

# Chapter 35: This'll Be a Rush Job

Harvel just *would not* make this easy for me.

I had to give him credit. He'd most definitely been prepared for House Kolb to come after him, which was less common than one would think. A surprising number of fugitives thought they'd get away with their crimes. This man kept leading me and Feena into traps that he must have set a while ago. There was no way he could have lain so many of them between getting here earlier and when we'd arrived. All of which meant that our pursuit of him became a series of hopping skips.

I careened to a stop, throwing an arm in front of Feena, when I noted an incongruous pile of fallen leaves ahead of us, one that was probably hiding a pit or a pressure plate. After half an hour of this, we'd reached a part of the mountain where trees had become clumps instead of a sprawl, soon to fade into craggy cliffs. I was curious why our quarry had laid a trap here, where it would be more easily spotted, especially after the cunning that he'd shown to this point, but not enough to question it.

"This is becoming tiresome," I said, "and I need to get to Xygek."

Resting her hands on her hips, Feena glanced at me.

"What are you going to do about it?" she said.

What *would* I do about it? If I was to return to the capital on time, I couldn't keep going like this.

Making a face, I said, "I have a fix on his trajectory. You stay on his heel. I'll take a shorter path to get ahead of him, and you can drive him to me."

With a nod, Feena said, "Sounds good."

So, I veered to the side, hoping that Harvel wouldn't deviate from his path, while she continued on. Trusting myself to a thoughtless state, I was in position within a few minutes, and as soon as I was ready, I requested a connection with my sister.

"You see my location?" I asked when it established.

"Yup," she said. "Getting close. Maybe another three minutes."

"All right," I said. "Keep the connection open, please."

“Mmhmm.”

For a while, I listened to her run while making a habitual check of my weapons. Soon enough, though, Feena’s array showed her approaching me, so I fell still, ready for any violence that might ensue.

It came earlier than I’d expected. The zap of an energy bolt filled the connection between me and my sister, followed by a thud and nothing else. Not even her heavily gasped breathing.

As prickling apprehension raced from my belly to my extremities, I said, “Feena? What was that?”

The connection cut, and while dumbly staring at the place where the marker of its existence had once lain in my array, a persistent roar filled my ears and mind, strangling logical thought. The only words that defeated this haze were ones spoken by Korix, months ago.

*Every Chosen I’ve known has died before their time. Horribly.*

Harvel stepped into view between two boulders, and slipping on pebbles, he stopped, leaning on his knees. When I stepped out from behind a stone, he whipped his head to me, and I again wondered how he’d known where I was.

“Lokke Vitras!” he shouted.

Raising my rifle, I shot a clean hole through the center of his forehead, and his body crumpled, rolling in the loose stones beneath it.

Yes, I should have captured him so House Kolb could conduct an interrogation, making sure that this neurotoxin was wiped from existence, but at the moment, I had no concern for the future. All I saw was a chemical formula that would have wreaked so much suffering. All I was considering was how this man had kept me from my family in a time when they’d needed me. All I heard was the absolute silence that was only heard in a connection with someone who’d just joined the Collective.

I paused at the corpse long enough to mark its location for retrieval, but then, I was racing for the tree line. Before we’d lost contact, Feena’s array had placed her in front of it, and that was where I found her.

Evidence of the energy bolt that had hit her had cleaved through her chest while the blood from an unseared vein was soaking the stone beneath her. It was one of the worst chest wounds I’d seen in a while, and Feena was lucky that it had landed where it had.

Glaring up at me, she gasped, “What—”

With a wince, she turned to the side so she can spit out a mouthful of blood.

“—are you doing... here?” she finished.

Crossing my arms, I said, “Making sure you’re all right. Have you given yourself enough of those?”

I nodded at the hypos sticking out of her thigh.

When she weakly nodded, I continued, "And emergency services are on their way?"

Again, she nodded, and lowering my arms, I released a long sigh.

"Ok," I said. "I'll trust that you know what you're doing, then. When I can, I'll bring my kid to see you in recovery."

With a smile, Feena said, "Go."

So, I did. I'd never used House Kolb for something personal before. The ability was too dangerous to justify doing that, but today, danger could be damned.

I was at the skycruiser within four minutes, and perhaps a single breath passed between me flinging myself into it and it rising off of the ground. As it gained altitude, I swept through the processes that regulated how fast it could move, disabling them. Because of this, when the skycruiser picked up speed, it accelerated so quickly that it slammed me into my seat.

I stayed plastered there throughout the trip to Xygek, gritting my teeth at the pressure on my body all the while, but enduring this discomfort proved itself worthwhile. A flight that would have normally taken an hour was compressed into twenty minutes.

As soon as the capital's towers blocked out the sky, my skycruiser reduced its speed so suddenly that it might have tossed me through the front window if I hadn't been ready to catch myself on the console, and during the agonizingly slow ride to the center of the city, I jittered my leg, staring with fixation at a map that was tracking my position. I had the skycruiser moving forward with all possible speed, but here, with so many people going about their business, careening thoughtlessly forward wasn't safe, and I was loath to abuse my status as the *Lokke Vitras* to disturb the average citizen's day, even for something like this.

I'd, of course, sent messages to both my partners and *shukusen* Marza when leaving the Barasgami Mountains, letting them know I was on my way, but I doubted anyone in House Drav would delay today's proceedings for me. The general consensus among Lutov's population was that if someone couldn't drop everything for an event like this, then they didn't deserve to be a part of it. Sometimes, this could lead to the promised child being adopted out to another family, but usually, it meant the child was sent to their parents' home, staining them and the kid with shame.

Fortunately, when we'd turned in our application, my partners and I had worked out an agreement with Marza to mitigate this. Considering who I was and what my job entailed, she would allow handoff if I was absent, but only if both Korix and Leski were present, not that I'd ever wanted that to happen. House Kolb members and anyone loosely associated with them knew better than to ignore worst case scenarios, though, preparing for them instead.

When the sea of towers around me opened to the empty air above the center of Xygek, I took control of the skycruiser, guiding it toward House Drav's headquarters, which was of course, on the

other side of the fucking park. I wondered how many people looked up at the skycruiser that was streaking by overhead, nearly skimming the roof of Acceptance Arena.

While coming up on my goal, I spied a pair of familiar people waiting at the tower's doors, and the kernel in my chest loosened. Even still, after the skycruiser had landed, I stumbled out of it, nearly falling on my ass, and while straightening my clothes, I bolted for Leski and Korix, not giving a single shit about the started looks directed my way.

As I approached, my life partner looked me over.

"That's one way to break deep cover," he said.

Then, I was on them, pulling the loves of my life to me, and while catching my breath, I ignored the manic laughter that was pouring out of me. Soon enough, I pulled away.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" I said. "Considering how *helpful* Marza's been throughout this process, she probably won't appreciate any delay on our part."

"Relax. Being a couple of minutes late won't hurt anything, and you look like you need them," Leski said, brushing hair out of my eyes. "You look horrid, love: disheveled, unshaven, dirt-streaked..."

Making a face, I said, "Literally just finished my mission. I didn't have time to change."

"So, you caught your target?" Korix asked.

When I nodded, he grinned, making me shiver.

"I knew you could do it," he said, "barely scraping by with it too. Sounds familiar."

"He does like to keep us guessing, doesn't he?" Leski said with a smirk.

Rolling my eyes, I grabbed them about the waist, ushering them toward the doors.

"Yes, yes. If you two could stop with the teasing, maybe we can get inside before Marza cancels our appointment."

We headed inside.

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