

Chapter 14: The Right Thing to Do

Oscar Shalen, a consummate businessman down to the having no soul bit, was a whiny bitch. As their car leaped over another unexpected bump in the terrain, jarring them, he grimaced, opening his mouth to complain again, and fucking hell, Rowan was going to strangle him. She didn't know if Mia saw this in her or not, but she clamped her fingers on her dad's knee before rubbing his leg.

"Almost there," she said. "Just a few more minutes."

She glanced at Rowan, in the front seat, and she lifted one shoulder in a shrug. Rowan didn't know where they were going, trusting the trooper at her side with that. For all she knew, Asher's airstrip could be hours from here.

Taking a deep breath, Oscar patted his daughter's hand.

"I certainly hope so," he said. "I didn't agree to getting tossed around in more than one metal can."

Thank *avan* he hadn't mentioned Asher again. The ten minutes Mia had spent convincing him to *get in the damn car* weren't ones Rowan could forget anytime soon.

Fortunately, or unfortunately she supposed, Rowan wasn't the only one who'd been caught in the misery of Oscar Shalen's presence. Mia, implacable as always, had been treating this car ride like she did with any other boring event in her life, but that was just her. Rowan wasn't looking forward to the day she truly broke down or otherwise lost her cool.

On the other side of her, though, John looked about ready to crawl into a hole and die, which Rowan couldn't blame him for. Caught in their own little world, it was easy for noble families to forget how unimportant the Houses had become. Sure, some of them hold great influence—Houses like Rowan's family with their small army of troopers, Cerullis with their focus on technological development, or House Breyham with their staggering wealth—but most noble families didn't have as many resources at their disposal as those few did. In fact, they did almost nothing to make their mark on society, keeping exclusively to themselves.

Which didn't help with their sway in Lutov as a whole. The only reason the untitled respected the nobles was out of reverence for the old emperor, dead for these many centuries, who'd given them their titles, although long-standing tradition probably helped with that too. The people of the four nations were incredibly resistant to change.

None of that truly mattered anymore. Still, it explained why when Oscar had made snide comments or otherwise derided the Kolb family's standing, it had come as a shock, even if *Rowan* had been expecting it. Considering that all of the quips he'd delivered today had been aimed at John, though, who was already wrapped in his private cocoon of debilitating grief, she wasn't surprised that her brother was hanging onto his door's handle like he'd yank it open so he could fall out, no matter how fast they were going.

Seeing this, Rowan was a little miffed at Thomas for refusing to get in the same car as his father. Only the knowledge that their current, hostile atmosphere would be a million times worse if he'd been in here had kept her from deciding to make her friend her sparring partner for the next few weeks.

Again, Oscar screwed up his face while opening his mouth, and Rowan swore. If he said one more caustic thing, she was going to leap into the backseat so she could punch his face in.

So, she forestalled anything that might have her doing that.

"If you complain again, I'm telling Corporal Spheris here to stop the car so we can leave you behind, and you can make your own way," she said. "The only reason you're with us is because you're Thomas and Mia's father. *Don't* push your luck."

Oscar clicked his teeth together, glaring at Rowan, while Mia murmured soothing words at him. Rowan had never understood her attachment to this man. From what she could tell, he wasn't a great father. Thomas had only stayed in his household for as long as he had because his financial situation would have been dire otherwise, through no fault of his own. Oscar had refused to let his children attend a college—"That polluting influence"—where they could learn useful skills. Instead, he'd had private tutors brought in to teach his children what they'd need to run Shalen Corp and that alone.

Thomas had *hated* this. Mia... Rowan wasn't sure what she thought about her schooling. She didn't talk about it much. She didn't talk much *at all*, actually, letting her brash brother take the spotlight, except for when she was just with Rowan and him.

She hadn't always been like this. When they'd been younger, she'd been a chatterbox with no one able to shut her up, but then had come the fire and...

She'd changed. They both had, but where Thomas had poured his time and energy into making unrealistic revenge plans on the Cerullis family, Mia had gone quiet and reserved, forever doting on her father while also keeping him in line.

Maybe that was why she sometimes stuck to him like glue. Maybe she was afraid of losing another parent.

The car jerked again, but once its wheels landed on the ground this time, they were back to a smooth ride over asphalt, which had everyone inside sighing with relief. When Rowan once more settled into her seat, she was pleased to find a chain-link fence in the distance ahead with its gate already open.

They sped through it and toward the only hangar on the small tarmac beyond. The Cerullis jet, a tiny twin of the rare commercial planes that crossed from the mainland to Shoya Dren, was sitting in the open in front of the hangar, and as the car came to a stop at its side, Asher climbed down a ladder near the plane's nose, hopping to the asphalt from the last rung. He waved at them, indicating where they should park.

Behind Rowan, Oscar muttered nasty sounding words under his breath.

"Play nice, dad," Mia whispered before Rowan could. "In fact, maybe you should keep quiet until after we've landed. You can chew him out then."

Oscar grumbled at that, even though he also appeared satisfied, but apparently, the tension in this car had become too much for John. As soon as it was safe to do so, he opened a door.

In a strangled voice, he said, "I'll start unloading our things."

He couldn't get out of the car fast enough, and after watching this, Rowan turned to the trooper beside her.

"Will you watch him, please?" she said. "I'm... worried."

When the corporal nodded, Rowan opened her door and stepped out on the tarmac, hurrying to Asher.

"Did my mom give you what you needed?" she asked.

Before leaving their manse, she'd given Asher's device to Bay, hoping they could hash out any complications that might arise from their families working together. It looked like they'd successfully done that from the wave Asher directed Bay's way.

"I have our course set, yes," he said. "All we need to worry about now is other pilots in the air, not that I expect to see many. Considering how rarely any of us fly, though, I can see someone forgetting to announce their positioning today, which could cause a mid-air crash. And... aliens might be a problem too, I suppose."

When he cracked a grin at Rowan, she swatted his arm.

"You live up to your family's reputation," Asher said in deadpan. "Very violent."

While Rowan stuck her tongue out at him, John shouted at them.

"If you two plan on kissing, would you hurry it up, *please*? We could use some help."

Snickering, Rowan pressed a hand to her mouth, waving at Asher's stricken expression.

"Please, forgive my brother," she said. "He can be an asshole sometimes, although... I'm rather glad to see *some* liveliness in him now, even if it came at my expense."

Sucking on her lip, she cocked her head at John, who was working with the corporal to get one of their heavier items out of a car.

“Anyway, he’s right,” she continued. “I should help.”

“That... seems... wise,” Asher said in a strained voice.

When she started trotting to the cars, Rowan spun to blow kisses at Asher, laughing at his tight smile. Rather than going to her brother, she headed for Mia, standing at the trunk of the other car. She was busy rifling through each piece of her luggage, checking what it held before placing it in one of their wagons.

Rowan couldn’t blame her for her scrutiny. When they’d been at her home, packing had been rushed with Liam appearing halfway through to share that a mob had been on the way.

On the sidelines, Thomas was waiting for her to finish with his foot tapping while the wagon beside him was half-full.

As Rowan came closer, Mia asked, “What was *that* about?”

She never pulled her head out of the backpack it was buried in.

“I was making sure Asher has everything he needs to get us in the air,” Rowan said. “Do you need help with anything?”

“Make sure I put our toothbrushes in this. I wouldn’t be surprised if they ended up somewhere else,” Mia said, pointing at a pocket in the piece of luggage beside her, “and that wasn’t what I meant.”

Humming, Rowan carefully peeled apart the pocket’s folds.

“What did you mean, then?” she asked. “Toothbrushes and various dental necessities: check.”

Nodding, Mia pulled her head out of the backpack.

“Thomas, this one’s done,” she called before turning to Rowan. “The flirting. I’m talking about you flirting with Asher.”

With a guffaw tearing out of her, Rowan let the pocket she was holding snap closed, but Mia was watching her with a carefully neutral expression, and Thomas was far too focused on slowly placing the backpack in the wagon.

“Oh, shit,” Rowan said. “I was flirting?”

“That’s certainly what it looked like,” Thomas said.

“*Avan* damnit.”

Huffing, Rowan rested her hands on her hips, lowering her head while she chewed on her lip.

“I wasn’t trying to flirt. You two know how I am with that sort of thing,” she said. “Besides, even if I wanted to flirt, I wouldn’t do it now, not consciously. With our current circumstances as they are, romance must *absolutely* be set aside. For now.”

Straightening, Thomas dusted his hands off, narrowing his eyes at Asher. The other boy was helping Rowan’s mom with... something. She couldn’t tell what it was from this distance, but they were laughing, which was nice to see. Anything that distracted Bay or John from their losses was welcome right now.

“So, you don’t find him attractive?” Thomas asked.

Cocking her head, Rowan said, “I mean... he’s pretty enough to look at, sure, but when I do, it doesn’t fill me with lust or anything. Nobody ever has. Besides, why does it matter, especially given, you know, *aliens?*”

With a head shake, Thomas said, “You’re right, of course. Sensible Rowan, ever to the rescue.”

He moved to take the suitcase from Rowan, but when he touched it, Mia clawed at him.

“I wasn’t done with that one,” she hissed.

Laughing under her breath, Rowan checked how much those two had left to unload, briefly wondering where their father had run off to, before stalking toward a second group of people. The corporal she’d set to watch John was gone. Instead, he was in the middle of handing a crate up to Liam, but Rowan didn’t care about her brother’s currently precarious positioning. She smacked the back of his head.

“I would appreciate it,” she hissed, “if you refrained from making drama for the time being.”

“Ow!”

Once Liam had the crate, John rubbed his skull.

“*What* drama?” he snapped.

“You know what? It doesn’t matter. I’m creating my own drama right now, which is stupid, especially since I *didn’t care* a few minutes ago,” Rowan said. “Just... can you please focus on what we’re doing? Don’t get distracted with trying to set me up on a date.”

“Ok! *Avan*, Rowan,” John said. “Why are you so intense all of a sudden?”

Oh, the answer she could give her brother. That while they’d spent five minutes at the most with getting their belongings on the jet, it had been too long. That she didn’t like the implication of anything romantic in her life, not now. Sex? Sure, if there was time. Romance, on the other hand, could take a big fucking step back until nothing was breathing down their neck.

But she said none of this. Getting in John's face, she poked his shoulder.

"I want to *survive*," she growled.

John blinked at her a few times, and with each shuttering of his lids over his eyes, his gaze softened, but whatever he'd been gearing up to say got interrupted by Liam as he dropped onto the tarmac.

"In the spirit of survival, I'd like it if you two carried these," he said, reaching for his ankle and waist. "My job is to protect the Kolb family, and considering my job is my purpose in life..."

When he offered each of them a handgun, they carefully took the weapons. John kept his pointed at the ground while Liam removed the weapons' holsters.

Meanwhile, Rowan turned aside, checking her surroundings before lifting the gun to press its magazine release. Once that was free, she glanced at the magazine, and yes, bullets were in there. Pocketing those, she pulled the handgun's slide back, making sure nothing extra was waiting for her in its chamber, before aiming at a bunch of trees. Only then did she move her finger to the trigger and squeeze it, expecting and getting no shots fired. Now that she *knew* it was unloaded, she could move forward: returning the magazine to the handgun's grip before holstering it.

In Athari, one of the many qualifications that were required before someone could own a gun was showing that one inherently knew how to safely handle the weapon. Rowan wished she understood the laws and regulations that had once maintained this standard, but when in history and politics classes during college, she'd always nodded off. When she had questions about those subjects, she usually turned to Mia, the closest to an expert in those fields that Rowan knew.

But how to safely handle a gun? She excelled at that.

Once both of their firearms had been holstered, Liam gave the siblings approving nods.

"Your parents and instructors have taught you well," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I must ensure Lady Bay is properly armed as well before we board this jet."

"I'll go with you," Rowan said. "If you don't mind."

Bowing, Liam said, "I'm at your disposal, Lady Rowan."

Meeting John's gaze, Rowan rolled her eyes.

"I appreciate the respect you mean to give me, Lieutenant Avisbell," she said, "but if you bow to me again, I will show you why *no one* wanted to spar with me toward the end of my combat training."

Rising from his bow, Liam frowned at her.

"Then, forgive my bluntness, but how am I supposed to treat you, ma'am?" he asked.

“When in public, I’m your superior officer,” Rowan said, “but when no one else is around, save for my family, I am your equal, Liam. In all things.”

Hesitating, Liam looked to John for his approval, which was going to get irritating eventually. Yeah, he was the head of House Kolb but *come on*. He didn’t always know best.

Still, Rowan kept her cool while John nodded.

“In that case, I’d be happy if you came with me,” Liam said.

They parted ways with John, and as they move toward Asher and her mom, Rowan note with satisfaction that the group was almost ready to board the jet and get the *fuck* out of Xygek. When no one was within earshot, however, Liam slowed down.

“I was wondering if I might ask you a personal question,” he said.

Avan, getting this man to relax around her was going to be a pain in the ass, wasn’t it?

“I just told you to treat me as your equal,” Rowan said. “Feel free to ask me anything you like.”

“Then-”

Liam stopped, bringing her up short as well.

“How are you so put together right now?” he asked. “I’m almost falling apart myself, but you... you’ve lost so much, but you keep right on going, standing strong for us.”

No. No, no, no. How had he found the *worst possible question* he could ask?

Because hearing Liam, someone Rowan hardly knew, observe that she seemed unaffected by what had happened yanked her free of her deliberate ignorance. Everyone who’d seen her laughing with Asher, teasing her friends, ribbing her brother, did they think Icrodon’s destruction hadn’t affected her? Did they think she didn’t *miss* the people who’d been lost, an ache a thousand times worse than anything physically could be?

Couldn’t they see that she was only doing what she had to? She couldn’t think about the dead, both the many she’d never know and the five precious few who’d been hers. She *couldn’t*.

When she next blinked, her mom had taken Liam’s place, although he was hovering nearby. She looked worried, glancing over Rowan’s head every so often and tugging on her, but Rowan didn’t care.

“Mama...” she sobbed. “I can’t do it. I can’t- I can’t! I need it to *stop*.”

Her mom snapped her focus to Rowan. Taking hold of her shirt, Bay drew her to closer, almost lifting her off of her feet, and Rowan froze, inside and out. Her mom wasn’t this strong. Was she?

Jutting her face forward, Bay hissed, “*Yes, you fucking can Rowan Veronica Kolb. I have lost my wife and four damn children today. I will. not. lose another one. So, stop this, and get on the damn plane. Preferably before we’re turned to vapor.*”

With her mouth hanging open, Rowan tried to figure out who this woman in front of her was. This couldn’t be Bay, who was always in her wife’s shadow, always helping where she could, always unsure of her position in foreign Atharian culture. This was-

This was mom. Shoya Dren mom. The woman her mother from Athari had fallen in love with.

And she was afraid. Why?

When Rowan glanced around them, Bay loosened her grip, only to drag her toward Asher’s jet with Liam on their heels, but as her mom spun her, Rowan understood why she’d returned to the base of who she was.

What she’d feared since this morning had occurred. An alien aircraft had arrived to blot out the sky.

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