

Chapter 74: Don't You Touch Her

It was quiet when we arrived. No one was outside of their homes, and there was no breeze to stir the air.

I couldn't be sure how many of these people were complicit in this plot, whether willingly or under force, so I was careful while moving between houses with Leski barely audible behind me. Before entering the town's confines, we'd placed camouflage disks on the back of our necks—

Our daughter's life was at stake. We weren't taking chances.

—but not only did that piece of tech fail to mask sound but our enemies might be on the lookout for the telltale sign of the disk's use: eyes skipping over a spot.

We easily reached the house Baely had entered earlier, and I signaled for Leksi to hold position while heading toward the back. When I scanned its interior, there was a small militia waiting for us, so many people crowding such a tiny space that I couldn't pick Baely out of them.

Can you eliminate the five closest to you? I sent to Leski.

She should be able to. I knew my wife's capabilities well, but for something this important, I also knew better than to make assumptions. Her reply popped into my array within a few heartbeats.

I'd be more comfortable with four, it read. I'm not sure I can get a good angle on the one that's furthest from me, but I can compensate if I must.

Let's not, I was quick to send back, not when Baely's life is on the line. You handle those four. I'll take the rest. I'll move when you do.

After a pause, I watched Leski reach for something at her waist, and as she strode for the front door, I slipped through the back entrance.

The scene inside was exactly as my array had reported it. A man was standing in the hallway that led deeper into the house, watching where I'd entered it, and on seeing the door open, he made to shout a warning. Fortunately, I was close enough to sink a dagger into his lungs, preventing him from making a sound, and finishing him off, I lowered the body to the floor.

Leski was almost to the front door, so I glided toward the first floor's central room, ready to join her when she made her entrance. She did that with style, opening the door the barest sliver before flowing through it, and already, she'd sent two knives flying. I didn't see the rest, firing off shot

after shot while sticking my dagger through a woman's heart.

Bodies dropped, leaving the room cleared of hostiles, and only five seconds had passed. It was damn fine work for a pair of House Kolb operatives. Sloppy for me, but I'd been too preoccupied with identifying my daughter to move faster.

She'd been sitting on the living room's couch, seemingly unperturbed by the people standing guard over her, but when one of them collapsed, lifeless, into her lap, she screamed. I was across the room in a breath, pulling the body off of the couch before crouching in front of her. Gently, I took her shoulders.

"It's ok," I said. "Baely, you're safe."

Falling silent, Baely dragged their gaze off of the corpse to stare at me, wide-eyed.

"You killed him," they whispered.

Sucking in a breath, I jerked away from them. Oh, Mother Time. What had I done? I... I'd *sworn* to keep this one life safe, protected from me, and yes, my daughter had chosen Kolb as their House. Yes, they'd probably see similar things throughout their life because of that but-

Something pushed against me, and following that prompt, I moved to the side, letting Leski take my place.

"Why don't you come with me, sweetie?" she said. "Let's go outside and get a breath of fresh air. Your father can finish in here."

Slowly, Baely nodded, and Leski led her outside, leaving me alone in a room full of bodies. Squeezing my eyes closed, I rubbed my face, trying to erase the look of horror imprinted on the back of my eyelids.

I'd been in this situation, surrounded by the dead, so many times before, but this instance of it was worse than any of the others. Could one factor really change it so drastically?

Shaking my head, I set to work, alerting the relevant parties of the mess I was leaving behind. They'd get it cleaned up, as they always did. I wondered what they thought of their *Lokke Vitras*, those people who constantly handled the destruction that I left in my wake.

Beside the skycruiser, this town's mayor was speaking with Leski, wringing her hands at the glare she was receiving in response, and I sighed under my breath. What was the point of wasting anger on a mostly innocent bystander?

After spotting my daughter through the skycruiser's window, I quickened my pace, eager to leave this place. The town's mayor soon caught sight of me, which hiccupped the stream of her word. Swallowing hard, she turned toward me, and I raised a hand.

"They coerced you into cooperating, yes?" I said.

The mayor frantically nodded, and making a face, I kneaded the back of my neck, which made her flinch. I paused before lowering my hands.

“You should have told me what was happening. I am your *Lokke Vitras*, here to serve Lutov and therefore, *you*,” I said, “but I understand why you didn’t, so please. Go in peace, knowing that I hold nothing against you.”

Bowing low, the mayor might have uttered her thanks before scurrying off, but if she did, I didn’t hear it, already focused on the greater problem.

Once Leski and I were alone, I said, “I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what else I could do to fix this.

Crossing her arms, Leski said, “You sure are saying that a lot lately. Isn’t part of your precious job never apologizing for what you’ve done?”

With my eyes burning, I turned aside, unable to do anything else. If I spoke, I was afraid of what might come out of it.

After an interminably long silence, Leski cleared her throat.

“What now, *Lokke Vitras*?” she asked.

Shit. She’d dropped into mission mode.

Snapping my eyes closed, I gritted my teeth, grinding them together until I no longer needed to scream at the world’s unfairness. With a long breath out, I joined my wife in a near emotionless state, a side of me that had become increasingly more comfortable as time had gone on.

“This disaster has shown me that I was right,” I said. “Having family near me while I resolve our current crisis is dangerous. While I can’t tell you or Korix what to do when it comes to this, I still have a say in how we handle our daughter, and I say that she cannot accompany me on this mission. So, we will fly back to Xygek, where we will leave them somewhere safe. We will meet with Ko, and the two of you will decide how committed you are to the idea of *helping me*.”

I’d almost sneered that last bit, barely catching myself in time, but Leski didn’t seem to notice. When I glanced at her, she inclined her head before getting into the skycruiser.

“Mother Time damn it all,” I said under my breath.

But then, I joined my family inside. I only took one look at Baely before facing forward, chewing on my lip. Hell, I’d never seen her so empty before. I wondered how long she’d look like that.

Without another word, I fed the console a set of coordinates, and the skycruiser lifted off, taking us away from a still seemingly abandoned town.

