

Chapter 99: How We Soar 1

Once we were a good distance from headquarters, I requested direct connections between my companions and myself, never slowing in my flight, and after they'd been accepted, I didn't let anyone else speak.

"I'm going to the Source," I said. "Whether you come with me is your decision, although I don't encourage it. You can, however, say nothing to sway me from this, so save your words for something helpful."

I knew they wouldn't do as I'd asked, especially not Feena. She'd always been too stubborn, so I wasn't surprised when she protested.

"Storming the enemy's stronghold isn't good tactics, Zae," she said. "We should try something else first."

She, however, didn't know how thoroughly the last few years had taught me to stick with my convictions.

"I know what I'm doing," I said.

And nothing more. They didn't need to know anything else, and I couldn't hurt them by sharing more of my plan.

"Do you know where it is?" Leski asked. "Maybe if we gave the location to other House Kolb members-"

"They won't be able to help," I said. "Where I'm going, you need something like these suits, something that only House Cerullis has developed, to survive. I'm assuming Talira didn't send any high Strata with you when you left her?"

They were silent for a moment, which was concerning.

"She doesn't know that we hit Cerullis' headquarters," Korix said, "or rather, she didn't before we went it. She probably does now."

Which meant she didn't know about what I'd done either.

"Mother fucking Time."

I cut the connection with the group before requesting one with my grandmother. I needed the information that I'd asked from her, and if she was withholding it because my sister and partners hadn't consulted with her before charging in-

[*Hello again.*]

My projected view of the world went fuzzy, and my twitching fingers dropped my elevation before I could correct, letting my irrational fear of heights make an abrupt reappearance. I couldn't focus on it or on how *high above the ground* I was.

"Find a distraction, moron."

Such as: Why did the Ancient keep doing this? Why not take me over when *it* gained a toehold? That was what a rational being would do.

Unless my continued success with burying *it* was a sign that *it* didn't have the strength that *it* needed. Perhaps *its* brethren wanted to see something beyond failure from *it*. Perhaps that was why *it* was delaying. In our situation, the easiest way for *it* to show strength would be to burn my neural pathways out as slowly as possible.

Or maybe *it* had contracted the disease of emotions, although how that was possible-

[*Your speculations are pointless.*]

Oh. Oh, no. Not again. Not-

"You better have a excellent reason for the shitshow I'm dealing... Zae-zae? What's wrong?"

Hearing Talira's voice was enough for me to gain control again, and my whine cut off with a cough.

"Thank you," I gasped.

I couldn't elaborate more on what had just happened, though.

"*Shukusen*, I need the reports that I requested, please. Now," I said. "I'm on my way to handle our problem."

"And how do you plan on doing that?" Talira asks.

"I can't tell you. Thinking about it could push me over," I said. "You'll have to trust me."

Mother Time, I wished I had visuals during moments of quiet like this. I couldn't read Talira without them.

"You have one of those asshole Ancients in your head, don't you?" she asked. "I thought that was what your message meant, but I didn't want to believe it."

"Sorry to disappoint," I said.

"What happened to giving your idiot *evushk* and me time?" Talira snapped.

I couldn't get angry with her, couldn't think about two hundred and forty-six lives lost because of her delay, couldn't remember The Library.

"Circumstances changed," I said.

"*What* circumstances?"

Did she not know about Pheniks?

"You know what? It doesn't matter," Talira said. "Come home, and we'll get the Ancient out of your head. Maybe this'll be a good thing. Having another one of *them* captured might buy us more time-"

"No," I said. "I have a way to end this disaster, not just prolong it, and I'm going to follow through with my plan. If you want to give me a better chance a surviving, you'll send me the information that I requested before I'm out of range, but I'm not turning around."

She started arguing with me, but I cut the connection before she could get much out. Cutting a connection with a *shukusen*. Ha! That had felt much better than I'd thought it would.

When I re-established the one with my companions, a cacophony of shouting voices greeted me, and I winced while pain speared through my eyes. Just what I'd needed.

"Everyone, hush!" I growled. "You're making this so much more difficult than it needs to be. You can't imagine. I'm grateful that you came to save me, but I need you to decide *right fucking now* if you're coming with me or not. I can't... no more arguing."

After a beat of silence, Feena said, "Shit. We really can't change your mind."

"No, you can't," I snapped.

A long sigh rattled to me.

"Fine," Feena said. "We should wait for-"

"No more waiting!" I shouted.

What was this hysterical note in my voice?

"I'm done with waiting! I have a plan that will work, and I'm taking it."

They went dead silent with my ragged breathing filling the quiet for a moment.

"*Kuvesk*," Korix said, "a private word, please?"

Without me having to do anything, Leski and Feena dropped from the connection, and I flipped to face the glinting shape that was my *evushk*.

“What happened?” he asked. “I know you. Physical pain doesn’t cause this cracking that I’m seeing in you.”

“You mean what else besides my brother dying?” I snarled.

He said nothing to that, and I sighed, wishing I could rub my forehead.

“During the negotiations with the Ancient, First Stratus Jayla was killed,” I said. “It was my fault.”

“Ah,” Korix said.

“Yeah.”

Drifting toward me, Korix extended his open palm, and with a broken sob, I laid my hand on it, fighting to keep my trajectory stable. I felt nothing through the suit’s metal, but the same sense of comfort that he’d always imbued in me seeped into my core anyway.

“Shall we bring Leski and your sister back in?” Korix asked after a moment.

“Probably a good idea.”

Once we four were connected again, though, I didn’t know what to say. I should probably apologize for yelling, but I didn’t know how to do it, not on top of my confession to Korix about Jayla. In aviation, guilt had let the Ancient pull me under its control. I didn’t want that to happen again. Still, I had to try.

“I-”

“Don’t,” Feena said. “We already know what you’ll say, and I shouldn’t have been pushing you, not when you’re so stressed. Leave it there.”

I... could accept that.

“Ok.”

“Now, where are we headed?” Leski asked.

“Somewhere near Ibis,” I said.

I didn’t have further details yet, merely a lure that was pulling me through my link with the Ancient.

“Ibis?” Leski said. “That’s halfway across the world. Why aren’t we using a beacon?”

Sometimes, I forgot that she was unHoused.

“Do you want to go through a Travel Center, looking like we do right now?” I asked. “How about getting stuck in the Terminal because House Cerullis puts a block on us? Sounds fun, right?”

“Super fun,” Leski said. “So, we’re flying there? That’ll take, what? Several hours?”

“Depends on how fast these atmospheric suits are, but something like that, yes,” Korix said.

“Great!” Leski chirped. “We should tell stories to pass the time. I’d love to learn more about you three.”

We, however, were quiet with each of us contemplating the horror of letting another person learn our secrets, even the most mundane of them. This was what House Kolb did to its members. They became paranoid, close-mouthed, twitchy assholes, and I didn’t want that for myself. Plus, if I told stories about the ones I loved, it would keep the Ancient buried.

“I have one about Ace,” I said. “I know you love my dog, Leski.”

“This is true,” she said in the most solemn of tones.

“Well, when he was a puppy, Ace wasn’t nearly as well trained as he is now,” I said, “and he’s cleverer than any dog has a right to be. He’d regularly escape from the house to explore the moors-”

“You mean that you lost track of him, and he did as any dog is naturally inclined to do,” Korix interrupted.

“Yes... that,” I said, glaring at him. “In any case, Ace got lost once, and I was having the hardest time with finding him. Because Ko wouldn’t help me look-”

“Ace is your dog,” Korix said. “You’re supposed to take care of him.”

“*Because Ko wouldn’t help,*” I said over him, “I had to continue searching through the-”

“Entertaining as this story already is and would probably continue to be, we should put it on hold,” Feena said. “Contacts up ahead, probably hostile.”

Of *course* there were. Nothing in my life could ever be easy. It didn't surprise me that this part, so close to a possible end, might end up causing problems too.

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