-highs and heels showed off her legs. Over this, an open-front dress draped and flared with its deep purple color accenting her hair. The hue lightened as it approached mid-calf while silver embroidery along every hem glinted in the Crescent's light. A thick belt at the waist and black gloves completed the ensemble, and at the sight of it all, I was stuck ogling it and her.

Whoever this woman was, she'd managed to blur the line between old-fashioned and modern styles, and in a rather appealing way as well.

She finished her inspection of me first, snapping her eyes to mine—

"You'll do."

—and as she took my hand, dragging me through the crowd, I realized that in my surprise, I'd failed to determine how much of a threat she might be to me: whether she was hiding weapons under her clothes and the like. I tried to do that now, but the attempt was made difficult by our need to squeeze through other people.

"Um... excuse me?" I said. "Who are you? Do you need something?"

Never relenting in her insistent tug on me, she called over her shoulder.

"Yes. A dance partner."

We stepped out from the crowd and into a group of couples, sweeping one another around a centerpiece of light and greenery. The dance floor. And she'd said she needed a...

It had been years since *evushk* had last tested me in how to turn one's body into art. Also, I was still holding Feena's snack.

"I'm... flattered, but another person might best serve your-" I started.

With more strength than I'd expected from a woman her size, she hauled me in front of her, and as she rested a hand on my shoulder, extending our clasped hands to the side, I was left awkwardly holding a plate rather than grasping her waist. Confusion momentarily rested in the woman until she darted her eyes to my impediment, and then, a mischievous smile replaced it.

"Just keep up," she said.

She slid to the side, twirling under my looped arm, and if I wanted to stay on my feet, I was forced to follow. Dipping and spinning, she performed so many different dance moves, and I barely stayed with her.

It was clear who was in the lead, considering how often she pulled us out of the way of other couples, but within a minute, this balance shifted. I gained my rhythm with my body remembering moves that I'd forgotten, and soon, we were in sync.

Neither of us took a role in this silent conversation. We just danced with one another, taking cues from our opposite. With a smirk, she changed styles halfway through a step. With an answering grin, I forced her into a complicated maneuver, giving her little help to complete it.

All the while, a plate changed hands or briefly hovered in the air with nothing on it spilling.

It was like I'd slipped into an old, favored habit: effortless and simple, and yet, I felt as if I'd returned to one of *evushk's* most difficult training sessions. The challenge of it made my heart race with the world fuzzing around me until it was only me, her, and a plate of food.

I didn't hear the music fall to silence. All I noticed was the woman drawing our dance to a close, and when we stopped, I was out of breath while giddiness bounced in me with every heave of air.

Stepping back, I bowed to the woman, moving through the steps needed to give her my Favor, short of cupping my neck. When I rose, applause broke on my ears, and I glanced around, noting that the dance floor was empty except for us and a ring of people, avidly watching.

How long had we been dancing?

I directed short bows to the audience, cringing the entire time, while the woman stared at them with her arms crossed. When she stormed off, I scrambled to follow, threading through people until we'd found a quiet spot.

"Thank you," she said, rounding on me. "No one but my instructors have matched me like that in years."

"It was no problem. Nothing's tested me like you in... oh, I don't remember when the last time was," I said. "It was fun."

For some reason, she found this amusing, showing me her teeth while extending a hand.

"I'm Leski," she said.

Shaking her hand, I said, "Zaeden."

She raised an eyebrow.

"No House?"

"You didn't give one," I said.

"That's because I'm unHoused, although that will change this year," Leski said. "I don't have a House."

Tilting my head to the side, I said, "Neither do I."

"You're unHoused?" Leski asked. "I thought I knew all of us."

And I grinned.

"Did I say that?" I asked.

Frowning, she stared at me for a moment before laughing, a delighted tinkle that ended with an uncontrolled snort. She threw a hand over her nose and mouth, even as she smiled.

"Oh, I like you," she said.

"I'm glad to hear it," I said. "Some people find my attitude... annoying."

Leski scowled, which caught me off guard. I'd never changed someone's opinion of me so quickly before.

“Please excuse me,” she said. “My father wants me to join him.”

That explained the change in demeanor. Was she not on good terms with her father?

“It was nice to meet you, Zaeden,” she continued. “I hope to see you again someday.”

“That would be wonderful,” I said.

She gave what I was holding a significant glance.

“Maybe get that food to whoever it’s meant for before it gets cold?” she said.

Oh. I’d completely forgotten about Feena. Shit.

“I think that might be a lost cause,” I said.

Laughing, Leski turned away.

“Good luck with revitalizing it, then,” she said.

“Thanks.”

With a flutter of her fingers, she let the crowd eat her, and I licked my lips. What had *that* been?

Starting for another banquet table, I considered the question for a moment but decided to simply leave it as a nice encounter.

Something appropriate for what today was and nothing more.

TTS Chapter Forty

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