

# Chapter 94: I Told You I Knew What to Do

As soon as I'd stepped into House Cerullis' headquarters, I removed my camouflage disk, working my jaw once it was gone. Damn, I did not like the way that felt.

Around me, people had recoiled, wide-eyed, from the person who'd appeared in their midst, and I cheerily waved at them before resting my hands on my hips. This place's lobby matched its upper floors' theme, sporting various displays of the wonders that our planet held, and there were many of them, enough to make the floor of this cavernous space feel crowded.

But what held my fascination were the objects floating between the paths of the lifts overhead. I didn't know how they were made, whether with projections or solid representations, but I did know what they were meant to model.

Planets. Specifically, the ones that circled our sun, all save ours. Its sisters, if you would.

I'd always had a peculiar preoccupation with space, as seen by my fascination with stories about the first *Lokke Vitras* and her Favored. After all, they were the only texts that had had anything outer space-related written in them for... I didn't know how long, actually. So, this gorgeous model of our solar system—something I was a little surprised to see—took my breath away.

It was almost enough to push Pheniks' death to the side.

"Can I help you?"

With my gaze tugged away from beauty, my loss once more hit me like a blow to the face. At the same time, I met a diminutive man's eyes, and considering how he flinched away from me, he must have perceived my pain.

"I'm here to see Alezand," I said. "We had an appointment planned for last week, but I'm sure he'll want to keep it regardless. Tell him I'm here about Jastin's elevation."

Normally, my behavior would only make this House Cerullis member scoff at me. I didn't know if my expression encouraged him to follow my instructions or if it was the coldness of mission mode, seeping from me, but he played at the air like he was writing a message, and after a delay, he licked his lips.

"Please, head to the top floor," he said. "My *shukusen* will be waiting for you."

No escort? Did Alezand know that his security measures were as nothing to me, or was he gambling that I'd come in good faith?

"My thanks," I said.

Brushing past the man, I entered a lift, and while rising through the tower, I requested and dissipated my rifle several times, checking that my array's functions hadn't been blocked. I might have come here to surrender, but if I didn't get the terms I wanted, I was leaving, whether that called for a fight or not. If it came to that, I'd need all of my resources at my disposal.

I was doing my very best to keep from thinking too hard about my purpose here today.

Alezand's office was little changed from its appearance at night, but without the risk of discovery placing pressure on me, I could actually enjoy it on this visit. He didn't have many windows overlooking the city, so little natural light filtered inside, and Cerullis' most precious discoveries were scattered about the room in displays. The centerpiece of the room, however, was a relaxed sitting area. It was the place that Korix had found so disturbing when we'd infiltrated the tower a few weeks ago, and Alezand was waiting there.

So was First Stratus Jayla. Almost, the sight of her stalled my stride. What was she doing here? Before I could consider thoughts of betrayal or coercion, though, a message slid into my array.

*I'm playing my part, it read. You play yours.*

But she didn't know why I was visiting. I'd have to devise a reason for her to leave before I...

Before.

"Lokke Vitras to come. I wasn't expecting you," Alezand said. "Please, take a seat."

He gestured to the sofa opposite him, and no matter that my body felt like wood, I perched where he'd indicated. Lifting a prepared mug off of the table, I sniffed it before sipping a flavorful blend of tea, one that was familiar in nature.

"From Ostiu?" I asked.

"I heard that you like their tea," Alezand said.

Ah. That made sense. With a sigh, I rested my mug on the table before angling my body toward Jayla.

"First Stratus, please forgive my rudeness," I said. "I didn't mean to ignore you."

"Please. I took no offense."

Jayla took a sample from her own mug before grimacing.

“It seems I don’t have as refined of a tongue as you,” she said, “but my apologies. You’re here to speak with my *shukusen*.”

“Yes,” I drawled, “with him and him alone.”

I leveled a pointed stare at Alezand, but the bastard only grinned at me.

“Should I not prepare my heir for conversations like this?” he asked. “You two are likely to work together at some point in the future, after all.”

Mother Time. Why was he acting like everything was business as usual? I was sitting here, barely restraining an urge to *scratch his eyes out*, and he...

Taking a calming breath, I said, “How much of what we’ll discuss does your First Stratus know?”

Alezand’s smile sharpened.

“Enough,” he said.

That was one attempt defeated, and perhaps Jayla knew what I was doing because she’d tightened on herself. I had to ignore the frown she directed my way.

Slowly, Alezand leaned back, tenting his fingers in front of his face.

“Tell me, esteemed one. Why are you here?” he said. “Is this about the tragedy that occurred earlier today? Because I don’t know how Cerullis can help the poor people who’ve survived it.”

Poor people from Zan, Cerullis’ rival House. Poor people who’d barely escaped an uncontrolled tumble into the sea. Poor people who if they’d shared their colleagues’ fate, would have drowned among the debris, on the off-chance that the fall hadn’t killed them.

“Do you think I’m stupid, or are you intentionally trying to piss me off?” I asked, somehow keeping my voice pleasant. “After what happened in your Southern Fells facility, I already knew that you were involved in something unwise, but now, I know about your collusion with the Ancients. I know that your people destroyed that research station’s supports after they disrupted its barrier. I know that you plan to do the same thing in Xygek sometime soon, just like I know that the Ancients destroyed The Library about an hour ago. My brother was in there, Alezand.”

Thank Mother Time for mission mode; otherwise, I’d probably be shouting at this asshole, no matter how pinched his eyes had become. The similar expression on Jayla’s face, however, had me grateful that I’d refrained from displaying my anger.

“I... I’m sorry to hear that,” Alezand said. “No matter that Second Stratus Pheniks was my rival as a House Zan member, he was your brother, and... I am *so sorry*.”

“Your apology means nothing to me,” I said, “and I didn’t come to speak with you either. I want to talk to the Ancient that’s made your House its puppet.”

As he rocked back in his seat, Alezand worked his mouth, and I leaned forward to take another sip of tea. Once I was done, I met the *shukusen's* eyes from my lowered position.

"Do you still think your First Stratus should be here?" I asked.

Alezand darted his gaze to Jayla, who'd gone stiff as a corpse, before making shooing motions at her.

[*She stays.*]

The steam rising above our tea shifted and condensed into a hollow shape, one with something shimmering along its inside, and in its midst, a spear of lightning sparked to life, growing and diminishing with the steam's shape. This was an Ancient? *It* was... so small. And damn, I could break *it* apart with a wave of my hand.

Before I could try, *it* twisted and jerked in a spastic pattern until *it* was hovering along the ceiling, all done in an eyeblink. Fast. That had been faster than me when I was using House Kolb speed.

As I gulped, I was grateful that the shadows along the ceiling were partially hiding the Ancient. It made the being slightly less intimidating.

[*Well?*]

Across from me, Alezand and Jayla winced while the First Stratus rubbed her forehead. Conversely, the new pulse throbbing in my head was only strong enough to make my eye twinge along with it.

"My *evushk* told me what you want," I said. "I'm here to negotiate the terms of my surrender."

As if ruffled, the shadows briefly flurried into motion before subsiding.

[*Why would we want you? We've already gotten everything that we need from your people's protectors, the ones you represent.*]

Gritting my teeth, I retrieved my tea mug, breathing in its soothing vapors. I knew the Ancients were beyond emotions, but I couldn't help taunting *it* anyway.

"Don't play dumb," I said. "You know who I am. You know that removing me from the board would be a blow to Lutov, one that you could exploit. You also know that I stole one of your most useful tools from you, although I'm confused about why emotionless beings like you would want something petty like revenge. Perhaps you need it to reassert your strength over the other Ancients. Do your people jockey for power like ours do?"

Opposite me, Alezand shot forward.

"Stop being difficult," he hissed. "*It* adjusts how *it* treats you based on your level of defiance, and trust me. You don't want-"

[*Be silent.*]

Grunting, Alezand shut his mouth, tottering in place so badly that Jayla had to steady him.

[*We won't deign to explain our society to a solid weakling like you, but you are right. Having you under our control would be... beneficial. What do you want from us so that we may gain this?*]

Oo, the pressure in my head would make it pop.

"Not planning to force it?" I said. "Or have you already tried that?"

It was more likely that the Ancient wanted to hear my terms before invading my head, giving *itself* more time to weigh *its* options, but I'd never find out if this was true. *It* refused to answer me.

"Fine, then," I said before raising my voice. "For one day, I want you to delay the plans that you *and Cerullis* have for Lutov, a day here being twenty-four hours."

Always best to be as specific as possible when making a deal with hostile forces.

[*Acceptable. Such a small thing will change nothing. Anything else?*]

Did I dare risk it? I didn't know if another demand would ruin my work to this point.

Oh, what was I thinking? I'd come here specifically because of this demand.

"Only one thing," I said. "One of your people killed Second Stratus Pheniks. I loved my brilliant, little brother, and he's dead now because of *you bastards.*"

Oo, I'd raised my volume too much there. Hell. If grief broke through mission mode, it would ruin my presented persona. Taking a deep breath, I let it out slowly.

"I don't want that to happen again," I said. "So, if you get what you want, you leave the people I love alone. You don't breed in them or whatever the fuck else you want Lutov for. They stay safe and alive. All of them. And before you go 'ignoring' this term because you don't understand love, I've sent a detailed list of my loved ones to Alezand. If he wants to atone for his hand in Pheniks' death, he'll distribute that list throughout Cerullis' ranks at the slightest lack of compliance on your part, letting them know that you've broken one of your agreements. That might make them more wary of dealing with you, don't you think?"

I'd made the list while on the way here, and when Alezand received it, his eyebrows soared before he shot an incredulous look at me.

[*Obedient one, recite the list for us.*]

Making a face, Alezand rattled off the names of each of my family members and every partner I'd had in my life, whether I was seeing them now or not. I hadn't thought I could risk adding more people.

For a while, I'd toyed with the idea of tricking the Ancient by adding everyone in Lutov to my list, but I'd figured my opponent would check what I was asking for, and I couldn't count on Alezand to lie for me.

I probably should have included Jayla in that list too, but in the short time between seeing her and this moment, I hadn't thought about that possibility, which had been slow on my part. I hoped she wouldn't pay for my mistake.

A long silence followed the last name that Alezand spoke, and while I waited, I finished off my tea. What else was I supposed to do? Either the Ancient would reject my terms, and I'd go from there, or... *it* wouldn't.

*[Before we make a decision, we would like to know. Is it possible for you solid beings to love so many people?]*

When Alezand frowned in response, my hopes started crumbling. Everything I'd worked for in this meeting would fail because this man had a shriveled heart. Then, Jayla cleared her throat.

"If I may, perhaps the emotion that we call love has been misrepresented to you," she said. "It has many flavors, from what we give to the people that we partner with or to those we call family or friend, but love, in whatever form it takes, is the most powerful of feelings, pushing humans to incredible lengths at times. You only need look at him and what he's willing to sacrifice for his loved ones to see that this is true."

She waved at me before continuing.

"As with all things that grant someone strength, each human has a different capacity for how much they can love. Some people don't have it in them to love a single person while others... others are like him."

Nodding my way, she smiled, and I did my best to appear pleased by what she'd said. Mission mode was making it difficult to tell how I really felt about it.

*[...Why are you solid beings so unreasonable? In the end, it doesn't matter, though. We have our answer, and now, you will have yours.]*

The Ancient's indistinct form floated through the air, stopping so close to my nose that I had trouble with focusing on *it*. The lightning inside of *it* had assumed a faint, golden color while the glister that coated *its* misty body had thinned.

*[Your terms accepted, rejected Favored. A pact formed between—]*

Again, with the garbled noise. Maybe it was *their* true name.

*[—and you, upon your surrender.]*

Oh, goody. My plan had worked. Might I please request my rifle and blow my brains out for my brilliant idiocy now?

“How do I do that?” I asked with my voice choked. “The surrendering bit, I mean.”

[*You LET. US. IN.*]

With a pained grunt, I almost toppled off of the sofa, making the Ancient jerk away from my pitch forward. Clutching at the edge of my seat, I sorted through my mased thoughts—one screeching knowledge of worse that was yet to come and another crooning triumph—but in this mess, I found what I remembered surrendering to be. It was almost like diving into a thoughtless state but also... not.

Bracing, I breathed out self—snarky behavior, fierce devotion to everything I held dear, desperate need for freedom—and when I sucked air back into my lungs, the Ancient came with it.

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