

# Chapter 21: Or Not 1

The Southern Fells Travel Center was smaller than the one in Ibis, and although its layout was similar—if stacked rather than aligned—the aesthetic here was much different.

The facility in Ibis had mostly concrete walls and slabbed tiles for its floor. It had clearly been built with function in mind. Nothing about it was pleasing to the eye, save for in the zones reserved for visitors.

Conversely, everything about the Southern Fells Travel Center focused on beauty and flow. Except for support columns, nothing divided each floor. Instead, it was an open space dotted by potted plants and sleek seating. Glass windows formed the place's exterior wall, and beyond it, Lake Phiabe stretched on three sides while misty marshland took up the fourth.

Although Lake Phiabe nearly rivaled Lake Voxmore in size, it matched Lutov's smaller Lake Sonis in appearance. Reeds and leafy pads blurred the line between its shore and shallows, and herons as well as other lake creatures glided, hopped, and darted through the grass and water. Fog hung heavy over the lake's surface, constantly teasing of something wonderful hidden just out of view.

The scene looked like something pulled out of a fairy tale, calling forth wonder and peace in most of the people who visited it, and it surrounded the Travel Center, the faintest breath of civilization imposed on a place of wild magic.

After the many times I'd passed through here, I'd grown quite fond of the place.

It was also one of the least frequented Travel Centers, as not many Lutovish made their homes in the Southern Fells. This relatively abandoned state was to my benefit at the moment. It meant that maybe a dozen people were staring at the *Lokke Vitras* and consequently, me, and from the way he was looking at me, I could expect a spot of embarrassment.

So, hooray for small audiences.

"*Kuvesk*," he said in an empty voice.

Shit, that was his lengthy lecture tone. This would take longer than I'd thought, which was too bad because a host of new alerts had popped into my array since apparating. My atoms had degraded more quickly during their transit to Lutov than I'd thought they would, and because of that, I didn't know how much longer I could stay on my feet, no matter how many pain receptors I deadened. Despite this, I bowed to the *Lokke Vitras*, nearly puking my guts up on his combat boots as a result.

"*Evushk*," I said.

Pride flashed in me for keeping my strain to myself. I hadn't let it show! For now.

“Make yourself comfortable,” the *Lokke Vitras* said. “I have a long list for you this time.”

By which he meant: Stop stressing your wounds, moron. And. Oh... you fucked up this time.

I was paraphrasing, of course. I'd never known this man to be casual or crass. He was usually so wrapped in formality and a lack of emotions that I sometimes wondered whether *shukusen* Talira had replaced his heart with gears in the past.

Still, I rose from my bow, although this effort was harder on me than the first had been. Every second felt like the moment after a gut punch, an aching queasiness that could, at times, steal one's breath, and when I moved, it blossomed into horribly dull pain, reaching a hand up my throat.

A few years ago, I'd have been on the ground, curling around my wounds, while desperately clinging to the focus needed to maintain consciousness. Now, I merely blinked at the *Lokke Vitras* as if nothing was wrong with me, although I couldn't stop sweat from rolling over my skin. I didn't have enough in me to control that function of the body as well as my stifled nerve endings while also giving the *Lokke Vitras* the attention that he demanded.

“Are you listening properly, *kuvesk*?” he asked.

“Always, *evushk*,” I said. “Teach me.”

With our protocol established, the *Lokke Vitras* raised a fist, lifting a finger from it.

“Regarding the length of time it took for you to complete your mission,” he said. “I noted no less than sixty-two opportunities that you could have used to more quickly finish it, beginning one month and two days into your stay with House Vaessa. A list of these has been sent to your array. I expect that after studying them, you'll never overlook these openings again. Our time is too valuable for you to waste four months on a mission as simple as the one I gave you.”

Mother Time, he'd started there? I'd thought my timing had been rather good on this mission, but if he'd found fault with something that small, we might be here for a while.

He looked at me expectantly, and I internally sighed.

“I hear your words, *evushk*,” I said.

Nodding, the *Lokke Vitras* lifted another finger.

“Regarding your persona,” he said. “Once again, you let it control you rather than the other way around, except when sex was involved. When in deep cover, you must become another person, but you cannot lose yourself to it. In your next slew of lessons, we will practice the art of persona switches again. You obviously need the review.”

A laugh burst from the people watching us, and almost, I went after its originator, just to show our audience what I was capable of, but this public humiliation was done for many reasons. It got me accustomed to the shame that every *Lokke Vitras* eventually underwent. It also, in a roundabout

way, provided a report on my progress to anyone who was paying attention.

And I had progressed. The failings mentioned thus far were nothing compared to the dressings-downs that I'd gotten during my first years as the *Lokke Vitras* to come.

So, instead of unleashing destruction on our impromptu audience, I gave no reaction. To them, at least.

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

Something that might have been approval flickered in the *Lokke Vitras*' eyes as he lifted a third finger.

"Regarding your fight today," he said. "If you had eliminated your targets right away, as was your right, you wouldn't have sustained the injuries that you have—"

As he quickly circled me, the *Lokke Vitras* jabbed my chest, gut, knee, and back, and for a breath, black lapped at my vision.

"—and Lutov wouldn't have four, dangerous people to monitor. In addition."

He stopped as if that had been the totality of what he'd wanted to say, but I knew that look, even barely present as it was. He was weighing his options.

"*Frankly, kuvesk, this is getting ridiculous,*" he said, switching to the Ibisian tongue.

Did he not want people to understand what he was saying? Few Lutovish had bothered to learn another tongue or gotten a translator inserted.

"*What do you hope to accomplish with your passivity?*" the *Lokke Vitras* continued. "*If you're to replace me someday, you will eventually take a life. It's part of the job. Whatever is keeping you from crossing this hurdle, you need to overcome it and soon. Do you hear me?*"

He closed his mouth, nodding to let me know I could speak.

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

But I didn't know how to solve this conundrum. I'd never killed someone, not once in the many years of my training, and ever, it had been a source of contention between us, one I didn't understand. I'd broken through most of the conditioning that every Lutovish received as a child, but the idea that death was something that should be chosen, not given, had sunk its claws into the depths of me, and I had yet to dig them out. When I considered killing someone, it made me almost as nauseous as I was now, with a gut wound slowly killing me.

The *Lokke Vitras* lowered his hand.

"I have other items to address, but considering they involve civilians' private lives, I will withhold them until a more appropriate time," he said. "You are free to focus elsewhere."

Again, I bowed, which had my spine screaming at me this time. It had been doing that throughout the lecture, but blocking the pain receptors along my back had, to this point, been more easily accomplished than doing the same for my gut.

My strength, however, was quickly flagging. I'd give myself another three minutes before my legs gave out.

"I am honored to receive your instruction," I said.

Uh-oh. Some of my stress had been laced into that sentence. Had anyone, besides *evushk*, noticed it?

When I hauled myself upright, the world was spinning at a dizzying frequency, and I took a slow breath through my mouth, watching people in the crowd depart now that the show was over. Many of them stayed, however, because who wouldn't take advantage of a rare encounter with the *Lokke Vitras*? Much as people feared him, he also had a certain appeal, as seen in the cautious awe civilians ever sent his way.

I was pretty sure he'd never gotten the same from me.

He came closer, closing us off from anyone who might try to eavesdrop on us, and I levelly met his gaze, noting when its emptiness wavered.

"*Can you walk?*" he asked, switching to the Ostium tongue.

Not without doing something extremely unwise, but hell if I was telling him that.

"*I can probably reach your skycruiser,*" I said.

Almost on the tail of this, he said, "*Don't lie to me, kuvesk.*"

If he'd already known I couldn't move, then why the fuck had he asked if I could?

"*Honestly, evushk,*" I stiffly said, "*it doesn't much matter what I think, does it? Not about something like this, at least.*"

And there it was. Despite his typical emptiness, despite what was fighting to break through it now, *evushk's* lips twitched like they did every time I'd surprised or amused him. Mother Time, I'd missed it.

"How unfortunate for you that I sent emergency services away," he said.

Frowning, I said, "What's that supposed to me-?"

Faster than I could track, *evushk* bent to lift me off the ground, cradling me to his chest, and after an initial yelp, I bit my tongue hard while trying not to scream. Almost, I blacked out with my vision sparking between scenes instead, and when I'd gained enough control to string those scenes into consecutive order, we were nearly to the lifts.

"You're only... making everything that's wrong with me... worse," I gasped.

"Then, perhaps you shouldn't have gotten hurt," my *evushk* grumbled.

Damn... I'd know he wouldn't be happy about how much damage I'd taken but this... this seemed excessive.

Then, we were in the lift, and its jerk on me, inside and out, forced my attention solely on staying awake. When I could spare focus for the rest of the world, *evushk* was loading me into his skycruiser.

I relaxed while he rounded the vehicle to his seat, putting our destination's coordinates into the console. As we lifted off of the platform, Lake Phiabe quickly replaced the wet marshlands below us, and *evushk* reached for a satchel in the back while reclining my seat. Before I could protest, he'd jabbed me with several hypos, everything I'd need to see my body healed.

"You silly, reckless, *stubborn* man," he said under his breath all the while.

I knew better than to respond, letting rapid regeneration drugs do their work instead. Once he was done with me, *evushk* fell silent, slumping in his seat with his arms crossed. Quiet reigned for the half-hour trip to his home, which would have been more awkward if our situation hadn't been so familiar.

Lake Phiabe passed beneath us, eventually transforming into a still mirror, even if the fog hanging over it had yet to lift. By the time this surrendered to the Southern Fell's typical moors, I'd healed enough to raise my seat and watch our descent into the estate that House Kolb's First Stratus claimed.

It was much less expansive than my family's place, but that was only because everything *evushk* considered unnecessary had been stripped from it. As we approached, its single, stark building rose out of the rolling hills, and the ground beside it parted, giving us access to the estate's underground landing pad.

Once we'd set down, *evushk* stayed where he was, neither moving nor speaking, and I waited, content to stay where I was.

"I expect to see you at dinner tomorrow," he eventually said.

He climbed out of the vehicle before I could say a word, leaving me alone.

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