



CHAPTER I

THE STATUS QUO

It was all a dull drone in his ears. There were so many people. There were always so many people. It was something he thought he'd become accustomed to. He was not.

He took a moment, needing some time to realign. He stood against the wall of a tall building and watched as the crowds scurried around. Like ants.

The city was vast, the people many, and the noise overwhelming.

After a time, he kicked off the wall and continued on, his destination not much further away. He did not like coming to the city, but he needed to now.

With a tug he fixed the strap of his bag to his shoulder, with another tug he pulled his collar straight. He wore no tie and often got heckled for it, but always found it stifling; there was enough suffocation from other sources, the last struggle should be from his own clothing.

The building in front of him was just as tall as the others around it. His feelings about it and the people inside could be described as indifferent. Nonetheless, it was his destination. He walked inside.

His steps echoed off the walls and once he reached the elevators, he discovered he was not the only one running behind today. She looked at him as he approached, smiling politely as she pressed the button again.

‘Good morning.’

He stood adjacent to her but a few feet apart. He had been warned about personal space before.

‘Morning,’ he responded while stifling a yawn with the back of his hand. ‘Train kept you too?’

She smiled at him again and tapped the button twice. ‘No,’ she returned curtly.

‘Catherine, was it?’ He leaned a little closer, recognising her but he did not know everyone yet.

Again, she smiled at him and nodded in response, tapping the button a little harder this time. And it surrendered. The lift arrived and she hurried inside. He followed behind her but made sure to keep the designated distance.

The metal carriage rumbled to life and the climb began.

She seemed nervous; he could not understand why. Her dressing seemed fine, neat and smart, quite well kept overall. She had no reason to be anxious.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked suddenly, not looking in his direction.

He decided to remain civil. ‘Athrin.’ He checked the floor numbers as they whizzed by. ‘The new guy.’

She did not say anything else during the trip.

Normally he would be bothered by this – her tone and demeanour seemed off, suddenly asking for his name. But not now, not anymore, he resolved to ignore such things, he resolved to be... civil.

With a beep, the doors opened and she hurried off and disappeared from sight. He wandered out into the open and followed his feet until he reached reception.

A grizzled lady with a bright red perm and long, colourful nails looked up as he approached. ‘Morning,’ she greeted him past the sound of snapping gum and with a polite-like wave.

'Morning,' he responded friendly, walking past her and to the back. He crossed through the doors arched with a prevalent 'Staff Only' sign and made his way between the cubicles and the people contained within them. At the far end he reached his designated table and took his seat, needing a moment to settle his thoughts.

The surrounding din was surprisingly quiet given the number of people, the patter of keyboards and clicking of mice, murmured whispers and quietened coughs. It was all so suffocating.

But necessary. There were worse things out there, he knew that, he wouldn't complain and he didn't mind it that much. He was here to do his job. That was the beginning and the end of it.

He pulled a bottle of water from his bag and put it on the table beside him, dropping the bag to the floor. He turned to his desk and was ready for today.

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A pleasant smell wafted through his senses. It reminded him of the time and he realised how many hours had gone by. It was time for a walk around.

He grabbed the empty bottle and stood, making his way towards the cafeteria where the smell grew stronger, making him hungrier with each step closer. While filling the bottle at the tap, he swept a look around the room. He recognised a few of the people, even remembered some of their names, but no one seemed to notice him yet. Good, easier that way.

When the bottle was topped off, he made his way to the vending machine and perused the various items on display. None of them seemed particularly appetizing, but he was not after sustenance; rather, something closer to a pick-me-up.

'Ah, Athrin. Good, I caught you.'

That did not bode well. He had almost made it half a day without someone 'catching' him. He abandoned the search for sugar and turned to face the man. 'Brent,' he greeted, as politely as he could.

‘How is your third week going?’ The man was about as tall as Athrin, maybe an inch shorter. He was very well kept, his hair smoothed back and tight to his head. It was clear to Athrin, even before he spoke, how high he held himself. But none of this would bother Athrin; he had resolved to remain civil.

‘Going well, thank you.’ Athrin beckoned towards the empty chairs; he did not want to create a queue. ‘Should we sit?’

‘No, no,’ he responded quickly, fixing his collar. ‘I am far too busy to stay here long.’ He looked around for a moment; Athrin could guess why. ‘I received an anonymous complaint, you were late today.’

‘Right you are, Brent. Will not happen again.’

He raised a hand, a few inches from Athrin’s face. ‘I don’t want to hear your excuses!’ he said loudly, attracting the attention of a few wandering ears.

The hand remained there. Right in front of his face. But Athrin chose to ignore it; his resolve was still sturdy.

‘Understood,’ he said plainly. ‘Apologies, Brent.’

He lowered the hand and stood proudly; his authority was fed a healthy meal.

‘Good.’ He still spoke loudly, seeking to attract the attention. ‘And be mindful of other’s personal space; I have had some anonymous complaints.’

Athrin could feel a nerve twitch; he hoped it wasn’t visible. He began with a nod and only after a moment did he respond. ‘Understood.’

The proud peacock nodded and then, with a twirl, strutted off in search of more admiration, carefully slinking from hall to hall to avoid any unnecessary banter lest he overwork himself.

With a somewhat further depleted level of energy, Athrin returned to his desk. Some eyes watched him as he walked, many of those eyes would judge him, but he did not care. He chose to instead remain civil.

The elevator hummed all the way down. Athrin watched the receding numbers tick away. He was alone in this small metal box; he preferred it that way – intended it to be this way. Less to worry about.

He left the building, the light from the sunset hidden behind the tall buildings. There were still a lot of people about but less during this time. Again, this was his intent; this was the optimal time for him. He liked the relative solace in the fading light.

The slow walk was calming and allowed reflection; it gave him some time to think and the chance to decompress after the events of each day. He took the long stroll, the walk instead of the transport. He had no pressure to be anywhere. No one was waiting for him.

This was his choice.

A quiet neighbourhood, the odd dog barking in the distance, the stray cry of a domestic quarrel, nothing out of place, everything was normal. It was better this way.

He climbed the metal staircase, one clank at a time. He paced the walkway, one sturdy foot after another. Then he stood in front of the door. For a while he remained there, in silence. His mind afire with thoughts and feelings he hurriedly bottled away. Then he slotted the key, feeling each tumbler give way, and turned the handle to walk inside.

He did not turn on a single light. He did not care for the contents of his bag as he dropped it and his shoes at the threshold. He took a few steps inside and stopped in the centre of the small room. He paused. His resolve was sturdy still.

It was quiet. A distant car on the road, a single rhythmic bark a few houses over, but here inside this small room it was quiet. So very quiet.

This was his choice.

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‘Athrin,’ a cheerful voice called. He ignored it. Almost as if he knew better.

‘Athrin!’ the voice called again. But he resisted. He certainly knew better.

‘Athrin!’

He wrenched from his sleep. For a moment he had wavered. He thought he knew better. He had to confirm that he was alone.

His walk was brisk; he had left a little earlier today to meet the new expectations but he wanted to leave nothing to unforeseen circumstances. He was never one for leaving things to chance.

As he walked, he watched the people around him. It was always fascinating to watch them go about their day. They made it look easy, as if they were all on some kind of autopilot, some kind of function he never had access to, or perhaps his was faulty. Effortlessly they queued for coffee, chatted with complete strangers on seemingly equal terms, and then in an instant went about their very different lives. It was fascinating.

That capacity was admirable, he thought.

He joined the crowd in the elevator. The ride up felt longer than usual. Hopefully this would be another normal day. He would try to lie low, as this week already scored an incident.

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The street lamps clicked on around him as he walked, almost as if guiding his path. It brought his destination into view. A diner – one of the few in this area to be open at this hour and as a result it was one he frequented. He knew some of the people there. Perhaps not by name, but their faces had grown familiar.

‘Good evening, honey,’ one of those familiar faces greeted him as he entered. There were not many people here, maybe one or two patrons and some staff in the back.

‘Evening,’ Athrin greeted, taking the seat he always took by the window.

The same woman approached him with a notepad. She scribbled and scratched. ‘The regular?’

‘Please,’ he responded simply.

Without pause, she spun around and yelled some gibberish to the man barely visible in the kitchen.

Athrin's attention returned to the window and the darkened city outside. He let his mind wander; he'd keep the leash tight in hand but allow enough freedom to pass the time.

'Athrin?' a voice pulled him back to reality.

He turned to the speaker, needing a moment to recognise him through the newly adored beard. 'Is that you, Rowley?'

'Sure is!' he cried, taking the seat opposite Athrin without a moment's pause. 'You seem unsure?'

'Well...' Athrin began, pointing to his face with what was almost a smile. 'Are you wearing that thing or is it wearing you?'

'Don't mock it, took ages to grow this splendour.'

'I remember.' He chuckled. 'Peach fuzz.'

'Hey now, that was years ago. Surprised you remember...' He stroked the course river. 'And that's in the problem, ain't it? Haven't seen you in years, Athrin!'

'Has been a while.' He leaned back, taking a quick glance around the room to see if anyone was eavesdropping. Seemed clear. 'What brings you here?'

'Walkin' by,' Rowley began, scratching his neck, 'Spotted you through the window, had to check.'

Something felt off. Athrin put his elbows on the table and leaned ever so slightly forward. 'And now that you have?'

This gave Rowley pause. It did not last long before he laughed it away. 'Relax, Athrin.' He tapped the table with his thumb. 'I'm alone, no motive.'

The feeling remained. But he would try to let it subside. 'Sorry, Rowley.'

'Woah.' He leaned forward to get a better look at Athrin. 'You really did change, huh?'

An eyebrow lifted in response.

'I didn't believe the stories, but it seems some of them might be true.' He shrugged. 'You're still as paranoid though.'

‘Cautious.’

‘Paranoid!’ Rowley laughed some more as he tapped the table again. ‘And what’s with the getup? You look like an office worker!’

‘And you look like a hobo.’

Rowley laughed again. But this time, just before his thumb touched the table, Athrin stopped him with a cold stare. ‘Touch the table again and you might lose that hand.’

A little surprised, he met Athrin’s eyes. In that moment’s pause, they weighed each other. ‘That makes me feel like I gotta.’

‘I’m not working, Rowley,’ he said simply. ‘I am out, and I intend to stay out.’

Some time passed, uncomfortable silence between them. The patrons and workers of the diner went about their business, unaware.

Then Rowley waved at the window with the back of his hand. ‘That glare. It was enough to end most fights before they started.’ He shifted in his seat towards the end then stood. ‘Take care, Athrin.’

‘You too, Rowley,’ he said neutrally, ‘I would appreciate it if we did not cross paths again.’

With a nod, Rowley left. Not two moments after he did, the lady approached with Athrin’s order, but for some reason his appetite was gone.

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The room was dark. A cold breeze drifted through to bring some fresh air after being closed up all day. Athrin stood out on the balcony, the tiny space that it was, and stared at the sky. He could only make out a few stars. The speckled veil of the night sky always gave him some measure of solace; it reminded him of the vastness beyond the circumstance.

He could hear the happenings around him. He could always hear it but he ignored it. That was not his concern anymore.

After a while, he smiled to himself. He did not dislike this life. It had come at a cost. His shoulders were weak from the weight he had carried, his eyes dimmer from the life that was, his heart dull and rigid.

Beside him was an ashtray with three buds twisted and squashed, a habit he was never able to kick. He added a fourth to the graveyard before moving it aside. Then he took a deep sigh, felt the cold air enter and exit his lungs, and savoured it. Was this peace, he wondered.