

Chapter 73: I Never Wanted You to See This

Leski followed me as I made for where Kolb scouts had last spotted my targets.

I wasn't sure how long this hunt would take me. Sure, the last one had taken a week, but usually, I only needed a day or two.

When it came to timing, I was hoping this hunt would be on the lower end. Not only did I want it over with so I could start on Calia's list, but I was uncomfortable with leaving Baely in strangers' care. I doubted they'd treat her poorly, and it was better that she was with them than me, but still. It set me on edge.

When we reached our destination, I frowned. No one was there, waiting for me. It would have surprised me if they had been, but considering the blatantly visible bike trails that were leading away from this spot, my targets might as well have stayed here. They hadn't hidden their tracks. Why?

It was likely that they'd simply failed to follow a precaution that I considered basic. Even as I turned to follow the trail, though, I couldn't shake my unease. Something was wrong here, but I couldn't pinpoint it, not yet. I eventually would, though. I always did.

Soon enough, I spotted the bump of an encampment on the horizon, and stopping, I dismounted my borrowed bike.

"You're to serve only as backup," I told Leski. "If they fight, you can watch my back, but that's all. Don't act aggressively unless you must."

Because I didn't want this confrontation to stain her hands more than it already would.

With a cheeky grin, Leski said, "You got it, love."

The way she'd said that was so reminiscent of another loved one that for a moment, their ghost was superimposed over her body.

"You've got this, LV," my hallucination softly said.

With a tight grin, I nodded to them both before turning toward the bump on the horizon. As expected, it filled out as we came closer, and with my array enhancing my sight, I picked out my targets before slowly breathing out, entering mission mode.

“We’ll use our speed to approach them,” I said. “Come in from the north.”

Once Leski had acknowledged her orders, I was off.

The fight didn’t take long. My targets hadn’t been prepared for me, and so, I’d incapacitated most of them before they’d registered our presence. Killing the others took minimal effort.

The same couldn’t be said for what came after that. Unlike with my last target, prying information out of these people was a long and arduous process, and halfway through it, I had to give up the illusion that I could shelter Leski from the evil I was committing. I noted her facial expressions changing, her slow drop out of mission mode, but I couldn’t change what was happening, much as I refused to consider what would come once I was done here.

In the end, my targets didn’t volunteer the information that I needed, making me use a Puppeteer on them. I was sorting through the last of the group’s arrays when Leski broke her promise to me.

“Zae... please,” she breathed. “This is enough, isn’t it? You can- you can stop now.”

Squeezing my eyes closed, I continued with my search, even as I forced words out of my mouth.

“I must be sure that I have everything,” I said. “If this woman had shared what she knew in a verbal manner, I could have read her body language as she was speaking, and that would have informed me as to when I could stop. She can’t do that right now, though, which means I have to continue. You’re supposed to be in mission mode, Leski.”

She was silent for a while, and I focused on scouring the last of my target’s array rather than considering what that silence might mean.

“This is cruel,” she eventually said. “Unnecessarily cruel.”

Rather than read through the array’s last bit of data, I copied it to mine as I took a calming breath. Gently, I lowered my target to the ground before requesting my rifle.

“No, my love. What I’ve done *was* necessary,” I said. “Keeping these people trapped in their broken minds would be cruel.”

Without looking at Leski, I wandered through the encampment, shooting neat holes through its occupants’ forehead. Once I was done, the hallucination that I’d seen earlier flickered into being once more.

“I get it now,” they said. “She will too, someday. Trust me on that.”

I didn’t know what to say to them. Why would they give me this comfort, so soon after shouting disgust at me? If they were merely a hallucination, why would their opinion differ from mine or at the least, from my perception of the person they were modeled after? In either of those circumstances, they shouldn’t be able to offer such soothing words, and the fact that they had only confused me.

In this moment, I couldn't afford confusion, so without a word, I dragged my eyes to my wife. Precariously balanced on her back leg, she was staring at me, wide-eyed, with her lips parted and nose wrinkled, which yes. That was what I'd thought she'd look like at the end of this. My anticipation of seeing her shock made it hurt no less, though.

With a sigh, I dropped my rifle.

"This is my job, love," I said. "This is what I'm doing every time I've said I don't need your help on a mission, smiling so you don't worry. I have fought so hard to keep you from realizing everything that the role of the *Lokke Vitras* has forced from me, but here we are, and I am so very sorry for what you're feeling right now."

When I stopped talking, she didn't say anything. She didn't even move, and shaking my head, I rubbed my eyes.

"I know how awful it is to say this, but we should go," I said. "I don't want to leave Baely with strangers for longer than we have to, and I have a safehouse to investigate."

I paused, unsure if I should continue, but Leski needed to hear this.

"After what's happened here, I'll understand if you'd rather stay in town than continue to my next destination with me," I said. "We shouldn't discuss that here, though. Let's get somewhere safe first."

I didn't wait for her response. Even without the need for it, I used House Kolb speed to reach our bikes, reading through the data that I'd pulled from my target as I did. That was why when Leski stopped beside me, releasing a long string of heated words, I didn't hear her. I was stuck staring at the last set of messages that one of my targets had both received and sent.

One where the other participant in the conversation lived in the town where we'd left Baely.

"It was a trap," I said, stunned.

Leski cut off with her face reddening, but I couldn't be bothered to calm her down right now. Of course my targets had made their tracks so visible. After learning that my daughter had been with me in the town, they'd wanted me to find them, keeping me away from her. And it was why they'd been so resistant to my interrogation. They'd been buying their comrades more time.

As I grabbed Leski's shoulders, stopping a second tirade, the world went crystal clear while my everything focused on a single thought.

"Leski, those people were bait," I said. "They're going after our daughter."

With blood draining from her face, Leski clicked her teeth together before ripping herself out of my grip. I didn't check what she did next. Why would I when I knew what it would be?

Together, we mounted our bikes and raced back toward the town.

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