

# Chapter Six

It took Eradnee weeks to recover, not that I'd expected anything else. A key piece of their psyche had been fundamentally altered. Of course they needed time to adjust.

I'd spent my own convalescence period in isolation. Before me, the *feralae* had been coasting on the leftover residue of the last Sage's sacrifice for almost a decade. No one had known how to handle what I'd become.

So, I'd spent months alone, fumbling to fit *myself* into the new framework of my thinking. I didn't make contact with *Aedeeka* until the end of that time period, the sign that the Curators had been waiting for to pull me out of convalescence.

It would have been nice if they'd told me about that at any point over those lonely two months.

I had no intention of letting Eradnee experience that discomfort. So, as they wandered aimlessly around their new apartment, I trailed in their wake. I was always one breath away from giving them whatever they needed, even if what they needed at times was simply space.

Yes, they'd told me that I should fight my undeniable desire to keep them safe. I understood this more than they could know.

But what they were going through right now? It wasn't some danger, come to put them in peril. It was trauma, plain and simple. Something that would only hinder their development into their own Sage. And I knew *exactly* how to help with that. Experience had taught me nothing less.

Companionship and care. I offered Eradnee as much togetherness as they desired, as often as I could do. It was the least I could do.

I was there when Eradnee stumbled onto the apartment's balcony, screaming their heart out to the void. I was there when they shook and wept, curled into as tight of a ball as they could manage. I was there when they sat in our star's dim light, blankly staring at Lesandra's vista through a window.

And I was there when they first contacted their *adraste*.

It took weeks, as I'd said, but when it happened, it was unmistakable. I was making Eradnee dinner on that fateful evening, letting a cup of stimulant steep while gruel slowly thickened in front of me. This might not be the most elegant of meals, but it would go down easily, something my scion had needed lately. I flavored it as best I could, keeping in mind which meals Eradnee had been picking at and which they'd devoured as I did. Just as I was transferring their food to an eating surface, a sharp gasp spiked into the air behind me.

Snapping my eyes closed, I set the gruel down and took a deep breath. After the weeks I'd spent here, I knew what Eradnee's pain, sorrow, and fear sounded like. That gasp had been unlike anything else I'd heard from them in this place. In fact, the tone of it had been distinctly similar to how they'd sounded on meeting me.

Happiness. They'd sounded happy.

And I knew what that meant.

I made myself turn around. Several paces away, Eradnee was sitting on the edge of their new couch, slack-mouthed and with wondering eyes. The misty being hovering at chest level in front of them contrasted the multihued decorations that framed her. Curled into a sleepy ball, she twitched her tail, one much longer than *Aedeeka's*, before unfolding into a stretching yawn. She flicked her rounded ears as her jaw closed, and blinking at the *feralae* in front of her, she cocked her head.

Eradnee lifted trembling arms. In increments, they cupped this being's body, keeping their hands a breath from her form, and at the sight, tears leapt into my eyes.

This was it. When they would fully understand what they'd become. I didn't want to watch it, didn't want to see the realization take place in their eyes, but I was helpless to close mine as my scion's fingers twitched, brushing against their *adraste's* outline.

Stiffening in place, Eradnee sighed, fluttering their eyes closed. As relief washed over them, I couldn't hold myself back anymore, try as I might. I flung my hands over my mouth, desperate to keep quiet, but still, a sob broke the serene stillness, and the *adraste* in our midst jerked toward me.

I spun away. Fate, I needed somewhere to hide. Maybe the washroom?

Eradnee should have this moment to themselves, untouched by all the grief and guilt I was bringing to the table. Much as the realization of their new life would surely pain them, it would also be a moment of peace. One of return to who they'd been. A break in the hell that was ordered time forced onto someone once free of it.

My scion didn't seem to agree with me.

"Serinius?" they whispered at my back. "Where are you going?"

There had been such hope in that one question. It broke my heart to answer it, but still, I did, burying all that I was feeling as I moved to the couch.

I didn't look at my scion until I'd sat beside them. Only then did I face them, and once I had, I had to lean away.

Because Eradnee's *adraste* was creeping toward me, lifting her nose in a curious fashion, and before I could get away, therefore freeing my scion of another complication, the misty being placed one delicate paw on my leg.

No.

In the apartment, the moment had turned thick and heavy, or it had for me. I wasn't sure how Eradnee was experiencing it. They had their eyes pinned on that white appendage, pressed into my dark leggings, and I didn't know what to do.

Too much emotion had swamped me in the last few minutes. It was all soup: a stone in my gut and a fist in my throat and acid in my eyes, and I didn't know the name for it all. I just knew that it was too much. There was too much *feeling* in one body, and I could not leak it out.

So, I focused on propriety. On expectations. On duty.

On Eradnee.

They lifted their gaze to mine, but I was already leaning forward. My fingers gently pressed into their temples and I brushed my lips over the top of their head, and they released a shaky breath.

"Beloved," they murmured.

I couldn't return that word to them. I wasn't sure why I'd said it after their ascension, when they'd been so proud and yet ruined. It certainly wasn't something I associated with them. Not 'now'.

But Eradnee wasn't in the 'now'. With their *adraste* summoned, they were in the 'all'. In the 'then' and 'now' and 'soon to come'. In this moment, I was everything I would ever be to them, and that meant I was beloved.

Which was what they needed. It was what they deserved, especially from me and every way I had and would destroy them.

So, as we tumbled to the floor and my skin collided with theirs, this might be an act of love for my scion. For me, it was only a service. It was biology, chemistry, and compatibility, coming together to create a reaction that left both of our thoughts scattered.

And in that moment, Eradnee's *adraste* filtered back into their core. The pain of this was covered by the rapture they were experiencing, something I barely noted through my own haze. They slumped against my chest, weak and limp, but again, this was to be expected.

It didn't matter whether our coupling had been to their satisfaction or not. After both that and everything their *adraste* had forced them to feel, their body had had enough.

Eradnee quickly drifted into sleep. I waited for as long as I could before replacing my body with a pillow beneath their head. After dressing, I strode to a com.

Liaison Veshtra's face was projected against a wall within a few heartbeats. Considering the annoyed look I was receiving and the late hour, I could only assume I'd interrupted their rest, but fortunately, they didn't make a fuss. They only inclined their head for me to speak.

"It's happened," I said. "I'll begin their training in the morning."

Veshtra nodded before vanishing, and it was done. The shattered Sage had their broken scion, one step further along in their decommissioning.

One step closer to the end.

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