

# First Task

After a few weeks together, training and occasionally studying by myself on the estate, the *Lokke Vitras* took me on my first mission. I wasn't sure what to expect, as he didn't give me a briefing before we left, but when we headed toward the Eastern Reaches, I assumed one of the production facilities there had gone haywire. The low Strata in charge of it probably needed an expert touch to bring it back online.

The *Lokke Vitras*, however, set us down between Lake Phiabe and the southern stretch of the Barasgami Mountains, although we were close enough to the lake that I could see its waters between breaks in the fog.

"I have a test for you," the *Lokke Vitras* said, keeping his eyes fixed outside. "Today, we'll see if you've learned anything while you've stayed with me. Your mission specifics are in the message you'll be receiving shortly. Once you get out of the skycruiser, you're to remain in place for three minutes before opening it.

"This won't be your first solo mission, *kuvesk*. You're not ready for that yet. I'll be keeping an eye on you somewhere nearby, but I will not step in unless your life is in immediate danger. Do you understand?"

"I hear your words, *evushk*," I said.

At that point, I still found the *Lokke Vitras*' protocols a little silly, but I conformed to them anyway. What else was I to do? Defy him? Please.

"Good. Then, get out."

Once the crisp air of the Southern Fells was nipping at my skin, the *Lokke Vitras*' skycruiser lifted off of the ground, quickly disappearing in the clouds, and I crossed my arms, waiting. I still wasn't used to the sitting around, doing nothing part of my training, which had happened far more than I'd expected. When instances of it came around, I usually dug into my assigned bookwork, but three minutes wouldn't be long enough for me to get anywhere with that right now.

After the allotted time had passed, I opened the newest message in my array, reading its contents, and groaned, throwing my head back.

"Shiiiiit."

An *ii* hunt. I didn't know wow the fuck a mage had gotten loose here, in the heart of Lutov, but the means of his escape didn't matter now. When looking over the types of magic, or *liiaresim*, that this mage claimed, I understood why this was my first mission as the *Lokke Vitras* to come, though. As a Vimian, Magsense, Somadept, and Hydroshifter, he matched the *ii* that had almost killed me

months before with one exception.

What that told me? The *Lokke Vitras* wanted to know if his teaching methods had been at all effective or if he needed to adjust his strategy.

Chewing on my lip, I headed for the position of the mage's last known location. Based on the report that had been attached to the message, the House Kolb members who's been tracking the *ii* would have apprehended him several hours ago if the *Lokke Vitras* hadn't stopped them in their tracks, taking over the mission. How long had he been looking for an opportunity like this?

On arrival, I started my hunt, tracking the mage much like I had with the one I's fought in Ostiu, and every few meters, the cursing under my breath got more colorful. The *ii* was heading straight for Lake Phiabe, a source of one of his *liiaresim*, and I had no doubt he'd probably reached it, given how long it had been since his last sighting.

Sure enough, when I reached Lake Phiabe's shores, I spotted a splotch of white, skating over the water in the distance. That splotch served as the endpoint to a trail of ice.

This just kept getting better and better.

With my heart in my throat, I carefully stepped onto the ice, and when it held, I started sprinting down it. Considering I had only tentative control over the techniques I'd need to fight a mage, I didn't see any point in making a cautious approach.

As I came closer, the mage had his back to me. Softly singing a whimsical tune, he sent orbs of water flying around his body.

Since I had the chance to make a clean shot and finish this mission in a timely manner, I lifted my rifle, aiming for the mage's head, but as I had in Ostiu's mountains, I couldn't squeeze the trigger. Making a face, I shifted my aim to the man's shoulder, peeking from the sleeve of his... Lutovish made shirt—that was weird—and only then could I take the shot.

Or shots in this case.

One energy bolt tore through the meat of the mage's shoulders, like I'd aimed for, but the second ripped through the side of his lower abdomen, leaving a ring of blackened fabric and skin to outline the evidence of its passing. Howling, the mage spun on me, clearly ready to fight, and with another curse more, I entered a thoughtless state, one of the techniques required to fight a mage.

As always when it comes to that mental regimen, I couldn't tell you what happened while I maintained it. I have brief snapshots, many of which don't make sense to me.

Fish and mucky plant life raining down around me. Water touching every bit of my skin, breathed in as if it were air. Something distinctly not right happening in my chest while viscous liquid bubbled away from my arm, flowing toward a man in white.

I came to myself lying on a patch of melting ice, watching the *Lokke Vitras* roll the mage's body into Lake Phiabe with his toe, and had a split second to notice my withered arm—holy shit, the mage had drained the water from it—before agony drove a spike through my brain and I lost consciousness.

I was stuck in bed for two days after that. Most of that time was lost to sleep or pain. The *Lokke Vitras* didn't allow me any anesthetic to help with my recovery, so I felt the gradual repair of my atrophied heart and desiccated arm to the fullest, every horrible moment of it.

But.

Despite this, I took notice of how attentively the *Lokke Vitras* took care of me. He was always there with a glass of water or a bowl of broth, even fluffing my pillows occasionally. Later, I wondered if he cared for me even that far back.

I've been told that he did.

Still. At the time, all I noticed was that the supposedly emotionless *Lokke Vitras* looked worried when he visited my bedside, even if the traces of it were slight and he never acknowledged it.

Once I'd fully recovered, the *Lokke Vitras* chewed me out extensively about my failure, and the next week of training was hell for me, but that incident and everything that happened afterward planted a seed in my mind, one that would both grow and decay over the next three years. From it would come one of the longest and most fulfilling relationships of my life.

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