

# Chapter 84: Preparing the Way

“Remind me why we’re here again?” Korix asked.

The city's lights cast a glowing corona around the towers on all sides of us, but none of them stretched upward as far as the one Korix and I were standing on. Well, none of them but the six House headquarters, the closest of which was waiting across a narrow skyway from us.

“Figure it out for yourself,” I said.

Now that we’d arrived, our purpose here should be obvious. I didn’t know why Korix was asking about it.

“Ok. Why are we infiltrating House Cerullis’ headquarters?” he said. “I can think of several reasons why we should do it. I’d like to know which of them you want to accomplish tonight.”

He’d made a good point. I couldn’t expect him to read my mind.

Also, why had he sounded so nervous just now?

“Besides hoping to figure out which House Zan facility Niklaus’ ‘gift’ was sent to?” I asked.

When Korix failed to respond to that question, I sighed.

“It’s been over two weeks, and Cerullis hasn’t made their move yet. When you woke up, I hoped that you’d have some details about *their* schemes to share, but since *they* kept you in the dark so efficiently about that, my wish is a bust,” I said. “So, we’ll go into Cerullis’ headquarters and pray that Mother Time favors us with more clues about their plan because being in the dark about that is killing me. While we’re here, I’d also like to leave a breadcrumb trail for the other Houses to follow once this is over, one that will see *shukusen* Alezand removed from his position.”

“And why did you ask for my help with this?” Korix asked. “It sounds like something you could have done by yourself, three years into your training.”

I just stared at him in response. He should know why I’d brought him with me. Sure, his knowledge of a building that I’d so infrequently visited would be helpful, but it wasn’t why I needed him nearby.

As Zaeden, I might trust him, believing without a speck of doubt that the Ancient had been pulled out of him, but as the acting *Lokke Vitras*, I couldn’t afford such certainty. Much as I didn’t like the

restriction and sometimes forgot about it, Korix couldn't leave my side until our enemy was dealt with.

"Ah," he said. "You're being polite."

"No, I really could use your help tonight. It would make this task easier," I said, "but I don't need it."

With a weak smile, Korix said, "I understand. You don't have to explain yourself."

Crossing his arms, he examined the building opposite us, but not before I spotted a slight tremble in his hands. Was he... afraid? If so, I could understand why. Who knew what sort of terrible deeds the Ancient had made him do here?

And I was bringing him back to it.

"I'm assuming we're using P.I.G.s to get in," he said.

Offering him the mentioned item, I said, "Unless you have a better idea."

I couldn't let him know that I'd seen his fear. What would that do to him, the one man in Lutov who believed his emotions must never be displayed?

Grimacing, Korix took a P.I.G., slapping it on the back of his hand, and I followed suit. Both of us checked our equipment after it had wrapped itself around our bodies, and once we were done, I marked a darkened window a few floors lower than us, sharing its location with Korix's array.

"Entering through the roof would be easier, you know," he said.

"Please, Ko. You know as well as I do that House Cerullis members have probably been stationed there from the moment I escaped with you," I said. "They won't expect us to come through a window, though, not the way we'll do it at least."

With a chuckle, Korix said, "I love seeing proof of how well you've learned my lessons."

Good. He'd sounded better. Hopefully, he'd stay that way.

With a fond smile at him, I jumped into thin air. Rather than letting gravity drive me toward the ground, however, I used my propulsors to maintain a stable trajectory as I raced between layers of traffic, a dark splotch lost in the middle of flashing metal. Once I'd drawn closer to my target, I throttled my speed before initiating a most hated process in my array.

As with every time I'd used the damn thing, I mentally cringed at glass's fast approach, certain I'd bounce off of the barrier surrounding it, but right when I might truly panic, the familiar disorientation that came with molecular dispersion settled over me. It didn't, however, fade in a split second like it did when traveling to the Terminal. I jittered and buzzed, and my teeth would have been clenched hard enough to chip them, if I could get them to physically touch.

And all the while, the world fuzzed like it did when seen through a soap bubble, splitting into a million different refractions.

When I slurped back into my natural form with my atoms ceasing their vibration, I rolled to my feet, taking a breath to gather my scattered thoughts while Korix slunk toward the door. As soon as I could, I checked that our passage through the window had left no ripples in its barrier. Since they only stopped solid objects from passing through them, reactions to what we'd just done didn't usually occur, but sometimes when using this process, one atom would hit another in exactly the wrong way, and a flare would run across a building.

I should have checked the barrier as soon as the process had ended, but shaking off its effects still gave me trouble. Korix insisted that given time, I'd consider passing through solid objects as normal. That made me no less impatient for it to be my reality now.

Hurrying to him, I said, "Anything?"

Even as he answered with a negative, I was accessing the nearby recorder feeds, using them to paint a simulation against a seemingly translucent wall.

"What now?" Korix asked in sub-vocals.

"Now, you teach me what you did at the Founder's Day Ball," I answered in kind. "Your camouflage technique?"

"You want to do that now?" Korix asked. "In possibly hostile territory?"

"After our many years together, you should know that I learn best when under pressure," I said.

With a slight headshake, Korix reached into a pocket before flipping something to me, and when I caught it, it almost fell through my fingers; its size was so small. I lifted it in front of me, squinting at the revealed disk, and raised an eyebrow.

"Your technique is a piece of high Strata tech?" I asked.

Shrugging, Korix said, "I never said it was difficult, only that I hadn't taught it to you, which is true. Unless you know how to operate that thing."

When he nodded to the disk, I made a face.

"All right, then. How does it work?" I asked.

"Hold it against the back of your neck, near the base of your skull," Korix said. "It'll feel a little strange."

Oh, goodie. His definition of strange could range anywhere from mildly annoying to excruciatingly painful.

Still, I did as he'd instructed, and when metal touched my skin, the disk pinched it before letting an electric zing flow over my body. Grimacing, I ran my tongue along my teeth. Korix had been right. This was *weird*.

"When you can, initiate the new processes that the disk has introduced to your array, and you'll become invisible to the unaided eye. The disk forces the arrays near you to skip their users' eyes over your position," Korix said. "You'll have to add me as an exception."

"Sounds simple enough," I said. "I don't suppose you have another one of these on you? I'll have to alter the plan otherwise."

But Korix held another disk aloft, prepared for anything as always, and after we were both ready, we headed deeper into House Cerullis' headquarters.

This place was nothing like House Kolb's tower, not opposite in nature but distinctly unlike it too. Here, Korix and I passed displays filled with different types of rock and the strangest models of flora and fauna, all testaments to the diversity of our world.

As we moved along each corridor, fear made a slow creep into Korix once more, even in mission mode as he was. He was swiveling his head too much, and each of his steps was too twitchy. I needed to finish this. Quickly.

Fortunately, security was terrible here. Breaking through the processes that controlled its recorders and lifts took little effort. With the ease of our control and the lack of people in the building, we practically flew through the tower. Even still, my skin crawled. It couldn't be this easy.

Despite my apprehension, we reached *shukusen* Alezand's office without incident.

Once we were inside, Korix and I scoured the room before pulling the disks off of our necks, and while he stood stock still, staring at a strangely placed sitting area, I worked my jaw, shaking off this tech's peculiar buzz. I didn't comment on Korix's obvious distress, letting him work through it, and when focus returned to his gaze, he took up watch without prompting.

As he did, a blanket of unease piled itself atop the tension I was already holding. Supposedly, my *Lokke Vitras* privileges should overshadow the ones that every head of House, save for my own, claimed. It was one of the advantages that the other *shukusenth* let the *Lokke Vitras* hold over them.

After all, while whomever held that role might be from House Kolb, they served all of Lutov. They were trusted to keep from abusing their power, although the threat of exile was on the table for the rare cases where that happened.

I'd never tested these privileges. What if something had gone wrong with them? What if the Ancients had modified the processes protecting House Cerullis? Considering *they* could isolate an array, surely *they* could also block me from what I needed. If my privileges didn't work, I'd have to breach Alezand's private storehouse on my own, and I wasn't sure how long that would take, time we might or might not have.

Still, as I moved into the room, I began my work, requesting anything that the *shukusen* had stored about the Ancients or Niklaus, and when I received an immediate response, it took me a heartbeat to hide my relief. I searched Alezand's desk for paper evidence of what Cerullis had planned while my array rifled through his digital records, and after going through everything, I restored the desk to its previous state. This took me maybe three minutes, and I spent another seven going through everything I'd gathered. Once finished, I suppressed a frustrated growl.

"I don't know if any of this will help us," I said.

Never relenting in his unfocused stare, Korix said, "At this point, anything new would be useful. So?"

Delving into the storecase again, I started laying my breadcrumb trail while answering the question.

"Alezand must be keeping his correspondences with Niklaus in his array or a personal storecase, found elsewhere," I said. "They're certainly not here, and there's no mention of any shipments to a Zan facility that haven't been scheduled for the last few months. If Niklaus was sending his 'gift' to his rival through Cerullis, I doubt the House would have set up its shipment so long before now.

"Now that we've cleared up the hard part of this investigation for them, the lower Strata should bring us more information about this plot quickly enough. I doubt we need to spend more time investigating it ourselves, unless nothing turns up within the next few days.

"As for the Ancients' plan, Alezand has *much* more information stored here, but I don't understand what any of it means. According to what I've read, *they* have cells of House Cerullis members stationed across Xygek. Once the... cascade—whatever that means—begins, they'll be the first to respond, ushering city residents to prepared holding facilities. Citizens will be processed there, which I assume means an Ancient will take them over.

"After *they* control Xygek, seizing the rest of Lutov will be easy, considering most of our people and resources are centered here, but I did find several mentions of *them* targeting the Eastern Reaches after *they're* done in the capital. Without the means of production found there or the manpower and resources needed to support them, the high Strata in their far-flung estates won't be able to resist the Ancients, the same as anyone who lives in Lutov's few towns.

"I found nothing, however, about what this cascade entails, although several reports placed great emphasis on the Ancients' affinity for electricity and manipulating membranes, of all things. I don't suppose any of that rings a bell?"

"No, unfortunately," Korix said.

I hadn't thought it would, but there'd been no harm in asking.

With a final few tweaks, I finished my changes to Alezand's storecase, ones that should see him stripped of House upon an investigation. If we survived the Ancients' attack, Talira would lead one against House Cerullis, and when she did, I wanted the way prepared for her.

Joining, Korix by the door, I asked, "Are we clear?"

When he nodded, we slipped back through Cerullis' headquarters until we reached the floor where we'd started. I wasn't sure how we'd extract. We could leave the same way that we'd entered, but I'd much rather find another way out, if possible. Experiencing the discomfort of passing through a barrier once had been enough for today, thank you.

While I considered other options, someone stepped out of a room ahead of us, and at the sight of her, I brushed my fingers over my knives. Considering how empty Cerullis' headquarters had been until now, finding another person here was concerning.

After a closer inspection of the woman, however, I lowered my hands from my weapons, even if my tension decreased not one bit.

"Is that...?"

Korix seemed at a loss as to how he should finish his sentence, but that was to be expected. When someone changed their gender presentation, the same usually occurred for their name, and he would never be so rude as to use the wrong moniker for another person, even if they could never hear him doing it. I filled in the blank for him.

"Jayla."

Drawing his shoulders together, Korix asked, "Sixth Stratus Fyester's partner at the time of his-?"

He stopped just in time, but I heard that last word anyway, and the old stab of that wound rushed through me for the millionth time.

"She's also Cerullis' First Stratus now," I said.

As we'd spoken, we'd been following Jayla with both of us drawn to the possibility that she presented, even if we didn't dare speak it aloud yet.

"That's what I thought. She's flown far," Korix said. "Do you want me to do it? I know it won't be easy for you."

"No. Too much unfinished business lies between us. I need to resolve it or it'll cause problems in the future," I said. "I'd appreciate your company, though."

"Of course."

Swallowing the recollected image of Jayla's face contorting with rage, I set myself on a collision course with someone I'd once shared a partner with, a man we'd both loved. Someone I'd killed.

Why did life keep doing these things to me?