

# Chapter 13: Thank Avan, You're All Right

When Rowan found them, her mom, John, and Aunt Hailey had several crates piled in pull-along wagons as well as knapsacks at their feet, full of supplies she was guessing. John was holding another backpack, focusing on his discussion with the other two until Rowan stopped at his side.

Extending it to her, he said, "I didn't know what you'd want to keep. I packed the outfits you wear the most and another pair of sturdy shoes as well as a few other things."

"Is Aurora in here?" Rowan asked.

Frantically, she started unzipping the backpack until John stopped her.

"Yes, bean. I packed your stuffed hedgehog," he said. "I'm not an idiot."

Her eyes started watering, the prelude to the storm that she was holding at bay, so she threw her arms around John's neck instead.

"Thanks, big brother," she said.

Patting her back, John said, "Anytime."

The muttering between their mom and Aunt Hailey abruptly stopped, and frowning, Rowan peeled herself out of the hug.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Her mom had her wristcom lifted, scowling at it.

"Nothing," she said. "I just..."

With her lips pursed, she tapped on her wristcom's screen.

"Hello, Ethan," she said. "Fancy hearing from you, now that the world's ended."

Ethan? As in one of Veronica's brothers, specifically Rowan's eccentric uncle? When she'd been growing up, her mom had talked about him on occasion, but Rowan had never met him before. When she'd asked why he wouldn't come visit them, her mom would always say that her brother was too paranoid to visit the city and too comfortable in his isolation to let others join him there. After so many years with minimal contact, why would he call today, of all days?

“Bay. I only want to help,” an unfamiliar voice said. “Are any of my nieces or nephews nearby? I need to talk to them, and I’m not sure how long this connection will last.”

“If you’d ever bothered to get their contact info before now, maybe you could have gone straight to them instead of using me-”

Aunt Hailey waved a hand in mom’s face, cutting her off, and once Bay had focused on her, she shook her head, pointing at John and

Rowan. They exchanged a glance—

“I’ll chalk that outburst up to the loss of your wife,” the unfamiliar voice said.

—and stepped forward together.

“So, you’re our famous Uncle Ethan,” John said. “Nice to meet you.”

Rowan was proud of him. That had been far nicer than it had needed to be.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” she added. “I’m Rowan, by the way, and that was John. Did mom ever tell you about us?”

“Veronica often wrote about her family in her letters. You’re two of the youngest three,” Ethan said. “Where’s the other twin, Henry? Actually, where’s the rest of the family? I need to speak with the head of our House.”

Gasping, John rocked back on his heels, and Rowan nudged him toward Aunt Hailey, waiting in the wings with a hug.

“You just were,” Rowan said. “John, mom, and I are all that’s left. The rest were in Icrodon.”

In the silence, her brother’s quiet crying sounded deafening, and Rowan itched to cover it up, but she wouldn’t treat her family’s grief like it should be hidden away. Slowly, she counted to ten in her head, giving Uncle Ethan time to process before forging onward.

“I’m sorry, but was there something you wanted?” she asked. “We’re trying to get out of the city before chaos takes over.”

Clearing his throat, Ethan said, “I’m glad I caught you before you left, then. My home is isolated and has been well-stocked, in the event of a catastrophe. Granted, I never thought what was coming would be something like this...”

As he trailed off, Bay made a face at her wristcom, looking like she might bite the thing.

“In any case, I wanted to invite you here,” Ethan continued. “You and any necessary companions you might have.”

Necessary companions? As in, a human being could be less than necessary?

"Why should we trust you?" Rowan asked. "Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the offer, but you've never been a part of our lives before--"

"Rowan. Honey. Much as I hate to admit it, he's being genuine right now," Bay said. "The bastard's been waiting for something like this to happen since before I joined the family."

...Why? Was Uncle Ethan one of those people who saw disasters in everything, or had he had some reason to believe something like Icrodon would happen?

"Then, we'll come to you. It's not like we have much choice, considering our other options," John said. "Where are we headed?"

"Your mother knows the location," Ethan said.

Rather than acting annoyed with them, as most would over their antagonism, he'd sounded amused.

"Depending on your mode of transport, I estimate it'll take you anywhere from a day to a few weeks to reach me," he continued. "Given that... Bay? Can you send me their contact info through the usual proxy? I'd like access to everyone in case you run into trouble on the way."

Releasing a long sigh, mom said, "Sure, Ethan. Is there anything else, or can we go?"

"No," Ethan said. "Good luck."

With nothing further, he cut the connection, and Rowan wrinkled her nose at the air over her mom's wrist.

"He seems *delightful*," she said.

"Don't be so quick to judge him," Aunt Hailey said, looking specifically at her sister. "He may be hard to deal with, but from everything I've heard, he'll do anything for this family."

Bay was holding her breath with emotions playing across her face, but she quickly got through her internal battle.

"You're right," she said.

"So, we have a destination," John said. "How are we getting there?"

"I thought we might use two or three off-road vehicles, depending on how many troopers we bring with us," Bay said. "We should quickly figure out which of them are accompanying us, though, so we can have the rest scatter, to meet us at Ethan's home."

Before they could get further invested in planning, Rowan clapped her hands together.

“Great! You three work on the trooper issue,” she said. “I need to check on something, but once I’m done, I may have our transportation sorted out.”

They gave her odd looks but indicated acknowledgment all around before huddling together. Hell, Rowan had forgotten how intense her family got when it came to making battle plans, which this was in a way. John and Bay had always been the *least* focused when a war in Shoya Dren had called for their expertise or a lord in backwater Sasmor had requested aid with a skirmish between noble families, but even still, their flat lips and flashing eyes did credit to the Kolb name.

They were so lost in it that Rowan wondered if anyone but Hailey noticed her slipping out the door. At her aunt’s concerned look, she waved before hanging Asher’s button off her ear again, pressing it.

It took him much longer to accept this connection, long enough that Rowan had started gnawing on her thumbnail as she paced to the end of the hall.

“Io,” he tiredly said when he eventually did.

“Hey, Asher,” Rowan said. “I have the start of a plan, but first, how are things on your end?”

“Well...”

A loud thud interrupted him with a groan of relief following it.

“I’ve learned that getting all the equipment I thought was necessary into a car is exhausting when you do it alone,” Asher said. “At least this has taught me that I should have been more grateful for my attendants.”

“I can imagine.”

Thinking of everything her family’s attendants had done while preparing for last night’s events, Rowan shuddered. It looked like she’d get that taste of an untitled person’s life that she’d always wanted. She didn’t know if she wanted it anymore.

“Are you planning on driving into the city?” she asked. “Because I don’t advise it. Xygek’s-”

“I’m going nowhere *near* civilization right now. I can only imagine what a minefield it’s become in the competition for supplies,” Asher interrupted. “No, I’m driving my nondescript car full of scientific equipment to my family’s private airfield. Looks like I’ll actually get to use the pilot’s license that Ma- dad forced me to get. I suppose I’ll have to be grateful to him for once.”

“Wait. You have a *plane*?” Rowan squeaked.

Air travel wasn’t a foreign concept in Lutov, but considering how their landmass’ rivers had made natural highways between the nations, most transportation here was aquatic in nature.

“Sometimes, going through Novadracht to reach Sasmor is inconvenient,” Asher said. “My House does a lot of business in that nation, and dad hates... hated dealing with passage through Icrodon, so yes. We have a plane.”

With a hum, Rowan fell against a wall, resting her head on its drywall.

“How many people can it fit?” she asked.

“Enough, I’m sure,” Asher said “but how many spots do you need?”

A car door slammed on his end of the connection before an engine started.

“Four for my family,” Rowan said before pausing.

She didn’t know how he’d react to the rest of her request, given how last night had ended.

“Row-?”

“Plus, one each for Mia, Thomas, and possibly their father,” she said in a rush.

After a whoosh of air, something thunked in her ear.

“Thank *avan* above,” Asher breathed, so quietly that Rowan wondered if he’d meant for her to hear it.

She was confused. Why had he sounded so relieved? He hadn’t seemed to like Rowan’s friends that much. For sure, she could see him tolerating Mia’s presence on his plane but Thomas? She wasn’t so sure. And that wasn’t counting their father, who hated Cerullis a thousand times more than his son did.

“Is there anyone else?” Asher asked. “I have room for two, maybe three more people.”

Yeah... Rowan probably shouldn’t mention she’d caught him acting strangely. Best to simply move on.

“In that case, we’ll bring a couple of troopers with us,” she said. “The rest of them will meet us at our destination, but it would be good to have a few nearby while we’re traveling.”

“Speaking of which, where are we going?” Asher asked. “It’s not that I doubt that we have a destination. I just-”

“You want to know. I get it. All of us are running on adrenaline, skirting the razor’s edge of a panic attack,” Rowan said. “My Uncle Ethan’s home is apparently quite isolated. A few minutes ago, he requested a connection to invite us there.”

“And... where is that, more specifically?” Asher asked. “I’d like to plot a flight path before taking off.”

Wincing, Rowan said, "Sorry, I don't know. Mom does, but she's not sharing. Maybe she'll tell you after I've let her know you're involved in our plans. Avan, that'll be a fun conversation."

"Then, you should probably handle it soon," Asher said with amusement.

"Hey!" Rowan said. "I'd like to see how you'd handle telling your dad that you're working with my family, and... oh, shit. That was too soon. I'm sorry."

What was wrong with her? It didn't matter that Asher's relationship with his father had seemed strained at best. The man's death must still hurt. But Rowan had forgotten, too invested in her own temporary denial of what had happened.

After taking a few sipping breaths, Asher said, "It's... fine. Go tell your family what we're doing. I'll send you the airstrip's coordinates so you can leave once you're ready, although I'd appreciate an update once you're on your way."

"Of course," Rowan said. "I'll let you know if anything changes too."

"Same to you."

After replacing Asher's device in her pocket, Rowan slapped her face a few times before making the trek back to her family. She fully intended to launch into an explanation of the plan she'd made as soon as she stepped inside, but when she did, she registered the new additions to the room first. Someone in a uniform was standing with her mom while Thomas and Mia hovered nearby, and Rowan ran, shrieking, to her friends.

They fell on each other, touching faces and crying and speaking words that probably meant something before they'd emerged from the three, but she couldn't comprehend them right now. The only thing she knew was that they were safe and alive with her. After everything today had brought, she reveled in this spot of joy, immersing herself in it.

When she could bring herself to break free, she found the three of them in a melted puddle on the floor with mom talking to a trooper... Liam over them. Rowan should probably butt into that conversation with her news, but she pressed her face into Mia's shoulder instead.

"I'm so glad you're ok," she said.

"Me too," Mia said before prying Rowan away from her.

One look at her face and Rowan knew what she was going to say. She flattened her palms over Mia's mouth, shaking her head.

"Don't," she said. "Let's get out of Xygek first, ok?"

Above her hands, Mia's eyes crinkled with worry, but she nodded, and Rowan released her. As she got to her feet, she touched Thomas' cheek.

“Good to see you too,” she said. “Sorry for what I’m about to do.”

Rolling his eyes, Thomas said, “Yeah, yeah. I know I’m second rate compared to- wait. What?”

While he swiped for Rowan’s wrist, he was a breath too slow to catch it, and frowning at him, Rowan stopped beside Liam and her mom.

“Good work with my friends, Lieutenant Avisbell,” she said.

Stiffening to attention, Liam said, “Thank you ma’am.”

With a laugh, Rowan lightly patted his shoulder.

“Relax, lieutenant. I’m not any scarier than my mother,” she said before turning to Bay. “What were you talking about?”

“Logistics to get us through the mountains,” mom said. “Your aunt and brother are busy with picking who will accompany us while I have the unenviable task of choosing whether we’ll take the road beneath the mountains or circle them instead.”

Hiding a smile, Rowan crossed her arms.

“Why don’t we go over them?” she asked.

Her mom made a face.

“I’d love to, baby girl, but...”

She waved at Liam.

“Not many roads cross over the mountains, ma’am,” he said, “and of those that do, we’re fairly uninformed about the surrounding area, whether it comes to terrain or possible hostiles. Risking a tunnel collapsing on us or circling the mountain would be safer.”

“I see,” Rowan said, “but that’s not what I asked. When I said over, I meant way over.”

She zoomed her hand in an arch, banking and dipping it, and almost poked Thomas in the eye with that effort.

“A plane? House Kolb owns one?” he said. “Those are wicked expensive. Even we don’t have one.”

“Neither does my family,” Rowan said before her mom could cut in, “but Asher Cerullis does.”

Everyone around her locked up, and she so badly wanted to laugh at the range of expressions around her, from horrified to disgusted, but she kept her face blank.

“Are you suggesting that we put ourselves in his family’s debt?” her mom asked.

"I'm suggesting that my *friend* can help us," Rowan said. "The way we did things before is dead, mom. Let's not allow family pride to kill the last of the Kolbs."

Without pausing, she turned to Liam.

"We have room for two troopers, lieutenant," she said. "If you could inform John and Aunt Hailey of this before having everyone else scatter from here, I'd be grateful."

"Two!" Liam squeaked before squeezing his lips closed.

Closing his eyes, he took a steadying breath.

With a nod, he continued, "As you say, Lady Rowan."

While he trotted away, Rowan met Bay's eyes, seeing resignation but also acceptance there, and with neither of them saying a word, they understood one another. She wasn't happy with this plan but would go along with it. Rowan hated putting her in this situation, but it needed to be done.

The picture she was presented with when it came to her friends, however, was hilarious. Mia had Thomas muzzled with him trying to speak through her hands, interspersed with brief bouts of quiet, and from her grimaces, Rowan was guessing he was licking his sister during those pauses.

"My dad won't like this," Mia said.

"He doesn't have to come with us, although if he's smart, he'll get over himself and accept Asher's help," Rowan said. "You're not obligated to join me either."

Mia glared at her, but before she could speak, Thomas knocked his sister's hands away.

"Are you kidding me?" he asked. "You're more our family than our dad is."

"Although we *will* try to persuade him to come," Mia added.

Making a face, Thomas nodded, and Rowan fought to keep from crying. She hadn't been sure if they'd stay with her.

With nothing else to hold them together, their group dissolved. They had no more time for flowery words, only escape. Once they were in the air, maybe they could deal with this long morning's fallout, but until then, they must focus only on what would keep them alive.

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