

# Chapter 18: Everything's Under Control

Hiking over the mountains took a grand total of eight days, made longer by several complications.

The first of these was, of course, Brandon. Figuring out a decent way to carry the trooper took much more thought than it should have, especially after a fever set in and his thrashing about became violent. They all breathed a silent sigh of relief when he came out on the other side of this, weak but alive.

The second difficulty came in the path they'd decided to take. When they reached the tunnel running beneath the mountain, it was blocked off by a tall concrete barrier with people holding guns patrolling along its length. They never figured out who'd claimed that length of the road, whether a corp or a well-organized group or a noble family, but they still steered clear of them. Pushing their luck with unknowns didn't seem wise after Nasmi.

Following a heated discussion, it was decided that, in light of recent events, risking the trip over the unknown mountains would be better than taking the time to circle them. As they traveled toward the peaks, they stuck to the roads. With every passing day, they saw fewer cars traveling away from Xygek until it seemed like we were walking through an empty wilderness.

Despite everyone's expectations, they'd come across no trouble on their lengthy ascent and hurried descent, nothing besides what the elements threw at them. This morning's chill seemed like nothing when compared to the night they'd spent near the top of the mountains, but that didn't stop Rowan teeth from chattering as she brought Brandon his refilled canteen. A heavier coat or a pile of blankets sounded heavenly right now.

When she handed it off, Brandon chugged from his canteen before lowering it and wiping his mouth.

"Thank you, Lady Rowan," he said. "I'm sorry to have been an imposition."

"It was nothing. What else was I supposed to do? Leave you thirsty?" Rowan said. "Besides, there's not much else I can do right now. We're almost ready to move out for the day."

"As soon as Lady Bay returns, yes?" Brandon said.

"...Yes."

With a smile, Rowan checked whether Corporal Spheris needed anything else before wandering off. Save for the bare minimum needed for travel, she hadn't spoken to her mom since Nasmi. She

could bring herself to exchange words with Lieutenant Avisbell and Aunt Hailey. After all, Liam was a trooper with his course of action in the town a given for him, and Hailey was practically a stranger to Rowan, even with their past and after everything they'd endured since Icrodon.

But mom...

If she was being honest, Rowan wasn't sure why she was so pissed at her. Turn her a little more jaded and she might have done exactly what her mom had done. She didn't even see what had happened in Nasmi as inherently evil. Avoidable? Yes. Not necessarily the most moral course of action? Yes. But totally evil?

Well... the townspeople had attacked them first. What had they thought would happen if the survivors of their trap had stuck around to greet their ambushers?

*Avan*, just thinking that made Rowan feel like a kid again, getting in an argument with Henry or Logan and pointing a finger at them when their parents had broken it up.

"He started it!"

She wished she could think of a better way to rationalize those people's deaths, if only so she could live with what had happened, but she couldn't, and so, she avoided her mom. John had tried talking to her about it over the last couple of days, but Rowan couldn't bring herself to explain *why* she was so upset. She'd rather endure his looks of disappointment than have him go through what she was experiencing right now.

For now, Bay was out with Aunt Hailey, hunting. Their food stock had been running low, and rather than rationing it, those two had decided to supplement what the group had with game instead, especially considering how close they'd come to Uncle Ethan's place.

While the rest of the group have been waiting for them to return, *almost* everyone else had been busy with breaking down camp. After changing Brandon's bandaging, Asher had been messing with one of his toys, probably trying to get a good read on what sort of weather they could expect today. Mia had brewed them coffee, which everyone had accepted with more gratitude than the act truly deserved, but Rowan thought she was secretly pleased by this. Liam was on his fourth inspection of their supplies while Thomas had been puttering about, doing what light grunt work still needed doing. John was helping him, and Rowan had been tending to the fire, which left... Oscar.

He'd gotten out of his bedroll maybe fifteen minutes ago, and after disappearing into the woods for a little bit, he'd proceeded to retrieve a book from his pack and *read*.

Now, don't get her wrong. Rowan understood the need for leisurely activity and what a lack of it did to the human psyche. She was even about to undertake a little of it herself, but as she settled into the scrabbly grass beside the road, she couldn't help but glare at Oscar.

He'd treated their flight from Xygek as nothing but a vacation, and Rowan didn't know if he was doing that out of revenge for mom embarrassing him in Nasmi, due to sheer obliviousness, or

because he was an asshole, but oo... Rowan had been tempted to squeeze her fingers around his neck often over the last few days.

Slowly, she tore her eyes off of him, turning them to her wristcom, and checked if she'd received any messages overnight. The network was still up in Athari, to her utter shock, but she had yet to hear much from anyone who had her contact info. Five days ago, she'd received a garbled message from one of the Breyham girls, a random line of nonsensical letters and symbols with only the words 'aliens' and 'safe' intelligible from it, but that was all.

Sucking on her lip, Rowan logged into the game client for *Nedrya's Breaking*. Typically, this was where she'd launch the game, if she had a storecase to do it with, but it also let her access any private messages that had been sent through Break from other players. She'd gotten most of the information she'd been sharing with the group from here, even if that source of information had been just as sparse.

She'd heard basically nothing about what was happening in her home nation or in Shoya Dren, but from what Rowan understood, the aliens had basically left Sasmor alone, which didn't surprise me. That nation had never had many redeeming qualities, although she didn't know if she should trust everything she'd heard about it. Sasmor's renowned isolationism made it difficult to form an accurate opinion on the nation or its culture.

As for Roswines, both Potatoad and HauntedFox—natives of the nation—had reported alien ships, vehicles, and structures congregating around the capital city of Stralberg. They thought that a siege might be eminent, which had spurred much debate between the members of Rowan's traveling group. Why would a civilization advanced enough to travel between the stars resort to such a crude military tactic?

Nobody in Nedrya had anything new for Rowan today, so she closed the game client with a disappointed sigh. She'd hoped that checking her messages would take longer, keeping her preoccupied until her mom and Aunt Hailey had returned with breakfast, but they still weren't here.

John was staring at her from where he'd finished tying packs down to a wagon, obviously about to make another attempt to reconcile his family members, so when he started toward her, Rowan leapt to my feet.

"Aunt Hailey and mom are taking a while. I'll go make sure they're all right," she announced, flushing when everyone turned their eyes on her.

Dropping the pack he was holding, Thomas said, "I'll come with you."

He hurried to meet Rowan's path where it would intersect with the forest, and she concealed a smile. Over the last week, she hadn't had much time alone with Thomas, time where she could pick at the problem of him and Asher. Her personal project.

Those two had been avoiding each other more than Rowan had been with her mom, almost zealous in their attempts to create space between them. They wouldn't even look at each other unless they had to. Fortunately, when they were forced together, they were cordial enough, causing no

arguments, otherwise the group might have had a real problem.

As it was, the boys' disastrous relationship was still something Rowan could use as a distraction, horrible as that sounded. When it came to solving this problem, she'd been hoping to talk things through with Asher first, what with him being the one to cause a rift this time, but at this point, she was grateful for the chance to speak with either of them.

"Wait, please!"

Pausing in the forest's eaves, Rowan suppressed a groan, flicking her eyes to Thomas. He'd gone taut, which was the opposite of what she needed, as was another person's presence while they enjoyed their little hike, *especially* Asher's.

But neither of them spoke a word of protest when he joined them.

"Which way do you suppose they went in?" Asher asked.

Rowan locked eyes with Thomas, smirking on seeing him suppressing a laugh. *He'd* seen her desire to check on their huntresses as the excuse to get away that it had been, and that warmed Rowan, especially when he raised an arm to randomly point into the forest's depths.

"They were headed that way when they left," he said. "We should start in the same direction, see if we can pick up their trail."

"Good idea!" Rowan said with a bright smile.

Taking the lead, she marched off, resisting the urge to hum. For some reason, she had a theme song running through her head, one from a flic about the explorers of centuries past. She didn't know where the song was coming from, hadn't thought about it in ages, not since history teachers had made her class watch it in high school. Rowan had never understood why her school had focused so much of their attention on those crown-sanctioned sailing trips, considering nothing had ever come of them, but she did understand the excitement of entering new territory, even if it was new for only her and her friends.

That excitement was dulled by the tense and, frankly, awkward air around them, but Rowan didn't know how to break the silence. What did she say that wouldn't antagonize either boy?

Asher did it for her.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Thomas, do you mind if I ask Rowan a personal question?"

Oh, shit. Rowan purposefully did *not* look behind her to watch Thomas' reaction, remembering how Asher had insisted a week ago that her old friend was nothing like her. Was that idiot trying to emphasize how much more highly he valued her?

"Why would I mind?" Thomas said before lowering his voice. "Minding implies I give a shit about what you do."

Thankfully, Asher either didn't hear that comment or chose not to respond to it. He scurried to match Rowan's pace with his eyes roving over the forest.

"From what I understand, we'll be reaching our destination soon," he said. "I was hoping we could discuss what sort of reception I can expect there."

"Probably not one much different from what you've received while with us. Why do you ask?" Rowan said before teasingly poking his side. "Do you think you deserve better treatment than the rest of us?"

"Um."

Asher looked lost, as if unsure of how to say something, and with an exasperated groan, Thomas joined them on the other side of Rowan.

"He's the head of a rival noble family. He's worried he'll be turned out into the cold after coming all this way," he said. "It's actually why I wanted to come with you too. How anti-corp is your Uncle Ethan? Do Mia and I need to worry about anything when we reach his home?"

"I..."

Rowan hadn't thought about that. With their world coming apart at the seams, she'd thought silly things like social standing would fall by the wayside, but perhaps she'd been expecting too much from her fellow human beings again. They did so love to feel superior to one another.

"Thomas, you and Mia will be fine because we've been friends for forever, and I will throw the biggest temper tantrum the world's ever seen if Uncle Ethan tries anything on you," she said. "And Asher. Once he hears about how you saved my family's ass, Ethan will have no choice but to welcome you into his home."

Thomas and Asher exchanged a glance, not even bothering to hide it. They leaned forward, raising eyebrows and everything, before Rowan's oldest friend spoke up.

"Don't you think you're being a little optimistic about this?"

Perhaps she was, but seeing those two agree on *anything* inclined her to continue with said optimism, giving them a common obstacle to overcome.

So, she said, "Not really, no. I've spoken with Uncle Ethan a few times since he first made contact, and while I won't argue that his general attitude can be off-putting, he seems like a reasonable man at heart."

Thomas rolled his eyes.

"You always think the best of people," he grumbled.

"Does she?" Asher asked, staring at Thomas over Rowan's head.

He vigorously nodded.

“One time, she dragged me to one of her college parties-” he started.

“I beg your pardon!” Rowan interrupted. “I didn’t force you to go to those. You *begged* me to let you come.”

“Yeah, well,” Thomas said, “if dad wouldn’t let me have my own college experience, I had to live it through you.”

“You mean you were *lucky enough* to live it through me,” Rowan said.

Wincing, Thomas said, “Fair.”

They walked along in companionable silence, reliving fond memories, until Asher cleared his throat.

“What happened at the party?” he asked.

Thomas cast an annoyed glance his way before continuing with the story.

“One of the guys there was obviously using the party’s chaos to his benefit. He was slipping drugs into other people’s drinks, not being very discriminate with it either. You know the drug I’m talking about? The pill that dissolves in liquid until it looks like nothing’s been added? It turns people loopy.”

“I am, unfortunately, aware of the drug you’re referencing, yes,” Asher said with his voice clipped.

Something in his tone of voice made Thomas stop, forcing Asher and Rowan to slow. When she glanced back, Thomas’ face was pinched.

“You all right, man?” he said. “I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s fine,” Asher interrupted. “I just hate it when people take advantage of each other, like you were talking about.”

Thomas looked doubtful, as if expecting to hear more, but he didn’t argue, continuing on without prompting.

“So, yeah. Guy drugging partygoers,” he said. “When I pointed him out, Rowan here gave the bastard the benefit of the doubt. We kept an eye on him as the party progressed, but she didn’t want to get the authorities involved until we had proof that he was actually being a massive asshole.”

When Asher shot a carefully blank stare at her, Rowan shrugged.

“I knew what he was likely trying to do, but the guy was spreading those pills around like he had an unlimited supply,” she said. “He could have been pulling a bad prank or something equally as

innocent, and I didn't want to get him in trouble for mostly harmless mischief."

Asher didn't look any less wary of her after that explanation, but she let that slide for now. He should know her well enough by now to know she would never have let the man in the story keep spreading his plague if she'd thought anyone had been in true danger.

"So, we watched the guy throughout the night until he got someone to taste his poison," Thomas said, "and predictably, as soon as she started getting woozy, he led her toward a private corner. That's when Rowan of House Kolb made her appearance."

He'd said her name with emphasis, as if it carried weight, and Rowan did her best not to snort.

Glancing between them, Asher said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Mm."

With a distracted smile, Thomas picked up the pace, bouncing ahead of them. Whirling, he pointed at Asher.

"You," he said, "have never seen Rowan after someone's stoked her temper. Let me tell you, man. It is an absolute delight to behold."

Flushing, Rowan fixed her gaze on her boots, desperately seeking a way to change the subject. She'd gotten what she needed from it. The boys had relaxed around one another, and while this wouldn't last, it was a start. Time to move on.

But Asher wouldn't let her.

"What did you do?" he asked.

Rowan chewed at her lip, working through what to say, until Thomas started incessantly poking her, and she slapped his hand down with a frown.

"I kicked the bastard's ass. Dragged him to the closest police station while Thomas brought the girl, making sure she got treatment for the drugs after they arrived," she said. "When the authorities delayed with beginning the investigation's proceedings so they could contact the guy's family with *no damn mention* made of doing the same for the girl, I pitched a fit, started throwing my family name around. *That* got things started.

"I stayed with the girl until everyone had made their statements, the asshole was booked, and three parents came for their daughter. Failed a fucking Into to Economics exam the next day. The whole thing irritated the hell out of my moms, but I think they were secretly pleased."

With wide eyes, Asher breathed, "*Avan* above."

"Yep."

Shoving his hands in his pockets, Thomas kicked at fallen leaves.

“That’s Rowan,” he said, “but that incident also shows how wonderfully idealistic she can be about human nature.”

“I can see that,” Asher said. “I can also see that I’m lucky to be her friend.”

Thomas’ face darkened, which had the lightened mood they’d obtained souring, and Rowan hurried into the gap to stop a sniping battle before it began.

“If you’re going to judge the quality of someone’s friendship on that story alone, then Thomas is a better friend than I’ll ever be. He stuck with me through all of that unpleasantness, knowing his dad would chew him out at the end, or at least, that’s what he complained about all night,” she said, smirking at her old friend.

Rolling his eyes, Thomas swatted at her, although he still seemed a little miffed, but that didn’t stop her from continuing.

“You should spend more time with him, Asher.”

Rowan smirked at the other boy as his stride suddenly hitched. Maybe that would be enough to keep those two from fighting again.

“In any case,” she said, “weren’t we looking for my aunt and-?”

“You’re kind, Rowan. I know what you’re trying to do, but it doesn’t matter how nice a portrait you paint of me. I’m not good enough to be *his* friend, not that I’m sure I’d want to be after the last few days,” Thomas said in a falsely pleasant tone. “That’s ok, though. I have you and Mia. Why would I need anyone else?”

Hooking an elbow around Rowan’s arm, he dragged her along with the forest rushing past them, but before Asher could fall behind them, Rowan saw the boy’s eyes flash, stuck on the point of contact between her and Thomas.

“Do you *really* want to discuss this again?” he said. “And in front of her, no less?”

Thomas painfully clenched his arm around Rowan’s, and when he spun, it twirled her too, hard enough that whiplash set a dull ache in her neck.

“Don’t bring Rowan into this,” he said.

With a smirk, Asher said, “I rather think you’re the one who’s done that.”

As if she was made of acid, Thomas released Rowan before taking several steady breaths.

“You’re right. About *that*,” he said. “And in answer to your question, no. I don’t want to discuss anything with you. You made your opinion on the matter in question pretty fucking clear last time.”

Something pained burrowed into Asher, and clicking her tongue, Rowan stepped between them before this situation could tumble even further out of control.

“Stop it, you *idiots!*”

Rounding on Thomas, she ground her fingertip into his chest.

“That complete and total *moron* opposite you wants to be your friend, no matter what he says to the contrary,” she hissed as quietly as she could. “Knowing the Cerullis family as I’ve come to recently, I can say that he probably had a life *quite* similar to yours while growing up. Do you remember how often you ignored me in grade school when I was trying to make friends with you? Do you remember how persistent I had to be before you let me in? He’s never had anyone like that, not until me and you and Mia.

“I don’t know why I got through his defenses before you, but it doesn’t matter. You want to be his friend? You have to be as annoying as I once was with you.”

When Rowan backed off, Thomas looked stunned, but she couldn’t revel in possible success. Flipping the other way, she marched toward Asher, jabbing at him.

“And *you!* I don’t even know what to say to you,” she growled. “You can’t treat people like they’re disposable, meant to be used and thrown away, because you have some unspoken trauma in your past. Everything your dad told you about friendship in the past is *bullshit*, Asher. Friends aren’t unreliable, a weakness, or malicious, or at least, good friends aren’t. Sure, we make mistakes, human as we are, but we help each other through the good times and the bad. We-”

But she stopped talking because something terrifying had made its way onto Asher’s face. He was looking over her shoulder with his amber skin further darkening and brown eyes flashing, and on seeing this, Rowan wasn’t not sure how much of her tirade he’d heard.

“You told her?” he said, biting off each word.

With *that look* to douse her passion, Rowan reviewed what she’d said and started cursing in her head. She’d just ripped into Asher about things she shouldn’t know, things he’d shared with Thomas on the night of the plane crash. She knew why those words had slipped out of her—she’d been replaying and analyzing everything Asher had said that night in the time since—but it made her no less horrified when she considered her mistake. She needed to admit she’d been eavesdropping before-

“You’ve *got* to be kidding me,” Thomas said. “That’s the conclusion you jump to? That I betrayed your trust?”

Oh, no.

“What else am I supposed to think?” Asher snapped, throwing his hands to either side of him. “How else would she know about... *that?*”

Oh no, no, no.

"I don't know, man. You were pretty fucking loud that night," Thomas said. "I wouldn't be surprised if everyone in our happy, little group heard what you said."

Rowan couldn't get a word in. Why wouldn't they let her speak, clearing up this misunderstanding?

Why wouldn't she let herself interrupt them?

Turning away, Asher cupped his forehead.

"I can't believe..." he breathed.

That whisper was loud in the forest's quiet, though.

"Can't believe what? Huh?" Thomas asked, finally resorting to shouting. "I can't believe you're upset about this. You spouted that horrid drivel about what friendship is *after rejecting me*. Why should I have cared to keep any of it to myself?"

No, Thomas...

Her friend couldn't take the blame for this, even if unintentionally. Rowan opened her mouth to confess, and Asher flashed past her. In a heartbeat, he had fistfuls of Thomas' shirt, drawing the other boy closer until their noses were almost touching.

"So, you *did* tell her?" he said.

And really, Thomas should be incensed about the treatment he was receiving. Really, he should be a tad frightened. A smile should not be tugging on his lips.

"If I did, what are you going to do about it?" he asked.

They held perfectly still with Rowan creeping closer to break them up, and she could almost see considered possibilities ratcheting through Asher's mind. When she touched his elbow, he jumped before thrusting Thomas away hard enough that he fell on his ass, and Rowan winced, pulling back.

As if in reaction, something at the corner of her eye moved.

"I don't know what else I should have expected from you," Asher coldly said. "Considering what you've done, it's clear unfiltered corp blood must be running through your veins, as I thought. The same as your father."

Normally, Rowan would be throwing herself between her friends at this, spilling her guilty guts before making Asher grovel for what he'd said, but she was too fascinated by the glimpses of an approaching... something that she'd caught from between the trees. She didn't know what type of animal it could be or if perhaps she'd spied a human in poorly made camouflage gear. What else could be rust-red and moving in this wilderness?

Because of her fascination, though, Thomas managed to get to his feet. He threw himself at Asher, hollering all the while, and collapsing, the two of them wrestled across the forest floor, swinging and kicking at each other. Thankfully, only glancing blows landed, but Thomas did sink his teeth into Asher's shoulder at one point, which drew a sharp gasp from the other boy.

Almost, Rowan had the attention span needed to focus on this massive mess she'd made of reconciling her friends. Almost, she dove, screaming, into their midst to pull them apart, but before she could, what she'd seen between the leaves and branches of the forest ambled into view.

And she froze.

"Guys," she whispered.

*Avan*, her eyes had gone so wide. They felt as if they'd push their way out of their sockets, and a tremble had rooted in her hands as she drew her pistol, loosely holding it at her side.

And still, Asher and Thomas were fighting.

"*Guys!*" Rowan roared. "Get the hell up and *help* me."

Something in her voice had them rolling away from each other and to their feet, and when they saw what had made her so tense, Asher hunkered down, making himself a smaller target while Thomas stepped in front of her, which was sweet, if annoying.

Moving out from behind him, Rowan examined what had her licking her dry lips with her dry tongue while her heart desperately fought to resume its normal rhythm. Because what they were facing is neither a human nor an animal, as she'd thought, but was instead, unmistakably an alien.

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