

Chapter 7: So, This Is Awkward

Beside Rowan, Thomas' breath caught, although she didn't know if that was from surprise or anger. He'd gone stiff, fixing his bright eyes on Asher, but the Cerullis heir had equally become a statue, flicking his eyes over all of them but continually returning to Rowan and Thomas.

Avan, Rowan didn't know where he kept finding these suits, so far from a noble's traditional black jacket and slacks, but the crimson one he was wearing tonight with a black waistcoat and white shirt beneath pleasantly complemented his natural hues.

"Rowan... is this the guy who's been eating up your free time for the last three weeks?" Mia asked.

"*Mia*," Rowan hissed through the teeth of her grin.

She wasn't sure how she resisted the urge to smack her friend upside the head. Fortunately, her mom decided to relieve her torment at that moment, striding forward.

"Lord Cerullis, you'll have to forgive us," she said. "My daughter neglected to mention that you'd be joining us tonight. It must have slipped from her mind while making preparations."

"It did!" Rowan said, jumping in. "I'm so sorry, Asher. Coordination like this isn't my strong suit."

Bay paused in extending a welcoming hand toward Asher, narrowing her eyes at Rowan, while someone behind her poorly contained laughter before retreating. She made a note to turn John's life into a living hell for the next few days.

But then, her mom returned to what she'd been doing, clasping the hand of a rival House's heir.

"*Asher?*" Mia hissed at Rowan in much the same way she'd done earlier.

Rowan shrugged, watching Bay cup Asher's elbow to guide him inside.

As she did, Rowan noticed that Thomas had yet to relax with his face frozen and lips parted. Worried that she'd killed him with shock, she nudged him, and sucking in a breath, he shook himself.

"The *hell*, Rowan?" he breathed. "Why'd you invite *him* here?"

That had sounded angry. Did Thomas have a problem with Asher that Rowan didn't know about? Besides the obvious one, of course.

Hell. The *obvious problem*. What had she been thinking, bringing a member of House *Cerullis* near Thomas *Shalen*? That boy had been carrying an aggressive grudge against Cerullis since... since the family's famous fire.

Rowan didn't have time to answer any questions, whether his or hers, as Bay drew closer, forcing her into making greetings and introductions. When she stopped, releasing Asher, her mom watched her expectantly, and predictably, Rowan's mind dumped everything that could be useful out of her memory.

"Hi. Um-"

Great. Really fucking eloquent.

"As I said, I'm sorry about-" Rowan started.

"Goodness, you certainly like apologizing, don't you?" Asher said with a soft smile. "It's fine, Rowan. Who are these lovely individuals at your side? Friends? Family?"

At her name on his tongue, everyone rocketed their eyes to Rowan, including Aunt Hailey, although she seemed more intrigued than shocked. Ignoring them, Rowan rested a hand on Mia's shoulder, containing a grimace. She'd rather not introduce the noble versus corp drama yet so...

Why not avoid it for now?

"They're friends," she said. "This is Mia."

Asher raised an eyebrow at Rowan's failure to provide a family name, but he didn't protest it.

"A pleasure," he said, bowing to Mia. "Rowan has mentioned you many times over the last few weeks. From what she's said, you're an excellent friend, which is good. She deserves nothing less in her life."

Oh, well played. The frigid air around Mia melted, and she returned Asher's bow with a dazzling smile.

"She hasn't been able to shut up about you either, so kudos," she said. "Not many nobles get past her typical disdain of them."

There was a small frown at that, but Asher didn't voice his concern.

"Good to know she's enjoyed my company," he said before facing Rowan. "And the gentleman beside you?"

Gulping at how much Thomas had bristled, Rowan briefly touched his shoulder.

"Thomas," she said, unsure how much more she should provide.

Once their eyes met, both boys refused to move for the longest moment, one that stretched until Rowan didn't think she could take it anymore, but the thick air around them loosened when Asher offered Thomas his hand.

"It's nice to meet you," he said.

It was like he'd somehow plucked the best way to greet her friend from thin air. Thomas had always hated the stuffy bows and flowery greeting associated with nobles, so the simplicity of Asher's greeting had been perfect, but even still, when Thomas took his hand, shaking it once, his smile had bite.

"Same," he stiffly said.

Dropping his hand to his side, he flexed his fingers as if shrugging off Asher's touch. Aunt Hailey watched this exchange with the most merriment possible in her eyes, but once she'd had enough, she clapped her hands together.

"You'll have to forgive me, Lord Cerullis," she said. "I'd love to greet you more formally, but I'm starving. Shall we head to the dining room?"

"Lady Chinook, your sensible attitude is a delight," Asher said. "I skipped lunch, so I'm as eager as you to taste our fare for the evening."

"Oo..." Hailey said, looking him up and down. "You're good at this."

With a small smile, Asher said, "Thank you. I've had a lot of practice."

Mom snatched her sister's arm, gesturing everyone along, before whisking her ahead of them, but she didn't create enough distance before hissing at Aunt Hailey.

"You *cannot* seduce the heir of a rival House."

"Oh, don't worry, Bay. I doubt I could," Hailey said, glancing back at the others. "I don't think I'm his type."

And she'd sounded so amused by that. Rowan's face was burning, but Asher only watched the older women leaving them in their dust with curiosity.

"Is your family always this much fun?" he asked.

"When we're around people we're comfortable with," Rowan said. "Go on ahead with them. I need to check on something, but I'll follow you shortly."

"All right," Asher said. "Don't leave me at their mercy for long, please."

"I'd never."

When Rowan turned to her friends, Thomas had his eyes pinned on Asher's retreating back, chewing on his lip, while Mia was glaring at her with fire in those typically ice-blue eyes.

"I'm sorry," Rowan said, lifting her hands to either side. "I like him, ok? He's nice and has a lot of weird, interesting quirks."

That drew Thomas' attention to her.

"You like him?" he asked.

Frowning, Rowan said, "Yes. Can we go, please? I *am* sorry for inviting Asher without asking you two about it first, but if we stay here for much longer, we might cause an incident."

Heaving a sigh, Mia nodded before turning to her brother.

"*Food*, Thomas," she said. "You know how good the Kolb's cook is at his craft."

Grumbling to himself, Thomas shoved his hands in his pockets, tucking his chin to his chest as he hurried after the others. Rolling her eyes, Mia went with him, and once they'd gotten a few paces ahead of her, Rowan marched toward the exit from the foyer, reaching around it to pinch John's collar.

Jerking him to her, she growled, "I just finished making nice with Cerullis. Don't ruin it because you can't control yourself."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry," John said. "Avan, when you get like this, I remember why you were always the darling of our combat instructors."

Rowan got in his face.

"This darling will kick your ass if you wreck tonight for me," she said. "Got it?"

John rapidly nodded, and releasing him, Rowan pecked his cheek.

"Thank you, big brother."

"Any time, itty bitty--"

"I swear to *avan*, I might kick your ass now if you finish that thought."

He laughed, of course, but Rowan couldn't stop him from doing that.

The dining room table was laid out in typical fashion with formal place settings in front of its chairs. A chandelier provided the room with light, although it wasn't bright enough to banish the shadows in the corners.

Everyone strolled to stand behind their chosen, high-backed chair, and the majority looked to Bay. As the wife of the head of House Kolb, she held the highest rank while under this roof and so, led

the proceedings.

When she signaled, attendants appeared as if by magic, bearing their first course of the evening, and in tandem, they placed bowls and glasses in front of each chair, careful not to touch the people waiting behind them. Once that was done, mom pulled out her chair, and after they'd all sat down, she took a bite of a cream-based soup, washing it down with a sip of wine. None of the rest moved, simply waiting for her pronouncement.

"Excellent," she said. "Let us share in the bounty before us and enjoy one another's company."

As expected, Rowan joined the others in saying.

"Gratitude to the provider."

But then, those around the table relaxed, and Rowan hungrily dove for what turned out to be a squash soup, which was heavenly as usual. Finding Eugene, their cook, had been one of the better staff acquisitions her parents had made.

Conversation started out slow but quickly gained traction. Rowan didn't pay it much mind, even given that three of the people here were her guests. When it came to food, she'd always been a bit focused.

She did catch the heat that ignited every time Asher addressed Thomas, thanking her lucky stars when John stepped in before it could turn into a full-on argument. Her brother kept shooting glances Rowan's way, but she didn't know how to help with that. She was only just now coming to realize how much of a mistake she'd made in bringing someone from the Cerullis and Shalen families together in such an abrupt manner.

She perked up when Asher started talking about one of his projects, shocked that he'd discuss it with her family.

"-it be nice to control when it rained or keep severe weather away from a populated area?" he was saying. "With such fine-tuning, farming would be so much easier, and think of the lives we could save!"

Oh, no. He was waxing passionate. *Avan* help her family if he went off on one of his rambling lectures. Rowan might enjoy them, but she doubted they would.

"Yes, Asher's told me all about his weather manipulation project. It's quite brilliant!" she said. "Hardly the best of them, though."

Everyone at the table looked at her as if they'd forgotten she existed, and despite how much she wanted to both sink below the table and scream at the top of her lungs, she merely smiled, waiting for the group's attention to inevitably shift away from her.

"What other projects can you tell us about?" John asked.

And there it was. Rowan was left out. Again.

Not that she was fostering her ability to be included, bending over her bacon-wrapped steak so she could suck it into her mouth as she was. She was aware of this, but that made it sting no less.

As they finished off dessert, her mom leaned back in her chair.

“Well. It was certainly nice of you to join us this evening, Lord Cerullis,” she said. “I hope you’ve enjoyed yourself.”

“I have! Your household and company have been exceedingly pleasant, Lady Kolb,” Asher said. “And please. Call me Asher, everyone. It’ll make conversations go so much easier.”

With a faintly twitching smile, Bay said, “Very well, Asher. How long do you think you’ll be staying with us this evening? You’re welcome here for as long as you like, of course. I’d simply like to know if I should have arrangements made for you.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose.”

Standing, Asher buttoned up his jacket.

“I’ll say my farewells and-”

“Please, stay!”

Rowan didn’t realize she’d spoken that cry out loud until she registered that she was standing with her fingers pressing into the tabletop. Again, everyone was staring at her, but while her family looked blank, Mia and her brother were giving Rowan very different expressions. Thomas looked incredulous while Mia was practically begging Rowan to stop. Asher, on the other hand, was giving her that recognizably curious look he sometimes got, cocking his head with his eyes narrowed, and that spot of familiarity helped Rowan with regaining her lost voice.

“I mean... I had some entertainment planned for tonight,” she said. “I was hoping you’d join me and my friends for it.”

And there was that uncertain twitch of the lips she’d come to know, although Rowan wasn’t sure why Asher’s eyes briefly darted to Thomas. Maybe he was worried the other boy would attack him if he stuck around for too long.

“I’d... be delighted, Rowan,” he said before turning to Bay. “If the Lady Kolb is amenable, of course.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Bay said. “My daughter has hardly ever shown an interest in building relations with other Houses.”

That had Asher’s amber skin darkening, which Rowan found confusing, and Thomas made the faintest of strangled noises, which mystified her even more. When Aunt Hailey started cackling like

a witch, Rowan decided she'd missed something again. In the past, pretending that she knew what was going on had always been best when this happened, so she grinned.

"Does that mean you'll stay?" she asked.

Glancing over the table, Asher said, "I believe I may have backed myself into it."

"Yes!" Rowan shouted, jumping as she threw a fist overhead. "We're going to have so much fun. Come on, come on, come on!"

She tugged on Mia and Thomas until they got to their feet before stopping short.

"May we be excused, mom?" she asked.

Rolling her eyes, Bay said, "Yes, Rowan. Begone with you."

As she flapped a hand, Rowan pulled her friends toward the door, beckoning to Asher once she'd shoved them through it. On reaching her, he cautiously edged around her to get into the hall, which she ruined by blazing past him to lead the way.

Behind them, John said, "If they're about to do what I think they're about to do, you might want to have another room prepared, mo--"

But then, the door closed, cutting him off, and Rowan was pulling and prodding her three guests through the house.

Revision #1

Created 11 January 2025 21:16:07 by FatalisticFable

Updated 11 January 2025 21:20:48 by FatalisticFable