

Chapter Two

The quiet murmur of voices woke me up. I couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but considering how many times I'd been in this position, I could guess their words.

"Rousing them is a mistake," one would be saying. "We should leave them in suspension until their time is gone."

If I was lucky, someone would reply, "How can you suggest such a thing after everything they've been through? It would be the definition of cruelty!"

But most of the time, the response went more like this:

"We might still need them. Let's not make them angry unless we must."

While I waited for them to figure out that I'd regained consciousness, I struggled to place when this moment lay on my timeline. I thought I was experiencing 'now' instead of 'then', but properly ordering events in the forward flow of time was always difficult after a slip.

Not unmanageable! I'd done it often enough that it would soon come naturally to me once more, but an initial placement did take effort.

I was on the tail end of this when rings rattled along a pole, probably due to my guests drawing a hospital curtain back, and footsteps approached me, which meant I needed to decide. Did I want to freak them the hell out, risking an alteration to my timeline, or should I wait for them to speak? All of which boiled down to one question. What would I normally do?

Fate, having to live these moments one at a time was disorienting.

"You might want to close the curtain," I said. "We wouldn't want Medic Clairmont, soon to come around the corner, knowing I'm here, would we?"

After a pause, someone started cursing, which made me smile. Unnerving them was always *ever so* satisfying.

Again, a rattle rang in the air, and I opened my eyes, fighting to hide my wince. As expected, spectral variants were shimmering around my guests, something that set a dull ache pulsing in my head. I ignored them as best I could, not that I really needed to do that. They'd fade soon enough.

Avoiding my eyes, my guests got settled in the chairs around my hospital bed, but no one spoke once they'd made themselves comfortable. Guess I'd start, then.

"Greetings to the Curators, most especially the honorable Liaison Veshtra among them," I said. "I'd say hello more properly but..."

Lifting my hands, I clinked my padded cuffs against the side rails I was bound to.

"I'm sorry, Serinius," Veshtra said with tears filling their eyes, "but we have a situation that requires a Sage, and you've been chosen."

No, that wasn't right. Those words belonged to 'then', the time immediately after the Curators had bound *Aedeeka* to me.

Damn. I hated it when my circumstances forced me to show them a weakness.

"Repeat that, please," I said through gritted teeth.

The three people around me relaxed, clearly happy to be in a more comfortable setting, and I ignored how much this burned me. The centermost of them, Veshtra, coldly smiled while running a hand over the incorporeal form of their *adraste*, nestled in their lap. What a stark contrast they'd become to their earlier self.

"I asked what happened this time," they said. "When you slipped three months ago, you assured me you had it under control."

Raising an eyebrow, I said, "I'm sorry. Am I forgetting the part where I caused anything but a minor disturbance in the last day? Because if not, I'm unsure why you're questioning me about *control*."

Sneering that last part, I rolled my eyes, but if my derision affected Veshtra, they didn't show it, mildly gazing at me as they continued stroking the beast of light in their lap.

"Yes, peacekeepers were close enough to intervene before you could hurt anyone, but that doesn't mean you wouldn't have, given time," they said. "You must see why I'm concerned."

Honestly? I did.

Given how I'd been acting in recent years and how previous Sages had typically ended their careers, it should be clear to anyone looking that I was approaching that same breaking point.

I couldn't voice that doubt, though.

"No, I don't," I said, "and since I'm obviously in control now, I have to wonder why I'm still restrained. Unless you've come to decommission me?"

Fate say they hadn't. I had to last as long as I could, delaying the passing of my burden for as long as possible. As far as I knew, we hadn't reached that point in my timeline. My scion had yet to join my class, after all.

"Don't tempt me," Veshtra said. "After all the problems you've caused, I'm having trouble with justifying how the benefits you've brought us outweigh the damage you've caused."

I had nothing to say to that. Veshtra and I'd had this conversation so many times before, and because of that, we both knew it was reaching its end. Even with their limited grasp on the timeline, they'd always had things like this, one of the few points concerning time where we were equal.

After a moment, they sighed, jerking their head at one of the people beside them, and the aide withdrew a key from their pocket. As they leaned forward, their *adraste* scurried down their arm, intently pointing its beady eyes at me, and they froze. The *adraste* sniffed the air, lifting its pointed nose, before abruptly returning up its host's arm. Slowly breathing out, the one who claimed it lowered their tensed shoulders.

It was too bad. They were rather pleasing to the eye. I'd have liked to bed them.

Rubbing my wrists, I said, "Is there anything else, or may I go?"

Veshtra turned aside before flicking their fingers at me, and I briefly considered causing an unnecessary advance of entropy to get away from them more quickly. It seemed like such a waste, though, considering how much heat I'd need to safely reach home.

"Well, then," I said. "A pleasure, as always."

Swinging my legs over the side of the hospital bed, I scooted between their chairs. I waited for the proper moment before ducking through the curtain. To my right, a medic took a step out of the space I'd soon occupy, intently focused on a chart, and as they moved on, none the wiser, I turned toward the closest exit from the ward, on my left.

As always when slipping through the cracks like this, the *adraste* were my primary source of concern. Most of the time, they caused me no trouble, attached to their hosts' timelines as they were, but the rare instances when they gained the ability to see all of time had fucked me over too often to ignore them.

They gave me no trouble today.

When I eventually stepped out of the hospital, I was walloped by the sudden upsurge of spectral variants floating around the people outside. This was to be expected, of course, given how many possibilities for an overall timeline change were wandering around me, but it froze me in place nonetheless, increasing the tempo of the pounding ache behind my eyes.

When I could, I once more oriented to 'now', glancing through the Aegis that preserved the city to this planet's failed seed. A little over-one-hundredth of an AU from where I stood, the long-dead corpse of a star still radiated the remnant heat of its life into the void, and measuring that against what I'd observe of it many times along my timeline, I quickly established when I was.

With that done, I could focus on my location. Lesandra, in all of its majesty, was spread before me. As always, the Curators had taken me to a hospital near the city's apex, and from there, I could see the stark line where the Aegis separated life from the freeze. Between me and it, the many jagged outlines of the city's skyscrapers, both narrow and wide, blocked sight of the ground *far* below. Their rooftops made a steady downward slope until all signs of civilization ended.

In between these buildings, the thick cables of transport lines hung at a slant, fanning out from where I was standing, while enclosed walkways made perpendicular paths at all levels.

While I waited for the spectral variants around me to fade, I watched a cargo crate zip down a cable from one of the factories found below this layer of administration.

I'd always admired the Curators' resourcefulness, an example of which was rapidly falling out of sight. Using potential energy to move goods around the city instead of relying on heat, like my people did, was genius, even if it didn't eliminate the need for thermal energy throughout the process. *Something* had to get supplies up this high before the end product could go zipping back down.

Still, the way the Curators did this and other such things was more efficient overall than my people's system, and I could appreciate that.

A gust of wind roared around the hospital, and shivering, I raised the hood of my jacket. Was it colder in Lesandra than normal? If so, I should check the Aegis' control sometime soon. It might need another transfer of heat, which would be a tad concerning. How quickly had the Curators been burning through my last transfer to need another one eight months later?

Also, where the *hell* would I find the heat needed for it?

Shaking my head, I set off, quickly leaving the hospital behind.

One would think that in a population several million strong, at least one person would recognize their Sage in the time it took me to reach my destination, although... perhaps it wasn't so surprising. Sure, I could filter through the timelines of the people around me so that I was always where they weren't looking, but even without that, keeping myself unnoticed was easy. I'd been able to stride through a crowd, unseen, for decades now.

The only time I revealed my identity was when I approached the edge of the Aegis' protection, but that was because dealing with a single person's reaction to me would be easier than forcing an unauthorized exit into the freeze. As I ambled toward my chosen door, the person guarding it rocked to their feet, presenting me with their palm.

"Excuse me, individual, but you can't be here," they said. "Access to this area is restricted to the peacekeepers, Liaisons, and-"

"The Sage?" I said, lowering my hood.

After blinking for a moment, the guard rested their hand over their heart and bowed to me.

"An honor, vaunted one," they said. "Meeting you has been a lifelong wish."

"Oh, I'm aware. Why do you think I chose to use this door out of the many available to me?" I said. "Please. You should relax."

Reluctantly, the guard straightened, flexing their hand once it was at their side once more, but that was the only sign they gave of any anxiety they might be feeling.

"Are you going home, vaunted one?" they asked.

Oo. I liked this one. Usually, it took much longer to get through the awe and formality part of conversations like this.

"I am," I said. "Would you open the door for me?"

"Of course."

With a short bow, the guard hurried to the door's controls, and cocking my head at their retreating back, I considered whether I should give in to temptation when it came to this solitary being. They were insignificant in the grand scheme of things. What possible harm could there be in perusing their timeline more thoroughly?

But as soon as I'd done it, I bit back a hiss, looking away. Looking anywhere but at the guard.

"When you're ready, Sage Serinius," they eventually called. "The door is open."

After taking a couple of quick breaths, I plastered a smile in place before heading into the distended bulge now sticking off of the Aegis. The ground crunched as I stopped within it while the ice I'd stepped on gradually melted beneath my boots.

Another pair of breaths preceded me turning to the guard.

"Thank you, Tanika," I said. "Your service has been noted."

As their eyes widened with joy warming them, I blinked back the tears in mine, unable to wipe away the image of a hole, soon to be bored through their forehead. The one I'd so recently beheld. It would be so easy to tell them what was coming, imparting a warning that would save their life, but if I did that...

Fate. Who knew what else I might change? Most of the time, it was best not to mess with time, letting it play out as it should.

"Honored to have served," the guard said.

They hurried back to the door's controls, and I forced thoughts of them away so I could find a source of heat to steal from. While I could easily take some from the air around me, it would be inefficient, forcing me to suck heat from a much greater perimeter than I'd like.

No. The best sources of heat were anything that involved combustion and if that wasn't an option...

Not far from here, a rodent had hidden a nest among a pile of debris. It and several smaller forms—its progeny most likely—were sleeping there.

"Sorry, little ones," I said. "Wrong place, wrong time."

With a thought and the twitch of my hand, I switched the level of entropy found in my location with what lay in the animals, and a wash of heat spilled over my skin, leaving tiny, rodent-sized icicles behind. Now that I'd lowered the entropy level around me, garnering myself an additional layer of warmth as a side effect, I only needed to hold it steady, or as steady as I could, until I reached home.

Because while I'd said that I'd 'lowered' entropy, I hadn't. Not really. I'd only shifted it around on the micro scale while also advancing it on the cosmic level. The lack of thermal energy to do mechanical work was part of what entropy was, after all, and *that*, especially in our part of the universe, was always increasing, a descent into randomness that loomed over every *feralae's* head.

Tanika, the guard, had cocked their head inquisitively at me, and I nodded. It was time to leave Lesandra behind.

In front of me, the side of the bulge I occupied started pinching off, and making sure I still had Tanika's attention, I laid a hand over my heart and bowed, although I also held their gaze. Flushing, they drew a breath to speak, but my bulge from the Aegis had pinched off, preventing sound from reaching me. With a smile, I maintained my pose until the bulge around me had dissipated, exposing me to the freeze.

Then, I put my back to the Curators, their city, and their skewed sense of time.

As I trudged toward home, I fought to remember how my people... how *I* should view time. This effort was made difficult by the observations that my brain kept making about my surroundings.

Like how the snowfall must have been light in recent days to make my trek today so easy. Or how the crumbling ruins of long-abandoned villages was a testament to the *feralae's* will to live.

Hundreds of years had passed since the Leachers had stolen the life of our stars, and still, we fought to survive.

It was the opposite of the problem I'd had in the hospital. There I'd muddled through placing events in the 'then', 'now', and 'yet to come'. Here, I had to constantly remind myself that concepts like 'now' and 'then' were arbitrary. Irrelevant.

Time was time. It could not be put in order.

But because of who I was, who the Curators had made me, I could no longer see it that way. I could come close, but my once natural state was always just out of reach, only fully achieved when I called on *Aedeeka*. I couldn't to that so soon after I'd slipped, no matter how tempting I found it.

This was me, someone stuck between worlds. Ever, I was tugged between the two versions of the *feralae*, never belonging. Never at home. I was outside of it all, and oh, how I wanted this to end. To call on *Aedeeka*, touch her, and force the Curators to decommission me.

And yet, I also dreaded the day that would happen because that was the day my scion would be chosen, and I didn't want to pass this mantle off onto another person.

In the distance, another Aegis, much smaller than the one containing Lesandra's heat, appeared, and I quickened my pace.

I was ready to reach home. A cup of liquidized stimulant waited for me there, and after I'd enjoyed a few sips of it, I could finish grading my class's papers, although... I'd have to retrieve those first. I doubted the peacekeepers who'd restrained me had been kind enough to take them to my home.

When I reached Celuk's Aegis, I force my way through it, hoping to avoid my people for now. I was nowhere near the mindset I'd need while here, which wasn't a surprise given my forced visit with the Curators. I didn't need a reminder of what I should be like right now.

Covertly moving through Celuk was much more difficult than it had been in Lesandra. Besides the occasional Liaison, the people here didn't have *adraste* forcibly ordering their sense of time, so I must rely on mundane skills to sneak through the village. That and the sparseness of Celuk with only huts in the way of buildings made moving through it *annoying*. I managed to successfully do it maybe one in three of the times I tried.

Today was one of those times. As I reached the doorway to my classroom, I felt my shoulders lowering from my ears, but as soon as I rounded the corner, they shot back up.

My classroom looked the same as before I'd called on *Aedeeka*. The mirage at the front was still displaying a diagram that explained ancient farming techniques, and a mix of papers and tablets had been left on the desks between. The peacekeepers must have ushered my students home after restraining me.

This didn't cause concern, familiar as the scene was. What I hadn't expected was the person slowly spinning in the center of the room with their fingers on their lips. Their copper hair fell to the neckline of their top, contrasted by the lighter than normal shade of their gray skin, and the leggings under their translucent wrap outlined a well-defined figure.

A figure I knew.

Here, now, when I'd least expected it, my scion had appeared in my life, exactly as I'd seen it so many years before, and I wanted to run from this place and pretend I'd never seen them.

Instead, I squeaked, silently cursing myself for the noise as they spun toward me. Their solid black eyes widened as a brilliant smile completed the lovely picture of their face, and as their lips parted, I internally groaned, knowing what would come next.

'Sage Serinius! Hi, there. I've joined your class.'

How many times had I replayed those words after figuring out who they were to me? They were words that heralded the end to a wonderful person's happy life.

So, I cringed as my scion opened their mouth and said.

"Hello, beloved."

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