

Tales of Zenathia #7

Faux Friends

Sssssh-Sssssh-Sssssh

Tochi approached from the garage and Nikita's hands paused. Her grip tightened on the emery board. Her throat tightened, ears swiveling toward the feline instinctively. Blue and brown eyes rested on her clawed digits. Keratin flakes dusted her pajama bottoms with each swipe. The dog woman's gaze flicked toward Tochi before returning to her filing.

"I was going to try and get us some food," The feline said. Tochi's purple hues took in Nikita's guarded stance. Her chest tight, the cat carried the weight within poorly, "Is there anything you want?"

"What about the truth," Nikita's canine ears folded back, and she flicked her eyes back to Tochi.

A coldness in the husky's blue eye bit at Tochi's soul. She frowned, slipping her hands in her pockets. "Nikki.. I've told you everything... how long are you going to stay mad at me?"

"Oh I don't know Tochi. You got like thirty people killed; probably longer than a week," Nikita snapped before jerking her eyes away from the catwoman. Tension coiled through her, her teeth bared as she growled. Hands tight upon the emery board, she grinded at the silence by filing her clawed tips once more.

The feline dropped onto the beanbag chair beside the couch. A sting of tears collected in her eyes. Her hands balled, the tremble in her arms contained by the fabric of her baggy pants.

"You think I don't see that shit every night? I... I can't think about that right now. Toz knows what I'm capable of.. He was dumb to send those guys after us." The feline's eyes closed. Even now, that blossoming spark and the roll of black fire replayed in her mind. Her shoulders shuddered at the recollection, and deep down she felt the responsibility, "I have to tell myself, after what we've discovered, that those who died... they are just a small sacrifice compared to the atrocities MilGov has committed over the years. What they've hidden."

"What *you've* discovered." Nikita's voice had softened, her bark lacking the bite it had moments ago. Something about Tochi's reckless reasoning touched her. And something about the depths of MilGov's deplorability shook her. She knew better than most. *People die in this city everyday... I... I guess I shouldn't be too shocked.*

Nikita flicked her gaze over to the sakura haired feline. The cat's ears were low, her whiskers hanging from her face, and the dogwoman could see the lines of sleep deprivation carved into the suave cream coated cat.

"I'll show you the data, Nikki. I promise..." Tochi's words split the huskywoman's thoughts, "I just... I need to know how far everything runs first."

Nikita's eyes rolled and her hands worked the emery board. Filings of her claws sprinkled over her lap. "You mean you don't trust me."

"Well you're tied to MilGov. Nikita Tirvsky," Tochi blurted out. The agitation that raised the fur along her neck was real now, born from a natural distaste of the privileged. "You're some merchant man's daughter, living high and pretty on a floating borough or something. I've lived my whole life under MilGov's boot, Nikki. I don't want to go back to that life."

She still doesn't know. Nikita's jaw clenched and her shoulders tightened. The emery board slipped from her hand, bouncing off the couch and falling to the floor. Nikita let out a sigh, "Yeah... but that doesn't mean I'd sell you out, Tochi. After what we've been through together..."

"No.. I know.. I'm just," Tochi's hands relinquished themselves of her pockets, wiping moisture wicked fur palms across her pants, "I have a way of doing things. And when I break from that rhythm.. That pattern well..."

She gestured to the subterranean platform of cracked concrete. "This is what happens... chaos."

Nikita looked over at Tochi, and she felt her heart release itself of the tension. Something moved within her. The husky's hand reached out to rest on Tochi's knee.

"I... I know MilGov did awful things to you and your family, Tochi. But I'm not MilGov. I'm your friend," Nikita's heart stirred, stiffening to the last word. *Are we really just friends though.*

"Friends," Tochi repeated, looking down at Nikita's hand brushed up against her own, "I... I've been wanting to talk about that. About what we are..."

Her heart quickened as her voice caught within her throat. She swallowed against the nervousness that agitated her furred form. Ear flicking, she shook her head.

"I mean... there was a moment... in the factory where..."

"A connection... yeah," Nikita looked away, at her furred feet, "I felt it too."

A flatness in the husky woman's voice brought pain to Tochi's heart. The feline fought through it, pushing the rising anxiety from her frame. Her whiskers trembled as she continued. "I... I haven't felt that way about anyone... Anyone, Nikita. And then, the chase and making it here. I... I'm really grateful you're okay."

I wouldn't say okay. Nikita swallowed and felt a split in her heart. Her tail stiff at her back, she shifted, letting her legs down. Sorrowful eyes looked over at the feline.

“Listen... Yumeto,” Nikita paused, collecting her thoughts, “I... I was crazy about you. When I thought I knew you. But... I don't know. Was the person I fell in love with really you? Or was it that facade you wear so well? I... I really need time to think. Some time away, which... I can't really get here.”

Her voice wavered and she fell silent. In the silence, Nikita could feel the bond that was forged, fast and strong, failing. She turned her head, and swept her hands across her furred face. A shivering breath fell from her maw.

“It's okay, Nikki. I'll get you out of here soon,” Tochi answered. Her voice distant, purple hues reflected the light in tears that danced over her heart shaped pupils. A sniffle escaped her nose as she pulled the emotions she felt back inside. Her PDA vibed in her pocket and she pulled it out.

“Fuck... Huet just texted. You remember Dozer, Huet's cousin,” Tochi said, her eyes dancing across the text on the screen. Her gaze flicked to Nikita who simply shrugged. Shaking her head, the feline continued.

“Well it looks like some of the Syndicate tracked him down. Put a bullet in his head. I need to check on this,” Tochi rose up, sliding her PDA back in her pocket. She wiped her hands on her gray tank, looking down at Nikita. “I uh... I'll be back in a while. I'll bring back some food, sound good?”

“Sure,” Nikita replied. Her gaze affixed forward, she tracked Tochi's departure with one of her ears. As the fading engine of the feline's LevBike echoed off the walls, tears choked Nikita's breath.

34... because of us... Nikita sobbed softly at the weight of another soul lost because of her and her relationship with Tochi. Clawed tips half filed pricked against her temples as she held her emotion ridden mind. *I didn't want any of this. I just wanted a little fun...*

“You think he got smoked because of us,” Tochi asked, exhaling a deep breath of vapor. Spiced chems hung in the cloud laden air. Huet shrugged. Perched in the back of his van, his feet sprawled across the beanbag chair, he pressed booted feet to the ground.

“I don't know, Toch. It rubs me raw, ya'know. I thought we was gonna hand that shit over,” her amber hued bunny friend shook his head. Tochi shrugged and looked out toward the front of the van. Outside, way up the alley. she could see people go by, caught up about their daily business.

“No, I told you... someone like Toz... they can't be trusted with this kinda information. He would just use it to seize power for himself,” Tochi replied. Her whiskers twitched and she brushed her muzzle.

“Oh sensei, teach me your way,” Huet mocked before taking a deep hit of his ChemBong. Deep clouds puffed through the hareman's nostrils and he let out bellowing coughs. “Still though, if Dozer ate it because of us, that means Toz is still looking. I know you're used to laying low, years even. But what about your squeeze, Nikitia?”

“Nikita,” Tochi corrected, and her brow furrowed. She shook her head and looked over to her bunny friend.

“I don't know, man. I think I blew it with her,” Tochi confessed. The confession brought tears to her eyes and she slumped back on the padded bench seat. Huet leaned forward, his hand resting on her shoulder.

“Hey... give it some time,” He said. Tochi looked into Huet's eyes. He shrugged and continued.

“When my wife found out I was slinging chems, she was furious. But in time, she saw it was just a way to pay the bills. Now, I keep my home clean and my bills paid. We got another kid on the way, you know.”

Tochi's eyes widened, and she shook her head, brushing his hand off her shoulder. “Jeez, what is that, like four now?”

“Yuuup,” he took another wheezing hit, the neon lighting of the bong flashing bright. It flashed a frowny face on it's holo-display and Tochi choked as Huet released noxious fumes.

“Fuck, dude, I think you burnt it,” Her whiskers twitched as acrid smoke brought a throb to her sinuses. Her hands waved her face as Huet keeled over, coughing violently. Stepping over the collapsed bunny man, she opened up the rear barnyard doors.

The smoke wafted from the vehicle as her hair caught the wind, tugging cherry blossom collared strands across purple hues. Her eyes gazed out to the Spire, kissed with clouds. Shifting, she settled down, her feet hanging out the parked vehicle. They dangled off the edge of the floating borough and she sighed softly.

“Still though, you shouldn't give up on her just yet..,” Huet's wheezed before settling in next to the shorter woman. His eyes gazed down, easily picking out his place amongst the sea of swirling neon candescence. He wrapped his arm around his friends shoulder, pulling her closer, “I mean, I could tell the night you brought her to that club, she was crazy about you. Like really crazy. So maybe she'll come around...”

“Hey.. it’s fine if she don’t. I mean... I got a lot going on. I’m not a softie like her,” Tochi snickered, and pushed off the bunny man. She turned, crawling toward the front of the van, hoping to escape Huet. Her chest felt tight, her jaw clenched.

“Yeah you are... I might be chem-sauced, but you’re as crazy for her as she is of you,” Huet said. Her turned, propping a leg up on the open door frame. Pressing his back against the metal wall, he looked back toward Tochi, “You wear your heart in your eyes, kiddo. I seen it all them years ago in Fort Kiln. Bloodied, running ragged from MilGov and the Syndicate, I could see you wanted out more than anything.”

He shifted and stepped toward her, bowed over in the ban. Tochi’s purple hues flicked away and her tail bobbed in thought. She shrugged. *I did... In that moment, more than anything.*

Her eyes flicked up as Huet dropped into the beanbag chair across from her. He leaned in, perched on his elbows.

“So I guess I’m wondering, Tochi... why you get back into it again,” Huet’s voice was stern. Mr Hatsumi’s face flashed through Tochi’s mind and she sighed.

“Same as you... to pay the bills,” She answered, her fingers swiftly working the clasps on her satchel bags. She reached in, gripping a HypoFlask.

“Is that really it... Tochi... Is it really just money, for you,” Huet asked. His words were heavy, and Tochi shook her head to his amber gaze.

“Yes,” She answered, sourness bending her whiskers down. She lifted her hand and produced a medical chem dispenser, “Sober up, I need you to take me somewhere.”

“Ah damn, Toch! I just peaked!”

The door opened, and husky ears pivoted toward the scuffling of feet on pavement, Nikita’s heart for a moment quickened by the sudden intruder. The familiar silhouette of her feline friend filled the doorway. The dogwoman turned away, her blue and brown hued eyes burying beneath the covers.

“I... I got you burgers,” Tochi’s voice was heavy with emotional turmoil. Black and white toned ears flicked to the sound of a crumpled plastic bag and the scrape of feet on pavement. A stiffness in the huskywoman’s form weighted her to the bed. A plate clinked on the table beside

the headboard and shuffling footfall drew away. An ache pulled through Nikita's chest. She was hurt, and angry at Tochi. But the continuing tension only added salt to the wound. She threw back the covers, sitting up. Her bleary eyes gazed into the forlorn purple hearts of the feline.

"How was Huet," She asked, deflecting from the source of her pain. Her eyes shifted toward the plate and she reached out. Waxpaper wrapped morsels rocked lightly as she plopped the platter atop her lap.

Tochi watched, her chest tight as a glimmer of connection pulled her from the doorway. The feline approached, her purple heart hued eyes watching Nikita's hands unwrap her foodstuff.

"He was alright, all things considered. Hiding out on the Anulli's floating borough still," Tochi fell silent. She paused at the foot of the bed, her breath still.

"That's good," Nikita nodded and her jaws stretched over the fatty meat and soft bread.

Tochi's eyes flicked from Nikita's chewing to the cracked mirror in the corner. The feline saw the weariness within her form and closed her eyes.

"This tastes really good," Nikita mumbled softly through her chewing bites, her tongue awash with layers of meat and cheese. Blue and brown eyes flicked up toward Tochi.

"Say... you didn't get yourself anything?"

Tochi shook her head, heart shaped pupils shifting toward the ground. Triangular cat ears flattened to either side as she clenched her muzzle. "Eh.. I kinda lost my appetite for that sort of thing."

"Oh," Nikita answered, her chewing slowing as she processed Tochi's words. Shrugging, the huskywoman held up the burger. "That sucks, this is like... the best thing I've eaten since you brought me here."

Blue and brown eyes danced over the flowing globs of cheese flowing across her bite marks, carried upon rivulets of melted fat. "Like... so good."

The feline nodded and turned. "I'm glad you like it. I'll get back to working on the car."

Nikita's hands dropped the fatty foodstuff to her plate. She swallowed the scraps lingering inside her canid maw. "Wait... I wanted to talk."

Tochi's shoulders tensed, her ears flicking at the words. The feline turned her gaze toward Nikita and her jaw clenched.

"Yeah?"

Nikita's heart ached at the detachment in the pink haired woman's voice. Her fuzzy ears drooped but she swallowed the tension in her chest. Blue and brown eyes looked down at the fuzzy rug on the ground.

"I... I know better than most how awful MilGov can be... I don't really want to go into it, but I know. And I also know..." The husky woman paused. Her tail stiffened as she gripped her knees, "I know I can't keep taking risks. We killed people, Yume. Innocent people going about their lives."

Tochi nodded, taking in a shuddering breath. She tried to squeeze the lump in her throat down but it remained. Slowly the feline woman approached. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I... I just wanted to get us to safety."

Nikita's heterochromatic eyes flickered over Tochi's defeated form. The husky woman's hands tightened around her pajama bottoms as the weight only intensified. She nodded.

"I know that, I know," She said. Her eyes closed and a breath was drawn through her nose. Canid muzzle caught the sweet scents of cherries that always exuded from the feline. Half a dozen pleasing memories spilled into her mind. *Memories of a simpler time...*

"Look, Yume... Tochi... I...", The words wavered on Nikita's lips as she drew in a breath.

"It's okay, Nikki. I'm... I'm not the safest person to be involved with," Tochi said. A snuffle pulled at her whiskers. Heart shaped eyes stung with the kiss of tears. The catwoman wiped her palms on her pants and continued.

"I don't want to be a criminal. And... and I don't want to be another tiny cog in MilGov's machine. I... I used to want a good life for myself. Nice clothes. Nice cars. Nice place in the sky borough."

Heart shaped hues flicked up to catch heterochromatic eyes opening. Nikita's heart pulsed as her breath tightened. She leaned in and her ears folded back. She asked with softened anticipation, "but?"

"But then I met you, bitch," Tochi sighed and threw herself back onto the bed. Long disused, it felt springy and fresh. She stared up at the cracked ceiling and swallowed the lump in her throat. "I met you and... I realized what I really wanted was someone at my side. Someone to come home to. To hide from all the bullshit with. And you were struggling and I was already doing the Syndicate gigs... I mean, I told you this part, already."

Nikita let out a soft sigh and with it the turmoil within lessened. She let out a snuffle and pushed the plate aside. Slowly, the husky curled against the cream furred catwoman. Her head pressed to Tochi's side and she could hear the catwoman's resolute heartbeat. Nikita listened and thought. After some time, she finally broke the silence.

“I don’t care where we live... as long as we live. Both of us, Tochi.”

Tochi felt Nikita’s hand seized hers and her shoulders rolled as the tension within sprung loose. Her eyes closed, heart shaped purple pupils stained with tears. “I... I want to make sure we give this data over to the right party. It’s... it’s bigger than us. I’m sorry, Nikita.”

The words stung with every syllable and Tochi waited for Nikita to pull away. But the husky remained. The feline tilted her head, hazarding a peak, and their eyes met. She felt an intensity in Nikita’s gaze unlike anything they’d shared before.

“No more killing. We find someone for the data... and we disappear. Promise?”

Tochi’s eyes watered. She nodded. “I promise.”