

Chapter 24: Perhaps I'm a Good Brother 2

I wondered what my parents wanted. Would they ask me to leave, taking the danger that I represented elsewhere? Or perhaps they planned to beg for their children's lives.

They gave me plenty of space, whether to gain an advantage on me or to give me an avenue of escape, I couldn't say. Unfortunately, this distance meant that we couldn't speak out loud without interrupting Pheniks, so we relied on our array's translation of our sub-vocals instead.

"We didn't forget you," mom said.

What? Why on earth-?

Right. What I'd said in my emotional state.

"Oh?"

I gave her nothing more, which had her shifting in place.

"We acted like you'd died because in a way, you had," mom said. "One day, you'll take over for the current *Lokke Vitras*, and when that happens, Zaeden will cease to exist. You'll have to abandon your ties with loved ones, and we thought you'd prefer to do that sooner rather than later."

Great. I'd heard this line of reasoning a thousand times before, but it had never come from someone I could argue with.

"I'm not forbidden love," I said, "and I have no intention of giving it or you up."

"You say that now," dad said. "What if your loved ones become a threat to Lutov, though? Will you fail in your duty so you can satisfy your own needs?"

"Sacrifice self, dad. It's the first part of the *Lokke Vitras*... oath, we'll call it," I said. "You've posed a good point, though. I'll have to consider it."

My parents shivered, and I was wondering what had caused it when mom came to my side and took my hand.

"We love you, Zaeden, and we want what's best for you," she said, "but we're limited in how we can show that by the constraints of who you are now."

“And we love them too,” dad said.

He nodded to Feena and Pheniks, who were immersed in their conversation, and I knew what he was trying to say. If they were right and I couldn't have loved ones because they might endanger Lutov, then I should leave them now instead of later. I should become the dead, middle sibling.

When my parents looked at me with tight eyes, I let my gaze slide off of them.

“Understood,” I said.

Mom squeezed my hand, but then, she and dad moved far away from me, and surrounded by people, I was alone. I'd been here many times before but never with people who were important to me, and that... hurt.

Eventually, someone mentioned that we should get some sleep if we wanted to be prepared for tomorrow. So, we exchanged good nights—although mine were made awkward, no matter how smoothly I tried to give them—before separating for the evening, or I thought that was what we'd done. I was proven wrong when Feena hurried to catch up with me after the others had disappeared.

“Can I speak with you?” she asked.

Odd question.

“Since when have you needed to ask me that?” I said.

“Fair,” Feena said, rubbing the back of her neck. “I thought you might be busy with something.”

What could I have to do besides...?

Wait. Did she think I had House business in the city? If I did, I certainly wouldn't be staying in such a compromised, emotionally fraught location while doing it. But then again...

“You have no idea what I've been up to for the last six years, do you?” I said with a laugh tugging on my lips.

“How exactly am I *supposed* to know?” Feena snapped. “You've never sent us messages, so we've had to rely on possible *Lokke Vitras* sightings to have an inkling of just your damn location, let alone—”

“I've been in the Southern Fells when I'm not on a mission,” I said. “But no, I'm not busy. *Evushk* gave me time so I could attend Phen's House naming ceremony.”

“*Evushk*?”

Oh, yes. Dad had had this same problem. Sometimes, I forgot that *evushk* was the opposite of a teacher in everyone else's mind.

"Your First Stratus, Feena," I said.

She stopped short, and puzzled, I watched her until she clasped her hands in front of her face.

"That's right! You know the *Lokke Vitras*," she said with her eyes shining. "What's he like?"

When had she gotten over her fear of talking about him?

Cocking my head, I considered how best to answer her. *Evushk* wouldn't like me disclosing details about him, private as he was, but I'd like to share something with Feena. Maybe if I gave her a single word, he wouldn't be upset by it. What was the best word to describe him, though?

The answer to that question came to me so quickly that it spawned a fierce grin on my face.

"Quiet," I said.

Continuing toward my room, I chuckled under my breath at the confused noise that rose from behind me, and when she drew alongside me again, Feena cast a dubious glance my way.

"The *Lokke Vitras*, a one-man army and the cause of nightmarish amounts of chaos, is quiet?" she said.

"Mhmm. Sometimes, the estate goes for days without a sound," I said. "Well, except for the ones that Ace makes."

Feena had to know that I was trying to change the subject, but she allowed it anyway.

"Ace?"

"Our dog," I said. "No, that's not right. Ace is *my* dog. *Evushk* brought him home soon after I moved to his estate."

If Feena's gaze had been dubious before, it had become accusatory disbelief now.

"The *Lokke Vitras* got you a dog," she said.

"Sure," I said. "Ace was the first step in my training."

For some reason, this assertion closed Feena's face off.

"How so?" she asked.

Hmm. I didn't know if I could answer that question. Could someone besides the *Lokke Vitras* know the details of my training?

I found the idea likely. The people who held the position of the *Lokke Vitras* met unexpected ends quite frequently, so spreading the knowledge of how to train a new one made sense. Still, my sister didn't seem like the type of person who'd need to know-

Feena raced around me to grab my arms with her lips peeled back and her eyes sparking.

“What did he make you do?” she growled.

Why was she so upset? More importantly, if I refused to answer her question, what would Feena do? Would she decide that our parents had been right about me?

If my training was supposed to be kept secret, it wasn't worth distancing her over.

“When *evushk* brought Ace home as a puppy, he ordered me to maim the dog,” I said with a shrug. “I refused, which was what he'd wanted. He needed to know if I was a monster before making me into one.”

That hadn't been Ace's only purpose. At the time, I'd been sent reeling by the sudden change in my life and the death of my dreams. I'd needed *something* to hold onto, a companion to help ease me into my new role, and that was what Ace had become.

I'd never been sure if *evushk* had meant to grant me such kindness with his gift. What I did know was that he'd been much more lenient in my training than he should have been. I'd seen flics of other people in my position, so I knew what the training of a potential *Lokke Vitras* was supposed to look like. Over the years I'd spent with him, there was no doubt in my mind that my *evushk* had deviated from this tried-and-true route.

That wasn't to say that he'd never been harsh with me, of course. Given what the *Lokke Vitras* was meant to handle and represent, I didn't think anyone could undergo the training to become one without some element of horror included in it.

Having heard my answer, Feena loosened her grip on me, but the intensity of her gaze never softened.

“If he gave you that same order now, what would you do?” she asked.

That was an... uncomfortable question for many reasons. Besides the obvious, it brushed up against my current inability to end a life, and... I didn't know whether to be honest with Feena about this. She wouldn't like what I had to say.

Maybe I could hedge my way out of answering her.

“It would depend on the circumstances,” I said.

Feena dug her fingernails into my arms.

“So, you might break a puppy's legs on command?” she snarled.

With my lips going thin, I knocked her hands off of me.

"If refusing to do it endangered Lutov in some, frankly, bizarre way, then yes. I would. Without hesitation," I said. "But I would look for another solution to the problem first. I would hate myself while doing it, and afterward, I would care for the poor thing. Why are you asking me this, Feena? Are you that eager to see how much I've changed?"

Gaping, she wouldn't answer me, and with a click of my tongue, I skirted around her.

What had I been thinking, giving her honesty? Believing that I could be myself around anyone besides the one man who understood me was naïve.

It was fine, though. Lesson learned. From now on, I'd use a persona when around my family. Where in my head had I left the blueprint for the one that I'd discarded years ago?

While I tried to remember how that Zaeden had acted, I turned into my room, starting a more thorough search of it once inside. Feena entered behind me, but I didn't speak a word to her. Not only would my persona take much longer to assume than normal, considering how long it had been since I'd last used it, but I didn't know what else I could say right now. She needed a night to digest my given truth before I could deconstruct her new perceptions of me.

She'd never gotten around to telling me what she'd first needed. Maybe that was why she'd followed me.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a small voice.

When I glanced at her, Feena was hugging herself while biting a lip, and I shook my head. If I made her that uncomfortable, then why was she here?

"I'm checking for traps and poisons," I said. "I didn't have time to do it earlier."

"You think one of us would *poison* you?" Feena squeaked.

Chuckling, I started rearranging items in the room so I'd know whether someone had searched it. Thank Mother Time I had monitors for faux windows, leaving the door as this place's only access point.

"That's always a possibility, but I highly doubt it would happen," I said. "It's more likely that someone snuck into this apartment, whether today or years ago, to set a trap. My identity as the *Lokke Vitras* to come isn't common knowledge, but a handful of people know about it. If I've made enemies among them, they might look for a place like this to surprise me. The scenario is again, unlikely, but it pays to be prepared when you're someone like me."

Feena coughed.

"Zae, this is Xygek," she said. "No one will try to kill you here."

"Do you know how many murderers I've brought in from this city alone?" I said. "Lutov isn't the paradise that we've been led to believe. It comes close, but the system still has flaws, mostly

human in nature.”

Finished with everything I could do while Feena was in the room, I faced her.

“Now, what do you want?” I asked.

She was pressing her hand to her scalp, yanking on her hair, and a hint of panic had infected her eyes. I was surprised she hadn’t started hyperventilating yet.

“Just... give me a second,” she gasped.

While she went through a calming technique, I hopped onto my bed, glancing through messages in my array. Nothing of consequence was waiting for me there, but I liked to go through them when I found spare time. Otherwise, they started piling up.

“So, you still do that,” Feena said.

She’d sounded less panicked, thank Mother Time. When someone looked like they needed comfort, I’d always hated when they asked for space instead, even if I still complied with their request.

Without bothering to focus, I asked, “Do what?”

“You were humming,” Feena said, “tapping your fingers on invisible piano keys. You used to do that when you were bored.”

Lowering my hands, I met my sister’s eyes.

“I’m still your brother. Still your obnoxious Zaeden,” I say. “I just... grew up. Had some new behaviors piled on the old.”

Holding her breath, Feena closed her eyes tight, pursing her lips, before releasing a long sigh. As she snapped her eyes open, she pushed off of the wall that she’d been leaning against.

“You’re right. Seeing you like this... it was quite a shock, but I should have expected it, given everything you must have experienced over these last few years. You even warned us that things had changed earlier,” she said. “So, I’m sorry. Will you forgive me?”

Reconciling with her had been easier than expected. I was tempted to be suspicious of it but... what was the point of that?

In response, I patted the sheets beside me, and with a hesitant smile, Feena sat where indicated, quickly collapsing to her back.

“So?” I asked.

She’d know what I meant. What had she wanted to talk about? I had my theories, but I was curious which, if any, would be right.

“It’s about the family tradition,” Feena said.

“The climbing a tower to jump off of it thing?” I asked.

Nodding, Feena said, “I was planning to do it with Phen tonight, what with you being...”

She vaguely gestured.

“But here you are, and by custom, taking him through that ritual is your responsibility. You could take over for me, if you were so inclined.”

After watching her for a moment, I flopped to lie beside my sister.

“I’m not,” I said.

Feena started protesting, and I lifted a finger above us to silence her.

“Let’s do it together,” I said.

Her breathing hiccupped, and the next thing I knew, my sister was smothering me, digging her elbows and hip bones into uncomfortable places.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“-welcome,” I managed to grunt. “Feena...”

I gently shoved her, and when she rolled off of me, relieving pressure, I hissed, clutching at my chest and gut.

“What is it?” Feena asked. “Are you hurt?”

Shaking my head, I said, “Sore. Rapid regeneration drugs don’t work as well on me anymore. I’ve used them too many times, but that’s a story for another day. Let’s focus on Phen. What’s the plan?”

Distractedly humming, Feena popped up on an elbow with an evil smile in place.

“So, I’ve changed a few details from when I did this with you...”

TTS Chapter Twenty-Four

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