

Chapter 16: Can I Not?

Once we were in the outer layer, the *Lokke Vitras* angled us toward one end of it, moving into an office behind its wall. One that belonged to this place's manager, I thought.

When he stepped inside, he never checked whether I'd followed him, and I was so distracted by what was happening that the door almost banged into my healing shoulder as it shut. After it had clicked behind me, I glanced around, taking in the room's desk and leather chairs.

That inspection only lasted for a heartbeat before I was drawn back to a wraith in black, stopped in front of its windows with his hands clasped behind his back.

Unsure what he wanted from me, I stepped away from the door, clearing an avenue of escape for me, and prepared myself, not that I expected a fight to start or that I'd stand a chance against *him* if one did. He said nothing, a perfect statue for several minutes, while I ignored the messages that were piling into my array.

I didn't like this. Why was he here, at a simple House naming ceremony? The only other times something like this had happened, the *Lokke Vitras* at the time had been looking for...

But no. That was impossible. Please, Mother Time, let me be wrong.

"You're drumming a finger on your thigh," the *Lokke Vitras* said. "It's a terrible, nervous habit for an operative to form."

Startled, I paused to assess what he'd said, and he was right. I was tapping my leg. The offending finger was stilled.

"Forgive me, but why am I here?" I forced myself to ask.

Please, say he wouldn't take offense to my point-blank question.

"Sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov over all," he said. "Our people take one piece of this maxim and make it theirs, forgetting the rest, but they can afford to do so. I cannot."

For a moment, I thought he'd say nothing more, but eventually, he turned away from the window, bringing his hands in front of him, while those alluring gray eyes peered at me.

"If I hadn't interrupted your House naming," he said, "what would you have said?"

Was he asking which House I'd have chosen? Would he punish me for my intention to say none? How had he known what I'd meant to say when even I hadn't?

With his lips twitching, the *Lokke Vitras* said, "You're not in trouble, Zaeden. I'm asking because I'm... curious."

Could someone like him get curious?

Still, I had no choice but to answer. The *Lokke Vitras* had complete authority when it came to keeping Lutov safe. I didn't see how one unHoused could threaten that, but I answered anyway.

"I'd have said no House..."

What was the proper term of address for the *Lokke Vitras*? He didn't seem to mind my lack of respect, nodding as if in understanding.

"That's what I thought, which is why I stepped in when I did. You'd have been making a mistake. This is a little earlier than I'd have liked but..." he said before gesturing to the chairs. "You may take a seat if you want."

And relinquish this feeble advantage that I had on him? No, thank you.

"I'm more comfortable on my feet," I said.

Again, those lips twitched, and I frowned. Where had I seen that before?

Circling a chair, the *Lokke Vitras* folded into it before spreading his arms.

"And now?" he asked.

Did he know why I'd rather ignore his suggestion?

"I would prefer to stand," I said.

And again, with that twitch. Why was it so familiar?

Slowly, the *Lokke Vitras* plucked blades and other weapons off of his body, making a pile of them at his feet.

"What about now?" he asked.

He *did* know why I'd rather stay on my feet.

Sighing, I crossed my arms.

"I'm sorry, but unless you order it, I won't give you an advantage on me," I said. "I'm well aware that you could kill me, even now, but I have to give myself every chance of escaping you regardless."

The twitch of his lips bloomed into a faint smile, and I knew why seeing it had sent a pang of recognition through me. Rather than relief at a mystery solved, however, this knowledge created a

layer of front along my insides.

“All right, then,” he said. “Zaeden, as House Kolb’s First Stratus, I command you to sit with me.”

I could swear I’d become a wooden doll. My joints creaked as I unfolded from my hunched state, took the four steps needed to reach my relegated chair, and lowered myself into it. When I clenched my hands in my lap, my knuckles turned white.

“Garreth,” I said.

Finally, I prompted a true reaction. The *Lokke Vitras* leaned on his chair’s arm, lifting an eyebrow. He said nothing, but then, I didn’t need him to.

“Is that even your name?” I asked.

“I am the *Lokke Vitras*,” he said. “I have no name.”

My fear had escaped from its cage, trying to consume me, and it took everything I had to keep from shouting its existence at him while turning his way.

“Why did you let me kidnap you?” I asked.

Knowing what I did now, I was under no illusion that the situation in Ostiu had ever been under my control.

“I found the situation amusing. No one’s tried something so audacious with me in ages,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “Plus, I wanted to test your skills. I saw you in the stacks where we met. You were scanning it for weaknesses, and that was your first reaction to the place, not the wide-eyed wonder that most people exhibit. After that, I had to know how qualified you were.”

He’d been testing me. At the thought, something flared in my gut.

“And?” I said, barely keeping myself from snapping at him.

His smile became a sardonic grin, and at the sight of it, my insides both melted and coiled on themselves.

“And you did well,” he said. “Better than expected, actually.”

“So, you told my grandmother everything that happened,” I said.

Why did I sound like I was a hairsbreadth from strangling him? That was *not* the way I should address the dangerous as hell man in front of me.

“Mother Time, I should have known you’d make a recording of it,” I continued. “I exposed myself to you, unearthing my deepest desire. The one that could get me exiled or worse. That I hold no loyalty-”

"I never shared our conversation in the transport with Talira," the *Lokke Vitras* said, "which is fortunate because after I showed the other memories to her, she had me eliminate them in my array. I'd have hated to lose them all."

Wait. She'd done *what*?

A person's array was intertwined with their brain. Was the *Lokke Vitras* expected to sacrifice something so inherent to who they were for Lutov's security? How could my grandmother equate my safety with another person's loss of memory? And why had he said his failure to share everything had been fortunate for him?

An image of me, projected about the *Lokke Vitras*' lifted palm interrupted my contemplation. Sitting in a transport's typical harness with clouds swiftly passing behind me, I looked cold with my rifle resting on my knee. I'd never seen myself without a persona attached, and observing it now, I shivered.

Then, the recorded version of me spoke.

"I see the House system as necessary," I said in an empty voice. "How else could Lutov function as one civilization instead of endless, squabbling factions? Its necessity doesn't mean I have to like it, though. It doesn't mean I can't wish for more. It doesn't mean I want to surrender my freedom."

The image winked out while the hand projecting it lowered, and the *Lokke Vitras* watched me, waiting to see how I'd react.

"Do you mean to blackmail me?" I asked, as if inquiring about the weather.

He chuckled under his breath.

"Hardly. I found what you said... interesting," he said. "I didn't tell Talira about it so I could keep a copy for myself."

Why would he want a recording of me? Or better question...

"What do you want with me?" I asked.

Tilting his head to the side, the *Lokke Vitras* looked at me like I was an ignorant child.

"Don't you know?" he asked.

I... did. It was what I'd been afraid of.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I looked away from him.

"Do I get a choice?" I whispered.

His silence was answer enough. Despair pounded against its barrier, but I managed to restrain it, which meant that my voices emerged just as dead as before.

“Is freedom real?” I asked. “Or is it something that we’ve created to resist our lack of choice?”

I didn’t expect a response. Why would the *Lokke Vitras* have considered this topic, after all? So, when he spoke, it pulled me out of a fall into hopelessness.

“Freedom is a lie,” he said. “Even if you could escape from the Houses, Zaeden, you’d be a slave to your family’s needs and expectations, and if you escaped from them, you would enslave yourself with your decisions, made only to satisfy your body’s needs and your subconscious. This, however, isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Living for a purpose, like the safety of the nation, can be quite fulfilling.”

He couldn’t know how systematically he’d crushed my hopes and dream. I was left with nothing to strive for, no goal that I might someday achieve, so I latched onto the next best thing: someone else’s purpose for me.

Jerking toward the *Lokke Vitras*, I snapped, “You want me to be your replacement?”

For the briefest moment, a flicker of surprise sprang to life in him.

“Yes,” he said, keeping his voice carefully controlled.

Shooting to my feet, I looked down on him.

“Then, let’s get started,” I said. “Train me to be the next *Lokke Vitras*.”

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