

Chapter 6: An Invitation

Foolishly Offered

After only a few weeks together, Asher didn't seem to care whether Rowan learned about his family's secrets anymore. He was excitedly rambling about improvements to their wristcoms that would let a holograph of the person on the other end of a connection hover above it before moving into possible methods of weather management, and Rowan tried to keep up with an indulgent grin.

She'd decided that she liked him. He was enormously passionate about his work, a depth of enthusiasm that still surprised her at times, and more down to earth and most importantly, *kind* than any other noble brat she'd met.

Honestly, those few things were enough to make her enjoy anyone's company.

He seemed a little sad today, though, drooping around the edges, and Rowan wondered if it was for the same reason she was. As the day ended, he became almost lethargic, trudging when he walked while his speech slowed down. When he escorted Rowan to her car, he almost looked like a puppy, about to get scolded.

Outside of the front door to his family's house, Asher turned to her, taking a deep breath.

"Well. I-"

"Would you like to come to dinner tonight?" Rowan blurted.

She'd been contemplating asking him this for a few days now, merely working up the nerve to say it. Once they were done today, her obligation to House Cerullis would be fulfilled, and Rowan didn't want to let go of what had been kindling between her and Asher. She wanted to keep what was quickly becoming a friendship, so she had to find a means for them to spend time together. This dinner could serve as a temporary one, if he accepted. Tonight, she could forge one that was more permanent.

"I-"

A brief flicker of panic on Asher's face morphed into a pleased expression.

"I would like that," he said. "When should I arrive?"

"Sometime between six and seven should be fine," Rowan said.

"In that case, I'll look forward to seeing you then."

With a smile, Asher reached for her hand, giving it a quick squeeze before heading inside. Rubbing where he'd touched her, Rowan stalked to her car, curious about why he hadn't hovered until she was out of sight, like he had until tonight. Making a face, she finished scrubbing at her skin and ducked into the car.

Back home, she coordinated with the attendants who were setting up for tonight, helping them with desk and storecage placement. All the while, she went through the messages she'd received from the members of her family at the Summit.

She almost fell asleep while reading Logan's. He had *the* driest way of writing, one that made Rowan think he was a robot, and the subject matter he usually chose to share didn't help with that impression.

Still, he seemed happy, based on how much he gushed over the cost of some of the Houses' events. Also, his typical messages to Rowan weren't this long.

Among other things in her message, her mom mentioned that she was proud of how Rowan had handled the Cerullis situation, which had her glowing inside, and with what Paisley had written, she could tell her sister had done her best to make Rowan feel as if she were actually at the Summit. She'd even received a message from Anthony, although it got a bit garbled toward the end. Hopefully, that was Jessica's fault and not because of something horrific happening to her brother. She didn't have anything from Henry, but he'd always communicated through John when he was away, so she wasn't surprised by that.

Reading their messages made her wish she was with them. They'd only been gone for a few weeks, but Rowan sorely missed her family. Even when they were home and busy, she at least had the security of knowing they were nearby. She didn't like missing out on that.

Once everything involved with her part of tonight's dinner was set up, Rowan pattered about the house for a while. While doing so, she secretly hoped she'd run into her Aunt Hailey, who'd recently arrived from Shoya Dren. Those two had yet to say more than first hellos, and she hadn't seen her aunt in ages. Hailey's family was still unhappy with House Kolb for stealing Bay from them.

Her hope wasn't to be, though. Dinner time rolled around, and Rowan ran to her room for a change in clothes.

Mia and Thomas arrived soon afterward, and as they were announced, panic briefly visited Rowan when she remembered that she hadn't told Asher her friends would be here. Hopefully, he wouldn't be too off-put by two corp children's presences tonight, although... getting Rowan's friends to be comfortable around *him* might be the hard part, but before she could think about that too hard, her friends stepped through the door.

She could never decide what to think of Thomas and Mia in formal wear. To her, they were jeans and t-shirts, baked skin and scraped knees, but when they showed up to her home in dresses and ties, Rowan couldn't help but enjoy the sight of them, two people who were pleasing to the eye, wearing outfits that were made to suit their bodies.

“Hey, guys!” she called.

She ran to them with her arms spread, and they answered with hugs of their own while Thomas pounded Rowan’s back.

“Hell, you’d think you three never saw one another.”

Pulling her head free of the embrace, Rowan stuck her tongue out at John. Her brother was leaning his shoulder against a wall with his arms crossed as he grinned at her, and she couldn’t help a silent cry of thanks to see him more like himself instead of the mopey lump he’d been for the last few weeks. Behind him, Bay and Aunt Hailey glided into view, deep in discussion like they were every time she visited.

“You just wish you had friends, John,” Rowan called.

Thomas wiggled free of their tangle, placing his hands on his hips with a pout on his lips.

“I’d say we’re more than friends,” he said.

He would?

“Really?” Rowan said. “How would you define us, then?”

With his hands slipping off of their perches, Thomas spluttered, and Rowan watched his reaction with curiosity. Why was he getting so flustered?

“Rowan, love, why don’t you introduce your friends to your aunt?” Bay said with a chuckle. “I don’t think she’s met them.”

Right. That would be polite, wouldn’t it?

Grabbing her friends’ arms, Rowan dragged them toward Hailey, hauling them in front of her when she stopped.

“It’s good to see you Aunt Hailey,” she said. “May I present to you Mia and Thomas Shalen, my two best friends in the world.”

Stepping forward, Hailey squeezed both of their hands, refraining from kissing their cheeks out of respect for their ‘delicate Atharian sensibilities’.

“I’m pleased to meet you,” she said in her breathy accent. “I don’t believe I’ve heard of House Shalen before.”

“Oh. Um.”

Rowan scratched her chin while wondering how to put this. Since Hailey wasn’t around... ever, she didn’t know her aunt’s stance on corps.

“That’s because it doesn’t exist,” John said from against the wall.

Great... thanks for that, brother.

Drawing her eyebrows together, Hailey said, “But...”

“Shalen Corp, sis,” Bay gently said.

Hailey’s eyes widened while her lips parted, and all the while, Thomas and Mia shuffled in place, looking anywhere but at the nobles in their midst. Rowan kept an eye on Thomas in particular. She knew he wanted to protest how John had used his connection to something he hated as his defining characteristic, but fortunately, her friend remembered his manners, keeping his lips sealed.

“Oh!” Hailey said. “Well, I’m doubly pleased to meet you, then. I’ve always thought the Atharian nobles’ insistence on mingling only with themselves was a bit ridiculous. If any of you travel elsewhere, you’ll find that nobles and those unassociated with a House mix company quite frequently. Good on the three of you for flouting the norm here.”

Ho.ly. shit. Rowan might just turn Shoya Drenish herself, tackling Hailey so she could nuzzle her to death, but somehow, she restrained herself.

Turning to Rowan, Mia said, “I *like* her.”

Her words only seemed to prompt the same sentiment in Hailey, as she burst into laughter with snorts sprinkled into it. Pressing a hand to her mouth, she turned aside, waving at their concerned expressions, and Bay puffed out a small sigh.

“If we’re all gathered, we should move into the dining room,” she said. “From what I understand, Eugene has finished dinner, and we should enjoy it while it’s hot.”

Shit. Rowan had forgotten to mention Asher to her mom.

“Actually...”

Already on their way deeper into the manse, Rowan’s family and friends glanced back at her, and she flushed.

“Actually, I invited someone else to join us tonight,” she said. “I hope that’s ok.”

Arching an eyebrow, her mom said, “Really? That’s unusual for you. Who is it?”

Before Rowan could answer, an attendant slipped through the front door as if summoned, scurrying to whisper in Bay’s ear, and Rowan’s mom turned a confused smile on her.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rowan said. “Please, mom.”

Please, let this member of a rival noble family inside the house. Please, let her have this friend.

“All right,” Bay said. “Send him in.”

Oh, hell. She wasn't giving Rowan a chance to warn Mia or Thomas about what was coming? Rowan knew her mom liked her small mischiefs, it being her way of paying tribute to her homeland, but this seemed excessive, although.... maybe Bay thought she'd already told them about this.

Rowan's friends were staring at her, almost aggressively, and she shrunk on herself as the attendant stopped by the foyer's door, opening it.

“Lord Asher Cerullis,” she announced.

And he stepped over the threshold in his typical, flamboyant fashion, effectively shutting everyone in the room up.

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