

Chapter 11: Fugue-Filled Hours

Hysterical laughter flew out of Rowan, and she couldn't stop it. This couldn't be happening. It had to be a nightmare. Right? Someone, please tell her this wasn't real.

Oh, *avan*, she couldn't breathe. Where had the air around her gone? Through the static filling her ears, filling her head, she heard Asher shouting, although the details of what he was saying were muddled, but honestly? Why should she care about that? Over half of her family had died.

Faces flashed before her eyes in a rapid, repeating cycle. Logan, Paisley, mom, Anthony, Henry, Logan, Paisley-

She was gulping at air that wouldn't fill her lungs, expelling it again in a crazed giggle. Hot streams were running over her cheeks, and her body was shaking, leaving a strong tremor in the hand that someone was using to tug her along.

What was she going to do? What were *they* going to do? What had that beam, strong enough to destroy a city, been?

Oh, they were fucked. Humanity was an extinct species that hadn't had the good sense to die out yet.

This should be more important to Rowan. She should be focusing on *survival*, not on people who were already gone, but all she saw were their faces. All she could think about was their names.

Logan, Paisley, mom, Anthony, Henry.

Henry.

Whose twin was still alive and probably losing it right now. Not three weeks ago, John had told Rowan about how he couldn't lose Henry in a marriage, and now, there was this.

And Bay! Hell, mom had lost the love of her life.

Why was she still here? She needed to be with them *now*. She needed to focus on the part of her family that was still alive, not dead.

The air Rowan was sipping at gained substance while her surroundings snapped to the forefront again. The lab was empty with its employees having probably scrambled to leave after...

Well, it was empty except for Rowan, huddled against a wall, and Asher, kneeling in front of her.

“Better?” he said.

When Rowan nodded, he pulled her hands out of their tangle in her hair.

“We need to get you home,” Asher said. “The city’s probably gone to hell, but I have some ideas for-”

“How are you so calm?” Rowan asked. “Something unknown and *exceptionally powerful* just attacked us. You’ve lost your father... Hell, Asher. You’re the head of your House now.”

Making a face, Asher said, “I doubt the distinction between nobles and untitled will last for much longer, and I can’t do anything about the... aliens right now. If they’re here to wipe us out, we’re dead, so I’m operating under the assumption that something else is going on, something we can fight. The first way I can do that is get you started on your way home so I can prepare for what’s coming.”

Slowly, Rowan nodded.

“Ok,” she said. “I’m sorry for the way I acted, for...”

What had that been? Retreating into her mind and obsessing over distressing details wasn’t like her.

“Having a panic attack?” Asher gently finished for her. “It’s ok. No matter how poorly timed it was, I’d have been a bit shocked if you hadn’t had one.”

Standing, he offered Rowan a hand.

“Your brother and mother are probably worried sick about you,” he said. “Let’s get you to them.”

Rowan accepted his help up, and when he raced toward an exit from the lab’s dome, she trotted behind him, playing with her wristcom. Her attempts to establish connections with mom and John bounced off the wall of an oversaturated network, which only made sense with a city full of people trying to reach loved ones as the news spread. So, she sent her family messages, hoping they’d receive them soon.

Asher led Rowan on a long race over the clipped grass of the estate’s grounds, following the road that led to his family’s home. His home now, she supposed.

She kept throwing glances at the sky, expecting to find another horror blocking the sun, but they reached the edge of his estate without anything appearing. Near the fence that surrounded everything Cerullis had claimed, a squat building with enormous doors popped out from behind the trees. On reaching it, Asher hauled one of those doors open, and sunlight splashed over the cars inside.

Huh. Rowan had wondered where his family kept those.

Without pausing, Asher strode past them toward the other side of the building, pulling a tarp off of an indistinct shape, and when what was beneath was revealed, Rowan gasped, lightly pressing a hand over her mouth.

“Asher Cerullis! I’d never have guessed you’d own something like this,” she said. “I’m impressed.”

Smirking, Asher threw the tarp into the darkness.

“You’ve only known me for a few weeks. You don’t know all my secrets yet,” he said. “Do you know how to ride?”

He waved a hand over the fucking gorgeous cycle, sitting in front of them, and scoffing, Rowan rested a hand on her hip.

“Do I know how to ride? Come on!” she said. “I went to Athari State, the wildest college in our nation, *and* I’m a daughter of House Kolb. *Do I know how to ride?*”

It felt good to banter, even if its typical humor had been sapped from her. She was empty, pretending to have emotions in the hopes that they’d return.

While Rowan shook her head at his presumptions, Asher said, “Yes, given who your family is, that was a silly question.”

“Key?” Rowan said, holding out her hand.

After digging in his pocket, Asher handed her the requested item, but he blocked her from climbing onto the cycle.

“One more thing before you go,” he said. “I know you’re in a hurry, but we don’t know when the network will clear up, if it ever will. So, take this.”

He offered Rowan an earpiece with a hook and a gigantic, blinking button attached to it, showing her a matching piece when she accepted the gift.

Hanging it from his ear, Asher said, “That’ll get ahold of me without bothering with the network: a direct connection. I meant to unveil these to the public after working out a few minor kinks, but desperate times and all.”

Doubtfully eyeing the device, Rowan bounced it on her palm.

“Why are you giving this to me?” she asked.

“Who else would I give it to?” Asher said. “You’re basically my only ally now, Rowan. My distant family has refused to talk to me and my dad for years, Cerullis status as Xygek’s most powerful House has pushed the other nobles away, and I won’t involve my employees in the play that I, or

maybe we, decide to make. They'll have their own problems to handle. And like you convinced me earlier, we—

He slumped, hanging his head, and Rowan waited for him to say it, although the enthusiasm she might typically feel here had gone.

“We’re friends,” Asher said. “Friends help each other, right? Friends want to know if the other person gets home safely.”

Swallowing, he looked away, and yes, most of Rowan was deadened right now. Yes, she might fall apart at any moment—

“My family left me!” the child in her wailed. “I’m alone!”

—but even still, this show of affection from a recently gained friend sent a sweet, flash flood crashing through her and everything that was making her numb.

Jumping forward, she threw her arms around Asher’s neck, pressing her lips beside his ear before burying her face in his shoulder. On her toes, Rowan wobbled in place, but she couldn’t pull away yet, didn’t want him to see her crying, even if he probably felt her tears seeping through his shirt and jacket.

Fortunately, Asher steadied her, although it took him a moment to wrap his arms around her waist. He awkwardly patted her back, and oh so gradually, she got herself under control.

Pulling away from him, Rowan wiped her eyes, softly laughing, while hooking his device over her ear.

“I’m guessing I push the blinking button to get ahold of you,” she said.

Asher was staring at her, frozen in place. Why was he doing that?

“Yes,” he eventually said. “It may take me a moment to return the favor, though, depending on what I’m doing.”

“Ok. I’ll let you know when I get home, then,” Rowan said. “Once I’ve coordinated with my family, maybe we can figure out what the hell we’re going to do next.”

Her words dried up while something thick and terrible fell over them at the realization of how much their lives had changed. Rowan had always argued that Lutov’s four nations needed reform but this? This was too much at once.

“We can’t panic,” Asher said. “Let’s take it one step at a time, ok? You get to your family, and once you have, we’ll discuss finding a safe place where we can hole up for a while, at least until we’ve figured out a long-term plan.”

Avan above, he was good at helping her ground herself.

“Sounds good,” Rowan said. “Thanks, Asher. I’m sure you’re dealing with turmoil in your head too, but still, you helped me with mine. You’re a good man.”

Huffing a laugh, Asher said, “I don’t know about that, but we don’t have time to argue about it. Go home, Rowan.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Ok.”

Swinging her leg over the cycle, Rowan started it, humming at the familiar rumble beneath her.

“I’ll open the gate from here,” Asher shouted before waving her on.

Rowan flicked her fingers in a salute, one that would have made Veronica scold her—*don’t think about mom, DON’T*—and set off, opening up the throttle to speed her along. She needed to get home quickly, not just for mom and John but for her own sake as well, because yes, what she was doing was dangerous. She wasn’t wearing a helmet, and as she went, she almost clipped far too many of the cars clogging the streets. Yes, it was thrilling. Jumping onto the sidewalk when roads got too crowded and weaving between panicked people sent her heart racing.

But she was doing it all in a fugue. She’d turned herself off. If Rowan let herself think about why people were leaping out of their cars to shout at one another, why she’d already seen four fistfights when she wasn’t even a third of the way home, or why supermarkets looked like a war zone, she’d probably crash this cycle at full speed into a brick wall, and if she survived that, she’d stay there, crying, until something came along to put her out of her misery.

At some point during this, Rowan remembered Thomas and Mia, cursing at how long it had taken her to think about her best friends. She didn’t blame herself for it, considering everything that had happened with her family alone, but even still, she stopped the cycle in the middle of the street to request a connection. Again, the network laughed at her attempts to join the avalanche of other requests that were choking it, so Rowan was once more left with sending messages.

Had her friends headed home yet, or were they still at her place when *it* had happened? The last she’d seen of them, Thomas hadn’t yet emerged from zombie mode, and Mia hadn’t woken up, so maybe they hadn’t left.

Rowan didn’t know if that would be convenient or not. Sure, if it were so, her friends would be where she needed them. That would be beneficial because if Asher or her family thought she was going anywhere or doing anything without Mia and Thomas... ha!

At the same time, though, her friends would probably want to rendezvous with their father. They disliked the bastard, but he was still their *dad*.

It wasn’t something she could worry about right now. Rowan needed to get home before the mild chaos she was seeing on the streets turned truly violent. Home would be the safest place for her, what with her family’s troopers to guard them. If they’d stayed. Which they might not have.

Too many uncertainties surrounded Rowan, and it was driving her crazy. Almost, she pressed the button on her ear, needing Asher's soothing voice since she couldn't reach anyone else she loved, but she had no doubt he was frantically busy. She wouldn't bother him unless she had to.

And throughout this, a looming, empty sky weighed heavy on her mind, although she wasn't the only one experiencing that. Other people, racing about their business, craned their necks for a view of endless blue, but nothing ever intruded on it.

This, Rowan thought, was the worst part of what had happened. Who'd attacked them? Were they or it intelligent, like she'd theorized? Maybe they or it were more mechanical in nature than organic.

And what was their plan? Sure, wipe out the enemy's center of power and influence. That was a good, logical opening move, but they should have turned to the four nations' capitals after that. Given how they'd annihilated Icrodon, Rowan would be *shocked* if they didn't have the means to reach Xygek or any other city in the time since they'd first made themselves known.

Maybe they were fielding troops first. Rowan didn't know why they'd do that, though. Did they intend to leave a portion of the population alive? But this thought led into the overarching question, the one that superseded all others.

Why?

These beings, if they were beings, were clearly far more advanced than humanity. What did they get out of attacking us? Were they xenophobic, intending to eliminate all other races? Did humanity have a resource they wanted, wiping Icrodon out as an intimidation tactic? Or maybe they'd done it just for kicks and giggles. Who knew?

Until she had more information, speculation was pointless, but Rowan couldn't help indulging in it. Doing so was keeping her mind off of other things, and along with her numbed state, it got her to her family's manse without incident.

As she approached the gate, her muscles slackened, leaving her hanging off the cycle's bars for a split second. Troopers were standing guard in front of bars of blackened steel with the House Kolb uniform crisp on their frames. When they saw Rowan coming, they lifted their rifles the slightest fraction—which was a testament to how rattled they must be—until she flashed her family's signs for safe and ally overhead.

She stopped beside the one who appeared to be in command while the gate swung open, and when he saw her, he slumped.

"My Lade Rowan. Thank *avan* it's you," he shouted over the cycle's noise. "Lord John and Lady Bay have been beside themselves since they received the news. We don't have our orders yet."

That was... odd. Turning the cycle off, Rowan dismounted it, rolling it through the gate. Fortunately, the trooper addressing her followed in her wake, and she hurriedly assessed his rank from the symbols on his collar.

“What’s our situation regarding numbers, Lieutenant...?” she said.

“Liam Avisbell, ma’am,” he said. “We’ve had a few desertions since... Icrodon, but overall, your troopers are at your disposal.”

How surprising. Rowan had thought for sure that more would have abandoned them. Why had so many of them stayed?

“Very well, Lieutenant Avisbell,” she said. “Your orders are to stand by for now. We should have more for you shortly and...”

Should she do this? Every allied trooper was another that they could use against the enemy but...

Would numbers make a difference against what they were facing?

“If they want it, everyone who has a family is relieved of duty,” Rowan said. “I won’t deny anyone who wants to remain at their post, but I also won’t keep people with a spouse or children away from those they love during a time like this.”

Liam’s breath caught, but he nodded.

“I’ll spread the word, ma’am,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

“If someone could mark this cycle as an item to be returned to the Cerullis family, I’d appreciate it. I doubt we’ll be able to get it back to them, but still, I want it done,” Rowan said. “Other than that, maintain a holding pattern. I need to discuss the situation with my family.”

Saluting—properly, not like she’d done with Asher—Liam said, “Yes, Lady Kolb.”

While he ran off, Rowan settled the cycle on its kickstand and trudged toward the manse. Now that she was here, she didn’t know if she should see her family. If she did, it was certain to turn her into a wreck, which wasn’t advisable right now. Maybe she should speak with Asher before finding her mom and John.

When she pressed the button hanging off of her ear, he answered within a breath.

“You’re safe?” he asked.

Damn, he’d sounded tense. What had happened at his place since she’d left?

“Yes. About to walk into the manse,” Rowan said. “Give me a couple of hours here. If I don’t get in touch before then, try to reach me.”

“Can do,” Asher said. “Good luck.”

“And to you.”

Almost as soon as she'd spoken that last word, Asher was gone, which Rowan would normally take offense to but...

Growling, she scratched her scalp. How had life gotten so fucked up so quickly?

When the manse came into view with its walking trail circling it, Rowan broke into a run. She still thought this was a *terrible* idea but honestly? Would delaying it be any better? This reunion *would* happen sooner or later, and she would fall apart. Wasn't it wiser for that to happen now, when she didn't yet need her full faculties about her?

If she'd had any choice in the matter, it was taken from her when the front door banged open and her brother filled its frame. Had he been waiting for-?

Oh... fuck. John's dark complexion had turned sallow, leaving his hazel eyes wide and red-rimmed, and *tears* were running over his cheeks with his shoulders heaving and his nose running. Avan. Rowan had known he'd be upset but this-

"ROWAN!" he shouted.

Her big brother *flew* to her while her mom appeared in the doorway, distressed but still sedate. She'd started Rowan's way with Aunt Hailey emerging behind her when John barreled into her with all his strength, and unable to stay on her feet, Rowan fell like she'd been taugth, minimizing any damage she might acquire. She was only in the dirt for a second before John was clutching her to his chest.

"You're alive!" he said. "Oh, bean. Our tiniest, smallest bean."

Rowan heard her pet name on his tongue with five, ghostly voices speaking it alongside him, and as she'd thought, something inside of her snapped. While John rocked them back and forth, Rowan sobbed into his chest, forceful gulps of air that *scraped* her throat. Her mom knelt beside them, wrapping her arms around them both—

"My babies, my babies," she whispered on repeat.

—with her sister's hand on her shoulder, and if something had appeared in the sky right then, Rowan didn't think any of them would have noticed or cared.

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