

Chapter 69: This Is My Job 2

When I came back into view, my target was trying to escape, but of course he was. In his situation, who wouldn't? The crunch of my feet in the twigs had him jerking his head my way, and when I started pulling what I'd need from my pockets, he burst into tears. This one was emotive.

"Please," he sobbed. "You don't have to do this."

Saying not a word, I came closer before crouching so he could see what I was holding, although I quickly unfolded a map to hide everything else in my hands.

"You probably can't read this, so I'll do what I can to help," I said before pointing to a spot on its surface. "This is where we are. I'll mark it in red because red is bad. Red is danger."

Flicking the cap off of my marker, I wiped away beaded water before placing an 'x' where I'd indicated.

"What color makes you feel safe?" I asked.

Gaping at me, my target flapped his mouth until I snapped my fingers in front of his eyes.

"Come on," I said. "That secret can't be nearly as important as everything else you've given me."

A nervous giggle flew out of the man.

"Yellow," he said.

Nodding, I traded my held marker for another one in my pocket before drawing a second 'x' on the map.

"This is Yanth. Small town at the mountain's base," I said. "It's roughly 3.2 kilometers to the north-north-east. For reference, it's that way."

Plucking a knife from its sheath, I flung it to embed into a tree.

"Once you've recovered, head there. I've convinced the town's residents to provide you with food and asylum for a couple of days. They'll also give you the supplies you'll need to reach the closest community of exiles, but you'll be on your own after that," I said. "Oh, and don't worry about getting lost today. You only need to head toward town. If you haven't reached it by nightfall, they'll send out a search party."

I offered my target the map, and after taking it, he licked his lips, flicking his eyes between me and what he was holding.

“Why would you...?” he asked.

Behind him, my hallucination cocked their head, seemingly curious for my answer as well.

“Because like you said, you did nothing wrong,” I said. “You will suffer for a crime that someone else committed, simply because of your connection to her. It’s the way the world works, and I am *sorry* for it. But I will do what I can to ease you into your new life.”

With his mouth left hanging open, my target seemed stunned, and I waited for him to collect himself, fairly certain of how the next part would play out. I’d been here a thousand times before, after all.

“You could... let me go,” he eventually said. “If you did, I’d never enter Lutovish society again. I’ll like as an exile! Just don’t take-”

He fell quiet as I placed something between us, and when I pulled my fingers away from it, his eyes widened.

“This is a gun from the old world. It operates like the pistol that’s tied to your array, but it has a meaner kickback, and it won’t disappear if you drop it,” I said. “House Kolb doesn’t have many of these. After the war with those from beyond the stars, most of them were melted down, so I’ve asked the residents of Yanth to take it from you when you arrive there. Please, don’t fight them about that. It wouldn’t be wise.”

I waited for my target to brush his fingers along the gun before continuing.

“I’m giving this to you for your protection and for that alone. Many wild animals live in these hills, and if one attacks you while you’re vulnerable, I don’t want you defenseless. If you use this gun for anything other than protecting yourself, it will be your choice. I won’t add it to my many misdeeds. Do you understand me?”

Swallowing hard, the man said, “I... do.”

“Good,” I said. “Then, we can get started.”

As I rose from my crouch, my target drew away from me.

“What? Wait, no!” he said. “Is this all you can...? I mean, can’t we talk about this?”

I couldn’t answer that question, so I took the only course of action available to me instead. With my array blocking signals from my audial nerves, the world went silent. I had no need to hear my target’s pleas. I’d heard them all before.

As I stopped behind my target, my hallucination faced me on the other side.

“Is this really necessary?” they asked.

Without a word, I gently forced my target's head forward, placing an Extractor against the back of his neck, and pushed the button to start its inbuilt process. Then, I looked down.

Although I'd long since given myself a break from listening to my victims' screams—I had enough memories of that to fill a lifetime, thank you—I always forced myself to watch what happened when I took someone's array. The reasons I did this were varied. Some of it was so I could punish myself, although I was also careful about helping the one who was suffering, if I could.

But most of it was because I knew that unless my circumstances changed or death caught me unaware, I'd eventually find myself kneeling in this man's place. To date, only a great deal of luck and an abundance of caution had kept me from it.

After all, the shukusenth wouldn't like learning how little loyalty I held toward their precious Houses. Among them, Talira knew, and only our tenuous, familial link and the excellent services that I provided for her had kept her mouth shut.

Who knew how long that would last, though? When the truth came out, I intended to incite the greatest manhunt that Lutov had ever seen, prolonging it for as long as possible, but I'd never had any doubt about how it would end and when it did...

This was why when my target went rigid, I sank to the ground, circling my arms around him, and whispered empty reassurances in his ear. Yes, I was the one who was doing this to him. Yes, according to reports, he was in so much pain that he wouldn't register what I was doing, but I couldn't stop myself. When it was my turn to endure this torture, this was what I wanted: one of the most primal forms of human connection, and I wouldn't give a damn who it came from. I'd be grateful for the smallest sign that compassion existed.

Soon enough, my target was left hanging in my arms, sightlessly staring at the ground while ragged gasps shook his frame, and after laying him on his side, I removed the restraints on him. As I placed the map and gun within easy reach, I let the signals from my audial nerves resume their race for my brain, and with pattering rain as my background music, I left the copse of trees.

I wished I could do more for that man, but I had neither the time nor the supplies needed for such a task. Instead, I sent messages to all nearby lower Strata, asking them to check the area in a few hours. They could retrieve anything that man had left behind or if he was still there, help as they saw fit.

"So, that's it?" my hallucination asked. "I'm so confused. What you did in there... it doesn't match the man I knew."

I wasn't sure why they were still here. Usually, after making a few quips, they vanished, popping up again a day or two later. At least, that was how it had been for the last four months. Sticking around wasn't their style, and it made me wonder if perhaps they were something more than just a hallucination-

As if to stop that thought, a distinctive *bang* rattled through the mountains, and with my breath catching, I stopped short, closing my eyes. Damn it all. Mother Time, damn it all, why-?

“Why would he do that?” my hallucination whispered into a deafening silence.

Why did they always do that?

Because as I’d said a lot today, this was nothing new. It was, in fact, heartbreakingly familiar, and I wanted to scream at that man and my hallucination and all of my past victims, almost as much as I wanted to hurt myself right now. Hell, I could feel steel in my hand and a sharp edge on my arm, but I couldn’t indulge that need because I’d made a promise.

“I made a promise,” I repeated to myself.

So, instead of doing as I’d like, I took a deep breath and opened my eyes, only to be greeted by my hallucination’s tear-streaked face.

“How could you do this?” they said. “You gave him that gun. You had to know...”

When they fell silent, staring at me, I crossed my arms with a sigh.

“Killing him was the best way to keep Lutov safe. We already have an excess of angry exiled, running wild across the homeland, and swelling their ranks with former Cerullis members is a terrible idea, an uprising in the making,” I said, “but I can’t bring myself to kill so many people, not in such a short time span at least. Besides that, I’ve always fought to get out of eliminating my targets, giving them every chance to escape their fates. That’s what I did here. And sure! Maybe that struggle only amounts to a manipulative play on my victims’ emotions but honestly? After so long doing this, I truly do not give a shit anymore.”

I shrugged while my hallucination slowly shook their head.

“Who are you?” they said with their throat working.

Biting my lip, I looked away before extending one hand to the side.

“I’m Zaeden, the man you knew,” I said before reaching out with the other hand, “but I’m also the *Lokke Vitras*.”

I let my hands slap to my thighs, straining to hear their response, but when I got only silence, I jerked my head toward them, seeing red.

“Look. *This is my job*, Damari,” I shouted. “You never saw it because I hid it from you, but this is what I do every fucking day, and I. *HATE*. it!”

My roar ripped away from me and down the mountain’s slope, and with it went the red haze that had been coating my vision. As it receded, I slumped, rubbing my eyes.

“I never wanted you to know,” I told my vanished hallucination. “I never wanted you to look at me like that.”

Pulling my hands away, I stared at their palms while a pair of tears pattered on my skin.

“Hell, I need sleep,” I said.

And maybe I’d get it today. First, though, I needed to reach a place of safety.

Descending to sea level took a little over an hour, but soon enough, I reached a road that led to the Eastern Reaches. I’d left my skycruiser there, picking up my targets’ trail from that point, and once I was in it again, I could rest while it took me elsewhere.

Unfortunately, two people were standing beside it with one of them perched on its tapered nose while the other one leaned against its door.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

Because I couldn’t avoid these people, not this time. They were guarding my means of escape too well, and with them having spotted me already, I couldn’t outrun them. It was time to face the music.

With trudging feet, I headed to my skycruiser so I could greet my partners.

Revision #1

Created 15 February 2025 05:20:34 by FatalisticFable

Updated 15 February 2025 05:28:41 by FatalisticFable