

# Chapter 15: Holy Shit, Holy Shit, Holy-

They were the last ones on the jet with everyone else already buckled down in their seats, and mom threw Rowan at one of the few left available, beside Thomas. She did something at the hatch—Rowan couldn't see what—before running toward them, screaming.

“Go, Asher!”

In the instant Bay hit a seat, reaching for its belt, the jet accelerated.

“This is going to be bumpy, everyone,” Asher said with his voice coming from the speakers. “I’ll leave my mic on in case I need help in the cockpit but otherwise...”

His far-too-calm voice fell quiet as they lifted off of the ground.

Rowan had never flown before. River and roadways had always been sufficient for any travel she'd had to make in the past, so this stomach-dropping-through-her-feet sensation was new, and she wasn't sure if she liked it. In fact, she might have thought the feeling was the effect of an enemy weapon or something equally as devastating if Asher hadn't been so utterly quiet in the cockpit.

Far too much of Rowan wanted to race up there and make sure he was ok with nothing impairing his judgment, and she might have indulged that impulse if she hadn't spent the last few weeks with Asher. She knew this quiet, one that fell when he was concentrating, so she didn't move.

Others found it more disturbing.

Beside her, Thomas was jittering his leg, and no matter how much Mia rubbed his arm or his father glared at him, he couldn't stop chewing the hell out of his lip. After about two minutes of this, which Rowan was sure felt interminably longer to him, he started undoing his lap belt's buckle.

“Fuck it,” he said.

Only Rowan and Mia's grips on his wrists keep him from standing.

Rowan said, “Everything's ok. If there were a problem, Asher would have said something.”

Mia only said, “He's fine.”

Rowan wasn't sure which of them calmed Thomas down, but he collapsed, turning to bury his face in Rowan's shoulder, while the weird feeling that had been tugging on her stomach relented. They

soared through the sky in a tense, roaring monotone for perhaps a few minutes. Then, the speakers crackled again.

"That's weird," Asher said.

Which was *not* something someone wanted to hear from the person who had one's life in their hands. Rowan started growling under her breath, even as Asher continued.

"I need someone's help up here."

Oh... that hadn't been a good tone of voice. Also.

"Why are all of you looking at me?" Rowan asked.

"You know him best," her mom said. "You'll catch any nuances from him that we might miss."

"*Now,*" Asher shouted over the speaker with his voice rising in pitch.

With a snarl, Rowan unbuckled her lap belt and stormed toward the cockpit, praying the whole time that the floor wouldn't leap beneath her. When she crashed into the seat beside Asher, he didn't glance at her, merely swiping at a few things on the touch screen between them without looking at it. A radial indicator, much like what was used to measure a car's speed or its engine's heat, flashed onto the screen in front of her.

"I need two things from you," Asher said, tensed. Scared. "Tell me if that starts flashing red and keep an eye out for our enemies."

"Our enemies?"

Asher nodded to something outside of the cockpit's canopy, and glancing where indicated, Rowan barely contained her scream. The same claw-like object that had ruined every life in Lutov loomed large ahead of them, getting closer with every second, and the cloud of blips around it was swarming toward them.

"*The hell are you doing?*" she shouted.

Wincing, Asher said, "Taking the most direct route away from Xygek, one that has the best chance of throwing our pursuers off of our tail. Assuming we survive this next part, of course."

"Are you aware that you're flying us *straight at the enemy?*" Rowan snapped.

Asher took a steady breath.

"No, Rowan, I thought the thing that nearly wiped out both of our families was friendly--"

Yelping, he pushed into whatever the hell he was holding, and they dove toward the ground with the force of it pushing Rowan into her seat. Almost immediately afterward, a beam of light zipped

over the top of the jet's canopy, and Asher leveled them off with his face tight.

"That's why I'm arrowing us toward our enemy," he said, far too calmly. "It's in the way of our flight path, and if we try to go around—"

He jerked on something, and they banked to the left while a ribbed-and-ivory object flashed past so close to them that its slipstream rattled the jet.

"—*those* things will overwhelm us," Asher continued. "Maybe if we get through them and out the other side, they'll lose interest in us, but for now—"

Again, acceleration pushed Rowan into leather, and her vision splotted for a second.

"—I have to avoid the damn things and everything they're shooting at us, and *this jet isn't built to handle the maneuvers I'm pulling*," Asher said with a note of hysteria disturbing his calm. "So, do what I fucking told you to do!"

Damn, Rowan had never heard him curse so much before. She wondered if he still had the cabin's speaker transmitting.

They lurched to the side as an aircraft—distinctly alien in nature this time—silently shot beneath them.

"Rowan!"

Swallowing, Rowan yanked her eyes to the screen in front of her.

"You're good," she said. "No red."

Then, she scanned the sky around them, above and below, or as much of it as she could see at least.

"Two o'clock. Thirty degrees above."

Rowan didn't know if Asher knew military terminology like that or if he was smart enough to figure it out without an explanation, but either way, he got them out of the way of the distant streak of light that had been hurtling for them.

They continued like this for the most intense Rowan didn't know how long of her life. It was probably a couple of minutes at most.

Asher didn't need many call-outs from her, avoiding things that would have ripped the jet to pieces with a split second to spare, and Rowan couldn't help but marvel at that. He couldn't have been trained for this. Who was going to teach someone how to fight in the air when humanity hardly ever left the ground?

All the same, he was *good* at it, and Rowan didn't just mean when it came to his flying. His calm and ridiculous self-assuredness in the face of impossible odds? She was well acquainted with those

two qualities. She'd experienced them in intense combat simulations. She was in their grip now.

As they darted beneath an enormous, alien claw, Rowan was far removed from her body and the circumstances she'd found myself in. Her consciousness had loosened its grip with something ever-present but buried beneath the surface peeking through. It was almost like what happened when she went dancing and lost herself to the beat, but a part of her refused to fully let go this time, making her watch each of their near-misses in excruciating detail.

Then, a beam of light connected instead of harmlessly flashing past, and the jet *shuddered*, making Rowan's view of the horizon violently wobble.

"Not good," Asher said under his breath.

Snapping her head to him, Rowan said, "*What's* not good?"

Still focused, Asher said, "Don't worry about it. Do your job."

But she couldn't anymore. She tried, truly, and they made it out from under the claw's shadow, but as soon as they were free of it, something shook the jet like a baby would with a rattle, and when Rowan's lap belt barely kept her pinned in place, she hoped everyone else had been smart enough to keep theirs on.

"*Crap*," Asher hissed.

The jet's nose tilted toward the ground, and he started *furiously* moving, swiping at touch screens while pulling back on the... wheel? Yoke? Rowan didn't know what it was called.

For a brief second, she focused on remembering its name because doing that was keeping her from acknowledging the fact that-

"We're crashing," she said.

Never taking his eyes off of what he was doing, Asher said, "Yes."

*What?* No! He was supposed to reassure her. Tell her everything would be fine. That was what pilots did! At least, that was what Rowan thought. It was what commanding officers told their subordinates when there was no way the squad was getting out of a situation alive. He could *lie* to her, damnit!

But *no*. Rowan was going to die, and she'd be angry when she did, pissed about something like this. Hell, what had she last said to Mia? Thomas? Did her mom and John know how much she loved them? They had to know. They *couldn't* leave this world, ignorant of it like- like-

"Please stop screaming, Rowan," Asher tightly said. "Making this landing is going to be difficult enough for me."

Making... this...

“We’re not going to die?” Rowan breathed.

“Don’t get your hopes up yet,” Asher said.

*Avan*, they were so close to the ground. Across the plains beneath them, a herd of elk fled from the horror of plummeting metal. Considering the flat expanse in all directions, at least they wouldn’t have to worry about trees.

Wait, no trees. No covers. The *things* chasing them would tear them apart when-

Their speed abruptly stopped, and Rowan hurtled toward a screen.

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