

# Chapter 104: You and Me

I easily caught up with Pheniks, but when I pulled alongside his aircraft, I slowed down, peering into the cockpit. When he spotted me, Pheniks animatedly waved, and I frowned.

“You seem unusually chipper, considering what we just did,” I said.

“What, disrupting the Source?” Pheniks said. “I’m not too worried about it. When it eventually reforms, the Ancients will be pissed with us, but by then, we should have a solution to *their* problems, one that will make everyone happy. For a start, you and I will have to prod our *shukusenth* into pushing for more environmentally friendly production methods than what we currently have, but that should be easy enough to do.”

Oo, my much-abused brain was having a harder time than normal with processing Pheniks’ way of talking.

“Hang on,” I said. “We didn’t kill off the Ancients?”

Pheniks snapped his head to me, and even with the cockpit’s glass and his helmet blocking them, I could see his widened eyes.

“What? Of course not!” he said. “*They’ll* just be scattered across the world for a while. Do you think I’d have tried this if there was the slightest chance of eliminating such fascinating creatures?”

I didn’t know why I trusted my brother’s surety about this over the uncertainty of beings who’d existed since the dawn of time, but I did.

I did! Pheniks had an unhealthy fascination with puzzles like the Ancients, and terrible as it was, I knew he’d have let Lutov fall before giving up an obsession like this.

“Oh, thank Mother Time.”

Huddling on myself, I unintentionally stopped my forward thrust, but so much relief was filling me that I couldn’t move to correct the mistake. Pheniks slowed down for a moment, circling me, before sighing.

“House Kolb brain,” he said. “I’ll see you back home, Zae.”

Speeding ahead, he was soon a blip on the horizon, but I wasn’t alone. Korix and Leski waited while I recovered, and once I had, they hovered as close to me as they could.

“We still need to talk,” Leski said, “but my reserves-”

"I know. You shouldn't rely on your emergency stash," I said. "Thanks for making sure I was ok."

"Of course," Leski said. "I realize that you probably have clean-up to handle, so do you need anything else from me, or can I...?"

Clean-up. Right. I hadn't thought about that yet, only focusing on each present moment. Was I in shock? That would explain how badly I'd been bumbling through the last ten minutes. Plus, I hadn't been this numb in a while.

Or I was mostly numb. Regarding this mess, I still had one thing left to resolve, and until that was done, I didn't know how effective I'd be with everything else.

First, though, I had to handle Leski.

"Please, get home before your reserves fail," I said. "I'll find you as soon as I have a free moment."

"All right," Leski said. "Be safe."

"You too."

And it was just me and Korix. In silence, we headed for the closest shore, soon flying over flooded land. Damn, Zan and Vaessa would have a hell of a time cleaning up after this man-made disaster. I should probably feel guilty about that but honestly? I couldn't bring myself to care.

The quiet between me and Korix persisted as we set down and removed our atmospheric suits, and once we were free of them, I stared at him, hugging my chest. I couldn't bring myself to speak. How did I continue with the conversation that we'd been having before Pheniks had interrupted us?

After what felt like forever, I tore my eyes off of him, turning in place while I chewed on my lip.

With a soft chuckle, I said, "Isn't this nostalgic? Once more, we're in an Ostium forest, much like the one where you first saved my life, and sure these fallen leaves might have become the sea's temporary shore but--"

"Yes."

My feet came together, and taking carefully even breaths, I glanced over my shoulder at Korix. The man I was presented with was much different from the 'Garreth' I'd met years ago or the wraith-like *Lokke Vitras* who'd stolen me from my House naming ceremony. In the evening's sweet-light, Korix beamed at me. The warmth of it turned his already striking features into the most breathtaking sight that I'd seen in my life, and he was completely relaxed, something he'd never done around me. Always, caution or worry had hovered over him, but it was gone now. I didn't know what to make of it.

"Uh," I said.

Eloquent, idiot.

But Korix only laughed, and hell, if that noise didn't make my heart swell.

"Yes, Zae," he said when he could. "I'll be your life partner."

Licking my lips, I tried to speak, failed, and tried again.

"It's not that I doubt you or anything," I said, "but... why? Why would you commit to a lifetime with me?"

Chuckling, Korix crossed one arm across his chest while hiding his eyes.

"Mother Time, with how confident you usually are, I forget how much self-assurance you sometimes need," he said before flinging his arms to either side of him. "Very well. You want to know why? Then, come here."

Swallowing hard, I crossed the distance to him. Part of me was certain he'd reject me, even after saying yes, but he merely draped his arms over my shoulders, resting his forehead on mine.

"I could tell you how over the years, I've noticed how well we go together. Or I could tell you about how we bring out the best in each other. You're always reminding me that it's ok to feel, and I remind you of when it's not," he said. "But the simple truth of it is that I want to be with you. I want the spark of my soul to commune with yours, even in the Collective after we've died. You've saved me in more ways than I can count, and I want to be there when you need the same from me. Is that enough of a reason?"

I'd fly to the moon. Mother Time, this bubbling brightness inside of me would lift me into the depths of space.

"Yes. That's enough," I croaked.

"Good," Korix said. "Because I need something from you."

He pulled away from me, and at those brown-striated-gray eyes turning to molten copper, I smirked.

"How curious," I said. "I need something from you too."

"Do you now?"

Lunging, Korix wrapped his arms around my waist, and we tumbled to the forest floor. With us tangled around one another, I let myself believe that life could return to normal again.

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