

# Chapter 33: I Don't Want to Be a Killer

The length of the road that I'd traveled earlier today, a time that seemed like years ago, went by in a flash with the forest on one side and a sea-like lake on the other.

Also, *evushk*.

He was... concerning me. In our time together, *evushk* had always been a still source of calm and confidence, a rock I could go to for advice about my every problem while knowing he'd have an answer. I'd seen that rock crack in the cabana, and now, he- he was *fidgeting*. It was disconcerting, and so, I ignored him, keeping my mind on what we needed to do once we reached Xygek.

Unfortunately, the silence between us was only making him worse, and I didn't know how I should proceed. If I acknowledged *evushk*, working to get him centered, I might lose this scooped-out state that I'd achieved. I didn't want to consider what would happen when it abandoned me.

On the other hand, he wasn't mission-ready like this, which was something I thought I'd never see.

His *fidgeting* was strange as well. From what I could tell, nothing was prompting it, no guilt or sorrow or impatience. It was like the hand that controlled his normally empty body had developed a twitch.

I didn't like it.

After a few minutes of this, I said, "Do we know where the Dissolver-?"

"You were right," *evushk* blurted out. "You were right, and I should have seen it."

Glancing at him from the corner of my eye, I frowned.

"Are we isolated?" I asked. "No one should overhear this conversation."

"I removed this transport's recorders before taking it," *evushk* said. "Nothing and no one's watching us, although you should have checked that for yourself by now."

I had. I'd wanted to make sure I hadn't missed one.

Knowing what was coming, I clasped my hands together, preparing for when they started shaking. Hopefully, I could hide any other physical reactions that might occur as well.

“What was I right about?” I asked.

“Your partner,” *evushk* said. “Something was manipulating him.”

His admission spawned nothing in me, leaving me a blank canvas waiting for a brush. Curious.

“Perhaps House Cerullis has developed a tech that could-” I started in monotone.

There was a sharp gasp and then...

“*Kuvesk*, stop,” *evushk* said.

Calm. We were back to the unnerving calm that I’d grown comfortable with over the years. No matter how harsh or forceful his words might be, they were always said in a level, even tone. Hearing it returned, as opposed to the panic from before, loosened something in me.

“What happened with Sixth Stratus Fyester was a... mistake on my part,” *evushk* said. “I only meant to hurt him a little, enough to gain the information we needed, and afterward, I’d have sent him to Talira. He was meant to live out his days in a normal fashion, if perhaps in harsher circumstances than before, but he wouldn’t tell me anything, kept apologizing...”

“When I extracted our intel, I stopped what I was doing. Immediately. But something...”

The image of Fyester, caught in the inflicted punishment of his captor, had yet to fade from the back of my eyelids. Did *evushk* see it too?

“Something burned out his neural pathways,” I said.

Turning to me, *evushk* stared. He opened his mouth, and I knew what he was going to say.

Lifting a finger, I said, “Don’t. Regret has no place in you, yes?”

With a coughing laugh, *evushk* threw himself into his seat again.

“Using my own words against me,” he said.

I didn’t know how to respond to that, so I rested my hand, palm up, on my knee, extending the same offer of comfort that he’d given me before I’d left for Xygek. I kept my eye on the transport’s windows until *evushk* accepted, but then, I squeezed his hand in a grip that he’d have trouble escaping from.

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “Even if you had believed me, I wouldn’t blame you. You were doing your job, following the role that Lutov has prescribed for you, and in so doing, we have the chance to save many lives today. What you did was for them, not something that was undertaken out of spite or possessiveness. Besides. You didn’t kill him.”

Mother Time, how that last part had hurt to say.

“Oh, *kuvesk*...”

*Evushk* slid lower in his seat, running a hand over his face.

“I know I’ve been pushing for you to assume the burden that all *Lokke Vitras* bear, but I never wanted your first kill to be someone you loved.”

Had I loved *Fyester*? I’d cared for him, sure, but love? I didn’t know. Maybe?

“And a tiny bit of possessiveness may have driven me,” *evushk* continued.

Slowly, I faced him while ice radiated from me, but he didn’t react to it, merely holding my gaze.

“I understand and accept your many needs, even share them to a degree,” he said, “but in part because of our isolation, I’m not used to seeing you close with other people. It makes me apprehensive of what might happen when that eventually happens, both to you and to- to me.”

Ah. This old argument.

He knew exactly what I’d say, so I left it unspoken, returning to my inspection of the view outside. The city raced past us with glass and metal replacing nature.

“If you have time when this chaos is over, I’d like your help with finding someone,” I said. “*Jastin*. Of House *Cerullis* most likely.”

“Do you have anything to go off of, besides a name?” *evushk* asked. “Otherwise, finding this person might take a while.”

“He was *Fyester*’s partner. They lived together,” I said. “I have last words to deliver.”

*Evushk* was silent for a moment, and when he spoke, his voice was hollow.

“He knew what would happen to him?”

When I woodenly nodded, *evushk* jerked his hand out of mine.

“Shit!”

Shooting to his feet, he paced the transport with his hands on his head while I watched him with wide eyes. I’d never heard *evushk* curse before. Not once in six years.

“Why didn’t he say something?!” he asked in a quiet shriek.

That decided me.

Flattening my lips, I tracked our transport’s progress through my array. We were close to the *Crescent*, so I eased to my feet, taking *evushk*’s hand as I skirted around him. I drew him to the console, perching on it, and all the while, I was feeding coordinates to the transport for its next trip.

“If he’d told you, would it have changed anything?” I asked.

*Evushk* was twitching everywhere I was touching him.

“No,” he said. “I would still have needed the information he had, and he couldn’t have given it to me unless I provided as much stimulation as I did.”

“Then, it doesn’t matter whether he knew his fate, not on the macro scale,” I said, “but on the micro... for us, shouldn’t knowing that he wanted to help us, no matter the consequences, make living with what we did easier?”

The park filled the windows behind *evushk*, but he didn’t notice. I had his full attention.

“That’s not how it works,” he whispered.

“I know.”

Hopping off the console, I took hold of his face.

“But we can pretend.”

And I reached for my goal with a firm grip keeping him from retreating. When my lips touched his, he gasped, pulling away, but he wasn’t doing that nearly as hard as I knew he could. He wanted this, no matter that he’d gone limp, a statue that was barely returning my kiss.

I’d been here before, though. I knew what this was: a final resistance that he always raised before giving in to the emotions that he kept constantly repressed.

In this instance, it took much less time than normal to draw them forth, and he returned my kiss with enthusiasm. He tried to drag me against him, but I caught his wrists, holding them between us. I let him do what he wanted with my mouth, though, even if I was too distracted with monitoring the transport’s approach to enjoy it.

As we came closer, I prepared the processes that I would soon need before pinning *evushk* to the wall opposite the door. Running my hands over him, I dipped one of them into his pocket, plucking something from it, and then, we reached Acceptance Arena.

One end of my stolen restraints went around my claimed wrist while I attached the other to a nearby handhold, and as *evushk* went stiff, I leapt away, sprinting out the opening door. Halfway through it, I put the transport in lockdown, which had every entrance or exit slamming closed, and it began its flight to the coordinates that I’d earlier provided for it. In lockdown mode, only extreme finesse with process cracking could get it to land or open its door, and even then, doing so took time.

*Evushk* barely needed that time to get out of his restraints. Through the transport’s diminishing windows, I caught a glimpse of him running for the door with panic written on him before the vehicle fell out of sight. It was the most emotion he’d ever shown me, apart from earlier, but I

didn't count that breakdown since he hadn't seemed fully conscious of it.

What I'd seen there? That had been pure emotion *allowed* to slip through his indomitable defenses.

I didn't take long to ponder this change or what it might mean, instead sending clumps of grass flying in my haste to reach the Crescent. I'd hit the stairs leading into it when the inevitable direct connection established in my array.

"What do you think you're doing?" *evushk* growled.

"Completing the mission," I said. "You're compromised. I don't know if you'll keep your shit together long enough to neutralize the threat, and I won't risk people's lives on the off chance that you can't."

"I'm turning the transport around," *evushk* said. "You're going to need help."

Oo... he'd sounded angry. I didn't know whether I should find that terrifying or alluring.

"Sure. Come back," I said, "but by the time you've done that, I'll have taken care of our problem. Now, stop talking to me. You're ruining my concentration, and that might get me killed."

For the first time, *I* cut the connection. Thank Mother Time, he didn't establish another one because I was at the door leading into the Crescent.

I didn't know how many targets were inside. I didn't know where they were. I didn't know when they'd trigger the Dissolver to begin its work, but I was going in anyway.

This should be fun.

### **TTS Chapter Thirty-Three**

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