

Chapter 36: Will You Tell Me What I Am? 2

My barricades against my emotions had yet to be raised again, as evidenced by my narrowing field of view and the sear of my heart. I got to my feet, taking sips of air to calm myself down, but it wasn't working. He needed to know what I'd decided while standing on the moors, but I didn't know if I could share it without screaming at him right now.

So, I diverted.

"You lost it in the cabana today, nearly *killed* me," I said. "You couldn't get yourself under control in the time that it took to return to the city, which meant that I had to leave my strongest asset behind when entering a situation when I most needed him. You let me distract you enough to get the fucking *Lokke Vitras* locked in a transport. You made nearly as many mistakes as me today, *evushk*."

Slamming a hand on the table, I shoved a shaking finger in his face. Oh, this diversion wasn't helping.

Evushk glanced from my accusatory finger to my face.

"Your point?" he asked.

I slammed the other hand down.

"My *point* is that you can't remain the *Lokke Vitras* for much longer," I growled. "How long will it be before you snap, entering a state of constantly reliving the past, and never break free of it? A couple of years? A decade? If you're to leave this position with any potential for finding happiness, you need someone to replace you soon. You need *me*."

"And your need isn't just for that far down the road. You need me now too. As you said, emotions like love and guilt may be inadvisable for us, but we still feel them, even if well below the surface, and let's face it. Being the *Lokke Vitras* means enduring more hurt in a year than most people do for their entire lives. You... no. *We* need someone to talk these things through with, someone who understands and won't judge us. You need me, *evushk*, and I won't leave you the moment my training gets tough. *Fuck* you for suggesting it."

Leaning on the table, I listened as my shout finished its ring in the kitchen and winced. I hadn't meant for that to come out as harshly as it had.

"So be it."

Sliding down the bench, *evushk* stood, invading my personal space, and I took an instinctual step back. He stopped me by cupping his hands behind my neck.

“Maybe you’re right,” he said. “Maybe we need to relax more in private, letting the emotions that we bottle up freely flow. Maybe we need to talk about the horrible things we do, speaking about them when their pressure grows too strong in our heads. I’m willing to try it. Who says the *Lokke Vitras* can’t adapt to changing circumstances? But for now, we have a protocol to complete, do we not?”

He rested his forehead on mine with those gray eyes so close that I could see the brown striations in them, and swallowing, I hung one hand from his elbow while the other found his waist.

“Today, you took your first, true step on the road to becoming the *Lokke Vitras*,” he said. “It churns my stomach to say it, but I’m proud of you, *kuvesk*. Your first kill was made to bring someone peace. I wish I could say the same for mine.

“After having undergone something that no doubt ripped you apart, you proceeded to diffuse the situation in Acceptance Arena in the most efficient way possible. Talira sent me a report on it, and reading about what you did impressed me. You have talent for our work, and even if that work forced you to take more lives, it also led to you saving hundreds of others. They might not know what you did, but those people are alive because of you. You did good today.”

With my cheeks burning, I said, “You forgot to mention that I went near-catatonic once it was over.”

A faint smile dashed across *evushk*’s face.

“Only to be expected for someone who’s progressed this far into your training,” he said. “Besides, I’m supposed to discuss your achievements right now, not anything that went wrong.”

“Oh. That’s right,” I said with a sarcastic lilt to my voice.

Chuckling, *evushk* leaned back, moving his hand to the side of my neck.

“There it is,” he said. “I’ve missed your snark.”

“Wha-?”

His lips silenced me, warm and soft on mine, and after a beat of waiting for my brain and body to catch up, I pulled him to me, just holding him for now. This was comfort, soft pecks on cheeks and noses and foreheads while we tightened our arms around one another.

That energy shifted when *evushk* kissed me again with his hand, resting on the back of my head, pressing me to him. I managed to break away.

“Did you-?” I started.

"The house is in lockdown mode, yes," *evushk* interrupted.

His tongue kept mine occupied for a while, and we swept our hands over cloth-wrapped-skin to squeeze and caress and just feel bodies that both of us had grown to know well. When *evushk* tugged on my slacks, I pulled away again, stopping him with a grip on his wrist.

"What about the-?" I asked.

"Traps around the house have been set," he said. "I checked when I got home."

Ripping his captive hand free, he grabbed my waist, turning us so that my back was to the table. Partially pulling my slacks off, he let them fall the rest of the way, and I was sure there was another precaution I should ask about, but it was getting hard to think straight.

I tried asking anyway.

"*Evushk...*" I said.

He went still before cupping my face.

"Don't call me that. Not here," he said. "You should use my name-"

"Korix?" I asked and at his look of confusion, continued. "My grandmother told me earlier, remember?"

"Right," *evushk* said. "That's right, and you're right. That's my name, but you, *kuvesk*, should call me Ko."

Ko. I liked it. A lot, actually.

"Only if you call me Zae," I said.

Applying my best teasing grin to my face, I lifted my eyebrows at him, and snarling, he kissed me again, trailing insistent fingers down my body. He lifted me to sit on the table, and I idly swung my legs until he gave me space.

"Zae," he said, breathing my name as if it were something sacred, "who am I to you?"

Leaning back on my hands, I cocked my head at him.

"You're Ko," I said, "perhaps the only person I truly trust."

Evushk... Korix shuddered at his name on my tongue, and shaking it off, he knelt in front of me with his lips quickly finding a much more sensitive perch than my mouth. He'd moved so fast that it caught me by surprise, and I yelped, falling to my elbows.

"Oh... fuck. Ko."

While a happy rumble vibrated through me, a distinctly different type of tongue licked at my fingers, and I feebly pushed on Ace's nose—

"Not... mm... now, bud...dy."

—but my mind quickly emptied of anything except an animalistic urge and the pleasure of it being satisfied.

When Korix eventually climbed onto the table with a kiss, he tasted like me, which I'd always found an odd sensation. Not enough to dislike what my partner was doing but still odd.

"What was that for?" I mumbled.

With a hum, Korix brushed his fingers through my hair.

"Mostly because I wanted it," he said, "but also..."

He laid his hand on my chest with his comb of my hair turning nervously frenetic.

"Also, because you decided to stay," he whispered.

"Mm."

I should probably say something more than that, but my eyelids were growing heavy.

"You'll make me fall asleep like this," I said, "and I'm not..."

I wasn't done with him.

"We'll just have to fix that, won't we?" Korix said.

Planting his hands beside my head, he leaned down, and Mother Time if he hadn't gotten to know me well over the years. Within a few seconds, I was wide awake, even if my body was still exhausted. When he sat back on his heels, I groaned.

"That's just mean," I complained.

Spreading his arms, Korix said, "What are you going to do about it?"

Lifting my head, I examined him for a moment, calculating what I could accomplish and what he'd let me get away with. Once I was done, I crawled to my knees while Korix watched with a grin playing at his lips, and when I was stable, I launched myself at him, tackling him off the table.

At some point, we got worn out and ended up cuddled against each other on the floor with Ace sleeping in a knot against my side. Today had been...

It had been all over the place, and I had no doubt that the next few days would be difficult for me, especially when I tracked down Jastin and give him Fyester's message, but that was the future.

Right now, I wouldn't consider coming troubles. I'd relish this breakthrough between *evushk* and me that had been years in the making.

Speaking of which, I should probably solidify it.

Rolling to my side, I kissed his cheek.

"I don't love you, you know," I said with my lips brushing his skin.

Would he understand the hidden meaning in those words, or would he think I was reiterating the lesson that he'd tried so hard to teach me over the years?

Facing me, Korix rested his hand on my face.

"Oh, Zae. You're sweet," he said, brushing his thumb under my eye. "I could never love you either. Not in a million years."

He smiled, and my heart swelled to near bursting.

For a week, we were left alone on the estate. For a week, House Kolb's various Strata picked up the slack for us, even if they didn't know that was what they were doing. For a week, Korix and I did nothing but read, take Ace on walks, and enjoy one another.

Then, we returned to training and missions, but both of us were steadier, more centered, and it showed. When out in Lutov, I occasionally heard the odd rumor about how the *Lokke Vitras* had lost the brittleness that had once been woven through his empty façade, and Talira, my family... hell, people I hadn't seen for years said that I looked happier than I'd ever been in my life. That I'd found my purpose.

They were right. I'd advanced one step closer to who I'd become.

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