

Chapter 34: But a Murderer Is What I've Become

The outer layer of Acceptance Arena held a reverential air, spilling over from the ceremony taking place inside. As I scanned what I could of it, I absently browsed through the feeds of the inner layer's recorders, and once I'd found one with a good angle on Pheniks, I left it in the corner of my array.

They'd started calling the unHoused's names, but my brother hadn't taken his turn yet. Lucky me.

As expected, I found nothing suspicious in the visible portion of the outer layer. Whoever had planned this power play wouldn't have planted a Dissolver in the open, even after the ceremony's attendees had left this place. House Kolb members were guarding the inner layer's doors, and while these people might be easy to subdue individually, one of them would probably raise an alarm before succumbing to an attack.

No, setting up the device in the enclosed ends of the outer layer would be more practical. Hence, why I'd entered the Crescent near one of them.

As I hurried toward my goal, a nearby guard caught sight of my approach. She stepped into my path, and I considered using House Kolb speed to go around her before having a better idea.

I didn't know why the House Cerullis saboteurs hadn't initiated the Crescent's dissolution yet. This year's House naming ceremony was the only event of note today, and the *shukusenth* were gathered for it, making this moment the prime time to complete their plan.

Even Cerullis' *shukusen* was here. Did that mean Alezand didn't know about this plot?

That didn't matter right now.

All of this was to say that I didn't know why disaster had yet to strike. Maybe the saboteurs were waiting for the most impactful moment?

Since nothing had started, though, it gave me an opportunity.

Raising her hand, the guard opened her mouth to speak, but I cut her off before she could.

"Check my shared status before you say anything," I called. "I wouldn't want you to make a fool of yourself."

At some point after I'd arrived at the cabana, *evushk* had reinstated my *Lokke Vitras* privileges. Regaining them had been why I'd had no trouble with taking control of the transport, and seeing them in my status, the guard, predictably, lost her composure.

"L-lok-" she tried to say.

I fluttered my fingers at her.

"Yes, yes. Shock and awe can come later. For now, I'm short on time," I said. "I have a task for you."

Snapping to attention, the guard said, "I'm honored to serve."

Of course she was. They always were.

"I need you and your security team to *quietly* begin evacuating audience members from the Crescent. Leave the unHoused and the *shukusenth* for now," I said. "I also require direct access to your array. If my end of this doesn't go well, you'll be in charge of a mass evacuation. Get everyone as far from here as possible. I don't know what the radius of damage will be."

Mother Time, she looked scared.

"Radius of damage?" she repeated.

"Yes. Your array's access information, if you please," I said, snapping my fingers.

Sluggishly, the guard waved toward me, and the means by which I could contact her popped into my array.

After sending her a test message, I said, "Grant me permissions for everything. Someone will visit you later to erase my information from your array, and I will do the same for mine. For now, start getting these people out of here."

She fumbled in word and body while I breezed around her.

When I'd been younger, my fellow unHoused had whispered about the *Lokke Vitras* and how nice it must be to receive so much hero worship. I'd only found it to be a burden, and I had yet to assume the mantle. Mother Time knew how I'd handle that part of the job when my ascension to it eventually came.

Once I'd passed into one end of the Crescent, what little decoration the place claimed disappeared entirely. Everything in this section was utilitarian, making this side the one relegated for the place's maintenance staff.

Nearby, the office for the Crescent's manager was squashed in among the others, and if I weren't in such a hurry, I might have stepped inside out of nostalgia. There, my journey on this road had begun.

As it was, I didn't have long to complete my search. The saboteurs were sure to trigger their Dissolver before the end of the House naming ceremony, and each of this year's unHoused was quickly making their choice without dithering like I had. It would be Pheniks' turn soon.

At the rate they were going, I'd give myself ten minutes, if I was lucky. Given how little time I had, I got my array to do a scan for high-level tech instead of completing a more thorough search myself. The scan's range covered this area, so when it returned with nothing, I headed for the freight lift on the other side of this cramped space. While I jumped into it, I set my array to continue scanning before hitting the ground running.

Sprinting down the tunnel sent fingers prickling along my spine. It followed the curve of the Crescent, so while I could see a fair distance ahead of me, I wouldn't get much warning before I ran into someone, if they were down here. I needed this speed, though, meaning that the only advantage I could give myself right now was to make this dash as silently as possible.

Despite the danger to myself, when Pheniks got to his feet above me, I pulled my recorder's feed to center field, letting its captured audio ring in my head. Once he was on the dais, my brother stopped beside this year's randomly chosen spokesperson, and the man gestured toward the *shukusenth* in their ornate chairs.

"Pheniks, it's time for you to choose how you will aid the homeland," he said. "Approach the representative of the House in which you will best serve and become a citizen of Lutov."

My brother faced the *shukusenth*. And hesitated.

My heart lurched in my chest, and while I recovered from a stumble, Pheniks looked to our grandmother for help. She gave him nothing, and on seeing that, he deflated a little.

With a start, I realized that I'd been mumbling under my breath—

"Come on, little brother. Make the best choice for *you*."

—and shut my mouth. What had I been thinking, making noise of any kind right now?

Taking a deep breath, Pheniks straightened, holding himself tall. He mouthed something to Talira, something I wouldn't have been able to read if I were anyone else.

'Sorry.'

And he strode to Arion, kneeling in front of Zan's shukusen.

A murmur floated through the inner layer. Even Arion looked a bit shocked, but he pulled himself together to finish the process.

This last part was the only throwback to when the Houses had been noble families, banded together to resist an impossible foe.

Laying his hand on my brother's head, Arion said, "As the head of my House, I take this worthy vassal into said House. May you serve it well."

He leaned back in his chair with a slight smile on his face, and Pheniks sprang to his feet. The happiness beaming from him would have been strong enough to break my recorder, if it had been a physical force.

"See here Pheniks of House Zan," the spokesperson said.

The hesitancy of the audience's resulting applause didn't dampen my brother's spirit. He hopped off the dais, making for his seat with a bounce in his step, and I sent him the message that I'd written last night.

Good for you, Phen.

After a breath, Pheniks tripped, barely catching himself before glancing toward where our family must be sitting. Failing to see what he'd wanted, he sank into his chair with a frown, and soon enough, I received his reply.

Zae? You're here? it read. I thought you ran off.

Smirking, I wrote, *I did, but I'm still watching. Recorder above shukusen Orin's head.*

Pheniks jerked his head toward where my feed was coming from, grinning when he found the recorder. Slumping, he draped his arms over the back of his chair before turning his head so I could clearly watch him draw his thumb down the back of his neck, and I rolled my eyes at the crude gesture.

Eloquent.

He quickly replied, but I shoved the message aside for the moment, hearing voices ahead. As I slowed to a creep along the innermost wall, however, I found nothing but a lift out of the tunnel ahead. They must be in the enclosed section above.

After I'd made the necessary adjustments, the tunnel's ceiling turned partially translucent, still visible but also... not. Five figures were moving about the room overhead with the simulation's generic avatar representing them, and a small box was sitting between them. Other items, like food warmers and banquet tables, filled the room, but my attention was reserved for that box.

A Dissolver. A weapon reverse-engineered from the tech of those from beyond the stars.

Once activated, it created a spherical energy field, one that we still didn't understand, of pre-set limits. Everything within the sphere was dissolved down to its requisite atoms, much like the molecular dispersion needed to enter the Travel Centers' Terminal. Unlike that process, however, this version was permanent.

If that wasn't bad enough, we'd never learned what happened to a person after their dissolution. What became of said victim's *anunsri*, their Life Energy, that kept the spark of their soul in their body? Did that same spark join the Collective, or was it lost?

The possibility of utter annihilation, nothing beyond death, made the Dissolver one of Lutov's most feared weapons, something that we only used in the direst of circumstances.

And these people meant to have this weapon's unleashed devastation propel their House into power. I'd find their behavior more detestable if I weren't confused as hell as to why they were still here.

Making exceptions to the Dissolver's energy field for specific items or people was impossible. If these saboteurs were still here when the weapon was activated, they'd cease to exist alongside everyone else.

Were they that fanatical about their House? Or could something be controlling them, like what had happened with Fyester? This situation raised so many questions, none of which I'd get answered if everyone above me died.

Which meant I had to leave one alive.

Could I kill them, though? Sure, I- I'd killed Fyester, but I'd done that out of mercy and at his request. Could I send people to the Collective if they weren't ready for it, like he'd been? The question had plagued me for six years with the answer always no, so why would today be any different?

I wasted precious seconds agonizing over this, watching my possible victims circle around the Dissolver above me.

That was the difference between now and every other time I'd faced this choice. Today, people's lives were in immediate danger.

I'd never dealt with this before. To date, I'd undertaken my missions before the situation had taken a nosedive. I'd always had the option of subduing my targets instead of eliminating them.

If I tried doing that today, however, it would take time, and given it, one of my targets could wreak havoc on this place. If it were only my life on the line, I'd take that chance, willing to trade my everything for the possibility that all six people would survive this coming confrontation, but I wasn't alone with them. When I looked through my guard's eyes, I saw stands that were only halfway emptied while those participating in the ceremony had been left untouched.

I saw Feena, mom, dad, and Pheniks.

Could I become a murderer in truth, staining the spark of my soul, if it saved their lives?

Choosing one of the better plans that I'd formed while battling morals, I sprinted for the lift. Jumping into it, I twisted as it carried me higher than a normal leap could, and when my feet hit the

far wall, I pushed off of it, alighting on the landing above with my rifle in hand.

I didn't examine the room or check my targets' positions. I just fired four times, and bodies thudded to the floor.

"Down on the ground," I shouted.

The last living Cerullis member lifted her hands above her head, lowering herself to her knees. I'd eliminated the threat in under ten seconds, as compared to my recent struggle with House Vaessa's problem in Ibis.

Killing made this job so much easier.

Planting metaphorical feet in the walls of my throat, I hauled on the sob clawing to escape from me while moving forward to check pulses. One could never be sure if a target was faking their injuries.

Please be faking.

That hope was quashed as I came close enough to take in the scene, keeping an eye on my captive all the while. My rifle's bolts had bored neat, blackened holes through each of these people's foreheads, clean and precise shots like *evushk* had taught me. Like I'd practiced a million times.

A tremor rattled over my hands as I crouched by each of my victims, rolling them onto their backs and closing their eyes, but I didn't think my captive noticed this loss of control. She was rapidly making her face a mess of mucus and tears. The hitching sobs that I wished I could unleash were coming from her instead.

When I stood beside the Dissolver, I placed my thumb in the glowing circle on its top surface. I didn't bother with deactivating it. Pulling a study on the weapon from my memory, I initiated the processes that would safely overheat and slag it.

Once that was finished, I lifted the cube off the floor, bouncing it on my palm, before switching it for a pair of restraints in my pocket. Dangling these in front of me, I approached my captive.

"Hands," I said.

She readily gave them over, and once I'd circled those glowing bands around her wrists, I let my rifle dissipate.

"Please," she said, "what will you do with me?"

That was a good question. I'd already sent messages to both Talira and *evushk*, letting them know the situation was handled. One of them should soon alert the necessary parties for prisoner retrieval, but I didn't want to leave this woman alone with her dead compatriots. That seemed cruel, not to mention risky.

So, I folded to the ground in front of her.

“Honestly, I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t usually stick around long enough to see what happens to the people I apprehend. Maybe I should look into it.”

With wide eyes, she asked, “Who are you?”

I raised an eyebrow at her.

“Who are *you*?”

“Ah,” she said before clearing her throat. “Tatum, Twelfth Stratus of House Cerullis.”

Such low Stratus! That could make her a fanatic or a woman looking to improve her quality of life, but people in her position also made for good patsies.

“Well, Tatum,” I said. “I have a name, but soon, it won’t be mine. I have no House, but eventually, that will change, and currently, I am of both the lowest and highest Strata.”

Her mouth dropped open. I’d never seen someone actually do that, so I cocked my head at her until her teeth clicked together, and she swallowed.

“*Lokke Vitras* to come,” she said.

When I nodded, Tatum burst into tears, reaching for my hands.

“Please, don’t interrogate me!” she gasped. “Please! I- I don’t-”

She seemed... unusually distressed by that prospect.

Grabbing her shoulders, I peered into her eyes, unsure what I was looking for.

“Does something have its claws in you too?” I asked.

Horror dawned, twisting Tatum’s face as she turned inward.

“No!” she cried. “Please! Don’t! I can still-”

She choked off while a familiar visage faced me with bulging veins and all, and as my heart dropped through my feet, something in her eyes begged me for help.

“How do I-?”

Before I could finish that question, she spasmed violently enough to rip herself out of my grip. Toppling, she curled back on herself, bending so far that her head nearly met her toes, while her hands stretched in front of her, straining against her bonds. Something popped, leaving one arm dangling from its shoulder, and a silent scream tore out of a gaping mouth.

On my knees, I hovered my hands over her, wishing I had a Puppeteer so I could see what was happening in her head. So I could stop it.

“Tatum? Tatum! Stay with me. Fight it!”

But after a ridiculously long two minutes, she'd gone limp with her empty eyes staring straight ahead, and I could swear that steam was rising like smoke out of her ear.

She was dead.

No. That wasn't right. She was still breathing with her body working, despite the flight of its soul. Like Fyester.

Was this how he'd left the world, in such agony and with only his recent torturer to comfort him? Was this what I'd let him condemn himself to?

Stumbling to my feet with the taste of bile in my mouth, I swept my gaze over the room, lingering on each of the corpses I'd made, and in a morbid act of self-hatred, I created a file in my array's long-term storage. I gave it no name, only adding one character to it: six.

Six deaths that I was responsible for. Six people's blood on my hands. All of whom I was sure had been innocent, despite their crimes. One of whom I... I'd loved.

Why could I only admit that I'd loved Fyester after he was dead?

Lifting my hands, I battered the side of my head, covering my mouth hard enough to leave fingermarks, and I screamed and screamed and screamed and-

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