

Chapter 9: A Gouged-Out Piece of Me

In the morning, Rowan dragged herself to the washroom, leaving the other three sleeping in a heap of pillows. Her mom might have had rooms prepared for her guests last night, but she knew they'd eventually end up in a pile of limbs on the floor, no matter what enmity might exist between them. That was what *Nedrya's Breaking* did to its players, when it didn't rip them apart.

When she could, Rowan trudged to her room so she could get ready for the day. She'd always been an earlier riser than most, even after nights where she'd stayed up into the small hours of the morning, so she knew the other three wouldn't be up for a while yet.

Showered and dressed, she headed outside, quickly finding a bench along the walking trail that circled the house. Her typical routine in the morning was to go through training exercises here, a leftover habit from lessons with her combat instructors. Outside, she could enjoy the early morning freeze, but today, she felt... off, which made her reluctant to workout.

All she wanted was to lean back on her hands, tilt her head toward the sky, and close her eyes, soaking up what small amount of warmth the sun might spread on her skin. In a little while, she'd head inside to wait for the house to wake up, but for now, she'd just be.

The sound of crunching gravel ruined that plan. Lazily rolling her head toward it, Rowan cracked one eye open and grinned, straightening herself. Aunt Hailey gestured to the empty seat on the bench beside her.

"May I?" she asked.

"Please."

Hailey got settled with a sigh, turning a soft smile on Rowan.

"I see you've taken on the Chinook habit of waking up long before you should," she said.

"Oh, is that were I got it from?" Rowan said in monotone. "Thanks for that, then."

Chuckling, Hailey patted her hand.

"Always eager to please, aren't you?" she said. "When's the last time I saw you, bean? The family reunion thirteen years ago?"

For some reason, having Aunt Hailey use her pet name has never bothered Rowan like it did with the rest of her family, but she'd never been sure why that was.

“*Avan*, you were such a small thing then. Eleven-years-old with your red hair cut so short that people mistook you for a boy,” she said, sucking on a lip. “You found that hilarious, if I recall correctly.”

“Even that young, I didn’t much care for gender norms, even if I didn’t truly understand what they were,” Rowan said with a laugh.

“Nor should you have, then or now,” Hailey said. “They’ve always been a loose set of rules anyway. Well, in most parts of the world at least.”

Rowan made a face, although she didn’t comment. Unless it was needed, it was best not to bring Sasmor into any conversation.

“What were you doing out here so early?” she asked instead.

“I needed some fresh air. Your family’s house can be stifling,” Hailey said. “No offense, bean. It’s just nothing like my home in Shoya Dren.”

The home Rowan had never been to and the nation she’d never visited. She wished she’d done so before now.

“Why did you come to visit us alone this time, Aunt Hailey?” she asked. “The few other visits I can remember, the whole Chinook side of the family swarmed the house: aunts, uncles, cousins, and all.”

“Oh, honey. Let’s not talk about that,” Hailey said. “I don’t want to worry you about the trouble back home.”

Problems in Shoya Dren? Could they expect another internal war there? If so, Rowan wondered if her family would be asked to field troops in that nation’s dark jungles.

Lost in her contemplation as she was, Aunt Hailey’s slip off of the bench made her jump. Leaning her head on its seat, Hailey smiled at the expression on Rowan’s face.

“Sorry. It gets so cold this far north. I thought the ground might be marginally warmer than a stone bench,” she said. “What about you, Rowan Kolb? Why were you out here as the sun began its rise?”

Rowan couldn’t tell her about her exercises. Not many people outside of her family approved of nobles getting a trooper’s training, but that was their House’s specialty, damnit! Should they not suffer the same as the people who served them, at least in part?

So, she spoke of other things.

“I don’t know. I woke up feeling strange, I guess,” she said. “I thought a walk might help.”

Clasping her hands in her lap, Hailey said, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Not really, but as Rowan opened her mouth to say that, other words fell from it instead.

“My whole life, I’ve had this... hunger, I suppose, inside of me, something that’s been gouged out of me that needs to be filled, and I get used to it, you know? Forget it’s there,” she said. “But then, I’ll have a night like last night, one where that hunger is satisfied, and I’ll wake up the next morning, only to have it roar back into place. Such potent reminders of its existence make me...”

Rowan chewed on her lip, hoping Hailey wouldn’t make her continue, because she didn’t have words for what it did to her. Without

speaking, Hailey spun to kneel in front of Rowan, covering the hand on her knee.

“Bean. You’re lonely,” she said, “but of course you are. You’re the youngest of six children. I doubt your family pays much attention to you.”

“It’s not their fault-!” Rowan started.

Hailey placed another hand over hers.

“I know. Trust me, I know,” she said, “but listen to someone who’s been where you are, as the youngest of four. You need to make yourself a family *outside* of your family. From what I saw last night, you’re well on your way to doing that, but you need to solidify it and think of it as family. They’ll never replace the one you were born into, but they can satisfy that hunger in you, and it needs to be satisfied, girl, otherwise you’ll go crazy.”

Rowan’s eyes were burning, and she needed it to stop. Pulling her hands free, she rubbed her face.

“That’s excellent advice,” she said. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

Patting her knee, Hailey said, “Don’t want me to see you cry, do you?”

When Rowan shook her head, her aunt chuckled.

“All right. I’ll leave you alone,” she said. “I’m glad I bumped into you.”

She ruffled Rowan’s hair, and Rowan tried to choke a ‘me too’ through her closed throat, but the block in it didn’t come loose before Hailey was gone. For who knew how long, she sat there, taking slow breaths in and out and forcing her heart back to where it should go.

When she felt stable again, Rowan ran to grab a scone from Eugene before heading to find her guests. She was munching on its delightful fluffiness when she ran into Thomas. Yawning, he was still in his silk nightclothes from last night with his sandy hair sticking up in spikes.

“Morning,” he mumbled. “Mm, scone. Get one before I... shower...”

Rowan still had trouble interpreting morning Thomas, even after knowing him for so many years. Rubbing a fist in one eye, he sleepily skirted around her.

“Where are Mia and Asher?” she asked before he was gone.

“Mia... still asleep,” Thomas blearily mumbled before taking on a blissful smile. “Asher... nice... suit. Said... home.”

“He’s going *home*?” Rowan shrieked.

With his eyes flying wide open, Thomas took a step back, blinking at her.

“Yes?” he said.

“Fuck!”

Rowan sped around him, grateful she was already presentable for the day. As she raced down hallways, she cursed under her breath, desperately hoping Asher hadn’t left yet, and when she sprinted into the foyer, she breathed out a sigh, slowing to a trot.

“Asher!” she called.

When she reached him, she clung to her knees, panting. She might be physically fit, but dashing at top speed from one end of the manse to the other left her out of breath nonetheless.

On straightening, Rowan swatted Asher’s chest.

“You were going to leave without saying goodbye?” she asked.

Blankly, Asher glanced between where she’d smacked him and her face.

“Whatever may have happened between us last night, Lady Kolb, I hardly think it gives you the right-”

“*Lady Kolb*?” Rowan interrupted. “Oh, no. No, no, no. We’re not doing this. You don’t get to armor yourself in formality because you feel uncomfortable. We’re friends, Asher. You might as well get used to me touching you.”

She poked him to make her point, refusing to move her finger once it was there, and he stared at it.

“You’re being unreasonable-”

“Uh-uh!”

Rowan wagged her finger in his face.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” she said. “I’m going to accompany you home in my family’s provided car. If I haven’t convinced you that we’re friends by the time we’ve arrived, then you may treat me as Lady Kolb instead of Rowan. Acceptable?”

Sighing through his nose, Asher nodded.

"I doubt I have a choice in the matter," he said.

"You don't," Rowan said.

Aunt Hailey had told her to solidify this secondary family she was forming? That was what she'd do. She could be aggressive when it was needed.

Looking Asher up and down, Rowan was amazed to see a delightfully burnt-orange jacket and trouser combination on him.

"I don't know where you got this, considering you didn't know yesterday evening would turn into an overnight affair, but Thomas was right," she said, touching a lapel to feel the quality of its fabric. "This *is* a nice suit."

While Asher flushed—Rowan's distraction complete—she left him behind her, scurrying to reach the car first so he couldn't try to escape this place alone. Asher had composed himself by the time he slid into the seat beside her, buckling his seat belt. Folding his hands on his knees, he stared at Rowan without a word, and as the car started moving, she scrambled for something to say.

She should have thought this conversation through by now.

"One more week until the Summit's over," she said, turning to the subject that had been near constantly on her mind in recent days.

"Are you excited about your father coming home?"

Something pained crossed Asher's face before he looked out the window to where the city had started sliding by outside.

"Not really," he said.

And nothing more. He *was* not helping her with this.

"Do you have any other family attending?" Rowan asked.

She honestly wasn't sure what sort of family Asher had. Everyone knew Lord Max Cerullis, his father, but the rest of them were extremely private with hardly anything personal escaping from them.

"No, it's just Ma- dad and me," Asher said. "My aunts and uncles don't talk to us, and my mom passed when I was a kid."

Oh, great... Yes, Rowan, bring up one of the worst probable traumas in his life. That was a *great* conversation topic.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said.

"Don't concern yourself with it. It happened a long time ago."

Why was it that she could be the most diplomatic and compelling of people when she least intended to be, but when she needed that charm, it abandoned her? Biting her lip, Rowan leaned against the door, peering up at the sky between the city's towers.

"I guess that's something you, Thomas, and Mia have in common then, tragic as it is," she said.

There was a bit of shuffling beside her.

"They've lost their mother?" Asher said.

Why was he asking her about that? Didn't he know-?

Smacking her face, Rowan groaned, "Right. I never told you."

She peeled herself off the seat's leather, wincing when she faced Asher.

"Mia and Thomas are Mia and Thomas Shalen," she said.

She was given the emptiest of stares for three, four, five breaths, and then, Asher blinked.

"Of Shalen Corp?" he asked in a flat voice.

When Rowan nodded, he sank into his seat.

"No wonder Thomas mentioned the fire last night," he said. "After that *travesty*, it makes sense that he'd hate me."

"I don't think he does, actually," Rowan said. "Thomas just needs time to think about things. At the very least, Mia likes you."

With a chuckle, Asher said, "That's true, and I'm grateful for it. She's a sweet girl."

"She really is," Rowan agreed, staring into nothing.

Shaking herself, she found Asher giving her an odd look.

"What?" she said.

"Nothing. I- It's nothing," Asher said. "Will you have family returning from the Summit next week?"

Avan above, he'd kept the conversation going. There was hope yet.

"Well, yeah," Rowan said. "You should already know about two of them."

“Lady Veronica and Lord Anthony, yes,” Asher said. “Kind of hard to forget a man who’s wedding I’ve attended.”

They chuckled together, although Rowan’s was mostly nervous. She wasn’t sure if she wanted him to be thinking about the events of their first meeting right now.

“Now that I think about it, Tony will be staying in Novadracht for a while yet as part of his extended vacation,” she said. “It’s what happens for every member of the Kolb family when we get married or turn thirty-five, whichever comes first. After his vacation’s over, Tony will be expected to take up a bigger role in the family business.”

“So, kind of like a last hurrah before assuming the weight of a House’s burdens,” Asher said.

“Part of them, yes. So, Tony will stay in Icrodon with Jessica, probably until the end of the year,” Rowan said, “but everyone else will be coming home, and won’t that be a mind-numbingly hectic few days?”

Despite himself, Asher actually looked interested in what she’d said.

“Why?” he asked.

“That’s just the way it is,” Rowan said with a shrug before freezing. “Wait. Do you know anything about my family besides the five of us you’ve already met?”

“From that question, I’d assume you have another sibling,” Asher said, “but besides that, no.”

Rowan tried, poorly, to contain a giggling fit, rocking back and forth with a hand raised to beg for patience.

“Sorry,” she gasped. “Sorry, it’s just... Well, here. Let me tell you about my family.”

Raising her hand, she started counting on its fingers.

“So, we have Veronica, the head of our House, and Bay. My moms. We also have Anthony, the heir; John, my brother who would quite literally do anything for the people he loves; and me. Those are the ones you know.”

At her splayed fingers waving in the air, Asher nodded, and Rowan raised her other hand.

“We’ve also got Paisley. She’s next in line after Tony and the most quietly supportive person you’ll ever find in your life. She’s saved my ass so many times during lessons by bringing me a piece of equipment I’d forgotten.

“Next comes Logan, our genius with numbers. That boy is so fucking sneaky that I’d be terrified to have him handling the family money if I didn’t know how good he is with it and if he weren’t my big brother. He’s been harassing me since I was small.

“And there’s Henry, John’s twin. He’s our negotiator and the most... active of us, sexually. *Avan*, the number of scandals we’ve had to field for him... I think he’s a teensy bit proud of how many broken-hearted boys he’s left trailing in his-”

“Wait. He’s gay?” Asher interrupted.

At the tone of his voice, Rowan snapped her eyes to slits.

“Yes,” she said in a clipped voice. “Is that a problem?”

It shouldn’t be. Most people didn’t care about something that was so instinctive to an individual, but occasionally, one ran across one of the violent few who did.

“What?”

Asher blankly stared at Rowan, obviously addled.

“No, why would it be a problem?” he said. “It’s just... your parents have to know. Don’t they care about how it might reflect on the family image?”

Implying it could reflect poorly. How?

“Well... no,” Rowan drawled. “My *moms* are gay too, after all.”

“Huh. That’s...”

Rowan wondered what was going on in that head of his. He looked like he was rearranging ideas while drumming his fingers on his leg, and when she gently nudged him, he turned a smile on her.

“That’s amazing. Your brother’s a lucky man,” he said, “but my apologies. I didn’t mean to interrupt. You were talking about your siblings, the last one being... Henry?”

Rowan looked down her nose at him.

“You don’t think I’ve listed enough family members already?”

“No, that’s plenty. I can’t believe you deal with so many,” Asher said with a laugh. “Wow. House Kolb is *much* larger than I thought.”

Shrugging, Rowan said, “My parents have always wanted a big family. It’s one of the things that first attracted them to each other.”

With a hum, she reflected on summoned family stories for a moment before shaking her head.

“Xygek’s adoption agencies know my parents intimately by now. They visit often enough, but... I think they’re done now. I’ll be the last new addition to the family.”

"I was wondering about that last night," Asher said. "You and John share *few* genetic markers, so I didn't think surrogates were a likely procreation method for your family."

Hell, he fell into science and its many dry terms at the strangest of times.

"No, my parents were happy to pull their children from the world's already enormous population," Rowan said.

"Hmm."

Relaxing in his seat, Asher rested his hand on the door's handle.

"I think I'd get along well with your parents," he said.

"Yeah, I think they'd like you too," Rowan said. "They usually agree with my opinions about people."

She gave him a pointed look, and groaning, he banged his head on his seat.

"All right, fine. You win," he said. "We're friends."

"Yay!" Rowan said, clapping. "I was starting to worry that I'd miss my deadline. We're pulling up to your house now."

Glancing out the window, Asher said, "Would you look at that?"

As they pulled to a stop, he drew his shoulders together before taking a deep breath and turning on Rowan.

"Thank you for pulling me out of my funk," he said. "I need someone like you in my life."

"You're quite welcome!" Rowan chirped, patting his hand on hers.

Licking his lips, Asher leaned toward her, but Rowan got too distracted by a commotion behind him to give him the extra space he seemed to be asking for.

"Asher..." she said. "Why is one of your attendants running at us in a panic?"

Shooting upright, Asher glanced over his shoulder, and his already tense frame tightened.

"That's not good," he said.

Rowan was already reaching for the handle to her door. Whatever was going on, she'd help her new friend with it.

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