

Chapter 12: Touching Base

Ten minutes later, they'd converged on a sitting room. John looked like hell, and Rowan thought mom might be dying inside, but at least they were together.

They were together.

What did they do now?

"Thomas and Mia left?" Rowan asked.

She was sitting cross-legged on the floor rather than in a chair, and John was lying beside her with his head in her lap. Lounging on the sofa opposite them, mom nodded.

"Shortly after you did," she said.

She'd sounded so broken, though.

Here they were, the man who'd become the head of their noble family and the woman who should be advising him through this transition, and neither were ready to lead anything.

Pulling her lips into a grim line, Rowan met the gaze of Aunt Hailey, the only other person here who was the least bit composed. With one leg crossed over the other, she had her hands folded on her knees with her elbows perched on the arms of her chair.

"We should discuss next steps," she said, raising her eyebrows at Rowan.

She took her aunt's provided opening.

"Do we know how many of our troopers are single?" she asked. "I dismissed all of them who have families, leaving the option to stay on the table, but I don't know how many of them will take it."

Tensing, John drew his knees toward his chest.

"I don't know," he said with a note of hysteria in his voice. "I don't know *anything* about our family's work. It was never supposed to be mine. How am I supposed to-? What do I-?"

Raising herself up on an elbow, mom said, "John. Love. Calm down. We have your back. You're going to be fine. The- the three of us will work through this together."

"Four," Aunt Hailey interjected. "I'm staying."

Giving her sister a searching look, mom said, "All right. Four. You have plenty of help, baby."

“Ok,” John said, nodding in Rowan’s lap.

But he didn’t relax while his legs continued hoarding the space they’d created. Observing this, mom made the most minute of headshakes before turning to Rowan.

“Well done, Rowan,” she said. “Most of our troopers are single, but by offering the ones with family an excuse to go home, you’ve likely hardened the loyalty of those who will stay.”

“That wasn’t what I was trying to do,” Rowan said. “I just did what felt right.”

Grinning, Aunt Hailey reached out to her, and she hesitantly took that offered hand, almost crushing John’s head in the process.

“And that’s why you’ll make a great commander, if you choose to take that route,” she said. “You inspire people simply by being who you are.”

One squeeze later and Rowan was free with mom nodding agreement and John burying his face in her stomach. Her cheeks were burning, and she wanted it to STOP. So, she hugged her brother’s head, pleasantly smiling.

“Thank you,” she said, “but no one’s answered my question.”

“About how many troopers are at our disposal?” mom asked. “I don’t have answers for you either, baby girl. You might have to ask the troopers. I don’t handle that side of the family business, after all. That’s Veronica’s-”

A stifled sob cut Bay off, and she shot upright with tears once more glistening in her eyes. When Rowan opened her mouth to ask if her mom was ok, she lifted a finger, shaking her head before darting out of the room. Rowan looked to Aunt Hailey for how to continue, but she merely shrugged, which was... helpful.

With that side of the conversation truncated, Rowan focused on John.

Pulling him away from her, she asked, “How are you doing?”

John took a deep breath before plunging his face into her skin again.

“Not good,” she barely made out. “I’m sorry, bean. You shouldn’t have to deal with this alone.”

Oh, *avan*. She loved him so much. After a loss as bad as he’d suffered, Rowan doubted she could think about his well-being.

“Focus on yourself for now. I’ve got everything else,” she said. “I need *you* to work on putting yourself together for me, ok?”

He clenched his arms around her.

"I can do that," he said.

As Rowan patted her brother's head, a connection request flashed onto her wristcom, which surprised the hell out of her until she saw it was from Mia. After that, she couldn't accept the request quickly enough, but once she had, she heard shouting and other concerning noises on the other end.

"Rowan?" Mia asked in a panicked voice. "Are you there?"

"Yes," Rowan said. "What's going on?"

"Oh, thank *avan*," Mia sobbed. "We need help."

Clicking her tongue, Rowan said, "I gathered that. What's the problem?"

"Our car's getting swarmed by a bunch of angry people, and our driver abandoned it pretty soon after the bastards arrived," Thomas said with his voice muffled. "We're on the corner of Hoffstead and Fifth."

Thank everything good and holy for him. During conflicts like this, Mia tended to get ruffled, but Thomas had always kept his cool. In Break, he'd always been the one to speak up when a party member fell out of position in a dungeon or to point out an unexpected patrol when they were sneaking out of their homes.

When Rowan glanced up at her, Aunt Hailey waved her along, and John was already on his feet. He followed Rowan as she raced outside, heading back to the gate. As ordered, none of the troops from before had changed position, so she headed toward the one she knew.

"Lieutenant Avisbell, if you'll join me," she called as they approached.

He hopped to attention, trotting toward them.

"Lord and Lady Kolb," he said, "how may-?"

"My friends are in a bind," Rowan said, removing her wristcom. "I need volunteers to save them from an angry mob before bringing them here, and *neither of you is arguing with me.*"

Bringing her wristcom up to her mouth, she spoke directly into it.

"My home is the safest place you can be right now. We can discuss how to help your dad and retrieve your possessions once you're not about to get torn limb from limb."

While Thomas grumbled something unheard, Mia said, "I wasn't going to argue with you."

"Good," Rowan said, extending what she was holding to Liam. "You can coordinate with them through this for as long as the connection stays stable. I'd offer to lead the volunteers to my friends' location but--"

"I don't think that's wise, Lady Rowan," Liam cut in.

"That's what I thought."

Ignoring her, Liam leaned to the side.

"Is this your wish as well, Lord Kolb?" he asked.

John shifted in place, clenching his hands together to keep from fidgeting.

"Lieutenant... Avisbell, was it?"

When Liam nodded, John said, "You're to follow my sister's orders until told otherwise. For the moment, she's better equipped to handle this disaster."

"Yes, sir!"

With restrictions no longer barring him, Liam snapped a salute before tearing off toward his fellow troopers, pulling a walkie from his belt. Marching over asphalt, Rowan laid a hand on John's shoulder, one that he held tight.

"Look at you, already acting like a good head of House," she said.

With a short laugh, John said, "How are you so calm, bean? You've lost the same people as me, and now, your friends might soon join them."

Rowan stiffened, clawing her fingers into John's shoulder so hard that he winced. That was the same question she'd asked Asher earlier. Hearing it from her brother now, she wondered if her new friend had had the same answer as she did now, retaining it out of worry for her, or if having someone he'd needed to help had kept him calm.

"I'm not thinking about it, any of it. I can't," she said. "We need to get our shit together and leave. Every second we stay here, I expect something to block out the sun, having come to destroy Xygek the same as it did Icrodon."

Lifting his eyes to the sky, John made a face.

"I can see that," he said. "It's a wonder you're here then, helping mom and me when we're so useless. You could have been out of here by now."

Rowan's hand had become a stone, and feeling that, John let it slip off him.

"I'm tempted to run and make a go of it by myself. Doing that may have a higher chance of survival," she said, "but I'd rather take the more dangerous route, possibly dying with you all, than live knowing I abandoned my family."

When John gave her a weak smile, she lightly grazed a fist along his cheek.

“We need to figure out where we’re going, seeing as how staying in Xygek is looking increasingly deadly,” she said. “If people are attacking cars that look corp in nature, it won’t be long before they start swarming the nobles’ homes.”

Catching her wrist, John said, “Let mom, Aunt Hailey, and me discuss that for now. We’re not going anywhere until Thomas and Mia get here. You should take that time to *start* processing what’s happened. That needs to happen eventually, and I doubt you’ve let yourself do it yet.”

Rowan geared up to protest, but John pressed a finger to her lips.

“Do it, Rowan,” he said. “That wasn’t a request.”

When she licked his finger, he pulled it away, wiping it on his shirt with a wrinkled nose.

“Ok, fine,” she said. “Bossy.”

As she passed her brother, Rowan bopped his nose, making him shake his head as he fell out of view. She had no intention of doing as she’d been told, though. If she started down that path, she wasn’t sure how long it would put her out of commission.

So, once she’d entered the manse, she went looking for her storecase setup. No one had moved it from where it had been placed last night, and after she sat in a chair, she logged in to *Nedrya’s Breaking*.

Rowan knew how horrible this was. Who knew how many people were dead—*probably somewhere in the tens of thousands*, her traitorous brain said—while an unknown menace had threatened life on their planet, and she was falling down the rabbit hole into a fake world. It was laughable. Someone should make a recording of this so future generations could shake their head in shame at her, if they got to live that long.

But she wasn’t the only one doing it. When Rowan typed an /online command, the number returned to her was larger than what she typically saw on a busy night, and her chats were *blowing up* with people asking for news and other things.

Almost everyone in her guild was online, but rather than answer the messages spilling to her from them, Rowan used her founder privileges to pin an update to the top of their guild’s chat. In it, she told everyone she was alive and that she planned to stay in contact as much as possible over the next few days.

She also set up chat channels for the subjects she’d seen discussed elsewhere: one for information requests on players, a second that would gather a knowledge pool for anything out of the ordinary seen throughout Lutov, and the third to hold appeals for aid. The last of these had two sub-channels. One was to be used for urgent, life-or-death-in-the-next-few-hours situations while the other was for anything less vital. Rowan also put a guild meet-date on the calendar for two weeks from today. Either they’d all be dead by that point, or they’d be in their separate safe places, ready to talk again.

Once that was done, she asked for her guild members to gather in their hall, and while they did that, she typed up instructions for the new channels. As soon as everyone had teleported to her, Rowan set that menu aside, looking over the characters whose players she'd become so familiar with over the years, and she thought she might cry. Instead, she cleared her throat and unmuted her mic.

"All right, everyone. Listen up," she shouted over a mix of hysterical and detached voices.

Her guildmates gradually went quiet while their characters turned to her, and she nodded.

"I know all of you have crises to handle. I do too, so I won't take up much of your time," she said. "What happened is horrific, something I wish we had more time to appreciate, but we need to prepare for what's surely coming.

"This guild has members scattered across Lutov, in all of its nations, but more importantly, we're *friends*. I mean to use Break help any of you that I can, whether I can find a way to log in or by merely checking my messages through the game's client. How long Nedrya's servers will be left running is up for debate, but until the game goes down, this is how I will stay in contact with you.

"Anyone who wishes to follow my example by helping others is welcome to it. We must stand together against this threat. Whatever they truly are, think of these invaders like a boss at the end of a dungeon. If you want to survive those encounters, you don't scatter, right?"

"At the same time, while I hope *all* of you will help your fellow Breakers, your fellow *humans*, over the next few days, I also understand the need for self-preservation. If you want to use the new chat channels only to update us on your status, that's more than fair.

"Regarding those channels, I don't think saying this is truly necessary, but use them only for their intended purposes. We're in the middle of a possible extinction-level event, people. Don't be a troll.

"Lastly, if anyone wants to send me a private message with your contact info, I'm open to it. I probably won't use it until *Nedrya's Breaking* goes down, but we all know that will happen eventually.

"Other than that, I wish you all the best. Good luck, and I hope to see you on the other side."

A chorus of voices rose with some of them merely answering Rowan's well wishes, but a few of them were asking questions, and hearing that, she rolled her eyes.

"Guys! I'll talk through messages. Right now, I need to log the fuck off so I can get myself and my family somewhere safe. You should do the same."

She didn't wait for their replies. Closing *Nedrya's Breaking*, she turned her storecase off before brushing her fingers along its top. She'd miss it, this first machine she'd put together.

Hopefully, they'd have storecases wherever she ended up. She'd hate to have set up an alternate communications network, only for her to never use it.

As she stood, pushing her chair under the desk, her throat closed. She couldn't yet let herself feel her family's deaths but this? At this moment, Rowan gave herself the small luxury of grieving the end of an era.

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