

# Chapter 101: Fighting Ancients

Ostiu had fallen behind us a while ago, and with us once more over the sea, we were flying between the arms of Ibis' crescent. Somewhere over these waters, we'd find the Source.

Unfortunately, I wasn't sure where it was. The more I'd fought to suppress the Ancient, the more *its* tug on me had gotten muddled, leading first west and then back the way we'd come.

Fortunately, we had one saving grace. Since I'd woken up from the Ancient's last torture fest, Korix had been on-and-off correcting our course.

I was tempted to tell him that he should stop coddling my feelings. He could take the lead if he wanted, but it was better if I let him have this. If he'd felt the need to take over, he'd have said something by now, and I was too tired to deal with the consequences of bringing it up now.

My last stint with the Ancient had taken something vital from me, something that was steadily replenishing, but for now, I was stuck in my lethargy. Even my thoughts were sluggish in my head.

"Zae?" Leski quietly asked.

Internally sighing, I said, "Yes?"

"Is this...?"

I waited for her to gather the courage to speak, examining a mass of clouds on the horizon with a cocked head. Bad weather? Could these suits withstand a storm, or would we need to circle around it?

"Is that we've done today—the running and fighting and... worry—what being a Kolb member is like?" Leski asked.

Once again, the ugly desire to acquire a talented person for Kolb raised its head, but it was predictably followed by revulsion. Not only was my hatred for the Houses as strong as ever, but I also had to contend with my resolution about Leski from weeks ago. So, I answered her question as honestly as I could.

"Sometimes. I've never been in a situation as intense as this, but others have been almost as bad," I said. "Kolb's purpose is to maintain the peace in Lutov. At times, that means boring stakeouts, watching innocent targets. Others, it involves pitched battles with *iisen* who will use every drop of their magic to try escaping. Always, it involves shielding the innocent, no matter how deeply the

effort of doing that might scar the spark of your soul. Always, it means danger, although most Kolb members don't risk their lives as much as Korix and I do. Does that answer your question?"

She was quiet for a moment, giving me time to push consideration of the clouds to the forefront again. Were they supposed to be moving like that?

"It does," Leski said. "Thank you."

"You're most welcome," I said. "Ko, are you seeing a strange pattern of movement up ahead?"

"Ancients," was all he said.

He'd sounded distracted, which was only a little terrifying.

"Their vanguard?" I asked.

"Probably."

Which meant that the gigantic mass of clouds floating behind those wisps was most likely the Source.

"All right, then."

Requesting my rifle, I ran my eyes over the smaller clouds. They looked nothing like my Ancient, but when I'd seen *it* in Alezand's office, *it* had been alone. These looked like typical cumulus clouds, if with a soap bubble sheen, and bits of electricity were sparking in them.

Watching the clouds, I counted... a lot of those flashes. Even my array was struggling at guessing their number, and the sea below them was shadowed, much like it would be during a storm. No rain was falling, though.

The Source itself was too far away to make out more than a ball of fluff, but if I let myself think about its probable size, my heart started unevenly beating.

Hefting my rifle, I winced. I didn't know what this would do to the Ancients. Probably nothing. But going into a fight with only my reflexes and speed, as I would shortly do, made me want to squirm. I'd take advantage of a crutch like my rifle.

"Strategy?" Korix asked.

"Head straight for the Source," I said. "Avoid any Ancients that get in our way."

Hopefully, Leski could handle a dodging chase. Something like that wouldn't require her to split her focus between avoiding hostiles and shooting at them.

"Simple. I like it," she said with her voice shaking. "And once we're there?"

"Let's worry about that after we get through these bastards," I said.

Said bastards had almost closed the distance to us, and in their mass, I spotted ripples of motion, much like worms writhing beneath a person's skin.

"Leski keep the connection clear when possible, but call out if you need something," I said.  
"Understood?"

"Understood," Leski said.

"Ko—"

"I know," he interrupted.

Good. Leski would have someone watching her back. Mother Time knew that I wouldn't be able to. I'd have enough trouble with keeping love in my heart while fighting for my life.

"Then, lets go."

At full thrust, I darted forward, aiming to arch over my enemy, but as I approached it, one of the cumulus clouds exploded into hundreds of streaming strands—the Ancients separating—and as observed in Alezand's office, *they* were fucking *fast*. Easily keeping up with my speed, *they* angled to intercept me, matching my every change in course.

When I could, I shot at *them*, but as expected, my energy bolts had no effect. Those that connected dissipated on the shiny shell inside *their* wispy exterior, so I threw my rifle aside, and before the first Ancient could hit me, I twisted, rising while I did so. *It* disappeared beneath me, but the one behind *it* impacted my suit.

For a moment, I thought nothing had happened. I thought that we could continue to the Source with the Ancients harmlessly slipping off of our suits, but nothing was ever that easy.

An alert popped into my array, telling me something about the suit's reserves, but before I could finish scanning it, liquid metal spit down the front of me. I slapped the circle that would seal the suit shut again, but not before ripping wind tore its hood off of my head.

Now, I was far above the world's surface, which was just *fabulous*, and while my propulsors kept me from plummeting into a deadly fall, the cold that one could only find this high in the atmosphere walloped me, stealing my breath. This was a problem because with how little oxygen was around me, I couldn't fill my lungs back up.

Heaving at the air, I fumbled for my hood, uncaring of how the Ancients were brushing against my suit and skin. My teeth were chattering by the time I got it back on, and I gulped down air after it had sealed.

"*They* can mess with tech," I gasped. "Guard your reserves and suit triggers."

"Like we needed more problems," Korix said.

Chuckling, I rolled around an Ancient, reversing that movement when another took its place. I didn't know why *they* hadn't come at us in a stream instead of leaving us gaps as *they* were, but I thanked Mother Time that *they* hadn't thought to try it yet. If *they* had, we wouldn't have stood a chance.

Every time, I darted around an Ancient, I thought about my partners, all the times I'd made Korix smile or put a frustrated look on Leski's face. It helped, but the enemy inside of me still found moments of weakness to surface in, and the flashes of *its* torment slowed my attempts to avoid *its* brethren. After one such appearance, I was left trembling, barely diving beneath an oncoming Ancient. I didn't know how long I-

"My reserves are running low," Leski said, calm and cool.

Korix and I stumbled over one another in our responses.

"How low?"

"Can you reach shore?"

"I think... I can get back," Leski said. "But-"

"We're withdrawing," I said. "Once you've broken free, meet here."

I sent coordinates to my partners before undoing the progress that I'd made through the enemy's ranks. It wasn't much, maybe a kilometer at most, and until I found free air, I didn't consider what our slow progress meant or how impossible our task was.

Surprisingly, the Ancients didn't chase us. Given *their* speed, *they* could have harassed us for as long as *they'd* wanted, but after a good three minutes of doing that, *they* stopped dead, coalescing into a cloud once more.

With the sun glinting off of their suits, Leski and Korix reached the rendezvous point before me, facing me as I slowed to a stable hover.

"That was fun," I grumbled.

"I liked it," Leski said, "and it returned some life to you, for which I'm grateful."

Rolling my eyes, I said, "Why are you still here? If your reserves are running low, you should find a place to land."

"But you said-!"

Leski clicked her tongue.

"What if you need my help?"

“Right now, the greatest help you can give me is peace of mind, knowing that you’re safe,” I said. “I’m sure Ko would agree.”

“I do,” he obligingly said.

Fortunately, Leski didn’t argue with us.

“I’ll hurry your backup along, then,” she said.

What backup? While on the way here, I hadn’t requested anything like that from Kolb, and I doubted Talira would have sent the high Strata after us. They couldn’t do much without these suits—least of all catch up with us—and my grandmother wasn’t one to waste resources.

“Don’t die, you two,” Leski continued. “Ok?”

“No promises,” I said.

“Good enough for me.”

Leski took off toward the closest patch of land with Korix and I watching her go.

After a moment, he said, “Didn’t feel like telling her about the emergency reserves in these suits’ backpacks?”

“If she didn’t use her array to check her pack for tech before now, then why should I correct her mistake?” I said. “Besides, what would be the point?”

Korix didn’t have an answer for me.

“Will you send me away as well?” he asked instead.

Turning to him, I said, “Could I?”

He snorted, which made me laugh, and relatively certain that Leski wouldn’t make an unexpected return, we faced our current conundrum.

Examining those wispy clouds, I said, “Do you think *they* have to stay within a certain range of *their* home?”

“Maybe. It would explain why *they’ve* stopped chasing us,” Korix said, “but if that’s the case, how did *they* infest Lutov?”

“Perhaps a select few can separate from the rest.”

It was a weak explanation, but I couldn’t think of another one to explain what was happening right now.

“Mm. It doesn’t matter much, though, does it? Let’s operate under the assumption that *they* can’t get any closer to us than *they* are now,” Korix said. “How does that help us?”

“Circle the perimeter,” I said. “Find a less well-defended breach point.”

Such a plan might be basic, but it should work.

“That’s what I was thinking,” Korix said.

Smiling, I said, “Then, let’s do it.”

Korix gestured toward our enemy.

“After you.”

As we circled a far-distant Source, I half-expected the smaller clouds around it to follow us, keeping an eye on *their* enemy even if we were beyond *their* reach, but *they* didn’t do that, just drifting like clouds normally would. When we found a spot without Ancients guarding it, we moved forward, and with us once more in their territory, I was sure *they’d* swarm us. *They*, however, never moved.

What were *they* thinking? Were we not a danger to *them*? And why was I trying to understand the logic that drove such inhuman beings?

Most importantly, though, could we reach the Source without a fight this time? I didn’t dare speak those words aloud. I’d seen circumstances reverse after a speculation like that too many times to tempt it now.

As we came closer, details about the Source became clearer. It was, as one would expect, a cloud, but it was huge, large enough to engulf Xygek, and yet, no rain fell from it. With that size and the weight behind it, its ice crystals should be returning to water, but there it spun, a distinctly solid sphere with scythes radiating from its base.

Lightning crackled inside of it, but even with that, it wasn’t darkened in color like a thundercloud would be. The setting sun painted pinks and oranges across its billowing surface, and a gauzy water funnel, rising from the sea, cast a rainbow beneath its scythes.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured.

“Admire the enemy later,” Korix said. “Bypass its scouts first.”

As he’d said, a baby cloud, even smaller than the first one we’d encountered, had come to defend its parent. It dissolved into its resulting horde, and I was returned to a frantic display of acrobatics.

This time, however, *their* typically undulating bodies had turned jittery, soon ending in a frantic halt, and through my link with my Ancient, I flinched from the repelling energy that the Source was exuding. The force of it was strong enough that I wondered whether that massive cloud was trying to push me away, getting its scouts caught up in the energy instead. If that was the plan, did that

mean the Source knew my purpose? Did that make it somewhat sentient?

Shaking off the idea, I converged with Korix. He took my hand, and we faced this marvel, the place where the Ancients were born, *their* Source in every sense of the word.

And I was here to destroy it.

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