

Chapter 6: This Is Where It Gets Interesting 1

As soon as the door had slid closed, I dove into my array, requesting Feena's location. She'd last been reported in the mountains to the west of us, close to where the Upheaval's origin lay. I chose to believe that her proximity to that tech-disrupting phenomenon was why she wouldn't answer my requests for connection rather than... rather than something worse.

I had a destination. Now, I needed transport.

And a way out of Zan's headquarters.

And anonymity while doing all of this.

Hell. Maybe I should wait. Nyco might help us, and who knew? Feena might not be in trouble. This might be me overreacting to a warning sign that I only thought I'd seen.

But no. That was fear speaking. If I listened closely, I could hear my instincts shouting denial at it.

Which meant I'd unexpectedly found myself on my first mission. Fear, panic, and all other emotions had no place here. So, how did I get what I needed?

Taking a deep breath, I said, "I'm going out for a bit. I need you to cover for me if anyone comes looking here. Say I'm in the washroom."

"What?" Pheniks said. "Did you not hear what Nyco said? We can't leave-"

Spinning in place, I stormed to my brother, taking hold of his shoulders.

"Feena's in trouble," I said. "Of the two of us, I'm better suited to help her, and you know it. I need you to stay here and *cover my ass* while I go save our sister. Can you do that?"

Leaning away from me, Pheniks kept swallowing as if trying to speak, but he soon gave up, nodding instead.

"Good," I said, releasing him. "I don't know how long I'll be gone so..."

With a sigh, I ruffled his hair while making a mental map of everything I'd observed in Zan's headquarters since reaching it, and as I did, the result appeared in my array, piece by piece. Before I could leave, Pheniks stopped me.

“Be careful, Zae. Remember, you have to keep your promise of no pranks for a month. I-”

Flushing, he looked to the side.

“I love you,” he mumbled.

Warmth sprang unbidden in me, and I clamped down on it, even as I kept its spawned smile in place.

“Love you too,” I said. “Don’t worry. Soon enough, I’ll be playing pranks on you again.”

Pheniks either sputtered or turned into an even more uncomfortable mess after that, but I didn’t stick around to find out which.

Once I was through the door, I didn’t check whether anyone was in the corridor with me. I strode down it with my head held high and my thumbs in my pockets, projecting an air of belonging as best I could.

It seemed to work. No one looked twice at me as I headed for a lift with access to the stacks, avoiding recorders as I went.

In my array, I was using what little process cracking I’d learned to get one of them ready for a short shutdown. I did a sloppy job of it, yes, but I didn’t need my work to be untraceable, only to fulfill its purpose.

When I reached the cross-section that led to my first goal, I paused, playing with the air like I was reading a message when in reality, I was watching the hallway beyond from the view of my target recorder. I by no means controlled the thing, but everyone knew how to slip through the security processes that guarded what a recorder saw. It was knowledge an eight-year-old should have, whereas everything else I’d done had required all of the process cracking I knew.

Mother Time, I should put more effort into learning that skill.

Once the hallway was empty, I turned onto it, playing the role of an unassuming House Zan member until I was several paces from the lift. Then, I activated the changes I’d made to the recorder’s processes, which had my secondary view of the hall going dark, and sprinting, I dove into the lift a split second before the recorder resumed its work.

The lift had grabbed me at an awkward angle, which made getting out of it difficult, but once I had, I took a calming breath, checking if my array had caught any alarms that I might have missed. I noted that none had been triggered with satisfaction, completing the first part of this endeavor.

Of course, everything after this only got more difficult, but that was ok. I could handle it.

As I wandered through House Zan’s stacks, I affected the same aura of belonging as I had above, keeping an eye out for what I needed. Thank Mother Time, an opportunity presented itself before five minutes had passed.

A technician far ahead of me separated from a group of his fellows, sharing cheery farewells with them. He headed toward where House members stored their belongings while working, a place that should be empty at mid-morning.

Had the technician and his friends stayed later than the end of a typical night shift today? Why? And... why did I care?

I followed the technician at a distance, moving further from the stacks with every step, until he went through a door. Once I was beside it, I paused.

I hoped I could get this man to cooperate with me sans violence, but if I couldn't, was I willing to hurt another person?

If I was to be part of House Kolb, I'd have to learn how to do it eventually. Exercises of morality had no place on a mission, right?

But to this point, I'd never had to harm someone, and I must admit. I was curious if I could.

At the moment, though, my ability or lack thereof didn't matter. I was going through that door either way because that was what Feena needed me to do.

When it slid to the side, I stepped into a small room, lined with lockboxes, while benches filled the middle of it. For a moment, I thought it was empty—somehow—but a flicker of movement turned me to the corner closest to me, all while I berated myself for not checking it after coming inside.

The technician was standing by the line of lockboxes closest to the door, and on seeing him, my mouth went dry. It was the man from yesterday, the one who'd been popping into my thoughts on-and-off since then.

And he wasn't wearing a shirt.

Squeaking, I backpedaled to the door. I couldn't do this, not with him. I needed another target. Finding one should be easy, right?

"Can I help you?"

Fuck. He was looking over his shoulder at me, which meant he'd probably seen my flustered state. Why the hell was I flustered?

Ok. Calm down. Go through this one step at a time.

Swallowing, I said, "Sorry. I didn't mean to intrude."

That twitching smile from yesterday made another appearance, but fortunately, nothing stirred in my chest on seeing it this time.

“It’s a public changing room. You can intrude all you like,” he said before reaching for his shirt. “Do you want privacy? I’m almost done here.”

“No, no!” I said, scratching my head. “I was actually hoping you could help me.”

The technician cocked his head while his face wrinkled.

“How’s that?”

Here was hoping my story sold.

“I’ve come to the stacks to make my final run for the day,” I said, “but halfway through that, I realized that I’d forgotten an inspection, one I’ll need a technician to help me complete. Lo and behold, as I’m panicking about that, I spotted you. I was hoping you’d join me.”

Expression dropped from the technician’s face, leaving a small frown as his only indication of displeasure.

“I’m about to go home,” he said.

“I know! I know, and I’m sorry to ask this of you,” I said, “but it’s a quick inspection, and if you help me, I’ll owe you a favor.”

This, the only form of currency that my people exchanged, was a huge offer on my part. Favors, even loose ones like this, weren’t lightly given, which could be seen by the sudden gleam in the technician’s eyes.

“What sort of inspection?” he asked.

“It’s on the emergency shuttles,” I said. “Not all of them, of course. Just enough to fill my quota.”

As he considered my proposal, the technician drummed his fingers on his thigh, and I split my focus between hoping that he’d buy my tall tale and keeping my eyes off of his exposed skin.

“Ok,” he eventually said. “Give me a second.”

He finished changing while I surreptitiously watched, cheering in my head. Part two was complete, although I should probably hurry up with the rest. Who knew when someone would spot my crude process cracking from earlier?

Once he was ready, the technician inclined his head toward the door, and we left the changing room. As we walked, I offered him my hand.

“I’m Traze, Fifth Stratus,” I said.

Shaking my hand, the technician said, “Garreth, Tenth Stratus. You’re acting pretty inexperienced for someone in such a high position.”

While rubbing the back of my neck, I had my array force blood into my cheeks.

"I did well in my placement exam is all," I said. "It doesn't mean I deserve my Stratus, as evidenced by how I forgot to do a damn inspection."

"We've all been there, Traze. Don't worry so much about it," Garreth said, chuckling. "Shall we?"

He waved to a nearby lift, and I laughed.

"Please, you go first, otherwise you might be waiting here for a while," I said. "I have to take lifts slowly, or I make a mess."

I rubbed my stomach.

"At least if you go ahead of me, the ride up will eat part of that waiting time"

Garreth's lips twitched again, although I wasn't sure if he was showing me a friendly smile this time or laughing at me. Not that it mattered.

"All right, then," he said.

As he input a floor destination, I kept a careful watch on him, and once he'd disappeared through the ceiling, I followed at a slower pace, looking for him on each landing that I passed. I didn't think he'd have put the wrong floor into the control earlier, and I was certain that he hadn't pierced through my disguise, but it never hurt to be cautious.

When I stepped out of the lift, I stumbled to a wall, raising a finger as I leaned on it.

"Give me... a moment," I gasped.

After an appropriate amount of time, I straightened, wincing.

"Sorry about that."

"No problem. Everyone's got their thing," Garreth said. "You can't handle lifts. I can't stand heights. See?"

I weakly smiled in response, which he returned with more enthusiasm.

"Let me grab some tools," he said. "I'll meet you in the hangar."

I... didn't want to split up, but I had no feasible excuse to keep Garreth with me.

So, I said, "Ok."

We parted ways, and I went through the only door that could lead to a hangar. Mother Time, had they made it wide enough? What sort of disaster had Zan thought would require so much clearance for its members to flee through?

I half-expected to find a group of high Strata waiting on the other side of the door, ready to take me to their *shukusen*, but the hangar was empty of everything but shuttles. Hugging my elbows, I glanced over them.

What would best serve my purpose? Most were open to the air, bulky craft, only used for House business or emergencies. One or two sleeker craft were resting at the end of the line, but no matter how much their crisp lines and smaller size might appeal to me, I needed something that wouldn't draw attention.

When Garreth eventually joined me, I was in the transport that I wanted to take, playacting that I was running through its processes. Standing beside the console near the front, I forewent the fold-down seats bolted into the transport's sides. The longer I could keep from strapping into one of those uncomfortable monstrosities, the better.

Garreth climbed inside, plopping a tool bag beside the console.

"So, how many of these do we need to inspect?" he asked.

Internally, I was cringing because this next part wasn't something I'd enjoy. Garreth seemed nice. I didn't want to disrupt his life, but this was a mission. My wants and his well-being didn't matter.

"I need you to fly me into the mountains to the west of Zoln," I said.

Crouching at my side, Garreth froze, lifting his eyes to me through his hair.

"Fly you...?" he said. "What do you mean?"

"What I said," I snapped. "Put the tools down, get this transport into the air, and fly us to the coordinates I'll give you."

Garreth's face darkened as he frowned.

"Who are you, really?"

Dammit, I'd known this would eventually come, but hell, if I hadn't naively hoped that I wouldn't have to activate the request that I had waiting in my array. My rifle materialized in Garreth's face, and he stopped breathing.

"Do as I say, or I will blow holes in both of your kneecaps before using your own electric tape to secure you to the console," I growled. "I'll keep poking holes through you until I get where I need to go."

Wordlessly, Garreth raised his hands, and I backed off. Shuffling to the transport's console, he input a few commands with me watching over his shoulder all the while.

"Coordinates?" he stiffly said.

I provided them, and within seconds, the hangar door opened, letting us rise into the air. Reaching Feena's last known location would take about an hour, so I settled into a seat, indicating that Garreth should do the same.

For a while, he glared at me. His silent accusation only bounced off the wall that I'd raised between me and my emotions, and soon enough, he got tired of watching me stare right back at him.

What would I do with him once this was done? What was *I* going to do? I could be ruining my life by running off like this. If it became common knowledge that I'd stolen a transport and kidnapped someone to save my sister, none of the Houses would elevate me beyond Eleventh or Twelfth Stratus, the dregs of society.

As for Garreth, I couldn't abandon him in the mountains or take any other steps to protect myself because those actions might kill him. Murder was- was *wrong*, in the deepest sense of the word. Death should be an individual's choice, not something forced upon them. This was what the Collective had taught us: that no spark of a should leave the physical plane before it was ready.

"Why are you doing this?"

Stirring, I brought the task of monitoring Garreth to the forefront once more. He was looking at me with something like morbid fascination, and facing this, I shrugged.

"What makes you think I'd answer you?" I said.

"Because an identity check on you reveals nothing, and you certainly won't share identifying details about yourself with me. I can't hurt you if I don't know who you are, right?" Garreth said. "Plus, you've guaranteed that my next elevation won't happen for a few more years. I might as well get something from this, even if it's just a story. What harm could there be in sharing?"

He was right.

Fighting the urge to find something other than him to rest my eyes on, I said, "My sister. She's in trouble. And she's House Kolb, meaning no one in Ostiu would volunteer to help her if I asked. So..."

As I spread my arms, emotions flurried over Garreth's face before settling into disgust.

"You'd choose family over House?" he asked.

"Who said I was doing that?" I shot back. "But if it came down to it, I don't know which I'd choose. Ha!"

Despite my best efforts to contain it, my body shook with laughter, and Garreth eyed me like I'd turned into a deadly, wild animal.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

“I doubt you’d understand, but like you said, there’s no harm in sharing,” I said. “This—”

I pointed at the shuttle’s floor.

“—is the first and only choice that I’ve made solely for myself, my only true taste of freedom. After this, I’ll be a slave to my House.”

Something shifted in Garreth with a new face peeking through.

“Is that how you see the House system? As slavery?” he asked with a dead voice.

My instincts screamed for me to tread carefully with my answer to this question. Still. I couldn’t lie here. No one else had come this close to seeing my deepest desire, and yes, I’d conceal it from him as best I could, but since he’d asked about it, I’d answer him as truthfully and cautiously as possible.

“I see the House system as necessary. How else could Lutov function as one civilization instead of endless, squabbling factions?” I said. “Its necessity doesn’t mean I have to like it, though. It doesn’t mean that I can’t wish for more. It doesn’t mean that I want to surrender my freedom.”

“I see,” Garreth said.

The strange face that I’d seen on him slipped back below the surface, and he turned away from me, soon slumping into sleep. I waited and watched and wished that pulling him out of his life hadn’t been necessary. Why hadn’t I gone looking for him last night before this craziness had started?

Squeezing my eyes closed, I leaned back in my seat, getting comfortable. We’d arrive to our destination soon, and I needed to be prepared for whatever we might find.

TTS Chapter Six

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