

# Chapter 38: Mission's End

House Kolb speed was plenty useful in short stretches, pulling operatives or strike team members away from killing blows, but using it for more than a minute at a time was difficult. The human brain couldn't keep up with a body moving at speeds that could look like teleportation. If one maintained the technique for too long, several consequences could visit themselves upon the one using it.

For one thing, my people's enhanced healing rate couldn't handle the damage that the ability caused. Theoretically, someone could use House Kolb speed to run from one end of Lutov to the other, but by the end of the sprint, that person's muscles would be shredded beyond repair, at the least.

In addition, adjusting to that speed while avoiding obstacles could lead to hazardous accidents. Many were the tales of House Kolb members who'd lost a limb because of it.

These dangers were why we'd given our support team a head start, as they'd need to take breaks between bursts of speed.

Korix and I didn't have that need. Instead, we used something slightly less treacherous than House Kolb speed to maintain the skill for as long as we needed it.

Shortly after placement, everyone in House Kolb learned a specific mental regimen. It was the only way to fight iisen without getting slaughtered, like I almost had years before.

House Kolb members had an addition to their arrays, one that predicted magic use before it occurred and displayed this as a flare in their vision. Unfortunately, the time between when a flare ignited and magic began had never extended beyond a single second, which was useless for humans under normal conditions. The mental regimen, however, let someone react to such a short warning period.

It involved an absence of thought. Without thought to burden the mind, instinct—that most primal of senses—was allowed free reign.

The only problem with using the regimen was that most people couldn't voluntarily leave the state, and the conditions needed to pull someone free of it could be unpredictable at best.

As one might expect, a state that relied on instinct greatly lengthened how long someone could use House Kolb speed, although it still had its limits. As one might also expect, Korix and I had mastered this mental regimen.

So, as we raced toward the encampment, I wasn't completely there. Snippets floated down to where I was buried, far below the surface. A tree limb barely jumped; my bisection avoided. Leaves

slapping at my face, leaving their plant fiber in my eyes.

But besides that, I knew nothing between leaving a clearing high in the mountains and stepping into a valley with nothing but grass and a creek between me and a camp full of unsuspecting children of Ibis.

The Escadese had formed a neat conglomeration of tents, wagons, supplies, and bedrolls, but that was what happened when one came from a nation that we Lutovish near constantly forced into war. I counted a little over thirty heat signatures, which was almost a third more than expected, but most of them appeared to be sleeping, leaving four as lookouts.

Korix and I could perhaps eliminate this many enemies by ourselves, but Talira wanted us to make this wipe look like another group of Escadese had attacked the encampment. I was guessing she hoped that when the rebels saw their fellow children of Ibis had chosen to oppose them, they'd stop cooperating with the people manipulating them.

Mother Time, how often would divisions in Vaessa's ranks mess with these poor people?

What that meant for us? We'd have to use primitive weapons, like swords and bows, against people who would be using loaned Lutovish tech, hence why we had a support team. Knowing snipers were watching one's back was always nice, even if a part of me was constantly watching for treachery from them. The few children of Ibis they picked off would likely be blamed on friendly fire.

As for the other Second Strata, they'd make sure that none of our targets escaped. No one could contain so many people by themselves, not even the *Lokke Vitras*.

When I checked the time, I found that a half-hour had passed and looked to Korix as to whether we could start. After an absent moment, one probably spent checking statuses in his array, he nodded, and our mission began in truth.

As we approached, I took point while a nearby stream covered what little noise we made. With probable lines of sight mapped out, sneaking up on the first lookout was simplicity itself.

Pressing my hand over the woman's mouth, I slit her throat before smoothly lifting the body into a nearby wagon. I repeated the process twice more without incident, but on the fourth try, the distinctive whistle and squelch of an arrow's concluded flight sounded from behind me.

Fumbling with my recent kill, I grabbed a man with a shaft of wood sticking out of his eye before he could fall, but I wasn't so lucky with the pistol he'd been holding. It thumped to the ground, releasing an energy bolt that missed my head by a hairsbreadth, and I dropped my burdens, drawing my sword.

"Coming from your right," Korix calmly said over our connection.

Racing that way, I hid behind the first spot of cover I could find, listening for footsteps.

“Eight hostiles,” Korix said. “I’ll take the three furthest from you.”

Nodding, I readied myself.

When a blob of heat reached my hiding spot, I surged to my feet, biting my sword’s point under a woman’s ribcage while thrusting my dagger through the jaw of the man beside her. As they fell, I lashed out, carving open the belly of someone behind them, and reversing my swing, I chopped into the join between the neck and shoulder of a short woman on the edge of the group. After throwing my dagger into my last target’s throat, I hurried to retrieve it, stabbing the man I’d disemboweled to end his suffering.

Three bodies formed a pile on the far side of my kills, and I’d opened my mouth to thank Korix when another of his arrows whizzed over my head, felling an enemy I’d failed to note.

“Focus, *kuvesk*,” he said. “Eighteen targets remain, gathering near the center of camp. Come in from the south. I’ll take position to the northwest.”

“Confirm,” I said.

When I reached the middle of the encampment, the children of Ibis were waiting for me in an organized circle with their rifle and pistol barrels pointed in every direction, which was just great. Mother Time, this confrontation would have been so much easier if we could use tech. One suppression grenade thrown into that circle’s midst would send everyone to sleep, and elimination afterward would be simple.

But no. Talira had said no tech whatsoever, not even what we could easily retrieve.

“I’ll draw their fire,” Korix said. “You attack once they’re distracted.”

I didn’t like this plan. Bow and arrow against Lutovish weapons wasn’t a good match-up.

Then again, neither was a sword pitted against rifles and pistols, and Korix could handle himself.

“Confirm,” I said. “On your go.”

As if waiting for my words, arrows sped, one after the other, for the children of Ibis, bringing two of them down before I’d set foot in the open.

They never saw me coming. I was destruction among them, a flurry of motion and violence, and as I worked, a few energy bolts flew into the conflict rather than out, our snipers doing their job.

Once most of their comrades had gone down, the survivors took off, and I dropped the poor man who’d served as my meat shield throughout the fight. Energy bolts had blackened his body, and wincing at the sight, I scanned my surroundings.

And saw something from my worst nightmare.

Korix had gone limp on his feet with his bow on the ground, a precursor to a retreat into his past, and behind him, a child of Ibis—smart bastard—was holding glinting metal above his head.

*“Evushk!”* I shouted.

I couldn't throw my dagger. Korix was in the way, and even as I took off for him, I knew I wouldn't make it. The child of Ibis would land a killing blow, and my *evushk*, my... he'd die.

From where I locked it during missions, gibbering panic began pouring forth.

A sniper's bolt knifed through the child of Ibis, and he fell, which had relief punching me so hard that I nearly tumbled to the ground.

Hell, that had been close.

Tensing, Korix whirled with a knife magically appearing in his hand, and when he found no enemies around him, he glanced at the corpse at his feet.

*“Nice shot, Five,”* he said.

But I heard this only in my ears, not my head. He must have established a direct connection with the support team, cutting ours while he'd spun.

*“Good job, everyone,”* he continued. *“I've called for pickup. They'll be here in a few minutes, so have your mag hooks ready.”*

After he'd noticed me, Korix headed my way, and when I raised an eyebrow, he shook his head, jerking a hand in front of his throat. His message came through a breath later.

*I'm fine. It's under control. For now.*

Nodding, I frowned when he came close enough for me to pick out details. I plucked at the jaggedly burned edge of a gash in his sleeve, wincing when I saw the charred flesh beneath it.

*Did you know you were wounded?*

While he glanced at the burn, I pulled him into one of the nearby tents.

*Must have been a stray shot. I didn't feel it.*

Removing my shirt, I shoved it at him before requesting my rifle, but Korix took my wrist before I could aim my weapon at my arm.

*“What are you doing?”* he hissed.

Rolling my eyes, I jerked free of him.

*The Lokke Vitras must be perfect in all things but most especially in a fight, a flawless weapon of death. You've already had one hit against that reputation tonight, and while these Second Strata's memories will be wiped of it, we can't easily stop people from noting your injury after we get home. So, give me your damn shirt. Thank Mother Time that we wear basically the same clothes.*

Hell, Korix's face had pinched at my conclusions, but he did as I said while I singed my arm. His burn would probably heal before we reached Lutov, negating the need for mine, but I'd rather be safe with this pretense.

While an energy bolt seared my nerve endings, my vision sparked, and to distract myself from the pain, I sent a message Korix's way.

*Why do you hate missions like this?*

He ripped his gaze off of my arm, moving it to the tent's opening and the bodies that we could see through it.

*I don't like killing the children of Ibis. They can't help their situation, and it wasn't so long ago that we worked with them. That collaboration may have ended with the Upheaval, but who can say which side caused that disaster? I sometimes wonder what they might have become if together, we hadn't messed with things beyond our comprehension. Their lost potential and Vaessa's poor treatment of them make me... reluctant to accept these missions.*

"I understand," I said.

Twisting toward me, Korix narrowed his eyes.

*Are you being snarky? Because much as I like your snark, I don't like having it directed at subjects I actually care about.*

I couldn't blame Korix for his defensiveness about this. Not many people back home cared about Ibis and the people who lived here. In fact, most of them thought that anyone who did care had something wrong with them. So instead of acting flippant, something I might normally do, I resorted to a genuine reply, shaking my head.

*I'm serious. The Ibisian deaths hurt more than the others do. They're people, and we treat them like garbage. I don't like enforcing the practice, but how do we solitary people help them? CAN we?*

He would know what I'd meant. As stated, Ibis was left as a side note for most people in the homeland, and that alone—what seemed like a lost cause—would be enough to stop many people from helping its residents.

I wasn't asking about that, though. I was asking if he, as the *Lokke Vitras*, or I, as his replacement, could change things. Could we refuse these missions, ones meant to keep Ibis under Lutov's boot?

If we did, what would happen? Despite how it might seem, checks and balances were in place for the *Lokke Vitras*. How much trouble could Korix or I cause before the *shukusenth* sent House Kolb,

in its entirety, to kill us? Indomitable as we might sometimes appear, we couldn't fight so many highly trained people, especially if they came at us all at once.

For a long while, Korix just stared at me before sighing.

*Enough of this. We'll miss our ride home if we linger for much longer.*

Striding outside, he removed his mag hook from his belt. I did the same, and together, we watched the sky.

Korix nudged me.

*Do we need to talk once we have a moment alone?*

Slowly nodding, I said, "That might be for the best. Let's finish with tonight's activities first, though, shall we?"

In the distance, a shape blocked out the stars, and my array started providing viable attraction points for me to choose from. As soon as the Packhorse was flying low enough, I aimed my mag hook, and once an attraction had set, I shot into the sky, quickly approaching the strike ship's open hatch.

As the ground fell away beneath me, I peered between my feet, watching a massacred encampment retreat until it disappeared from view.

## **TTS Chapter Thirty-Eight**

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