

# Chapter 98: This Is Why We Make Friends

“Zaeden! I need you come back, *kuvesk*.”

Hurt is the world is the world is the world is my-

“Fight it off. You can do it.”

No relief some relief have to think have to... Mother Time, it HURTS!

Someone. Help.

I’m breaking.

“I KNOW THEY’RE COMING, FEENA!”

Something there. Something besides hurt.

I—what is I?—think I know what that mish-mashed noise meant. I can almost pick apart its words.

“Please, Zae.”

Oh, good. He made it simple for me this time.

He? Who’s he?

“Hurry back to me.”

Someone I... love. Such a good word. I *love* him. Even if I don’t know who-

Yes, I do. Korix. My Korix.

As something... *evil* howled in defeat, I blinked at a blurry world, one that was inundated by sound. Muffled shouting rose from somewhere distant interrupted by an alarm and a crashing noise.

And above me, ragged sobs twisted my heart while moisture pattered on my face.

“You can’t leave me like this. I’m not strong like you. If the Ancient burns you out of your body, I can’t... *Please...*”

My eyes focused at the rate of my muscles' relaxation, and the fuzzy shape that was Korix gained clarity. Holy shit. Was he crying?

"Ko," I breathed.

Despite how quietly I'd spoken, my throat couldn't take any more, not until my body finished healing its ravaged state. Weak coughs flopped my head around in Korix's lap until he clutched me to him—Mother Time, his touch was cold—and rained kisses on my face.

Feebly, I pushed against him.

"Ko."

And again, when he didn't respond.

"Ko!"

My coughing fit rolled me away from him this time, and I struggled to lift myself onto my elbows.

Meeting his eyes, I said in sub-vocals, "I can't love you too, and I'm grateful that you dragged me back, but I don't know how long I can keep the Ancient suppressed. We need to go."

Nodding, Korix wiped his face clean, and when he lowered his hands, I could find no trace of the weepy man who'd pulled me out of a submersion into oblivion.

"You have a plan?" he asked.

With a weak grin, I said, "Of course I do."

Behind Korix, Feena trotted into view.

"We barricaded the door as best we could," she said, "but- Zae!"

She dropped to her knees at my side, hovering her hands beside my face for a moment before slapping my shoulder.

"Don't you dare go running off like that again," she snapped, shoving a finger in my face. "Finding you like that... you *scared me to death.*"

Grimacing, I mouthed, 'Sorry.'

Feena frowned.

"Throat not healed?" she asked.

"There was extensive damage done, yeah," I said in sub-vocals.

Wincing, Feena scrambled to her feet, resting her hands on her hips.

“Well, you didn’t come to this random-ass part of Cerullis’ headquarters for no reason,” she said. “I assume there’s a plan.”

“Yes,” I rasped.

And I didn’t cough up a lung. Fabulous.

Nodding, Feena glanced over her shoulder.

“Leski, get over here,” she shouted.

Wait.

“You brought an *unHoused* with you?” I hissed.

Predictably, I paid the price for my outburst.

“She didn’t give us a choice,” Korix said over my coughing.

The discussed woman skipped into view, and when she saw me, her face lit up.

“Zae! I told these two you’d be fine,” she said.

“You give me too much credit,” I said.

At my words, chipper Leski vanished with someone hollow replacing her, and she ran haunted eyes over me.

“Don’t’ remind me,” she said.

She was using false cheer to cope. Smart. For the short term anyway.

“Ok,” I said. “I won’t.”

I tried to smirk. I wasn’t sure how well it worked, but Leski’s face brightened again, and clasping her hands together, she bounced on the balls of her feet.

“So, what are we doing next?” she asked. “Do we need to wear fancy atmospheric suits like you?”

“If you don’t want to be left behind, yes,” I said.

Turning to face Feena, Leski narrowed her eyes.

“Told you,” she said.

Shaking her head, Feena said, “You only said that we needed to put them on before we barricaded the door, and considering how enthusiastically those Cerullis bastards are banging on it right now, I’d say I made the right call by ignoring you.”

“And that barricade could fail at any moment,” Korix said. “So, how about you two get a move on?”

He was still kneeling beside me, and while the others rushed to figure out how the suits worked, I noted that he’d already donned one, which explained why he’d been so cold earlier. Its hood, however, was flung back, and I had to wonder. Was mine still on, or had it fallen off during... everything?

Moving closer, Korix said, “Status, *kuvesk*?”

He wanted to keep my physical state a secret? I could oblige.

“Well, I can’t stand by myself,” I said. “So, there’s that.”

Without a word, Korix spun into a crouch, flinging my arm over his shoulders. Pulling me upright, he got me to a wall before the others could take notice, and with my back to it, I could stay on my feet.

“What else?” Korix asked. “Is the Ancient...?”

“Still in my head, yes,” I said. “I’m stretching for memories that will ward *it* off now, although some always seem to work. There’s one of a mission where our investigative target was conspiring on the balcony below us while we...”

Korix’s cheeks turned a faint pink, and he let his eyes drift toward my forehead while I smiled.

“And now, there’s this one,” I said.

Jerking his gaze down, Korix frowned before shaking his head.

“You’re feeling well enough to tease me, so I’m not too concerned about whether you’ll recover, although...”

Pausing, he checked whether Leski and Feena were still occupied.

“This plan of yours,” he said, “will you survive it?”

How could he ask me such a distressing question right now? He had to know how difficult fighting the Ancient off was, even without complications like that.

“Maybe,” I said. “It will depend on what happens while on the way.”

“On the way where?”

Leski bounced toward us with Feena behind her.

“To the Source,” I said. “Are you two ready?”

In front of me, Korix stiffened, and something like panic invaded him before he could quash it. He knew about the Source?

"We are," Feena said. "What's a source?"

"The Source," I corrected. "It's the Ancients' home."

All of them stared at me as the pounding on the barricaded door grew louder, now with the distinctive sound of energy bolts added to it.

"You want to invade the enemy's stronghold?" Feena squeaked.

Wincing, I said, "Something like that. Look. Let's escape from the House Cerullis members who are clamoring for our heads. We can discuss everything else once we're clear."

I had absolutely no intention of discussing anything, but I needed to get them away from danger. I'd do what I must to accomplish that goal.

"Agreed," Leski said.

She cast a nervous glance at the door.

"How do we finish putting these suits on?"

"Um..." I helpfully answered.

Fumbling for my suit's hood, I drew it over my head, but it only flopped uselessly in front of my face. Biting my lip, I tapped my fingers on my leg until Korix gently touched my neck. Where the glowing circle was lying.

My suit's hood drew together with a slurp, cutting me off from the world, and in the dark, claustrophobia placed a finger at the base of my spine. When processes popped into view, however, they stopped that sensation's insidious advance, and after initiating a few, I was looking through the hood's material like I would when projecting through a wall.

I also had a P.I.G.'s typical spheres under my palms. Using them, I briefly boosted into the air, but as my feet hit the ground, I maintained my propulsors' lift. I might otherwise fall.

"All a go," I said.

Rolling their eyes, the others followed my example and just in time too. An energy bolt burst through the door, blackening a shuttle's side, and while my companions finished getting ready, I tried requesting my rifle.

When it settled into my hand despite the metal between it and me, I breathed a sigh of relief. As I'd been donning the suit earlier, I hadn't set aside any weapons, so if this hadn't worked, I'd have been essentially unarmed. That didn't seem wise when heading into the enemy's heart, and given

our situation, I wouldn't have time to open my suit before House Cerullis members stormed into this room.

With everyone's preparations nearly complete, I opened aviation's hangar door, relaxing when Xygek and a wide, blue sky greeted me.

*Ready?* I sent to the others.

After receiving their acknowledgments, I launched into the free air, marveling at the atmospheric suit's speed, and left House Cerullis' headquarters behind.

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