

# Chapter 19: Ok, I'm a Badass

## 2

Well. This had been a travesty.

For the love of all that might be holy, say I was wrong. Say *he* hadn't been watching. If *he* hadn't been, I might have time to retrieve the feeds from any nearby recorders and doctor them a bit-

A direct connection established in my array, and I started cursing in my head. I didn't get an image because *of course I didn't*, but I had no doubt that I was still under watch.

"*Kuvesk*. We need to talk," *he* said. "Come home, and burn your cover while you leave. It doesn't suit you."

I tried so hard to be an obedient student and retain my protest, but I couldn't help myself.

"Shouldn't I hold onto every tool I have, even if it's a little broken?" I asked.

Silence stretched over the connection, and the longer it continued, the more I winced. Oo. *He* wasn't happy.

"Are you questioning me?" *he* eventually asked.

I shook my head so roughly that I was momentarily afraid it would fly off my neck, wincing at the twinges it produced.

"No, *evushk*," I said. "I wouldn't *dare*."

Oh, that had been dumb. Closing one eye, I bit the inside of my lip, silently praying.

*Let the snark go. Let the snark go.*

"Just do as you're told," *he* said. "Come home."

The connection cut, and I slumped a little, even knowing that *he* was probably watching.

I didn't know why I'd provoked *him* as much as I had. It wasn't smart, would probably get me severely hurt someday, but no matter how much I tried to stifle it, sarcasm still came out sometimes.

The four unconscious House Vaessa members in front of me could stay where they were. Someone would be along shortly to collect them, but their stolen weapons were another matter entirely. I couldn't leave them here, where they might fall into untrained hands, so I oh-so-slowly gathered them as best I could and limped away from the recent site of conflict.

As I made my way to a lockup, I started the process of assuming my natural features once more. I hadn't changed much for this mission: added a rash of freckles across my nose, leached a bit of color from my eyes, and softened my cheekbones. But reversing these alterations would take hours without an accelerant to speed up the process, although small shifts should be noticeable soon.

All the while, I continued monitoring my injuries, making sure any nerve endings connected to them remained dampened. I hadn't fully read through the list of the damage I'd accrued, the one that my array kept insistently pushing into view, but at the least, I made sure I couldn't feel them and that they didn't get any worse than they already were.

When I reached the lockup, the Second Stratus from earlier was waiting for me with his arms crossed and his foot tapping, and seeing this, I grimaced. As I came through the door, I exaggerated my limp, allowing the wheeze in my lungs to come through as I spread his things across the counter.

"Please, forgive the delay," I said. "We... the Travel Center hasn't had a high Stratus come through in a while. I jumped on the opportunity to finish my mission."

Leaning on the counter, I gently prodded a wound while the Second Stratus narrowed his eyes.

"You're Kolb too. Deep cover?" he asked.

I nodded, although technically the first wasn't true yet.

Critically running his eyes over me, the Second Stratus asked, "Are you ok?"

I flapped a hand at him.

"I'm fine. Gut shot, knee shattered all to hell, a hole in one lung, and a possibly slipped disk in my spine. I haven't checked the alert on that one yet," I said. "All in a day's work, right?"

I knew it wasn't. I knew I'd taken an excessive amount of damage, only kept upright by my body's quickened ability to heal itself, but I just *loved* making someone's eyes pop like that.

"No, it's not. Mother Time, we need to get you to a hospital," the Second Stratus said. "What happened? What was your mission, and hell, what's your Stratus? If you've advanced too early..."

Chuckling, I pushed off the counter, dropping all signs of my pain.

"I haven't," I said. "Tell me. Have my features started blurring yet?"

As he crinkled his brow, the Second Stratus said, "No. Why-?"

“Good. I can answer your questions, then,” I said. “A few months ago, Vaessa requested help, asking us to find the people stealing weapons from their lockups. The stolen items kept finding their way into the hands of local children of Ibis, which wasn’t good for the safety of Lutovish visitors. Over the last few months, I’ve rooted out the conspiracy, tagging the last four today.”

“Did they jump you?” the Second Stratus said. “Is that why the...?”

He waved a hand over my body, trying to play it cool even though my change in demeanor had clearly unsettled him.

“No, I confronted them, hoping they’d surrender. I didn’t want anyone hurt, at least not permanently, and while I failed to talk them down, everyone who took part in the confrontation is still breathing, even if we’re a little battered.”

The Second Stratus raised an eyebrow.

“Four of them. By yourself. And none of them are dead,” he said. “Are you sure about that? Even a high Stratus like myself would find something like that difficult.”

“Right! Your last question! You wanted to know my Stratus,” I said. “I don’t have one and seriously doubt I will for a while yet. I can’t gain my Stratus until my *evushk* leaves his position open, and he’s far too stubborn to relinquish it for some time yet. Mother Time help us all if he dies before I’m ready.”

The poor man looked mighty confused and maybe a tad fearful now. Good instincts on this one and enough sense to partially overcome the impossibility of who I was. I could see why he was Second Stratus.

“Who’s this *evushk*?” he asked. “Maybe I can help you. Your teacher’s clearly putting you in situations that you shouldn’t be anywhere near yet.”

“But that will be my job. To travel to the places no one will go and undertake the tasks that no one should have to accept. After all, am I not to sacrifice self? Am I not to put House before myself and those I love? Am I not to hold Lutov in the center of my heart?” I said. “As for my *evushk*, he is... *evushk*, and while I appreciate your offered help, you couldn’t give it to me, even if I wanted it. *Evushk* is higher Stratus than you. You couldn’t touch him.”

I shrugged while the Second Stratus blanched.

“*Lokke Vitras* to come,” he said. “Mother Time, the things I said to you. Please, accept my apology.”

Bowing to me, he moved to cup his neck, and I leaned over the counter, snatching his wrist before he could get his hand in place.

And all the while, my gut wound screamed at me.

*"Don't do that,"* I snapped. *"Never give your Favor to someone like me or evushk. You don't know what terrible things we might demand from you."*

While the Second Stratus stammered, I whipped my eyes over this lockup, re-checking the recorder placement in it before requesting their feeds. I needed to erase what I could of them as thoroughly as possible, removing evidence of the honor that this man had meant to convey.

It was a tribute that would instead become a vulnerability for us both. That he'd almost gave me his Favor and I'd refused it... it wasn't good, wasn't *done* in Lutov, so I needed any recordings of it removed. The evidence of it would never be gone, but I could diminish its traces to the point that my enemies wouldn't look for it.

When I received my requested feeds, however, they were blank. They'd captured nothing since I'd walked into this lockup.

*His work.* I didn't know whether to be grateful that *he'd* been looking out for me or annoyed that *he'd* have more fodder for the lecture I was sure to soon receive.

After focusing on the surface world once more, I found the Second Stratus glancing between my hold on him and a point below my chest. Releasing him, I hopped to the ground, and the world went fuzzy for a moment, making me grab for the counter.

Somehow, I didn't black out, pulling my fingers, one by one, off of sticky, wet metal. My blood was coating it, and hastily, I wiped the mess clean with a sleeve.

Glancing down, I winced at the spread of red across my shirt. That would make reaching departures frustrating, and the annoyance of it would only get worse the longer I delayed here.

*"Second Stratus, please tell me that my features have started blurring,"* I said.

Damn, he looked troubled.

*"They... have,"* he said. *"Do you need me to get help?"*

Shaking my head, I said, *"I'm fine. I need you to go about your House business and pretend you never met me here."*

*"Of course,"* the Second Stratus said. *"Are you sure you don't want anything else from me?"*

*"I am,"* I said. *"Get out of here, please."*

Gathering his weapons, the Second Stratus left, casting a final, concerned look my way.

While I waited for him to create sufficient distance between us, I reviewed the alerts that I'd ignored to this point. I knew most of their contents already, but two of them confirmed suspicions I hadn't yet verified.

Namely, yes. A herniated disk in my spine was pinching its nerve, which explained the horrendous twinges that ran through me whenever I stepped the wrong way, and yes, I'd need additional medical treatment when I got home.

The pressure I'd applied to my gut wound had ruptured a grazing burn on my intestines, which had leaked acid and other... things into my abdomen, and soon enough, this would cause sepsis. The damage to my intestines alone, my body could fix, but repairing the wound while also fighting itself? Not so much.

Damn, *he* wouldn't be happy with me. *He* never liked it when I returned so badly damaged.

Dragging myself through the Travel Center was *hell*, but I made myself walk confidently, turning off pain receptors as needed. As I passed through arrivals, the woman who'd replaced me earlier today raised a hand.

"Hey! Did you forget something?" she asked. "You were lucky. We had a rush of visitors come through after your shift..."

Trailing off, Soaph frowned at me, keeping her eyes on my abdomen. The rusty stain found there would probably have people trying to stop me soon, and wouldn't that be fun to handle?

Soaph hurried toward me with her hands outstretched.

"Clarx! What happened?" she asked. "Are you-?"

"I'm not Clarx," I said, never stopping.

She spun to follow me.

"What are you talking about?" she asked. "Pax, we need help over here."

The man lounging behind the checkpoint for departures never moved his eyes off of his monitor.

"What sort of help?" he asked.

"The medical emergency type," Soaph snapped. "Get off your ass and help me!"

She was pulling on my arm, trying to get me to a chair, but I shook her off easily enough. At the frustrated shriek that this caused, Pax glanced up and shot to his feet, raising a cautionary hand.

"Clarx. Buddy. Stop moving before you hurt yourself more," he said. "Let's get you somewhere more comfortable until emergency services arrive."

When I showed no sign of following his advice, he moved into my path.

"Please, Clarx-"

Clicking my tongue, I said, "Like I told Soaph, I am *not* your Clarx, never was."

A burst of House Kolb speed got me around Pax before he could grab me.

“And I don’t require your aid,” I called.

Moving into departures, I headed for the closest beacon, smiling at its receptionist when I breezed inside. She scrambled to her feet while a cry rose behind her.

“Stop him! Something’s wrong-”

“Nothing’s wrong,” I interrupted. “I’m just burning Clarx of House Vaessa and good riddance to him. Maintaining that persona was a trial. No, I have finished my mission here. It’s time for me to go home.”

Even without looking, I could feel anger rising behind me as realization took hold. Much as I might have disliked the Clarx persona, he’d made friends with good people here, people who would struggle with everything that came after an operative’s betrayal.

Mother Time, Keaya, who would meet hostility from her comrades for never figuring out her romantic fling’s true nature.

There was a reason Kolb was the most hated House.

“You can’t make an unauthorized jump to Lutov,” someone growled behind me.

“Sure I can,” I said.

Spinning in place, I observed people radiating disgust and hatred, imprinting the image in my mind, and laid a hand on the ring around the beacon.

And nothing happened. Because after a quick check, I learned that my *Lokke Vitras* privileges had been revoked.

Flinging my head back, I groaned, “For fuck’s sake, *evushk*.”

*He* would make the final phase of a mission more difficult, perfectly aware that process cracking was my weak spot. Fortunately, I’d improved enough with it to bypass the security that protected the beacon, activating it before the House Vaessa members circling me could come closer.

Receiving the permission that it needed, the beacon did its work, and for a moment, I was ripped into a million-million parts, but after that initial discomfort, I was standing in the Terminal.

## **[TTS Chapter Nineteen](#)**

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