

Chapter 5: Well, He's Not So Bad

The Cerullis family had *weird* taste. That was Rowan's first impression as she was driven up the long driveway to their door.

Her family's manse followed traditional building standards: everything square and symmetrical with gray bricks and windows arranged in a perfect grid. This place looked more like a fluid sculpture with curves and walls made of glass and steel. The rise of another building's roof peeked above it, but of that building, not much else could be seen.

Rowan loved it all.

When they pulled up, an attendant was waiting at the front door, and after her driver handed Rowan out of the car, he bowed to her.

"Lady Kolb. A pleasure," he said. "My Lord Cerullis has been waiting for you. If you'll follow me?"

Nodding permission for the attendant to continue, Rowan followed him into the house, marveling at the door's smooth slide open as they approached it. The building's interior provided further examples of Cerullis' strange tastes. Paintings with bright colors and no form hung on the walls, and on the other side of an open, airy room, a staircase made of... plastic and glass, of all things, led to the second floor.

Rowan was surprised by how much vivid color she saw here. Most nobles preferred monochromatic themes, but this palette reminded her of pictures she'd seen of Shoya Dren's jungles. Walking through it lifted her spirit, even given what she was here to do.

When they walked straight through the house and out of a back door, she almost asked the attendant where they were going, but that question was answered without her having to voice it once the sun's glare had stopped blinding her.

Nobles usually kept expansive grounds around their homes, preserving Athari in its natural state within those grounds. House Cerullis had a gigantic dome behind their house. At the sight of it, Rowan was a little ashamed to admit that her mouth dropped open and continued hanging as they crossed the space to the tiny door at the base of the structure.

People were scurrying around the place's stark interior, but they weren't attendants, Rowan didn't think. Their dress and bearing screamed more of a corp's employees. Even still, they showed what polite society had decided was the proper amount of respect for her, stepping aside with their

heads lowered. Rowan had always and would forevermore *loathe* this, but it came at a good time.

Harnessing the heat that it had spawned—what was threatening to make her grit her teeth—she calmed down the fluttering in her stomach.

They again stepped through a set of marvelous sliding doors, and finally, Rowan saw something familiar. She was in a lab, much like what her chemistry and biology classes in college had used, if more complex and well-stocked. Besides the typical beakers and test tubes that one would find in a lab, a bank of storecase screens took up the middle of the far wall with various images of the stars displayed on them.

Near these, Asher Cerullis was intensely discussing something with two of his employees, although it appeared to be more an argument of focus and not anger. He was wearing a lab coat with safety goggles pushed onto his forehead while holding a pair of nitril gloves. A bright, orange smudge was sitting on one of his soft cheekbones, and his hair was frazzled.

Seeing this, Rowan was half-intrigued by the picture and half-irritated that she'd spent so long picking out what to wear this morning. This boy didn't seem to care about fashion nearly as much as the one from a few nights ago.

As they came closer, the attendant said, "Lord Cerullis, your guest has arrived."

When Asher glanced at them, the beginning of a grimace flashed over his face before he could control it. He said a final few words to his employees before closing the distance to them.

"Thank you, Dan. I've got it from here," he said.

Bowing, the attendant strode away, leaving Rowan pinned under the gaze of the heir to a rival House, someone she'd humiliated.

Dipping his head to her, Asher said, "Lady Kolb."

"Please, call me Rowan," Rowan said out of habit before wincing. "Is there somewhere I can speak with you privately before we continue on with our day?"

Asher drew his eyebrows together with an uncertain tilt to his lips.

"Certainly," he said.

Turning on his heel, he marched toward a door with his coat flapping behind him, and Rowan hurried to keep up. Exiting the lab, they turned around several corners before walking into someone's—his, presumably—office. The only windows Rowan had seen in this place were eating one of the room's walls while a desk with a storecase and screen combination on it faced the door. Several files were neatly stacked on one side of this desk with a host of notepads and fountain pens filling what space remained. A few potted plants were dotted around the room, and as they entered, soft music that Rowan couldn't quite identify was playing, although it quickly cut off.

Removing his safety goggles, Asher ruffled his hair into order with one hand while taking off his lab coat with the other, hanging both items on a hook near the door, and every doubt Rowan might have had about Paisley's advice from last night disappeared. Finished with his hair, Asher straightened the open collar of his turquoise button-down shirt, one that was tucked into chinos with a silver color to them.

It was all custom fit. All probably outrageously expensive.

So. He did like his clothes.

When Asher looked over his shoulder at her, Rowan nearly snorted on seeing that same orange streak still on his cheek. What did she make of that with everything else he'd presented? What did she make of *him*?

"What did you want to tell me that couldn't be said in front of my people?" he asked.

"It's not that I didn't want them to hear," Rowan said. "I just didn't want you..."

She shook her head. Asher wouldn't care that she'd been worried about embarrassing him again, as some people might be on hearing the next words out of her mouth.

"I wanted to apologize," she continued, "and if you want me to repeat that in front of other people, I'm happy to do it. But before we begin these three weeks together, I have to say I'm sorry for my behavior at my brother's wedding. It was deplorable, and I will do everything in my power to make it up to you."

Asher had cocked his head at Rowan with a quizzical expression in place, which she didn't know what to make of. What on earth was he thinking?

"Why are you apologizing? I'm not angry with you," he said. "I could see you were drunk that night and knew you might react poorly if I asked you to dance, but I chanced it anyway. I was a little upset that you ruined my suit, but your family has already repaid me for its cost. This thing we're doing over the next few weeks? It's only to maintain appearances, not because I think you owe me a debt."

Huh.

"You're... not angry with me?" Rowan said.

"No, Lady--"

Cutting off, Asher made a face.

"No, Rowan. I'm not."

"Oh, thank *avan*."

Dropping her hands on her knees, Rowan clung to them, shaking a little.

"I hate it when people are unhappy, doubly so when I cause it," she said. "I've been trying to figure out how I'd fix what I did since I woke up yesterday."

Cupping her elbows, Asher pulled Rowan upright before smiling at her for the first time, one that was so infectious she had to return it. When they were this close, she could fully appreciate the crinkle next to his eyes and how straight his teeth were.

Wait. This close...

As Rowan went stiff, Asher didn't seem to notice.

"You're sweet to worry about how you've affected me," he said. "Most nobles... most *people* don't care about what they do to others."

"I'm not most people," Rowan said.

When she tried to tug free of his hold, Asher let her go.

"I'm beginning to see that," he said with amusement. "If you're quite done giving me an apology I never wanted, though, I wondered if I might give you a tour of my workspace."

He waved toward the door, and nodding, Rowan started digging through her purse.

"I'd like that but first..."

Finding her tissues, she pulled one free, offering it to him.

"Not as fancy as a handkerchief, I know, but it'll get the job done," she said. "You've got something-"

She tapped her cheek, and Asher huffed.

"Of course I do."

After he'd scrubbed his face clean, he showed Rowan around his family's many labs. Most of them were pretty humdrum, even if what was being worked on in them looked fascinating. Asher failed to say anything about what his family had in development, but Rowan hadn't thought he would, not to someone from House Kolb.

They ended up in a room quite different from the others. Hexagonal in shape, a waist-high shelf ran along each wall, only interrupted by doorways, and storecase screens were crowded onto them. As in the first lab Rowan had seen, different pictures of space filled most of the screens here with people bustling between them and a table, set in the center of the room. A few people, however, stayed in place, monitoring the screens in front of them and taking notes.

As Rowan looked over this hive of activity with wide eyes, wondering what on earth this place's purpose could be, she noticed a pocket of calm in the metaphorical storm. Along a small portion of one wall, a man was placidly gazing at a screen she couldn't see, and in the thirty seconds she watched him, no one approached his workstation. Chewing on her lip, Rowan kept an eye on him while Asher explained the room to her.

"Here, we monitor outer space as well as a few other things I can't discuss," he said. "Since our world started getting smaller several generations ago, my family has believed we need to look to the stars for our future. We've invested a lot of time and resources into researching the expanse beyond, speculating on ways we could survive in that harsh realm."

"Admirable," Rowan said.

At that, Asher snapped his head to her, giving her a piercing stare.

"You think so?" he asked.

Nodding, Rowan said, "Sure! It's definitely better than what most nobles use their money for. At least you're trying to help people with it, if indirectly. I find that effort commendable."

She didn't mention how many other ways said money could be used, ways that could help people here and now. Granted, he was right. The problems of how humanity had stressed and overcrowded their world needed to be addressed, and taking to space might solve those problems, but they'd never leave this planet if they didn't survive until they had a means of doing so. Given how many other threats were vying for humanity's erasure, Rowan wasn't sure if the limited capital of the few nobles who cared should be spent on something that would only help the far-distant future.

But Asher didn't need to hear that opinion. Rowan had meant what she'd said. Work like this was utterly worthy of respect, and from the odd look and hesitant smile he turned her way, she got the feeling he didn't often receive that.

"You are... kind," he said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Rowan said. "Now, what's going on over there?"

She pointed toward the room's epicenter of calm, and Asher made a face.

"That's where we monitor and record data from probes that have been sent into the Source," he said.

Hearing that, Rowan locked up, and as she turned toward him, it felt like her neck was creaking.

"The Source?" she said.

Slumping, Asher said, "Yes."

“Home of the Ancients,” Rowan said.

“Yes.”

“The distinctly *not human* beings that have existed on our planet since the dawn of reality.”

“Yes, Rowan, I know what the Ancients are,” Asher said with an eye roll. “Everyone does.”

As Rowan stared at him, he shifted in place, doing his best not to seem uncomfortable.

“Why are you watching them?” she asked.

“Because my dad insists,” Asher said before raising a hand to forestall further questions. “Don’t ask me for his reasons. I don’t know them.”

After another beat, Rowan said, “Ok.”

As she returned to observing the rest of the room, Asher made a funny noise beside her.

“O...k?” he said.

“Yeah. It’s none of my business what your family researches,” Rowan said. “If your father wants to poke at something as unfathomable as the Ancients, more power to him.”

“Huh.”

Rowan waited for more from him, but when Asher didn’t say anything, she filled the silence.

“So, what’s your part in this?” she asked, waving a hand in front of her.

Coughing, Asher stepped further into the room.

“I oversee most of it. I’ve been doing so since shortly after finishing college,” he said. “Research and development like this have been a part of my family’s tradition for decades, but I was the one to focus us on it. In a way, everything around you is my baby.”

Suddenly, Rowan was extra glad she hadn’t expressed her full opinion about what he was doing here. Before she could form a response to what Asher had said, a woman came skittering toward them.

“My Lord Cerullis,” she said, “if I may?”

At the obligatory pause, Asher waved for her to continue.

“If you can spare the time, we’d like your opinion on something strange, my lord,” she said. “Would you join us?”

“Of course,” Asher said. “Show me.”

With a nervously bobbed bow, the woman retraced her steps, and they followed, although Rowan shot inquiring glances at Asher all the while.

What was going on? These people didn't seem like they were in a panic, but Rowan couldn't help but worry about whether something like the famous Cerullis Family Fire was about to repeat itself now. Many people had speculated about that incident, wondering if it had been more than an accident. Some had even claimed that it had been a ruse to get rid of a new and powerful competitor in the field. Rowan wasn't sure if she could qualify it as that, given that she was only the youngest child of a rival family, but still, she had to wonder.

If that was what *was* happening and Thomas heard about it, her friend would never stop with his revenge schemes against House Cerullis, and Rowan *really* didn't want that. Sometimes, he seemed a little too obsessed with them.

Asher either didn't see the worry on Rowan's face or chose to ignore it because they stopped behind a stationary employee without him once looking at her.

The man in the chair raised pinched eyes and puffy jowls toward the two before struggling to reach his feet with a wheeze. A firm hand pushed him back down while Asher reached to tap on a keyboard.

"The hell is this?" he said under his breath.

And that was officially enough.

"What's going on?" Rowan said in a sharp voice.

Finally, Asher glanced at her with a small furrow between his eyebrows.

"Sorry, Rowan. I didn't mean to brush you off," he said. "Give me a minute, and once I'm done talking with these fine people, we can continue with our tour."

Clicking her tongue, Rowan crossed her arms with her foot tapping.

"*Avan* above, Asher. I know something's gone wrong," she said. "There's no point in trying to hide it, so why not explain it instead? Maybe I can help."

Straightening, Asher lifted one corner of his mouth.

"I doubt you could," he said.

When Rowan bristled, he raised his hands in a calming gesture.

"But I'll explain anyway," he continued. "Nothing's wrong. We've simply received the latest transmission from the probes we have orbiting furthest from the sun, the ones near the edge of our solar system, and some of what they've sent back looks... strange. That's all."

“Can I see them?” Rowan asked, stepping forward.

Moving to the side, Asher gestured her toward the screens, and she bent to their level, grinning at the shifting man beside her.

“Hello,” she said before focusing.

But she didn’t understand what was strange about these images. They looked the same as the others around them, a normal image of space, as portrayed for the human eye to perceive it at least.

“What’s wrong?” she said. “I don’t see the problem.”

Asher leaned on the shelf beside Rowan, curling his fingers over hers, and she absently moved her hand away while he tapped on a particularly bright part of the image on the screen.

“This, right here,” he said. “It’s... new, which doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Perhaps our probes are malfunctioning. Perhaps some random burst of electromagnetic activity caused this bright spot, although that seems unlikely.”

Pausing, he narrowed his eyes at the image.

“It *could* be something that’s only now giving off a signal we can detect, but that seems unlikely too.”

Looking between him, gnawing on his lip, and what he’d shown her, Rowan frowned.

“So... what’s causing it?” she asked.

Opening his mouth, Asher closed it again with every part of his face creasing.

“That’s what I’m saying. *I don’t know*,” he said before shaking himself. “Put a higher priority on monitoring this, just in case it’s not an anomaly. Update me if anything changes.”

Once the woman who’d first collected them nodded, Asher strode away from the shelf, and Rowan tripped over herself to stay at his side.

“That’s it?” she said. “Keep an eye on something that might be totally new in the vastness of space?”

“I don’t have another option right now,” Asher said. “Sometimes, that’s all science is. Observing phenomena in the hope that you can understand them.”

In silence, Rowan walked alongside him to the door, but once they were in the hallway beyond, she voiced her thoughts.

“That sounds frustrating.”

Asher laughed, genuine and full-throated.

“It can be,” he said, “but sometimes, it can be deeply rewarding. Want to see?”

When he raised an eyebrow at her, Rowan showed him her best impression of Break’s worst villains, plastering an evil grin in place while she rubbed her hands in front of her face.

“Show me,” she said.

As she’d hoped, Asher chortled, almost losing his balance from the force of it, and after this, he was more open about what his people were working on. They spent another couple of hours wandering around the gigantic dome before leaving. The rest of her three weeks here, Rowan would arrive well before lunch and stay until near dinner, but with her family’s sending-off this morning, today’s visit had been necessarily shortened.

Asher personally escorted her to her car, through his family’s fantastic home and out the other side. Her driver stood ready to open her car’s door for her as soon as she was ready, so turning to Asher, Rowan tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Well,” she said. “I don’t know about you, but I don’t think this arrangement will be nearly as bad as I thought it would be.”

Grinning, Asher said, “Definitely not. This has, in fact, been one of my more pleasant afternoons this month. Thank you for it.”

He bowed the tiniest bit, which was strange to see from another noble.

“So, I’ll have the pleasure of your company tomorrow?” he said. “Perhaps there won’t be as much tension between us, now that we’ve cleared the air.”

“I’ll be here. That *is* the agreement our parents made, after all,” Rowan said. “Have a good night, Asher!”

She didn’t know if he rose from his bow behind her, booking it toward a source of escape, but once she was in her car, she rolled down a tinted window to wriggle her fingers at Asher, who returned the gesture with a hesitant wave. Then, they were pulling away.

Exhausted, Rowan slumped in her seat. She’d made it through the day without causing another disaster.

“Yay, me,” she said to no one.

Leaning against the car door, she watched as trees and eventually, Xygek passed them by, on her way back to the people who loved her unconditionally.