

Chapter 16: Catching Our Breath

Something was wrong. Rowan didn't remember what it was, couldn't decide what could have gone wrong, but something was. Something-

A loud noise... voice... crash... tugged at her. Moaning, she flailed, looking for Mia. Thomas and Asher had argued last night. She wasn't happy with them, but Mia... Mia was good. Mia was soft and warm and... she'd help Rowan figure it out, her secondary family, and when Anthony and the rest came home, she'd... What would she-?

"...allied yourself with *Cerullis*, of all families, Bay? It's no wonder you're in such bad shape. The brat probably crashed his jet while trying to kill off a rival House."

"And himself in the process, Ethan? Really? Look, I only requested a connection with you to update you on our status. I don't have to listen to you if you're going to act like *this*."

"You little...! No. *Avan* damnit, you're right. I'm sorry I'm being such an ass. I know I'm not likable but this... I'm sorry."

"It's ok I get it."

"It's just that I—"

"I miss her too."

"—miss her."

"Of course you do. She was your sister."

"She was your *wife*. Hell, I can't even imagine what that's like."

"No. You can't. But I can't imagine how it would feel if Hailey..."

"Yes, well. It's not great but... why are we talking about this again? Don't you have better things to do after *surviving a plane crash* than speak with me?"

"I'm doing the best thing I possibly can right now: making sure my babies are ok."

"...Are they hurt?"

“John only has a few scrapes and bruises, thank *avan*. We think Rowan might have a concussion, but we won’t be sure until she wakes up.”

“She’s going to be fine, Bay. Everything will be...”

Something was wrong.

Something was wrong.

Some-

Chill fingers brushed through Rowan’s hair, plucking at its strands. A damp spot spread along her back with something sodden trying to reach her goosebump-pricked skin. There was a smell in the air, a tinge of oil, an enormous amount of smoke, but none of that last scent was entering her nose or mouth. She could breathe.

Why was she so cold?

Opening her eyes took effort with their lids languidly peeling back, but once that was done, Rowan could see stars. A light source nearby was trying to drown them out, but it wasn’t a city’s lights, and it certainly wasn’t the sun. The far distant stars prevailed.

Unsteadily, Rowan lifted herself onto her elbows with a blanket falling into her lap. Someone had built a fire nearby—the source of the smoke, she presumed—and several people, concealed by shadows, were huddled around it. On the other side of her, the earth had been turned into a mound, a knee-high line of it, with a metal cylinder resting along its length. The tube rose at a slight angle with landing gear keeping its tail aloft, and one wing almost succeeded where the fire had failed in blocking Rowan’s view of the stars.

In between these two sights, only plains lay with a few dots of light—towns most likely—on the horizon.

“Your friend did good. We started dropping, and I thought for sure we were dead, especially with you screaming bloody murder, but... he did well.”

Relaxing, Rowan tilted her head back, smiling at the figure standing over her.

“John,” she said.

“Hey, tiny bean,” John said. “It’s good to see you awake.”

While he folded to the ground, Rowan wrinkled her nose.

“What happened? The jet crashed and...”

She scrunched her eyebrows together.

“I thought I heard mom. Is she ok?”

“Fine. Arguing with Asher, Lieutenant Avisbell, and Oscar freaking Shalen about what to do next,” John said, pointing to the clustered group. “We’re lucky. Everyone’s alive, and our worst injury was a broken arm.”

Scooching under her, John pressed on Rowan’s forehead until she laid back in his lap.

“Why aren’t you...?” she started.

“Mom’s been watching you near constantly since we pulled you out of the jet. She needed a break,” John said. “And she’s better at... that—”

He flung a hand toward the people discussing their plans.

“—than me. Although I guess I’ll have to learn how to argue like her soon.”

Making a disgusted noise, he stroked her hair.

“You’ll be...”

Rowan didn’t know how to finish that statement, though, mostly because her head had started *fiercely* aching. Squinting, she turned away from the firelight, which was only making that ache worse. What had she been telling John?

Had it been about how something felt off? Why did her subconscious keep trying to trip her into a fight or flight reaction? Something was wrong...

Or maybe it wasn’t.

“Since we’re not worm food right now, I’m guessing the aliens have left us alone?” Rowan asked.

Nodding, John said, “They’d gone once we stumbled out of the jet with even that massive ship of theirs having disappeared from the sky. We’re not sure what happened, but we’re alive so...”

He shrugged before stretching toward something on the other side of her.

“But you shouldn’t worry about that,” he said. “We’re safe for the moment, away from the city’s mobs and with nothing alien in sight. You should look through this and make sure I packed everything you’ll need for the next few days. Lieutenant Avisbell wants to make a stop in Nasmi tomorrow for a few things. Let me know what you want added to the list.”

John plopped a knapsack onto the ground beside Rowan, which had her frowning up at him. Why did she feel like he was manipulating her into something right now?

Pulling the knapsack to her chest, she unzipped it, first digging something fuzzy and soft from it. Black and tan, Aurora stared up at Rowan with beady eyes, and she stared right back. She’d had the stuffed hedgehog for as long as she could remember, the only thing she owned that had come from her birth parents. Aurora had been her companion through the best and worst of times, and

she could not sleep without the stuffed animal. She wasn't sure why that was.

Rowan hugged the stuffed animal to her chest, burying her nose and mouth into the hedgehog's face, and an irrational part of her found herself at home. After nuzzling her, Rowan trapped Aurora between the knapsack and her stomach so she could draw out the next few items.

Two sets of sensible outfits and a pair of sturdy boots were soon spread on the dried grass around her, and she nodded with approval. John had made good choices. An obligatory hygiene pack followed these, but after that came something that turned her nerve endings completely numb.

It was a framed photograph, carefully wrapped in a jacket. In it, Rowan was wearing one of those awful gowns that one was forced to wear during college graduations with her hair a mess and all of her joyous and exposed for the world to see. She'd hooked her arm around Henry's neck, dragging him down so she could knead her knuckles into his scalp. He'd made some ribald joke the moment before, and there was John at his side, caught halfway through rolling his eyes.

Logan was on her other side, leaning in to lick her cheek, because of *course he was*. The younger boys had always fucking *loved* making trouble, spending hours planning pranks between them.

Paisley had her arms crossed and her eyes raised to the heavens while Veronica was swatting the back of Logan's head, even with a fond smile in place. Anthony stood off to the side, tired and proud, and Bay watched everything by her wife's side with her mischievous side showing through her approving half-smile.

It certainly wasn't the most flattering picture of the Kolb family, but it was more candid than the formal portraits Rowan had sat through. She clung to its frame so hard that she thought she might break the glass, and air shuddered in and out of her lungs.

"That's one of my favorites," John said. "The last of the Kolb children leaves the safety of school, young and ready to conquer the world. Look at us now."

The fire nearby popped, filling his weighty silence, and Rowan teetered on the edge of something she didn't want, about to slide into a shattering that she'd staved off for almost twelve hours.

"I know it's one of your fondest memories," John continued. "Not many people showed up for your graduation, sure. Far less than any of us expected, but still, we were there, and don't think we failed to notice how much that lit you up. I swear to *avan*, you nearly blinded us when you came running our way after the ceremony."

He slowly breathed out with that air skipping over an impediment in his throat.

"I hate thinking about how much we ignored you. Fucking hell, all the things we thought were so important seem *so damn pointless* now..."

"And the ones who mattered are gone," Rowan hollowly finished.

"Yes."

Oh, how that word, had been ripped from her brother, twining around the awfulness coiling in her, and she couldn't keep the monster down anymore.

"They're *gone*, John," she said.

When she tried to shoot upright, Rowan ended up right back in his lap with those cursed stars above them whirling.

"What do we do?" she whispered.

She hated the shake in her voice and the heat in her eyes.

"How do we keep living without them? How is the world still spinning when they're *fucking gone*?"

And she screamed, at what she didn't know. The noise was deafening and awful, and Rowan was pounding against what had made it until something stopped her.

But by then, the scream had turned intelligible.

"WHY?"

It was an idiotic question. Rowan knew life was stupid and cruel and indifferent to all those who suffered, but she couldn't help voicing this protest, this uncontainable cry of indignity forced into a single word, one she was sure countless other people across Lutov had asked themselves today. She'd hoped she might hold out on joining them until the sun had dawned on a new day, but here she was with her face sticky from tears and a dribbling nose, and her throat was screaming its own protest about how much she'd abused it.

She didn't dare let herself consider why she was in this much pain, not consciously at least. She just rode waves of grief with no heading to point her toward a safe harbor and no rudder to steer her there. Would she ever heal from this, or would this heartache plague her for the rest of her life?

If so, she didn't want to live like this.

Almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, something knotted and dragged itself through her hair, but it was comforting, this pull, and a voice lifted and dropped in a pleasing pattern, a melody Rowan had known since she'd been small. *Light the stars, my warrior child; Keep the dark at bay.*

The song, an old favorite from her childhood, reached into her and licked at her wounds, drawing her back to where her mother was kneeling beside her with a hand on her head. To John with his bitten lip, the smallest blood droplet swelling beneath a tooth, and his body, limp and barely upright. They were both staring at nothing, into the past, at things that were never to be. Mom was singing as if she was a radio, mindlessly repeating something fed to her, and Rowan couldn't make herself lift her hands to stroke her mom's cheek or squeeze John's hand.

They were all of them caught in the tempest that true loss brought, one that couldn't be explained to those who'd never experienced it, but the solidarity found in three of them, a House left

dangerously swaying in the wake of this storm's wind, eased what was clogging Rowan's heart so badly that she thought it would rupture, squeezing her lungs so hard she couldn't breathe.

And oh hell, it still hurt. She didn't think it would ever stop aching, these five pits never to be filled again, but this was one of the ways humans helped one another. Rowan was not alone in her grief, and because of that, she would survive it.

So, taking a deep breath, she sat upright, swaying, and spun to her family, and when she threw her arms around them, pulling them together, her heart resumed a ponderously throbbing beat. They were stuck in place for a while, shuddering themselves into something that resembled stability, until someone gently cleared her throat above them.

"I thought you might want to join us for supper," Aunt Hailey said. "We have everything ready."

Disentangling from them, Bay wiped at her eyes.

"That's a good idea. We'll be there in a second."

The shadowed shape of Hailey made a vague sign of acknowledgment, but it mostly passed beneath Rowan's notice as her mom clasps her and John's shoulders.

"We can do this," she quietly said. "We can live and fight, no matter how hard it gets."

John swung his hand to trap hers against his shoulder before Rowan closed her eyes, nuzzling into her mother. Standing, Bay offered them help up, straining against their weight, and the three of them crunch across drying grass to join the others around the fire.

Everyone was quiet, mechanically eating from flame-heated soup cans, but Rowan didn't know if anyone could bring themselves to speak. The evidence of their near-death experience today loomed not a thousand paces away, and of course, they were all a little shell-shocked from what had happened over the course of this long day, or they looked it, at least.

The two troopers didn't seem too bad off, even with Liam helping his subordinate eat. Rowan wasn't sure if or how Corporal Spheris—she should really learn his first name—had had his broken arm set. Had anyone thought to pack medical supplies in their mad dash out of the capital? She hoped they had and that he wasn't in too much pain. Considering what suffering through a broken arm without painkillers might be like made Rowan feel queasy.

Although that nausea might also have been caused by her blinding headache.

Her family was exactly as one might suspect: reserved and lost in themselves, although Aunt Hailey gently bumped her shoulder into her sister's from time to time.

Across from Rowan, Mia was leaning against her father, staring into the glowing kindling. Her spoon's trips between a can and her mouth were sluggish with something lively absent from her at the moment, and what had stolen it had cast the same effect on Oscar. He made the occasional unhappy face after swallowing another bite, but he didn't say a word about how basic their food

was, which from the few times Rowan had interacted with the man, seemed like a minor miracle.

Thomas was... not here. Rowan wasn't surprised that he was nowhere near his father, and his refined palate might have had him skipping this meal, but at a time like this, he wouldn't leave Mia alone without a good reason.

Finished with her food, Rowan set the empty can in front of her, scanning the horizon and finding nothing.

"Where's Thomas?" she asked.

At that, a couple of heads jerked her way, but most of the people here remained listless, although Mia perked up. She pointed toward the nose of the crashed jet.

"He went that way," she said. "Said something about checking on Asher."

Asher... Asher!

When Rowan leapt to her feet, she wobbled with the world spinning around her.

"Rowan..." someone at her feet said.

"I'll be right back," she said over him.

As she carefully balanced over the lurching ground toward the jet, Rowan wondered why she'd forgotten about Asher for so long. He'd saved them, getting them out of the city during incredibly stressful circumstances. How could she forget about that?

But when she reached the jet, stumbling to support herself on its metal side while vomiting up the meal she'd just eaten, she thought she knew the answer to that question. What had her mom said in the swirl of conversation she'd heard while half-conscious?

'We think Rowan might have a concussion, but we won't be sure until she wakes up'?

That would be inconvenient to deal with. Rowan wondered if anyone else had noticed her blatant symptoms and if they had, why they were letting her run around in the dark, alone. Sure, it wouldn't be especially difficult to find her if she collapsed but still...

Wiping her mouth, she continued moving toward the jet's nose. Now that she knew about her probable concussion, she should probably return to the fire, but she couldn't force her feet to do that, and she didn't know why. She just... couldn't.

When she reached where the nose began its dig into the earth with the line between canopy and metal sweeping at an angle over her head, Rowan pressed the back of her hand to her nose and mouth. She'd noticed a foul smell a while ago, but combined with the sight ahead, it was walloping her in the face now. A mess of fur, viscera, and horn was splattered around the tip of the jet's nose, and at the top of this small, gruesome crater, Rowan could see half of a figure.

She couldn't tell if it was Thomas or Asher, but whichever boy it was, he was hugging his elbows like letting go of them might kill him. When Rowan turned to scramble up the side of the crater and get out of this *horrifying* pit, Asher's voice pinned her in place.

"You can stop standing there. I've felt you staring at me for a while now."

He'd *what*? Rowan had only been standing here for a few seconds!

Unless her concussion was making her lose time. That would be bad.

Before Rowan could panic, another figure came to a stop beside the half-hidden one.

"I didn't know if I should join you or not."

Thomas. Of course. That was who Asher had been talking to. *Avan*, Rowan was such an idiot. She should get up there and-

"I almost killed her," Asher said. "A little further down and she'd be dead, all because I needed a co-pilot. I should have been able to handle that flight all by myself."

A little further?

When Rowan glanced up at the canopy, her mouth went dry. A particularly long tine of an elk's horns had been punched through its glass, and if she was judging that angle right, it should have gone through her head too. *Avan*, Asher was right. If the crash hadn't careened her forward, she'd be dead right now.

"Hey, I won't deny that listening to Rowan scream while we fell out of the sky froze my heart over," Thomas said, "but she's fine, man, and you... hell, Asher. You were *fantastic*. Think about everyone you saved! Who cares if you needed a little help with doing it?"

Asher tightened his finger on his elbows so much that Rowan was certain he'd snap a bone.

"Max would have," he said.

...Max? His father?

Oh... hell. Rowan needed to let those two know she was here. She *shouldn't* eavesdrop, accidentally or not, on a conversation of the sort this was turning into.

"Then, he'd have been dead wrong," Thomas said.

Damn. That intensity only came from Rowan's friend when he was exceptionally upset about something. The only times she'd heard it before had been when a couple of boys got pissy over Mia refusing their advances or the single time Rowan had witnessed someone attack a woman in Xygek's transgender neighborhood. Damn, Thomas had looked so proud once he and that girl had been finished with the fight, black eye and all.

And he was using that same tone for *this*? Was Rowan... was she missing something?

With a sigh, Asher released his hold on his elbows, letting his hands swing to his sides.

"I know," he said.

He was quiet for a moment while a breeze rustled through the grass stalks, and unsure what to do, Rowan was frozen. What was going on up there had turned into something she shouldn't interrupt, just as much as she shouldn't overhear it. She'd like to back away and maybe approach from another angle in a little bit, but the silence was so deep that she was afraid the slightest noise would alert the boys to her. So, she held perfectly still.

An unnerving laugh broke the quiet.

"It's funny," Asher soon said "I hated Max for so many, many reasons, but now that he's gone..."

"It still hurts," Thomas said, "and you probably had a lot you wanted to tell him."

Hesitantly, he rested a hand on Asher's shoulder.

"If you ever need someone to, I don't know... listen, I'd be happy-"

Asher knocked Thomas' hand off of him with scuffling sound accompanying the visible half of his body disappearing behind the jet. He was gasping, frantic for air, and Thomas hadn't moved, stuck with his hand half-raised.

"I *don't*-"

Hell, such raw ferocity. Even as Asher cut off, those two, small, seemingly meaningless words sliced through the air.

"I don't need your pity, Thomas," he eventually continued, calmer. "I don't need your friendship, no matter how-"

A sob cut him off, and Rowan's heart lurched. He was crying. Thomas fucking Shalen better do something about that before she came up there like a screaming banshee and tore into what had hurt her friend, no matter how invisible and incorporeal it was.

Lowering his hand, Thomas said, "Ok. I get it. You don't need me as a friend."

Not helping! *Avan* above, that was *not* helping.

"But do you want me?" Thomas continued.

...Better. It certainly stopped Asher's crying, which was ultimately what Rowan had wanted.

"Friendship is unnecessary."

Oh, hell. This... this was *so* much worse.

Like an automaton, Asher recited, "Friends are unreliable. They'll fail you when you need them. Friends are a weakness. They'll put you in compromising situations that you'd otherwise avoid. Friends are ever malicious in the end. They'll learn your *deepest* secret and share it with the world. We, as nobles, can't afford that risk, so cut them out of your life, or I—"

Holy shit, someone had done a number on him. Did Thomas see it? Please, say he did.

"What about Rowan?" he dully asked. "Is she your friend, or are you using her? Because if she's just a tool to you, I *will* tear you apart."

"Rowan is..."

Yes? She was what? Rowan knew she was his friend, despite whatever bullshit he might decide to spew now, and yeah, that friendship was fragile, not nearly as deep as what she had with Mia and Thomas, but here and now, she was hurting in equal parts for both of her friends, trapped in a disaster of their own making. She was begging with everything she had for one of them to say something that would fix this.

"Different," Asher said before continuing as if the words had been torn from him. "Not you."

Oh, no.

"I... see," Thomas said. "I suppose I'll just... go then."

"Probably best."

With a strangled inhale, Thomas spun in place before marching away, and after the crunch of his footfalls faded, a muffled scream did its best to follow.

"*Avan* damnit!" Asher shouted. "*Damn* it!"

His knees hit the ground with something thumping into the side of the jet.

"*Fuck* you, Max. I did what you said. I can break a tiny rule after that."

The metal beside Rowan rumbled again while quiet crying started up again.

"I hate you, dad. I hate you so much."

Then, why did it feel like he was saying 'love' as well?

After a bit, Asher slapped his face, stomping away, and Rowan just...

Exhausted, she rubbed her face, adding a fissure between her friends to the problems she needed to tackle tomorrow. With the world spinning even more than before, it took her a while to return to the others, so when she drop beside John and everything around her fell still, she silently cheered.

"You all right?" her brother said. "You look a little worn."

“Yeah, well. No one told me we crashed into a *herd of elk*, so that was fun,” Rowan said. “Also, I have a concussion.”

“I know,” John said. “I was planning to come after you if-”

Mia flopped in front of them.

“Ok. What happened?” she demanded. “You usually know about this sort of thing before me, so... why is Thomas-?”

She waved at where her brother was barely sitting within the firelight’s glow, facing the dark while hunched over on himself. Rowan sighed before reluctantly saying.

“He and Asher had another argument.”

With color draining from her face, Mia said, “I swear to *avan*. I thought my senseless brother had figured out-”

“It was Asher’s fault this time,” Rowan said, “although I wouldn’t get in his face about it tonight.”

Mia gave her a skeptical look while John leaned away to examine her.

“Why?” her friend asked.

Rowan didn’t know if she should share this. What she’d heard included a lot of personal information, but she didn’t know if she could handle this particular problem alone. Plus, secrets had seldom done anyone any good. So, she told her friend and brother a little of what had happened, although she did her best to be sparse with the details.

“That poor boy,” Mia whispered once Rowan had finished.

She looked horrified.

“So, you caught the implications too?” Rowan asked.

“They seem pretty obvious,” John growled.

The fury practically billowing from Rowan’s brother didn’t surprise her. He’d always *hated* parents who hurt their children, whether physically, mentally, or emotionally, using the example of their mothers and... previous experience to understand how utterly blessed the Kolb children were. Before... today, he’d spent quite a lot of time in homeless youth centers, helping people he might have once known, so Rowan had known this would get to him. Hopefully, he had the good sense to contain himself about it for now.

“I wonder what else-” Mia started.

“No.”

Cupping her cheek, Rowan brushed her finger over Mia's skin.

"You *cannot* act differently around him, cannot give in to your innately human sense of curiosity," she said. "Nothing's changed about him except now you know another part of why he is who he is. Besides, don't you have bigger things to worry about? If the past is any experience to go by, Thomas will probably be acting out a lot over the next few days."

Making a face, Mia said, "That'll be fun."

Rowan patted her cheek.

"Wrangling Thomas under control is one of your top five skills," she said. "I'm pretty sure *at least* one person would have kicked the crap out of him by now, if not for you."

"The lucky bastard," Mia said under her breath.

Chuckling, John said, "He's friends with Rowan and has a remarkably intelligent, lovely young woman for a sister, so yes. He's lucky."

Rowan narrowed her eyes at her brother. Was he... flirting with Mia? It had sounded like it to her, but she had an incredibly hard time with deciphering the subtle ways people showed each other their interest, and everyone in her life knew it. At the very least, Mia hadn't reacted to what her brother had said, and he didn't seem upset by that. Maybe she was misreading the situation?

"In any case," John continued, "where is Asher? I'm surprised you didn't go looking for him after everything."

"I'm right here."

Stepping into the firelight, Asher looked down at John.

"Did you need something?"

With his eyes popping, John rapidly shook his head, which had Asher drawing his eyebrows together, but whatever had caught his attention, he ignored it. He brought one of the cases in his hands to hold in front of his chest.

"Attention, everyone," he said. "I come bearing gifts and peace offerings. Maybe with this, we can start smoothing ruffled feathers."

Rowan might have helped his not-so-subtle apology along if what he was displaying for them didn't already have her on her feet with her hands outstretched.

"Is that *beer*?" she asked.

"Indeed."

Asher sets two twelve-packs at his feet.

“Something reminded me about my dad’s secret stash on the jet, so I went looking for it,” he said. “They’re not cold, but after the day we’ve had, I didn’t think anyone would mind. Plus, we deserve a drink.”

“Holy hell,” someone whispered.

Hurrying over, Liam crouched as if to inspect the cases for traps before rising to enthusiastically shake Asher’s hand.

“You, sir, are my new favorite,” he said.

With a weak laugh, Asher said, “I don’t suppose that means you’ll consider serving my family instead of the Kolbs?”

Bending to open the twelve-packs, Liam made a rude gesture at Asher without looking up.

“Not a chance in hell.”

Laughter broke apart any hesitation the group might have been clinging to as each of them came forward to claim a bottle. Corporal Spheris handed over the bottle opener on his keychain, which had quite a lot gratitude showered on him. Even Thomas emerged from his sulk, and as he stalked forward, Asher backed off. Their eyes met for a moment while a lord made as subtle of a bow to an untitled as possible, and huffing, Thomas snatched a beer for himself.

By unspoken agreement, they circled a rapidly dying fire with no one drinking until they were arranged. Here they were, these ten humans bereft of a home. These ten intent on surviving.

Raising her bottle, Bay called, “To all those lost.”

Murmured approval rumbled into the night, and hesitantly, Rowan lifted her drink as well.

“But also, to our new world.”

May they live to see what would be born from this. May we feeble humans be strong enough to shape it.

Meeting Rowan’s eyes, Mia said, “To a new world.”

And they drank. And the stars shone on them.

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