

# Chapter 58: Well, I'm About to Die 1

I didn't rush him. I wasn't an idiot. If I did that, he'd just shoot me from the landing pad.

No, I had to sneak closer before I engaged, praying all the while that I could surprise him. I seriously doubted that would happen, but one could always dream.

"What are you doing, *kuvesk*?" Korix crooned. "Are you planning on sneaking up on me? That's what I'd do."

Every time this... *thing* called me its student, I had to control a shudder, even with my emotional blockade in place. It was *wrong*, and if I weren't so detached right now, I'd probably reveal myself somehow. At least he wasn't calling me-

"Zae, this is silly," Korix called. "I trained you. I know all your tricks. You should come out and let me knock you senseless. I won't leave you in a cell for much longer. I promise."

I couldn't pay attention to him. He was trying to rip control away from him, and it was working.

As I focused, his voice faded into the background, and I could consider the options laid before me. I'd gotten nearly ninety degrees around the landing pad Korix was standing on, leaving another one opposite me. I could try a noiseless sprint to the shuttle sitting there, or I could continue with this circle, getting further behind him. I didn't like the idea of giving him more time, though. Plus, I had no guarantee that he'd stay where I'd last seen him.

Examining calculations in my array, I threw myself into the open. Only a few meters lay between me and my goal, and I was across them in a handful of heartbeats with my footfalls nearly silent, despite my speed. Thank Mother Time that my array's full faculties had been returned to me.

Plastering against the shuttle's hull, I listened, but Korix had fallen silent, which was concerning. Slowly, I eased down the aircraft to where I could see the shuttle shielding my target. When I glanced at the other landing pad, however, no one was standing on it. With my target vanished, I requested my rifle's formation, only to have it denied.

The hell? I'd thought that something in my cell had been blocking my array. If it was another thing entirely, though, what-?

"Relying solely on yourself is inconvenient, isn't it?"

That question had come from above me.

Dropping, I rolled beneath the shuttle's lifted nose as boots clomped where I'd just been standing. He knew where I was, had probably known the entire time, and I didn't have a damn weapon on me, too hurried until now to look for one besides my rifle. I'd been relying on my tech again. What a gigantic mistake.

As soon as I was on my feet, I was off to the end of the shuttle's nose. Now that he'd announced himself, Korix wouldn't try anything fancy. He'd take the straightest path to me, one that also wouldn't put him at risk.

Soon, he'd round the shuttle, and I had to reach that spot first so I could force him into close combat. It was the only way I stood a chance now. My sole weapon was me while he probably had a host of them available, both ranged and melee.

Korix flashed past me at House Kolb speed, but somehow, I caught hold of his arm. I didn't keep it for long—didn't want mine ripped out of its socket—but it was enough to keep him in my immediate vicinity.

He used his sudden stop to his advantage, twisting to kick at my knee. With my own burst of speed, I moved out of range before jabbing my fingers at his eyes. Knocking the strike aside, Korix threw a fist at my temple, probably hoping to adle me, but I caught it on my wrist.

The broken one.

Grunting, I barely maintained my block, but my distraction let him plant a foot in my stomach and shove me away.

Fuck, I couldn't breathe!

Stumbling, I corrected my balance as quickly as possible, fully expecting to find a rifle in my face, but Korix had maintained his position. He'd magicked a knife into his hand, tumbling it through his fingers.

When my lungs would allow it, I gasped, "You're playing with me."

His knife's hilt slapped into his palm before he pointed the blade at me.

"You may be nearing the end of your training, *kuvesk*, but I—"

The knife flashed as Korix spun it to face him.

"—have decades of experience on you. You can't win. Give in."

"Not going to happen," I growled. "I don't care what sort of deal you've struck with them. I know what you want. I *will* stop you, Ko."

And I dove for him. I ignored the knife, chopping at his neck while I slammed my foot on his toes. Something I'd said must have stolen his focus because I felt something give way beneath my heel,

but even with that, Korix slapped my hand away, which was fine. The other one, in a fist, was flying for his nose.

Before it could connect, Korix responded. Ducking, he lashed out with his knife, sending ribbons of numbness spreading across my chest. Superficial cuts.

As he rose, however, the knife's arc stopped, switching to a downward thrust at my face. I couldn't dodge it, too invested in my current strike as I was, so I did the only thing I could.

Aiming for his wrist, I missed, curling my fingers around the knife's blade instead. Sharpened steel dug into my bone, fileting my palm, and my poor, abused wrist nearly buckled as I stopped the swipe. The knife's point tickled my eye, ripping miniscule lacerations across my cornea, but with this blow, Korix had opened himself up.

Ignoring alerts and a ruined hand, screaming in protest, I slapped my palm against the inside of his elbow and twirled him in front of me. I jerked his arm up his back, twisting until the knife fell out of his loose fingers, and shoving him away from me, I ran the fuck away, clutching my hand to my chest once I'd extracted my prize.

I had a weapon.

Energy bolts chased my dash to the hangar's crates, and I wove between them. I'd almost reached cover when something punched through my back while light burst in front of me. Before I could deaden my nerves' receptors, debilitating pain took me in body and mind, but I managed to transform my resulting topple into a roll behind the crates. Thank Mother Time for well-practiced reflexes.

I didn't have long before Korix would come after me, but slumped against plastic, I couldn't move. My wheezing gasps weren't giving me enough oxygen, and oh, I might be sick. Dizzy and with hurt howling through me, I forced myself to my hands and knees, reading alerts as I crawled deeper into the maze of crates.

Obviously, at least one of Korix's bolts had hit me. The question was what it had damaged as it had passed through my body, and glancing over what my array had presented, I winced. One of my kidneys, my diaphragm, and my liver. No wonder I felt like I was about to drop dead.

None of these injuries were immediately life-threatening, though. I could still fight, if only for a short time.

As pain faded to nothing, I hauled myself to my feet, grimacing. Half a minute into this fight and I'd already sustained too many injuries. Given that, how could I expect to win? At least if I died here, Leski would bring news to-

Leski. As I swiveled my head to examine my surroundings, something like panic took root in my emotionless state. She was hiding nearby. I was bringing Korix right to her.

"Shit," I mumbled.

In a stumbling run, I put distance between me and her, heading for a break in the crates up ahead. Despite the danger it would put me in, I needed to get into the open, drawing Korix to the other side of the hangar. The thing inside of him couldn't have Leski too.

A mass of black dropped between me and the opening while a glinting dagger chopped at my neck. I raised my knife, and the dagger's glance along it gave me enough support to make an unsteady retreat.

The coldness in Korix's eyes was back. He dispassionately watched as I slipped and nearly fell in a bloody handprint that I'd left behind.

"Unlike you humans, the- the-"

Korix made a face.

"The *Ancients*, as you lot call us, honor our pacts. Because of that, we cannot kill you," he said, "but we will do what we must to preserve the plan. Our people require no less. We would rather not hurt you until your frail, solid body succumbs to the state that your people call sleep. Please, surrender."

Was this... was Korix's captor talking to me? Was it... not human?

How was that possible? With those from beyond the stars gone, nothing alien populated our planet. Not anymore.

"Let my *evushk* go and agree to talk peaceably with us, and I'll consider surrendering," I said. "Otherwise, you can fuck off."

Korix's face twisted.

"Why are humans always so volatily unreasonable?" he said. "Oh, well. What happens next will be your choice,

The mocking in that last word...

But then, Korix was flying at me with a dagger, and consideration of my enemy's nature was wiped from my mind.

I refused to think about how dangerous knife fights were, even as I missed an opportunity to disarm Korix in our first exchange. He overextended in his stab, but my fuzzy brain was only occupied with avoiding further damage, so I didn't see it until it was too late. Even given that bad start, I laid a deep cut into Korix's retreating arm. It was nothing deadly, but it would annoy him.

As he readied to attack again, I failed to make my own strike, darting around him. I wouldn't last long in these conditions, needed to reach an environment more conducive to my survival. Maybe I could find a rifle in a weapons crate, if I could reach one-

A fist impacted my chest, which emptied my lungs. Off-center, I lurched toward Korix, blocking his dagger, and this gave me the momentum needed to stay on my feet.

As soon as I'd recovered, however, a pistol's barrel was leveled at my face. I didn't register what it was until House Kolb speed had assisted me in jerking the weapon above my head, and the heat of an energy bolt seared my scalp.

Tiny knife against a dagger *and* a pistol? Hell. I needed to-

Something rocked me to the side, and I took a risk, glancing toward the impact site. The primal part of my brain shrieked at what I saw.

Korix's dagger was embedded in me below the ribs, and my body had slurped the blade inside, burying it almost twelve centimeters into my chest.

Rather than twist it to further damage my organs, Korix cleanly removed the dagger with a sheet of blood following it, and almost, *almost* shock froze my solid. Almost, my incredulity that my partner would do something like this got me killed.

Instead, I dropped one hand from my hold on his wrist, swinging for his face, but this time, the blow connected. Korix lurched backward, and I used this incapacitation to get around him.

Only then did I press a hand to my side, letting the blood on my palm mix with the slick spill of it found there. As I took off in a run, my skin parted, exposing bits of innards to free air, and I was so damn grateful that my mind had yet to acknowledge the pain of this. It wouldn't matter how many receptors I dulled; the flare of this damage would burn through them with the injury demanding to be heard.

I needed rapid regeneration drugs. Now.

Using House Kolb speed, I sprinted in an uneven gait toward the hangar's entrance. Maybe I could lead Korix in a merry chase to a clinic of some-

The heat of an energy bolt tore through my thigh, and with everything else hobbling me, my legs gave out. I went down, rolling and tumbling.

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