

Chapter 3: Consequences

Bay and Veronica looked... well. They looked empty, showing Rowan *the* most neutral of faces, and that, more than anything else, told her exactly how much trouble she was in.

Her moms took a laid-back approach to parenting, especially when it came to her, but Rowan was still well-versed in the many annoyed expressions of mother dearest. The severity of their rolled eyes or exasperated sighs usually escalated with how badly she'd messed up, but their carefully controlled look had never been directed at her.

She'd seen Logan receive it during the year he'd gotten addicted to making risky investments with the family's money. Paisley had stared it down after she'd told them she was pregnant and didn't know what to do, and they'd given the iciest possible version of it to Anthony when he'd snuck off to go cliff jumping with his friends, coming home with a broken leg.

On the receiving end of it now, Rowan could see why her siblings had squirmed so hard when confronted with it. She was certain that if she sat here for much longer, it would kill her, and this wasn't helped by Anthony, perching on the sofa beside them.

Her brother looked much less severe than their parents—he couldn't with amusement pinching his green eyes so much—but it had been his wedding that Rowan had ruined. Facing the three of them, she wanted to turn into sludge so she could seep through the floor and into the earth, never to be seen again.

"Ok, Rowan," Veronica said, making her jump. "Here's what's going to happen. First, you're going to apologize to your brother, and then, we will discuss proper punishment for what you did."

Oh... *avan*. Rowan had gone through so many ways to tell Anthony she was sorry since last night, but now that the floor had been handed to her, everything she'd rehearsed evanesced in her head. She faced her brother and his raised eyebrows with her insides shriveling.

"Tony... I- I'm sorry," she said. "I should have stopped drinking when I noticed I was tipsy or kept my temper under control. I-

Swallowing hard, she met his eyes, mildly impressed by how well he'd learned their parents' lack of expression when he wanted to show it.

"How can I make it up to you? If that's possible, I mean," she said. "I did absolutely ruin your wedding, a once in a lifetime-"

Snorting, Anthony doubled over on himself, cracking up, and Rowan watched, dazed, as he slapped his knee, trying to control himself. Soon enough, he straightened, wiping his eyes.

“You didn’t ruin anything, bean,” he said. “I needed that outburst, considering how stiff the party was getting, and besides, everything went back to normal after you left, which you have John and Henry to thank for.

“The only thing you need to worry about on my end is Jessica. She’s pretty pissed at you, but I know you don’t care much about her opinion. I’m just as mystified as everyone else in our family about why I love her, but I do, and I would appreciate it if you made nice. I don’t want anything else from you.”

He shrugged, but Rowan barely saw it through the tears misting her vision.

“Tony,” she sobbed.

“Whoa, there!” Anthony said.

Jumping to his feet, he strode to Rowan, crouching to wrap her in a hug.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry,” he said. “It’s ok, bean. You’ll have plenty of time to bring Jessica around.”

A laugh competed with Rowan’s tears.

“N-no, Tony,” she hiccupped. “I was afraid you’d hate *me* for what I did.”

When Anthony pulled away, she was presented with the most potent display of horror she’d seen in a while.

“No way!” he cried. “You’re my littlest sister. There’s no way you could make me hate you.”

With her throat working, Rowan fought against what was rising in her.

“You’re the best,” she said.

Smirking, Anthony said, “I know.”

And Rowan broke down, smacking at him even as she repeatedly told him how much she loved him. After a solid thirty seconds of this, Bay cleared her throat, and Rowan was jerked back to the reality of their mothers’ disapproval.

Anthony pressed a kiss to her brow—

“I love you, bean.”

—before leaving, and Rowan shrunk beneath Veronica’s glare. Bay remained impartial, thank *avan*, but as soon as the door closed behind Anthony, Veronica was ripping into her.

“I’m glad there’s no bad blood between my children, but we still have to deal with the fallout from the offended noble family,” she said. “Do you know who you insulted last night?”

As she curled on herself, Rowan cringed with her chin touching her chest.

“No,” she said. “I’m guessing it was someone important, based on your reaction.”

Scoffing, Veronica threw her hands in the air, which had Bay automatically resting a hand on her wife’s shoulder.

“It was Asher Cerullis,” that normally reticent woman said.

Hearing that, Rowan’s heart skittered to a stop in her chest. Cerullis? As in the most powerful noble family in Athari? And not only that but-

“The House’s *heir?*” she squeaked.

Bay nodded at her, which had her stopped heart freezing over.

“Fucking hell,” her stressed lungs forced from her lips.

“*Language*, Rowan,” Veronica said. “That’s one of several things you’ll have to watch while making ‘educational’ visits to the Cerullis estate over the next month.”

Wait.

“*What?*” Rowan shrieked.

With her heart lurching into motion once more, the blood laying latent within it sprang into her vision, and she clawed her fingers into the chair to keep from leaping to her feet.

“These are the consequences of your actions, daughter,” Veronica said. “I’m sorry, but that’s how it is.”

“But if I’m here, making nice with Cerullis, then-”

Rowan cut herself off, unwilling to speak the words.

“You’re not going to the Summit this year,” Bay quietly finished. “Icrodon will have to wait one more year for you.”

And Rowan couldn’t stay seated any longer.

“This is bullshit,” she hissed. “I have been the perfect House Kolb daughter for years, honing so many skills I never wanted to learn, all with the promise of eventually reaching Novadracht. Somewhere I can make a real difference! You can’t take this from me.”

Her parents met her fury with placidity.

“We can, in fact,” Veronica said. “If you act as you did last night, you’ll have to fix your mistakes. I thought your mother and I had taught you this.”

“Would it be so bad to stay here, with me, for one more year?” Bay added.

With her vision still tinging red, Rowan glanced between them, her mom who was only trying to protect their family and her mother who seemed desperate for people to keep her company over the next month, and she wilted.

“When do I start?” she dully asked.

“Tomorrow. One of our people will take you to their home,” Veronica said. “I expect you to be on your best behavior while you’re there.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rowan said.

Damn, she’d sounded like a robot there. Veronica must have heard it because wincing, she rose from the sofa, coming to cup Rowan’s face.

“I love you, my silly girl,” she said. “You know that, right?”

From somewhere unknown, a faint smile curled Rowan’s lips.

Leaning into Veronica’s hand, she said, “I know, mom.”

Veronica patted her face, pinching her lip in her teeth, before sailing through a door with her wife behind her. As Bay passed, she squeezed Rowan’s hand, smiling before releasing it.

Well. That had just happened. What Rowan had been using to keep herself afloat for the last few weeks had been ripped away from her, and she didn’t know what to do with herself.

In the real world at least.

As always, *Nedrya’s Breaking* provided a sense of relief from her troubles. She spent hours in her room, fighting players from the other side of the war that was tearing this online world apart. All the while, she received requests and messages from members of her guild, but she ignored them. When one flashed on her wristcom, however, she couldn’t dismiss it straightaway.

Let’s go, ya idiot, it read.

Rolling her eyes, Rowan shut down her storecase, sneaking through her home until she’d reached the one balcony here that Kolb’s troopers didn’t patrol beneath. A boy was waiting for her there, leaning against the railing with his arms crossed.

With his sandy hair and nearly turquoise eyes sitting above sharp cheekbones, he might have made a supremely pleasing picture, save for the chubbiness found in his body and face. Jeans and a ratty t-shirt didn’t help this image, but even still, Rowan couldn’t help a giddy grin from forming.

“Thomas!” she said, barely keeping her voice down.

Racing forward, she engulfed him in a hug, and as usual, he stiffened for the briefest fraction of an instant before returning it.

“Hey, Rowan,” he said. “You ok? You weren’t responding in-game. That’s usually not a good sign.”

Making a face, Rowan said, “It’s not a big deal. I got pulled off the team that’s attending the Summit, is all. I’ll survive.”

It was *more* than a big deal, and Thomas knew it, based off of how still he’d gone.

“But... the Summit is all you’ve been talking about for the last six months,” he said. “How is having to stay here ok?”

Sometimes, Rowan hated having friends she could confide in.

“It’s not!” she said. “But I don’t want to focus on that. Can we go get ice cream or something instead?”

It was better if she ignored how much she wanted to scream at the world or *punch something*—probably herself—*in the face*.

Thomas examined her for several agonizing seconds before shrugging.

“Definitely ‘or something’,” he said. “Ice cream sounds gross right now.”

Rowan rolled her eyes. Thomas had always had the pickiest of palates.

“Ok, weirdo,” she said, elbowing him. “Feel like leading the way out of here?”

“No,” Thomas said before wincing, “but fine.”

And he was off, jumping for a nearby tree. Rowan followed his lead, trusting her sneaky, untitled friend to get them off of Kolb grounds undetected, and before she could process it, they were waltzing into the city proper with human civilization springing up around them.

Rowan loved this part of Athari. Here, people lived unfettered with no expectations to guide them, unlike with the nobles. Social norms still existed, of course—Rowan didn’t think humans could live together without those—and an example of these could be seen by how the untitled grouped themselves.

The wealthy, usually those who were strongly associated with Athari’s corps, lived practically in the noble families’ backyards. Then, they had all those who deviated from sexual and gender norms. These people usually gathered near the city’s center, in the heart of this enormous community. Immigrants from the other three nations usually settled in the less prosperous parts of Xygek while those who didn’t fit into any group could be found anywhere in between.

Rowan didn't particularly enjoy this social segregation—it was a minor version of the problem she had with Lutov's four nations—but she would admit to reveling in each neighborhood's culture. There was something distinctly unique and wonderful about each of them.

As usual, Thomas guided her into the heart of the city, where trans people and others like them typically lived, and the energy found here lifted Rowan's mood almost immediately. When they'd been younger, she'd wondered if her friend might have a reason for always coming here, perhaps a sense of kinship that he might find with its residents, but then, he'd gotten his first girlfriend, becoming as masculine as one could get, and she'd dismissed that theory, assuming he enjoyed this place for the same reasons she did.

"So?" she said. "If we're not getting ice cream, what are we doing?"

Thomas wrinkled his nose, which pulled his lips away from his teeth.

"My dad wants me to speak at the next shareholders' meeting, and when telling me this, he mentioned his distaste for my typical clothing choices," he said. "I was hoping you might help me with finding something a bit more acceptable to those crotchety, old bastards."

Oh, *avan*. Her poor friend.

"Sure!" Rowan said. "Where do you want to start?"

As Thomas led her into a clothing store, she reviewed all the reasons she shouldn't be helping him. Corps, in all four nations, had been contesting the noble Houses' leadership in recent years. Previous to about two centuries ago, no one could match them when it came to wealth, which amounted to power in Lutov, but along had come this group of people, intent on undermining the nobles by collectively pooling their resources to form unions of working people. Or corps, as they were currently called.

Rowan had always found it strange that a group of people who'd once been focused on dismantling the noble families' subjugation of the common folk had basically replaced them in the modern age, but since no one else seemed to appreciate this irony, she rarely brought it up. The only two people who'd laugh about it with her were Thomas and Mia, the children of Athari's largest corp, and this attitude formed a large part of their friendship's foundation. Hence, why Rowan waited outside a fitting room while Thomas tried on suits, giving him an unbiased opinion on each of them, instead of tempting him elsewhere.

Eventually, she got sick of his obsessive worrying, picking an outfit out for him so they could have fun somewhere else. Leaving the suit in the shop, to be picked up later, they hurried to their typical hangout place.

The bouncer at The Pink Gorilla smiled when she saw them next in line.

"Lady Kolb and Thomas Shalen. Good to see you," she said. "Slumming it with us again, huh?"

With her lips going thin, Rowan lifted her wristcom so the bouncer could scan her ID.

“I really wish you’d call me Rowan,” she said. “Everyone else here does it.”

“Everyone else doesn’t enjoy bothering you as much as I do,” the bouncer said before sticking her tongue out. “You can go in.”

After thanking her, Thomas skipped inside, and on passing the bouncer, Rowan flicked her arm. She play-rubbed the ‘injured’ spot, mouthing ‘ouch’.

Past the door, they found music thumping within the walls of a shadowed, cavernous room, and a combination of sweeping-and-blinking colored lights washed over a swath of humanity, writhing in the center of the space. There was such a wide variety of people here: men, women, and every other type of person possible, wearing all sorts of outfits and accessories.

And almost all of them were dancing. Rowan’s kind of dancing, not what had been done last night.

Seizing Thomas’ hand, Rowan dove them into the mosh pit's midst, feeling the beat match-time with the thrum in her veins. She quickly lost herself in it, bit by bit.

First, her surroundings went, leaving only the people in her immediate vicinity impressing themselves on her eyes, but even they vanished one by one until only Thomas remained.

He was flushed, already sweating through his t-shirt, but *avan* if he wasn’t beaming at Rowan. When she made kissy faces at him, he laughed, which flung open the locked-tight doors that usually hid what he was thinking. He kept getting distracted, glancing over Rowan’s head or shoulder, and each of these was followed by the ripple down his neck of a hard swallow, but always, he returned to her, especially when she pulled him in.

His body against hers with strangers all around them: this was exactly what Rowan had needed to wind down from meeting with her parents. All they were missing was Mia, and this would be perfect, but since she wasn’t here...

Rowan fully surrendered to the rhythm making itself known to the crowd, with even Thomas fading, until only instinct remained.

And she *moved*.

Lost to the music, she only caught snapshots of what was happening. A head turned her way, space forming around her, her counterpart in this argument—held between their bodies—following along, and eyes. So many eyes watching.

Abruptly, quiet fell while a softer song replaced what had had so many people thrashing not moments before, and when Rowan glanced around, blinking, she found herself near the sound table at the front of the room with its controller grinning at her from behind it.

Whooping cheers and hollers rose around her, which had a flush creeping up her cheeks.

Raising their mike, the controller said, “Rowan Kolb and Thomas Shalen, everyone. Two-thirds of our resident Elite Triad have come to grace us with their presences again.”

The club erupted into even more raucous shouting with so many people whistling and winking at both Rowan and Thomas, at her side. Catching her eye, he squeezed her hand.

“Y’all make them feel comfortable,” the controller said. “After that display, I need to get a drink.”

Laughter scattered over the crowd while people moved forward to greet them. Thomas hated this part of their nights out, although Rowan didn’t know why that was. He was plenty social, had had stupid amounts of friends in school, and nobody in this place could off-put him. At least, she didn’t see any quintessentially corp people in this room.

Even still, he was stiff when a gay couple shook his hand, and his smile was brittle when a tiny, little thing in a tulle skirt nervously said hello. For her part, Rowan accepted what she hoped was a fruity drink from a gorgeously tall woman—*avan*, legs for days—with a square jaw and gradually eased her way out of the spotlight, tugging Thomas behind her.

“Done with dancing?” she asked when she could.

Thomas nodded, and skirting the crowd, they ducked out of the club, heading for their last stop on nights like this. Mia was waiting for them beside a taco stand, and when she saw them coming, she returned to making purchases.

At some point, Thomas must have messaged her about tonight’s plan because she looked like she’d come straight from a meeting, although she’d exchanged her typical heels for sneakers. Wispy strands of her platinum-blond hair were drifting around her face, pulled from the tight bun at the back of her head, and while arguing with the stand’s owner about her taco’s prices, Mia pushed her glasses up on her nose with her mouth twisted somewhere between irritation and amusement.

As they came closer, she leaned over, presumably to get in the stand owner’s face, but based on the other woman’s scandalized expression and the number of undone buttons Rowan had seen on Mia’s blouse earlier, she’d say the other woman was letting her moderately-sized breasts serve as a distraction while finishing up with her ‘negotiations’. Mia had never been above using her body to get what she wanted.

Once she was finished, leaving the stand owner flustered and disgruntled, Mia turned to them with a mischievous smile, shoving bags full of tacos into their chests while taking one for herself.

“Hiya, slackers!” she brightly said. “Did you have fun dancing while I was hard at work?”

Thomas ignored her, digging through his bag.

“Why are there tomatoes on my tacos?” he said. “You know I don’t like them.”

“Oh, sorry. Must have gotten the goods mixed up.”

Rolling her eyes, Mia took the bags back before exchanging them.

“Better?”

After a moment, Thomas mumbled something that might have been a yes, and shaking her head, Mia lifted her eyes to the sky.

“Why was I blessed with such a disappointment for a brother?” she said.

Snapping his head up, Thomas said, “Hey! I got a suit tonight like dad asked, which should be enough for today. Not everyone can measure up to your impossible work standards, Mi-mp.”

Having shoved her hand over her brother’s mouth, Mia faced Rowan, spreading her free arm.

“Come here.”

Rowan moved in for a side hug, enjoying it as Mia rubbed her skin. She’d almost rested her head on the other woman’s shoulder when she shrieked, yanking the hand she’d had on her brother to her chest.

“You *licked me?!?*” Mia shouted.

Grimacing, Thomas made disgusted noises while lapping at the air.

“Ugh, you taste gross,” he said.

Mia dropped the arms she’d had around Rowan’s shoulder, and grinning, Rowan rolled her bag up, making sure she had a good grip on it. She knew what was probably coming next.

Raising her hands as if to strangle Thomas, Mia growled, “You little shit. I’m going to freaking *smother* you in your sleep! No. That’s too easy of a death. You’re getting Rowan’s tomatoes shoved down your throat until you choke.”

“You’ll have to catch me first,” Thomas said.

He took off, waving at Mia and Rowan from the end of the sidewalk before they could move, the nimble asshole. Frustrated hollering trailed from Mia when she chased after her brother, and as Rowan sprinted in her wake, laughter followed her. Thomas led them through Xygek’s streets with the city’s center flashing around them, and as they ran, the occasional passerby cheered them along, hopefully because they’d noticed how much Rowan was cackling and not for another, more malicious reason.

When sidewalks started emptying of people, Thomas vaulted over a construction zone’s fence, and while Rowan easily followed him, she had to help Mia over. On the other side, they raced for a half filled-out apartment building with a crane and stacked pilings around it, taking its finished stairs two at a time. When they reached the topmost floor, they headed for a spot where drywall and brick had yet to be raised before dangling their legs over the edge.

After getting settled, Mia poked the shit out of her brother, and pulling a slightly squished taco out of its bag, Rowan settled in to watch. Mia was soon finished, though, letting each of them bite into their food with relish.

Leaning back on one hand, Rowan looked out over what she could see of Xygek while swinging her feet.

“Thanks, guys,” she said.

Humming, Mia leaned into her while Thomas rested his palm on top of Rowan’s hand, and neither of them spoke a word. The three of them sat under a hugely glowing moon, and in this moment, Rowan was free of worries or troubles. She was content.

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