

Chapter 15: Life in House

Zan

I was already awake when my alarm went off, working on the problem that had become my obsession in recent days. I'd worked at this random string of letters from my placement exam for a little over a month, and still, I'd come no closer to unraveling their secret. With my unconscious mind seeing a pattern in them, I knew something was hiding there, but I couldn't find the dangling thread needed to unravel it.

Right now, I had to set it aside. It was time to start the day, and if I wanted to beat Taelor to the shower, I needed to get up now. Rolling out of my bunk, I crept on silent feet toward the washroom, relaxing when I reached it without waking anyone up.

I was halfway through my morning routine when the door slid open with Taelor shuffling inside. Thank Mother Time for the shower's heavily misted glass, otherwise I'd be shrieking and reaching for a towel. Instead, that panic went to Taelor. Her scream had my ears ringing, and her blurred form jerked away from me.

"Fuck, Rylan," she gasped. "Do you ever sleep?"

"When I need to," I said. "Do-?"

I swallowed hard.

"Do you *mind*?"

Whirling, Taelor raced out of the washroom, and I hurried to finish with my shower.

When I entered the dining area, Nyco was happily munching on a nutrition bar, watching the news on our small holodrama plate, while Jazmi leaned against the stove with a steaming cup of caf in her hands. Daerryl was nowhere to be seen, but that was normal for him.

When I joined her, Jazmi handed me my own cup of caf.

"Thank you for our lovely Taelor alarm this morning," she said.

Ducking my head, I focused on my drink, all while Jazmi shook her head.

"Loosen up, Rylan," she said. "There's no need to be skittish with us. We've been sleeping in the same room for a month, after all."

Heat crept up my neck and toward my hairline, and I was clenching my mug so hard that I was afraid I'd crack it.

"Leave him alone," Nyco said. "He gets a free pass from your teasing until the end of the week."

"Ah, yes. Because he solved our recent machine logic problem."

With a blank face, Jazmi fully faced me.

"Lucky you."

Look, I couldn't help it that I'd identified the issue in Jazmi's assigned processes before her. I'd been bored, and with my own work finished, I'd had nothing to do. I was trying to help.

I should probably tell *her* these things, but I could only sip my caf, burning my tongue in the process. Jazmi would forgive me soon enough. I hoped.

Once I was finished with breakfast, I headed for my team's assigned workspace. Several storecase blocks filled it with all of them on a closed-circuit network. Nothing got in or out of this room, not digitally at least.

"Hi, Daerryl," I called while heading for my workstation.

He lifted a hand in greeting, already engrossed in work, and I joined him.

I found it funny that given my reaction to Aida during my placement exam, I was building a substitute for her, but then, I guess that was why I was on this project. The fact that I'd jumped on the idea that Aida might be an A.I. had caught someone's attention. Now, I was striving to perfect a machine intelligence, like so many House members before me had tried to do. It was everything I'd wanted when I'd chosen Zan at my House naming ceremony.

The others on the team trickled in throughout the morning, and as each of them settled in, I took greater joy in quietly working toward a shared goal with my... friends? Yeah, friends.

Toward lunchtime, someone unknown walked into our sanctuary, someone high Stratus. No one else could enter this place without Nyco's authorization.

Our project lead greeted the woman, and the two chatted in an empty corner with everyone else surreptitiously watching them. After a moment, Nyco glanced over the team, waving when his eyes landed on me. As I got up, none of my teammates bothered to hide their stares at me, and I silently groaned. My internal cringing was already making me nauseous.

What was Nyco doing? He knew I didn't want more recognition than I already had. We'd talked about it during one of the chats that he insisted on holding, meant to ensure that his team members were happy. But here he was, broadly smiling as he clasped my shoulders.

"Rylan, this is Second Stratus Amelise," he said. "She's borrowing you for the day."

Great. Considering her position, I'd guess that I didn't get to refuse, so nervously picking at my sleeve's hem, I nodded to her.

"Pleased to meet you," I faintly said.

"The same," Amelise said before turning to Nyco. "I see what you mean. I'll be delicate with him."

"Much appreciated," Nyco said.

He patted my shoulder before pushing me toward Amelise.

"Have fun," he said with a laugh in his voice.

I glared at him for the length of time it took us to get out the door. Once in the hall, though, I meekly followed Amelise, trying my best to disappear, and she let this continue while we took a lift to a sub-level that I'd never visited before. Here, we were faced with a heavy door and a pair of... automatons to either side of it.

As we approached, these robots straightened, aiming their guns at us, but when Amelise swiped at the air, they stood down. While we passed them, I spun, soon walking backward to admire these fantastic creations until the door blocked sight of them.

"Clockwork fiends," Amelise said in answer to my unspoken question. "That's what we call them at least. They're our answer to House Kolb. While we can't hope to stop their operatives from infiltrating our ranks, the clockwork fiends are our way of keeping their warriors out. We theorize that they could match the *Lokke Vitras*, if required, but let's hope we never have to find out."

I added a nervous titer to her laugh. What had Nyco gotten me into? I didn't want to be anywhere near a project that my House wanted to keep secret from Lutov's peacekeepers. The story of Cerullis' recent gutting still made my insides clench on every telling. Perhaps I should find out what Amelise was planning to use me for.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Excuse me but... why am I here? And where exactly is here?"

So far, it looked like any other hall, but another large door was sitting at the end of it. Maybe something more lay on the other side.

"You're here because my department is having a problem with processes, and from what Nyco says, you're the most skilled with that on his team," Amelise said. "Considering what you lot are trying to make, the people on your team are among the best process workers that our House claims."

"But!" I interrupted before biting my lip.

Amelise raised an eyebrow, gesturing for me to continue, and I tucked my chin to my chest.

“I’m not that good with processes,” I said. “I’m... my process work is terrible when compared to others.”

“Like who? The *Lokke Vitras*?” Amelise said with a laugh. “No one can compare to him, kid, except for maybe his wife—who is without a doubt, a prodigy—or his predecessor. Damn, I can still remember how disappointed we were when that little shit, Korix, chose Kolb over Zan. Given how talented he is with process work, we thought we might have had a chance with him.”

Slowing down, I scanned Amelise.

“You knew the once *Lokke Vitras* when he was young?” I asked.

With a smirk, Amelise said, “Kid, I grew up with *Talira*. Telomere refinement does wonders for your appearance once your array can no longer help with that. But that doesn’t matter. What I’m saying is that you shouldn’t compare your work to such impossible people. Here, with us, you’re one of our best in process work. If Nyco’s not overselling one of his people again, that is.”

I... didn’t know what to think of that. If I had the talent she was suggesting, it wouldn’t help with my efforts to lie low, but then, perhaps that ship had sailed.

“As for your other question, you’re in our House’s top-secret lab, where we work on everything the other Houses might disagree with,” Amelise said before nudging me. “If you’re lucky, you might meet our department head.”

I rubbed where she’d touched me, frowning.

“And who’s that?” I asked.

With glittering eyes and a laughing grin, Amelise said, “First Stratus Pheniks, of course.”

As if a wall had sprung up in front of me, I stopped short with the breath knocked out of my lungs. *Pheniks*? I... didn’t want to meet that man. I...

Shaking my head, I banged on my temple, trying to shake the sense of disconnect that was filling me. What was this? It felt wrong. It-

“Rylan?” Amelise said.

Paused a few steps ahead, she was looking back at me with narrowed eyes and a tilted head.

“Sorry,” I said. “Everything’s ok. I was just a little... dizzy for a moment there. I think I might be dehydrated.”

“I’ll get a drone to bring some water to your workstation,” Amelise said. “Will you be ok until then?”

“I... think so,” I said. “I’m really sorry.”

Amelise lifted a hand.

“Don’t be,” she said. “At one point or another, all of us have forgotten our bodies’ needs when doing what we love. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Come on, kid. Let’s get you through this mini-tour as quickly as we can.”

When I nodded, she took us through a second set of doors, and I did what I could to control my stumble. One example of strange behavior was enough for today, thank you.

The place where I’d found myself was worthy of a reaction like that, though. At the far end of a long, metal cavern, an assembly line sat with drones buzzing around it. Closer to us, desks of an industrial style made several, ordered rows and columns, and around the space’s edges, enormous vats towered over everything else. I wondered what was in them.

Never pausing, Amelise led me to a workspace that was hidden among everything else. It was a mess. The storecase beneath it had barely enough ventilation space to keep it cool while a monitor was buried under a pile of junk. Amelise swept it all to the floor.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “This is our spare. People in the department tend to *leave their shit here.*”

That last part was shouted while she spun in place, and several curious people ceased their stare at us. Amelise retrieved a wire from where it had been dangling off the back of the desk.

“You’ll have to use a connector,” she said. “You haven’t been vetted thoroughly enough to wirelessly access our closed network yet, and we can’t have any breaches in our security.”

As she pressed the wire into my hand, I could do nothing more than nervously nod acceptance.

“You’ll find the issue that we want you to fix in a file under your name,” Amelise continued. “If you need anything, ask a drone for it.”

As if summoned, one of them floated to a stable hover beside us, and I accepted the glass of water that it was carrying. Amelise folded her hands in front of her.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked.

I had plenty, but most of them revolved around what would happen to me if I failed, so I didn’t voice them.

“I understand what’s expected of me,” I said instead.

With a smile, Amelise said, “Excellent. I wish you luck, then.”

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