

Chapter 25: Establishing a Foothold

Ahead of me, Third Stratus Laylah glided down the hall, drawing stares as she talked in an almost deafening manner. What those rude people didn't realize was that she was speaking that loudly for my benefit.

Me, her bumbling buffoon of an assistant who'd always had a hard time with walking while taking notes. I missed another couple of words as I tripped over my own feet, wondering once more why Mother Time had cursed me.

Laylah stopped short, almost making me bowl her over, before glancing down both sides of the intersection we'd reached.

"Rylan, dear, are you sure about those directions the receptionist gave you?" she said with a distracted air about her.

I gulped. Retaining information was another of my weak spots. Who'd decided I'd make a good assistant again?

"I'm not sure, Third Stratus," I said. "Let me pull the memory-"

"No, no. This is good!" Laylah said. "We can use it to meet our associates in the capital! Won't that be nice?"

No. If Laylah went near other people, they'd eventually notice me, and it wouldn't be long afterward before I did something to embarrass her. I didn't want that.

Still, I sighed and said, "As you say, Third Stratus."

Rounding on me, Laylah put a ridiculous pout on her face with her hands on her hips.

"How many times do I have to tell you to call me Laylah?" she asked.

I'd almost worked up the courage to do as she'd asked a few days ago, when we'd received the summons to headquarters. Leaving our outpost, deep in the Barasgami Mountains, had reset me to the first week after I'd been assigned as Laylah's assistant but worse because now, I was worried that I'd ruin more than my reputation alone.

There were also a lot more people here.

“Maybe another couple dozen?” I said with a weak smile.

Bursting into laughter, Laylah clasped my shoulders, leaning on me, and I forced myself to keep my eyes on the ceiling. *Eyes up!*

“You’re so funny, Rylan!” Laylah gasped.

“I’m glad you think so,” I said.

All the while, I triggered the process that I’d written a while ago, one that stopped me from blushing. I’d had to use it a lot over the last few months.

“Didn’t you say that you wanted to meet new people?” I continued.

As the last word fell from my tongue, I bit it. Hard. What the hell had I been thinking?

“Yes, of course!”

Shooting upright, Laylah dragged me toward the closest clump of people.

I was still amazed that she was holding my hand like this. She’d started doing it this morning, as if the stress of being here had made her grab for the closest source of comfort, or at least, that was what I assumed. I was glad it had been me.

“Excuse me!” Laylah called as she stopped beside the group. “I’m Third Stratus Laylah, and this is Fourth Stratus Rylan. We’re new here and have lost our way. Could you tell us how to reach Aeronautics?”

Too many eyes landed on me at once, and a familiar surge of crawling fingers—long forgotten—climbed inside my skin. Fortunately, the strangers quickly focused on Laylah, sparing us a side effect of my worst failing.

“Welcome to Xygek. I hope you’ve enjoyed your time here so far,” a man in a lab coat said.

He smiled at Laylah with far too perfect teeth.

“I’m Fifth Stratus Harvel. A pleasure to meet you.”

When he bowed, I clenched my jaw, even if the man’s hand hadn’t gone to his neck. *What* was he thinking? Was he intimating that he was interested in giving Laylah his Favor? They’d just met!

“The same!”

Laylah looked pleased, which only made it worse. Did she want to encourage him with this cheerfulness? If not, I wished I could politely tell her what she was doing. She’d always been oblivious when it came to social interactions, especially of this sort.

Rising from his bow, Harvel flashed another smile.

“Aeronautics is fourteen floors up and on the other side of the building,” he said. “I’m surprised your... assistant? I’m surprised he couldn’t get you there. Headquarters’ layout is fairly simplistic. Even a *bakava* could navigate it.”

He met my eyes, and all I could do was blink as ice water washed down my spine. All the while, my body fought it, trying to bristle. The contradictory sensations started a war in me, so it came as a relief when Laylah spoke, drawing Harvel’s attention back to her.

“Then, I should be glad that Rylan got us lost,” she said. “I’d hate to have an assistant with the base intellect you’re suggesting, although it’s strange that you’d believe a child of Ibis is so mentally stunted. After all, was not Ashley one of their number? And she introduced us to the bloodsong and the concept of Mother Time, even if that was done with Jared’s help.”

Oh, hell. She was about to get started on a lecture about the events that had led to the Upheaval. That wasn’t a good subject to discuss in current times if one didn’t want to be ostracized.

“Third Stratus?” I interrupted. “Forgive me, but they’re expecting you upstairs.”

“Wha-?”

Laylah blinked at me for a moment before focusing.

“Yes. Yes! Thank you, Rylan,” she said. “And thank you for the directions, Harvel. It was nice to meet... at least one of you. If you’ll excuse me.”

She’d rattled off her farewell like each sentence had been a line in a bulleted checklist, leaving the people in front of her speechless, but as always, Laylah didn’t care. Within thirty seconds, I was scrambling to keep up with her again. At least she wasn’t distracting me with notes this time.

“That went well, I think,” she said with a giggle.

Still moving, she turned to me, and delight dropped off of her face. Immediately, her pace slowed down.

“I’m sorry. I forgot that you don’t like being around so many people,” she said. “Doing process work in the isolation we had back home didn’t help with that, did it?”

Again, I used my process to keep from blushing. I should start keeping track of how many times I did that a day.

“It’s fine,” I distractedly said, creating a file. “I’ll get used to the crowds soon enough, and my clumsiness was slowing me down more than anything else.”

Freezing, I increased the number in my new file by one.

“Aw, but your clumsiness is what makes you cute,” Laylah said.

Ruffling my hair, she continued toward the lifts, leaving me with a pit in my stomach. Cute. She thought I was *cute*. Swallowing the lump in my throat, I took off after Laylah, reaching her as she set a floor into the lift's control.

"See you soon!" she chirped before backing into the lift.

I eyed the hole in the floor, only made non-lethal by an invisible force. Don't get me wrong. I was well aware that lifts were safe, but that made them no less intimidating. Even so, it was where Laylah had gone, so I let my lungs stutter to a halt, but I stepped into the lift.

When we eventually found it, Aeronautics... confused me. I'd expected a hangar or an observatory, but all we found on stepping into the department were waist-height counters, dividing the lobby into rows. Random pieces of tech had been scattered across them, some of which were in the middle of assembly, and stools lined both sides. Enormous armchairs and a few tables filled a smaller portion of the room. People occupied all parts of this place, but in that portion, they were waving at the air, as if using their arrays.

"Come along, Rylan," Laylah said.

She was already on the other side of the room, having made the crossing while I'd been distracted. As I trotted after her, the people around me stopped what they'd been doing to watch, but no one intercepted my scurry to the far side, thank Mother Time.

Once through a second set of doors, we moved through Aeronautics in hops and skips. Laylah stopped to exclaim about the projects that we found inside, not that I could blame her for that. There was some truly fascinating stuff in here: designs that I'd have never thought of trying. Eventually, Laylah squeaked another wordless exclamation before making a turn into the lab beside us. Where we'd be working, I assumed.

To my surprise, it was filled with displays and storecases. I'd expected fancy equipment, including holographic representations of what we were studying, but considering what Laylah and I had left in the Barasgami Mountains—our single telescope and pair of storecases—what we'd found here made sense.

Most people in the lab weren't wearing PPE. In fact, they looked like they'd strolled into headquarters from the park outside. Several of them were seated in front of displays, focused on their work, but one was on her feet, leaning on a man's desk so she could examine his work. When we stepped inside, she glanced up, patting the man's shoulder.

"You must be Third Stratus Laylah," she said as she approached us. "We've been expecting you."

"I'm guessing you're Janyka," Laylah said.

Thrusting out her hand, she grinned, and on seeing the other woman's step falter, I winced. Giving Laylah an odd look, Janyka shook her hand before turning on me.

"Which makes you the assistant," she said. "I'm sorry. Your name wasn't in my report."

Sure, it hadn't been. Still, I broadly smiled, returning the woman's greeting before Laylah could puff up with indignation.

"Quite all right, *Second Stratus*. I'm sure you've been busy," I said. "My name's Rylan."

Behind Janyka, Laylah made a face, probably realizing she'd left off the woman's title when saying hello, but I hardly noticed this. Janyka had yet to take her eyes off of me, which was drawing the attention of the other people in the lab, and I made myself focus on my breathing and *not* on how badly I needed to squirm.

"Forgive me, *Second Stratus*, but where would you like us?" Laylah said. "Now that we're here, I'm eager to get started."

When Janyka turned to her, she dragged everyone else's gazes along as well, and relaxing, I absently rubbed at an arm.

"From what I remember, you require silence for your work, yes?" Janyka said.

Flicking her eyes to me, Laylah smiled.

"That's right," she said. "It's hard to pick patterns out of the background noise of space when someone's typing right next to you."

Frowning, I narrowed my eyes at her. Since when had that been a requirement for her job? I'd heard her singing along to thrasher music while working before.

"All right," Janyka said. "We have a soundproofed cubicle next door that you can use. Feel free to visit us whenever you want, though. I'm sure Krish—that's who we report to—will want to see your face every so often."

Stiffening to attention, Laylah said, "Yes, *Second Stratus*."

This display had everyone blankly staring at her, of course. I doubted they understood what Laylah was doing: poking fun at Janyka by imitating a soldier from ibis. That was fine, though. Soon enough, Laylah relaxed with another bright smile.

"May I get myself set up?" she asked.

Janyka swept a hand toward the door, and with a chirped 'thanks', Laylah skipped through it. As I followed her, I ignored the whispers rising behind us.

The cubicle that Janyka had mentioned was almost too cramped for two people to use, but Laylah and I made do. As usual, she gave me a long list of processes that she wanted me to analyze, but before I got started, I cleared my throat, preemptively increasing the number in my newly created file.

“I didn’t know that you like quiet in your workspace,” I said. “If I’ve been bothering you with that, please-”

“Oh, Rylan, you sweetheart,” Laylah interrupted while throwing an arm around me. “I don’t care about the noise. I just wanted to get away from *them*.”

She squeezed me, which made me glad that I’d already adjusted the number in my file.

“They may have ‘asked’ me to come here, and I may be making the best of our situation, but that doesn’t mean I want to be in Xygek.”

Releasing me, she returned to her work while I considered what she’d said. If she didn’t want to be here, did that mean she wanted to go home? Did that mean she wanted to be alone again? Alone with me?

Getting started on my assigned processes took far longer than it should have, and by the time I’d fallen into the flow of it, only another hour would pass before the workday was over. Even so, I continued on, frowning as I did.

Most of these processes were what I’d expect to see from Laylah, what I’d worked with since becoming her assistant, but some were... different. In other circumstances, I could see my work being used to crack security processes and advanced ones at that.

But Laylah couldn’t have me doing that.

At the end of the day, she and I returned to the lab. There was no sign of our superior, Krish, but we made our farewells to Janyka before leaving headquarters.

When planning this trip, Laylah had gotten us quarters in neighboring, temp apartments, which I appreciated. It gave me another few minutes with her every day. She was quiet on our walk home, which was unusual, but I didn’t think anything of it, or I didn’t until we reached our housing’s location. Meeting my eyes, Laylah inclined her head toward her apartment’s door.

“Would you like to come in?” she asked. “I could use some company, and there’s a bottle of brandy inside, just waiting for someone to open it.”

I was... confused. What was she suggesting?

...Why was I questioning it?

“All right. Sounds fun,” I said.

Flashing a grin at me, Laylah strode into the apartment with me on her heels, and when the door closed, a lock thunked into place. Curious as to why we needed that extra layer of security, I opened my mouth to ask about it, pausing when I saw the absent look in Laylah’s eyes. After a moment, air whooshed out of her, and she rolled her neck before kneading it.

“Mother Time, I hate deep-cover work,” she said.

...Wha-?

An alert popped up, flashing *T.R.O.U.B.L.E.* into my vision, and squeezing my eyes closed, I turned to the side, fighting to keep my stomach calm. Oh... what the *fuck*, Rylan?

“You ok?” Feena asked.

Which only made my stomach dance harder. I lifted a finger toward my sister, taking deep breaths, and when I could, I lowered my hand from my mouth.

“We... have a problem,” I gasped.

Trudging into the kitchen, I collapsed into a chair, and Feena sat opposite me, holding her face perfectly still.

“What’s the issue?” she asked.

When I tried to speak, another bout of gagging shut me up, and I had to vigorously wipe my mouth once it was done.

“Rylan’s attracted to Laylah,” I managed to say.

Shuddering, I scrubbed at my arms while Feena’s mouth dropped open.

“Ah,” she squeaked.

She couldn’t say anything more for a time, and as she formed a response, I took turns between nervously watching her and scanning the room.

Clearing her throat, Feena said, “Are you...?”

“*No!*” I yelped, shooting upright. “No way in *hell*, Feena. My personas are in no way, shape, or form me. In many ways, they’re completely separate people.”

“I see.”

While Feena absorbed this, I noticed that my fingers were tapping on the table, and with an internal groan, I quashed my anxiety and self-disgust. How had I let those emotions creep up on me? They weren’t helpful at all, not when I was on a mission like this.

“I’ve never heard of a persona complex enough to change who you are, but if anyone could do that, it would be you,” Feena said. “It explains why you were so in-depth when grilling me about my persona last night, at least.”

Leaning into my chair, I crossed my legs, folding my hands in my lap.

“When it comes to personas, I’ve always been all or nothing,” I said. “You have no idea how many times Ko lectured me about finding a balance between those extremes when I was the *Lokke Vitras* to come.”

Wincing, Feena sucked in a hissing breath.

“That must have been fun.”

Shrugging one shoulder, I said, “When it came to small things like that, I learned to ignore him. Don’t you dare tell him I said that, though.”

My sister burst into laughter, and I struggled to ignore how much her delight pinched my heart, much like I had with other things over the last day. What Korix had told me about the Chosen last night...

I wasn’t ignoring it, but I was putting off its consideration until after this mission was over. That task could sit with everything else I’d need to confront during the month Talira had promised me.

The fastest way to dispel that shitstorm, though, was to pour my heart and soul into this mission, completing it as quickly as possible.

“So obviously, I should keep my distance from Rylan in the future. Besides that, I think today went rather well,” Feena said. “We left our team in a sweet spot. They’ll think we’re strange enough to avoid but mysterious enough to find intriguing. Given that, should we discuss anything else tonight? I’d like to watch a holodrama before bed.”

Bed... Mother Time, didn’t that sound good right now? I’d love to lose myself in the oblivion of sleep.

But if I relaxed now, I was concerned about what I might do. The last few days’ events might be hovering over me, yes, but that didn’t mean they’d stay there. At any minute, they could start raining down, long before I was ready, and when I thought about that, I felt the cold steel of a blade in my hand.

So, I said, “We should talk about how we’ll handle tomorrow.”

Hanging her head, Feena sighed before retrieving a bottle of brandy.

“All right,” she said, slamming it onto the table. “Hit me.”

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