

# Chapter 21: I Didn't Need Your Help

Given the flat, treeless nature of the tundra on this side of the mountains, Rowan wasn't sure how Uncle Ethan kept his home hidden. As they once more rolled over bumpy ground, she didn't think it was wise to ask this question of his honor guard, and with the grumpy, old trooper driving them nearby, she couldn't speculate on it with her friends. They also couldn't discuss what had happened in the alien encampment, which only added to an already tense atmosphere.

So, it was with far too much relief that she spotted four colored lights ahead: two green and two red. Rowan wasn't sure how they related to her Uncle Ethan's home, but they were the only sign of a human touch on these barely habitable lands, and the car was headed straight for them.

The trooper aligned the car to pass between the green lights of the outlined box, and as they came closer, Rowan glanced around, checking the sky as well. Maybe they were about to take another plane ride, although what they would potentially fly in would have to be much larger than the Cerullis' jet to accommodate all these cars. The lights could indicate a pick-up zone, though. Rowan wasn't sure where Ethan could have gotten his hands on a-

Their car's front wheels hit the invisible line between the green lights, and it angled down with its hood about to hit solid ground. Despite Rowan's cringing anticipation, however, there was no impact. As they passed *through* the grass and frozen earth, something flickered, and they were no longer bouncing along the outside tundra. They were rolling down a paved ramp with stark lighting and bricked walls to border it, leading into some sort of garage.

Holy hell. Uncle Ethan had used his portion of the family money to build an underground bunker. He really was crazy.

Beside Rowan, Asher had twisted to look out the rear windshield with color draining from his face.

"What-? I- Where- were did he get that prototype?" he whispered to himself. "Max said it wasn't finished yet."

The trooper driving the car glanced up to the rear-view mirror with an unseen frown pinching her eyes, and both Thomas and Rowan laid a hand on Asher's thighs while Mia drew her shoulders together in the front. When Rowan squeezed her hold, Asher flipped forward again, but he couldn't stop chewing on his lip, so preoccupied that he didn't sweep their hands off of him. Rowan left hers in place, gently patting her friend, but after a moment, Thomas drew his hand back, crossing his arms as he leaned his forehead on the car's glass.

Now, yes. Uncle Ethan knew that Asher Cerullis had been traveling with mom, John, and me, and yes, he probably knew what her friend looked like too. It was kind of hard to keep one's photo from circling throughout Athari when one came from a noble family as recognizable as one of theirs. On the off chance that he hadn't seen such a photo, however, Rowan would like to keep Ethan guessing about her friends for as long as possible.

Once the car was in park, everyone piled out of it, and *at least* Thomas, out of all of us, rubbed his back side, wincing. None of them were used to off-road rides yet. Before they could start taking in their surroundings, the same captain from before marched to them from the car she'd taken to get here.

"Lady Kolb, you'll be pleased to know that another of our squads ran across the rest of your group while we were on our way here," she called. "They'll be joining us soon."

Oh, thank *avan*. Rowan knew this was supposed to be a sanctuary for her traveling group, but because of who her friends were, she couldn't help but feel as if she was in hostile territory. Her immediate family and their troopers, an addition of allies, would be welcome.

"That's wonderful news!" she said. "Thank you, captain."

Slowly, she turned in a circle, taking the lay of the land, which besides it being underground, was nothing special. A dozen or so off-road vehicles sat in two, neat lines around them, and the same gray-painted brick walls from the ramp had followed them into this place. It was about the size of the building where Cerullis had stored their vehicles in Xygek, if with a slightly taller ceiling, and no effort had been made to hide the steel supports overhead with domed lights interspersed between them. A giant, rolling door filled up most of one wall, perhaps leading into another garage, while three smaller ones promised entrance to possibly more eye-pleasing parts of the bunker.

Rowan saw no sign of Uncle Ethan, just the troopers who'd stumbled upon them.

"So, what's the plan now that we're here?" she asked. "Are we meant to greet my uncle, or does he want us to settle in first? Maybe a bit of both?"

"My Lord Kolb has asked me to show you to your assigned quarters for the length of your stay here," the captain said, "but technically, Lady Kolb, you have a greater rank than him among Kolb's troopers, higher up the line of succession as you are. If you want, I could bring all of you to him, or if your friends would like to rest, one of my people can take them to their rooms while I escort you to your uncle."

Hiding a smile, Rowan turned to her friends. It seemed she needed to learn another trooper's name. Reading her intentions and providing a viable path toward them—diplomacy, of a sort—were rare talents among the people who fought for her family. She'd like to cultivate those skills in this captain, if she could.

To her friends, she said, "Want to come with me or no?"

"I doubt we'd help you during this first meeting," Mia said.

“From everything I’ve heard, Lord Ethan is likely to focus on us instead of you, if we came,” Asher added.

“Plus, I don’t know about these two, but I’m tired.”

With a fairly convincing yawn, Thomas stretched his arms overhead before draping one of them over Mia’s shoulders.

“I could use a nap.”

Bullshit. On the way here, they’d had days much more strenuous than what they’d experienced this morning, and during them, Thomas had still bounced around like an overly excited puppy at the end of them. Rowan doubted he’d suddenly lost all of that energy now.

Still, she smiled because they’d known what she needed without her having to tell them.

“All right,” the captain said, signaling to a pair of troopers. “If you’ll follow these two, they’ll take you to your quarters. Lady Kolb?”

“After you,” Rowan said, waving the captain ahead. “I’ll see you in a little while, guys.”

*Please, be safe,* she silently added.

From their guarded eyes and the excess of enthusiasm in their waves, she thought they might have heard it anyway.

To her surprise, not much changed between the garage and the halls of Uncle Ethan’s home. Drywall had replaced brick, and the floor was made of wood planks instead of painted concrete. The ceilings were closer to the floor, letting the warm light here spread over every surface, but the roof’s girders were still visible, and the same stark style from before continued around every corner.

The further along they went, the more Rowan’s pace slowed down, prompting the captain to glance over her shoulder several times. When they’d almost gotten to a crawl, she pulled back, still in the lead but close enough for Rowan to see her face.

“Something wrong, ma’am?” she asked.

Biting my lip, Rowan looked away.

“I’m not sure how to handle—”

She vaguely waved.

“—*this*. Ethan is my last living aunt or uncle on the Kolb side of the family. I have plenty of them in Shoya Dren from the Chinooks, but in Athari, it was just him and Aunt Sally before she died. It never mattered before because he wasn’t a part of our lives, but now, with so many dead—”

Rowan hiccupped into silence, stopping short in the hall as the monster she'd kept caged since the plane crash made a bid for freedom. For a moment, she could do nothing more than choke on her tears, forcing them down, forcing herself to focus elsewhere. To temporarily forget. FORGET.

When she could breathe again, she moved along. Thankfully, the captain made no comment on the pause.

"I need this meeting to go well," Rowan said, "and considering some of the things we must discuss, I don't think it will."

"Because the issues are contentious?" the captain asked.

Thinking on all of the problems that existed between her and Uncle Ethan, some of which he was unaware of, Rowan hugged herself, nodding. The captain was quiet for a while, keeping her eyes distant while she walked down a well-known path.

Eventually, they stepped into a foyer of some sort, hexagonal in shape. An arch, much like they'd passed through to enter this space, created a passageway through the wall that mirrored theirs, and a grand, double door stood between these arches with an elevator installed opposite it.

Seven or so people, troopers or otherwise, were gathered here while more passed through. Rowan had seen a couple of attendants and other staff on their way to this place, but here, she finally found enough living people to make this cold bunker seem alive.

Automatically assuming her uncle was waiting behind the double doors, she started that way, halting when the captain lightly pressed fingers into her shoulder.

"If I may, Lady Kolb?" she said.

Intrigued by her initiative, Rowan said, "Of course."

Letting her finger slip away, the captain stood at relaxed attention.

"My Lord Ethan is many things, too much for me to quickly share. As it is for all people," she said, "but I can tell you that you shouldn't take the gruff, insensitive personality that he typically presents at face value. I'll let you draw your own conclusions about him, but at least trust me when I say that *that* isn't the real him. He *will* listen to your every concern, Lady Kolb, whether they'll cause friction in this household or not, and he will respect you for bringing them to him in the most honest and direct manner that you can. Take that as you will."

Lifting her hands on either side of her body, she took a step back, and Rowan narrowed her eyes.

"How do you know so much about him?" she asked. "What you've shared sounds like a deeper understanding of him than most people have of their employers, especially since he's a noble."

As the captain shifted her eyes away from Rowan, a half-smile forced its way onto her lips.

“You’ll find out,” she said. “Would you like me to accompany you inside, Lady Kolb, or may I return to my duties?”

That was an *interesting* answer.

“Please, don’t let me keep you, captain,” Rowan said. “Thank you for your help.”

With a short bow, the captain hurried off, and Rowan watched her go until she couldn’t see her anymore. Yep. Definitely need to learn her name, preferably in a way that would make it plausible that Rowan had known who she was all along. She seemed like the type who’d like a commanding officer taking enough interest in her to dig up at least that tiny detail on their own.

But she should focus on why she was here.

Squaring her shoulders, Rowan briskly marched to a set of doors, looming intimidatingly over her, and eased one open. Slipping through, she was buffeted by the amount of noise and activity that greeted me.

People in the House Kolb uniform were bustling about the circular room, staying within its confines for the most part, but some of them were coming in and out of doors along the back wall.

Damn. How had Uncle Ethan got his hands on so many troopers? Had the ones from Xygek started trickling in? Maybe he’d been recruiting, although that seemed unlikely, considering how far they were from the closest source of civilization. Rowan would have to ask him about it later.

Most of the troopers in the room appeared to be acting as aides: fetching food or other supplies for the rest, giving reports or taking orders, or pulling requested information from storecases. The rest were sitting at tables, haphazardly scattered across the floor. Each table had storecases below them as well as touch screens embedded in their surfaces. Far too much paper sat in front of the troopers with some of those sheets spilling across the giant blocks of tile beneath their feet and the table’s legs.

They also had... Asher’s button, the one that establishes direct connections, hanging off of their ears. Strange. Rowan had thought those weren’t available to the public yet, as her friend had once said.

Shaking herself, she sucked on her lip while examining the ring of monitors hanging from the wall, high above her head. A mix of images was shown there. One or two depicted pictures of the northern half of Athari from far away, obviously satellite feeds. Some were simply black, feeds that had been cut she was guessing, but most looked out over the tundra, swaying like what one would encounter in a first-person shooter game. Body cams, probably.

Above this ring, the concrete walls rose far overhead, ending in a grid of clouded, glass panes. The sun’s feeble attempt at illumination through those panes was helped by spotlights, placed in various places along this tube, as well as a few lamps on the floor.

The arrangement reminded Rowan, in a vague way, of the Cerullis lab, where their employees had monitored outer space and the Ancient's Source, but that only made sense. Both places' primary purpose was to collect data through human observation, although this room also seemed to act as a command center, of sorts.

So, where was the commander?

With a jolt, Rowan realized that she didn't know what her Uncle Ethan looks like. It had never come up during the few times he'd been mentioned while growing up, and no one in their traveling group had thought to clarify during their journey.

In the end, though, she didn't need a description. Since she'd entered this room, a man had been standing in the center of it with his hands clasped behind his back. She hadn't initially paid him much attention because not only was this place a lot to take in, but he was wearing the same House Kolb uniform as the other soldiers here.

As she glanced over the room's occupants, however, something about him caught her eye. She wasn't sure what it was, though, so she watched this man until he turned toward her, enough for her to see his face.

Her resulting, gasping squeak was soul-grippingly loud, at least to her ears, but it was quickly muffled by the back of her hand, slapped to her mouth. As she sank her teeth into its skin, her vision crystallized from the tears filling her eyes, and she thought she'd be sick, her heart hurt so badly. She was shaking with restrained sobs or maybe crazed laughter? She couldn't tell.

Because this, an echo of Rowan's mother blazing from her brother's face, was *not fucking fair*.

Somehow, Rowan got herself back under control. *Avan* help her if she had to explain how she did that because she couldn't express the effort it took with words. Not accurately at least.

It was kind of like pushing and shoving and fighting an overstuffed piece of luggage closed, only to realize you'd forgotten to pack a charger for your wristcom. Carefully, you'd ease your luggage open the barest of cracks, but it would spring open instead, flinging clothes across the floor, and you'd have to repeat the process but with the addition of a charger this time.

But Rowan did it. She... did it, and exhausted, she strode toward her uncle, projecting as much of a pleased expression as she could.

He saw her coming when she was halfway to him, pinning a stiff smile to his mouth as he faced her.

"You must be Rowan," he said. "Anya told me you were coming."

Anya?

No, she couldn't let that distract her.

“Hello, Uncle Ethan,” Rowan said. “Thank you for extending refuge to me and my family. I’m sure John and mom will be equally as grateful when they arrive.”

Ethan shifted to another foot with a wave of tensing muscles crawling over his frame, which Rowan could only stare at. Had that been a squirm?

“Yes, I’d heard you were separated from the rest,” he said. “How did that happen?”

What? No hug for a niece he’d never met? No attempt to make a guest feel comfortable? Rowan might find this lack of hospitality more annoying if she hadn’t wanted the coming confrontation to be over and done with.

“I don’t suppose we could speak privately about that, could we?” she asked. “It looks like you’re running a few ops at the moment. I can wait, although I’d rather not.”

Almost before she could catch it, Ethan’s stiff smile flickered into something more genuine before going rigid again.

“Now is fine. Give me a moment?”

When she nodded, he twisted toward one of the tables behind him.

“Diedrick, you’re in command,” he shouted. “Shouldn’t be more than half an hour gone.”

A dark-haired man answered this with a loose salute, never looking up from the touchscreen in front of him, but rather than berate the man for disrespect, as most nobles would, Ethan softly chuckled, waving for Rowan to follow him.

She didn’t know what to say as she trailed behind this stranger of a man. How did one bridge a gap of so many years and missed opportunities?

Uncle Ethan was having the same problem, though, if that was what his silence meant. The stiff pace of his march matched the drumming of his fingers on his hands, still clasped behind him, and Rowan wondered if that tic was meant to hide the slight twitches in them, although she wasn’t sure why he’d make an effort like that. Those twitches were faint enough that only someone extraordinarily observant or fixated on him, like her, would notice.

As they entered a dimmed room, Ethan pressed the button hanging from his ear, and it blinked more rapidly, as if waiting for input.

“Captain Anya Ivanov.”

Wait, captain? As in *Rowan’s* captain, the one who’d brought her here?

She frowned as the button’s blinking became a solid glow, but even as he moved to a sideboard, turning in order to pour a drink, Ethan didn’t notice Rowan’s confusion or questioning stare.

“Anya,” he said.

There was a pause.

“Yes, she found me. Thank you for bringing her,” he continued. “Are the others handled?”

Another pause.

“Good. Private debrief in fifteen minutes. My usual spot.”

Pushing the button again, Uncle Ethan removed it from his ear before giving Rowan his full attention, sipping at his drink.

“So?” he asked. “What happened?”

“Um.”

Was Rowan supposed to stand in the entrance of this room while answering that? Damn, if their conversation was going to go that way, he could at least offer her-

“Oh, hell. I’ve done it again, haven’t I?” Ethan said, covering his eyes. “Please, forgive me. I get so *comfortable* here. I forget...”

He rubbed his face before dropping his arm.

“Anyway. Come in, Rowan. Make yourself comfortable,” he said. “Would you like something to drink?”

“I... would like that, yes,” Rowan said. “Thank you.”

She slowly wandered into the shadows, letting her eyes adjust, with her arm stretched in front of her.

“Anything in particular you want?” Ethan asked.

“Surprise me,” Rowan said.

Hidden in the dark, the precariously stacked towers of notebooks and paper, crammed into nearly every one of the room’s free spaces, impressed upon her eyes, and half-consciously, she cocked her head. Where were we? Some sort of poorly organized filing room? The leather armchair in one corner and a desk chair, peeking from the stacks lining one wall, would suggest otherwise. But what else could it be?

“Here,” Uncle Ethan said.

He handed Rowan a tumbler, and while she took a sip, he looked over the room with one arm crossed. At the flavor that hit her tongue, Rowan sprang her eyes open wide, that combination of smoke and cherry wood flavors was so familiar. She almost spilled the rest of it when jerking her

head toward Ethan.

“Do you like it?” he asked. “It was your mother’s favorite. Glenbacken 1171.”

Rowan took one, ragged sip of air, two, before joining him in his examination.

“I do,” she said with a rough voice. “You look a lot like her, you know.”

“So I’ve been told.”

They took a sip together with nothing spoken, and Rowan wondered if he was thinking about Veronica, like her.

“Don’t worry,” Ethan said. “I’ll limit my contact with Bay, at least at first. I wouldn’t want to distress her.”

Rowan hadn’t even considered how he might affect her surviving mother. That he had first surprised her.

“I think that might be best,” she said.

She drained her tumbler, and when she lowered it, Ethan had his hand outstretched.

“Go ahead and sit down,” he said. “I’ll pour you another.”

Rowan did as he said, or she meant to, but as she was picking her way between stacks of paper, she spied what they and an office chair had been hiding.

A storecase. There had been storecases in that strategy room, sure, but this was the first free one she’d come across since leaving Xygek, and her fingers *ached* to touch it.

“Uncle Ethan? How good of a connection do you have with the network?” she asked.

“Only the best. I couldn’t do my work here without it,” Ethan said. “Why?”

Rowan tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry, emphasized when she passed a rough tongue over her lips.

“Can- can I use the storecase in here?” she asked.

A glass bottle heavily thumped onto wood, and Rowan counted to eleven before Uncle Ethan tightly answered.

“Sure. Just use the guest account, please.”

“Can do.”

Dropping into the office chair, Rowan flexed her fingers before laying one hand on the keyboard while using the other to power the storecase. The whirl of fans as it began its boot process set a flutter in her heart, and after logging in, she opened a network portal with trepidation.

And a window appeared on the monitor.

Oh, thank *avan*. The network was still up and running. Why hadn't the aliens disrupted it yet?

Rowan didn't give that question much thought, navigating to the site for *Nedrya's Breaking* so she could start downloading it. To do so, she had to force administration privileges onto this account, but she'd been doing things like that since she was small, so it didn't take her long.

Uncle Ethan had *not* been kidding about his network connection's strength. Downloading Break took a little under three minutes, and it was a big game, one that would have taken fifteen minutes to download back home.

While it was working, Uncle Ethan set her tumbler beside her jittering fingers.

"You wanted to play a video game?" he asked.

No audible contempt had been infused in his voice, but Rowan heard it nonetheless, which set her into a bristled state.

"No. I wanted to check in with my guild. My friends," she said with each word short. "We don't have a meet date for a few more days, but still, they've been sending me messages in game. It's how I've learned what's going on with Sasmor and Roswines, but I can't see chat channels unless I'm properly logged into the game. I want to look through the ones I set up on the day of... Icrodon. See if anyone's dropped any useful info. Make sure no one's being an asshole with them. Et cetera. it'd be nice to say hi to my guildmates too, but I doubt anyone's online."

Rowan could feel her Uncle Ethan hovering behind her as she started the game and selected one of the characters under her FatalisticFable account to play.

"You set this up on the day of the attack?" he asked.

"Mmhmm."

"I'm impressed," Ethan said.

And he'd sounded impressed too, if also a little surprised.

"Thanks," Rowan said. "Give me five minutes, at most, and we can talk."

By that point, though, she was too far gone to hear his reply. She'd returned to Nedrya, and *avan* above, if it didn't feel glorious. She'd missed it.

More of her guildmates were online than she'd expected, and of course, as soon as one of them noticed Rowan had logged on, they flooded her with messages. These trickled to almost nothing once she posted that she didn't have a headset in the guild's general chat. A few people expressed wishes to speak with her once she could do so vocally, but besides that, no one bothered her, leaving her free to go through her new chat channels' logs.

It took her a little longer than she'd estimated to get through them. Still, most entries only mentioned a guild member's projected destination and timetable to arrive there. Not many of those timetables had expired yet, which gave Rowan hope that most people in her guild had yet to reach their safe havens. She held the nuggets of golden information that she gained from her trawl close to heart, to use as needed while she and her people settled into their new home.

Once she was done, she logged out, but she left the storecase on, finding comfort in its monitor's glow when facing this member of her family that she barely know. The ice in her drink had melted, but she sipped it regardless and pinned her eyes on her Uncle Ethan. She'd felt him doing the same throughout her time in Nedrya, so it was a bit of a relief to finally meet that gaze.

"So," she said.

"So," Ethan echoed.

They stared at one another for a bit, but he was the first make a move in breaking it.

Gesturing at the stacks of paper around them, he said, "Apologies for the mess. My study wasn't so cluttered a week ago, but when it became clear we'd need an unconventional method to defeat the two-tails, I had all the notes from my childhood brought up from storage."

Rowan raised an eyebrow, picking at a towering pile of paper beside her.

"This is all yours?" she said.

It was a *lot* of scribbling to come from one man.

"Yes," Ethan said, running his eyes over what he'd written. "I've always been... different, especially as a child. Researching and writing about the strange and fantastic phenomena of our world helped me feel normal."

Snatching her fingers into her lap, Rowan swallowed a surge of shame for the voice that was whispering 'eccentric' in her head. At the same time, she pushed down memories of Logan, times when he'd struggled to justify his fascination with numbers to the high school sports coaches who'd tried to recruit him.

"I see. Considering what's attacked us, I believe a look into the strange and fantastic is warranted," she said.

Uncle Ethan snapped his eyes back to her for a split second before looking away again.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," he said. "Now, if you don't mind..."

He waved his glass toward Rowan suggestively, and she puffed out a sigh.

"Yes, yes."

She told him what had happened from the moment she'd left the group's campsite this morning to when his honor guard had slaughtered the aliens, including a... polite criticism of overdone violence, and through this, Uncle Ethan didn't move. Even once she'd finished, he swirled his drink, gazing into nothing.

"And you're sure you were getting somewhere with this Tanovsinka?" he eventually asked.

"We could have at least established *why* they attacked us," Rowan said, fighting to keep from growling. "We could maybe have extrapolated a way to appease them, if we knew that."

Groaning, Ethan slumped in his armchair, thunking his head on its back. After a moment, he lifted his tumbler to precariously drink from it.

"What a missed opportunity," he said. "If Anya had attacked just a few minutes later..."

"So, you see it too?" Rowan asked, scooting to the edge of her seat. "The chance we had today?"

That she'd never needed help?

As if his neck was grating on its hinge, Uncle Ethan noded

"Maybe your Tanovsinka's still alive... but going back to check so soon after inflicting so much violence probably isn't a good idea," he said. "Best to let it settle. Time has a way of dulling hurts, thank *avan*."

Thank *avan* indeed. Rowan didn't know what she'd do if she had to live for the rest of her life with these random upsurges of grief or pain, waiting below the surface for her to loosen her control.

"But I assume you didn't want to speak in private just because of that op's disastrous conclusion," Ethan said. "So, what's bothering you, Rowan?"

It was her turn to refuse to meet his gaze.

"My friends. I want to make sure they'll be safe. They can't be treated any differently than I am while they're here," she said. "That's why I've done my best to conceal their identities throughout our trip, although I'm sure you've worked out who they are by now."

"Yes, but I wasn't terribly surprised when Anya shared their names with me," Ethan said. "I already knew about the Cerullis boy, and your mother often spoke of the Shalen children at the same time as you in her letters."

After swallowing a lump in her throat, Rowan slowly breathed out.

“So?” she said. “Do I need to worry about anything horrible happening to them here?”

Keep it short and blunt, much like he’d been with her. He was more likely to respect that and therefore, her if she avoided flowery words.

“The Shalen children and their father, who I’m assuming you brought with you at your friends’ insistence?”

Not exactly true. Rowan was sure at least Thomas wouldn’t have minded leaving Oscar behind. Still, she made a face and nodded.

“They may have free reign here, and I’ll spread the word that they’re to be treated as regular, untitled people rather than those who are corp-related, which is what they’ve become,” Ethan continued. “Without Shalen Corp, which is most assuredly gone now, they no longer hold power and are unlikely to sway what we do here because of that. I’ve had Anya show the children to rooms that are appropriate for their station.”

Rowan stopped herself from clicking her tongue, but it wasn’t because of her uncle’s decision about Mia and Thomas. That had been more than acceptable. She was more annoyed by certain words he’d used.

Untitled? Station? These were words she’d hoped to have finally escaped, one of the few good things to come from the arrival of the aliens, but she couldn’t exactly protest that right now.

“Sounds fair,” she said. “What about Asher?”

“The Cerullis boy...”

Shifting, Uncle Ethan balanced his tumbler on the arm of his chair so he could scrub his eyes.

“I don’t want him wandering around my home unsupervised,” he said. “It’s not that I don’t trust your judgment of him. Veronica shared enough of your childhood with me to trust you, and your decisions on this journey have more than proven it to be sound. I just—”

Sighing, he fully reclined in his chair, watching Rowan with the monitor’s glow glinting in his unreadable eyes.

“There are... things here that I don’t want your friend to stumble upon before I’m ready to show them to him,” he said, “and even given what I said about your judgment, anyone bearing the Cerullis name rankles me for—”

With his breath catching, he looked away.

“—personal reasons,” he eventually continued. “I wish that weren’t the case as I’m sure Asher is a nice young man, but it would make me feel more at ease to know he’s been restricted in his

movements until I've grown comfortable with him."

Considering how antagonistic the Kolb and Cerullis families had been with one another for the last thirty years or so, Rowan was surprised by how reasonable Ethan was being. She hadn't thought he was likely to toss Asher out of this place, leaving him to fend for himself in Athari's harsh tundra, but she also hadn't been stupid enough to believe her uncle would want to go without precautions concerning Asher. Not only that but the justifications he'd given her for these precautions were logical, not ones spawned from vicious hate.

Ethan made a funny noise, snapping Rowan out of contemplation.

At the strange look he was giving her, she said, "What?"

"It's... nothing. Only..." he said before chewing on his lip for a moment. "You're smiling. May I ask why?"

"Huh."

Prodding her lips, Rowan indeed found them curled into a grin.

"It's probably because I realized I like you," she said. "I think we'll get along well."

Scrunching up on himself, Ethan stammered, "Good? Yes, good. I'm sorry. It's been a while since anyone—"

He clicked his teeth together before forcing himself upright in his chair.

"I like you too, Rowan."

...Odd. Not the behavior Rowan would expect from the man she'd spoken with over their connections for this last week, but the captain—Anya, she was fairly certain—had mentioned that her Uncle Ethan wore his gruffness like a mask. Was this what he was really like?

She rolled her chair forward until their knees were touching, but when she moved to take one of Ethan's hands, he pulled them to his stomach, which was fine. Rowan didn't much like unnecessary touching, except with people she was intimately familiar with, and now, she had an excuse not to do it. She planted her palms on her hips instead.

"How about if Asher had a guardian? Someone always watching him so he doesn't run across anything you don't want him to see," she said. "That way, he wouldn't have to be cooped up while you get accustomed to one another."

Lacing his fingers together, Ethan cocked his head with narrowed eyes and his bottom lip visibly red, even in the low light. Hell, how much was he going to gnaw at that?

"I could handle that," he said. "Who'd do it, though? Maybe your friend, Thomas."

Hissing, Rowan recoiled from Ethan.

“Noooo,” she drawled, rapidly shaking her head. “They have a complicated relationship. There’s something *weird* between them that always has them at each other’s throats. They’d probably kill one another if they were constantly forced into the one another’s presence.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Ethan said, back at his lip chewing. “Who do you suggest, then?”

Silently, Rowan raised her hand, and Ethan snapped his eyes wide open.

“You realize this arrangement would have whoever’s watching Asher sleeping in the same room as him,” he flatly said.

“Yes. And?”

Furrowing his brow, Ethan took a breath before stopping to drum his fingers on pursed lips.

“And... propriety?” he said with uncertainty rife in his voice.

Rowan might have taken offense to what Ethan was suggesting, but the way he’d put it, it had sounded more like something he’d felt obligated to mention than something he actually cared about.

Snorting a laugh, she said, “I don’t think stupid things like that matter much anymore. *Plus*, I’m old enough to decide what I do with my body, have been for a while, but if it makes you feel better, I can guarantee you that nothing scandalous will happen between us. We don’t like each other in that way.”

At least, Rowan didn’t think they did. She’d never truly considered it, though. She liked looking at Asher, considering the proportions of his body and face lined up to make an exceptionally pleasing picture, and she thoroughly enjoyed his company. Those two items usually added up to pretty fantastic sex with said person, something Rowan wouldn’t mind trying out with Asher, but he’d never expressed interest in anything like that before, besides the one time he’d asked her to dance. Or she didn’t think he had.

Had he?

Hell, she’d be thinking about this for the rest of the night, wouldn’t she?

“Rowan?”

Ethan lightly touched her knee, retracting his hand so quickly one would think Rowan’s skin had been as hot as a heated stove eye, and she shook myself.

“Sorry. I was making sure that I told you the truth, and I’m positive that I did,” she said. “So? Can I annoy the hell out of my friend by making him stay with me for an undetermined length of time?”

Oo, that would be interesting. Thinking of ways she could irritate Asher in the coming days, Rowan bounced in place with her smile threatening to split her face.

“If you think you can handle the task, you can have it. Let me know if it gets to be too much,” Ethan said, lifting a hand before she could celebrate. “I’m trusting you with this, Rowan. Please... be careful.”

Reading between the lines, Rowan sobered, setting her jaw.

“I won’t let him dig into your life, uncle,” she said. “He and everyone else in our group are already stressing you enough.”

“You’re not, though. I’m happy to finally have a way to contribute to our family,” Ethan said with a half-smile. “Now. Was there anything else?”

Rowan was sure she’d think of more than they’d need to discuss in the future but for now...

“That’s it,” she said. “Unless you have something to share with me, I’d like to check on my friends now.”

“Of course. I’ve put all of you in neighboring rooms. To get there, simply head left from this room, take the next right and the second left from there. You’re the three doors on that hallway, although it should be fairly obvious with the troopers guarding the Cerullis boy’s room,” Ethan said. “I’ll contact them and let them know custody’s been transferred to you. Think you can find your way alone?”

Rolling her chair back to the desk, Rowan said, “Sounds easy enough. Besides, if I have trouble, I can just ask someone for help.”

“And they’ll be happy to provide it.”

Getting to his feet, Uncle Ethan marched to her, awkwardly offering her a hug, but she shoved a palm almost into his face.

“You don’t have to touch me unless you want to,” she said. “Ok?”

Ethan lowered his arms, shifting in place while he stared at Rowan as if trying to read her mind.

“Understood,” he said.

“It was nice to finally meet you,” Rowan said, smirking.

She did so love making people pleasantly uncomfortable.

Clearing his throat, Ethan said, “Same to you.”

With a final smile, Rowan left that set of problems behind, content with their solutions, and hurried to pick up the next snarl.

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