

Chapter 4: Sometimes, I Forget How Much They Love Me

When Rowan snuck back home, three people were waiting for her in her room, turning as one when she entered it. Frozen with the doorknob in her hand, she gulped.

“Hi...?” she drawled.

“Evening, Rowan,” Logan said from where he was swiveling in the chair in front of her desk. “Or is it morning now? We’ve been waiting for so long.”

On the ground with his back to the bed, John snorted, and above him, Paisley sighed, rubbing her knuckles into his scalp, before running her fingers through his hair once more.

Cringing, Rowan said, “Sorry. I was out with- with friends.”

“The Shalen kids?” Logan asked, wrinkling his nose.

“Oh, give those two a break,” Paisley lazily said. “They can’t help that they were born to the founders of a corp you hate, not any more than you can help poking at that corp whenever you can, at least.”

While Logan glared at her, Rowan eased the door closed, wondering why they were here.

Not that she was complaining. Her siblings were usually too busy for one of them to spend time with her, let alone three. So, she didn’t ask that question, focusing on John instead.

“Where’s your other half?” she said.

Anthony was probably... no. He was *definitely* with his new wife, which left one sibling unaccounted for.

Arching an eyebrow, John said, “Henry? Where do you think he is?”

“Uh...”

John rolled his eyes.

“Come on, bean. I know you saw him flirting last night, and you gave him an opportunity to impress everyone at the after-party with your temper tantrum.”

Absently, Rowan stuck her tongue out at him.

“So, he’s with the House Mistral guy. Still?” she said. “No, what am I thinking? His flings usually last a few days. What’s the poor thing’s name?”

“Who knows? There are too many nobles in this city to keep track of them. I’ll hear all about it when Henry eventually comes home,” John said. “Sit down.”

He patted the ground beside him, and while Rowan sank where indicated, Paisley rolled onto her stomach toward them.

“His name’s Alexander,” she said. “In case you were curious.”

Groaning, John smacked at Paisley over his head, and she dissolved into laughter. Meanwhile, Logan scooted the chair closer toward them, kicking at Rowan’s shoes, and play hissing at him, she drew her feet up under her.

“Ok. Why are you three here?” she asked. “Two of you should be getting some rest before you leave in the morning, and the other one must have something better to do with his time.”

Paisley and Logan stared at John with Rowan’s sister poking him, and he sighed, lowering his head. When he lifted it again, he was wearing the most solemn of expressions.

“We are gathered here on this sixteenth day of Reind to make our farewells,” he intoned, “and to incessantly speak of the great shoving of the littlest bean’s enemy, Asher Cerullis, until she screams bloody murder.”

Nodding, Logan sad, “As he said, it shall be, oh smallest of beans.”

“Teeny, weensiest bean,” Paisley added.

Growling, Rowan crossed her arms.

“You three are the worst,” she said.

“Uh-huh.”

Snaking an arm around Rowan’s head, John pulled it to him so he could kiss her forehead. When he released her, he dropped his hand on her shoulder, keeping her close.

“How are you doing?” Logan asked. “Mom told us you’re not coming with us tomorrow. I know you’ve been looking forward to this year’s Summit for months.”

“Try for my whole life,” Rowan huffed, “but it’s fine. There’s always next year, and I have obligations to fulfill here.”

“Yeah, we heard about those too,” John said.

His grip on Rowan’s shoulder tightened.

“Can’t believe mom’s making you follow another House’s brat around for the next three weeks.”

“I mean... I did embarrass him in front of a bunch of powerful Houses,” Rowan said. “I think it’s fair that I make it up to him, even if it’s in a way that our parents, not him, probably decided on.”

“Still sucks, though.”

Kicking the floor, Logan rotated back and forth, fixing his eyes on his lap.

“Yeah, maybe. But it is what it is. I’ll make the best of it,” Rowan said. “So, anyone have tips for how I should handle this Asher kid?”

“Did you not *just* hear me talking about how there are too many Houses in Athari?” John asked.

“I wasn’t asking you,” Rowan said, jabbing his side.

He yelped, and after a brief spell of rustling, Paisley stuck her head between them.

“So, let’s start with what we know. In recent years, Cerullis has been focusing on the scientific field, which is the primary reason they’re so powerful right now, but it’s also been their primary source of trouble as well,” she said. “I believe we all remember THE fire, yes? The one that caused so much controversy fifteen years ago?”

John and Logan chorused affirmatives while Rowan nodded, reflexively shunting her focus away from that... *incident*. She tried not to think about the fire when possible. There was too much heartache, both for herself and the Shalens, trailing it.

“For the most part, that lovely disaster has dropped from public awareness,” Paisley continued. “Recently, people have been focusing on how Cerullis’ innovations have let us farm further into Athari’s tundra, making us less reliant on Roswines for food. In other words, you might want to prepare for a lot of dull, scientific talk.”

Rowan wouldn’t find it dull. Science wasn’t her passion, per se, but she did enjoy listening to others gush about it. What else could someone do when an interesting subject was combined with another person’s enthusiasm but take pleasure from it?

“From what I hear, Asher’s a quiet kid, unlike his many cousins,” Paisley said. “He doesn’t often leave the grounds of his family’s estate and has basically no friends outside of those needed for his work. He’s also an only child, the poor thing.”

“Or lucky bugger, depending on how you view your siblings,” John grumbled. “How do you know this much shit about him, Paisley?”

Turning to him, their sister pecked his cheek.

“I *pay attention*, baby bro. You should try it sometime,” she said before rolling toward Rowan. “Oh! From what I saw yesterday, the kid’s an impeccable dresser, probably cares way too much about fashion. You might want to be careful with what you wear tomorrow. Other than that...”

Shrugging, she retreated from view, and stopping with his fidgeting, Logan leaned on his knees.

“Just act like you normally do around nobles, and you’ll be fine,” he said. “You’re usually pretty good at public relations. Usually.”

When he winked at Rowan, she resisted the urge to kick him in the shin.

“Maybe don’t have anything to drink, though,” John added.

Rowan didn’t resist play-punching him. While he rubbed his arm, she cocked her head, staring into nothing with her tongue poking from between her teeth.

“This should be interesting,” she said after a moment. “Athari’s most famous House of warriors and the one that’s most devoted to science? I’ll probably start the first House war in a century.”

Logan dropped out of the chair to his knees, squeezing Rowan’s calf, while Paisley threw her arms around her neck and John buried his face in her shoulder.

“You’ll do great.”

Rowan didn’t know who’d said that, but it didn’t really matter. Here was her family: so, so busy most of the time but still here for her when she needed them. When she sniffled with tears filling her eyes, Paisley chuckled into her hair.

“Our itty, bitty bean,” she said.

“You guys,” Rowan shouted, wiggling and squirming until they got off of her.

Jumping to her feet, she pointed a finger at their far-too-pleased faces.

“So mean to me,” she said. “You’re trash, all of you.”

Raising an eyebrow, Logan said, “You know, if you want us to leave you alone, all you have to do is ask. You don’t have to insult us.”

Leave.

Alone.

“No!”

Rowan fell to her hands and knees, crawling into the center of them.

“Don’t leave me. Please.”

Someone released a mighty sigh, and arms wrapped around her.

“Ok, Rowan. We’ll stay.”

And they did. Once Rowan climbed out of their mess of limbs, they talked into the small hours of the morning, about projects and girls and boys and friends, whether noble or corp. Rowan went off on a tangent about how much bullshit it was that one of them having untitled friends would cause a scandal for the family, and her siblings indulgently listened.

They started dropping off, Paisley first and then Logan, from where he’d once more clambered into the chair. John and Rowan stayed up a little longer.

He was supposed to have been the child left behind this year, here to carry on the bloodline if things turned to shit in Novadracht.

Technically, he could join everyone else now, taking Rowan’s place, but her removal from the team had been so last minute. He couldn’t have prepared for the month-long trip in a day’s time. So, it would be the two youngest Kolb children, alone with Bay, until everyone came home.

“I’m worried about Henry,” John drowsily murmured with his head lolling against the bed. “We’ve never been apart for this long.”

Wincing, Rowan said, “Thanks for volunteering to stay so I could attend the Summit, even if I ended up not going.”

“Are you kidding? Mingling with strangers? Working to make alliances with foreign Houses? That’s what you were made for, Rowan,” John said. “Meanwhile, I can’t remember our own damn nation’s noble families. It was about time for you to go. Henry and I were looking forward to watching you shine.”

“Well...”

With a burst of a sigh, Rowan fell into John.

“There’s always next year. And Henry will be back before you know it.”

“I hope so,” John said, hugging himself. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he meets someone from another nation while there. I can’t lose him in a marriage like that, Rowan.”

“Well, of course not! He’s your twin. Now, come here.”

Curling an arm around his face, Rowan forced his head against her shoulder before patting his cheek.

“Sleep,” she said.

She thought he mumbled a protest, but it got lost in slowed-down breathing and his body relaxing against hers. Carefully slumping against the bed, Rowan closed her eyes, trying to follow her own command, but she didn't drift off for quite a while regardless.

The morning found her family at a dock on Lake Voxmore. The ferry that would take most of them down the river was gently bumping against its wood. Seeing such an old-timey vessel on the river rather than the sleek, underwater skimmers Rowan was used to sent a thrill through her, but of course it did. It was a reminder of something she'd always wanted. Taking an antiquated ferry to Novadracht was tradition, a harkening to times of old when an emperor still ruled a now-fractured empire.

Anthony had been on the ferry for hours, but still, he popped up on deck after they'd arrived, enthusiastically waving at them. They catcalled and teased him until he went back to his wife. Rowan hoped he enjoyed this vacation before he fully assumed his responsibilities as Kolb's heir.

As Paisley had suggested last night, she was impeccably dressed, set to head for House Cerullis' estate after this, but the wrap she'd chosen to wear wasn't helping much against the morning's chill. While Bay and John received their goodbyes, she shivered in place, fighting to keep it unnoticed. Henry and John stepped aside to say their own, private farewell while Veronica padded to Rowan, taking her by the shoulders.

“Remember that I love you, ok?” she said. “Nothing you do will ever change that.”

“I will, mom,” Rowan said with a slight smile. “I love you too.”

Veronica dragged her into a hug, repeatedly kissing the top of her head, before murmuring into her hair.

“You are my remarkable baby girl, Rowan. When next year rolls around, I fully expect you to kick the asses of every stuffy noble who attends the Summit, including mine.”

Pulling back, she nudged Rowan's chin.

“Even with all the stupid shit you sometimes pull, you make me so proud,” she said. “I'll see you in a month.”

With a final smile, she left to kiss her wife once more before boarding the ferry, and Logan hopped in front of Rowan.

“You going to be ok?” he asked.

“Duh,” Rowan said, rolling her eyes. “Get yourself aboard, and have fun, yeah?”

“I will,” Logan said, hugging her.

As he was walking away, Rowan called, “Don’t swindle too many people out of their money.”

With his stride hitching, Logan stumbled before bursting into laughter. Glancing back at Rowan, he stuck his tongue out at her, which she happily returned.

Paisley said not a word to her, merely gathering Rowan in her arms. Squeezing her, Paisley rocked her back and forth before letting go, and after briefly touching her hand to Rowan’s cheek, she turned away.

Once he was finished saying goodbye to his twin, Henry headed for the ferry without acknowledging Rowan, and if she hadn’t known how distressed he must be about leaving John behind, she might have been more pissed at him. As it was, she cupped her hands around her mouth.

“No sex scandals this year, Henry,” she shouted.

With his head rocketing to her, Henry grimaced on seeing her grin.

“Fuck you too, Rowan,” he yelled back.

But he followed it up with a kiss at the air, a gesture Rowan repeated.

This left only John, Bay, and Rowan on the dock with the ferry soon chugging away from them.

“Welp,” Rowan said. “I have to go pretend I like some boy I’ve never formally met. I’ll see you two at dinner tonight?”

John awarded her with the faintest of smiles and a nod, but Bay squeezed her hand.

“Have fun, baby girl,” she said.

“I’ll try,” Rowan said.

And she would. What was the point of making herself miserable, even if she’d rather be doing anything but spend the day at another noble family’s estate? She would find the positives in her situation, and she would *revel* in them, damnit.

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