

Chapter 56: In the Enemy's Midst

On the facility's main level, House Cerullis members were crowding the halls that had been empty not ten minutes ago, flocking to the call of their leader. Having so many hostiles around her clearly made Leski uncomfortable, given the number of sharp glances she directed at me, but I didn't blame her for that. I hated this too.

She sidled up next to me, and in the nervous muttering bouncing around us, I almost didn't hear her voice.

"What will we do if someone recognizes you?" she asked.

Shaking my head, I said, "They won't. The only one I'm worried about is the *Lokke Vitras*, and so long as I stay back, he should be too preoccupied to notice me."

Should. I was gambling that the blending skills he'd taught me over the years would overcome his ability to detect me, but what else was I supposed to do? Leave this place when I had a clear opportunity to help him? I didn't think so.

"You're sure no one will recognize you?" Leski hissed. "You have pretty distinctive features."

Lifting an eyebrow, I said, "Distinctive good or distinctive bad?"

Flushing, Leski sputtered a bit, and I enjoyed the sight of it. Teasing her was fun.

"*Distinctive* distinctive," she growled.

"Ok. I'll give you that," I said, "but I have operative training. When needed, I can make myself look innocuous."

Crossing her arms, Leski stared at me for a few steps.

"When we get out of here, we need to talk about exactly who you are," she said.

That wasn't going to happen, but I displayed an agreeable smile anyway.

"So long as we focus on our surroundings for now," I said.

With a snarl, Leski faced forward, chewing on her lip. We got another dozen paces before she spoke up again.

“Why are we doing this when we should be getting out of here?” she asked. “And don’t give me the bullshit answer of needing more information. If you didn’t get what you needed from the stacks, then I’m a child of Ibis, which means something else is driving you. What is it? I deserve to know why I’m risking my life.”

Almost, I flinched from the twinge that pinched me. I should be escorting her to safety, but I couldn’t stop my feet from moving toward Korix.

Rather than answering her, I asked, “How did you know I was headed into a trap?”

Leski hunched on herself with her lip chewing growing more violent.

“I don’t know. A feeling?” she said. “It seemed strange that the *Lokke Vitras*, if it truly was him, would send me away. Why divest of a valuable resource when in the middle of a highly dangerous mission? I know I’m unHoused, but the bastard had to see my value, considering I was standing with you, deep in enemy territory.

“But I wasn’t sure. He’s the fucking *Lokke Vitras*. There had to be another reason for what he did. So, once I’d gotten somewhere safe, I wrestled with the facility’s recorder system until it was mine to control. Kept finding loops in their feeds, which was your work, I presume. I traced them until they stopped inside of a warehouse and...

“I saw the House Cerullis members sneak up on you, saw you realize what was going on, saw the *Lokke Vitras* crush your wrist.”

When she glanced toward said body part, I pretended not to notice. I knew she must be curious about it, considering I’d been using it as if it had healed. It hadn’t. It was getting there but was still very broken.

Leski didn’t need to know that, though.

“Is that when you decided to help me?” I asked.

With a huff, Leski said, “I did more than help you. I saved your ass. And you still haven’t answered my question.”

“No, I haven’t,” I said.

She cast an annoyed glance my way, and rolling my eyes, I slowed down, angling us toward the edge of the people flowing around us. Once there, I stopped, laying a hand on her shoulder.

“You don’t have to risk your life by following me. I know you’re more than capable of escaping from this place on your own, especially with the facility in an uproar,” I said. “So, why are you here?”

Mother Time, I’d never seen such stubbornness flare at me before, and I’d subdued a lot of people who’d rather I’d have killed them than bring them in.

"I'll answer yours once you've answered mine," Leski snapped.

As my hand slipped off of her shoulder, I almost spoke my first direct lie to her. I'd subsisted on misdirection to this point, but she wasn't having it anymore, and if I refused to answer her, I was worried that she'd become reckless, whether with helping me or because emotions might blind her while she escaped. So, I had to decide. Would I keep my resolution? Would I only speak the truth with this woman?

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath, scouring budding distractions from me, and empty, I considered the situation from an entirely logical mindset. In this state, the answer seemed obvious, and when I opened my eyes, Leski recoiled from me, which should hurt.

But it didn't.

"In all honesty, the only reason I'm still in this facility is sentimental in nature. Someone I..."

I couldn't bring myself to say the word aloud.

"I have to rescue someone who's trapped, although I'm not sure how much of a prisoner he is," I said, "but that doesn't matter. I'm getting him out regardless."

"Oh," Leski said.

Lowering her head, she played with her shirt's hem.

"You love him?" she asked.

Silent, I stared at the top of her head until she glanced up at me and winced.

"Your turn," I said.

Blowing out a breath, Leski nodded.

"I've seen the look you're wearing before," she said. "The person who wore it back then thought she was about to lose..."

Leski roughly shook her head.

"It doesn't matter why she showed me a face to match yours," she said. "I didn't help her when she needed me, and in part because of my failure, she died. I'll never make that mistake again."

Guilt. How intimately did I know its strength as a motivator? It almost always made someone too volatile for a mission, which meant Leski couldn't be here.

"I'm more than capable of protecting myself," I said.

Crossing her arms, Leski turned her head aside.

“That’s what my mother thought too,” she said.

Her mother. Shit. Even if I sent her away, this woman would follow me. With that as a source of guilt, she’d never stop helping me until she thought I was safe.

Knowing this, should I turn my back on Korix, securing Leski before going after him? No matter how much it pained me, I couldn’t deny that the question made me want to laugh with only one answer to it possible.

“Do what you want,” I said. “I have to hurry if I’m to blend in with the crowd again.”

I brushed past Leski, but before taking two paces, I rounded on her, jabbing my finger into her chest.

“I’m not your mother,” I said.

Glancing at my finger, Leski sighed before meeting my eyes.

“I know, Zaeden,” she said.

“Good,” I said.

With nothing more, I strode after the House Cerullis members with poured stone flying beneath my feet. Once I’d merged into the crowd again, I pointedly ignored Leski. No matter how much I wanted to pick at the mystery of her, her story would have to wait until we were free of this place.

If we were headed somewhere Korix would be, I’d need my full faculties about me. A possible confrontation with the *Lokke Vitras* required nothing less.

As we funneled into the facility’s hangar, I guided Leski toward a group of crates, good cover for if we needed it. They also sat toward the back of the crowd, all of whom were facing a central landing pad.

On this, *shukusen* Alezand was standing with his arms crossed, glancing over his subordinates as they got settled. I skipped over him and his oddities to the shuttle behind him.

In the shadow of its tail, Korix was leaning a shoulder against its hull, but he seemed uninterested in the House Cerullis members in front of him, tapping a finger on his arm instead of watching them. He was just... staring into thin air, and only the occasional slide of his eyelids over vacant gray helped to interrupt the prickles running rampant over my skin. When on missions, he might be empty, but I’d never seen him like this.

Yanking my gaze away from him, I noticed something shifting in the shadows above his head, and as Alezand stepped forward, I had my array enhance my view of this anomaly.

“A prisoner, a potential *they* have Favored, has escaped,” he said. “He must be found before *they* turn their full attention on us.”

The crowd's nervous muttering rose in volume, and while Alezand motioned for calm, I narrowed my eyes. The air above Korix's head. Something was... in it.

"We don't have time for panic," Alezand shouted. "Please, listen, so we can begin our search."

The gathered House Cerullis members gradually fell quiet, especially when Alezand waved toward the shuttle to draw his subordinates' gazes that way. Even with so much attention paid to him, Korix never moved from his spot with his finger continuing its tap.

"Your target is one of the most well-trained and dangerous men in Lutov," he said, "but fortunately for you, I know how he thinks. I doubt he's left this... lovely facility, probably went to the stacks as soon as he escaped. Send a few people to the sub-levels to search for him, but he won't be there anymore. No. Now, he'll be combing this facility for... well. What he seeks isn't your concern, even if his quest for it is inordinately stupid."

Ouch.

"When you find him, shoot him," Korix continued. "You should aim to wound, but if you have nothing but a kill shot, take it. He cannot be allowed to escape this place."

He fell silent, all while I fought watering eyes. Mother Time, he'd told them to...

Fuck. Whether something was controlling him or not, that *hurt*.

"I've sent a description and image of your target to your arrays," Alezand said. "Get out of here, and find our prisoner as quickly as possible."

In the end, I blessed the shimmer in my vision. It gave me a vague outline of the thing hovering over Korix, even as its shape wavered and changed in the next moment. What was that? Why didn't it seem... corporeal? Was I fighting ghosts?

Even silly as the desire was, I hoped something so strange was my enemy because if that was true, its attachment to Korix was another piece of evidence in my case that his actions weren't his own.

As the House Cerullis members left the hangar, I tugged Leski along with me, following the flood of people until we reached a better hiding spot. I crouched in the shadows between a wall and another set of crates, further away from the enemy while maintaining a decent line of sight.

Beside me, Leski hissed, "What are you doing? Now that this meeting's concluded, we can use their search to find the man you love."

"We're staying here," I said. "Sub-vocals, Leski."

Gritting her teeth, she complied.

"Why would we stay here? Unless..."

She glanced at the landing pad.

“Is it Alezand?” she asked. “Zaeden, I’m sorry, but he can’t be rescued. He’s the leader of this conspiracy, if only as a figurehead-”

I pressed a finger to her lips, even though they weren’t moving. The last House Cerullis members were filing out of the hangar, and I needed to give Leski her instructions.

“No matter what happens, you stay here,” I said, jabbing a finger toward the floor. “If you try to help me, I promise you. It’s more likely to get me killed than actually help, so don’t do it. I’ll need your help with the aftermath. Understand?”

When she nodded, I relaxed a fraction. I’d thought for sure that she’d protest.

“Hopefully, everything will go the way I want,” I continued, “but if it doesn’t, you keep quiet until you can escape, and you *go home*. Tell Talira that the instructions you sent her way were a trap. Let her know what happened here.”

“Will do,” Leski said.

Slumping, I said, “Thank you. Now, just-”

“Stay here. I know,” Leski said.

Smiling, I squeezed her shoulder before creeping to the edge of the crate. With the hangar emptied, only Korix and Alezand remained here, and I made a face. I needed the *shukusen* to leave before I could make my move because...

Mother Time. I was about to attack the *Lokke Vitras*, my *evushk*, my...

Hell. I was about to engage in a fight where I couldn’t hold anything back and my intent must always be to kill, and my opponent would be my partner.

I *hated* my life.

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