

Chapter 106: Ascension

My grandmother's office was in shadows with the glow of the city's lights lending it an aura of mystery. As we entered, the door closed behind us with the distinctive thunk of a lock engaging, and I went on alert.

Despite knowing this meeting wasn't a trap, I couldn't help the sudden feeling that it was, and in response, my mind went into overdrive. A thousand different ways to escape a fight popped into my thoughts, but even with that sudden chaos, I took comfort in a single fact. If we worked as one, Korix and I could take Talira down, even if it would require the best from both of us.

As we moved forward, however, Korix squeezed my hand, a subtle reminder that I could relax, and I forced myself to do as he'd suggested. Despite my efforts, I hadn't completely calmed down before we stopped in front of Talira's desk.

She was facing her wall of windows with her arms crossed behind her back and her feet shoulder-width apart, the epitome of martial discipline, and when she whirled on us, I couldn't help responding with the barest of flinches. Flicking her eyes over us, she marched to her desk, resting her fingertips on it.

"In the last three days, you two have caused me more trouble than any other time in my life, both as a *shukusen* and the *Lokke Vitras*," she said. "What do you have to say for yourselves?"

Before I could respond, Korix painfully clenched my hand, hard enough that I kept my mouth shut. Apparently, this was one of those times when I was supposed to let him take the lead.

"I did what I thought was necessary, my *shukusen*," he said. "My *kuvesk* was only following my orders."

"I see," Talira said.

She left us in suspense for quite a while, and with every second of it, my muscles further bunched on themselves. Eventually, though, Talira pushed upright from her desk, and with that one move, the world seemed to pause, listening in on our conversation.

"Your personal status, my *Lokke Vitras*?" my grandmother asked.

"Rapidly deteriorating," Korix answered. "Objectivity questionable at best. Nearing the end of my usefulness."

Humming, Talira said, "And your replacement?"

When Korix glanced at me, I ignored my clenching gut and pattering heart. I'd known what this meeting might entail since Talira had called for it, so I nodded for Korix to say what he must.

Still, he watched me for far too long with his throat working. What was he waiting for? This was best for us both.

Eventually, he slowly swiveled his head back to Talira.

"Ready," he hissed.

I didn't understand why he'd been so reluctant to say that. Tonight's events had been my goal for five years.

Yet, even Talira seemed saddened by Korix's response. Maybe she'd begun mourning the loss of her relationship with him. Maybe she dreaded what was coming next. I didn't know which of those was the case, if either, but I wished she'd get on with this. The waiting was killing me.

"In that case, I find you in contempt of your purpose, my *Lokke Vitras*," she said. "You are stripped of your title, henceforth to be known as Korix of House Kolb. You will retain the privileges of a high Stratus, but otherwise, you are as nothing to me."

And something horrible and long-held fell away from Korix. I could literally see the tension that rolled off of him, spreading a beatific smile across his face, and the sight of it sparked warmth in my heart.

This. This was what I'd needed since I'd realized what he meant to me.

Releasing my hand, Korix bowed over a raised arm.

"Yes, my *shukusen*," he said.

Nodding, Talira turned to me with a petrified look on her face, and even keeping to a congenial façade as I was, I went very, very still inside.

"Zaeden, no House," she solemnly said. "You are forevermore dead to Lutovish society. From now until such time as you take my place, you are the *Lokke Vitras* of Lutov. Long may you preserve the sanctity of your role."

She fell silent, and to my surprise, I found myself at a loss. Thirty years I'd trained for this, eleven of which I'd known what I'd been doing, but now that the title was mine, I felt... nothing. I was the same person. Did that mean I could play the role as Zaeden might have? I supposed there was nothing saying that I couldn't.

Rocking back on my heels, I smirked at Talira.

"Why, thank you, my *shukusen*," I said. "I shall endeavor to be the best *Lokke Vitras* that Lutov's ever seen."

Beside me, Korix burst into laughter, slapping a hand over his mouth in an attempt to hide his snickering, and Talira cast an annoyed glance his way.

“Thank you for your service, Korix,” she said. “You may leave.”

Again, my life partner bowed.

“My pleasure to have served, *shukusen* Talira,” he said.

He gave me one more squeeze before slinking out the door. Once it had closed behind him, though, Talira turned her full attention on me, and almost, I buckled beneath it. Circling her desk, she quirked an eyebrow at me.

“Now is when you kneel before me and pledge your loyalty to your House,” she said.

No. Now was when I made my gamble and hoped that I was right.

“About that,” I said. “How important is your *Lokke Vitras* to you, my *shukusen*?”

Furrowing her brow, Talira said, “I- I don’t- What does that have to do with anything?”

Why did her confusion amuse me as much as it had? With what I was doing, I should only be afraid right now, but I wasn’t. Sure, I might be anxious, but I was also cold calculation, barely resisting a smirk.

“You’ve made a good point. My answer? When it comes to everyone else in Lutov, my importance to you is probably irrelevant, but for me, it’s everything,” I said. “I am irreplaceable to you, or at least, highly inconvenient to get rid of. After all, if I refused to serve as the *Lokke Vitras*, you’d have to fill the role yourself. Who else is skilled enough to do it but you?”

“You *could* use Ko again, I suppose, but you and I both know how close he is to breaking. How would it reflect on House Kolb if its First Stratus started attacking random citizens on the tiers, thinking them his past enemies?”

“So. Here is my proposal. I will serve as your *Lokke Vitras*. I will even claim to be a House Kolb member when in public, but I will never swear loyalty to you or a House. Knowing that I act under my own power, even if no one else does, will be enough for me. Meanwhile, you will ever hold the threat of death over me, as a *shukusen* always does over her *Lokke Vitras*, but you will gain one who’s happy and mostly well-adjusted, which is more than can be said for how you handled Korix.

“Given this, *shukusen*, will you accept my bargain? Or will Lutov suffer for the next several decades?”

I’d never seen my grandmother’s face so red before. She looked like she’d let her temper get the best of her, but after taking a deep breath, she clapped.

“Well done,” she said. “You’re the first to have backed me into a corner in a long while, even if my concession to you will be minimal at best. I accept your bargain.”

Bowing, I said, “Thank you, my *shukusen*.”

This wasn’t freedom from the Houses, not really. I wasn’t naïve enough to believe that I was anything more than a captive in this system still, but for now, it was the best I could do.

As I straightened, I barely contained a grimace. No. I couldn’t look at it like that. What I’d gained here was a start, a position that I could fight from.

And I would continue to fight. One day, I *would* be free.

Leaning on her desk, Talira said, “The concession’s not as great as you might think, considering the second half of your initiation tonight.”

Withholding a smile, I said, “What’s that?”

“I need a way to ensure that you’re *you*, much like with Korix after we woke him up from stasis,” Talira said. “So, I’ll give you a code, one that you’ll bury in your subconscious, and attached to it will be your greatest desire, which you’ll give me now.”

As expected.

“Very well,” I said. “What’s my code?”

With a faint grin, Talira said, “Tango romeo oscar uniform bravo lima echo.”

Trouble? Damn, she’d picked a good one for me. Restraining my laughter took me a moment, but when I could, I followed Korix’s example from last week.

“Tango romeo oscar uniform bravo lima echo,” I repeated. “To be free of the Houses. Tango romeo oscar uniform bravo lima echo.”

Falling still, Talira narrowed her eyes at me.

“That’s your greatest desire?” she asked.

“It is,” I said. “I’ve fought for it since I was six-years-old.”

For a moment, I worried that I’d accidentally killed my grandmother with my ambition, but before I could move to shake her, she filled the office with her laughter, throwing her head back with her shoulders shaking.

When she eventually wiped her eyes, she said, “You’ll be entirely vexing to handle, won’t you?”

I frowned.

“That’s not my intention,” I said.

“And that’s why I love you, Zae-zae. You’ll be a spectacular *Lokke Vitras*,” Talira said. “Now, go home. With recent events, you’ve earned yourself a break. Report to me a week from now, and we’ll go from there.”

Again, I bowed.

“Yes, my *shukusen*,” I said.

Spinning, I raced for the door, ignoring Talira as she muttered behind me.

“Oh, you and I will have so much fun together, grandson.”

Weeks later, Leski’s House naming ceremony came along, and as I took my seat in the stands, I focused on maintaining my easy smile and loose demeanor, ignoring everyone around me. I’d been the *Lokke Vitras* for what already felt like forever, and I still wasn’t used to the stares that were inevitably directed my way.

At the *shukusenth*’s insistence, my identity had been revealed to Lutov shortly after my elevation. Given that, you’d think I’d have gotten used to my new, infamous status, but holy shit. Having so many people focusing on me made my skin crawl. How I wished for the days when it had caused nothing but glee in me. Only Korix’s presence at my side was keeping me from fleeing this place.

I felt sorry for the unHoused here. This was the most important event of their young lives, and I was detracting from it with my presence alone.

Today, however, was also Leski’s day. I would be here for her, this ridiculous woman I’d come to love.

When she eventually mounted the dais, I breathed a silent sigh of relief. I could leave soon. Unfortunately, a message popped into my array at that moment, disturbing my newly gained sense of calm.

We have a problem in Ibis, it read. Dispatch immediately.

While I read the attached files, Korix leaned on me.

“Problem?” he asked in sub-vocals.

“Not really,” I replied in kind. “It can wait five minutes.”

I wasn’t lying about that. Talira wanted me to look into the rumors of subversive behavior circling the current heir to Escad’s throne. It was a silly task, something a lower Stratus could easily handle, but my grandmother had been testing me in recent weeks, her version of revenge for how I’d bested her on the night I’d become the *Lokke Vitras*.

Still, situations like this could easily lead to violence in Ibis, and when possible, my goal had always been to save people's lives, no matter which landmass they called home.

Finished with this year's chosen spokesperson, Leski strode to Talira, exactly as Korix and I had been speculating she'd do. How many nights had we spent idly envisioning a future with all three of us working in similar veins?

Once she knelt, my grandmother tore her glare off of me to lay her hand on my newest partner's head.

"As head of my House, I take this worthy vassal into said House," she said. "May you serve it well."

Rising, Leski found Korix and me in the crowd, and her small smile warmed me.

"See here Leski of House Kolb," this year's spokesperson said.

When applause broke out, I leapt to my feet, cheering, with Korix following suit. The rest of the audience threw scandalized glances our way, not that I cared. With how much trouble I handled for them, they could give me something small like this.

As she returned to her seat, Leski stuck her tongue out at us, although the flash of her beaming grin was soon lost among the unHoused. Once she was settled, I snuck a kiss from Korix before making my way out of the Crescent. Only after I was free of it did I read the twin messages that had popped into my array.

I'm here if you need help, they read.

How I loved them both.

With a fierce smile, I approached my skycruiser, thrusting emotions aside, and once I was in it, I became the *Lokke Vitras*, Lutov's protector and shield.

And I had a rebellion to prevent.

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