

# Chapter 22: You're Sending Me in Again, Aren't You?

When I walked into her office the next day, Talira took one look at me before wincing.

“Did you get any sleep?” she asked.

“It’s not important,” I sighed.

Slinging myself into a chair, I sprawled against one corner of the seat, hooking a knee over its arm while scuffing the other foot on the floor.

“Which House am I going deep cover in?” I asked.

After running her eyes over me, Talira pinched her lips.

“Are you drunk?” she said.

“No,” I said before squinting. “Yes? I don’t know. My body’s a little fucked right now, but again, it doesn’t matter. Even like this, I can handle the initial steps of a deep-cover mission, and by the time more is required from me, I’ll be better.”

Talira’s entire face was pinched now, but I couldn’t read it. Was that worry or disapproval that she was showing me? Her eyes had gone distant while she played at the air like people did when they were messing with their arrays, and when I got an alert from my apartment’s recorder system, I sat bolt upright, slapping my feet to the ground. She couldn’t see what had happened last night, couldn’t know...

But when her eyes cleared and she just *looked* at me, I knew that she already did.

“How much blood did you lose?” Talira calmly asked.

Too calmly.

“Do I need to send you to our medics downstairs?”

“What? No!” I said. “I didn’t lose enough to impair me. Something in me was cognizant enough to keep an eye on that.”

“But that’s why you’re not sure if you’re drunk,” Talira said. “You can’t know how your body will react to alcohol, weakened as you’ve made it.”

I decided to take the wise course of action and stay silent. Completely blank, Talira watched me, and I fought to keep still, knowing that she was evaluating me.

“I’m sending you home,” she said. “You need time with your loved ones-”

Shooting to my feet, I slammed my hands on her desk.

“I need a mission. I need *work*, Talira,” I said. “You need to stop protecting me. I know myself. I know this pattern of behavior. I will be *fine* in a week or so, but in the meantime, I desperately need something to throw myself into, something I know I’m good at. So. Which House am I going deep cover in?”

Ok. Now, I could read her. She was pissed at me, if also worried.

“I should tell you to remove yourself from my office. Your behavior is unbecoming of the *Lokke Vitras*,” Talira said, “but since no one is here to see you like this, I’ll just tell you to get your hands off of my desk and sit your ass down.”

Mother *Time*, she was angry. Slowly, I lowered myself into my seat again, locking my gaze with hers the whole way down. She broke our staring contest first, dropping her face into her hands.

“How am I supposed to trust you with a deep-cover mission when you pull shit like this?” she asked, waving at me.

I kept my mouth shut, realizing that nothing I said could help me, and sighing, Talira slapped her palms onto her desk’s surface.

“Cerullis,” she said. “Your target’s in House Cerullis.”

The depth of hollowness that her revelation scraped into my heart surprised me. Given that House’s history, should this news have come as such a shock?

“Do you think *shukusen* Sanya knows that someone in her ranks has broken the Concords?” I asked.

“Doubtful,” Talira said, “and I wouldn’t blame her for it either. Becoming a head of House is hard enough if you’re prepared for it, and prepared, Sanya was not. Besides, I’ve known that girl for a long time. I seriously doubt that she’s capable of requesting a weapon as horrid as what Zan’s created.”

Wait. How did Talira know Sanya? I hadn’t thought their association extended beyond the younger woman’s appointment as a *shukusen*.

Could I ask about that now, though? I’d crossed a lot of lines today, and while I didn’t much care about holding to decorum, Leski’s words from before I’d left home rang in my head.

“All right. Cerullis,” I said. “Is Rylan still viable as a persona, or should I visit alterations again?”

Talira's face soured, almost as if she'd wanted me to question her.

"No, he remains intact, but you'll have to doctor his record a bit," she said. "Also, this mission shouldn't be as immersive as the last one. You can break deep cover when you go home every night, which is good for you. After today's display, I'll require an in-depth report of your activities every day."

"All as I expected," I said. "Is there anything else, *shukusen*, or may I start prepping for this mission?"

Talira stared at me for long enough that I shifted in place. Had I said something wrong?

"You don't want to know how things resolved with Pheniks after you left?" she asked.

Wincing, I glanced to the side. I'd rather avoid anything to do with my brother until the emotional dust-up from our last parting had settled. I didn't want a repeat of what I'd recently left in my apartment. Even still, a question was dragged from me, much like my gaze was to my grandmother.

"Is he ok?"

Making a face, Talira said, "Physically, yes. Until we deal with Arion, he'll stay in one of the apartments meant for Kolb's unplaced members. I'm sure you remember those well enough. You made such a mess of one forever ago, after all."

With my breath catching, I fought to keep my eyes on Talira. I'd rather not relive memories of Fyester and subsequently, Jayla on top of everything else.

"You might want to avoid him for a while," Talira continued. "He's pissed at you."

"Which is about what I expected," I said, drooping. "Still. Thank you for letting me know he's safe."

"Of course. It's the least I can do," Talira said. "Do you need anything from me before you go under, Zae-zae?"

I shrugged.

"Just the usual. Keep my family apprised of my status as much as you can and..."

Pausing, I sucked on my teeth.

"This might seem strange, but Fourth Stratus Elin's missing persons mission continues to weigh on me," I said. "Can you make sure he gets into the Preserve, please?"

Talira seemed taken aback by such an unusual request, but she nodded.

"That'll be easy enough," she said. "I'll let you know how it goes."

“Thank you,” I said. “If there’s nothing else, I’d like to get started.”

“I wish you luck,” Talira said, “and Zae-zae?”

She reached across her desk, waiting until I touched her hand before continuing.

“When this is over, you’re getting a month to yourself, and don’t you fucking dare argue with me about that. I got a message from *Korix* this morning, expressing concern for you, and he rarely talks to me anymore. Please, grandson. Give yourself time to heal before barreling into another crisis.”

Raising an eyebrow, I said, “Once this one’s over?”

Talira slumped.

“Once this one’s over,” she repeated.

“Thanks in advance, then,” I said. “I’m leaving now.”

As I rose from my chair, I pointedly did *not* think about how *Korix* had told on me. I also chose not to see the concerned look on Talira’s face before I left her office.

So. Cerullis again. Had the person who’d requested this neurotoxin from Zan not learned from the Ancients Crisis? It had only been a hundred years. I’d think the House’s members were still reeling from something that had nearly torn it apart, but perhaps my target was new to Cerullis. Perhaps they hadn’t felt the hysteria that came from nearly losing the central-most pillar in most Lutovish’s lives.

Speculation occupied me on the journey to my apartment, although a few odd glances along the way dragged me free of it. They had me reversing the changes that I’d made to my body in the last few days.

It wasn’t a long trip. Unlike *Korix*, I didn’t feel the need to distance myself from Kolb’s headquarters. Almost as soon as the city proper surrounded me, I turned onto a walkway that bordered the main street, wandering through crowded towers until I reached a courtyard, resting between them. Mirrors, hanging from the bordering towers, bounced sunlight to this lowest level so that minimal plant life could grow here, producing enough green to break up the city’s steel and glass theme. Concrete gave way to patterned cobblestone, and a stone bench sat between two, scraggly tress. A single door, my home hidden away in the city, opened onto this.

On stepping inside, a guest would find a lift to the left, one that rose at the highest of speeds to the top of this building. The apartment’s hangar filled one of its topmost floors, making my residence one that was separated by a tower’s length.

Every so often, I adjusted the lift’s destination to somewhere on the middle tiers. I might not live among them anymore, but I liked maintaining the relationships that I’d developed with the low Strata as the *Lokke Vitras* to come. They knew what I was now, which made things difficult at

times, but mostly, they seemed appreciative of the fact that I checked on them.

What did I know, though? The happy faces that they presented might only be shown to appease me.

When I stepped inside my home today, I didn't pay much attention to the lift or the decorations around me. Catching the suppression grenade that an opening door had dropped, I frowned at it. The knot, attached to its pin, had been retied, but it wasn't one I'd seen Korix or Leski use before. Was a stranger in my home?

I reset the trap, and as I slunk into my apartment, my rifle filled my hand. Why would someone infiltrate my home? Cracking the security processes that protected this place would take dedication. I didn't think I'd antagonized anyone that badly before.

Maybe Niklaus?

I shook my head. He was too much of a coward to challenge me or my family.

It could be Nyco. Twice, I'd disrupted his life in a significant way. If he hadn't gotten caught up in Kolb's recent raid, he might have decided to attack me, no matter how compassionate the man had always seemed.

It didn't matter. Instead of dwelling on who might be here, I locked the question of the intruder's identity away. I had a possible hostile in my home, which meant I needed to focus.

I glided through the apartment—kitchen, sitting room, Korix's study, Leski's studio, a public washroom—only pausing at the last of those. Drones were still scraping dried blood off of the floor there, and I watched them for far longer than I should have before moving on.

After checking a few more rooms, I came to the last one, my bedroom, and held my breath. When asked, my array showed me one heat signature inside, waiting in a corner, and raising my rifle toward it, I slipped through the door.

Before I could start demanding answers from the intruder, a lamp in the corner brightened, revealing a woman in an armchair. With one leg bobbing on her knee, she regarded me with the gravest of expressions.

*"Lokke Vitras Zaeden,"* Feena said. "We need to talk."

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