

Chapter 19: The Enemy Is... Adorable?

Rowan didn't know what she'd thought an alien would look like if she encountered one, too busy running away from them since they'd arrived to consider it, but it was definitely *not* this.

Where it was standing at the edge of the clearing, the top of the being's head skimmed the lower branches of the trees around it, towering at least half of Thomas' height over them. A face that more resembles a wooden mask with curling horns in place of ears sat atop a long neck that gradually tapered into slender shoulders. Thin, upper arms yielded to enormous scoops below with pointy fingers at the end of these. The longest of those fingers brushed against the forest floor, and a puffed chest became a lower body that resembled the stubby legs that the ancient reptiles from long ago had once claimed. Instead of an inflexible tail, though, this being had one like a fox's: swishing back and forth, red, and distinctly furry.

As was the rest of the being. Black, tribal markings ran over its tail, chest, and arms, mixing with the burnt-red carpet of the softest looking fur Rowan had ever seen. As if to complete the look, a second, thin tail was draped in front of the being's abdomen to coil around its neck, partially hiding the row of blipping, blue and purple lights that were embedded there.

It was the strangest, most off-the-wall, cutest thing Rowan had seen in a while, and she badly wanted to pet it, even knowing how dangerous it must be. All it was doing right now, though, was holding perfectly still, sans its twitching tails, with the black lines that must be its eyes shortening, as if paint was seeping across its wooden background.

In front of her, Thomas hissed, "What are you doing, Rowan? Shoot it!"

"Do you seriously want me to start a fight with something that's probably stronger than us?" Rowan hissed right back. "Besides, I don't want to hurt something that hasn't done the same to me."

Both boys snapped their heads toward her.

"Icrodon?" Asher growled.

Right. For a moment there, both her pattern of enforced ignorance and her shock had overridden her memory of the recent past. With it brought to the forefront again, however, Rowan found herself strangely... calm, at least in her mind. She considered everything about the situation she was in and everything she knew about other disasters like it, including all the ones she'd watched in science-fiction flicks over the years, and she knew just what to say.

“So, because part of this alien’s civilization attacked us, I should shoot any of them I find on sight? That’s very... racist? No. That’s very speciesist of you, Asher,” she said. “Plus, we still don’t know *why* its people attacked ours. If we’re not already in a full-blown war with them, I won’t be the one who tips us into battle, just because I’m pissed and want revenge for my family.”

Which she did. Her body spoke the truth, even if she didn’t feel anything right now. *Avan*, she must want it *badly*, considering how much her pistol was shaking at her side, but she forced herself to keep it there. She couldn’t lift it to *shoot that wooden mask-face off*. She *couldn’t*.

“I’ll spend the entirety of our afterlife pestering you if that thing kills us because you won’t shoot it on *principle*,” Thomas hissed.

“Well, now you’re just making me glad I’m the only one with a gun,” Rowan whispered at his back.

They fell silent, not daring to move and with their eyes pinned on the alien for what seemed like an eternity.

Rowan wasn’t sure where to go from here. Should she try to greet it? Would it understand her if she did? Should they retreat into the forest, run back to camp, and get the hell out of dodge?

A string of noises spilled out of the alien, a mix of tones similar to the sounds elephants made, if muffled and *much* lower-pitched, and after a moment where all four of them waited, the alien turned as if moving through a vat of honey and lumbered away. Without a word, Rowan holstered her pistol and started after it, only to be jerked to a halt by Thomas’ grip on her wrist.

His eyes were wide with fear as he asked.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting answers,” Rowan said. “Let go of me.”

Reluctantly, Thomas peeled his fingers off of her skin, and Rowan hurried after flashes of red among the forest’s green.

Why hadn’t the alien killed them? No matter what Rowan had told Asher and Thomas, she’d thought they were dead back there, but they weren’t, and instead of counting her luck and leaving, she was chasing something that was supposed to be her enemy.

It was, wasn’t it?

Rowan was half-aware of the boys catching up with her while she requested a connection with Mia over her wristcom. The network had been spotty up here in the mountains, but when heading out to find her mom and aunt, they hadn’t hike *that* far from the camp, and while there earlier, she’d had enough access to open the game client for *Nedrya’s Breaking*.

Sure enough, the request for connection was accepted within seconds of her making it. Before Mia could greet her, Rowan barreled over her with a question that she and Shalens had used to pull each other into trouble since they’d been kids.

“Want to go on an adventure?”

“...Rowan?” Mia started.

But she couldn't get much further before Thomas was tugging on Rowan's arm.

“Oh no, you don't,” he growled. “You're not involving my sister in this.”

“Hush, Thomas,” Mia and Rowan said together.

And then, the other girl continued, “What's the adventure?”

“We met an alien in the forest,” Rowan said. “Chasing it now. *Damn*, it's fast.”

“*What?*”

Mia's voice blared from her wristcom with other sounds of startlement from those left behind accompanying it, and Rowan couldn't help but grin.

“I know,” she said. “So? Want to come?”

“*Hell*, yes,” Mia said. “You have your wristcom ready for me to track it?”

After a few taps on the device's screen, Rowan said, “Yup.”

“Cool. I'll see you in a bit.”

“What do you think-?” Oscar started before Mia cut the connection.

What was it with the Shalen men and unnecessarily sheltering their one female member?

Levelly meeting Thomas' glare, Rowan said, “If you don't start paying attention to where you're going, you'll trip.”

Gasping laughter erupted on the other side of her, and she noted with concern that Asher had pressed his hand to his side while he sucked down air.

“Got a stitch?” she asked. “We can slow down a little.”

Waving at her, Asher shook his head.

“I'm fine,” he mumbled. “Forgot how much fun the three of you are.”

“Kind of easy to do when you act like a jerk to one of us and he decides to reciprocate,” Rowan said.

Making a face, Asher said, “I know. Apologies later. Focus now.”

Rowan didn't think there was a need to focus. Tracking the enormous, brilliantly red alien wasn't that difficult, but she respected her friend's tacit request for silence anyway.

Jogging through the forest while between two men who'd been *fighting*—really? who did that?—not too long ago with her acting as the barrier between them was... awkward. *Extremely awkward*. If the boys thought she didn't catch the unreadable glances they were shooting at each other, then they had to be oblivious, which... yeah. Rowan wouldn't put that past them, but no matter how much this tension was making her suffer, she dealt with it, praying for Mia to rendezvous with them soon.

She arrived in a near-silent vault over a fallen tree, and Rowan breathed out some of the strain that had been eating at her.

"Where is it?" she asked, out of breath.

Rowan pointed toward splotches of red ahead, splotches that seemed to be slowing down. To match the alien's speed, they dropped to a walk while Mia pouted.

"That's all I get for running all this way?" she asked. "Teasing glances?"

Grabbing her hand, Rowan patted it.

"I'm sure you'll see every bit of it soon enough."

Behind her, Thomas snorted, covering a laugh when she checked on him.

"Don't mind me," he said. "You keep chasing the scary-ass—"

They broke free of tree cover, and Rowan expected to barrel through another small clearing, but instead, she was greeted by flat tundra for as far as the eye could see.

Well, it was flat except for a cluster of steel structures, shaped like the upper half of a dumpling, far ahead of them, a cluster that their quarry was ambling toward.

"—aliens," Thomas breathed.

All of them had stopped at some point. Rowan wasn't quite sure when that had been. She'd been too preoccupied by not only the encampment they'd stumbled upon but by the fact that sometime during the chase, they'd reached the base of the mountains to notice them slowing down. Granted, they'd been close to this point when bedding down last night but this...

How far were they from their allies right now?

"We're going in there, right?"

As one, Rowan and the boys stared at Mia, and a flush crept into her cheeks.

“What? I figured Rowan would want to talk with them. Given how advanced they seem to be, they must have a way to communicate with us, even if they speak a different language,” she said. “And we could use the opportunity to scout and maybe learn *something* about this enemy we’ll eventually have to fight. It’s not like the aliens here will attack us if the one you met didn’t. It did ignore you, yes?”

When their stares failed to relent, Mia shifted under the weight of their gazes until Rowan spoke up.

“She’s right,” she said, ignoring her closing throat. “We should pay our alien guests a visit.”

“Are you *crazy*?” Thomas hissed. “You want to get us surrounded by... *creatures* that murdered tens of thousands of people without cause?”

Rowan didn’t appreciate the reminder of what the aliens had done, didn’t need it. This whole situation required the utmost of rationality. She was *fighting* to stay in that state, to keep her emotions at arm’s length, and Thomas wasn’t helping with that.

“How do *you* know that we didn’t provoke them? We know nothing about these aliens, least of all what would set them off,” she said. “And like I said, how can we know if this group agrees with the rest of its people? Given how many factions humanity has, I wouldn’t be surprised to learn that they have a few too.”

“Now who’s generalizing?” Asher said.

At Rowan’s glare, he placatingly patted at the air.

“Still, I’m curious why such a small portion of them is here, in the back end of nowhere.”

With his face draining of color, Thomas took a step away from Asher.

“Don’t tell me you agree with them,” he said. “I thought I could count on at least you to appreciate how dangerous this would be.”

Averting his eyes, Asher shrugged with one shoulder, and an evil grin spread across Rowan’s face.

“Thomas...” she softly said.

Reaching for her friend, she advanced on him with wiggling finger, and he backed away with a yelp.

“No. *No*, Rowan,” he squeaked. “Don’t you dare.”

But Mia had already guessed Rowan’s intentions, sneaking around to her brother’s back so she could hold him in place. Rowan found every ticklish part of her friend’s body, and while he cried with laughter, she planted wet, sloppy kisses on his cheeks and jaw. At some point, she whispered in his ear.

“What to go on an adventure?”

After that, it didn't take long for him to shrug Mia off, slapping at Rowan's hands all the while.

“F-fine,” he stuttered with his cheeks bright red. “If you mean to get us killed, I suppose I should come along. I can pull us out when this all goes to hell.”

Bouncing on the balls of her feet, Rowan excitedly clapped.

“Yay! We should go before he changes his mind.”

As she waited for the others to agree, she noted the carefully blank expression on Asher's face while he flicked his eyes between her and Thomas with a frown, but she didn't have long to contemplate it. As soon as she had everyone's consent, she was striding across clumped grass toward a camp full of enemies, this moment's definition of trouble's epitome.

As was her wont.

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