

Chapter 17: A World in Chaos

The only other time Rowan had seen traffic this bad had been on her way home from the Cerullis' estate yesterday, but that made sense. The people here were fleeing from the same thing.

The plan had been to reach the nearest road and hitch rides from as many people as possible until they reached Nasmi. Once in that town, they'd gather any supplies they'd forgotten in their haste to leave Xygek and continue onward.

That plan was looking increasingly untenable.

The road was *packed* with cars, both sides of it flooded with traffic heading away from Xygek, and none of it was moving. Rowan had seen people inch forward maybe twice in the thirty minutes they'd been walking beside asphalt.

She was surprised so many people were staying in those cars. Obviously, traveling by foot was faster in this particular instance, but still, people clung to their possessions as if those things continued to matter in their new world. Sure, cars would be incredibly useful in the coming days, or one would assume they would be, but right now, when they were hindering forward progress and therefore, survival? Not so much.

It was the same argument Rowan had used on Asher this morning. He'd been... upset, to put it lightly, about leaving so much of his scientific equipment behind, insisting that they'd need it if they were to learn anything useful about the beings that had invaded the planet, and yes, that was true. But this group had needed food and other provisions, the things that would get them through the mountains, more. Fortunately, Asher had accepted Rowan's line of reasoning but...

He was still sulking near the back of the group, pulling along the *one* wagon that Bay had let him use for his possessions.

Rowan kept glancing back at him, unsure what she was looking for. He and Thomas equally looked like shit, but she was used to that from her oldest friend. Thomas had always seemed like a little boy, caught playing in the woods, who'd grown up too fast, and considering how little he slept each day, she didn't tend to notice the thick lines of red that usually rimmed his eyes anymore, an appearance that matched his typically manic behavior.

Asher, on the other hand, had been well-put-together since Rowan had met him: all impeccable grooming, fashionable suits, and a well-rested demeanor. She wasn't sure what to think of the stubble sprouting over his cheeks and chin or his bloodshot eyes. She wasn't sure what to make of

gashed trousers shoved into borrowed boots or a button-down shirt, sweat-stained with the sleeves rolled up.

And that was just her worries for them individually. Together? They'd been avoiding each other since last night, and Rowan didn't know how to fix it.

She needed to fix it.

"They're going to be ok."

With a half-smile, Rowan glanced at Mia, striding beside her with her frizzy hair pulled into a ponytail.

"You really think so?" she asked.

"Mhmm. Maybe not before we're all slaughtered but..."

When Rowan narrowed her eyes at the other girl, Mia stuck her tongue out.

"Shouldn't you be monitoring one of the men in your family," Rowan said, "considering they can hardly do anything without embarrassing themselves, if left alone?"

Making a face, Mia said, "I needed a break. Sometimes, those two can be such pieces of work, and I have only so much valuable time to devote to them."

Smiling fully now, Rowan edged closer to her, brushing their fingers against one another.

"Tell me, Ms. Shalen. Why aren't you normally this vocal and quick-witted when other people are involved?" she said. "Do they scare you that badly?"

Smirking, Mia swung across her body to punch Rowan's shoulder.

"Of course they don't, Lady Kolb," she said. "You know how I am, reserving my words for the right opportunity."

"Yes, you do so love to fade into the background," Rowan teased.

"All the better to bite those who've overlooked me in the ass later," Mia said.

Rowan resisted the urge to nudge her before again glancing behind her. On catching that, though, Mia groaned a little.

"Why are you so worried about those two?" she asked. "Out of all of our problems, why fixate on them?"

They belonged to her one family that was still intact.

Rowan didn't know where this thought had come from or why it had been pushed to the forefront now, but it definitely wasn't something she could share with Mia. Not only would it put pressure on her friend but it would make Rowan sound like she didn't care about her birth family, the one that was so clearly in pain right now. So, she focused on a secondary reason to explain her focus.

"They're a problem I can help fix, if those two idiots will let me," she said. "If I turn all of my attention on what might seem like a trivial problem, the rest don't seem quite as overwhelming. Does that make sense?"

As she ducked her head, Mia pinched her lips together with a worried pull on her eyes.

"It does," she said before meeting Rowan's eyes. "Can I say it now, Rowan? That thing you wouldn't let me say in your home."

Rowan's face went as tight as Mia's while she nodded, and her friend hooked a pinky finger around hers.

"I'm so sorry," Mia said. "I can't imagine what you're going through, nor will I make a pathetic attempt to relate. When I lost my mom, it was horrible, but this, everything you're dealing with, is so much worse. So, yes. I can't comprehend it, but I want you to know I'm here for you. Whatever you need."

Rowan didn't know how to share how deeply the horror hidden just below the surface had been embedded in her and how doubtful she was that her friend could help with it, but she took Mia at her word. If she meant to help, then she'd understand why Rowan turned to her with a mischievous smile and a sparkle in her eyes instead of gratitude.

"*Whatever* I need?" she asked.

Puffing out a breath, Mia rolled her eyes.

"*Avan*, I should have known you'd respond like that," she said. "Yes, Rowan. Anything that will help you."

For some reason, this made her smile die.

"Then..."

Shivering, Rowan pulled her finger free of Mia's, rubbing her arms.

"Then, will you walk with me for a while?" she said. "And... will you help me with Thomas and Asher? I need those two to get along. I need..."

How did she put this into words?

"I know. I get what they mean to you," Mia said. "So, of course I'll help."

Rowan fought to swallow the lump in her throat, refusing to look at her friend. Silently, they strode alongside stalled cars with friend and family around them.

It took a few more hours, but eventually, they reached Nasmi. The place was a small town, one that Xygek's suburbs would have eaten in the next decade, if the city's growth had been left unchecked. As it was, Nasmi gave off a sleepy village vibe with most people who were fleeing from the city continuing on the highway rather than taking the turnoff into the town.

As once spread-apart homes gradually drew closer together, bordering the single street running through the place, Rowan noticed curtains flicking closed, and with how deserted sidewalks had been until now, she wondered if Nasmi's citizens had started barricading themselves inside. If so, it could be detrimental toward their goal of getting supplies.

When they reached the center of town—a strip of shops and restaurants with apartments above them—it seemed just as deserted with closed signs hanging on doors and no one in sight.

“Well, this doesn't look good,” Liam said.

“No. No, it doesn't,” Rowan said. “We should make this quick. We need... what? Drugs and food, right? So a pharmacy and grocery store of some sort.”

“I think I see both of those toward the far end of this strip,” John said. “Question is, how will we get inside any of these shops without their proprietors here?”

A grunt sounded from behind them, and Rowan turned to find her mom keeping Oscar from chucking a rock through a window.

“Not like that,” she said. “We will not stoop to destroying other people's property.”

Sneering, Oscar tore his wrist out of Bay's grip with more force than he should have needed.

“What do *you* suggest, then?” he growled.

Calmly, Bay glided to one of the wagons, digging through it until she found what she wanted.

“I thought we'd use this,” she said.

Withdrawing her hand, she displayed a lock pick gun.

“But I know a subtle method like this might be foreign to Shalen Corp, so I'll overlook its owner's near descent into barbarism.”

Oscar's face started reddening, and with nothing else, Bay breezed past the others and toward the end of the strip. Meanwhile, Rowan scrambled to keep up with her.

“Mom...” she breathed. “What did you...? Holy hell, I think you just made my year.”

“And mine!” an out-of-breath Thomas said when he caught up.

Bay glanced at them with an odd smile quirking her lips.

“Because I humiliated someone I shouldn’t have?” she asked.

“Yes!” Thomas shouted.

“No,” Rowan said, frowning.

She shoved her friend, shaking her head at him.

“I didn’t know you owned something like *that*,” she said, pointing at what her mother was holding. “They’re so rare!”

“In Athari, yes,” Bay said with a laugh in her voice. “Remember, baby girl. This lovely nation isn’t my home. I am and always will be Shoya Drenish, just like your aunt.”

With slightly crossed eyes and a stuck-out tongue, she lifted the lock pick gun, making it click, and Rowan laughed.

“How could I forget?” she said. “I must say, though, that seeing you shut down Oscar Shalen was cool too. You have to admit it was.”

Blowing out a breath, mom murmured, “We’ll see how cool it is in a week.”

“He does usually start a revenge scheme soon after anyone makes him that red,” Thomas said, looking over his shoulder.

With a secret smile at Rowan, mom patted her friend’s shoulder.

“I can handle anything he throws at me.”

Once they were at the other end of the strip, she crouched, and a few pumps of the lock pick gun later, the doors they needed to be opened were unlocked. Asher accompanied Corporal Brandon Spheris—Rowan had learned his name this morning—into the pharmacy while everyone else, except for Liam, piled into the tiniest grocery store Rowan had seen in her life, leaving the lieutenant to stand guard outside.

While the others wandered down short aisles, Rowan lingered by the checkout counter near the front. A tented piece of paper was standing beside the register with the message ‘Please take only what you need’ on it, and reading this, her heart twinged. Whoever owned this place had cared enough to let desperate people know that they could have what they needed to survive, which was so very human. Compassion and reaching out to help one another, these were some of their species’ best qualities.

Digging in her pockets, Rowan found a couple of coins and notes, slotting them so they peeked out from under the register. She didn’t know how much good Atharian currency would be in the next few months, but on the off-chance that things returned to normal before society had completely

collapsed, she'd like to leave something of value for what they took today.

In the likely event that their world fell apart, though, Rowan searched for a pen on the counter, smoothing the tented note once she'd found one. On its blank side, she left directions to her Uncle Ethan's home—also learned this morning—extending an offer of safe haven to the grocery store's owner. After she was finished, she returned the paper to its upright position, hiding her message from other potential looters.

Smiling at it, she'd turned to help the others when the door banged open beside her with a panic-stricken Asher filling it.

"We've got a problem," he gasped.

Of course they did. They couldn't go one fucking morning without something going wrong.

Those deeper in the grocery store peeked their heads above the aisles with confusion and hesitation on them, so Rowan decided she'd handle this crisis, leaving the next one for them.

"Ok. Show me," she said before calling to the others. "Hurry it up, people. I get the feeling that we'll need to be out of here soon."

As she trotted outside, following Asher to the pharmacy, she noted Liam giving his rifle a once over while keeping an eye on possible avenues of attack, which was reassuring. No one would be sneaking up on them while they dealt with... whatever the problem was.

Unlike in the grocery store, the pharmacy was dark inside with no lights turning on when Rowan flicked a switch. Why was electricity working next door but not here?

Rowan activated her wristcom's flashlight before following after Asher, hoping the charge that the device had gotten from the sun this morning would last. It wasn't that she didn't trust her friend to know where he was going. It was just that this scenario was screaming 'trap' to her, although she could see how the other two might not have seen it, given that they hadn't been next door beforehand.

Asher took Rowan around displays to the counter that separated convenience store items from restricted drugs. Slowing down, he stopped beside a door that opened into the back, and when Rowan came around to stand beside him, she pressed a hand to her mouth.

Laid out on the floor, Corporal Spheris gave her a weak smile.

"I'm afraid I've made quite the mistake, Lady Kolb," he said in a strained tone.

"You... Stop talking, corporal," Rowan said into her hand. "Asher, please tell me you got your hands on some high-grade painkillers before this happened."

Because Brandon was going to need them and for more than just his poorly splinted arm now. A length of barbed wire looked to have been strung at calf height across this entryway, and wile one

end had snapped off of its attachment point, the other one was still in place, straining for freedom against the weight of Brandon's leg. The wire was wrapped around the man's ankle and lower calf, leaving the limb bloody and with bone peeking through where its tissue had been scraped away.

"We hadn't gotten that far," Asher said, "but I'll just-"

Cutting off, he edged around Brandon, and the rattle of his search began as Rowan fell to my hands and knees. She brought her nose within a hairsbreadth of the wire, clicking her tongue when she saw rust clinging to it.

"We'll also need antibiotics and a lot of first aid supplies," she called.

"Already on it," Asher said.

He made a brief reappearance to throw Rowan a pair of rubber gloves.

"Those might help."

"Thank you," Rowan said.

Shoving her hands into them, she turned to the part of the barbed wire that was still attached to the door.

"What- what are you-?" Brandon started.

"I said to shut up, trooper," Rowan said.

Gently, she unwound the wire's end from the nail binding it to the door before lowering it to the floor. When she turned to Corporal Spheris, she was met by him raised onto his elbows with a stormy expression presented.

"You can't, Lady Kolb. You must have seen the security cameras trained on this door. They're working, even without the electricity running," he said. "Whoever set up this stupid trap will be coming sooner or later. You need to get out of here before then. You need to leave me-"

Taking hold of the ends of the barbed wire, Rowan pulled on them the smallest of fractions, tightening it around Brandon's leg, and he screamed, a noise he quickly swallowed. Instantly loosening the wire's grip, Rowan didn't look up at him as she began her work.

"Don't you *dare* suggest that I leave you behind, Corporal Spheris. You are one of *mine*, and I will need every one of you in the coming days," she said. "More importantly, I do not abandon people who have given my family their loyalty. It isn't a fucking option for me. So, I'd better never hear any such words coming out of your mouth again."

Rowan didn't know how much of that Brandon had heard. He'd fallen to the floor again with his eyes glazed and veins bulging in his neck to contain a shout, but she couldn't stop what she was doing. When she was nearly finished, Asher stopped beside her, holding a shopping bag full of pill bottles.

“He won’t be able to walk,” he said.

“I know,” Rowan said. “Can you get John and Thomas for me?”

She swore to *avan*, she heard Asher gulp when she said her friend’s name, but he took off regardless. Not long after he was gone, Rowan finished disentangling the barbed wire from around its victim, throwing it into an out-of-the-way corner. Shuffling to kneel at Brandon’s head, she brushed sweat-soaked hair off of his skin.

“All done,” she said. “We’re finished.”

She repeated this until his eyes cleared, and then, grazed her fingertips along his cheeks.

“Hey. Still with me?” she said.

Swallowing, Brandon licked his lips.

“I believe so, Lady Kolb,” he rasped.

“Good. You had me worried there for a moment,” Rowan said before chuckling. “It seems misfortune has taken an extra shine to you over these last two days, Spheris.”

With a ghost of a smile, Brandon said, “I must have pissed off fate one too many times.”

Rowan sagely nodded.

“That’s quite possible.”

As he laughed, Rowan glanced up at the sound of approaching feet. When Thomas and John came into view, both stopped short, but while her brother merely flattened his lips, her friend was almost sick all over the pharmacy’s carpet.

“John-” Rowan said.

“I know,” he said.

Coming to them, he crouched in front of Brandon.

“This is going to hurt,” he said.

“Avan send that it’ll knock me out first,” Brandon said.

With his lips twitching, John clapped the trooper’s shoulder before standing and lifting Brandon into a fireman’s carry. Rowan clenched her jaw at the pained shout that filled the air before the corporal’s body went limp, and John stumbled for a moment.

After taking a moment to adjust, he said, “Meet you where the road joins with the highway?”

Rowan nodded, and as he trotted off, Thomas shuffled in place, obviously unsure of why he was there.

“Um-”

“Where’s Asher?” Rowan asked.

A disgruntled look passed over her friend’s face, but he answered.

“Organizing everyone to get out of here.”

“Good. You go with John,” Rowan said. “Help him when he gets tired.”

Instead of sprinting away, as he should, Thomas gave her an odd look.

“You’re... *good* at this, Rowan,” he said. “Why-?”

“It’s how I grew up, how I was trained, and it’s partly what I meant to spend my life doing,” Rowan cut in. “Go help my brother please, Thomas.”

“Right.”

He stared for a moment more before leaving, and only once he was gone did Rowan scrub her face. How was this already happening?

With the aliens’ arrival, she’d expected people to start turning on each other. It was what humans did, one of their worst qualities, but she hadn’t thought it would happen this soon. One fucking day had passed since... Icrodon. Since the world had ended. She’d thought they were better than this.

By the time Rowan emerged from the pharmacy, most of their people were gone. She was left with Liam, her mom, and...

“Who’s on the roof?” she asked, squinting at the reflected light that was bouncing to her from across the street.

“Your aunt,” Bay distractedly said.

She was patting at various spots on her body, mouthing to herself, and after a moment, she sharply nodded. Pulling Rowan to her, Bay kissed her forehead.

“I’m going to take up position,” she said. “You don’t have to stay, but if you do, good luck, baby girl.”

Liam paid Bay no mind as she slunk away, but Rowan couldn’t keep her eyes off of her mom until she’d vanished. She hadn’t known her mother could fight.

“Do you need an extra magazine?” Liam asked.

Jerking her head to him, Rowan found him slowly sweeping his eyes over their surroundings with his rifle swaying as he bounced it in the cradle of his arms, and at this subtle reminder, she cursed under her breath. Drawing her pistol, she cocked it, holding it to the side while she checked her other accouterments.

Adrenaline beginning its pound through her body? Check. Side knife? Check. Spare magazine? Check. With two of those, Rowan would have twenty-two rounds. That should be plenty unless...

"How many do you think are coming?" she asked.

Liam shrugged, which was about what she'd expected. Nasmi was a small town with a population of roughly twelve hundred, according to its welcome sign, and while Rowan seriously doubted that all of those people were in on this trap, that didn't mean the majority weren't. Better to be safe.

When she reached toward him, Liam slapped a magazine into her hand without her having to ask, and she absently pocketed it.

Why the hell had their current adversaries laid the trap that they had? Sure, people looking to loot supplies would probably find the pharmacy's drugs tempting, and the trap had been laid well enough that a highly trained trooper had fallen into it, but why?

That trap could have ensnared only one victim, at the most, and everyone else that person had been traveling with wouldn't typically stick around, as they had. What could be gained from incapacitating *one* person?

Rowan did so love to chew on the hypotheticals of a problem while waiting for action, had always done so. She'd never cared whether they were important or not, just worrying away at them until she'd worked herself into a tizzy. Sometimes, she had to remind herself to relax, to clear her mind, before the conflict began.

Fortunately, Liam was here to help with that today. As he slowly shifted from foot to foot, he hummed under his breath. The melody that had drawn Rowan out of her grief last night was on his lips, and she silently sang along.

Light the stars, my warrior child

Keep the dark at bay

You are who guards against violent death

The innocent made to stay

Hold the line, don't back down

Bare your teeth, show your strength

You are the few

Who will pave the way

For you know how

You know how

You know how to give everything

Somewhere in the fourth repetition of this, movement from further down the street silenced the song, pushing Rowan and Liam into cover. A band of ten or so people ambled down the pavement toward the end of the strip, and as they came closer, Rowan's chest fell still with air ceasing its flow.

They had guns. POWERFUL guns. Fucking semi-automatic rifles. Where the *hell* had they gotten those? The distribution of firearms was supposed to be heavily restricted in Athari!

"That's far enough."

Apparently unfazed by what they were facing, mom let her voice echo down the strip, seemingly everywhere and nowhere, and the hostile group approaching Rowan and Liam went on alert, swiveling their rifles above and around as they searched for a target.

"You have attacked someone belonging to House Kolb," Bay continued. "You have thirty seconds to lay down your arms and explain yourselves, or we will show you what happens to those who harm us."

Which meant... what? They'd hurt these people in turn? They'd kill them? Rowan knew the protocol for military missions where someone had requested Kolb troopers, but this situation wasn't that. Civilians were standing against them. Malicious civilians, but civilians nonetheless.

Knowledge of her family's name rippled through the hostile group, and some of them wavered, but a woman stepped out from among them, lifting her chin.

"Sure, you're from the Kolb family," she said. "Anyone can claim that now. Why don't you come out and prove-?"

"Time's up."

A flash sped through the air before something punched into the woman's neck, and she weakly scrabbled as it as she fell to the ground. Sucking in a breath, Rowan blinked, watching bullets precisely cut down each member of the group until one of them was left standing, and the entire time, she was stuck in the moment before violence had begun.

She'd fought plenty of people before, causing a ridiculous number of injuries during those fights, but she'd never *killed* someone. So, bullets had started flying, and she'd locked up. The two seconds needed for the bodies to drop hadn't been long enough to shake her free of her shock.

The woman who'd been left alive wildly swung her rifle through the air, searching for the people who'd killed her comrades, and when its muzzle fell still, pointing toward where Aunt Hailey was lying, Rowan *reacted*. Her finger moved to her pistol's trigger, and when she squeezed it, the woman's rifle was torn out of her grasp.

As she hissed, rubbing her hand, Rowan gasped. She couldn't believe she'd made that shot. She'd always been extraordinarily accurate with guns, but at this distance and with a handgun no less, the round should have gone wildly off-course.

After a moment of shocked silence, Bay spoke again.

"Leave."

The woman scurried away like wild wolves were on her tail, and once she'd vanished, they waited a solid minute before emerging from hiding. Mom strode for the corpses, jerking items out of them. Meanwhile, Rowan stood in the middle of the road, watching her mother while she chewed on her lip, until Aunt Hailey joined them.

"That was unfortunate," she said "I hate it when they don't run."

When they didn't... run.

"I don't like it either," Bay said as she approached Rowan.

"Those people wouldn't have backed down, no matter what we did," Liam said. "At the slowed pace we'll need to take, they'd have hounded us until we were forced to let Corporal Spheris serve as a distraction, which none of us wanted. We had to kill them."

Had to... kill them.

"Did we?" Rowan breathed.

Her elders glanced at her as if they'd forgotten she existed.

"We couldn't have...negotiated with them or... tried another scare tactic?" she shakily asked. "We couldn't have disarmed them? Tied them up and... *left*?"

After a moment of wordless staring, Liam said, "Not all of us are as precise with our shots as you, Lady Rowan. And we *did* give them a chance to back down. When they didn't, their lives were forfeit, all of them but the one we left to serve as a warning. That's the Kolb way."

His words rang in Rowan's head over and over and over again until her shoulders started shaking alongside their beat. Something entirely broken spilled out of her mouth, bouncing until ragged sobs interrupted their rhythm, and at that, her mom reached for her.

Swiping at her hands, Rowan yelled, "Don't touch me!"

She turned away, couldn't bear to see her mom's face, while she struggled to regain control.

When she could breathe evenly again, she said, "Let's join the others."

She didn't wait for their confirmations. Tucking her chin to her chest, Rowan trudged down the road, desperately fighting to keep from thinking of the corpses left cooling in their wake.

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