

## Chapter XV - Ruffling Feathers

The music was overpowering, almost as if being played with the express intention of discouraging conversation among the guests. People danced and grooved to the jazzy tune, drinks in hand, as the multicolored flashing lights swept over them.

The pool in the center of the open-air area reflected the lights over its calm surface, making for an eerie display. A ramp floated down its middle, upon which a fashion show of sorts was going on, with models strutting along in ludicrous fancy outfits by some designer named Fotranch or something. Nobody seemed to pay much attention to it except a few odd groups here and there, whispering and giggling at each other as they looked on in amusement.

The evening sky was studded with twinkling stars, along with a sliver of the smooth and blue Ahore and half of the dappled Raimyor. Seeing the moons of Karomoz always made Zablaron wonder why the Karomozians never bothered to colonize them — it would make sense to start with them than with planets that didn't belong to them. A few of the nearby planets gleamed faintly in blurred blues and greens.

They sat inconspicuously in one corner of the pool party, at a wooden table, watching the guests engage in the merriment. Florinok took note of the notable guests. The Karomozian Minister of Health, a morbidly obese woman, sat munching at a chicken bone, accompanied by a few other people at a table near the boundary hedges. A decorated, high-ranking official of the Karomozian military stood tall and stiff near the pool as he sipped from his drink and surveyed the partygoers. And then there was Jod Quinn, the owner of Quinn Furnishings, lying in one of the floatable seats in the pool — he was one of the few people paying attention to the fashion show. Perfect, Florinok thought, as she couldn't help but smile.

"Can I ask you a question?" Zablaron asked as he set his lychee smoothie down. Florinok turned to him abruptly. He wore a maroon tuxedo over a royal-purple waistcoat, a white dress shirt, and black trousers.

"I'm sorry? Did you say something?" she asked as she clutched at her periwinkle pearl necklace. She wore a lime, one-shoulder evening dress with a glittery periwinkle skirt. Her hair was let loose but held up at the back of her head by a broad, lime barrette clip.

Zablaron leaned over. "Can I ask you something?" he asked again, this time loudly.

"Oh." Florinok shrugged. "Sure."

"Where does the Head of Drug Design get the skills to infiltrate a top-secret base of operations?" Zablaron asked inquisitively.

Florinok shrugged. "In the streets."

"In the streets?" Zablaron raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, I grew up with this bunch of orphan kids. We used to steal stuff for us all the time. I was the best one. It's how I got into Curavez Pharmaceuticals."

"Oh? You stole the position of Head of Drug Design?"

Florinok giggled. "Pretty much. You see, my friends got really sick one time, and we had no money to buy medicines. So, I set up shop near a pharmacy and kept track of the deliveries. Then, when they arrived, I would sneak over and steal the medicines."

"Just like that?" Zablaron asked, surprised.

"Oh, sometimes it would be as simple as walking by an unattended cart and grabbing a handful of the drugs. Other times, I would get one of the other kids to fall over and pretend they were hurt as a distraction. Most of them were atrocious actors, but it still worked for me. Then I started taking empty boxes to the pharmacy itself and replaced them with new ones."

"OK," Zablaron said uncertainly. "But how did that get you your job?"

"I went a little overboard." Florinok tittered. "I began lifting drugs in advance... for all kinds of illnesses. It got so bad that Lavandora Myrtle, the CEO, herself, had to visit that particular pharmacy. I was caught and brought to her."

"Yeah, you do get caught eventually," Zablaron quipped.

Florinok wrinkled her nose. "Because people don't do what I tell them to. Anyway, Lavandora... she turned out to be a really nice lady. She asked me why I was stealing. I told her everything." Florinok drew in a deep breath. "She took pity on me. Not only did she take me under her wing, but she also promised to bear all expenses for my friends and me — including our education."

"Oh. Maybe I should have offered that to the Crimson Crows," Zablaron said thoughtfully.

"She passed away six years ago. I said I grew up as an orphan, but that was the first time I actually felt like an orphan."

Zablaron cleared his throat and picked up his smoothie to sip at it again while Florinok turned her gaze back at the pool.

None of them said anything for a while as the music hammered at their ears.

"Oh well, life is unpredictable. The only thing predictable is how you react to it. Sometimes, not even that," Zablaron said wistfully. "The good thing is that the time you spent with her seems to be... memorable."

"Yes, that it was," Florinok said, watching pop icon Iszonik Marhang from planet Vibraudio, throw his drink at a server in indignation. Keep doing that, Florinok thought. Makes my conscience all the clearer.

She turned back to Zablaron. "So, you keep a journal, don't you?"

Zablaron looked at her uncertainly. "Yes."

"What do you write in it?"

"Oh, stuff."

"What stuff? Do you, maybe, write about the unpredictability of life?" Florinok asked with a mischievous smile.

"No."

Florinok sighed. "Hmm... why would you? You probably had it all handed down to you on a silver platter." She put a hand on her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry. I did not mean that!"

"I did not have it handed down to me," Zablaron said, frowning.

"No?"

"I had to go through a lot. That's all you need to know."

"You have lost someone, too, haven't you?" Florinok said, looking straight at him.

"No," Zablaron said and busied himself with his drink again.

"It's alright," Florinok said, soothingly. "But if you ever want to say something, I am an excellent listener. Well, people say so."

"Is that so?" Zablaron said with a smile. "You must know a lot of secrets, then."

"As a matter of fact, I do," Florinok said proudly.

"For example?"

"They wouldn't remain secrets, then, would they?" Florinok said in mock indignation. "You don't have a secret keeper, do you? Well, apart from that journal."

"No. The journal is enough for me."

"Is it?"

"Yeah. It doesn't judge me. It doesn't divulge my secrets. It doesn't give me its unsolicited opinion. What more could I ask for?"

"Try me." Florinok smiled. "I don't do any of that either. If I did, I would have told somebody by now that you have lost someone too."

Zablaron sighed. "You don't give up, do you? I have lost no one."

"Well, then, where are they?" Florinok asked, looking around.

Zablaron looked at her for a moment. "I don't know. Far away, somewhere. So far that we have lost all contact."

"And who is 'we,' may I ask?"

Zablaron ran a hand through his hair and chewed his lips. "My parents and me," he answered.

"Oh," Florinok exclaimed. She paused for a bit, too taken aback to think of something to say. "I'm so sorry. What happened?"

"Injustice," Zablaron said bitterly and took a long swig of his drink. He slammed the empty glass onto the table. "The corrupt system happened. They wouldn't stand against it. They meekly accepted their fate. And they wouldn't let me do anything either."

"But you did, anyway," Florinok said thoughtfully.

A long, uncomfortable silence followed. "What was this injustice you speak of?" she asked, finally breaking the silence.

Zablaron did not answer for a moment as he stared at his empty glass. Then he drew in a deep breath. "My parents owned a big media group — The Liberty Conglomerate. It was

one of the most reputable media groups, if not the most. No one ever questioned any news from TLC. That came with a cost, though. It made for enemies in powerful places — the Metalloy government, the military, and rival media groups."

He remembered how strange people used to come to their home all the time. Mom and Dad would meet them in the living room behind closed doors and come out all fretful and upset. Then there were the stalkers. Everywhere Zablaron used to go with his parents, he would get this awful feeling of being watched. He would look around and watch creepy men in cars, not very far, staring back at him.

"In those days, an illicit industry was burgeoning," Zablaron went on. "That of a drug known as dragonsalt. Its production was officially banned by the Metalloy government. It was a highly addictive psychedelic that originated from a mushroom native to planet Eddenmusk. The mushroom was imported to Metallon at some point and widely cultivated for making ropes from its fibers. However, dragonsalt was also being produced and distributed throughout Metallon and the galaxy. Drug lords and the Metalloy government were making good money while the youth around the world plunged into the woes of addiction.

"Unfortunately, my parents chose to highlight this issue. They exposed many powerful people involved in this illicit industry. That, obviously, did not sit well with those powerful people."

Should I tell him I used to steal dragonsalt too? Florinok mused. There used to be times when Florinok and her friends were hard-pressed to find scraps of food for their next meal. Her friends used to be content with begging, but not her. And at that time, nothing was as much in demand as dragonsalt. She scouted out a few crack dens where dragonsalt could be found in abundance. She would lift small quantities at a time, and it was amazing just how soon she would be all sold out. That made sure her friends' and her bellies were full at night. Yeah, he doesn't need to know that, Florinok decided.

"They started a propaganda against my parents," Zablaron was saying. "It started with rival media groups claiming that my parents wanted to hurt the dragonrope industry by falsely exaggerating the 'near non-existent' production of dragonsalt. They said some associate of my parents was about to launch into the business of synthetic ropes." Zablaron paused, rolling his eyes. "Then came the more ridiculous accusations. Kyuron and Melaura Inrazax wanted to seize land all over the planet, hence this stunt to drive out dragonrope farmers.

The Inrazaxes were found to be involved in divulging planetary secrets to Wystalline, and this was a ploy to divert attention."

The chokehold around his parents grew ever tighter, and they had prepared themselves for the fallout. Then came the fateful day.

It was an ordinary winter morning, and a fire burned in the hearth. Zablaron sat sullenly — he hated how his parents were behaving as if everything was normal. Mom sat on the windowsill, sipping oolong and writing in her journal while Dad played Xo with his assistant robot.

All at once, Zablaron heard police sirens wailing all around. Then someone's voice boomed on a loudspeaker as they ordered Mom and Dad to come out immediately.

Zablaron ran over and tightly hugged his mother, too scared to let go. She ran her hands through his hair and kept telling him to be brave for her as she and Dad walked to the front door. The police stood outside, armored up like murderous robots.

Just like that, they took his parents away and left him on the doorstep.

"I am so sorry," Florinok said mournfully. "That's awful." She had many questions in her mind, but she was hoping Zablaron would eventually get to them.

When he showed no signs of continuing, she asked, "And since then, you have had no contact at all with them?"

"Oh, we did. When I said we have lost contact, I meant we are not on talking terms," Zablaron replied.

That baffled Florinok. "Really? Why? What happened?"



"Enter Uncle Vonsten, my father's younger brother. When my parents were gone, he took me in. You see, he is the founder of Point Blank. He hated the government as much as my parents did, but he was much slyer about it," Zablaron reminisced. "He was very careful to maintain the charade that he was a stooge of the government. When he took me in, he maintained the pretense that he was taking me into custody so that the heir of Kyuron and Melaura Inrazax no longer posed a threat. In reality, he was protecting me. Without him, I wouldn't even be alive today."

Everyone on Metallon seemed to want Zablaron dead so that he wouldn't stir up any trouble later on. But Uncle Vonsten secretly protected him, nurtured him, guided him, taught him. He prepared him for the world and its machinations. That was when Zablaron vowed he would take revenge.

"My parents were given freedom after seven long years... on some terms."

"Terms? Even after seven years?" Florinok asked, surprised.

"Yes. They were to admit to their treason publicly. Then, they were to leave Metallon and quietly live the rest of their lives, never to be seen or heard of ever again. And they were only allowed to meet their son once every month."

Florinok covered her mouth in shock. "Please, tell me they didn't accept those terms."

Zablaron drew in a deep breath, all the while looking at Florinok. "They did. They were too tired. And they wanted me to accept too. They chided Uncle Vonsten for putting the wrong ideas in my head." Zablaron sighed. "I refused. I have never heard from them since."

Florinok shook her head. "I'm so sorry," she said, casting her eyes down on the table. "You are a very strong person. And you did manage to clear your name. Metallon no longer hates you."

"Thanks, in no small part, to you," Zablaron replied. "That video you made of the Wystals has been going viral. Everyone now knows who the Wystals were making a deal with."

"I suppose that's true," Florinok agreed. "Eventually, people will start reconsidering your parents, too."

"I hope so... and I hope they contact me someday."

The two of them fell quiet again, letting the pop music currently playing cover the silence. Florinok glanced at the pool where the designer's line had almost come to an end. The star models were now walking the ramp as the others stood in the background. Jod Quinn was still lounging around in the pool while the Vibraudino pop star made his way backstage.

I can't believe I rambled on like an idiot, Zablaron thought, slightly ashamed. Yet, strangely, he felt lighter than he had ever been lately. "What was it like for you after?" he asked. "After that lady passed away?"

"Oh, horrible," Florinok said with a sigh. "The juniors respect me well enough, even love me, if I may say so myself. But the board members are another story. Nobody respects me."

"Why not?"

"To them, I am just an upstart lowlife who only got to this position because of Lavandora. Now, of course, that's partly true — without Lavandora, I would still be on the streets... maybe even dead. But the galaxy knows I worked hard. I worked and worked until I lost track of day and night." Florinok paused. "There is one friend, though. She always believed in me, and I don't know what I would have done without her."

"You say that for everyone who ever treated you nicely," Zablaron interjected. "It's good you value them, but let me tell you, you would still have made it even if nobody believed in you."

Florinok giggled. "Well, thanks."

"Also, now you have two."

"Two what?"

"Friends," Zablaron declared.

Florinok let her jaw drop and stared at Zablaron, too dumbstruck to say anything.

"And after tonight, nobody will disrespect you," Zablaron finished.

Florinok opened her mouth to say something. "What a dazzling collection of the most gorgeous yet trailblazing outfits that we just witnessed here, ladies and gentlemen," a voice boomed. "Give it up once more for Astreil Fotranch of Soluminiz!"

As the crowd erupted into applause, the fashion designer bowed on the ramp, hand in hand with the star-model couple. After the applause settled down, the designer made his way back up the floatable ramp and disappeared backstage as a curtain dropped.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, we come to the most-awaited, final act," the voice burst out again. "To charge this evening with the most exhilarating beats and rhythms, I now invite a guest from planet Vibraudio, who is an undisputed master of his craft, so to speak. Ladies and gentlemen, I now invite the king of pop, the wizard with spellbinding songs, the—"

"Oh, come on, already," Zablaron muttered.

"The one and only, Iszonik Marhang!"

The curtains lifted, and out came the pop star, strutting in a garishly shining shirt and torn jeans. People filled the seats in the pool at an astonishingly fast rate. Within a minute, there was no space left inside, so other guests began huddling around it until it was no longer visible. The crowd relentlessly chanted the singer's name until he put up his hand to silence them.

"I think it's time," Zablaron said gently.

Florinok nodded. She reached for her purse, lying on the table. She fished out a remote control with a large display screen.

Her mind went back to everything that had led her to this moment. The previous day, she had been looking up the activities of Quinns Furnishings on the net. The lease on the forest patch had already been awarded to them. That had not surprised Florinok in the slightest. The Health Ministry had decided to withdraw all the subsidies it had previously granted to Curavez Pharmaceuticals and instead divided them up among rival companies.

Serendipitously, she had come across an official statement from Wystal Foreign Minister Philin Luko claiming how Karomoz was intent on maligning the goodwill gestures from Wystalline. She also threatened to expose the 'nefarious designs' of the Karomozian government and referred to a certain 'Project Elemorts.'

She was still too mad at Loress Wenerly for getting her caught, even though she was the one who had aired the footage of the Wystals in Malorawa Forest. Hence, she contacted other journalists from some of the other Karomozian news channels. She quickly learned about a particular pool party, code-named Project Elemorts, taking place in Brivil, a city on Karomoz, which was a ten-hour drive from the capital city of Malora. Its attendees included top scientists, government officials, military officials, business moguls, and superstars from all over the galaxy. More importantly, the Karomozian Health Minister was also there, and most importantly, Jod Quinn. It was supposed to be a gathering place for the top players to discuss secret projects and make new alliances.

There was supposed to be an online website distributing invitations for the party, but it did not appear in Florinok's searches. She had informed Zablaron about it, who had used his contacts to access it, and then they had bought a pass each.

"Alright, here goes," Florinok said nervously.

"Let it go, I say," Zablaron replied.

Florinok exhaled and pressed a button on the remote control. The display blinked to life. It showed the concentration of a substance in the pool water — that of the pathogen causing the Mad Diver epidemic. Florinok laid the remote control on the table so that both of them could see. It started at 'zero percent.' After a moment, it began to rise, bit by bit.

Zablaron looked on proudly. With Chizear's help, he had been able to cobble together his latest invention at such short notice. It was a miniature vial containing the pathogen that could be remotely uncovered to spill its contents. It also had a sensor built into its base, which recorded the pathogen's concentration levels in the surrounding pool water. When they had entered the party, Florinok had discreetly let it drop into the pool, too small to be noticed by anyone.

The concentration rose steadily. At eight percent, a yellow blip appeared, declaring the pool water to be significantly contaminated. Keep going, Florinok thought.

It still amazed her that they had not run into any trouble considering Zablaron had just annihilated an entire cell of the Crimson Crows. The two of them had had to keep a low profile all the time. Zablaron had assured her that the pool party would be the last place these people would expect him to be. That had not quite assuaged her fears, but fortunately, the area was enormous and so jam-packed that it had been relatively easy to sneak in and blend. She thought she had still seen a few people casting suspicious looks their way, but she assumed that with the fashion show going on and the pop star's presence, they had been deterred from taking any drastic steps.

At fifteen percent, the blip turned orange and deemed the levels 'critical.'

"OK, why not recap the symptoms while we wait?" Zablaron said, raising his voice over the ruckus being kicked up by the Vibraudino singer.

Florinok gave a look of disapproval. They had been over this before.

"C'mon, please talk. I can't bear this noise."

"OK," Florinok relented. "Well, in about six hours, these people will start to lose control over their motor functions — just facial muscles at first and then fingers and toes, but in the next few hours, the entire body. They will remain conscious all the while, though. Then, a day or two later, they will get this uncontrollable urge to leap into the nearest body of water, all the while being self-aware. The pathogen makes most people just submerge themselves up to their necks, allowing the pathogen to proliferate. If they can't find a body of water, they will just pour copious amounts of it on themselves. If not even that, they will end up roaming around, searching for anything even remotely damp. That's when it normally gets... incurable."

Zablaron swallowed a lump despite himself. "So, I'm guessing water is the way it reproduces?"

"That's such a dumb question, I'm not even going to..." Florinok began playfully before a red blip caught her eye. At twenty-two percent, the concentration levels were enough to cause 'imminent infection.'

"That's it." Zablaron exhaled. "We have successfully infected them... the elusive elite of planet Karomoz."

"And of a bunch of other planets," Florinok corrected him. She briefly gazed at the raving crowd and pictured Jod Quinn, who was now out of view, somewhere in there. Then she turned back to Zablaron. "Let's leave them to their merriment, shall we? Got to take the antidote on time," she said, getting up.

"No sense in staying any longer," Zablaron agreed, getting up. "About the antidote... are you sure it will work this time?"

Florinok picked up the remote control and stuffed it into her purse. "It's a bit crude, but yes, it will work. There may be side effects, though," she said as they moved away from the table.

"Like what?"

Florinok cast her mind to the rabbit back at the lab. Yeah, he doesn't need to know that, she decided. Besides, that sample had been spoiled by the Karomozians, and she had had time to further refine the formula. "Oh, just a little muscle stiffness," she replied nonchalantly. "Don't worry, there's muscle relaxant for that," she added when she saw Zablaron look askance at her.

"There better be," Zablaron said as they headed for the exit.

Do give me your feedback about this chapter, and if you enjoyed it, please consider dropping a vote. Have a great day!