

Chapter 26: When to Take a Break

“You think that Alan would surrender to those from beyond the stars?” I said, staring at Damari. “Really?”

On the other side of my bed, my friend shrugged.

“Normally, I’d say no but...” they drawled, “Soefi’s involved this time, and everyone knows that Alan would move mountains to keep her safe. Ya know... he reminds me of you in that regard.”

Pointing at me, they giggled when I made a face at them, but besides that, I didn’t respond to what they’d said, too lost in a sudden surge of homesickness. I’d been deep cover in House Cerullis for two weeks now, meaning I sorely missed Korix and Leski. Even with the breaks that I got every night, I hadn’t contacted them, as was our practice, because while they were of enormous help when it came to keeping me stable, they were also gigantic distractions, unlike Damari.

Leaning toward me, my friend rested their hand a hairsbreadth from my thigh.

“Problem, LV?” they asked.

I shook my head.

“No. Just missing Leski and Ko a bit.”

“Ah,” Damari said, sagely nodding. “They’re good, by the way, or they were when I saw them a few days ago, which reminds me!”

They flicked a finger toward me, and a message flashed into my array.

“Leski wanted me to give you that,” they said as I opened it. “Apparently, our *shukusen* has given you permission to attend one of her concerts, so long as you go in disguise.”

“That’s kind of Talira,” I said, glancing over the dates in the message. “This is the list of upcoming performances, I take it?”

Shrugging, Damari made vague ‘I don’t know’ noises before swaying in place. I kept an eye on them while comparing Leski’s special nights against my schedule, snorting when my friend threw their head back.

“Ugh! This waiting is maddening! I don’t know how you do it,” they said. “Watching *Favored Alan and the Sanguine* is fun and all, but not when there’s a mission to be done.”

“Welcome to my life,” I said with a grin.

Dramatically groaning, Damari tossed themselves to the side, landing on the bed hard enough to bounce me. They buried their face in a pillow while I chuckled.

“Don’t worry. Feena and I will be leaving soon, and you’ll come right after us,” I said. “Think you can wait that long?”

Damari turned their head toward me, enough to glare with one eye, while a pillow muffled their answer. I climbed out of bed, taking the three steps needed to enter the apartment’s kitchen, and glanced at my friend over the counter that separated it from the bedroom.

“Do you want a snack before we go?” I said. “I don’t know your routine before a mission.”

Making a face, Damari got up to lean on the counter.

“I’ll have something soon,” they said before turning serious. “Are you sure you want me on this mission, LV? I haven’t done one in ages, and I kinda... stick out.”

They glanced at their body, which I pointedly didn’t look at. I’d gotten my look-over when they’d shown up at the apartment, so I knew the truth of their words. I could tell they’d toned down their appearance for this. They’d modified their hair to a drab brown, and their clothes weren’t more brightly colored than the average Lutovish’s, but something about Damari just drew people’s attention, a magnetic personality that would be crippling for an operative.

Thank Mother Time they were a pilot.

“That doesn’t change the fact that you’re perfect for what I need,” I said. “Plus, you’re the only person I can trust with...”

Biting my tongue, I looked away, which made my friend shift.

“It’s not a weakness,” they said. “I think it’s amazing that your persona gets as embedded as he does, and I look forward to jarring you out of it.”

“Ko would disagree with you,” I said.

Clicking their tongue, Damari said, “Well, excuse me, but I believe the last hundred years have proven that the mighty Korix isn’t always right about everything.”

With a laugh, I rolled my head toward them.

“That’s true,” I said, “but hey! Enough about me. How have you been? I should have asked when you first showed up but-”

“You were that excited to see me?” Damari interrupted with a gasp.

Rolling my eyes, I faced the refectory, punching in the commands for it to make me a snack.

“Sure. So?”

“Uhhmmm... Um, um, um...” Damari said before blowing a strand of hair out of their eyes. “I don’t know what to tell you, LV. Life’s been boring lately.”

“So, no problems with partners or family?” I said. “No interesting flights or annoying meetups with friends or other high Strata?”

Opening the refectory, I retrieved my snack while digging for a spoon, and taking a first bite, I made a face. That was another thing that I couldn’t wait to have again: a well-stocked kitchen. Meanwhile, Damari had wrinkled their nose at me.

“Partners? Meaning romantic entanglements?” they said and when I nodded. “Ew! No, thank you. You can keep that all to yourself. How do you not know that about me?”

Leaning my elbows on the counter, I lifted my yogurt in front of my face with a shrug.

“I always assumed that romance wasn’t your thing, but I’ve never actually confirmed it,” I said. “I should have done that before now, huh?”

“Nah. If I wanted you to avoid the topic, I should have mentioned it before. I was just a little... I don’t know. Scared?” Damari said. “Before they joined the Collective, my parents would get on my case about finding a partner, and while my baby sister, Misah, is supportive, she doesn’t get it. None of them have tried to be hurtful about it, but... yeah. I don’t want that from anyone else.”

Sucking on my spoon, I nodded.

“Some people can’t understand. I’d tell you I’m sorry, but I’m pretty sure you don’t want to hear it,” I said, which had Damari guffawing. “Your life’s really been a bunch of routine flights since that disastrous party six weeks ago?”

With mock severity, Damari said, “I like my routine life, thanks. Dealing with you is about as much excitement as I can take. Not all of us can have as adventurous of a life as you, you know.”

Wincing, I pushed myself upright, tossing my waste in the recycler.

“Trust me. If I could, I’d take a boring life over this one in a heartbeat,” I said before turning to my friend with a smile. “Will you be ok by yourself for a bit? I’d like to get started.”

“Sure!” Damari said. “Maybe I’ll have a snack like you.”

“Pick something light if you do,” I said. “See you in a bit.”

My friend's farewell followed me outside, and two steps later, I was knocking on my sister's door. She answered it near instantly, making me wonder whether she'd been waiting nearby.

"I'm guessing you're ready," I said, lifting an eyebrow.

"You'd guess right," Feena said.

Stepping around me, she took the lead toward House Cerullis' headquarters, and for a while, we walked in silence. Once we'd reached the park in the middle of Xygek, however, Feena glanced over her shoulder.

"You're sure about this?" she said.

Somehow, I kept from rolling my eyes. This again?

"Which part?" I asked. "The details of the mission or what Laylah and Rylan's team is planning to do tonight?"

Crossing her arms, Feena slowed down so that she was walking beside me.

"Which do you think?" she asked.

The second. The issue we'd been offhandedly bickering about since our superior had revealed the first step in our team's extended project.

"I don't see any harm in letting them continue with their experiment," I said. "In what way could it negatively impact Lutov?"

"Besides the possibility that it becomes a cataclysmic event?" Feena said.

Shaking my head, I said, "That's not likely. I've looked over the team's equations and equipment far too many times. The chances of something going wrong are ridiculously small, although maybe..."

Biting my lip, I hugged myself.

"Maybe I should have had Phen check my work."

Feena jerked her head forward while her casual stride became a march. With so many weeks having passed since the raid on House Zan, everyone in the family knew what I'd done to Pheniks, and while mom and dad were struggling to play mediator between us, my sister had resolutely stayed out of it. I knew she had an opinion about what had happened, but she refused to discuss it with me, even after I'd asked her to. I didn't blame her for that, but still, it hurt.

When she said nothing for several, awkward minutes, I said, "I should get into persona."

As had become a trend in recent weeks, I was happy to do that. I thought about who I was, and soon enough, I shook my head. Why had I been acting so morose? It was a beautiful day with the setting sun casting a tapestry of colors in the sky, and I was on my way to help with Cerullis' most notable experiment in decades.

If that wasn't enough, Laylah was at my side. Maybe she was the problem, though. Laylah had been withdrawn in recent days. She hadn't once been hostile toward me, but she'd been distant, and I wasn't sure how I'd upset her.

I couldn't let it get to me, though. I had to be supportive of her, no matter what.

As soon as we walked into headquarters, my skin started crawling, as usual. That sensation might have diminished since coming to Xygek, but it hadn't vanished, and I doubted it ever would.

Fortunately, Laylah took us to the lifts, refusing to get distracted by the many wonders displayed here, and when we entered Aeronautics, she breezed toward our assigned observatory, ignoring people's attempts at making small talk.

I particularly enjoyed Fifth Stratus Harvel's look as we passed him. That man had yet to stop showering Laylah with affection, even with her never having reciprocated.

In the observatory, someone had already started a projection of our satellite's feed, and thank Mother Time, a snack table was on the other side of the room.

"Would you like a cup of caf?" I asked, pointing at it.

"Hmm?" Laylah said. "Oh, yes, Rylan. That would be lovely."

Most of our team had already assembled, which meant I had to skirt my way around them. I listened to several of them grumbling about the late hour, all while chuckling to myself. Back home, Laylah and I used to stay up later than this so we could manually adjust our telescope as needed.

Once at the table, I waited for a drone to reheat cups of caf, watching the projected sun as it rotated in the center of the room. For decades, I'd been numbed to the magnificence of that natural wonder, but seeing it blown up here, towering above me, I was reminded of my first years in House Cerullis, still fully enamored with everything we studied. As always, though, it bothered me that what I was observing was about eight minutes behind what was happening in that far-distant place, impinging on my sense of wonder, but then, that was what we were fixing tonight.

When I was back at Laylah's side, I handed off one cup of caf while sipping at mine. She'd surrendered to social pressure, chatting with colleagues. We wouldn't get started for a while, so I idly listened to Laylah's conversation until something in it caught my interest.

"-do you suppose we're going with this?" said the man in the group.

Isolated as Laylah and I had been, I hadn't learned my teammates' names yet. I should get on that.

Sucking on a lip, the woman beside him said, "I heard this wasn't Krish's idea. I *heard* that the order for this experiment came from *shukusen* Sanya herself."

Now that, I hadn't known.

"Regardless," the man said, "why would anyone in Cerullis want to open a wormhole between our world and the sun? It could be dangerous!"

"Come now. Both ends of it will be *far* from those spatial bodies," Laylah said, "but still, it's a good question. Maybe *shukusen* Sanya wants more accurate readings from our satellites? Mother Time knows that being so far behind has been frustrating. Even still, if something goes wrong with our sun, I don't know what we could do with only eight minutes warning."

I could think of several ways to use it. Saying goodbye to family. Resolving unfinished business.

"Confessing your feelings for someone."

I didn't realize that I'd spoken that last thing aloud until the others stared at me, and a blush started spreading across my face. What the *hell* had I just said?

Fortunately, a commotion soon came to end my misery. From the observatory's entrance, an exclamation of shock dragged the group's gazes that way, and when I joined them, I cocked my head.

Janyka was standing in the door, blocking an... individual—I thought—from entering, and at first, I wasn't sure why she was doing that. This experiment wasn't restricted to anyone in Aeronautics, and the stranger didn't seem threatening. In fact, they were rather plain in appearance, even if something about them was off.

Huh.

Curious, I requested their status, and a second later, it popped into my array. The stranger held Third Stratus, which was well and good. Expected, even. When I read what House they were from, though, I sucked in a breath.

Kolb. The fuck was any member of House *Kolb* doing here?

Oh, no. Had someone on our team attracted that violent House's attention, and if they had, *why*? No one here was young enough to have missed the horror of the last time Kolb and Cerullis had been at odds.

Sighing, the stranger crossed their arms.

"-to test some new..." they said with their words barely audible. "You requested... pilot."

Janyka hissed something at them, probably berating them for the interruption, before thrusting a finger down the hall, and rolling their eyes, the stranger scanned the room, briefly resting their

eyes on me before moving on.

“GET OUT!” Janyka shouted.

Tensing, the stranger lifted their hands and backed out of the room. When the door had slid shut behind them, Janyka stormed back to the storecase she’d been working on, and across the room, conversations slowly resumed, including the one I’d been part of.

I wasn’t paying attention to it, though, because I’d received a message, one who’s sender was... me. What was I to make of this, other than its impossibility? I didn’t remember writing or sending any such message, and besides that, if I had done something so bizarre, I would have sent it the moment before receiving it, which wasn’t possible. I’d have noticed doing something like that.

Unless I’d used a proxy. Say I had written this message, however long ago that might have been. I could have given it to a third party so they could send it at a later date, and if left unopened, the proxy would have left such a faint trace on the message that my array wouldn’t have noted their touch. I could dig deeper and find out who they’d been, but that seemed unnecessary, considering their likely identity. Why on earth, though, would I have associated with a member of House Kolb, and why didn’t I remember something as significant as meeting one of them? Was this message even mine?

There was only one way to answer those questions. When I opened the message, however, I found only one word waiting for me.

T.R.O.U.B.L.E.

Taking a slow breath, I barely kept myself from rubbing my eyes and temples. Rylan was learning. If I wasn’t careful, he could take over, at least until Talira sent a Second Stratus to knock me out of it. She’d never had to do that before, but there was always a first.

Focusing, I turned to the conversation that Laylah-Feena was participating in, hoping I hadn’t missed my chance but no. They were still talking about Damari.

“Why do you suppose they were here?” Second Stratus Aveela said. “Was it to test an aircraft, like they said?”

“Possibly. That half of Aeronautics has Kolb’s best pilots do test runs for them sometimes,” Fourth Stratus Tavik said, “but I doubt it. Not only is it late, but I find it highly suspicious that they showed up tonight, of all nights.”

Oh, look. Another example of how suspicious the members of Houses other than Kolb were of them, not that they were wrong to feel that way. With this suspicion, though, I had my opening.

“Maybe they were here because something’s controlling us again. Maybe that’s why *shukusen* Sanya’s been so focused on the sun recently,” I said. “It couldn’t be the Ancients, but maybe those from beyond the stars have once more taken an interest in us.”

My portion of the observatory went quiet with nearby scientists glaring at me. I started squirming like Rylan would, but I didn't have to continue with that performance for long. After all, what I'd said was the signal that Feena and I had established before coming here tonight.

"Rylan, I forgot! I had another round of processes for you to review before tomorrow morning," Laylah-Feena said. "If you want to get them done in time, you should get started, don't you think?"

With my array forcing blood into my cheeks, I bowed to her.

"Yes, Third Stratus," I said.

As I turned away, Laylah-Feena whispered to the others.

"You'll have to forgive Rylan. He's very socially awkward..."

But then, I was out of hearing range. I made my way to the door with jerky steps, casting a last look at the projected sun. It was too bad. I'd have loved to watch the creation of Lutov's first artificial wormhole.

The door closed, cutting off my view, and relaxing, I finished shaking Rylan off while heading for the rendezvous point.

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