

Chapter 31: Please, Don't Make Me Decide 1

Evushk held something out to me, ignoring the hysterical giggling bouncing around us, and dazedly, I took it.

Shaped into a thin, rectangular stick, one end of the device had gold squares embedded in its body while the other had a glowing, blue circle painted on its surface with aberrant blips of light streaking through the black metal between.

I knew what this was. I might have never held one, but I'd seen it on *evushk* before.

A Puppeteer. Highly illegal, it was used to take over someone's array and therefore, control them. The only person in Lutov held exempt from the harsh penalties imposed for owning one was the *Lokke Vitras*.

And he'd given his to me.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

Raising an eyebrow, *evushk* said, "Ostium?"

"Fyester's a House Cerullis member. Ostiu is the territory of Zan, their rival House. He doesn't speak their tongue," I said. *"What am I supposed to do with this?"*

I shook the Puppeteer for emphasis, and *evushk* glanced at it before levelly meeting my gaze.

"You know what," he said. *"You're welcome to use any of the other techniques I've taught you, but I need my answers. Do you understand?"*

I understood plenty of things. I understood that *evushk* had told me to do something that I wasn't sure I could follow through with. I understood that this was probably a test of some sort. I understood why he'd so clearly defined the importance of learning House Cerullis' plan before leading me in here.

"Kuvesk, do you understand?" he repeated.

I couldn't say yes. If I did, it would mean I'd accepted the job. So, I did the next best thing.

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

Something flickered in the *Lokke Vitras'* eyes, sorrow or maybe pity, and he nodded.

"I'll give you space," he said.

He stepped outside, and I was left alone with my partner and the Puppeteer balanced on my palm. Staring at it, I let its flashing blips lull my racing thoughts. I didn't know how long I stood there, ignoring the gaze spearing through me, but it was long enough.

"You know I speak Ostium, right?" Fyester asked. "I learned it to spite my parents."

Nodding, I said, "I remember."

"Then, why...?"

Closing my fingers around the Puppeteer, I faced Fyester.

"I hoped that by convincing the *Lokke Vitras* of your ignorance, he would expose how serious he is about getting what he wants," I said. "I thought you should see that."

Fyester was relaxed in his chair. Too relaxed. Didn't he understand what would happen to him here?

"Won't that make him angry with you?" he asked.

He was concerned about *me*. Almost, a babbling cackle burst out of me, but I cut it off with Fyester's answer.

"I doubt he'll learn about it. This cabana has no recorders in it, so he can't use one to watch us. I triple checked for that as soon as I arrived, and I can see him through the wall. He's moved well outside of hearing range," I said. "Of course, I could be wrong, but if the *Lokke Vitras* did learn about my manipulation, the worst I'd receive from him is a mild rebuke that I did it for emotional reasons alone. He'd consider it... evidence of my improvement."

With a quiet laugh, Fyester said, "You two truly are different animals, so far above the rest of us. So, tell me, Zae, master of my fate. What will you do? How badly will you hurt me?"

He couldn't know how much his words had torn gouges out of the spark of my soul, couldn't know how weak I was. Not if I was to have any chance of getting what I needed without... without...

"Just give me something, Fy," I said. "Anything that I can use to get him off your back."

"How likely is that, do you think? The *Lokke Vitras* backing off? It's a fantasy," Fyester said. "Besides, if I try to talk about the plan. I'm stopped-ngh!"

Last night, I hadn't seen what had cut him off like this. Now, I did, and I wished I hadn't.

Fyester clenched his jaw to the point that his teeth nearly bit through his tongue, and the veins in his neck bulged. All of his muscles bunched while a horrible image of their fibers tearing apart flashed through my head, and his eyes, popping in their sockets, *burned* from what was ripping him to pieces.

He stayed like this for a solid ten seconds before unclenching with a gasp. Fucking hell, what his gaze had told me...

As he slumped, I strode across the distance between us, crouching to cup his face. I ignored how I'd curled my other hand into a fist, holding something that could cause him worse pain than what I'd just seen. He met my eyes, and seeing the conflict taking place in him—how much he was railing against an unseen captor—I knew how today would end.

"I can't," I breathed.

"You have to," Fyester said. "I can't say it if you don't. The information you want... lives are at stake. If they die because you spared me, I couldn't live with it."

"But—"

"Shut up, Zaeden," Fyester snapped.

On hearing those words, an echo of last night before it had gone wrong, so much emotion urged me to let it spill over that my body showed the strain of keeping it under.

"I need you to promise me something," Fyester said. "This tug of war between them and the two of you will leave me..."

He looked away, and I struggled to perform the simple task of breathing.

"Put a bullet in my head once it's done, Zae. Empty my *anunsri* well. I can't hang in limbo, waiting for my husk of a body to fail, before I join the Collective. Don't condemn me to that. And... tell Justin that I loved him? Please?"

He wanted me to go to his partner after I-

"I will, Fy," I said with a calm voice. "You have my word."

I brushed a thumb over his cheek, making a crooked smile my gift to him, and peace fell over this wonderful, *glorious* man who I'd-

"Get it over with," Fyester said, "before they visit again. I beg you, Zaeden."

I couldn't stop myself. With a sob, I shot up to his level, pressing my lips to his, and then, I shoved him away, nearly toppling the chair. Rising from my crouch, I circled him and rested the Puppeteer's golden end against the base of his skull with my thumb in its blue circle.

A second array popped into mine with all of its messages, beautifully written processes, and functions of the body mine to control, and I isolated what I'd need to bring Fyester more pain than what 'they' might cause. To compel details about today's coming disaster from someone who was pleading for the freedom to speak it.

For what seemed like an eternity, I hovered over the process that would start everything, but when I yanked the Puppeteer off of Fyester, his chair was still rattling on its legs from when I'd pushed him.

"No," I said. "I'll keep my promise, but this? I can't do it."

Which was strange because my emotions weren't denying it to me. They were in turmoil. I was in turmoil, but as with Laytn several days ago, I couldn't pull the trigger if it would end a life.

So, I stormed to the door while Fyester shouted something behind me, trudging through the sand until I reached the far end of the transport. I slapped the Puppeteer to the *Lokke Vitras'* chest, not giving a single shit when it clattered onto the asphalt.

"I can't do it," I said. "If you want your information, you'll have to get it yourself."

Impassive, gray eyes stared at me until I retreated a step, remembering who I was speaking to.

"So, you're not to the point where torture has become acceptable. I thought as much, but what better opportunity to test your limits was there than this? I couldn't pass it up," *evushk* said, as if to himself. "Still, I must admit that I'm glad I haven't yet made you into such a monster."

"Forgive the interruption, *evushk*, but I said I *can't*, not that I won't. I'm perfectly willing to do as you've asked, but something inside of me won't let me cross that line," I said. "Perhaps it's Fyester's relative innocence. Something or someone is controlling him. Can't we break that control another way?"

An already still man turned to stone, and his gaze was hard as it drilled into me.

"It is not your place to question me, *kuvesk*," *evushk* said. "I know how hard this must be for you, but remember. You are to trust that I know what I'm doing and obey me."

Mother Time, that chill. It almost made me bow to him, letting him have his way, but gritting my teeth, I stayed perfectly still, maintaining eye contact.

"I'm not questioning you," I said. "I only want to understand. I've always done as you've commanded without an explanation about its necessity, but in this, I'm asking for one. Please."

I needed him to reinforce what Fyester had already told me so that I might find untroubled sleep at some point in the next few years.

Something switched in *evushk*. He went from the calculating man he became on missions to the person I knew at home, the one who seemed to have a soul.

“You really do care for him, don’t you?” he asked.

I said nothing, forcing myself not to look away.

“Do you see why loving someone is a risk when you’re the *Lokke Vitras*?” he asked.

I couldn’t answer that, not yet, and after a moment, *evushk* shook his head.

“You may have your explanation,” he said. “In my long life, I’ve watched the Houses perpetually squabble amongst themselves, and every so often, their infighting turns violent. When it does, the conflict always escalates quickly, and always, innocent people pay for it with their lives.

“Unless the *Lokke Vitras* stops it.

“What we’re seeing with Cerullis is another of those overeager attempts to seize control. Knowing that my gathered intelligence about their power grab is good and that they mean to move forward with it today, this gives us little time.

“And yes. We have ways to break an individual’s conditioning without hurting them, but not only am I unsure about whether Sixth Stratus Fyester is under another person’s control, but those other methods can take weeks, which we don’t have. I find causing one man pain a better outcome than risking hundreds of innocent lives.

“Therefore, one of us *will* torture what we need from Fyester before leaving to dismantle his scheme. I’m assuming I’ll do that, something I’m happy to shoulder for you. Now that I see how attached you are to him, I know that I asked you to do this too soon in your training. Even still, this continued refusal to cause true harm to someone is something we must soon address. Satisfied?”

No.

“Yes,” I said. “Thank you, *evushk*.”

And he closed off.

“We’ve wasted enough time,” he said.

Scooping the Puppeteer off of the pavement, he marched to the cabana with me on his heels, but when we reached the door, he pointed to a spot beside it.

“Stay. You shouldn’t see this,” he said, “and I’ll need you once it’s over.”

I obediently moved where he’d indicated, distracting myself from an agonizing wait with something less painful. Something that nonetheless still hurt.

While *evushk* spoke to Fyester inside, I considered what I’d planned to do this morning. Had the inner layer of the Crescent been opened to the unHoused and their families yet? Had mine found their seats in the crowd? Had the speeches that marked the start of the ceremony commenced?

I'd left the Crescent and its park not long ago, but I avoided checking how much time had passed since then. If I did, it would answer my questions, and for now, I'd rather leave them open-ended.

Behind me, two voices, muffled by bamboo walls, fell silent. The world around me had gone so quiet that the slight sound of my breathing felt like an intrusion on it, and startled by this, I jerked back to present circumstances, scrabbling for something, anything to give me escape.

TTS Chapter Thirty-One

Revision #2

Created 20 November 2024 18:25:43 by FatalisticFable

Updated 24 May 2026 03:39:07 by FatalisticFable