

# Chapter 35: Will You Tell Me What I Am? 1

I landed the skycruiser far from *evushk's* estate. After finding me in the Crescent, Talira had lent me the vehicle, although my memory of the event was hazy. I didn't remember much about what had happened after Tatum's 'death', just snapshots.

Talira stopping me from beating a fist against my skull, pulling me to her all the while.

Sitting in the Crescent's inner layer with mom's arms wrapped around me and dad yelling at someone I hadn't cared to note.

Feena crouching beneath me with my hands clasped between hers, speaking nonsense words about stories I'd once loved.

The entire family sans Pheniks getting me into the skycruiser before Talira had reached over me to input coordinates.

I'd returned to myself at some point during the flight, just... dully staring out the windows as first, mountains and then, moors had passed below me.

Thank Mother Time that my family hadn't embroiled Pheniks in any of this. My evils shouldn't ruin his House naming day for him.

Messages were waiting for review in my array, some of them personal and others business-related, but I ignored them as I hiked over the hills with my hands in my pockets and tall grass slapping against my legs. They could wait until tomorrow. Tonight...

Hell, I was so disoriented, leaving my training so far behind, that I'd probably mess up something as simple as replying to a message. The only reason I hadn't lost my way was because my array constantly pointed me toward my destination.

When the estate came into view, I slowed to a halt. Did I really want to end my journey there? I could walk away, survive in these hills. With my training, it would be easy.

If I stayed the course, continuing in this life, I would participate in far more tragedies than the one I'd caused today. It would eventually consume me, turning me into an unreasoning mess like...

Like *evushk*. Holy shit, *that* was what had happened in the cabana. He'd been reliving his past.

That was why he'd said he was failing as House Kolb's First Stratus all those years ago. How long could he continue carrying out his duties when the atrocities they'd forced upon him already had him making mistakes?

That was why he needed me.

Fucking hell, *evushk* NEEDED me.

For the longest while, I couldn't move while the sun disappeared behind the mountains and a breeze rustled the stalks of grass and my hair. I didn't know how to describe what was filling me. It was like the glow of happiness, one so strong that it drew tears, but there was something else as well, something I couldn't pinpoint.

The protectiveness of a mother wolf over her pups. The fierce determination of someone doing everything that they must to save their loved ones. It was all of this and more, and it was enough to set me marching toward the estate with my decision made.

*Evushk* was waiting for me outside of its front door with his shadowed profile stark against the lights of his home. I was hesitant as I approached. When I'd sent him away, he'd been angry, which was a tone I'd never heard from him before. His silences occasionally spoke of irritation but anger? Not once in the time I'd known him. I wasn't sure what he'd do now that I was here, and that had my every sense firing like a live wire.

I stopped quite a distance from him, giving myself room to fight if need be, but he didn't move.

"*Kuvesk*," he said.

Did he want to...?

Keeping my eyes on him, I bowed.

"*Evushk*," I said.

Please, say I was right.

Something flickered over his face, and his shoulders tightened. He was probably clenching his hands behind his back too.

"Get up," he said.

That had been shorter than he typically was with me, but he'd also sounded like his usual, empty self. Pulling myself upright, I copied his stance, even matching the vulnerability of his clasped hands. Just this once, I abandoned my snark, showering him with as much respect as I could give.

I couldn't tell if it was having the desired effect, though. He was back to a machine, guided only by duty and orders.

“Are you listening properly, *kuvesk*?” he asked.

Oh, thank Mother Time. I’d been right. He wanted to follow our typical protocol after a mission.

“Always, *evushk*,” I said. “Teach me.”

For nearly a minute, he did nothing, but right as I was about to start fidgeting, he raised his fist, lifting a finger from it.

“Regarding how a Lutovish citizen caught you unaware,” he said. “You failed to search the room, whether surreptitiously or not, before participating in sexual activity, one of the greatest distractions in existence both for us and the average person. You didn’t immediately incapacitate your adversary following his initial attack, but most importantly, you let love blind you to his intentions. Emotions are anathema to the *Lokke Vitras*, but of them all, love is the worst. Yes, it may not be forbidden to us, but indulging in it is highly inadvisable, and I believe you might understand why now.”

He’d spoken of how emotions hobbled people, and yet, the faintest wisp of flame had burned in those last few sentences. He was on the edge of something, but I wasn’t sure what it was.

Cautiously, I said, “I hear your words, *evushk*.”

A second finger sprang out of his fist.

“Regarding your tardiness in reaching me beside Lake Voxmore,” he said. “After I gave you your orders, you lingered with your family, your *loved ones*, making you waste precious time. We can blame the same culprit for your inability to follow orders when inside the cabana. *Love*.”

He’d spat the last word with a flush beginning to bloom across his skin, and I... I thought I might know what this was about. Hell if I’d voice the theory, though.

“I hear your words, *evushk*.”

Another finger was raised.

“Regarding your actions in the transport and the Crescent,” *evushk* hissed. “You left your greatest ally behind.”

He took a step toward me, reaching for me with his eyes flashing.

“You charged into a highly volatile situation, one that you shouldn’t have been able to handle at your level of training. Not alone.”

Taking hold of my shirt, *evushk* pulled me close, lifting me onto my toes, and I forced myself not to resist.

“You *threw* yourself at a damn *Dissolver*, Zaeden!”

Mother fucking Time, he was shouting at me. I didn't... this had never happened before. What was I supposed to do?

"You could have been killed."

*Evushk's* voice broke while his hold on me shivered. Shit.

At least he'd given me an indication of what to do next.

Laying my hand on his arm, I said, "Sacrifice self. House before family. Lutov over all."

With a shaky gasp, *evushk* released me, and I barely kept from falling.

"I've taught you too well," he said.

Shaking his head, he strode into the estate, leaving the door open behind him. I accepted his invitation, following him even if I didn't need to. I already knew where we were going.

As soon as I stepped foot in the kitchen, Ace was wriggling his way around my legs. He and his wagging tail did their best to trip me until I crouched, catching him in a hug, and buried my face in his coat.

He smelled like a dog, of course, needing a bath soon in fact, but he and this room were the closest things to home that I'd had in years, and after the day I'd had, it had my fingers curling in his fur with a burn in my throat.

"Hey, buddy," I said into his neck.

He started squirming, so I let him go, sitting still so he could sniff me. As an added bonus, Ace's antics gave me time to examine *evushk*.

He'd begun meal preparation, and watching a knife flash at his command, I wondered if he'd been waiting for me to arrive before making dinner. It was late, though. He should have eaten hours ago.

Finished with me, Ace padded to his spot on an invisible line, one that we'd designated was the furthest he could come into the kitchen proper, and I turned to my task. When I joined *evushk*, he pointed me to a pan with a sliver of butter in it and two pork cutlets beside it. I got started with my part of the cooking process, doing my best to ignore the heavy air hanging between us.

*Evushk* used cooking to work out his problems. I thought he found its natural rhythms soothing, although I had no evidence to support this theory, but tonight, he just looked tired.

Once he'd prepared his casserole and placed it in the oven, he trudged to the table, and despite the hooks tugging on me, I kept my focus on the frying meat in my pan. After the cutlets had reached an optimal temperature, I removed the pan from its heat source and placed a lid on it. Only then did I face *evushk*, leaning on the counter as I did.

He was sitting on the bench behind the table with his head in his hands, and to me, he looked... defeated. After today's many changes, another shouldn't affect me, but seeing the *Lokke Vitras*...

No. Seeing my *evushk* like this tugged on my heart.

Sitting beside him, Ace laid his head in *evushk's* lap, ignoring food preparation to comfort his master, and I wished I could do the same, but I was stuck, glued to the counter. When a timer went off for the casserole, I pulled it out of the oven, prepared our plates and drinks, and brought everything to the table. I slid *evushk's* dinner in front of him, but he didn't move, not while I circled the table and not when I sat. I played with my utensils, waiting, until he lowered his hands and started eating.

A wall had been erected between us. We were sitting so close to one another that I could feel his body heat, and yet, something was keeping us separate. The clack of forks and knives—our chewing and swallowing—sounded amplified to my ears, and poor Ace felt the tension. After quick sniffs at us both, he slunk to his bed and curled up in it.

I didn't taste my dinner. I knew it was good. Every meal that *evushk* and I made—except for the occasional experimental one—came out amazing, better than anything a refectory could produce, but I couldn't focus enough to register its flavor.

*Evushk* appeared to be having the same problem. With his food halfway finished, he rested his utensils on his plate, leaning back in his seat, and I was quick to finish my bite so I could collect our dishes.

I sped through clean up, glancing over my shoulder every so often to check on him. Lounging on the bench, he was resting his head on the wall with his eyes closed. I'd think he was asleep if I didn't know him better. No way would he fall to dreams before securing the room.

Once the kitchen was shining, I returned to the table. He hadn't dismissed me for the evening, yes, but tonight, I had a more important reason for lingering than that alone.

It took a while, but eventually, *evushk* said what was on his mind, refusing to look my way the whole time.

"Today showed me something important, not only about you but also me. I've been mulling over this revelation while waiting for you to arrive, and I've come to a decision about it."

I didn't like where this was going, but maybe I was reading him wrong. Please, let that be the case.

"When I first took you as replacement, I didn't give you a choice in the matter, even though I... I should have. I want to do so now," *evushk* said, turning to me. "If you'd like, you can back out of this. I'll see that you get whatever Stratus you want in any of the Houses. Give you the chance to live a peaceful life. You don't have to become the *Lokke Vitras*."

I'd been right.

Shit.

## **TTS Chapter Thirty-Five**

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