

Chapter 8: An Addition to the Group

They careened into their destination, and when Rowan stopped short, the others teetered into a near fall, but she didn't care about that. With her hands pressed together in front of her lips, she observed the room and silently declared it perfect, making a note to profusely thank the attendants who'd finished its set up.

Four desks had been dragged to mirror each other in the middle of the room with comfortable rolling chairs in front of them. A storecase setup was arranged on each of them, and at the end of this arrangement, an ornate table capped two of the desks with all manner of junk food and energy drink spread across it. After the meal they'd had, Rowan knew no one would indulge in that wondrous collection now, but it was glorious nonetheless. Meanwhile, a pile of pillows and blankets filled one corner of the room, there if they needed it, and Rowan let herself relax on noting Aurora, her sleeping buddy, among them.

Most important, however, were the silky nightclothes draped over the back of each chair. Each had something embroidered on the shirt's breast pocket: a hammer ablaze with light for Thomas, a staff laid over herbs for Mia, and two crossed swords for her. Rowan hadn't been sure what character Asher might roll tonight so she'd had his outfit emblazoned with a telescope and beakers. With colors that were vividly potent when compared to the other sets' bland gray, it was also the only set of nightclothes sporting a tastefully striped pattern.

"*Rowan*," Thomas groaned.

He glided into the room, picking at an embroidered hammer.

"This is *perfect*."

Hugging Rowan from the side, Mia whispered in her ear, "*You're perfect*."

Striding to snatch her nightclothes off of the chair beside Rowan's, she stalked into an attached washroom while Thomas held his outfit up for examination, giddily grinning.

"Can someone explain what this is?" Asher asked.

Looking at him, abso-fucking-lutely lost and nervous as all hell, Rowan made her decision. On her tiptoes, she hooked her elbow around his neck, dragging him down to her level, before spreading a hand over the room.

"This, Asher Cerullis, is the best night you've had in a while and for a long time to come."

Thomas, standing with his suit's jacket flung across the room and his shirt both unbuttoned and halfway off, froze in place as if remembering that they had a new person here. Rowan didn't know why he'd stopped undressing. It wasn't like he had anything to be ashamed of when it came to his body, but still, she dragged Asher aside, angling them away from her friend.

"This is a tradition my friends and I have held every year during the Summit. While that's happening, I get lonely without my friends around so..."

Pausing, Rowan glanced back to make sure Thomas was getting ready, like he'd been doing before, and was surprised to find him hunched over and hurriedly changing. He really didn't want the other boy to see any of his exposed skin, did he?

"As part of that, I'd like to run an experiment tonight, one that involves you," she continued under her breath. "If you participate in it, you'll have to follow my lead for the rest of the evening, but I guarantee that you'll have fun. Are you in?"

Licking his lips, Asher started turning his head to look over his shoulder before stopping himself.

"I- Sure," he said. "May I stand up, please, or is that part of the experiment?"

"Oh, duh," Rowan said, smacking her forehead. "Of course. Sorry."

When she released him, Asher rolled his head in a circle, massaging his neck.

"So, what do I do first?" he asked.

"Easy."

Spinning, Rowan grabbed his uniform for tonight before handing it off.

"Put that on once Mia's out of the washroom, and I'll get you set up."

Avan, she'd never seen someone so perplexed and intrigued before.

"Ok?" Asher said.

Patting his shoulder, Rowan turned to his setup, powering it on. As she launched *Nedrya's Breaking*, starting the process of creating an account for him, she noted Asher trading places with Mia and hurried up so she could change before he was finished.

Asher came out of the washroom with his hair wet—had he taken a shower?—when Rowan was in the middle of pulling her silky shirt over her breasts, and again, his face darkened, sending him scrambling to maintain his balance. As he darted his gaze over the room, noting Thomas and Mia still in it, he... didn't get outraged, like most would. He simply had a small frown in place that seemed more confused than anything.

Not that he or anyone else had anything to worry about when it came to propriety between Rowan, Thomas, and Mia. The three of them had been friends for long enough that exposing their bodies to one another like this wasn't a *thing* anymore.

Rowan waved for Asher to sit beside Thomas while he and Mia logged on. After following her instructions, Asher looked over the screen in front of him, quietly speaking the title splashed across it out loud.

"Break, is it? I've heard of this," he said. "When it came out, it looked interesting, but I've never had the time to try it. You play?"

He glanced up at Rowan, and she raised her eyebrow, all 'what do you think?' like.

"I've been a Breaker since the game launched," she said.

Huffing, Asher said, "Wow. I'm impressed. I didn't take you for the gamer type."

"I live to surprise," Rowan said before leaning over him to take control of his mouse. "Let's create your character, slowpoke."

Beside her, Thomas' clicking slowed down, and finally, Rowan thought she got it. Was he jealous? He couldn't think anyone could take his or Mia's place, so why would he be?

Jealousy, however, would explain his behavior tonight, beyond the hostility Rowan had expected from him at least. It would explain some of Mia's too, now that she thought about it.

Sometime when Asher wasn't in the room, she should reassure her friends of their place in her life, just in case she was right. Which she probably wasn't.

But whatever.

Rowan helped Asher navigate through menus until they got to the first real choice he could make.

"Race?" he said, wrinkling his nose. "Like...what? Not human?"

"Yes, Asher. You can be an Ancient in this game, if you want," Rowan said in the most solemn of tones.

When he snapped a glare at her, she breathed a sigh of relief. With every second she'd spent draped over him, he'd been getting progressively stiffer, but this seemed more like the Asher she'd come to know, albeit only during the times she'd annoyed the shit out of him.

She lightly punched his shoulder.

"No Ancients," she said, "but you could be a dwarf outcast or a gremlin or a Dullahan, if you like. I've already eliminated the races that are exclusive to the faction that Mia, Thomas, and I aren't part of, so have at it. Choose your race and make your character look as pretty as you want. Then, we'll move on to class."

Backing off, Rowan watched as Asher hesitantly poked about the menu, smiling when he leaned toward the screen. In the end, he picked a dark elf, slender in build, with a black miasma floating around him.

Bending over him again, Rowan laughed when Asher's eyes bugged out on seeing his class choices.

"How the fuck am I supposed to pick *one* of these?" he said.

Considering he'd never cursed around her before, Rowan started laughing harder, briefly collapsing on him. Gradually, she clawed herself upright, patting his shoulder.

"How do you want to play?" she asked. "Maybe I can help you narrow down your choices."

"I don't know!" Asher said in a tight voice. "I don't play games like this, Rowan! Ever!"

And that made her heart pang.

"Oh, you poor thing," Rowan said, ruffling his hair. "Ok. Close your eyes."

As Asher took a deep breath, his shoulders settled under her hands.

"Next?" he said.

"Imagine that our world doesn't exist," Rowan said. "All of your attachments here, good or bad, are gone. You have a chance to remake yourself with no one knowing who you were before. How would you do it?"

There was a moment of quiet, one that was only interrupted by mouse clicking and pressed buttons, and on catching sight of his venomous glare at her, Rowan play-snarled at Thomas.

"If I had no one watching me... judging me... I would devote myself wholeheartedly to science," Asher said. "I wouldn't worry about whether my experiments conformed to the nobility's sensibilities, only whether they benefited humanity. And... and..."

When he fell silent, Rowan poked his side. Hard.

As he winced, she said, "And?"

"And... that part's not important," Asher said. "I can see why so many people like this game. The idea that I could be someone else is intoxicating."

"Exactly."

After changing a few more options, Rowan patted Asher's back.

"Ok. Open your eyes," she said.

When he did, Asher relaxed in his chair.

“That’s much more manageable,” he said. “Thank you.”

“No problem,” Rowan said. “Pick a class, choose a name, and let me know what it is. I’ll invite you to our guild, and we’ll get you through the starting area as quickly as possible.”

He grunted, and chuckling, Rowan circled to her chair. In a private chat with Mia, she wrote, *Hooked?* When she got the message, Mia’s eyebrows shot for her hairline before she nodded at Rowan, and her returning smirk may or may not have been triumphant.

Asher eventually shared his username with her, and after the hour needed to get him into Nedrya proper, his character was standing in their guild hall, surrounded by its players.

“Who’s this, then?” Brassassin asked, ever willing to break the first awkward social wall.

“This is DefiantEnigma, a friend,” Rowan said. “He’s a newcomer to Nedrya, so everyone, play nice.”

A chorus of welcoming greetings rang along the connection, and over the top of their screens, Asher shot Rowan a panicked glance. She smiled encouragingly, waving for him to answer them.

“Hello,” he reluctantly said. “Glad to meet you all. I hope you can forgive any social gaffs I might make. I’ve never done... this.”

“That’s ok. Everyone’s been new to the game at least once,” said HauntedFox, their ranger.

Rowan was a bit surprised to see her here. Katy Drav was an inordinately busy woman, only online once or twice a week.

At the same time, GothicFlash said, “Aw! How cute!”

“Flash, leave the newbie alone,” Rerunner said.

‘Newbie?’ Asher mouthed at Rowan.

Rowan shook her head.

“Anyone want to help run Nigma through a few dungeons?” she asked. “Get him leveled up real fast?”

“What class did he chose?” Commandroid, their artificer, said.

Before Rowan could scold him about ignoring Asher, he clicked his tongue.

“Sorry. Nigma, what’s your class?”

“Um.”

For a moment, only key tapping filled the guilds' connection.

Then, Asher said, "I'm a... necromancer."

Despite people's best intentions, groans rose all around, and even Rowan grimaced.

"What?" Asher said with a note of panic in his voice. "What is it?"

"Nothing. It's *not important!*" Rowan said. "Right, guys?"

Her guildmates mumbled varied agreements, which seemed to calm Asher down.

"People who play necromancers can be a pain to work with sometimes, is all-" she started.

"Meaning they're usually dark assholes, trying to look cool," Thomas interrupted.

Shooting to her feet, Rowan reached over their screens to smack her friend's head.

"But Nigma's not like that," she said. "Besides, why is it a bad thing to be dark or try to look cool? It's not any worse than paladins with their stuffy smugness."

Bursting into laughter, Mia rocked in her chair.

"Holy shit, Nigma. You picked a class that's the complete opposite of Gramps!" she gasped. "Guys! Guys. They're sitting next to each other right now!"

As a riot of giggles and snorts sounded over the connection, Asher looked at Rowan, but she had no intention of fixing this mess. When she poked at Thomas for an explanation, though, he kept his eyes resolutely fixed on his screen, and Rowan sighed.

"That's his in-game name. Grampaladin," she said. "He's the grumpy-looking, old man, standing in the corner with a hammer."

"Oh, it's a pun." Asher said, squinting at his screen. "That's wicked clever."

Straightening, Thomas turned carefully neutral eyes on the newcomer while Rowan sat down.

"You think so?" he asked.

"Sure," Asher said, still locked onto his screen. "I've always loved a play on words."

Something shifted on Thomas' face, and Rowan let herself believe that this might work.

"Thanks," he said. "I guess I'll tank you through your first few levels."

"...Tank?" Asher said.

Shaking his head, Thomas said, "You have so much to learn."

"I'm assuming Willow's going to heal since Toad's not here," Commandroid said.

"Yeah, I think so," Mia said. "You lot know I'll do any sort of favor for Fable."

While the guild groaned, Rowan play swiped at Mia, which she rolled away from with her tongue stuck out.

"Nigma and I will be damage, obviously," Rowan said. "Anyone else want to volunteer? Make this go faster?"

"If you make it go by too quickly, Fable, he'll learn his class or the game," Brassassin said.

"I know-" Rowan started.

"I wouldn't worry about that," Asher said. "I'm a quick study."

What was it with boys and interrupting her tonight?

"If you want to risk reaching high level without knowing what you're doing, far be it from me to stop you," Brassassin said. "Fable, let me know if you need someone to rescue you, but I have other plans tonight."

"Yeah, yeah. Have fun ganking poor, innocent Wilders in their starting zone," Rowan said.

"Hey! The Wilder Union invaded *our* territory last season," Brassassin said. "Anyone who joins them is an accomplice to that crime and can *deal with the consequences.*"

Rowan rolled her eyes while Mia snickered into a hand beside her. In their guild, Brassassin was the most invested when it came to the role-playing side of *Nedrya's Breaking*.

"And the Clockwork Convention thanks you for your service," Rerunner solemnly said. "If anyone in the guild has an issue, we'll message you."

"*Thank you,*" Brassassin said. "That's all I wanted."

And his character vanished. Meanwhile, Mia was busy typing a private message, probably explaining Nedrya's two factions to Asher so Rowan wouldn't have to.

"I'll run dungeons with you," HauntedFox said. "Toad just messaged me, canceling our date. They won't be online tonight."

"That sucks," Rowan said.

"Eh. It's ok," HauntedFox said. "I'll see them in a couple of days."

"Still. Thank you for taking the time to help me," Asher said. "You could be doing other things. I appreciate you spending the evening with me and my... with us instead."

Holy shit, he'd almost said it. This did not excite Rowan. Not at all.

"No problem, Nigma," HauntedFox said. "Like I said, we've all been newbies at one point or another."

"All right," Thomas growled. "If we're quite done with talking, can we play, please?"

"Sure, grumpy Gramps," Mia said.

Reaching for the snacks, Thomas chucked a chip at his sister before sending out group invites.

They ran mid-level dungeons for a couple of hours with the high-level players keeping Asher's character from getting one-shot after he tagged each mob. He advanced through levels until he reached twenty-five, halfway to the top, but then, HauntedFox called for a washroom break. While she was busy, the four in the group who were in Athari descended on their provided snacks like ravenous wolves.

"So?" Rowan asked with her mouth full of gummies. "What do you think?"

"I think..."

Trailing off, Asher took a sip of his beer, which was something Rowan had thought she'd never see. He seemed like more of a top-shelf guy.

"I think you were right," he continued. "This is the best night I've had in a while. Thank you."

Laughing, Rowan threw her arm around him, squeezing him from the side, but she quickly let go when he stiffened.

"Glad you're enjoying yourself," she said. "I've liked having you with us."

"Surprisingly, me too," Mia chipped in. "You're not too bad for a noble brat."

Rowan thought for sure that Asher would make a comment about that, but he seemed content to ignore it. Maybe he'd figured out Mia and Thomas were untitled at some point over the evening.

Thomas stayed notably silent, intent on choosing what to drink, but he was genuinely smiling for the first time tonight, and Rowan thought Asher noticed this from the way he was looking at her friend. There was something incredibly pleased on his face.

"It seems tonight's experiment was a success," he said.

Wait, *what*? He'd known what Rowan had been trying to do with this?

"Experiment?!"

Snapping his head up, Asher frowned at Thomas, but before he could say anything the other boy barreled on.

“Did you seriously just call us an *experiment*?”

Avan damnit. As soon as Thomas had spoken up, Rowan had known the night was about to fall apart. She’d known it would probably run into *this exact problem* for a while now but had been hoping that they’d somehow avoid it.

Because much as she might wish it were otherwise and might like to shove knowledge of it out of her mind, there was one huge obstacle standing between any friendship between the Shalen children and Asher Cerullis.

“We’re not catalysts or reagents for you to play with,” Thomas growled. “Here I was, thinking you might not be an asshole like your dad, but there you go, proving me wrong. I wonder if you have a body count as high as ‘the great innovator: Lord Max Cerullis’. How many people died during the fire he caused, huh? A few dozen? A hundred? And here you are, talking exactly like that murderer.”

The fire. Something Rowan avoided thinking about as much as possible. It had been one of the biggest scandals to hit Athari in the last fifteen years because during it, Thomas and Mia’s mother, who’d also been the CFO for Shalen Corp, had died while trying to get off of the Cerullis’ property.

Asher had gone pale, leaving his black hair stark without its usual background to soften it, and Rowan got ready to keep him on his feet if she needed to, but he only blinked a few times before licking his lips.

“I’m going to take a walk,” he said. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

Stiffly, he marched out of the room while Rowan whirled on her friend.

“What the *fuck*, Thomas?” she snarled.

“What do you mean, ‘what the fuck?’” Thomas said. “Shouldn’t I be the one asking you that? Why the hell did you invite *him*, of all people, to our yearly celebration? Fucking House Cerullis with their fucking experiments! Nothing good comes from them, Rowan. Nothing!”

Seizing her brother’s elbow, Mia hissed, “*Thomas*. Watch yourself. Don’t let your temper control you.”

When Thomas still let his mouth fly open, Mia clenched her hold on him, making him wince, and after taking a few deep breaths, he nodded, getting her to release him.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have yelled,” he said, “but I still want to know what you were thinking.”

Oo, Rowan wanted to punch his face in, but if Thomas—the biggest hothead she’d ever met—could control his temper, so could she.

“Just so you know, the experiment that Asher mentioned was mine,” she said. “As I’ve said before, I like him. He’s thoughtful and kind, and I *enjoy being around him*, which you know is rare. I think...

I think he might be my friend, and I wanted to see if he could mesh with what we have, but now, I don't know if he'll speak to me again, not after *this*.

"I know he's part of the Cerullis family, and I get why you hate his father but really, Thomas. Considering how much you harp on not being judged for who *your* father is, I thought you could see past Asher's lineage. So, there. That's what I'm thinking. Are you happy?"

Thomas looked like Rowan had slapped him silly with his mouth gaping like that, and crossing one arm under her breasts, Mia hid her eyes with the other.

"Thomas, you *ass*," she sighed.

Gulping, Thomas said, "I'm... so sorry, Rowan. I didn't know... I'll fix it. I promise."

"You'd better," Rowan said. "Because I..."

She needed the empty ache in her to be filled, and the only thing that did that was the company of the people she loved. With how her family was... with how busy they were...

Rubbing her face, Rowan circled the snack table to her chair.

"I love you, Thomas, but I won't lie. I don't want to be around you right now."

"And that's saying something," Mia said under her breath.

Rowan pretended that she hadn't heard her, diving back into Nedrya. When Asher eventually returned, she watched Thomas approach him with half an eye. She couldn't hear what they said to one another, but soon enough, Thomas offered his hand, and after a pause, Asher took it, which made her release a held breath.

As Asher sank into his chair, Rowan met his eyes before he disappeared behind his screen.

"You ok?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Everything's all right."

"Then, let's play."

Even still, tension bled into the air around their desks, although it wasn't a terrible weight. Gradually, it eased until they were laughing and ribbing one another again.

Rowan considered all of this, listening to three voices twining around one another, and wondered whether her experiment had been a failure or a success.