

Chapter 30: Break-In

After Feena had left, I wrote up my daily report for Talira, like I'd told her I would. I hadn't been lying about that. As the months had worn on, doing this had grown tiresome, but every time I'd suggested that they were a waste of my time, Talira had repeated her earlier command for me to send them.

Once I was done, it was time to start with the evening's activities. I grabbed some snacks and a water bottle before heading out the door. Stuffed among people on their way home for the night, I took a shuttle to the closest landing pad, and on arriving, I waited in line for my skycruiser, giving a drone my doctored designator once I reached the head of the line.

I only relaxed once I was high in the clouds, heading away from Xygek. I'd thought for sure that someone would stop me by now.

About an hour later, my skycruiser landed, and I climbed through my snacks' wrappers to get out of it. The dark of night enveloped me, and as I strolled along, I soaked in the moonlight. All the while, I expected another skycruiser or several Second Strata to alight in the tall grass around me. I hadn't been subtle when leaving the city, and if Talira had noticed where I'd been heading, she'd have sent people to dissuade me from it, as per my long-ago given instructions.

But I continued unimpeded until I saw a structure on the horizon, which slowed me to a stop. Home.

Should I be doing this? While I was on a deep-cover mission, seeing my family was always detrimental for me. For instance, after attending Leski's performance a few months ago, I'd been a wreck for days afterward. Going home... I could only imagine what it would do to me.

I, however, could only find the answer to a most urgent question here. Talira wouldn't tell me what I wanted to know, no matter how many times I'd asked, and getting the information that I desired another way would have been close to impossible, not with me staying deep cover at least. Easier to come here.

So, I moved forward. Getting into the house tested my skills, but considering who lived here, I'd have been disappointed if they hadn't. I barely bypassed the defense grid around the place, and breaking through the security processes on a window took far longer than it should. Entering through the front door would have been easier, certainly, but if possible, I'd like it if no one knew that I'd been here tonight.

Fortunately, once I was inside, my task got easier. Trap placement in the house might change on a daily basis, but I was familiar with their many combinations. In addition, recorders were sparse here. I'd insisted on having some installed, all at key junctions, but for Korix's sake, we'd kept them to the bare minimum.

I'd find the answer I needed on either Leski or Korix's personal storecases, but instead of heading to either of their studies, my silent feet glided me toward our bedroom. This was a bad idea, and I knew it. I couldn't stop myself, though.

As I passed the room beside ours, however, my stride hiccupped, nearly tumbling me to the floor. Its door was open and through it...

In a haze, I wandered into the room. The tarp and paint cans from months ago were gone, leaving the carpet pristine, and the paintings on the wall were done. Korix's castle with its knights and horses had a road leading from it into Leski's field of flowers. Stars and comets were scattered on the ceiling, and there was a forest opposite the castle. With a lingering trail of Leski's flowers along its bottom edge, I found my contribution: a sunrise. A reminder that every day was new and full of opportunities to make oneself a better person.

The crib sat beneath this with a mobile hanging over it. A rocking chair was beside it, flanked by a small chest of drawers, and near the door was a changing table.

I looked at this, and my eyes burned with my hands becoming dead weights at my sides. They'd finished the nursery, which shouldn't surprise me. I'd known they'd do that but still. I'd wanted to be here, helping, for more than the short time that I had been.

Shivering, I padded into the hall, doing my best to shrug it off. There was no point in getting upset about this, *no point*. And yet, I was.

A step from opening our bedroom's door, I bit down on a laugh. I must hate myself, considering the torture I was putting myself through right now.

Overriding the door's processes, I had it open the barest of slivers. With my heart in my throat, I glided to the foot of our bed, keeping my eyes fixed on a point above it, until my stomach bumped into the footboard. Then, I looked down.

Both of my partners were home tonight. On his side of the bed, Korix was sprawled with his arms thrown above his head while Leski was nearly buried by the covers, huddling on herself.

For who knew how long, all I could see was them. I rarely went on months-long missions, meaning we were rarely apart for this long, but when we were, reuniting with them was like seeing them for the first time. They were beautiful, my wife and life partner. Always beautiful, and it always took my breath away.

This time, I couldn't retrieve the air that I'd lost. I could swear that something had perforated my diaphragm *again* while a stone slowly crushed my chest. Mother Time, my heart...

Absently, I brushed my fingers along my breastbone in the moment before something rustled in the sheets. I jerked my eyes toward the disturbance, and on seeing it, I wanted to smack myself for my lack of awareness. A rather gorgeous woman was sleeping between Korix and Leski. I didn't know how I'd missed her, but there she lay, and hell. I was an idiot. I shouldn't have come here.

Slowly taking a breath, I turned, making my way to the door. Lost in my thoughts as I was, I didn't know what warned me, whether a sixth sense or long-drilled instincts, but halfway to the hall, I shifted sideways as someone tried to wrap their arms around my neck. Thanks to that movement, my assailant couldn't get a chokehold, and I slipped free, drawing a knife as I spun. I barely stopped it from laying open Korix's carotid artery, half-aware of the rifle's muzzle that had been pressed into my chest.

After a blink, Korix had his rifle dissipate, lifting his empty hands into view, and I lowered my knife. We stepped back, eyeing each other, but when Korix eventually took a breath to speak, I shook my head, holding a finger to my lips.

"Your guest?" I said in sub-vocals.

Glancing at the bed, Korix nodded.

"Probably best not to wake her," he replied in kind.

"Meet me in the library?" I said.

Cool eyes shifted to me, almost jarring me out of the combat state I was in.

"Leski?" Korix asked.

Should we wake up my wife? Since Korix knew I was here, it wouldn't be long before she did too. There was no longer a point in keeping her asleep. Still. I was loath to disturb her rest.

"I'm not here in a mission capacity," I said. "I'd like to see her, but I also don't want to be an inconvenience."

Rolling his eyes, Korix said, "I'll wake her up, then. Go on ahead. Do what you must to adjust your mood because I don't want to talk to you like this."

When he waved a hand over me, I barely suppressed my flinch, knowing I should do as he'd asked. A closed-off state had never worked well around any of my partners.

With a jerked nod, I hurried out of the room, making sure I was far from it before scrubbing my face. Tonight was *not* going the way I'd wanted.

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