

Chapter Three

Hello, beloved? That... that was *not* what my scion was supposed to say. They were *not* supposed to softly smile at me while I gaped back, and they were *definitely not* supposed to come forward and gently take hold of my face.

With their eyes fluttering closed, they said, "Mm. Even if this touch is always available to me, it's good to feel it in full. Don't you agree, Serinius?"

Grabbing this person's wrists, I pried their hands off of my skin before backing away.

Not much scared me anymore. The ability to shift the galaxy's level of entropy around while also having a singular control on my view of time had given me too much power, enough that very little could threaten my life.

Someone acting outside of their timeline's established parameters was one of the few things that still *scared the shit* out of me because it always heralded coming chaos or... I could be nearing the end of my timeline. But that wasn't much of a comfort either.

So, I walked away. It wasn't wise to ignore an anomaly of time like this, but I. just. *couldn't*. I'd endured so much struggle and strife and suffering in my time as the Sage, had so much happiness taken away, and I couldn't make those sacrifices again. Not anymore.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised that my scion kept pace with me, humming under their breath. Several times, I tried to escape or otherwise break their sure stride at my side, but nothing I did worked.

They didn't comment on my newfound helplessness, which I was grateful for. It was helping me keep my agitation under control.

My scion accompanied me all the way home, ignoring the people around us as they paused and subsequently scattered. Only once we'd reached my destination did my scion diverge from my path, stopping short instead of continuing on.

Knowing I'd regret it, I turned toward them, curious what had brought on the change. They reached behind their back to pull a stack of papers out of their waistband before offering it to me.

"What you wanted," they said.

Hesitantly, I took my students' papers, the ones I needed to grade, from my scion, and they clutched their hands behind their back, beaming at me.

"My name's Eradnee, by the way," they said. "I know it's hard for you to know all of the timeline or at least, all of it at once. It's ok, beloved. I can do that for us. I can wait for you to lose yourself to me."

Stepping up to me, they cupped my face before rising to their tiptoes and kissing my cheek. I was frozen by this, stuck in place until they'd strolled out of view, but then, I entered my home in a haze.

They were here. How long had I known about the moment of our meeting, reliving it so often that at times, it had been like it had already and was currently happening? Yet even still, I'd missed some details, besides the obvious. Like...

Fate! They were so *young!* Sure, I'd been around the same age when the Curators had bound *Aedeeka* to me, maybe a little younger, but... shit.

Taking a deep breath, I shook my head while latching the door behind me. The papers got dropped onto a nearby side table along with my jacket, once I'd shrugged out of it.

I couldn't think about this. It needed to settle in my mind until my thoughts had stopped spinning so fiercely, but once that had happened, I needed to sit down and scour my timeline once again. Maybe I could figure out when and how time had jumped its track enough to cause the discrepancies I'd experienced.

To hurry this along, I wandered into my kitchen. A cup of stimulant was calling my name.

I was grateful for the need to crank and squeeze that liquid through its strainer, as one must in Celuk. With the Curators in Lesandra, the process was automated, but not here. The burn of this physical work chased away the lingering chill that I'd gained on my journey home and during my encounter with my scion.

But I *wasn't* thinking about that.

Once I was finished, I flopped into one of the chairs around my small table. Behind me, the weak light of this planet's star streamed through a window, diffusing until it had stippled my paper stack. Prepared for a good bit of reading, I leaned over the first of the papers.

My class covered the time of the Leachers and the Sages' origin. Every year, I had my students do a research project, one that lasted throughout the class's length, and at its completion, each student presented me with a scenario that might have kept the *feralae* from experiencing a slow extinction.

While this project was incredibly useful for putting *feralae* history into perspective for the young, my class was mostly used as a tool to, in a roundabout way, teach my people about time in the way the Curators saw it.

I taught it because I had a foot in both worlds. If a Curator took my place, they'd have no clue how to begin with my students, and my people, being the students, didn't have the understanding

necessary for my role, not even after they'd completed the class.

It was another way that the Sage was pushed to the outskirts, but perhaps that was for the best. I couldn't be disappointed by my attempts to integrate with the *feralae* if I was never given the chance to make them.

Hell, I was acting maudlin tonight.

Pushing the papers aside, I sipped my stimulant, watching the outline of the window on the table move away from me. Soon, I could get ready for bed and lose myself to dreams, but before that could happen, I had to do something I'd rather not attempt.

Had my thoughts stilled enough for me to begin? I no longer felt as if a gong had gone off in the world, reverberating through me until it had knocked my stream of consciousness loose. That was a good start.

Slowly breathing out, I set my mug on the table, flattening my hands on its surface. In the most gradual of increments, I reached deep inside, seeking *Aedeeka*. I couldn't do this quickly. If I did, we might get a repeat of earlier with me seeing all of time at once. I lost myself when that happened, and when combined with my other skills as the Sage, it could be devastating and at times, deadly for the people around me.

Soon enough, I found my *adraste*, and taking a deep breath, I plunged forward.

My life expanded before me, an explosion of events and words and actions. It was overwhelming, inundating me with information, but usually, I could handle it, identifying what I needed before too long.

It was too much for me today. Two heartbeats dragged by in the outside world, and I could no longer contain the scream building in my chest. It burst from me, rubbing my throat raw while I collapsed on the table, and I knew I hadn't given myself enough time to prepare for this.

Scenes popped like the start of a combustion before my eyes.

I slide a blade into my target, weeping as they breathe their last. It's my first kill.

Rapture washes through me as my partner and I come to completion. They're my first love.

I brush my lips over a kid's forehead, nodding to their parent once I'm finished, and they're taken away. They're the first of my offspring.

Resin slows in its drip from the gaping wound in my side, and the cold, ever my enemy, comes to claim its victory. It's my first death.

Or my last one. Telling the difference had been getting difficult for me lately.

Desperate, I cast out for the one piece of my timeline that I knew like the back of my hand, and my classroom rushed into focus. My scion scanned it with a wistful smile, turning to me after I'd alerted them to my presence.

And with widening eyes, they said...

"Hello, beloved."

Jerking upright, I yanked free of *Aedeeka's* influence with one question circling in my head—

What? What? What?

—but before I could escape, a last bit of the scene popped into my awareness.

My scion comes forward to cradle my face, and their eyes flutter closed. They're my last love. My *greatest* love.

And air burned me as I sucked it into my lungs.

"*WHAT?*" I shrieked.

Oh... oh, no. I couldn't...

Had I finally lost my mind? Had what I'd originally known about that meeting never existed on my timeline?

And *greatest* love?

Slowly shaking my head, I muttered, "No..."

They were my *scion*. Eventually, they would replace me, and it would be my fault that they must occupy my role. Not only that but I'd sworn years ago that I would never trust my heart to another *feralae*. So, love?

"No," I said. "No, no, no."

Getting to my feet, I scrubbed my hands along my scalp before shaking myself. Maybe fatigue had interfered with my dive into my timeline. Things of that nature had certainly messed with me like this in the past. So... bed?

"Yes," I said. "I should get some sleep."

Even with the decision made, it took me a while to clean up my spilled cup of stimulant and get ready for bed. Throughout the process, my hands wouldn't stop shaking, but eventually, my head hit a pillow, and I forced myself to relax.

No more thinking about what had happened today. I could deal with the implications of it tomorrow.

Everything would be better in the morning.

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