

Chapter 32: Please, Don't Make Me Decide 2

I didn't find the escape I'd longed for. My world became the interior of the cabana with my every sense attuned to it, and soon enough, they were blasted by a wailing screech. It went on and on while every jittery beat of my heart competed with its volume, and my mouth went so dry that it was hard to swallow, but before that noise could stop, I ripped free of its cloying hold.

I silently sprinted for the transport, using what I knew of *evushk's* favorite security processes to get it open. The sinuous bonds of a weeping voice rose into a scream again, chasing me inside, and my hands shook as I ripped a cushion off of the closest bench. As always, *evushk* had a spare pistol hidden here, and I took it, both hating and loving myself for leaving mine in my parents' apartment this morning.

On my return trip, what had pursued me before instead resisted, and I could swear that I was swimming upstream or pressing into the furious wind of a gale. The sheer *hurt* in *Fyester's* voice hooked into me, doing its damndest to haul me far away from here, but I had a promise to keep. Nothing could stop me from fulfilling it.

I was sweating, gasping as if I'd sprinted here from *Xygek*, when I reached my assigned spot once more, and for the worst ten minutes of my life, I fought—poorly—to ignore what my *evushk* was doing to a man I cared for.

When *Lake Voxmore's* typical quiet fell over us again, all I heard was ringing, much like what happened when one had been standing too close to an exploding grenade.

I took a deep breath. Let it out. Raised the pistol that I was holding in loose fingers. Adjusted its beam to a needlepoint setting. Lowered it. Walked inside.

Fyester was hanging from his bonds, unmoving. This, I'd expected.

Evushk was crouched in a corner, scrunched as far from his victim as he could get. With his head ducked and his arms thrown over the back of his neck, he was rocking in place, and as the ringing in my ears relented somewhat, I heard him murmuring to himself, even if the specifics were still mush.

This, I had *not* expected. What-?

No. *Evushk* could wait. Keeping my promise could not.

Once I was at Fyester's side, I shook his shoulder, hoping against hope that the two of us had been wrong.

"Fy."

And when that gained me nothing, I shook him again, hard enough to flop him around in his chair.

"Fyester."

Circling in front of him, I hooked my finger under his chin, lifting his head, and wondered at how the emptiness in his slack face matched what I felt, a deceptive calm that would break as soon as I was somewhere more secure. Color was leeching from his eyes with them beginning their transition back to their natural hue. I'd always been curious if that had been a body modification.

As a last check, I retrieved the Puppeteer from where it had fallen on the floor, holding it as needed, and when Fyester's array popped into mine, I flinched. It was destroyed with bits of broken processes and snippets of numbers haphazardly floating through it, and when I caught hold of what had once monitored his brain, I found burned-through neural pathways, a network of black that looped through gray matter like a spiderweb.

A Puppeteer couldn't do this much damage. I'd seen an example of its use, and yes, it could harm the brain, but the damage it did was limited. This was...

I let the Puppeteer fall out of my fingers. Something else had been at work here. Had someone in House Cerullis developed a form of mind control? That might explain some of the House's recent, nonsensical behavior.

But that was a question for later.

Fyester was gone, leaving an empty shell in front of me. Shouldn't... *something* be howling through me right now?

Instead, I found pressing the pistol's muzzle to Fyester's skull remarkably easy. I wanted to make as little of a mess as possible here. His parents and... his partner shouldn't have to deal with a mangled corpse on top of their loved one's death.

My array helped me adjust my angle so that the bolt would go through his brain stem, stopping his heart, and hugging his head to my belly, I squeezed the trigger.

And Fyester died. And I'd made my first kill.

One of my partners.

I could do nothing more than stand there for a while, holding him while brushing my fingers and the pistol through his hair, but at some point, the ringing clogging my ears cleared in truth, and I heard what *evushk* had been mumbling behind me this whole time.

“Not another. Not *another*. Please, Mother Time, I *can't- I can't*. So much blood. on my hands. When will it stop? I need it to stop! You were right, mom. Right, *right, right, right*, right!”

As he kept going, his words came fast, like rain against the glass of a speeding skycruiser, and they fluidly shifted between the three known tongues. Combined with what I'd seen earlier, I'd say that *evushk*, someone who'd shown me only muted emotions for years, was having a breakdown.

Over this? *Why?* Shouldn't I be the one doing that?

Instead, I remembered what he'd said about how critical timing was today. Hurrying to him, I sent a message to Talira, letting her know that we had a mess on our hands, ready for cleanup.

I didn't know who else to contact besides her. *Evushk* usually handled the aftermath of our missions.

At his side, I knelt, reaching for him, but he knocked my hand aside, skittering even further into the corner, and his rifle coalesced, pointed at me. Quick reflexes and House Kolb speed kept me from getting my face caved in, and I backed away from him with my arms spread wide.

“*Evushk*, it's me,” I said. “Calm down.”

But feverish eyes didn't see me, sliding over my face without recognition.

“So many kids dead,” he said. “Oh, the Collective *should reject me* when I die. Then, *you won't see* what I've become, mom. A monster, monster, *monster*. I *hate-! Black spark of soul*, just like him. Ah! When will the *screaming* stop!”

My brain stalled, leaving me unable to do more than blink at him. I didn't know how to handle this. If he were anyone else, I'd risk getting shot to knock him unconscious, but he was the *Lokke Vitras*. If I did anything he didn't like right now, he'd kill me.

Someone requested a direct connection with me, and after checking who it was, I accepted.

“Has he lost it?” *shukusen* Talira asked.

“Wha-?” I started.

“*Is he losing it, Zaeden?*” Talira growled. “No. You know what? Let me have access to your array.”

If she hadn't been my grandmother, I would have laughed in her face. Granting someone full permission to one's array was a vulnerability that even a normal Lutovish wouldn't make.

But Talira was a *shukusen* and part of my family. I trusted her. I gave her what she needed, letting her hear what I heard and see through my eyes, and for a heartbeat, she said nothing.

Then, she was shrieking in my head.

“MOTHER FUCKING SHIT!”

Wincing, I rubbed my ears, even knowing that the noise hadn't originated there.

“Zae-zae, has he hurt you?” Talira snapped.

“He shot at me, but I ducked it,” I said. “What's happening?”

“Kid, your self-sufficient asshole of a teacher can tell you about it himself if he wants to, I certainly won't,” Talira said. “I'm guessing something traumatic happened?”

I firmly didn't think about the body behind me.

“For us both,” I said. “You can access my memory of it, if you want.”

“Oh, hell. I'm still in your array,” Talira said before pausing. “There. I'm out. Revoke my permissions.”

I'd done so as soon as she'd left, but I wouldn't tell her that.

“Done,” I said. “*Shukusen, my evushk...*”

He was still babbling and stuttering up a storm with his rifle raised and his eyes jerking over the room.

Sighing, Talira said, “He'll be like that for a while. If you have the time, he'll calm down by himself, but I don't know how long it'll take. Can you wait?”

“Kind of have something time-sensitive to handle,” I said.

“Of course you do,” Talira grumbled, “and he's not accepting my requests for connection, so you'll have to calm him down. I'll help you through it, but you'll have to destroy your memory of it later. Doing so is vital for Lutov's security. Do you understand me?”

That I wasn't part of House Kolb and therefore, didn't have to follow her orders? Yes, I understood.

“I hear you,” I said.

“Ok, then,” Talira said. “Do exactly as I say, or this will turn to shit.”

Creeping closer to *evushk*, I stopped when his rifle and gaze fixed on me, making the rush of his words hiccup, and into this brief break, I flung a name.

“Korix!”

It was as if something had petrified *evushk*. I'd swear that shock had killed him if he weren't blinking every so often.

“Korix,” I repeated. “I have your orders from *shukusen* Talira.”

Stiffening, he straightened, dissipating his rifle even if his eyes stayed unfocused.

“What are my orders?” he asked.

“Finish your current mission,” I said, “and then, take a week for yourself. I’ll notify you if an emergency comes up.”

Evushk took one deep breath. Two.

And clarity returned to his gaze.

“Yes, my *shukusen*,” he said. “Please stop using my *kuvesk* as a mouthpiece.”

With a chuckle, Talira said, “Good luck, Zae-zae. Maybe if you finish quickly enough with your current shitstorm, you can get back here in time for Phen’s House naming.”

She cut the connection, but when I looked at *evushk*, hoping for guidance, he was already on his way out of the cabana. He gave the corpse a cursory glance before exiting, and I followed in his footsteps, catching up with him before he reached the transport.

“What was that?” I quietly asked.

“Not something we’re discussing right now,” *evushk* said. “We need to get back to Xygek.”

Boarding the transport, he made no comment on its already open state or his missing pistol, heading for the console to input coordinates instead. I joined him inside, although I remained on my feet for the moment.

“What’s in Xygek?” I asked.

“House Cerullis’ power play,” *evushk* said. “They’ve planted a Dissolver somewhere in Acceptance Arena.”

So in essence, a bomb. Where my family was.

“Oh,” I said.

Spinning, I sat on one of the transport’s benches while it sealed the door and began its slow acceleration toward the city. As *evushk* sank to a seat beside me, I wondered why I wasn’t more upset that we were leaving Fyester’s body behind. I wondered why I wasn’t torn up inside about murdering him. I wondered why I wasn’t ripping-my-hair-out frantic to reach the Crescent and my family.

I had none of this. I just sat beside my teacher and waited.

TTS Chapter Thirty-Two

Revision #2

Created 20 November 2024 18:55:50 by FatalisticFable

Updated 2 June 2026 21:33:06 by FatalisticFable