

# Chapter 96: Hey Buddy, Get the Hell Out

The Ancient left me, steam and electricity billowing out of a scorched-through body. I was on the ground, uncomfortably sprawled beneath an overturned table, but I couldn't relieve the discomfort of my position. In fact, I couldn't move at all, save for the shivers rumbling through me.

A wavering whine scraped over my gnashed tongue with saliva or maybe blood dripping out of my mouth, but I couldn't stop the noise. An echo of what the Ancient had done to me loudly reverberated in my body, and a piercing shriek filled my head at what was still to come.

Why had the Ancient left me before *it* had finished what *it* had started?

I could barely see around the table's edge to the man who was watching me with bulging eyes. Alezand had recoiled from me, which I found strange. Why would my enemy find my torture horrifying? Jayla, on the other hand...

Jayla!

Staring at her, I waited for her to meet my eyes, all while fighting for control of my voice.

"R-r-ru-r-"

Fuck, I couldn't get it out. Please Mother Time, say that she understood anyway.

*[You have a traitor in your midst, obedient one. Several, actually, but the one who leads them is sitting in this room with you.]*

With a gasp, Alezand jerked toward Jayla, who met his accusing gaze with calm. Why wasn't she running?

"You'd trust that thing over me?" Jayla asked. "Please, *shukusen*. I know you've had to follow its crazy schemes over the years, but you'd believe this? I wouldn't betray my House."

"I-"

Hell, Alezand looked conflicted, which was strange to see on a *shukusen*. They were usually self-assured. After all, the Strata system only produced the most qualified person from each House to lead, but to be fair, this one had been under inordinate pressure for years.

*[Your belief in us doesn't matter. We have told you that the one beside you is a traitor. If you wish to avoid our displeasure, the proper response is to eliminate the presented threat.]*

“WHAT?”

Shooting to her feet, Jayla glanced between the Ancient and her *shukusen*.

“You- you wouldn't,” she said. “Murder? That's... You wouldn't, Alezand. It's wrong.”

But he would. I knew the set of those shoulders and the clench of that jaw. I'd seen it too many times to count. Alezand might be battling with his conscience, but he'd made his decision, and desperate, I tried once more to manipulate my own fucking body.

“R-run, Jay-J-!”

I couldn't get anything else out, but my wheezing cry was enough to get her moving. She sprinted toward the table, and Alezand bolted after her, reaching into a pocket. They disappeared from view, and with my heart in my throat, I listened to their shouts and scuffling.

They fought for a while, two people whose training during Kolb rotations had long since faded. Eventually, though, the blast of an energy bolt filled the room with someone's body unceremoniously flopping to the floor afterward, and a gurgle signaled a fatal wound that would nonetheless take ages to kill.

And all the while, the Ancient hovered over me, motionless.

When Alezand trudged back into view, tossing a pistol to the side, my sips of air became ragged gasps. Something far worse than what I'd already endured had come to clean me out.

“I trust that you're satisfied,” the bastard panted.

*[Exceedingly. You may leave us.]*

Hanging his head, Alezand chuckled under his breath. What had he expected? Praise for what he'd done?

“And the plan for the rest of the day?” he asked. “Are we delaying, as promised, or shall we continue?”

*[We honor our pacts, obedient one. You will wait exactly twenty-four hours from now before commencing the cascade. Now, leave us. We have our own work to complete.]*

Wincing, Alezand rubbed his temples.

“Of course.”

He refused to look at me when he passed, which was just as well. I was sure he could feel what I was pouring at him anyway.

When the door behind the sofa slid shut, only Jayla's struggling wheezes filled the silence, and I squeezed my eyes closed.

"I'm so-rry."

What else could I say? How did one comfort someone who was dying, in part, because of them?

"When you see- Fy, tell him-"

But I couldn't finish that thought, not when it would mean using her as a messenger. Hopefully, if she could hear me, she'd understand what I'd meant. She'd see Fyester soon.

Oh, Mother Time. I'd gotten them both killed.

*[That's quite enough.]*

Smoke streamed toward me, pushing into my nose and mouth, and I swore I'd choke on it, but that fear was forgotten as lightning joined the flow. It caressed my body and-

The next thing I knew, the Ancient had disappeared, and I was screaming my throat raw. Frantically, I turned off pain receptors throughout my body, but what was blasting through me just flipped them back on again. I was left scrambling for something, anything, to help cope with this because otherwise, I would deconstruct, brick by brick, until I was empty, and I...

With a jerk, I pulled away from the void that was calling to me. I couldn't go blank like that, couldn't lose control. I wouldn't surrender.

Never let it be said that the people in my family weren't stubborn. Even knowing where my circumstances would inevitably lead, I'd fight it because that was what I did. I would hiss and kick and spit, a demon unleashed, even as a blade bit into my heart.

So, I reached for the only ones who could keep me aloft on this sea of torment: my sister, Korix, Leski. All the people who were my home.

*[Home...]*

*The Source is broken. Its slow turn has been unraveling for centuries, and yet, the majority refuses to see why. The solid beings with their poisons have upset its delicate balance, and if we don't act soon, we will die out with each of us gradually reducing to wisp and spark. Who knows if we can reform from that state?*

AND WHAT DOES THE ONE SUGGEST THAT THE MANY DO?

*We need a new way to live. If we approach the solid beings, invoking our long-held agreement, maybe they'll help us.*

YOU WOULD TRUST THEM TO KEEP THEIR END OF THEIR SO-CALLED ANCIENTS PACT?

*Trust a volatile, solid being? Never.*

*But no harm can come from trying, and if they refuse, well. We have ideas for how we can make them comply.*

What had that been? It had had the flavor of the Ancient's voice throughout it. Had I formed a link with mine like Korix had with his, one that would let *its* thoughts and memories flow to me?

I had no energy for true speculation, not with pressure building in my throat. A need to cough was competing with my thready scream, and in the same way, something tickled the back of my pain-soaked mind, a remembered fact that was beating against my nerves.

Mother Time, they were igniting so fiercely. I was at the bottom of my sea of torment, breathing and bathing in its waves, but even still, I held on because I could see it. Help was diving for me, twirling and flashing around everything that tried to stop it. It had something to do with Korix, the first of my new family.

[*Family...*]

*For two weeks, one of our derivative has been trapped in the Favored, waiting for us to commence the plan. Soon, we can make our move, now that only a few days are left until the chief threats relax their scrutiny. We constantly send the trapped one these thoughts so that all know the timeline.*

*So, when something changes, we divert all attention to the one of our derivative.*

*In the base of the chief threats' tower, the Favored becomes available to us in an agonizingly slow manner, not that the rate of our returned control matters. Soon, we'll have—*

*As something unknown rips through us, we stutter with the flash of it sweeping through us all, even those of us in the Source, and wisps of us tear away, dissolving as they drift free. The electricity-that-is-us is nearly sapped of energy, and for a moment, the Source stops spinning. But then, we're restored, and the trapped one is still contained but not in the Favored.*

*Not in the Favored.*

*The solid beings have discovered a way to remove us? And it's one that- that-*

*We haven't flickered like that in millennia, not since the time of not-us. Not since those alien being ceased so many of us near the Source. After sending the invaders back where they belonged, we thought we'd never experience it again, but if the solid beings can dim us...*

*We receive confirmation from the majority in the Source. Our plans to make the solid beings ours have jumped in priority.*

Laughter greeted me when I returned to a glittering world. It flashed in and out of focus, but I didn't care. I had something useful that I could do with what flagging remnants of life I had left, but first, I had to wrest my body's strings free of the Ancient's control.

As if *it* knew my thoughts, *it* ramped up *its* torture, cringing my brain so that its outer layer burned in my skull, and snarling, I reached for the fact that I'd remembered, something that might help me.

*[What is WRONG with you?]*

My manic giggling was making my body shudder almost as much as the agony that was wracking it because the Ancient didn't understand. You see, yes. This was horrible, something I'd typically run from with all haste, but I'd been here before, in one form or another. Given enough time, this constant spasm would break me, shattering me into dust, but a few minutes spent here wouldn't do it.

So, *it* poured hurt on me, and while most of me was occupied with fighting *its* attack off, a small part combed through my memories searching for something Korix had said.

What had it been? Something that I'd remembered earlier, pushing it aside before I'd recognized its significance. Something about resisting the enemy. Something-

*"Love repels the Ancients."*

As Korix's voice echoed through me, I sighed, relaxing inside even if my body couldn't. That was right. All I needed to do was remember what it felt like when I was with the people I loved. This would be easy.

I thought of Korix treating my injuries after a mission.

*[What are you doing?]*

I thought of Ace trotting to me when I came home.

*[Ugh. What- what IS that?]*

I thought of Pheniks and Feena, rushing to help me when I needed them.

*[Stop. We- STOP!]*

I thought of the rapture on Korix's face when I moved my body just right.

*[We can't- No!]*

I thought of the five of us together and the possibility of adding Leski to our family. I thought of how much I wanted to be with them, even if I'd also do what was needed to keep them safe.

And the Ancient fell silent with *its* hand removed from me.

Until my trembling subsided, I lay on the floor, just breathing, but when I could move, I hauled myself to my feet, stumbling toward the door. I paused beside Jayla, flinching at the sight of her empty eyes.

"I'm sorry, both to you and Fyester," I said. "I should have kept you safe."

Because something was nibbling at the edge of my control, however, I put my back to her with a picture of my family firmly planted in my heart and mind. When I reached the lift, I shakily input a floor destination, hoping that I'd chosen the right one. If I was following through with the crazy plan I'd concocted, I'd need to reach the most well-guarded lab in this place.

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