

Chapter 10: What. the. Actual. Fuck?

On the other side of the car, Asher practically tumbled out of it, and Rowan raced to him. He'd regained his balance before she reached him, striding to meet the attendant.

"What happened?" he snapped.

The attendant pointed behind her toward the labs with her arm shaking.

"You... It..." she said.

"Don't stop, dummy," Rowan said, snatching Asher's wrist. "The problem's obviously in the labs, so let's *get there*."

She hauled him behind her until he'd caught up, and together, they darted through his house with its out-of-the-norm architecture passing beneath Rowan's notice. Outside again, she noted a calm scene with confusion. Where was the disaster? Where were the people running for safety? Why did a lack of these things have her stomach clenching more tightly than when she'd seen that attendant running toward them?

They quickly passed through the dome's foyer, and when a second set of sliding doors finally finished opening, allowing them entry, they ran into a wall of people, blocking access to the first of the place's labs. Why were they just *standing* there?

Before Rowan could open her mouth, Asher roared, "*Out of the way!*"

Jumping, the people in front of them stepped aside, although they were lethargic with their movements. Asher and Rowan had to push and squeeze their way through most of those gathered, which made their progress agonizingly slow, but eventually, they spilled into a patch of empty space.

They'd reached the far wall with its bank of screens inset into it, but unlike with the rest of the lab, people were avoiding the area Rowan and Asher were standing in as if the floor had been coated with deadly acid. Spinning, Rowan searched for what could have packed so many of Asher's employees into this one room. If it was something dangerous, why hadn't they evacuated? Were they containing it or...?

Were they infected with something? Had she in her haste, gotten herself and Asher and exposed to a deadly virus?

“Rowan,” Asher faintly said.

He’d gone slack with his muscles loosened and eyes wide while a special kind of fear lit them. Carefully, Rowan started running her hands over his chest, certain she’d find an injury that was keeping him stunned, but he took her wrists, jerking them off of him.

Turning wild eyes on her, he said, “*Rowan!*”

He jerked his chin toward the wall with its screens, and when Rowan turned toward it, she cocked her head, trying to decipher what she was seeing. Someone had changed the displayed feed from one originating in Cerullis’ satellites to a camera or recorder on the ground. Mountain peaks clipped into the bottom of the picture, but other than that, Rowan had a big, wide view of the sky, dotted with clouds and several... somethings blocking it.

The largest of these, the only one discernible to the eye, loomed large above the camera with all of it black and spiky. A dark ring, nearly complete in its circumference and jagged along its edges, served as the base for an elongated claw with eleven fingers of varying heights reaching for the sky. These blade-like fingers swayed like grass in a breeze. Around the claw, insect-sized blips were frenetically buzzing back and forth like... like aircraft of some type.

“Asher? What am I looking at?” Rowan asked.

“I don’t... hang on,” Asher said. “Where’s this feed coming from?”

His shout echoed in the room’s silence, and when no one answered him, he broke free of what had been holding his body captive. Striding for his closest employee, Asher shook the man.

“The feed’s source?” he said through gritted teeth.

Lazily pulling his eyes off the screens, the man focused on Asher.

“Icrodon,” he said with a thick voice.

Oh... *shit*.

Asher blinked once before pulling his employee closer to him.

“Is it the anomalies we’ve been tracking?” he asked. “The ones that have been sending unintelligible signals toward our probes?”

Nodding, the man said, “The new blips in the stars.”

Rowan remembered the first day someone had noticed those. She’d been here, on her first visit to ameliorate the Cerullis family. What had Asher said about it? ‘I have no other option but to observe them’?

Well, there they were, plenty observable.

“Obviously, it’s not an asteroid or other falling debris, otherwise we’d be dead,” Asher said, having returned to Rowan’s side. “But what else...?”

Rowan had a pretty good answer for that question, even if she didn’t want to speak it. Sometimes, it helped to have read so much speculative fiction while growing up.

“Alien beings,” she forced herself to say.

Glancing at her, Asher said, “What?”

“Intelligent life from another planet or perhaps from beyond our galaxy,” Rowan said. “Have you never watched a science fiction flic before, Asher?”

He returned to staring at the screens.

“No,” he said, “but you could be right. The design of this object suggests a measure of intelligence and those dots around it-”

Cutting off, he clicked his teeth together, and Rowan sought what in the picture could have stopped a scientist from making speculations on a recently discovered phenomenon. It took her a while, but eventually, she noticed that the blue sky framed by the claw’s ring had tinged neon, a change in color that was steadily growing stronger.

“What-?”

The claw’s fingers started closing together, forcing Rowan to step back, and by the time they touched, the blue tinge inside the ring had turned into a nearly solid state with a small dot in the center having turned dark enough to drown out the sky.

“Is that a force fie-?” Rowan started saying.

A blue beam shot from the ring’s central dot to the tips of the claws, and they sent it back in a thicker, white line. As it passed through the ring, it widened to match the circle’s internal circumference, turning it into a ray of light that blasted toward the camera.

The feed cut off, making the screens go black, and around Rowan, the deepest silence she’d ever heard competed with the ringing in her ears.

“What the fuck?” she distantly heard herself say.

What had just happened? What had that been? Why was she shaking so hard that she thought she might fall?

“Get me an image of Icrodon!” Asher was shouting.

But no one moved. The silence was too absolute for it to be otherwise. Rowan imagined Asher’s employees were like her: slack-jawed, frozen, and unable to tear their eyes off of the darkened screens.

“Avan DAMN it! I’ll do it myself.”

A furious string of curses filled the air with grunts and rustling clothes interspersed with it until Asher returned to his spot at Rowan’s side with a tablet in his hand. Muttering under his breath, he poked at its surface, and after a few breaths, an image flickered onto the screen.

Again, Rowan wasn’t sure what she was looking at, although she thought that might be because her brain was refusing to process it.

This time, they were looking down at where snowy mountains were cradling a patch of shiny, blackened land. Four rivers converged on this place, and where each of them passed through the mountains before steadily streaming into their valley, a sprawl of tan stone stretched above them, much like gateways into a holy land.

Looking at the picture as a whole, it looked kind of like...

No, that wasn’t possible.

But Asher had asked for an image of it...

Rowan’s mind stuttered for a moment, trying to shield her from the hurt that accepting this fact would bring, but behind her, someone sobbed, shattering her enforced ignorance. Shattering her world.

Because Icrodon, the one place that had embodied peace in their world, had been destroyed and her family had been in it.

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