

Chapter 57 - Crash Landing

Ethan

Jane is huddled in one corner of the basket as we plummet towards the ground, her eyes clamped tightly shut as she holds on for dear life. At a certain point I had to cut the propane off completely, the storm arrived too fast, and a gradual fall was too risky. Now we're being batted around like a ping-pong ball trapped in some macabre game played by the gods of thunder and lightning, and it's only getting worse.

When the nylon balloon tears, true fear slices through me for the first time. Up until then I was worried but optimistic: as long as the balloon was intact and we stayed in the basket, eventually we'd have to land. However one of those factors just got shredded, and the other was about to go right out the window with it. Still, I had to take the risk – for Jane's sake if not my own.

Wrapping one of the dangling ballast ropes around my wrist, I begin climbing onto the edge of the basket, edging around to the side of the balloon that tore. Just then a terrified but familiar voice reaches my ears, "Ethan, what are you doing?!"

"I have to fix the tear!" I shout back.

"It's too dangerous!" Jane screams, crawling out of her corner and trying to cross over to me, as if she wants to pull me back inside.

"I have to!" I call back, holding out a hand to stop her frantic movement, "Just stay there and let me do this. There's no other way."

To my immense relief she obeys, watching me with eyes as wide as dinner plates. Climbing up the rigging, it takes nearly all my strength to hold on as we careen through the air, but eventually I manage to reach the tear. Grasping one side of the nylon with one hand, I take a deep breath and let go of the ropes long enough to reach out and grab the other side of the ripped envelope.

Bringing the two sides together, I quickly tie the shredded ends and loop my arms and legs through the ropes crisscrossing over the balloon, stabilizing myself as I prepare to ride out the rest of this disastrous flight. The base is more secure now, but I'm going to have to hold the sides of the tear to prevent it from ripping further at the top. Luckily these mountains are high enough that we aren't far from the ground now, but we still have a crash landing to survive.

Regret and fear for Jane pulses through me as I watch the mountains draw nearer, occasionally illuminated by blinding flashes of lightning. The last thing I wanted was

for her to be harmed. She has to survive this – and not only because she means the world to me, but because if it comes down to one of us, the pups need her far more than they need me – assuming they're mine at all.

Those minutes hanging on the side of an out of control hot air balloon were among the longest of my life, but eventually we hit the ground like a ton of bricks, and I throw myself free of the balloon a second before the envelope hits the rocks. The basket is on it's side, but I can see Jane still huddled inside.

Rushing to Jane, I pull her out of the basket and onto her feet, "Come here, let me look at you." I murmur, checking over her small body, "Are you all right? Are you hurt?" But Jane isn't responding, the moment I touched her she latched onto me like a little blonde strip of velcro, throwing her arms around my middle and sobbing into my chest.

Sighing with relief and just a little bit of pride that she's seeking me for comfort, I return her hug and bury my head in her sweet-smelling hair. "Open your eyes, Janey." I encourage her gently. "It's over, we made it."

She shakes her head against my rain-drenched shirt, and I cuddle her closer. "It's over little wolf, you're safe."

Her lashes gradually part, revealing tear-stained, red-rimmed eyes as green as the forest around us. Looking

hesitantly around, she slowly turns her attention back to me. Pushing away from my embrace, she slashes her hand towards my bicep and I catch it reflexively, not allowing her swat to land. "What is wrong with you? How could you take me up in that thing!" She shouts furiously, "Are you crazy! We have kids!"

"I'm sorry." I profess sincerely, pulling her back into my arms, "I'm so sorry, I never would have done it if I thought there was a chance of a storm."

Jane's face is buried in my chest, and she grumbles something indecipherable. I'm sure it was an accusation of insult of some sort, but as long as she's hugging me, I don't care what names she wants to call me. I could gladly do this all day. However when I finally push her away, deciding we'd better try to find some shelter, she's not insulting me at all.

"A-and y-you climbed o-out of the b-basket and I thought... I thought you were g-going to die and-" She sobs, staring at me with a look of abject betrayal, "what?"

"Nothing." I cover the sudden pang in my heart quickly, "I'm sorry I scared you, baby."

"You should be." She sniffled, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. A red smear appears on her cheek then, and I catch her hand as carefully as I can. Angry red gashes dot her palms, and I spy a few shards of glass

imbedded in her skin. The champagne glasses must have broken. Tsking softly, I look around us for a suitable spot to wait out the storm and treat her wounds. To my surprise, I recognize the spot where we stand.

"We're not far from the temple." I announce, glancing back at Jane. "Are you up for a little walk – I don't think we're going to find better shelter."

"Fine." She informs me grumpily. "But I'm not doing any reminiscing, mister."

"Agreed." I chuckle softly, leading her away into the trees.

"Ow!" Jane yelps, trying and failing to jerk her hand away from me. "Ow, ow, ow."

"Hush now," I croon, using my extended claws like a pair of pincers to pull the glass from her ravaged palms. "I'm almost done."

We're seated in an abandoned cave near the stone circle, shivering as rain continues to pour outside, but slowly drying out beside the fire I built. The temple's priestesses live in the wilds around the altar, and I suspect the cave we currently inhabit might have housed one of the Goddess's mysterious servants once. It's far too clean to be home to bears or other wildlife.

Jane continues to fuss as I tend her wounds, I suspect more out of feeling sullen than actual pain. "Didn't you

birth quadruplets?" I tease after a moment, "this can't be that bad."

"Actually this is worse." Jane sniffs with a pout, "I had drugs for that."

"Oh I see." I murmur sympathetically, wrapping her hand in a strip of damp fabric I tore from my shirt and kissing her palm before moving on to the other. I let my lips linger on her second hand a few moments too long, testing just how vulnerable she's feeling. Jane lets me press a few lingering kisses to her wrist, then more as I make my way up her arm. Realizing she must have been very shaken if she was letting me take advantage this way, I pull back, feeling a sliver of guilt settle in my chest. I wouldn't mind taking advantage further, but I feel badly for scaring her so much. "Okay sweetheart, I think we should shift and try to get some sleep."

Is it my imagination, or does she look disappointed?

"It's awfully cold." She observes with a shiver. "Even with a fur coat."

I have to smother my smile, suddenly remembering how sneaky Jane used to be when we were dating. The pups definitely got their alpha personalities from their father – whether it's me or Eric remains to be seen – but all their deviousness came directly from the little she-wolf in front of me. When Jane wants something she almost

never comes out and asks for it, instead she schemes her way into making others offer it. I'd be willing to bet that my chosen mate wants a cuddle right now, but feels too proud or shy to ask for it.

"Then I suppose we'll have to snuggle for warmth." I suggest with a sigh.

I know my suspicions were correct when I see a spark of triumph in her beautiful eyes. "Fine." Jane mutters sulkily, "but don't even think about trying anything."

"You have my word." I vow, stripping off my clothes and shifting into my wolf. Curling up by the fire, I watch as Jane removes her soaked clothing one piece at a time, making absolutely no attempt to hide herself from my view. With the near-death experience we just survived, I'm not surprised she's feeling the need to reaffirm her vitality with physical affection, but I know from experience that giving in now would be a mistake.

I'm sure Jane would gladly let me make love to her in this moment, but in the morning she would call it a mistake. Much better to keep her wanting, to leave her hot and bothered and hungry for more. So when she finally shifts and the sweet little blonde wolf curls up against me, I simply wrap my big body around her, and purr until she's fast asleep. As disastrous as this date turned out to be – this round undoubtedly goes to me.