

# Chapter 27: Initial Investigation

When I entered Laylah-Feena and Rylan's private cubicle, Damari was doing a good job of maintaining a calm demeanor. Well. A good job for them. They were tapping their fingers on their bouncing knee, but that was their only concession to their persistent restlessness.

Jumping to their feet, they said, "So, it worked?"

I gave them an odd look.

"What worked?" I said. "I'm sorry. Who are you, and what are you doing in my workspace?"

With their mouth dropping open, Damari tensed, flicking their eyes over the cubicle.

"I'm... um... I... got... lost?" they said, rubbing the back of their neck. "I thought-"

Oh, this was painful and *hilarious* to watch. Laughing, I waved for my friend to calm down.

"Damari. It's ok," I said. "I was just messing with you."

Clicking their teeth together, my friend glared at me.

"You know, I get pranked often enough by your wife," they said. "I don't need you adding to it."

"Shouldn't have decided to be my friend, then," I said, sticking out my tongue. "Besides, you like it."

"Wha-?" Damari sputtered. "I don't like it. Why would you think I-?"

"In any case, we should get started," I interrupted. "Are you ready?"

My friend's face was crimson now, and they'd narrowed their eyes to slits.

"I was ready before you came in here," they growled. "Now, I'm just irritated."

"Not a bad place to start an infiltration mission from," I said. "Come on."

Damari grumbled to themselves as they followed behind me, but that was ok. The sight of a disgruntled person, scientist or otherwise, was fairly common in this place.

As Zaeden, walking through Aeronautics was strange for me. A century ago, I'd stumbled down these corridors with an Ancient stuck in my head, one that had been fighting to break through my control so it could torture me into a living death. I'd thought my brother was dead, and my grief had been what had driven me to this building in the first place. In addition, a new scene had waited for me around every corner, since I'd never stepped foot inside of it before.

As before, I'd once more lost Pheniks, if not to something as permanent as death, but now, I knew each of the Houses' headquarters well, and while this floor might be devoted to only Aeronautics instead of designated as a secret lab, its architecture was the same. At least this time, I didn't have to worry about sneaking around while heading to the lifts.

Once we reached them, Damari and I flew to the top of the tower, stepping out on the floor below Sanya's office, and as expected, it was deserted, hence why I'd decided to make a move tonight. With the high Strata home for the evening and the plausible deniability of my team's experiment to give me cover, it had been too good of an opportunity to waste.

At a swift stride, I led Damari along, bypassing the offices on either side of us. My friend kept giving me odd looks for this—the information we wanted might be in those offices, after all—but their curiosity had been expected. I hadn't told them the details of tonight's mission, afraid it might scare them off, and I hadn't wanted to use my authority on them. Who wanted to order a friend around when they might volunteer to help instead? So, when we glided into First Stratus Teag's office, they glanced around curiously, probably wondering why I'd chosen this room out of all the ones available to us.

"Nice digs," they commented.

Shoving their hands in their pockets, they started circling the room.

"Mm," I said. "I've got the storecase, and I'm monitoring the hallway outside. Can you look for physical clues while I do that? Tonight's target might have hidden something in a book or a similarly tiny hiding space, assuming he's part of this conspiracy, of course."

"You got it, LV!" Damari said.

As they messed with items on the nearby shelves, I had my array scour the First Stratus' storecase for any mentions of a neurotoxin or other suspicious language. While it worked, I stared at the desk in the center of the room, ignoring a woman's flickering ghost on the other side of it.

It shouldn't have surprised me that this place hadn't changed since the Ancient's Crisis. Yes, the room was smaller than Aeronautics, making it easier to renovate, but it was the traditional office of Cerullis' First Stratus, and none of the Houses liked changing tradition, not for anyone lower Stratus than a *shukusen* at least.

Sighing, I turned away from a source of aching guilt to help Damari with their search. I didn't get far with this, however, before the feed from a recorder in the hall outside had me stiffening. Shoving my current book back on its shelf, I touched Damari's shoulder as I passed them.

“With me,” I said.

Striding to the back wall, I passed through its painted landscape with my friend on my heel.

“Is this a bolt hole? Cool!” they said. “How did you know this was-?”

Spinning on Damari, I shoved them into a wall with a hand over their mouth. The glow of the lift beside us illuminated their indignant expression in the split second that it took First Stratus Teag and *shukusen* Sanya to stride into the office. Unless my friend had accessed the room’s recorders, they wouldn’t have seen the leaders of Cerullis coming inside, not with the hologram blocking our vision, but we both heard their footsteps, and once Damari understood what I’d done, they nodded for me to remove my hand. Together, we listened with bated breath, and I watched Teag lean against his desk while Sanya collapsed into a chair in front of him.

“It’s done,” she said, “which makes part one a success. Why am I not more relieved?”

“Because the other Houses will give us hell when they learn about the resources we’ve used tonight,” Teag said before resting a hand on the *shukusen*’s shoulder, “but hey! You shouldn’t think about that right now. I know you like to worry about the future, but we need to focus on the present. We have our wormhole. We have near instantaneous communication between here and the sun. That’s something to celebrate.”

“I know! I just-”

Dropping her face into her hands, Sanya rubbed it.

“Why can’t the others see the threat that we face?” she said with her voice muffled. “Why won’t anyone *listen* to us?”

They were both quiet while I exchanged a glance with Damari. I wasn’t sure what my friend was thinking, but I was trying to figure out what Sanya and Teag were doing. Now that I knew Laylah-Feena and Rylan’s team had created a wormhole on the order of Cerullis’ *shukusen*, I was curious about what came next in their plan.

I was also concerned that Talira might soon send me here on a deep cover mission, all to investigate these two. Nothing they’d said had indicated that they were planning to hurt Lutov—the Houses kept secrets all the time, as was their right—but I could see this secret turning into something I’d need to handle, and I truly hoped it didn’t. I’d been looking forward to properly meeting Sanya.

With a sigh, Teague pushed himself off of his desk.

“Give me your hands,” he said.

Ok. That had been more familiar than most people were with their *shukusen*. Sanya didn’t seem to mind, lifting her head before hesitantly giving her hands to Teag. With a smile, he tugged her to her feet before leaning down for a kiss.

For a moment, all I could do was dumbly blink at what I was watching. I'd had my suspicions that something had been going on between those two, but this was a hell of a way to confirm it.

When the kiss deepened, I pushed the feed to a corner of my vision, hoping Sanya and Teag wouldn't go any further than this. I'd never had a problem with watching people please one another, but doing it without them knowing I was there just felt *wrong*.

Unfortunately, I couldn't close the feed. I couldn't rely on audio alone when at any moment, Teag or Sanya could use this bolt hole to leave. I'd need the seconds that visuals would give me to get down the lift myself. So even with me unfocusing my eyes to blur Sanya and Teag's forms, I saw hands going under clothes, and I heard their gasps and moans growing more passionate.

I also heard Damari gag. They'd plastered their hands to their ears with their eyes squeezed shut, and wincing, I tapped their arm. When they met my gaze, I jerked my head toward the lift.

"Meet at my apartment," I said in sub-vocals.

Gulping, Damari leapt at the lift, making no noise, and I got the distinct pleasure of staying behind, but I could deal with that. This wasn't the first time I'd been caught in such an awkward situation, although that didn't make it any easier.

Fortunately, I'd learned a few tricks over the years. While I waited, I reviewed that I'd pulled from Teag's storecase before I'd been interrupted. I didn't find anything helpful, of course. In the century I'd been doing this, I could count on one hand when I'd gotten answers on a first fishing attempt.

I did, however, run across some amusing correspondences, but only one of them caught my eye. Over the last few weeks, Second Stratus Krish had sent Teag several messages about Fifth Stratus Harvel, the man who'd been bothering my sister. Apparently, Harvel had some... interesting views about how Cerullis should handle the other Houses. To be fair to him, they seemed spawned out of frustration with the discrimination that members of House Cerullis still dealt with, even this many years after the Ancients Crisis.

All of this was concerning. I mentally noted to look into him later, or maybe I could ask Talira-

On the other side of the hologram, Sanya said, "We should get an overnight. It's not safe here."

With a pained groan, Teag nodded his blobby head.

"You go first," he said. "I'll meet you there."

Swallowing hard, Sanya spun, quickly leaving, and after a good three minutes, Teag followed her. Thank. Mother. Time.

I stayed in place until after they'd left the building, and when I stepped back into the office, an unexpected wave of exhaustion hit me. Careful not to touch anything, I sank to the floor, leaning against a wall, while my array finished its scan.

Why were Teag and Sanya hiding their relationship? Plenty of *shukusenth* and First Strata had had romantic relationships in the past. Hell, my dad had come from a brief fling between Talira and another House's First Stratus. Though short, that relationship had still been serious enough to warrant each party committing to raising a child. She'd never told us which of the First Strata it had been, but I had my guesses.

Maybe Sanya and Teag had realized that Cerullis couldn't afford any extra scrutiny right now. The House might be mostly recovered from the Ancients Crisis, but they were still the most closely watched out of the six. Perhaps those two simply didn't want to put more pressure on their House.

Why did I care about that, though? What they did in private was none of my business.

As I let the conundrum fall away from me, though, something else stepped into place, something worse. The reason I'd dove into the Rylan persona every morning for the last two and a half weeks. The reason I'd started drinking myself to sleep.

My fingers twitched while my bared forearm drew my gaze because no matter what I did to cover it up, I was still reeling from everything that had happened between a disastrous party and a raid on House Zan. Work had helped to a degree but not... not enough.

Fortunately, my array soon informed me that it had completed its work, long before I might have started tumbling a knife through my fingers. Standing, I returned to Aeronautics, all while conforming my behavior to the Rylan persona once more.

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