

Chapter 53: Let's Mess This Shit Up

Bowing, I stuttered, "*L-lokke Vi-vitras.*"

Korix, something deep inside whispered with relief.

Seizing my arm, he pulled me out of my bow before dragging Wyla and me after him. He pushed us into the closest lab, locking the door once it had slid closed, and shoved me deeper into the room.

"Find a corner," he said. "Stay there."

While I scrambled to do as he'd commanded, the *Lokke Vitras* rounded on Wyla.

"Name and House," he said.

Wyla didn't seem to be listening, though, with fascination lighting her eyes. Funny how I could read the emotions on her face, even with it so thoroughly blurred.

"You..." she said, tapping her lips. "The way you're holding yourself is... familiar. Why do I-?"

The *Lokke Vitras* stepped into her personal space, towering over her.

"Your name and House," he said, "if you please."

Blinking up at him, Wyla shifted in place, shucking the distracted air that she'd assumed. Her body stiffened with her shoulders rising for her ears while her hands trembled in fists at her sides.

"I'm unHoused," she said with her voice clipped, "and unless you find it necessary, I'd rather not provide a name at this time."

UnHoused? What on earth was she talking about and...? Had she just refused the *Lokke Vitras*?

"I don't require it, so you may have your privacy," he said. "Why are you here?"

With a slow breath in and out, Wyla bled tension from her frame before glancing at me.

"Helping him, among other reasons," she said.

Piercing, gray eyes landed on me, and I shriveled in my corner.

"I see," the *Lokke Vitras* said.

He returned his gaze to Wyla, letting me breathe again.

"Can you get out of here by yourself?" he asked. "He has me to help him now, and I need you to carry a message for me."

Shrugging, Wyla said, "Shouldn't be too hard, considering how easy it was to get inside. What's the message?"

"Tell *shukusen* Talira that my mission is almost complete. She should send as many high Strata as she can spare to clean up," the *Lokke Vitras* said. "Here's her array's access information."

He waved toward Wyla, and after a pause where she ran her eyes up and down his body almost... appreciatively, she nodded. How was she so nonchalant about the legendary *Lokke Vitras* giving her the means to contact a head of House? This wasn't the Wyla I knew.

How did I know her again?

"Anything else I can do?" she asked.

Shaking his head, the *Lokke Vitras* said, "He and I will take care of the rest. Run along now."

Assuming the bearing of a soldier from Ibis, Wyla touched her fingers to her forehead in a salute.

"Yes, sir."

As she trotted to the door, the *Lokke Vitras* unlocked it for her, absently staring through it once it had closed.

"I like her," he said. "I hope you haven't gotten her killed."

How was I supposed to respond to that? I was confused as hell, unsure why he'd taken such an interest in me and my assistant. What did he want from me?

Looking over his shoulder, he raised an eyebrow.

"An unHoused? Really?"

Did he mean Wyla?

"I- I don't know what you mean," I said. "As far as I'm aware, she's Fourth Stratus."

"Oh, for Mother Time's sake."

Facing me, the *Lokke Vitras* crossed his arms.

"I've isolated us from the recorders near this lab," he said. "You can drop the persona, *kuvesk*."

And I surfaced, taking a deep breath. Shaking Tobis off. Devouring Korix with my eyes.

He was ok. Oh, thank all that might be holy, he was fine.

Right?

“Why are you here and out of persona no less? Someone *will* recognize you. Eventually,” I said. “Have you come from another facility? How did you arrive on the same night as me?”

With a soft laugh, Korix said, “Straight to it, then? No hello? No answer to my question?”

“Sorry,” I said. “Sorry, I-”

Stepping forward, I clasped his shoulders, the most physical contact I could allow myself right now. If I did anything more, I might unleash the grateful tears that I was withholding.

“The last few days have been difficult,” I said. “I’ve been worried. You?”

“The same,” Korix said. “How’s Ace handling everything?”

“The best he can. He’s safe,” I said. “As for the unHoused young woman, she chose to come with me. I didn’t encourage her to join my team, although I did facilitate. I wasn’t going to stop her from living her life as she wanted, even if that meant that she stepped into danger.”

Sighing, Korix said, “That is so very you.”

I waited for him to answer my questions, but he collected my hands from his shoulders, holding them between us while brushing his thumbs over the backs of them.

“Why are *you* here?” he asked.

Getting asked the same question that I’d just spoken without him answering me first was rather annoying, but he was *evushk*, and I was *kuvesk*. I bowed to his wisdom in all things, including how he ordered our questioning.

So, I told him everything I’d learned and what I’d concluded from it, and once I’d finished, he was quiet, gazing into nothing while he thought.

“That matches my findings,” he eventually said.

“So, you’re here to cause a disruption too?” I asked.

With a small smirk, Korix said, “What do you think? Care to come with me?”

Work with my partner to punish the people who’d destroyed our home?

“Yes, please,” I growled.

“Then, let’s go.”

Korix led me through House Cerullis’ facility with no hesitation in his step, which didn’t surprise me. I had no doubt he’d taken the time to learn this place’s innards before coming here, if he hadn’t already known its layout.

When it came to looping the recorders’ feeds, thereby keeping us invisible from our enemy, he and I traded off like we’d always done on missions together, something we’d practiced so many times that it had become as instinctive as breathing.

I was a little concerned by the lack of House Cerullis members in the halls, but while we’d been exploring earlier, Leski and Tobis had encountered few of them too. Korix was probably using his array’s indications of body heat to avoid the small number of them who were still awake. With him in the lead, I didn’t bother to do the same.

As we moved along, however, Korix himself began to worry me. His shoulders were drawn together with far too much tension there, and when we turned onto a new hallway, I caught his throat working like he was trying to say something. After I’d seen these signs of an imminent collapse, it didn’t matter that we were on a mission. I grabbed his wrist, pulling him to the side.

“Are you ok?” I asked. “You look like you might fall apart at any moment.”

A war was taking place behind those gray eyes with the past quickly coming to claim its owner, and after checking that no recorders were watching us, I twisted my hand into his and squeezed it.

“It’s ok if you’re not,” I said. “I can carry us this time.”

Sucking in a breath, Korix said, “I-”

He went absent for a moment, making my heart seize in my chest, before relaxing.

“I’m fine for the moment,” he said, returning my squeeze. “Let’s get this over with so we can have one of our talks. We haven’t had a chance to do that yet, right?”

“Right,” I sighed. “Sorry.”

We’d delayed doing that for far too long.

“It’s ok. You needed to know how much you can rely on me. It’s understandable that you’d check on my mental state,” Korix said. “I promise. I’ll be fine until the end of this. Besides, after a few more turns, we’ll be where we need to be.”

“And what’s the plan when we arrive?” I asked. “Are we destroying weapons? Eliminating personnel?”

I’d hate to learn that Cerullis had more firepower than the stockpile in the hangar at our backs, but it wasn’t like I could do anything about that.

“Something like that,” Korix said with a half-smile.

He wanted to be mysterious, did he? I could live in suspense. It wasn't like I'd stay there for long.

True to his word, Korix stopped us outside of a wide door, probably guarding a room that Cerullis was using for storage.

“Sneak in, initial recon, and we'll go from there,” he said. “No rifles unless we must. We don't want their formation alerting the facility to us.”

“They have the room alarmed for that?” I asked.

Running across a place with security measures like that was uncommon, and nine times out of ten, it meant something shady was happening inside.

“Unfortunately,” Korix said.

“Damn,” I muttered.

Canceling my request, I nodded to him.

“When you're ready.”

Korix touched the panel beside the door, and it began pulling apart. Once the gap between the top and bottom halves was large enough, I stepped through them, scanning for cover. If someone was in here, we'd need concealment quickly. The room's occupants would probably soon come to investigate.

But in the cavernous chamber beyond, there was nothing, just a lot of empty space. Had someone moved what they'd kept stored in here?

Cautiously, I advanced into the room, and Korix swept ahead of me with a worried look on his face. He hadn't expected this?

Wait. Was this a-?

“Hello, Zaeden. We've been waiting for you.”

Fuck. It was a trap, but that was ok. I'd been trained for this.

Slowly turning, I kept my hands in a neutral position, clearly visible but also near my weapons. In the doorway, a handful of armed House Cerullis members were watching me, one of whom was staring my way with black eyes in blue-tinged sockets. Alezand.

I waited for Korix to say something, but when nothing came from him, I stepped into the silence.

“Alezand, what are you doing?” I said. “I saw your people loading several aircraft with all manner of weapons. Who's it meant for? House Kolb?”

Why was Korix letting me take the speaking role? Sure, I needed more practice with negotiations, but now was a supremely bad time for it. Horrible threat lurking and all, right?

“Shouldn’t you be more concerned about yourself than a House you don’t claim?” Alezand asked.

He wasn’t worried. Why was that? Even having surprised me and Korix, he should be terrified. Not many enemies walked away from an encounter with us.

“You don’t scare me,” I said. “I can take you, especially given who my backup is.”

I jerked my head in Korix’s general direction, but rather than showing fear at the reminder of the *Lokke Vitras’* presence, as I’d expected, Alezand slumped, shaking his head.

“He was right,” he said. “You do unconditionally trust him.”

What? *What?*

Alezand was showing me pity and-

Oh... fuck. I- I couldn’t breathe, certain I’d entered a vacuum, even with my array insisting that I had oxygen all around me. This growing suspicion couldn’t be right. It couldn’t. *Evushk...* he- he was my...

Please, say I was wrong. *Please.* I couldn’t do this again.

With his face twisting, Alezand said, “You’re alone, Zaeden.”

In a blink, a knife was in my hand, and House Kolb speed turned the Cerullis members by the door into statues as I whirled. I drove my weapon’s point toward Korix, hoping only to maim him, but he snatched my wrist while pressing cold metal into my jaw, tilting my head back.

“I always knew love would get you killed,” he said.

Thin lines of steel rolled from under his sleeve to encase the hand around my wrist, and as any good operative would, Korix squeezed my wrist, breaking its bones, to disarm me.

Even knowing it for the defiance that it was, I fought to retain my weapon, but without something to support the blade, my effort was useless. My knife fell to the floor with each of its clatters a thunderclap of diminishing volume, and when the noise stopped, all was still.

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