

Second Chances

A close-up photograph of a white ceramic coffee cup filled with dark coffee. Steam is rising from the cup, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. The cup sits on a matching white saucer, which is surrounded by a pile of dark brown coffee beans. The background is a warm, blurred brown, suggesting a rustic or cozy setting.

Elli Eberle

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Impressum

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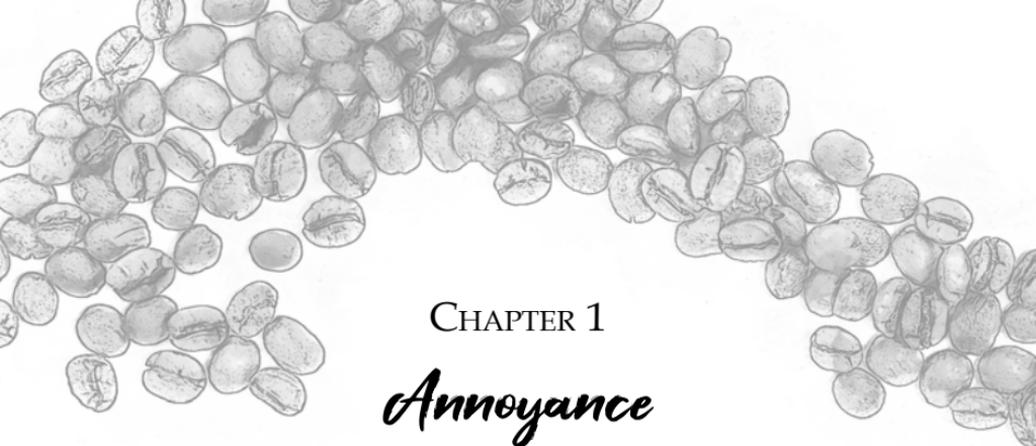
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For my two friends, an ocean away



CHAPTER 1

Annoyance

“Don’t call me Fifi!”

Josephine mumbled it through grit teeth so the nyvi on the cart next to her wouldn’t hear her. It didn’t seem like Anka was listening; they had their nose stuck in a book, their big, pointy ears twitching while the tip of their tail traced their progress on the page. Still, Josephine didn’t want to take any risks. The quarrel between Valadan and her was childish and shouldn’t affect the other members of the group.

She kept her gaze straight ahead, not giving this insufferable asshole the satisfaction of seeing the annoyance in her eyes. She had heard many variations of her name in her life, but this was by far the worst. Every time Valadan called her by that silly nickname, she wanted to strangle him.

“Sure thing, Fifi.”

Strangle him and then dump him in one of the many small canyons they passed on their way through the lower mountains. She hated that he and his mercenaries had been assigned to her little group of researchers. Why did they even need an escort in the first place? It wasn’t like they were going anywhere dangerous. In fact, Valadan’s behavior had been the only trouble on the journey so far.

A portal to the other side of the world, then a five day trip from the city to their destination. The weather was nice, beautiful even. A clear, blue sky, the temperature not too hot and not too cold. It was late summer, the meadows and forests a deep green, overshadowed by the distant mountain tops powdered with white. What a stark contrast to the remnants of a murky winter they had left behind.

Any other time, Josephine would have enjoyed the view. As it was, it only served to anchor her gaze while she pointedly ignored Valadan until he grew bored, wandering away to bother someone else. She didn't know what his problem was. Authority figures, perhaps, or women, or women in authoritative positions. Maybe all of it.

Her problem was *him*. She cast a glance in his direction, watching him talk and laugh with his mercenary buddies two dozen steps behind the rest of the group. All three of them were clad in light leather armor, though he was the only one who had dyed it dark, almost black. It was a nice contrast to his slightly tanned skin and his copper hair, shimmering in the sun. Josephine assumed he was very aware of that.

Unlike Valadan, the other two carried weapons—one a short sword, one two axes. When she had asked him about it, he had told her that she'd have to get to know him better if she wanted to see his sword.

It was a shame that such a nice ass was attached to such an asshole.

Determined not to let him ruin her day fully, Josephine left her spot next to the covered cart and jogged to the front of the group. Two of the others were walking there, engrossed in conversation. The lead researcher, a human called Marian, and one of the two human brothers—Tassilo, probably. Seeing him only from behind, Josephine had trouble telling them apart. They were both copper skinned with dark brown hair, and while one was half a head taller, that didn't help

her much when the other wasn't around. Pascal was more likely to wander off, though, only to come running half an hour later, hopping on the cart to sort through a bag full of specimens.

As Josephine came closer, Marian turned around, raising her hand in greeting, a broad smile on her face. In the light of the midday sun, her red dress seemed to glow in contrast to her dark brown skin. Somehow, she had managed to keep the skirts in pristine condition, despite the five day travel through uneven terrain. Even though Josephine had the official lead, it was Marian who would oversee the excavation. She had never worked with her before, but so far, Marian had proven to be pleasant company.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," Josephine said. "What were you talking about?"

"Oh, you know." As the man turned around to nod at her, she could see that it was indeed Tassilo. "Earth mage stuff." Amusement glimmered in his brown eyes. No wonder; the previous night, Josephine had fallen asleep while listening to the two of them comparing the properties of two completely identical-looking stones.

"Think we'll make it before nightfall?" Josephine asked.

"Oh, for sure," Marian said. "I'd say two, three hours at most. We'll have plenty of time to set up camp, perhaps even get acquainted with the whole area." Her golden eyes shone with excitement at those words. "Do you think the stones really do move?"

Josephine shrugged. "That's what they said. And that's what we'll find out."

In this area, the stones were moving. The few scared wanderers hadn't given the Order much more than that to go on. It could mean anything; magnetism, earthquakes, magic, or more sinister things. Okay, *perhaps* there was a valid reason to have some mercenaries with them.

As Marian had predicted, they arrived at their destination about two and a half hours later. Following a barely visible path upwards towards a clearing nestled against the mountainside required multiple people to push the cart and keep it steady.

Not only the humans were relieved when they finally came to a halt. Anka said something about stretching their legs and grabbed their belongings as if fearing that someone else could mess with them. Even the horses looked visibly happy as Pascal led them to the side, out of the way of the bustling activity that was about to start.

Josephine looked around. The clearing was surrounded by forest on all but one side and cut in half by a clear mountain stream barely one step wide. It was a perfect place to set up camp, and they had a few hours of daylight left.

“Okay. I think we should put up the sleeping tents over there, and the storage and research tents closer to this side,” Josephine said, standing in the middle of the clearing.

“Actually, I think the opposite would be better.”

Of course, it was Valadan. Josephine took a deep breath before turning around, facing him just as he said, “That way the research tents are closer to where we’ll actually do our research.”

Yes, but the sleeping tents less protected from wind and weather, she wanted to say. Instead, she asked, “Any other opinions?”

There was pointed silence.

“Whatever,” she mumbled under her breath, so quietly she was sure none of the others had heard her. The clearing was pretty protected as it was. “If you think so.” She tried really hard to keep most of the sarcasm out of her tone. “Let’s do it your way then. Pascal, would you please start gathering firewood?”

“I already told Trevor to gather wood,” Valadan said.

Josephine cast a quick glance at Pascal, who shrugged with

a barely visible motion. Fine. If he didn't care.

"All right. Enjoy. Let's get to work. Anka," she called, waiting for the nyvi to turn their attention to her. "Please get someone to help you with the research tent and make sure everything is at the right spot."

This was more a favor for Anka, who would have to double check and correct everything anyway, so she might as well save them some time and let them do it right the first time. Josephine paused for a moment, half expecting Valadan to disagree with this decision as well, but he stayed silent. Thank the Seven.

Anka pointed at Pascal, who followed them to take care of the research tent.

"Let's split up. The sleeping tents are smaller, so you two should be enough," Josephine said, nodding in the direction of the mercenaries, "and the three of us take care of the storage tent."

"The storage tent is much taller than the sleeping tents, so Lee should help with that," Valadan said.

He had a point. The kalani was indeed taller than the others, though Tassilo wasn't far behind. Marian was about as tall as Valadan, and Josephine really didn't like where those thoughts were leading.

"So why don't you come help me with the sleeping tents instead, Fifi?"

Josephine barely managed not to snap at him. So this was his idea of entertainment. Ignoring her every order, waiting for her to lose her cool. For a moment, Josephine considered it. Not merely suggesting it, *commanding* it. Her people would surely follow her orders. They didn't have as much of a problem with the mercenaries as she had, but they didn't care for them, either.

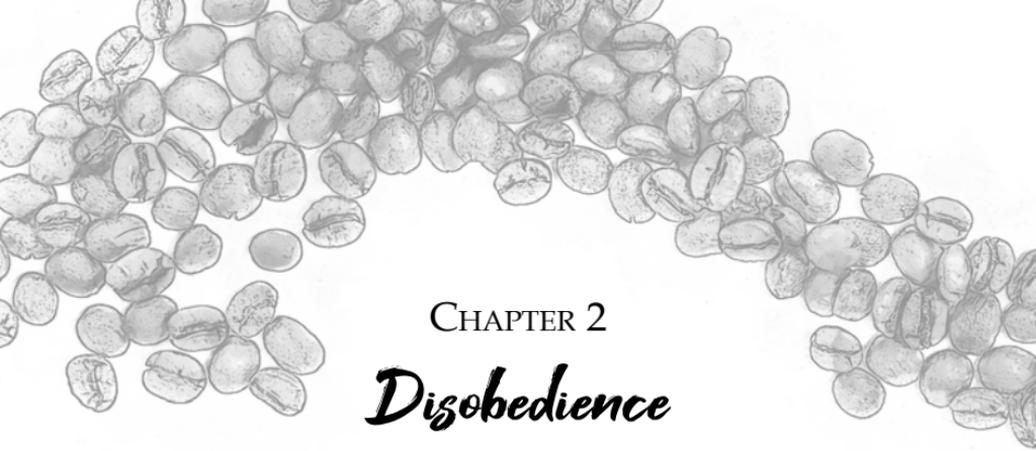
Whether his two men would follow her orders was the question. On the one hand, she had the highest rank of the

whole group, and as long as they were on a mission, every mercenary was under the command of the Order of Fire.

On the other hand, the two of them already looked visibly uncomfortable. Well, at least one did; the human, pointedly facing neither her nor Valadan. He was redoing the braid of his ash-blonde hair, the tips of his pale ears tinting slightly red as soon as he noticed she was looking at him. The other one was a kalani, all bark and leaves in warm orange and red hues. She couldn't quite make out his facial expression, but the way he very much didn't look at her either told her enough.

They'd have to work together for ten more days. This was a battle she didn't want to fight, least of all on the first evening.

"Whatever," she said, this time audibly.



CHAPTER 2

Disobedience

Nine. Nine fucking days in the company of this asshole. Considering the added time of traveling, fourteen in total. Two weeks in which Valadan had taken every possible and impossible opportunity to undermine her authority, question her decisions, and pester her with pointless comments and those silly nicknames.

Josephine was so ready to be done with it. In the oppressive heat and humid air of an approaching thunderstorm, they were packing up their camp to return to the citadel. Without having achieved much to boot, as despite their best attempts at finding anything, the rocks had stubbornly refused to move. Neither Tassilo's and Marian's magic nor Anka's science had discovered anything out of the ordinary. As it looked, the mountain was littered with completely regular caves filled with completely regular rocks.

Movement in the corner of her eye caught Josephine's attention. She looked up from the bundle she was wrapping to see Marian throw something onto the cart before walking over to her.

"Josephine? I'd like to go to the caves one more time," she said. "Bring some stones for my personal collection. Perhaps

they only move on the day of the summer solstice, and they'll scare me in ten months." There was an amused glimmer in her eyes. "It shouldn't take long."

Josephine nodded. "All right. I think we're almost done here anyway."

While Marian hurried in the direction of the cave, Josephine looked around. Anka was messing with some boxes, Pascal was busy with the horses, Lee and Trevor were wrapping up the large tent, and Tassilo was helping her. Which left...

"Valadan, please go with her."

For one glorious moment, it seemed like he might just do what she had asked him to. He left the spot where he had been coiling some rope to avoid doing any real work. But instead of following Marian, he stopped in front of Josephine. Of course, that would have been too easy.

"What for?" he asked. "We've been here for ten days. The most dangerous thing I've seen was a scared rat."

"I don't care. We decided that no one is going anywhere too far from camp on their own. It has worked well so far, so go with her, *please*." The last word she hissed, trying not to scream at him.

"No."

Despite everything, his plain refusal startled her. He had teased her and challenged her but never refused to follow a direct order. Perhaps because she had given few, worried about what would happen if it came to that. As long as they were all stuck together here, she had wanted to keep the peace.

But in a few hours, they wouldn't have to work together anymore. They'd go separate ways, she'd make sure he'd never again be assigned to her groups, and she was so fucking *done* with it.

"You will go with her, because *I* tell you so," she said, not quite shouting, but louder than usual. "I've ignored your insolent behavior so far because it was harming no one." Other

than her pride, that was. "But you will not put Marian in danger because you want to behave like a toddler who always has to get his will. This is an order. You *will* go with her, *now!*"

Out of breath, with her own voice ringing in her ears, Josephine stared at Valadan. He stood still for a moment, just long enough to make her wonder if he would still refuse to follow her orders. Then he raised his hands, palms outward, and turned away, a condescending smile on his face.

Josephine pinched her nose, feeling Tassilo's gaze on her. Anka was staring, too. Great. Turning back towards the bundle in front of her to tug at the edges more forcefully than it would have been necessary, she instinctively wondered if she had done the right thing. She could have gone with Marian herself, avoiding this last confrontation.

No. In fact, she should have told him off sooner. Perhaps it would have preserved some of her nerves. Casting a quick glance in the direction where Marian and Valadan had vanished, she sighed. Tassilo stepped next to her, following her gaze.

"What? He had it coming." Josephine's irritated frown faded as she looked at Tassilo and saw the amused look on his face.

"You should have done that on day one," he said, not quite a whisper, but quietly enough none of the others would hear him. "We all would have had your back."

* * *

By Duriath, this woman was annoying. Do this, do that; do it my way. As if he had never before set up camp, fetched firewood, or laid traps. More often than her, that much was certain. With her perfectly styled hair, each black strand where it belonged, and her pale skin that looked like she never saw the sun, much less the wilderness.

Josephine Lightwood. Some rich noble's daughter, born with a silver spoon in her mouth. Valadan was sure her family name was enough to open any door for her. What other reason might there be for someone like her—neither an earth mage nor a scientist—to lead an expedition like this? Let the spoiled little princess gather some real-world experience.

He stomped through the forest in the direction of the cave until he was sure he could no longer be seen from the camp. With a disgruntled sigh, he leaned against a tree. What was it with these people and stones? He couldn't understand how it would take longer than a moment to figure out that the stones here didn't move. An hour perhaps, or a few, if one was thorough. But nine whole days?

And she still wasn't done with them! Duriath knew what was left for Marian to find there, but he didn't care one bit for finding out. Stubbing his toes in the darkness, or his head, if he was unlucky.

After what seemed to be a reasonable length of time for Marian to go to the cave, pick up a stone, get distracted by lichen or some shit, pick up another stone, and return, Valadan started to walk back. He hadn't noticed her pass by, but the forest was dense this time of year, barely allowing him to see more than a few steps ahead.

Back at the camp, everything looked as before, except that the amount of stuff scattered around had decreased, and the amount of stuff piled on the cart had increased. Valadan tried to stay out of sight, picking up bits here and there, pretending to be busy until they'd finally be able to leave this place.

"I think that's most of it," he heard Josephine's voice across the clearing.

"I think that's most of it," Valadan mouthed soundlessly, rolling his eyes. Of course it was; everyone could see that.

"Pascal, you can bring the horses. All we need— Oh, you're back. Great." Josephine eyed him and the stuff in his hands

before looking around. "Where's Marian?" she asked.

Well, shit. If the woman wasn't back yet, he hadn't waited long enough. Frantically, Valadan tried to think of an excuse. Saying she'd be right behind him? Saying he hadn't found her?

Whatever he might have picked, he didn't get the chance. Josephine looked from the edge of the clearing back to him. For once, the expression on her face wasn't barely contained anger and disgust. It was disappointment.

"Anka, I need a torch."

Valadan watched her walk over to the cart to take the torch the nyvi offered her. He couldn't help but notice the little changes in Josephine's posture: how the hand she hadn't extended was clenched into a fist, how her gaze kept darting back in the direction of the cave, and the thin line her lips formed as she pressed them together. She wasn't only angry and disappointed, she was *worried*.

"I'll go get her," she said. "Valadan comes with me, the rest of you continue loading up. Don't activate the portal yet, you know it won't last long."

Then she started to walk, almost run, and this once, Valadan said nothing. He followed her, having no trouble keeping up with her.

I'm sorry, was on the tip of his tongue, but he bit it back. It was fine. This silly earth mage had probably gotten lost in her research, as so often before. They'd find her cooing over some rocks, drag her back to camp, and return to the citadel.

Never before had the path through the forest seemed this long. Over the days, the group of researchers had cleared it a bit, but not enough to run carelessly. Valadan cursed as a stray branch scratched his cheek, then ducked under another.

Only when they reached the mountainside and the dark cave entrance lying in front of them did Josephine slow down. She scanned the area, holding the torch more like a

sword. It made Valadan nervous, and it itched in his fingers to summon his own weapons.

“Marian?” she called, pausing and listening every few steps. “Marian?”

A scream, coming from inside the mountain. Josephine started to run, holding the fingers of her left hand above the torch until fire flickered.

Fuck.

Valadan cursed under his breath as he followed her. He cursed the darkness and the dancing shadows cast by the flickering torchlight ahead. He cursed every ledge and crevice that made him stumble. He cursed the whole damn mountain, and those way-too-normal rocks, and this godforsaken expedition.

He cursed himself, because he should have been with Marian.

“Marian! Where are you?”

Every time Josephine paused, waiting for a reply, he held his breath. There had been no second scream, but a voice echoed from deeper inside the mountain. Following it was difficult. The curving, rocky walls distorted the noise, turning each time the path split into a game of guessing and listening.

What if they didn’t find Marian? What if their meager torch ran out, and they got lost in the mountains and starved to death? He already had trouble remembering the path they had taken, and that was assuming he hadn’t missed and therefore failed to memorize any junction.

At least there was a chance of Tassilo coming to look for them if they took too long. Well, for Josephine and Marian; Valadan doubted the mage would ever come look for *him*.

“Marian!”

Josephine ran faster, and Valadan cursed again. He almost stumbled over her when he turned a corner and found her

kneeling on the floor, a heap of red fabric in front of her. Valadan swallowed, then breathed a sigh of relief when the red moved.

“Are you hurt?” Josephine asked. “What happened?”

While she was busy with Marian, Valadan looked around. In front of them, the cave was blocked. It didn’t seem to be a normal wall, nor a cave-in. Squinting in the flickering light of the torch, he tried to make out the details. It was almost as if a wave had arisen from the ground, the rock freezing mid-motion. It reached from one side of the tunnel to the other, looming over Marian and Josephine.

He didn’t know anything about caves, but this didn’t look normal. He didn’t like it when things that could bury him under tons and tons of stone didn’t look normal.

“Can you get up?”

Valadan turned his attention back to the two women. Watching them, he didn’t need to hear Marian’s answer to know that no, she couldn’t.

“Be useful for once,” Josephine snapped. “Help me.”

There wasn’t even the idea of a snippy reply on his lips as Valadan bent down to reach for Marian’s arm. Together with Josephine, he pulled her up, holding her steady while she tried to find her balance standing on one leg. Sweat glistened on her forehead, and her lips were a pale, thin line. Valadan made the mistake of looking at the leg she didn’t put any weight on. It didn’t look good.

“You’re on her left since I have the torch,” Josephine said.

Valadan nodded. Following her orders – as he should have fucking done it before – he put Marian’s left arm around his shoulders and his own arm around Marian’s back.

“We should... get out of here,” Marian said through clenched teeth.

His mental reply of *no shit* was more of a reflex than anything else. He still didn’t know what had happened, but fuck,

if he had been with her, she might not have been injured. Just because he didn't like those scholars too much didn't mean he wanted them to get hurt.

The way back through the tunnels was painfully slow. The distant fear of what would happen should they get lost returned, but Valadan told himself that it wouldn't be a problem now that Marian was with them. She'd surely be able to find the way back outside – wouldn't she?

She hobbled between them on one leg, eyes half closed and wincing with every step. Valadan started to wonder if he'd be able to carry her. This took forever, and she was obviously in pain, and –

His thoughts were interrupted by a noise that could have been harmless; a distant rumbling, like a small boulder falling down. Marian froze, turning around as best as she could, staring into the darkness with a haunted look.

"We have to run. They're back."

Valadan looked from her back to where they had come from, then to her again. "They're?"

"The rocks, they're... they're alive. They tried to kill me."

Valadan's laugh got stuck in his throat. This had to be a joke, right? Rocks didn't try to kill people. He didn't get a chance to ask. Marian pulled against their shoulders, urging them to move, and Josephine started to walk. Valadan had no choice but to keep up with them.

The rumbling returned. Valadan could have sworn the ground was vibrating as well. The sound came closer and closer until it was right above them. A piece of the ceiling broke off, grazing his shoulder.

"Fuck. What's going on?"

No one bothered to reply to him. Not that it mattered. All that mattered was that they had to get out, quickly. Another rock crashed down behind him, then one shot past him.

That definitely wasn't normal.

More rocks fell all around them. Somehow, the three of them managed to pick up speed once more, but then they couldn't possibly run any faster. Whatever it was that was causing this, it was catching up with them quickly.

"Valadan... take her," Josephine said.

"What?" He only had a moment to wonder before the weight around his shoulders doubled. He stopped, groaning as he tried to steady Marian. "What are you doing?"

"Take her and run."

She couldn't mean that.

"Not without —"

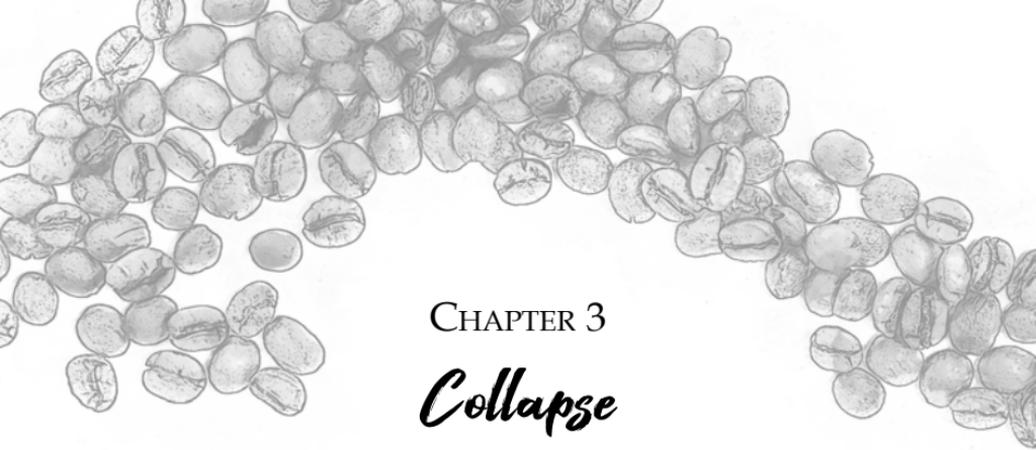
Another rock shot past them, barely missing Marian's head.

Josephine dropped the torch as she raised her hands. In the dim light of the dying flame, Valadan could see shimmering white spread out from her fingertips. A cold breeze brushed his cheek as a layer of ice encased the walls, forming a dome to protect them. Rocks crashed against it, causing cracks to spread out from their points of impact like spiderwebs.

"Run!"

The fire was gone, and Valadan's heart seemed to skip a beat. Marian's weight was heavy on his shoulders, but the panic gave him new strength. Stumbling through the darkness, chased by the thunder of falling stones and with only Marian's voice to guide him, he ran.





CHAPTER 3

Collapse

Josephine's magic was no match for the fury of the mountain. Boulders crashed against the frozen walls, chipping away at the ice until it cracked. She retreated backwards, shuffling over the uneven ground. Now that she had dropped the damn torch, it was completely dark. If her memory served her right, the rest of the way was straight ahead, no hidden junctions that could lead her astray.

If she made it that far.

Perhaps, she thought bitterly as another part of her wall shattered under the onslaught, the wanderers could have been a bit more precise about what they had meant with moving rocks.

Forming layer after layer of ice, she kept falling debris and hurled boulders at bay. There was a hint of light in the air; the faint outline of the tunnel, suddenly visible where before only impenetrable darkness had been. It gave her new hope. If she had made it this far, slow as she was, that meant Valadan and Marian must have made it out. At least this once this stubborn son of a—

Something hit her between her shoulder blades, so hard it drove the air out of her lungs and made her stumble against

the wall. Without thinking about it, she conjured ice all around her, shielding herself from every direction. It would keep her safe for a moment, but she couldn't move like this.

Sending out the ice to encase the tunnel walls and keeping a barrier in front of her and behind was exhausting. It wasn't only the quickly fading adrenaline that made her legs shake. She had to cling to the wall, both for guidance and to keep herself from falling over, her eyes squeezed shut against the pressure building behind them. Every time she dared to blink, it seemed to have become brighter again. Perhaps she'd make it. It couldn't be that far anymore.

The earth shook, and the air was full of dust that stole her breath. Something broke through the barrier and crashed hard against her shoulder. Josephine slammed into the wall, then dove out of the way as she heard a crunch above her. She wasn't fast enough. The falling rubble caught her arm and dragged her down.

Buried beneath the debris, her right arm was pinned to the ground. In the desperate attempt to free herself, Josephine ignored the pain of broken bones shifting under torn flesh and pulled. She screamed, then coughed, then sobbed, pounding her free hand against the rocks.

Something crashed to the ground next to her head, little stone splinters breaking off and leaving bleeding scratches on her cheek. She formed a layer of ice around her, a cocoon as thick as her fading magic would allow her. Pressing herself against the pile of fallen stones, she tried to make herself as small as possible.

Another piece of the ceiling broke off, shattering what was left of the cocoon and burying her under a mountain of ice shards and broken stones.

She couldn't have been unconscious for long, too fresh the echo of the noise in her ears. It was deafening, her head still

pounding with a sharp, stabbing pain behind her eyes. Too much magic used. The faint, distant thought quickly lost relevance as the pain increased. It was everywhere; hammering in her head, crushing her legs, jabbing her chest. A pained moan left her lips, vibrating in her throat.

Josephine wasn't sure if she could move – if she should try. The mountain was still shaking, small stones and dust trickling down in the cracks between larger boulders. The noise they caused seemed overly loud in the suffocating darkness.

When the tremors finally faded, her body didn't react to her attempt to move. Weight pressed down on her from every angle, digging into her back and sides and hips and shoulders. It hurt too much, so she stopped trying to move. The pain stayed.

Help me.

As the shattered ice started to melt, freezing rivulets ran down her body. It told her where up was and where down. She was lying on her back, her right arm trapped beneath the rocks, her left one under her. Her legs were buried as well, the same weight pinning them down that was pressing on her chest and forehead.

She couldn't tell if her eyes were open or closed. Her eyelids were sticky and heavy, dust and sand painful under them. The weight on top of her kept her chest from expanding, every attempt a stabbing pain between her ribs that got worse and worse and worse as her panic increased.

Help.

Something bubbled inside her lungs, a deeply unsettling feeling. She didn't have the breath to cry or even cough. The involuntary movement as her body convulsed in its struggle for air made the broken bones in her limbs shift and grind. Something ran down her face, slick and cool; blood or tears or melted ice. She didn't know if she was crying, but she wanted to. Crushed to death by the weight of the mountain,

slowly drowning in her own blood. She wished the rocks had knocked her out so she wouldn't have to spend her last moments aware of the pain.

There was no way anyone would find her, would get to her in time. If Valadan even came back for her. She didn't know why he hated her that much, but perhaps there was enough compassion behind those piercing purple eyes and that condescending smirk of his to make sure her parents would get her body back.

* * *

Running back to camp was one of the hardest decisions Valadan had ever had to make. But there was no point in waiting at the cave to see if Josephine would make it out. If she did, she wouldn't need him to get back to the others. And if she didn't, he couldn't help her as long as he had Marian with him.

He needed help.

Before he had even left the forest, he started to shout. It was no surprise that Lee and Trevor were the only ones following his call at first; at least until he came into view, with Marian leaning heavily on him. Then the scholars started to run towards him as well, talking over each other. It was fucking irritating.

"Trevor!" He shouted it louder than necessary, seeing as the man was standing right in front of him. It had the desired effect, though. The voices died down. "Take her. Whoever knows first aid, help him. The rest of you make sure the portal's ready, but don't activate it yet. Tassilo, Lee, come with me."

He didn't wait, he turned around and started to run. Someone followed. A single person. It had to be Lee.

For a short, horrifying moment, Valadan wondered if the

others would even listen to him. After his behavior of the last weeks, it would be no surprise if they ignored his orders as well. Luckily, Tassilo was less of an asshole than him. Without asking a single question, he fell into a run next to Valadan and Lee.

Minutes later, they were back at the cave. The dark hole in front of him seemed even more threatening than before. Fuck, he hadn't brought a torch with him.

"Josephine?" Tassilo shouted.

There was no reply.

When the earth mage cast him a questioning glance, pointing into the cave, Valadan nodded. Tassilo didn't hesitate. He ran inside. Valadan and Lee followed.

As soon as they left the daylight behind, the kalani started to glow. The faint orange shimmer matched the autumn colors of his leaves. It wasn't much, but it was enough to see the outlines of the walls around them. And, a moment later, the destruction in front of them. The tunnel was caved in, large pieces of rock and rubble blocking the path.

Valadan stared at it, at the spot he had passed what felt like minutes ago. It had *been* minutes ago. Now, there was no path, no way to go further into the mountain. He turned around, staring at where the entrance of the cave was hidden behind two turns. Perhaps it was the wrong tunnel. Perhaps they had missed a junction.

"What *happened*?"

It was Tassilo asking. Valadan couldn't reply. When he swayed, someone grabbed his arm, an orange glow catching in the dark leather of his armor. He stared at it. It almost looked like blood.

"By Yendho, she's under there. Help me!"

The arm around Valadan pulled back. He stumbled against the wall, grabbing it, trying to keep standing. Tassilo's words had destroyed whatever small hope he had clung to; that it

might be the wrong spot, that she might have made it out.

He had to help. He couldn't move. The sound of shifting rocks made his panic spike again. It took all his willpower not to try and run; not that he would have come far with how weak his legs were. He couldn't run. If there was the smallest chance to save her, he had to help.

Valadan forced himself to step up to the others, feeling like he might throw up every second. He rolled some of the smaller rocks aside— not much of a help, but it wouldn't matter if his trembling hands dropped them.

"I can see her."

Torn fabric, soaked with blood. Torn skin and flesh. Valadan tried not to look, focusing on keeping the path clear. Rolling a small stone to the side. And another. And another.

"Almost done. Lee, press against this spot. Her arm is trapped. It won't hold once I move the rocks, so we need to be quick. Valadan, the moment the rock is gone, you need to pull her out, do you understand?" A short pause. "Valadan!"

"Yes," he somehow managed to croak.

Please don't be dead please don't be dead please don't be dead.

"On three. One... two... three."

The rocks scattered. Valadan pulled, digging his fingers into her shoulders. He dragged her out, glad that the light of Lee's glow wasn't enough to make out any details.

"Further!"

He fastened his grip, grabbing her under the shoulders to pull her along the tunnel. Her clothes under his fingers were sticky and wet, her head lolling to the side. Her limbs moved bonelessly, like those of a doll.

Deep inside the mountain, something rumbled.

The panic gave Valadan new strength. He put one arm under her knees, the other around her shoulders, and struggled to his feet. Whatever was raging inside the mountain, *it wouldn't get her.*

“Go, go!”

Valadan didn't know who had said it. It didn't matter. The two men stayed at his side, Lee's light enough for him to find his way, Tassilo's magic their last defense against the quickly approaching calamity.

Suddenly, there was more than just Lee's glow. One more turn, and the exit of the cave lay in front of them. Valadan put all his strength into his steps, racing towards the daylight. Then he was out, they all were out, leaving the nightmare of crumbling walls and falling rocks behind.

The victorious feeling was short-lived. Outside, the sunlight was merciless. It showed him how pale Josephine's skin was, the blue tint of her lips, the blood running down her arm, dripping off her fingers. He wasn't sure she was still breathing.

“Let us help.”

No. There was no time. Valadan started to run again, ignoring his protesting muscles and the burning in his lungs. He had to get back to camp, to the citadel, where someone could help her.

“Portal,” he wheezed.

Tassilo understood; Valadan prayed to Duriath that the mage understood. He ran ahead while Lee stayed at Valadan's side.

The way back to camp took barely longer than before. His legs were moving on their own, his hands holding on on their own. When he arrived, gasping for breath and stumbling towards the spot where they had set up the portal earlier that day, everyone crowded around him. Valadan pressed Josephine against his chest, but no one tried to take her or even touch her.

The only one not staring at him and the lifeless body in his arms was Anka. They crouched next to the portal, fiddling with a mechanism made of crystals.

"The portal will be up in a second," someone said.

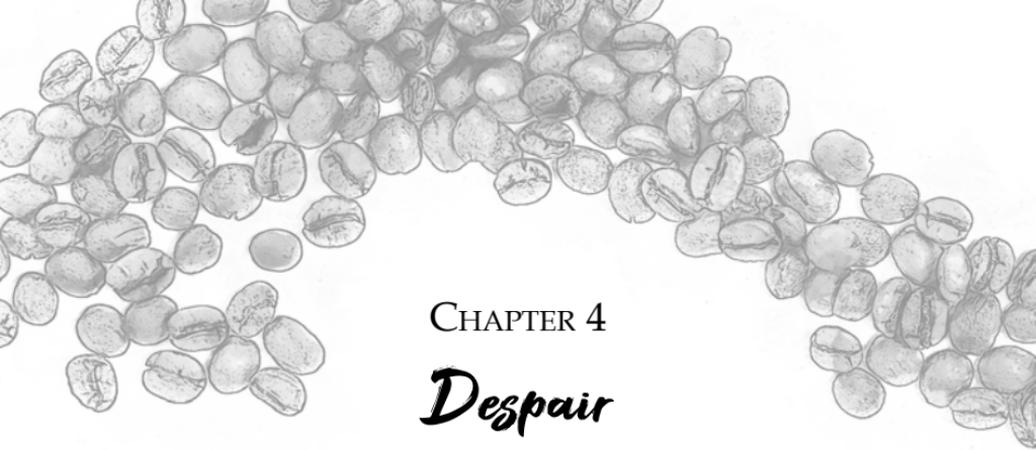
Valadan didn't bother to find out who it was. The minute it took for the portal to light up was the longest of his life. He didn't even know if Josephine was still alive. She had to be alive. His own arms were trembling too much to see if her chest rose. Weren't her eyelids fluttering? She *had* to be alive.

"Please don't die. Please. Hang on." His voice was shaking. His arms were shaking. He didn't dare set her down, knowing that he'd never manage to pick her up again if he did. "Please. Please, Josephine."

Then the iridescent circle appeared in front of him, wavering and flickering, not framed like the permanent ones.

He looked at Anka. The nyvi nodded.

"Please don't die," he whispered as he stepped into the portal.



CHAPTER 4

Despair

Valadan made it two steps out of the portal before he collapsed. As his legs gave way under him, he leaned backwards to make sure Josephine would land on top of him.

People came running. Surrounded him. Asked him questions. Even if he would have understood them, he wouldn't have had the breath to reply. When they lifted Josephine off him, he let go, his arms dropping uselessly to the ground.

"Save her. Please, please save her."

His words were more of a breathless wheeze than anything. Valadan doubted anyone even heard him. He stared at the sky, wondering why it was so dark, until he remembered that this citadel's portal was inside a hall.

Some of the voices around him sounded familiar. Tassilo and Trevor. Attention shifted away from him. Perhaps because of Marian, or simply because chances stood better to get answers out of any of the others.

"Hey, boss. You all right?" someone asked.

Blurry orange and red streaks towered above Valadan. Lee.

"Yeah." Valadan could barely get his voice to cooperate. "Help the others." It was an order. Kinda. Anything to get the kalani to leave him alone. "Go."

Lee hesitated for a moment, but he left. Valadan closed his eyes, taking a deep breath before he tried to at least sit up. His arms were shaking, his legs weak and wobbly, but he somehow managed to. With his arms propped against his legs, hunched over and trying to catch his breath, he listened.

Footsteps approached.

“Are you hurt?”

This time, he didn’t know the source of the voice.

“No,” he managed to say. If only they’d stop fucking asking him that!

As he raised his hands to wipe his eyes, he froze. Perhaps they wouldn’t ask him that if he weren’t covered in blood. Her blood. On his hands, on his arms, on his armor. Valadan felt sick.

He looked around, blinking fresh tears away. At this very moment, no one was paying him any more attention. A few people were crowded around someone on the ground—probably Marian. Others took care of the horses, who didn’t react well to all the noise and the commotion. Time for him to fuck off.

He scrambled to his legs, stumbling towards the wall, leaning against it as soon as he had reached it. He had to get back to his room. Get out of these bloodstained clothes. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the luxury of an attached bathroom, a fact he was reminded of when he passed one of the common washing rooms. After a moment’s hesitation, he dragged himself inside. He had to get the blood off.

Bent over one of the sinks, Valadan scrubbed his hands and arms, soaking the sleeves and sides of his armor. The water running down the drain was red. So much red. It didn’t stop, no matter how much he scrubbed.

When the red turned blurry, he stopped, gripping the edge of the basin with both hands. Fresh blood trickled down from where he had scrubbed his skin raw, leaving faint pink trails

on his fingers. Valadan stared at them, watching them change direction as he raised his hand to reach for the soap. When he heard footsteps behind him, he froze, fingers closed around the soap.

“Hey? Are you alright? Do you need help?”

“Stop fucking asking me that!” he shouted, whirling around and throwing the soap in the same motion. It bounced off the wall with a very unsatisfying thud, leaving a little mark on the polished wood next to the asker’s head. Some kid, still wet behind the ears, now staring at him wide-eyed.

“S-sorry,” they stammered, almost falling over their feet on their way out of the washing room.

Well fuck. Valadan stared at the empty doorway. At least it stayed empty. But washing his hands didn’t work, and now the fucking soap was lying on the floor, and he couldn’t bring himself to pick it up again. Whatever bit of composure he had left, it was fading fast. He had to get out of here.

Stumbling along the corridor, he kept his head low, turning away from the few people he came across. One probably wanted to ask yet another concerned question, but Valadan pushed ahead, storming past them before they could finish their sentence.

When he finally found a side door, he ripped it open, slamming it against the wall. Some kind of garden lay before him; herbs or vegetables or some shit. It was as good a place as any to break down. Valadan staggered along a narrow, sandy path, leading him past raised plots filled with blooming plants. Behind an old oak tree, he sank to the ground, leaning against the rough bark. The trunk was wide enough to hide him from anyone entering the garden, and it didn’t seem like there was anything noteworthy on this side of the tree.

He wrapped his arms around himself and started to cry.

By the time Valadan managed to drag himself back to his room, it was night. He padded through the darkness, stubbing his toe on the fucking chair he hadn't put back in its fucking place before he had left for this fucking mission. He kicked it so hard, it crashed against the wall, the impact sending a wave of pain through his toes.

"Fuck," he muttered. If the chair had still been in range, he would have kicked it again.

The pain throbbing in his toe reminded him that he was still wearing his boots. And his armor. His bloody armor. Suddenly, he couldn't get it off fast enough, fumbling with the clasps with trembling fingers. Piece after piece, he dropped carelessly on the floor, shoving them aside with his foot so he wouldn't fall over them as well.

When all that was left was his underwear, he shoved the pile of armor one last time before walking over to his bed. No other forgotten objects tried to ambush him, so he found himself sprawled on the mattress a moment later. If only he could take off his memories as he had taken off his armor.

Her blood, and the wrongness of her limbs, and her pale face. The skin on his chest itched, but his searching fingers found nothing. No dried blood, not even a scratch. How was it fair that he was completely unharmed, that she got hurt for saving him and Marian?

If only she would survive. If only he would get to see her again, her ice-blue eyes piercing him as she would tell him what a fucking asshole he'd been.

Praying to the god of chaos probably wouldn't do much good. He did it anyway.

It was a bleak awakening. Valadan's head pounded from all the tears he had cried the previous day and from the lack of water. His mouth was dry, his lips cracked. He stared up at the ceiling, wishing he could just fall asleep again. Sleep, and

never wake up; at least not for a hundred years, like in that one silly fairytale his brother had told him when they were young. That way, he wouldn't have to face this day and the consequences of his fucking arrogance.

But he had to get up. He had to find something to drink and to take a piss. Most of all, he had to find out if Josephine had made it. And he was fucking terrified of the possibility that she hadn't.

Valadan groaned as he rolled to the side, swinging his legs out of the bed. For a while, he just sat there, cradling his head, staring at the floor instead of the ceiling for a change. Then his body reminded him of all he should be taking care of, and he struggled to his feet.

Walking over to a pile of clothes that might or might not have been cleaned before his departure, he pulled out the shirt that looked the most presentable. Dark brown fabric with some pretty embroidery at the sleeves and only one visible stain. Okay, so those clothes had not been cleaned.

He took less care with the pants, grabbing the first pair he found—some washed-out green linen—and putting them on. On his way to the door, he ignored the pile of discarded armor and slipped into a pair of low shoes. A quick glance down the hall revealed it to be empty. That was nice. Even nicer that it stayed empty while he made his way to the closest washing room.

He remained unbothered as he relieved himself, and as he splashed some water into his face. Inspecting his hands, he found that the few scratches had scabbed over, and the traces of blood were gone. That was about the only positive thing he could think of, though. He probably looked like shit. Luckily, this room didn't have any mirrors.

After drinking some water, there was no way to delay the inevitable any longer. Heart beating up to his throat, he made his way to the hospital. Before he had even crossed half the

distance, his hands were wet with sweat, and he wiped them against his pants.

The entrance to the hospital was a large double door engraved with symbols of fire and healing. Valadan pulled one wing open, taking a deep breath. It smelled like sickness and herbs and alcohol—not the good kind.

He entered, pulling the door quietly closed behind him. There weren't many people around. Three standing on the far side of the room, busy with conversation, and one a bit closer, messing with an assortment of tools and herbs on a broad table.

Valadan approached the latter. "Excuse me," he said as soon as he was in earshot.

"What do you want?" the healer asked curtly. She was either busy, rude, or both.

"Josephine Lightwood?" Valadan asked. "She's—"

"Over there," the healer cut him off, gesturing vaguely in the direction of a bunch of beds. Only one of them was in use, so it had to be her, even if Valadan couldn't make out any details from where he was standing.

If she was in a bed, that meant she was alive. His hastily mumbled 'thank you' was barely discernible, but it didn't seem like the healer cared, already busy with her work again.

On shaking legs, Valadan walked over to the bed. The closer he came, the slower he moved. Josephine was covered with a white blanket, her arms resting above it. Her skin, or what was visible of it, was almost as pale as the fabric. Thick layers of bandages hid her right arm, and more bandages were wrapped around her head. They covered her left eye, while her right eye was swollen shut, with bruises coloring her temple and cheek.

Stopping in front of the bed, Valadan swallowed. Fuck. This was so much worse than he had hoped, yet so much better than he had feared. She was *alive*. Everything else could

be healed... could it? The images of her broken limbs moving unnaturally as he carried her returned, and he struggled to fight them back.

"Do you—" he started, then trailed off. It really didn't seem like anyone cared if he was here or not, so why should he ask? He grabbed a chair that was standing next to an empty bed and dragged it closer.

I'm sorry was on the tip of his tongue, but he didn't say it out loud. It would be a cowardly thing to apologize when she couldn't hear it; when she couldn't tell him where he could stick his worthless apology.

With nothing better to do and no chance of managing to focus on anything else, Valadan decided to stay. He stared at the blanket, and at Josephine's hand, and anywhere that wasn't her bruised face and her bloodless lips.

How much time had passed when she started to stir, he couldn't tell. It was a weak twitching of her fingers, a quiet whimper followed by irregular breaths that made him flinch. He should fuck off. If she was waking up, his face would surely be the last thing she wanted to see.

"Hey, she—"

Valadan raised his head and found himself alone. Why the fuck was there no healer, why was no one around? When Josephine whimpered again, he swallowed, staring helplessly at her. She tried to move, but the blankets and bandages trapped her. He could see how her breaths quickened as she struggled, a distressed noise escaping her lips.

She'd fucking hate him for this, that much was sure, but he couldn't just watch her and do nothing.

"It's okay," he whispered. "You're safe. You're in the hospital, in the citadel."

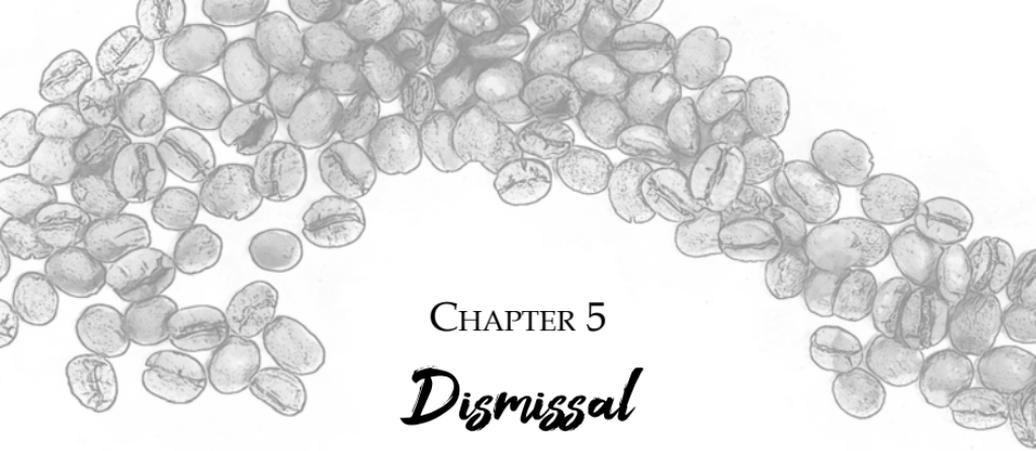
When it didn't seem like his words did anything to help, he reached for her left hand, the only spot of her he could see that wasn't covered in bandages. Closing his fingers around

it and stroking the back of it with his thumb, his voice was trembling as he spoke again.

“You’re safe here. The healers are taking care of you.” Or they would, if they’d be fucking here. Valadan swallowed, trying to suppress the fear and anger, to keep his voice even. “Everything will be all right. Just rest. I’m here. I’ll watch over you.”

She couldn’t be awake. There was little chance those words would actually have calmed her if she was. But she did calm down, the tension leaving her fingers. Valadan didn’t let go.

“I’ll stay,” he whispered. A promise to her and to himself. If there was no one else willing to stay at her side, he would. It was the least he could do.



CHAPTER 5

Dismissal

Sometimes, Josephine drifted close to waking. When the pain increased, the terror of being trapped came creeping back into her mind. Her heart hammered so fast it felt like it was going to break her ribs all over again. It was dark and her limbs so heavy. She couldn't move, couldn't open her eyes.

Please. Don't leave me here.

The words didn't leave her lips, didn't even linger in her mind, falling apart into nameless terror that made her whimper. Darkness reached for her, but she tried to resist it. She didn't want to die.

Sometimes, she was aware that she was in the hospital. When the healers unwrapped her limbs to continue healing, the sensation of shattered bones mending making her wish she had the strength to scream. When someone put a vessel to her lips, helping her drink; water and some mixture that left her thoughts in a haze. When fragments of words reached her, and the smell of clean linen and medicine, telling her that she was no longer in the mountain.

The awareness never stayed for long. When the next nightmare clawed its way into her restless sleep, she was back being crushed by rocks, choking on her own blood. Her head

hurt from unshed tears. She tried in vain to scream, to call for help. The weight pushed down on her, crushing her, taking her breath.

I don't want to die.

Until there was a voice. She couldn't make out what it was saying, but it was calming. Familiar in a way that was wrong. It was accompanied by a touch on her hand, warm and gentle. Holding her. There could be no voice in the mountain, and no touch. Someone had come for her. Someone was saving her. Her relief allowed the unconsciousness to claim her again.

From then on, the voice was there every time she almost woke up. A weak twitching of her hand, only to be cradled warmly, safely, a finger tracing patterns on her skin. A quiet whimper or choked sob, only to be answered with whispered reassurances that she was safe, that she could rest. That he would be there every time she awoke.

After a while, she started to trust it. When the fog lifted for a moment, when the fear came crawling back, her hand twitched searchingly, relaxing under the familiar touch. It was easy to give in to the darkness, to allow it to take away the pain, knowing that she wasn't alone.

Until the pull slowly subsided. She awoke, and she still was tired, but her thoughts were clearer this time. She knew where she was, recognizing the feeling of soft linen and the smell of the hospital. When she tried to move her fingers, something pressed them; calming, reassuring.

She still couldn't open her eyes. Her left one was kept closed with some weight pressing down on it, her right eyelid too painful to open. She tried anyway, her breaths turning into stuttering, pain-filled whimpers as she slowly succeeded. A sliver of light made it in, a colorful blur, too bright after such a long time in the dark. Copper and brown streaks of color bent over her.

"You're awake, aren't you? They said that would happen any moment now." The voice was back, *his* voice. It turned her stomach into a knot, her breaths quickening in nameless panic. "Try not to move. I'll get the healers." Then he was gone, and she wanted to scream at him to come back and to scream at him to stay away.

When voices came closer, he wasn't with them, or he didn't speak. People called her name, touched her hand and her face. Asked her questions she was too tired to understand. Propped a pillow under her head so it was easier for her to drink. This time, the mixture tasted different.

"It's no wonder you're still out of it," a voice said. It was the wrong voice. "We've stopped giving you..."

Josephine didn't listen, the words a meaningless blur in her mind. She let herself be handled and moved, vaguely aware of the pain, numbed by whatever they had given her. They took away the blanket, unwrapping her legs, their hands all over her. It hurt, and it felt wrong, and she was glad she couldn't see the damage. They talked to her about her condition, and her progress, and the prospects of healing, but few of the words truly reached her. Even fewer of those stayed in her mind. She was so tired. She wanted to sleep.

Eventually, the healers left, her limbs bandaged once more, the blanket pulled back up. Josephine leaned into the pillow, taking deep, conscious breaths. It didn't hurt. Her ribs were fully healed now, that much she could remember. They wouldn't pierce her lung again, wouldn't make her drown in her own blood.

The weight around her limbs were bandages, not stones crushing her, and the swelling around her right eye was going down, allowing her to see at least a sliver of her surroundings. Her left eye was still covered in bandages, but the healers had explained to her that it was not because of the eye itself, but because of lacerations on her head.

Why was she still so terrified, then? Something was missing. Her memories were a mess. Her thoughts were a mess. It couldn't have been him. He hated her. If only her mind weren't this persistent, telling her that she had heard his voice, had seen a glimpse of his copper hair. That someone had been with her, that *he* had been with her, all the time, the touch so deeply familiar that the lack of it now almost felt like physical pain.

Whoever it had been, they stayed missing. Josephine knew she was safe, but as she closed her eye, it didn't feel that way. She grabbed the blanket with her left hand, twisting it around her fingers. It didn't feel nearly the same.

Why did you go?

She cried, and she slept, and when she woke up from her next nightmare, she was still alone.

* * *

With the healers crowding around Josephine's bed, Valadan retreated. He paused before leaving the hospital, looking back. From this distance, he couldn't make out words, but the whole mood had shifted. Where before there had been only hushed words to coordinate the healing, now they spoke to her. If she replied at all, he couldn't hear it.

He just hoped he had retreated quickly enough so she might not have noticed his presence. She had enough to deal with without being bothered by him. There was no way she'd want him to see her like this.

Actually, he was pretty sure no one would want to see him in his current state. Valadan looked down at himself and grimaced. He was still wearing the same clothes he had picked up that morning. Now, they were wrinkled and stiff, with a few more faded stains here and there. Two or three times a day, when the healers had continued their work, he had taken the opportunity to visit the washing rooms and find

something to eat on his way back. Other than that, he hadn't left her side, even sleeping on that damn chair. His dizziness and his aching back told him that all of it probably had been a bad idea.

Well, whatever. If he had managed to keep even a single nightmare at bay, it had all been worth it. Now that she was awake, he could return to his room. Get some food, sleep for a day or two. But first, he should probably take a bath and find some clothes that didn't smell like he had been wearing them for a week.

He left the hospital, closing the door quietly behind him. Hands buried in his pockets and gaze lowered, he started to make his way back to his room.

"Are you Valadan?"

"Yes?"

He stopped, turning around to face the speaker. It was a middle-aged woman with pale skin, long blonde hair, and gray-blue eyes. And a strong hand, which connected with his face as soon as she had crossed the distance between them. The sudden pain was accompanied by the taste of metal on his tongue. Valadan resisted the urge to raise his hand to his cheek.

"And what was that for?" he asked, trying his best to ignore the nausea the taste of blood caused.

"You almost got my wife killed!"

Her wife? A flash of fury drove the pain away. Well, if she was Josephine's wife, where had she been those last— oh. Marian's wife. Probably.

"I'm sorry," he said automatically. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.* It was all he seemed to be able to say, and it was never enough.

"That's all you have to say?"

Valadan half expected another hit, but she only shoved his chest, pushing him against the wall.

"Do you really think 'I'm sorry' is gonna cut it when you didn't even have the decency to check in on her? To ask if she's okay?"

Well. He probably should have; he might have if he hadn't been preoccupied. As it was, he hadn't had time to think about anything else. After all, Marian only had a broken leg – which was still bad enough, and still his fucking fault, but nothing compared to Josephine's condition.

"I was busy," Valadan said quietly. He was too exhausted to deal with this. If it would make her feel better, she should hit him again already. Wouldn't be the first time. But he didn't have the energy to talk to her and defend himself.

"Busy." Her voice was dripping with disgust.

"Valadan. I've been looking for you." Another voice, a familiar one. The tone was icy, and the 'all over the place, and you know how much I hate wasting my time' implied.

Valadan closed his eyes for a moment, swallowing. Barnett Graves. His boss. When footsteps approached, he opened his eyes, turning his head towards the man. The woman kept him pinned to the wall but stayed quiet.

"Did she attack you?"

"No, sir." His cheek was still throbbing. "We were just talking."

"I see." Barnett let his gaze wander over Valadan, frowning. Yeah, he probably wasn't close to holding up any kind of dress code. "If you would be so kind," he continued, his tone almost as venomous as the woman's, "to finish your little talk? Because you are expected somewhere, and I am here to make sure you arrive."

The woman shoved Valadan one last time, pressing her palms against his shoulders. If the movement was visible, Barnett didn't comment on it. Valadan resisted the urge to rub the aching spots, looking after her as she stalked away. He surely wasn't making any friends here.

Looking at Barnett's grim expression and the motion with which he gestured Valadan to follow him, he got the sinking feeling that soon, it wouldn't matter anymore.

As Valadan followed his superior through the halls of the citadel, he felt sick. For the first time, he started to wonder what would happen to *him*. Since he hadn't committed any crime, it would most likely be disciplinary action only. That still left plenty of room. But, he thought bitterly, whatever punishment awaited him, he'd deserve it.

Barnett led him past a row of offices and up a set of stairs. Pausing in front of a heavy wooden door, he gave Valadan a stern look.

"Let's get this over with," he said as he pushed the door open.

The room wasn't overly large. It was furnished with rows and rows of bookshelves, the walls in between decorated with framed documents. One wall was empty save for the artful tapestry showing a detailed map of the world. Valadan stared at it for a moment, trying to find the courage to look towards the middle of the room where six chairs were arranged around a rectangular table made of dark wood; five on one side, one on the other.

Three of them were already taken by two men and an elderly woman Valadan had only seen in passing before. He couldn't remember their names if he had ever learned them. Barnett stepped next to them, gesturing to the single free chair on the other side of the table.

"Take a seat."

Valadan did so, glad to be off his wobbly legs. He placed his hands on the table, then pulled them away, hiding them beneath it. He felt like a boy again, in trouble and about to be scolded and punished. Just this time, there would be no big brother to protect him.

One of the men—the one with the least grim expression—picked up a quill.

“Valadan Ebonheart?” he asked.

Valadan nodded. He nodded again as the man read his rank, the date he had joined the Crimson Sun, and a rough overview of the last mission. When he was done, Barnett took over.

“You were given a chance. An easy mission to prove yourself. Because I know despite *numerous* complaints about your attitude, you are an excellent fighter. And yet, you still somehow managed to mess this up. Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Valadan swallowed. “I do not, sir.”

“From what I’ve been told, you undermined the mission’s lead. You ignored her clear orders more than once. In doing so, you endangered the people you were supposed to protect.” The disdain was evident in Barnett’s voice as he added, “And because of that, two of them were injured, one critically so. Is that correct?”

“That is correct, sir.” The words were like poison on his tongue and stones on his heart.

One of the others spoke up. He didn’t bother to introduce himself. If his posture and clothing were any indication, he held a higher rank than all others. It made Valadan all the more aware of his own desolate appearance.

“Your actions are a disgrace for the Crimson Sun. You will be let go immediately. There will be no severance pay. As for your room, you have until tomorrow afternoon to gather your things and leave. Any questions?”

“No. Sir.”

Valadan didn’t manage to hold the man’s gaze for more than a moment. He stared at the table in front of him, focusing on the patterns in the wood. He wouldn’t cry. He should be grateful. If that was all, he got off easily. Easier than he

deserved. Definitely easier than Josephine.

It didn't change the fact that the moment he'd set foot outside the citadel walls, he'd be on his own. There was no home for him to return to, no family, no friends. No skills to speak of other than the sword, and it was unlikely another mercenary group would accept him once word had spread. At least none of the reputable ones.

Someone pushed a paper in front of him, handing him a quill. Valadan only read the first few words, blinking against the blurriness in his eyes. A summary of what they had talked about, confirming what had happened, accepting his dismissal. He signed it without bothering to read it all.

"You may leave," Barnett said.

Valadan stood up and left.

* * *

Staring at the ceiling, at the dark brown wooden panels high above, Josephine listened. Hushed voices, so muffled they probably came from one of the adjacent rooms. The clinking of glass when a healer prepared tinctures and salves. Other than that, only silence.

Every day the same routine. The healers approaching her, telling her what they planned to do that day, as if she'd have anything to say about it. As if it mattered. Their hands and magic mended broken bones, while they pretended not to see the tears running down her face. Even with all the medicine they dared to give her, it still hurt so much.

Josephine was tired of it. She was in pain, and lonely, and too scared to sleep, knowing how likely it was that she would dream again. Eventually, her exhaustion always won, dragging her into a few hours of restless sleep before she woke up—sometimes calmly, most often not—to another day of the same.

Sometimes, she found herself wishing her family were here. Well, perhaps not her parents. They were kind but strict and would have loved to see her in a purely administrative position instead of going out into the field. Learning that she had been injured on a mission would only fuel their prejudices, and Josephine could imagine that not even in her hospital bed she'd be safe from their lectures.

Seeing her sister would have been nice. At least Christine would have found some consoling words for her, would have told her all about her own studies. It was unlikely she'd have stayed for long, though. No one Josephine knew would have the patience to sit with her. To perhaps entertain her when all she could do all day was stare at the ceiling, too weak to even hold a book.

Something was at the back of her mind, a memory fading with each passing day. Telling her that someone had been patient enough. Had been with her. But he hadn't returned, and the more time passed, the more she doubted her memories. Perhaps her mind had made it all up to protect her from losing herself in the nameless terror of her nightmares. That was much more likely than that Valadan—the very Valadan who had passed up no opportunity to pester her—had stayed at her side.

Still, in those moments after she woke up, she found herself reaching for something that wasn't there. When her searching fingers closed around the blanket, an aching hollowness she had no explanation for took over her heart.

People came to talk to her. Her boss, Ruth, and her boss's boss, and other people Josephine didn't know. Luckily, it was Ruth taking over the talking. All Josephine had to do was nod and answer a question or two.

She learned that the Order already knew what had happened—not a surprise. Even if she didn't know how long exactly she had been out of it, it must have been days.

Eventually, they seemed satisfied, and most of them left. Only Ruth stayed behind, sitting down on a chair next to Josephine's bed.

"Don't worry, my child," she said. "Everything will be all right."

The affectionate term made a small smile tug at the corners of Josephine's mouth. The elderly woman was a renowned scientist, an expert in some things Josephine had barely even heard of. As fierce as she was when defending her research, as kind and caring she was towards those under her care.

"How's Marian?" Josephine asked. It had been one of the first questions she had asked once the fog had lifted from her brain. Nobody had bothered to tell her any more than *alive*.

"She's fine. Cecelia came as soon as she heard what had happened. They'll be staying for a while before returning to their citadel, at least until all is settled. Marian's and Tassilo's statements helped us figure out what happened. It wasn't your fault." Ruth's gentle tone turned stern as she added, "This Ebonheart has been dealt with."

Josephine winced, a knot in her stomach. It shouldn't be worry. It clearly was.

"Once you get out of here, we'll make sure you have all the time you need to get back on your feet," Ruth continued, speaking softly once more. "You can have a position in the archives until you are ready to face the world again. For however long you want."

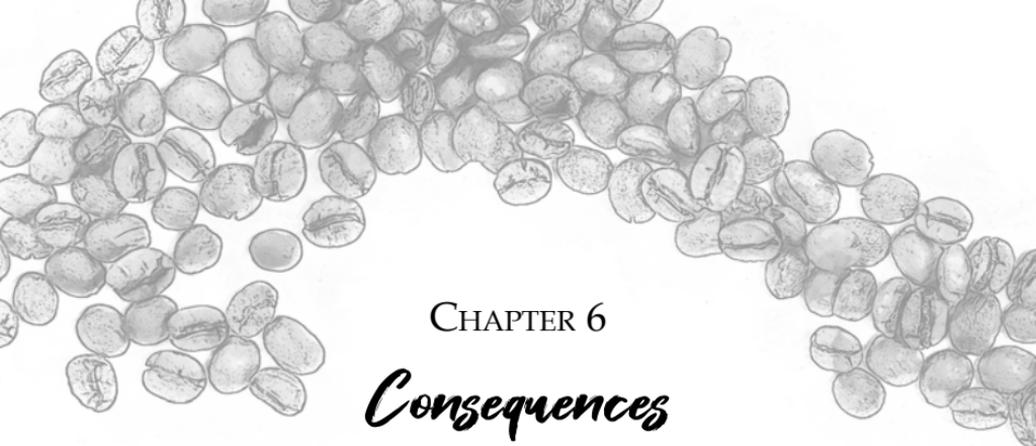
What should have been consoling words had the opposite effect. Josephine nodded, fighting the tears pricking at her eyes. She didn't *want* to work in the archives, to gather dust like the books stored there. She wanted to ask what dealt with meant. She stayed quiet.

"Do you want me to call your family?" Ruth asked.

The way she patted her hand almost made Josephine sob. It was tempting. So tempting. She didn't want to be alone,

but it wasn't her family she wanted. She didn't know what she wanted.

"No," she said weakly. "I just... I want to sleep."



CHAPTER 6

Consequences

A few days later, Valadan was still walking around in a daze. After he had grabbed his things and handed the key to his room back to Barnett, he had slept in a storage room for one night. Chased away by a scholar the next morning, he had since found a spot near the stables.

It was uncomfortable, cold, and stank, but he couldn't leave yet. Not before he knew if Josephine would be fine. Every morning, he lingered near the hospital, not daring to go see her again. Every afternoon, he visited the citadel's tavern, sitting in a dark corner, getting drunk.

This morning, he had overheard that Josephine was supposed to leave the hospital today. On the one hand, it was a relief. If she was well enough to leave, that meant she was going to survive. On the other hand, it brought back the question of what he should do now. He didn't know where to go. Perhaps he could beg Barnett to let him use the Order's portal one last time, allowing him to at least reach one of the major cities.

Sitting in the tavern once more, he pondered his options. So far, he had managed to diminish four – or perhaps five, he had stopped counting – tankards of beer. Currently sipping

the next one, he stared blankly ahead. The tavern was starting to get crowded, so it was probably evening already. Almost every table was filled, the air full of voices and the smell of greasy food.

Valadan took another sip. It was a rather bad decision to spend too much of his meager savings on alcohol, but if he were making good decisions, he wouldn't be here in the first place.

"Got a problem, man?"

It took a fist smashed down on the table in front of him to make Valadan realize the words had been directed at him. Confused, he looked up, finding a rather buff figure looming over him. The last three brain cells of his that were not yet swimming in cheap beer tried to make sense of it. The angry face looked vaguely familiar.

Valadan blinked, trying to focus his gaze. Slowly, things clicked into place. The table in the direction he was facing was empty. It hadn't been before. Someone had been sitting there. Someone whose general shape matched the one in front of him now. *Fuck*. It must look as if he had been staring at the man with an expression sourer than forgotten milk on a hot summer day.

He should apologize. Tell some sob story, explain that he hadn't meant to stare, and fuck off.

"Yeah. Your ugly face," was what he said instead.

Valadan's drunken reflexes weren't fast enough to fully evade the blow aimed at him. Instead of breaking his nose, it only grazed his cheek, but it still hurt like fuck. He hissed as he stumbled backwards, kicking the chair away so he wouldn't fall over it.

Perhaps sober, he would have had a chance. He was a decent fighter, both with and without weapons. But his opponent, while also drunk, wasn't as drunk as him. While Valadan had to keep most of his attention focused on the monumental task

of not falling over his own feet, the other man didn't seem to have such problems.

Valadan managed to avoid some, but not all hits, all while he was unable to land a good one himself. A few times, he came close, his knuckles grazing over muscles as hard as stone, but it wasn't enough to make the other man waver. Then Valadan took one wrong step, and his foot got caught in the chair he had pushed aside. Trying to keep his balance was a hopeless endeavor, his arms swinging wildly, making some of the onlookers take a step back.

Before he was fully on the ground, his opponent stood over him, kicking his side. Valadan's pained grunt was interrupted by a second kick, to his chin this time. Tasting blood, he buried his face in his arms, trying to shield himself. It didn't do much to soften the onslaught. One kick against his stomach took his breath away, and the next two went to his head again. Warm blood trickled down his face, soaking his sleeves.

"I think he's had enough."

His opponent grunted something but didn't kick him again. For once, a tiny bit of self-preservation took over, and Valadan bit down the insult on the tip of his tongue.

"Okay, what the fuck is going on?" Another voice, commanding and even angrier, approached quickly. People muttered and moved around, away from him. "You. And you. You're both gonna leave."

"He started it!"

Mumbled agreement sounded all around them. Whatever else was said was lost to the pounding in Valadan's head as he squeezed his eyes shut, trying not to throw up.

Hands roughly grabbed him by the arms and pulled him to his feet. Dizzy from the sudden movement and unable to hear anything over the heartbeat pounding in his head, he didn't resist as he was dragged through the tavern and out the door.

A few steps to the side of the entrance, the men let go of him. Valadan stumbled forwards until his legs gave way under him. He screamed as he tried to catch his fall, a sharp pain running up his arm from his right wrist. It was unable to hold his weight, and he crumpled to the ground. Too busy with trying to fight the nausea, he didn't even attempt to get back up.

"And don't come back!" someone shouted before the door was pulled shut again.

Yeah. That seemed to be a common theme in his life. Valadan rolled onto his back, pressing a hand against his throbbing lip, staring at the sky. A dull gray, overcast with heavy clouds, no moon and no star in sight. How fitting.

He kept lying there, his mind blissfully empty, until the first raindrops fell.

It was very rude of the walls to change direction while he was walking in a straight line. Even ruder of the floor to ripple in an attempt to slip out from under his feet. Valadan stayed close to the wall, bumping into it with every step as he let his legs carry him wherever they wanted.

When they stopped, almost dropping him to his knees as they did so, he found himself in front of a door. He peered down the hall and back into the direction he had come from, squinting in the hopeless attempt to see through the headache pounding behind his eyes. Slowly, his thoughts fell into place. *Fuck*. It was Josephine's door. He'd been here only once, walking with her while planning their departure on the next day.

He wished his legs hadn't remembered the way.

Valadan gave in to the urge to sit, sliding down the wall and leaning against it. The world was spinning. He felt sick. He wasn't sure if it was the guilt, the pain, or the beer. Probably all of it.

He had managed to get inside before the downpour had truly started, but his clothes were still wet. Wet, soaked with blood, and covered in mud. Which meant he probably looked at least half as miserable as he felt. His nose had stopped bleeding, but it was still pulsing with pain, and the taste of metal lingered in his mouth. When he reached for his lip, his fingers came back glistening red.

At least this time, it was his blood. Valadan pressed on what would soon become a bruise on his cheek. No matter how often he'd get himself beat up, how much he hurt, it wouldn't change anything about what happened to her. He'd do anything to turn back the time, to take back his arrogance, his misguided hate.

He still hated the image of her he had formed so carefully in his mind. A spoiled noble daughter, not having to lift a single finger to get whatever she wanted. Just that the image didn't fit her any longer. She was a brave woman who hadn't hesitated to put her life on the line to save those she was responsible for.

Which had been *his* job. It should have been *him* in the mountain. Not that he would have been able to stop the rocks, to give the others time to escape. If not for Josephine and her magic, they would have died.

With the adrenaline fading and the cold seeping into his bones, everything hurt even more. By the Seven, his head was about to explode.

Valadan shivered and pressed his hand against his temple, only realizing he was crying when the first tear dropped from his chin. More tears came, followed by a muffled sob as he buried his face in his arms.

What a pathetic piece of shit he was. Crying on the floor instead of finding the courage to knock at her door. To see that she was truly well again. To leave her a worthless apology. To go, because why was he even still here.

When the door opened and a shadow fell over him, he didn't find the courage to look up, either.

"What... hey, are you... wait, Valadan?" A short pause, then she mumbled, "What the fuck. Why are you sitting outside my room?"

Before he could manage to find an answer—and convince his tongue to form it—she must have seen the blood on his clothes. She crouched down in front of him, putting her fingers to his chin to lift it.

"What happened?"

Her gaze was full of concern. Valadan looked away.

"Nothing."

"Nothing," she repeated. "Do you need a healer for your nothing?"

Valadan could have laughed. "No." As if he could afford one now, even if he did need one.

With a sigh, Josephine stood up. He would have expected her to tell him to get lost and close the door behind her. Instead, she offered him her hand, pulling him to his feet as he reached for it. Standing, he remembered why he had been sitting in the first place. With a groan, he leaned against the wall, panting in the desperate attempt to keep the contents of his stomach down.

Whatever Josephine said was lost to the rushing of blood in his ears. Then he was sitting, and he could barely remember how he had made it to the chair at her table. Josephine sat across the corner from him, her face way, way too close.

"Can you tell me your name?" she asked.

Gods, he wished he couldn't. If only he could forget his miserable name, and his miserable life, and his miserable future. "Valadan," he said. "Ebonheart."

"Do you know what day it is?"

"I don't." How many times had he slept behind the stables, how many days had he spent at her side? What day had it

even been when they had returned? "Pretty sure I already didn't know before I got hit in the head," he added as he noticed her concerned frown.

"Okay. What's my name?"

"Josephine—"

"Josephine, huh?" She raised her hand, softly brushing over the bruise around his eye. "Perhaps you should see a healer after all."

Something about the look she gave him, her touch, her words, was too much. Before he could stop it, new tears started to spill. She should scream at him, hit him, and throw him out. Instead, she was sitting here all gentle and concerned, and he couldn't deal with it. He had to leave. As soon as he managed to figure out how his legs worked. Which, unfortunately, he seemed to have said out loud.

"You're not going anywhere like this."

It wasn't even an order, not like all the ones he had ignored before. He still obeyed, sitting still, hands folded awkwardly. He didn't know what to do with them, or with himself, or with his thoughts.

Watching Josephine get up and go to a cupboard, he tried to think of something to say. Anything that wasn't 'I'm sorry' over and over and over again. She took something out, closing the cupboard door with a push of her elbow.

"Alcohol?" If it wouldn't have hurt so much, Valadan would have raised his eyebrows. As it was, he only stared at the bottle. "Don't you think I've had enough?"

"That," Josephine said, putting the bottle on the table with a thud, "is for me."

She sat down, placing a shot glass next to the bottle. Valadan was so busy giving the thick, carved crystal glass a dirty look that it took him a moment to notice how Josephine pinned the bottle against her side with her right arm, fumbling with the cork with her left. Eventually, she managed to

open it, pouring herself some of the amber liquid. Holding the bottle. Setting it down. Picking up the glass, raising it. She did all of it with her left hand.

Valadan looked at her right arm, at the spot where her short sleeve ended. The skin was covered in thick scars, reaching down to her hand, across the back of it, and even along her fingers. Three of them didn't move as she picked up the cork, twisting it between thumb and index finger.

"Your arm," Valadan said tonelessly.

"Yeah." She chugged down the contents of the glass and poured a second one.

Valadan wished it had been him in the mountain.

* * *

"So," Josephine said, a third glass later. "Tell me again why I found you in front of my door, in the middle of the night, covered in blood?"

She tried to keep the irritation out of her voice, the success of which was questionable. It was late, and she was tired and bitter. She had every right to be bitter, she reminded herself. After all, this was all his fault.

Josephine wasn't sure what she had expected it would be like to see him again. A part of her had assumed she never would, that by the time she left the hospital, he was long gone.

But finding him like this, beaten and bloody and so drunk he barely managed to stay on his feet, had been nowhere on the list. Apparently, she wasn't the only one with the urge to beat the ever-living shit out of him.

Watching him, she got the sinking feeling that actually doing so would have been less cathartic than she had hoped. He seemed strangely lost, his gaze not focusing on anything. She wasn't sure he had heard her at all.

"Hey. Valadan?"

When she reached for his hand, he flinched, grimacing in pain. Josephine let go instantly.

“You’re hurt.” It wasn’t even a question anymore as she watched him cradling his wrist. She sighed. “Wait here. I... Just don’t move, okay?”

Josephine waited until her back was to him before she scowled. Why did she even think about helping him? He was an asshole. It was his fault that she had almost died. It was his fault that her arm was like this.

And if she sent him away in his condition, she wouldn’t be better than him.

The motion with which she snatched a bowl from the shelf made the cups and pitchers next to it clatter. From the corner of her eye, she saw Valadan flinch and quickly turned her head to stare straight ahead at the bathroom door. Inside—out of sight—she let her shoulders drop, leaning against the sink as she waited for the bowl to fill.

When it was full, she didn’t turn off the water yet. Cupping her hands to splash some in her face reminded her all too well of how half of her right hand was numb. She stared at it, wiping the water off her face with only her left hand. She knew it wouldn’t work, but she tried to move her fingers anyway; only her thumb and index finger obeyed her will.

Lips pressed together into a thin line, she opened one of the cupboards to pull out a bunch of towels and clean cloths, draping them over her right arm. Then she picked up the bowl, balancing it on her right wrist while holding it with her left hand.

Josephine decided to ignore the twist in her stomach as she returned to the main room and found Valadan still exactly where she had left him. As she walked to the table, she dipped her thumb into the water, reaching for her magic to warm it up.

“Let me see,” she said as soon as she was sitting and had

put the bowl down. Under Valadan's incredulous gaze, she placed the towels on the table, picked one up, and dipped it into the bowl. "Come on. Give me your hand."

Slowly, he did so. His skin was covered in dried blood mixed with dirt. As Josephine started to clean it, she discovered his knuckles bruised and chafed. She was careful not to move his wrist.

"I take it you didn't win?" she asked, gesturing for him to give her his other hand.

"No." Valadan closed his eyes as she touched his hand, a slight shiver running through him. "He wasn't fighting fair."

"Mhm." Josephine found more wounds; this time not on the knuckles but the fingers. She followed the trail up to his sleeve, pushing it up to clean the blood beneath. "Is that so."

"Yeah. He had arms, and legs, and they were doing what he wanted."

Somehow, Josephine managed to turn her laugh into a cough. This asshole shouldn't think he was funny. And anyway, there was nothing funny about his injuries. They vanished under his sleeve, on the outside of his arms, like he had shielded his body or head from his attacker. Judging by his other scratches and the wounds on his head, her best bet was that someone had kicked him while he had been down on the ground. Asshole or not, that wasn't right.

"Let me get fresh water."

This time, she searched for bandages while she waited for the bowl to fill. Finding them under the sink—probably left here by whoever had used the room before her—she pinned them under her arm before returning to the main room.

"Give me your hand again."

When he did, she placed her fingers on his wrist, calling for her magic. The look of surprise on Valadan's face quickly turned into relief, and he closed his eyes. Under her touch, his hot skin turned cool.

After a while, she wrapped a bandage around his wrist.

"I think it's only sprained. Try not to move it for a few days, and it should be fine."

Valadan nodded wordlessly. Cleaning, and cooling, and trying not to look into his eyes—so unsure and vulnerable for once—Josephine washed the blood off his face. Between his bloody nose, swollen lip, and a small gash on his temple, someone had gotten him good.

"I guess that's it. Anything else?"

Valadan raised his hand to his face, gingerly touching his nose. When he shook his head, Josephine sighed. She wasn't entirely convinced, but there was also absolutely no chance she'd ask him to take his shirt off or anything.

"I'll put this away, then."

Stuffing the used cloths into the bowl, not caring that they got soaked, she managed to carry everything to the bathroom at once. She wasn't going to deal with cleaning up before the morning, so she dropped everything on the floor and only washed her hands before returning to the main room.

"You still haven't told me why you came here," she said.

Valadan stared at her, then at her arm. Josephine resisted the urge to withdraw it and hide it behind her back. He should see what he had caused.

"I wanted to..." he started, breaking off.

"What?" She was still tired, and still bitter, but now there were a lot more confusing feelings which she really didn't want to deal with. "Ask me for forgiveness? Because I don't think—"

"No," he interrupted her. "Just... Say I'm sorry. I'm not... I don't expect you to forgive me. But I had to... Had to see you. To see that you're alive." He ran his fingers through his hair, not looking at her as he added, "To try and get those images out of my head."

"Well, did it work?"

Josephine hadn't intended to sound as harsh, but now she couldn't take the words back.

Valadan didn't reply.

"I'm sorry," he said, getting up. "Thank you for..." He raised his bandaged hand, a sad smile on his face. "Farewell. You won't have to see me again."

He was leaving. In a moment, he'd be gone for good. She wouldn't have to see his unnerving eyes or hear his irritating voice ever again.

"Wait," Josephine said, stopping him before he reached the door.

Valadan was still swaying slightly, reaching for the wall to steady himself as he turned around to give her a questioning look. She couldn't let him go like this. He might fall and hurt himself, or get into trouble again, or be sick after all and choke in his sleep.

Before she could decide otherwise, she walked over to her bed, stretching to reach the second blanket and pillow. The citadel's rooms were furnished to house two people, but she was obviously only using half of the bed.

"Here," she said, thrusting both towards Valadan. He only managed to catch the blanket. "I don't think you should be wandering around like this."

Only then did she realize that she was keeping him from going back to his room by – what, offering him to stay on her floor? Because there was no fucking way she'd let him sleep in her bed.

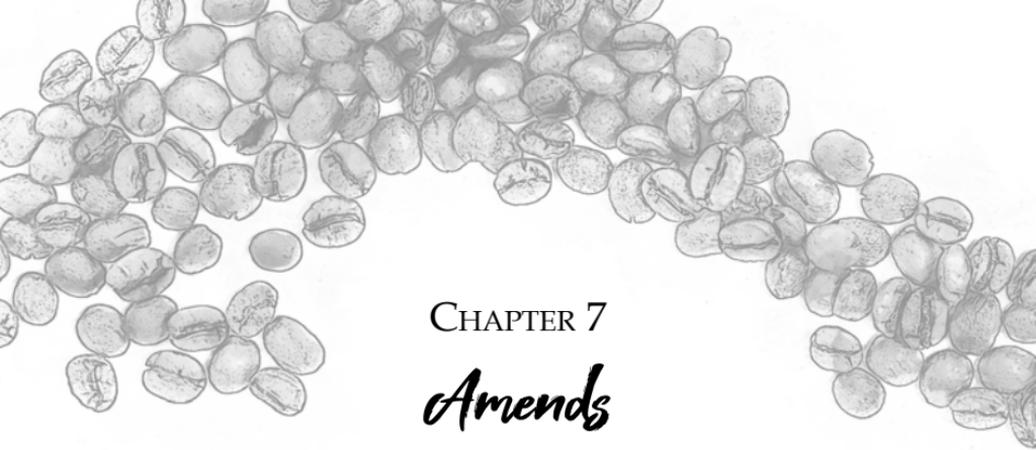
"I mean, you don't have to stay. Whatever. I'm going to bed." She turned around to hide her embarrassment, still feeling his gaze on her back. "Just don't throw up on the floor if you stay. There's a bucket in the bathroom."

She walked to her bed, pointedly not turning around again. Not as she settled down. Not as she wrapped herself in her blanket. Not as she stared at the wall, listening; half expecting

to hear the opening and closing of the door. Instead, she heard the rustling of fabric, and footsteps, and a pained groan as he sat down.

Knowing that he was here in this room while she slept should have been unsettling. Josephine decided that she was too tired to deal with the question of why it wasn't.





CHAPTER 7

Amends

When Valadan awoke, his head hurt. Well, that was an understatement. His head was *killing* him. With his eyes squeezed shut, he tried to remember where he was.

He was lying (so he couldn't be in the hospital anymore) on a hard surface (too hard for a bed), but wrapped into a blanket and with a soft pillow beneath his head (where the fuck had that come from?)

His memories of the previous day were a mess. He remembered drinking, and fighting, and wandering around, and... *fuck*. Josephine. Valadan groaned as he realized that it hadn't been a dream, that he had found his way to her door. That she was alive; alive but scarred, and it was all his fucking fault.

Between worrying that she might die and hoping that she would survive, he had never once paused to wonder if there would be things the healers weren't able to fix. But now, the thought that he might still have ruined her life made him feel sick. Perhaps it wasn't only that thought. His stomach cramped, and he fought to free himself from the blanket to struggle to his feet.

She had said there was a bucket in the bathroom. Even his pounding head managed to remember the door through

which he had entered the room, so he staggered towards the other one. What he hadn't expected was to find a literal bathroom behind it, with a copper bathtub and all. Because of course she had her own bathroom—brave or not, she *was* a noble's daughter. Valadan found that the bitterness that had accompanied this thought for so long remained absent, even though a bit of envy was still lingering.

At least it made it unnecessary to search for the bucket. Instead, he stumbled over to the toilet just in time. He clutched it with both hands at first, and then, as the pain in his right wrist flared up, with his left hand only. The kick to his mid-section must have left a bruise of considerable size. The muscles above his stomach strained painfully as he heaved.

Fuck, he was a mess.

Staring into the toilet bowl, cramping and puking, and perhaps wishing a tiny little bit that he'd just die instead, Valadan couldn't stop the tears from welling up in his eyes. He had ruined her life, and he had ruined his own life. In fact, he was pretty sure from the moment he was born he had always ruined everything he touched.

After the first wave of nausea, he laid his head on his arms, breathing heavily, not trusting the peace yet. Distantly, he wondered if she was awake. He hadn't had the time to look around before running for the bathroom.

The muffled noise of a door opening and closing, followed by footsteps, answered that question. Throwing up again, he wished that she wouldn't come looking for him, wouldn't see him like this.

This once, he was lucky. Josephine didn't enter the bathroom or even call out to him. She left him alone until his stomach calmed down and he had splashed enough cold water in his face to perhaps look like a living person.

His limbs were heavy as he dragged himself back into the main room. Eyeing the blanket and pillow on the floor, he

fought the urge to lay down until the world stopped spinning and he wouldn't feel so terribly sick anymore.

But it wasn't his bed, wasn't his room. There was no bed for him to return to, and gods knew when he would have one again. Instead, he decided on the next best option. Not looking at Josephine, he trudged over to the table to sit down on the free chair. He was probably overstaying his welcome, but he didn't have the strength to leave yet.

Forehead pressed against his palms, he tried to think of something to say. The smell of fresh coffee made his stomach cramp again, but in a different way. He couldn't remember the last time he had eaten something.

Something slid into his field of vision, being shoved underneath his face. A cup of coffee. The smell was irresistible. As Valadan closed his fingers around it, he looked up. Josephine was watching him, the corners of her mouth curled upwards, an amused glint in her eyes.

Valadan stared at her, then realized he was staring at her and stared into his cup instead as he lifted it to take a sip. The coffee was perfect. Almost black, with a hint of milk to take away some of the bitterness. He closed his eyes with a content sigh.

"Feeling better?" Josephine's amusement extended to her voice.

"Yeah. Thank you."

Drinking slowly, Valadan relaxed. As long as he didn't have to open his eyes, this morning wasn't so horrible anymore. In fact, it might have been the best morning in a while. It certainly beat waking up aching and worried in a hospital chair or to the smell of horse manure.

"It's perfect," he said, taking another sip. "Just how I like it."

"I know." Josephine still sounded amused.

Valadan opened his eyes, looking at her own cup, standing half-empty on the table in front of her. The liquid inside was

a pale brown, almost beige, telling him that she had taken much more milk in her coffee. He would have assumed she'd just brought him some of whatever she was having, but apparently not.

Whatever she saw in his expression, it made her laugh. It was this laugh that cut straight through his heart. Her joy, and her care, and her kindness, and he didn't deserve any of it. He didn't *believe* in any of it. It was a fleeting, treacherous moment, which would make it hurt all the more once she remembered what a useless piece of shit he was. What he had done to her. That there was no way for him to ever put it right.

"I think I need some fresh air," he said, putting down the cup with trembling hands.

Josephine's smile faded to be replaced by a frown—a worried frown, if he didn't know better. Valadan looked away as he pushed back the chair and got up. Leaving the half-empty cup of coffee behind, he stumbled out of the door.

* * *

Josephine stared at the door as Valadan fled the room.

She was still staring at the door half an hour later, her own coffee empty, the rest of his long cold. She couldn't make sense of him. It had been easy to be annoyed by him, to hate him even. He had made every effort to get her to hate him, that much was for sure. She still didn't know why.

But she hadn't expected the look of shock and guilt when he had seen her arm. The surprise on his face, as if a cup of coffee was a miracle.

Perhaps it was. He didn't seem like the type to make friends, to be offered a cup of coffee instead of a kick to the face. Josephine sighed. She didn't want to feel sorry for him, but it was hard not to. Sleeping, with the side of his face slowly turning

purple, he had looked so vulnerable. Coming back to him puking his guts out wasn't exactly helping matters. Perhaps her life wasn't great, but at least she didn't end up crying in front of a stranger's door and sleeping on a stranger's floor to throw up in their bathroom the next day.

While she was pretty sure his desolate condition was mostly due to too much alcohol, a bit of worry remained. Besides, there was something she had wanted to ask him, and she hadn't gotten the chance for it. It was as good an excuse as any to go and look for him.

She took the cups to the bathroom to rinse them out and bring them back to the kitchens. Then she slipped into more presentable clothes, dark pants and a silver sweater with long sleeves. Pulling the sleeves down to cover her hands, she picked up the cups and made her way through the citadel.

Half an hour later, she left the citadel's building with a bag and a glass bottle in her hand. She squinted up at the sky, at the sun that was just rising high enough to shine over the outer walls of the citadel. Where should she start looking for him? Fresh air, he had said, so he was probably outside.

For a while, she strolled along the paths, enjoying the warm air. It had been days since the last time she had left her room; she had barely left it at all since she'd been released from the hospital. Hiding from the world and from the position in the archives that was waiting for her. Going there felt like she'd be walking into her own grave.

Feeling the sun on her face, Josephine could forget about her bleak future and the inevitable talk with her parents. She couldn't forget about Valadan, and when she eventually spotted him, sitting in the grass a good bit behind the stables, she was relieved.

"Spot's still free?" she asked as she walked up to him.

He froze when he heard her voice, gesturing next to him

without looking at her. She sat down, leaning back on her hands, looking in the same direction he did. Nice view. Some grass. And trees. Trees and grass. Perhaps a flower, but the yellow-or-perhaps-white spot was too far away to tell.

“Why did you run off?” she eventually asked.

“I thought I might get sick again. You told me not to throw up on the floor.”

That did not sound like the truth. Josephine sighed.

“Well. Thank you for not... doing that.” She reached for the bag lying next to her, offering it to Valadan. “Here. Those might help.”

From the corner of her eye, she watched him open the bag, finding it filled with baked balls of pretzel dough sprinkled with coarse salt. He took one out, staring at it like he had never seen one before.

“Why?” he asked.

Once again, he looked so forlorn. Josephine averted her gaze. She reached into the bag as well, taking out two of the little balls at once.

“Why not?” she returned his question. She couldn’t give him an answer; none other than ‘because it felt right.’

“Thank you.” A short pause. “How did you know how I like my coffee?”

“I know a lot of things.” Josephine bit into her ball of dough, gesturing with the rest of it. “You like a tiny bit of milk in your coffee. Marian only drinks tea. Pascal never puts anything on his bread. Anka doesn’t like to eat with others but has a sweet tooth. Your friend Lee” – Valadan’s barely visible wince at those words didn’t escape her – “doesn’t like most cooked food, while your meat usually looks like it’s been turned into charcoal.”

Okay, so perhaps she had watched Valadan a bit more than the others. So what. It wasn’t illegal, was it? For all his insufferable attitude, he had been pleasant to look at.

"I'm responsible for my people. I *should* know them." Josephine snatched another few balls out of the bag. "I could get Anka to do me any favor if I ask them with a piece of candy in hand. You get so much further by being kind. You should try it sometime."

Those last few words had just slipped out. She eyed Valadan furtively, but he didn't look at her. Chewing on the food she had brought, he stared straight ahead.

"You're a good leader," he eventually said. "I'm sorry I didn't see it. And for... everything," he added, his last word barely a whisper.

Josephine sighed and reached for the bottle. Pinning it against her leg with her right arm, she tried to open it with her left. Her grip on it wasn't strong enough, but before the bottle could slip out, Valadan reached for it. He held it steady without looking at her, giving her a chance to pull out the cork.

When the bottle was open, she raised it to her lips. The juice was almost sickeningly sweet, a mixture of different ones: apple, plum, and some others she couldn't identify. She wished she had thought to mix it with water.

"Just because I didn't want to be, doesn't mean I have to suck at it," she said, handing Valadan the bottle. As sweet as the juice was, the sugar would be good for him.

Valadan's expression as he drank from the bottle was probably similar to hers. Too sweet. The juice, not... anyway. She looked at the grass and trees again, and definitely not at him.

"You didn't?" he asked while putting the bottle down between the two of them.

Josephine was quiet for a while, nibbling on another little ball of dough. "No," she eventually said. "I never wanted to be a scholar or join the Order. Studying geology, it was... by Ilairyah, it was the most boring thing I ever did. I did it to

please my parents. Not that they were very pleased when I told them I wanted to go out into the field.”

And they would be even less pleased once they heard what had happened. Josephine wondered how long she’d be able to avoid that particular discussion.

“So if you didn’t want to be a scholar, what did you want to be?”

Josephine bit her lip. It wasn’t a secret, not truly – but she had never told anyone. Not that anyone would have cared.

“I wanted to be a warrior. Do you know the tales of Minna the Brave? I wanted to be just like her when I was a child. Between my studies, I learned some sword fighting and stuff, but I never focused on it.” She laughed quietly, feeling how the desperation reached for her heart. Taking a swig from the bottle, she wished it was something stronger than fruit juice. “I guess that dream’s over now.”

She couldn’t even hold the damn bottle properly. There was no way she’d ever wield a sword again. The bitterness came back, crashing down on her like a wave. A part of her wanted to hit him, to scream at him, to tell him that all his words came too late.

One look into Valadan’s eyes was enough to tell her that she had the power to absolutely devastate him. She didn’t want to. It wouldn’t do anything to help her, to fix this. It would only make both of them feel worse.

“I need to go,” she said instead. “I’m expected in the archives.”

It wasn’t a lie. She hadn’t said she’d actually go there.

“You can keep the rest. Bring the bottle back to the kitchens when you’re done. And... try to stay out of trouble.”

By the Seven, she probably sounded like his mother. Josephine jumped to her feet, brushing grass and dirt off her pants. She winced when she couldn’t feel where the fingers of her right hand touched the fabric. Valadan’s gaze prickled at

the back of her neck as she made her way over to the citadel's main building.

The moment she arrived outside her room, she realized she had forgotten to ask her question.

* * *

Clutching the bag, Valadan stared after Josephine as she left. He had seen the short flash of fury in her eyes, expecting for her to finally lose it, to scream at him, perhaps hit him. It always happened eventually. He would have let her.

Fuck. Now that she was gone, he *wished* she had. Her words had left a new ache in his heart, worse than the bruises and his still pounding head. Valadan fished another one of the little baked balls out of the bag, biting into it. He barely tasted anything.

The food helped his stomach calm down, though, so he forced himself to finish it, drinking some of the juice afterwards. It was too sweet on its own but a decent contrast to the salt. Slowly, he started to feel better. Physically, that was. The guilt stayed. He had to do something.

By the time he had eaten the last pretzel ball, Valadan had made a plan. A foolish plan, perhaps, but a plan. After he had brought the empty bag and bottle back to the kitchen, he spent the rest of the day on preparations. Torn between determination and doubt, he eventually crawled back into his makeshift camp behind the stables.

With the first light of dawn, he got up, digging in his messy pack for a shirt that was neither covered in grass seeds nor smelled like horses. At least the lack of grass seeds was a success. Dressed and with a blunt training sword tied to his belt, he made his way towards the kitchens. He bought two cups of coffee, eyeing the offered breakfast as he did so. But there

was only so much he could carry, and he didn't know what she liked.

Coffee would have to suffice for now. Pouring milk into her cup until the color roughly matched the shade he remembered, Valadan hoped she didn't take sugar or anything else in it.

With every step he took towards her room, his nervousness grew. In front of her door, he managed to hold both cups with one hand for long enough to knock.

Josephine opened the door, her expression wary, confused. Her eyes behind thin-framed reading glasses were tired. Valadan swallowed, holding out one of the cups.

"Coffee?" he asked.

When he followed her gaze to the cup, he found that he was holding out the wrong one. He quickly exchanged them, offering her the one with more milk instead. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, but she didn't reach for the coffee yet.

"What do you want?" she asked instead. She sounded as tired as she looked.

"Talk?" It was more of a plea than a question.

Josephine gave him a long look before she stepped aside, pushing the door fully open. When she gestured for him to enter, Valadan did, stopping awkwardly once the door had closed behind him. He sipped his coffee while Josephine walked over to the table with hers, sitting down on a chair. She took off her glasses and put them on the table. Watching her raise the cup to her lips, close her eyes, and breathe in the smell of the coffee, he wondered how to start.

"Your understanding of talking is a funny one," she said without opening her eyes.

Valadan took a big gulp, trying to wash down his nervousness. "Wanna learn how to fight?" he asked, speaking quickly before he could decide otherwise. "I mean, I know

you said... you learned, but... you also said now, with your arm..." He trailed off, swallowing. The guilt was like a knot tied around his stomach. "I think you still can. Just, you know. Differently."

"You want to teach me?" Her incredulous gaze was only topped by her incredulous tone.

Valadan shrugged. "What do you have to lose?"

"The last bit of my dignity?" she asked. It didn't sound too earnest.

"Luckily for you, I wouldn't know dignity if it hit me in the face. Come. Give me a chance."

When she didn't reply, Valadan raised his cup, taking sip after sip so he had something to keep himself busy. He didn't want to stare at her, to pressure her, but he also didn't want to look around the room too thoroughly. After all, it was her private space, and he was invading. Instead, he ended up staring into his cup, which was empty way too soon.

"Fine. Wait outside so I can get dressed."

Only when the tension left him did Valadan realize how nervous he had been. He nodded quickly, looking from his cup to hers, wondering if he'd have time to bring them back into the kitchens.

"Leave them here." Josephine must have noticed his gaze. "I'll take them back next time I go to grab food. Now shoo."

Valadan put his empty cup down on a shelf next to the door and left. Outside, he leaned against the wall, playing nervously with the hilt of the training sword.

When Josephine emerged from her room, she was wearing plain, close-fitting clothes and had her hair pulled up into a tight knot. She didn't look at him as she stepped next to him, matching his pace when he started to walk.

Valadan led her to one of the training grounds, the one furthest away from the buildings. It was slightly overgrown at the edges, but there was plenty of room inside the sandy

circle for two people. Josephine kicked a rock away, watching it bounce across the field and vanish in a tuft of grass. With her arms crossed, she turned towards him.

“So... no sword for me?” she asked.

“Oh, that one is for you.” Valadan untied it, offering it to her hilt first. When she slowly took it, a questioning look on her face, he shrugged. “Told you I’d show you my sword once you get to know me better.”

The moment the words left his lips, Valadan froze. The last time he had said it, it had been to irritate her. Successfully so. He didn’t want her to think he was making fun of her now.

He quickly took a step back, which coincidentally brought him out of reach of the dull yet heavy training sword. Then he extended his left hand to the side, concentrated, and summoned his own weapon. With his right wrist sprained, that would have to do for now.

Shimmering pink and purple, not quite solid and not quite transparent, the sword lay in his hand. It was a familiar weight – one he had missed for far too long. He hadn’t kept his daily practice up during their expedition and even less afterwards. He swung the sword a few times safely away from her before he dared to look at her again.

The expression of wonder on her face was a relief. Not everyone distrusted chaos magic, but many people did; fewer so here, in the Order of Fire.

“Can I touch it?”

Valadan couldn’t help himself. He grinned, trying very hard to bite back an extremely inappropriate response. When he didn’t say anything, Josephine looked up, noticing his grin. She huffed.

“You’re impossible.” She playfully hit his upper arm, and Valadan’s grin turned a bit strained. There definitely was a bruise there. “I mean, is it solid? It has to be, right?”

“Yeah.” Valadan turned the sword in his hand, focusing

on his magic to make sure the edges were as dull as those of the training sword. "My domain is manifestation, but I have to keep contact. If I let go..." He did so, and the sword dissolved the moment his fingers weren't touching it anymore. He shook his hand, turning his wrist to summon a new blade. "Makes for light travel, and while you can disarm me, it won't do you much good."

Josephine hummed thoughtfully. Her gaze wandered to her own sword, which she was holding with the two fingers of her right hand that were not... well, Valadan didn't know exactly what the problem was. Perhaps he'd ask once he had gotten to know her a bit better. For now, it was none of his business.

"Why are you doing this? What's your goal?"

"My goal?"

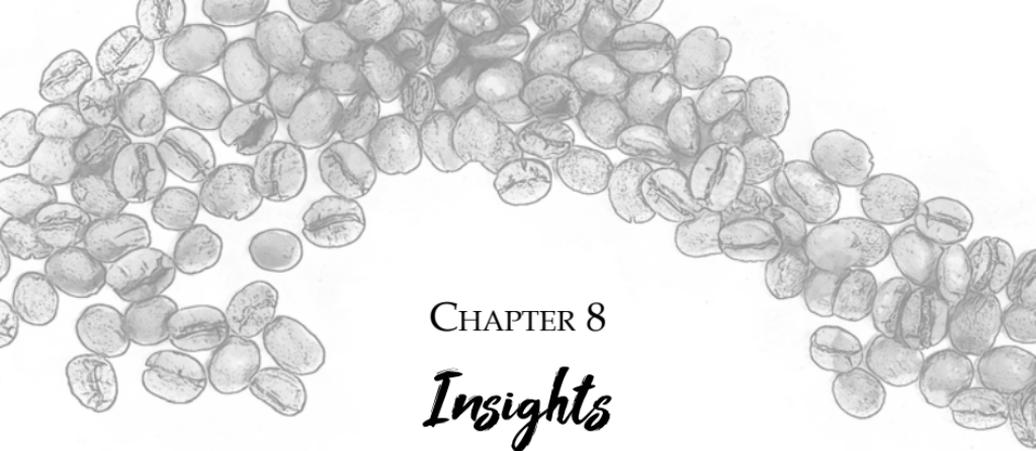
Valadan swirled the blade around before he let it dissolve as he raised his hand to run his fingers through his hair. He wanted to try and make it right. To help her be what she could have been if he hadn't been such an asshole, hadn't ruined her life. He wanted to see that confidence in her posture and that smile on her face.

"I'm gonna get you to the point where you can kick my ass."

Josephine switched the blade to her left hand, testing her grip and the weight of the weapon. Perhaps this would work. Perhaps they'd have to find a better weapon. Perhaps they could even come up with a way for her to use her magic in combat. All Valadan knew for certain was that he'd do whatever it would take to make sure she'd be able to follow her dream.

"All right," she said. "Let's start."





CHAPTER 8

Insights

Josephine was just getting ready for her training when someone knocked at her door.

“Ah, shit,” she muttered, hopping on one leg, trying to wrestle the other into her pants. “Coming!”

Of course, being in a hurry made the leg of her pants twist, and it took twice as long to finally get dressed as it would usually have. Slightly out of breath, she hurried to the door.

“Hey, you’re—” she started as she opened the door, only to freeze as soon as she saw the person waiting in front of it. “Tassilo.”

“Yes, I am Tassilo,” he replied, an amused smile on his lips. “Is this a bad time?”

Josephine resisted the urge to look down the hall to see if Valadan was anywhere close.

“Not quite, but I don’t have long. Come in.”

Walking back through her room, she turned her back to Tassilo, making sure to fix her pants and tuck her shirt in. Looking a bit disheveled had bothered her less when she had thought she’d be opening the door for Valadan. After all, during their training, her hair and clothes rarely stayed in pristine condition.

Speaking of hair... She walked over to the nightstand, grabbing a leather strap.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

Wrestling her hair up was one of the things she had already hated before half of her right hand had become all but useless. If she didn't, it was always in the way; falling into her eyes, getting caught in her clothes, and she didn't even want to think about how training with it loose would end. Unlike her sister, she had never once considered cutting it off, though.

"Just wanted to see how you're holding up." Tassilo watched her fight with the strap, how she dropped half of the strands and started over. "Haven't seen you in a while."

"I'm fine," Josephine said, her voice slightly pressed due to the fact that she had decided to hold the band with her mouth to have her hands free. "How are the others?"

"Anka is barely leaving their lab. If there is anything at all in those stone samples, they will find it." Tassilo smiled. "Marian and her wife have returned to their citadel in the Wilds."

Josephine nodded. They had stopped by before their departure a few days prior, inviting her to visit someday.

"Pascal and I will leave for another mission tomorrow."

At those words, her eyebrows rose. She hadn't even *heard* of another mission. "Geology or botany?" she asked. The brothers' specializations differed, but they only worked as a team.

The silence that followed her question was answer enough.

Great. It didn't surprise her that she hadn't been asked to join. She was far from ready for a mission, and she didn't think she'd be anytime soon. But it hurt that she hadn't even been informed. Despite working in the archives for now, she was still a part of the geology department. Or so she had thought. She would figure out later if she was truly hurt, or if this was just one more incident pushing her to leave it all behind.

She had only trained with Valadan for a bit over a month— if one could even call it training. Her bones had been healed, but her strength and condition were severely lacking. Most of their mornings they spent warming up, then doing some exercises to help her regain her endurance and flexibility. She could probably have done that without him, but she had to admit that it was way more fun with him.

With every day she walked to the training grounds, her sword at her side, she felt better about it. Unlike her work behind closed doors, this was somehow fulfilling. The sun on her skin and the wind in her hair, her blade in her hand and her magic deep within her. Valadan had brought up the possibility of using it to fight, and the mere thought had her excited. It was something she would never have considered. It wasn't *proper*.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Tassilo asked.

Oh. She must have been lost in thoughts for a bit too long. And now those very same thoughts made her smile as she finally fastened the leather strap keeping her hair up.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Under Tassilo's incredulous gaze, she let her hands sink. Perhaps that had been a bit too enthusiastic. She flexed the fingers of her right hand; at least the two that obeyed her will. For a moment, it all came back. The bitterness and the pain when she did something that had always been so easy, only to be reminded that it wasn't anymore. All the scars that had remained, a sensation she hadn't quite gotten used to yet, not to mention that some of them limited her movements. The nightmares that still plagued her almost every night, leaving her shaking and too afraid to go back to sleep. Knowing that all she had worked for was in shatters.

But for the first time in her life, someone believed in her. Valadan didn't blame her for her weaknesses but worked with her to find her strengths. It almost made her believe in

herself, believe that her own wishes were just as valuable as the expectations that were set on her. Perhaps it would be a vain effort, but she could certainly afford to indulge in her dreams for a couple of weeks.

"This isn't gonna change," she said, raising her right hand before she took a few steps to where her sword was leaning against a shelf. Tassilo's eyebrows rose as she reached for it. "But this is not who I *am*," she continued, fastening it to her belt. "I'm not gonna let this get the better of me."

A knock on her door made her spin around, turning her 'even if it's hard sometimes' into a distracted mumble. Despite being worried about what Tassilo would say about her arrangement, she didn't hesitate a moment to hurry towards the door. She definitely was old enough to meet who she wanted, when she wanted, and for whatever reason she wanted.

Opening the door, she had to remind herself that she was definitely meeting him to learn how to fight, not to stare at him or get lost in his purple eyes.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he replied.

"Thank you for checking in on me, Tassilo." Josephine purposefully raised her voice, not sure if Valadan was able to see him from where he was standing. "I wish you good luck on your mission. Please extend my regards to Pascal as well."

Well, that had come out a bit more formal than appropriate, but Tassilo didn't comment on it. She stepped aside to let him pass. He paused just outside the door, looking at her.

"I see. I mean, thank you. I'll let you know how it went when we're back, but it'll be some weeks; possibly two months. Take care. And..." He smiled, and she could have sworn it almost warped into a grin. "I'm glad you're fine."

Tassilo waved one last time in her direction and walked down the hall. Josephine took a deep breath, leaving the

room herself and pulling the door closed behind her. Her gaze fell on Valadan's hands, and the one cup of coffee he was holding.

"No coffee for me?"

"That one is for you." He handed her the cup. The liquid inside was as almost-beige as always. "I already had mine. Need it a bit earlier to keep up with your schedule, princess."

As much as she had hated this nickname before, now she didn't mind it at all. Perhaps it was the way he said it: spoken kindly, with a smile that reached his eyes and was mirrored in his tone.

Suddenly, the fact that no one had told her about some boring mission to stare at some boring rocks didn't bother her as much anymore.

Things went better than Josephine could ever have dreamed. Every morning, she met up with Valadan, now with a few more training weapons in her collection. To her surprise, he had turned out to be a good teacher. He was as knowledgeable as any she'd ever had and definitely more patient. On top of that, half of what he taught her had no place in the ranks of the Silver Blades. Survival first, fairness second, or so he had said. Josephine had to admit that she enjoyed it immensely to leave strict rules and etiquette behind.

Every afternoon then, she visited the archives for a few hours. After her training, the lists and catalogs didn't seem all that dull anymore. Her handwriting wasn't as neat as it used to be, but legible enough, and the scholars working with her were a pleasant, if somewhat boring bunch.

Sometimes, she wondered where Valadan found this much time to keep teaching her. She expected each day that he would tell her he'd be gone for a while, escorting another mission or having been assigned some other task. It never happened. Perhaps he was doing something else in the afternoons, as

was she. She never dared to bring it up. Despite spending so much time together, their conversations so far were limited to superficial pleasantries.

Once more, she stood on the training ground, her sword in her left hand, her right hand empty. They had tried some things—a chain, a dagger, a small shield—but lately, Josephine preferred to use her hand to channel her ice magic. It wasn't easy yet, not in the heat of combat, but she was making progress quickly.

"What's your plan today?" she asked, eyeing Valadan.

She never knew what weapon he would pick until he summoned them. He used a wide range as well, mostly for fun; multiple blades or a two-handed one, chains and staves and axes. When things turned serious, he always chose the same: a shortsword in his right hand and a chain in his left. As her training sword, his magical blades were dull.

Today, he summoned two daggers, as purple and translucent as all his weapons.

"Really?" Josephine grinned. "Those are tiny."

"It's not the size that counts." He twirled one around, managing to keep permanent contact so it didn't dissolve. "It's how you use them."

It hadn't taken her long to figure out that his crude word plays were just that—words. He never behaved inappropriately, never touched her outside of their training. In fact, he never even as much as hinted at having any real interest in her, which was almost a shame.

Those few weeks had been plenty of time to admire his muscular build, his nimble movements, and the mesmerizing gleam of his eyes. Sometimes, she wished his hands wouldn't only rest on her arms when he showed her how to stand and how to move.

"Show me, then."

Josephine raised her sword. When he made no attempt to

attack, slowly circling her instead, she struck first. Expecting to be at an advantage because of her longer reach turned out to be a mistake. Seconds later, she found herself disarmed, one of his daggers pressed against her throat. Despite the blade being blunt, she didn't dare to move. Which was because of the dagger and had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that her back was pressed against his chest.

"Do you believe me now? Princess." The last word was a mere whisper, his breath hot against her ear. It made goose-bumps rise on her arms.

Way too soon, he let go of her, dismissing the dagger and taking a step back. She wondered if he had felt the way her heart was hammering in her chest. The laugh on his face and the little wrinkles around his eyes showed her that he was at least having fun.

"Okay. When you move like that..."

She forced herself to focus on his words, to listen as he explained what he had done, demonstrating it while he spoke.

"Let's try that again," he then said, summoning the second dagger.

This time, she was more patient. As he circled her, she didn't rush to attack, waiting for him to make the first move. Valadan's motions were slower than usual, making it easier for her to stop his attempts to get past her defenses and disarm her. The more confident she became, the quicker he moved, taking little breaks in between to allow both of them to catch their breath.

The sun rose higher. Some strands escaped Josephine's pinned-up hair and stuck sweaty to her forehead and neck. Her cheeks were hot from the heat of a late summer day and exertion alike. She held up her hand to sign that she needed a moment, stretching her arms and taking a deep breath. She felt the strain in every single muscle, but it was a good feeling. It made her feel alive.

After a few moments, she smiled and nodded, holding her sword ready once more.

“Good. Now try to beat me.”

It was what he always said at the end of their sessions. Sometimes, she won. Other times, she was sure he *let* her win. Valadan usually kept using whatever weapons he had chosen that day, but other than that, there were no rules.

Josephine shook her arms, raising her sword and swinging it out of Valadan’s reach. She hoped the movement would distract him from her other hand. Spreading her fingers as well as she could—three of them were still numb and weak but no longer entirely immobile—she called for her magic.

She jabbed at him with her sword, an attack he easily side-stepped—right onto the patch of ice. Instantly, Josephine closed the distance between them, slamming the broad side of the sword against his hand as she tried to kick out his legs from under him. She didn’t manage to make him fall, but he did let go of the dagger.

Valadan took a step back. The moment his foot touched the ground, she let a new patch of ice grow, catching him unaware. When he struggled to keep his balance, she took her chance, kicking at his leg again and blocking the path of the dagger with her blade, then grabbing his arm with her weaker hand. A moment later, they were both on the ground; Valadan lying on his back, Josephine sitting straddled on top of him.

In falling, he had let go of the second dagger, and now it was her sword that was pressed against his throat. She propped herself up with her right hand, holding the sword with her left as she bent down so she could whisper close to his ear.

“You were saying?”

She enjoyed her victory—and, just maybe, being so close, she could see each drop of sweat glistening on his forehead and his throat pressing against the metal as he swallowed. But

where she had expected a witty reply, another crude remark, Valadan remained silent. Worry overshadowed her triumph; hopefully she hadn't truly hurt him. As she lifted the sword and leaned back, she felt something else touch her... *oh*.

Somehow, Josephine's cheeks grew even hotter, and it wasn't the sun's fault this time. She put the sword down so she had both hands free to roll off Valadan and push herself to her feet. As she offered him her hand to help him up, she didn't look at him, scrutinizing the green stain on her knee instead. She should pick darker shades, like him. Grass was so hard to get out of clothes.

Valadan cleared his throat, holding out the sword to her. As she took it, Josephine noticed that he was careful not to touch her hand.

"That was good," he said, taking a step back as soon as he had handed the sword over. "You're, uhm. Good."

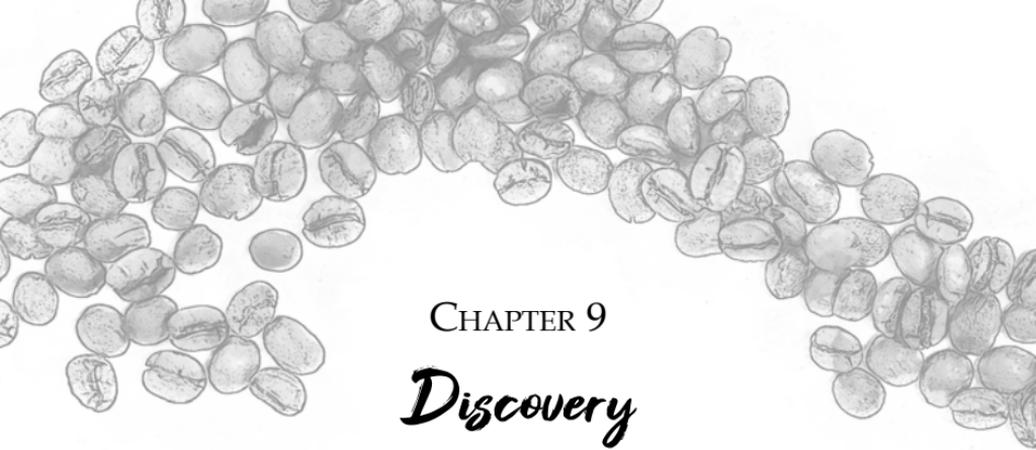
Seeing him flustered like that was kinda adorable—a thought that did nothing to ease the burning of her own cheeks.

"Thanks," she mumbled, fastening the sword to her belt. "I have to go. You know. Work."

Valadan nodded. They often walked back to the citadel together, but today, he kept standing in the middle of the sandy circle, watching Josephine as she left. She didn't dare to pause or look back.

She would go to the archives. But first, she was going to take a cold bath.





CHAPTER 9

Discovery

Dim light painted the world in muted colors as Valadan followed the path towards the training grounds. Winter was quickly approaching. The nights were getting colder, and the mornings stayed cold for longer. Bathing in the nearby lake was no longer remotely as pleasant as it had been during the summer months. Even now, with the sun rising over the outer walls of the citadel, Valadan was still freezing. He considered jogging the rest of the way, but he had to conserve what little energy he had. It would be hard enough to get through the two or three hours of training as it was.

The weakness of his knees and the ache in his stomach reminded him that it had been two days since the last time he had eaten. Two weeks ago, he had run out of money, occasionally managing to earn some coins with random tasks and errands since. Even if he found someone willing to offer him work, it was barely enough to get a single meal a day. He was left constantly hungry and a bit more desperate with every passing day. There was no future for him here, no way to get out of his predicament. He would have to leave and find another town where he could actually earn a living — before the hunger would leave him too weak to wander or the nights

would get even colder. If he stayed here, he wouldn't survive the winter.

If he left, he wouldn't survive the loneliness.

When the training ground he and Josephine used came into view, he found her already waiting. Sword in hand, she was warming up, her practiced motions like a dance. She wore dark gray pants and a light gray shirt, fitting tightly. When she moved, it shimmered, like bands of silver were woven into it. She seemed to like silver. Valadan had to admit that it looked great against her sun-tanned skin and her dark hair, pinned up like always.

Valadan stopped to watch her. Whoever had taught her before him must have valued form and posture a lot. Perhaps a mentor of the Silver Blades. A noble like her surely could afford that. She had kept most of the grace, adding ruthlessness and the clever use of ice magic to her repertoire. By now, she won regularly, even when he wasn't holding back. There wasn't that much more he could teach her.

Turning around, Josephine spotted him. She let her sword sink, raising her other hand to wave at him. From this distance, he couldn't make out her expression, but he could imagine her smile. It made his heart heavy as he started to walk again, raising his own hand to return her greeting.

If there was nothing left for him to teach her, that meant his time here was coming to an end. Sure, they could train together as equals now, but that didn't solve his myriad of other problems. And he didn't even know if she'd want him around. When she looked at him like this, a smile lighting up her ice-blue eyes as she greeted him, it was certainly easy to believe.

It would hurt all the more if it turned out to be wrong.

"You're okay?"

Ah, fuck. "Yeah," Valadan said, rubbing his neck. "Didn't sleep too well, that's all."

In fact, he had spent half the night awake, shivering and listening to the rain pattering on the bit of the roof sheltering his sleeping place. Every time the wind had picked up, freezing drops had found their way through the bushes that were blocking him from view. His blankets were soaked. If the weather stayed like this, they'd barely be dry by the time evening came.

"Wanna take a break today?"

"No." If these were the last few days with her he might have, he wanted to savor every one of them. "Come, let's start."

Josephine shot him one last worried glance, but she nodded, raising her sword. Stepping next to her, Valadan summoned his own blade. Moving in unison with her was comforting, even though it couldn't lift the weight that had settled on his heart.

By the time he was warmed up, Valadan was already exhausted. He tried not to show it, extending his left hand to summon a chain. If he wanted to have a chance today, he needed his preferred weapons.

It didn't take long for his steps to become erratic, for him to have to focus almost completely on not slipping on the ice she created. She drove him back across the sandy ground while he had trouble evading her strikes, with no opportunity to attack. A kick he would usually have avoided with ease made him stumble, directly into her strike. She turned the blade at the last moment, only hitting him in the stomach with the broad side. For a few seconds, he stood hunched over, gasping for air, his vision darkening. Then he was on the ground, the darkness slowly dissipating to reveal the overcast sky above.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?"

Josephine had put the sword down, hovering over him with her hands clasped together.

"No. Ah. Fuck." It turned out that breathing was a bad idea; as was speaking. His stomach hurt, and he was sure there'd be a bruise across it soon.

"Fuck," he repeated, propping himself up to at least assume a sitting position. "I don't... feel too well today."

"Yeah, no shit." Her tone was annoyed, but the look on her face spoke of concern. "Perhaps you should rest."

"Yeah."

Valadan didn't look at her as she offered him her left hand to help him up. He didn't want to rest, but he had to. Crawl back into that fucking damp nest of blankets that stank of horses. Hope that he'd manage to earn some money tonight or perhaps tomorrow. Fuck. He had to keep it together until he was out of sight.

"Sorry," he said, averting his eyes. "I'll just... yeah. I'll rest."

He could feel her gaze on his back as he started to walk up the small hill and towards the citadel. On the off chance that she might catch up with him, he listened for her footsteps, already thinking of an excuse should she offer to escort him back to his room.

She didn't.

Nevertheless, Valadan looked around to make sure he was alone before he followed the path to the stables. He didn't often return during the day, too great the risk of being discovered and questioned, but he was too exhausted, both physically and mentally. He just wanted to lay down on the closest thing to a bed he owned, close his eyes, and dream of a miracle he knew wouldn't happen.

As he walked past the stables, he heard muffled voices inside. It was too late in the day and too busy to hope he'd be able to snatch some oats from the horses. He couldn't afford to be caught stealing. Chewing on a sad, half-wilted dandelion flower, he lay down on his bed.

Perhaps he was wrong. Perhaps it was already too late. He couldn't see himself wandering to the next town like this. His chances of asking Barnett for permission to use the portal had vanished months ago, but Josephine might be willing to help him—if he found the courage to ask her for it.

Maybe, if he could choose a city, there might be one tiny sliver of hope left for him. Valadan closed his eyes, hoping the sleep would take away the pain in his stomach and the pain in his heart.

"Valadan? Hey. Hey, what's wrong? Can you hear me?"
Something rustled close to him. "Valadan?"

It was the worry in her voice that made him open his eyes. Had he collapsed again? But he wasn't on the training field, was he? When he saw the leaves above him, surrounding Josephine's face, he swallowed. He was definitely *not* on the training field. All those months, he had avoided her finding him, and now he had to mess it up on those last few days. Had she followed him without him noticing?

Not that it mattered, not really. All that mattered was that she had found him. That he was lying in front of her, wrapped in some dirty blanket, with all his failures, all his misery displayed for her to judge.

"Hey," he croaked, trying very hard not to burst into tears.
"Hey."

She looked around, taking in the wooden box he had turned upside down to place his water flask and cup on there, as well as some other things he occasionally needed. Her gaze wandered on over his crumpled blankets and the pack he was using as a pillow, eventually resting on his face again. Her eyes were wide, her lips pressed together.

"So you're... here."

Valadan laughed; he was sure it was a laugh, not a choked sob. "Yeah."

"Can you get up?"

That wasn't what he had expected. He stared at her and her outstretched hand, taking it hesitatingly. "Yeah."

"Then come."

She pulled him to his feet, holding on to him until he was standing with one hand against the wall of the stable.

"That's all your stuff?" she asked, gesturing to, well, everything.

"Yeah."

"We really gotta work on those answers of yours." The smile accompanying her words didn't reach her eyes. "Give me a second."

She flipped over the box, putting everything that had been standing on it inside. Next came the blankets, quickly rolled up, and his armor. He hadn't worn it since the day he had arrived back at the citadel. There was still her blood on it, the stains long dried by now, unlikely to ever come out again. He wished he could afford to just throw it away.

With his bag in hand, she looked up. "I don't think I can carry both, so can you take this?" She held it out to him and, when he made no move to take it, added, "If not, we'll leave it here, and I will come back."

Leave it here. Come back. His brain was trying very hard to keep up with her.

"I can," he eventually said, focusing on the easy part.

Josephine nodded, handing him the bag. Valadan clutched it with both hands, leaning his back against the wall. When she picked up the box and started to walk, he stared after her for one moment before he realized that she wanted him to *follow* her. Follow her past the stables and towards the citadel, into the building and along the corridors, until he found himself in front of her room once more.

At least this time, he wasn't sitting on the floor crying, but he had the feeling that either could change at any moment.

When she opened the door, he followed her in, watching her put down the box in a corner of the room.

"Why don't you —" She broke off when she turned around and looked at him. Instead of finishing her sentence, she took the bag from his hands, setting it down next to the box. Then she returned to him to take his arm and lead him to the table. She sat him down on the chair.

"You're freezing." Somehow, her hand was still on his arm. It took all his willpower not to lean into her touch. "Wait here a moment, okay?"

He nodded. When she moved around, in and out of the bathroom, he didn't have the strength to look at what she did. Distantly, he heard the sound of water flowing and of cupboard doors being opened and closed. Just as distantly, he realized that it was warm inside the room. It did nothing to warm him up.

"Hey."

Josephine's voice made him look up. She reached for his hand, pausing halfway and raising it to his forehead instead. Perhaps checking for fever. Valadan sat stock-still.

"You don't look good." When she brushed his hair aside, it was wet, but Valadan couldn't tell if it was sweat or still the moisture from the vegetation surrounding his makeshift hideout. "Do you know what's wrong? Did I hurt you? Are you sick? Eaten something wrong?"

Valadan laughed a quiet, desperate laugh. "Haven't eaten at all. For a while." There already was nothing of his pride left, so he might as well be honest.

The line Josephine's lips formed seemed to become thinner once more. "Okay. I'll get something. Come."

This time, she helped him up. He let her lead him into the bathroom, only looking up when she paused in front of the bathtub. It was filled halfway, tufts of foam sitting on the surface of the water.

"You can take a bath until I'm back. It'll warm you up. There's soap. And a towel."

He looked at where she pointed, then back to her. It seemed like she wanted to say something else, her mouth already open. She only sighed, though, squeezing his arm lightly before letting go.

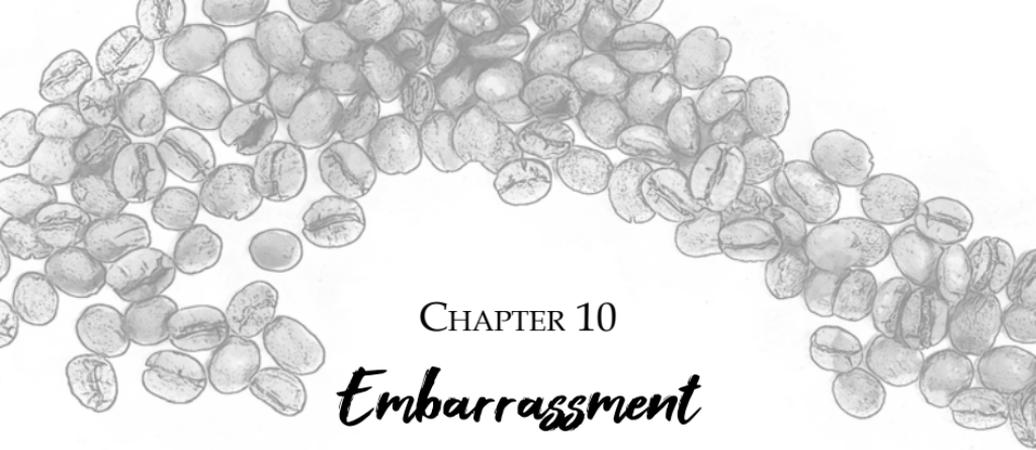
"I'll try to be quick, but take your time."

Valadan waited until the door to her room had closed behind her before he stirred. His fingers were stiff as he undressed, piling his clothes next to the stool the towel was lying on. He had tried his best to keep his clothes and himself clean, taking soap from the citadel's washing rooms, but there was only so much he could do when he spent all his time outside and slept on the ground.

Climbing into the bathtub, he found that the warm water was quite possibly the most wonderful thing he had felt in a long time. As the warmth spread, his muscles relaxed and the tension faded. He leaned back, staring at the ceiling. Relief and sorrow formed a knot in his empty stomach.

Josephine hadn't even asked him any questions, just taken him in. She was so kind. She'd surely help him to get to Caldeia, so he probably wouldn't starve or freeze to death this winter. It still meant that soon he would see her for the last time.

Valadan cupped his hands to scoop up some water and wash his hair. The water was warm on his face and shoulders, and it did a good job hiding the tears running down his cheeks.



CHAPTER 10

Embarrassment

Josephine's thoughts were all over the place as she hurried through the citadel. They had been since the moment she had managed to find Valadan's boss—former boss, that was—and this Barnett had told her that Valadan had been let go months ago.

Luckily, she had had enough presence of mind to not insist, to only nod, apologize for the intrusion, and leave. Then she had started looking for him. After checking every storage room, every spot where she could imagine someone might hide for months, she had finally found him behind the stables. The nest of blankets between the outer wall and some bushes had looked like he had been living there for a while. Possibly for the whole time since they had returned from their mission.

And in all this time, she hadn't noticed a thing. Sure, sometimes he had looked a bit tired, his clothes slightly disheveled, but that wasn't too unusual for him; was it?

Suddenly, she doubted everything. What was he even *doing* here if he wasn't part of the Crimson Sun anymore and no member of the Order?

She'd have to ask him, but first, she had to make sure that

he was okay. Perhaps a warm bath would fix some of it, but the weakness and despair behind his every movement had seemed so much deeper. He must have hidden it for so long. How had she not noticed anything sooner?

As she hurried past a row of stores, she stopped. Turning around and walking back slowly, she looked at the display in front of a tailor shop.

Many citadels of the Order of Fire were rather remote, and this one was no exception. Three days' travel on horseback away from the nearest city, there was a certain need to find some amenities here. Most of it was a colorful mixture of cultures: human clothing and matrix jewelry, all kinds of food – from nyvi insect bars to human candy – and about everything a scribe's heart may desire.

The blankets she had wrapped up had been all but wet. There was little doubt everything else in his pack was sharing this fate. A little unsure still – by the Seven, what was she doing? – she entered the store.

"Ah, Josephine. Welcome!" The tailor, a short, slightly chubby human with light brown skin and graying hair, walked towards her, smiling broadly. "I acquired some new fabric last week, but I haven't had time yet to work with it. Ymaharian velvet, in silver."

"Thank you, Tabi, but I'm not looking for something for myself. Do you have..." She trailed off, looking around. What exactly was she going to get? "I need some pants and a sweater," she decided. "And a couple of socks. For, uhm, a man." As she spoke the last words, her cheeks felt slightly hot.

"I see." The pause was just a tiny bit too long to seem truly innocent. "Any particular style you have in mind? Or color?"

"Dark," she said without having to think about it. Valadan always wore dark clothes. But also... "Perhaps a dark green?" Green would surely complement his hair. The heat spread to the top of her ears.

"I might just have the right thing for you." Humming quietly, Tabi dug around in a pile on a shelf, casting a glance back over their shoulder. "So, this man." Another pause, just as heavy as the one before. "Do I know him?"

"How would I know who you know?" Josephine said. Actually, she was quite sure Tabi didn't know him. This was one of the pricier stores. "And I'm not sure what it has to do with anything, anyway," she mumbled, trying to fight back the guilt that had come with his thought.

They didn't seem impressed in the slightest. "Professional curiosity, my dear. I need to know his size. Do you think this will fit him?"

Tabi held up a dark green sweater, knit with a soft, barely visible pattern around the hems.

"Well, to sate your professional curiosity, yes, I think so. He's about my size, but, uhm. A bit broader built, like..." She gestured at her shoulders, trying to indicate Valadan's shape without focusing too much on how well she remembered it.

"Good looking?"

"Tabi," she hissed.

Tabi only laughed. "Okay, well, then take this" — they handed the sweater to Josephine — "and I'll find you some pants to go along with it."

As they did so, Josephine's thoughts drifted off. She was already wondering what food would be best to bring. When Tabi handed her a folded piece of dark fabric, Josephine smiled, putting it in her basket next to the sweater. A couple of black socks followed. She paid, bid Tabi farewell, and hurried onwards towards the kitchens.

With plates and covered bowls stacked next to a pitcher and the clothes she had bought, she made her way back to her room. The door to the bathroom was still closed, so she took her time, placing the food on the table but leaving the clothes in the basket.

How long would he take? She couldn't blame him for enjoying a warm bath after what must have been a couple of freezing nights, but it was doubtful the water would keep the pleasant temperature for long. Perhaps there was enough time for her to bring his clothes to the laundry room. On the other hand, digging around in his personal belongings wouldn't be very polite.

Looking over at his bundle, she saw something scurrying across the floor on way more legs than she was comfortable with. Resisting the urge to smash the disgusting thing, she scooped an empty cup off the shelf to plunge it over the spider and send it on its way, slamming the window shut behind it. Yeah, no way, polite or not, his stuff would *not* stay like that. Ilairyah knew what else was crawling around in there.

Josephine grabbed a large, woven basket and set out to empty the contents of Valadan's bag into it. It was mostly clothes, some in better shape than others, all of them wrinkled and slightly damp. Luckily, there were no more spiders, but a few ants fell out as she unfolded a shirt.

Josephine focused on sorting through the clothes, putting them together with the blankets in the laundry basket. While she was at it, she might as well take the things he had been wearing as well.

"Valadan?"

There was no reply as she knocked on the bathroom door. He had really been in there for a long time, hadn't he? Josephine chewed on her lower lip.

"Valadan? I'm coming in," she called out.

Slowly, she opened the door. There was no reaction, no sound. Valadan was still in the bathtub, his head resting limply against the edge of it. He didn't move. Josephine hurried to him, crouching down next to him. Her hand on his cheek made him flinch and open his eyes.

"Hey, are you okay? Looks like you fell asleep."

He stared at her, his throat bobbing slightly as he managed to croak a 'yeah.' Josephine furrowed her brows. Why was he looking at her like... Okay, yeah, perhaps she was way too close, considering that he was very in her bathtub and very naked.

"Good. I, uhm, just wanted to make sure you're okay. The water must be getting cold."

She *could* warm it up, but she also would very much *not* stick her hand into the bathtub to do so. Instead, she jumped to her feet, nudging the stool closer.

"Here's the towel. I'll wait outside."

On her way out, she grabbed the pile of clothes off the floor. Pulling the bathroom door closed behind her, she took a deep breath. Perhaps a quick trip to the laundry room was exactly what she needed right now.

When she came back, hands empty, Valadan was standing in the main room, the bathroom door ajar behind him. He had the towel wrapped around his hips. It left a lot of him on display. Josephine tried not to stare.

"Uhm. Where are my clothes?" he asked.

"I've sent them to be cleaned."

The slight look of panic on his face would have been very adorable – if the situation had been different, if he had been here because of his own will, not because he had no other choice. How she wished the situation was different. There were a lot of replies she could think of. Most of them were far from appropriate. As it was, she only picked up the basket and offered it to him.

"Here."

He looked from the clothes in the basket to her but didn't say anything. Perhaps the need to be dressed overcame whatever questions or objections he might have had. As he retreated into the bathroom, Josephine sat down at the table

and poured two cups of tea. She quickly heated her own, then closed her hands around Valadan's cup, concentrating. It was way harder through the ceramic, but she couldn't very well stick her finger into his tea.

When Valadan emerged from the bathroom, Josephine stared again. All teasing aside, Tabi had picked an excellent sweater. It wasn't nearly as tight as his usual shirts, but that was a good choice for a sweater, and the color did indeed complement his copper hair perfectly. A bit too perfectly.

"Come, sit down," she said, gesturing to the empty chair at the table. "I brought you something to eat."

Valadan sat down, looking over what she had spread on the table. A cup of soup and some sandwiches, a few apples, and a bowl full of crunchy, salty breadsticks. He reached for one of the sticks.

"Take it slowly, or you might get sick."

"Yeah." The grunt he made had a very vague resemblance to a laugh. "I know."

The way he said it sent a shiver down her spine. How often had he been starving, freezing? He had always been so self-assured, so playful; Josephine wondered how much of it had been merely a mask. A mask that had shattered the moment she had found him behind the stables. Now, he seemed sad and lost. Even the purple shimmer of his eyes was dimmer than usual.

He ate a few of the breadsticks and half a sandwich, sipping his tea in between, before he leaned back, cradling the cup in his hands. Josephine wondered if he was still cold.

"How did you find me?" he asked, staring at the table instead of her.

"I was worried, so I asked Barnett where to find your room. When he told me that you're no longer part of the Crimson Sun, I started searching. Took me a while. I... I didn't dare to ask around." This Barnett had been just a tad bit too hostile

for her liking. She hadn't been sure drawing attention to Valadan wouldn't get him into trouble. She still wasn't.

"So you've been living back there this whole time?"

Valadan nodded, still not looking at her.

Josephine knew that with his position, he would have lost his room and his income. So this meant... "What happened? Why didn't you eat?" she asked, despite being pretty sure that she knew the answer already.

"What do you think? Princess."

The last word was spoken gently. It wasn't an insult. It was an explanation. Josephine swallowed.

"Why did you stay here, then?" Her words were barely louder than a whisper.

This time, he didn't reply. He just looked at her, and it was more than enough of an answer. Josephine turned away quickly, not sure if she would be able to win the fight against the tears pricking at her eyes.

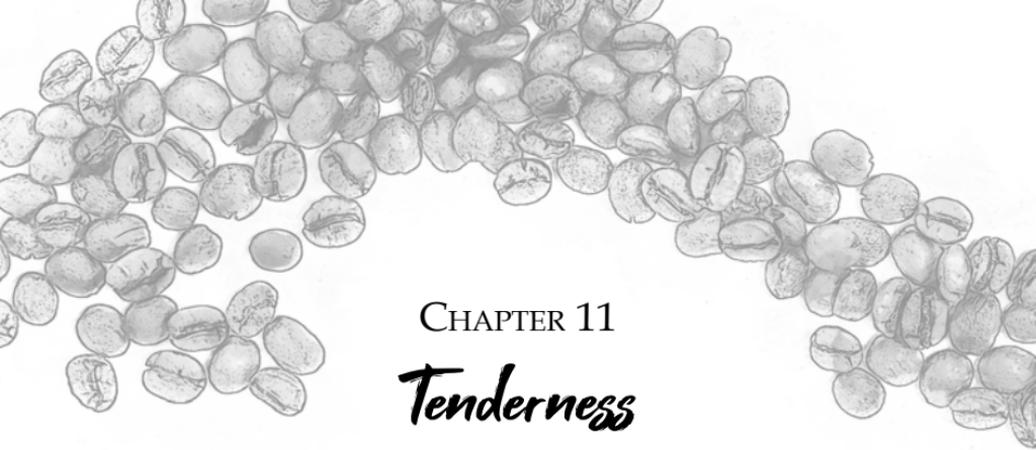
"Well, it's definitely too cold outside," she said, trying to keep her voice steady—as if she'd let him sleep outside no matter the temperature. "Let me get you some blankets."

She gathered the blankets, pulling the comforter off the bed as well. Turning around, she found that he had gotten up. It was not nice to let him sleep on the floor, but the thought of inviting him to join her in her bed made her freeze. It wasn't that she didn't trust him; she didn't trust her own feelings.

She didn't have to decide. Valadan stepped up to her, reaching for the blankets. "Thank you," he said quietly. Josephine watched him settle down at the spot where he had slept that first night, spreading the comforter beneath the window.

As she lay down on her bed, acutely aware of the soft mattress beneath her and imagining how he had slept outside—in the cold, for weeks, because of *her*—she didn't bother to hold back the tears any longer.





CHAPTER 11

Tenderness

When Josephine awoke, her heart was racing. The darkness in her room suffocated her, even though some moonlight fell through the windows, tinting her surroundings in muted grays and blues.

Swinging her legs out of the bed, she sat up and propped her head in her hands. She was tired, yet wide awake. There was no way she'd try to fall back asleep anytime soon; to risk dreaming again, to find herself dying in the cave.

Fuck, she was sick of it. Of dreaming. Of being afraid. Of spending half her nights awake and half her days about to fall asleep. While her days had significantly improved, her nights hadn't. If anything, her nightmares had become worse.

Josephine got up, slowly making her way to the cupboard near the window. The bottle she took out was half empty already after only a week.

"Hey."

The sudden voice made her jump. Clutching the bottle, she turned to face Valadan. Despite him staying with her for a few days already, his presence still sometimes startled her. In the dim light, his copper hair was as dark as the clothes he wore.

He walked over to her, not stopping until he was so close she could feel the warmth radiating off him on her bare arms. Then he reached for the bottle, taking it from her to put it back into the cupboard. The irony could have made her laugh if she hadn't felt like crying.

"Come sit with me," he said, holding out his hand. It was an offer and a plea.

Without thinking about it, Josephine took his hand. The warmth of his skin made her all the more aware of how cold her own hands were, how numb those three of her fingers. When Valadan led her to the pile of blankets beneath the window, she followed, sitting down next to him. He took one of the blankets and draped it over her legs before leaning against the wall.

Here, in the dark of the night, he was someone else. Someone completely new. Earnest and calm and gentle, every trace of his arrogance and playfulness gone. He was still holding her hand, but barely. The slightest movement would have made hers slip out. She took care not to move.

"Do you wanna talk about it?" he asked quietly.

"What's there to talk about?" Josephine hated the bitterness in her voice. "I'm trapped, and I'm dying, and I know no one is coming for me." Every night. Always the same: the darkness and the pain and the terror.

"Did you think I wouldn't come for you?" Valadan's voice was rough.

"I thought... if you did, you would have come too late." If. She hated that she had doubted it. She hated that she still doubted it in her dreams.

Valadan didn't say anything. Instead, he wrapped his free arm around her, pulling her close. She could feel him tremble, hear his breath hitch.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, not quite sure what she was apologizing for.

"Shh." He reached for her other hand, holding it as well, brushing the back of it with his thumb. "Don't."

The familiarity of the touch sent a jolt through her hand and up her arm. It brought back memories; memories she had started to doubt, then shoved aside.

"I didn't imagine it, did I?" So long had she been too afraid to ask, but now the words came easily. "You were there. While I was in the hospital."

Valadan cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"Why didn't you come back?" It came out more desperate than she had intended. Why had he left her alone? She had *needed* him. She still needed him. Relaxing under his touch, she nestled against him, her head resting on his chest.

"I didn't think you'd want me there."

Perhaps he was right. While she had needed him, she might have taken all her fear and anger out on him. It was likely she would have sent him away anyway and then been too proud to call him back.

"I want you here now," she whispered. At her side, in her life. The realization came so suddenly, so clearly. It scared her. It scared her less than the thought that he might vanish from her life again.

"I'll stay as long as you'll have me."

'What about forever?' she wanted to ask. She didn't. That was a question that merited more thought than her tired, overwhelmed brain could muster at this hour. One that would lead to more questions. What was he going to do? Where was he going to live? He couldn't be sleeping on her floor forever. She wouldn't be staying here forever.

She slipped her right arm around his back, pulling him closer as if it could stop him from ever leaving. Perhaps she held on to him a bit too desperately. Valadan let go of her hand to put his hand on her temple and run his fingers through her hair.

"It's okay. You can sleep. I'll watch over you."

Cradled in his arms, with his heartbeat under her cheek and his breath in her hair, she did just that.

* * *

If someone had told Valadan that waking up on the floor of a room that wasn't his could be one of the most perfect moments of his life, he would have laughed. But, with the sunlight streaming in through the window above him and his arms still wrapped around Josephine, it was. At some point during the night, he had dropped to the side, taking her with him. She was lying half on top of him, only partially covered by the blanket. He wondered if he could risk pulling it up without waking her.

He decided against it, only letting his thumb wander over her arm. She wasn't cold. Perhaps this moment could last a bit longer. When she sleepily wrapped her arm around him in return, snuggling closer, he closed his eyes. Or forever. Forever would be nice.

But then he made the mistake of raising his hand to brush through her hair, and she froze.

"You're awake," she mumbled.

"Mhm. No."

Yeah. Surprisingly, she did not believe him. Valadan sighed as she rose, hoping that the sound would get lost in the rustling of fabric. He sat up as well, leaning against the wall.

"How do you feel?" he asked. As much as he had enjoyed waking up with her in his arms, he hated how it had come to that. He hoped it had at least helped her to sleep the rest of the night without being disturbed by any more nightmares.

"Better. Thank you." Josephine touched his arm, a small, grateful gesture. "I'll get some breakfast, and then... I don't feel like training today. Can we just stay here and... talk?"

Valadan swallowed. Then he nodded. He wished he could interpret her gaze. Training was the only thing he could offer her—a small thing compared to what she was doing for him. While she vanished into the bathroom, he let his thoughts wander. He hadn't yet dared to ask her about allowing him to take a portal to another city, because if she would, that meant he would have to leave her.

"I'll be back in a bit."

Josephine's voice pulled him out of his musings. Valadan looked after her as she left, then struggled to his feet to fold the blankets.

While she was gone, he dragged himself into the bathroom. Staring at his reflection in the mirror as he dried off his face, he found that he looked better than he had a week ago. Healthier. Rested. His hair was no longer a tangled mess. He pulled the shirt he had been sleeping in over his head, putting on the dark green sweater. It wasn't his usual style, but damn, it was soft and comfortable, and didn't only keep him warm from the outside. Josephine had even gotten him a second one—dark blue this time—after he had refused to take the green one off for three whole days.

It was silly to be that attached to a piece of clothing. Just as silly as the little flutter of his heart when the door opened as she came back.

Leaning against the doorframe, he watched her place the tray on the table so she could take off multiple bowls and cups. Oatmeal and coffee, if the smell could be trusted.

"Come, before it gets cold." She turned around to face him, a smile on her lips, and his heart did that annoying fluttery thing again.

Sitting down, he found that the oatmeal was topped with fruits, and the coffee was as perfect as always. Valadan closed his hands around the cup and breathed in deeply, enjoying the smell first, then a sip. Only then did he pick up the spoon.

Some of the fruits and berries he didn't even know the names of, but they tasted wonderful.

After a while, Valadan couldn't help himself. He chuckled. When Josephine raised her eyebrows, shooting him a questioning glance, he sipped his coffee.

"Your idea of talking is a funny one," he said.

For one moment, she stared at him. Then she started to laugh. Valadan grinned.

"Okay, so... what's your plan?" Josephine asked when she had calmed down again. Her expression turned serious, too. "What do you want to do now?"

Well, that surely was a way to dampen his mood. "I don't know," he said, avoiding her gaze by focusing very hard on a stray speck of oatmeal on the table. It looked a bit like a cat.

"So you... what? Wanted to stay until winter and freeze to death?"

Yeah. It sure looked that way, didn't it? "I wanted to leave. Eventually. Walk to the next town. Try and get some work."

Josephine breathed out audibly. "You wanted to walk. To the next town? You *do* know where we are, don't you?"

Valadan shrugged. "Not like I had many other options."

"You could have taken a portal."

"I'm no member of the Order and no longer a part of the Crimson Sun. I wouldn't have been able to afford the fee." Well, that was partially the truth. He might have, at the very beginning, before he had spent all his savings on surviving. If he hadn't decided to stay with her. He'd do it again, a thousand times over.

Josephine said nothing, she just looked at him, her eyebrows furrowed. Didn't she believe him?

"Listen. I know you probably have a hard time understanding it—" The 'princess' got stuck in his throat. He couldn't call her that, not when the topic was serious. "But there really aren't that many options when you have no money. You can

take a private portal, or you can eat for a month or two.”

Now Josephine must have noticed the stray speck of oatmeal. It was truly fascinating. He wondered if she saw a cat in it, too.

“How do you even know?” she eventually asked. “That I have money, I mean.”

Valadan gave her a long look. How could she not see it? Bringing the best food the kitchens had to offer, wearing clothes that probably cost more than what he had earned in a month as a mercenary. But he had no intention of being mean about it, especially not when he wore very similar clothes right now, eating the very food she had brought.

“Come on. Everyone knows the name Lightwood,” he said softly, hoping it wouldn’t come across as an insult.

“You can’t be... wait, you are serious?” Again, she gave him this indiscernible look. “So you’re from Caldeia?”

Yeah, right. Probably not everyone. Only people who lived there, who at least followed some of the gossip of noble circles. His father’s... His *brother’s* customers had been rich people, for who else could afford fancy, useless glass things. It had given him plenty of opportunities to get to know the biggest names in the city.

“Yeah,” he mumbled.

Josephine was quiet for a while, drinking her coffee. When she spoke again, it took Valadan a moment to realize she was continuing her earlier train of thought. “You could have asked someone for help.”

“Who? Barnett?” Valadan laughed. “You can imagine how well that would have gone.”

“You could have asked me.”

Valadan had the impression that there was a tiny bit of hurt in her tone. He wondered if he had imagined it.

“I could have,” he said quietly.

Again, silence settled between them.

"You could ask me now," she pointed out.

He could. As if he hadn't played through this conversation a dozen times in his mind. Trying to think of the best way to plead, of anything he could offer her in return. Now, she was even offering it. He should be grateful for a chance like this. He was, in a way.

It didn't change the fact that he didn't want to leave.

"Okay." Josephine's voice made him flinch, wondering if he had said anything without realizing it. "You know the Queen's Festival is in a week?"

She paused, giving him time to reply, but Valadan only shrugged. In theory, he knew. It wasn't like he had paid any attention to which day it was. It wasn't like he *cared*.

When he said nothing, Josephine continued, "I wanted to visit my parents. I have to talk to them about something. You can come with me. Then you're in Caldeia, and then... we'll see. We'll figure something out, okay?" She sighed. "I might not stay here much longer, so we'll have to figure something out anyway."

Something unspoken lingered behind her words. Valadan wished his mind didn't cling to it, wouldn't try to find hope where there should be none. He lowered his gaze. The cat-shaped speck of oatmeal was gone. She must have wiped it away when he hadn't been looking.

"Okay," he said quietly.

One tiny thing Josephine might have forgotten to mention was that while the Queen's Festival was in a week, she wanted to visit her parents the very next day already.

After breakfast, Valadan watched with mixed feelings as she scrambled around, packing her things. He had... less to pack. Cleaned and—where applicable—ironed and folded, his meager belongings took up even less space. It was a matter of minutes to put the clothes in the bag and the armor

in the box, distributing whatever was left evenly between both.

After an early lunch, Josephine left for the archives and to take care of some other things she hadn't specified. Valadan left as well, managing to earn a few coins by scrubbing some kegs clean until the sun set. It would have been barely enough to get himself through the day, but with Josephine returning with two plates of food and a pitcher of watered down juice, there was no need for him to spend it.

Staring at the plate of roast and vegetables, he hadn't eaten much by the time Josephine was done.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm just... nervous. When we get to Caldeia, I'm gonna visit my brother. I haven't seen him in years." And what a mess his departure had been. "I hope that I can stay with him for a while. Until I get back on my feet."

Damien surely wouldn't send him away... would he? Valadan remembered a night so long ago. Two boys huddled together under a blanket, and the whispered promise of 'I'll always protect you.' If his brother was willing to give him another chance, this time he wouldn't fuck it up.

"I booked a portal to Caldeia at noon tomorrow." Josephine's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. "Then you can visit your brother, and I'll visit my parents, and we can meet again after. I'm sure he'll be glad to see you."

Valadan wasn't so sure about that. "Do you have any siblings?" he asked.

"A sister, yes. She's... We're not as close as we used to be. She'll be there for the festival as well. Perhaps you'll get to meet her."

It seemed like Josephine wanted to say something else, but after a moment of hesitation, she closed her mouth. She stayed silent as Valadan finished his own dinner, forcing the last few bites down, his appetite long gone.

When she picked up the empty plates to bring them back to the kitchens, Valadan went into the bathroom. This time, he avoided looking into the mirror or taking more time than necessary, so that by the time she came back he was already lying on his blankets. He returned Josephine's quiet 'good night,' still staring up at the ceiling long after she had turned off the lights.

"Valadan?" her voice sounded maybe half an hour later.

"Yes?"

"You're still awake?"

"... yes?"

"Would you..." She fell quiet, and he barely dared to breathe. "Would you want to sleep... here? Tonight. I mean. Next to me."

The small crystal on her bedside table flared back to life, painting dark shadows on the ceiling and walls.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't want to be alone."

Valadan sat up, grabbing one of the blankets as well as the pillow. "Okay," he said, voice rough.

The pale purple glow of the crystal illuminated her face as she watched him pause in front of the bed. With her hair loose for once, spread on the pillow around her like black silk, and wearing a wide, worn shirt, she looked so soft, so vulnerable. He wanted to wrap her in his arms, to hold her close and press kisses on that perfect skin of hers. To keep her safe from her nightmares and himself from the thought of losing her.

Instead, he padded around the bed, slowly and carefully, to not stub his toes – and perhaps to give her enough time to change her mind. She didn't, and soon Valadan found himself lying in the bed, the blanket tangled awkwardly around his legs.

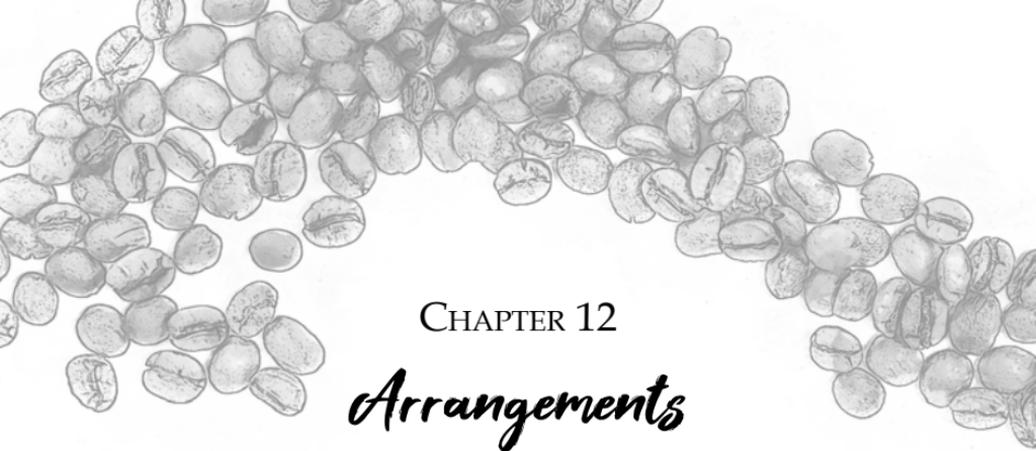
Now that the mattress under him was soft, it was he who lay rigid and stiff. He didn't dare to move, afraid of doing something wrong. She was so close he could smell the fancy soaps and oils she used. She had been closer in the morning, but somehow, this was different.

When Josephine touched his hand, his fingers closed around hers, and he turned to his side to face her. She was trembling slightly, her bright eyes open wide. Suddenly, it wasn't so different anymore.

"Hey," he whispered. "It's okay." His free hand trailed along her side until it came to rest on her hip. "When you wake up, I'll be here."

At least for this one last night, he could promise her that.





CHAPTER 12

Arrangements

Stepping out of the portal in Caldeia was almost surreal. A decade had passed since the last time Valadan had been home, but the moment he walked past the trimmed hedges, smelled the flowers of the palace garden, and saw the shimmer of the glass roof above, it was as if all those years vanished.

He stayed in the background as Josephine signed the forms for their arrival. With his bag over his shoulder and carrying the box with his armor, there was little else he could do.

"Let's split up, then," she said once they reached the edge of the garden. "Do you know the flower shop in front of the temple of Ilairyah?"

"The one with the dolphin-shaped topiaries?"

"Yes, that one." She smiled. "My sister and I have been using that spot to meet for years. If we meet around sunset, is that enough time for you?"

He nodded.

"Great. Sunset at the flower shop, then."

"Josephine..." Valadan shifted the box so it rested on his hip and he could tug at his sweater. Damn, it was way warmer in Caldeia than it had been in the citadel. "Could you lend me a bit of money? I'd like to get a shirt that hasn't been eaten

by ants." That, and a gift for his brother, perhaps.

"Sure." She dug around in her pocket, grabbing a couple of coins to press them into his hand without counting them.

"Here."

"Thank you." He tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

"I'll pay you back as soon as possible."

"Hey, don't worry about it." She grinned. "I'm rich, you know."

"I know. Princess."

There was something soft in her expression now when he called her that. He didn't allow himself to get his hopes up. Even if, by some kind of miracle, she returned his feelings, what kind of future was there for them? After the festival, she was going to go back to the Order, and he definitely couldn't.

"Let's go!" Josephine laughed and started to walk. She had to take another route, turning around once more to wave at him before she vanished around a corner.

Valadan smiled, a bit happy and a bit sad, as he followed the road towards the artisans' district.

* * *

"But it's so far away!"

Josephine resisted the urge to roll her eyes as her mother wrung her hands. That kind of behavior would not fly with her parents. She wished she had a map. There probably was a map somewhere in this house. Unfortunately, pointing out that the citadel in the Sentient Wilds was no further away than the citadel in Norhar was unlikely to do her any good. It wasn't a physical distance her parents were worried about.

Norhar, at least, was in *human* territory.

"It's not. Not really," she mumbled.

"Why do you want to go there?" her father asked. "Haven't you been happy in Norhar?"

No! she wanted to scream. She hadn't been happy. Research over dusty tomes and stone samples was boring, and those few missions she had been on before her last one had been boring with a side of fresh air. If she stayed at the Norhar citadel, there was no way any of this would ever change.

"I was..." Bored. Frustrated. Annoyed. "Not unhappy," she said carefully. "But this is not what I want for my life."

In fact, she had only joined the Order because her parents had insisted, all but resigning herself to a life of dull research. Now, with the greatest of opportunities at her hands, she wanted to make the best out of it.

"But why does it have to be the jungle?" Her mother sounded truly dismayed. "I heard there are spiders as big as horses!"

Joséphine tried to hide her involuntary shudder. She did not like spiders, and she liked the idea of a spider that could eat her whole even less. It wouldn't stop her from chasing her dreams when the possibility of actually reaching them was so close.

Everything Marian had told her about this citadel sounded fascinating. Led by some members of the young race of kalani, it was the most recently founded one. At the heart of the Sentient Wilds, near their capital—in a jungle full of magic with wonderful things to discover. So far out, they didn't rely on any of the regular groups of mercenaries to escort their researchers when necessary. Instead, they employed their own warriors, ones who were familiar with the environment.

The letter weighed heavily in her pocket. She was already accepted, Marian's advocacy apparently enough to vouch for her. She could take a portal there any time she wanted, ask for their leader, and they would talk about what kind of position would be suitable for her. Nevertheless, she'd have to write another letter— as soon as she got over this dreadful talk.

“Mother, Father. I am twenty-eight years old. I’m not here to ask you for permission. I’m here to tell you.” Josephine swallowed. It was hard to keep her voice steady under their disapproving looks. “This is an incredible opportunity. I can be part of something new. I can learn so much, see a whole new world, get to know a whole new race. I’m not giving up that chance to stare at rocks all day.”

“Oh, Josephine, we’re just worried. You just got hurt.” Her mother reached out for her but stopped before she touched her arm. “Do you really think it’s a good idea to go out there? What if anything happens to you there? Who will take care of you? How will you get back?”

“Mother.” This time, she couldn’t hide the annoyance in her tone. “They have healers. And they have a portal, like all other citadels. I will be fine, and I can visit just as often as before.”

Which wouldn’t be very often because her parents could be *exhausting*.

“Now, please, can we continue this at dinner later, or tomorrow?” Or never. She knew that wasn’t likely to be an option. “I have a letter to write, and then I’ll meet with a friend.”

Under her parents’ gaze, Josephine retreated upstairs, breathing a sigh of relief as soon as she was out of sight. Well, that had gone as well as expected. She was long past needing her parents’ permission to do something. That didn’t change the fact that it very much still felt as if she did.

It was late afternoon already. If she wanted to be at the flower shop in time, she had to hurry. Josephine sat down at her desk, opening a drawer to find a stack of fine stationery. As she pulled out a sheet of paper, she brushed over the embossed emblem at the edge of it. ‘Princess’ echoed in her head.

Quill in hand, she chewed on her thumb. How should she start a request like this? Years of education and etiquette told

her about at least one page of empty phrases and pleasantries, but that wasn't her style. And, judging by the letter she pulled out of her pocket to scan it again, not his either.

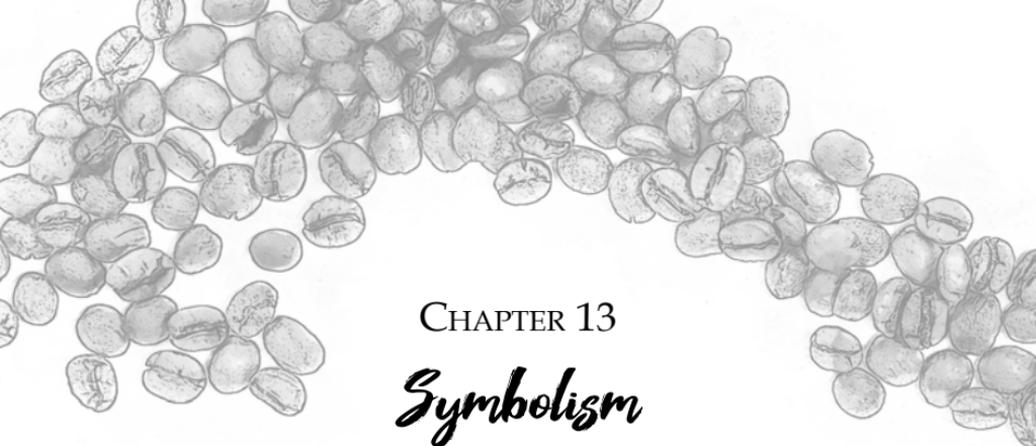
No. It was time she started to do things her own way.

She wrote a short notice that she would drop by after the Queen's Festival in a week and how much she was looking forward to it. Then, with each word carefully chosen, she put down her request: asking if they might have a second spot, one for a former mercenary who had worked with the Order before. A friend of hers, who she'd hate to leave behind.

Josephine wasn't sure if he'd even want that. If he wouldn't rather stay in Caldeia, now that he was back. But he had seemed so lost, she hadn't had the heart to ask him when it was not certain at all that he would be accepted as well. Before she could ask him if he wanted to join her—to stay with her—she had to be one hundred percent sure that it would be possible.

As for what she would do if this citadel wouldn't accept Valadan or if he didn't want to go—she had no idea. Then, the prospect of transferring to the Sentient Wilds suddenly lost a lot of its appeal.





CHAPTER 13

Symbolism

It didn't take Valadan more than a single glance at the house to know something was wrong. Could a house look dead? Because it surely seemed that way.

The windows were dull, the paths in the garden overgrown. Weeds and wildflowers fought with the rampant grass for prevalence, and where bushes and trees grazed the wall surrounding the garden, their branches had been crudely snapped off; probably by some city gardener to stop them from growing into the walkway.

There was little doubt that the house was abandoned.

Valadan stepped up to the main door and set the box down in front of it. Brushing his fingers over the weathered wood, he looked around. No colorful glass shone behind the large windows framing the door, and only barren, dead wood remained in the flowerpots in front of them. The gravel path leading around the house was barely discernible anymore. Valadan followed it, evading a couple of saplings that had grown tall enough to reach his thighs.

Behind the house, it looked even worse. Broken rubble was strewn on the ground, perhaps carried in here by a storm or thrown over the wall by someone. The paint of the bench on

the porch was faded, the table gone, and the once white bird bath was chipped and overgrown with moss.

He made his way to the wall, still finding the spot easily after so many years. A loose rock, perfectly fitting in and hard to pry out, too low for an adult to reach comfortably. Behind it, a rusty key.

Key in hand, Valadan returned to the back door, sliding the key into the lock. Hesitating. Over the years, he had often imagined how it would be to come home. Never once had he considered that his brother could be gone. The thought was surreal, as if only opening the door would make it real.

But he had to open the door, needed a place to stay. Lips pressed together, he turned the key. It took a bit of force and some wiggling to unlock the door, and he had to shove hard to move the warped wood over a small dent in the floor. Then the hallway lay in front of him, and it looked like it always had, and it didn't.

He couldn't say what made it feel so forlorn. Perhaps the layer of dust or how empty the coat rack was. Perhaps the lonesome pair of wooden shoes to be slipped on for a short run into the garden or the crumpled piece of paper lying next to them. Or perhaps it was the four metal hooks drilled into the wall over the sideboard, each one decorated with a different painted picture. A key hung on each of the hooks, which meant Damien hadn't taken his with him.

"Damien?"

He knew there would be no answer. He called out anyway.

When all stayed silent, Valadan let the bag drop from his shoulder. Sliding the key into his pocket, he walked back to the front of the house to gather the box with his armor. With it in hand, he had to move slowly, almost falling over the spot where the roots of the nearby oak tree had pushed up the earth under the path.

When he was back inside, he closed the door behind him with a shove of his hip—and a second, more vigorous one to push it over the same bump that had tried to prevent him from opening it. He carried the box into the kitchen, placing it down on the table. A bit of dust rose, dancing in the light falling through the windows.

Valadan reached into the box, taking out the wrapped apple pie. His hands were trembling as he put it down on the table. It felt silly now, having bought it without knowing if his brother would even be there. Silly and sad.

How long had Damien been gone already? Considering the state of the house and garden, it must have been years. Where could he have gone? Was he even alive? Perhaps there would be a hint somewhere. Desperate to keep himself busy, to stop his thoughts from spiraling out of control, Valadan started to search.

All he found in the kitchen were pots and dishes, pristine behind closed cabinet doors. There was no food left other than some containers of flour, sugar, and salt. The storage room delivered no results either, except that it was empty. It was odd to see it without bags of potatoes and root vegetables or glass jars filled with preserved fruits. The shelves were barren, save for some stacked baskets.

With a lump in his throat, he climbed the stairs to the first floor. He started on the left side, not wasting much time with their father's room. It looked the same as it had since the day he had died. The bathroom, too, was unchanged. There was little dust and not much that could be missing in the first place. Dark specks on the bar of soap made him wrinkle his nose—how the fuck had the soap managed to grow mold—and he didn't bother testing if the water would still flow.

Valadan decided to check his own room next. When he opened the door and stepped inside, it felt so much smaller

than he remembered. There was barely enough space to stand between the bed along one wall and the shelf along the other. Where every other room in the house had been tidied and must have been left behind in spotless condition, his own looked like he had just stepped outside—and then forgotten to come back.

His wooden sword was lying on the floor, his stuffed horse on the bed. Clothes were strewn all over the place, shirts he had long outgrown. A bunch of papers were piled on the desk in front of the window, a long-dried inkwell next to them. It looked like no one had entered the room since the day he had left.

Valadan went to the bed and sat down on it. The creaking of the wooden frame and the mattress were so familiar it made his heart ache. He reached beneath the bed, searching for a moment before his fingertips found the wooden box. Inside were the keepsakes of the child he had once been. Pretty stones, crude wooden figures, glass marbles, and a bag filled with coins. Small coins only: copper and the occasional silver. Saved at a time when he had dreamed of finding his luck in the world, leaving this dull life behind.

But then his departure had been so hasty—following a fight that now, in hindsight, had been so fucking unnecessary—that he had not had the time to take anything with him. At least he would be able to pay Josephine back immediately.

Stuffing the bag of coins into his pocket, he moved on to the next door, pausing with his hand on the handle. Damien's room. His room, too, so many years ago. Before they had started to fight almost every day. Before their father had grown so tired of it, he had allowed them to turn his office into another bedroom—an office he hadn't had any use for anyway since it had long been Damien who had taken care of the business.

Just like he had taken care of everything.

The room was blurry when Valadan opened the door. That damn dust burning in his eyes. He blinked, trying to clear his vision so he could look around. A large wooden desk stood where once his bed had been. He had seen it before, of course, but never as empty as this. The whole room was tidied, from the comforter on the bed, over the curtains in front of the window, to the rug on the floor. Not a single scrap of paper or piece of clothing was lying around. The books on the shelf were meticulously arranged, a colorful glass statuette to the left of them, a wooden carving to the right.

When Valadan opened the wardrobe, a few empty spots suggested that Damien had taken some clothes with him. It was a small relief; a dead man would have taken none.

Still, nothing to tell him what had happened, where Damien could have gone. He checked the desk, pulling open some of the drawers. Inside, he found nothing but old letters, a faded propaganda flyer, and business paperwork: confirmations of paid taxes and notes from a few suppliers.

There was one more room he had to check. Valadan's heart beat up to his throat as he descended the stairs and crossed the hallway, stopping in front of the workshop. He had always hated it as much as Damien had loved it. The fucking glass that had connected everyone in this family but him.

He pushed the door open with a bit more force than would have been necessary. Warm light streamed in through the large windows, almost blinding him. He took a step forward, freezing when something crunched under his soles. When he looked down, he found that glass shards covered most of the floor. The thin, fragile remains of baubles. The thick, lead-framed pieces of lanterns and candle holders. Colorful parts of figures: heads and legs and wings.

Valadan stared at the devastation, trying to make sense of it. There had been no sign of a break-in, and anyway, everything else was intact. The sick feeling in his stomach grew as

he looked around, spotting more details. Some things were still whole. On the shelves at the far wall, true masterpieces caught the light of the setting sun, shimmering in all colors of the rainbow. He even remembered some of those pieces—those that were older than he was.

With every moment that passed, everything he took in, it became clearer that only the newer works were shattered and destroyed. Those Damien had made.

“What have you done?” Valadan whispered.

Something shimmered in a pile of red and green shards. He bent down, carefully brushing the sharp edges aside to reveal a star. Somehow, it had remained unscathed. Made from pieces of white, almost silver glass, it had an iridescent shimmer as he held it up into the light. Perhaps there was some kind of symbolism to it if he believed in such things. Finding a silver star in the shards that remained of his old life.

Star in hand, he turned around to leave the workshop. In the doorway, he stopped and looked back.

What happened? Where are you?

He wished the glass could answer him.

Valadan sat at the kitchen table, tracing patterns in the dust with his finger.

For years, he had guarded that one last belief in his heart. That no matter what, he could come back. That his brother would forgive him, as so often before. That there would be shimmering glass, and a warm kitchen, and stern looks.

No matter how often he had wanted to return, he had never dared to. Knowing how much his brother had done for him, had lost because of him, had *suffered* because of him. Damien deserved better than having to take care of his useless mess of a brother.

Now, for the first time in his life, Valadan truly wanted to be better. He wanted to do something his brother could

be proud of. He wanted to keep his anger under control. He never again wanted to be the reason someone got hurt.

Valadan knew it would be hard to hold on to that once he was alone again.

At least he had a place to sleep now, and with whatever few coins his younger self had saved, he'd make it for a couple of weeks. More than enough time to find something new, if not another group of mercenaries, then anything else.

Looking at the windows, he found that the sun was setting already. With nothing for him to do here, he really shouldn't let Josephine wait. The temperature would fall as soon as the sun was gone, so he went to the hallway to grab his bag. After digging around in it for a moment, he decided on the green sweater. Brushing his fingertips over it, he sighed.

There was another tiny spark of hope, one he tried not to acknowledge. That perhaps wherever she went, he could come with her. It was unlikely the Order would accept him again, no matter which citadel she chose, but not all of them were as remote as the one in Norhar. If there was a town nearby, he might be able to start a new life there. To keep seeing her.

It was a few days until the Queen's Festival. A few days to work up the courage to ask her.

Valadan took the key from one of the metal hooks so he could put the rusty one back outside, behind the rock in the wall. Perhaps it was silly to consider it, to hope for it, but if Damien returned, he would need it.

Key in one pocket, enough coins to pay Josephine back in the other, Valadan paused. He walked back into the kitchen and picked up the star that was lying on the table. With the sun almost gone, it didn't shimmer as much anymore, but it was still silver. She liked silver. He took it with him as he left the house.

The way to the temple of Ilairyah wasn't overly far. Outside, it wasn't even fully dark yet, and the streets were as busy as

ever. Valadan wasn't sure if he was late. They should have agreed on a better time than *sunset*. As soon as the flower shop came into view, he slowed down, his gaze wandering searchingly over the crowd.

It didn't take him long to spot her. She was wearing a long, emerald green dress with a pale yellow stole wrapped around her shoulders. Her hair was put up in some elaborate fashion, not a strand falling below her shoulders. It was unusual, to say the best. Unusual and stunning.

Valadan hoped she hadn't been waiting for long. He started to walk towards her, hand already half raised in greeting when someone else approached her.

Josephine's face lit up when she saw the man. She ran the last few steps towards him, her dress fluttering behind her, and all but jumped into his arms. He swirled her around, then pulled her close to kiss her.

Valadan took a step aside, partially hiding behind a gorgeous display of blooming flowers. He should have turned around and left, but he couldn't stop watching. Little touches, held hands, words spoken close to the other's ear so they could be understood over the noise of the crowd.

There was nothing for him to fight for here, nothing he could hope to gain. It was ridiculous for him to even feel that way. He had merely paid back his debt, fixing the damage he had caused in the first place, nothing else. She had been kind to him because that was the person she was. The person he had fallen in love with.

He should have known better.

Suddenly aware of a sharp pain in his right hand, he looked down. Blood dripped off his fingers, staining the glass star. Fuck. He must have squeezed it too hard. A part of it had broken off and was now sticking out of his palm.

He dropped the rest before carefully pulling the shard out. The wound didn't seem to be too deep, but it was deep

enough to bleed – and hurt – like fuck. Already grabbing the sleeve to pull it over the wound, Valadan froze. It was a nice sweater. He shouldn't stain it with blood. Instead, he held his hand away from his body, letting the blood drip on the ground.

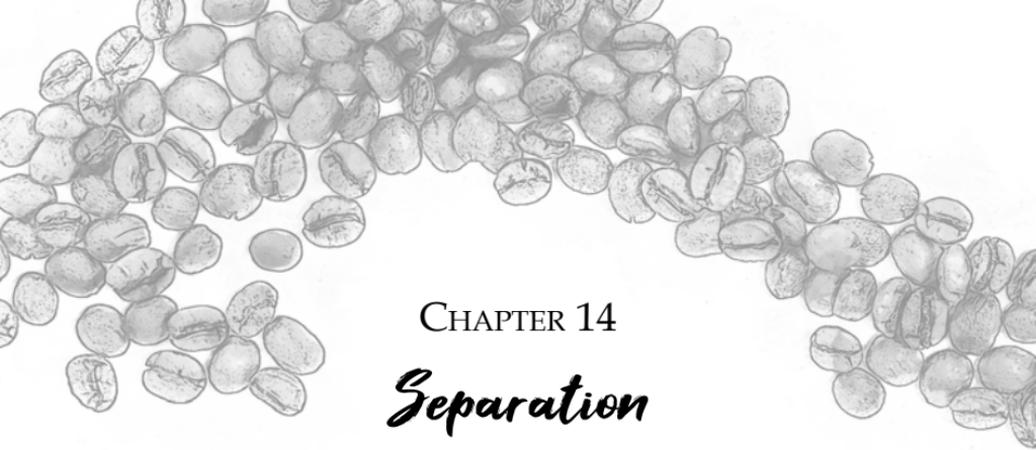
When he looked up, they were leaving. Walking away, their backs turned towards him. The way she clung to the man's arm, her head on his shoulder, slightly inclined to listen to whatever it was he said. Her posture, her whole demeanor, was so carefree and joyous. It hurt to think that she had never been like this around him. It wasn't even jealousy, but the knowledge that she could never have been this happy with him.

He stared until the two of them vanished in the crowd and then a bit longer. Someone else would be there for her now, holding her after her nightmares, helping her chase her dreams. Balling his hand into a fist, he dug his nails into the cut, pressing down.

Please take care of her.

If only it hurt enough, it would be a reasonable explanation for the tears in his eyes.





CHAPTER 14

Separation

Josephine was standing close to the window, a glass in her left hand. The liquid inside—some way-too-expensive rum she had found in her parents' bar—shimmered golden in the light. If she looked at it from above, holding the glass over the polished wooden floor of her room, it turned almost copper.

She wasn't even sure why she had gotten it. The smell was too strong already, and the taste would probably be even worse, definitely not worth whatever her father had paid for it. Alcohol had never done her much good in the first place. It only slowed down her thoughts, scattering them yet never managing to fully chase away the memories that tormented her. It had been a futile attempt to deal with the nightmares and easy enough to stop as long as he had been there at her side to hold her when she woke up.

He was no longer here, though. Which was the whole fucking problem.

"Hey, Sis. Since when do you drink?"

Josephine looked up from her glass to find her sister standing in the doorway. She was wearing a long dress with short sleeves, light enough that going out would require a jacket to keep warm. The bright green fabric with colorful flowers

stitched all over it could have been an attempt to cling to the quickly fading summer, but she knew that it was just Christine's style.

"I'm not," Josephine said, raising the still full glass. "I'm staring at it."

"So you are." Christine sighed as she entered the room, pulling the door closed behind her. "Come on, something is wrong. You've been hiding in here for three days now. I've barely seen you since you've come back."

Three days. Three days since she had waited in vain at the flower shop, until long after nightfall. Three days of wondering if he had only used her after all; to take a portal to Caldeia, to get some money for a fresh start. Three days of fearing that something had happened to him. Josephine turned towards the window, staring outside as if he could appear in her parents' carefully tended garden any second now.

Of course he didn't.

"Jos..." Christine stepped next to her, peering outside as well. "Tell me."

Josephine looked at their reflections in the window. Despite their lives having drifted apart some years ago, they were still so similar. Christine's hair was shorter than hers, barely reaching her shoulders, and her features were less stern. With how bright it was outside, only their outlines were visible on the glass, making it seem like they were one and the same person.

"It's a long story."

"Well, I have time." Christine took the glass from Josephine's hand and put it down on the desk before leading her to the bed. "Tell me, Sis."

And Josephine told her. About the expedition and Valadan's insufferable behavior. About the cave-in and how she thought she was going to die. About waking up in the hospital, alone at first, then no longer alone, then alone again. The

memory made her heart beat quicker and her hands shake. She dug them into the comforter.

"Please, Chris, you can't tell our parents how close it was. They'd never let me go if they knew."

Christine made a gesture to show that her lips were sealed, but her gaze was earnest and sad. "So this guy... he got you into trouble, and then he saved you?" she asked.

Josephine opened her mouth, then closed it again. He had done so much *more*. This time, she had to choose her words more carefully, leaving some details out. She wouldn't tell Christine about the desolate condition Valadan had been in when he had first appeared at her door, nor about how she had found him behind the stables.

Some things she couldn't leave out, though, not if she wanted to paint an accurate picture of her situation. She had to mention that he had lost his position with the mercenaries and how he had run out of money, and how, despite it all, he had stayed to be with her.

"You love him."

It wasn't even a question.

Josephine wanted to object, but the words got stuck in her throat. She didn't love him! She only wanted to have him at her side for the rest of her life, see his smile during the day, and hold him close during the night. And, perhaps, get to the point where she could accidentally misplace his clothes without feeling bad about it.

Well, fuck.

"I guess I do." Her voice was heavy with resignation. Wasn't it a bit too late for that realization?

"And he loves you." When Christine noticed her questioning look, she rolled her eyes. "This man has basically dedicated his life to you! He slept on your floor and almost starved because of you. If that doesn't mean he wants to fuck you, then I don't know what would."

Josephine swallowed. Her sister surely had a way with words. Her parents would be delighted.

"So, where is he?" Christine then asked. "When can I meet him?"

"He's gone."

"Gone?" her sister repeated. "What do you mean? How?"

Josephine sighed, wishing she had her glass back, if only to hold onto it. "I don't know. He needed a way to leave the citadel, so I offered him to come with me to Caldeia, and I gave him some money. We were supposed to meet up again in the evening, and he never showed."

"You think he used you?"

"No." Josephine's response had been instant, firm. Then she hesitated. "No..." she said again, but it sounded less certain now. "I mean, why would he? All he would have to do was *ask*. He knew that." She had quite literally offered it to him. "I don't know what to think. I'm hurt, and worried, and angry, and..."

"A bit heartbroken?" her sister asked.

Josephine nodded.

"Jos... is there a chance he didn't find you? You say he hasn't been here in a while."

"I don't think so. I told him about the flower shop, and he knew it." She kneaded her hands. "I was there a few minutes late because I had to send an important letter, but... He would have waited, wouldn't he? I was... I did. Wait. Until it was dark, and everything was closed, and..." She trailed off, remembering the growing feeling of sadness, of loneliness.

Even if he hadn't waited, he knew her name, her family. Three days would have been plenty of time for him to find her if he had wanted to. Just thinking about how she might never see him again made her want to burst into tears.

"Was that the day you came back?"

Staring at some spot on the carpet, Josephine nodded.

"Does he know about me?" Christine asked. Something about her tone was off.

"What?"

"Does he know about me?" Christine repeated. "I was there, that day. With my fiancé. We were meeting for dinner." There was a short pause in which Josephine's thoughts started to fall into place, only to be interrupted as Christine blurted out, "What if he saw *me*?"

The mere possibility made Josephine's stomach drop. If Valadan had seen her sister with her fiancé, it was no wonder he had left without confronting her. She couldn't forget the vulnerable look in his eyes, the disbelief every time she had shown him a bit of kindness. He would have felt so betrayed.

"Do you know where he wanted to go?" Christine's question pulled her back to the present.

"He wanted to visit his brother."

"Okay, so you," Christine started, looking Josephine up and down, "are gonna take a nice long bath now. And I will find out where this brother of his lives." She sighed. "We'll find him. If something happened to him, you can save his ass. If he's a jerk, you can kick his ass. But if all this was just some big misunderstanding..."

Christine theatrically wriggled her eyebrows in an obvious attempt to make Josephine laugh. Successfully so. She laughed, then blushed.

"Thank you," she said.

Perhaps Christine was right. It was too early to give up hope.

* * *

Valadan sat in the darkest corner of the cheapest tavern he had been able to find, a stale beer in front of him. It had tasted

like piss already before it had turned warm, which had happened several hours ago. He had only managed to take one small sip before feeling sick.

Not that the taste had ever bothered him before. It didn't even bother him now. What bothered him was thinking how disappointed Josephine would be if he got drunk out of his mind and managed to get himself beat up, as always. As if it mattered. As if she fucking cared about him.

No. That wasn't fair. She did care about him, that had been more than obvious. More than he deserved, probably.

Instead of drinking, he tapped his fingers against the tankard, watching the beer inside slosh around. It wasn't late yet, only a couple of tables in use, so no one had bothered to kick him out. When evening came, he'd either have to order more or leave.

He should leave. He had to get his ass up and find work before he'd pick up where he left off: starving to death before the winter was over. It would be rude to waste the chance she had given him. Not to mention that it would be a fucking bad end to die like that. A bad end to a bad life full of bad decisions.

"Spot's still free?"

The voice made Valadan freeze. He closed both hands around the tankard, needing a moment to steady himself before he dared to look up. Josephine wore a long, dark gray coat, her hair bound back. Her ice-blue eyes bored into him, as beautiful as ever. Valadan swallowed.

Before he had a chance to reply, she sat down next to him, pushing her chair so close her knee brushed his leg. He swallowed again.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

He could ask her the same question. He didn't, instead staring at his tankard.

"Are you drunk?"

"No," he said, though right now he certainly wished he was. "Just been looking at it."

Josephine made a noise somewhere between a sigh and a huff. Why was she even here? Why had she bothered searching for him? Because she must have been searching for him. There was no way she'd randomly show up in a place like this.

They hadn't talked about their plans here in Caldeia—mostly because he had assumed they'd talk that evening, and it had never come to that. As far as he was aware, their agreement had come to an end. She would move on, and he would stay here, and that was that.

Well, except for one thing. He did owe her money. Valadan reached into his pocket, pulling out a small pouch tied closed with a leather band. He had been carrying the money with him each day on the off chance that he might meet her or his legs would be willing to take him to her house. He wasn't even sure if she knew how much she had given him. He knew, though, and he had made sure it was all there.

"Sorry. Didn't want to vanish without paying you back," he said, placing the pouch on the table.

She barely cast a glance at the pouch. "I'm not worried about the money. I'm worried about you! What's wrong? Why didn't you come back?"

"I'm sorry," he said, burying his face in his hands. "Sorry. I should have said something." He could at least have written her a note and put it in her parents' mailbox with the money. It wasn't like the house of the Lightwoods was hard to find or anything. "I didn't know you were... I— I just couldn't bear to see you with another man."

A long silence followed. Valadan didn't dare to look up, not even as Josephine reached for his hand, pulling it away from his face so she could close her fingers around it. Her skin was warm and soft, and Valadan automatically clung to her hand. By the time he realized how inappropriate that

was, letting go seemed to be an impossible task.

“Remember when I told you I have a sister?”

Valadan nodded, finally looking up.

“I guess I forgot to mention that Christine is my *twin* sister.”

Twin sister. His thoughts were as slow as if he had truly spent his morning drinking. There was a significance behind those two words, brought to light by the way she smiled, by the mixture of worry and relief in her eyes.

“You mean...”

“It wasn’t me you saw. I was late, and when I arrived, you were already gone.” She squeezed his hand. “You saw my sister Christine and her fiancé.”

Her sister. He had seen her sister. The wave of relief washing over him was quickly replaced by dread. He had pretty much told Josephine he was in love with her, and if she didn’t return his feelings, it would make everything so much more awkward, and perhaps he had ruined his only chance of her sticking around now, and—

“So... you can’t stand to see me with another man, huh?”

She raised her hand to his face, looking at him a bit amused and a bit something else. Valadan could only stare at her as she came closer until her lips touched his. Too shocked to react, he sat frozen while she pulled back, a questioning look on her face.

“Do you—” she started, interrupted by him closing the distance between them.

This time, he kissed her, a short, gentle kiss only before he wrapped his arms around her, burying his face against her neck. Clinging to her, as if that could keep her from leaving again, to make her stay in his life forever. How could he ever have thought he’d be able to live without her?

“I love you,” he whispered as he eventually let go.

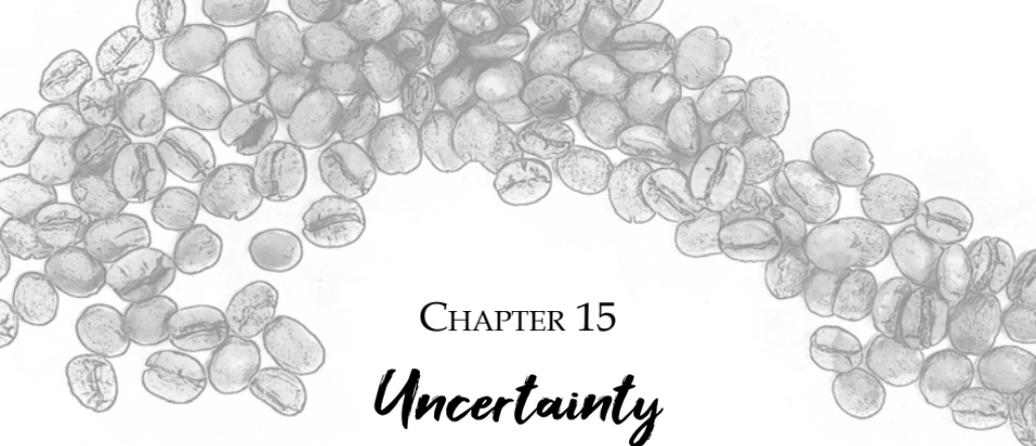
Josephine smiled, stroking his temple and running her fingers through his hair.

"I love you, too."

She looked at him so warmly, like it was truly him she saw, him she wanted. Like he could be enough. For the first time in his life, Valadan felt like he could be.

Then her lips touched his again, and nothing else mattered anymore.





CHAPTER 15

Uncertainty

“Let’s go.”

Valadan nodded. Lost in Josephine’s eyes, and with his hand in hers, he would have followed her to the end of the world. It wasn’t quite the end of the world she led him to, though, only out of the dingy tavern. Outside, a fresh breeze made him shiver, and he rubbed his bare arm with his free hand.

Josephine led him away from the tavern, looking up at the sky, perhaps trying to find the position of the sun behind dark gray clouds.

“We should get some food and find a place to sit and talk. What’s the last time you’ve eaten something?” she asked.

Valadan’s expression must have been guilty enough to give the truth away. Josephine sighed, coming closer with her next step, gently bumping into him.

“Yeah. Me too,” she mumbled.

The sadness in her eyes, in her voice, sent a strange kind of pain through his chest. Realizing she had truly missed him, had been distraught by the thought of never seeing him again, was so surreal. He didn’t think anyone had ever missed him like that before.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Josephine squeezed his hand. "It's not your fault. It was bad luck."

The look she gave him was so earnest, holding his gaze as if she wanted to make sure that he truly believed her. That, too, was surreal. Usually, people did blame him – not that it wasn't justified most of the time.

"Come."

She pulled on his hand, leading him through streets he barely saw. All Valadan had eyes for was Josephine. He took in every detail: the few strands that had escaped her hairdo and were now fluttering in the wind, the glances she cast in his direction, the warmth of her hand wrapped tightly around his fingers. A part of him couldn't believe that it was real, not just a dream he would awake from any moment now.

By the time a merchant handed her a wrapped bundle of pastries, the first raindrops started to fall. Josephine wiped a fat drop of water off her forehead, peering up to the sky.

"I had hoped for a bit more privacy than an inn can offer, but if it rains, we can't stay outside. Or do you know a good place around here?"

"We can go to my –" Valadan faltered. It was his brother's house, but his brother was gone. "My family's house," he said after a moment. "It's where I've been staying."

"Your family won't mind?"

"My family is gone."

The words were easily spoken, and Valadan was almost sure he had managed to keep his emotions from showing on his face. Almost. Josephine's expression was full of sympathy as she reached for his hand.

"Let's go, then."

Valadan nodded, looking around for the first time. Despite all the years that had passed, it took him only a moment to recognize the area and figure out where he had to go. Side by

side, they followed the street, picking up speed as more raindrops began to fall. By the time they reached the house, they were all but soaked anyway. Valadan let go of Josephine's hand, pushing wet hair out of his face while he dug for the key in his pocket.

"Come in," he said while giving the door the customary shove past the bump in the floor.

Josephine did, looking around as she entered. Suddenly, Valadan was nervous. As if this house wasn't cause for enough conflicting feelings already, now he wondered how she saw it. As homely as hand-painted key hooks and colorful mended aprons were, they were surely no match for the kind of life she was used to.

Josephine sat the wrapped bundle down on the sideboard so she could take off her coat. Seeing her do so made Valadan move as well.

"I'll get some blankets," he said, walking towards the stairs. "You can go into the kitchen." He pointed towards one of the two doors on the ground floor; the other one led to the workshop, which he had no intention of ever entering again.

By the time Valadan walked into the kitchen, Josephine was sitting on the bench at the table. It had taken him a few minutes to change into a dry shirt and find the spare blankets in his parents' bedroom. When he entered, Josephine stopped looking around and looked at him instead. The smile on her face made his heart beat faster as he crossed the kitchen to come to a halt next to her.

Her coat had kept her mostly dry, so he draped one blanket around her shoulders. The other, he put down on the bench, not sitting down himself yet.

"Want something to drink? Tea, coffee, water?" he asked.

"Coffee, please."

Valadan walked over to the cupboard. Luckily, he had at least bought the most important things: coffee and milk,

some bread, and a few eggs. He pulled the container out and filled the kettle with water. When he put it on the stove, he found that there was no wood left.

“Ah, fuck,” he muttered, looking at the window. It would be a joy to fetch fresh wood while it was raining like that.

“Bring it over here.”

Valadan raised the kettle with a questioning look, and Josephine nodded. When he put the kettle down in front of her, she placed her hands around it. For a while, nothing happened. When steam began to rise, so did Valadan’s eyebrows. Apparently, she didn’t only specialize in ice magic.

“Thank you,” he said, picking up the kettle to prepare the coffee.

A short while later, they sat side by side on the bench, wrapped in blankets, their legs touching, two steaming cups in front of them. Josephine unwrapped the bundle on the table, revealing more baked, cheese-filled pastries than the two of them could possibly eat.

They shared the first one in silence, the rain pattering against the window the only sound in the otherwise quiet kitchen. When Josephine cut the second pastry in half while Valadan refilled their cups, they started to talk. Josephine inquired what he had done in those last few days and whether he had found his brother. Valadan asked how the meeting with her parents had gone and about her sister.

Slowly, they became more comfortable, telling each other stories about their childhoods and the early years after leaving their homes. He didn’t know if she felt similarly, but he found it easy to talk about things he had never told anyone before.

“If you hadn’t seen Christine – what would you have done that evening?” Josephine eventually asked.

Valadan looked into his cup, mourning the fact that it was empty. “I was going to ask where you are going. Since, you

know... You said you might not stay in Norhar. I had hoped that..." He tilted the cup, watching the dregs of the coffee pool at the lowest point. "That it would be near a city. That I could come with you and..." He swallowed. It should be easier to say it now that he knew she wanted him around. It wasn't. "And find some work there. So I could keep seeing you."

"I'm going to the citadel in the Sentient Wilds." Josephine's words were calm and matter-of-fact.

"Oh."

Valadan wasn't even sure he had known that there *was* a citadel in the Sentient Wilds. All he knew for sure was that there would be no human city anywhere near. The pastry in his stomach seemed to turn to stone. No city meant no way for him to earn a living, no place for him to stay.

Perhaps there would be another way. He had heard of outposts and small villages in the jungle. There had to be another way. He couldn't lose her — not *now*.

"You know," Josephine said, her tone as neutral as before. "You don't have to work. You could just come with me. I can pay for all we need."

A bit of the long forgotten bitterness flared up at her words. Valadan tried to fight it down. She surely hadn't meant for it to sound as condescending as it had seemed to him.

Sure, it would be nice to never be starving again, to never have to worry if he'd be without a roof over his head in the middle of winter. If the price for that was sitting around without a purpose, without contributing anything, it was too high.

"I think..." He trailed off, swallowing. "I can come with you. Stay for a while, see if I can find some kind of work there." Not everyone in a citadel was a scholar. There had to be kitchens, stables, house- and groundskeepers. He couldn't give up hope yet. "But if I don't... I don't think I can stay."

Josephine gave him a long look, and he wished he could guess her thoughts. His own thoughts wandered back to Damien, to how frustrated he had been with his useless little brother. He couldn't bear to eventually see the same kind of frustration in Josephine's eyes.

"I think you'll find something," she said, sliding something towards him.

Torn between hope and despair, Valadan reached for the folded piece of paper. With trembling hands, he unfolded it, finding a neatly written letter. The handwriting was beautiful, the signature at the bottom he skipped to a name he didn't know.

His nerves made it hard for him to focus on the words, skimming past the smallest amount of pleasantries to find a confirmation of her acceptance. Below was a list of possible dates for her arrival, all of them a few days in the future, after the Queen's Festival. And below that list was another note, one that made his heart beat up to his throat. He had to read the part multiple times, not believing his eyes.

As for your companion, you're welcome to bring him along. While I can make no promises, I am convinced that everyone can find a place in this citadel. We can talk about the details once you've arrived; please also let me know if you'll need separate or joint accommodations.

Valadan looked up, eyes burning. To have this letter, she must have sent a request days ago. While he had been too much of a coward to so much as ask her about her plans, those very plans had already included him.

Josephine raised her hand to his face, wiping a tear off his cheek he hadn't even noticed.

"I was also hoping you'd come with me."

How long the two of them sat there, arms wrapped around each other, Valadan couldn't say. Outside the window, it became fully dark, and the heavy rain turned into a quiet background noise.

"Perhaps we should go to sleep," Josephine mumbled.

Her head was resting on his chest, tucked under his chin, and her voice sounded as if she was already half asleep. Valadan pulled her closer, humming a quiet approval. Despite the earlier coffee, he was tired; he hadn't only barely eaten during those last days but also barely slept.

"Do you want to stay here tonight?" he asked.

"Mhm."

"Then come."

He stood up, somehow managing to keep one arm around Josephine as he shook off the blankets and draped them on the bench. Then he reached for the oil lamp he had ignited some hours ago and led Josephine up the stairs.

Valadan ignited another lamp in the hallway and two in his room before putting the lamp he was holding on the table. In the chest next to his bed – he hadn't been worth a wardrobe to his father – he dug around to find an old shirt and some even older pants that were cut off at the knees. They probably wouldn't fit him anymore, but might be just right for her.

"Here." He held them out to Josephine. When she took them, he picked up the oil lamp again, nodding towards the door as he said, "I'll show you the bathroom."

While she got ready for bed, Valadan slipped into new clothes as well. He pulled the sheets off his bed, replacing them with fresh ones. Staring at the bed, he hesitated, realizing how small it was. How small everything was. Perhaps he should get a second blanket or just sleep somewhere el –

"Hey."

Josephine's voice startled him out of his thoughts. She was standing in the doorway, wearing his shirt, her hair falling

over her shoulders. The dark, washed-out linen made her ice-blue eyes shine. It was the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

“Hey,” he croaked.

She entered the room, looking around for a free spot on the shelf to place her folded clothes. The fine silver fabric of her sweater looked so out of place next to tattered books and stacks of business correspondence. He had been thankful enough to get a room of his own to never complain that most of the things inside hadn't even been his.

“I left the lamp in the bathroom,” Josephine said as she walked over to the bed. Sitting down, she chuckled.

“What?” Valadan asked.

“So now you managed to get me into your bed after all.”

At those words, Valadan choked on his breath. All their lighthearted banter had vanished the moment she had found him behind the stables. He hadn't even realized how much he had missed it. The way she was a match for him in every way, be it with plain stubbornness, crude jokes, or her skill on the training field. It wasn't only her beauty and her kindness; it was all those facets of her he had fallen in love with, and he wanted to treasure every single one of them.

Right now, it was him who was at a loss for words, only managing a mumbled ‘be right back’ between coughs as he fled towards the bathroom. A bit of cold water and a few minutes alone were exactly what he needed to get his feelings under control.

When he returned, Josephine had wrapped herself into the blanket. She looked up at him as he turned off the two lamps, leaving only the one burning he had brought back from the bathroom. He placed it on the nightstand—more a wooden box, really—and sat down on the mattress.

Staring at the narrow bed once more, he swallowed. There would be no way to keep even a resemblance of distance up.

"Do you want me to sleep somewhere else?" he asked. Had to ask. It would feel wrong to use his brother's or parents' bed, but he would find a way if he had to. He had slept on the floor long enough; another night or two would barely matter.

"No," she said without hesitation, but her tone was strange. Valadan tried to read her expression, having little success.

"What is it?" he asked softly.

"I made that joke, but..." She gripped the blanket tighter, pulling it up above her chin. "I'm not... I'm not ready yet. Sorry."

"Hey." Valadan reached for the swirl of blanket that covered her hand. "That's not... I wasn't even thinking about that."

Well, that wasn't the whole truth. It was hard not to think about that, especially after such a comment, but he hadn't *considered* it. If he was honest, he wasn't ready himself.

"We'll just sleep. And if you have a nightmare, I'll be there. And tomorrow morning, I'll make you the best coffee and the worst breakfast you've ever had."

Valadan could see how she relaxed at his words, how her grip on the blanket loosened and a smile lit up her face. If his heart hadn't already been completely lost to her, it would have been now.

"Worse than Pascal's attempt at porridge?" she asked.

"That wasn't breakfast, that was a crime against the gods."

Josephine laughed, shuffling against the wall to make more room for him. As soon as he extinguished the light and laid down, Josephine's hand found his. Valadan had forgotten to pick up a second blanket after all, but it didn't matter because she pulled the one she had wrapped around herself over both of them. Her closeness and her warmth were intoxicating; reminding him how this was all he had wished for days ago, but also reminding him how close he had been to losing his chance of being with her.

He'd have to thank her sister for helping her find him.

Valadan bedded his head on the mattress – he had also forgotten to look for a second pillow – and closed his eyes.

“Josephine?” When she made a low, questioning noise, he continued, “Can I... can I hold you? I just – I need to know that it's real.”

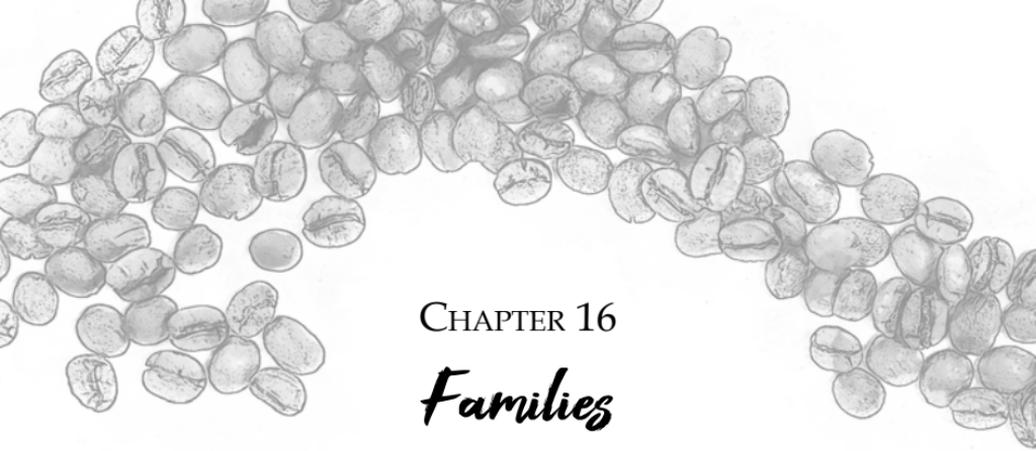
How pathetic it sounded, spoken out loud. Valadan opened his eyes, wishing he could take the words back.

Josephine shifted, but in the darkness of the room he couldn't see what she was doing. All he heard was a soft rustle before something brushed over his arm, towards his shoulder. A moment later, her fingertips touched his cheek. She traced the line of his jaw, then moved higher to stroke his temple and get lost in his hair. Valadan shivered under her touch.

“It's real,” she whispered. “I'm here, and you're here, and wherever the future will lead us, we'll go there together. Okay?”

She wrapped her arm around him, and he wrapped his arm around her in return, pulling her so close he could feel her heart beating in her chest. Her head under his chin was a perfect fit, her hair as soft as silk as he pressed a kiss onto it.

For the first time in his life, the future was something he didn't dread.



CHAPTER 16

Families

“So that’s him?”

Christine’s scrutinizing gaze made Valadan feel like an insect pinned to a showcase. While he resisted the urge to take half a step back and hide behind Josephine, he wondered what exactly she had told her sister about him.

Now, seeing Christine up close and side by side with Josephine, there was no way he would ever confuse the two. Christine’s hair wasn’t put up; it was barely shoulder length, and she wore a long, green dress again. At first glance, their faces looked the same, but Josephine’s blue eyes were brighter, shimmering with her ice magic.

It wasn’t so much their physical differences but their posture and expression that made it easy to tell them apart. Christine held herself lightly, her dress fluttering as she moved, the skin around her eyes crinkling with laughter. In contrast, Josephine wore a high-necked silver sweater over simple black pants, and there was a certain sternness in her expression that never fully went away.

Half a year ago, he had considered her clothing style prude and her behavior standoffish.

Half a year ago, he had been a fucking fool.

“Nice to meet you,” her sister said, finally having finished her assessment. “My name’s Christine, but I guess you already know that.”

Valadan took her offered hand, shaking it a bit awkwardly.

“I’m Valadan. But I guess... You also already know that. I heard you helped her find me.” He swallowed, overly aware of his hand as she let go of it. Her touch, too, had felt nothing like Josephine’s. “I’m really glad to meet you, because I— Thank you. Thank you.”

Christine nodded, then looked from him to Josephine. “I don’t know what you mean, Sis. He does have some manners,” she said with a mischievous grin.

Valadan froze, not quite sure what to reply to that. The question of what Josephine had told her sister about him came back; just that this time, the knot in his stomach reminded him of all the ways he had fucked up since he had met her. By the Seven, he had been such an asshole.

“Be nice,” Josephine said next to him.

Christine ignored her. “And he’s handsome.” She looked him up and down once more. “Now he just has to be good in bed, and you’ve found yourself a perfect man.”

“Christine, *please*.”

Something about Josephine’s tone broke the spell. Perhaps it was the fact that she was defending him in front of her sister, the one person who must be closer to her than anyone else—or the urge to protect her, even if all there was to protect her from was her embarrassment, making her blush slightly.

“Oh, I can promise you, I’m great in bed,” he said, pulling Josephine towards him and wrapping one arm around her. The gesture might have looked possessive, but he only did it so he could give her shoulder a reassuring squeeze while holding her close. “I don’t snore, I don’t steal blankets, and I am so hot, I don’t mind if she warms her icy little feet on me.”

The cocky, self-assured smirk slipped back onto his face all on its own. With Josephine right here at his side, because she *chose* to be, some of his confidence returned. The memory of her body under his hands and her lips on his skin filled him with warmth. She loved him, so whatever it was she saw in him, it couldn't be all that bad.

Christine stared at him, then started to laugh.

"I like him. Don't lose him again, Sis."

Valadan looked at Josephine, relieved to see a smile on her face, even if she did roll her eyes at him the moment his gaze met hers. He resisted the urge to stick his tongue out.

"Come, let's walk a bit and find something to eat." Christine spun around, pointing in a specific direction. The last bit of her guardedness seemed to be gone. "Last year, there was this stall with baked fish near the palace district. I'd kill for one of those right now."

Josephine laughed, taking Valadan's hand. "Sure. Lead the way," she said.

Half an hour later, the three of them settled down in one of Caldeia's many parks. Sitting side by side in the grass, they ate their baked fish, sharing a bottle of sparkling wine between them. The light was slowly growing dim, taking some of the day's colors with it. It wasn't really cold, but Valadan surely didn't complain as Josephine edged towards him until her arm was brushing against his.

She was telling her sister about something that must have happened before he had met her, some funny incident on a day trip outside the citadel. While she laughed and gestured wildly with her right hand, the rest of her fish sat all but forgotten in her left.

Valadan loved seeing her this happy. At the same time, he couldn't help but miss his own brother. Looking up at the sky where the first stars began to glimmer, he wondered if

Damien was looking at the same sky right now. Where he was. If he sometimes thought of him. If he missed him.

Or if, perhaps, he was happier without him. If he had found a new family, one that didn't only hurt him.

No. It was pointless to think about it, and he really shouldn't ruin this perfect evening with musings that were bound to drag his mood down. Valadan lowered his gaze, paying attention to the sisters' words again.

"You're not gonna introduce him to our parents, I take."

Josephine sighed. "They're already barely willing to accept that I'm moving to the Wilds," she said. "Can you imagine the outrage if I appeared at their doorstep with a commoner?"

The moment the words left her lips, she flinched. When she raised her gaze towards him, he grinned to show her that he didn't mind. It was the truth, wasn't it?

"Oh, I would pay to watch that. From a safe distance." Christine grinned as well, then shook her head. "It's probably better that way. Get settled in, then write them a letter, and then give them half a year or so to cool down."

"Half a year would mean I'll miss Winter's Heart. I'm not sure that will help improve their moods," Josephine pointed out. Then, under her breath and so quietly, Valadan wasn't sure Christine was supposed to hear it, she added, "Sure would improve mine, though."

It was true, the year was quickly coming to an end. Soon, fall would make way for winter and the first snow would begin to fall. What had been a cruel threat a while ago was barely relevant now. As far as he was aware, there were no seasons to speak of in the Sentient Wilds.

"Well, whatever you decide, you know I'll have your back." Christine looked from her sister to Valadan. "Both of yours."

She jumped up, shaking the skirt of her dress in an attempt to dislodge a few yellowed blades of grass that clung to it.

"I have to go now. I'm meeting with Michael. He should be

off in a bit, and I intend to grab him the moment he steps out of the door so I can drag him—”

“Goodbye, Christine,” Josephine interrupted her.

Valadan bit back a laugh. “Goodbye,” he said. “It was nice to meet you.”

Christine laughed, but her look quickly turned serious. “Take good care of her,” she said, capturing Valadan’s gaze. “This is the happiest I’ve seen her in a long time. Goodbye.”

Valadan looked after her as she walked away, his heart beating a bit too quickly in his chest. If only her words were true, if only *he* could make Josephine happy, could be the cause for this beautiful smile of hers that now lit up her face.

“She’s right, you know?” she said. “This *is* the happiest I’ve been in a long time.”

For a while, they sat in silence, finishing their meal. It was a comfortable silence, with the voices and laughter of hundreds of people in the distance. Sometimes, when the wind turned just right, it carried a few notes of a melody with it. Valadan inclined his head, listening to it, remembering other Queen’s Festivals so many years ago.

It had always been one of his favorite days. A day when adults didn’t mind them running around, grabbing enough food to last them a week, and staying up late to watching the colorful illusionary displays spanning the night sky above Caldeia.

“Will your parents really hate me?” he couldn’t help but ask.

Sure, it was all fun and games to imagine two nobles almost fainting because their precious daughter dared to fall in love with a man so far below her social status. But they were Josephine’s family, and he didn’t want his presence to put a damper on their relationship.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Not *you*, just...” She sighed

a frustrated sigh. “They don’t approve of anything I do. There was a time I tried so hard to gain their recognition, but I... well, I wish I could say I don’t care anymore, but that isn’t true. A part of me will always care. But I don’t let it dictate my actions anymore.”

A flicker of orange light made her break off, and she lifted her head to look at the sky.

Cascading patterns in all the colors of the rainbow started to fill the air. Some were symmetrical: circles and stars, expanding, merging, shrinking, and fading. Others showed stylized little scenes of popular fairytales: a dragon spewing fire, a ship at sea, a man offering a red rose.

The best chaos mages of the kingdom came together for an artistic display so wonderful, even those who disliked chaos magic usually stayed silent about it. As always, Valadan remembered that his mother had been one of those mages. And as always, he quickly pushed the thought aside.

He watched the spectacle for a while before he let his gaze sink to look at Josephine instead. She was smiling, her eyes full of wonder, reflecting the colors of the illusions. Valadan wrapped his arm around her, and she didn’t hesitate to nestle against his side.

As beautiful as the illusions were, she was more beautiful. He couldn’t tear his eyes off her. Eventually, she noticed, turning her head towards him. The shower of red and golden sparkles above made her hair shimmer and her features glow softly.

The wine wasn’t strong, but it had left him a bit dizzy – and a bit sentimental. It wasn’t only the happiest he’d been in a long time; thinking about it, it was the happiest he had been in his *life*.

“I love you,” he said. It was all he could think of, a feeling so large it filled every part of him.

Josephine raised her hand to his face, tracing his temple before she buried her fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. He

melted into her touch, holding onto her as she held onto him. Her kiss stole his breath and scattered his thoughts. Light flickered around them, the grandiose finale of a show neither of them had eyes for anymore.

When she finally allowed him to catch his breath, her hair was disheveled and her cheeks flushed. He brushed his thumb over her lips, sucking in sharp breath when she bit it. In her eyes, he saw the same need that was burning inside him, and he was secretly glad he wasn't drunk enough to ignore the fact that they were very much in public.

"Let's go home."





CHAPTER 17

Beginnings

Valadan checked his armor for what was probably the tenth time in the span of an hour. He stroked over the freshly dyed leather. The deep black hid every trace of the blood that had stained it for so long. Under his mild protests, Josephine had insisted on taking care of it and had paid for it to be restored. Now, some parts of the armor had a purple tint, matching the weapons he summoned – and his eyes, as she didn't get tired of mentioning.

"Your armor is fine. *You* are fine. Stop being so nervous!" she said with a laugh, obviously having noticed him messing with the clasps at his side.

"The armor is fine." He sighed. "But what if I am not? What if they don't want me there?"

"Well, then we find something else."

We. He still couldn't believe it. Her telling him that she had requested a position on his behalf had felt nothing short of a miracle. Hearing that he had been invited to introduce himself and talk about the prospects of employment *was* a miracle. Knowing that she would stay with him even if he wasn't accepted, willing to keep searching for a place that took them both in, was something else.

Finally letting go of the clasps, he crossed the distance between them, pulling her into his arms and kissing her. Josephine returned his kiss, then freed herself.

“Nothing of that now. We need to be going, or we’ll miss the portal. Do you have everything?”

Valadan reached for the bag on the floor, slinging it over his shoulder. “Yeah,” he said, casting a last glance around. He had left a letter for Damien on the kitchen table on the off chance that his brother might come back. Despite his best efforts, he had been unable to find out what had happened to Damien.

At least there had been no record of his death, so Valadan was hopeful. Perhaps he’d try to find him at some point, but first, he had to take care of his own life. The chance to directly join the Order was an incredible opportunity and one he intended not to fuck up for once.

“Yeah,” he said again, his sad smile becoming earnest as he turned towards her. “Let’s go.”

She reached for his outstretched hand, and he closed his fingers around hers. The look he gave her was nothing short of adoration. Josephine had bought herself some armor as well. Silver leather and light chainmail, a beautiful blade at her side. It was clear that she didn’t plan to join this citadel as a scholar, though Valadan knew she hoped to find a position where she could be both a scholar and a warrior.

She was carrying no bag of her own. When he had asked her about it, she had told him that she had arranged for someone to bring her belongings for her later so she wouldn’t have to bother with it. Valadan had only rolled his eyes before whispering ‘princess’ into her ear.

Hand in hand, they left the house. As he locked the door behind him, he looked around the desolate garden one last time. This had never been a good place, and yet it had been the only home he had ever had. Turning his back on it left

him with mixed feelings. Thinking about how he was about to start a new life with *her* at his side did dampen the sorrow. And this time, he'd be able to come back. Should he become a member of the Order, he would be allowed to use the portal whenever he wanted.

The streets of Caldeia weren't as busy as they had been a week ago. It had quickly cooled down during those last days. Today, the sky was overcast, promising rain but not quite delivering yet. By the time the sky opened up, they would probably be at the other end of the world already.

With each minute, Valadan's nervousness grew, and by the time they had reached the palace garden, his hands were sweaty. There was no queue in front of the portal, not for a private attunement like this. All they had to do was sign the paperwork and wait for the nyvi to finish setting up their connection.

"It'll be fine," Josephine said, nudging him slightly.

Valadan only hummed in response.

The portal flared to life, a shimmering circle in front of them. The nyvi gestured impatiently for them to move; there were probably more people waiting to use the short window between regular attunements. No time to waste then.

Josephine squeezed his hand and started to walk. Valadan hurried to catch up so she wouldn't have to pull him along, and together they entered the portal.

When Valadan opened his eyes—he had never gotten used to keeping them open when traveling—they were no longer outside. The hall they were standing in was large, with a high ceiling and illuminated by floating crystals that tinted the furthest corners in deep shadows.

"Josephine! There you are."

As the portal flickered and vanished behind them, Josephine let go of Valadan's hand to run towards Marian,

hugging her. A woman stood next to Marian: long, blonde hair and a rather familiar... *oh*.

Valadan froze on the spot, deciding that this was an excellent moment to give the strange walls of the hall a closer look. Something about their texture was off. It almost seemed like they consisted of branches or roots, intertwined to form a solid surface while still showing their former shapes and patterns. The floor was made of wood as well, polished by countless feet, and he could not make out the ceiling.

When he finally stepped closer to the three women, Josephine turned around. "A lot has happened," she said over her shoulder towards Marian. Then, "I'll tell you later. Valadan! This is Cecelia, Marian's wife. Cecelia, this is Valadan."

He couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from twitching.

"We've met before," he said, glad that gazes could not kill. "It's my pleasure to get to know you properly."

Josephine raised her eyebrows but was probably too preoccupied to dwell on it. She turned her attention back towards Marian, and the two of them started to walk. When Valadan wanted to follow, Cecelia held him back.

"You. And her." It was a question, and it wasn't, her tone incredulous.

Valadan looked down at her hand pressed against his chest, fingers spread. It would be easy to sidestep her, but not easy to sidestep this conversation.

"Yeah," he said.

"So when you said you'd been too busy to visit Marian... It was because you were with her."

Valadan swallowed. "Yeah." It was an image he didn't want to be reminded of, least of all on an important day such as this.

Cecelia glared at him.

"I'm not gonna apologize for hitting you."

"You shouldn't." Valadan grinned. "I deserved it."

"I know every carnivorous plant in this jungle. If you hurt her, your body will never be found."

"Good thing I'm not gonna hurt her, then." Valadan's grin turned a bit strained. He hoped Cecelia wouldn't notice.

He'd never want to hurt Josephine, but who knew if he would. The lifetime he hoped to spend with her would offer a lot of chances to mess up, to say or do something wrong. All he could promise her was that he would try to work on himself, try to be the best version of himself he could be. But that was a thing between him and Josephine, not this adorably aggressive little woman.

"Valadan! Where are you?"

Josephine's call made him sidestep the hand holding him back after all. A quick glance told him that she and Marian had left the portal hall already.

"She's waiting for me. Let's postpone the threats against my life, okay?"

Valadan waited a moment to see if Cecelia wanted to say anything else. When she didn't, he started to run after the other two, following them into a tunnel that was illuminated by glowing crystals. He caught up just in time to catch the end of what Marian said.

"... wanted to greet you but probably lost track of time. His office is here. You can just enter."

Valadan looked from Marian to Josephine, who laid her hand on the door but made no attempt to open it yet. When her gaze met his, he shrugged, and she nodded. She pushed the door open, and Valadan put his hand on it to keep it from closing as he walked in behind her.

The room they entered was an office of some kind. Bookshelves crowded the wall to their right, cabinets and low tables the one to their left. In the middle of the room, framed by a high window at the far wall, stood a large desk, and behind the desk sat a kalani who now looked up.

His features were less human-like than those of most others of this race Valadan had met so far. Deep lines in the dark brown bark of his face formed nose and mouth, and bright amethyst eyes shone without a trace of white. He had no hair to speak of, only broken stubs where once branches might have grown, but was clad in purple and translucent cream petals, some of them shimmering in the light.

As the kalani rose, it became apparent that he was quite tall, even for someone of his kind. He put down his quill, then caught it as it started to slide off the stack of papers he had placed it on, then put it down again, properly this time. After giving the quill one last look as if daring it to move again, he stepped out from behind the desk, hurrying towards them. The bark forming his mouth twisted into what could be considered a smile as he stopped in front of them.

“My name is Breannan,” he said. “Welcome to the Sentient Wilds.”



Cocky warrior meets icy scholar

Retrieving some possibly magic rocks should have been an easy mission. Unfortunately, the rocks turn out to be not magic, and the mercenaries assigned to protect Josephine's group are a nuisance. And while their leader's refusal to follow her orders starts out as a mere annoyance, it culminates in a tragic accident.

Between grievous injury and disgrace, both of their lives fall apart. Josephine might never hold a sword again, and Valadan is back on the streets with nothing to his name. As he insists on helping her get back on her feet, Josephine realizes that there's more to him than his rude behavior. Similarly, he finds that she isn't the spoiled princess he thought her to be.

Together, both of them might heal – if they can overcome the damage they've done to each other's lives.