

# Chapter Four

//4526.08.05-02:36 hour of the sun// *Why have I been called on again? This is too soon after the last...*

*Oh.//*

I wake to the end, unfolding all around me. Fate, the cold of it... it takes root in my core, slowing me down as I leap... or stumble to my feet.

Around me, the stars go out with entropy taking a firm hold, and I... I can't stop it, no matter what my timeline might once have said.

Still, I had to try. I tottered on unsteady feet through a door and down the dimly lit hall outside.

I was on a ship; I thought. One of the starfarers that had come before my people had learned to create Gateways. This should concern me, shouldn't it? The means to travel between the stars had been in storage for.. for...

A bright light flares around the hatch ahead, and I weave toward it.

//4526.08.05-02:45 hour of the sun// *Oh, this is bad. Host... Serinius has drunkenly stumbled into a populated area, teetering in place as they stare. If the bereft ones around us know what is best for them, they will avoid Serinius until the replete ones arrive, but that will never happen. Time's course is set, and everyone here knows what comes next.//*

I'm here again, floating in the void, with nothing around me, not even stars, not even...

Someone important should be with me now. Right? They keep me on track for this last part, giving me purpose.

Who are they? *Where* are they?

Something moved in the void around me, and I go still. That isn't right.

Or is it? Time was no longer behaving as it should, refusing to follow my timeline's familiar course for... oh, I don't know how long it'll have been now.

If something's in the void with me, what could it be? Nothing survives here, nothing but- but me, I supposed.

And the Leachers. Long ago, they had the ability to travel between the stars without the protection of starfarers to sustain them.

Again, something moved nearby, and I have to wonder. Have I run into them, the *feralae*'s most ancient enemy? I remember something about encountering them at the end of my timeline. Possibly.

Fate, why is it so hard to think? Where- where-?

Screaming, long and loud, I pressed my hands to my skull.

"Eradnee!" I shouted. "Beloved, *where are you?*"

Shadowed monsters materialized in the void, speaking garbled noise. They reach for me, trying to hold me still, but I won't let them touch me.

*I moved.*

//4526.08.04-02:58 hour of the sun// *I watch, helpless, as Serinius snaps the neck of the bereft one who's come to help them. Roaring, they charge the others, gathered on all sides, and that group stands still, putting up no resistance as Serinius begins their slaughter.*

*This... is my fault. I should have seen it coming, should have warned someone—ha! Like that is possible—should have resisted Serinius' call earlier, should have...*

*Should have, would have, could have. I cannot change what is happening, cannot stop the beginning of host's final unraveling. I can only stay at their side and bear witness.//*

They wouldn't stop coming! And they... they were *everywhere!*

Nowhere is safe, nothing set to save me. This is it, isn't it? The end of my timeline. The passing of the mantle. The time when I...

"NO!" I roared.

I have to keep going. It didn't matter how many forms stepped out of the void around me. I will eliminate the threat because I can't let it go. I can't let Eradnee-

"Serinius. That's enough."

Their voice will pull me up short, leaving me stretching hungry fingers for another shadowed monster. I have to make it vanish, had to- to *end the threat!*

"There's no threat here, beloved. All that's left is you, me, *Aedeeka*, and a sole survivor."

Survivor of *what?* The shadowed forms that had stopped rising on all sides? The Leachers, come to escort entropy up the final steps to its throne?

"A sole survivor of *you*, Serinius. Stop this now. See when you are. *Aedeeka*, my friend, my foe? Stop acting like you can't do anything. You don't need the Curators' help to return to where you

should be."

*Aedeeka*. My *adraste*.

My scion was speaking to her? Why? *Aedeeka* couldn't hear or understand us. The only times I could communicate with her were when I touched her.

Fate, I want to touch her.

"Then, do it."

But where... where...?

White light in the shape of a small, four-legged creature drifts in front of me. The animal plops to a seat with its bushy tail and pointed ears drooping. Why does it seem so sad?

When I stretch a finger toward it, though, it perks up. It reaches out with its nose, and we *connect*.

And I screamed.

Usually, when I touched my *adraste*, I merged with her, returning to what I'd once been. Time was no longer a concern for me, and everything *wrong* about me, everything that was missing, healed.

Something new accompanied the sensation this time. A stream of voices, all of them crying out in frustration or pain or fear, funneled into my head, and there, they pooled with nowhere to go. I picked out strands from this mess as best I could, but they were fragmented, choppy, disconnected.

"Don't do it! Not aga-!"

"You can't leave-"

"-please! I love-"

And behind it all was my voice, ragged. Reedy.

And theirs.

"I know. It hurts, my beloved. You'll get through this, though, and finally, *finally*, our journey will begin."

It was the last thing I heard before *Aedeeka* channeled into me, toppling my already shaky wobble. Twitching on the ground, I fought through the pain so I could see my surroundings. I frowned at the limp bodies lying around me, but then, I was gone.

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