

Chapter 78: It's Been a While

The person making the connection request must understand why my answer had been so delayed because I was able to put quite some distance between me and Baely before accepting it.

“Whoever you are, you have thirty seconds to explain why I should maintain this connection,” I snapped.

I *really* hadn't wanted to leave Baely hanging after what she'd just said.

In answer, a soft laugh sounded over the connection.

“Goodness, Zaeden. I never thought you could be so frazzled. It hurts to hear.”

I stopped short with invisible lighting nailing me to the ground. Through a fog, I watched myself begin the process of tracing this connection, even knowing I'd never reach its source. Still, I had to try, and while I did that, I turned my attention to the woman on the other side of it.

“Sanya. What a surprise,” I said. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Again, she laughed.

“Please. There's no need for civility. You must hate me by now, much as the thought pains me.”

Did I, though? The last time I'd been involved in a disaster like this, the one who'd started it had quickly earned my enmity, but this time around, I had yet to decide whether Sanya was a villain or not, even after everything she'd done. She couldn't know that, though.

“Fine. What do you want?” I snapped.

“Two things,” Sanya said. “First, I wanted to warn you. Sometime in the next week, Talira will probably order you to do something that will test you, and when she does, you'll have a choice to make. Do as you're told, or for the first time, you could stand for what's right.”

This argument again? Hell, I couldn't indulge in something so meaningless right now.

Because yes. Over the last few months, everything Sanya had said during our last confrontation had been echoing in my head, and much as I'd like to, I couldn't deny that fact. Even with this echo plaguing me, though, I couldn't give up my convictions. Changing Lutov at a slower and steadier pace would be better in the long run. At times, chaos might break a society, temporarily changing the status quo, but unless the upset was truly severe, society would eventually bounce back, discarding any changes that had occurred. If possible, it would be better to make changes that *lasted*, no matter how long doing that might take.

“Did you seriously request a connection just to deliver a vague threat?” I said.

Which was about the only thing I could say at the moment.

“No. Why do that when I know you won’t listen to me? Or you won’t do that yet, at least,” Sanya said. “I also wanted to warn you that I’m sending something to your array. Don’t worry. It’s just a message. Definitely safe, not that I expect my word to reassure you. You’ll be far too careful with it anyway.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, crossing my arms. “What exactly are you sending that’s so harmless?”

“Before all of this began, do you remember when I shared my reasoning for everything I’ve done?” Sanya asked.

How could I forget? The moment when one learned that aliens had destabilized their sun seemed fairly significant.

“What does that have to do with your message?” I asked.

“At the time, you asked me to give you all of Cerullis’ research into the issue, and I complied. Partially,” Sanya said. “I’m sending you everything I left out of that initial data dump.”

I’d known that first outpouring of information had looked light! Unfortunately, I hadn’t gotten the chance to question Sanya about it before she’d pulled her stunt at that fateful assembly, but apparently, the question had never been needed.

Still, I had to know.

“Why would you share such helpful data with me?” I said. “You’re smart, Sanya. Given Lutov’s current state, you must know I’ll be coming after you soon. So, why help me?”

I probably shouldn’t have said that. Warning a target about an imminent pursuit wasn’t a good idea, but like I’d said, Sanya was smart. Even if I’d said nothing, she’d have known what was coming.

“That’s good. As it should be,” she said. “Don’t you remember? I told you that you had to stop me.”

And why was that? What on earth did she get out of me...?

Coughing, I said, “You didn’t answer the question.”

“True,” Sanya said with a chuckle. “I’m giving you everything I have on our sun because you’re the only person I trust with it. No matter what I’ve done, you’ll make sure that Cerullis’ research on it continues because you’re incapable of letting the world burn. Lutov’s current mode of politics certainly won’t stop you, not when your hatred of me couldn’t accomplish it.”

“I *don’t*-”

I barely stopped myself from finishing that thought, grinding my teeth on the remaining words.

"I suppose I can accept that answer," I eventually said. "Did you have anything else to add? Maybe you could make my life easier and surrender now."

Snorting, Sanya said, "Do you think that's likely to happen?"

Throwing my hands to either side of me, I couldn't stop myself from grinning.

"I had to try."

But then, there was silence, and after a while, I almost cut the connection with nothing further spoken. Sanya stopped me from doing that.

"Zaeden, if I may," she said in a rush. "How's...?"

"Korix?" I finished for her.

Because who else could she have been talking about? Over the time I'd known Sanya, he'd been the only person she'd consistently asked after.

"Busy. Besides that, I'm not sure. We haven't spoken since he started his new project," I said. "Why do you want to know?"

For a long count of ten, Sanya said nothing, and when she did speak, her voice was dead.

"He hasn't told you who I am to him."

Shaking my head, I said, "I know you're connected, but that's it. Never looked into it because I keep waiting for one of you to tell me about it."

"Huh. Maybe he did mean what he said the last time we spoke," Sanya said, as if to herself.

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I waited, glancing over the plains around me. If I tried, I could almost let the wind's rustle through the grass distract me from the tension of my sudden anticipation. Would Sanya unveil the mystery that had always lain between her and my life partner?

"I'm sorry, Zaeden. I know you'd like me to explain," Sanya said, "but trust me. It'll be better for everyone if he does it instead."

Well, fuck. That wasn't ominous at all.

"All right," I simply said.

What else was I supposed to say? And what other topic of polite conversation, besides what we'd already discussed, existed between me and my enemy-not-enemy?

After an interminable pause, Sanya softly said, "Again, I'm sorry. I'll see you soon."

And she cut the connection. And I wanted to scream and kick the earth.

As usual, though, I buried that impulse, calmly withdrawing from my attempt at tracing the now broken connection. I trudged back to Baely, plopping to the ground when I reached her. I had a conversation to continue with her.

Rubbing my face, I said, "Eventually, sweetie, we all die. When I do, it may be a sad day for you, but you'll survive it, and I'll live on as a memory, one that you may someday share with your children. That's the beauty of humanity. We've found a way to live long after we leave this world behind. With our stories, we can persist for a time, and even when those tales are inevitably forgotten, that's ok. It's the natural order of things."

Slapping my hands into my lap, I crookedly smiled at Baely.

"But it's best not to think about depressing things like that, not for long anyway," I said. "Stay here, in the present, with me. I'm with you now, so let's enjoy that, yes?"

The sour look on Baely's face softened as they rolled their eyes.

"How am I supposed to 'enjoy your presence' when you'll probably be snoring up a storm soon?" she said. "You *are* going to sleep, right?"

Smirking, I said, "I don't know... maybe I should push myself a little harder. Prove to my daughter that I'm not the weakling she thinks I-"

"*Stooooop!*" Baely said, interrupting me. "Go to sleep, *per*. If you don't take care of yourself the bare minimum, I won't save you the next time you get hurt.

Oo, I'd love to tease her more, but instead, I gently grabbed her head, pulling her to where I could kiss her forehead.

"I love you, Baely," I said. "I will always love you."

With a cough, Baely said, "Love you too, dad. Now, will you let me go?"

Softly laughing, I released them before sinking against the tree.

"Please, keep watch," I said.

But then, I gave in and let sleep's oblivion carry me away.

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