

# Chapter 18: Ok, I'm a Badass

## 1

My footfalls spun the conspiracy's remaining members to me, and I held my hands to either side, spreading my fingers to show that I was unarmed.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and others!" I called. "This is highly inappropriate behavior!"

Ugh. Clarx was lingering. With a silent growl, I beat that persona back beneath the surface with a stick.

"The weapons at your feet should be in lockup, not planned for delivery to children of Ibis," I said. "Unless you mean to give them lessons as well, those unfortunate people are more likely to hurt themselves with your gifts than to damage whoever you're aiming them at."

One of the women—their leader, presumably—stood from the group's crouched huddle to face me.

"Who are you?" she snapped.

Good question. Not the first thing I'd have asked or done in her position, but to each their own.

"He's that idiot I followed to lockup," Vray said. "Um... Clarx, Fifth Stratus was what my identity check returned with."

"A Fifth Stratus?" the man in their midst said. "Well, then. This should be simple enough to clear up."

He stood, brushing himself off.

"I'm—"

"Laytn, Third Stratus of House Vaessa, I know," I said, "and this idiot has been hunting you for four months. Much longer than it should have taken, yes, but I was working under special circumstances."

Like using a persona that I despised.

After a pause, the other two were on their feet, pointing previously hidden weapons my way, and I stopped. That was fine, though. I was close enough.

I was surprised it had taken them this long to halt my advance. That had been sloppy, but then, what else should I have expected from House Vaessa members?

“You’re from House Kolb?” the last woman asked.

Never let it be said that House Vaessa members were stupid, though. They just had no tactical awareness, and to be fair to them, a skill like that wasn’t required for what they did.

With a faint grin, I said, “Yes and no.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Vray snapped.

At the same time, Laytn asked, “What’s your Stratus? As part of the high Strata, I have access to many luxuries. Perhaps we can work something out.”

Evidence of corruption. Given how many House Kolb members I’d dragged before *shukusen* Talira for accepting an offer like this, Laytn’s proposal shouldn’t surprise me, but the innocent part of me, yet to be crushed despite everything I’d seen and done, decried it.

“I have no Stratus,” I said in answer. “Not yet.”

“They sent someone who’s yet to be placed after us?” one of the unarmed women said. “No. Another operative has to be with him. How else could the others have been caught?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “You’ve misunderstood me, but perhaps this will clear it up.”

Straightening, I lowered my hands to my sides.

“By the power of the *Lokke Vitras*, imbued in me, I find you guilty of planning to harm Lutov,” I said. “Peacefully surrender, or I cannot guarantee who among you will survive this day.”

As I’d been speaking, their faces had slowly leached of color, and one of the women stumbled, nearly falling. I watched them for a moment, letting everything I’d said sink in, until Vray gave the only appropriate response for someone in her situation.

“We’re fucked.”

“Not necessarily,” I said. “You’ll probably be stripped of House and Stratus for a while, working for the good of Lutov until Vaessa takes you back, but they will do that. Eventually. The Houses always do. Once they have, you’ll probably stay low Stratus for a few decades, but I have no doubt that you’ll reach your current level again, given time. Yes, your lives will be hell for a while, but you won’t be dead. I highly recommend any choice that results in your survival.”

Baring his teeth, Laytn lifted his weapon, and sighing, I slowly adjusted my position so that he was aiming somewhere less deadly.

“You’re good enough to take on the four of us at once?” he said. “You said ‘power of the *Lokke Vitras*, imbued in me.’ Therefore, not him, right? Seems to me we have a chance. Ladies?”

With my hands raised once more, I waited for them to make a decision, keeping half of my attention on the man pointing a pistol at me, while the women exchanged glances and probably messages as well. I shouldn’t let them form a plan. By right, their lives had been mine the moment after I’d declared myself, but I’d never liked starting a fight that might end in bodies unless I absolutely had to.

When an unnamed woman joined Laytn in aiming a weapon at me, I knew this confrontation wouldn’t go my way—

“He’s right,” she said.

—but I tried to delay its inevitable conclusion anyway. Mother Time, I didn’t know why I always did this. It would only end in a scolding for me later.

But only if *he* was watching. In case *he* was, I wiggled my fingers in the direction of a nearby recorder.

The other two conspirators took aggressive stances, and I winced. With the way they were standing, their pistols’ kickback would send them careening to the floor.

“Really?” I said. “You’d rather try to kill me than relinquish your lives’ luxuries for a while?”

That wouldn’t surprise me. Of the people I’d brought in over the years, high Stratus House members had always been the ones most likely to fight me.

“We don’t care about that. We’re doing this for the children of Ibis,” Vray snarled. “They don’t deserve what we do to them, but they’ll never have a chance at living normal lives or pushing us out of their land without weapons like these. Lutov won’t let Ibis go. Some of us have to help them if they’re ever to gain their freedom.”

The others in the group nodded or murmured their agreement, and I cocked my head. Ibisian sympathizers in House Vaessa? That was new.

“I understand what you’re trying to do,” I said, “but freeing Ibis this way will only end in a slaughter—”

“How is that any worse than the hundreds of them we kill *every day*?” Laytn snapped.

He’d... made a good point, but handling social problems like this wasn’t my job, unfortunate as that was. Keeping Lutov safe was, and these four had threatened her. So once again, I must set aside my personal thoughts and feelings on the matter.

“Sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov over all,” I breathed to myself before raising my voice. “I’d rather not send you to the Collective before your time.”

“Well, you’ll have to try anyway,” Laytn said.

He set his shoulders, leaving my attempt to peacefully capture these conspirators a heartbeat away from failing. Dammit.

My rifle was in my hand without a thought to call for it, and House Kolb speed brought it to bear on Laytn before he could squeeze his pistol’s trigger. His face filled my vision while I lined up a quick and painless kill shot and...

I froze. Laytn’s energy bolt took me in the gut which...

*Ow.*

But I’d gotten used to injuries like this, at least while I was in the heat of battle. It didn’t slow me down.

I grabbed a woman to serve as a shield against her companions, and as expected, they were far less willing to hurt her than they had been with me.

“Do you lot even know what those things do?” I called over her sobs, gesturing at the weapons that had started this.

The other three wordlessly stared at me, obviously afraid to move lest I blow their friend’s head off of her shoulders. Had they not seen me hesitating with Laytn? If they hadn’t, it was to my advantage but...

Shit. *He* might have seen me locking up again. Fantastic.

But I needed to focus on the here and now, not on what might have happened.

“I thought not,” I called before smirking. “You might not know what you’ve stolen, but I do.”

Slamming my rifle’s stock into my captive’s head, I thrust her away from me. I didn’t know if my blow would drop her, but I didn’t have time for anything else right now.

Diving toward the weapons, I snatched a suppression grenade from among them, activated it, and rolled it toward Laytn. It stopped at his feet, drawing a yelp from him before a loud puff of air was released.

I didn’t stop to watch how the grenade would affect him, already intimately aware of what it would look like. Instead, I rolled to my feet, which had my gut protesting while an alert flashed in my array, and halfway up, something slammed into my back.

Somehow, I stayed on my feet despite that, jerking away from a second blow, but the initial one had been forceful enough to jar something in my spine. That would be fun to deal with once this was over, but for now, I ignored how much my vision flashed if I moved the wrong way, which I did a lot of while dodging energy bolts.

As soon as I got a chance, I raised my rifle, aimed, and fired twice, all in a heartbeat, and Vray screamed, falling to one knee while her fried pistol tumbled out of her fingers. I needed to put her out of commission before the blackened hole in her shin healed, but that wouldn't be for a while yet. I had time to deal with my other... *three* opponents?

How the hell had Laytn stayed awake through a damn suppression grenade? Mother Time, these people really were desperate to see their goal met.

When he passed the pile of weapons, poor Laytn got five more doses of suppression gas, courtesy of my rifle's bolts, but honestly, he should count his luck. My last shot had almost hit an actual grenade.

That *should* take care of him, but I pulled a nearby recorder's feed into my array so I could keep watch. Just in case.

One of the remaining women got a bolt through her hip, and as she fell to the floor, clutching at it, I winced. I knew how painful a wound like that was.

The last conspirator, the first of them to show sense, ducked behind cover, but she didn't lay down suppressing fire as well. She let me wander among her comrades, jabbing them with hypos full of the strongest sedatives Lutov could produce, while catching her breath.

"You should stop this and surrender," I said. "You can't match me by yourself, and in the long run, it'll go better for you if you stop resisting me now."

She didn't reply, and shaking my head, I made my way to the crate that she was hiding behind with my rifle raised and every sense strained. I didn't think she'd make this difficult for me, but nonetheless, I treated this last target as if she was the most dangerous threat I'd ever faced. With my steps near-silent and breathing rate almost non-existent, she'd have to claim Magsense magic to hear me coming.

Somehow, she knew where I was without that. As I approached the corner of the crate, she stuck her pistol into view before squeezing its trigger.

From this point-blank range, the shot *obliterated* my knee, and with a grunt, I toppled. The woman came into view, but instead of finishing me off as she should, she ran.

"Mother fucking Time! Dammit!" I shouted.

With the nerve endings in my wounded leg already dampened, I pulled emergency stabilizers out of my pocket. Clarx had carried these around out of paranoia, a trait I'd built into the persona. House Vaessa might not have allowed me a real weapon while here, even if I'd acted like one of their members, but after the many years I'd been doing this, there had been no way in hell I was going on a mission without some form of first aid on me.

The stabilizer's gel hardened, and I struggled to reach my feet, taking off in a lurching sprint once there. Because my makeshift cast was unable to fully take my weight, my leg wanted to buckle

every fifth step, but as long as I could keep going, I didn't care how well it worked. For now.

I caught up to my target a hallway over. Other House Vaessa members scattered out of our path, especially when I fired a warning shot over the conspirator's head.

Slowing to a stop, she spun, pointing her pistol at my chest. I kept the bolt that she fired from destroying my heart, but I wasn't fast enough to miss the shot entirely. It clipped my lung, which was just... wonderful, but the adrenaline rush that the injury imparted certainly helped with my aim. My next shot left burn marks on the woman's face, and she froze.

"Drop it," I said, barely keeping myself from wheezing. "What's the plan, huh? Escape the Travel Center and hide among the children of Ibis? Do you want to live like them?"

"I want them to be free," she cried.

Nodding, I said, "I know, but how can you help them if someone from House Kolb is constantly on your tail? They won't stop chasing you. You know this, and no matter what personal beliefs they might hold about Ibis, they *will* kill you or bring you in eventually. Just... come with me now, and I'll put in a good word with *shukusen* Raelle for you."

When doubt flickered to life in her, her aim wavered, and I shot the spigot above her head, setting alarms blazing and water dousing everyone in the hall. The conspirator slapped her hands over her ears to block that deafening noise, and with a burst of House Kolb speed, I was pumping her full of sedatives before she could gasp.

Catching her as she sagged, I slowly got her over my shoulders before limping back to the 'warehouse'. Once I had my targets laid out in front of me, I stared at their sprawled forms with my hands on my hips, swaying in place.

## **TTS Chapter Eighteen**

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