

Chapter 22: Leave My Friend Alone

Troopers weren't waiting in the hall that Uncle Ethan had directed Rowan to. Maybe they'd left after he'd told them she was taking over Asher's supervision?

Shrugging at herself, Rowan started knocking on doors, beginning with the third from the hallway's end. When no one answered, she moved on, assuming that one was hers. At the second, petulant shouting pierced through the door, and recognizing Thomas' voice, she eased it open.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

"Oh, Rowan! Yeah, get in here."

Rowan did as she'd been bidden, looking around the cozy room beyond with curiosity. Two twin beds were shoved against opposite walls with a single desk between them and nightstands tucked into the corner each bed made with a wall. Drywall had made a reappearance in here, but it was painted a soft gold with a few framed drawings to accent that color. Thick carpet on the floor made her wish she had her shoes off so she could squish her toes in it, and a door to her right probably led to a washroom. She wondered if a closet was in there too, since she didn't see one out here.

"This is nice," she cautiously said.

Because Thomas, sprawled on one of the beds, had storm clouds roiling across his face so powerfully that Rowan felt like she could poke their invisible, fluffy moisture.

"It doesn't matter *how* nice it is," he said. "Not when I have to share it with *her*."

He flung an arm toward Mia, sitting at the desk and engrossed in the monitor in front of her.

"You know us, Rowan. You *know* we need to have our own spaces. We'll kill each other if we're forced to stay together," he continued. "I mean, look at her! She sat down at the storecase without any discussion about who'd get to use it first."

"Hush, drama queen," Mia said. "I'm looking for any news about what's happening back home, whereas we all know you'd have fallen into Break the moment you sat here. Also. Hi, Rowan."

While Thomas sputtered, Rowan strode to stand between them, planting kisses on their cheeks.

"Ah, sometimes, I wonder why we're friends, and then, you two show me you're just as much of a glorious mess as me," she said, patting their heads. "Has my family arrived yet?"

In another room, something thumped against a wall or maybe another surface, and frowning, Rowan tried to figure out exactly where the noise had come from. How thin were the walls here?

Fortunately, Mia soon drew her attention away from that silly distraction.

“When I spoke to John, he said it’ll be a while,” she said. “Apparently, there were complications with Corporal Spheris after we left. They want him stable before moving him again.”

Oh, no.

“What happened?” Rowan asked. “I... He seemed *fine* this morning.”

Sitting up, Thomas leaned against a wall with his legs crossed, picking at his shirt’s hem.

“Apparently, his fever’s flared up again. It spiked soon after your uncle’s people found the group,” he said before looking up at Rowan. “It’s not good. The squad’s medic is worried that the fever’s heat might be cooking his brain, and there’s not much they can do to alleviate it where they are, especially after it’s gone for so long without proper medical treatment.”

A fever, something usually no more dangerous than say, rock climbing, and it was killing a man, all because of those from beyond the stars.

“Fuck,” Rowan coughed, dropping onto the bed beside Thomas.

She leaned on her knees with him rubbing her back, and rotating in the chair, Mia took her hand.

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” she said. “Brandon is a strong, young man, right?”

Sighing, Rowan said, “Right. Sorry. I didn’t mean to focus on something so grim.”

“It’s ok,” Mia said. “You’re not totally at fault, after all. I could have kept it to myself-”

Shooting upright, Rowan said, “Don’t you dare go blaming yourself like that.”

With an evil grin, Mia patted her cheek, looking so condescending as she did it.

“I won’t if you won’t.”

Rowan stuck her tongue out at her before falling back on Thomas. Hugging an arm around her shoulders, he pressed his cheek into the top of her head.

“How’d it go with your uncle?” he asked.

“Better than I thought it would, actually. He’s... not what I expected,” Rowan said with a soft smile. “We hashed out a few things, including what to do with the lot of you. You two have nothing to worry about. From what I can tell, Uncle Ethan doesn’t give a shit about Shalen Corp and everything affiliated with it.”

“Asher, on the other hand... well, he’s in for a *fun* few weeks. In fact—”

She sprung to my hands and knees, pausing when she heard another thump from next door. What was that? Was Asher having trouble with unpacking or something?

“—we should go tell him about it,” she said, trying to pluck her mischievous grin from where she’d lost it. “What do you think?”

“Sounds fun,” Mia said.

They both looked at Thomas, and he huffed.

“Ok, fine,” he said, “but only because I know that grin. He’s not going to like what you tell him.”

“Nope,” Rowan said, popping the ‘p’.

She clambered off of the bed with her friends at her side, one joining her with giggles and the other with a predatorially gleeful smile. When she knocked on the last of the three doors, however, no one answered her.

“Asher?” she called.

Again, she heard nothing, but when she turned to consult with Mia and Thomas, a muffled shout drifted to them from inside. With her breath catching, she met her friends’ eyes.

“It’s probably nothing,” she said, ignoring how her heartbeat had already started accelerating like a train.

“We should check anyway,” Thomas said.

He could deny any affection that he might hold for Asher as much as he liked, but Rowan knew he didn’t actually mean anything by it. She saw an example of how much he cared in this moment, where only restrained fear was on his face.

Nodding, Rowan drew my pistol—just in case—and slammed the door open.

Asher’s room was almost an exact copy of Thomas and Mia’s, except it had a single bed instead of two and wood was covering the floor instead of carpet.

Something else was different too: the pair of troopers who were pinning Rowan’s friend to a wall. One of them had hastily slid her hand over Asher’s bloodied mouth with his eyes wide and glistening above it.

Hell no.

Jerking her pistol up, Rowan cleared the entrance to the room, and to her *great* and *utter* surprise, Thomas came barreling inside after her. Taking hold of one trooper’s collar, he bodily threw her

across the room, storming after her to straddle her stomach so her arms were pinned to her sides. Once he was in place, he raised a fist, which captures Rowan's attention for half a moment.

"Don't hurt her, Thomas," she said. "We don't know how my uncle will react if you do. Just keep her where she is."

While he deflated, Rowan cautiously crossed the room, keeping her pistol trained on the other trooper.

When she was at an appropriate distance, she said, "Let him go."

As commanded, the trooper stepped aside, but Asher didn't take advantage of his new freedom, caught in something no one should ever experience. Rowan knew those distant eyes. She'd seen them far too many times.

Footsteps approached her from behind.

"Just a second, Mia," she said. "You. Gun and knife on the ground. Slowly."

Once the weapons were on the floor, Rowan raised her eyebrows, and sighing, the trooper kicked them to her, lifting his gaze toward the heavens.

"Ok. Mia, take Asher into the hall. Check him over for obvious injuries, but *do not* touch him more than you have to. Wait until Thomas or I can help," Rowan said. "Can you do that?"

"Of course," Mia softly said.

While she gently took Asher's hand, Rowan stepped forward, extending her hand.

"Your button, earpiece, whatever the hell your people are calling it," she said.

For the first time, the *bastard* blanched, as if just now realizing the shit he'd landed himself in.

"You don't understand," he said. "The Cerullis family-"

"I can't even begin to tell you how little I care," Rowan interrupted. "Give me what I want, or I will make sure you no longer have a commission with my family by the end of the day."

Gulping, the trooper lifted a trembling hand to the side of his head. When the button was hanging off of Rowan's ear, she pushed it before moving to stand over the surrendered weapons.

"Lord Ethan Kolb," she said. "Or possibly Commander Ethan Kolb."

While a tone told her a connection had been requested, she listened to her heartbeat, slow and steady. It had been dropping from the pace of a train since she'd first seen her friend two minutes ago, finally steadying out after she'd guaranteed his physical safety.

Her uncle sounded distracted when he accepted the connection, out of breath and with his voice's pitch weirdly dropped.

"What is it?" he said. "I'm a little... busy-"

"I need you to send troopers to Asher's room," Rowan said.

His side of the connection went very quiet, and Rowan wondered if he'd noticed how detached she sound. She'd laugh at how ridiculous that idea was, but humor felt... foreign right now.

"What happened?" Ethan said.

"The troopers you had stationed here assaulted my friend," Rowan said. "I'd like to make sure they can't do it again."

"...Shit," Ethan quietly said. "Ok, Rowan. You'll have your backup soon. *Avan*, I- What do I say? I'm sorry. I-"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Rowan said. "A commander isn't always at fault for their subordinates' failings."

She didn't know how long silence reigned after she said that, not caring to keep count.

"Your backup will be there soon, Rowan," Ethan repeated. "I have to-"

"Thank you, uncle."

Pushing the button hanging from her ear, Rowan dropped it beside a gun and knife. It probably hadn't been wise, cutting the connection, but as she was right now, further words had seemed unnecessary.

She held still in body and mind, only aware enough to watch her potential target for movement, until someone in a uniform crept into the edge of her vision.

"Lady Kolb?" she asked, as if it hadn't been the first time she'd said that name.

"I hear you," Rowan said. "You may apprehend this man without fear of me shooting you."

"As you say."

The woman swiftly went about the process, but Rowan didn't lower my pistol until zip ties were around her potential target's wrists.

Glancing around, she saw a handful of unknown troopers in the room, gathering weapons and otherwise processing what had become a crime scene, but Thomas and Mia had vanished.

"Where are my friends?" she asked.

One of the troopers who wasn't occupied with a prisoner glanced at her.

"We had them move to your room, Lady Kolb," he carefully said. "Is that acceptable?"

Why were they being so cautious, refusing to step in front of her and eyeing her like she might attack them?

Holstering her pistol, Rowan nodded.

"Perfectly fine. Thank you," she said. "Please, let me know if you need anything else from me."

She left before they could reply with her feet gobbling up the distance to her friends. Before opening the door to her room, she paused, trying to gather herself. People could react so many ways in the face of an assault, especially when it had come after several days spent under threat. Rowan wasn't sure how Asher was going to respond—by pretending nothing had happened, by retreating from the world, by getting angry, or something else entirely—and she wanted to be prepared for whatever she'd soon face.

When she entered her room, she didn't get time to appreciate its opulence. Barely visible, Asher was in a corner, whimpering and swiping at Thomas and Mia when they tried to come near him.

Fuck. This was an *interesting* response from her usually cool and level-headed friend, but... why did that matter right now?

Shaking off her shock, Rowan shouted, "*Back off* of him! I swear. It's like you've never dealt with someone who's been traumatized before."

Pulling the Shalens to their feet, she dragged them toward the entrance of the room while Thomas yanked on her with panicked eyes. Dropping Mia's arm, she spun him to face her.

"Stop," she hissed. "You can't allow yourself anything but confidence and calm right now, do you understand me? If we screw this up, it'll make this already horrible experience so much worse for him."

Slowly, panic receded from her friend, and with his throat working, he nodded.

"Good," Rowan said. "It's going to be ok, Thomas. You have to believe that."

"I... do," he said.

Grinning, Rowan nudged his chin.

"We should have a talk about why you, of all people, had the most violent reaction to this horribleness *but first*."

She turned to Mia.

“What’s the damage?”

While she’d been calming Thomas down, Mia had been watching her brother with her arms crossed and a chewed lip, but she focused on Rowan at that question.

“I think we got there before they really started hurting him,” she said, “but he still has a... a lot of bruising, Rowan. It’s mostly on the abdomen and other parts of his torso, but he’ll have rings around his wrists too. There’s a particularly bad bruise on his side where I- I think they might have broken one or more ribs, but I’m not certain about that. We’ll need a doctor to make sure.”

For a moment, detachment fell away from Rowan, and flaming red filled her vision. She was going to *kill those monsters*. It would be slow. Painful

As soon as she caught herself having those vengeful thoughts, though, she shook her head. What happened to those two troopers wouldn’t be her decision to make.

Taking a deep breath, she said, “Thomas, can you let the troopers outside know that we need a doctor?”

“I-”

Before Thomas could finish whatever protest he’d had on his tongue, Rowan glared at him, which promptly shut his mouth. He trotted for the door with a clenched jaw, and Rowan finally let herself look at Asher.

Her room’s double bed almost obscured him from view, cutting the room in half as it was, and when she rounded the monstrous thing, she squeezed her eyes closed on seeing a flimsy nightstand knocked over with its lamp on the floor and broken glass all around it.

Taking a steadying breath through her nose, she carefully navigated around that hazard, slowly crouching in front of her friend.

He was huddled in a tight ball with his arms over his head, just breathing. Something in the scuffle had torn a gaping rent in the back of his already ripped shirt, and through it, Rowan could see the initial darkened splotching of bruises, just as Mia had reported.

Without moving, she said, “Asher? You’re safe, buddy. It’s just me and Mia. Thomas went to get a doctor, but he’ll be here in a bit. Can you look at me?”

Guarded, brown eyes peeked over the top of Asher’s knees, and keeping her face otherwise blank, Rowan smiled.

“Hey,” she softly said. “There you are.”

She waited for a bit, watching him blink, before moving on.

“We need to get you sitting on the bed, all right? If you stayed here, the doctor would have a hard time making sure everything’s ok with you, wouldn’t they?”

Slowly, Rowan lifted her hand, and when Asher tensed, she went still.

“It’s only me, Asher. You know me. I would never hurt you, would I? Neither would Mia. Neither would Thomas, not like this at least.”

She pulled a face, getting a soft laugh as a reward, and even with how strained that had sounded, a part of Rowan, left holding her breath, released it, only to retain another.

On the other side of the bed, the door opened and closed, making Asher scrunch back on himself.

“Thomas, can you lock that, please?” Rowan asked. “We don’t want anyone else coming in here without knocking first, do we?”

The lock’s thunk was loud in this confined space, but a small amount of tension drained from Asher when he heard it.

When footsteps stop behind her, Rowan said, “See? It’s only us, your friends. May I please help you up?”

She gradually extended a hand, and Asher initially recoiled from it, eyeing it as if it were a snake, but Rowan waited, never moving. Giving him all of the time he needed.

His shoulders rose and fell, and he hesitantly reached out to touch Rowan’s hand. Never breaking eye contact, she curled her fingers around his and got to her feet, gently tugging Asher up with her. He managed it with a pained grunt and every motion stiff, and Rowan didn’t let herself look at his split lip or the finger marks around his mouth.

“Would you like to sit?” she asked.

Clearing his throat, Asher croaked, “That... would be... nice. Yes.”

Shit. How loudly had he been screaming to tear up his voice like that? How had they not *heard* it, or had those bastards simply muffled him that well?

Once she had Asher settled, Rowan stayed on her feet in front of him, but the Shalens sat on either side, although neither of them was dumb enough to stretch out behind him, thank *avan*. Thomas moved like he wanted to touch Asher, pausing before she could warn him off.

“May I?” he asked.

He was learning.

Asher had his eyes fixed on Thomas’ hand, taking forever to decide, but when he gave a slight nod, Thomas lightly rubbed his arm. Mia

didn't need to ask to touch him. Asher took her hand himself, squeezing it.

"I'm... sorry if I... hurt you," he rasped.

Wincing at the gravel in his voice, Rowan raised a finger, letting them know she'd be right back. When she entered the washroom, she hardly noticed its luxuries, zeroing in on her quested-after item. Returning to her friends, she offered a glass of water to Asher, which he gratefully accepted.

While he drank, Mia shifted in place.

"If you want to—I don't know—*talk* or anything like that, we'll listen," she said. "But you don't have to. *Avan* knows how many things I keep bottled up inside. I'd be a hypocrite to tell you that you have to share."

Rowan sharply glanced at her. What was she keeping to herself? Could Rowan help with it?

One friend at a time.

Lowering the glass, Asher stared at his lap.

"Thank you. I'll... keep it in mind," he said before turning to Thomas. "Why... are you being so... kind to me?"

"You mean because you've been such a jackass over the last week?" Thomas said.

Asher lowered his head, and Rowan struggled to keep her hand at her side and not *smack the shit* out of Thomas. Even Mia was glaring daggers at him, but he didn't seem to notice, just leaning back on his hands to watch Asher with a soft smile.

"Yeah," the other boy whispered.

"Now, *that's* a good question," Thomas said. "In answer, I'd say that Rowan shared something earlier today in the forest, and it gave me some perspective. So, you can push me away as much as you like, and I may *hate your guts* at times, but I'm going to be your friend, whether you like it or not. Because I—"

Shifting, he looked away.

"Well. I like you, Asher. As a person. Even if you make me *stupid* jealous with how you act around Rowan."

Jealous? Did Rowan still need to spell out to that moron that no one could replace him or Mia?

Sighing, Asher rubbed his face, avoiding his mouth.

"Great. Another challenge," he said.

"Oo. I like that," Thomas said. "I'm a *challenge*."

He bounced on the bed, and when Asher clutched at his side, groaning, Rowan pulled the excitable boy off of it.

“Why don’t you and Mia go check on that doctor?” she said. “Let’s get this battered sand bag some painkillers, shall we?”

Thomas glared at her, even as Mia hopped off of the bed. Even as she dragged him to the door. Even as it closed behind them.

But then, Rowan was crouching again, cautiously curling her fingers into Asher’s free hand.

“I need you to think about what you want to do once the doctor’s seen you,” she said. “My uncle will want to know what happened at some point, and you’re the only one who can tell your side of the story. I’m sorry to ask this of you, and it can wait until tomorrow if you like, but it has to happen eventually.”

“I’m... aware. I know how this procedure goes quite... well.”

Asher was looking at her, but Rowan didn’t think he saw her when he squeezed his fingers around hers.

“I didn’t want to go through this again,” he said. “At home, things were always... predictable, so I knew how to keep myself safe there, but that isn’t possible in the rest of the world. After... after *it* happened when I was in high school, I swore I’d never be so vulnerable again. I can’t be... *violent*. It isn’t in my nature, so I developed tech to keep me safe. It... it didn’t work. *Obviously*. And I- I don’t know what to do. I can’t do this again. *Can’t*.”

Leaning his elbows on his knees, Asher lifted Rowan’s hand to his forehead with his shoulders shaking, and she ignored the droplets that were falling to soak into his pants. Biting her lip, she waited, letting him take what comfort he could from her touch because she didn’t know how else to help. Drawing people out of a shell-shocked state, she could do, but when they started crying, she floundered, on the verge of her own breakdown. It was something she’d been struggling with over the last few months.

She kept herself from joining in with Asher’s pained tears this time by pondering what he’d said. This wasn’t the first time something like this had happened to him? As if his father’s treatment of him, whatever it might have been hadn’t been bad enough. Something *else* had devastated his youth?

Oh *avan*, wait a second. *Had* his father been the one who hurt him? Emotional and physical abuse were equally as horrid and destructive toward the people who experienced them, but growing up with both? Hell, it made Rowan want to shiver her way out of my crawling skin. She’d heard enough horror stories from John and Henry to understand exactly how wounding it could be.

That wasn’t necessarily what had happened to Asher, of course. It was a possibility, but Rowan didn’t have enough details to cobble together a working theory, and she certainly wasn’t going to ask for them. No fucking way. He was welcome to share if he wanted, but she wouldn’t prod.

But maybe she could help Asher with keeping anything like this from happening again.

Reaching up to play with his hair, she said, "If you like, I can teach you a little about self-defense. I know! You said you're not a violent person, but what I'm offering to show you would be moves you can use if someone's already decided to attack you. That plus tech should keep aggressive assholes the hell away from you."

Asher raised his head with his eyebrows drawn together.

"There's no harm in learning, I suppose," he said, "but when would I find the time for it?"

Rowan laughed, poorly trying to cover it up, and waved at his annoyed expression.

"It shouldn't be too hard, given the agreement my uncle and I came to about you. He *really* doesn't like your family, Asher," she said. "Basically, you and I will be attached at the hip until Ethan comes to trust you. He wanted someone to watch you at all times, and I volunteered."

Groaning, Asher released her.

"That's just *brilliant*. No alone time... wait," he said. "He wants us sleeping in the same room too?"

When Rowan nodded, Asher mumbled several wonderfully creative curses before sighing.

"All right. I'll adjust to it," he said. "Spending time with you, after all, is infinitely better than being confined to a room, guarded by-"

Sucking in a gasp, he went rigid with his eyes far too wide open.

"Hey. *Hey!*" Rowan said, continuing only once she was holding his gaze. "It's over. You're safe, and I will keep you safe until you can defend yourself."

Slowly, Asher nodded.

"I know. It's just-"

Rowan rested a hand on his knee.

"You never have to explain yourself to me."

Swallowing, Asher rapidly blinked before rubbing his eyes.

"Then... is tomorrow ok for talking to your uncle?" he asked.

"Of course," Rowan said. "Don't push yourself."

She hoped her family would understand if she wasn't there to greet them when they arrived. Who knew when that would be, what with... Brandon, but Rowan would be surprised if they weren't here by midday tomorrow. She wouldn't let herself worry about that now, though, not when she could do

nothing to change it.

With her legs aching, she stood and was about to sit on the bed when someone knocked on the door.

“Someone called for a doctor?” a muffled voice called.

Rowan raised an eyebrow at Asher.

When he nodded, she yelled, “Come in.”

While the burly man who entered started working on Asher, Rowan headed for the washroom, making sure to keep an eye on the only way out of her room. She *seriously* doubted her friend would purposefully do anything to upset her uncle, especially not right now, but she had to keep her promise to Ethan regardless.

When the doctor eventually left, he promised to send Rowan a full report on Asher’s condition later, having already received permission for it from his patient, and after she thanked him, he switched places with Mia and Thomas. On stepping inside, they looked to Rowan for guidance, and she beckoned them closer.

“You can be a little more boisterous, but keep in mind that he’ll probably startle easily,” she whispered. “We’ll have to walk a fine line between being cheerful and careful.”

“We can do it, though,” Mia said.

“Of course we can!” Thomas said, nudging his sister. “Before we go back in there, though, how did you know how to handle all of this so well? You’ve been so calm through it, and I’ve...”

Folding his arms, he made a face.

“You’ve acted like yourself, which we all love?” Mia said, hugging him before glancing at Rowan. “You never told him what part of the family business you decided to take over?”

“Hey! I’ve been oscillating on that since graduation,” Rowan said, glaring at Mia. “I wanted to make sure the idea stuck before announcing my decision.”

Mia, of course, just smiled back at her, the infuriating woman. Glancing between them, Thomas waved a hand in front of Rowan’s face.

“Well?” he said.

“Well... there’s more to battle than tactics and knowing how to use your weapon. There’s also what’s left once it’s over,” she said. “For the last few months, that part of combat has become my focus. Helping physically hurt troopers, to be sure, but also reintegrating traumatized soldiers into civilian life or otherwise helping them cope. I was planning to assume control of that side of Kolb’s business.”

“Oh. That makes perfect sense for you, actually,” Thomas said before smirking at her. “So, when do you plan to use those skills on yourself?”

Oh, he’d noticed, had he? Damn. It had taken Rowan *much* longer than a few seconds to realize why she’d been so drawn to this type of work several months ago. Than again, he had the luxury of an outside perspective, which could usually pierce through a person’s protective denial much faster than said person could.

But she still had to respond to her friend.

“When I *can*, you *ass*, and besides, I’ve only been at this for a little while. *Avan*. Give me a break,” she said, lightly smacking his shoulder. “Now, stop delaying. Let’s go. Asher’s been alone for long enough.”

When they spilled out of the washroom, said boy was stretched out on the bed with his shirt off and a bandaging wrapped around his chest. Seeing all of that bruising revealed, Rowan stopped short while Thomas gasped. Mia squeezed Rowan’s hand before slipping past them to flop beside Asher’s head.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

Right. She was supposed to be helping him. Rowan hurried to the bed, flinging herself onto it while Asher answered.

“Fun-ny.”

Lifting his head, he frowned at Rowan, and she shrugged apologetically.

“The doctor gave me something before he started his exam,” he said, leaning back into the pillows. “I think it’s working because I feel *strange*.”

“Good strange or bad strange?” Rowan asked.

While Asher hummed in contemplation, Thomas perched on the bedside, stiff and pulled in on himself. Which wasn’t like him at all. Before Rowan could consider that further, Asher sat up, scooting to rest against the headboard.

“Neither?” he said, cocking his head. “But I’m not aching all over, so that’s good.”

It also seemed to have helped his mood, which was a fantastic stopgap. They’d have their work cut out for them over the next few days, but for now, Asher seemed to have forgotten the specifics of what had happened to him.

Looking down at himself, he lifted an arm.

“Where’d my shirt go?” he said with a pout.

Snickering to herself, Mia said, "I'll get you another one, although I don't think I've seen your luggage anywhere. Oh, well. You're about Thomas' size. I'll get you one of his."

Jumping, Thomas whirled on her.

"Don't you dare," he said. "Don't- What will dad-? Don't you *dare!*"

But Mia was already at the door, fluttering a wave over her shoulder, and when Thomas tried to go after her, Asher hooked his fingers into the waistband of the other boy's jeans.

"Don't go," he petulantly said. "I've been terr- awf- *mean*. I've been so mean to you. I have to make it up to you somehow. How should I do that?"

Bright red, Thomas gaped at the other boy, trying and failing to speak, and Asher laughed.

"This is a good look on you," he said, poking at Thomas' cheek.

Avan, this was fucking *hilarious*, the most amusing spectacle Rowan had watched in ages, but she should probably rescue her friend.

Before she could do that, the door flung open with Mia hurrying to them.

Shoving a t-shirt at Asher, she asked, "What did I miss?"

"Asher wants to show your brother how sorry he is for being an asshole over this last week," Rowan said.

"Oo, fun."

Mia folded her hands in her lap.

"And how exactly are you planning on doing that?" she asked Asher.

He was caught halfway through shoving the t-shirt on, wincing as he shrugged it into place.

"I don't know..." he said before pausing.

Picking at the t-shirt's neckline, Asher brought it up to his nose and took a big sniff. With a wide smile, he turned to Thomas.

"This smells like *you*," he said. "I like it."

Still flaming red, Thomas awkwardly said, "Well... good. I guess."

With a sleepy smile firmly entrenched on his face, Asher relaxed back into the bed's pillows, slowly blinking.

“I’ll think of something to make it up to you. I always do. I’m very good at fixing my mistakes,” he said under his breath, “but I think I’m too sleepy right now. It’ll have to wait until tomorrow. Is that ok?”

Apparently unable to form words now, Thomas just gaped like a fish at the other boy, so Rowan clicked her tongue.

“I’m sure that will be fine,” she said. “You should just relax. We’ll all huddle up in this room and have a sleepover. Does that sound nice?”

“Mm. Yeah, I like that idea,” Asher said, almost mumbling now. “Need something, though…”

Looking over all of them, he eventually moved his gaze right back to Thomas, which gave Rowan pause. Why was he so focused on her oldest friend?

“You,” he said, pointing. “You’re like a teddy bear, sorta. Soft in all the right places. Come ‘ere. You can keep me warm.”

He spread his arms wide, which did nothing to help Thomas’ apparently perpetual frozen state. The only thing he seemed able to do was flick his eyes to Mia, silently begging for help, and seeing that, his sister sighed.

“Baby bro, remember what we talked about a few days ago?” she quietly said, and when he reluctantly nodded, she continues. “This will be fun. And you’ll be ok. I promise.”

Blowing out a breath, Thomas squeaked out an, “Ok.”

But then, he stretched out beside Asher, and the other boy tugged him closer, smacking his lips as he closed his eyes.

“Much better,” he mumbled.

Thomas looked very stiff, but when nothing untoward happens after a few moments—besides Asher starting to snore—he gradually loosened his body.

“Well, all right. Since I’m apparently going to be trapped here for a while, could you go get some pillows and blankets, Mia?” he said. “If we’re making this a sleepover, we’re going to need it.”

“Sure thing, *baby bro*,” Mia said with a slight tease in her voice this time. “Rowan? Why don’t you come with me? I could use an extra set of hands.”

Rowan had expected this to make Thomas start protesting about getting left alone with Asher, but when she got to her feet, only silence greeted her. Frowning back at her friends, she raised an eyebrow to see his eyes closed as well while he slowly took deeper breaths. The two boys actually made a sweet picture like this. Hopefully, she’d get to keep this view of them in the future, rather than one where they kept throwing insults at one another.

Once they were in the Shalens' room, though, she couldn't help but ask, "Is there something going on with Thomas and Asher? Those two were acting *really weird* back there. They were almost... getting along, which felt strange to see after how much they were arguing this morning."

In answer, Mia rolled her eyes while grabbing pillows from one of the beds.

"You know boys, Rowan," she said. "Sometimes, they're the dumbest, most oblivious brutes you could imagine."

Rowan *might* argue that—after all, *she* was horribly oblivious about a lot of things—but for now, she just grinned wide, gesturing to take some of Mia's burden.

"I couldn't agree more."

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