

First Day

The events immediately after my House naming ceremony are a blur to me, even so many years later. I remember that I wasn't given leave to say farewell to my family. Instead, the *Lokke Vitras* tersely informed me that Talira would tell them what had happened.

Apparently, she gave him the dressing down of the century later that day, berating him for almost ten minutes for ruining my House naming for me.

I remember the flight to his estate with the most uncomfortable silence lying between us. I remember landing and silently following him down strange halls—suppressing my curiosity all the while—until he stopped at a room in the farthest corner of the house's outer wing.

"You'll sleep here," he told me. "Make yourself comfortable. We'll start at daybreak tomorrow."

And then, he left. I think the unspoken assumption was that I'd stay in place until then, and once I'd satisfied myself about my new quarter's security and dug through the contents of the room's closet and dresser, I did agonize over whether I should go to sleep or not.

I chose 'or not'.

Wandering through the *Lokke Vitras'* home years later, when I knew him better, occasionally gave me the heebie jeebies, so you can imagine what it was like when I was creeping, alone and in the dark, through the home of Lutov's most dangerous man that night. I'd never been more cautious in my life, but even with how sneaky I was, I didn't escape the *Lokke Vitras'* notice.

He found me in his library, running a finger along the spines of his books. By that point, I'd long ago lost the awe of being surrounded by so much of the printed word, leaving me looking for something to read until morning. I was pretty sure that sleep wouldn't visit me that night, not with how jittery I still was from earlier events.

I didn't get far before the *Lokke Vitras* stopped me. The books on all sides had so captured my attention that I hadn't noticed him entering the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" he said.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, setting into an attack stance after spinning toward him. With him lost in the shadows, I could barely make out his form, just... standing there and staring at me. With my nerves screaming, I forced myself to relax, flashing a smile at him.

"I couldn't sleep," I said. "Decided to go exploring and found this fascinating collection."

In response, the *Lokke Vitras* continued staring at me, nearly making me wilt. Unsure what to do, I cleared my throat.

“It wasn’t my intention to wake you up,” I said. “I’m sorry if I did.”

“You didn’t wake me,” he said.

And he'd sounded so empty that I thought he might have been a ghost. After another interminable wait in silence I turned back to the shelves to continue my search.

“Do you have any recommendations?” I idly asked.

Again, with the silence. I didn’t know what to make of them. Did he have anything to say? If not, why was he here?

“The texts at the end of that row should hold some interest for you,” the *Lokke Vitras* eventually said. “Try not to damage them.”

“Thank-”

But he was gone. I wouldn’t realize how kind he was being to me until years later. Those books were his pride and joy, the one thing he prized above all—at the time, at least—but he let me touch and handle them on our first night together. He looked past the discomfort of having an unknown sleeping under the same roof as him to the disruption he’d made in my life: changing the course of it so drastically from what I’d imagined.

Of course, I didn’t know that back then. I only saw the *Lokke Vitras* leaving me alone for the night. I only saw that I didn’t need to be so careful anymore.

After looking through his suggested books, I chose one and settled in to read it. At some point, I fell asleep doing this.

I woke up with a vague sense of unease the moment before something nudged my foot, and when I snapped my eyes open, a rifle’s muzzle was in my face. Scrunching back in my chair, I barely kept myself from reacting, having noted the cool, grey eyes on the other side of the gun.

“Four minutes, twenty-two seconds,” the *Lokke Vitras* said.

He paused as if waiting for a response.

Licking my lips, I said, “What?”

“That’s how long I was standing over you before you woke up,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “If I’d wanted to, I could have killed you a thousand times over by now. In the future, you’ll have to do better.”

His grip on his rifle loosened the tiniest bit, making me relax.

“And one more thing, *kuvesk*,” he continued. “Always trust your instincts.”

As his finger tightened on the trigger, I had a split second to react. Long drilled practices had me slapping my palm to the inside of his elbow while knocking his wrist toward the ceiling, and an energy bolt flashed by close enough to burn my skin. I tried to get up so I could run, but faster than should have been possible, the *Lokke Vitras* recovered, pinning me to the chair with a hand around my neck.

House Kolb speed. A skill I had yet to master.

Kicking for his legs, I grunted, “Not. fair.”

Before the last word fell from my lips, a cold circle was pressed to my temple, and I fell still. I didn’t think he’d kill me, considering what he wanted me for, but still, I couldn’t deny the doubts and fears roaring in my head.

“You are the *Lokke Vitras* to come, *kuvesk*,” he said. “Fair shouldn’t exist in your vocabulary.”

And he pulled the trigger, making the rifle click. Out of charge. Thank Mother Time.

Easing off of me, the *Lokke Vitras* backed away while I rubbed my neck.

“Follow me,” he said.

I almost didn’t obey. The man had just tried to kill me, after all. But disobedience, at least with him, seemed hazardous to my health, so while pressing my fingers to the burn on my forehead, I clambered out of the chair.

The *Lokke Vitras* again led me through an unfamiliar maze of halls, and I kept quiet all the while. I had many questions for him, most of them urgent, but something inside kept me from speaking up.

Eventually, we stopped in a large, open room, one with white walls.

A sim room.

I’d expected this, seeing as how today would mark the first day in my training, although I’d thought I’d at least get a shower and breakfast before our first session. What I hadn’t expected, however, was the puppy running straight for us as soon as we stepped in the door.

Completely black and in the clumsy stage of growth, it was a spot of adorable goodness that I hadn’t expected to see again for a long time. I was a little disappointed when my companion stepped into its path, sending it careening to a halt. He reached out a hand, and I watched incredulously while the fucking *Lokke Vitras* cooed over a dog. While he scratched its belly, I edged closer before clearing my throat.

“Why have we come here...? I’m sorry. What am I supposed to call you?” I said.

Glancing up at me, the *Lokke Vitras* said, "You will call me *evushk*."

"Teacher?" I said. "I guess that's why you called me student earlier."

Without a word, the *Lokke Vitras* returned his attention to the dog, and I waited for instruction. Instead, I got a lecture.

"The role of the *Lokke Vitras* is demanding," he said. "It will take many things from you: love, family, any sense of choice. I could go on. It is, however, needed for Lutov's stability, and this is why the role persists from one person to the next."

Holding the puppy, the *Lokke Vitras* rose to his full height, turning his piercing gaze on me.

"You are the *Lokke Vitras* to come, and because of that, your freedom will be even more restricted than mine is," he said. "From now until such time as I relinquish my role, you will do as I tell you without question. Is that understood?"

"Of course."

What else was I supposed to say? Was I supposed to refuse the *Lokke Vitras*? I couldn't, not if I wanted to stay alive.

Wordlessly, the *Lokke Vitras* extended the puppy to me, and I accepted it, even wriggling as it was. Its fur was so soft and its body so warm that a sense of safety began growing in my heart unbidden.

The *Lokke Vitras* stopped that in its tracks.

"I want you to break its legs," he said.

As my head shot up, I opened my mouth to say Mother Time knows what. I barely stopped myself from voicing my disbelief, squeaking instead.

Damn, his eyes were so cold, alien and without feeling, and I shivered, reflexively clutching the puppy to me.

When it started squirming, I looked down at it. The *Lokke Vitras* wanted me to hurt this innocent creature and for what? To establish who was in control here? I was already fully aware of that.

Regardless of his reason, the *Lokke Vitras* had given me an order, no matter how softly it had been phrased, and given who he was, I had to obey, on pain of *at least* death. Not only that, but as his student, I had an obligation to follow his instructions. Who was I to think I knew better than such a respected man?

But I looked into those trusting, brown eyes and watched the creature excitedly panting, frantically squirming to connect its tongue to my face, and I knew I couldn't do as I'd been told. Closing my eyes, I set my jaw, knowing I might be living out my last few moments.

“No,” I said before lifting my eyes to him, “I won’t do it.”

I don’t know how long I maintained that freezing stare when I should have been begging forgiveness, but after what felt like an eternity, the *Lokke Vitras* nodded.

“Good,” he said.

Turning on his heel, he strode for the sim room’s door.

“Because you’ve chosen to spare it, the dog is now yours,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll give you a few minutes to get acquainted while I gather some equipment.”

He left me staring at the closing door with my mouth gaping, and when I eventually regained control, my screeching voice filled the room.

“WHAT?!”

The puppy did *not* like that. It wriggled its way free of my arms, and I barely lowered myself to the floor in time to keep it from hurting itself. With a happy bark, it started circling my legs, and dumbass that I was, I didn’t know how to regain my balance once it had been so thoroughly thrown askew. I landed on the floor with a crack, thankfully missing the dog, and got a face full of slobber as a reward.

Sputtering, I pushed it aside so I could sit up and wipe my face .

Glaring at the dog, I said, “The hell am I supposed to do with you?”

I’d had partners who’d owned dogs before, but my parents had never wanted their children owning pets. I didn’t have the first clue about how one raised a puppy.

“I suppose I could start with a name,” I said under my breath.

But I didn’t know where to begin with even something that simple. Sighing, I popped to my hands and knees, crawling toward the puppy, and as I should have expected, it bowed to me before jumping from side to side, unleashing a series of happy barks.

Goodie. It wanted to play.

Glancing about the room, I found nothing I could use as a play toy, so I used myself instead. Leaping for the dog, I tackled it, trying to be careful all the while, but it somehow managed to dodge before performing its own jump on my back. It immediately tumbled off, but that didn’t stop it from hopping upright once it had hit the ground. He—and I knew the puppy was a he now—got a mouthful of my shirt before tugging on it with a growl, skipping away from my reaching hands whenever I came close to him.

I don’t know how long we played like this with the puppy near constantly in control of the situation, but eventually, I gave up. Flopping to my back, I endured tiny teeth nipping at my fingers and

many a puppyish whine before the dog trotted to where I could see him. With one sloppy swipe of his tongue, he sat beside my face, furiously wagging his tail, and cocked his head.

“You’re going to be a handful, aren’t you?” I said.

Lunging for the dog as fast as I could, I scooped him up and... nuzzled my face in his stomach, for some reason. After a spot of struggling, the puppy settled down, letting me hold him in my lap, and I watched while his eyes began drooping. Mother Time, it had taken far too much effort to wear him out. How much trouble would this creature cause me during the first weeks of my training, given how tenacious he was...?

“Ace,” I said.

Sleepily, the dog blinked up at me, and I smiled.

“Your name is Ace,” I told him.

Stretching in my lap, Ace yawned, letting his tiny, pink tongue fall out of his mouth, while I gently rubbed his back. Sure, this creature might cause me way too much trouble, but I thought it would be worth it.

Right after Ace had dropped off, the *Lokke Vitras* returned to the sim room with a pair of swords and other Ibisian weapons on his person. When I made to stand, he waved for me to stay still.

“Wait until he’s more deeply asleep,” he said. “You’ll need him so restricted if you’re to have any hope of completing today’s training without waking him up.”

I should have focused on what the *Lokke Vitras* had implied. With the weapons he’d brought with him, how was I supposed to last in any fight, let alone one against *him*, without rousing a lightly sleeping puppy?

Instead, I turned to the realization of what Ace was meant to be for me: something to care for. A companion to ease my transition into my new role, or that was what I assumed, and understanding that, I didn’t know what to say.

So, I just spoke my mind.

“Thank you.”

The *Lokke Vitras* didn’t reply, merely glancing my way before tossing me a sword, which I reflexively caught, but by that point, he’d turned away, going through a basic warm-up.

Hell. So, not only was I to have a sound impediment in the coming fight, but I’d have to do it with stiff muscles? The *Lokke Vitras* really was an evil teacher.

I found I didn’t mind that, though. Watching him move his body in increasingly... interesting ways, I ran my hands over Ace, letting myself believe that this deviation in my life’s course might not be so bad.

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