

Chapter 37: You, Me, and a Bunch of Bad Guys

A shiver ran through the aircraft, rattling stored equipment in its bins, and in the seats closest to the cockpit, our Second Stratus support team tensed, throwing glances over their surroundings.

I didn't know why they'd let the disturbance ruffle them.

Sure, House Kolb's strike ships, affectionately called the Packhorses, might travel most of a flight near where the planet's atmosphere met the vastness of space, lending to a smooth ride, but us puny humans couldn't survive up there—not without a ton of help, at least—and when making the descent into more habitable zones, a strike ship was likely to hit patches of turbulence. The Second Strata should be used to this.

Maybe they were on edge for another reason.

Nudging Korix, I sent off a message.

Do you think they're sitting so far away because they're scared of us or because they don't want to disturb 'the great Lokke Vitras' and his student?

When Korix glanced their way, the Second Strata, who'd been surreptitiously watching us, jerked their gazes away in a comical manner.

They're displaying an appropriate reaction to people like us, those they know are far above their level.

I'd... meant what I'd said as a joke, but sure. He could take the question seriously if he wanted, although he was usually better at picking up on my humor than this.

Running my eyes over Korix, I pursed my lips. To others, he probably looked like he always did: a blank canvas unless expression was required, a deceptively loose body that could spring into action on command.

The utterly capable and infinitely dangerous *Lokke Vitras*.

They, however, didn't know him. I did.

I saw the lips that wanted to pull into a frown as well as the barest of tension in his shoulders and neck, and my hand twitched, so badly did I want to take his.

I couldn't, of course, not with several Second Stratus House Kolb members as possible witnesses. To this point, Korix and I had kept what lay between us a secret from everyone, *shukusen* Talira included, and neither of us wanted that to change. It was none of their business what we got up to in private.

Keeping it secret did occasionally have me or him refraining from providing comfort when the other person needed it, but more versions of comfort existed than the physical alone. With the barest lift of an eyebrow, I sent another message.

What's wrong? Do you need me to do this one alone?

As he considered my question, Korix pulled weapons off of his body for inspection before replacing them. Even the bow at his feet got a cursory look over.

I'm fine, his reply read. This type of mission simply... bothers me.

Which meant he hated them. I poorly strangled a laugh, snorting instead, for which I got a cautioning glance, but I couldn't help it. Out of everything we did, he found a surgical wipe the most disturbing?

Hey, think about all the fun waiting for us once we get home. That should cheer you up, yes?

Korix gave in to his lips' desire, scowling at me.

Just because you enjoy events like tonight's doesn't mean that I do.

Resting an arm on the back of my seat, I turned to him with a cheeky grin.

I know.

He narrowed his eyes.

You're not helping.

My smile widened.

I know.

When he rolled his eyes at me, I checked on our support team. They were, as one, staring at us, and the tiny prank demon in me giggled when I tilted my head to the side, tweaking my features into a monstrous expression. I didn't get a chance to observe their reactions, however, as our pilot's voice soon sounded in the Packhorse's belly.

"Ninety seconds to drop."

I'd freed myself from my harness before she'd finished speaking, slinging my bow over my shoulders and checking my other weapons. Nothing had changed since my last inspection, but

ensuring one's equipment was in perfect condition was always best before going into combat.

Once I was finished, I leaned against a hatch, watching people gape at me. Being allowed so much attention for once felt nice. I could do without the average citizen's hero-worship, but damn if having so many people looking my way didn't still send a thrill through me.

You'll leave an impression on them.

Huffing, I shot my reply to Korix.

Why should that matter? Talira will have their memories of this mission extracted from their arrays. I only need to avoid things that I don't want her to know.

Zaeden...

Stepping up beside me, Korix gave me a *look*, one that meant we'd be having a chat later, but I just shrugged at him. By now, he should know that I wouldn't behave as he wished his *kuvesk* would. Not anymore.

I had my own ideas about how to play the *Lokke Vitras* role, and he knew this. When my actions truly didn't matter, I'd been experimenting with this, to his dismay.

"Ready, people," the pilot said. "Drop in five, four, three, two..."

The hatch I was leaning against popped open, and I vaulted from it and into the empty air. I badly wanted to whoop, releasing a cry at the delight of a sudden fall, but the mission required silence from me. So, instead of a joyous commencement to what would probably be a bad night, I focused on a patch of highlighted ground, far below me.

The mountains to the far east of Escad, one of Ibis' nations, reached sharply pointed fingers to the sky. To us. This range was nowhere near as tall as the ones in Ostiu, but it was still impressive, especially considering how each individual peak managed to hide my landing site. As needed, I made course corrections with my P.I.G.'s propulsors, but in general, I let gravity drive me toward the ground.

Until I needed to slow my speed, of course. Then, it was a matter of fine-tune adjustments, which eventually had me threading through the pine trees to land in the snow.

My array reported no body heat emanating nearby, but I performed my own search while waiting for the others. It didn't take them long—I'd only had a few seconds head start on them—but one by one, they touched down with perfect landings all around, which honestly, I'd expected from Second Stratus House Kolb members.

None of them, however, noticed when Korix alighted in a tree rather than the ground. A lucky breeze hid the sway of its branches when he crouched on it.

Do you have eyes on their encampment? I sent to him.

I'd seen it while diving through the sky and therefore, knew its location relative to ours, but if he had eyes on it, he could probably make out its details.

Confirm. More targets than expected. Modifying plan to accommodate.

Great... I *loved* it when our mission intel proved itself faulty.

Our support team shifted behind me, probably scanning the sky for their First Stratus. For a moment, I was tempted to fake panic and grief, making them think the *Lokke Vitras* had died, but not only would that be cruel, but it would also be counterproductive to the mission.

Instead, I circled the clearing's perimeter, keeping my eyes peeled for patrols or scouts. I doubted our targets had sent them out this far, but preparedness led to success.

A small scuffle of feet let me know when Korix had joined us with a glance over my shoulder putting him to the right of the clumped Second Strata. Marking his position, I continued with my circuit.

"Circumstances have changed," Korix said. "I've sent your new positions to your arrays. Five and Six, you'll be joining One through Four on target containment. Seven, Eight, and Nine will remain as our snipers. Questions?"

They usually didn't have any, too afraid to speak up, but this time, a tremulous female voice answered him. That was Five, I thought.

"Forgive me, *Lokke Vitras*," she said, "but my ratings with rifle accuracy and reaction times have recently surpassed Nine's. I don't think the change has been added to our records yet."

Interesting. Talira didn't usually provide us with an unstable support team. Were things ok with her?

"True?" Korix asked.

"Yes, *Lokke Vitras*," a man—Nine, I assumed—said.

"Very good. Nine and Five will switch positions, then. Thank you for saying something," Korix said. "Anything else?"

Smoothly done. By turning recognition to Five, he'd diverted people's attention away from his failing, or at least commenting on it.

Because the *Lokke Vitras* did not make mistakes, even ones as trivial as this. Matching this expectation was one of the role's most difficult tasks.

When no one else spoke up, Korix said, "Then, go. Arrival to positions in three-quarters of an hour. Commencement of mission on my mark."

Several rushes of air indicated our support team's departure, and after a moment, a direct connection opened in my array. Korix slid his arms over my shoulders, and slouching to make the position more comfortable for him, I absently rubbed them while he rested his chin in the crook of my neck.

"Ranged or melee tonight, *kuvesk*?" he said.

His voice had echoed in my head and ears, a wholly unpleasant sensation, but I didn't let myself wince, shrugging instead.

"I don't have a preference. You know that," I said. "Which of them do I need more practice with?"

"Mm. You're proficient enough with both, don't need practice anymore," Korix said, "but I have a preference, as you know."

"So, I'm melee?" I asked.

He rocked his chin on my neck, and with difficulty, I drew my sword and dagger, checking them for a final time.

"Have we given them enough of a head start yet?" I said.

"Maybe," Korix said, "but it doesn't matter either way. If they're not prepared by the time we arrive, we can wait."

"All right, then," I said. "Back to mission mode? I'd like to get this over with."

"One last thing."

He kissed me behind the ear, at the hairline, and a shiver rattled up my spine.

"Dammit, *evushk*," I said. "Are you trying to distract me?"

With a soft laugh, Korix released me before straightening.

"Your training for the evening," he said. "Considering your voracious appetite, you'll have to learn how to ignore your desires sooner or later."

Tilting his head, he smiled at me, and with a shuddering breath, I spun in the direction of the enemy encampment.

"Fuck," I muttered.

What might have been a laugh burst into the air as Korix zipped past me, and shaking my head, I chased him.

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