

Chapter Five

The door hissed open behind me, but I didn't check who'd entered. Why should I?

I'd been here for two weeks. Two weeks since I'd woken up and the Curators had told me what had happened. They were right to keep me confined.

But to this point, they'd been... kind enough to respect my wish for isolation. Except for when someone brought me food, no one came into this room, too busy figuring out what to do with the mess I'd caused to linger.

Given that, why was my current guest still here?

"If you've come to gawk, I wouldn't blame you for it, but I'd also advise against it," I said. "Staying so close to a shattered Sage is hazardous for one's health."

"You'd never hurt me. Not in any timeline I've seen, at least."

My view of Lesandra, seen through a window, blurred as I whirled in place. Standing between me and an open doorway, my scion had their hands clasped in front of their hips and an uncertain smile on their lips.

"*What are you doing here?*" I hissed.

With their lips twitching, Eradnee said, "Don't you know?"

I did. That skintight jumpsuit with its weirdly textured material and the hair shaved from their temples meant only one thing.

Numbly, I reached out, seeking a nearby chair. When I found one, I heavily dropped into it before burying my face in my hands.

"No," I breathed into them.

"You don't agree with the decision?"

I barked a broken laugh, loud to me but probably muffled for them.

"How could I not?" I said. "You're the last piece needed before the end begins, seen so many times by me that I can't deny it. How I wish that I could."

My scion's feet tapped across the floor. They sank in front of me, pulling my hands off of my face. With pinched lips and a face creased with earnestness, they stared at me for a moment before

opening and closing their mouth.

"What?" I said.

Damn, I hadn't sounded that hollow in a while, but then, it matched my state right now. Everything about me had been dug out, everything but the faintest ghost of the person I'd once been, and that was unacceptable.

I might be a shattered Sage, but I still had a final duty to perform, no matter how protracted it might be. I had to get myself together.

But I couldn't.

"This is what I never understood, no matter how often I've experienced it," Eradnee said, lightly resting their hand on my knee. "After all the horrible things that have happened in your life, both the crimes committed by you and against you, why does this—"

They gestured at their jumpsuit.

"—affect you so much?"

I looked away because how was I supposed to answer them? Whatever I said, they wouldn't understand, not now and hopefully not for a long while yet.

Warm skin caressed my cheek, nudging me forward again, and once I'd met Eradnee's eyes, they brushed a thumb under one of mine.

"Tell me. Please."

Fate. Suddenly, I *had* to explain.

"I know what I am. I know what I've done," I said. "If I had a choice in the matter, I would never pass this burden off onto another innocent *feralae*. No one should be me."

Something filled Eradnee's gaze—sadness maybe?—and they slowly breathed out with a nod.

"Ok."

Rising from their crouch, they offered me a hand.

"The ascension procedure will start soon," they said. "Will you come with me? I could use a friendly face today."

I snorted. A friendly face? *Me?*

But I took their hand.

I didn't know how they did it, but as we wandered down the halls at Lesandra's pinnacle, Eradnee kept us out of everyone's line of sight. Already, they performed as a proper Sage should, and it broke my heart.

Eventually, however, they couldn't keep it up. We approached a door guarded by two peacekeepers, and when they saw us coming, they did a double take before reaching for their weapons.

"Don't bother. You'd never touch us," Eradnee called. "Besides, I've asked Sage Serinius to stand as my witness today."

They'd *what now?*

The peacekeepers stayed tense for a moment before slowly relaxing.

"All honor to you, vaunted ones," one of them said.

They bowed as we passed between them.

Once we were out of the peacekeepers' hearing range, I hissed, "You want me to be your *witness?*"

Never looking at me, Eradnee nodded.

"I'm sorry. I know you never wanted this," they said, "but I can't look to your desires alone, beloved. I have needs too, and one of them is for you to be at my side while they destroy this version of me."

Well did I remember my ascension to the position of Sage. Well did I remember my need for someone 'safe' at my side. How I'd screamed when what I'd needed hadn't been there!

"Of course I'll be your witness, then," I Said. "*Of course.*"

Stopping, I turned them to face me.

"Eradnee, what they'll do to you... I'm sorry for it."

Hanging their hand from my wrist, Eradnee showed me a twisted smile.

"I know," they said.

"I want you to know that I'll take care of you," I said. "For as long as I can, I'll keep you safe."

Their face fell.

"That's very sweet, and I will always love you for what you've offered," they said, "but if you do that, then I'll also never forgive you for it. If we're to maintain our timeline, you have to make me an unstoppable Sage, Serinius. You have to break me, destroying your soul in some ways, because if you don't, all *feralae* are doomed."

Something had lodged itself so immovably in my throat that I had to painfully clench my hold on Eradnee to relieve the pressure.

"I don't know if I can," I hoarsely said.

Again, Eradnee cupped my face, and I was half-tempted to nuzzle into their palm.

"You can," they said. "You will."

Trailing their hand down my neck and arm, they intertwined our fingers, and we moved on.

When we eventually reached the staging room, I stopped short, fighting to take a step forward, and at my side, Eradnee patiently waited for my struggle to resolve. I didn't know if I could do this. I didn't *want* to do this.

I had to do this.

It hurt my soul to walk through that cursed door, but I made myself take those awful steps anyway. Inside, we found everything arranged exactly the way it had been 'then'. Or- or was it 'now'?

Fate, I *could not* lose my hold on time right now but- but-

I took in the bright, surgical lights lining the ceiling, glaring down on the black cushions of a reclined chair. I hyper-fixated on the metal beams peeking through those cushions and the restraints secured to each of them.

And I surged backward, caught by the peacekeepers behind me.

And I froze, caught in the realization of everything the Curators intended for me.

And I was dragged, kicking and screaming, to a place I'd never willingly go.

And I recognized the futility of fighting, gliding serenely to the site of my execution.

And it didn't matter whether I'd win or lose. I'd make this farce as difficult for the fucking Curators as I could. I would make it obvious how much I didn't want to submit.

And Eradnee slipped their hand into mine, curling their fingers against the back of it.

"Breathe, beloved," they said. "This moment is mine, not yours."

That was right. I was here as a witness, not a victim. This was 'now', not 'then'.

And I'd already been destroyed.

At my nod, Eradnee calmly took their place, taking a moment to get settled before beckoning to me. I moved forward with reluctance clinging to my every motion, but soon enough, I was at their side. Smiling, Eradnee unfurled their fingers. I took the prompt for what it was. I gave them warmth

and reassurance and as much kindness as I could spare as the restraints tightened around their limbs.

A Curator came into the staging room once Eradnee had been secured. With their head held high Liaison Veshtra kept the hexagonal container in their hands at chest level, as if to proudly display its contents to the world. Through the glass in its sides, I glimpsed a fuzzy, white pinprick, secured in the center by many glowing lines, and I wanted to throw up.

Much as I might always long for *Aedeeka* with every fiber of my being, much as the *adraste* had become such a central pillar in *feralae* society, they also remained a lingering, final gift from the Leachers. The sight of one of their newly-born twisted me inside and out. As Veshtra placed the box in the holding space beneath Eradnee's head, it took far more effort than it should have to remain calm and still.

Eradnee merely smiled, squeezing their hold on my hand.

Fate. This was pure torture.

Once Veshtra had left the room, there were no fancy speeches. Maybe at one point, someone would have thanked Eradnee for their sacrifice, but as with everything else, that practice had changed. The Curators had grown complacent, expecting my people to provide a Sage for them without complaint. It was one more way they'd long since diverged from my own people.

This was the way of things now.

So, no words were spoken before wire-like tendrils stretched away from the container. They tentatively trailed up the chair's metal struts, reaching and seeking until they touched Eradnee's flesh.

My scion held perfectly still as those tendrils crawled over their body, which I couldn't help but admire. I struggled to bury an image of myself, thrashing to get away from the repulsive sensation, as the tendrils found their places at Eradnee's temples and each of their orifices.

They held my gaze as the tendrils dug their way inside, burrowing under their eyes and round their nostrils and into their mouths and...

Eradnee's breath caught for a moment, spreading a dead silence through the staging room, but once more, they smiled for me, imparting a final squeeze.

Then, a hiss replaced the silence while the white pinprick in the container faded to nothing. It traveled along its conducting tendrils, and Eradnee *screamed*.

My hand became a fist around their fingers. While their body arched off of the chair, I maintained my hold as if it were the only thing that mattered, throwing words at them in the hope that they would hear them.

"I'm here. I'm here. I'm here. I'm here."

I kept repeating those words, daring to believe that Eradnee would absorb the message behind them.

You are not alone. As long as I'm here, you will never be alone.

Finally, it was over. The tendrils retreated to an empty container, and with their body slowly relaxing, Eradnee focused their red and streaming eyes on me. They tried to speak, to put words to the loss I knew they were feeling, and I dropped to my knees at their side.

"I know," I whispered. "But it's over, and I've got you. You can rest, beloved, and when you wake up, we will get through this together."

A soft smile somehow carved through the remnants of agony still spread across Eradnee's face.

"Beloved?" they croaked.

But then, they were gone, slumping into sleep, and I was left with the wreckage that the Curators' precious ascension procedure had left behind.

Revision #1

Created 23 January 2025 22:51:45 by FatalisticFable

Updated 25 January 2025 03:22:52 by FatalisticFable