

Short Stories

Stories to fill in some of the narrative gaps. Most take place between Chapters 16 and 17 of *Clash with the Ancients* aka the day after the *Lokke Vitras* takes Zaeden as his replacement.

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First Day

The events immediately after my House naming ceremony are a blur to me, even so many years later. I remember that I wasn't given leave to say farewell to my family. Instead, the *Lokke Vitras* tersely informed me that Talira would tell them what had happened.

Apparently, she gave him the dressing down of the century later that day, berating him for almost ten minutes for ruining my House naming for me.

I remember the flight to his estate with the most uncomfortable silence lying between us. I remember landing and silently following him down strange halls—suppressing my curiosity all the while—until he stopped at a room in the farthest corner of the house's outer wing.

"You'll sleep here," he told me. "Make yourself comfortable. We'll start at daybreak tomorrow."

And then, he left. I think the unspoken assumption was that I'd stay in place until then, and once I'd satisfied myself about my new quarter's security and dug through the contents of the room's closet and dresser, I did agonize over whether I should go to sleep or not.

I chose 'or not'.

Wandering through the *Lokke Vitras'* home years later, when I knew him better, occasionally gave me the heebie jeebies, so you can imagine what it was like when I was creeping, alone and in the dark, through the home of Lutov's most dangerous man that night. I'd never been more cautious in my life, but even with how sneaky I was, I didn't escape the *Lokke Vitras'* notice.

He found me in his library, running a finger along the spines of his books. By that point, I'd long ago lost the awe of being surrounded by so much of the printed word, leaving me looking for something to read until morning. I was pretty sure that sleep wouldn't visit me that night, not with how jittery I still was from earlier events.

I didn't get far before the *Lokke Vitras* stopped me. The books on all sides had so captured my attention that I hadn't noticed him entering the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, setting into an attack stance after spinning toward him. With him lost in the shadows, I could barely make out his form, just... standing there and staring at me. With my nerves screaming, I forced myself to relax, flashing a smile at him.

"I couldn't sleep," I said. "Decided to go exploring and found this fascinating collection."

In response, the *Lokke Vitras* continued staring at me, nearly making me wilt. Unsure what to do, I cleared my throat.

“It wasn’t my intention to wake you up,” I said. “I’m sorry if I did.”

“You didn’t wake me,” he said.

And he'd sounded so empty that I thought he might have been a ghost. After another interminable wait in silence I turned back to the shelves to continue my search.

“Do you have any recommendations?” I idly asked.

Again, with the silence. I didn’t know what to make of them. Did he have anything to say? If not, why was he here?

“The texts at the end of that row should hold some interest for you,” the *Lokke Vitras* eventually said. “Try not to damage them.”

“Thank-”

But he was gone. I wouldn’t realize how kind he was being to me until years later. Those books were his pride and joy, the one thing he prized above all—at the time, at least—but he let me touch and handle them on our first night together. He looked past the discomfort of having an unknown sleeping under the same roof as him to the disruption he’d made in my life: changing the course of it so drastically from what I’d imagined.

Of course, I didn’t know that back then. I only saw the *Lokke Vitras* leaving me alone for the night. I only saw that I didn’t need to be so careful anymore.

After looking through his suggested books, I chose one and settled in to read it. At some point, I fell asleep doing this.

I woke up with a vague sense of unease the moment before something nudged my foot, and when I snapped my eyes open, a rifle’s muzzle was in my face. Scrunching back in my chair, I barely kept myself from reacting, having noted the cool, grey eyes on the other side of the gun.

“Four minutes, twenty-two seconds,” the *Lokke Vitras* said.

He paused as if waiting for a response.

Licking my lips, I said, “What?”

“That’s how long I was standing over you before you woke up,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “If I’d wanted to, I could have killed you a thousand times over by now. In the future, you’ll have to do better.”

His grip on his rifle loosened the tiniest bit, making me relax.

“And one more thing, *kuvesk*,” he continued. “Always trust your instincts.”

As his finger tightened on the trigger, I had a split second to react. Long drilled practices had me slapping my palm to the inside of his elbow while knocking his wrist toward the ceiling, and an energy bolt flashed by close enough to burn my skin. I tried to get up so I could run, but faster than should have been possible, the *Lokke Vitras* recovered, pinning me to the chair with a hand around my neck.

House Kolb speed. A skill I had yet to master.

Kicking for his legs, I grunted, “Not. fair.”

Before the last word fell from my lips, a cold circle was pressed to my temple, and I fell still. I didn’t think he’d kill me, considering what he wanted me for, but still, I couldn’t deny the doubts and fears roaring in my head.

“You are the *Lokke Vitras* to come, *kuvesk*,” he said. “Fair shouldn’t exist in your vocabulary.”

And he pulled the trigger, making the rifle click. Out of charge. Thank Mother Time.

Easing off of me, the *Lokke Vitras* backed away while I rubbed my neck.

“Follow me,” he said.

I almost didn’t obey. The man had just tried to kill me, after all. But disobedience, at least with him, seemed hazardous to my health, so while pressing my fingers to the burn on my forehead, I clambered out of the chair.

The *Lokke Vitras* again led me through an unfamiliar maze of halls, and I kept quiet all the while. I had many questions for him, most of them urgent, but something inside kept me from speaking up.

Eventually, we stopped in a large, open room, one with white walls.

A sim room.

I’d expected this, seeing as how today would mark the first day in my training, although I’d thought I’d at least get a shower and breakfast before our first session. What I hadn’t expected, however, was the puppy running straight for us as soon as we stepped in the door.

Completely black and in the clumsy stage of growth, it was a spot of adorable goodness that I hadn’t expected to see again for a long time. I was a little disappointed when my companion stepped into its path, sending it careening to a halt. He reached out a hand, and I watched incredulously while the fucking *Lokke Vitras* cooed over a dog. While he scratched its belly, I edged closer before clearing my throat.

“Why have we come here...? I’m sorry. What am I supposed to call you?” I said.

Glancing up at me, the *Lokke Vitras* said, "You will call me *evushk*."

"Teacher?" I said. "I guess that's why you called me student earlier."

Without a word, the *Lokke Vitras* returned his attention to the dog, and I waited for instruction. Instead, I got a lecture.

"The role of the *Lokke Vitras* is demanding," he said. "It will take many things from you: love, family, any sense of choice. I could go on. It is, however, needed for Lutov's stability, and this is why the role persists from one person to the next."

Holding the puppy, the *Lokke Vitras* rose to his full height, turning his piercing gaze on me.

"You are the *Lokke Vitras* to come, and because of that, your freedom will be even more restricted than mine is," he said. "From now until such time as I relinquish my role, you will do as I tell you without question. Is that understood?"

"Of course."

What else was I supposed to say? Was I supposed to refuse the *Lokke Vitras*? I couldn't, not if I wanted to stay alive.

Wordlessly, the *Lokke Vitras* extended the puppy to me, and I accepted it, even wriggling as it was. Its fur was so soft and its body so warm that a sense of safety began growing in my heart unbidden.

The *Lokke Vitras* stopped that in its tracks.

"I want you to break its legs," he said.

As my head shot up, I opened my mouth to say Mother Time knows what. I barely stopped myself from voicing my disbelief, squeaking instead.

Damn, his eyes were so cold, alien and without feeling, and I shivered, reflexively clutching the puppy to me.

When it started squirming, I looked down at it. The *Lokke Vitras* wanted me to hurt this innocent creature and for what? To establish who was in control here? I was already fully aware of that.

Regardless of his reason, the *Lokke Vitras* had given me an order, no matter how softly it had been phrased, and given who he was, I had to obey, on pain of *at least* death. Not only that, but as his student, I had an obligation to follow his instructions. Who was I to think I knew better than such a respected man?

But I looked into those trusting, brown eyes and watched the creature excitedly panting, frantically squirming to connect its tongue to my face, and I knew I couldn't do as I'd been told. Closing my eyes, I set my jaw, knowing I might be living out my last few moments.

“No,” I said before lifting my eyes to him, “I won’t do it.”

I don’t know how long I maintained that freezing stare when I should have been begging forgiveness, but after what felt like an eternity, the *Lokke Vitras* nodded.

“Good,” he said.

Turning on his heel, he strode for the sim room’s door.

“Because you’ve chosen to spare it, the dog is now yours,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll give you a few minutes to get acquainted while I gather some equipment.”

He left me staring at the closing door with my mouth gaping, and when I eventually regained control, my screeching voice filled the room.

“WHAT?!”

The puppy did *not* like that. It wriggled its way free of my arms, and I barely lowered myself to the floor in time to keep it from hurting itself. With a happy bark, it started circling my legs, and dumbass that I was, I didn’t know how to regain my balance once it had been so thoroughly thrown askew. I landed on the floor with a crack, thankfully missing the dog, and got a face full of slobber as a reward.

Sputtering, I pushed it aside so I could sit up and wipe my face .

Glaring at the dog, I said, “The hell am I supposed to do with you?”

I’d had partners who’d owned dogs before, but my parents had never wanted their children owning pets. I didn’t have the first clue about how one raised a puppy.

“I suppose I could start with a name,” I said under my breath.

But I didn’t know where to begin with even something that simple. Sighing, I popped to my hands and knees, crawling toward the puppy, and as I should have expected, it bowed to me before jumping from side to side, unleashing a series of happy barks.

Goodie. It wanted to play.

Glancing about the room, I found nothing I could use as a play toy, so I used myself instead. Leaping for the dog, I tackled it, trying to be careful all the while, but it somehow managed to dodge before performing its own jump on my back. It immediately tumbled off, but that didn’t stop it from hopping upright once it had hit the ground. He—and I knew the puppy was a he now—got a mouthful of my shirt before tugging on it with a growl, skipping away from my reaching hands whenever I came close to him.

I don’t know how long we played like this with the puppy near constantly in control of the situation, but eventually, I gave up. Flopping to my back, I endured tiny teeth nipping at my fingers and

many a puppyish whine before the dog trotted to where I could see him. With one sloppy swipe of his tongue, he sat beside my face, furiously wagging his tail, and cocked his head.

“You’re going to be a handful, aren’t you?” I said.

Lunging for the dog as fast as I could, I scooped him up and... nuzzled my face in his stomach, for some reason. After a spot of struggling, the puppy settled down, letting me hold him in my lap, and I watched while his eyes began drooping. Mother Time, it had taken far too much effort to wear him out. How much trouble would this creature cause me during the first weeks of my training, given how tenacious he was...?

“Ace,” I said.

Sleepily, the dog blinked up at me, and I smiled.

“Your name is Ace,” I told him.

Stretching in my lap, Ace yawned, letting his tiny, pink tongue fall out of his mouth, while I gently rubbed his back. Sure, this creature might cause me way too much trouble, but I thought it would be worth it.

Right after Ace had dropped off, the *Lokke Vitras* returned to the sim room with a pair of swords and other Ibisian weapons on his person. When I made to stand, he waved for me to stay still.

“Wait until he’s more deeply asleep,” he said. “You’ll need him so restricted if you’re to have any hope of completing today’s training without waking him up.”

I should have focused on what the *Lokke Vitras* had implied. With the weapons he’d brought with him, how was I supposed to last in any fight, let alone one against *him*, without rousing a lightly sleeping puppy?

Instead, I turned to the realization of what Ace was meant to be for me: something to care for. A companion to ease my transition into my new role, or that was what I assumed, and understanding that, I didn’t know what to say.

So, I just spoke my mind.

“Thank you.”

The *Lokke Vitras* didn’t reply, merely glancing my way before tossing me a sword, which I reflexively caught, but by that point, he’d turned away, going through a basic warm-up.

Hell. So, not only was I to have a sound impediment in the coming fight, but I’d have to do it with stiff muscles? The *Lokke Vitras* really was an evil teacher.

I found I didn’t mind that, though. Watching him move his body in increasingly... interesting ways, I ran my hands over Ace, letting myself believe that this deviation in my life’s course might not be

so bad.

First Task

After a few weeks together, training and occasionally studying by myself on the estate, the *Lokke Vitras* took me on my first mission. I wasn't sure what to expect, as he didn't give me a briefing before we left, but when we headed toward the Eastern Reaches, I assumed one of the production facilities there had gone haywire. The low Strata in charge of it probably needed an expert touch to bring it back online.

The *Lokke Vitras*, however, set us down between Lake Phiabe and the southern stretch of the Barasgami Mountains, although we were close enough to the lake that I could see its waters between breaks in the fog.

"I have a test for you," the *Lokke Vitras* said, keeping his eyes fixed outside. "Today, we'll see if you've learned anything while you've stayed with me. Your mission specifics are in the message you'll be receiving shortly. Once you get out of the skycruiser, you're to remain in place for three minutes before opening it.

"This won't be your first solo mission, *kuvesk*. You're not ready for that yet. I'll be keeping an eye on you somewhere nearby, but I will not step in unless your life is in immediate danger. Do you understand?"

"I hear your words, *evushk*," I said.

At that point, I still found the *Lokke Vitras*' protocols a little silly, but I conformed to them anyway. What else was I to do? Defy him? Please.

"Good. Then, get out."

Once the crisp air of the Southern Fells was nipping at my skin, the *Lokke Vitras*' skycruiser lifted off of the ground, quickly disappearing in the clouds, and I crossed my arms, waiting. I still wasn't used to the sitting around, doing nothing part of my training, which had happened far more than I'd expected. When instances of it came around, I usually dug into my assigned bookwork, but three minutes wouldn't be long enough for me to get anywhere with that right now.

After the allotted time had passed, I opened the newest message in my array, reading its contents, and groaned, throwing my head back.

"Shiiiiit."

An *ii* hunt. I didn't know wow the fuck a mage had gotten loose here, in the heart of Lutov, but the means of his escape didn't matter now. When looking over the types of magic, or *liiaresim*, that this mage claimed, I understood why this was my first mission as the *Lokke Vitras* to come, though. As a Vimian, Magsense, Somadept, and Hydroshifter, he matched the *ii* that had almost killed me

months before with one exception.

What that told me? The *Lokke Vitras* wanted to know if his teaching methods had been at all effective or if he needed to adjust his strategy.

Chewing on my lip, I headed for the position of the mage's last known location. Based on the report that had been attached to the message, the House Kolb members who's been tracking the *ii* would have apprehended him several hours ago if the *Lokke Vitras* hadn't stopped them in their tracks, taking over the mission. How long had he been looking for an opportunity like this?

On arrival, I started my hunt, tracking the mage much like I had with the one I's fought in Ostiu, and every few meters, the cursing under my breath got more colorful. The *ii* was heading straight for Lake Phiabe, a source of one of his *liiaresim*, and I had no doubt he'd probably reached it, given how long it had been since his last sighting.

Sure enough, when I reached Lake Phiabe's shores, I spotted a splotch of white, skating over the water in the distance. That splotch served as the endpoint to a trail of ice.

This just kept getting better and better.

With my heart in my throat, I carefully stepped onto the ice, and when it held, I started sprinting down it. Considering I had only tentative control over the techniques I'd need to fight a mage, I didn't see any point in making a cautious approach.

As I came closer, the mage had his back to me. Softly singing a whimsical tune, he sent orbs of water flying around his body.

Since I had the chance to make a clean shot and finish this mission in a timely manner, I lifted my rifle, aiming for the mage's head, but as I had in Ostiu's mountains, I couldn't squeeze the trigger. Making a face, I shifted my aim to the man's shoulder, peeking from the sleeve of his... Lutovish made shirt—that was weird—and only then could I take the shot.

Or shots in this case.

One energy bolt tore through the meat of the mage's shoulders, like I'd aimed for, but the second ripped through the side of his lower abdomen, leaving a ring of blackened fabric and skin to outline the evidence of its passing. Howling, the mage spun on me, clearly ready to fight, and with another curse more, I entered a thoughtless state, one of the techniques required to fight a mage.

As always when it comes to that mental regimen, I couldn't tell you what happened while I maintained it. I have brief snapshots, many of which don't make sense to me.

Fish and mucky plant life raining down around me. Water touching every bit of my skin, breathed in as if it were air. Something distinctly not right happening in my chest while viscous liquid bubbled away from my arm, flowing toward a man in white.

I came to myself lying on a patch of melting ice, watching the *Lokke Vitras* roll the mage's body into Lake Phiabe with his toe, and had a split second to notice my withered arm—holy shit, the mage had drained the water from it—before agony drove a spike through my brain and I lost consciousness.

I was stuck in bed for two days after that. Most of that time was lost to sleep or pain. The *Lokke Vitras* didn't allow me any anesthetic to help with my recovery, so I felt the gradual repair of my atrophied heart and desiccated arm to the fullest, every horrible moment of it.

But.

Despite this, I took notice of how attentively the *Lokke Vitras* took care of me. He was always there with a glass of water or a bowl of broth, even fluffing my pillows occasionally. Later, I wondered if he cared for me even that far back.

I've been told that he did.

Still. At the time, all I noticed was that the supposedly emotionless *Lokke Vitras* looked worried when he visited my bedside, even if the traces of it were slight and he never acknowledged it.

Once I'd fully recovered, the *Lokke Vitras* chewed me out extensively about my failure, and the next week of training was hell for me, but that incident and everything that happened afterward planted a seed in my mind, one that would both grow and decay over the next three years. From it would come one of the longest and most fulfilling relationships of my life.

First Year

Time passed, and I approached my one-year anniversary as the *Lokke Vitras* to come. At the time, I still hadn't adjusted my priorities about what was important in life. I still found milestones significant, even if I knew not to expect any sort of gift for them from the *Lokke Vitras*. By then, I had a decent understanding of him, and I knew he'd think my anticipation of this anniversary was unnecessary and a bit silly.

I couldn't ignore my excitement, though. Even if that day turned out to be like any other, *I* would know what it meant

When I woke up that morning, things seemed set to follow the typical routine, except I almost had to spend an hour flushing anti-venom through my system first thing. The *Lokke Vitras* had let an adder into my bedroom while I was sleeping, and I nearly missed it when getting out of bed. My mind and body hadn't *quite* gotten used to my new sleep schedule, and that made me extraordinarily drowsy on some mornings. That day happened to be one of them.

After killing the snake, I rushed through getting ready for the day. The *Lokke Vitras* didn't usually mess with me during that part of the day, although it did occasionally happen. So, while I wasn't as cautious while showering and getting dressed, I also kept an eye out for anything unusual.

Since I hadn't received a message informing me of a change in plans, I snuck my way across the estate to the kitchen, the one place in the world that was completely safe for me. Even still, I was always on my guard there, but toward the beginning of my training, the *Lokke Vitras* had told me in no uncertain terms that he would never attack me there, and if he did, it would mean he'd decided I wouldn't cut it as his replacement.

In other words, if I ever got jumped in that room, I was dead, and there was no way around it.

I don't know why I trusted the *Lokke Vitras* when it came to that claim. He'd certainly lied to me about other things, trying to teach me how little I could trust people, but when it came to the kitchen, I never doubted that he'd told me the truth. I was safe as soon as I crossed the room's threshold.

Ace was there, of course, happily waiting for his morning trip outside, and after attaching his leash, we started our journey to an exterior door. My dog was fairly disciplined by that point, sticking to my heel and scrunching low as we snuck out, but he was still a puppy. He Food and other things that dogs loved still distracted him, and the *Lokke Vitras* just *loved* to scatter temptation across our path wherever he could, hence why Ace was on a leash. Eventually, I thought he could do this without it, but until I was certain he wouldn't break stealth during this part of the day, I kept him attached to me via rope.

That went away when we eventually stepped back inside. We sprinted through the estate, moving as quickly as we could back to the kitchen.

Not that our speed mattered much. The *Lokke Vitras* always found us, although the number of his lightning-strike attacks depended on how long we spent between the door and the kitchen.

Mother Time, he went easy on us those first couple of years. If I'd known then what I do now, I'd have been grateful for how much he restrained himself.

As it was, I was usually cursing him in my head every time I had to dodge an energy bolt or fend off a series of stabs from a knife. Ace always fought the *Lokke Vitras* as well, but that was what I'd trained him to do, what he was supposed to do. If the famed *Lokke Vitras* couldn't avoid a measly dog, even one as well trained as Ace, then Lutov had a problem.

When we eventually reached the kitchen with our morning workout complete, I was out of breath and already exhausted, not that I let it show. I waited with Ace until the *Lokke Vitras* showed up, and as it did every other morning, watching my dog trot up to the man he'd been snipping at not five minutes dragged a smile from me. Strangely enough, the *Lokke Vitras* never scolded me for these expressions of amusement, unlike what he did with every other unintentional revelation of my emotional state.

Despite the day's significance, the *Lokke Vitras* thoroughly reamed me for every failing I'd displayed in our morning warm up, although I did get more compliments than usual afterward. After he'd finished critiquing my performance, we started cooking.

Breakfast was always the easiest of meals for us two chefs, so while I scrambled eggs at the *Lokke Vitras*' discretion, I scanned the news, as I usually did at that point in our routine.

It wasn't long before a piece of it had me freezing in place with my spatula stuck in the middle of soggy eggs. For several precious seconds, I blinked at the images of destruction splashed into my array, knowing all the while that I should return my focus to my cooking.

But I couldn't.

"Is something wrong, *kuvesk*?" the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Over the last twelve months, I'd learned exactly which empty tones correlated to which nearly non-existent emotions this man might have. This one made me shiver.

"Nothing, *evushk*, only..."

A small, logical part of my brain hissed warnings, shouting about how dangerous it would be to continue, but I couldn't stop myself.

"A tornado hit Daka this morning," I said. "Shouldn't we be there? Helping?"

A long, tense silence fell, one in which I started furiously scraping at my eggs again.

“Give me your argument for why we should go to Ibis and help what are essentially products when House Vaessa should have the situation under control within the week,” the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Fuck. I hated when questions of time management came up between us, considering I usually had slightly different priorities than him, and with this particular incident, my reasoning might not hold up to his standards. Still. I had to try.

“The children of Ibis play an essential role in Lutovish society, even if it’s only one of aggression release,” I said. “Any threat to them is also a threat to us, and I would prefer to have such useful pieces of our society up and running again as quickly as possible.”

I’d modified my true reasons for wanting to help there, but I was pretty damn sure I couldn’t talk about how I thought the *Lokke Vitras* should protect the children of Ibis just as much as they did with the Lutovish.

Without looking at the *Lokke Vitras* to see how my argument had landed, I transferred my eggs to a platter before setting the pan aside. After placing several slices of fried ham around the platter’s edge, the *Lokke Vitras* brought it to the table, and I followed with plates and silverware. He only spoke once we’d sat and started eating.

“An acceptable line of reasoning. We’ll depart for Escad as soon as the kitchen’s back in order.”

My shock had me stabbing my fork into my lip instead of getting it properly into my mouth, and with the barest of coughs, I did my best to hide the embarrassing slip up. Fortunately, the *Lokke Vitras* ignored it, instead mildly advising me to slow down my rate of consumption when I started shoveling food into my mouth.

The trip to Ibis passed in a daze. There was one (1) silent skycruiser ride to the Southern Fells Travel Center, one (1) painfully disconcerting stop in the station while hurtling across the world as particles, and one (1) zipping flight to Daka with P.I.G.s after arguing with a surprisingly stubborn House Vaessa member about using them.

But then, we were in Escad’s capital, and it was a wreck. So many squat buildings had been ripped to pieces, the wreckage strewn everywhere, and so many people listlessly wandered the street or sat in out of the way corners. Some of the soldiers of the nation’s standing army were flying about the small square where we’d landed, carrying their archaic medical supplies and rolling barrels full of water back and forth across it. Many of them eyed us as we set down, which made me uncomfortable, but the *Lokke Vitras* just ignored them, surveying the damage.

“They’ve responded to the disaster more quickly than usual this time. That’s good,” he said. “*Kuvesk*, you start clearing rubble wherever you see fit. I’ll coordinate with these soldiers about where they could best use us.”

He didn’t already know? Then again, the *Lokke Vitras* hadn’t gotten much time to gather the details of what had happened and what we’d find here before arriving.

But why was I questioning what he planned to do? I had my orders. If I wanted to stay alive and whole, I needed to follow them. So, I wandered off to the closest site of destruction.

The nearby children of Ibis seemed scandalized when I asked if there were any survivors in the wreckage, but they answered me. After they mentioned hearing voices under the rubble, I picked up those sounds for myself. Starting toward the noise, I called for the survivors keep shouting so I could find them, and with my enhanced hearing, I started picking through collapsed wood beams and piles of broken stone.

Clearing the rubble was an involved task, forcing me to consider how to shift debris so it wouldn't collapse on top of the person I was trying to reach, but honesty? It wasn't that taxing. I worked my way through it, hauling away what I could move on my own away while others helped. I summoned my rifle to break larger stone into smaller pieces while coordinating with the others on the 'rescue team'.

Within a good quarter hour—a much shorter time period than it would have been without my help—we uncovered a man holding his unconscious partner. After helping the two out of what might have been an early grave, I shot ahead with the injured woman. I got her to triage quickly enough that she might have decent odds of survival.

And then, I couldn't move further. Staring at the medics working on that woman, I was struck by the realization that I'd saved a life today instead of ending it. After the last year with nothing to prove me wrong, I'd begun to think the role of the *Lokke Vitras* was only meant for killing. Something deep inside of me loosened on seeing that I could be something more than a murderer in the future.

Someone dropped their hand on my shoulder at that moment, making me jump, and when I glanced behind me to see the *Lokke Vitras* standing there, I winced in preparation for the lecture I was sure to receive. But he just watched the medics finish their ministrations before meeting my eyes.

"Do you understand now?" he said.

And I nodded, nothing more or less. What else was there to say?

"Savor this, *kuvesk*," the *Lokke Vitras* said. "Moments like this, triumphs in every sense of the word, are rare in our line of work. Make them count when they happen to you."

"Yes, *evushk*," I said.

He squeezed my shoulder, making my skin tingle, before jerking his head to the side.

"This way," he said. "Apparently, the king has requested our presence. Hopefully, he can give us a broader picture of the situation."

As he made his way deeper into Daka, I trotted at his heel, working through everything that had happened this morning, and when I was finished, I cocked my head at the *Lokke Vitras*' back.

Why was he being so generous with me today? Indulging my desire to come here, making sure I understood how precious what we'd was? These were atypical behaviors for him, so I had to wonder. Did the *Lokke Vitras* remember that it was my one-year anniversary?

I mean... of course, he did. I supposed the question was more, was he acting so out of the norm because of it?

Was coming here and helping these people his gift to me?

I didn't know what to make of the idea that my *evushk* might acknowledge—if only in deed—that we were merely human. That we might need breaks on occasion.

Wait.

He was merely human.

Huh. It had taken me a whole year to figure that one out.

Shaking my head, I picked up the pace so I could be at the *Lokke Vitras*' side instead of behind him, removing that possible source of unease for him. This man, seemingly emotionless and resolute, might be just as tense and uneasy as I typically was with a source of danger at my back. What a radical concept, and it stirred my curiosity.

Given that I'd figured out something that most Lutovish would never even consider possible, what more might I learn about the *Lokke Vitras*?

First Solo Mission

Despite how it might seem from other stories, Korix was *not* the primary focus of my life, nor was he my only source of happiness in the years after my House naming. Sure, he played a large part in it, but I had many other things to occupy me. Most of that included the numerous tasks that my training required and a never-ending acquisition of skills, some of which I'd never once thought that the *Lokke Vitras* might need.

Boy, did the *Lokke Vitras* disabuse me of the notion that certain skills weren't worth a warrior's time. I couldn't tell you how many times simple things like *doing the laundry by hand* made themselves necessary during a mission . Once, I even had to sing my way out of a sticky situation. That didn't go over well.

The point here, though, is that I found joy and happiness in learning these things, just as much as I enjoyed maintaining the regimen needed to keep me in perfect shape .

Another of the things that kept me from going insane over that first year was Ace. Training him, feeding him, taking him on walks, all of these things helped to sooth the spark of my soul as it grew steadily more scarred and abused by my new role. Even so, Ace was—as I'd thought he'd be—a handful. He was curious, clever, and tenacious, much like his name declared. All of which meant that I spent a good sliver of my time chasing the bastard down and/or getting him out of scrapes.

On the day I would receive my first mission, Ace had once more found a way to escape the house. When I discovered this between morning drills and lunch time, I made a bee line to the *Lokke Vitras* , even knowing how the coming conversation would go. If I avoided it, he'd think I'd abandoned my training for the day, which wouldn't... end... well for me.

The *Lokke Vitras* was already in the kitchen when I careened into it, propped in a corner with his feet on the bench and a book in his hands.

Not once looking up at me, he said, "Ace is gone again?"

Completely out of breath from my sprint, all I could do was nod.

"Well?" Korix said. "Go find him."

And I would have left right then if I hadn't been absolutely loopy from lack of sleep. I'd stayed up for the last two nights, frantically finishing my studies on some obscure mathematical theorem that the *Lokke Vitras* wanted memorized by the end of the week. Originally, I'd planned to crash for a good five or six hours tonight to pay for the lack, but with this, I wouldn't have time for that. I wasn't sure I'd be mission ready, which the *Lokke Vitras* had always harped on me about maintaining, for the rest of the day.

Fortunately, by that point, I'd figured out that he was occasionally reasonable when it came to my training. He'd give me a break with certain things if he thought it necessary for my health. So, I wasn't too fearful for my life when I opened my mouth.

"Would you come with me to look for him?" I said. "I'm afraid my sleep deprivation might impair me today."

Slowly, the *Lokke Vitras* lifted his eyes to me, staring long enough for my heart to stop beating in my chest, before returning his focus to his book.

"Ace is your dog, *kuvesk*, and you're the one who didn't prevent him from escaping," he said. "So, you have a choice before you. Do you get the sleep you need, caring for your body and therefore leaving Ace in the wild, or do you rescue your dog from his own idiocy? You have until the end of the day to choose and then, act on your choice."

Or he could make this another damn training exercise. Sighing, I bowed to him.

"Thank you for the time, *evushk*," I said.

And I took off for a door outside. There was never a question about the decision I'd make. Ace was my responsibility. If I couldn't teach him how to stay safe, then I had to make a sacrifice to get him back home.

So, I wandered into the moors around the estate, looking for him. I won't detail how I managed that, as it's mediocre story material at best, but I will say that when I eventually found my dog, I was glad I'd gone after him. He'd gotten himself stuck in a bush, whining pitifully as I came closer. Poor thing probably would have starved to death or frozen solid by the time morning came again.

He knew he was in trouble too. For the entire hike home, he trotted beside me with his tail down and his head lowered. I'd never hit him or otherwise abused him, but still, he shied away from me whenever he could read that I was pissed off with him.

When we got home, I brought Ace to the kitchen, exceedingly grateful when I noted that the *Lokke Vitras* had left the room, but almost as soon as my dog had gotten himself settled, a connection opened in my array.

"Meet me in the staging room," the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Before subsequently breaking the connection. A mission? Great... That would be just my luck.

After I'd secured Ace, I hurried to my destination, knowing I didn't have time for anything else. Our 'staging room', as the *Lokke Vitras* had called it, was a small place with a holodrama plate and an attached closet/weapons cache that held everything we might need for a mission. Any random thing we didn't have on hand could be picked up from headquarters while on our way out.

When I entered, the *Lokke Vitras* never looked up, merely pointing me to the wardrobe.

“You need to look like a House Kirst member,” he said.

While I followed instructions, he continued with his brief.

“*Shukusen* Arion is meeting with Orin later this afternoon. Arion requested for the meeting to take place in the Preserve, which has made Orin understandably wary. He doesn’t suspect foul play. If anything happened to Orin, it would be pretty obvious who’d done it, but he still wants a form of protection with him. Talira wants us to take care of it.”

And we’d never find out why that was. My grandmother sometimes had us complete the most random of tasks, ones I at times wondered what the point of them was, but she had to have a good reason for assigning them to us. She wouldn’t have wasted valuable resources like us otherwise.

Having finished changing, I called, “Great. When do we leave?”

“You leave as soon as you’re ready,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “I have things to do, so you’ll handle this by yourself.”

Halfway between the closet and the main room, I stumbled, casting a sharp glance his way. My first solo mission? Today? I’d told him not two hours ago about how sleep deprived I was.

But he met my gaze with nothing in his eyes, and I knew he didn’t care, or rather, that I was suffering the consequences for my choice that morning.

Swallowing hard, I said, “All right. Anything else I should know?”

The *Lokke Vitras* just lifted an eyebrow.

“I don’t know, *kuvesk*. Is there?”

And he left me there, cursing in my head.

Prep didn’t take long, and the process of doing it isn’t worth recording. Just know that by the time I was sitting in a skycruiser, on my way to Xygek, I was ready for almost anything to happen, but then, that was the state I was always supposed to be in.

When I arrived in the capital, I headed straight for House Kirst’s headquarters and once there, subtly announced my presence. At that point, I knew how to act around high Strata, or rather, I’d known how to do that for my whole life. With my own parents in the Second and Third Strata and my grandmother a *shukusen* in her own right, it was kind of hard not to learn behavioral protocol.

Even still, I’d been isolated from Lutovish society for close to two years. I... made some mistakes.

I’m not sure if Orin noticed them. He was a bit too occupied with preparing for his meeting.

His First Stratus, Kaeko, on the other hand, did. Or I think she did. Maybe she just didn’t know who I was. She certainly treated me like a stain on the earth during that mission, like most people did

with House Kolb members.

Soon enough, myself, the *shukusenth*, and their First Strata, left for the Preserve, and hell, if that wasn't awe inspiring. I'd been there a few times since obtaining my new role, but this was the first time I'd visited where the stakes were low. This time, I could pay attention to my surroundings.

Lutov doesn't have much in the way of forests. Ibis certainly does, so many that it boggles the mind, but I had yet to spend much time on the other continent. In my home, the makings of a forest sprinkle the bases of the Barasgami Mountains, but besides that, it's mostly made up of moors, tundra, plains, and the wasteland of the Eastern Reaches. So being surrounded by evergreens, nature blocking out the sky instead of towers, took my breath away.

Mother Time, it was so hushed there, and that hush permeated the *shukusenth's* conversation. I barely heard any of what they said, but then, I wasn't paying much attention to it. I made sure to mark my memories of when their words began so I could reference it later. Talira would undoubtedly ask for a transcription of it at some point, but in general, I was more occupied with watching my surroundings.

The Preserve might have been beautiful, but it was also different terrain than what I was used to.

Still, I caught the disturbance when it happened, although it wasn't of the type Orin had anticipated.

A bear tried to attack our group, and wasn't that fun to deal with? Poor thing must have decided we looked tasty or something. I don't know why it started lumbering toward us from where it had been resting, far off of the path. All I know is that I caught its movement when it got up and angled toward it.

So, yes. I fought a bear. Managed not to kill it too, Mother Time knows how. I'd rather never have to do something so strange again in my life, but it was certainly an experience at the time, and once it was asleep at my feet, I was grinning like a fool, letting the group I was supposed to be guarding get too far ahead of me.

The rest of the meeting continued without a hitch. The only other thing of note that happened came after we'd returned to Kirst's headquarters. Orin tried to berate me for abandoning my post while dealing with our disturbance in the forest. I had far too much fun explaining to him exactly why he was wrong about that before describing the danger he'd been in while I was 'gone'.

But then, I returned to the *Lokke Vitras'* estate with my first solo mission complete and yes. He went extraordinarily easy on me for my first foray into the world as the *Lokke Vitras* to come. I'm perfectly aware of that, both then and now, but it still felt nice to report in and hear very little in the way of criticism from him.

I went to bed happy that night, getting a full six hours of sleep, just like I'd planned.