

# Chapter 28: Debrief

I ran into Laylah-Feena near our cubicle.

“There you are!” she said. “Where did you go? I couldn’t find you.”

Hooray... time to play our parts again, all under the assumption that someone would be watching us. In Lutov, someone was almost always watching.

Throwing a thumb over my shoulder, I said, “Washroom. I’m sorry, Third Stratus.”

With a chortle, Laylah-Feena waved a hand at me.

“Don’t apologize for that,” she said. “Anyway, the experiment was a success, in case you were curious. We helped to create the first man-made wormhole! Isn’t that exciting?”

Bouncing forward, she grabbed my hand, and I forced blood into my cheeks.

“It is,” I said.

My embarrassment was only half-faked. I hated pretending to be enamored with my sister like Rylan was.

Releasing one of my hands, Laylah-Feena covered a yawn.

“Goodness. It’s late. Time stops for no one, not even us victorious scientists, huh?” she said. “Are you ready to leave?”

Making my eyes bulged, I stammered, “Third Stratus, the processes that you assigned to me... I need- I haven’t-”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Laylah-Feena said. “I’ll give you a break with them, just this once.”

“Then... yes,” I said. “I’d like to go home and get some sleep.”

“Fantastic!” Laylah-Feena said. “Come on, then.”

Neither of us said a word on the way across the city, and when we reached our apartments, we both entered mine. Inside, Damari was watching something on the apartment’s holodrama plate, and on the side of the table closest to the door, two drinks were already sitting in place: a whiskey sour for me and a fruity concoction for Feena. My sister and I dropped into our assigned seats, just... sitting there for a moment while Damari powered down the holodrama plate. When I could, I grabbed my whiskey sour, lifting it toward my friend.

"Thanks," I said.

"No problem," Damari said.

They ruffled their hair, sending water droplets flying.

"I took a shower while I was waiting. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," I said. "I don't blame you, considering what we ran into."

Damari grimaced as they sat across from us, and Feena leaned forward for her drink.

"What did you run into?" she asked.

"*Nothing!*" Damari and I shouted.

Still bent over, Feena glanced between us with her eyes narrowed.

"Nothing important, at least," I clarified.

"Ah."

Straightening, Feena took a sip of her drink.

"So?" she said. "Please tell me we got something out of all that work."

"I got jack shit," Damari said, crossing their arms.

When I raised my eyebrows, they made a face. Even if they hadn't been on a mission in a while, they should know that the highest Strata person in the room decided what was relevant.

"Look. I didn't get far with my search before we were interrupted," they said. "From that, I can say that whoever claims that office has an obsession with those from beyond the stars. I've never seen a more extensive collection of books about those alien beings."

"Clearly you've never toured Zae and Ko's library," Feena said under her breath. "I swear. It's like every book has something to do with them."

Jerking toward my sister, I glared at her.

"Those books are about *space*, not those from beyond the stars," I said. "I can't help it that the only books to discuss the first topic always include the latter."

Feena just gave me an innocent smile. I kept glaring at her until Damari cleared their throat.

"*Anyway*," they said, rolling their eyes, "I also found something that looked like a diary. Couldn't tell you a lick of what it said off the top of my head, but I can access my memories of it so I can transcribe it for you. If ya like."

“That would be useful, thank you,” I said, “but don’t make it a priority. I doubt the man who wrote it is involved in this plot.”

Shrugging, Damari said, “Ok. That’s about all I got. Do ya need anything else, LV, or am I all done for the night?”

For some reason, frustration welled up in me at that, and I didn’t fully consider my next few words.

“I’d love it if people stopped being such assholes. Why do we keep creating new and horrible ways to kill each other?” I said.

How in the *hell* had that been related to what my friend had asked?

Damari and Feena stared at me for long enough that I sighed, slumping in my chair.

“That was uncalled for, I know. I’m sorry. It’s hard to control certain things when I’m with people I trust, and I’ve been off all night,” I said. “In any case, I don’t need anything else from you, Damari. You’ve already been immensely helpful.”

My friend exchanged a look with my sister before smiling at me.

“Cool!” they said. “Can I stay here tonight? If I head home now, I’ll only get a couple hours of sleep before I need to leave for my weekly atmospheric brush.”

“You’re welcome to, I suppose,” I said, cocking my head at them. “You *are* aware that there’s only one bed here and that I tend to get cuddly in my sleep, right?”

For a split second, the smile on Damari’s face tightened.

“I’ll make do,” they said. “I’m guessing you two need to discuss mission specifics now?”

“Yeah, that usually comes right before bed,” Feena said. “Zae likes to keep to his routines.”

Snorting, I said, “You think *I’m* stuck to a routine? Hell, you should have seen Ko, back when he was the *Lokke Vitras*.”

“Fortunately, neither Damari nor I had to,” Feena said with a smirk. “Damari, feel free to do what you like, but please block nerve signals from your ears until we indicate otherwise. All right?”

“Sure!”

Slapping their thighs, Damari got to their feet.

“I’ll just lounge on the bed for a while,” they said.

Feena and I waited until they’d gotten comfortable before digging into the meat of tonight’s recovered data, which was...

“Nothing, Feena,” I said. “I’ll have to review what my array retrieved and read Teag’s diary, but I’m fairly certain that I found nothing of use tonight.”

With a low sigh, Feena took a sip from her drink before cupping it once more.

“Fantastic,” she said. “It was too much to hope that this one would be quick, huh?”

“Mm.”

Finishing off my drink in one go, I slammed it on the table.

“It’s too bad,” I said. “Rylan’s affection for Laylah is *really* starting to bother me.”

“You can’t adjust the persona?” Feena asked. “Make it so he doesn’t... you know?”

Waving at herself, she looked away while I shifted in place.

“That’s not how it works, unfortunately. Once they’re... *them*, I can’t tweak their personalities. They just... do their own thing, for the most part,” I said, “but speaking of Laylah, I tagged some useful information for her.”

Glancing at me, Feena said, “Oh?”

“Mmhmm,” I said. “You know Harvel, the guy who’s pining after Laylah almost as hard as Rylan?”

With a secret smile, Feena swirled her drink in her glass.

“Yeah?”

“I’d keep Laylah away from him, if you can,” I said. “He has some strange viewpoints about things. I’ll send you the relevant messages later.”

“That’s too bad. He’s attractive,” Feena said. “Care to elaborate on these viewpoints for me?”

Making a face, I said, “In essence? He wants every House to serve Cerullis in the same way that the children of Ibis serve Lutov.”

“Ugh.”

With a wrinkled face, Feena pulled away from me.

“I won’t go near him, then,” she said, “but besides that, we have nothing?”

“Yup,” I said.

For a moment, we watched Damari, who was swaying their head to an unheard beat.

“So?” Feena eventually said. “Next steps?”

Looking down my nose at her, I said, "Come on, Feena. You're Second Stratus. You know what our next steps are."

"Wait for another opportunity?"

"That's right."

Groaning, Feena sank into her seat until her head touched the top of her chair.

"This'll be one of those awful, months-long missions, won't it?" she said.

"I sincerely hope not," I said. "Considering that possibility, though, should you duck out? You must have your own work to handle."

The reason she'd left that work buzzed in my mind, and I internally flailed at it, burying that knowledge. I couldn't think about the Chosen or what they were. I couldn't think about their fates. I couldn't think about my sister's status as one.

"Ha! You won't get rid of me that easily, Zae," Feena said. "I talked to Talira. Once she found out that I've been helping, she assigned me to you. Said something about you needing the support."

Lifting my eyes to the ceiling, I shook my head.

"I do *not*," I said, "but I'm grateful for it nonetheless."

Smiling, I put our glasses in the apartment's sterilizer while Feena stretched.

With my back to her, I said, "Is Damari in charge of watching me tonight?"

She'd know what I really meant.

*Am I so unstable that even you think I need a babysitter? Are the two of you so concerned that you'll go out of your way to make sure I don't do anything 'unwise' tonight?*

With her clothes rustling, Feena sighed.

"Damari wants to be your friend. They can see that you're hurting and want to help," she said. "When's the last time you had a good night's sleep? And don't even think about lying to me."

Slumping, I rubbed my face before turning to my sister.

"I don't remember," I said.

When I lowered my hands, my sister was watching me with concern, although it wasn't an oppressive amount.

"If this becomes a months-long mission, you won't return to the stable anchor that is your family for a while," she said. "Take any lifeline that's thrown to you."

Squeezing my eyes closed, I nodded.

"I know. I will," I said before meeting my sister's gaze. "Thank you."

"Anytime."

As she headed for the door, she ruffled my hair.

"Good night, Zae," she said. "Sweet dreeeeeams."

The sung note of her last word echoed in the apartment as the door closed behind her, and in a few leaping strides, I was close enough to flop on the bed, bouncing Damari in place.

Lifting their head, they shouted, "Can I listen now?"

When I nodded, they started working their jaw.

"Mother Time, I hate how that feels," they said. "So. Bed time. How are we doing this?"

"I'll sleep on the floor, and don't you dare argue with me," I said. "I know why you're really staying over tonight."

With a grin, Damari dropped into the pillows, swiping their arms and legs over the comforter.

"Why would I argue about getting this whole bed to myself?" they said.

Chuckling, I got up, although I paused before entering the washroom. I probably shouldn't ask this, considering how much my friend disliked classical music, but...

"Hey, Damari. If you can, will you go with me to Leski's performance?" I asked.

If I couldn't be near my wife for a while, I needed someone by my side when I saw her for a few hours, especially when all of it would be from a distance.

Damari craned their neck to look at me, and so many thoughts and emotions ran across their face before they smiled.

"Sure, LV!" they said. "Sounds fun!"

I truly *did not* deserve them.

"Thank you," I said.

With a laugh, Damari relaxed before playing with the air, probably messing with something in their array.

"Anytime, Zaeden," they said. "That's what friends are for."

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Revision #1

Created 6 February 2025 19:46:58 by FatalisticFable

Updated 6 February 2025 20:10:17 by FatalisticFable