

Chapter 102: Arguing Semantics

“Should I do this?” I asked.

Korix would know what I meant, just like he’d known my plan since I’d shared where I was going, and since the Ancients had been weirdly kind enough to stop attacking us for the moment, I needed to speak these thoughts out loud. I needed... I wasn’t sure what I needed, but I couldn’t move forward without it.

“Why wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Look at that!”

I flung a hand toward the Source.

“It’s quite possibly the most wondrous thing I’ve seen in my life,” I said, “and if I destroy it, I’ll be finishing what our people started with our production facilities in the Eastern Reaches. How has their effect on the atmosphere harmed what we’re looking at? I will kill it, thereby murdering an entire species, Ko. Why would I do something like that? And don’t give me that ‘duty of the *Lokke Vitras*’ bullshit. I want a real answer.”

“You want to get into philosophy now?” Korix asked.

“I want to know that this is necessary,” I say. “I don’t want to throw my life away for no reason.”

If my revelation of intent surprised Korix, he didn’t show it.

“What would happen if we went home now? You’d either die at the hand of your Ancient, or we’d pull it out of you, capturing it,” he said. “Either way, Cerullis would continue with their plan. Shukusen Alezand won’t care if we’ve eliminated the immediate threat. He’ll only tell his people to stand down if we give him proof that no Ancients will never return to vex him, and we couldn’t easily remove him from his position. The other Houses wouldn’t allow it, not quickly enough at least. They’d go to war with Kolb to keep it from happening.

“So, *their* plan would likely continue, and yes, it may require an Ancient for total success, but with the firepower that Cerullis has in their possession, its members would still cause a horrible amount of damage. People would still die. The only way to stop Cerullis from enacting their plan is to get the Ancients to leave us alone, and that won’t happen. With *their* ability to reproduce failing, *they’re* desperate.

“I’ve seen this place through the Ancients’ eyes, the way it was millennia ago. It’s why Ibis looks like a crescent in the first place! The landmass’ arms once embraced it. Given all of this, the Source won’t exist within another few centuries.

“And yes, this steady reduction of their home may be Lutov’s fault. Yes, we should make recompense for it, but by becoming incubators for *them*? You’ve experienced what having an Ancient inside your head is like. Can you imagine having one of *their* children grow to maturity in there? That’s what *they* want to impose on our population, and no matter how much we’ve wronged *them*, we don’t deserve so horrible a fate.

“But the Ancients refuse to look at other options, refusing to even discuss it. We’ve made multiple attempts to work through this problem with *them*. You have no idea how many times I tried to reason with *them* while I was under *their* influence, and when we... fought, you made an attempt as well. Every time, we’ve been rebuffed.

“So, why should we do this, Zae? To protect our people from a hostile species that’s intent on enslaving us in the worst way possible. Unless you think that we should just let *them* erase us.”

Hearing the reasoning that I’d requested from Korix, methodical and logical as he always was, I could accept it, no matter how much it tore at me, but despite how much I’d like to focus on that, something else had caught my attention.

“We?” I asked.

“Yes, Zae. We,” Korix said with a huff. “You figured out that hurting one of *them* hurts all of *them*, right? With the links we hold in our minds, we have a viable way of doing that. By removing ourselves from the picture, therefore snuffing those links out, we’ll greatly damage the ones on the other end of *them*. And I’m guessing you also know that the resulting flicker in them becomes more violent when that hurt originates closer to *their* Source. What do you think would happen if the number of them who stutter increases too?”

Keeping my mouth firmly shut, I glared at Korix. I didn’t like the conclusions that he was drawing and certainly wouldn’t validate them. He didn’t seem to care if I did, though.

“Have you seen the war with those from beyond the stars through your link yet?” he asked.

“No,” I grudgingly said, “only mentions of it. Enough to concoct this plan.”

Nodding, Korix said, “To be expected. I didn’t get a glimpse of it until a few years under an Ancient’s influence, but what I saw...

“During the war, one of the last-ditch efforts that those from beyond the stars made for victory was to kill hundreds of the Favored as close to the Source as they could get them. Their loss and the resulting harm to the Ancients almost led to an alien victory. It’s one reason that *they’ve* been so slow to collect on their end of the Ancients Pact.

“Now, I doubt the deaths of two Favored would typically be more than a bee sting to them, but I agree with your reasoning. If we first fly to the exact center of the Source before snuffing our links and the Ancients connected to us, the stutter that it induces should radiate outward in a devastating sweep, our own cascade if you will. It will probably turn this wonder into the most forceful deluge of rain that our world’s ever seen, and like the Ancients, I’m not sure if it or *they* could reform from such a collapse.

“Even if your plan doesn’t work, though, it should leave the Ancients recovering for a long while. That will give our people time to devise an alternate solution, although I doubt they’ll take advantage of the chance we’ll give them. But you shouldn’t listen to my pessimism. Does what I’ve outlined cover your plan?”

He knew me too well, but why shouldn’t he? For a third of my life, he’d been my teacher.

“You’ve summed it up nicely,” I said, “but you haven’t said anything to convince me of *your* plan. Why should more than one of us enter the Source?”

While Korix decided how to reply, I cast a nervous glance at the nearby Ancients. When would the Source realize that its attempts to repulse us weren’t working? Any second now, we could get swarmed, but neither I nor Korix could move, too caught in our argument. It was pathetic, especially when considering who we were.

“You’re planning to kill yourself,” Korix said.

I flinched. Sure, just come right out and say it.

Apparently, my microscopic reaction was enough of an answer for Korix.

“I don’t want to learn what will happen to me after you’ve died,” he said. “I wouldn’t recover from it.”

“And I don’t want to die knowing that you won’t try to live,” I said. “You should be happy again. I know you could be-”

“ZAEDEN.”

I shut my mouth, struck dumb by Korix’s intensity.

“Statistically, the odds of surviving as the *Lokke Vitras*, whether until your *shukusen* retires or you finish training your *kuvesk*, are one in a hundred,” he said. “Ninety-four percent of the time, death unexpectedly comes for you, usually within the first few decades of your service. Over the millennia, only five percent of the *Lokke Vitras* have chosen when they’ll die. We are part of those lucky few. I’m *choosing* this, Zae. Would you deny me that?”

I hated him. I loved Korix, but right now, I wanted to kill him.

“So, you’re ready to join the Collective?” I snarled. “I thought your greatest wish was to stop existing after you die. You don’t want to meet the people you’ve killed, right?”

“That was me hundreds of years ago,” Korix quietly said. “I’m ready to face them now, but only if you’re waiting in the Collective for me.”

As I sucked cold air in, it made my teeth ache. That had to be the most romantic, bittersweet, and *utterly idiotic* thing that Korix had ever said to me.

“I wanted to spend my life with you,” I blurt.

I didn’t know where this was coming from or why I was saying it *now*, when I couldn’t do that over the last few days, but hell if I’d stop talking with the first words already spoken.

“I’d still see other people. That’s never going away, but you would be home. You would be who I turned to with my problems and my joy, and making you happy would always be one of my top priorities,” I said. “I wanted you to... I wanted us to be life partners, Ko.”

Not spouses. I didn’t think either of us wanted or needed our relationship validated by Lutov’s legal system, but I’d wanted to make a commitment. I’d wanted a promise that we’d hold tight to one another, fighting through our relationship’s difficulties, for our lifetimes.

That wouldn’t happen now. I’d do what I must to save Lutov, but I wouldn’t let him follow my example.

“Life partners,” Korix said, as if to himself. “If that’s what you want, then why won’t you let me be one for you? Let me support you as a life partner should.”

Did that mean he’d have said yes? I opened my mouth to ask when a request for a direct connection flashed into my array.

Who on earth could have sent this? Without a communicator to strengthen a connection, we were far out of range for one to establish, whether the person who’d requested it was in Ibis or Lutov. Mildly curious, I accepted the request, intending to cut the connection as soon as I’d solved the misery, but the voice on the other end froze me solid.

“You gigantic morons! Why the hell are you just floating there? Here, catch!”

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