

Chapter 20:

Misunderstandings and Their Consequences

Rowan didn't like this.

And yes, she knew how silly that was. Once Mia had suggested it, Rowan had been the one to badger her friends into this plan, but still, it was making her skin prickle, leaving sweat beading on it.

Now that they'd reached this camp, the aliens were, for the most part, ignoring them, which was good but fucking creepy as well. When they'd first entered the confines of these strange structures, a few of the aliens had stopped what they'd been doing with their mask-faces tracking her group's progress, but now, they were pretending the humans didn't exist.

Rowan wasn't sure what they were doing. Between the six onion-shaped domes of their encampment, spikes with blinking lights on one end had been driven into the earth, forming a line that disappeared into the tundra. An alien was hovering beside each of these, swaying back and forth, and as they did this, their arms swung like pendulums with their enormous hands scooping at the air. They were making more of the elephantine noises that she and the boys had heard in the forest, softly thrumming those noises together into a barely-heard chant.

Mia, the boys, and Rowan had given those aliens a wide berth.

The minority who'd been left idle seemed to just come and go from their buildings. Some had bowls held at neck level with straws poking beneath the bottom ridge of their mask-faces. One of the aliens emerged with a handful of flat, colored rocks that it tossed across the ground. Plopping into the grass, it rested its hands atop its bent knees, unwinding its long-tail from around its neck to nudge at those rocks.

When he saw this, Thomas shuddered, but Rowan couldn't blame him for his reaction. Even fighting with her every breath to keep prior perceptions from coloring her vision, that casual flick of a fluffy chord had looked unnatural to her.

Despite the distractions around them, she and her continued following the alien who'd found them in the forest. When it reached the dome furthest from where they'd entered the encampment, it ponderously turned, and after its painted eyes landed on the humans, they stretched into long lines. Dropping to the ground, it pushed its stubby legs out in front of it with grass strands puffing

into the air all around.

Once more, Rowan was hit with an overwhelming urge to pet it. *Why* did she want to crawl into the enemy's lap and let it cuddle her?

"Now what?" Thomas asked from the corner of his mouth.

Now... now, Rowan took the lead on this venture and prayed to everything good and holy that eloquence decided to pay her a visit today.

Stepping forward, she said, "Hello? Can you understand me? If possible, we'd like to speak with you."

Please, let this be an alien species that communicated with verbal utterance and not with—Rowan didn't know—telepathy or some such bullshit. That would make things *difficult*.

For a moment, she didn't think the alien understood her, not with its only reaction being to shorten its eyes and manically swish its fox-tail, and seeing that, she was glad. Perhaps she could indulge in this wrath, boiling far below the surface.

Then, it leaned forward, hesitantly extending its long-tail toward Rowan. She held still, hoping she was projecting calm to the creature instead of fury, and it must have worked because the alien traced its tail in a delicate path over the smooth skin of her face. She snapped her eyes closed, listening to one of her friends growl under their breath, until the tail moved to her hair, lifting its red strands into view. Fortunately, the alien didn't take its exploration further, abruptly removing its touch.

Unintelligible noise emerged from it, and at the end of that, its fox-tail flicked toward Rowan with the long-tail poking at a light on its neck. Had that been a cue for her to speak?

"Um... Do you-? Should I-?"

Fuck. She couldn't lose my cool now.

Sighing, she said, "My name is Rowan Kolb. If you can understand me, what should I call you?"

When the alien removed pressure from the light, it blipped a few times before a mechanical voice chirped from it in both understandable sentences and garbled nonsense. With both of them overlapping, it was to make out anything Rowan could understand, but she struggled to do so anyway.

"Mammalian species. Syntax similar to the Arodnes. Translation services prepared."

The mechanical voice said something more in solely elephantine tones, and the alien slowly flipped its hand a few times before returning with more noise.

After a few minutes, the mechanical voice said, “We didn’t realize the worker bees possess intelligence. Sincerest apologies for the blunder. Much repentance must be made for your diminishment but not now. Now is the time for sharing signifiers. Well met, Rowan of the Kolb catalyst. Tanovsinka of the Janak sustenance am I.”

Oh, hell. For how much Rowan had wanted an explanatory conversation with the aliens, she hadn’t thought it would actually happen. Caught out, she didn’t know what to say. She spun through ways to respond, trying to pick the best one, but she was coming up with nothing, and if she was the reason humanity died out—over her damn inability to communicate—the shame of it would atomize her.

Someone lightly brushed their fingers over her shoulder, reorganizing her spinning thoughts.

“Maybe introduce us?” Mia whispered in her ear.

Slumping, Rowan squeezed Mia’s hand before waving hers over the people behind her.

“These are my friends,” she said, pointing to each. “Mia Shalen, Thomas Shalen, and Asher Cerullis.”

She waited while the mechanical voice and the alien conferred, and with each word spoken, the sway of its fox-tail grew more rapid.

“Yes, I remember the last two,” the mechanical voice eventually said. “They were tangled together on the ground. Was that some sort of mating ritual?”

From the strangled squeak behind her, Rowan could imagine that at least Thomas had gone *beet* red, and the mental image made her smile, but then, she had to consider how to respond.

“No, we um... that’s not a part of how we um... mate,” she said, “and if you don’t mind taking advice from someone like me, you might not want to discuss... *that* topic so openly with other humans.”

Once the mechanical voice had finished translating, the alien *trumpeted* its noise into the air, drawing its knees up so its hands and long-tail could encircle them. Across the rest of the camp, other aliens stopped what they were doing, slowly turning to the group, and no matter how much Rowan wanted to coo over Tanovsinka’s adorable pose, she hovered her hand beside her pistol.

“My apologies,” the mechanical voice soon said. “I didn’t mean to offend, but that seems to be all I can do today.”

Well, this was... weird. Rowan hadn’t expected the enemy to be so...

“Why is it being so polite, do you think?” Thomas asked.

Rowan shrugged, still keeping a wary eye on the possible hostiles.

“Please, don’t apologize. You didn’t offend me,” she said. “I just wanted to warn you against the subject in case you come across other humans in the future.”

If said humans didn’t immediately try to murder it first.

On hearing the translation of her words, Tanovsinka slowly unfurled its arms and tail from around its legs with the tail rapidly swishing through the air.

“Oh, good. I would have hated to hurt another piece of the great cosmos, may we all work in harmony,” it said. “Do your people call yourselves human, then?”

Another piece of the great cosmos?

“Yes,” Rowan absently said, still caught on that piece. “What about yours?”

“Our name is long and difficult for most to say and hear,” the mechanical voice said, “but we go by <loosely translated> ‘those from beyond the stars’ here. It is what the first of the many different parts of this galaxy called us when we arrived, long ago.”

When they’d arrived...?

“Rowan, what are you waiting for?” Thomas hissed. “As it *why*.”

Right.

Drawing herself up, Rowan took a deep breath, hoping she wasn’t about to get them killed.

“I have a question, Tanovsinka of the Janak sustenance, one that my friends and I followed you here to ask.”

After the usual pause, the mechanical voice said, “Please, ask what you like. I have never before been so honored as to have another part of the great cosmos approach me.”

Nope. Not getting sucked in by her curiosity about the aliens’ culture. Not when she has greater concerns.

“Why did you attack us?” Rowan asked. “Did we offend you or...? I don’t know. Why did you kill so many of us?”

Tanovsinka’s painted eyes shortened to dashes with its tail falling still.

“Attack... you?” it asked.

Was- was it showing Rowan confusion right now? That looked like confusion. Why would this alien be confused about *murdering tens of thousands of people*? How could it forget? So many dead. HER FAMILY. What was there to be confused about?

With her blood boiling, Rowan had opened her mouth to snap at Tanovsinka when a faint tone whined between them. At that sound's commencement, the hair all over the alien's body stood on end, making its tails thrash while it swiped its hands at the air. One of those hands caught on a horn, and a crack accompanied a piece of it flying by her face. The force of that blow toppled Tanovsinka into the grass.

All around them, the other aliens were acting similarly, and while Rowan didn't know what was going on, it was clear something was hurting them.

And no matter how much she might hate these beings, Rowan couldn't stand seeing a creature in pain like this.

Rushing to Tanovsinka, she dodged its swiping hands, wincing at how large they looked up close, and gently laid a hand on its back.

"Hey! How do I help?" she shouted.

Dutifully, the mechanical voice translated while Rowan dodged punches that might have killed her. Once its translation mechanism was done droning, Tanovsinka lessened the ferocity of its thrashing, turning its head so the dashes on its mask-face could meet her eyes.

"Inside," it said.

Nodding, Rowan shouted, "Guys, lend me a hand?"

"Fucking *really*, Rowan?" someone yelled.

"YES, DAMNIT. NOW."

Turning to Tanovsinka, she said, "Can you hold still for a little while?"

Its answering bark sounded pained, but the mechanical voice gave Rowan an affirmative while the alien became like a stone, and her friends gathered around her.

"Asher, you join me at the head. Thomas, you've got the legs," she said. "Mia, grab the piece of its horn that broke off, and then, help where you can."

If they were lucky, these aliens—those from beyond the stars, as they called themselves—would have a way to reattach the detached piece.

Rowan's friends scrambled to do what she'd said, no matter how reluctant they look about it. That reluctance changed to something far worse while they struggled to move Tanovsinka, and Rowan knew she'd be hearing an earful from each of them later.

Because dragging an alien that was twice one's size across the ground turned out to be really fucking difficult. Puffing and panting, they got Tanovsinka to the two, short steps that led into the nearest building, and looking over the handful of its compatriots that were now laid out, twitching,

in the grass, Rowan wondered how many of them they'd be able to move before their own bodies gave out.

That was when a sharp, deafening crack sounded somewhere nearby, and Rowan went cold with ice water sluicing through her body. Gunfire. The cacophonous stutter of gunfire was rising all around them.

Humans had caused this hurt.

As she increased the urgency of her tugs on Tanovsinka's body, Rowan silently railed against the people attacking this place. Why *now*? They'd been getting somewhere with these aliens, and someone had come along and *ruined* it.

She let these furious thoughts burn through her, assisting with one final pull into the dome, rather than consider the other implication of what had happened, but once they carefully lowered the alien to a gel-padded floor, she let it seep to the forefront.

They could hurt this foe, one that Rowan had thought was invincible for weeks. They could fight.

A fight was *not*, however, what she wanted right now.

As her friends cautiously exited the structure, probably just as unnerved by the alien architecture around them as Rowan was, she knelt beside Tanovsinka, rubbing her hand across the smooth fur of its shoulder.

"You need to stay here. Do not leave this place under any circumstances," she said. "It's the only way I can help you. Do you understand me?"

She squeezed a little as she said this, and while it listened, Tanovsinka's eyes stretched and shortened in a crawl.

"I understand," its mechanical voice said.

"I will try to help your companions as much as I can, but I- I don't-"

Biting her lip, Rowan glanced over her shoulder at the door, where its thin surface was muffling the gunfire outside, before hanging her head.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Shooting to her feet, she paused as an idea formed. With gritted teeth, she snatched up the broken part of Tanovsinka's horn, digging its tip along the seam of her neck and shoulder, and as warmth trickled beneath my shirt's neckline, she drew her pistol, firing it two times into the part of the dome that was furthest from them.

As she hurried to the door, a mechanical voice asked, "Why?"

And squeezing her eyes closed, Rowan left, failing to answer either of the questions the alien had been asking.

As soon as the sun's rays splashed on her skin, she stopped short, gut-punched by what she was seeing. The aliens were dead. An unreasoning, vicious part of her roared with delight at this, the minuscule balancing of the scales between her and these creatures that had harmed her, and she had to bite her tongue, driving her fingernails into her palms, to push that anger down. She had to remind herself that *she didn't know* if these particular living beings had wronged her, and once she'd done that, something vastly different and, in many ways, worse than rage trickled into her until her heart was filled.

What she'd encountered here, though, was what Rowan had thought she'd find on emerging from the dome, considering how incapacitated the aliens had seemed before the first signs of violence had appeared, but the people loosely holding rifles, strolling between bodies, and lifting red-fuzzed heads by the toe? They were wearing House Kolb uniforms. They were her family's troopers.

And two of them were currently aiming rifles at her friends, who had their hands above their heads.

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" Rowan said, marching down the steps. "Back the hell away from these *civilians*, or I swear to *avan*, I'll make sure my brother cuts your commissions short. How long do you think you'll survive-?"

When the troopers swung two rifle barrels toward her, making her stare them down, she shut up. Facing imminent, violent death often did that to a person.

It didn't stop her instincts, though. As soon as those rifles had started moving toward her, Rowan had angled her body to present a smaller profile while leveling her pistol at the closest trooper to her.

Fortunately, her brain caught up with her body before either of the troopers could react to the danger she'd become.

"I don't want to kill you. We've seen enough death recently," she said, pouring ice into her voice, "but if you don't stop aiming the weapons that *my family gave you* at me, I'll take at least one of you with me when bullets start flying."

Still, they didn't back down, and though Rowan saw someone else approaching from the corner of her eye, she couldn't give this person her attention yet.

"At ease. I've got this," they said.

Slowly, the troopers lowered their rifles, and Rowan matched their weapons' descent with her own. With the threat level lowered, the troopers gave the new arrival their full attention, and she patted their shoulders.

"Thank you, gentlemen," she said. "You can join the others."

While they did so, Rowan gave this woman a once over. She had her helmet under her arm with her brown hair cut short, but Rowan didn't seem much else before she was bowing.

"Lady Kolb, my apologies for those two," the woman said. "Until Icrodon, most of us here hadn't seen combat, not since training at least. Our inexperience has made nerves run a little high."

"No one was hurt, so it's fine," Rowan coldly said. "Although if any of you threaten my friends like that again..."

She didn't know what had come over her. She didn't act in this aloof manner, the way most nobles carried themselves. She didn't make threats, even those unspoken, to the people who served her.

"It won't happen, Lady Kolb," the woman said.

Was she that upset about what had happened here? Why did she care if these aliens were dead? They were the *enemy*. They'd killed her family. She *hated* them.

Right?

Avan, these questions were making her head hurt. Best to put them aside for now.

"You may rise," Rowan said and once the trooper was upright, continued with. "How did you come to be here... captain, is it?"

"Yes, ma'am," the captain said. "We were on a scouting mission and saw these domes. Came to investigate, and I'm right glad we did. I could never have lived with myself if a member of House Kolb or her friends came to harm because of my negligence. Although you *do* look like you handled your own."

She drifted her eyes to the scratch across Rowan's shoulder.

"Mm," Rowan said, refusing to comment. "And how did you... do what you did with the aliens?"

So specific, that question, but from her grin, the captain seemed to know what she'd meant.

"We've learned some things in the week since the two-tails arrived, although most of it seem useless," she said, "but we do know that certain radio frequencies mess with them, even if we're not sure why. They also only work if the aliens are unprotected by tech, like these ones were. Looks like they might have been in the process of raising one of their damnable shields with those spikes, even if the formation of them isn't quite right. It's a good thing we arrived before they'd finished."

Rowan nodded along, pretending to be delighted by this news while secretly finding nothing good in it. What this captain had described sounded like a weak advantage, one they couldn't use except in the most impossible of circumstances, so she couldn't take any joy from it, and if this group of aliens had been on the precipice of protection from these troopers, what might a difference of five minutes have made? What more could Rowan have learned from Tanovsinka?

This was all assuming that the captain had been right when it came to her conjecture about the spikes, of course.

“All well and good,” Rowan said, “but I’m also a little curious about why you’re here, in the tundra. That’s what I meant by my first question. Are you the first of those who’ve come from Xygek, and if so, how did you find one another? You should have been more scattered than this.”

“Oh! No, we didn’t come from Xygek, ma’am,” the captain said. “We’re part of your Uncle Ethan’s honor guard.”

Asher made a note of comprehension, which was strange. Why would he know about a practice that only Rowan’s family had employed, among the nobles in Athari at least?

If these troopers were part of an extended family member’s honor guard, though, it would explain why they hadn’t seen combat, assigned to stick with that family member as they were.

“Excellent! Does that mean we’re close to my uncle’s home, then?” Rowan asked. “If so, perhaps you could escort us back. I’m afraid we’ve been separated from the rest of our group.”

Shifting in place, the captain said, “We would be... happy to serve as such, if you don’t mind a short wait first. I’d like to make sure these domes are clear. It wouldn’t do to leave any two-tails alive, this close to base.”

Rowan’s friends, silently watching to this point, unconsciously drew together, flicking their eyes to the door behind her while Mia hunched on herself. Rowan doubted they cared about whether she succeeded in protecting Tanovsinka, but the fact that she meant to shelter an alien probably wouldn’t reflect well on her while among these already twitchy troopers. She didn’t want to push that dynamic.

“There’s no need for that. As soon as I heard gunfire, I started clearing these domes myself. I only found one enemy, in there,” she said, jerking a thumb over her shoulder. “Thank you for the assist, by the way. I wasn’t sure how we’d escape after one of those *bastards* captured us earlier today.”

Internally cringing, Rowan cast an evil eye at a dead alien and suddenly realized why this massacre had disturbed her so much. For a moment, a face from Nasmi was superimposed over a wooden mask-face. She couldn’t think about that or let it create a swirl of conflicting emotions in her gut right now, though.

“I couldn’t do much with only a pistol at my disposal, although...”

Cradling said pistol, Rowan smirked.

“It seemed sufficient for killing one of these... two-tails, is it?”

While the captain weighed her words, she holstered her weapon and stashed Tanovsinka’s horn—*avan*, she wished she could return it—in a pocket before heading for her friends, all as she would normally act.

“All right, then. We’ll head out immediately,” the captain said. “It’s only a short walk to our off-road vehicles, although...”

“Forgive me, Lady Kolb, but my Lord Kolb will want to know your friends’ names before we arrive. He’s been mighty antsy, what with your side of the family keeping those secrets to yourselves.”

So, maybe Thomas and Asher had been right to be paranoid about Uncle Ethan’s reaction to them.

Having reached Thomas, Rowan rose to her tiptoes so she could sling an arm around his neck before dragging him down to her level. He swiped at her in protest.

“You can tell my dear uncle that these people’s names don’t matter. They are like family to me and should be treated as such,” she said. “Now, which way to our ride?”

The captain pursed her lips, but she shouted for the troopers milling around them to move out before leading them at a brisk pace ahead. As they left the domes behind, Rowan hoped none of those trigger-happy people would decide to go exploring before following their orders. She hoped Tanovsinka would be ok, but she couldn’t worry about it any more than she already had.

She had bigger problems to handle now, namely greeting her paranoid uncle who’d never been a part of her life before. Hell, this would be *interesting*.

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