

Chapter 100: How We Soar 2

Feena was right. Below us, *way to fucking far* below us, the Preserve soon gave way to a beach and the sea while islands dotted its cerulean waters further out, and above this, five blotches were peppered across the sky, swaying in place. My array couldn't make out their details yet, but I knew what they'd be.

"Definitely hostiles," I said. "Probably those modified skycruisers that I saw in Cerullis' aviation hangar. You saw them too, yes?"

"Mm," Leski said. "How did they reach the coastline before us?"

"They didn't. These were likely deployed from a satellite facility. The other Houses do so love setting those up wherever they can," Feena said. "So? What's the play? We could go around them."

"No," I said with my tone bordering on harsh.

When Feena rotated toward me, I winced.

"No," I repeated, gentler this time. "We don't have time to skirt them, and I can't—"

I wasn't sure if I could make the trip to Ibis before the Ancient subsumed me again.

"Ok. Fight it is," Feena said.

She requested her rifle, cocking her head at our foe.

"How do we get through them?"

"Whatever we do, Zae can't be part of the fight," Korix said.

"Why not?" I said. "Yes, the emotions associated with fighting would leave an enormous hole in my defenses against the Ancient, one that *it* could exploit, but I'll have to fight at some point today. Unless you think we can get near the Source without a confrontation when our enemy knows we're coming."

"So, save your effort for that struggle," Korix said. "Don't waste it on something that we can handle without you."

"I can."

Frowning, I glanced at where Feena was gleaming in the sunlight.

"I can handle this alone," she clarified. "Once we're close, I'll draw their fire, and you three can swoop under them and get clear. I'll keep them pinned down."

"Feena..." I growled.

Before I could continue, Leski said, "You can't fight five by yourself. Let me or Ko help you."

Ko? She was using his nickname now? When had that happened?

"You can't," I said. "Kolb doesn't teach the unHoused how to fight in the air. You'd be more of a hindrance than help here."

Given that, I wasn't sure how Leski would help us at the Source, but I couldn't have her, someone who moved and thought only on a horizontal plane, engaging in this clash. Better to delay that for as long as possible.

"And you'll need the *Lokke Vitras* with you when you reach the Source," Feena said. "I can handle five scientists who have no clue how to fight."

I didn't like this idea, but much as I wanted to deny my sister, I knew she was doing this, whether I approved of it or not. I focused on how her act of love warmed me rather than on the terror of whether she'd survive. I couldn't lose both of my siblings in one day!

"Don't worry, little brother," Feena said, as if reading my thoughts. "I don't die here."

"You can't know that," I said.

"Oh, but I can," Feena said with a laugh in her voice.

"Wha-?"

"Zaeden! Pay attention to your surroundings," Korix said.

His mild rebuke, so reminiscent of the thousands that I'd received during my training, had me smiling despite our situation, but that quickly vanished when I saw how close we'd come to those skycruisers' guns.

And my ability to change the plan was ripped away from me.

Korix, Feena, and I opened fire on the aircrafts with Leski quickly following our example. Our bolts fizzled out before they got anywhere near the enemy, but they scrambled regardless. A flurry of light raced for us, which I should thank these House Cerullis members for. Their spectacle let my array calculate the distance that I needed to fly before I could make a perfect drop.

As we reached that point, I shouted, "Now!"

That cue had been mostly for Leski's benefit, but still, it helped with our coordination. Despite how much my fear screamed for me to do otherwise, I pointed my head toward the waves and let gravity do its work, leveling off a few meters above the water's surface. The sea sprayed my suit when I put its propulsors into full thrust, and flipping to my back, I jerked to the side as a bolt impacted a wave, turning it to mist.

Feena had engaged four of them, leaving a single opponent chasing us, but we could handle those odds. From the delighted laughter filling our connection, one of us might even be enjoying the challenge.

"Leski," I said, "keep coms open, please."

"Right. Sor-!"

She yelped as an energy bolt almost vaporized her.

While we were still within view of it, I watched my sister's battle. She was beautiful, a flashing speck amidst vehicles several times larger than her. Weaving and dodging and twirling, she was like an angry wasp. I hoped that she invoked the same enmity in her opponents as those insects usually did in humans.

"Good luck, Feena," I said as she merged with the sky.

"And to you," she absently said.

I cut the connection with her, having already been too much of a distraction.

Not long afterward, the skycruiser that had been intent on chasing us turned tail, whether due to its distance from its comrades or its inability to hit us, I couldn't say.

And suddenly, we three were racing across the world in an unnatural quiet, the one that always followed a time of so much chaos. I didn't filter adrenaline from my bloodstream, even though it would have made the buzz buried under my skin more bearable. It was helping with my internal battle.

With my heart skipping beats, I gained altitude. I didn't know if Korix or Leski followed me, but eventually, one of them broke the silence.

"You went looking for Ace?"

As if the fight had never happened, I resumed my story.

"I searched for him through the night, which put me at seventy-two hours without sleep. Not unmanageable but not fun either," I said. "So, it was just my luck that a mission came in that morning, one that Korix decided would be perfect as my first to tackle solo."

Gasping, Leski said, "He didn't."

“I did,” Korix said with a chuckle, “although if I’d known exactly how long he’d been without sleep, I’d have told him to get into bed before handling the mission myself.”

“If you’d known how long I’d been without sleep?” I said under my breath. “That’s such bullshit. There was so much monitoring during those first few years...”

And maybe Korix cut in there. Maybe Leski laughed. At that point, it didn’t really matter to me. I was just happy to be with them.

As we crossed the sea, we continued like this, swapping stories to stave off our boredom. We occasionally lapsed into comfortable silence, enjoying one another’s presences, but these didn’t last long, and not once during this time did the Ancient break through my defenses.

This and the ease of our relationships since that night atop a tower made me realize what I had here. The three of us had an undeniable energy, and while I didn’t yet know if I loved Leski, I could see myself inviting her to live with us, given Korix’s consent, of course.

Hell. Why had I figured that out now?

At some point during the trip, I received my requested reports from Talira, along with a message that I couldn’t bring myself to read. Looking over the reports was bad enough. They confirmed what I’d already suspected, which was not what I’d been hoping for.

I finished the last of them as Ibis filled out in front of me, and as soon as I closed the last report, I got a message from Korix. I didn’t know how he’d known what I’d been doing—reading body language was impossible in these suits—but still, he’d done so.

Will you tell me the plan anytime soon, or will I have to guess it? it read.

I considered how to reply. If I bullshitted my way through this, Korix might indulge me, but he’d only do that if he thought it would help me. Besides if I lied to him, it would...

I’d hurt him more than I already planned to.

So, I wrote, *Guess it, Ko? Don’t you already know it?*

Waiting for his response, I wondered how he was handling everything. He’d been more unstable than normal since Talira and I had pulled him out of stasis. So, after what I planned to do, what would happen to him? Would I be the final shove needed to push him into the state that he’d feared for years?

I couldn’t destroy the man I loved, and yet, with what I had planned, I probably would.

[We don’t understand this attachment that you hold for another one of you. Oh, well. You’re not escaping us again, pact-breaker.]

Fuck. “Fuck!”

I fell into

Flame Fire Burn Ash Choke Cough Pulsing Ache Warmth Grind Fists Pound Warmth Acid Bile
Warmth Scour Warmth Warmth

“We’re with you, Zae. We’re here.”

Ragged gasps rubbed sandpaper along an oozing throat, but I couldn’t stop them. Overexerted muscles trembled with their fibers shredding, but I couldn’t make them fall still. Tears streamed from stinging eyes, but I couldn’t.-

“I can’t...”

I should find how dead I’d sounded concerning. I should worry that *breathing* had become difficult, but I just. didn’t. care.

I’d thought I could do this. I’d thought that saving Lutov would be worth the price I had to pay, but apparently, I’d found my limit because-

“I can’t. No more. Please.”

“Yes, you can, Zae.”

Sunlight, beaming into my eyes, accompanied the sound of her voice, and when I shifted away from the glare, I found myself trapped between two... people? Somehow, Korix and Leski had sandwiched me mid-air, soaring at ridiculous speeds between Ostiu’s mountains.

How had they known which direction to take without me leading the way?

More importantly, how were we aloft? I wasn’t directing my suit’s propulsors, making me dead weight.

Feebly, I craned my neck, finding Leski above me. With her arms hooked under mine, I couldn’t see much of her, merely a suit that had conformed to traditionally feminine features. Which meant Korix was... where?

“Les...” I said, meaning to ask after him.

But I couldn’t get anything else out. She peered over my head.

“He’s back,” she said.

Arms around my waist squeezed me—or tried to—through my suit.

“Can you fly on your own?” Korix said. “Maintaining this position it difficult, but I can manage it for a while longer, if needed.”

He was under me?

Wait. That meant I was lying on him, which meant...

I needed to get the fuck up.

"I-"

Nothing else would emerge from my mouth, so I nodded, and gradually, Korix moved away from me. In a stable float, I hovered for a moment, writing a message while I gathered myself.

Ko... I can't do that again.

My body refused to move until I received my response.

So don't, it read.

"Shall we?" Korix asked.

Hell, how did he always know what to say? I couldn't dwell on what might happen. I must focus only on the present, and this moment required me to move. So, I did, blazing over the remaining distance to the enemy's home.

Revision #1

Created 26 December 2024 05:42:41 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 December 2024 05:53:23 by FatalisticFable