

Chapter 85: The Moment When I Break

I placidly waited while my grandmother secured the room, although I couldn't stop myself from double checking her work as she disabled recorders. Habits died hard, it seemed. Once she was done, she turned to me as if expecting me to speak, which was a good assumption on her part.

"So, my next order of business is to track Sanya down," I calmly said. "Considering you've had months to do the same with no results to speak of, how do you expect me to find her?"

As I'd spoken, I'd heard those words as if they'd come from a great distance. Someone else was speaking for me, someone *not Zaeden*, and this anomaly might concern me more if I hadn't been too... busy to consider it. I'd give it the time it needed later.

Sighing, Talira looked down her nose at me.

"I hate saying this, Zae-zae, but don't you already know how you'll do it?" she asked. "Given the circumstances, you only have one option available to you."

Yes. And wasn't that feeling of hopelessness getting exceedingly familiar?

Spinning on my heel, I strode away from Talira, needing to be far from here. I needed a distraction, something to keep me from thinking, but given how potent those distractions had needed to be in recent days, finding one now was giving me more trouble than it should.

"I'd rather not involve him," I again calmly said.

After a pause, Talira said, "But you know you'll have to."

And with no warning, my calm was gone. Every defense I'd raised in the last six months, all to keep me from acknowledging my internal state, failed, and with a guttural howl, I swung a fist at a wall, pouring everything into the punch, but even when its impact sent dry-wall flying around me and pain flaring from my knuckles, it wasn't enough.

My unintelligible howl became words.

"I *hate* this!"

In a blink, I was beside the table, grabbing a chair so I could throw it at the window.

"I hate this city!" I shouted over the tinkle of glass to the floor. "I hate the fucking homeland!"

The next thing I knew, I had hold of Talira's shoulders while towering over her.

"I hate *you!*" I roared in her face. "Hell, how could you do this? It was evil, Talira, much like the next part will be. EVIL. How the fuck can you condone...?"

I trailed off as the absolute calm that was radiating from my grandmother pierced through the haze around me, and seeing it, I knew that I hadn't been asking those questions of her. Releasing her, I ground my knuckles into my eyes, just *screaming* for a moment.

"I hate myself, Talira!" I said. "I hate myself the most."

"I know," Talira said "Self-loathing is simply something that you do. You're exceedingly good at it."

She was quiet for a time, all while I raggedly gasped. Soon enough, though, she muttered my name, probably meaning to say something encouraging, and with a laugh, I shook my head in jerky movements.

"Don't," I said. "Just *don't.*"

With a slow breath out, I lowered my hands, and not once looking at Talira, I skirted around her so I could leave.

"I'll begin the hunt in the morning," I said at the door. "Don't contact me before then."

That was all she got. In a blur, I stormed through House Vaessa's headquarters and across the park outside, and all the while, I was composing messages to my various partners.

A distraction. I needed a distraction.

Time skipped around me as I received my partners' replies. They were, as one, all refusals, which was entirely fair if also... unfortunate.

Because *I needed a distraction.*

Eventually, someone—I hardly took the time to check who—accepted my proposed scenario, inviting me to their place, and as with everything for the last...

Holy shit, had it been an hour?

As with everything else, the trip to my partner's place passed in a fog, and I soon found myself outside their door, waiting for them to open it. I also found myself quietly muttering curses at how long it was taking, and this made me pause. Given how utterly out of control I was right now, should I be interacting with other people, especially a partner? Was I about to use them?

But when the door opened, revealing their lovely face, a wave of such thirst and hunger swept through me, wiping these concerns away.

So what if I was using this person? I'd asked if I could do it, and they'd said yes.

So, without truly seeing my partner, I stepped into their apartment, and discarding any pleasantries I should have made, I grabbed their head, pulling them to me. Our lips collided as the door slid shut between us.

That night, I didn't truly sleep. Some of this was because of the various physical activities that my partner and I got up to. Hell, for hours, I did my damndest to drown myself in sex and other such things, but eventually, they got worn out, quickly falling asleep, and I was left drifting in the half-fog between wakefulness and dreams.

There, I encountered a host of horrors. I didn't know how long I spent running away from the dead or a nameless dread, but when I managed to crawl my way to awareness, I was tangled in sweat-soaked sheets with my partner having vanished from my side.

I found them curled up on the couch in the living room, and after brushing their hair aside to kiss their forehead, I wandered into the kitchen. Pouring myself a glass of water, I drained it while checking messages in my array.

One in particular caught my eye. From an unknown sender, it was titled 'So, You Chose the Long Road', and when I opened it, I was fascinated by its contents. Who knew something could go so wrong with a star? I certainly hoped no inhabited planets circled the one indicated here because if they did, the people who lived on them were fucked, at least within a cosmological timeframe.

Too many reports were attached to this message for me to read them all right now, so I set them aside. I'd review them when I had time.

For now, I had... *something* to do, something important, but its details had slipped from my mind, which was unlike me. Shaking my head, I subsequently shook off that conundrum before heading to the washroom to get ready for the day. I took my time in the shower this morning. I might need to do important things, but I would enjoy this hot water, damnit.

Then, it was time to brush my teeth and dress, and once that was done, my partner had woken up. We shared a heartfelt, if hasty, goodbye, all while I ignored some of the, frankly, strange things they said. If they couldn't remember my name, maybe I should consider creating some distance between us. When I opened the door to head for work, however, I stopped dead in my tracks before going right back inside.

Lifting an eyebrow as I passed them, my partner said, "Forget something?"

With a nervous laugh, I nodded, unwilling to tell them that I'd seen something unpleasant outside. I thought it had been unpleasant, at least. I couldn't remember exactly what it had been.

Instead of voicing that, I headed onto my partner's balcony and climbed over a few railings before invading the apartment a few doors down.

I wasn't sure how I was doing all of this—I didn't know how to crack processes like this—or even why. What on earth was I trying to escape? But as with earlier, I shook these questions off, moving through the apartment and heading outside.

While on my way to work, people stared at me, which was strange. I was nothing special, and having so many eyes on me was uncomfortable. Mother Time, my skin was crawling by the time I reached ground level.

The other thing I noticed while walking was that someone was following me. I didn't know how I knew this, but either way, the hair on the back of my neck was standing on end, and I kept glancing over my shoulder, no matter how many times I tried to stop doing that. Hell, how suspicious must I appear to the people around me?

Halfway to work, I couldn't take it any longer. I ducked into an alleyway, resting my hand on my chest. It felt so tight, and I was hyperventilating. When had that started?

I needed to calm down. No one was following or staring at me. That was paranoia talking. So, I took deep breaths, focusing on that until I could no longer hear blood rushing in my ears.

That was when someone stepped into the alley with me. Tall, he was wearing only black, and an intimidating aura hung heavy on him. He looked familiar too. Did I know him?

"Zae, what are you doing?" he asked. "Are you ok?"

He reached for me, and at the sudden move, I flinched away. For some reason, this made him freeze in place, watching me with something unreadable in his eyes. I didn't like it.

"I- I'm sorry," I stammered. "I-"

Licking my lips, I got myself under control. I was in the middle of Xygek, for Mother Time's sake! There was nothing to fear here. So, I squared my shoulders as I said.

"You've got the wrong guy. I don't know any 'Zae'."

I didn't know what I'd expected from this stranger when I said that, but it certainly hadn't been the blank stare I was receiving.

With an empty voice, he said, "What?"

Unsure what else to do, I shrugged while pasting a shaky smile in place.

"My name's Rylan," I said. "Sorry. You've got the wrong guy."

With a sharply indrawn breath, the stranger mouthed my name before pinching his nose with his eyes squeezed closed.

"You've got to be kidding me," he breathed.

Now, I really didn't know what to do.

"I'm... not? Kidding you, that is," I said. "Again, sorry. Maybe I can help you find your—"

"T.R.O.U.B.L.E, Zaeden," the stranger snapped. "Stop this. We need to get started."

At his words, the world had begun pulling away, making me feel faint, but as soon as he stopped speaking, it snapped back into place, although the strangest pang of melancholy accompanied it. With a rough headshake, I rubbed my temples.

"If you don't want my help, I should get going," I said. "I have something important to do at work, and I'm already late—"

Slapping his hands to his thighs, the stranger growled, "We don't have time for this. T.R.O.U.B.L.E, Zae. *Please*. I... I need you for this."

At his apparent distress, I frowned.

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you," I said. "If you'll excuse me?"

When I tried to brush past the stranger, however, he took hold of my arms, pinning me to a wall, and my everything went cold. Violence? In Xygek? That was impossible.

With pleading eyes, the stranger said, "Don't do this."

Ok. I didn't know what was going on, but I'd had quite enough of this disruption to my morning. Summoning as much courage as I had, I lifted my chin.

"Let me go," I demanded.

The stranger's face morphed through a variety of expressions—ones that I could read, for some reason—before settling into a snarl.

"No," he growled.

Then, he kissed me, and- and—

—and I started weeping. I tried to get free of Korix, but he kept me pinned to the wall, ignoring tears and mucus when they started dribbling around our mouths. Soon enough, though, all fight left me, and with my muscles going limp, I slumped, hanging from Korix.

"No, no! I can't do this to you," I sobbed against his lips. "I *can't*. Don't make me. Please. Fucking hell, Ko, *please*. Pleeeeease..."

That one word became a wail, one that was only silenced by his kiss, and once it had stopped, Korix lowered us to the ground. With him holding me up and my legs over his, we stayed there while I lost myself for a time, and if my hallucination deigned to join us at some point during this, I

chose not to notice them.

At some point, I started slipping into a familiar, listlessly dead state, and as if aware of this, Korix cupped my jaw, gently slapping my cheeks until I focused on him. Hell, what was I doing? I might have to demand something unconscionable from him soon, but he was the one who'd-

His grip on me tightened.

"No," he said. "You don't go running off to somewhere deep inside. You stay with me and listen. Understand?"

When he peered at me as if uncertain whether I was still with him, I mutely nodded.

"Good."

Releasing me, Korix rested his hands between us, staring at them, but after a moment, he started.

"Do you remember what you told me after the Crescent Incident? You'd just seen me have a fit for the first time, and shortly after that, you saved your family and hundreds more from a Dissolver."

It was also when I'd first killed someone I loved but...

"Yes, I remember," I whispered. "How could I forget?"

Nodding, Korix said, "I believe it was, 'You need me, *evushk*, and I won't leave you the moment my training gets tough', yes?"

That was it exactly.

"You chose to make a significant sacrifice, one that no one should have asked of you, for my happiness," he continued. "Now, it's my turn. I'm *choosing* to do this, even if it's not entirely for you."

Sniffing, I said, "That's not fair, Ko. You can't just turn the tables on me like that."

With a laugh, Korix bumped his forehead into mine.

"I very well can," he said, "and look! Now, you know how I felt all those years ago."

Making a face, I said, "It's not pleasant."

"No. No, it's not," Korix softly said.

He brushed his lips against mine again, holding me to him with a hand on the back of my neck.

"So," he said, "will you stay with me?"

There was only one answer to that.

“I will. Always.”

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