

Chapter 22: Or Not 2

For a while, I didn't move, simply considering how lucky I was that *evushk* had let me off easy this time. While at the Travel Center, he could have revealed much more embarrassing secrets from my last mission than he had. I couldn't tell if he'd done that out of consideration for my emotional well-being or if my injuries had worried him enough to delay those criticisms. If that weren't enough, he'd given me much less time to heal in the past.

To be fair, I couldn't remember the last time I'd come home so badly wounded.

When I could, I clawed my way free of the skycruiser, leaving the hangar in lurching steps. The familiar route to my room passed beneath my notice, although the help I'd received from rapid regeneration drugs quickly reached its limit. I had to rely on the drones' in-built anti-gravity function for the last few meters.

The processes that ran when I entered my room were different from the ones that I'd used years ago. In the past, I'd been more concerned with superficial precautions and comfort. Now, everything was set for my safety.

My array informed me that no one had entered the room since I'd last left it, and the lights stayed ridiculously bright until I chose to dim them, giving me time to check for superficial surprises. Even with my array's assurance in hand, I slowly circled the room once I'd sent the drones away. I couldn't do as thorough of a search here as I might like, but what I could finish indicated that no subtle traps had been set while I'd been gone. After raising my typical warning system near the door and windows, I fell into my bed's sheets, never bothering with stripping my blood-soaked clothing off of me.

My safety measures weren't nearly as complete as I'd like, but I had nothing else to give. I'd have to trust that the *Lokke Vitras* wouldn't murder me in my sleep.

Other threats didn't concern me. If they were undesired, they wouldn't get into this estate.

With nothing else to prevent it, I fell into the sleep that rapid regeneration drugs had been urging from me since I'd received them.

When I woke up, it was late afternoon of the next day, and despite the integrity of my warning system, I knew that *evushk* had been here. I could smell him, or at least, I thought that was what alerted me to his visit.

What had he been doing in my room?

I didn't know why that question had popped into my head. It would never be answered.

Climbing out of bed, I winced. I was sore, but my wounds were gone, and seeing that, I stretched, testing my range of motion. I wasn't happy with the results, disliking the accommodations I'd have to make to achieve typically normal movements, but I couldn't stay in this room for more rest, not with dinner a couple of hours from now.

I headed for the kitchen, enjoying the quiet that was ever found in this house. It was truly a refuge for someone constantly embroiled in turmoil, stress, and violence with peace found in every austere corridor and room.

I understood why the estate claimed little embellishment. From what I could tell, it had been built with only one goal in mind: safety. Hence, nothing extra had been added besides what was needed for comfortable living. Barely any personal touches marked the place.

Except in the kitchen. Located in the center-most bowels of the estate, it was the most defensible room here. So, knives of all types freely decorated magnetized strips on one wall, and an old-fashioned stove and counter tops lay beneath them while ovens sat in a wall at the far end. An icebox stood on the near side, containing perishable ingredients.

Very different from a kitchen's typical solitary refectory.

In addition, a table sat in the room's nook with recessed lights shining down on it, and a bench rested between it and the wall. No other seating was around it, which only made sense for a household of two.

Most importantly, however, the kitchen was where Ace spent most of his time. As I entered the room, he trotted to me, wagging his tail, but when he sniffed me, he laid his ears back on his head.

"Yeah, I know," I said.

Crouching, I extended a hand toward the dog.

"I smell like Vaessa and the drugs you hate, don't I?" I said. "It's only me, Ace. If I have time, I'll take you to the lake before I leave again, ok?"

I knew he hadn't understood what I'd said, but the sound of my voice soothed him. Cautiously, he moved toward me, and I scratched his muzzle. After this was done, he let me move about the room without trouble, and once I'd finished with the prep work for tonight's meal, I slid onto the table's bench, resting my head on the wall.

I must have fallen asleep because the soft scuff of shoes on the floor jerked me upright, and I frowned. He'd made that noise on purpose.

Ace zoomed to the kitchen's entrance, waiting with barely contained excitement, and I watched the rapidly increasing fury of his wagging tail to know how close *evushk* had come. When he stepped into the room, he leaned over to appease Ace's need for attention before glancing at me.

He'd changed into something more comfortable, although it kept to his typical palate of black, and my cheeks heated when I remembered that I had yet to shower or change. He noted this with a slight crease between his eyebrows before patting Ace's back.

"You're early," he said.

"Preparedness leads to success," I replied.

"Only if your condition meets the standards required for your task."

"And mine doesn't?" I asked.

Lifting an eyebrow, *evushk* moved toward my basted chicken meat and chopped vegetables, and I got out of my seat, leaning on the table once I was on my feet. After a few deep breaths, I crossed the room to assume my typical role as sous chef.

Together, the *Lokke Vitras* and I made dinner, and if I had to take a few breaks to regain my strength during this, he said nothing about them. Once we'd finished, he served our plates before bringing them to the table, which was usually my job.

Once we'd arranged ourselves in our normal seating pattern, Ace came to lie at our feet, but neither of us reached for our utensils. I stared at my food while waiting for him to begin.

"Despite how it might have seemed in the Travel Center, you did well on this mission," the *Lokke Vitras* said. "At some point, we should discuss the conversation you held with Second Stratus Graham in that lockup, but it can wait. Now isn't the time for criticism but for a listing of everything you did right.

"So. While the four months that you took to complete your mission were much longer than any potential *Lokke Vitras* can spend on one task alone, it was still much better than most Second Stratus House members can achieve. You maintained a persona that was so anathema to you that checking on you recently has made me sick, seeing how changed you were. You fought four people without causing serious injury to them, something I've never gone out of my way to try, and while with Vaessa, you cultivated well-placed contacts, even if I forced you to divest of them in the end."

He fell silent, and I'd think he was finished if his body weren't so tense.

"You're almost ready," he said.

Jerking to face him, I said, "I'm what now?"

Evushk nodded.

"A few more years and I can give you this position," he said.

Somehow, I caught my crazed cackle before it flew out of my mouth. A few years. Fucking hell, a few more years and I'd be...

Suddenly, I wasn't so hungry.

Nudging me, *evushk* said, "You'll be fine."

He laid his hand, palm up, on the table, and I eagerly reached for the comfort he'd offered me, curling my fingers around his. The warmth of his skin on mine sent a surge of calm splashing against the spark of my soul, and the vice that had been squeezing my heart loosened at the same rate as *evushk's* hand from around mine.

Setting my jaw, I pinned it to the table. He wasn't letting go of me so easily.

"Shall we exercise our non-dominant hands?" I asked, refusing to look at him.

But he tightened his hold on me once more, and I reached for my fork.

"What have you been up to while I've been gone?" I asked.

"Infiltration of House Cerullis," *evushk* said. "They've turned dangerously hostile in recent months, so Talira sent me to find out why."

"Did you learn anything?" I said around a mouthful of food.

Evushk slowed down in his eating, which was my only clue that I'd unintentionally upset him.

"I had to extract before gaining any meaningful intel," he said. "It was nothing serious, just a possible compromise of my persona. I'll return within the month."

"Do you need help?" I asked.

I didn't expect that he'd ask for any, too stubborn for it, and as usual when it came to this topic, I was right.

"The role of the *Lokke Vitras* is solitary," he said. "If I accepted someone's help, even yours, others would perceive it as a weakness."

I wanted to argue that his expressed worry wouldn't come true, but even if it did, why should he care what other people thought of him? Their opinions didn't lessen his ability to mop the floor with them, but I didn't say this. While on this estate, our roles might be relaxed to a certain degree, but there were some topics I could never argue with him about, no matter the setting.

"Your brother's House naming ceremony is in two days," *evushk* said.

The subject change whiplashed me so badly that I almost choked.

"Yes?" I hesitantly said. "I keep track of my family's activities, even if I never see them. I know Pheniks will be choosing a House soon. Why bring it up?"

I was half afraid that he'd say someone in my family had become a threat to Lutov. If that was the case, he might order me to eliminate them, which was a terrifying thought, but he just squeezed my hand.

"Would you like to attend?" he asked.

I clenched my fingers around my fork to keep it from clattering onto my plate. Was he serious? Mother Time, he'd never asked me what I wanted, not about anything like this at least.

It didn't matter either way. Whether I believed his sincerity or not, he'd expect me to answer his question. So, I turned my body to stone, keeping my eyes on my half-finished food.

"I would like that, *evushk*," I said.

"Then, you should attend."

When I swung my head his way, the *Lokke Vitras* was leaning on the table, cupping his cheek, and his hair had fallen into his eyes, making me shiver.

"No one needs you at the moment, and I can suspend your training for something as momentous as this," he said. "Attend your brother's House naming."

Oh, hell. Something this powerful hadn't threatened my control in ages, and on seeing the unspoken question in my eyes, *evushk* nodded.

"You may relax in full, *kuvesk*," he said.

So, as had been threatened before, I let my fork clatter across the table while throwing myself at him. He rocked back while I circled my arms around his neck.

"Thank you!" I gasped. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!"

After awkwardly patting my back for a moment with Ace worriedly sticking his nose between our legs, *evushk* pulled me away from him.

"You'll need to pack for an extended trip in Xygek. I may have a mission for you by the end of the week," he said. "Take a skycruiser. Try not to crash it this time."

I flushed at the reminder of a chase that had ended in disaster a few years ago.

"I won't," I said.

"Good. Then, go," *evushk* said. "I'll clean up tonight. You have a lot to do."

Grabbing his hand, I held it between mine, bringing the resulting bundle to my lips.

"Thank you, *evushk*. Truly," I said. "This means a lot to me."

With his lips twitching, the *Lokke Vitras* pulled his hand out of my hold.

“I can see that,” he said. “You should probably get out of here before I change my mind.”

“Yes, *evushk*.”

I left my dinner half-finished, racing for the room where I slept.

My family. I hadn't seen them in years. I let myself believe that our length of time apart was the only reason that my arms were trembling. If it was something more, it meant that the simple promise of a visit with them had defeated my years of training.

And I refused to believe that was possible.

TTS Chapter Twenty-Two

Revision #2

Created 19 November 2024 15:02:47 by FatalisticFable

Updated 19 April 2026 03:58:56 by FatalisticFable