

# First Year

Time passed, and I approached my one-year anniversary as the *Lokke Vitras* to come. At the time, I still hadn't adjusted my priorities about what was important in life. I still found milestones significant, even if I knew not to expect any sort of gift for them from the *Lokke Vitras*. By then, I had a decent understanding of him, and I knew he'd think my anticipation of this anniversary was unnecessary and a bit silly.

I couldn't ignore my excitement, though. Even if that day turned out to be like any other, *I* would know what it meant

When I woke up that morning, things seemed set to follow the typical routine, except I almost had to spend an hour flushing anti-venom through my system first thing. The *Lokke Vitras* had let an adder into my bedroom while I was sleeping, and I nearly missed it when getting out of bed. My mind and body hadn't *quite* gotten used to my new sleep schedule, and that made me extraordinarily drowsy on some mornings. That day happened to be one of them.

After killing the snake, I rushed through getting ready for the day. The *Lokke Vitras* didn't usually mess with me during that part of the day, although it did occasionally happen. So, while I wasn't as cautious while showering and getting dressed, I also kept an eye out for anything unusual.

Since I hadn't received a message informing me of a change in plans, I snuck my way across the estate to the kitchen, the one place in the world that was completely safe for me. Even still, I was always on my guard there, but toward the beginning of my training, the *Lokke Vitras* had told me in no uncertain terms that he would never attack me there, and if he did, it would mean he'd decided I wouldn't cut it as his replacement.

In other words, if I ever got jumped in that room, I was dead, and there was no way around it.

I don't know why I trusted the *Lokke Vitras* when it came to that claim. He'd certainly lied to me about other things, trying to teach me how little I could trust people, but when it came to the kitchen, I never doubted that he'd told me the truth. I was safe as soon as I crossed the room's threshold.

Ace was there, of course, happily waiting for his morning trip outside, and after attaching his leash, we started our journey to an exterior door. My dog was fairly disciplined by that point, sticking to my heel and scrunching low as we snuck out, but he was still a puppy. He Food and other things that dogs loved still distracted him, and the *Lokke Vitras* just *loved* to scatter temptation across our path wherever he could, hence why Ace was on a leash. Eventually, I thought he could do this without it, but until I was certain he wouldn't break stealth during this part of the day, I kept him attached to me via rope.

That went away when we eventually stepped back inside. We sprinted through the estate, moving as quickly as we could back to the kitchen.

Not that our speed mattered much. The *Lokke Vitras* always found us, although the number of his lightning-strike attacks depended on how long we spent between the door and the kitchen.

Mother Time, he went easy on us those first couple of years. If I'd known then what I do now, I'd have been grateful for how much he restrained himself.

As it was, I was usually cursing him in my head every time I had to dodge an energy bolt or fend off a series of stabs from a knife. Ace always fought the *Lokke Vitras* as well, but that was what I'd trained him to do, what he was supposed to do. If the famed *Lokke Vitras* couldn't avoid a measly dog, even one as well trained as Ace, then Lutov had a problem.

When we eventually reached the kitchen with our morning workout complete, I was out of breath and already exhausted, not that I let it show. I waited with Ace until the *Lokke Vitras* showed up, and as it did every other morning, watching my dog trot up to the man he'd been snipping at not five minutes dragged a smile from me. Strangely enough, the *Lokke Vitras* never scolded me for these expressions of amusement, unlike what he did with every other unintentional revelation of my emotional state.

Despite the day's significance, the *Lokke Vitras* thoroughly reamed me for every failing I'd displayed in our morning warm up, although I did get more compliments than usual afterward. After he'd finished critiquing my performance, we started cooking.

Breakfast was always the easiest of meals for us two chefs, so while I scrambled eggs at the *Lokke Vitras'* discretion, I scanned the news, as I usually did at that point in our routine.

It wasn't long before a piece of it had me freezing in place with my spatula stuck in the middle of soggy eggs. For several precious seconds, I blinked at the images of destruction splashed into my array, knowing all the while that I should return my focus to my cooking.

But I couldn't.

"Is something wrong, *kuvesk*?" the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Over the last twelve months, I'd learned exactly which empty tones correlated to which nearly non-existent emotions this man might have. This one made me shiver.

"Nothing, *evushk*, only..."

A small, logical part of my brain hissed warnings, shouting about how dangerous it would be to continue, but I couldn't stop myself.

"A tornado hit Daka this morning," I said. "Shouldn't we be there? Helping?"

A long, tense silence fell, one in which I started furiously scraping at my eggs again.

“Give me your argument for why we should go to Ibis and help what are essentially products when House Vaessa should have the situation under control within the week,” the *Lokke Vitras* said.

Fuck. I hated when questions of time management came up between us, considering I usually had slightly different priorities than him, and with this particular incident, my reasoning might not hold up to his standards. Still. I had to try.

“The children of Ibis play an essential role in Lutovish society, even if it’s only one of aggression release,” I said. “Any threat to them is also a threat to us, and I would prefer to have such useful pieces of our society up and running again as quickly as possible.”

I’d modified my true reasons for wanting to help there, but I was pretty damn sure I couldn’t talk about how I thought the *Lokke Vitras* should protect the children of Ibis just as much as they did with the Lutovish.

Without looking at the *Lokke Vitras* to see how my argument had landed, I transferred my eggs to a platter before setting the pan aside. After placing several slices of fried ham around the platter’s edge, the *Lokke Vitras* brought it to the table, and I followed with plates and silverware. He only spoke once we’d sat and started eating.

“An acceptable line of reasoning. We’ll depart for Escad as soon as the kitchen’s back in order.”

My shock had me stabbing my fork into my lip instead of getting it properly into my mouth, and with the barest of coughs, I did my best to hide the embarrassing slip up. Fortunately, the *Lokke Vitras* ignored it, instead mildly advising me to slow down my rate of consumption when I started shoveling food into my mouth.

The trip to Ibis passed in a daze. There was one (1) silent skycruiser ride to the Southern Fells Travel Center, one (1) painfully disconcerting stop in the station while hurtling across the world as particles, and one (1) zipping flight to Daka with P.I.G.s after arguing with a surprisingly stubborn House Vaessa member about using them.

But then, we were in Escad’s capital, and it was a wreck. So many squat buildings had been ripped to pieces, the wreckage strewn everywhere, and so many people listlessly wandered the street or sat in out of the way corners. Some of the soldiers of the nation’s standing army were flying about the small square where we’d landed, carrying their archaic medical supplies and rolling barrels full of water back and forth across it. Many of them eyed us as we set down, which made me uncomfortable, but the *Lokke Vitras* just ignored them, surveying the damage.

“They’ve responded to the disaster more quickly than usual this time. That’s good,” he said. “*Kuvesk*, you start clearing rubble wherever you see fit. I’ll coordinate with these soldiers about where they could best use us.”

He didn’t already know? Then again, the *Lokke Vitras* hadn’t gotten much time to gather the details of what had happened and what we’d find here before arriving.

But why was I questioning what he planned to do? I had my orders. If I wanted to stay alive and whole, I needed to follow them. So, I wandered off to the closest site of destruction.

The nearby children of Ibis seemed scandalized when I asked if there were any survivors in the wreckage, but they answered me. After they mentioned hearing voices under the rubble, I picked up those sounds for myself. Starting toward the noise, I called for the survivors keep shouting so I could find them, and with my enhanced hearing, I started picking through collapsed wood beams and piles of broken stone.

Clearing the rubble was an involved task, forcing me to consider how to shift debris so it wouldn't collapse on top of the person I was trying to reach, but honesty? It wasn't that taxing. I worked my way through it, hauling away what I could move on my own away while others helped. I summoned my rifle to break larger stone into smaller pieces while coordinating with the others on the 'rescue team'.

Within a good quarter hour—a much shorter time period than it would have been without my help—we uncovered a man holding his unconscious partner. After helping the two out of what might have been an early grave, I shot ahead with the injured woman. I got her to triage quickly enough that she might have decent odds of survival.

And then, I couldn't move further. Staring at the medics working on that woman, I was struck by the realization that I'd saved a life today instead of ending it. After the last year with nothing to prove me wrong, I'd begun to think the role of the *Lokke Vitras* was only meant for killing. Something deep inside of me loosened on seeing that I could be something more than a murderer in the future.

Someone dropped their hand on my shoulder at that moment, making me jump, and when I glanced behind me to see the *Lokke Vitras* standing there, I winced in preparation for the lecture I was sure to receive. But he just watched the medics finish their ministrations before meeting my eyes.

“Do you understand now?” he said.

And I nodded, nothing more or less. What else was there to say?

“Savor this, *kuvesk*,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “Moments like this, triumphs in every sense of the word, are rare in our line of work. Make them count when they happen to you.”

“Yes, *evushk*,” I said.

He squeezed my shoulder, making my skin tingle, before jerking his head to the side.

“This way,” he said. “Apparently, the king has requested our presence. Hopefully, he can give us a broader picture of the situation.”

As he made his way deeper into Daka, I trotted at his heel, working through everything that had happened this morning, and when I was finished, I cocked my head at the *Lokke Vitras*' back.

Why was he being so generous with me today? Indulging my desire to come here, making sure I understood how precious what we'd was? These were atypical behaviors for him, so I had to wonder. Did the *Lokke Vitras* remember that it was my one-year anniversary?

I mean... of course, he did. I supposed the question was more, was he acting so out of the norm because of it?

Was coming here and helping these people his gift to me?

I didn't know what to make of the idea that my *evushk* might acknowledge—if only in deed—that we were merely human. That we might need breaks on occasion.

Wait.

*He* was merely human.

Huh. It had taken me a whole year to figure that one out.

Shaking my head, I picked up the pace so I could be at the *Lokke Vitras*' side instead of behind him, removing that possible source of unease for him. This man, seemingly emotionless and resolute, might be just as tense and uneasy as I typically was with a source of danger at my back. What a radical concept, and it stirred my curiosity.

Given that I'd figured out something that most Lutovish would never even consider possible, what more might I learn about the *Lokke Vitras*?

---

Revision #2

Created 19 November 2024 03:14:42 by FatalisticFable

Updated 26 December 2024 07:53:19 by FatalisticFable