

# Chapter 30: Nope, Neither of Those

Considering what had happened the last time I'd been here, arriving at the Crescent early felt strange, like an off-key note in a song. Other families had had the same idea, trickling in hours before the beginning of the ceremony. They'd socialize in the building's outer layer, enjoying the refreshments that each House had provided, until the inner layer was opened for seating.

I preferred to wait outside, at least until my family had joined me. With less possible hostiles nearby and more room to maneuver here, the steps leading into the Crescent made for a much better position than its interior, and after last night, I needed the comfort of relative security.

No matter how much I might wish it were otherwise, images from Fyester's apartment kept splashing into my mind's eye. For the most part, I could shunt them to the side before they took up residence in my head, but some stuck around like a splinter under the skin.

The look on his face after I'd realized he'd betrayed me. The photo of him with a smiling man that had given me pause before I'd left. How eager he'd seemed when he'd invited me to his home.

Had the desire that I'd seen in him been a lie too, a ruse to manipulate me into a moment of vulnerability, and if so, how could I have fallen for it?

And why was I dwelling on this? Fyester was no doubt in the hands of his *shukusen*. Alezand and Talira would decide his fate together.

Absently, I pinched my broken nose to yank me out of my thoughts. I'd had to use a blending cream to hide the bruising around it this morning because apparently, my body and array were taking their time with healing this injury. To be fair, I *had* excessively stressed them over the last week.

Getting the rest of my appearance in order hadn't been difficult, considering that everything I'd needed for it had already been in my room, or most everything had been. I'd had to sneak out of my parents' home in the early hours of the morning to find formal clothes that would fit me. Since I'd last lived with my family, my body shape had changed more than I'd thought.

When at the clothing store, I'd tried to pick something nondescript, but I must not have done a good job of that, given how many odd looks I was receiving.

Or maybe that was just my face.

With nothing to distract me, I'd been focused on keeping my emotions subsumed rather than on displaying a proper expression for my circumstances. Instead, I appeared as I was when I was relaxed.

I'd seen this look in the mirror before. Blank, with nothing present to speak of my humanity, I understood how it might cause the quickly hidden shudders that I'd seen from passersby.

I should fix it.

Leaning against a pillar, I crossed my arms, tapping a finger against an elbow while bracing my foot on the stone behind me, and donned a mask of boredom. People ignored me once I'd chosen a part to play, and I could return to finding an interesting enough diversion to keep me in the present.

*Where* was my family? This morning, I'd sent out messages, telling them that I'd meet them at Acceptance Arena, and half an hour ago, Feena had responded, letting me know they were on their way.

It didn't take long to travel from my parents' apartment to this park. Had they run into trouble?

A direct connection opened in my array, and for a heartbeat, I thought it was from mom or dad, subsequently wondering why I hadn't yet revoked their privileges to access it so thoroughly, but when *evushk's* voice sounded in my head, I rolled my eyes, mostly at myself. Of course it was him.

"I need you to join me outside the city at the provided coordinates," he said.

They popped into my array, and while it calculated the best route to reach him, my heart plummeted into the earth. I ran through reasons why he'd ask this of me now. It couldn't be because of last night. He didn't do punishment this way. His discipline was *always* constructive. So, why...?

I couldn't exactly ask him that, though.

"Of course," I said. "When do you want me there?"

I already knew how he'd answer. I just needed him to say it out loud before I could move.

"Now," he said.

Given that, I should straighten from my pillar so I could leave the Crescent, disappointing my family and more importantly, my brother, but something kept me glued in place.

"It can't wait for a few hours?" I asked, cringing as I did so.

*Evushk* merely sighed.

"House before family, *kuvesk*," he said.

With my eyes burning, I let air hiss between my teeth. A pawn. I was just a *phansha* piece to be played.

“Lutov over all,” I said. “I know.”

“Then, get here. I expect you in half an hour.”

As he cut the connection, I dug my fingers into my eyes. Why now?

When I lowered my hands, I spotted my family in the distance and froze. Should I tell them what had happened? *Could I?*

Hell, Pheniks looked so happy with a glow settled over him and a skip in his step. Would my absence ruin that?

I needed to go, had a deadline to meet, but instead, I watched them get closer, battling with indecision. They climbed the steps that led into the Crescent, and with his eyes bouncing across the building, Pheniks caught sight of me. His face lit up, which only closed my throat, and as his brow furrowed, my brother’s smile faltered. There was a question in his eyes, one I couldn’t answer.

And I couldn’t be here.

I sprinted away from my family, dodging the occasional pedestrian. A message popped into view. I didn’t bother with reading it, setting my array to reject any further attempts at communication.

Besides from *evushk*, of course. Unless I ripped my array out of my head, he would always have a way to contact me.

Not far from the Crescent, several middle Strata had left their cycles in an asphalt square, meant for their storage. I doubted many of these people were attending this year’s ceremony, considering the park’s popularity as a picnic spot. Even still, one of them was going to regret coming here today.

I flung a leg over the first cycle I reached, starting it. Unlike most vehicles in Lutov, cycles were driven by their passengers, although onboard guidance might take over if a collision was imminent.

I overrode that safety feature while logging the name of the cycle’s owner for their property’s eventual return. Since *evushk* had yet to return my *Lokke Vitras* privileges, I had to brute force my way into gaining control of the cycle, but after I’d done that, I zipped out of the park, following the directions in my array.

Once I was on the street, I threaded through ground transports at reckless speeds, hugging the cycle as wind tore through my hair. The city flashed by on either side of me, and towers blinked past quickly enough that they blurred together. At this source of danger, this relatively new experience, my spirit should lighten.

But I'd turned myself off. This wasn't keeping my emotions separate, felt but never allowed to affect me. This was me as an automaton, pulling deep inside and letting skill and instinct take over.

A shell of a person sped through Xygek.

After I'd left the city behind me, traffic died to almost nothing with most transports taking the route to the Eastern Reaches and the production facilities centered there. I headed toward the Azuwell Plains, where most high Strata kept their estates.

The drive there was quite beautiful. What else could it be with Lutov's Preserve on one side and picturesque beaches on the other? Lake Voxmore stretched for as far as the eye could see with mountain peaks poking above its choppy water.

Vacationing citizens lounged or played in the sand, enjoyed the lake's cool shallows, or sped across its surface in every type of watercraft available. Cabanas, expansive and small, dotted the land between the beach and the road, and it was at one of these that I eventually stopped.

I could feel *evushk's* eyes on me as I dismounted the cycle and combed my hair into order, but I refused to look his way. I'd seen him on approach, a splotch of black against a bamboo wall, just as I'd seen the transport that he'd left waiting beside the building, but I couldn't face him.

Why was I delaying this greeting? Was I ashamed of what had happened last night?

I shouldn't be. Nothing I'd done had endangered Lutov and therefore, could be put in the past without qualms.

He hadn't needed to fix one of my mistakes in years, though. Was that it?

Before I'd left his estate, *evushk* had said that I was almost ready to assume his role. How was someone who'd let a partner drug him during sex ready to become the *Lokke Vitras*?

How was someone who couldn't face his teacher any better?

*Evushk* watched me march toward him without expression, and when I stopped, I kept my stance loose, not that I expected him to turn violent. If he did, I wouldn't win. I could only recall one time when I'd beaten him in a fight, and from the way he'd thoroughly thrashed me during our next session, I still didn't know if he'd let me win that time or not.

"You're late," *evushk* said.

I checked the time, and sure enough, it had been thirty-one minutes since he'd told me to leave the Crescent.

"I've failed you twice in as many days," I said.

Should I ask him what he'd done with Fyester? Why the hell would I think that was a good idea? If I truly wanted to know what had happened, I could make inquiries later and not from *the man who'd*

*probably stayed up all night dealing with it.*

Mother Time. When had I gotten so stupid?

“Stop. You are the *Lokke Vitras* to come,” *evushk* said. “Regret has no place in you.”

Damn, those words had cracked like a whip against me. Was he... angry?

No. That wasn't possible. He'd never been anything but cool and detached when we were away from home. Just in case, though, it was best to play it safe.

“I hear your words, *evushk*,” I said. “If I may, why am I here? Are we on mission?”

“As of this moment, no, although that may change shortly,” *evushk* said. “I have a task for you to complete, one that requires a briefing beforehand.”

Ok. This, I could handle. It had been a while since he'd done anything but send me on missions, but I remembered the protocol for a training exercise.

“My focus to you,” I said.

With a nod, *evushk* said, “You know that I recently infiltrated House Cerullis, although I had to extract without gaining much intelligence. One thing I learned while there is that Cerullis, or perhaps a faction within it, means to make a move for power today.

“Since I gave Talira this knowledge, all Second Strata embedded in our sister House have been working to learn the plan's details so we can assess the threat. It's been a trying few weeks for everyone in the upper Strata with nothing to show for it, so today, our *shukusen* authorized a last-ditch effort to learn what we'll be facing, and I'm entrusting the task to you.”

Oh... fuck. My tongue was sticking to the roof of my mouth, a leaden weight that I could barely move, but I did it anyway.

“Understood,” I said.

Cocking his head, *evushk* crossed his arms.

“Do you?” he asked. “Do you understand how much House Kolb stands to lose if you fail this task? The loss of our control? The smear on our reputation? Your House's continued existence may ride on your success today.”

With a slow breath out, I said. “Forgive me, but Kolb isn't my House. Not yet. Even still, I understand the importance of your order, just as I understand how my success or failure may affect Lutov.”

*Evushk* stared at me for what seemed like forever, a clinical examination that had me internally flinching. Had I passed or failed?

“Good,” he said. “We can go inside, then.”

As I followed him onto the cabana’s deck, I had to drag my feet because they’d suddenly become concrete blocks. I had an inkling of what *evushk* wanted from me, a suspicion that was breathing apprehension down my neck. I hoped I was wrong, that for once in my damn life, my mind had connected two dots that didn’t go together, because if I was right...

I didn’t know what I’d do.

*Evushk* stepped through the door, and as I did the same, I held my breath, sending silent pleas to no one in particular, but once my eyes had adjusted to the darkness inside, my retained air came whooshing out of me like someone had gut-punched me.

The cabana was one of the smaller buildings on Lake Voxmore’s shore, so small that a partitioned washroom was all that divided it. Someone had shoved its furniture against the walls, leaving ample empty space in the middle, and the lights had been dimmed to an excessive degree, forcing my array to adjust my vision.

In the middle of this, faintly glowing restraints bound a man to a chair, securing his arms and legs up to the elbow and knee. With sweat plastering his hair to his skin and a bruise circling one eye, he looked a little worse for wear, but the damage wasn’t too bad.

Yet.

Glancing at me, he laughed uproariously. All the while, the emotions I’d held off since last night threatened to turn my legs to water, and warm air rushed far too quickly through my nose.

Because it was Fyester sitting in that chair. Who else would it be?

## **TTS Chapter Thirty**

---

Revision #2

Created 20 November 2024 08:31:51 by FatalisticFable

Updated 24 May 2026 03:11:04 by FatalisticFable