

Chapter 66: Retrieval

I stumbled toward the dropship, only now noticing how much my body had started trembling. That was bad, wasn't it? I thought that was bad.

As I came closer, I noted signs of the fight that had taken place outside of the dropship. Bits of corroded armor were scattered across the ground with their contained skeletons long since decomposed while scorch marks decorated the aircraft's hull. The part of me that was always dedicated to combat took great interest in the differences between those ancient sets of armor when compared to the ones I sometimes used, but mostly, I was concerned about whether I could fly this ship.

When it came to alien tech, I'd had a basic education, as did most Lutovish citizens during House rotations, but as a whole, the homeland was mostly clueless about how larger machinery like this operated, content as we'd been to integrate smaller pieces of it with our own tech. Hopefully, the little I did know about it would be enough.

As I stepped into the aircraft, I glanced down either side of the hallway inside while wrinkling my nose. The interior of this dropship could be a replica of its exterior with white, bone-like material making ribs over its metallic walls. The only differences here were found in its floor's black material and the glow lights—so like fireflies—that had been strung along the ceiling.

Leaning against the aircraft's entrance, I analyzed all of this, looking for potential danger. Not that any threat here could have been worse than what I was fighting internally. In no way, shape, or form could I stay on my feet without support right now. My legs were trembling too much to keep me upright.

Mother Time, I needed to hurry. If this turned into full-body convulsions before I was ready, it would be unfortunate.

When I could, I picked a direction and trudged down the hall, hoping I'd quickly find what I needed. Fortunately, I did, although that wasn't surprising. Given how small the aircraft was, searching it didn't take me long.

Not far from the hatch, an organic-looking door had been jammed open by a... body. I couldn't think of another single-word description for what I was seeing.

Was this what those from beyond the stars had looked like? It was nothing like what I'd imagined. In far better condition than I'd expected, it had fur covering its atrophied muscles with two, withered tails lying along its back. A thin arm was stretched into the hall with an enormous scoop of a hand reaching for something unknown, and on the other side of the door, I could barely make out stubby legs as well as several, additional lumps. Other bodies, perhaps?

Overall, the corpse was massive, making me grateful that it was already in the aircraft. I was also glad that it was lying face down. What I'd already seen was strange enough, thank you. I had no need to see its face.

Besides, seeing its eyes, no matter how empty or desiccated they might be, would probably bring up memories, ones I was trying to block in with everything else I had sectioned away, which...

No. Not right now.

Also, *how* was this body so well-preserved? It had been hundreds of years since the war, and yet, this being looked like it had died a few days ago. How advanced must these aliens have been if they'd had the ability to so greatly slow down decay? It was no wonder that during the war, they'd been destroying us, and given that, thank Mother Time that the Ancients had given us *their* aid.

Shaking my head, I went looking for the aircraft's cockpit, and when I found what I needed, I slid into the room's egg-shaped chair. Trying to catch my breath, I examined strange instruments, wondering how they were meant to get this dropship off of the ground.

My eyes snagged on a pair of wires, left dangling beside a display. Even as different as this pair looked from what I was used to, I recognized a set of connectors, the equipment needed to access a storecase. Had we stolen that tech from these beings too?

When I reached for the end of the wires, my hand was shaking so badly that it took me four tries to grab them, but once I'd accomplished that, I lifted them to eye level, pursing my lips. Interacting with alien tech sans prior testing seemed like a horrible idea but...

"I don't have much of a choice," I sighed. "Here goes nothing."

As I pasted the ends of the wires to the back of my neck, I hoped I was right about them, and sure enough, an interface popped into my array once they were in place. It was unintelligible, but still, I relaxed at the sight of it, letting shivers rumble through me.

"Don't have much time," I said under my breath. "Should get started."

How did I do that, though? To me, the provided interface was an unreadable mash of shapes and symbols, and with the extent of my radiation poisoning's progress, I'd say that I had an hour, maybe two if I was lucky, to figure it out. I distinctly didn't think about what my body's uncontrolled shaking would mean for me personally.

Mother Time, I had to get over the demarcation line. Once I had, I could send a message to my family before...

They couldn't live in suspense, never knowing what had happened to me or Damari. I had to get home, get this damn alien aircraft off of the ground-

The interface in my array flashed purple with the controls around me lighting up, and a thin segment of the wall peeled back, giving me a good view of the mountains. As the dropship shot

into the air, the ground diminished beneath me, although no pressure pushed me into my seat, but once it had reached a stable height, it stopped, hovering in place.

I was left panting in my chair. Even without inertia to distress my weakened body, that takeoff had had black spots blooming in my vision, and rapidly blinking, I struggled to shake it off.

“So, you work on intention, huh? Like Truthseeker magic,” I gasped. “That’s scary. Still.”

Closing my eyes, I thought of a decent landing site, one that wasn’t far from Xygek. Bringing an alien aircraft into the city proper might cause a panic, hence the external location, but when I envisioned flying there, nothing happened.

“Ok, maybe not intentions alone,” I said. “Maybe you need detail too?”

But when I thought about the coordinates associated with my landing site, the aircraft stayed hovering in place, and for a moment, I thought that my hypothesis was wrong.

Then, I clicked my tongue. This aircraft belonged to those from beyond the stars, not humans. Who knew how those beings had pinpointed a location on the planet or if they’d even thought doing something like that was worthwhile? Coordinates were a human construct.

So, hoping it would work, I pictured the globe, finding where I wanted to go on it, before imagining the aircraft landing there.

And it *moved*. Hell, it was fast, making the ground blur beneath me, but I was too tired to marvel at this, just glad that something was canceling out inertia where I was sitting. If it hadn’t been, this aircraft’s rate of acceleration would have finished what a neurotoxin had started last week.

For a good fifteen minutes, I limply sat in my chair, watching an intermeshed wall of lasers approach, and once we’d gotten close enough, I sent out the code needed to lower it. On passing through, I requested a direct connection with Talira, and when she accepted it, she didn’t give me time to speak.

“Where the fuck are you?” she snapped. “You cannot go off the grid like-”

“I have your sample,” I interrupted.

I had to stop for a moment because *fucking hell*. I’d never sounded so... so...

“What happened?” Talira said, suddenly all business.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, slurring the words. “I’m on my way to Xygek. Plan to land at these coordinates. Get a team to collect the sample as soon as possible. Now, I need to talk to my family.”

After a pause, Talira said, “Zae-zae, how bad-?”

“Talira!” I shouted.

This left me breathless for a moment, but I forced myself onward.

“I greatly respect you, more than most people I know, but *I need to talk to my family*. Right now. Please, let me do that.”

My grandmother swallowed hard enough that I heard it over the connection.

“Ok,” she said, “but I’m sending an emergency response team out with the others. So... so, fight for me, all right?”

With a slight smile, I said, “Fighting’s what I do best. Goodbye, Talira.”

I cut the connection before she could answer, squeezing my eyes closed. Despite what I’d said, I wasn’t sure if I should contact my family. My body’s shivering was getting bad enough that I might topple out of my chair, and I wouldn’t be able to hide that for long, not even in my voice.

Should I leave my family with such a horrible memory of me? If I didn’t reach out now, Leski and Korix would be furious, more than they already would be after I’d left them out of this mission, but Baely...

In the end, I didn’t include my daughter in the connection request, at least for now. If their parents thought we should add them, I might do that, but for them moment, I’d rather shield them from... me.

Korix and Leski accepted the request at the same time, as if they’d been waiting for it, and as with Talira, they didn’t give me a chance to speak.

“You’d better have an excellent reason for your silence, Zaeden,” Leski growled.

With a soft sigh, Korix said, “Love, I thought we were saving the lecture for once things have settled down.”

“Oh, right.”

As they continued chatting, their voices washed over me, and this had me clamping a shaking hand over my mouth while my eyes burned.

“-still. What do you have to say for yourself?” Leski eventually asked.

Oh, Mother Time. I didn’t want to say a word. Please, could they just keep talking?

That wouldn’t happen.

Peeling my fingers away from my lips, I cleared my throat.

"I'd say... that meeting you two and having Baely are the best things that have happened to me," I forced from my tongue. "Without you, my life would have been hell, so thank you for sticking with me through the hard times."

Silence fell, one so deep that I wondered if it had a bottom, until Leski's oh-so-small voice filled the connection.

"Love, what are you-?"

She cut off, leaving me with imaginings of Korix's death grip on her.

"Do you want visuals, Zae?" he asked.

Mother fucking Time, how did he *always* know...?

"If you share them, I can't reciprocate," I weakly said. "There are no recorders here-"

"That doesn't matter," Korix said. "Do you want visuals?"

Somehow, I kept from sobbing.

"Yes, please," I whispered.

I rested my hand, palm up, on the chair's arm, clamping it in place with my free hand as best I could. When it came through, their image was jittery, but even still, it was one of the most glorious sights I'd ever beheld. Korix was tightly holding Leski, and they were sitting on a couch, completely white-faced. I couldn't see much of their surroundings, but given what was visible, they could only be in our apartment.

"Hello, there," I said. "You two are gorgeous. You know that, right?"

On that last word, my teeth clenched together with every muscle in my body tensing, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop a grunt from flying free of me.

When I could, I said. "Sorry. I know this is disturbing. You'd say it's a weakness, Ko, but- but I need you both right now, so *please*..."

Leski set her jaw while Korix just closed his eyes, taking a steadying breath.

"You always were the most frustrating and amazing *kuvesk*," he said, as if to himself. "Why should I have expected that to change now?"

Glaring at him, Leski reached over to whack the back of his head before facing forward again.

"We're always here for you, no matter what you might need," she said. "So, how do we help now?"

"Just... talk," I said. "I don't care about what. I want to hear your voices. To see your faces."

“We can do that.”

So, they told me what was happening in Xygek as well as their plans for the next week, the ones I’d soon be wrecking. During this explanation, my body betrayed me several times, and the noises I unintentionally made occasionally left them speechless. Because of this, when Baely came up, we agreed that keeping her out of this conversation was for the best.

I wished that I could talk to her. There were so many things I wanted to say, but a conversation like that would only help me. I’d made a recording for her a long time ago, one that Leski and Korix knew to give her in the event of these circumstances, and while I’d hoped that she’d never have to view it, I’d secretly known it would come to this.

As Xygek appeared on the horizon, I did my best to share what had happened to Damari. Unfortunately, I couldn’t bring myself to say *those words*, but from the looks on their faces, I gathered that they’d put together what I meant, which was good. I couldn’t go into the details of... that. I just couldn’t.

Eventually, the aircraft stopped, hovering over its designated landing site, and I landed it with little difficulty. For a moment, I considered waiting for the recovery team where I was, no matter how impossible fighting dea... no. No matter how impossible *staying* seemed at the moment. The mission wasn’t over until the sample was in trusted hands, and I couldn’t *go anywhere* until the mission was over.

To that end, I couldn’t sit here, waiting. If I did, surrendering to my declining state would be easy, and I couldn’t give up. *I couldn’t*.

I had to fight. Always. It was what I did.

So, I hauled myself out of my chair. As I stumbled toward a hatch, leaning on walls as I went, I was vaguely aware of my partners’ voices in my array. Even with me only occasionally responding, they kept talking—although they sounded panicked now—because that was what I’d asked them to do.

“Mother Time, I love them. They’re too good for me.”

Finally, the hatch came into view, already opened, which was good. Clinging to its frame, I breathed in the free air, giving myself a moment before straightening.

Just a few more steps and I could sit in the soil, standing vigil—of a sort—until the mission was done. Just a few more steps and I was in Xygek. Home, in a way.

No matter how weak I felt, I could take those few steps because I was the *Lokke Vitras*, the one person Lutov had deemed strong enough to carry a society’s burden. Because I was Zaeden, and I would never, ever, *ever* accept my fate.

But as I released the aircraft to move forward, my body once more locked up while a muffled scream whistled through my teeth, and I tumbled down the ramp and into the dirt. A hand reached into my brain, jerking on my body’s strings so that my limbs spasmed, and something inside

decided that it couldn't take any more. As my view of the sky narrowed into pinpricks, the last thing to touch my mind was the sound of my partners' voices.

"I love you, Zaeden."

"It's ok. We'll be ok."

"Please, just rest."

Revision #1

Created 15 February 2025 03:56:33 by FatalisticFable

Updated 15 February 2025 04:08:53 by FatalisticFable