

Chapter 97: So, This Hurts

As I descended through House Cerullis' headquarter, I set about dismantling as much of its security as I could. I had no doubt that Korix had gone straight to Talira after losing me, and once she learned I had a handle on the Ancient in me, she'd be sure to send Kolb's high Strata in here.

Speaking of which, I should send her a message.

It's mine. For now. Send me everything you have on the removal of my evushk's Ancient.

As if to prove my point on my tenuous control, something inside of me made a leap for control

[*You pact breaking—*]

I swatted *it* down with memories of my grandmother. Her crying over me when Korix had made me his replacement. Her doing everything she could to make my training easier.

The Ancient ran away from the warmth in my heart, but *it* didn't go far. *It* paced at the boundary of my control, watching for an opening.

When I stepped out of the lift, I leaned against a wall, fighting to get my breathing back under control. Mother Time help me if I had to fight because it would, without a doubt, not be much of one.

Despite how much easier my camouflage disk would have made this walk through enemy territory, I didn't retrieve it from its pocket. I couldn't give the Ancient an advantage, and the disk's buzz over my skin would definitely be one of those. So, after several steadying breaths, I pushed off of the wall and made my way into Cerullis' most secret lab.

I looked out of place here, having dressed for a day spent researching, once my meeting with Talira had concluded. My white jeans and formal, black jacket drew many an eye, not that I could blame them.

What could I say? When nothing constrained me, I dressed to attract.

At the moment, though, it was a bit inconvenient. I met every stare with the person I became while in mission mode, and as usual, my observers shuddered before returning to what they'd been doing, intent on pretending I didn't exist. Thank Mother Time for humanity's innate desire to stay out of trouble.

Maintaining this image, however, was more taxing than normal right now. Projecting intimidation? Pretending that I'd cast emotions away from me? These were at odds with what I must hold in my heart.

It also didn't help that most of what I passed, Pheniks would have found fascinating beyond belief. I loved... had loved my brother, but the thought of him was a chink in the armor that I'd raised around my mind, and oh, how the Ancient worried at it.

The worst of this came when I stepped into a large, domed chamber with storecases scattered around its edge. A few paces from the wall, an ankle-high railing made a ring, serving as a guard against the half-sphere that had been dug into the floor. A staircase led into the bottom of this hollow, where controls of some sort lay, but the crown jewel of the chamber hung above this.

A depiction of a star—our sun, if my array was correct—rotated in the middle of the chamber. Orange and yellow fire roiled below the surface of a sphere while whips of flame rose from it in arcs and tendrils.

I looked upon one of the most powerful sources of energy in the universe, enough to bring life to a planet, and it was spectacular. For who knew how long, all I could do was stand before this representation. When compared to the wonder of how chance and science had merged to create this, I was floored by my insignificance.

So, when a tiny spot on the star jittered, I frowned. Was the depiction's equipment glitching?

As I watched, though, more pieces of the star's surface shimmered until all at once, the sun stopped rotating. A warping sheen, much like a reflection in a patch of disturbed water, coated it, and shivering in place, the star jumped in size by the tiniest of fractions before jolting into a spin again.

While the jittery segment faded, I gaped at an image of the sun, returned to normal. What had that been? Was Cerullis running projections for a planned experiment's outcome?

No, that couldn't be it. Lutov didn't do space travel anymore.

We *did* occasionally send satellites to orbit our planet, though. Considering that, was this an actual representation of our sun, and if it was, I was returned to my original question. What the fuck had that been?

Damn, a puzzle like this would have enchanted Pheniks. He'd have been hopping about this place, running down the stairs to inspect the depiction's controls before pouring over the reports in the chamber's storecases. He'd have been babbling up a stream, one that I'd have barely understood, and I'd have watched it all, pretending to be exasperated but secretly pleased.

[But his solid body failed.]

Grunting, I stumbled toward the chamber's perimeter, blindly reaching for support. I found it right as my legs gave out, leaving me clinging to what I was holding.

I couldn't focus on Pheniks' loss. I had to remember every time my little brother had realized that he'd said something insensitive and how red his face had gotten while stuttering his apology. Or every time he'd indulged me with a session of combat training, even though he'd hated it. Or every

time he'd stopped by my room to ask a question about a girl, all of which I found easily answerable.

I wouldn't let the Ancient use him to defeat me.

"Another distortion...?"

A woman scurried into the chamber, stopping short when she noticed me.

"Who-? What are you doing here?"

Dragging myself upright, I faced the House Cerullis member storming toward me.

"I haven't seen you here before. Name and Stratus, if you please," she snapped. "And what are you wearing? It's not at all appropriate for a lab."

"I'm... not usually in one," I said.

Oh, hell. I had to get this panting under control before she noticed it.

"First Stratus Jayla sent me to retrieve something from aviation. I got a little lost."

Rubbing the back of my neck, I ducked my head, pointedly refusing to consider how I was using a dead woman to get what I wanted.

"I see," the House Cerullis member said. "You're one of her Third Stratus assistants, then?"

Keeping my eyes on the floor, I nodded, and the woman irritably sighed.

"You stopped too soon," she said. "Aviation's two doors down, on the right."

I said nothing more, delaying in the hopes that my damn legs would start working before I was forced out of here.

"Well?" the woman soon snapped. "How long will you keep our First Stratus waiting?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Thank you for your help."

I couldn't say how I remained upright while staggered out of that chamber, but as I continued down the corridor outside, I had to trail my fingers along a wall. I was pretty sure I'd topple without its steadying surface to help.

When I reached it, aviation was less crowded than I'd expected. A handful of people were bustling about the place, working on shuttles and transports, but the number found here didn't match with the size of the cavernous space they filled. Knowing that aviation took up half of this floor, I'd thought it would be big, but this... it could easily fit several copies of my parents' estate inside of it.

While its size was interesting, I was more occupied by the aircraft inside of it. These transports and shuttles looked the same as any other, although the people working on them were focused on their

underside rather than visible parts. Perhaps whatever changes they were making to those vehicles could be found there.

When I saw the skycruisers, though, my heart leapt in my chest while my lips parted. Cerullis had taken those sleek aircraft and added weapons to them. So many different guns were bristling from them, mostly on the front, and I didn't know how useful having them on a skycruiser would be, considering its limitations, but *I wanted one*. Now.

Unfortunately, they wouldn't serve my purpose. I needed something fast and maneuverable, much like a P.I.G. Something with the reserves to get me halfway across the planet while also sporting protection against extreme environments. With how much focus Cerullis had given to the atmosphere in recent years, they should have what I needed around here somewhere.

On shaky legs, I wobbled around aviation, keeping my eyes peeled for anything that would fit my requirements, and thankfully, finding it didn't take long. I slumped against a rack full of shiny people, if said people had been flattened and hung from hooks. Each of these suits had a large reserve and a pack strapped to its back as well as a P.I.G.'s spiderweb flowing over it, but besides that, it was a viscous sleeve with no openings in its material. How the hell did I put one on?

Pulling a—hopefully—atmospheric suit free of the rack, I held it in front of me, flipping it back and forth, before cautiously touching a glowing circle under its chin. Whatever the suit was made of, it was gelatinous in nature, resisting my finger's pressure even as it gave, and it was cold, an intense enough sensation that I retracted my hand with a hiss. When I forced myself to once more touch the liquid metal, I pushed on the circle, and the front of the suit split open, separating until it stopped at mid-shin and the wrists.

So, I just what? Stepped into it?

"Hey! Why are you just standing there?"

A man was jogging my way, waving overhead, and on spying him, I clicked my tongue. I'd noticed people beginning to file out of the room, but I'd hoped to have left this place before anyone noticed me.

"Didn't you get the alert?" the man asked. "We're supposed to assemble in the park. Apparently, someone's been..."

Swallowing hard, he shuddered.

"Someone's been killed," he continued more quietly.

Jayla. I pushed images of her dead face out of my mind.

When I didn't react to the mention of death like he had, the man gave me an odd look.

"What are you doing?" he asked. "We don't need to take atmospheric readings anymore, remember?"

“Is that so?” I sighed.

Stepping into one floppy boot, I cocked my head as the material conformed around my foot, hardening as it did. I could move, but that movement was limited, and when I bent to knock on what was covering me, my knuckles rang on something solid.

Thank all that might be holy, the material’s chill sensation stayed on its exterior surface. Instead, a pleasant warmth embraced my foot.

“Huh,” I said.

“Mother Time, it was you!” the man gasped. “You’re the murderer!”

Glancing up at him, I displayed what I hoped was a feral grin. To me, it felt anguished.

“Yes,” I said.

As if waiting for my admission of guilt, alarms started blaring in aviation with its lights flashing—Talira must have deployed the high Strata—and the man from House Cerullis retreated a step.

Rising to my full height, I growled, “Better run along now.”

And he did so because who wouldn’t? I was a terror, only deserving other people’s fear.

I shoved my other foot into the suit, following it with a hand into a glove.

How many people had died because of me?

What a stupid question. I had the answer sitting in my array, but as I brought it up, I paused.

I couldn’t do this. Self-flagellation and disgust? They couldn’t be indulged in when-

[Ah, but you’ve already let us in, pact-breaker. Such formidable defenses to be cracked by such a large breach. What a pity. Now, let us show you what we do to the people who have broken their promises to us.]

Desperately, I reached for the suit’s hood, flinging it over my head, while bringing to mind those I loved. Talira, Korix, Ace, Feena...

It wasn’t enough. The Ancient poured boiling acid over me, and I melted beneath it.

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