

Chapter 9: Hello There, Civilization

With my back pressed to crumbling concrete, I counted my breaths, loosely holding my rifle in front of me. When I reached thirty-seven, I had my array activate the mine that I'd left behind. The roar of its explosion rang in my ears as I spun to where I could see over the collapsed wall that I was hiding behind, searching for my target.

Pheniks was easy to find. The force of the explosion had knocked him into the pristine hull of a ship, once claimed by those from beyond the stars. Even with the chaotic scene of humans fighting an ancient enemy displayed between us, I leveled my rifle at my brother with a kill shot lined up, but it was too early for our mock fight to end. I couldn't show off my skill, so I shifted my aim a fraction, and my energy bolt blackened the metal beside Pheniks' head.

He jerked away from this, rolling to his feet, and as he sprinted for cover, I chased him with barely missed shots.

Once he'd found safety, he shouted, "Really? A mine? I know you're still dealing with your near-death experience, but that's no excuse for breaking the rules."

Ok. Maybe it *was* time for this to end.

Vaulting the broken wall, I let my rifle dissipate, drawing a long knife to replace it. I ducked and dodged between the people that the scenario had generated, but not once did Pheniks peek from his hidey-hole, and as I drew closer, my skin prickled.

Ducking behind the ship's boarding ramp, I scooped pebbles off of the ground, tossing them toward Pheniks. When they landed, smoke poofed into the air, and my brother leapt from his hiding spot, nowhere near where I'd thought he was.

No matter.

I tossed my knife, and it spun to the tune of machine calculation and muscle memory, soon burying to the hilt in Pheniks' side. To his credit, my brother didn't scream, only releasing a single grunt as he reached for the wound, but I ended his misery soon enough. An energy bolt from my reformed rifle punched through his temple, and the scenario ended.

White walls replaced a battle between humans and alien beings, and stretching, I eyed Pheniks as he rubbed the side of his head.

"You good?" I asked.

“Mother fucking Time, Zae! Ow!” Pheniks groaned. “Why would you kill anyone like that?”

Chuckling, I said, “Would you rather if I did it another way?”

At his glare, I rolled my eyes, turning my back on him, and frowned. Someone was striding out of the weapons chamber, someone I didn’t know.

Shortly after Pheniks and I had begun the scenario, I’d registered an alert, notifying me of a participant’s addition to it, but I’d thought it was one of our parents, which this person clearly wasn’t.

Black swirled around them, billowing hair or clothes perhaps, and I had long enough to register a sense of familiarity before the door fell closed. Something inside urged me to give chase, but my brother’s continued cursing kept me in place. I had to make sure he was ok.

“Did you know someone was watching us?” I asked.

Bristling, Pheniks snapped, “No. How could I have known?”

I shook my head at him.

“Relax. I didn’t see them until just now either,” I said. “Do you think mom and dad are entertaining a guest? With us leaving in a few hours, that seems unlikely, but someone could have arrived unexpectedly.”

Apparently mollified by my admission of ignorance, Pheniks joined me in staring at the door.

“They mentioned something about a visitor this morning. Were acting antsy about it too,” he said. “I assumed it was a medic, coming to check on you again.”

Before it could raise its ugly head, I batted irritation aside. A little over a week had passed since our visit to Ostiu, and people hadn’t stopped treating me like a fragile, porcelain doll, despite how many times I’d insisted that I felt fine. Getting Pheniks to practice with me today had taken every manipulative trick I knew, and when our parents learned about this afternoon’s pastime, I was sure we’d both suffer for it.

“I hope it was a medic,” I said. ‘Maybe they’ll tell mom and dad to stop fussing.’”

“Yeah, you obviously don’t need it,” Pheniks said. “Damn, I don’t think you’ve ever taken me down so quickly.”

“You did well too,” I said, punching his shoulder. “What was in that smoke? It was so thick that I could hardly see through it.”

Brightening, Pheniks chattered about his innovation, and I half-listened while eyeing the door.

The stranger watching us had not been a medic. Of that I was certain.

Once a warrior had fought for long enough, they emanated a certain type of aura, one that any combat veteran could sense like dogs did with an impending earthquake. Our visitor had worn that aura like a well-loved cloak.

Whoever they'd been, though, they were gone, and I should put them out of my mind. Easier said than done. A message, sliding into my array, helped with that.

Zaeden. Pheniks, it read. Exactly what do you think you're doing? We're leaving for Xygek in a few hours, and you two are playing in the weapons chamber? Get into the house and help with final preparations.

Wincing, I said, "Oo, dad's not happy."

"I'm blaming this one on you," Pheniks said.

He brushed past me, and I followed, sputtering protests.

Hours later, my family and the items that we'd need for a week-long stay in the capital had been loaded onto a shuttle, and the four of us were lounging in its enclosed passenger segment. Relatively spacious, it was lined with nicely padded benches around the perimeter.

While the vehicle was in motion, only one belt was required here rather than the full-body harnesses that transports needed. A table sat between these benches, provided for passengers who wanted to play games while traveling, and a cooler was hanging on the far wall with every drink one could imagine ready for preparation inside of it.

Usually, individuals and smaller parties would use a skycruiser to reach the capital, as those vehicles could provide a more comfortable trip, but groups as large as ours needed to take a shuttle. Also, other travelers would usually be sharing this space with us, but my parents had finagled their way into a private trip this time.

I wished they hadn't. If strangers had been in the shuttle with us, they might have distracted my family from their favorite topic in recent days: me.

I didn't mind the attention they were giving me, rather enjoyed it in truth. The problem was the amount of it.

The longer I spoke with someone, the more my persona cracked, and even if that process was slow, it gradually revealed my rigid control of the emotions hidden beneath it. To this point in my life, those cracks hadn't spread far enough for people to notice what I'd unintentionally revealed, but sooner or later, that day would come, and I didn't know what I'd do when that happened.

These cracks in my persona weren't usually a problem. Most conversations included breaks where other people were speaking, and I could reset in those moments, reminding myself of which lies I'd told to which people, but on this trip, those breaks weren't lasting long enough.

I was the center of attention with my House naming the reason that we were crossing half of Lutov. On top of that, my parents hadn't stopped fretting about nearly losing me. They bombarded me with their concern, and eventually, I left my seat to get a drink, hoping to impose a pause.

As I input what I'd like into the cooler, I listened to Pheniks' restrained hiss behind me.

"Lay off of him. Can't you tell you're making him uncomfortable?"

"Oh," dad said.

While mom muttered, "Oops."

Mother Time bless my brother. When I took my seat again, he'd engaged our parents in a game of *phansha*, leaving me to do as I liked. Draping over the back of a bench, I watched the grasslands passing by outside.

No estates stood against the horizon, none within view at least, but I hadn't expected to see any. House Drav kept Lutov's population at its lower limit for many reasons, but chief of these was to make sure that we Lutovish didn't overcrowd what meager land we could claim.

Even still, the privacy that the upper Strata enjoyed must be maintained, and both low and mid Strata must have a chance to lead comfortable lives in Xygek or the handful of villages spread across the homeland, neither of which could happen if too many people occupied too little space. So, Drav kept our numbers restricted.

Perhaps if the Tainted Lands hadn't been constraining us so badly, House Drav could lift their restrictions, but that wasn't the case. Feena sometimes grumbled that we should crowd the upper Strata more closely together so more people could have children, but she always voiced her complaints in the privacy of the family home. No one, not even her, would dare suggest such a thing in public. High Strata House members deserved some perks for the punishing work that their roles required.

When we reached the forest surrounding Xygek, the shuttle lifted into the air, leaving trees swaying in the breeze below us. Lutov's sole nature preserve stretched from here to the coast: some three thousand kilometers dedicated to protecting the land's native plant and animal life. Rarely were Lutovish allowed to venture beneath its branches, and when this happened, the lucky few must enter on foot, taking nothing from the forest and leaving nothing behind.

I'd always found it funny that Feena complained about the high Strata taking up too much space while never making a peep about the abundance of land that the Preserve ate up. I wasn't a proponent of leveling the forest, mind you. Mother Time knew we'd wrecked enough of this land over the centuries. I just found the contrast interesting.

A glint appeared above the forest's canopy, and as my heart rate increased, I twisted to my knees in my seat. At my movement, Pheniks and my parents stopped talking to join me at the window. Together, we watched that bouncing light grow stronger until the trees fell away, revealing the magnificence lying in the valley behind them.

Xygek, the seat of Lutov's power.

I could never control my reaction at the sight of it, no matter how many times I visited. A sea of towers, all precisely laid out, rose for the sky while glinting skycruisers formed a cloud around them. Plasma bridges stretched between the buildings, linking tiered platforms and sprawling parks at every level, and all of it claimed a monochromatic theme with the clothing from blotchy crowds providing its only color.

From its edge, the cityscape rose in a reverse funnel to six, towering skyscrapers with bands and rotating loops of gold decorating them, and the vast spread of Lake Voxmore shone behind all of it. This was Xygek, capital of Lutov, and the only true city that the homeland claimed.

"It's beautiful," mom said.

She'd only spoken what we were all thinking. Something about this city called to the heart of all Lutovish. Maybe it was pride in our accomplishments, both of those who were alive and those gone to the Collective. Maybe it was the stark change found between here and our home in the country. Whatever it was, it shoved a fist down my throat, making it hard to swallow, while tears blurred my vision.

When we drew close enough for individual towers to fill the window, I flopped into my seat. The city up close failed to impress as spectacularly as the view from a distance, and I didn't like intermingling the two.

Soon enough, we set down on a landing pad, leaving the shuttle to wait for our return. One by one, we filed into House Kolb's headquarters, descending a single level to an expansive foyer, adorned with all the trappings of those who held authority.

Noting a painting that Talira had added since the last time I'd visited this place, I strode to it, leaning forward to inspect the piece. The canvas' shifting threads morphed the painting through the process of a bird taking flight. I quite liked it, but then, I'd always enjoyed the art here.

As he stopped beside me, dad said, "Another Gazi piece? She sure does like that artist."

"To be fair, Gazi's quite talented," I said. "I wouldn't mind owning a few of his pieces."

Giving me a sidelong look, dad said, "I didn't know you were into art."

I shrugged.

"I appreciate the effort and technique that goes into a painting like this, is all," I said. "Nothing more."

"Hrmm," dad grunted.

Had I surprised him, and if so, did that mean I'd operated outside of my persona's parameters? If I had, it shouldn't be a disaster. People's likes and dislikes changed all the time, but it meant I'd

have to stay within the limits of my chosen role for a while.

Before dad could start asking more pesky questions, the foyer's second set of doors opened, and the four of us entered the office of House Kolb's *shukusen*.

"Ximon!" Talira cried, striding from behind her desk with her arms spread wide.

My dad moved forward to accept her embrace.

"Mom."

The rest of us waited while they participated in their normal battle of who could squeeze the hardest, but when they released one another, Talira turned on mom.

"Mira, it's good to see you," she said. "I'm guessing you're not fighting with my son at the moment."

With a small smile, mom said, "If we were fighting, could we be in the same room without a sniping competition starting?"

"Fair enough," Talira said, chuckling. "Come here, then."

They hugged, and once that was done, our grandmother turned her attention to Pheniks and me. She swept us into her arms before we had time to react, and we endured peppered kisses with many a wince. When she freed us from this torment, she bopped Pheniks' nose.

"I've been keeping track of your studies," she said. "Aleza and Arion have been raving about your rotations in their Houses. You have no idea how many hours I've spent preening over you with them."

She winked, which had Pheniks stumbling over his words.

Meanwhile, I wondered what to make of my grandmother's obvious lie. Houses Kolb, Zan, and Cerullis—two of whom were led by the *shukusenth* Talira had mentioned—had been jockeying for power since the formation of Lutov. I doubted my grandmother could stand to be in the same room as her rivals for long, especially not Cerullis' *shukusen*. Things had gotten... tense between them and House Kolb in recent years.

But then, Talira turned to me with her face darkening, and contemplation of her lie fell to the wayside. She pinched my cheek *hard*, leaning in until she was all I could see.

"And you," she growled. "Don't you *dare* make me worry as much as you have in recent days. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal," I managed to reply.

Biting her lip, she wrapped me in her warmth, placing her mouth beside my ear.

“You make me so proud, Zae,” she said, “but I wish you weren’t such an embodiment of this House.”

Releasing me, she patted the cheek she’d pinched before returning her attention to my father.

While they visited, I circled Talira’s office. As the head of House Kolb, she took up the highest floor in their headquarters, looking down over the rest. It had always been an austere place with not much to look at besides a sideboard and a wall of windows, as well as the obligatory desk and chairs, of course.

As I wandered toward that arrangement of furniture, one of the gold rings that swooped around this tower soared into view, and in its shadow, I palmed a device, left lying in my pocket since earlier today. When I passed Talira’s chair, I dropped this device into it before continuing on as if I’d done nothing out of the ordinary.

Eventually, my grandmother bade us farewell, and we returned to our shuttle, having made our obligatory obeisance. While on the way to my family’s city apartment, I received a message, embedded in the tightest security processes I’d seen in a while.

Zae, it read. I don’t know when you placed it, probably when your parents were distracting me, but your shocker gave me quite the buzz when I sat on it. I cannot tell you how hard it made me laugh once I’d figured out what had happened.

In the future, however, I would advise against pranking a shukusen, whether your own or one from another House.

Much love, grandson. I look forward to attending your House naming ceremony.

As I closed the message, Pheniks asked, “What are you smiling about?”

“Just our grandmother,” I said. “She wished me well with my House naming.”

Pheniks was quiet for a moment before darting a glance my way.

“Are you nervous about it?” he asked.

More than I could say.

“Not at all,” I told him, chortling. “What’s there to worry about?”

Besides my entire future getting decided by a single event. Besides a fault in my logic possibly ruining my life.

My brother didn’t push it, thank Mother Time, and within a quarter hour, the shuttle glided into our family’s private hangar. Feena was waiting here, probably under the assumption that she’d stay with us until the week was up.

She wasn't wrong.

Once necessary social obligations had been satisfied, I begged off of anything more, claiming fatigue as an excuse to leave my family's side. That wasn't, of course, my real reason for wanting time to myself, though. As I wandered down familiar hallways, I sent off a message, one that confirmed my arrival in the capital, before retreating to my room so I could prepare.

I had a date soon, after all.

TTS Chapter Nine

Revision #3

Created 16 November 2024 05:55:55 by FatalisticFable

Updated 19 April 2026 01:44:57 by FatalisticFable