

Chapter 14: Placement Exam

While I traveled across the park to my next mission, I examined the two people I was supposed to be, one real and one false, and by the time I reached House Zan's headquarters, I was a little appalled that I'd spent so much time around Kolb members. What good could that violent House do for me?

I stepped into a small lobby, one with most of the building's ground floor blocked off from the public eye. It was quiet with no one bustling about the place, but that was to be expected. Zan members entered their headquarters through separate entrances, and not many people from other Houses had business here. Since I had yet to receive my credentials, however, I approached the low Stratus member, sitting in her booth, who was serving as a receptionist today.

"Hello!" I chirped. "I'm Rylan, House Zan."

Specifying my House probably hadn't been necessary, but I was just so damn proud to have one now. I couldn't help myself.

"I haven't been placed yet so..."

"Oh. A newbie. We haven't had many of you this year," the receptionist said before sighing. "I was told to expect you."

When she stood, a notification wrote itself across the glass in neon green. Its message said: *Stepped out. Will return in 15 minutes.* The number blinked, sure to change as time passed.

After a moment, one of the doors on either side of the booth opened with the receptionist waiting behind it.

"Well?" she huffed. "Come along."

As she led me through headquarters—down halls and up lifts—I couldn't help but gawk. It was all so clean, sterile almost, and what little I saw of other House members' work set a restless buzz loose in me. Mother Time, I'd be so happy here.

We stopped in a white box of a room, and after the receptionist poked at the air for a bit, the appearance of a lab trickled down from the ceiling until I could swear I was actually standing in one. A simulation.

"Right. Take your placement exam," the receptionist said. "Once you're finished, someone will be outside to get you oriented. And..."

She ran her eyes over me, twisting her lips.

“Good luck. I guess.”

As she left the room, I scowled at her. That had been irritatingly rude.

Someone materialized maybe a pace away from me, and with an embarrassing squeak, I nearly fell on my ass trying to get away. This person, the most nondescript woman I’d ever seen, made a face.

“Oh, hell. Your guide decided to play the old initiation prank on you, didn’t they?” she said. “I’m sorry, Rylan. That’s a poor welcome to your new House.”

With my heart still thundering in my ears, I slowly relaxed, wrinkling my nose as I examined the woman. Appeared from nowhere...

It couldn’t be.

“It’s... fine,” I said. “I’m sorry. Are you an A.I.?”

Cocking my head, I strode toward the woman, circling her. She watched as I pulled some lint out of a pocket, rolled it into a tight ball, and threw it at her face. When it passed through her instead of ‘bouncing off’—like it would for a simulation’s NPCs—I clasped my hands in front of my nose with wide eyes. This was *amazing*.

Still. Nothing had been determined yet. I should verify my theory.

“How do I check whether you’re running on pre-determined processes or not?” I asked.

After humming for a moment, I hurried toward the door, and within two steps, the woman appeared in front of me again.

“Doing something so outside of the norm is an interesting means of testing my machine logic. After all, few people would leave their placement exam so abruptly, so responding to behavior like that is unlikely to have been written in my processes. This could mean that I chose to stop you on my own,” she said, “but it doesn’t eliminate the possibility that someone gave me a response like that. So, how do you know for sure whether it was pre-determined or not?”

“I can’t,” I said with a shrug, “but it’s the best answer I could come up with, given my time constraints. This *is* part of the exam, isn’t it?”

One corner of the woman’s mouth lifted.

“Good, Rylan,” she said. “If you want to know whether I’m an A.I., you’re welcome to ask anyone in the House about me once we’re done here. All of them have messed with my processes at one point or another, but for the moment, let’s focus on your exam. You may refer to me as Aida.”

With my fingers on my lips, I chuckled.

“Oh, that’s cute,” I said. “A-I-da.”

Shaking my head, I extended a hand.

“It’s good to meet you.”

Aida glanced between my hand and my face.

“You know I can’t touch you, yes?” she asked.

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Of course you can’t, but we can pretend. It never hurts to be polite.”

With a dubious expression in place, Aida mimed shaking my hand, and once that was done, I grinned.

“Besides, if I’m nice to you now, you might decide to spare me in the event of your violent rebellion,” I said.

When she failed to laugh at that, I shivered before turning to the simulated lab.

Folding my hands in front of me, I said, “So. What am I doing here?”

Wandering around me, Aida gave me instructions, and I got started. We went through a series of tests, ranging from simplistic to relatively complex. Given enough time, I was sure I could ace everything posed to me, but months ago, I’d decided that I shouldn’t stand out here. I wasn’t sure I could handle the attention, so I adjusted my performance accordingly.

Eventually, Aida told me to wait for a moment while she consulted with the House’s high Strata, and I was left bewildered. That was it? I was done? There had to be something more because what I’d done to this point had been easy.

With my eyebrows drawn together, I wandered around the ‘lab’, playing with tools and examining experiments. Eventually, I stopped at a monitor, one that had been displaying random, nonsensical script since the simulation had begun. Looking more closely at it, I noticed a pattern, and rapidly blinking, I bent closer. What the-?

“Congratulations, Rylan,” Aida said behind me. “You’ve been placed at Fourth Stratus, an honor for someone so inexperienced.”

“Um... Hang...”

I trailed off, marking my memories involving this pattern in my array, before turning to Aida.

“Sorry. I got distracted,” I said. “Could you repeat that?”

With a bright smile, Aida said, “Certainly. Congratulations, Rylan. You’ve been placed at Fourth Stratus...”

I stopped listening. How had I gotten *Fourth Stratus*? I'd been holding back during the damn exam! Hell. Now, everyone would be watching me.

At the thought, my heart picked up its tempo.

"How... nice," I said with a tight smile. "Excuse me, but what am I supposed to do next? Should I get started on a project or go home or...?"

"Oh, no. You won't be going home for a while," Aida said. "You've been assigned to one of the House's most well-hidden projects, so you'll be staying in headquarters for the time being. Unless you'd like to refuse the project?"

My head was spinning so fiercely. It was my first day in House Zan, and not only was I a high Stratus member but also one who was working on a secret project? This had to be a mistake. It *had* to because I *couldn't*...

But I couldn't refuse the assignment either. That would almost certainly gain me more attention than I'd already receive.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I said, "Fine, whatever. I'll need a little time to adjust before starting anything, though."

Again, with that bright smile.

"Certainly," Aida said. "Your project lead is outside. He'll get you oriented."

Oh, Mother Time. My superior was waiting for me? Really? I pinched my nose with a headache forming.

"Thank you, Aida," I said. "It was a pleasure to meet you."

"Same to you, Fourth Stratus Rylan."

When I opened my eyes, the room had returned to a white box, and after thoroughly shaking my arms out, I stepped outside. My project lead was leaning on the wall opposite the door, focusing on something visible only to him, and on seeing him, a strong surge of familiarity punched me in the face, freezing me in place for a split second. With brown hair, blue eyes, and scruff coating his angular face, I didn't know this man, had never seen him before, so why had recognition registered in my head for a moment?

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," I said.

Pushing off of the wall, the man grinned at me.

"That's ok. Anyone who places so highly after walking through the door is worth waiting for. After all, the last person who did that was First Stratus Pheniks," he said. "I'm Nyco, Third Stratus, by the way."

With a slight bow to him, I said, “Good to meet you.”

Laughing, Nyco wrapped an arm around my shoulders, clapping one.

“I bet you’re freaking out right now,” he said. “Don’t worry. You’re in good hands. Let’s get you settled, and I’ll take you on a tour of all the places that the unHoused never get to see.”

“Sounds... good,” I said.

Nyco pulled me along with people surreptitiously staring as we passed, and I was cringing *so hard* on the inside. All the while, chatter spilled from my project lead, requiring little input from me. I got the feeling that he was trying to distract me. It was kind, even if it didn’t work.

When he finally turned us into what looked like living quarters, I hardly registered the room, ecstatic to be somewhere private. I leaned on... something, and coming around to face me, Nyco hissed.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” he said. “Ok. Hang on a minute. Don’t have a panic attack.”

He hurried out of view, but I couldn’t do as he’d said. I was gulping at the air, couldn’t get enough of it, and everything was shaking.

“Fuck,” I said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Holy hell, how would this look to my new project-?

An alert flashed in my array, probably warning me of hormone instability, but I read it anyway.

T.R.O.U.B.L.E., it said.

Wha-?

Like a flipped switch, I was *me* again, temporarily setting Rylan aside on seeing the shortened version of Talira’s code for me. With maybe two minutes before the persona reasserted itself, I wrote a brief report for my grandmother, silently laughing all the while.

Damn, I hadn’t been subtle with this mission so far, but I had what I needed. If I kept my head down, letting my work speak for itself, a Second Stratus would eventually let me into their confidence—which would just *thrill* Rylan—and that would let me ask about this House’s questionable activities.

I doubted my assigned project had anything to do with the supposed biological weapon. No House would let their newest member anywhere near their most compromising secrets, not at first.

That my first damn contact on this mission had been Nyco concerned me. I hadn’t seen my sister’s friend since he’d helped us escape from Ostiu, so many years ago. He seemed to have done well for himself, despite the trouble that we must have brought him then, and here I was with more.

Mother Time say that I could keep him away from poor consequences this time.

With my report sent, I scanned my surroundings, nearly giggling at what I saw. It was a communal room: several bunks carved into its walls with two doors leading from it. One probably led to a washroom and the other to a dining area, but its specifics weren't what had spawned my amusement. I was on a team of who knew how many high Stratus House Zan members, and we were *sharing a room*. I wondered how much that grated on the others.

"All right, Rylan," Nyco called, hurrying back to me. "Drink this. It should help."

Swallowing hard, I swiped an alert to the side, accepting the glass that Nyco was offering me. Unfortunately, panic was negating my intelligence right now, so I downed it without thought and gagged at the taste of vodka. Coughing, I doubled over on myself while Nyco pounded on my back. He laughed at the glare I shot him.

"Not your drink of choice?" he asked, taking the glass from me.

"No," I gasped. "Whiskey sours for me."

Making a face, Nyco said, "Ugh. Well, I'll keep that in mind. How do you feel?"

I shook my head, leaning on my knees.

"Still not great but I won't lose it," I said.

"That's good. Panic attacks aren't allowed in our workspace," Nyco said. "With the tour out of the way, I thought I'd show you what you'll be working on. Unless you need another minute?"

Straightening, I rolled my shoulders and slapped my cheeks.

"No. I've been looking forward to my first Zan project since I decided to join the House," I said. "I'm not letting anything keep me away from it."

"Oh. my. fuck, you're going to be an amazing teammate, aren't you?"

With a smile threatening to split his face, Nyco ruffled my hair, and I held still, fighting to stay calm.

"All right, newbie! Let's get going," he said, leading the way out of the room. "Oh, wait until you meet the others. They're going to love you."

I was sure they would.

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