

# Chapter 83: A House Disbanded

Absolute chaos had been unleashed at this most momentous of gatherings, and it wasn't helping me with maintaining my grip on my focus. As it often had over the last two days, my mind kept drifting, mostly to the glassing of an island or to a tale that Talira had told me in her dark office, and this was... unfortunate. I needed to stay in the here and now.

Even if the here and now was currently hectic, to put it lightly.

Today's proceedings had started simply enough. The relevant parties had gathered, including the *shukusenth* and several high Strata from the remnants of House Cerullis. A neutral representative had presented the evidence of that House's recent machinations, most of which their high Strata had tried, unsuccessfully, to refute or deny.

Of course, I'd expected they'd have no success with that. Kolb's best had been in charge of the various forms of operative work that had ended with a satellite positioned over the dissenters' island.

This had, however, led to our current site of chaos where the high Strata of House Cerullis and the people presiding over this legal case were leaning over their various tables with their fists ground into wooden surfaces. Red-faced, they were trying to shout over one another, all of which had been happening for a good five minutes.

Sitting beside one another, Talira and I had silently watched the debacle. We weren't the only ones who were nonplussed by what was happening. Several others, members from all Houses, had joined us in our observation, but some of those people had started looking for us to provide a sense of direction.

Sighing through her nose, Talira turned to me.

"My *Lokke Vitras*, silence this rabble for me, if you please," she said.

Which was the order I'd been waiting for. After getting to my feet, I bowed to Talira—

"Yes, my *shukusen*."

—and then, I marched in between the squabbling parties, crossing my arms. Within a minute, the chamber had gone quiet as the grave.

Mother Time, much as it was useful, I hated the power I held over people. No one should be able to silence an argument with their presence alone. Shaking my head, I said not a word, merely returning to my seat, and while I took it, Talira stood.

“Fighting amongst ourselves is useless,” she said with her voice booming in the cavernous chamber. “If we fight, we stagnate, and Lutov suffers, as our predecessors once proved. Before the war with those from beyond the stars, this land was divided between four nations, nations that fought. Nations that *stagnated*. This stagnation almost saw humanity wiped out of existence. So, let’s not fight now. Let’s look at the evidence before us, rationally draw conclusions from it, and form a plan to move forward that will satisfy all parties involved.

“In this matter, however, I would remind you that as ever, House Kolb remains impartial, looking only to the safety and security of greater Lutov. If necessary, we will see that a resolution comes about this day, although I hope that everyone here can reach such a conclusion without our... persuasion.

“Now, if we could return to the presented evidence, reviewing it calmly, my First Stratus and I will continue with our watchful observation.”

Wow. Had she seriously just threatened the other Houses with retaliation if they didn’t start acting like rational grown-ups? I’d never have done that, too wary of disturbing Lutov’s fragile peace, but these were special circumstances. Everyone else seemed to recognize this as well, which again reminded me of how well Talira could read a room, and even with the Cerullis members occasionally acting as if they were barely keeping it together, today’s show got back on the road.

Talira’s threat hovered over us throughout the rest of the gathering, quickly getting us through a review of the evidence, and once that was finished and the Cerullis members had made their case, their judge and jury disappeared into another room to discuss everything.

Legal matters as significant as this were usually given into the hands of several randomly selected citizens, which had left a bunch of anxious, powerful people in the chamber with me and Talira. Not a pleasant place to be. Regardless, I tried to keep things light.

Glancing over the chamber, I said, “Never thought I’d set foot in this place.”

Although they usually had to go through lengthy discussions at an assembly first, proceedings like this, where we were considering disbanding a House, took place in a nondescript building sitting at one end of Xygek’s main park. The interior of this place consisted only of this plain chamber and a small, attached room where rulings on these matters were made. In the time I’d been alive, the building had only been used four times.

The first time had been to exile *shukusen* Alezand shortly after the Ancients Crisis. At the time, Korix had still technically been the *Lokke Vitras*, so he’d been the one who’d attended that trial.

The second had been similar: exiling *shukusen* Arion and appointing my brother as Zan’s new Head of House. By some miracle, Talira had kept me out of that one because I’d still been in the middle of my month of recuperation.

During the place's third use, when Sanya had been removed from her position, I'd been too busy elsewhere to attend, but now, today's most momentous of occasions had come, and here I was.

While watching the other *shukusenth*, Talira cocked her head, shifting in her seat.

"I'm shocked that you haven't been here before now, honestly," she said. "It's been a rocky century."

I snorted, which had her curiously eyeing me. Rocky. That was how she'd describe the last hundred years?

"What I wouldn't give for another twenty-five years of peace and quiet," I said.

Sighing, Talira patted my arm before returning to her examination of the chamber.

"You and me both."

This trial's judge and jury took much less time than one would think to decide Cerullis' fate, but then, Kolb had heavily stacked the deck against that poor House. When the group stepped back into the chamber, a woman separated herself from them while the rest took their seats. After clearing her throat, she folded her hands in front of her.

"Quick as this decision may have been, it was not an easy one to make," she said. "After all, disbanding a House would have been unthinkable to everyone before today, I'm sure."

I wasn't so certain about that, considering how badly I, in general, wanted the entire House system removed. Despite the seeming fanaticism about it that I'd found in everyone else I'd met, one or two of these people must have considered the eradication of a rival House at some point as well.

"These are, however, extraordinary circumstances," the woman continued. "A little over one hundred years ago, House Cerullis first set foot on the path to today's plight by scheming with the Ancients to destroy the rest of Lutov. Their plan was disrupted, in large part thanks to our *Lokke Vitras*—"

She nodded to me, and I inclined my head in acknowledgment, refusing to think about that awful period of my life. One that was nearly matched by my current circumstances, actually.

"—and the House was largely forgiven because those plans had been made and contained within their leadership and not among the lower Strata. We also must consider the creation of a wormhole between us and the sun, an experiment that Cerullis completed without the approval of the other Houses, and if that weren't enough, something similar to the Ancients Crisis has happened again within the last twenty years.

"Frankly, the revelation of that disaster's details shocked me and my fellow adjudicators. While we may trust those of you who lead us, learning how thoroughly you hid the development and distribution of Cerullis' neurotoxin from the rest of Lutov disturbed us, to say the least."

If only they knew. Maybe if the rest of the homeland understood how much they'd been kept in the dark about this, it could be the chink I needed to more rapidly change things, but I wasn't sure how to release that information without causing undue chaos.

"That concealment of critical information isn't why we're here, however. The neurotoxin itself is," the woman continued. "That and the final straw: the elimination of all those who saw fit to disagree with their House's insidious strategy, a disagreement that's proven to be a discussion point among all of Cerullis' Strata, not solely those who dissented."

I found her outrage at this 'final straw' a little funny, considering how many singular individuals I'd exiled, stripped of House, or occasionally killed over the years for having similar views. But I shouldn't let that distract me right now.

"Given these crimes and how obsolete Cerullis' function has become in recent years—so much so that the other Houses could easily assimilate its useful remnants—we didn't have much choice with regards to these proceedings."

Taking a deep breath, the woman squared her shoulders and held her head high.

"As of this moment, House Cerullis is disbanded," she said. "We absolve its remaining members of their crimes. They will, however, be folded into Lutov's five other Houses. This is our ruling."

Once more, the chamber erupted into chaos while the woman who'd been speaking deflated and hid among her fellows. Detachedly, I watched House Kolb members hurry to restore order with every bit of me turned toward one idea.

Welp. I'd certainly helped to make history now. Mother Time damn it all.

Releasing a breath, Talira clapped my shoulder before climbing out of her chair.

"I need to get ready for the assembly," she said. "You stay here until things have calmed down. Then, join me and the others."

With my eyes pinned on a weeping, former member of House Cerullis, I faintly said, "Yes, my *shukusen*."

Again patting my shoulder, Talira leaned down to my ear.

"You did good, Zae-zae," she whispered.

Then, she left me. I didn't know how long I watched angry, frightened people scream at one another, only stopped from violence by the silent sentinels standing ready to keep the peace.

I never moved to quell this storm. The coming assembly couldn't start without me, and while I wasn't typically someone who wasted another person's time or annoyed the *shukusenth*, I didn't care about that today. I needed a brief spell to just... sit. Watch. Do nothing.

If I was also doing everything in my power to delay an order that I knew I'd soon receive, I'd never admit it.

Eventually, people started trickling out of the chamber, slowly siphoning off the turbulent energy found there, and when the storm finally died, only a handful of people, seemingly lost or otherwise bewildered, were left, although one of them was a surprise to me.

Striding to me with purpose, Pheniks jerked his head toward an exit.

"Join me?" he said. "We're headed to the same place, after all."

Those words broke me free of the spell that was keeping me pinned in place, and after shaking myself, I hesitantly grinned at my brother.

"After you," I said.

The park outside looked exactly the same as it had before I'd entered the building at my back. People were wandering through it, oblivious to the significance of recently concluded events. In a way, it made Cerullis' disbanding insignificant. I badly wished that it actually was.

As we ambled along the park's outskirts toward House Vaessa's headquarters, Pheniks kept his eyes fixed on his feet, hanging his head. I wasn't sure what had him so contemplative, but he'd tell me soon enough. My brother had never been able to keep his thoughts to himself for long.

While I waited for him to speak, I scanned our surroundings with my gaze catching on a tower toward the far end of the park: House Cerullis' headquarters. What would we do with that building, now that it no longer had a purpose? Would it be demolished as easily as the institution it had once housed, or would we find another use for it?

Perhaps because of a chance encounter I'd once had with him at the foot of that building, the sight of it brought Fyester, one of my long-dead partners, to mind. What would he think of what had happened today, given that he'd belonged to House Cerullis when he'd been alive? If he were still with us, would his living, breathing state have given me the strength I'd needed to refuse Talira's order? And what would he think of me now? Would this have been the last evil required for me to earn his enmity?

Probably not. When he'd been alive, that man couldn't bring himself to hate me, even after I'd chosen to let him die.

Taking a deep breath, Pheniks drew me out of my thoughts—thank Mother Time—and I eyed him while he bit his lips.

With an explosive sigh, he said, "I'm concerned by recent events, Zae. A lot of what's happened in the last few years has been frightening, certainly, but right now, I'm most... worried... about how the balance of power has shifted between the Houses."

Mother Time, he was being so careful with his word! I silently acknowledged this rarity, even as I turned a rueful grin on him.

“Care to elaborate?” I drawled.

Pheniks stopped short, balling his hands into fists, before pinning me in place with his fiery eyes.

“Don’t play stupid,” he hissed. “Kolb’s become too powerful, and you know it.”

There, my brother was, saying what he was thinking without any padding to soften his words’ blow. Still, I considered what he’d said with my head cocked. Until now, I had not, in fact, recognized the reality of what my brother had proposed, too busy with fixing my fuck up, but... he was right.

Hell.

Frowning, I said, “That may be true for now, but we *are* in the middle of a crisis, and handling crises *is* Kolb’s purpose. Once things have stabilized, Talira will have her House step back into the shadows.”

Or I certainly hoped that she did. If she refused to do so, it would be concerning, as Pheniks had put it. What would I do then?

My brother’s demeanor echoed my doubt back to me.

“Maybe,” he said.

Shaking his head, he started off again, and until we’d reached House Vaessa’s headquarters, nothing else was spoken between us. Once we were in the place’s lobby, however, Pheniks paused once more.

“Zae.... you know I love you, right?” he said.

Rapidly blinking, I froze, wondering where that had come from. Pheniks was usually horrible at expressing how he felt.

“Yes...?” I said, lifting an eyebrow.

Nodding, Pheniks found something else to occupy his gaze.

“I just...” he said. “I don’t know what I’ll do if Kolb decides to hold onto their new power. I know you don’t think they will, but what if they do and you- you side with them?”

He peered at me from the corner of his eye.

“What happens then?”

That was a good question. After considering it for a moment, I shrugged.

“I sincerely hope it doesn’t come to that, Phen,” I said, “because if it did, I, like you, am not sure what I’d do.”

I’d meant that exactly as I’d said it. In the proposed scenario, I had no clue how I’d react. A lot of it would depend on details I didn’t have now, but wide-eyed, Pheniks recoiled from me as if I’d threatened to hit him.

“I see,” he said.

His throat worked for a moment, but before I could explain what I’d meant, my brother shook himself.

“Let’s go. The others are probably waiting for us.”

He made a beeline for a lift, and biting my lip, I watched him go. Had I just unintentionally alienated my little brother again?

Goodie. Add it to my ever-growing pile of recent mistakes.

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