

Chapter 103: We Die Here, Right?

The strangest aircraft I'd ever seen slowed to a stop beside me with only a faint whir coming from its engines, which explained how it had snuck up on me. It looked like the fighter planes that had been used during the war with those from beyond the stars, but thousands of short tubes were sticking from its surfaces as well. I wasn't sure what purpose those served, as they'd only hinder airflow around the craft, but questions about that hardly mattered at the moment. Not when I'd been whacked over the head and infused with adrenaline at the same time.

The cockpit popped open, and the pilot peeled straps off of his body before awkwardly standing, holding two unrecognizable rifles toward us. The helmet and his suit concealed his features, but that was ok. I knew his voice.

"Phen," I faintly said.

My brother tossed me a rifle and a few magazines, and when making my catch, I almost fumbled both items, held captive by the need to gape at him.

"Leski's not happy with you," he said. "When I ran into her, I told her about her emergency reserves. She should be right behind me."

Why was he talking nonsense?

I couldn't race to my brother and hold him to me—protect him—like I wanted, not with how far we were above the sea, so I settled for what I could have.

"You- Mother Time, you-"

If only I could get my tongue to work.

Turning to Korix, Pheniks asked, "Is he ok? He's not making any sense."

"*How are you alive?*" I gasped. "The barrier failed. A pillar fell on you. I... I thought you were dead!"

"I'm... Zae, what are you talking about?" Pheniks said. "None of that debris landed on me, although some came close. I made it into The Library's pocket dimension before things got too flooded and used one of the strange arches in it to get out. You remember? The one I used was part of the clump near the books about the pre-Founding nations. *The one that led to Asher Cerullis' lab and its hangar?* Or... wait. Did you get my message about that? I thought for sure..."

When I didn't reply, too busy flapping my mouth, he tilted his head to the side.

"Did Feena not tell you about this?" he asked. "She was supposed to."

"Well, she didn't," I growled.

Oh, I was going to *smack her silly*... or I would if I had a chance of seeing her again.

"She tried to share this with you. You didn't give her a chance, though," Korix said. "In too much of a rush to get here, if I'm remembering it correctly."

Whirling on him, I barely stopped myself from shaking him.

"You knew too?" I shouted. "*Why didn't you say something?* You let me think my little brother was dead!"

"Upsetting your emotional balance seemed unwise, given-"

[*-away from our Source! We will obliterate you all!*]

Everything turned white for the longest moment of my life, and when I came to again, Leski had joined us, shouting at me based on how much her suit was shaking.

"Given that," Korix softly said.

So, he'd been hoping to keep me away from the Ancient's abuse. That was quite possibly the only acceptable reason that he could have given for concealing something this significant from me.

"Is he ok?" Pheniks said. "He doesn't sound ok. He sounds the opposite of ok. He sounds like when we were kids and-"

Damn, I'd never heard my brother so anxious before.

My brother. Alive. Somewhere deep inside, I was manically giggling, for more reason than one.

"I'm fine. Ecstatic to see you, Phen," I said, "but I need to-"

"Yes, yes. The *Lokke Vitras* sent me a message about your suicidal bullshit of a plan, so I asked him to delay you for a bit. Thanks for that by the way."

Inclining his head to Pheniks, Korix said, "It was no trouble. Zaeden seemed intent on delaying himself, so I didn't need to put much effort into it."

He'd been... *delaying me*? We hadn't just been uselessly floating here? Well, I suppose I had but still...

"Your plan is typical for you: brilliant and utterly self-sacrificing," Pheniks continued. "I have a better one, a plan where none of us die."

I could go home today? Go home, have a life, be with Korix, be with Leski, be with everyone I loved?

“And what’s your plan?” I asked.

Pheniks dropped into his aircraft’s cockpit before closing it.

“Let’s just say that Asher Cerullis was much more brilliant than our history gives him credit for,” he said. “I’ll use one of his inventions to solve this problem while you use another to watch my back. From what I understand, those rifles should disperse any Ancients that come to challenge you, but I’m not sure about that. I didn’t get the chance to test them because *someone didn’t come to help me today.*”

“O-ok.”

Distracted by my internal fight with the Ancient, reeling from my brother’s survival, stunned by the possibility that I might live to see tomorrow, I thought the fact that my head was whirling so badly was perfectly understandable.

“Maybe we should loop Leski in on this?” Korix said.

Right.

Leski was still shouting when she accepted my request for a connection.

“-idiotic assholes. I swear to Mother Time, I’ll-”

“Leski!” I yelled over her. “You can thoroughly berate us later. Let’s save Lutov first.”

She cut off with a hiss before calmly continuing.

“It is *not* ok to send me away like you did, and we *will* be having a talk about that, but you’re right, Lutov comes first.”

Grinning, I nudged Korix.

“Sacrifice self.”

With amusement, he said, “House before family.”

“Lutov over all.”

We burst into laughter, and while I wasn’t sure why Korix was bent double on himself, I found hilarity in how thoroughly I’d integrated two-thirds of this maxim into my life. The one part that I opposed with my whole being was the one that most Lutovish knew.

A loud sigh filled the connection.

“If you two are quite done with you incomprehensible Kolb humor, I’d appreciate it if you’d help the only unHoused among us, please,” Pheniks said. “Go do what you do best. I need to get started.”

“Technically, Phen, I also haven’t joined a House yet,” I said on his words’ heels.

The glare he was probably leveling at me was physically palpable.

“I’m going to kill you when this is over,” he said in deadpan.

His aircraft zipped forward with the Source quickly enveloping it, and even encumbered by laughter as I was, I noted that the bunched Ancients, once waiting on an invisible line, had surged forward. Apparently, *they’d* finally realized that *their* home’s defenses wouldn’t hold us back.

I should probably handle that.

Raising Asher’s rifle, I inspected it, making a face at how antiquated it appeared. Pity I didn’t have any specs on it.

“We should spread out,” Leski said.

For a split second, she got a drop of my full attention, considering I’d been about to say the same thing. Mother Time, she amazed me.

“Preferably before they reach us?” she continued.

Yes, that would be wise.

Without discussing it, we dispersed. As I shot to the right, Korix maintained the center, and Leski headed to the left. I didn’t know how long we’d be able to hold off the Ancients with such a spread-thin line, but we had to try.

I took a few experimental shots at the cloud swarming toward me. My array picked up partial details from each of these rounds, soon informing me that the rifle’s projectiles were similar to old-fashioned bullets. The only difference in their appearance came in their clear exterior, coating a blinking pellet. They dropped off more quickly than I’d like, starting their descent at around three hundred meters from me, but their arch into the sea was much less steep than what I’d expect from a gunpowder bullet.

Please, say that Pheniks was right and these would kill an Ancient. I didn’t see how they could, given how quick the enemy was, but... I trusted my brother. I’d get him the time that he needed for his end of the plan.

The first Ancient came into view, and *it* might be fast, quick enough to dodge many of my initial shots, but one eventually connected with *it* at center mass. With other targets waiting for my attention, I didn’t have long to watch what happened to *it*, but as more of *them* fell to my bullets, I gained a clear picture of what Aser’s rifle did to the enemy.

When a bullet hit an Ancient's body, the glimmer that coated its foggy shell broke apart while a hole expanded from the impact site, and wherever its phospholipid bilayer dissolved, bits of its surface drifted away. Without that shell to protect it, the lightning tendril in its center bolted into free air, quickly traveling out of sight.

But that wasn't what gave me hope that we might have a chance. Each bullet dissipated the Ancient that it hit, yes, but after the initial impact, the bullet also exploded, spraying the rest of its liquid in a wide radius.

With a sheen that reflected the sun, that liquid didn't act like water or any other fluid should, though. At the bullet's explosion, the Ancients around *their* fallen fellow scattered, but the liquid followed those inhuman bastards. It still obeyed the law of gravity, if at a slower rate than it should, and had a limited range before it returned to a standard fluid state, but because it hovered like that, landing a shot on one enemy led to a good handful more dissipating as well.

And then, there was what happened when an Ancient's tendril of lightning encountered its outer shell. Rather than escaping into free air, this led to the core fizzling out.

We could kill the enemy.

Unfortunately, when each of those tendrils was extinguished, it also made something deep in my center release a silent scream.

"You're free to leave me whenever you like, asshole," I said. "What more can you do in my head? Better to join your people in *their* fight against us."

It didn't respond, leaving me free to focus.

It was a relatively anti-climactic battle, all told. *They* had the numbers, but we had better weapons and far superior skill. After my first few successes, hitting an enemy took about two bullets, and I blessed the many, once-cursed hours where Korix had made me practice my rifle accuracy past what I'd thought was necessary.

He was performing similarly, of course, but Leski surprised me. She might need more bullets per target, but she instinctively aimed for positions in the swarm that had them swaying between an advance and a retreat.

Holy hell, if she chose any House but Kolb at her House naming, they'd be missing out on a damn fine operative.

Even with our advantages, however, three people could only impede a swarm for so long before our bullets started running dry and *they* realized that *they* could overwhelm us. When *they* scurried away, conglomerating into a clump, I cursed under my breath.

"Phen, how much longer?" I snapped.

"I don't know. Maybe three minutes?"

He'd sounded distracted.

"Navigating through this stuff is difficult, although this relic's ready to release its payload whenever I say."

I'd always found it funny which of Kolb's terminology had stuck with my brother over the years.

"You have one minute," I said. "Then, we-ngh!"

Steam and lightning poured out of my nose and mouth, seeping through every microscopic hole in my suit, and a hook in me was yanked free. Despite how little good it did me, I slapped my hand to a dully throbbing head, sniffing stickiness back where it belonged.

My Ancient, the one that had been tormenting me, swirled into being.

[Stop this! Why would you harm us? What wrong have we committed against you?]

What... wrong...?

"You seize control of people, people who are already hurting, and under your influence, they do things that will haunt them for the rest of their lives," I said. "When they don't conform to your will, you murder people. You've tortured me for half a day. You intend to turn millions of people into empty husks for your offspring to manipulate, and you ask what wrong you've committed?"

The Ancient's cloud layer brushed against my suit while its lightning core filled my vision.

[This is... anger, yes? We're learning these strange emotions, but... it doesn't matter. Why are the items that you have listed crimes? They seemed like a proper form of payment for our long-held pact, especially after your people refused to honor it.]

"Proper—"

I sputtered to a stop before taking a deep breath.

"Let's not discuss payment. We should talk about this pact," I said. "The one you mentioned is the Ancients Pact, yes? You drove those from beyond the stars away in exchange for an unnamed favor. Tell me. Why should we honor this deal?"

[Because... it is a pact. You agreed-]

"But we didn't," I interrupted. "The people who made this agreement with you are long dead, and we who have taken their place weren't given a chance to approve of it. If we'd lived during our ancient war, we might have chosen to fight our enemy alone rather than accept your deal."

The Ancient's form eddied and swirled as *it* considered what I had said, probably consulting with the Source as well. When I could, I checked my surroundings, noting the enemy massed for an attack, but that imposing group had yet to move. Both Leski and Korix were turned toward me,

listening to my half of the conversation, and hoping to keep them calm, I wiggled my fingers at them, unsure if they'd see it.

[What do you propose we do?]

Jerking my attention back to the Ancient, I cocked my head, narrowing my eyes. *It* was asking for my opinion?

"Make a new pact," I said. "You leave Lutov alone for now, and we work together on solutions for your problem. We revisit the issue every hundred years until both parties are satisfied. Sound fair?"

Hell. If those few words were enough to end this conflict, I'd be ecstatic beyond words. I know, however, that in situations like this, reasoning alone usually didn't work.

As expected, the Ancient drew away from me while *its* voice turned caustic.

[Make a new pact. With you. A pact-breaker.]

That was what I'd thought. Even still, I tried again.

"Yes, I broke my promise to you, but I did so because I saw a way to save my people, one that only I could fulfill," I said. "Stupid? Probably, but it's what I did, and it's in the past. I know you've been in a similar situation before, and you did the same thing, breaking from the majority as a result. I saw it. Besides, surely you've seen enough of my history to know that behavior like that is atypical for me, and this pact wouldn't be made between you and me but between your people and—"

[A pact-breaker is a pact-breaker. There is no greater crime, no excuse for it, and from what we have observed of your people, you are a prime example of them. We find it better to risk what you might do to us than trust that you will honor your word. The plan in your land will continue.]

Shit.

"Zae..." Leski said.

The massed Ancients began moving, and with House Kolb speed, I raised my rifle to aim at the one in front of me. After squeezing the trigger, I watched the being's dissolution with a sick feeling in the pit of my gut, but even still, I flew with all speed to regroup with Korix and Leski.

I wouldn't make it in time. We'd be separated when the attack came with our strength—us—unable to face the enemy, and watching the Ancients descend on us, the sight of so much sparking electricity squeezed my throat closed.

"Phen, please tell me—" I forced through it.

A swirling mass of fog, spark, and membrane pulled to a halt, trembling in place, and seeing that, I spun toward the Source. Its slow rotation had stopped with its density lessening at an alarming rate, and beneath it, the water funnel that had once stretched toward it had reversed and expanded.

Bit by bit, the Source wept into the sea until it reached critical mass, and the totality of its remnants was dumped into the waves. As they swept for Ibis' shore, they quickly rose, and I winced at the image of a soon-to-come tidal wave that splashed into my mind. No towns lay on Ibis' west coast, but still, the destruction that we'd unleashed shriveled any joy I might have felt at our seeming victory.

Two other factors sapped my satisfaction, one being what I'd earlier discussed with Korix. When I glanced behind me, I no longer saw a cloud of Ancients. Instead, fizzling electricity scattered toward the horizon, which meant that we had, in essence, committed genocide.

Maybe we'd been right to do so. Maybe not. The question would haunt me for the rest of my life, but in this moment, it caused such a swell of self-loathing that I might have curled into a non-responsive ball if not for the second detractor to my happiness.

I couldn't find Pheniks. He'd said that his plan would leave us alive, but what if something had gone wrong? What if I'd gained my brother, only to lose him again?

Something glinted overhead, and when I glanced toward it, Pheniks' aircraft swooped by with him laughing over our connection.

"Race you!" he called.

He was fine.

Taking a deep breath for the first time since the Source had failed, I clicked my tongue before chasing my brother.

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