

Chapter 16: House or Family?

Amelise left me alone, and pasting the connector's pads to either side of my neck, I sank into a chair. I easily found the file that had been assigned to me, and after combing through its processes for less than an hour, I identified what was likely causing the problem. With little trouble, I fixed it, surprised that no one else in this elite department had caught the discrepancy. Revealing how quickly I'd found it, however, didn't seem wise, so I messed around in the network.

I didn't have access to most of the information found here, but breaking through the security processes guarding it took no effort. I'd have to look into improving them later. For now, I browsed through the projects that my House held closest to its chest.

While skimming through them, I only got a vague impression of what I read. Most of it flew way above my head, but what I did understand interested me: things like mass production of clockwork fiends and processes that could seize control of every satellite in orbit.

Then, I came across *the* file. Accessing it gave me the most trouble, requiring twenty minutes when compared to my typical three, but I did get into it, and what I saw there...

I had to read the chemical formula at the heart of the file at least a dozen times while mine sank through my feet to the other side of the plant. This was... bad. I- I couldn't believe anyone in Zan would create something like this, but there it was: the means to produce a neurotoxin that would slowly dissolve the body's nerves.

At least, I thought that was what it was. I wasn't an expert in chemistry or biology.

It had to be a failsafe, something we'd use if the other Houses turned against us. It had to be. If this was meant for anything else...

I didn't know what I'd do.

Pulling the connector's pads off of my neck, I paced in front of my desk, chewing my lip. The longer I considered what I'd seen, the more my lungs were starved of air, leaving my muscles twitching, so when a drone floated past me, I jumped on it.

"Kind of a strange request," I said, "but can I get a pen and paper? It'll help me think."

The drone flashed its lights at me before drifting away, and for a hellish four minutes, I thought it had ignored me while the pressure inside quickly built to a breaking point. When it returned, I nearly cried.

Collapsing in my chair, I smoothed a piece of paper in front of me, rapidly jittering my pen against it. I set its tip on the first line before absently writing, setting down anything that would drag my brain from obsessing over what I'd discovered.

After a minute of this, I frowned at the random string of characters that I'd scratched along printed lines. I knew this combination of letters. It was the one from my placement exam.

Lifting the pen to my mouth, I gnawed on its end, furrowing my brow as I stared at this puzzle. There had to be a pattern here. I couldn't believe I was seeing things. I leaned back in my chair, making possible combinations, but an answer to what I was seeing stayed ever ahead of me, laughing at my attempts to catch it.

"What are you working on?"

Jumping, I spun toward the person who'd spoken while my pen clattered across the desk. On seeing him, my eyes bulged, but First Stratus Pheniks didn't seem to notice my agitation. Leaning on the desk for a better look, he burst into laughter, waving at me when I moved to help him.

"Sorry," he coughed. "It's just-"

He waved at my chicken scratch.

"I forgot about that."

Falling silent, Pheniks turned calculating eyes on me, and I squirmed.

"Over a century and you're the first person to stumble on the tidbit that I left in our placement exam," he said. "Name and Stratus?"

Oh... fuck. What did I-? Did I tell the truth? Hell, I didn't have a lie prepared. *What did I do?*

"Hey."

Hands came down on my shoulders, imparting a reassuring squeeze.

"You're not in trouble," Pheniks said. "It's ok."

I took two, shuddering breaths.

Once my thoughts had quit playing tag in my skull, I said, "Forgive me, First Stratus, but I'm not afraid of trouble. I've been trying to keep my head down since choosing Zan at my House naming ceremony, and things like this keep happening."

Waving between us, I cringed, hoping he wouldn't take offense, but Pheniks just squeezed me again until I looked at him.

"I understand. Truly," he said. "You want to know a secret? I didn't want my position, stumbled into it, actually. So, I can keep this conversation between us. If you want."

He retreated a step, and I relaxed the tiniest bit.

"That would be nice," I said. "I'm Fourth Stratus Rylan."

When I extended my hand, Pheniks shook it, cocking his head.

"You're not in my department," he said.

"I am not," I said. "My project lead lent me to you at Second Stratus Amelise's request. I fixed some process work for your people."

"I... see," Pheniks said. "I assume you haven't asked for an escort out of here because you don't want to draw attention to your speedy work."

Looking away, I rubbed my fingers along the ink that I'd embedded in paper.

"That's about right," I said.

"Huh."

When he said nothing more, my shoulders started rising for my ears, and I shifted far too often in my chair, fighting a need to look up.

To appease it, I grabbed the pen, putting it between my teeth again.

"You said that this is your work, First Stratus?" I hesitantly asked, inclining my head to the paper. "If I may, what does it mean? I can tell there's a pattern in it, but for the life of me, I can't decipher what it says."

Mother Time, that had been bold. I should have kept my mouth shut, but rather than speaking a rebuke, Pheniks lowered an open palm into my field of view.

"May I?"

I gave him the chewed-to-hell pen, rolling my chair to the side, and leaning on the desk, Pheniks tapped the pen's tip to each letter before writing it below. Once done, he backed away, gesturing for me to look.

My random string of letters had been shifted into five, legible words. They read, *My choice for my happiness.*

With a frown, I glanced at Pheniks. This was the solution to the puzzle I'd pored over for the last month?

"Do you know who my family is?" he asked.

I cautiously nodded.

“All high Strata House Kolb members and-”

I cut off, afraid to say the words.

“And the *Lokke Vitras*, yes,” Pheniks finished for me. “As you can imagine, I struggled as an unHoused in a family like that. I subconsciously knew I wasn’t destined for Kolb, always hated rotations with the House, but it was the one that everyone in my family had chosen. If I wanted to keep them in my life, I thought that meant I had to join Kolb too, and I love my family. I was willing to be unhappy until the day I died if it meant they stayed with me.

“My House naming came near, and I prepared for it, knowing it would be the worst day of my life, but my brother... he came home for it. He was the *Lokke Vitras* to come then, probably stupidly busy, but still, he made the time to attend my House naming ceremony.”

Falling silent, he tapped a finger on the piece of paper with a wistful smile twitching his lips, but when I shifted in place, he returned to the present, hopping onto the desk.

“The thing you need to know about my brother is how fiercely protective he is of the people he loves,” he said. “When we were kids, I used to follow him around because he made me feel safe. I’m not sure if he knows this, but to this day, if he isn’t nearby, I feel like I’m in danger. No matter how many stupid pranks he’s pulled on me, he was also the one who fended off the other kids in my House rotations when they picked on me, and when we were very young, he...”

Chewing on the inside of his lip, Pheniks rubbed his hands together before fixing his gaze on me.

“The point is, Rylan, that I love my brother. Very much. So, having him come home was a big deal, especially considering how difficult the circumstances must have been for him. Knowing that he’d be watching the next day soothed the panic eating at me, and I knew I could get through the ceremony in the morning.

“Then, he and my sister, Feena, woke me up in the middle of the night for some stupid House Kolb shit, a ritual that turned out to be quite fun. Once we’d finished, they sat me down, and my brother told me something that I’d longed to hear since understanding what the House system would mean for me.”

Cautiously, I placed a finger on Pheniks’ scrawl.

“This?”

With a fond smile, Pheniks nodded.

“My brother told me that I shouldn’t join House Kolb. That my place was elsewhere,” he said. “He told me, with Feena backing him up, that he’d support whatever decision I made. That when I chose a House, I should think only about myself.

“He told me to be happy. Do you understand?”

I thought I did. Why else would I be tearing up like this?

“So, this ‘tidbit’ is a commemoration of your siblings?” I asked with a waver in my voice.

“Of a sort,” Pheniks said. “Taking my placement exam was the first time I felt like a House Zan member, and it was... incredible. I was exactly where I needed to be, and it was all thanks to my siblings. I wanted to remember it and them, so...”

Gesturing to the paper, he hopped to the floor.

“And there’s your reward for finding it, Rylan. That’s an extraordinarily sensitive story for me, and I’m entrusting it to you,” he said. “Good work today. I’ll send Amelise to escort you out in a bit.”

Waving, he strode away, and hell, if my throat wasn’t closed, but I needed to know something.

“First Stratus,” I squeaked.

Pausing, Pheniks turned to me with his head cocked.

“Yes?”

Swallowing several times, I said, “I appreciate that you’ve shared a piece of your life with me. Truly. And I know your time is precious. But... I was hoping you might give council to someone new to House Zan.”

With a frown, Pheniks retraced his path back to me.

“What is it?” he asked.

Oh, Mother Time, I shouldn’t ask this. It was beyond stupid, but I had to know.

“Please, forgive me. I mean no offense with this,” I said, “but I’d have to be an idiot to miss that something—”

Hell, how did I put this?

“—*not good* is in the works down here. You seem like a decent enough person. So, I need to know. Why would you lead a department like this and- and-?”

I stared at my toes, unable to drag my head up, but I forced the words out of my mouth.

“Did I make a mistake with the House I chose?”

A long sigh filled the hush of a workspace and lab, and I tensed, sure that I’d be regressed in Stratus. Pheniks, however, merely crouched in front of me, snagging my gaze.

“You didn’t make a mistake,” he said. “Most of Zan isn’t like this, dedicated to advancing Lutov instead, and you’re unlike to end up here.”

And I could breathe. Sniffing, I ran my sleeve under my nose, lifting my head at the rate of Pheniks’ straightening. He laid a hand on my shoulder before making to leave, and I should be happy with this, but without permission, my mouth opened while my tongue smoothly spoke a final question.

“Then, why are you here?”

Pheniks turned the most mournful eyes on me with his lips twisted.

“Sometimes, we don’t get a choice in what we do,” he said.

I let him go after this, a little mystified about why I’d pushed him so far. He was my fucking First Stratus, after all. I pondered this question as Amelise retrieved me, walking me back to my team’s sleeping quarters. Outside the door, she stopped me.

“Do you need a reminder to keep quiet about what you saw today?” she asked.

“No, Second Stratus,” I said.

“Then, thank you for your help,” Amelise said. “Good luck on your path.”

I bowed to her, and once inside, I went through dinner preparations in a daze, sitting on the edge of my bunk once I’d finished eating. The chemical formula that I’d stumbled upon kept flashing before my eyes. No matter how kind Pheniks had seemed, I had to do something about it. I *couldn’t* just let it lie. If it was put to use, it could- it could kill-

I couldn’t think about it.

Maybe I could bring this information to another House?

No. Out of the question. I couldn’t betray Zan, and even if I could, no other House would believe this. I’d have to talk to someone in my House, then. But who?

I jumped when Nyco strolled through the door with his hands in his pockets, but his relaxed air fell away when he saw me. Hurrying to my side, he crouched, taking my hands.

“What is it?” he asked. “What happened?”

I opened my mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. Fucking hell, I had to speak.

“I saw something today,” I croaked.

Before I could continue, another pesky alert flashed into view. Maybe I should see a medic about these. I hadn’t scheduled them, and they’d shown up every day since I’d joined Zan. Because Nyco was speaking to me, I meant to shove it to the side, but before I could, its contents were seared

onto my brain.

T.R.O.U.B.L.E.

I was going to be sick. Oh fuck, I'd be sick *all over* Nyco.

Slapping a hand to my mouth, I stumbled away from a bunk with bile filling my mouth, barely making it into the washroom before vomit started leaking between my fingers. I didn't know how many times I heaved into the sink, certain with every one that my stomach had emptied, and sobbing, I couldn't breathe with my nose stopped up.

If I could- if I could just *concentrate*...

Collapsing against a wall, I sat with my knees up and my hands in my hair. Someone was banging on the door, and that noise wasn't helping with the snarl in my head.

"Give... give me a minute," I called. "I'm ok."

What a big fat fucking lie, but it stopped the noise. With its cessation, I didn't move for a while, picking apart everything that I'd learned through Rylan, and I thought I'd be sick again.

"What am I going to do?" I whispered.

When it came to the sciences, I had a little more knowledge about them than I'd given to Rylan, so I knew what sort of agonizing death awaited anyone who'd been infected with my brother's neurotoxin. I also knew that for the moment, it had been tailored to target only Ostiums, but that would be easy enough to change.

Zan couldn't have this. None of the Houses could, but I didn't know how to get rid of it.

Even if I snuck into Pheniks' department and erased every file on the neurotoxin, they wouldn't truly be gone. Nothing ever was in the digital world. Someone determined enough could dredge the formula from its informational graveyard.

I could blow up every storehouse on that level, but Zan would take that as an act of attrition. The precarious peace that I'd had to tiptoe around for the last century would fall apart, and Lutov would descend into war. I didn't want to think about what that would look like, not when one of the Houses had a neurotoxin like this. What might the others be keeping in their deepest vaults?

No, my best course of action was to go to Talira—

...my brother made me feel safe...

—to GO TO TALIRA and trust that she wouldn't ruin her grandson. Surely, she'd see that Pheniks hadn't had a choice with this. Surely, she'd protect him.

Would I be protecting him if I did this?

My lungs and heart stayed frozen in my chest as I wrote a message.

Proof acquired. Extracting now.

Wrapping my arms around my legs, I buried my face in my knees, shuddering, until I got a response.

Confirm.

Walking my hands up the wall, I got to my feet, checking my appearance in the mirror. I splashed water on my face to get rid of dried vomit, but I couldn't do much for my red-rimmed eyes, not unless I wanted to wait for my body's reversal of it, and I couldn't stay here long enough for that to happen.

When I left the washroom, Nyco was waiting for me, biting his nails. As soon as he could, he grabbed my arms.

"Mother Time, you look awful," he said. "Talk to me, Rylan."

Swallowing hard, I tried to pry his hands off of me.

"I will. Just... let me take a walk first, yeah?" I said. "Clear my head?"

Furrowing his brow, Nyco released me.

"O... k..." he said.

Thanking him, I headed for the door, but I paused before leaving.

"Make sure you're squeaky clean, Nyco," I said. "From what I saw today, I wouldn't be surprised if Kolb visits us soon. It was..."

Trailing off, I shuddered, and Nyco's expression went flat.

"I'll do that," he said.

Nodding, I used the fastest route I knew to escape from House Zan's headquarters, scrubbing Rylan from me as I did. When fresh air hit my face, I took a moment to enjoy it, but then, I tucked my chin to my chest, making my way to a second home with trudging feet.

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