

# undeserved

A man with long brown hair, a beard, and striking purple eyes is looking directly at the camera through a pane of shattered glass. The glass is cracked and broken, with sharp shards visible. The background is dark and filled with small white specks, suggesting a night sky or a dark, textured surface. The man's expression is one of intense focus or perhaps a mix of fear and determination. His right hand is pressed against the glass, with fingers splayed.

*Elli Eberle*

# undeserved

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*Elli Eberle*

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For Morgan.  
And for the one who created Morgan.



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### **Interlude: Dragon's Reach**

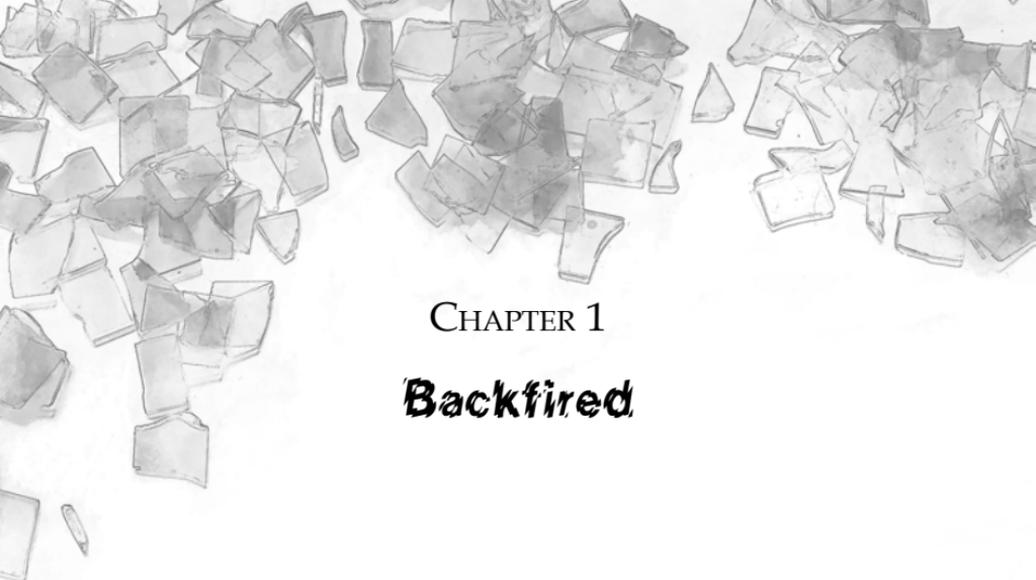
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# *Part 1*

Raqhar



## CHAPTER 1

# **Backfired**

It was a figure in the crowd, a missed sign, a tiny movement of his finger that changed Damien's life forever.

One moment he was aiming the pistol, pulling the trigger. The next moment he was lying on the ground, curled up, cradling his right hand. The pain wasn't even the first thing to register in his mind; it was the smell of gunpowder and blood and burned flesh. It made him gag, only worsened by the sudden feeling of heat and cold rushing over him. Something was wrong, so very wrong. Where his left hand held his right, pressing it against his chest, he could feel sticky blood and loose flesh. He couldn't bring himself to look at it, to see how bad the damage was.

His ears were ringing from the explosion. What little noise made it past sounded strangely muffled, dampened by the rushing of blood in his head. The sounds of boots on the hard packed earth, shouted commands, weapons being drawn. There were voices, but he couldn't make out a single word. They came closer. There was no way Damien could hide from them. He couldn't even stop himself from shaking as the realization set in that he had fucked this up. He had fucked this up so majorly, there was no way he'd get out of this alive.

He didn't even know what had gone wrong. His plan had been perfect; kill this bloody son of a *mok* ambassador who used his influence to take from the poorest, all in the name of diplomacy. His disguise had been perfect; an illusion cast with chaos magic, making him look like one of the ambassador's men he had hidden amongst. His aim had been perfect; he wasn't a great shot, but he had been so close, he would have taken his target out for sure.

But *something* had gone wrong. Terribly, utterly wrong. The fucking pistol had exploded, all but taking him out instead. He didn't know how that was possible. He distantly wondered if there was anything left of it to find out. Fuck, he wondered if there was anything left of *his hand*.

The only thing telling him that it was even still there was the touch of his left hand. His right was only pain, searing into his arm, pulsing with every frantic heartbeat. It hurt. It hurt so fucking much. He couldn't stop the tears from welling in his eyes, or the pained whimpers from escaping his lips. All he could do was curl around his injured hand, frozen in agony. How fitting that they'd find him like this, crying in the dirt like the pathetic loser he had always been.

Then someone grabbed his shoulder, pushing him to the ground, face first. Damien struggled against it, inhaling dusty earth as he tried to scream. His injured hand was buried under him, pinned between the leather of his armor and the rocks that littered the ground. Something hit his back, increasing in pressure until he thought his ribs would break. A knee perhaps, pinning him down, making sure he didn't move. As if he even could.

"Check if there's more of them."

They wouldn't find anyone. Damien had come alone. At least he had only fucked up his own life, not that of his friends. Or the closest thing he'd had to friends in a long, long time at least. It was a comforting thought; one that didn't last

long. Someone grabbed his left arm, pulling it out from under him. The feeling of the torn flesh of his right hand, slipping through his fingers, made him gag again. He tried to fight the nausea, focusing on his short, desperate gasps, each one filling his mouth with more dust. It clung to his tongue, to his throat, choking him. It left him no breath, no strength to fight as his left hand was bent back to rest against his back. The knee lifted, the pressure vanishing for one, precious moment, before it came down again, now pinning down his hand as well.

Then fingers closed around his right arm.

“No, no. Gods, no.”

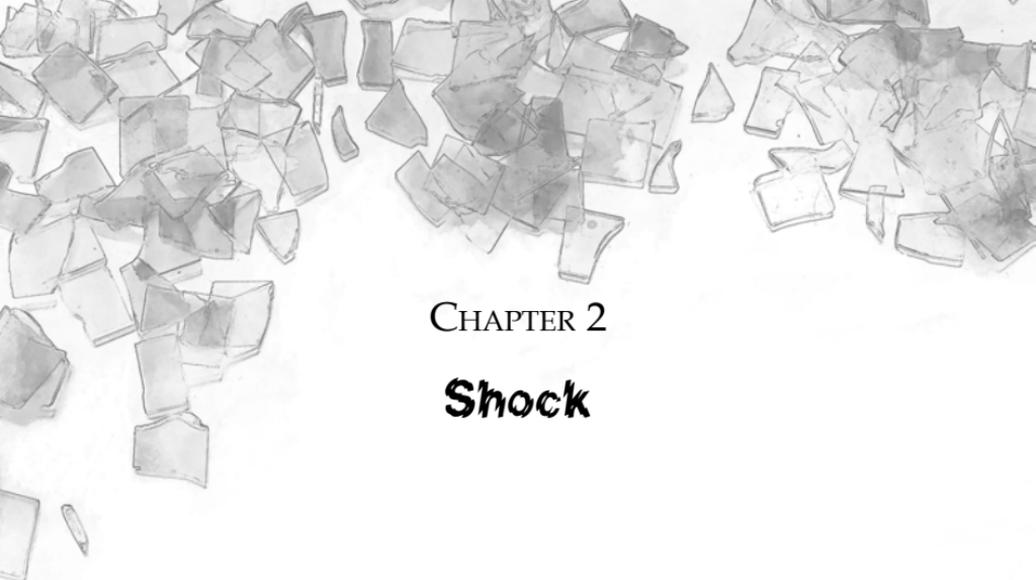
They didn’t care about his pleas, or his desperate attempt to turn, to get off the ground. As his left arm was dragged out from under him, torn flesh was ripped apart. He tried to shake off the knee still pinning him down, to wriggle out from under it. It was hopeless. As his feet scraped over loose rocks, trying to find anything to hold onto, someone slammed his head on the ground, making him dizzy. It was his own screams keeping the unconsciousness at bay, and the horrible feeling of bones being dragged over stone.

There was blood on his tongue, and salt, and dust. It hurt on his cracked lips and in his raw throat as his screams died down to desperate sobs. When his hand was out from under him, it was pulled toward his back. Blood ran down his arm, drying in the dust that covered his skin. He didn’t even realize he was speaking, begging for them to stop, to *stop*, until one of them slapped his head.

“Shut up, will ya.”

Through the haze of pain he felt how a rope was wrapped around his wrists, so tightly it pulled his shoulders back. Then someone grabbed his arms, dragging him to his knees, and his world turned black.





## CHAPTER 2

# Shock

When Damien came to, he was lying on the ground. He briefly wondered if they had moved him at all, or just let him drop back down where he was.

Nothing much had changed. His hands were still tied behind his back, straining his shoulders. He still couldn't breathe, because his face was pressed into the ground. His lips still tasted of blood and tears and dirt.

And everything still fucking hurt, making him groan quietly. As he attempted to turn his head, to finally be able to breathe without inhaling dust and sand, a shiver ran through his body. It wasn't even the pain, exploding in his arm as his movement tugged on the rope. It was the absolute wrongness of his hand, sticky with half-dried blood and clenched into a fist, as if that could stop it from falling apart. Perhaps it would hurt less if only he could bring himself to relax, but the mere *thought* of trying to move his fingers made him shiver again.

He tried to calm down; to focus on the grainy sand, pressing against his forehead, and the distant voices, reaching his ears. It helped to ease the tension in his shoulders, but the shivers didn't stop.

It was so fucking cold.

It shouldn't be. Not this time of year. Not when the sun burned down, turning the grass of the steppe brown and unprotected skin red. He could feel it on his neck, see the brightness from the corner of his eye. It just did nothing to warm him. It was neither the coldness of the ground, slowly crawling through his armor, nor the wind, making goosebumps raise on his neck. It was a bone-deep chill, sapping all his strength, making his teeth chatter.

But he had to breathe, had to move, had to try again. Damien clenched his teeth as he started the next attempt to shift his head. Knowing what to expect made it easier and harder at the same time. Harder to start, to gather the courage to strain his shoulders; easier to continue as the pain in his arm flared up. When he had finally managed to turn to the side, he sucked in a deep breath, causing him to cough instantly. His mouth was so dry, the cough did nothing to ease the scratching in his throat; it did, however, strain his arms and he pressed his head against the ground with a pained whimper.

The sad, little tufts of grass before his eyes began to swim as new tears blurred his vision. He wished they had just finished him off, run him through with a sword or whatever. Death was all that was waiting for him anyway. There was no way around it; not after all he had done, not after they had caught him in the middle of an attempt to assassinate a fucking ambassador. Every possible trial would be nothing but a show. They'd hang him like the traitor he was, and by the Seven, he didn't want to die, not like this. The thought alone made him shake again. At least he could pretend it was from the cold, not from the sheer terror that had gripped him. At least he could pretend his tears came from the sand in his eyes, not from despair of having his miserable fucking life end like this. At least he could pretend his wince and sob

were caused by the agony in his hand, not by a pair of boots, stepping into his field of vision.

“Not doing so well, are we?”

The boots had stopped in front of Damien. All he could see was dusty, well-worn leather of excellent quality. Whoever stood above him was probably someone important, at least more important than a mere footsoldier. Perhaps this squad’s leader. Maybe he’d find out what their plans with him were. The thought wasn’t exactly reassuring.

He tried to look up, to see the person looming over him, but his blood-crust hair had fallen into his eyes. It made it impossible to see anything but a blurred shadow. When the shadow moved and the boot lifted, Damien winced. He half expected to be kicked in the head—or the ribs, if he was lucky—but the person only walked along his side. The boots crunched on the dry ground, then something touched his arm. Fuck, it hurt. Damien howled, ignoring the pain in his shoulders as he struggled to get away, somehow. Luckily he hadn’t bothered to shave in a few weeks, so the sand didn’t scratch his chin raw as he shifted and squirmed. Fuck, fuck, fuck, now this son of a *mok* pressed down on *whatever*, Damien couldn’t even be sure what. There was only pain, in his fingers and his palm, in his wrist and arm and shoulder.

The anger he felt as the owner of the boots laughed was drowned out by the fire, eating through his arm. The hand let go, but the pain stayed. Damien was still freezing, but now a wave of heat rolled through him, making him dizzy and nauseous. He tried to concentrate on his breaths, to ignore those embarrassing tears, running down his face. Perhaps if he could keep on breathing, he’d manage to not let the sobs escape his lips. It was a small chance only, but one he tried to hold onto.

The boots came back in front of his face, just as close as before. They weren’t as clear anymore, which was obviously

the boots' fault, and not because he was crying like a fucking baby.

"Tz, tz. That doesn't look good. Didn't your mother teach you not to play with explosive things? Should have listened to her."

For a moment the rage was stronger than the pain. How did this arrogant asshole dare to bring up his mother? He growled, thrusting his head towards those godforsaken perfect boots, as if it could do him any good, even if he would manage to reach them. He didn't. Instead the boots reached him, kicking his temple, making black spots dance in front of his eyes. Fuck, even that hurt less than his hand. He tried to turn his sob into a cough, shaking his body all the same.

"Behaving like a wild animal, huh? I know just the place for you. Hey, Rob? Get over here."

The boots jogged away and hushed words reached Damien's ears. He couldn't understand what they were saying. Not that it mattered, whatever they had planned, whatever they'd do to him, there was fuck all he could do about it.

Then Mr. Fancy Boots was back, crouching down next to Damien. He pushed the bloody hair aside, so Damien could take a look at him for the first time. A young, clean shaven face, framed by golden curls, just as fucking perfect as his fucking boots. Damien hated him.

"If you fight us. If you resist. If you do anything other than being a good boy and let us move you to where you belong, I will drag you by your hand. Did I make myself clear?"

Damien nodded, his heart beating up to his throat. He wasn't sure if he could have spoken. The humiliation was drowned out by the sheer terror those words awoke in him.

It seemed to be answer enough.

"Excellent. I knew you'd see reason."

The man patted his cheek, then gestured for the other person to come closer. One of them grabbed his right arm and

shoulder, one his left. Then they pulled him up. Damien tried to stifle a scream, to become as limp and compliant as they wanted him. No matter how bad this was, it could be so much worse. At least they didn't seem to purposefully put weight on his wrist, on his torn hand. He wasn't sure he'd survive if they did.

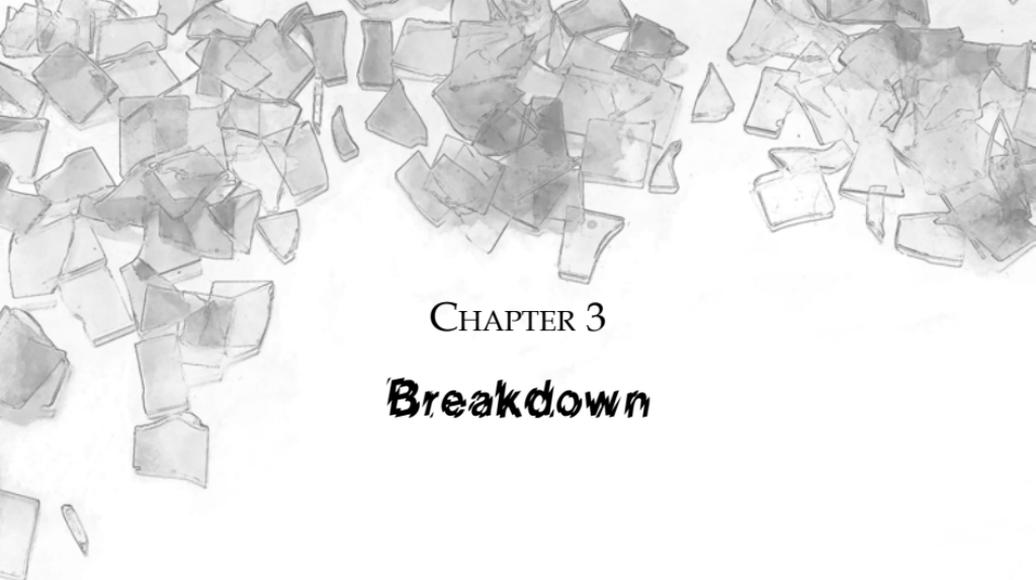
He only got a moment to look around, to realize he was still in the ambassador's camp. As the two men started to drag him away, he had to close his eyes against the nausea the pain and movement caused. He didn't see where they were bringing him, noticed too late that they had arrived. They barely stopped before they pushed him forwards like a bag of sand. Damien's bound hands made it impossible for him to break his fall. His knees scraped over a rough surface, his head slammed into something hard. Pain spread over his face and he tasted blood, more blood than before. The impact had probably split his lip, perhaps he had even bitten his own tongue. Everything hurt too fucking much to find out where the blood came from.

Then someone touched his hands again and he screamed, almost choking on his own blood. Fuck, why did they do that? He had done what they wanted, had let them handle him like a piece of luggage. He didn't have enough breath to speak the question out loud, to beg them to stop. He wriggled weakly, trying in vain to get away. Something scratched over his skin. Something snapped. Then the strain on his shoulders was gone, his hands free. They dropped to his sides and Damien sobbed with relief.

Something metal sounded and steps moved away, then all was quiet. Stayed quiet. Damien listened, breathing heavily, eyes squeezed shut. Were they really gone? It took all his willpower to force his eyes to open, but he had to see where he had ended up. Had to figure out if it was safe for him to move, to turn, to pull his hand closer.

The light was so horribly bright as he slowly opened his eyes; first the right one, because it hurt less, then the left one. Everything was blurry, not only because of his tears. It felt like needles in his eyes as he tried to focus. There was something in front of him, quite close. He blinked a few times, trying to clear his gaze. When he finally saw what it was, he froze.

They had put him in a cage, like a fucking dog or something. Damien stared at the metal bar in front of his face, not seeing anything other than the pattern the rust had eaten into it. He had to breathe, to *breathe*, through the hammering of his heart and the tightness in his chest. To keep breathing, until the terror would fade and the pain become bearable. It was all he could do, breathe, and wait, and ignore the pathetic tears running down his face once more.



## CHAPTER 3

# **Breakdown**

It took Damien a long time to find the strength to move. Trying very hard to keep his right hand still, he grabbed the bars of the cage with his left hand. He pushed himself away a bit, so the top of his head was no longer pressed against the metal, then turned around. By the time he had shifted to lie on his left side, his arm was trembling and he was out of breath. At least he managed to raise his head, to look around.

He had already guessed it from still feeling the sun warming his back, but the cage had no cover. Just more metal bars above, and some half rotten wood panels beneath him, covered with straw of all things. Damien wondered if the cage had already been used for some kind of animal, or only been prepared for it. It was disgusting. He could count himself lucky, though. He doubted they would have been nice enough to add the wood and straw for him, would have thrown him on the bare metal bars instead.

The cage was small, too. Too small for one of the steppe lions, so he most likely wasn't lying in cat piss. Could still be dog shit, though, he probably wouldn't notice it over the stench of his own blood and charred flesh. He groaned as he struggled to lift his head higher, to see the other end of

the cage. The closing of the door had shoved his legs inside. Damien found that there wasn't enough room to stand or lie down properly; he'd barely be able to sit, even if he'd manage to get that far.

For now, it didn't seem like he would. He was already out of breath, just from turning to his side. There was only one thing left for him to do, one thing he had to do. If only the mere thought didn't turn his stomach and make him break out into cold sweat. He stared through the bars, his vision too blurry to see more than colorless tents and half-dead grass. The fingers of his unharmed hand were squeezing the metal and he pulled his legs closer to his chest. Curling up like a frightened child.

What was the worst thing he could find? Perhaps his hand to be gone, the pain nothing more than a memory that would stick with him for the very short rest of his very pathetic life.

No, he realized after a moment, that wouldn't be the worst thing he could find. The worst thing would be finding his hand looking like it had felt when those fucking assholes had dragged it over the ground. Charred and bloody and *ruined*, with pieces of bone sticking out and patches of flesh coming off. He imagined the picture, clung to it, even if it made him feel sick. If he was ready for that, it couldn't get worse, could it?

When he finally found the courage to look, it was every bit as horrible as he had feared.

Not that it mattered. A dead man would need no hand. If only it wouldn't hurt so fucking much. He could feel every single heartbeat, pulsing like liquid fire in his arm. Pulsing way too quickly, too, should a heart beat this fast?

He tried to breathe calmly, to fight the terror. It didn't work. It didn't matter, he told himself. He wouldn't need a hand where he was going. Or any other body part, for that matter, other than his neck. The thought made him laugh bitterly,

then sob as his breath hitched. By Duriath, he didn't want to die, didn't want to feel the rope squeezing every last bit of life out of him.

It didn't matter. It didn't matter. It fucking *did* matter. Because it was his fucking hand, hanging from his wrist in shreds. It didn't help that he *knew* he'd never need it again, would never get to hold a pen or tool again. He wanted to. He wanted to sit in the summer sun, wanted to write a letter on golden parchment, wanted to watch the glass spin until it broke the light into every color of the rainbow.

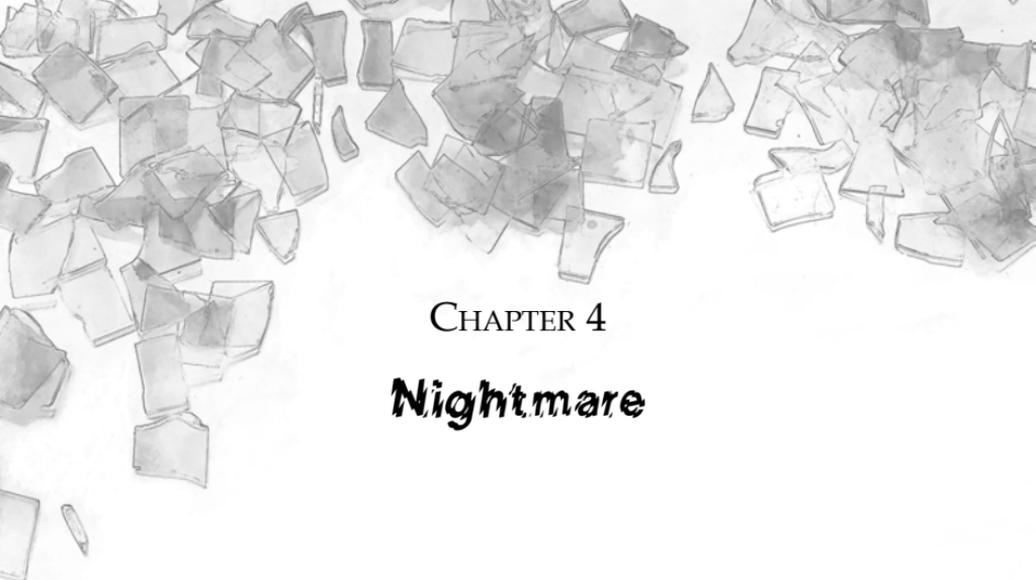
He curled up, pressing his hot forehead against the cool metal. Cradling his right hand against his chest was both agony and relief. It hurt so fucking much, like being torn apart all over again. Damien could barely breathe, every inhale and exhale passing his lips in a shuddering whimper. But it also stopped his hand from feeling like it was falling apart, like every moment what little remained of his flesh would just come off, leaving the half-charred bones exposed.

He didn't want it to fall apart, he wanted it to be whole, and his. He tried to fight the tears gathering behind his eyes, making his headache worse. He knew, the moment he'd give in, he'd break down completely. Just because he seemed to be alone now, didn't mean they wouldn't notice. They had already caged him like a fucking animal, he didn't want to give them this satisfaction, too.

He didn't...

When he gave up, when he allowed himself to cry, he didn't only cry for his hand, or the life he was about to lose. He cried for the life he had already lost so many years ago. A life he had never deserved, had never been good enough for. He hadn't been good enough for his father, he hadn't been good enough for his brother. In the end, it really was no surprise that he hadn't been good enough for himself, either.





## CHAPTER 4

# **Nightmare**

Somehow, Damien had managed to sit up, to lean against those damn metal bars. He would have sworn they must have left bruises by now. Trying not to think, he stared into the distance, until the light was taken away by the approaching dusk. It was too cold for him to stop shaking, and he was in too much pain to even think of sleeping. At least he had been able to calm down a bit. After the first shock had passed, a part of his despair had made room for anger.

Anger was good. It was better to show them that he'd like to rip their throats out than to let them see him crying. There wasn't exactly much of his pride left, bloody and beaten and trapped like a fucking animal. But what little remained, he didn't plan to give up that willingly. If only it was easier to cling to his anger. If only he wasn't so thirsty he considered begging for a bit of water. If only there wasn't this throbbing pain around his left eye, slowly swelling. If only his arm didn't hurt like it was cut open with fiery knives. He hadn't dared to look again, kept it cradled against his chest. He was sure time was doing nothing to improve the view.

"Do you like the accommodations, Nightmare?"

It was a new voice, sounding from behind him. At least he

thought so. He didn't bother turning around to find out.

"I'm talking to you. Nightmare."

Whoever it was, he kicked the cage. The noise hurt Damien's ears, and the movement as he flinched made the pain in his arm flare up. "Fuck you," he muttered, which was pretty pathetic, but better than the pained groan he had suppressed.

"You don't look so well. A shame."

That asshole kicked the cage again. Damien growled, too busy with breathing to find the strength for another curse.

"I guess they don't want you dead. Justice for all you've done or some shit like that. If you ask me – you know, unfortunately no one ever does," he said, kicking the cage again. "But *if* they'd ask me, I'd suggest stringing you up on the next tree and be done with it."

Damien couldn't stop himself from wincing at those words. A dark laugh told him that it hadn't gone unnoticed, and he cursed himself.

"Don't like that idea, do you?" Now the man crouched down, keeping one hand on top of the cage to steady him. "It's almost funny. Tell me, Nightmare," he said, drawing out the name, "how many did you make believe they'd die? How often?"

Damien dared to look into his face for only one moment before squeezing his eyes shut. It was a face he didn't recognize. Short black hair and the shadow of a beard, and eyes of such a bright blue color they seemed almost white. Unnatural.

"Oh, I know what you are. What you do. A despicable use of magic, for sure, but interesting. A shame we can't give you a taste of your own medicine. Would be fun, don't you think? To know what's waiting for you?" He tapped the top of the cage with his fingers, humming quietly. "Can you imagine it? How the rope tightens and pulls you up? They won't do you the favor of breaking your neck. It will be a slow, horrible death."

Damien's breath hitched and he tried to scramble back, to get away. There wasn't exactly much room for him to move. By Duriath, he shouldn't listen to that asshole, but the words followed him relentlessly.

"At first, it will be merely uncomfortable. The rough rope on your vulnerable skin. Then your feet will leave the ground. Perhaps you'll still be able to feel it for a moment. Reaching it with your toes. Making you believe that you'd just have to try a bit harder to stand again, to breathe again. But you'll never breathe again. And with every passing second your lungs will burn more, and your heart will beat faster, and you'll be more afraid than you've ever been in your life."

Damien's heart was already beating up to his throat, his breaths coming too quickly. Fuck, he had to calm down. He had to breathe. He couldn't listen. He had to breathe. It was only words, cruel, horrible words, but only words. It wasn't even images, feelings, nothing like what he had done. He could breathe, he had to breathe.

"You know, I might just start to see the fun in this. I could do this all day."

Those words reignited Damien's rage. He jerked towards the bars, his mouth opened to snarl some insults at this son of a *mok*. He couldn't. He gasped, helplessly. Something was wrong. So wrong. Why couldn't he breathe, why was there no air? Nothing was blocking his airways, nothing wrapped around his neck.

*Fuck you. Stop you fucking asshole, stop. Stop... please, by the Seven, stop, stop whatever you're doing, stop. Please, stop. Please, oh please.*

Damien had no breath left to speak, to beg. He clawed at his throat, finding nothing, scratching his skin instead. Then he slammed his hand against the bars until his fingers bled. He had to get out, get out. There must be air outside the cage. This asshole was just in front of him, and he was still smiling,

and still speaking, and still breathing.

“Then you’ll hang there, writhing like a worm on a hook,” he continued. “You’ll piss your pants and you won’t even care about it. All you’ll think about is how much you need to breathe, and how much it hurts not to. You’d give everything for one more breath to ease the pain. Absolutely everything. It might only take a few minutes, but it will be the worst minutes of your miserable life.”

It was already the worst minutes of his miserable life. The pain in his destroyed hand was almost forgotten, pushed aside by the sheer panic that had taken over his mind. Damien’s movements slowed as it became harder and harder to lift his arm. His vision began to swim, to darken at the edges. He wanted to scream, to sob, but every effort only left him with a frantic, painful twitching of his chest.

“It will be a glorious thing. I’ll make sure to take the day off, so I can watch.”

There would be nothing to watch. Not if he died now. A weak, strangled croak was all that left his lips. He had to... had to...

His burning lungs managed to draw breath again. Damien almost choked on it, then started to cough. Fuck, it almost hurt as much as not breathing. He curled up, gasping and sobbing shamelessly. Each new breath was fire in his lungs. The air was back, but it wasn’t enough, it wasn’t *enough*.

“You were right. This was fun. But now for the reason why I’ve come here in the first place. We can’t have you die before we’re back at the capital, can we? So here, enjoy.”

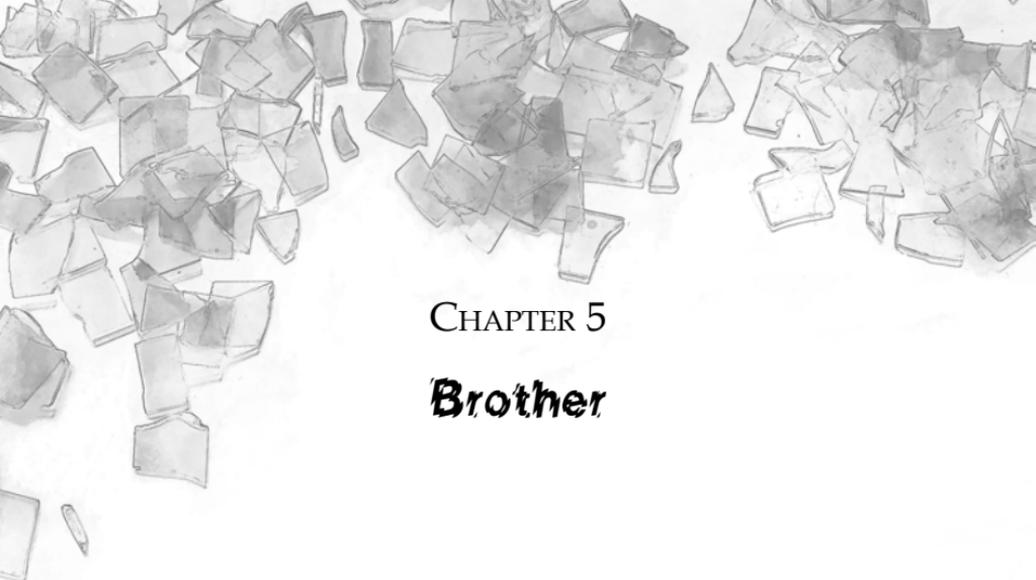
A heavy thud and the sound of splashing water followed his words. Still struggling to get his breaths under control, Damien opened his eyes—just in time to witness the cause of another splashing sound. He gagged, trying to scramble away from where this fucking son of a *mok* was pissing in the bucket of water he had just brought.

“That’s what I think of people using magic to hurt innocents.”

The man kicked the cage one last time before turning away. Damien sat frozen in horror, the marks his nails had left on his throat burning. His heart was still racing and fuck, he couldn’t get this image out of his mind. That’s how he would end. If he didn’t die before, of fever or thirst, because there was no way he’d touch this fucking piss bucket.

He curled up and leaned his head against the cage once more, not bothering to suppress the sobs shaking him. They called him a monster. The only difference between him and them was that he was on the wrong side of the law.





## CHAPTER 5

### **Brother**

“Damien.”

One word, one *name*, sending a shiver down his spine. It made him open his eyes; at least his right eye, as his left eye was all but swollen shut. Everything was blurry. The light hurt. He wanted to close his eyes again, to lock out the pain and his bleak surroundings and those fucking metal bars in front of him. He didn't. Instead, he raised his head, trying to figure out where the voice had come from.

Footsteps crunched on the dry ground, approaching him. Damien stared at the legs, now bending as the person in front of him crouched down. At a familiar face, in more than one way. The same hard features, the same copper hair, some strands of it hanging in front of the same purple eyes. It looked more like a mirror image than the last time he had seen it, over a decade ago.

What the fuck was his brother doing here? Of all the people he wouldn't want to see him like this, Valadan was on the very top of the list. Actually, he might be the only one on that very specific list. Damien opened his mouth to ask, then closed it again. He wasn't sure he could speak. His tongue was sticking to the top of his mouth, painfully swollen and

oh so dry. He hadn't touched the fucking piss bucket, and he didn't want to. But soon the sun would rise again, would slowly roast him in this godforsaken cage, and he'd have no other choice. The thought alone made him gag. He closed his eyes, his head pressed against the cage. At least he didn't have any tears left to cry.

"I brought you some water."

The words made Damien lift his head again. There was a hand in front of him, holding a worn waterskin. Offering it. For a moment, Damien wanted to believe, wanted to trust his brother's kindness. He couldn't. He didn't deserve it.

"Did you piss in that, too?" he asked while snatching the waterskin. It was more of a weak, desperate grab, really, but indignant snatching sounded better in his head.

The disgust was so clear on Valadan's face. Damien couldn't blame him. He'd be disgusted with himself, too, if only he'd have the strength for it. As it was, he didn't even have enough strength to open the godforsaken waterskin. He shifted, trying to find a way to pin in somewhere, so he could use his good—his only, really—hand to open it. It didn't work, he slid off; his fingers too weak, shaking too much to grab the cork. His shoulder sagged with a sob, saved at the last moment by adding a '...ck' at the end. Perhaps it would pass as a curse.

Then the cork was gone, popping out, falling down. Damien stared at it, filled with strange, surreal envy for a moment. Even if he hadn't been too weak to use his magic, he couldn't have done that. Unlike his brother, he couldn't manipulate physical things.

He was too thirsty to dwell on it. There was only the smallest moment of hesitation as he lifted the waterskin to his lips, taking a sip. It didn't even matter what was in there. It couldn't be worse than the alternative.

It was water. Clear, slightly lukewarm water. Damien

could have cried with relief. He closed his eyes, taking small, conscious sips. It was hard to resist the urge to gulp it all down, but it would be even worse if he made himself sick. He paused in between, trying to calm himself down, feeling his frantic heartbeat pulse behind his eyes.

A similar sound made him look up. Valadan was drinking, too, a dark blue bottle in his hand. That was only fair, Damien guessed. Still, he didn't like to see his baby brother drink, not like this. Not that it was his place to say anything about it. Not when it was his fault, like everything was his fucking fault.

"Why did you do that?" Valadan asked.

"Why do you care?" Damien snapped back, invigorated by the fact that he could almost move his tongue again.

"Why? You're not a murderer, Dami."

Fuck, that hurt. Not the ridiculous claim that he wasn't a murderer; he was, a murderer and worse. A traitor. A nightmare. No, it was the name—a name he thought he'd never hear again, cutting straight through his heart. It made him remember the only time in his life he had ever known true, unconditional love. But of course he had fucked that up, too, like he had fucked up everything else.

"You tried to kill the ambassador," Valadan said. Damien could hear the disappointment in his voice. It hurt almost as much. "You would have, if I hadn't stopped you. By Duriath, what were you thinking?"

"You what?" Damien managed to raise his head, his fury giving him new strength. "You fucking what? How?" His hand was shaking, squeezing the waterskin so tightly, a few drops spilled out.

The cork was lifted, carried by ethereal, purple tendrils, putting it back in place. Suddenly it all made sense. Chaos magic. Valadan's chaos magic. He was the one who had caused Damien's pistol to blow up. His *hand* to blow up. It

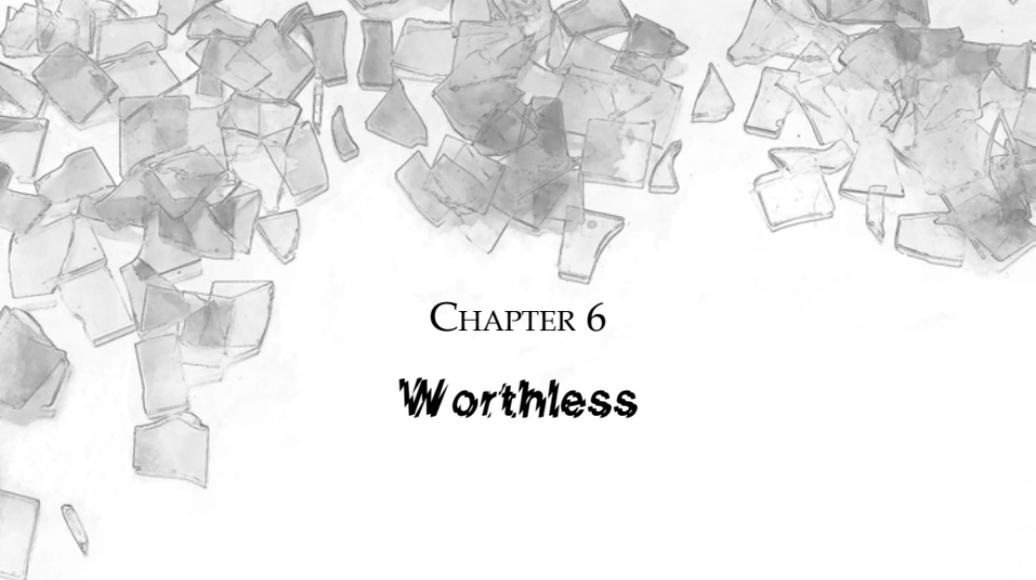
was Valadan's fault he was in this fucking cage, it was Valadan's fault he would fucking *die*. Blind rage made his blood boil.

"This is all your fault. Your fault!" No, it wasn't, it was *his* fault, but perhaps, if he screamed loud enough, he could believe it. "You just had to come here and ruin my life, didn't you? What the *fuck* did I ever do for you to hate me this much? I know I wasn't perfect, but I tried. I tried. You thankless..."

He couldn't break down now. Not in front of him. Instead, he threw himself against the bars, hissing and snarling. He wasn't strong enough to truly reach out, to put any kind of real threat behind his ridiculous attack, but that didn't stop him from trying.

"If I get out of here. I'll show you how it is to have everything taken from you. Everything! Do you hear me? I'll kill you, I'll —"

Something shattered against the bars. Wine dripped all around him, running down his face and soaking his clothes. It smelled like terror and tasted like nightmare. Damien stared at the glass shards, scattered on the ground. Where the wine pooled on them, it looked like blood. Then it was blood as he reached for one, not careful enough. All his fury, his strength left him. He stared at the shard, barely able to breathe, a sob trapped in his still too-dry throat.



## CHAPTER 6

# Worthless

"This. This is bad work."

His father's voice was as calm as his hands. He smelled of alcohol, of the same cheap wine he always bought. Because of course he did. Otherwise he wouldn't have had the patience to hold the little glass bird up, showing it to Damien before smashing it on the floor. Golden wings shattered, the little red crystals that had been its eyes falling off. They looked like tiny drops of blood.

"This is worthless."

A white crystal flower followed, its petals breaking apart. It had taken Damien the better part of a day to form it. He had been so proud of it. The petals hadn't been perfectly symmetrical, but they had broken the light just right, painting rainbows at the ceiling.

"All this time and you still can't do anything right. Do you really think someone would pay for this?" A glass bauble followed, not perfect enough, not round enough. It shattered like the rest. "Or this? Or this?"

More and more shards piled on the floor, red and green and yellow and purple. Damien stared at them, trying to hold back the tears.

“Perhaps you’d be good for anything if you didn’t waste so much of your time. Stop dreaming like a child. Stop reading all day. Books will get you nowhere. This will get you nowhere.”

His father swiped his arm across the counter, pushing down the rest of the little figurines and baubles. Most of them broke, adding more glass shards to the pile. A little dog stared up at Damien accusingly, the ears not quite floppy enough, the snout slightly crooked, one paw missing now. It was inadequate, like everything else. Like him.

“You are a rude, obnoxious brat,” his father said. Damien didn’t look up. “And you raised your brother to be an even ruder, more obnoxious brat. Your mother would be ashamed to see you like this. I am ashamed to see you like this. I thought I could teach you my craft. I thought you could continue the family business. I’m starting to see that you’ll never be good enough. Everything you do is worthless. *You* are worthless.”

His voice was still so eerily calm, and perhaps that was the worst of it all. It made it impossible for Damien to fight back, to kindle his own anger. The rage that made him stand up for his brother when their father screamed at him, that made him fearless when he stole enough money to buy some food before he’d drink it all away. But there was no anger in his father’s words, only disappointment. All it left in Damien’s mind was the unshakable knowledge that it was true, that his father was right. Everything he did was worthless. He was worthless. Why did he try at all, if he could never succeed, never be enough?

“You can clean this up now.”

It wasn’t even a direct order, but Damien sank to his knees all the same. Tears blurred his vision as he grabbed a basket, barely hearing his father’s steps, moving away from him. The door fell shut as he reached for the first shard, an iridescent white petal. He placed it in the basket, trying not to think

about what it once had been. Then he reached for the next one. And the next.

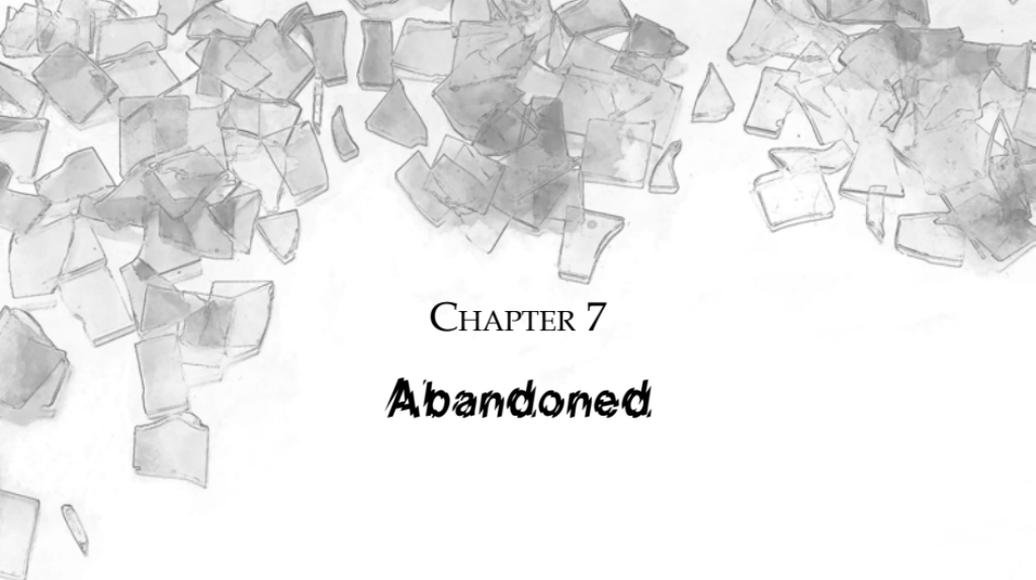
Damien barely flinched as he cut himself the first time, only trying to not smear too much blood onto the shards. He could have fetched the broom, could have made it easier for himself, but he knew that would only earn him yet another punishment. He had to keep the shards that were still good – unlike him, they could still be turned into something useful.

When he was done and the larger shards were all collected, he straightened up. It was only a few steps to the container in which his father collected all leftover pieces, to be shaped into colorful lamps or candle holders. It felt like an eternity. He emptied the basket without looking. Seeing the remains of his work, broken into pieces, waiting to be picked up by someone who was *good* at this work, would be more than he could take.

Empty basket in hand, Damien looked around, to the rest of the mess. His hands had almost stopped bleeding. They still hurt, but Damien felt strangely numb. His body went to the kitchen, to grab the broom and the dustpan, to clean up what his fingers had missed. It then took out the trash, and he watched the glittering shards fall between stained cloths and moldy vegetables and bones sticking out of half-rotten, cooked meat. His body placed the basket where it belonged, and picked up the broom and dustpan as well. Better not leave it lying around. Better not make him angry a second time today. Better hide somewhere and pray he wouldn't remember his failure of a son when he'd come back home.

His body walked back into his room, dropping him on the bed, before leaving him alone with the pain in his fingers and the emptiness in his heart.





## CHAPTER 7

# Abandoned

Damien stared at the shard in his fingers, and at his blood, staining it. It was surreal that he couldn't place it, couldn't remember where it came from. Had he ever made something from glass in a dark blue shade such as this? It was too large to belong to a creature, too thick to belong to a bauble, too flat to belong to a lamp or candle holder. It almost looked like a part of a bottle, but he didn't make bottles.

He hated bottles. The colorful ones, the ones containing wine and spirits. And yet he held a piece of one, still smelling of wine. A blue bottle.

Like the one Valadan had been holding.

It all came crashing down on him. His brother had found him, had been here—and he had lost him again. Probably for good this time. He wouldn't live long enough to make amends. By the Seven, why had he threatened to kill him? He could never as much as lay a single finger on his baby brother.

It was an all too familiar ache. Valadan, making him explode with something he said or did. Him, losing his temper and lashing out like the fucking asshole he was. But every time he gathered his courage to apologize, he failed. Then

those painfully familiar purple eyes were staring him down, or Valadan interrupted his first sentence with an annoyed scowl, or just walked away. All that should have been said would remain unsaid, the hurt still festering in their hearts.

After a while they'd start to talk to each other again, manage to live together again, almost peacefully. Until the next thing would escalate, rip open the cracks between them, widening them. Perhaps those cracks had been too deep already to ever be mended again. He surely wouldn't have the time to try anymore.

Damien let go of the glass shard, hugging the waterskin instead. His head hurt. He wasn't sure if it was from the bruises around his left eye, or from the tears he tried to hold back. With how little water he had, he really couldn't afford to waste any more of it on crying. Perhaps he could concentrate on something else, until this pain tearing his chest apart would subside.

There were voices, not too far away, but too quiet for him to understand what they were saying. One of them was familiar, though, made his heart beat faster. His brother was still here, hadn't left yet. Perhaps he could still put this right, could apologize. It would do him no good, wouldn't save him, but perhaps he could die without the knowledge that truly everyone he had ever known despised him.

*Valadan.*

He tried to speak, but all that left his lips was a dry croak. The waterskin was still resting on his lap, now soaked with wine. For a moment he considered opening it, taking a sip to make speaking easier, but that would take too long. He couldn't wait.

"Val..."

He coughed, cutting off the barely audible name. Trying to catch his breath, he doubled over, squeezing his hand. The pain made his vision swim and black spots dance in front of

his eyes. Fuck, he had to... had to call him... before it was... it was already too late... wasn't it?

Footsteps and voices, closer now, but not next to him. Damien tried to focus, a tiny spark of hope in his chest.

"You should put him into morlit shackles." It was Valadan's voice, and yet it didn't sound like him. It was cold and cruel and so full of disgust. "He's a chaos mage. His domain isn't only mind tricks, but also teleportation."

The pain those few words caused him almost managed to surprise Damien. Everyone knew about his mind tricks, about the horrible things he had used them for. Few people knew about his other talents. Valadan truly wanted to make sure he wouldn't escape. Wanted to see him dead, because that was what awaited him at the end of this. He knew he deserved his hate. It still hurt.

Fuck, it wasn't even like he had really planned to escape that way. With the pain clouding his thoughts and the thirst making him all dizzy, he was too weak to even consider using his magic. A misplaced teleport could literally tear him apart. Perhaps he should have risked it. If only he had realized that they would take this chance away from him, too.

"Thanks. Anything else we should know?"

There was a long pause. Damien barely dared to breathe, wishing so much his brother would speak again. Tell them to give him some water, or send a healer, to at least pretend he'd care.

*Please. I'm so sorry. I would never hurt you. I love you. Please help me. Please, I don't want to die.*

"No. Good luck."

Then he was gone. At least Damien believed that the fading footsteps belonged to Valadan, because it surely wasn't him, roughly grabbing his left arm. Damien screamed. He tried to pull away, but he didn't have the strength for it, or anywhere to go. Something terribly cold was clasped around his wrist,

burning on his skin. Fuck, fuck, he hated that stuff, the touch alone made his heart race.

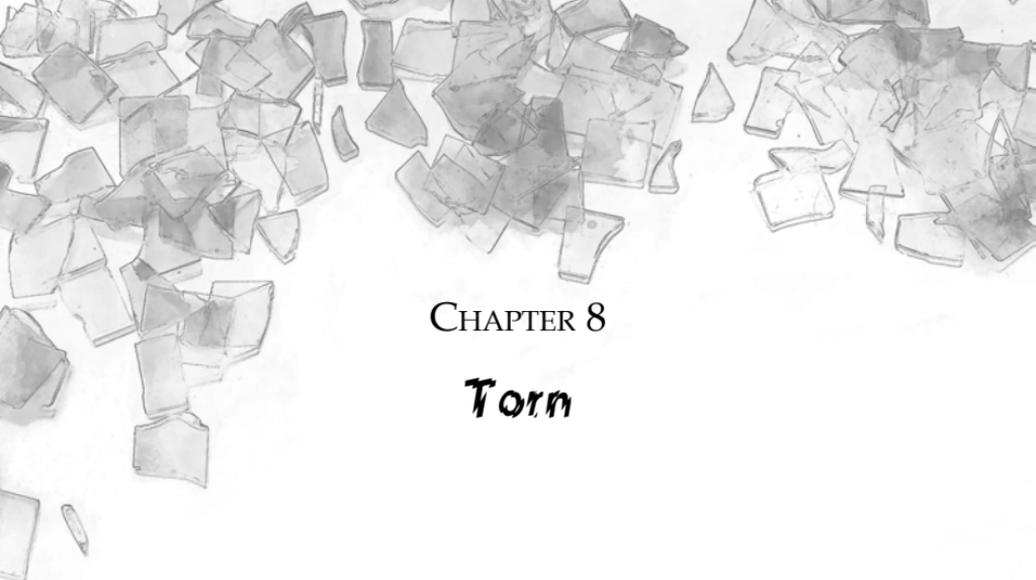
Then it skipped a beat as the same hands grabbed his right arm.

“No. No, don’t!”

Damien’s pleas turned into a terrified wail as his arm was ripped from his chest and dragged between the bars. He didn’t have the breath to scream as rough fingers touched his torn hand. The movement alone made it feel like his fingers – or what was left of them – were falling off. He wanted to pull away, but he *couldn’t* pull away. The image of how the flesh would slip off his bones when he pulled too hard made him almost black out; unfortunately only almost.

Then they put the second shackle on, squeezing it tightly around his swollen wrist. It dug deep into already painful skin, breaking it as the lock snapped closed with a click. Damien screamed. The coldness of the magic-suppressing metal was like fire burning directly into his bones. He screamed and screamed, barely realizing that they had let go of his arm.

Several minutes later, when his screams had died down to desperate sobs, he managed to pull his arm back. He pressed it against his chest, curled up around it, as if that could do anything to protect it. He was shivering again. It didn’t stop, even as the sun rose above his cage. Perhaps it was the shock from his injury being handled like that, or the fear of death that had come crawling back. In the end, it didn’t matter. Valadan was gone, and with him he had lost his last chance of trying to fix the only relationship that had ever been worth it.



## CHAPTER 8

### **Torn**

Valadan stared at the cage, at this horrible, rusty and way too small thing they had trapped his brother in. It was wrong to treat him like that. He knew Damien had done bad things, he had heard more than enough stories. By Duriath, he had found more than enough proof himself, and still... it was wrong.

What he was about to do was just as wrong.

He didn't even know what he had hoped to achieve by coming here and speaking to him. Perhaps he had hoped that he could find his brother somewhere in there. Not the Nightmare he had come to hunt down, perhaps not even the young man he had last seen over a decade ago. No, the boy, almost still a child himself, smiling at him. Holding his hand, cutting his fruits into funny little faces, helping him with his homework.

How had their life ended up like this? How could it be that now they were standing here, on different sides of the law? He had always been the troublemaker. Damien had always been the reasonable one, the meek one, following orders.

Ten years seemed to be enough time to change people.

"You wanted to see me?"

Valadan turned around, nodding curtly towards the squad's leader. He couldn't remember his name. It didn't matter, because in a moment, he'd be gone, never to look back. Leaving his brother with those people. Fuck, they didn't even give him water. The moment he had realized why Damien hadn't touched the bucket standing next to his cage, he'd almost thrown up.

He had toyed with the thought of helping him escape. He had only needed to find him, really. To be here, to be the hero, showing them that Damien was the brother they wanted. Assuring he himself would be safe to go. They wouldn't suspect him, probably – not after it had been him who stopped the assault. But fuck, there had been so much hate in Damien's words. He understood him, he really did. He just couldn't risk anything. A few years ago, it wouldn't have bothered him. He would have threatened him back, challenged him to dare come and try to kill him.

But now he had a family to take care of. A wife and – soon – a child. A family who had already come way too close to be harmed in this conflict, and he just *couldn't risk it*.

Valadan blinked against the burning in his eyes.

"You should put him into morlit shackles." It took all his efforts to keep his voice calm. Neutral. Disinterested. "He's a chaos mage. His domain isn't only mind tricks, but also teleportation."

It felt like spilling a secret. He didn't know if Damien had told anyone about this part of his magic – he guessed not, because not even a bunch of rowdy drunkards like those would think it was a good idea to lock someone with teleportation magic in a fucking cage.

The raising of an eyebrow told him that his suspicion had been right.

"Thanks. Anything else we should know?" the leader asked.

Valadan wanted to say so much. Things like ‘get him a fucking healer, you asshole’ and ‘I’ll drown you in your bucket of piss if you ever touch my brother again’.

“No. Good luck,” was what he said instead.

He couldn’t stay here any longer. He had to get away. Valadan nodded once more, then turned around, stumbling off. He didn’t know where to go, he just know he couldn’t be around when –

A horrible scream made him freeze, shaking him to the core. It was wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. His hands were trembling as he grabbed the nearest tent, holding onto it until he was out of sight. The screams grew louder, more desperate. He sank to the ground. This was all his fault. Valadan felt sick.

He wrapped his arms around his legs, burying his face in them. He couldn’t leave. Not yet. Hopefully, the spectacle would keep anyone from finding him like this. Even if they’d find him, it didn’t matter, not really. He had talked his way out of worse situations than some tears.

Damien’s pleas broke his heart, and the laugh that followed stomped it into the ground. Valadan forced himself to stay, to be near his brother, even if there was nothing he could do to help. Even if this was his fault. Even if Damien wouldn’t want him here, anyway. If he left now, he knew he’d never see him again.

He stayed until the screams died down, to be replaced by heart-wrenching sobs. He stayed until those, too, grew quiet. He stayed, because he couldn’t bear to turn his back on him for the last time yet.

*I’m so sorry.*

The silence that followed was worse.





## CHAPTER 9

# **Restless**

Sometime during the night the fever had started. His arm had been bad before, but now it was a whole new layer of agony. Damien was shivering so hard his teeth were chattering. He didn't even know if he was hot or cold. He was both and nothing at the same time, barely able to feel anything but the pain radiating out from his torn hand.

His breaths had grown heavier at first, then after a while turned into little pained groans. Now it was all he could do to hold back the screams as the pain got worse and worse and worse. Sometimes they still slipped out, usually followed by a desperate sob. It was just too much, *too much*.

He was still gasping for breath when something hit the cage, bouncing off the bars.

"Shut the fuck up. People are trying to sleep here."

Damien could have laughed, if only he could still breathe without fucking dying. He'd love to sleep. He already hadn't been able to the previous night, and he was so exhausted, he wanted to cry. There was no hope of him falling asleep anytime soon. Nothing short of unconsciousness could give him any relief from this nightmare.

He managed to lay still for three, four breaths, before it

became too much again. He screamed, not even trying to suppress it anymore. If he couldn't sleep, those fucking assholes shouldn't either. Not that it would stop them. They'd probably share a bottle of wine more, then sleep like babies. More like childless adults, really. It was him, screaming like a baby, awake all night.

Something clattered against the cage again, making the bars vibrate and his head with it.

"I told you to be quiet!"

Fuck, that voice was close. Damien whimpered, trying to hold back the noises. He couldn't. He couldn't. He shifted, curled up, trying to press his face against the shoulder of his unharmed arm.

"Can't... can't s'ry. Please. Please please... it hu... hurts."

A hand reached for his forehead and he tried to jerk back. The hand followed, pressed down for a moment, then vanished.

"Might have to do something about that after all. But not tonight. Try to drink something." Footsteps. A pause. "You haven't even touched this. Listen, if you think you can just..."

The voice trailed off, but Damien didn't care about the reasons. He was burning up, barely even coherent anymore. Even if he would have wanted, he wouldn't have found the strength to reach for the bucket.

"Ambrose! What the *fuck* is wrong with you?"

The shout made Damien flinch, even if it wasn't directed at him. There were too many sounds to make out what was happening. Footsteps and shouts, splashing and banging. They weren't close, and that was the best he could expect at any moment, really.

Damien only noticed the man had returned when he spoke again. Slowly, it dawned on him that must be the one who had come to him first. He probably wouldn't be able to see

his fancy boots in the darkness, even if he'd manage to open his eyes without throwing up.

"Sorry. He shouldn't have done that," the man said. "Can you sit up?"

No. No, he fucking couldn't. He barely managed to grunt in reply, breathing heavily against another scream. A moment passed, then a hand reached for his head, pulling it up. The movement strained his shoulder, made everything hurt so much more, he couldn't help but scream again.

At least he wasn't scolded for it this time.

"You need to drink. Here."

The voice sounded kinder than it should. Suspiciously kind. Then something touched his mouth, hard and half round, splashing something wet against it. Damien pressed his lips shut, whimpering quietly. He could feel the bile rising in his throat. No, by the Seven, no.

"Relax. It's only water."

But what if it *wasn't*? On the other hand, it wasn't like he had much of a choice. His half-swollen face barely allowed him to breathe through his nose. He'd have to open his mouth eventually. Might as well get it over with.

Not quite daring to actively drink, he at least allowed his lips to relax. It was enough to let a few drops in, making him wince. They tasted like nothing but a hint of the omnipresent dust that covered the steppe. He quickly gulped them down, opening his lips for more. There was more. The water felt almost cool on his lips, and even cooler in his throat. Soon, way too soon, the cup was empty. He wanted to cry as it retreated, to beg for more, for anything to ease the burning in his body.

The cup returned, filled again, and it was even more wonderful this time. His throat finally didn't feel like it was on fire anymore. The rest of him still was, though.

"Hey, what's that?"

The words didn't make sense. Not until he felt how something was dragged out from under him. Damien opened his eyes, trying to see what was happening. Fancy Boots had grabbed the waterskin, was just pulling it through the bars. Damien tried to reach for it, but he was too slow.

"No. Leave..." His voice broke with a sob. "No..."

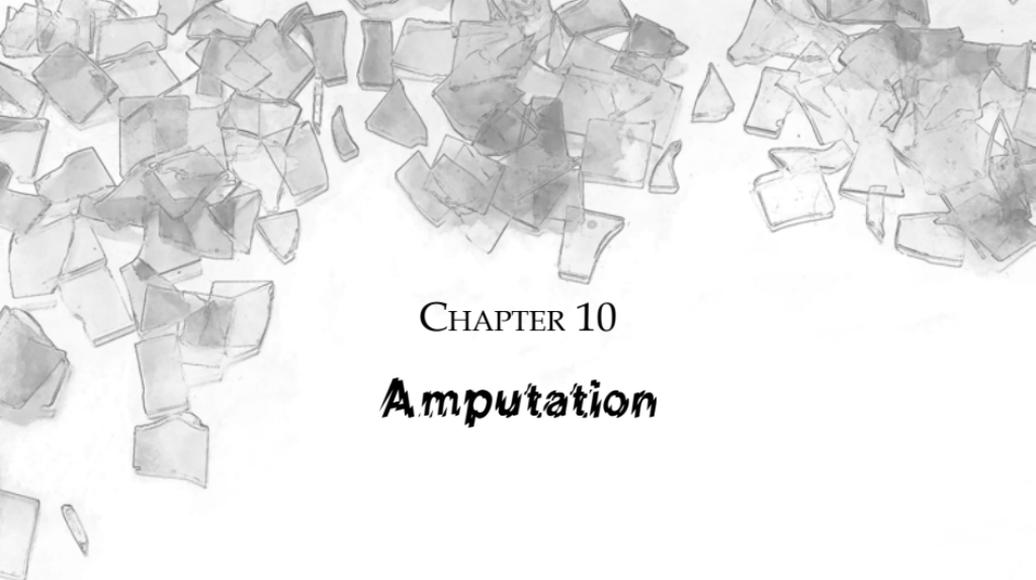
By Duriath, he was a pathetic piece of shit. The waterskin was worthless. It had been empty for hours already. Still, he didn't want him to take it, to take this little piece of kindness his brother had shown him. He didn't want to cry, not over a fucking piece of leather. It was hard not to.

Then the waterskin was back, pushed through the bars and pressed against him. It was heavy now. Full. This time he really did cry, clinging to it, cradling it next to his horrible hand. He was lying on the side again, so he was already almost curled up around it. Might as well finish it and wrap his good arm around it, as if it was a stuffed animal or something. He knew how pathetic that was. It didn't stop him.

Something touched his burning forehead, and it was cool and calming. It made him cry in relief. A wet rag, placed across his forehead, and a hand, brushing his sweaty hair aside. The hand left, but the rag stayed. It wasn't as cool anymore, but it was better than nothing. Everything was better than nothing.

There were some long minutes of silence. Damien started to wonder if the fancy boots had already left, taking their owner with them. He didn't have the strength left to open his eyes and find out. The water hadn't brought much relief, but perhaps just enough to finally grant him some rest. If only.

"Th... ah... ank..." His thoughts were failing him, his attempt to speak slurred. He probably imagined the whispered 'I'm sorry', moments before unconsciousness overtook him.



## CHAPTER 10

# **Amputation**

It was a restless night for Damien. The fever kept dragging him under, granting him nightmarish dreams he couldn't recall when he regained consciousness. The only thing he was aware of was the pain in his hand. It seemed to get worse every time he awoke, even if he could have sworn there was no fucking way for it to possibly get any worse. He didn't even have the strength to scream anymore. All he could do was writhe on the ground, pathetic sounds somewhere between a whine and a sob leaving his lips.

When the sun started to rise, the light stung in his eyes. It was too bright, even through closed eyelids. The thought that in a bit it would get even warmer made Damien sob. Fuck, he was burning already. And so thirsty again. The waterskin was still full, still held tight, and there was no way he'd manage to open it on his own.

"Up!"

Someone banged on the cage. Yeah, because there was so much room to get up, get in here and try it yourself you fucking —

Damien couldn't even finish the thought, let alone speak it out loud. Another shiver made him whine as he tried to bury

his face in his shoulder. There was the sound of metal, and a rough grasp on his ankle. Damien yelped in shock as he was pulled out of the cage. His head slammed against the bars, and he instinctively curled up to protect his hand. Then he was lying on the sandy ground, with only his head still resting on the boards of the cage.

“Get up!”

Someone shoved his side. It wasn't even hard, but hard enough to make him scream. Fuck, why couldn't they leave him alone? Suddenly, he wanted to crawl back into the cage, behind the bars, shielding him as much as they were trapping him. But he couldn't move, and then there were hands all over him. He was grabbed and dragged and pushed. It was impossible for Damien to open his eyes, to find out what was going on. He kept them squeezed shut, fighting down the nausea as wave after wave of heat crashed down on him.

After a few steps he was dumped on the ground, on his back. The impact drove the air out of his lungs, allowing him nothing more than a strangled groan. Full of panic, he tried to get control over his limbs back. The fingers of his left hand dug into the hard packed earth, but his right... fuck, fuck, he couldn't move it. It was trapped. Held. Rude fingers groped and prodded his injured arm, making him wail and thrash. His heart was beating so fast, he could barely hear anything over the rushing of blood in his head.

“... like we have a healer ...”

“... no, more fire ...”

“... sharpen it then ...”

“... not you ...”

He only managed to sob as another finger pressed down on inflamed flesh. By now, he was too exhausted to struggle, only twitching weakly.

“St... stop.. Plea...”

Damien wasn't even sure how much of his words he got out. Perhaps enough. They stopped, not letting go of him, but not continuing to actively hurt him, either. He tried to breathe, to calm down before the beating of his own heart would tear him apart.

"Hey, can you hear me? Hey, you. Nightmare."

By the Seven, he hated this fucking name. Hated it almost as much as he hated his fucking miserable life. It probably meant that person was talking to him, though. He still didn't open his eyes. He couldn't.

"You'll hate us for this, but there's no other way. I'm sorry. I need you to bite down on this."

He *already* hated every single one of them. He hated those fucking hands on his arm, and the fucking piece of leather, being shoved between his teeth. It tasted like salt and dust and blood, but the blood was probably his own. His lips were almost dry enough to crack from merely looking at them.

Damien tried to focus on not choking on his own spit. It was a small thing. Perhaps he could manage that. He failed as something was wrapped around his arm. The thing pulled tighter, squeezing his arm, cutting into overly sensitive skin. He screamed. He screamed louder with every passing moment, with every bit of pressure that was applied, until his voice broke. Damien was sure his arm would just burst like an overripe melon. Choking on saliva and tears alike, he threw his head to the side, then back against the ground. Perhaps if he'd put enough force into that, he'd manage to finally pass out.

"Hold him down."

More hands. Hands holding him. Hands hurting him. Hands on his forehead. Hands on his shoulders. Hands on his hips. Hands hands hands. He had to get them off, had to get away from the pain. He tried and tried, but it was hopeless. His screams had died. Even his breaths sounded barely

human anymore, ragged and bubbling as his own blood ran down his throat. He must have somehow managed to get a bit of his tongue between his teeth and the leather.

Then there was a vibration and a thumping sound, almost delayed, as if his brain had failed to connect the two. The agony that followed was so bone-deep and horrible, it made coldness wash over him.

Damien only realized he had stopped breathing as his chest began to burn. It forced him to breathe, gave him enough air to scream again, somehow. The sound returned and something splintered. Everything felt wet and wrong. Damien started to gag, panic rising in him. He opened his eyes, stared at the shadowy figures above him, unable to focus a single one.

*Please. Please.*

They'd have to let go of him, or he'd choke on his own vomit.

A voice shouted, but he couldn't make out the words. Then he was roughly shoved to the side, his head pressed down to the ground. It felt cold against his cheek and warm against his unharmed hand, pinned down next to him. His body convulsed, struggling where he would have thought he'd have no strength left to fight. It was hopeless anyway. The sound returned a third time, shaking him to the bone. His tears mixed with the bile, dripping from his lips.

Unconsciousness was so close, yet just out of reach. He could feel it trying to drag him down, but the pain kept him awake. He wished they would just end it. Plunge a knife through his heart to stop this endless nightmare.

*"There's too much blood. Quickly, the knife."*

Damien could smell the blood. He could taste it, too. The latter was probably still due to his bitten tongue, and the rough leather digging into his mouth. At least he didn't choke on it anymore.

There was heat and the smell of burnt copper and a fire, tearing him apart. His broken scream was cut short as he started to retch again. The ground beneath his cheek was already wet from blood and tears and more disgusting things. Not nearly as disgusting as the smell of burnt flesh. Damien couldn't help it, he threw up again, coughing and sobbing and wishing nothing more than to die instead.

Then the heated blade returned, pressing down on his wound again, and he finally, finally passed out.





## CHAPTER 11

### *Trust*

“Shh. Be quiet!”

Damien knelt on the floor, a piece of bread in one hand, a crumb he had broken off of it in the other. His brother was peeking over his shoulder, little hands clinging to the fabric of Damien’s shirt.

“There! There!”

Valadan’s voice cracked with the futile attempt to keep his excited squeal down. The little nose that had appeared under the nightstand vanished again.

“Yes, he’s there, but you need to be quiet or he won’t come out.”

Knowing exactly where the mouse was hiding now, Damien moved closer, holding the bit of bread in front of the space beneath the nightstand. Something moved in the shadow, but the mouse did not reappear.

“I’m quiet. Why does he not come?”

Valadan’s whispered words were everything but quiet.

Damien sighed. “He’s scared. He’s so small and we’re so big, and he can’t know that we won’t hurt him.” He tore the crumb into even smaller pieces before placing one down, pushing it right to where the shadows started. Then he

retreated. Sometimes the mouse took the food from his fingers, when he was very patient and very calm. There was little chance of that happening with his brother fidgeting behind him.

"There."

This time, it was truly a whisper, managing not to scare the mouse off who had reappeared. Damien watched as tiny hands grabbed the bread, retreating halfway back into the shadows before nibbling on it. He placed another crumb, this one a bit further out than before.

"Wanna see."

Damien glanced back over his shoulder, finding that Valadan was right behind him. No wonder he couldn't see like that. He nudged him towards the side, pointing at the floor with a small gesture.

"He's right there."

The mouse had finished the crumb and was now sniffing in the direction of the second one. It froze when Valadan moved.

"Can't see." Valadan stood on his tiptoes to look over Damien's shoulder, then sank back. "See better from up."

He took a step to the side, reaching for the bed next to him, trying to pull himself up. It made Damien turn around in annoyance. He tried to be patient, he really did, but his brother had to push every single boundary he set in place. Today it was his bed that was off limits, because Damien had spread some books and papers there.

"You can see just fine from here. Come down."

He didn't want Valadan to sit on them or stain them. It wasn't only that his brother's hands and clothes were still dirty from when he had played outside earlier, or that he was as clumsy as any three year old would be, it was... those books and notes were *his*. Couldn't he just have one little thing that was truly his? Valadan wouldn't even understand

them, or care about them, and he surely wouldn't be careful with them.

"Up."

"No." He reached for Valadan's leg, grabbing his pants to stop him from climbing up fully. "I told you, you can't go up there."

"No!" Valadan shook off the hand, grabbing at the bed-cloth. "Up!"

Something crinkled, then ripped, and Damien snapped. "Come down!" He roughly grabbed Valadan's leg, pulling him down before he could fully make it up onto the bed.

The boy thumped to the floor, landing on his butt, staring up at Valadan with wide eyes. Whatever he had grabbed on the bed, he dropped it to the floor. Then he started to cry.

"I'm sorry." The mouse was forgotten as Damien tried to console his brother, catching the little fists trying to hit him. "Sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"What the fuck is going on?"

Damien raised his head to stare at their father, standing in the doorway. Threatening in a way he had never been before, he looked from one brother to the other. He was always loud, often shouting, but this time he seemed to be so much more angry than usual.

While Damien was frozen in fear, trying to find the right words to explain, Valadan started to cry louder. There were stammered words and sobs, and their father walked across the room, to where Valadan pointed at the nightstand. He moved it away, uncovering the mouse that tried to run for a hole now covered by a leg of the nightstand.

A foot came down, leaving the little creature dazed and limping, trying to get away. It couldn't get away, couldn't even walk right. Damien could only stare as the foot came down again, lifted again, leaving little brown body in a tiny pool of crimson blood. He wanted to scream, to cry, to stop

his father, but his thoughts hadn't caught up before it was too late. There was nothing he could do anymore.

His ears were ringing, drowning out all sounds. His father said something before stomping out of the room, but Damien didn't understand it. He didn't understand what Valadan was saying, either, the words getting lost somewhere on the way from his ears to his mind.

"Leave me alone." A toneless whisper was all Damien managed, and even that took all of his strength. He had brought the little mouse in, after finding it half frozen outside in the snow a few weeks ago. First, he had kept it in a little box, feeding it bread crumbs and bits of cheese, but it had quickly escaped. Ever since, he had fed it and watched it and tried to gain its trust. Because of him, it now was dead; because he had been too impatient with his brother, because he had been too slow to stop his father. He couldn't look at it. He couldn't even stand to stay in the same room as it. He had to get out.

The tears started to fall as Damien ran out of the house, crossing the garden until he could hide in the shadow beneath a large tree. There he curled up, head buried in his arms, leaning against the rough bark. If only he hadn't decided to show Valadan his little friend. If only he had let his brother climb on his bed, putting the papers away instead. If only he had done something... anything to stop his father, instead of just *standing* there. But he hadn't, and now it was too late, too late.

He was shaking, freezing inside and out. It was too cold to be outside without a jacket for long. He couldn't go back in, though. He couldn't imagine ever going back into this room, seeing the tiny bloodstain, knowing that it was his fault.

By the time his father came out, Damien had wrapped his arms around himself, still shivering. He winced, expecting to be found and shouted at, but his father only walked over to the trash bin, throwing something in. Without even looking

in Damien's direction, he entered returned inside, pulling the door shut way louder than it would have been necessary.

Damien didn't need to go over there and check to know what he had brought out. Thrown away like trash. It wasn't right. It had been a living being. A tiny one, seen as a pest by most, but still. It had enjoyed bread, and started to trust his finger, and taken little scraps of cloth back into his nest.

He wanted to get up, to find it and pick it up, to at least bury it. He couldn't. The mere thought of seeing it again, of touching it, so wrong and broken and lifeless, left him nauseous. So he didn't. He kept sitting under the tree, and trembled, and cried until his tears dried up, because there was nothing else he could do.

When the night came, he had to go back inside after all. It was too cold, and he was hungry and thirsty and so tired. He was just in time to avoid another burst of anger, it seemed, as all he got was a grunted command to set the table, as always. As always, they ate in silence, and as always, Valadan asked to get up when he was done, and as always, Damien had to clean up the dishes. Everything was as it always was, as if his father hadn't just shown him that he could turn around and crush his heart in the blink of an eye, for nothing but a minor annoyance.

He didn't have the words for how much it hurt that his unshakable trust in the one person he should be able to trust had been shaken. How wrong it was that he kept watching him, constantly on edge, flinching at a hasty movement or two. He breathed a sigh of relief when their father left the kitchen, and him alone with the dishes.

Damien was quiet as he went back to his room, a candle in hand, pausing in front of the door for too long. When he eventually found the courage to open it, he saw that the nightstand was back at its place, covering whatever trace there would be

left on the worn wooden panels of the floor. It could hide the sight from his eyes, but not the memory from his heart.

He walked over to his bed, picking up the piece of paper Valadan had ripped apart in his attempt to climb up. It was an unfinished sketch, a scene of one of his favorite books. It would remain unfinished now.

With shaking hands, he placed the candle on the nightstand and pulled an empty box out from under the bed. He didn't look or care as he threw the books in there, and the papers, and the charcoal pens. They left dark marks on the things on top, but he didn't care about that, either. Why should he care, when nothing was truly his, when everything could be gone just like that?

After pushing the box back under his bed, he sat down on the blanket, staring at the candle. He was tired. So tired. There was a noise from the room next to him, a more or less regular popping sound, probably Valadan playing with his little ball. Damien wondered if he hated his brother now. No, he realized, he didn't. Valadan was only a child. He didn't know better. Damien couldn't hate him.

He didn't hear anything from his father. The man was probably back in his workshop, where he would stay until late at night, as so often. Damien listened within, trying to find out if he hated him. He didn't think so. It would be wrong. He shouldn't hate his father. But then, he also shouldn't be afraid of his father, but he was.

In the end he decided that right now, he was too tired to hate anyone. He slipped under his blanket and cried until he fell asleep.



## CHAPTER 12

# **Humiliation**

When Damien came to, his cheeks were wet from tears. For a moment, the overwhelming sadness and sense of loss from his dream were all he could feel. Then the pain came back, turning his quiet sob into a pained moan. Fuck, his hand was on fire. He tried to curl up, to wrap himself around it, shifting against the bars until he could pull his arm closer. He froze when the realization hit him. Not his hand. It wasn't there anymore. There was nothing; nothing pressing against his chest where his arm ended, nothing happening as he tried to move his fingers. Only the pain in his arm flared up, throbbing above where his wrist was. Had been. Damien's desperate sob was cut short as nausea washed over him.

He turned to the side, pressing his face in the space between two metal bars. They rubbed against the bruises on his face as his stomach convulsed, failing to bring anything up. He remembered the taste of blood and the smell of burned flesh, and fuck, why couldn't they have just killed him instead. But they hadn't. They had only cut off his hand, and by Duriath, the memory of his bone splintering was enough to make him sob as his stomach cramped again.

He guessed there really had been no other way. Knowing

that didn't make it remotely better. It hurt less now, in a way, but he felt so much worse than before. It wasn't only the pain in what was left of his arm. He was burning in the sun, shining mercilessly down on his cage. At the same time, he was freezing, shaking from the cold that had settled so deeply in his limbs. It took a conscious effort to not let every single breath escape with a quiet whimper. Never before had he felt this weak and hopeless. Merely keeping his eyes open took most of his strength, so he didn't. Drifting between the waves of nausea and the shivers running through his body, Damien could feel the cool traces his tears left on his burning cheeks.

"Hey, look at that. The baby is crying." Someone laughed. "That's the second ugliest thing I've ever seen."

Fuck, he knew that voice. How could he have forgotten it? Telling him how he'd die while the son of a *mok* it belonged to had almost killed him. This piece of shit was exactly what he needed now. The short flash of anger was quickly replaced by dread as steps came closer; steps of more than one person.

"Aw, he's scared." Another voice. Someone kicked the cage. It could have been the person who spoke; all Damien could see were two pairs of legs. "Good."

"You know," the first one said. Damien remembered his name now. It was this fucking Ambrose. "Yesterday was almost as entertaining as I imagined your execution to be. Seeing you screaming and writhing on the ground, almost choking on your own blood and vomit. We should do that again sometime."

Damien tried to focus on his breaths, on keeping his sobs down, on not showing them how much these words terrified him. He wanted to hide, but there was nowhere for him to go.

"Such a nice, sunny day. I'm sure you are terribly thirsty, aren't you?" the one who wasn't Ambrose asked. Damien didn't reply.

“Aren’t you?”

The repeated question was accompanied by yet another kick to the cage, making him flinch. Fuck, the tiniest bit of movement was agony in his arm. “Yes,” Damien forced himself to reply. Not because he believed they would do anything to help him, but because he hoped it would stop them from kicking the bars again.

“Don’t you want something to drink?”

“... yes.” There was no hope behind Damien’s word, other than the hope that they wouldn’t hurt him if he played along. Being teased with what he couldn’t get was at least slightly better than being actively hurt.

“Perhaps you want to beg us for it.” This time it was Ambrose speaking.

“Please.” The word left Damien’s lips automatically. *Please don’t hurt me.* “Please.” *Please, I’m so thirsty.*

“That’s not very convincing.” Ambrose was walking as he spoke, circling the cage, stopping behind Damien. “Why don’t you get on your knees and try again?”

He couldn’t move. No matter how thirsty he was, the false promise of water wasn’t enough to make him try. Instead he closed his eyes, failing to suppress a desperate sob.

“I said kneel.”

This time the kick went between the bars and the tip of a boot dug between the ribs on Damien’s back. He screamed, then heaved as he had tried to catch himself with both arms. Hunched over, his right arm pressed close to his chest, he closed the fingers of his left hand around the bars of the cage.

Trying to drag himself up, away from where Ambrose was standing behind him, was hopeless. Damien couldn’t stop himself from crying out as the movement sent fire through his right arm. Desperately clinging to the bars, he was almost kneeling, but his legs were to his side. There was no way for him to move them like this.

"Please. P-please." He wasn't even begging for water anymore, just for them to leave him alone, to not hurt him when he'd inevitably collapse. "Please."

He couldn't kneel, couldn't get his legs under him. He collapsed as he tried, catching himself at the last moment, his trembling hand pressed against the floor. Dark spots were dancing in front of his eyes. He almost wished he'd pass out, but that would also leave him completely at their mercy, so he fought against the darkness trying to drag him down.

"Aw, look, he's trying. I think that deserves a little reward. What do you think?"

Whatever Ambrose's reply, it was either nonverbal or Damien couldn't hear it over the pounding in his head.

"Here."

Damien saw the movement from the corner of his eye, but had no time to react. The one who wasn't Ambrose chucked the contents of a mug in his direction. The disgusting smell of cheap alcohol hit him at the same time as most of it splashed against his face. It tasted foul on his lips and burned in the scratches on his skin. Some drops clung to his eyelashes, while he squeezed his eyes shut, afraid it would burn in them, too.

Only when the beer soaked his clothes did he realize that he wasn't wearing his thin leather armor or boots any longer. Someone must have removed them, leaving him with nothing but a plain shirt and pants that barely reached his ankles. He shivered from the cold, while the smell of beer made him feel sick. It was almost as bad as wine.

"Robert!" Another voice joined. This one was familiar, too, but in a slightly less terrifying way. "I could have sworn I told you to take the supply tent down. And if my eyes don't deceive me, it's still up. So why the fuck are you over here?"

Damien was too weak to do anything but listen to the voices surrounding him. The new one, the one shouting, sounded commanding. It was probably Fancy Boots. Damien didn't

have the strength to lift his head and find out.

One of his attackers—most likely this Robert—started to say something, but was quickly interrupted.

“I don’t wanna hear it. Get your ass over there and get to work, or you’ll take down the other two tents on your own.”

Someone walked away. It wasn’t enough for Damien to be truly relieved, but he found himself breathing a bit easier. Some of his tension left him as he allowed himself to lean against the cage once more, slumping to the side.

“Ambrose.” Just this name, nothing else. Perhaps a gesture followed, one Damien couldn’t see.

“Whatever you say. Boss.”

Another person left. Then steps approached, making Damien tremble in helpless anticipation. *Please just leave me alone.*

“Hey.” The word sounded gentle. A nice illusion. “Hey, Nightmare. That’s probably not your name, is it?” The voice paused, waiting for a reply.

Damien didn’t bother. As much as he hated that fucking nickname, he didn’t want to hear his real name; not from those people, ripping apart the last shred of self he still had. The last reminder of a time before his life had fallen apart.

“All right.” There was a quiet sigh. “Here, you need to drink.”

The voice was annoyingly persistent. Damien couldn’t resist the small hope of getting some water. He turned his head, forcing his eyes to open. Someone was crouching next to his cage, holding something out to him. He squinted until he could make out a cup. Too bad he couldn’t reach for it. As he tried to lift his arm, it didn’t obey him. Damien wasn’t sure if it was because of his weakness and exhaustion, or if his body merely refused to move, after the pain had just started to become bearable.

“Can you hear me?”

He could. He couldn't figure out how to reply to this question, though. Not with his thoughts as sticky as his tongue, clinging to the roof of his mouth. With glassy eyes, he watched the cup withdraw and the person come closer. Damien hated that he involuntarily winced as a hand reached for him; not nearly as much as he hated the look of pity on Fancy Boot's face as he pressed the back of his hand against his forehead. It rested there for a moment, feeling almost cool against his sun-warmed skin.

"Well, how the fuck am I supposed to figure out if you have a fever like this."

The words were quiet, muttered, probably not directed at him. Their tone still made him flinch and squeeze his eyes shut. The expected blow didn't come. Instead, a shadow fell over him, and Damien opened his eyes again. Something was lying on the cage, blocking out most of the direct sunlight, leaving his head and shoulders in the shadow. It was a blessing; one that left him utterly confused.

Even more confusing was the cup returning, being placed against his lips. A hand held his head as the cup was tilted, allowing him to drink. He emptied it, then a second one, all while the man waited patiently for him to catch his breath between sips. When the cup was empty, it was taken away, and Fancy Boots pushed something through the bars of the cage.

"Here. I filled it and there's... this thing now," he said, wriggling something in front of Damien's eyes. A kind of strip, attached to the cork of the waterskin. "Might be easier to pull out. Doesn't do you much good if you can't open it." The waterskin was placed in front of Damien, resting against his thighs, and the man stood up.

"Why?" Damien couldn't... why was this man kind to him? Kinder than he deserved, that much was for sure.

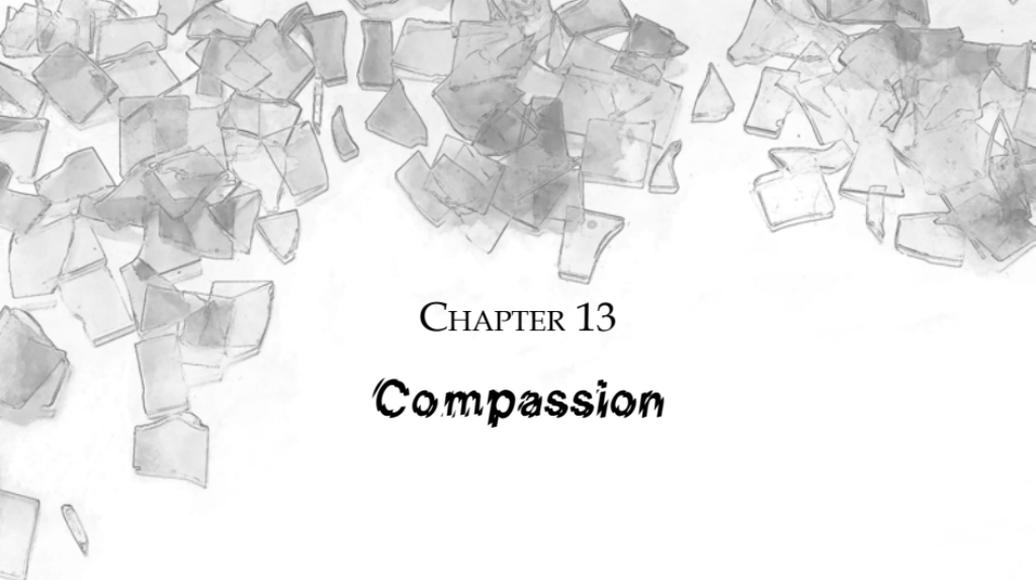
"We gonna have to bring you all the way to Caldeia." Fancy Boots' words were slightly fuzzy due to him having

his back towards Damien. "Do you have any idea how quickly a corpse starts to smell in this weather?"

Then he walked away, leaving Damien in the half-shade of the cage. Damien pressed his head against the bars with a desperate laugh. Yeah, that would be a shame. Causing them more trouble than he already did. Though, he mused, with everything that had soaked his clothes in those last days, it was questionable if a corpse could smell that much worse.

So it didn't seem like they would allow him to die. Perhaps he was lucky and Fancy Boots would also not allow the others to hurt him, to not test the limits of his battered condition. It might be a bit much to ask for, but one could certainly hope. In fact, hoping was all Damien could do, so he closed his eyes. Trying to ignore the shivers still running through his body, he hoped he'd manage to fall asleep somehow.





## CHAPTER 13

# Compassion

Riordan stared at the bleached canvas tent above him, dark gray in the light of the rising sun. Being squad leader had some perks — one of them being that he had a tent to himself. It brought the convenience of no one seeing him as he struggled to sit up, groaning quietly. His head was pounding. Perhaps he had had a bit too much wine last night, but there was really no shame in it, was there? Not that it had helped to ease the memory of the fucking axe, and the screams, and the blood, and the smell of burned flesh.

Fuck, the previous day had gotten to him.

Perhaps this man had done horrible things, but he was still a *person*. Unfortunately, most of his men didn't seem to think that way. Riordan would never have thought he could ever feel so disgusted by his people. They had laughed at the Nightmare's terror. They had made *bets* about if he would cry, if he would beg, if he would piss himself. Fuck, he had almost had to threaten the squad's medic to take care proper of the man's wound, to at least wrap it, instead of leaving it like that.

Riordan ignored the thought that he himself hadn't been much better at the start, getting to his feet and grabbing his

armor to put it on. The Nightmare's armor was gone. Between fever and the relentless sun, it had been too hot for him, and Riordan had taken it off while at least trying to clean him up a bit. It had found its way into the fire hours later. This one fight Riordan hadn't bothered to fight. Where the man was going, he wouldn't need it anymore.

The Nightmare. Riordan realized that he didn't even know the man's real name. Perhaps he should ask. But first, he had to grab some way-too-strong coffee and make sure his men would start taking down the camp.

When he left the tent, he realized that it was earlier than he had assumed. The sun had barely risen, but the sky was so clear, it was bright already. He made his way over to the fire, filling his cup with the leftover sludge—some might call it coffee—from the night watch. Eyeing the empty kettle with annoyance, he played with the thought of putting it right back, to let it be the next person's problem. He didn't.

Once he had filled it up again and pushed it back right next to the fire, Riordan started to walk through the camp, sipping his horrible excuse for a beverage. He avoided the sandy spot that was still dark with spilled blood, walking closer to the cage instead.

The Nightmare was sleeping... was he? Riordan froze in his tracks, watching him intently until he could make out the faintest movement: the rising and falling of his chest, barely visible with how slumped he sat against the bars. His sleep didn't seem peaceful, but that was not a surprise. In his condition restless sleep was surely better than none at all, so Riordan didn't approach him.

He walked on, stopping again a few steps later. Something was lying on the ground. Riordan stepped closer, picking up the waterskin as soon as he reached it. It was still full. He was already halfway back to the cage when he paused. It shouldn't be full; not after a whole night, plagued by fever.

Perhaps the man had been too out of it to drink, but it might also be possible that he hadn't been *able* to. And he definitely needed to drink, if he wanted to survive another day. Riordan looked at his hands, then pinned the waterskin under his right arm, trying to open it with his left hand. It wasn't overly hard, but he had to hold onto the waterskin pretty tightly. It was unlikely the weakened captive would have the strength for that, if he could even still use his right arm—which was just as unlikely, thinking about it.

Waterskin in hand, Riordan walked back through the camp. The first men were just gathering around the fire, and he took a moment to assign some tasks, assuring them that they could have their coffee first. Hoping he'd find anything to help him with this dilemma, he entered his tent.

When he returned, the waterskin in one hand, a cup of water in the other, two people were standing around the cage. Riordan came just in time to see one of them throwing something—no, *pouring* something over the cage. Then they laughed.

"Robert!" he shouted, not caring that his voice carried his fury. "I could have sworn I told you to take the supply tent down. And if my eyes don't deceive me, it's still up. So why the fuck are you over here?"

Robert spun around, a look of slight panic on his face, mouth half open to stammer some pitiful excuse, Riordan was sure of it.

"I don't wanna hear it. Get your ass over there and get to work, or you'll take down the other two tents on your own."

It didn't surprise him that this was all it took to make Robert piss off. He wasn't the rebellious one of the two. After all, Riordan had already laid into Ambrose as soon as he had discovered what he had done to the captive's water, but apparently it hadn't been enough. At the moment, he was staring

at the cage, a despicable grin on his face.

As angry as he was, Riordan would have preferred to not have this discussion right in front of the captive. Bad shape or not, he was a fucking rebel, and whatever disagreements he had with his squad were not meant for his ears. He pinned the waterskin under his arm.

"Ambrose," Riordan said, not quite a shout, but loud enough to make him look up instantly. As soon as Riordan had the man's attention, he raised his free hand, signing, "What the fuck. Didn't I tell you to leave him the fuck alone?"

"Make me." Ambrose's signs were as angry as his own.

That was not what he had expected. Riordan tried to not let his nervousness show. He might be the leader of this squad, but that didn't mean Ambrose wouldn't be able to knock him out with a flick of his wrist. Riordan fucking hated mages like him. But chances that he would actually do that were low, he reminded himself.

"You're willing to risk your job? For that?" he signed, pointing at the cage.

He had meant Ambrose's repulsive behavior, but the mage's snarl was surely directed at the captive.

"He deserves it."

"That's not on us to decide. If I so much as see you near this goddamn cage one more time," Riordan signed, barely stopping himself from letting the other hand join in, spilling all the water, "I will report your disobedience and make sure you'll spend the next ten years of your life pushing windmills in a lull."

For a moment, it seemed like Ambrose would defy him again. Hands raised, he hesitated, before letting them sink, not without rolling his eyes one last time.

"Whatever you say," he mumbled, turning around. "Boss."

That surely sounded like an insult, but Riordan didn't care.

As long as he was finally pissing off, and hopefully wouldn't come back. He stared after him until he had vanished between some tents, then he approached the cage, crouching down in front of it.

"Hey. Hey, Nightmare. That's probably not your name, is it?"

There was no reaction. Riordan waited a moment, taking in the pitiful sight. The man was half curled up, half collapsed to the side, his head resting on the bars of the cage. He had his right arm pressed against his body, his whole posture a desperate attempt to protect it.

"All right." Riordan sighed. He hadn't truly expected a reply. "Here, you need to drink," he said, holding out the cup while setting down the waterskin.

The man turned his head, but made no attempt to reach for the cup. His hair was wet, clinging to his head, and Riordan couldn't tell if it was sweat or whatever those two assholes had poured over the cage.

"Can you hear me?"

Again, there was no reaction. Without thinking, Riordan reached for the man's forehead. It was hot, but so were the metal bars he touched with his bare forearm. No wonder; the goddamn cage stood right in the light of the rising sun.

"Well, how the fuck am I supposed to figure out if you have a fever like this," he muttered, not missing the way the Nightm— man flinched at his words. If he left him like this, he'd be roasted alive.

Looking around, Riordan spotted a discarded piece of tarp. He put the cup down and went to grab the tarp, to drape it over the cage, pulling it so it would block out as much of the sun as possible. He didn't bother to talk to him again, instead crouching down once more and lifting the cup to the man's lips. Riordan made sure he drank slowly, filling the cup again from the waterskin when it was empty. Eventually he put the cup down, giving the man a long look. There really wasn't

much more he could do. They didn't have a real healer with them—an oversight he had started to regret.

"Here. I filled it and there's... this thing now," he said, wriggling the strip he had found and attached to the cork of the waterskin. "Might be easier to pull out. Doesn't do you much good if you can't open it."

He shoved it through the bars, leaning it against the man's legs, before he stood up.

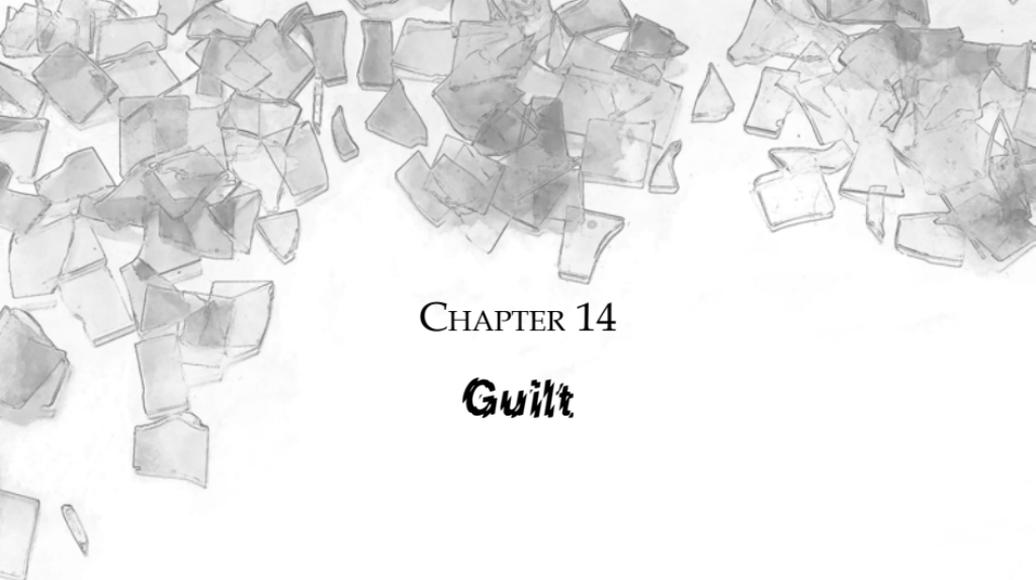
"Why?"

The rough, broken voice made him pause.

"We gonna have to bring you all the way to Caldeia." Rior-dan tried to swallow the lump in his throat. There was something in the man's tone that made his stomach twist. "Do you have any idea how quickly a corpse starts to smell in this weather?" he tried to deflect the sudden wave of pity with a bad joke.

Regretting it the moment it had left his lips, he walked away, his steps brisk, his hands balled into fists. What was the point in keeping the man alive, bringing him to Caldeia, only for him to be executed? There was no way anything but death was waiting for him there.

But this wasn't his decision, and Nightmare or not, the man deserved a fair trial. And as long as he was under his responsibility, Riordan would make sure none of the others would touch him again.



## CHAPTER 14

### **Guilt**

Damien barely bothered to open his eyes anymore. When he did, it was for a moment only; letting in some light, something to focus on. Clear blue sky, and rusty bars, and a scrubby tree or two. Mostly he just listened. To the sound the wheels of the wagon caused on the dusty road, or the voices of the ambassador's squad, walking next to it. When he was lucky, he could hear a bird or two, listening to their songs for a minute before the wagon had passed them.

Since they had taken off his armor, the bars of his cage hurt more, where he lay pressed against them. On the other hand, it made the heat just the tiniest bit easier to bear. Not that he was really warm. The shivers had stayed, even after the fever had gone down a bit. His fingers and toes were freezing, his limbs cold. Perhaps it was the blood loss taking its toll. If only he had lost more of it, had bled out on the fucking ground. Then he wouldn't be on his way to find another, just as gruesome end now.

At least they didn't seem to try and let him starve or die of thirst. It was always Fancy Boots who stepped next to the cage, extending his hand for Damien to give him the waterskin. He didn't understand why a man of his rank would bother with

scum like him. Damien was thankful for it, though. At least Fancy Boots had shown him a scrap of kindness, deserved or not. He would have had a hard time trusting any of the other men.

The man never spoke to him. When he brought the filled waterskin back, he sometimes dropped some scraps of food in the cage as well. Whatever was left of their meals, Damien assumed. It was barely enough to ease the permanent gnawing in his stomach. It was enough to make him feel sick when the next wave of shivers left him all dizzy.

He had lost all sense of time. They could have been on the road for hours or days or weeks, he wouldn't have known. There was only the haze in his mind and the pain in what remained of his arm. Perhaps it was still the fever. Perhaps it was a part of him refusing to accept what had happened. He tried not to look at it. He tried not to think about it. Mostly, he tried not to think at all.

"Have you heard? The guy who stopped him was his *brother*."

The voices near him were a welcome distraction. The topic not so much, but he couldn't be picky. Thinking of Valadan made his heart hurt almost as much as his arm. He'd never see him again. Or perhaps he would. Perhaps he would be there, watching him die. Damien wondered if he'd find his face in the crowd. What would he see on the oh so familiar features—sadness or grim satisfaction?

"That's rough. His own brother. I'm not sure I could do that. But then, the worst my brother has ever done is steal our neighbor's apples."

Someone laughed, and Damien wanted to cry.

"Oh, he didn't do it for fun. From what I've heard, his brother faked his signature. Framed him. He was lucky the Silver Blades didn't straight up kill him when they stormed the house. You've seen how similar they look. His wife—his

*pregnant* wife—somehow managed to make them not murder him right there at the dinner table. Must be a brave one, that woman. I heard they don't fuck around with traitors like him."

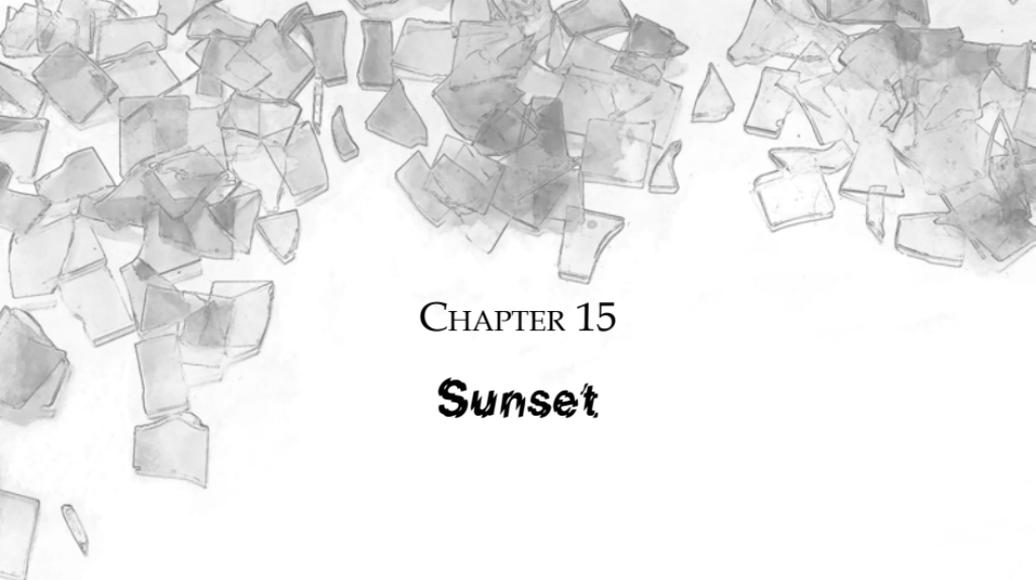
Damien's heart had grown colder with every single word. He had never faked his brother's signature. By Duriath, he didn't *know* his brother's signature. But their family names were the same, and they looked the same and—

There was no point fighting the tears or suppressing the sobs. He could have gotten his baby brother killed. He could have gotten his brother's wife and her unborn child killed. He hadn't only ruined his own worthless life, he ruined the life of everyone around him. There was no love in him, no kindness, nothing good. He broke everything he touched.

Damien leaned his head against the cage, staring blindly up at the sky above. The bars at his back hurt, but he didn't move. He was hugging the waterskin, clinging to it. After all he had done, his brother had still shown him this kindness. A kindness he hadn't deserved. He deserved to be sentenced, to be hanged before he could ruin any more lives.

Valadan would surely be there, watching him die. And the look on his face would probably be disgust.





## CHAPTER 15

### **Sunset**

The sunset over the steppes of Raqhar was beautiful. It was perhaps the only truly beautiful thing Damien could think of. There was little to do at the moment, so he usually had the time to steal himself away in the evenings. Walk until the tents faded behind him, until he could imagine he was the only person far and wide. Then he'd sit and wait for the sun to set, enjoying a rare moment of peace.

The sun was so big and so low and so red, he could look at it for a moment before it became too bright. The afterimage burned behind his eyelids when he closed them; a different kind of illusion. He sometimes played around with it, looking at the sun, then watching the dark spot in his vision travel across the tufts of grass as he let his gaze wander.

His favorite moment was right after the sun had vanished, though. When the endless sky turned dark at the edges, and the horizon seemed to be on fire. Sometimes, such as today, there were clouds, glowing pink and yellow, turning into purple where they met the approaching darkness. It was a fragile harmony of colors, here one moment, gone the next. Damien would wait until the last streaks of purple had faded, and sometimes longer. Watching the moon rise and the stars

appear, a shimmering blanket of darkness, hiding away the world and all its cruelty.

As beautiful as this sunset was, Damien wished he would never have to see it again. Sure, he could leave, just walk away, turn his back on this conflict on the verge of a civil war. Perhaps he'd even make it back to civilization in one piece. It was unlikely, given how far out he was, and the hostility of both nature and people. If there had been anything for him to return to, he might have tried.

But there was nothing. How could he go home, when he had no home to speak of? It felt wrong to put it like that, when so many people in this land truly had no home, had lost everything to a conflict that had started before their parents were even born. There was a house waiting for him. Assuming two years hadn't been a long enough time to attract thieves — which was rather unlikely, if he was honest — it would still be fully furnished. He'd surely be able to sell some of it, live frugally for a while. Live like a ghost in the dusty rooms, which had been too big, too empty for one person alone, when they had been built to house a whole happy family.

It would only be a short reprieve, before he'd be as lost as before. There was no future for himself he could see. All his life, he had kept it together because he had needed to take care of his brother. Now Valadan was gone, Duriath knew where, and it was all Damien's fault. There wasn't a day where he didn't wonder where his brother was, if he was well. He'd have given everything, absolutely everything, to turn back the time to that one last day when Valadan had walked out. To take back those fucking words of his, or at least run after his brother and apologize. But his chance had passed, and he wasn't sure he'd ever see him again.

He was useless. Worthless. Good at nothing he had ever learned, with no idea what to do with his life. Well, there was one thing he was good at, and that he hated even more. Hated

what his group's leader made him do. Hated that there didn't seem to be a way out for him. He'd hurt people if he stayed, and he'd hurt people if he'd leave, and he just couldn't figure out which of both options would be the better one.

As if people didn't have enough ways to hurt themselves without using him. Damien's fingers wandered over the piece of metal and polished wood in his hand. A gun. It was a strange contraption, a nyvi invention, as far as he knew. But where nyvi usually utilized some magic crystals or something, this one was purely mechanical. A masterpiece of craftsmanship, if one looked at it this way. A horrible, deadly device, if one looked at it another way.

It was wrong. No one should be able to hurt, to kill someone with a little movement of the hand. Damien's finger brushed over the trigger, the barrel of the gun pointed carefully down towards the ground. Not that it was much harder to kill someone with magic, at least for those with the right talents. Magic seemed to be more personal, though. It sure as fuck was for him. He couldn't get the images out of his head, or the guilt that hounded him night and day. Even if he'd manage to leave, Damien knew those images would stay with him.

He idly wondered if Ed would even let him go. Damien had no illusions about his true usefulness to this group, but the reputation he had earned was an asset in its own right. The Nightmare, they had started to call him some months ago. A name he absolutely despised, more so with every time Ed called him by it. Perhaps he should kill that son of a *mok*. It was a futile thought. He wasn't a killer.

He could always kill himself instead. A humorless laugh escaped his lips as he pointed the gun towards the sky—not towards himself, he wasn't that careless. There was no true hope left in his heart. No idea how anything could turn for the better, or how a better life might even look, for that

matter. He didn't know why he held on, day after day, waiting with dread for the next time Ed called for him. Spending each waking hour plagued by guilt, and each sleeping one plagued by nightmares.

And still, if he did it, then it would be over. Then what little chance there was of a better future would turn to zero. Then the faint spark of hope that he'd ever see his brother again would die with him. Then he'd leave the world in the same horrible state it was in now. If he was to die, he at least wanted to die doing something *good*.

There was a short tree not too far from him, its branches twisted towards the sky. Damien raised the gun and took aim. He wasn't exactly sure what to expect when handling this kind of weapon, had only seen it being used by others so far. It surely wasn't the force with which his arm was pushed back, or the volume of the noise, ringing in his ears. He almost dropped the gun, thinking better of it at the last moment, pointing it towards the ground instead while he waited for his heartbeat to calm down.

He had missed the tree. It was no surprise. He tapped the fingers of the other hand against the gun, recalling the motions needed to reload, and trying to remember how many projectiles—bullets, Ed had called them—it did fit. Four, he thought. Three more tries then. He hit the tree with the last one. Bark splintered, little pieces of it bursting against the dark blue sky, leaving a cloud of dust in their wake.

Damien pushed the lever to reload and pulled the trigger again, a few times, just to make sure it was really empty. Not that he'd truly trust this device now, but knowing that there were no bullets left removed a certain temptation from his thoughts. He placed the gun next to him in the grass and pulled one of his legs close, wrapping his arms around it. As the sun fully slipped behind the horizon, he put his chin on his arms, staring up at the sky. He couldn't go home. He

couldn't give up. He couldn't save anyone. All he could do was stay, a pawn in a game he didn't know the rules of, hoping that one day there would be a way out for him.





## CHAPTER 16

### *Arrival*

Seeing the park surrounding the royal palace in the capital of Amalhar wasn't exactly a new thing for Damien. He had walked those gravel paths before, had admired the ornate hedges, had smelled the hundreds of flowers.

Seeing it through the bars of a fucking cage, covered in sweat and dust and blood and... other things, was new. He could count himself lucky he was still too feverish to really pay attention to the people around him, otherwise the whispers and stares might have bothered him. As it was, it didn't matter.

It didn't matter, because this was the place where he would die.

He distantly wondered how long it would take. Would they send him straight to trial, execute him before the sun set? Or would they throw him into the dungeon first, to sort out whatever paperwork there was to fill out? Perhaps he'd live a day longer. The court sure loved its paperwork.

Damien leaned his head against the cage, finding that the well mended paths of the royal park allowed the wagon to roll much more smoothly. It was nice. Would be nicer if his ribs didn't hurt, if he could move his legs, if he still had his fucking

hand. The stump was throbbing with pain, didn't seem to get better at all. That didn't matter either, he guessed.

Drifting close to unconsciousness, Damien's head jerked up when his surroundings grew dark. The wagon had reached some kind of roof, blocking the sky. Perhaps a hall? He tried to crane his neck, to look around, then sank back with a groan. Everything fucking hurt. It was as if his muscles had long frozen in place, and perhaps they had. He couldn't remember the last time he had straightened his back or stretched his legs.

The door of the cage was opened and someone slammed their hand on the top of it. The vibration and noise made Damien wince.

"Get out."

For a moment he considered resisting, but that didn't seem worth the effort. They'd get him out of this thing one way or another. He started to shuffle towards the opening, keeping the stump pressed against his chest. The empty waterskin tucked somewhere under his arm, he managed to swing one leg out of the cage, then the other.

Apparently not quickly enough. Damien was shoved in the back and stumbled forwards. A lucky reflex saved him, made him turn around instead of trying to catch his fall with his hands. As his back slammed on the ground, the air was driven from his lungs, taking a curse with it. Fuck. It wasn't like he resisted. If they wanted him to be in better shape, perhaps they should have given him enough to *eat*.

No point in feeding a dead man he guessed. But he also knew he wouldn't manage to get up again. Pretending he didn't notice the tear in the corner of his eye, he let his body go limp. Giving up. Wherever they wanted him, they'd have to drag him there.

"Hey, you, help me with him."

"I'll do it."

One of the voices sounded vaguely familiar. He couldn't put a face to it. Hands reached for him, pulled him up, turned him around. One moment he was kneeling, the next he was hanging between the men holding him. The waterskin was gone, and as he opened his eyes, he couldn't see it anymore. Another tear found its way down his cheek.

Damien looked at the ground while he was dragged along. There were feet on either side of him. The left pair of boots was plain and clean, probably never leaving the palace grounds. The right pair of boots was worn and dusty, but expensive. Fancy. There was something comforting about seeing them.

The air grew colder as he was brought down a set of stairs. Now the only light came from flickering torches at the walls, and the air was musty and stale. So he'd end up in the dungeon for now. He didn't count the doors they passed, or look around as one was unlocked and he was dragged inside. He half expected to be thrown to the ground, but he was placed down almost gently. Something was put under his head. It was soft and stank, but even the very air reeked of mold and piss and death, so that barely mattered.

His legs were straightened, which was nice. He wasn't sure he'd have found the strength for that anytime soon. Then his stump was placed on his chest, and a calloused hand touched his forehead.

"If you want him to live until the trial, give him water."

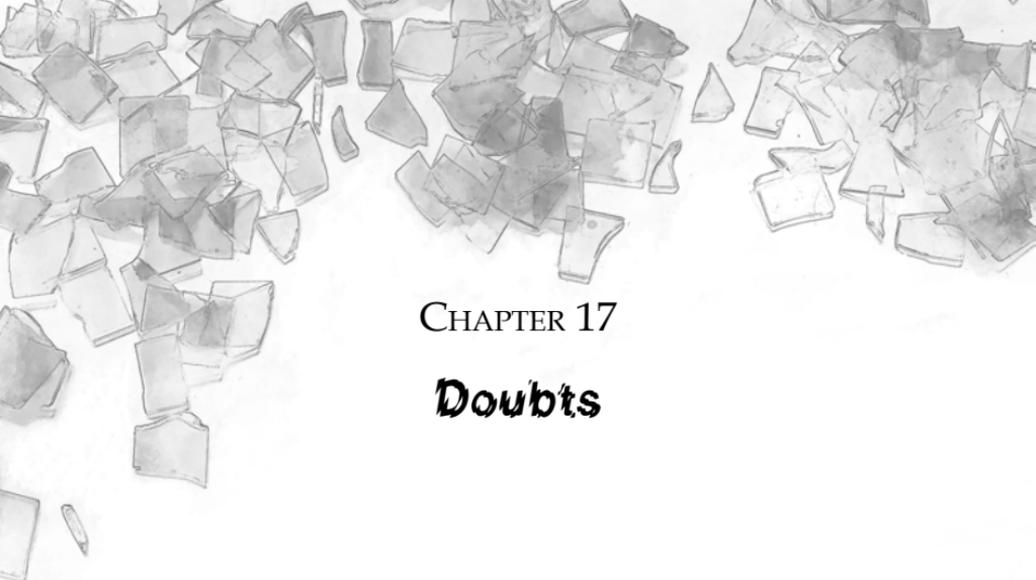
That would be funny, wouldn't it. Dying like that. Denying them the spectacle his death would be otherwise. He probably wouldn't be this lucky. His heart still raced, just thinking about the rope.

But right now he could breathe, and the humidity of the cell was more pleasant than the dusty raqharian air. The lack of direct sunlight was a relief as well. If only the floor

wasn't so cold. Cold and hard, making his back hurt and chilling him to the bone. He'd probably be sick in a day or two.

But then, he'd probably be dead in a day or two, so what did it matter. Damien sighed, taking a deep breath. He listened to the footsteps moving away. One of them must be Fancy Boots. He should have thanked him. For... well for being less of an asshole than the other assholes. He didn't have the strength to speak.

Then the door was locked, and he was alone. He opened his eyes to stare at the dark ceiling. It would be over soon. His worthless life in which he had done nothing right. He knew the tears running down his cheeks didn't matter, either.



## CHAPTER 17

### **Doubts**

“And another signature here, please.”

The guard lifted one of the sheets on the clipboard to reveal yet another empty line, waiting to be filled. Riordan had lost count of how many there had been. Those stuck up nobles and their fucking paperwork.

“Get out,” someone behind him said. Others laughed.

If that wasn’t the last signature, he would stick the quill up—

A heavy thump made him flinch, ruining the last stroke of the ‘Finnley’ he had just put down. He turned around, looking at the cart blocking his view. He couldn’t see what was happening, but he had no doubts that it wasn’t something good.

“Are we done?” he snapped at the guard.

Well, that hadn’t been very polite, but at least the man nodded. Riordan left him standing with his fucking clipboard, and the quill politely shoved into his hand instead of the alternative.

When Riordan rounded the wagon, he found the prisoner lying on the ground. What the fuck. He left them alone for *one minute* and they couldn’t keep their hands off him. He

was sure the man had done nothing to provoke them. There had been no fight left in him since the day they had cut off his hand. Half of the time when Riordan had checked in on him, he had seemed barely lucid, staring off into the distance or crying quietly.

The guard looming over the prisoner pointed at one of Riordan's men.

"Hey, you, help me with him."

Riordan stepped in front of him.

"I'll do it."

He didn't give them time to object, reaching for the prisoner's right arm. The man's shirt hung in bloody tatters over the stump, hiding it from sight. Riordan took care to grab his arm as far away from the wound as possible as he started to pull him up, but he had to put the arm around his shoulder somehow.

The guard taking the other arm was less careful. He hoisted the prisoner up and started to walk immediately. Riordan had no choice but to keep up, trying his best to support the listless body. The man didn't try to walk, not even as they dragged him down the endless stairs into the dungeon. His feet dragged along the ground, his head lolling from side to side. If not for the way his eyelids fluttered, Riordan would have thought he had lost consciousness.

A second guard was waiting for them at the end of the stairs, a large keyring in one hand, a lantern in the other.

"Follow me. I have a nice cozy room prepared for our guest."

The other guard laughed, and Riordan's gaze darkened. They walked through a dimly lit tunnel, past closed cell doors on each side. Most of them were empty.

"Here we are."

The guard unlocked one of the doors, gesturing for them to enter. As soon as they were inside the cell, the other guard let

go of the prisoner. Riordan didn't. He bit back a curse as the full weight rested on him, shoving the man a bit further, and then lowering him to the floor as gently as possible.

He hated to leave him on the cold stone, but the scraps of straw would barely have been enough to cover half of the space he occupied, even if they hadn't been strewn all across the cell. Riordan raised his head, looking around, trying to see if there was anything he could use to help. His gaze darkened further when he saw the rest of the cell. They couldn't be fucking serious about this. It was dark, with only one small slit of a window, high above the floor. Moss grew on one wall, and rusty chains hung from various equally rusty rings in the wall. It looked more like a drawing in a story book than a place to keep an actual person.

Some kind of rag lay in one corner. Riordan went to pick it up, trying his best not to wonder what the fabric had once been. He folded it, as pointless as it was, and placed it under the man's head. Then he straightened the man's legs and put the stump on his chest, as if that would do anything to keep it away from the filth.

If, by a miracle, it wasn't infected yet, it would soon be. Riordan raised his hand to the man's forehead, finding it too warm to the touch.

"If you want him to live until the trial, give him water."

Fuck, as if water would be enough. That man needed a healer, and something to keep him warm, and a chance to rest—and he wouldn't get any of it. All that was waiting for him was death, one way or another.

Riordan would have liked to find some comforting words, but the guard at the door already jingled the keys in a clear display of impatience. Besides, what comfort was there to give if the man wasn't going to live to see another week? Riordan got up, lingering a moment longer, before he turned to leave. He tried his best to ignore the twist in his stomach as

the cell door clanked shut behind him.

The guards started to walk next to each other, one of them gesturing in the direction of the cell.

“Did you see the tears? Pathetic.”

“You think he’ll be crying for his mommy when they’ll lead him to the gallows?”

Riordan fell a step behind them, balling his hands into fists. They hadn’t even waited until they were out of earshot. He tried his best to ignore their continued slander, but it became harder and harder. By the time he emerged from the building, he was so fucking done. When the guards bid him farewell, nodded mutely so he wouldn’t say anything wrong. He just had to grab his bag, then he’d be out of here.

On his way to the cart, his boot hit something. When Riordan looked down, he found the waterskin half shoved behind a wheel. He picked it up, turning it in his hand. It was empty, the blood stains long dried and covered with dirt.

“Hey, Finnley! Drinks at the bowl tonight?”

Riordan turned around, managing to give Robert a look that was neither murderous nor incredulous. Regretful was too much effort, though, so he had to settle for neutral.

“Nah. Gonna visit family. It’s been too long.”

He *was* going to visit his family, but even if that hadn’t been the case, he wouldn’t have come along. If he was honest, he wasn’t sure he ever wanted to see him again; him and the others. No matter what the Nightmare had done, Riordan couldn’t understand how they were able to see him suffer and cry, and *enjoy* it. How instead of showing a bit of sympathy, they decided to torment him further.

“See ya,” Riordan said in no particular direction. He had found his bag and slung it over his shoulder, walking out of there as quickly as he could.

Half an hour later, his anger had made room for weariness. He was standing in front of his family's home, his fingertips tracing a wreath of dried flowers on the front door. He opened the door—never locked during the day, when people were home—and called out.

"It's me! I'm home!"

The smell of freshly baked bread filled the air, mixing with the scent of dried flowers on the sideboard in the entrance hallway. Riordan put his pack down, and the waterskin. He wasn't even sure what he had kept it for, there was no way he'd ever use it. All he knew was that it had felt wrong to leave it there.

"In the kitchen, honey."

Hearing his mama's voice made him smile. Gods, it felt so good to be home. Riordan took off his dusty boots before he followed the sounds coming out of the kitchen.

The fire was burning brightly in the hearth, a casserole form lined with dough standing next to it. His mama was wearing a colorful apron, her graying hair up in a bun. With his hands propped on the counter he watched her prepare something in a bowl, the wooden spoon knocking against it in a steady rhythm.

"How have you been?" she asked while emptying the contents of a measuring cup into whatever she was stirring.

Riordan told her about the jobs he had taken since the last time he had been in Caldeia. He kept it to descriptions of foreign cultures and beautiful landscapes, losing no word about what had brought him back. He loved her, but she wasn't the one he wanted to talk to about it.

"Will mom be home for dinner?" he asked once he was done describing the city of Gorin, from where he had set out escorting the ambassador across the steppe.

"Yes. The last few weeks have been slow, luckily."

A bright squeak made Riordan spin around. Eveline stood

in the doorway to the kitchen, a bright grin on her face. Her hands were flying as she ran towards him. "Big brother!"

Riordan caught her, lifting her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on as he carried her into the living room. The place looked like it always had. Mismatched furniture, colorful fabric, sunlit windows and little trinkets all over the place. This time, there was an unusually large amount of crystals. One of the twins must have taken up a new hobby.

Riordan took a deep breath. It smelled like home. There was no other way to put it.

Eveline tapped his shoulder. "You look sad," she signed as he looked at her.

Riordan propped her onto his hip, so he could hold her with one arm for a moment. "I am sad," he admitted.

"Why?"

She was getting too tall to hold her like this for long, so instead of answering, he grabbed her with both hands, swirling her around. Her laughter was music in his ears, and by the time he set her down, his frown was gone.

"Grown up things," he signed as soon as he had his hands free.

Eveline scrunched her nose. "If grown up things make you sad, being a grown up is stupid."

He couldn't argue with that.

"I'm here now, so I won't be sad much longer. You have to tell me everything that has happened since the last time I was here. But first, I'm gonna have to take a bath. I'm sooo," he signed, drawing out the word, "stinky." Riordan grabbed his sleeve, pulling it towards his nose, and grimaced.

Eveline laughed, following him as he left the living room, to poke his head into the kitchen.

"Mama?" he called.

When she turned around, he signed, "I'm gonna take a bath and change. Tomorrow, I'll do my laundry."

His mama dropped the spoon into the bowl to sign, not wanting to exclude her daughter from the conversation. "You're staying for longer?" she asked.

"Yeah. I think I'll stay for a while. I have some things to think about."

Riordan sat on the low wall surrounding the back porch, a cup of hot chocolate in his hands, his mom next to him. It had always been like that, since a time when his legs had been too short to reach the ground, and his mom had still been his dad.

"So you're... angry at them?" his mom asked.

"I don't know. I think I was angry, but now?" He looked up, staring at nothing in particular. "I'm disappointed. I thought I knew them. I thought they were good men."

And he hated the part of him still clinging to that assessment, whispering to him that they had only been this cruel to a criminal. To a man who had done so much worse, who deserved it.

"I hurt him too, you know?" he said. "When we caught him, and he was so..." Riordan trailed off. Back then, he had assumed the Nightmare had tried to attack him out of anger, but fuck. The man must have been in agony, if not in shock from the injury, not to mention terrified to be in the hands of his enemies. Not that he had been wrong to be terrified, had he?

"He tried to bite me, so I kicked him and put him into a cage like a fucking animal." In the grand scheme of things, it might have been one of the Nightmare's least problems. That didn't make it any better. "Perhaps if I had set a better example."

It was a futile thought. He couldn't change what had happened, and if he was honest, he didn't think it would have changed anything about the way his men had treated the

captive. The captive. The man. The Nightmare.

"I don't even know his name," Riordan mumbled. "He didn't tell me."

He could have found out now. Fuck, it had probably been written somewhere on those papers the guard had made him sign. It almost made him wish he had actually read them. Almost. It didn't matter anymore.

"Do you regret it? Bringing him here?"

"I don't know. I don't think so." Riordan took a sip of his no-longer-quite-as-hot chocolate. "He's done terrible things, and he tried to kill the ambassador. He needs to be brought to justice." His voice was merely a whisper as he added, "I'm just not so sure anymore how justice looks."

## *Part 2*

Caldeia



## CHAPTER 18

### **Bargain**

“... take the night shift for a week. For two ...”

Voices close enough to be understood woke Damien from his restless sleep. The cell wasn't exactly a worse place than the cage, but it also wasn't better. And it was cold. The cold was welcome on his burning forehead, but made the ache in his still freezing limbs worse. At least he could move now. When he found the strength for it, that was. Most of the time he didn't. Then he just stared at the ceiling and wondered when he'd die.

“ ... fuck the law. You know what he's done.”

A few times a guard had come, had made him drink. Always the same or every time a different one, he couldn't tell. Half of the time he didn't even bother to open his eyes. Between their visits could have been hours or days. He was always thirsty, it was never enough. It wasn't for the lack of water. It was the fever burning in his body that made his mouth dry the moment they left again.

“ ... my family! I don't care if I ...”

The guards hadn't given him any food. Damien wasn't even sure he would manage to keep anything down, but it would sure have been nice to try. Strangely enough, he wasn't even

hungry anymore. But perhaps he wouldn't be so horribly weak then that even sitting up seemed too much of an effort. He couldn't really blame them, though. Why waste their rations on a dead man. Just why the fuck wasn't he dead yet?

"... four silver coins? Have you lost your mind? For that ..."

He had pondered asking for food. But there was little chance of success, and speaking had become so hard. Everything had become so hard. The tiniest exertion was enough to leave him gasping for air, sometimes even making his vision fade. Breathing should be easier than moving. It wasn't. Being constantly out of breath was unnerving. It reminded him of things he didn't want to think of, made his heart race with terror.

"... alive. That's all I promise. When will ..."

Damien tried to remember what he had heard so far. None of the fragments he had understood made sense. They weren't meant for his ears anyway, but could have been a nice distraction from the pain and the cold. There was not much else in this cell he could distract himself with. He didn't miss the light of the sun, hurting his eyes. He missed the sky though, and the occasional cloud. Would he get to see it one last time, or would they drag him out of this hole with a bag over his head?

"... in a few hours. Don't overdo it."

The door creaked and Damien turned his head to the side, keeping his eyes closed. Opening them was such an effort. Not worth it when in a moment a crude voice would tell him to drink. Perhaps tell him it was time, if he was lucky.

The footsteps paused in front of him, but the words he had expected didn't come. Instead a kick hit him in the side, just below the ribs, making him double over in pain.

Damien scrambled to curl up, trying to turn his back towards his attacker. He was too slow. Another kick hit his right arm, below the shoulder, shoving him forwards and

into the wall. His vision blurred, then turned red as blood trickled down from his forehead. The suddenness and brutality of the attack made Damien shake. He pressed his left hand against the wound on his head, while he tried to shield the stump with his body. There was nowhere for him to go, no way for him to defend himself. Another kick, to his lower back this time, made him cry out.

“Please stop.”

Footsteps sounded, but no new attack came. For now. He didn't trust the peace. All he could see between the blood in his eyes and the hand shielding his face was a shadow looming over him.

“What was that?” the shadow asked.

Damien tried to make sense of the question. “Stop,” he whimpered, not sure what else to do but to repeat his plea. “Stop.”

“How about you say that to my face?”

The thought of turning towards his attacker, of exposing more of his body in doing so, made Damien whimper again. He didn't. Instead he tried to curl up more, drawing his legs towards his chest.

“I said,” the man said, grabbing a fistful of Damien's hair. He yanked his head to the side, making a sharp pain shoot through his neck. Damien had to roll onto his back to ease the strain, trembling with how vulnerable it left him. The man held Damien's head so he was forced to look at him as he repeated his words. “How about you say that to my face?”

Damien stared at him wide-eyed. He didn't think he'd ever seen him before. The man had unremarkable features and an unremarkable complexion, a bit paler than those Damien had been used to during his time in Raqhar. Unremarkable eyes, watery blue, and unremarkable medium brown hair, cut to a finger's length. The only remarkable thing about him was the fury in his eyes.

"Please..." Even while he spoke Damien felt his heart sink. It wouldn't work. There was a cruel glimmer in the man's eyes, one he had seen so often before. Still, he had to try.

"Please stop."

"Why should I?"

Such a simple question. Damien couldn't answer it. *Because it hurt.* As if that wasn't the point of hurting him. *Because it was wrong.* As if he'd be one to judge what was wrong and what was right. *Because he was scared and would die soon anyway and please, couldn't he just be left alone while he waited for the end.*

"I thought so."

The man let go of his hair. This time Damien was warned, could see the kick coming. He still screamed as the boot connected with his hip, scraping over bone. Before he could gather enough breath to beg, the man kicked the same spot a second time, then followed up with another kick to the ribs. The air left Damien's lungs with a sob and he whimpered as he tried to inhale again.

"Pl... please..."

"Tell me, Nightmare, how many have begged you to stop? How many have you ignored?" When Damien didn't reply, he placed his foot on Damien's neck. "How many?"

Damien couldn't reply. The pressure wasn't even enough to cut off his air, but it felt horrible and wrong and made his heart race. It didn't exactly help that the man's words conjured images he had trouble to suppress on the best days. It definitely wasn't one of the best days.

The pressure increased and Damien's hand twitched. He brought it halfway towards the foot before he stopped. He wanted to grab it, to get rid of it, but his chances of succeeding were rather low. There was no strength left in him to fight. Tears burned in his eyes as he let his hand sink with a choked sob.

"You're pathetic." The man spat on the ground next to him and the pressure vanished.

As soon as the foot was gone, Damien tried to crawl backwards, away from him. It was hard to move with how much he was trembling. He pressed the stump against his chest, while his left hand felt blindly for what was behind him. The man just followed, taking one, small step to close the distance that had taken all of Damien's strength to bring between them. Then there was the cold dungeon wall at his back, and a metal ring grazing his ribs. He flinched, looking around frantically for a way out he knew didn't exist.

The man crouched down in front of Damien, studying him. He raised his hand. Damien couldn't help but flinch. The expected punch didn't come, instead the man started to laugh.

"That's all what's left of the Nightmare of Raqhar. A pathetic little piece of shit, afraid of his own shadow. But you know what? Your shadow isn't gonna hurt you—I am."

He raised his hand again, but this time he finished the motion with a punch. His fist met Damien's left temple, smashing his head back against the wall. Damien bit his tongue, tasting fresh blood as he groaned. His swollen eye had barely started to heal and being hit on already bruised skin made stars dance in front of his eyes. He lifted his left arm to shield his face, pressing his right cheek against the wall.

"Don't want me to ruin that ugly face of yours, huh? Fine."

The next punch hit his stomach, just below the ribs. It made Damien double over in pain and gasp for air, tears spilling from his eyes. He tore his right arm from his chest when he saw the man lunge out again. This strike hit him in the middle of his chest. The next one crashed into his side. More punches came, in quicker succession than before. They rained down on him, the man's knuckles sinking between his ribs and into his stomach. Another punch to his side caused a sharp, stabbing

pain that made Damien freeze. It trapped the breath in his lungs and choked his screams. Some of his nails broke as his left hand tried to grab the wall, to find anything to hold onto. Tears and blood were already drying on his face, but new tears rolled down his cheek and new blood dripped from the cut on his forehead.

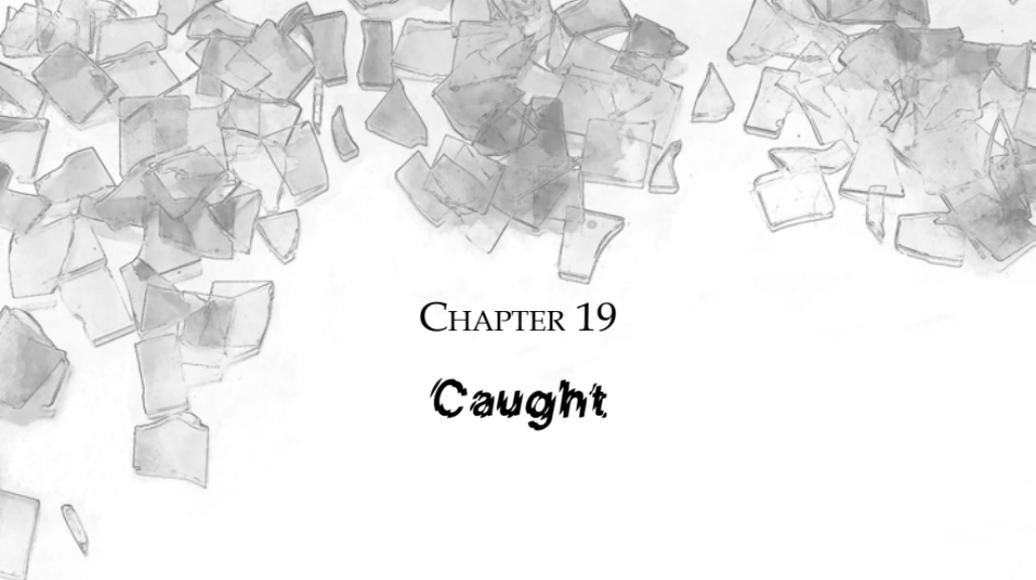
“Please.” He couldn’t help it, he sobbed. “Please...”

“Haven’t we been there before? Give me one good reason to stop,” the man said. His bloodied hand was frozen mid-air, as if it was waiting for just the right word to sink—or strike.

Damien stared at him. His eyes were glassy from tears and pain. Every single thought he tried to grasp slipped away from him. There was no reason. He deserved no mercy. Gods knew it was more likely he deserved *this*.

His stump was pulsing with pain, hanging down instead of being held against his chest. He didn’t dare bring it closer, hold it where the man could hit him again. He barely dared to breathe either, each shallow breath stinging in his chest. Too shallow. Drawing too little air. His breaths quickened, as did his heartbeat, while he desperately tried to find any words that would make it *stop*.

Then the door to his cell opened.



## CHAPTER 19

### **Caught**

The sound of the opening cell door was accompanied by the drawing of a sword.

“Why is this door— Gaston? What’s going on?”

Footsteps approached and the man—Gaston—stood up. Damien used the chance to try and crawl away from him.

“Nothing.” If Gaston was nervous about being caught, Damien himself was too terrified to notice it in his voice.

“Sure looks like something,” the stranger said, stopping in the middle of the cell. There was a short pause, then the sword was put away. The sound of sharp metal sliding into a scabbard was familiar to Damien, but it did nothing to ease his terror. He had managed to retreat until his shoulder hit the next wall of his cell. Cowering in the corner, his head pressed against the wall, he cradled his stump against his chest. He didn’t dare to open his eyes, to look up, as if there was a chance they’d just forget that he was here if he didn’t look at them.

“Got some complaints about someone screaming. Guess I don’t have to ask whose screams those were.” Another pause, some more footsteps, coming closer. Damien’s breath hitched and he tried to shrink even more, whimpering as his

ribs hurt. "One of those noble assholes thinks this is a vacation, not a dungeon. But he's probably out in a day, as soon as his tax money has magically appeared. So... is that who I think it is?"

"It's no one," Gaston said.

"And you're doing nothing to him, I assume?" When Gaston didn't reply, the man continued to speak. "Why are you even here at this hour? Thought you had the night shift at the other end of town."

"Swapped shifts with Neville for a week. He had a family emergency coming up."

"A family emergency. I see." Another pause followed in which Damien tried to keep his panic under control. A week. There had been no time for him to think about anything but the very next moment. "He's a good guy," the stranger continued. "Nice of you to help him out like this."

The tiny spark of hope in Damien's heart shattered. Whoever this stranger was, he wouldn't stop Gaston. He looked up and found the stranger looking at him. His features were just as unremarkable as Gaston's, and his gaze indifferent and cold. Damien tried to hold back the sobs, to make no sound. It wouldn't help him. Nothing would help him. There was no mercy for him here, no relief.

"You should hold back a bit." The stranger's words managed to spark a new hope, only to be crushed again as he continued, "You know the trial's been delayed until the queen returns, and that could be another fortnight. They're gonna make an example out of him. I don't wanna have to explain why he's bled out before. Shit like that leads to paperwork, and I *hate* paperwork." The stranger turned around, started to walk towards the door, then paused again. "Oh, and shut him up," he said, looking back over his shoulder. "I'd prefer to not get any more complaints."

Then he was gone, and Damien was alone with Gaston

again. He was standing in the middle of the cell, not making any attempt to come closer, but the look on his face still sent a shiver down Damien's spine.

"You know what... he's right." Gaston shook his hand, stretching his fingers, as if it was his fingers that were hurting. They probably were, Damien knew that too well. They wouldn't hurt nearly as much as he was hurting, though. "For tomorrow I'll find something better." He flashed a grin, looking more like a snarl with how many teeth it showed, and turned towards the door.

Damien stayed in the corner until he was gone and the door locked. He stayed a while longer, listening to his frantic heartbeat, pulsing in his bruises and behind his left eye. He was shaking so much, his muscles so stiff, the attempt to move made him whimper quietly. The effort to curl up on the floor was cut short by the stabbing pain in his side. There was nothing he could do but lie on his back, pressing his stump against his chest and wiping his bloodstained face. His breaths were still too shallow, and he didn't know if it was from the fear, or the pain, or the chill that had crawled deep into his bones.

He thought he should be glad he'd get to live a few days longer. He wasn't. There was no hope for him here, no chance to get out of this. Just more agony and more terror, and in the end, he'd die just the same.

Hours later, Damien was still unable to find rest. Every part of his body hurt, every breath stung in his side. He barely managed to lie still for a minute before he had to move, to shift, trying in vain to somehow ease the pain. In between, he stared up at the ceiling, and to the little window barely deserving the name. High above the floor, it only let a sliver of light in; a sliver of light that had vanished a while ago, leaving Damien in almost complete darkness.

At least the wound on his head had stopped bleeding. It had left his face caked in a fresh layer of dried blood and tears. He had tried to wipe it away, quickly giving up when the pain in his bruised face had been too much to bear the lightest touch. Fuck, even his left eye had swollen shut again. Not that he needed it in this darkness, but the pain pulsing behind it was just as bad as everything else. It hurt to breathe. It hurt to cry. It hurt to move, and it hurt when he didn't move. It hurt when he let his right arm rest beside him, making the stump pulse with each heartbeat. It hurt when he tried to lift it, pressing it against his bruised chest. Everything fucking hurt, and he was so tired, he wanted to cry.

He didn't know how often he managed to slip into a light slumber, only to be awakened what felt like minutes later. Sometimes it was the stabbing pain of a too-deep inhale, sometimes the memory of a touch that had only existed in his feverish dream. Then he lay awake, his heart beating up to his throat. Every shadow he thought to see, every noise he thought to hear made him wince.

He had never been this afraid in his life. Damien had seen death before, had come close to dying himself. He had made peace with the fact that he would die, even if the how still turned his stomach. And now it could take another two weeks before he'd be brought to trial. Two weeks of slowly rotting away, of freezing and starving, of pain and fear. Perhaps he wouldn't even survive this long; he wasn't sure his body could take this much longer. The fever was rising. It wasn't as bad as it had been before, but that was surely just a matter of time.

And if the fever wouldn't kill him, perhaps this Gaston would. His hate and the brutality of his attacks were what left Damien on edge. Not knowing when he'd return, not knowing what he would do to him. The thought that no one would care, even if he'd beat him to death. The very law that

had brought him here now did nothing to protect him. He had long since stopped believing that the law was made to treat everyone equally. The law was on the side of those with power or money or connections; and right now, Damien had neither. Not that he would have deserved it, not really.

The next time Damien jolted awake, an outline of silver moonlight had appeared at the window. He stared at it, trying to calm his breaths, to suppress the memory of hands touching his neck, strangling him. Even though he was awake now, he still couldn't breathe right. It was as if his lungs refused to expand enough, to fill properly. Every rising of his chest seemed to be a struggle against gravity. Damien dug his fingers into the cold stone. He had to get off the floor.

With great effort, he somehow managed to sit up, to scramble backwards against the wall. It was just as cold, just as uncomfortable, but perhaps it would be easier to breathe that way. He couldn't curl up to try and preserve what little heat his body produced; as he tried to, the pain in his side made him scream. Damien quickly pressed the sleeve of his shirt against his mouth, muffling the sobs that followed. The last thing he needed was a guard visiting him because of another 'noise complaint'.

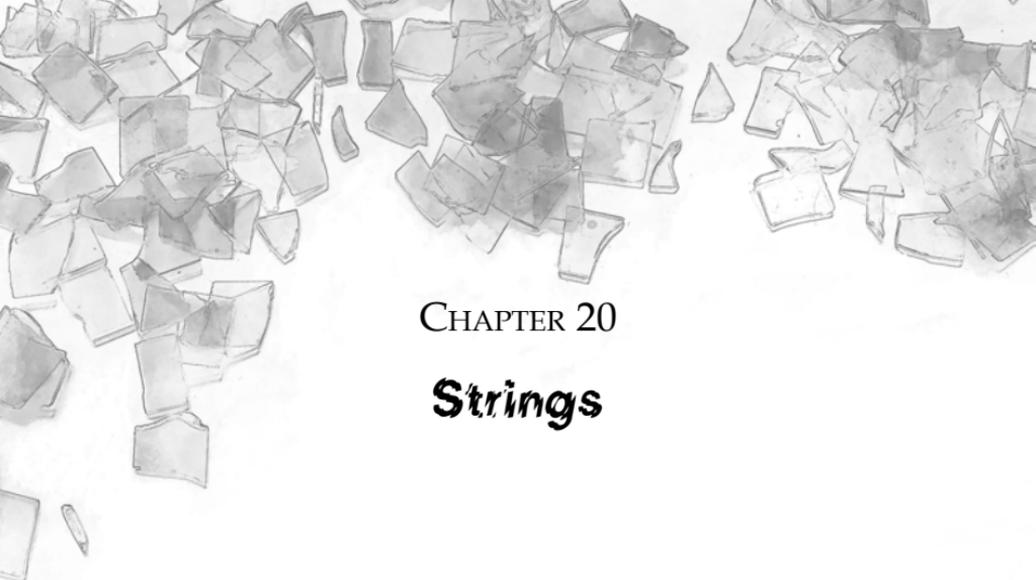
With no hand free to steady him, it was hard to untangle his legs. He somehow managed to, pressing himself into the corner of the cell, breathing in quick, shallow gasps. They came a bit easier now. It was a small comfort.

Damien tried to keep his head up. He couldn't let his left temple rest on the stone, not when every touch meant pure agony. He could have turned his head to the other side, but that would mean he'd no longer be able to see the window. The little bit of light was all he had to focus on, to distract himself with. However short his sleep had been, it had left him no more rested than he had been before.

Even the spot where no fucking hand was anymore hurt now, just as if it was still there. Damien had heard of that before, of phantom pains lingering long after a limb was gone. He'd sure as fuck would have preferred to never find out how it was to experience them. He tried to tell himself it wasn't real. The burning wasn't real. The feeling of his fingers wasn't real—still clenched into a fist, so tightly it made his arm cramp. But it felt fucking real, was just one more drop in the ocean of agony he threatened to drown in. He tried to relax it, to convince his brain he believed his hand was still there. It didn't work. Nothing fucking worked.

He lifted his sleeve to his mouth again, muffling another desperate sob. All he could do was sit and wait. Wait for the terror that kept him awake to fade, so he could get some more sleep. Wait for the night to fade, every passing minute bringing him closer to the moment his jailor would return. Wait for his strength to fade, if only his body would do him this favor.

He stared at the window, his vision swimming. The little sliver of silver moonlight was almost gone. Soon it would vanish and leave him alone, with the pain and the darkness and the terror in his heart.



## CHAPTER 20

### **Strings**

The smell of dust and sweat and alcohol permeated the air inside the tent. Damien hated every part of it. He hated the fucking sand under his feet that managed to get everywhere, dry and irritating. He hated the cheap beer that was easier to come by than water these days. He hated that he'd come here, he hated that he hadn't turned around and left the moment he had seen what a fucking shithole he had ended up in. And he hated that he was still here, three months later, with no idea what to do other than stay.

"Ha. Seven. You're out."

The music in the tent was arrhythmic and sluggish. Hands probably too drunk to hold the cards plucked the strings of a crude little guitar—at least it mostly resembled one of these instruments. Sometimes they missed a note, paused a moment in obvious confusion, then attempted to play the offending part again. And again. It grated on Damien's nerves. At least the aspiring musician didn't attempt to sing.

"Hey, asshole, make your move or fuck off."

Damien looked up, daring to meet the eyes of the one who had spoken for a second before dropping his gaze towards his cards. The symbols and numbers barely held any

meaning. He blindly reached out to grab a new card, staring at it for a moment before putting it in the middle of the ones he was holding already. A tiny nod was all the indication he gave that he was done. The man next to him reached for the card pile.

“Fuck, I’m out.”

Damien’s gaze wandered over the two remaining men sitting at the table. One had his brows furrowed, tongue between his lips, trying to figure something out in his cards. Something very difficult, by the looks of it. The other man’s glassy stare was directed at something behind Damien. He didn’t turn around to look.

Damien was the only sober one. He was also probably the only one who could still count higher than three. The chances for him winning weren’t that bad, even if half of that was luck. He didn’t really care about it. They were playing for copper or beer, both things he found himself largely uninterested in lately.

“Your turn.”

The whining sounds of the guitar were interrupted by a muffled scream, followed by sobbed, incomprehensible pleas. Damien’s hand trembled as he reached for the card pile, picking up another card, tucking it between the others. It was a good hand. One more round and he might have... might...

“Fuck, you’re killing him!”

He only realized he had screamed it when he saw the heads turn towards him. He gulped. He should not get involved, should not get involved. He was the new guy, the one no one trusted anyway. The one made to run all the shitty errands, to pick up the work no one wanted to do. But fuck, how could he just sit here and do nothing?

“What’s that to you, *Tmorecal?*” someone behind Damien asked.

He turned around to look at what might be the only other

sober one in this tent. The leader of this unit—Ed, whatever his full name might be—sat backwards on a chair, facing a pale and trembling man. Strings, just like the ones on this fucking guitar, making those fucking sounds, were tying the man's wrists to a second chair. Blood was dripping down his arms, from where the strings had dug deep into his skin—and from where some parts of his fingers were missing. Damien stared at the stumps, feeling very faint and very sick.

"I'm the one who's gonna have to bury him," he said the first thing that came to mind. The first thing that wasn't 'because what the fuck is wrong with you, you fucking asshole!' The man started to sob, the sound muffled by the blood-soaked gag in his mouth. Damien closed his eyes, trying to suppress the nausea rising in him.

"Yeah, well, I promised to make an example of everyone who tries to sell us to the Silver Blades." Ed's tone was nonchalant, and when Damien opened his eyes again, he saw him shrug. "Can't go breaking my promises like that, can I?" He stabbed the knife into the wooden chair, purposely missing what was left of the man's fingers.

"There's better ways to do that," Damien said without thinking. He had to find a way to stop this madness. Even if the man would survive, would manage to die neither from blood loss nor from infection, he probably was a farmer. Almost everyone in this area was. What would he do without his fingers, barely able to use his hands? Probably still starve to death. Perhaps taking his family with him, if he had any.

"Like what?" Ed's gaze was way too interested, a dangerous glimmer in his eyes. Curious. He pulled the knife out of the chair, holding it at the bloody blade and offering it to Damien, handle first. "Wanna demonstrate?"

Damien stared at the knife, feeling the bile rising in his throat. No. No, he didn't. He couldn't. But he had to do *something*.

"You have to stop the bleeding first," he said.

He had to buy himself some time. Had to figure something out. As he cast a glance to the side, he found some of the others staring at him as well. The card game was forgotten. Ed shrugged, standing up to grab one of the torches, illuminating the tent.

Damien looked at the cards in his hand as the man began to scream. A five, like the number of fingers on a hand; red like the blood that had stained the ground. The man's screams turned into sobs as the smell of burned flesh filled the tent. A six, like the number of months it had taken for his life to completely fall apart; black like the color of charred skin. A one, red. A nine, black.

"Your turn then, *Tmorecal*."

Ed was holding out the knife again, the blade apparently cool once more. Damien didn't reach for it. He had thought of something else. It was horrible and wrong, but everything about this was horrible and wrong. He stood up, legs shaking. Perhaps it could have been possible over the distance, but he was too shaken to try. Instead, he walked up to Ed, making sure not to step in the blood that had soaked the sand.

The man stared at him, eyes rolled back in terror. Damien returned his gaze, trying to appear calm, sure of himself. *I'm sorry*. He placed a hand on the man's shoulder, feeling him go stiff.

The moment he started to weave the illusion, the man's eyes glazed over. Damien couldn't tell what shape his illusion took. He only planted the seed, dragging out the deepest terror from his mind, making it come alive. In his mind he could be choking, burning, being flayed alive right now. Damien didn't know, and he didn't want to know.

It was horrible enough to see what his illusion was doing to his victim. The man was screaming again, but his screams were short, choked now. He was barely able to breathe,

hyperventilating already, his skin covered with a layer of sweat. He tried to break free, fighting the strings tying him to the chair, making them dig deeper into his wrists.

After a moment, Damien lifted his hand. He didn't need the contact to keep the illusion up. He didn't even need to concentrate much, depending on the level of precision he was going for. He could make someone see an animal, a bird or a sparrow. He could make someone smell food, a fruit or an apple. He could narrow it down, or keep it vague, depending on what he tried to achieve.

There wasn't much precision needed for what he was doing now. The human mind filled the blanks.

He leaned back against the pole in the middle of the tent, hands crossed behind him, resting on the wood. It was supposed to be a casual pose, and perhaps it would even work in hiding how much his hands were shaking. He didn't want to think about what the man was seeing, what he was feeling right now, but he couldn't help it. The way his throat moved. The way he threw his head back. The way his eyes darted around, wide in sheer horror. The tears on his face and the blood on his arms and the little choked noises that broke his screams.

Damien tried to swallow the lump in his throat, digging his nails into the pole. *Fuck*. What was he doing? But if he stopped, Ed would pick up the knife again, would continue where he left off. Damien could only hope he'd be happy with... whatever the result of this would be.

It seemed to last forever, until the movements slowly stilled. The man stopped struggling, stopped screaming. He was only breathing heavily, his eyes empty, his head lolling to the side.

"Think he's done?" Ed asked.

Damien didn't look at him. He couldn't look away from the man, from what he had *done*. "I don't know." His voice was

toneless, his expression empty. "I can't read thoughts."

"Mhm. A shame." Ed took his knife, cutting through the strings. The man didn't move. Ed grinned. "Take him outside and drop him somewhere where he'll be found."

When no one moved, he walked to the table, slamming his hand on the wood to get some attention.

"One of you drunk fuckers. Our *Tmorecal* here has earned some rest, don't you think?"

One of the drunkards got up, mumbling about having to take a piss anyway. Damien didn't look at him as he dragged the man to his feet. He turned his head away as they left the tent. There was an icy grip around his heart.

*What have I done?*

When Ed pressed a tankard of this fucking stale, lukewarm piss into his hand, Damien even took a swig. It was every bit as horrible as he had expected, and yet it did nothing against the sour taste in his mouth.

"You're more useful than you look." Ed laughed, patting Damien on the back so hard, he almost spilled his beer. "Might have to find a new name for you after all."

Damien forced himself to smile.

*What have I done?*



## CHAPTER 21

# Knives

Damien was awake when the door to his cell opened. He was still sitting against the wall, because it made breathing slightly less unbearable. His head snapped up and he stared at the corner, shielding the door from his view. Perhaps it was someone else. The keys on a ring jingled. Another guard, to bring him some water. Footsteps sounded on the hard floor. Perhaps the queen had returned earlier, and they came to get him. Something heavy was put down. Perhaps... perhaps... *please, anyone, anything other than this Gaston coming back.*

Of course he wasn't this lucky.

The moment Damien recognized Gaston, the breath he had held escaped him with a quiet whimper. Ignoring the pain stabbing in his side, he pulled his legs closer, trying to shrink into his corner. There was no strength left in him to pretend he wasn't absolutely terrified.

"Did you miss me?" Gaston asked. He walked into the middle of the cell, then paused to look at Damien. "I personally lay awake half of the night, thinking of all the possibilities." He continued his way to the wall, brushing his hand over the chains hanging there. "Unfortunately, the fact that they want you alive," he said, unlocking one of the chains and pulling it

down, "severely limits my options. Get over here."

Damien didn't move. He couldn't move. All he could do was stare at the chain in Gaston's hand, eyes wide in horror.

"Get over here, or I swear by the Seven, I will break every bone in your body and then drag you here myself."

Fuck, there was no doubt he'd do just that. Perhaps not all of them. That surely wasn't compatible with 'want you alive'. But there were enough bones that could be broken without killing him.

Damien started to crawl along the wall, knowing that there was no way he'd manage to stand up and walk. Every bit of strain he put on his trembling arm seemed to tear his side apart.

He had barely made it when Gaston bent down and grabbed his forearm. Damien yelped at the pain in his side as his arm was yanked above his head. Gaston linked the chain to the magic suppressing shackle around his wrist, then looped the other end through one of the rings embedded in the wall. As he pulled on it, Damien's arm was lifted. He shuffled closer to the wall, trying desperately to keep up. Way too soon he couldn't possibly get any closer, but the chain kept lifting his arm higher and higher.

"Almost," Gaston said, sounding way, way too keen.

A sharp tug on the chain lifted Damien's left hip off the floor. He screamed, scrambling to try and keep the weight off his strained shoulder. He moved one leg beneath the other in the hopeless attempt to lift himself up a bit. It was barely enough. The shackle still cut into his skin, his side still pulsed with pain, but at least he wasn't solely hanging on his wrist anymore. He craned his neck, trying to see if he could grab the chain, to hold himself up. His fingers twitched uselessly, barely scraping the metal. Fuck, fuck, he couldn't reach it.

Tears of frustration and pain welled in his eyes as he pressed himself against the wall, trying to get a bit higher, in

the desperate hope he'd manage to reach the chain.

After a few seconds his strength left him, and he dropped down with a pained groan. The edge of the shackle was already cutting deeply into his wrist. He couldn't take the pressure off it, couldn't possibly stretch himself any further.

"Beautiful. And we haven't even started."

Gaston's voice made Damien's head snap back. His eyes widened as he saw the knife in the man's hand. It was placed on his chest, above the collar of his shirt, the tip barely touching his skin.

"No, no, please..."

"Shut the fuck up."

Damien managed to stay quiet as Gaston grabbed his shirt, lifting it. He managed to only whimper quietly as the knife cut through the fabric, splitting it in half. He even managed to do nothing but take sharp, gasping breaths as Gaston tapped the knife on his chest. Left, right, left, right, just pressing the edge of the blade against bruised skin. But when he paused, when the pressure increased, when blood welled up in the cut, Damien couldn't stay quiet anymore.

"Please." His chest heaved in a desperate sob. "Please, don't."

Gaston lifted the knife. There was nothing reassuring about this gesture. Damien didn't believe for even one moment he'd suddenly listen to his pleas. He tried to blink against the tears in his eyes, so he could watch Gaston grab the left half of his shirt. With a quick motion, Gaston cut through it, hacking away at the resistance at the hem. Then he placed the knife on the ground, holding the cut off fabric with both hands.

"Open your mouth."

No. Fuck no. Damien pressed his lips shut, knowing that the defiant glare he hoped for would look more terrified than anything else. Like fuck he would.

"I said..."

Damien saw the punch coming. There was nothing he could do about it. Gaston's fist sank into his stomach, cutting off his scream and leaving him gasping for air for one second. Then his fingers were on his mouth, forcing it open, pushing the fabric in.

"Open your fucking mouth. Was that so hard?"

Damien started to choke as the rough material touched the back of his throat. He tried to turn his head away, but Gaston pressed him against the wall, pushing the gag further in, forcing his jaws apart. For a short, terrifying moment, Damien thought it might even block his airways. His heart was beating up to his throat, his eyes wide in panic. Fuck, he couldn't even swallow past that thing. He tried to calm down, to relax his tongue, to fucking *breathe*.

His efforts were in vain when the knife returned, pressing into the soft skin on the underside of his jaw.

"If you spit it out, I'll cut your tongue out instead. Understood?"

Damien couldn't reply; he couldn't even nod. All he could do was whimper as the knife nicked his skin, hoping desperately that it would sound like agreement. He wouldn't. He wouldn't!

It seemed to be enough for Gaston, who lowered the knife, continuing to cut where he had left off. The pain left Damien shaking, breaking out in sweat at the absolute wrongness of cold metal splitting his skin. Gaston cut from his chest down to his stomach. The cut wasn't deep, but it burned in the cold dungeon air.

Then the knife was back, resting on the left side of his chest. The pressure increased. Skin broke. Gaston drew three short lines, deeper this time, cutting into muscle. They bled more. The drops ran down Damien's bare chest, making him shiver. He leaned his head against his strained arm, staring straight ahead. Trying not to see Gaston's gleeful

expression as he soaked up every pained gasp, every choked sob Damien couldn't suppress. There was no point in fighting it. No point in trying to fight the tears blurring his vision, either.

Through the thin fabric of his shirt Damien could feel the edge of every single stone at his back. He shivered, pressing against it, as if he could somehow manage to get away from the blade, leaving another burning trail on his chest.

*Please.*

The word died in his throat, muffled by the gag choking him. The knife slid over one of his ribs, splitting skin, drawing blood. Damien screamed.

*Please stop. Please, please, stop this.*

There were no words, leaving his lips, and no mercy to be found. For what felt like hours, Gaston carved one line after the other into Damien. Burying the tip of the knife into the muscles of his shoulders and stomach. Splitting skin in long, paper thin cuts. Scraping metal over bone. Making him scream and cry and fight to breathe through the pain.

In between Gaston paused, watching Damien twist in agony, only teasing the skin with the tip of the knife, not breaking it. It was worse on the left side of his body, where most of his bruises were. Purple skin split to reveal crimson blood as Gaston dragged the knife all the way from Damien's shoulder to his navel. Damien made the mistake of looking down, squeezing his eyes shut in the desperate attempt to fight back the bile rising in his throat. He leaned his head against the wall, trying to breathe, to breathe, to *breathe*. It had become difficult as his tears clogged his nose and soaked the gag. Blood was running down his arm as well. The useless struggle had left his wrist rubbed raw and his fingers numb.

*Please... Please just kill me.* The knife dug between two ribs, slicing across Damien's side. The metal tip grating along the

bone made Damien shiver. *Please, press it in a bit deeper and end this.*

Of course Gaston didn't. Not with this cut, and neither with any of the ones that followed.

"Time flies when you're having fun, doesn't it?" The knife twisted in the shallow cut it had caused, scratching against Damien's left collarbone. "I have other things to do now."

Damien didn't have any breath left to scream. He barely managed to keep breathing as the knife was dragged along towards the middle of his chest.

"Fortunately we'll have all week to continue this."

A week. He wouldn't survive another hour of this. Despair gave Damien enough strength to struggle against the chain. It didn't give in. Of course it didn't. All his efforts were good for was letting new blood run down his arm. Damien's shoulder burned in agony as he had to give up, his head dropping to the side with a desperate, defeated sob.

Gaston paused, studying Damien's face. His nose was stuffed, his eyes swollen from all the crying, even though his tears had dried up a while ago. He could only breathe through his mouth, taking small, panicked gasps past the tear-soaked gag. Whatever Gaston saw, it made him smile and he lifted the knife; lifted it to Damien's face, pressing the flat side of it against his cheek. He wiped off the blood that had not yet dried, smearing it across Damien's cheek and into his beard. Then he got up, to reach for something at the wall.

Damien screamed as the chain holding him was unhooked. His arm slumped down, setting his shoulder on fire. Gaston pulled the chain back through the metal ring, then tugged on it, making Damien fall forward. He tried to somehow keep the balance, to not use the stump of his right arm to catch himself. His left arm was pulled toward another metal ring, this one embedded in the floor. Gaston locked the chain to it, with barely any room for Damien to move.

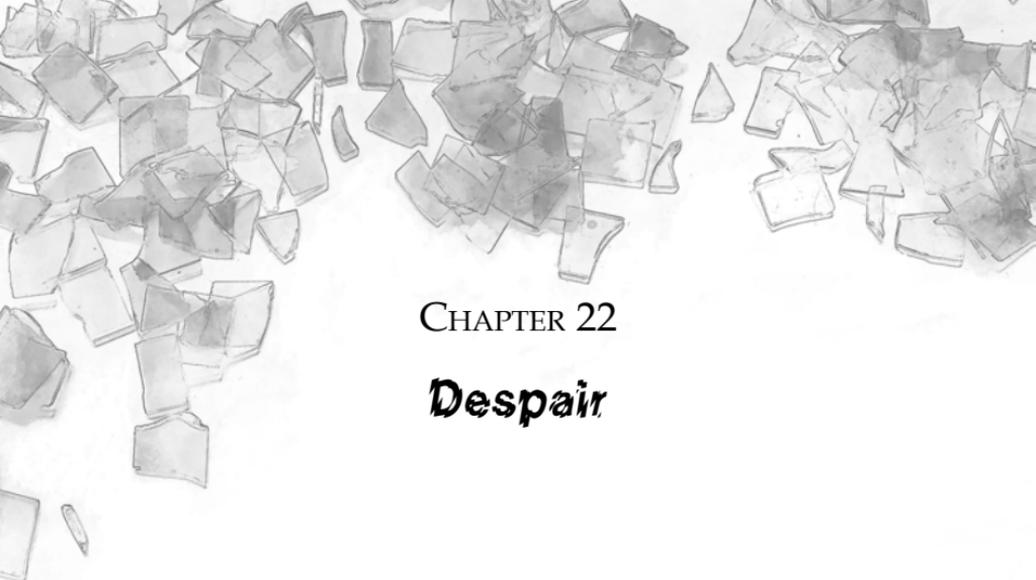
Damien stared at his hand, trying to ball his fingers into a fist. He couldn't even feel them.

"And here." Gaston shoved something into the cell from behind the corner to the entrance. A bucket, filled probably, with how heavy it sounded as it was pushed over the floor. A small thing followed, becoming clearer as Damien blinked the tears in his eyes away. A piece of bread. His stomach twisted painfully at the thought of finally getting something to eat.

Gaston pushed both in the middle of the room, staring straight at Damien as he did so. "Enjoy," he said before turning around to leave.

The sound of the cell door closing, of it being locked again, made Damien sob with relief.





## CHAPTER 22

### **Despair**

Damien sat hunched over, his left arm stretched out in front of him. He didn't dare to move. His chest was agony, burning with every breath and every involuntary shiver. A few drops of blood were still making their way down towards the pitiful remains of his pants, but most cuts had stopped bleeding quickly.

If only they'd stop hurting, too.

Trying to focus was hard when every single thought tried to slip away from him. He had to figure out the next step. The next tiny, singular, fucking step, because he couldn't just stay like this until his body gave up—which probably wouldn't take all that long. The next step. He had to get the bread, before someone came to take it away again.

Damien wanted to reach for it. For one exhausted, surreal moment he forgot that his hand was missing. He lifted his arm, staring blindly at the stump poking out between tattered fabric. The pain and despair came crashing down on him all at once. Fuck, he couldn't reach it. It was there, so close, and he couldn't fucking reach it.

He struggled against the chain, trying to get closer. A small trail of blood ran down his wrist as a sob escaped him, still

muffled by the fucking gag he couldn't even pull out. Not as long as his fingers were numb.

What little strength had kept him up left. Damien sank to the floor, another choked scream dying in his throat. He had put some weight on his injured ribs, now littered with cuts. Fuck. His head rolled to the side as he realized he didn't have the strength to get up again. He didn't have the strength to do anything but lie there and wait. He focused on breathing through the gag, against the panicked rising of his chest, complaining about a lack of air. He had to calm down.

It seemed to take forever for the feeling to return into his hand. It did so with a faint prickling sensation first, turning quickly into the feeling of a dozen burning needles stabbing his fingers. Damien groaned but ignored it. He had to get this fucking gag out.

He dragged himself close enough so his chained hand could reach his mouth. Painful fingers dug around, trying to find something to grab. He pulled and choked and shivered, this tiny bit of exertion already almost too much for his exhausted body.

When the fabric eventually started to slip out, Damien couldn't help but scream. It felt like the inside of his mouth was torn apart. Damien paused, trying to find the courage to continue. He had to continue. He had to get this thing out so he could breathe again.

No matter how carefully he pulled, it still hurt like fuck as the gag came out. He was glad his dry retching suppressed the scream, because it was less likely to attract anyone. He had to be quiet. His lower jaw was painfully stiff, his tongue so dry it hurt. He barely dared to close his mouth with how out of place his teeth felt. Fuck, this was messing with his head. He kept his mouth slightly open, enjoying the fact that he could breathe freely for the first time in what could have been hours.

Slowly, Damien's tension left him. He had been so afraid for so long, his muscles were just as exhausted as his mind. If only he could find some rest. But he couldn't, not yet. Not with the pain burning on his chest, and the thirst burning in his throat. He needed water.

Lying on the floor, he eyed the bucket. There was no way for him to reach it with his hand, or even with the stump of his arm. Perhaps he'd manage to reach it with his legs. Of course that meant moving, putting strain on his battered body. He didn't have a choice. Damien kept his arm pressed against his mouth as he shifted on the floor, struggling to turn towards the bucket. He was sure the movement tore some of the cuts on his side open, but there was no point in trying to sit up instead. He wouldn't reach the bucket sitting. His effort left him with new tears streaming down his face and trembling with pain and exhaustion.

He stretched, trying to get his foot behind the bucket. It wasn't quite enough. At least he managed to touch it. For a short, terrifying moment he thought he had hit it too hard, pushing it away or even toppling it over. To his endless relief, his foot merely slid off. He had to get even closer then. His left arm was already above his head, there was little chance of using it to push himself any further. Which left his right arm—or what was left of it. Damien didn't give himself the time to think about it. He clenched his teeth, turning onto his back.

As he leaned on his right elbow, he wondered if he should have left the fucking gag in. There was nothing in direct contact with the stump, but the muscles trying to work hurt just as fucking much. He hissed through clenched teeth, pushing himself forward. A tiny bit. He was almost there, almost... his foot slipped behind the bucket and he angled it to drag the fucking thing closer. It worked. It really, truly, fuck-ing worked. The tiny success gave him more strength than

anything else could have done. He pulled again, managing to bend his leg this time to bring the bucket closer. He had to crawl backwards after that, until his outstretched leg was next to the bucket. Pulling. Crawling. He could feel the blood on his side, soaking his shirt. It made the floor feel even colder. Pulling. Crawling. It had to be enough, had to.

It took Damien endless minutes to catch his breath, to find the strength to attempt to sit. It took him even longer to actually succeed. He touched his side and his fingers came back wet with blood. Fuck. He didn't want to know how bad it was. There was nothing he could do about it anyway.

Wiping his hand on his pants as best as he could, he finally reached for the bucket. He had to use his leg one more time, pushing it close enough so his shackled hand could actually reach it. Resting his fingers on the rim of the bucket, he considered. There was no way for him to lift it, so he had to dip his hand into it. The chain was just long enough for that.

The first drops of water Damien brought to his mouth tasted metallic and muddy. He didn't care. He needed it, needed it so much. He gathered more water, taking just enough care to make sure he wouldn't spill any of it. Who knew how long until someone brought him some more.

Damien licked his cracked lips, wincing as the contact burned. He could swallow again. He slowed down, drinking two more hands of water before he let his arm sink.

With this first, immediate need fulfilled, the hopelessness of his situation came crashing down on him again. The stabbing pain in his side, accompanying every breath, had become worse. His fingers still didn't feel quite right, and his body was covered in cuts. Perhaps he wouldn't die of thirst today, but he would die. And before that, Gaston would come back. The thought alone made Damien sob.

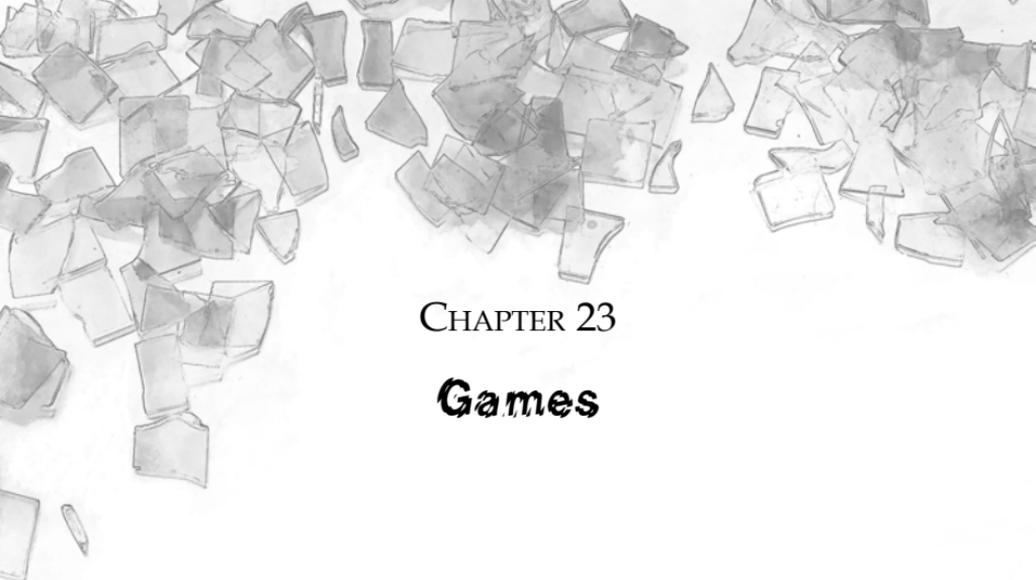
He clung to the bucket, reaching for the water again. With his thirst quenched for now, it was more to keep himself

occupied with something. He feared that if he didn't, he'd lose his mind in despair. For a moment, Damien wondered if he shouldn't have done it. How quickly would he have died from a lack of water?

Staring at the few drops he had managed to gather in his hand, he decided that it didn't matter. He brought the water to his mouth, drinking most of it, feeling how a few stray drops ran down his neck.

It wouldn't have been quickly enough.





## CHAPTER 23

### **Games**

With his arm stretched out in front of him, Damien managed to sit up against the wall. It was less comfortable than sitting in the corner, but it still made breathing easier than lying on the floor. That was about the only remotely positive thing that came to his mind, though.

Night came, finding him half awake and his thoughts in a haze. He didn't even have the strength to look up to the window, to see if the sliver of moonlight would come back. Instead, he spent endless hours staring into the darkness, occasionally slipping into sleep, only to jolt awake shortly after. He was too exhausted to keep his eyes open for long, and too terrified to find rest. Every little sound—imagined or not—made him flinch. He knew it was unlikely for Gaston to return before morning. This knowledge did nothing to stop his heartbeat from quickening every time he thought he heard footsteps or voices outside his cell.

The bucket next to him was almost empty. At first, he had tried to ration it, but quickly decided against it. Worst case, Gaston would return and take whatever was left away from him. Better to drink it before. It helped to ease the burning in his head, though he feared the fever would rise soon. It did

nothing to help against the hunger, tearing his insides apart. The bread was still lying on the floor, taunting him with its presence. He had resisted the urge to try and reach it, knowing that he'd never succeed. The darkness of night had hidden it as well – another small mercy, if he thought about it.

Then the morning came, filling the cell with what little light the sun could spare for a criminal like him. With the light came the fear, settling in the pit of his stomach like a rock. If he would believe his god could hear him, would care about him, he'd pray for his miserable life to end before Gaston came back. But Duriath wasn't known for listening to prayers, so he didn't even try. No god had ever cared about him, not even back at a time when he might still have deserved it. He surely didn't deserve it now.

It was no surprise that the door eventually opened, letting Gaston stride into the cell.

"Not hungry? Such a shame."

He stepped on the bread on his way to Damien, crouching down in front of him. Gaston looked him up and down, taking in what must surely be a pitiful sight. The blood had dried on his torso, mixed with dirt from where he had struggled to reach the water. Damien's shirt was hanging in tatters from his shoulders, and his pants were stained with blood and piss and whatever else he had been lying around in for days.

Apparently pleased with what he saw, Gaston looked around, scanning the ground. When he had found the piece of fabric, he picked it up, weighing it in his hand.

"Open your mouth."

Damien trembled as he obeyed. There was no point in resisting. The thought of another punch to his stomach, now covered in cuts, was enough to almost make him whine. Gaston shoved the piece of fabric into his mouth, every bit as roughly as on the previous day. Then he grabbed Damien's hair, forcing him to look at Gaston.

"You're learning. That's good. How about we play a little game." Gaston paused, probably enjoying the panicked look on Damien's face. "I'll continue where I left off yesterday," he explained, playing with the knife he had drawn. "And for every time you manage to make no sound, I'll leave some food for you when I'm done. Leave it where you can reach it, I mean. What do you say?"

Damien glared at him. If only his thoughts weren't as hazy. He couldn't see an obvious downside to what Gaston was proposing — other than the fact that he'd fucking torture him again, but it didn't seem like that was up for debate. There must be one. He couldn't think.

"How silly of me. It's not like you can reply." Gaston tapped the tip of the knife against the gag. "Well, you know the rules now." He let go of Damien's hair.

Damien closed his eyes with a shiver. Fuck, his heart was already racing. He couldn't help it, the thought of his skin splitting under the cold metal was enough to almost make him throw up. But he'd manage to stay quiet for a bit. He had to. Anything to finally get something to eat, before the hunger would drive him mad.

He forced his eyes to open, to not be taken by surprise when Gaston would start. But he wasn't about to start. Instead he was fiddling with something Damien couldn't make out. There were sparks, then a flame. A stubby torch, meant to be put into a holder rather than be carried for a long time. There was no holder here, so Gaston dragged the almost empty bucket closer and put the torch into it. The gag turned Damien's terrified pleas into unintelligible sounds. Gaston pointed the dagger at him.

"You don't wanna lose before we've even started, do you?"

Damien stared into the fire, trembling so hard the chain holding his left arm started to rattle. It was still secured to the

floor instead of to the ring above his head. It was tempting to try and crawl half a step away from the flames. Unfortunately, it would also be absolutely pointless. Damien forced himself to resist the urge, to sit still. The last thing he needed was to hang from his wrist again. The side of his hand and the two smallest fingers were still numb.

Gaston had been holding the knife into the fire, turning it slowly, heating the blade. Well, perhaps being chained to the wall was the second last thing Damien needed. The last thing he needed was very much the heated metal, coming closer, pressing against his chest. He bit down on the gag, clenching his fingers around the chain. Pulling on it as hard as he could, he somehow managed not to scream. His body tried to jerk away as the blade burned into his skin. There was nowhere for him to go.

“One.”

Gaston’s voice made Damien shiver. As the blade was pulled away, he sank forward, gasping for air. The knife returned too quickly, pressed just below the first strip of blistering flesh. Damien didn’t have time to grab the chain. He pulled against the shackle, biting into the raw skin on his wrist. It was a different pain, a better one, because *he* was the one controlling it. It almost wasn’t enough. His breath was trapped in his chest, burning inside and out. He had to breathe, to *breathe*, but the moment he’d give in, he’d scream.

“Two.”

Damien screamed. His whole body was shivering as he let his arm sink. He could feel the blood drip down from his wrist, but the pain barely registered in his mind. He was covered in sweat, feeling sick and hot and cold at the same time. *Please*. He wanted to beg. He couldn’t. It wouldn’t help. All he could do was focus on his breaths, each one squeezing past the gag with a muffled whimper.

Gaston took his time to heat the knife before raising it again.

This time he pressed the length of the blade against Damien's left side. The fire seemed to sear directly into his bones. A strangled cry tore out of his throat, despite his best efforts to hold it back.

"Ah, I heard that."

*Fuck you, you son of a...* Damien sobbed. He couldn't do this. He had to try. He couldn't. He had to. A too short pause as the knife was heated again. A flash of panic as it came closer, pressing against the skin below his collarbone. Damien bit down on the gag. *No*. He tried to pull on the chain, but his cramped muscles didn't obey him. *No, no, no*. He pressed his stump against the wall. Not enough. He slammed his head back against the wall. Again. And again. Something wet and warm dripped onto his neck. He didn't pay it any attention. The impact made black spots dance in front of his eyes and left him dizzy, but he still heard Gaston's voice.

"Three."

Watching the knife in the fire, everything seemed to be in slow motion. The flames flickering. The hand turning. Watching the knife approach, everything seemed to be too fast. It scorched the skin on his stomach, pressing down and down and down until Damien thought he'd just break apart. He screamed and cried, shivered and convulsed. There was nothing he could do. No way to be quiet. He stopped trying.

The blade came back and back and back again. Burning him. Ripping off skin where it stuck to the metal. Blistering it where it didn't. Searing into muscle and bone until there was nothing left but agony.

"Four."

It took a moment for the word to settle in. Apparently he had been too weak to make a noise the last time the knife had pressed down. It surely hadn't been a conscious effort. There was no room left in his mind for any conscious thought at all. He could feel the burns pulse across his chest; skin shrunk

by the heat, blistered and torn open. Damien's breaths were ragged, shallow. He was bathed in sweat, shivering and twitching involuntarily. Every breath moved burned skin, stretched it over bruised ribs. He wanted to raise his head, but only managed to roll it against his shoulder.

*Please...*

All that made it past the gag was a weak sob. Damien stared into the flames, smelling his own burnt skin and flesh. Feeling it. It was too much. He began to heave. Eyes wide in horror, he struggled against the chain, cutting into his wrist all over again. In trying to reach his mouth he forgot that he could as well bow down towards his hand. There was no room to think, only panic as the pressure in his throat increased. There wouldn't be anything but water coming up. It would still be enough to suffocate him.

Gaston made an annoyed noise and grabbed the gag. He tore the fabric out with one quick motion, just in time for Damien to double over and retch.

"A shame. Guess that's it for today."

Gaston grabbed the torch, turning it around to extinguish it in the little bit of water left in the bucket. Then he put the knife back into its sheath and stood up, picking up the bucket. Damien wished he would leave it where it was, so he could use the water to wash away the bitter taste of bile. He knew better than to ask.

When Gaston walked away, taking the bucket with him and leaving the piece of bread lying out of reach, Damien started to cry. A part of him had never truly believed he'd keep his word. It didn't change the fact that he couldn't handle the disappointment, not on top of everything else. Right now the hunger was buried somewhere between layers and layers of pain. It would return soon enough.

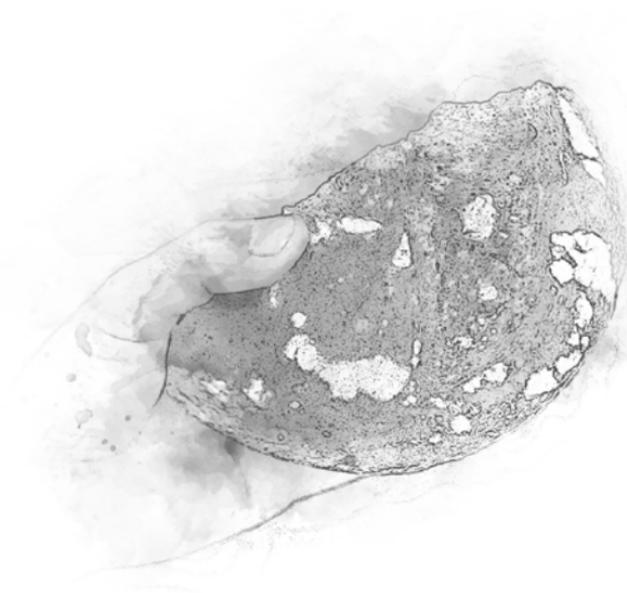
He was still crying when Gaston came back. His steps were so sudden, so unexpected, Damien flinched. He groaned from

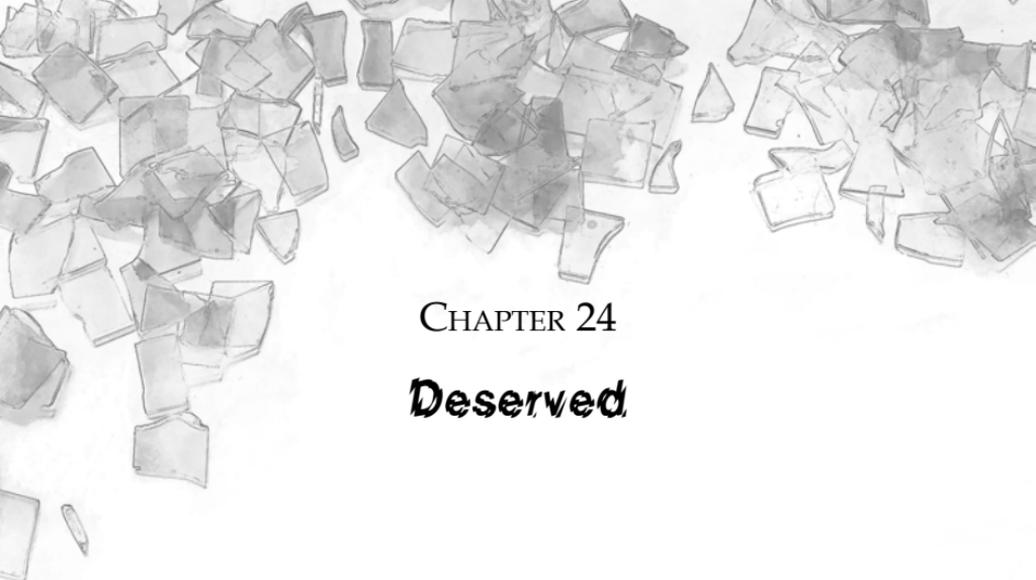
the pain as his burnt skin twisted. It didn't stop him from trying to crawl away as far as the chain allowed it. Which was not very far.

The look Gaston gave him would have been fit for finding a roach on his dinner plate. He put a bucket of fresh water down next to Damien. "You're not supposed to die. Yet. Unfortunately," he said. "The last one doesn't count." He dropped something on the floor, in reach of Damien's chained hand. Two quarter loaves of bread and a piece of dried meat; rather a bit of dried meat, embedded in a clump of half-rancid fat. Damien stared at it.

He was still staring at it as the cell door closed behind Gaston.

Slowly, as if it could vanish any moment, Damien reached for the food. It didn't vanish. His fingers closed around the piece of bread. Clutching it. His hand was trembling. He'd eat, in a moment. Just... a moment. When he'd be sure he wouldn't instantly throw it all up again.





## CHAPTER 24

### **Deserved**

Damien was woken up with a kick to the face. The sudden pain left him disoriented, his heart racing in blind panic. His hand was yanked back by the chain as he tried to pull it close, then nausea washed over him as he instinctively leaned upon his other arm instead. Fighting the bile rising in his throat, he tried to make himself as small as possible, not daring to move otherwise. How could he, when everything he did only made the pain worse?

“Rise and shine.”

A dark laugh and the sound of boots on stone were his only warning, then pain exploded in his stomach. Damien choked on his scream, coughs and whimpers alternating as he struggled to breathe.

“Get up.” When he made no attempt to obey the command, the foot returned, nudging his stomach. “Get up, or I’ll make you.”

Damien whimpered. He grabbed the chain and somehow managed to pull himself up into a halfway sitting position. His head rolled to the side, and he pressed it against the wall to stop the world from spinning. Warily, he watched Gaston come closer, crouch down in front of him. Whatever the man

had planned for today, it would be horrible, and Damien was already so over it, he wanted to cry. He somehow managed not to.

When Gaston lifted his hand, holding the piece of fabric again, Damien opened his mouth without thinking. He regretted it the moment the disgusting thing touched his tongue. Fuck, why had he become so compliant? He'd be hurt anyway, he could at least pretend to have a shred of dignity left. Dignity didn't help against the cold dread that had settled in his stomach, though, or could stop him from trying to drag out the inevitable moment he'd be hurt for as long as possible.

"How did you like our game yesterday?" Gaston asked, playing with a knife he suddenly held in hands. "I had the time of my life. Ah, how silly of me. I really need to start asking questions before I put that thing in, don't I?" He pointed the tip of the knife towards the gag, then let it sink.

Knife in one hand, Gaston fiddled with something else. Damien was too busy with fighting down the panic to pay attention to what he was doing. As long as whatever he was holding wasn't close to him yet, trying to breathe definitely had precedence.

"While yesterday was fun, today we'll see if you'll manage not to move. There's no reward this time," Gaston said, a sinister grin on his face, "but if you move, I'll chain you to the wall again. Might leave you like that, too."

With a shudder, Damien tried to find out what Gaston was holding after all. He didn't see anything but the knife. There was no fire, no other tool he could recognize. Only a large flask, lying on the floor next to an empty looking bag. Not that the knife wouldn't be bad enough.

Then the cold metal touched his chest and his pained moan was muffled by the gag. Fuck, there probably wasn't much unmarred skin left on him, but it surely felt as if Gaston cut

straight into his older wounds on purpose. Already aching skin split anew and scab was scraped away.

“Ah, that doesn’t look good.”

The knife dug into the cut. A finger followed, widening it, prodding it. Rasping along. Something trickled down Damien’s chest, sticky and foul smelling. He tried his best to focus on breathing past the gag, as his spilling tears left his nose stuffed.

“You really should know how important it is to keep wounds like these clean.”

A quiet, harmless splashing sound followed, accompanied by the pungent smell of vinegar. Then something was pressed against Damien’s chest. It burned. Fuck, and how it burned. The fire seemed to crawl under his skin, making him scream. It wasn’t worse than the real burns, but it was relentless. It followed as he struggled to get away from it, shifting against the wall, in the desperate attempt to escape the agony.

“Well, that was fast.” Gaston dropped the knife and the rag, getting to his feet. “I surely expected you to hold out a bit longer.”

Damien sobbed as the chain was unlocked from the ring on the floor, then lifted to pull his arm over his head. As before, it was fastened to something outside his field of vision, pulling his arm far enough up the shackle dug deeply into the already raw skin on his wrist. His next breath brought the stabbing pain in his side back, stealing his breath.

More metal sounded. *No, please.* No words made it past the gag as Gaston wrapped another chain around Damien’s right elbow, pulling this arm up as well. The pain of his inflamed stump being handled so roughly left Damien shaking, unable to even try to resist as the chain was fastened to the wall. He was all but hanging from his wrist and elbow now, just high enough to no longer sit on the floor. He tried to shift, to press himself against the wall, to ease the strain on his shoulders.

He barely felt the blood running down his left arm, following older, long dried trails. The agony pulsing in his right one was so much worse. The links of the chain dug deeply into swollen flesh. Perhaps he could have managed to slip his arm out. He had neither the strength to try, nor the courage. Gaston would just put him back like this – if he was lucky.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Gaston picked up the knife, to continue cutting open another barely healed wound. “I want you to think about everything you have done.” The rag was pressed into it, soaking up blood and replacing it with fire. “I want you to remember the face of each of your victims.” Another cut. “Their screams, and their pleas you ignored.” Another burning pressure. “Think of them. Think of what you’ve *done*. And then tell me that you don’t deserve this.”

Fresh tears welled in Damien’s eyes, no longer only from the pain. He didn’t need this son of a *mok* to remind him of that. Their faces still haunted him; in his dreams, and sometimes when he was awake. There wasn’t a single day he didn’t regret what he had done. He hated himself for it, but this – this wouldn’t fix anything. Perhaps he deserved this, but nothing Gaston did to him would undo anything he had done.

The knife returned, opening another wound. It was followed by fire, searing through him as the rag was pressed against it. Damien clenched his teeth.

“You deserve this.”

Another wound. The rag rubbing the vinegar into it, scraping and burning and *hurting*. He sobbed.

“You deserve this.”

The same words, over and over, each time followed by more pain. Cutting and burning and tearing him apart. Leaving him trembling, hanging from the chains, unable to escape any of it.

Damien had long given up on trying to stay still or quiet.

He was crying, twitching uselessly at each new touch. He couldn't get away. He couldn't make it stop. He couldn't even scream, each attempt choked by the fabric in his mouth.

"You deserve this. Do you understand?"

Without thinking, Damien nodded. Anything to make it stop, if only for a moment. It seemed to work, Gaston lowered the knife, reaching for the gag instead. He pulled it out with one quick tug, leaving Damien retching and gasping for breath, despite the pain in his side.

"Well, say it."

Damien moved his jaw to buy himself one more second to breathe freely. "Fuck you," he then said. His voice was rough, his tongue and throat dry from the gag.

Something furious flitted over Gaston's face, and he slammed Damien's head back against the wall. Before the black spots in front of his eyes had faded, the gag was back in Damien's mouth, soaking up the blood from his bitten tongue. He didn't have time to recover. A punch hit him square in the stomach, stealing his breath once more. Another. And another. Chained to the wall like this, there was nothing he could do about it. Tears were running down his cheeks as he desperately tried to fight the nausea. If he'd throw up now, it was questionable whether Gaston would bother to save him from choking.

"That wasn't very wise." The knife was back, pressing against his left shoulder. Sinking into it, deeply enough to make Damien throw his head back with a desperate sob. "Now the gag stays in until you've learned your lesson."

The blade wiggled and twisted, but then it was gone, leaving a slow trickle of blood running down Damien's chest. Gaston didn't bother treating this wound the same way he had done with the others. Instead, the tip of the knife hooked under a patch of blistered skin, lifting it. Loosening it. Tearing it off. Damien screamed into the gag. His screams turned

into mindless, unintelligible pleas as Gaston raised the rag, to press it against the open wound. Fresh blood ran down Damien's arms as he struggled against the chains, trying to get away. There was nowhere for him to go.

"You deserve this."

Another cut reopened. The skin scraped away over another burn. The rag returning, searing into him. The same words, over and over and over and over again. He deserved this. He deserved this. He deserved this.

There was no strength left in him to lift himself up, to try and ease the strain on his shoulders. He was hanging limply from the chains, his arms bloody, his hand numb. Together with the gag and the stabbing in his side, it made it hard for him to breathe. The lack of air left him dizzy and his eyes unfocused. Not that there was anything to focus on other than the pain. The shadow of a hand approaching him was enough to make him whimper in fear, his heart racing in helpless anticipation. When the hand was holding the rag, his panic grew, the words ringing in his ears as his wounds burned and burned and burned.

He deserved this. He had learned his lesson. He'd say anything Gaston wanted, *anything*, if only he'd stop.

But he didn't stop. The knife returned, and the burning returned, and the words returned, until they all blurred together. Damien was left half-conscious, shivering as his lungs struggled to draw breath that wouldn't come.

Then the gag was gone and a rough hand grabbed his chin, forcing him to look up. Being able to breathe freely was a huge relief – nails digging painfully into the bruised skin on his cheek less so.

"Well?"

A single word. Such an unspoken threat behind it.

"I... deserve... this. I... I deserve." His voice failed him. *Please. Please let this be enough. Please stop.*

“See. Was that so hard?” Gaston let go of his chin, and Damien’s head sank back to his chest with a defeated sob. “I’ll even let you down again. Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

Damien’s glassy gaze followed him as he got up. Lifting his head took tremendous effort, and the movement left him dizzy. He wanted to squeeze his eyes shut. The fear was stronger, the need to see what Gaston would be doing next.

Unfortunately, seeing it didn’t do anything to help. Gaston reached for the stump, closing his hands around it. His own scream was the last thing in Damien’s ears as unconsciousness claimed him.





## CHAPTER 25

# Lessons

Blood dripped down Damien's chin from where the punch had split his lip. More blood soaked his sleeve as he pressed a folded piece of cloth against the cut on his upper arm, in the futile attempt to stop the bleeding.

He hadn't expected the attack. It was the first time someone had truly managed to resist his illusions. Sometimes it took more effort, perhaps even direct contact to keep it up, but it always worked. When he had realized that the man didn't seem quite as affected as he should have been, he had come closer. Close enough to be left dazed by an unexpected blow, followed by a slash with a broken bottle.

Unfortunately for his victim, they had not been alone in the tent, and the man was currently thrashing and cursing loudly, pinned down to the ground by two rebels.

"What's going on?"

There was a dangerous edge to Ed's voice, making Damien's skin crawl. He turned around. Of course the commotion had drawn their leader to check on them. His attention was never a good thing.

"He resisted my magic and attacked me," Damien stated plainly, his voice calm. "It's rare, but possible."

"Is that so?" Ed came closer, scrutinizing both Damien and the man, who was currently being dragged to his feet by the rebels. "Does that mean it doesn't work on him, or did you fuck up?"

"I don't know. I'd have to try again."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Try again."

Damien looked at the man who was breathing heavily, with blood smeared across his face and a snarl on his lips. He had stopped struggling for the time being, but it was clear that he'd use the next best chance to attempt another attack.

"You should restrain him. If it doesn't work, he could hurt someone." He already *had* hurt someone, but Damien knew he didn't count, not really. At least the bleeding was slowly stopping, even though his lip and arm still pulsed with pain.

Ed gestured towards the two rebels. They dragged the man to the pole in the middle of the tent, pulling his arms back around it to tie his wrists together. Then they fastened the rope to a hook, so he had to bend forwards if he wanted to relieve the pressure on his shoulders. It didn't stop him from raising his head, glaring at Ed and Damien alternately.

Damien gave it another try. He focused on his magic, sending out the illusion. The man froze, eyes closed, breathing heavily, but that didn't mean anything. He had looked like that before, a moment before he had attacked. There had to be a way to find out if it truly worked.

Damien couldn't read thoughts, not like that. If he focused on the illusions he cast out, he could trace them, though. He could feel, *know* what they turned into. Eyes half closed, he tried it now. *A fear*, he urged the man's mind. Usually, that would result in at least a small physical reaction, sometimes hinting at what was going on. Perhaps spiders, or closed spaces; perhaps drowning or fire or darkness. This time there was... the image was shifting. Like the surface of a calm lake being disturbed by a sudden gust, it rippled, then changed.

He tried another angle. And another. The darkness he conjured up got broken by rays of light, the vague idea of water became a shallow pond.

“He’s a chaos mage,” Damien said, opening his eyes. “His domain must be close to mine. He’s deflecting my illusions.”

For a moment, he almost managed to forget the severity of this situation. He pondered about a way to solve this conundrum. Morlit would render the other mage unable to do that—but it would also leave Damien unable to use his magic on him.

“So you’re saying you can’t do your *thing* on him?”

The gleeful glimmer in Ed’s eyes while he played idly with the dagger at his side sent a shiver down Damien’s spine. Fuck, as horrible as what he did was, he couldn’t let the man fall into Ed’s hands instead.

“I can try something else.”

Ed didn’t even reply, just made an inviting gesture. Damien swallowed. Yes, the man could redirect his usual attempts of nudging the mind into a certain direction. If he’d manage to avoid a direct illusion as well came down to the question of which of them was the stronger mage. Damien didn’t know how powerful he himself was. It was a hard thing to measure. He had to try, though.

Heart beating up to his throat, he approached the man, trying not to look into his eyes. A short glimpse had been enough to see the fear he was trying to hide. Even if the man didn’t believe Damien’s magic would work on him, the situation he was in was dire enough. Hands twitched helplessly against the restraints as Damien stepped behind the man, resting two fingers on his wrist. Direct contact made it easier. He’d need every bit of advantage he could get if he wanted this to work.

Taking a deep breath, Damien tried again. Only this time, he didn’t merely nudge the man’s mind, he tried to take over

it, to force the images onto it. It started out like a game; a deadly game of horrors and nightmares. He attempted every scenario he could think of, listening to the man's breathing, feeling for his pulse under his fingertips. *Water*. No reaction. *Insects*. A bit of disgust. *Darkness*. He was as calm as possible, considering his situation. *Physical pain*. The man hissed, trying to pull away from an imaginary cut. *Fire*. Breath hitched and the hand under Damien's fingers started to shake.

He grimaced, quickly trying to turn it into something that might pass as a triumphant smile. Fire it was. By Duriath, he wasn't exactly afraid of it, but that wouldn't be pleasant. Not that anything about this was. A quick glance into Ed's direction showed him curiosity and fading patience. Damien swallowed. He had to.

He didn't allow himself to hesitate before conjuring up the illusion fully. A pile of wood and dry brushwood for the man to stand upon, instead of the sandy ground inside the tent. The smell of smoke and hot air. A single flame, licking up the man's leg, setting his pants on fire.

The man started to scream.

Damien flinched from the pure terror behind the sound. Focus. He had to focus. Forcing himself to keep the illusion up, to let the flames rise higher, he swallowed. It wasn't real. It wouldn't truly hurt the man. Only that it did; the terror on the man's face was real, his memories would be real.

He screamed, jerking forward, trying to break free. Something snapped. He screamed again, throwing his head back, and his shoulder looked *wrong*.

Trying his best to ignore it, Damien let more flames rise. The clothes would be burning now, the fire slowly reaching the skin. Terrified screams turned into pained ones. In between were pleas for mercy, promises to do anything, *anything*. Damien knew there was nothing Ed wanted.

No longer needing direct contact, Damien retreated a few

steps, until he bumped into a table. He kept standing there, leaning against it, ever so slightly. The support was welcome as he poured his magic into the illusion, unable to look away with how much he had to focus.

When the embers left his feet a charred, deformed mess, the man started to crumple. His arms were yanked upwards, eliciting another choked scream as they twisted in their sockets. Damien froze, his illusion faltered. He felt sick.

As the man looked around, eyes wide in terror but obviously seeing the people inside the tent, Ed took a step towards Damien. His posture was a silent threat, even without his hand still resting on the hilt of his knife.

“Did I say you can stop?”

Damien stared at Ed. This was... he couldn't *do* that.

“He's gonna injure himself like that. I only started to do this because it wouldn't hurt them!”

It had been the wrong thing to say. Damien knew it instantly. There was no way to take those words back, though.

“I don't care why you started to do this.” Ed's tone was dangerously low. “Now you are doing it because *I* tell you to. And you will not hesitate, not question me. Make no mistake. You're not irreplaceable. I quite enjoy the reputation you've built us... Nightmare.” Damien winced at this name. “That doesn't mean I *need* you. I think it's time for a lesson. You will do this, or I will. Either way, he will not leave this tent standing.”

Damien wondered if he was half as pale as he felt. He knew there was no way out. If he didn't hurt the man, Ed would do it. And if he refused, there was little doubt that he was next.

Hands clasped around the wood at his back, Damien brought the illusion back. It seemed to be harder this time—perhaps because the man wasn't taken by surprise anymore, knowing it was an illusion now. He was obviously struggling against it, but Damien was stronger. He forced the fire

back onto the man's mind, making him scream and convulse. Flames engulfing his torso, charred legs collapsing. Real fire would long have suffocated the man by now. Damien's illusion knew no such mercy.

After a while, his legs started to shake as pain blossomed behind his left eye. The illusion slipped from his grasp, at least partially, leaving him struggling to regain his control over it. Damien was too busy trying to hold onto his magic to see how far the man was able to shake off the illusion, but Ed must have noticed some change.

"Go on," he said.

"Please." Damien's voice was hoarse, the plea squeezed past a ragged breath. "I need. To stop." He had no strength left to keep his magic up. Its normal use was exhausting already to keep up for longer, and this was so much worse.

"You stop when I tell you to stop. The moment I see the illusion fade, I'll cut his throat."

A desperate sob escaped Damien. He couldn't... he couldn't do this, but he *had* to do this, or the man would die. Damien held on to the illusion, forming flame after flame, letting embers rise and skin char. He was no longer standing, but sitting on the ground, his back against the table as he wrapped his shaking arms around himself. Flames rising as the man's shoulders twisted, leaving his arms in an impossible angle. Smoke suffocating slowly dying screams. The smell of burnt flesh, and embers burning into already blackened skin. Clothes and hair, drifting to the ground as ashes.

With every heartbeat, agony pulsed behind Damien's eyes. He tried not to move, digging his nails into his arms, anything to take his mind off the pain and allow him to focus on what he had to do. Another flame. Another. Rising up, searing through skin and muscle. He had no way to tell how much time had passed, how long he had been doing this. The man's screams had faded. Then his movements had stilled.

His eyes were open, glassy and unfocused. He was barely breathing, hanging limply from fully dislocated shoulders.

“You can stop now.”

Damien collapsed the moment he let go of his illusion. He tried to catch himself, but his arms had no strength left. They just crumpled under him as he sank to the floor. The exhaustion his use of magic had caused was so absolute, it made him nauseous. He tasted dust as he sobbed quietly, his cheek pressed against the sandy floor. He couldn’t even turn his head.

Footsteps and voices approached, then something was dragged over the floor. Probably the man—or what was left of him—to be deposited somewhere in the steppe.

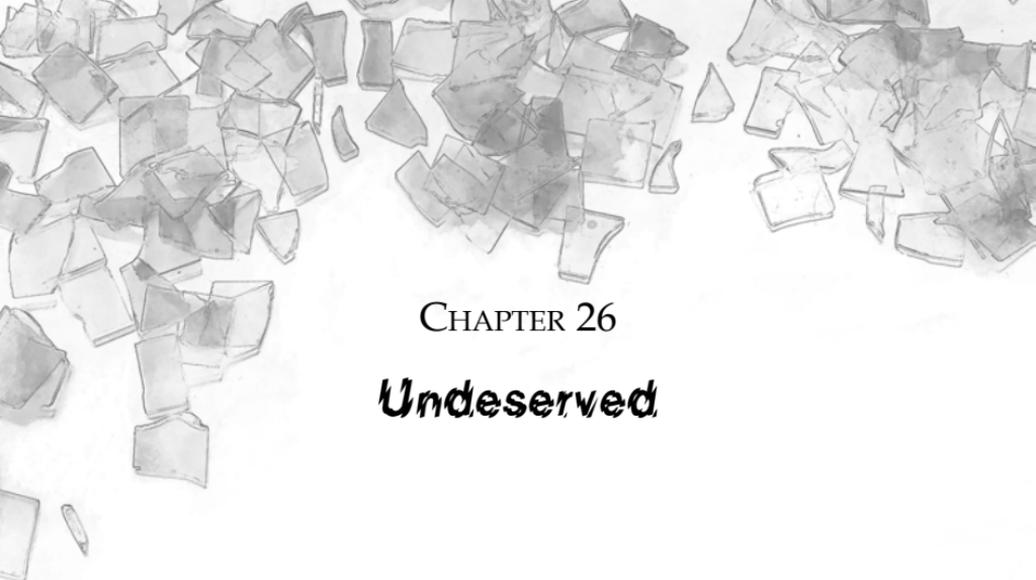
“What about him?” someone asked.

There was no reply, or Damien didn’t hear it. He didn’t need to hear it to imagine Ed’s shrug, his indifferent expression. The last footsteps faded, and he was left alone in blessed silence.

Damien managed to drag his arm closer, to lift it over his head, blocking out the light stinging like needles, even through closed eyelids. His sleeve quickly turned wet as he pressed it against his eyes, as if it could take away some of the pain. It didn’t work. All he could do was lie and wait, burying his face in his arm to muffle his hopeless sobs. The pain would probably fade, in an hour or two. The guilt wouldn’t.

*What have I done?*





## CHAPTER 26

# **Undeserved**

When he awoke from his nightmare, Damien found himself sprawled on the floor. He didn't have the strength to try and sit up. All he managed to do was to pull his right arm closer, to rest his stump on his chest. It hurt. There was not a spot on his upper body that wasn't cut or burned or both. Still, it was worse to feel his pulse throb in his stump. It was wrong, in a deeply unsettling way. Lifting it helped, slightly.

The stinging in his side had become worse. He couldn't tell if it was from his burnt skin, being stretched with every breath, or from the cuts, or from what he assumed was a broken rib or two. Perhaps it was all of it together. It didn't matter. His head was burning, his throat dry, no matter how much he drank. The fever left him shivering, even in moments when he couldn't feel the cold anymore.

He deserved the pain. He deserved every cut and every burn. He deserved to lose his mind to the fear. He deserved to die as well. Wishing for it to happen sooner was selfish enough of him already. Not that his wish would change anything about reality. Wishes rarely did. If they could change things, he wouldn't have ended up in Raqhar in the first place.

Allowing himself to think about how his life could have been was a mistake. If he hadn't ruined his relationship with his brother. If he had been better at his work. If he had never left Caldeia. If, if, if. His whole life was a series of ifs, and he had managed to take the wrong turn at every possible moment.

Damien still didn't move when the door opened and Gaston stepped in. The terror seeped into his heart, making him shake. In the desperate attempt to find anything to hold onto, Damien grabbed the chain with his left hand. At the same time he was strangely numb. Gaston would torture him again, find some other horrible way to hurt him. There were lots of ways. Damien probably knew more than him. The need to keep him alive would severely limit the selection, though.

But no matter what Gaston did, he'd only break his body. There was nothing left of his mind to break. Perhaps there hadn't been since that horrible day. He should have tried to stop them. He should have started a fight. They would have killed him. It would have been better for everyone.

"Get up."

Damien didn't move. What was the point? He'd hurt him anyway.

"I said get up."

The kick to his side wasn't entirely unexpected. Neither was the pain, taking his breath away and making tears well up in his eyes. Damien pulled against the chain, managing to press his hand on his side. He could feel fresh blood seeping through the fabric. He didn't move otherwise.

"If you don't do what I say, I'm not bringing you any water today," Gaston tried.

Damien stared at the ceiling, showing no visible reaction to these words. It was unlikely Gaston would keep that up long enough to kill him. Not when the man had orders to keep him alive. Perhaps the fever would be in Damien's favor,

though. Perhaps he'd die quicker than they expected. He remembered the excruciating thirst under the raqharian sun. It would surely be a horrible way to die – not that much more horrible than what was waiting for him anyway. Nothing he didn't deserve.

Gaston circled him, kicking his other side. This time it was more probing than anything else. He continued, kicking Damien's knee, then his hip as he had finished his round. The pain exploding in his deeply bruised flesh there made Damien gasp, but that was the only reaction he showed.

"If you think your defiance will get you anywhere..."

No. No, he didn't. It was just that nothing would get him anywhere.

"Perhaps I should start by breaking your bones. How many of those do you really need?" A sharp tug on the chain made Damien's hand drop to the floor. Gaston put his boot on it, without much pressure. "You don't need any of those to walk up to the gallows, do you?" The pressure increased, grinding Damien's hand against the stone. "I'm sure they break easily. Don't you want to beg me to stop?"

Damien's breath hitched as Gaston put more and more of his weight on his fingers. The thought of losing his second hand as well was almost enough to break through the apathy. Almost. Damien's lips moved, but his tears ran down his temples in silence. To beg, he'd have to believe the man capable of mercy. Perhaps himself to be worthy of mercy. He didn't believe either of it.

When Gaston lifted his boot and the pressure vanished, Damien sobbed quietly. He didn't dare to try and move his hand, to find out if he still could.

A moment of silence was broken by the jingling of metal. It was followed by the sound of something sliding over fabric. Damien focused his gaze and started to shake. There was something about the leather belt in the man's hand, looming

over him, that still managed to make his stomach turn. He resisted the urge to crawl away. There was nowhere for him to go. It would only make it worse. It always did. All he could do was wait for it to be over, to try and be better next time, even if he knew he'd never be good enough.

Damien curled up, trying to wrap himself around his chained hand and the stump. A quiet sob escaped him. *Please don't, please please.* He deserved this, for all he had done. *Please don't hurt me.*

He had expected for the belt to come crashing down on him, to raise welts over already aching skin. He hadn't expected for Gaston to crouch down and loop the leather around his neck.

"Perhaps you'll beg for air, then," he said.

Damien struggled against the shackle, trying to reach his throat, to grab the belt. The chain wasn't long enough for that. The leather wasn't even pulled tight, did nothing to prevent him from breathing, and yet his heart beat up to his throat.

Then Gaston tugged on the belt and it somehow doubled its pace.

"No, please." Damien had trouble to even get these words out with how much he was shaking.

"Oh, so you can still speak after all. Get up."

Damien's hand scratched over the floor, desperately trying to find something to hold onto. He propped himself up a bit. He wasn't quick enough. The belt tightened, just enough to make him gasp.

"Up, up, up."

The pain tore through his side as he struggled to sit up, to push himself against the wall. Then he was sitting and no, no, it was still too tight, still pulling him up. Teasing him. Tugging and releasing.

"Please." Damien's voice was trembling just as much as he was.

"If you want to breathe, I'd suggest getting onto your knees now."

Gaston's words were followed by a moment of slack. Damien didn't even think about it, he used it to push himself forward, to do as he was told. The belt pulled him back, upwards and against the wall. Hobbling across the stone floor on his knees was agony. The cut and burnt skin of his torso being stretched as he had to straighten his back, to keep up with the pressure, was worse.

He couldn't keep up. It was still too tight. He couldn't possibly get any closer to where the leather was slowly cutting off his air. Not with his hand chained to the floor, not with his feet already against the wall.

Gaston stepped in front of him, no longer holding the other end of the belt. No chance of mercy then, of the leather giving in when he slipped.

"How long do you think you can stay like this?" Gaston's voice was cruel and horrible and made Damien's chest heave in a soundless sob. "Minutes? Hours?" He smiled as Damien's eyes widened in obvious panic. "I have a lot of time today."

He wouldn't let him die. Damien stared at the far wall, trying to keep his breaths calm, to breathe through the fear. They wanted him alive. It didn't help much to ease his terror. Not when the leather was so tight, it turned his panicked gasps into ragged wheezes. Not when the blood started to rush in his ears, to pound in his temples. They wanted him alive. His heart didn't know that, beating frantically. Every single breath seemed to carry less air than the previous one as the muscles of his neck pressed against the leather.

They wanted him alive.

The first time his leg wavered and Gaston did nothing to help him, this belief started to crumble. The second time he hung from his neck, for a short, terrible moment before he managed to steady himself, it faded fully. *Please*. He didn't

have the air to beg. The terror gave him new strength to keep himself up, but he knew it wouldn't last. He had no idea how much time had passed, or how much longer Gaston would keep him like this. Perhaps he should give in. Let himself fall. It was inevitable.

He couldn't.

Damien fought against the pain in his knees, feeling like they were pressed against shards of glass. He fought against the strain on his back and the stabbing in his side and the weakness, making him shake. He fought quietly and desperately, keeping his gaze focused on the far wall, blurring before his tear-filled eyes.

"This is less exciting than I thought it would be."

Suddenly Gaston's face was in front of his. A hand pressed down on the bruised and cut flesh of Damien's chest. It made him jerk back, turning his scream into a strangled wheeze. He struggled to get back into position, to raise his head, to breathe. The hand stayed, tracing cuts and burns alike. Nails scratched over a blistered patch of skin. Damien trembled with the effort to hold still, a pained whine escaping his lips.

"I wonder..." Gaston's fingers wandered lower, pressing down hard on one of the cuts. Panicked gasps became more desperate as he dug a nail into the split flesh. Damien couldn't even shrink back. Every movement, no matter how small, would cut off what little air he still managed to get.

The finger moved lower, hooking into his waistband, and his heart seemed to stop. *Please. Don't.* Damien's breaths were frantic, close to hyperventilating. Gaston paid it no attention. He tugged on the pants, feeling the hem, humming quietly.

"Would they believe they forgot to take your belt from you? That you've done this yourself?" he asked, pulling Damien a bit closer. It was barely any movement, and yet it was too much. Damien's mouth hung open in the desperate attempt to breathe. A little air made it past the belt, being sucked into

his lungs with painful, ragged breaths. It was too little to stay conscious and too much to allow him to faint.

"It's so tempting to try. You'll die just the same when the queen is done with you. But here, now, I could be the one watching. I could look right into your eyes when the light fades."

He did just that, looking straight into Damien's eyes. Then he pulled a bit more, and Damien's air was cut off fully. Eyes wide in horror, he struggled against the chain. If only he could get his hand free, if only he could reach for the belt. It was hopeless. He didn't even have enough strength to break free from the finger hooked into his waistband. With every second his heart seemed to beat faster, until he was sure it would explode. Hot tears ran down his cheek, but no sound made it past his throat, slowly being crushed by his weight.

"I've been dreaming of this day for a long time, you know? Such a long time."

When the finger pushed him instead, a bit of air made it past the belt. It wasn't enough, not nearly enough. It kept Damien hanging at the edge of unconsciousness, not allowing him to fade.

"I wonder if you'd remember my cousin, if I showed you a picture. Such a bright young man. Always kind, always smiling. Eleven years and sixty-two days since we found him; with his fingers cut off and his tongue ripped out. You might as well have cut out his heart."

Gaston pulled again. Held him, for a few seconds only, before pushing him back, deliberately putting pressure onto the burn on Damien's stomach as he did so. There was no air for him to scream, but his muscles twitched desperately against the pain.

"He never smiled again. Not once. And a year later we found him a second time. In his room. Hanging from the handle of his door. We had to push his body aside to get in. Can you imagine how desperate he must have been, how broken?"

To tie the rope without fingers. To not fight the body's urge to live when the ground was right there."

Damien wanted to sob, to scream. It was wrong. *Wrong*. He couldn't. He didn't have the breath for it. The hand pressed into his stomach, pushing him up. He was sure Gaston could feel every desperate tremor, every shiver running through his body.

"I promised on his grave that I'd get revenge. And here we are."

Gaston kept holding him for a few more terrible seconds, before letting go of him. Damien's body swayed, suspended by his neck. He fought to get his bleeding knees back under him, struggling against the weakness making his muscles fail. He couldn't raise his head high enough, couldn't relieve the pressure on his neck.

His chest was burning. Screaming for air. It made him twitch in the desperate attempt to draw a breath that just wouldn't come. His left leg started to cramp, shaking for a moment before it faltered, unable to hold him up any longer.

He was going to die. Gaston was going to watch him die. Damien's head was swimming. There was no air for him to speak, to beg, to cry. There were only his tears, and the terrible hole Gaston's words had left in his heart.

He could feel his muscles failing. He couldn't stop it. Damien's mouth opened in a soundless scream as his right leg gave in as well. His stump scraped over the wall, tearing out festering stitches in the vain attempt to pull himself up.

As the belt cut off the blood flow, his frantic heartbeat hammered in his head. His body stopped obeying his will, burning and trembling, too weak to keep him alive. Blood ran down from his wrist and dripped off his fingers.

*It wasn't me.*

Then everything went dark.



## CHAPTER 27

# Blame

"That's right! Very good!"

Valadan beamed up at him. The gap between his front teeth reminded Damien how he was very much not a baby anymore. The little boy was six now, starting school, learning to read and write. It was this Damien was helping him with at the moment; making him read the short, simple sentences he had scribbled onto the small blackboard with his best handwriting.

Damien pointed to the next sentence, and Valadan started to read. Tongue between his teeth, he pieced together letter after letter, slowly forming the words until he got it right. Valadan laughed, and Damien smiled, and it was a perfect, wonderful moment.

Of course moments like these never lasted long.

"Valadan! Damien! What the *fuck* is this?"

The voice of their father, shouting across the house, made Damien shake. He dropped the pen and hid his trembling hands under the desk. He didn't know what the man was shouting about, but it couldn't be something good. It never was.

"I'm sorry."

Damien's gaze snapped up to see Valadan staring at him. Purple eyes wide in fear, lips trembling. He was up and standing before he had even thought about it. Turning towards the door, putting himself between the approaching footsteps and his little brother.

Then their father was there, stomping into the room, carrying something. He slammed it onto the table, a broken piece of colorful glass. Damien gulped. He recognized the glass. It was part of a vase, beautiful and expensive. And fragile, apparently.

"Which one of you little bastards did this? You?" he spat, trying to peer past Damien at Valadan.

"It was me. I'm sorry." The words left Damien's lips strangely calm. Their father was still staring past him, apparently not quite ready to direct his ire towards a new target. Damien continued, "I wanted to look at it. I dropped it. It's my fault."

"You. Shouldn't you know *better*?" Then his cheek burned from the slap, and his eyes with tears, threatening to spill over. He didn't back off.

"I'm sorry," he repeated plainly. He knew nothing could save him from their father's rage.

"I guess I'll have to remind you how to be careful then," the man said. Damien's legs turned weak as he saw him reach for the buckle of his belt, unfastening it. "And when I'm done," he continued, "you're gonna clean up the mess you made."

"Dami..."

Damien turned his head towards his brother. Valadan was staring at him.

"Fuck off, will you. Get out."

He couldn't help it, the cold dread in his stomach broke out of him in the form of pure rage. It wasn't Valadan's fault. But it also wasn't his fault, yet he would be the one suffering for it.

Valadan stared at him for one moment, but then decided to run. He sprinted past Damien, past their father, out of the room. There was a terrible sob, tearing Damien's heart apart, a moment before it turned to ice. His father was already holding the belt, already approaching him. Damien bit his lip to stop himself from crying out as the leather crashed down onto his back. Hunched over the table, he clenched his fingers around the edge. Tasting blood and watching his tears form little dark stains on the wood, he managed not to scream until the fifth strike.

It wasn't his fault.

An hour later he was lying in his bed, on his stomach. His back was throbbing, his fingers bleeding from where he had picked up the glass. He hadn't bothered to find something to bandage them with. It would stop soon enough. It always did.

Footsteps sounded, slow and scared. Shuffling into the room. Pausing in the middle of it.

"Dami..."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Damien asked. "I could have..." He fell quiet. He probably couldn't have done anything. Or rather, he wouldn't have done anything different. Perhaps have been prepared for it, perhaps picked up the shards on his own – then waited for punishment all the same.

He'd never let this man lay hand on his baby brother as long as he could help it.

"I'm sorry. I was scared." The steps came closer, stopping next to his bed. "Did he... did he hurt you?"

"It's okay," Damien said. It wasn't okay. But perhaps he was lucky and Valadan had run away far enough, not heard his screams. "I'll be fine." He wanted to turn around, to look at his brother, to smile at him. The mere thought of moving made him cry.

A small hand on his shoulder hurt as much as it was comforting him. It made Damien shiver and he buried his face in the pillow. Quiet sniffing next to him told him Valadan was crying as well.

"It wasn't your fault," Damien mumbled into the pillow, for his brother's sake as much as for his own.

Valadan didn't say anything. But he stayed, his tiny hand on Damien's trembling shoulder. Damien cried until he fell asleep.



## CHAPTER 28

### **Fever**

Damien awoke with tears streaming down his face. The trails they left were cool on his burning skin, at least for a moment. His tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth, his lips brittle and dry. He didn't know if Gaston had left any water for him. The last thing he remembered was the terror, trying in vain to *breathe*—and these horrible words, taking away the last bit of Damien's strength.

All this hate. All this pain. Only for him to realize that Gaston blamed him for something he had never done. Not that it mattered much. He had done enough. Still, those words had sparked a new kind of despair; the kind that told him that perhaps, just perhaps, he didn't deserve this. That it would have been enough for him to merely die.

Damien's throat hurt as a quiet whimper escaped him. It matched the rest of his body, which hurt just as much. Not only the cuts and burns. There was a bone-deep ache in his limbs, making him want to cry with every shivering breath he took. Water. He needed water. Damien forced his eyes to open, staring up at the ceiling for a few minutes, until the cell stopped spinning. Then he dared to slowly turn his head. There was no bucket to the left of him, in reach of his hand.

Damien closed his eyes and focused on just breathing for a few minutes. How could such a tiny movement take so much of his strength? Once he was reasonably sure the ground wouldn't just open up and swallow him when he moved, he turned his head to the right side. There was the bucket. Damien couldn't tell if it was empty or not, but the mere sight filled him with a tiny bit of hope. If only he'd manage to reach it.

Trying to figure out how to accomplish that was hard. He decided he'd have to sit up first. That was also hard. By the time he had managed it, he was trembling and sweating. He wouldn't quite call it sitting. But a part of his body was propped against the wall, allowing him to reach out with his right arm. Perhaps it would be enough.

The bucket was close. Damien leaned to the side, stretching out his arm. The sleeve of his shirt slid down, hanging loosely from the stump. It made it impossible for Damien to see what he was doing, to guess how much further he had to reach. The pain throbbing in his arm and the strange sensation of feeling a hand that was no longer there made it equally impossible to just guess. Damien paused, breathing heavily. He had to... to...

He leaned to the other side, swaying from the dizziness the sudden movement had caused. But he could reach his sleeve now, pull it up carefully. Perhaps he'd manage to somehow roll it up above the stump. Just a bit more. He tugged on the fabric, wondering why a part of it didn't move. Too late he realized that it had moved; that what he was staring at wasn't fabric, but his arm.

The skin at his stump had turned black. Some foul, green liquid oozed past the crude stitches that kept the wound closed; or had kept it closed, before the flesh around them had started to rot away. Damien couldn't look away. He stared at the glistening black threads. He stared at the dried

shreds of skin. He stared at the rest of his arm, impossibly swollen, the skin a deeply unsettling purple. He wondered if it would turn black, too. He sobbed, his gasping breaths stinging in his throat.

The infection would spread, would make him burn and tear him apart. The water wouldn't save him. He didn't have the strength to try and reach for it again. Instead, he let his arm sink on his chest. His sleeve dropped down, mercifully covering the sight. Damien wouldn't have seen it anyway. He stared across the cell, at the rough, dirty stones, looking almost soft in the morning light. He didn't see them, either.

"... hear me?"

There was a voice, grating in Damien's ears. He tried to ignore it. If he could ignore it, perhaps he'd manage to fall back asleep. He couldn't remember his dream, and he couldn't remember where he was. But there was this feeling, deep inside, that he really, really didn't want to be awake.

"... drink ..."

Something touched his mouth. He tried to turn his head away. He couldn't. Fear crept into the unsettling feeling that something was wrong. *Please...* He didn't even know what he wanted to ask for. *Please leave me alone. Please let me sleep.* He tried. But opening his mouth only allowed the thing to pour some liquid between his lips.

Damien gagged. It tasted awful. Like rotten plants and metal. There was too much of it. He tried to spit it out, but his head was held down. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't *breathe*. He choked as he tried to swallow, then sobbed as his coughs set his lungs on fire.

"Calm down. This will help you. Drink."

Damien obeyed, if only because there really wasn't anything else he could do. Not if he didn't want to choke on this horrible stuff. He forced himself to swallow it, ignoring the

taste. It was harder to ignore the burning in his tormented throat.

At some point the cup seemed to be empty. It was replaced by one filled with water, which was just as hard to drink. It didn't taste that awful, though, and didn't burn as much as it ran down his throat.

When the second cup was empty as well, it was taken away. For a moment, Damien drifted aimlessly, somewhere between waking and sleep. He wanted to slip away, but there were movements and voices, keeping him on edge. Then something cool was placed on his forehead, making him whine in relief. It didn't stay cool for long, but it was enough for Damien to dare and try to open his eyes.

There were dancing lights and shadows in his cell. The shadows were scary, but the lights looked warm. Friendly. Like glass lanterns with candles burning in them. He tried to find the source of them. The mere attempt to turn his head left him dizzy and nauseous. He had to squeeze his eyes shut, focusing on the heavy fabric on his forehead instead.

One of the strangers raised their voice.

"You can't or you won't? It's not like I'm asking for much. The queen is expected to return in three days and..."

Whatever else they said was lost to the pounding in Damien's head. Three days. Perhaps he would finally be put to trial. If the fever didn't kill him before. If Gaston didn't return to finish him off. Damien didn't know what would be worse. He wanted this to be over, but the only way for this to be over was to die.

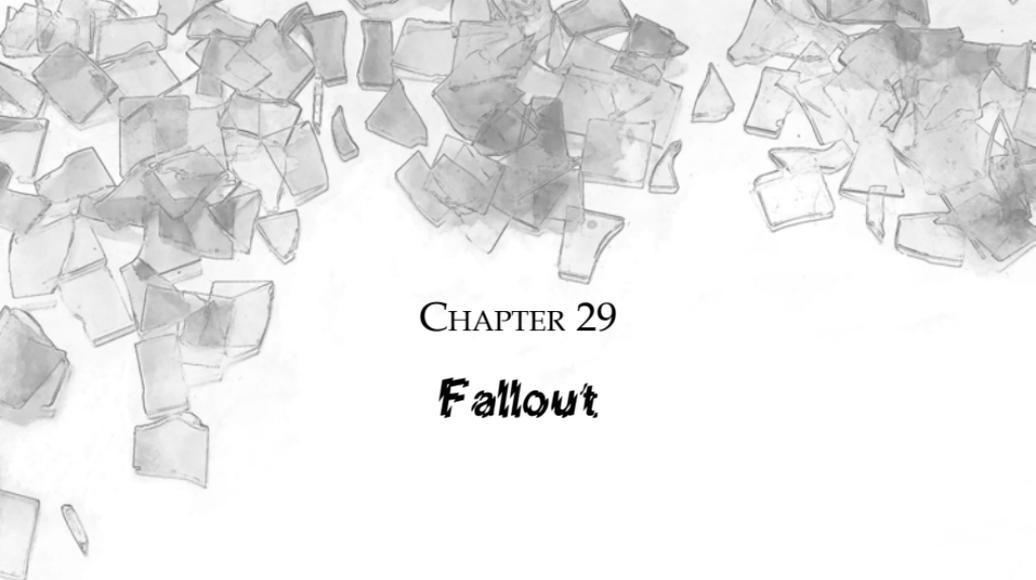
"I'm sorry. There's nothing else I can do."

Damien forced his eyes open, watching the dancing lights. There was a face, somewhere between them. Wrinkly skin and gray hair and friendly eyes. They seemed to shimmer and dance, too. If only they'd hold still, perhaps he could focus on them. Tell the person they belonged to that he was thankful

for the attempt. Not that he was, not really. There was this ache, telling him that perhaps he wouldn't have woken up again. He wished he hadn't.

As his eyes slid shut, a hand gathered the rag from his forehead. It returned once more, dabbing at it, before vanishing for good. Damien's mind slipped away in the knowledge that, one way or another, it would be over soon.





## CHAPTER 29

### **Fallout**

“You’ve been out all night again.”

Damien stared at his brother; clothes wrinkled, hair disheveled, reeking of smoke and alcohol. He had long given up on trying to keep his disapproval from his tone when Valadan showed up like this. There was no reply. His brother leaned against the closed door, arms crossed, in a pose that could be both defiance and the simple attempt to keep his balance.

“Had fun?” Damien probed. He wasn’t surprised to get no answer to this, either. With a sigh he took a step to the side, leaning against a shelf, mirroring Valadan’s pose. “You can’t keep doing this. I’m gonna need your help if we want to keep the workshop. I can’t do the fancy things yet.”

He paused, fighting the lump in his throat. *Worthless.*

“Perhaps I’ll never be as good,” he continued, more quietly. “But we’ll have to fulfill orders, or we’ll run out of money.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Valadan stared at him, his purple eyes glowing with barely suppressed rage. There was always so much rage in him. “Fuck this glass. Fuck everything,” he snapped, making Damien flinch.

“Fuck everything and then what? What will you do with your life?”

"I don't know. There's a whole world out there. There's more than..." Valadan trailed off, stepping away from the door. He walked to the shelves lining the shop window towards the street. Damien watched him trail his fingers across some of the things laid out there, resting on a colorful lantern made from dozens of glass shards. "This old-fashioned bullshit made by an old-fashioned asshole."

"I made that."

It wasn't perfect. Perhaps it wasn't even good. He didn't even think it would sell, but had kept it out because the displays were getting dangerously empty. What other choice did he have but to *try*? It was all he could do, try and try and never be enough. But he also couldn't give up, not as long as he had to take care of his little brother.

"Well, guess you're an old-fashioned asshole then."

There was no edge to Valadan's voice. It almost made Damien smile. Almost. The weight on his heart was too heavy to let him smile. With their old man barely under the earth, there were a dozen or more contracts to overview. There were impatient customers threatening to withdraw their orders, storages running low, taxes approaching. So many responsibilities. Way too many, way too soon, and apparently he couldn't expect any kind of help. Not that there was anything new about that, either.

"At least this old-fashioned asshole manages to still put some food on the table. What's your plan, get wasted and fuck around each night until you starve to death?"

"Perhaps." Valadan shrugged, but didn't look at him. "Why would you care?"

"I care because I am your brother."

"Exactly!" Now Valadan looked up. The purple glow of his eyes had somehow managed to intensify. "You're my brother, not my father. Stop pretending you are. I'm old enough to take care of myself."

“If you think that” — Damien gestured broadly at his brother’s shape — “is taking care of yourself, I have to disappoint you.”

“Well what do *you* know about disappointment?” Valadan glared at him, hands balled into fists. “You’ve always been the one he cared about. The one he talked to. You are the son he wanted. I’m —” Valadan slammed his hand on the shelf, making the lanterns and candle holders shake.

“I didn’t have any more of a father than you had,” Damien said quietly. He was tired. So tired. He had always tried his best, and it apparently had never been enough. He hadn’t been good enough to raise his baby brother properly. He hadn’t been good enough to learn his father’s craft. He’d continue to be barely good enough to make it through life, somehow, waiting for the next stroke of fate to make it all fall apart.

“At least you still knew our mother.”

Damien remembered her. Sometimes. Some things. Her hair, copper curls; a color both her sons had inherited. A story read with funny voices and a hand tickling him until he wrapped himself into his blanket willfully. A summer day full of laughter and love. Sometimes he missed her so much, it seemed to tear him apart.

“And if it wasn’t for you, she’d still be alive,” he whispered.

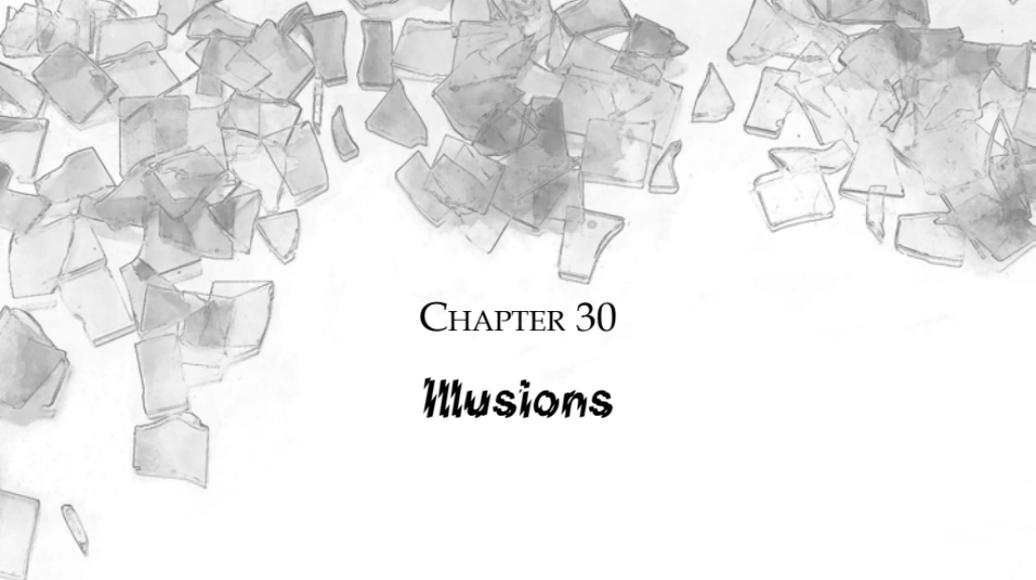
Damien regretted those words the second they had left his lips. An icy hand grabbed his heart as he saw the look of pure, defeated hurt on his brother’s face. How often had Valadan heard those words from his own father. How often had it been Damien who had comforted him. How the fuck could he have ever spoken them himself. His brother’s shoulders dropped as he turned around, towards the door.

“Valadan...”

But Valadan didn’t look at him, didn’t stop. His steps were heavy in a way that was different from the usual weight the

alcohol put on his movements. There was no pause as he laid his fingers on the doorknob, pulled the door open. Then he was gone, the door closed behind him, the sound echoing in Damien's ears with a horrible finality.

"Fuck," he whispered, sinking down to the ground, his back against the shelf. He closed his eyes to not see the reproachful stare of the little glass bird next to him. Who was he trying to fool? His life was already falling apart.



## CHAPTER 30

# ***Illusions***

By the time Damien opened his eyes, the fever had gone down. He seemed to be alone. The lights were gone as well, and he found himself staring into suffocating darkness. Everything was quiet. He had no idea how long he had been sleeping—or been unconscious, really. Everything hurt. The shallow rising of his chest aggravated the wounds littering his torso. Every breath burned in his throat. He wasn't sure he'd be able to speak. He didn't try.

The taste of this disgusting brew still lingered in his mouth, which was slightly better than the taste of bile and blood. He would have liked to drink a bit of water, though. There was no way for him to see if they'd left him some. As he weakly moved his left arm around, as far as the chain and the ache in his shoulder allowed him, he found nothing.

Just as well. Perhaps he'd be able to sleep until the morning. If only he could find rest. If only he could push the thought aside that the queen was coming back. If only he could forget the feeling of the belt cutting off his air, and the pain, and the panic.

But he couldn't, and he still found himself awake what was probably an hour later. Nothing had changed. It was still

completely dark and quiet. The only thing that had changed was the beating of his heart, which had picked up its pace by a considerable amount. Every time he swallowed, he felt the leather around his neck, squeezing the life out of him. As so often during those last days, he wished they had just let him die. How many chances had there been since his capture? Every one of those would have been a better way to go than to be hanged in public.

But as always, he had managed to avoid all the better options, aiming unerringly for the worst. Almost blown up. Almost bled to death. Almost died from fever. Almost starved and almost suffocated. Almost, almost, almost. He wasn't even good enough for death to have some mercy.

A quiet sob left his lips. Damien shifted closer to his chained hand, so he could feel for his neck; feel that there was nothing but bruised skin. No leather, no rope. But there would be, soon. He sobbed again, the sound scratching in his raw throat. It wasn't even the worst way to die he could think of. But it was so tangible, so close, it filled him with terror.

Not for the first time he wondered if he'd take another way out, if there was one. Not that he could think of any. There was nothing within reach, nothing he could use. No weapon, nothing heavy or sharp. Just the chain around his wrist, and the bucket, if he was lucky.

He'd heard tales of mages dying when trying to use their powers against morlit – the very material the shackle around his wrist was made of. Damien wondered idly if there was any truth to the stories. He hadn't even tried to use his magic. He had known it wouldn't work, and there was no reflex in him to try. Fancy images had never been something that could save him, while a headless teleport could kill him.

Perhaps he should try.

It was curiosity more than determination that made him reach for his magic. Light. A light would be nice. Damien

concentrated on what should be an easy trick. Nothing appeared. The shackle grew slightly warm. Other than that, he didn't feel different.

A small illusion like a light was barely worth the name, though. He could try something bigger. Turn this cell into a nicer place.

*A green meadow perhaps, with warm sunlight and fluffy clouds.* The metal around his wrist grew uncomfortably hot.

*With a few trees, casting shadows, and a soft blanket for him to sit upon.* Weakness washed over him as his magic poured into the shackle.

*The air would smell of grass and flowers, not like the dust he had grown used to during those last years.* The shackle was almost burning him now. Damien clenched his teeth, holding on to the image.

*A book in front of him. Laughter in the distance.* He wasn't sure if he had his eyes closed or not. The darkness around him was spinning so fast, it made him feel sick.

*Footsteps on a sandy path and a little stream bubbling behind him.* It was too hot. Too hot.

*A bowl of fruit next to him. Little bits of strawberries and peaches and plums.* His magic was no longer drawn into the void, the void was drawn into him.

Damien screamed, slamming his hand against the floor. The shackle was burning him, melting him, he couldn't get it off, he couldn't get it off. He half expected to smell burning skin, but there was nothing, just the pain searing into his bones. It left him shaking, his fingers twisted, nails breaking as he clawed at the stone.

The pain wasn't even the worst of it. It was the feeling of being dragged down, falling into an endless void. The darkness was spinning around him and there was nothing he could hold onto. It felt like he was falling forever, his fingers cramped in agony, his legs twitching helplessly. There was

nothing. No sight or sound or smell. Just absolute, all-encompassing emptiness.

When his fall finally stopped, the first hint of light started to appear in front of the window. Damien looked up to it with tears in his eyes, too terrified to move. The comforting warmth of his magic was gone. Almost gone. There was a little spark left, like the single shard of a shattered bowl. Too small to be of any use, a painful reminder of what once had been.

He had never felt so... empty in his life. There was a hole, not in his chest, but in his self, tearing him apart. Damien knew with absolute certainty that it would kill him if he continued to use his magic against this void.

He also knew he'd never find the courage to do it.

As the sun continued to rise, Damien slowly calmed down. He wondered if Gaston would come back. Maybe him almost dying would make them force him to leave him alone. Perhaps, this once, he could be that lucky. He barely dared to hope for it.

Damien tried to listen to any footsteps that might approach. The third time he jolted awake from some kind of weary half-sleep, he decided to give up. Even if he would hear anyone walk towards his cell, there was nothing he could do about it. It would only give him a few seconds warning. But he had spent the better part of the night awake, shaking and out of his mind from terror. He had to get some rest. Every hour he spent asleep was one hour he didn't have to spend thinking about what was waiting for him.

Perhaps he wouldn't even need his magic to turn this cell into a better place. Damien curled up, wrapping the chained arm around himself as best as he could. He would have given a lot for a bit of warmth, a small comfort. Not that he had anything left to give. A tear ran down his temple as he recalled the scene he had thought of.

*The meadow in the park, not far from his home. It was a summer day, filled with warmth and golden light. The air smelled of drying grass and blooming flowers. He had spread his blanket in the shadow of a large oak tree, so its shade would make it easier for him to read. A book was open in front of him.*

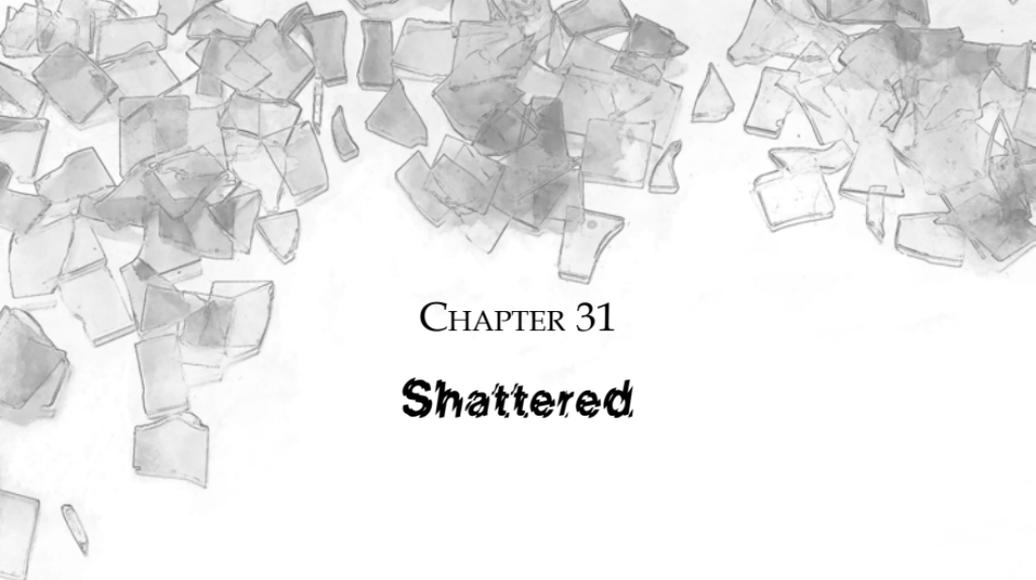
*He looked up from it to see a little boy weave a wooden sword around, laughing as he stabbed an invisible foe.*

*'I win!' he exclaimed, then hopped over the little stream, to run towards Damien. 'I won,' he explained, before popping a strawberry into his mouth. He sat down next to Damien, looking at the book in front of him. 'When I'm all grown up, I'm gonna be the best warrior the world has ever seen!' the boy announced. 'Like the heroes in your books.'*

*This book wasn't about heroes, or warriors. The boy couldn't know that.*

There was a smile on Damien's lips as he slipped back into sleep. The floor beneath his cheek was wet from his tears.





## CHAPTER 31

# Shattered

Damien stared at the blob of glass in front of him. A moment ago, it had been golden and viscous like honey, but now it was turning dark orange. He didn't know what to do with it. Surrounded by masterful artwork, so much better than anything he would ever be able to create, he couldn't even hold on to a fleeting image of what this one might become.

Perhaps it would have been easier if he had actual orders to work on, but he had refused to take any lately. Not being able to finish something to sell was bad enough for business; not finishing something that was *expected* would be so much worse.

Prodding the lump of glass listlessly with his tools, he found that it was too hard already. He shoved it back into the fire. With nothing better to do than to wait, he slipped off the thick, heat resistant gloves, so he could rub his eyes and bury his face in his hands. What was the point of all of this?

He was so tired. Without his brother, there really was no point in going on like this, was there? To keep up the twisted image of a normal family, a flourishing business. His family was gone, the business failing, and there was no way for him to fix any of it.

*Worthless.*

Perhaps his father had been right. He was useless, would never be good enough. Not for this, not for anything. What was he even still trying for? Damien reached for the metal rod, to pull the glass out of the fire and put it aside. Perhaps it was his brain catching up at the last moment, or the overwhelming heat emanating from the oven, but he didn't manage to close his fingers fully around the rod before flinching back with a scream.

It was still enough to sear a red, angry line into his palm.

Damien stumbled back, knocking into a shelf with his left hip. His scream turned into a curse as tears blurred his vision. Something clattered. When he turned around, he saw that a vase on the shelf had fallen over and was now rolling towards the edge. Pressing his burning hand against his body, he reached for the vase with his left. His hand was shaking, his movements unsteady. Fuck, it *hurt*.

He put the vase upright, but not upright enough; it fell over again, resuming the same path of rolling lazily towards the edge. Anger flared up in Damien's mind; at the fucking vase and the fucking glass, the fucking fire and his whole fucking *life* that was falling apart. He grabbed the vase and threw it across the room.

It shattered against the wall, the shards falling to the ground like shimmering pieces of a rainbow. He stared at them, the rush of adrenaline making his heart hammer in his chest, suppressing the pain in his hand. Before he fully realized what he was doing, he reached for the next object: a lantern, the edges not as smooth as they could have been, the pattern not perfectly symmetrical. It followed the vase, shards bouncing off the wall, clattering to the ground.

More and more pieces followed: lanterns thrown against the wall, baubles smashed on the ground, suspended birds and glittering stars ripped apart. Soon the floor was covered

in glass shards, crunching under Damien's soles as he walked to the next shelf, and the next. A pile of colorful decorative plates skidded over the floor, one by one, each one thrown with more force than the previous one. Crashing, breaking, shattering. Some of the shards must have ricocheted back; when Damien raised his left hand, to reach for yet another vase, there were glistening streaks of red on his arm.

Damien clenched his fingers to a fist, purposefully straining the muscles of his arm, but he could barely feel the cuts. There was one on the back of his hand, another on his arm, and a few scratches on his fingers, from where he had grabbed the glass. The sight of the blood running lazily towards his elbow was enough to take away some of his rage. He still swiped the rest of the things off the shelf, but didn't put as much force behind his movements as before. Grabbing one last handful of decorative stars, ripping them off the bands that held them up and dropping them to the floor, he walked towards the door.

Before he left, he turned around, his eyes burning as he stared at the devastation he had caused. There was nothing left but the masterpieces his father had made – the best ones, those he had kept, those Damien would never dare to touch. It was familiar, and it was different, and it broke his heart, and it lifted a weight off his shoulders. There was no way to undo the damage, to take back his decision to *quit*, to hopelessly try to one day be good enough.

His whole fucking life. A fucking charade of expectations and responsibilities he had never stood a chance to keep up with.

He raised his hand, muttering a soft 'fuck' when instead of wiping away his tears, he managed to smear blood across his face. Another 'fuck' followed as he stomped out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. The sound echoed in his ears, and the vibration in his hand, and his other hand

started hurting again, and it was all just too goddamn much. The only thing stopping him from pounding against the wall was the fact that in the palm of his right hand blisters had started to form, while his left one was dripping with blood. He wanted to deal neither with more pain, nor with bloodstains on the wall.

Holding his burned hand close to his chest, he made his way up the stairs and into the bathroom. It was a bit late to save anything with cool water, but he had to at least wash off the blood. Damien shoved a stool in front of the sink, sitting down with a defeated sigh. Letting the water run over his hands, he leaned his forehead against the sink, closing his eyes.

After a while, his arms grew tired and the coldness of the water became uncomfortable. Damien turned off the water and wrapped a towel around his still-bleeding arm, before he trudged over to the cabinet. He found the bandages behind the third door he checked; bandages and some pots and flasks that were probably at least half as old as he was. The writing on the labels was faded, and inside the one container that was transparent he saw a dark, dried out mass. None of those things would be of any use to him, so he only grabbed some of the bandages and returned to the stool.

Wrapping bandages around his hands would have been a whole lot easier if he hadn't ruined both of them. The anger came crawling back as the end of the cloth slipped through his teeth a third time, instead of letting itself be fastened with a knot. It was a pale, washed out anger, wiped away by exhaustion before it could truly settle in.

When the bandages were finally in place, he didn't get up yet. Instead he stared at the empty sink, at a pale pink drop clinging to the white ceramic. There was one more thing he had to do. He dreaded it, but he wanted to be done with it, so he struggled to his feet, feeling slightly lightheaded as he was

finally standing. He couldn't have lost that much blood, but as all his rage and frustration slowly faded, there was nothing but weakness left behind.

He dragged himself into his room, sat down at his desk and pulled open a drawer, to grab a stack of paper and a quill. Writing those damn letters with his burned hand was agony. Damien kept them as short as possible; greeting, termination, thanks and goodbye. Three of them were all that was needed – three merchants all he had still ties with.

He remembered a time his father had bought supplies from two dozen different ones, visiting some for one special material only. Year after year, more of these relations had fizzled out.

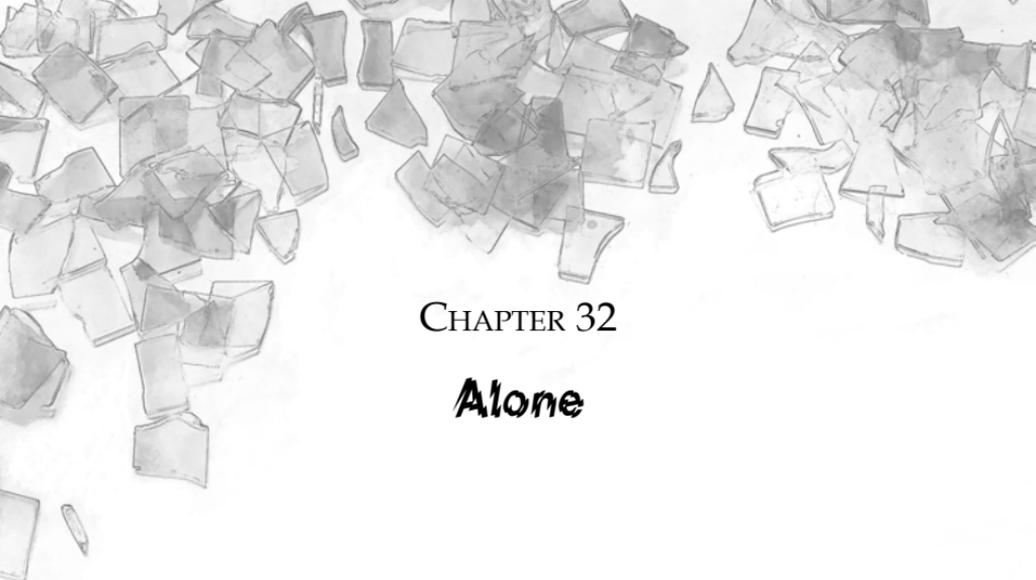
Damien signed all of the letters, staring at his signature as he did so. It looked almost the same as his father's had. Back then, he had learned to imitate it, so he could do the paperwork in his old man's name when he had been too drunk to bother. Over time, he had officially taken over, but his signature had stayed largely the same. At least that he had been decent at; keeping the books. Not that it was fucking helping him now, was it?

With shaking hands, he folded the letters, placing them in an envelope each. One more time he had to lift the quill, writing addresses on them he had memorized almost a decade ago. Tears blurred his vision, making him blink rapidly so he could finish the last few words. Then he let the quill sink, pain and grief and exhaustion flooding him. He looked to the window, outside which the last light of the day was fading fast. It was too late now. He'd bring them to the postal service first thing in the morning.

As for what he would do *after* that?

Damien pushed the letters aside, so they were out of the way as he laid his head on his arms and started to cry.





## CHAPTER 32

### **Alone**

Faces. So many faces. All of them strangers. They were everywhere. Filling the square, filling the streets, filling the whole world. Damien's gaze darted over them, a strange panic gripping his heart. There was one face he had to find. He had to be somewhere in this mass. With every face he passed without finding him, Damien's despair grew. He was running out of time. The noose was already around his neck, the weight of the rope all that kept him standing on trembling legs.

Someone started to speak, their voice carrying across the square. Damien didn't understand the words, but he knew what they said. Listing his crimes, announcing his punishment. The crowd cheered. Someone stepped behind him. Damien sobbed as the rope started to lift and the pressure around his neck increased. So many faces, and not a single one familiar. He had to find the one that would be. The only one that had ever mattered.

Blood rushed in his ears and pounded in his temples as the rope was pulled taut. Damien struggled to keep up, straining his battered body to buy himself a bit more time. His breaths were panicked, unable to deliver enough air to his aching lungs, to calm his hammering heart. Knowing that it

was useless didn't stop him from instinctively trying to break free. But his hands were bound behind his back, the restraints cutting deep into his wrists as he tore against them.

*Valadan.* Instead of his brother's name, a broken sob left his lips. *Please.* He had to be here. Damien tried to blink the tears away, to be able to keep looking. All he saw was hate and disgust, mirrored on each face his gaze passed.

His toes scraped over the wooden boards of the scaffold, trying desperately to find a way to relieve the pressure. Then they were in the air, swaying helplessly, unable to reach anything. Damien opened his mouth, trying to scream, to plead. No sound came out. He needed a moment longer. He had to find him.

Blood ran down his hands. It hurt. Not as much as his bruised neck, being squeezed mercilessly by the rope. Twisting against it only made it worse, but the pain barely mattered against the burning in his lungs.

Where was his brother? He had to hold on, a moment longer. To fight the darkness, eating away at the edges of his vision. He had to find him. To see him one last time. But he couldn't breathe, and it hurt, it hurt so much, and his heart was about to break apart, and he couldn't *breathe*, and he couldn't *find* him, and —

Damien awoke with a scream, sounding more like a rasping croak than anything else. He tugged at the chain, trying to reach his neck. There was nothing there. Nothing. He could breathe, even if it hurt. His heart was still beating so fast, he wouldn't have been surprised if it managed to break his ribs.

He had to get up. Ground himself somewhere in this terrible cell, which was just the slightest bit less terrible than his nightmare had been. Damien managed not to scream as he put some weight onto his right arm. He didn't have

the strength anymore to get up any other way. He shuffled towards the wall, pushing himself up. His whole arm had turned into one horrible well of agony. Perhaps it was rotting away. If he was lucky, he'd never have to look at it again, see what had become of it.

Sitting against the wall, he slowly managed to calm down. He looked at the little window, the sky behind it turning pale with the approaching dawn. Was it the third day already? Damien had lost all track of time, drifting between darkness and light. Sometimes it felt like he had been unconscious for days, other times it seemed to have been mere minutes. In any case, his time was running out.

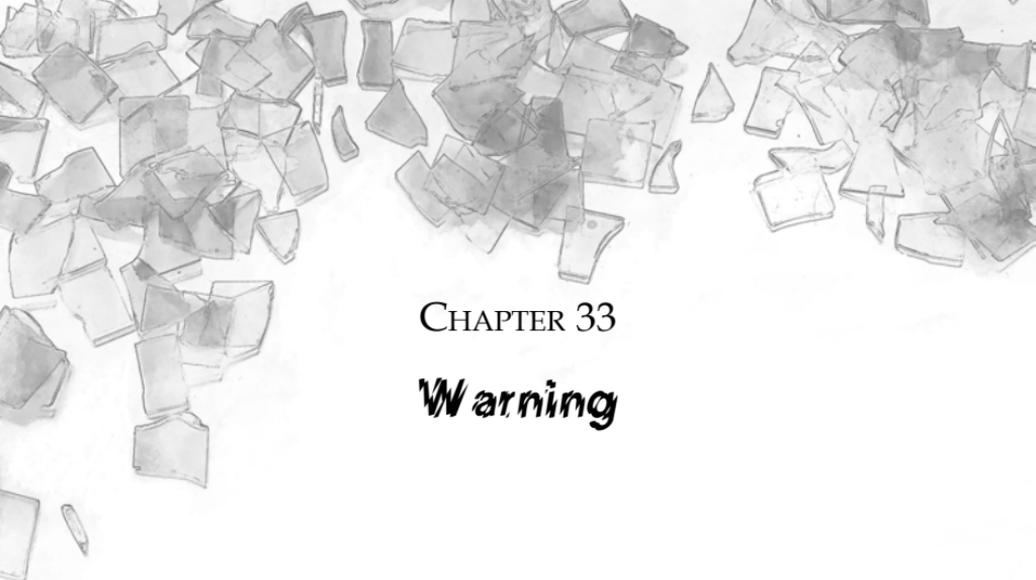
He'd end just like in his dream.

A quiet sob shook him as he realized that he would die *exactly* like in his dream. Alone and terrified, with a mass of strangers staring at him. Perhaps some of them would have pity with him – he probably looked miserable enough to soften a heart or two. People were like that, sometimes. But none of them would truly care, would ever miss him. They'd go home and continue to live their lives, and his body would end up being ditched into some unmarked hole.

His neck still hurt. Damien couldn't swallow the lump in his throat. His whole life, and he wouldn't leave a single person behind who would mourn his death. A tear ran down his cheek as he closed his eyes. Perhaps it was better this way. At least in his death he wouldn't be able to hurt anyone else.

He leaned his head against the wall and waited for the end.





## CHAPTER 33

### **Warning**

Valadan's hand around the letter was trembling so hard, the writing began to swim in front of his eyes. Should it be swimming? Surely trembling should make it shake instead?

"Hey, are you all right?"

He waved the messenger off, trying to say something somewhere between 'I'm fine' and 'fuck off'. He didn't quite manage to. "I'm off," was what he said.

There was a short pause, an awkward one.

"If you say so."

Another pause, then the messenger shrugged—Valadan saw it from the corner of his eye, just as blurry as everything else—and left. Before the messenger's steps had fully faded, Valadan sank down to the ground, clutching the letter.

Fuck. For days he had waited for any kind of news from the capital. He hadn't even managed to return to Caldeia, had waited for a portal to Dragon's Reach instead. He had known he couldn't be there to watch his big brother die. He had always been a coward, so this was nothing new. Perhaps he could have managed to, if he would have thought Damien wanted him there. Damien sure as fuck *wouldn't* have wanted him there, though.

So he had waited for a message, telling him it was over. Now he had received a message. Fuck, he didn't know what to think. He couldn't think. He couldn't even read the letter a second time, because for some fucking reason everything was still blurry.

He still hadn't moved when his wife came looking for him. Sitting on the ground, his back to the wall, he didn't look up as she crouched down next to him. His tears had dried, then started again, then dried again. Now he was crying once more.

"What's wrong?"

Wordlessly, he handed her the letter. Fine, orderly handwriting. Probably one of the royal scribes, writing hundreds of those each day. A few seconds passed. She was a fast reader.

Josephine let the letter sink. "Oh no."

Valadan didn't look up, didn't want to meet her gaze. He wasn't sure what he was more afraid of; what he might find in her expression, or what she might see in his.

"Are you worried?" she asked

Worried? Right. Damien had threatened to kill him. To take everything from him. He had told Josephine. Of course he had, because *she* was everything to him. She and Christian, sleeping soundly inside the house.

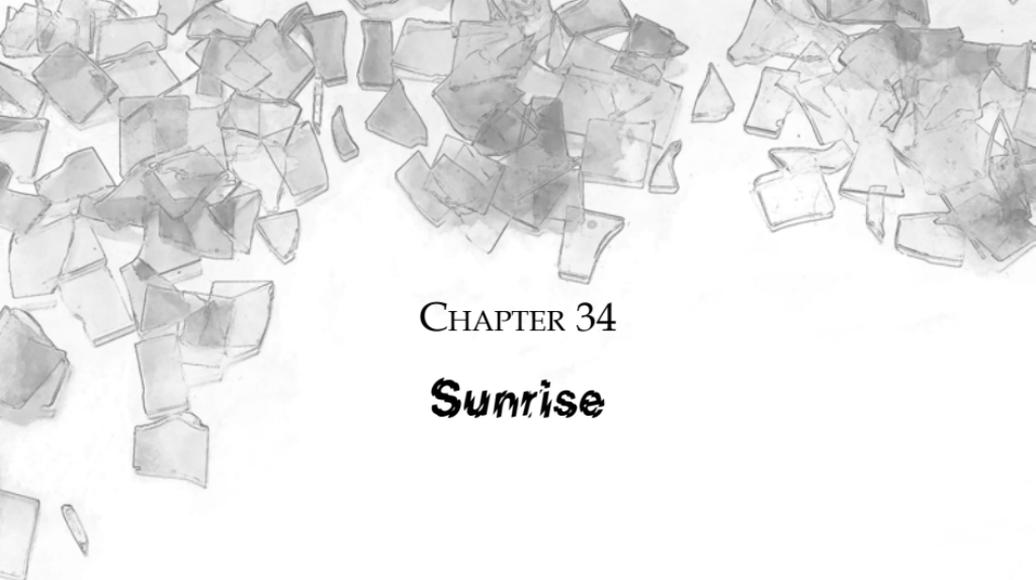
"I don't know." A rush of guilt made fresh tears well up and he let his head sink back against the wall. Fuck. He hadn't been worried. For one horrible, wonderful moment he had been relieved. He should be worried, should be out of his mind, trying to protect his family. But Damien was his family, too, and he had never wanted him to die.

Josephine sat down next to him, wrapping her arm around him. "It's gonna be okay," she whispered, holding him. "Don't worry. They'll find him."

Valadan hoped they wouldn't.

# *Interlude*

Dragon's Reach



## CHAPTER 34

### **Sunrise**

“We need to go.”

Damien stared at the girl in front of him, at stormy blue eyes, and light brown hair bound into pigtails. Not a girl—a woman, even if she seemed so young, so innocent. Her face was familiar, but she looked at him as if he was a stranger.

“Come.”

She held out her hand for him to take. Damien stared at it, squeezing a muffled, pleading sound past the cloth stuffed into his mouth. Couldn’t she see that he couldn’t take it? Not with his hand chained to the wall above his head, his fingers long gone numb. He pulled against the chain, whimpering quietly as the shackle dug deeper into his already raw wrist. It was no use.

Disappointment crossed her face and she slowly pulled her hand back.

*Don’t leave me here, please, please don’t leave me.*

Another desperate pull sent a wave of pain through Damien’s shoulder, bringing tears to his eyes; or he was already crying, the despair of seeing her take a step back, leaving him to his fate, too much to bear.

*Don’t go, don’t go please, I need you.*

He sobbed, gasping for air as it became harder and harder to breathe.

*Please, please save me.*

In a last, desperate attempt he reached out with his other arm. The hand was gone, nothing more than a black, rotting stump in its place, partially covered with the shredded, blood-soaked linen of what had once been his shirt. The pity on her face turned to disgust, and she took another step back. Behind her, the darkness of his cell shifted, and Damien's stomach turned.

*Run! Run, oh please run. Turn around turn around turn around, don't let him get you.*

She didn't understand his unintelligible noises, not noticing the shadow looming behind her. A hand wrapped around her waist, and another pressed down on her mouth. Damien could see the panic in her eyes. She kicked out at Gaston's legs, clawing at his hand, squirming and struggling. It was hopeless.

"I see you have company." As Gaston stepped out of the shadows, the cruel smile on his face became visible. "It's a shame. No one must know I was here." Something was wrong about the words Gaston spoke, a memory that didn't match. It made Damien's skin crawl as the man added, "I have to kill her."

His grip on her face was so strong, she seemed to have trouble breathing. Her movements became erratic and slow; her feet slipping over the floor, her hands weakly hitting Gaston's arm.

"Please, don't. Don't hurt her." At the sound of Damien's voice, her gaze found his. The terror in her eyes squeezed his chest as he choked out, "You have me. Please. Hurt me, kill me, do whatever you want, but please, let her go."

"She means that much to you, huh?" Gaston shoved her closer; so close Damien could have touched her, if only his

arm was still there. "It's time you see how it is to watch someone you love die, unable to do anything about it."

At those words, her eyes widened in horror, but she seemed to be too weak to struggle already. Her hands sank down as her chest desperately tried to expand, to suck in air that wouldn't come.

"Please," Damien whispered. "She's innocent."

"Has that ever stopped you?" Gaston asked as he kicked at her legs, forcing her to her knees. He crouched down, pressing one knee against her back while pulling her head back. "My cousin," he hissed, roughly tearing the fabric of her shirt apart, "was innocent, too."

Damien sobbed, looking into her tear-filled eyes, wide in fear. He'd do anything to save her, anything, but there was nothing he could do. Nothing to get that hand off her face, slowly suffocating her. Nothing to prevent Gaston from ripping off the last shreds of her shirt. Nothing to stop him from dragging a knife over her exposed skin, not breaking it yet, but making her shudder all the same.

"I never hurt him!" Damien shouted. He knew it wouldn't work, but he had to try anyway. "It wasn't me. It wasn't *me!*"

Gaston ignored him. The knife pressed down a bit harder each time, drawing thin, red lines first, then a single drop of blood. Damien could only watch, tears welling in his eyes, each muffled cry, each attempt to flinch away from the blade like a stab through his own heart. He tried to get up, as if that could help him to somehow reach her, but his legs were as numb as his hand, not obeying his will.

Damien gave up, sinking against the wall, his whole weight resting on the shackle around his wrist. Blood ran down his arm again, fresh crimson lines next to older, dried ones.

"It wasn't me... please. Stop. It... it wasn't..."

His desperate cries fell on deaf ears. Gaston didn't even

pause, didn't look as if he had heard him at all. The knife cut deep now, blood running down her body, slowly staining her skirt. Behind his hand, she cried out every time he cut her, followed by heart-wrenching sobs she didn't quite have the breath for.

"Please stop. Please. You're killing her, you're killing her."

"This won't kill her."

Gaston raised the knife, moving his fingers aside so he could cut open her cheek. The blood mixed with her tears, staining his hand, dripping pale red off her chin. Damien could see the bone beneath her flesh and panic in her eyes. Her pulse was hammering, visible at the side of her strained neck as Gaston pulled her head so far towards him her back arched.

"Or this."

He trailed the knife down her throat, pressing it against her skin as she swallowed. Drawing a single drop of blood, then another, while Damien cried at the look of pure terror in her eyes. When the blade dug in deeper, she raised her right arm in a desperate attempt to push it away. Gaston made an unwilling noise, catching her hand effortlessly, bending it backwards.

New tears welled in her eyes as the pressure increased, her eyes pleading where his hand over her mouth prevented her from speaking. It didn't stop him. If anything, it made him grin as he slammed her arm down across his knee, snapping the bones in her wrist, then bending it further before finally letting go of her hand. Her whole body shook as her arm dropped to hang uselessly at her side.

"Or this."

As if nothing had happened, Gaston set the knife on her left collarbone, slowly cutting along it. When he had reached the middle of her chest, he paused for a moment, twisting the knife—and then dragged down, splitting the skin from her

breasts to her navel. Her muffled screams were almost hysterical now, using up what little breath she managed to take.

“But this will.”

Without hesitation, he rammed the blade into her stomach. Damien screamed, throwing himself forward. When the chain on the floor held him back, almost yanking his shoulder out of its socket, he sank to the ground with a strangled sob.

Crying, he dug his fingers into the stone, trying to get up, then shoving himself forward when he failed. In his despair, he tried to reach for her with his stump, ignoring the pain as his rotting flesh scraped over the floor.

Gaston laughed, pulling her backwards, just out of Damien’s reach. While her body convulsed around the blade, he held it there, the hilt pressed against her skin. He let go of her mouth just long enough for her to scream, only to press down again harder than before. His fingernails dug into her skin, and into the cut on her cheek, while his hand covered her nose. She struggled against it, then froze when her movement pushed against the blade. Way too soon, the panic of not being able to breathe took over and she resumed fighting to break free, widening the wound in her stomach.

Only when her eyes started to roll back did Gaston lift his hand. It wasn’t enough for her to regain her strength, to fight; just enough to stay conscious. He let go of her face, to let his hand wander over her body. Prodding and pinching her skin, digging his fingers into the cuts, anything to make her squirm around the blade.

Every so often, Gaston raised his hand to her face again, covering mouth and nose until she couldn’t help but struggle. When she grew too weak, he let go, moving the knife instead; shoving it further in, wriggling it, twisting it. Damien could do nothing to help her, nothing to stop him. He had given up on begging, trembling from the exhaustion of pulling against the chain. Wincing at every pained noise she made, at every

shiver running through her body, he felt like his heart was slowly turning to ice, burning in his chest.

Until she didn't react at all anymore; not to the knife, twisting once more, nor to the hand, roughly grabbing her breast. Even as Gaston let go of her mouth, she made no more noise, other than the ragged breath her body drew on its own.

Damien cried, the floor beneath his cheek wet with his tears. He looked up at her, at her vacant expression and her mangled body, and at the blood, pulsing out of the wound with each of her heartbeats. Meeting his gaze, a twisted smile on his lips, Gaston slowly pulled the knife out and let go of her.

She fell to the side, without trying to catch herself, or even any indication that she noticed how her head slammed against the stone floor. Her gaze seemed to go right through Damien, her eyes unfocused and dark. Her face was covered in blood; her right cheek where the deep cut gaped, her left where Gaston's fingers had smeared the blood. Even though her lips moved weakly, no sound made it out. Damien still recognized the 'help me', while she used the last of her strength to push her left hand towards him.

He pulled against the chain, ignoring the pain as his wrist ground against the metal. He had to reach her. Nothing else mattered. Pressing his shoulder, his hip, his temple on the floor, dragging himself towards her, her fingertips almost touched him when someone reached for her hand.

Damien blinked the tears away to see Ed crouching over her. Pinning her down with one knee on her lower back, he placed the other on her arm, locking it in place. Then he grabbed her finger, the smallest one. He bent it to the side, caressing it before positioning his knife at the first joint.

"Don't. Don't don't don't, Ed, *please*." Damien's breaths came too quickly, leaving him lightheaded as the floor pressed against his chest. "Please. Let her go."

"You know the rules." The tone of Ed's voice was as dangerous and cruel as always. "You do it, or I will."

Damien stared at him, uncomprehending. He couldn't do it. Ed must *know* that he couldn't, not with the morlit so horribly cold against his skin.

If he knew, he didn't care.

When the blade cut through her finger, she screamed, but it was a broken, choked scream. Her feet scraped over the floor, while the knee on her back held her down. Blood dripped off her lips, forming clumps in the sand beneath her cut cheek as her body convulsed once more.

"You know how to stop this," Ed said, placing the blade on the next finger.

Desperately, Damien reached for his magic. There was nothing. Not even the burn of the metal, just emptiness. He sobbed, inhaling dust with the next breath, making him choke and cough.

*I can't. I can't I can't I can't please stop.*

Ed didn't stop. She cried out as the knife pressed down, severing half of her ring finger. The rest of her fingers curled into the sand, but Ed grabbed her middle finger, placing it flat on the ground. Stroking along it, first with his own finger, then with the tip of his knife, until she was trembling in anticipation, whimpering quietly. When he cut it off, her scream was barely more than a pained sob, her eyes burning into Damien, silently begging him for help.

"Only you can stop this, Nightmare."

Damien wanted to close his eyes. He couldn't. He couldn't leave her alone like this. He knew it was hopeless, but he reached for his magic again. The tiniest sliver would have been enough, if not to save her, then at least to take away her pain. He found nothing.

Crushed by the knowledge that there was nothing he could do, he whispered, "I can't, I can't. I'm so sorry. I can't."

When Ed cut off half of her index finger, only bubbling blood left her lips. Her body twitched under his knees, but there was no strength left behind her movements, and no will.

The last cut, removing her thumb, left her silent, her broken eyes staring straight ahead.

"Useless," Ed said as he lifted his knee, and Gaston said as he got up, shoving her, rolling her towards Damien.

Her limp body slumped against him, face down. Using his stump and his right leg to pull her even closer, he managed to turn her. Her head lolled to the side, eyes open and unmoving, half dried blood all over her face. He wasn't sure if she was still breathing.

When Gaston stepped closer, Damien propped himself over her lifeless body. Protecting her, as if there was anything left to protect.

"A shame you attacked this poor innocent thing," Gaston said, walking around Damien, stopping behind him. "A shame I came too late to save her."

Damien's hand was pried open and something placed in it. His fingers closed around it, finding smooth wood, slick with blood. The knife. He knew it without seeing it.

He pulled against the chain, but his arm was stretched to its limit already, not allowing him to make any use of it. Before he could consider letting go of her, to get closer to the chain and regain some room to move, Gaston stomped down on his hand.

Damien screamed, curling up around her in his instinctive attempt to get away from the pain. Gaston's boot came down, again and again and again, crushing his bones, tearing his flesh apart.

By the time he stopped, it felt like all that was left of his hand was a bloody mush. Seconds might have passed, or minutes; the pain had washed away any clear thought, and

Damien was sure he had thrown up. He couldn't remember it. There was only the bitter taste on his lips, and the smell of blood, so much blood.

That, and the awareness that in that time, she hadn't moved at all.

No wince as his weight pressed down on her wounds, no sound, nothing. He tried to listen for her breaths, her heart-beat, anything, but his own sobs were too loud in his ears.

Lacking the strength to lift himself up, to look at her, he could only bed his head on her chest. It didn't move. The cut skin under his cheek felt wrong, the blood disgusting and slick, but he couldn't let go of her. He couldn't.

"Look at what you've done."

When a kick hit his back, Damien barely had the breath to scream. He wrapped his horrible arm around her, trying desperately to hold her close, to shield her. He couldn't let Gaston near her again.

"You killed her."

Somewhere under what was left of his hand was the knife, stained with both their blood now. He hadn't been holding it, hadn't cut her, but she was still dead because of him.

"It's all your fault."

Gaston kicked him again and again; his side and his legs and his head. Breaking one rib after another, shattering his knee, splitting the skin on his temple. Damien didn't have the strength left to scream. His pain didn't matter; not anymore.

"You deserve this."

He couldn't see. Everything was red and black. Like the blood on his face, on his lips, her blood and his. Like his rotting flesh and her eyes, dull and lifeless, burned into his memory.

"You deserve this."

He couldn't *breathe*, only searing pain where his lungs should be. They refused to work, refused to move against the

stabbing in his side. Perhaps he would finally die. He was ready for it. He only wished he could have saved her.

“Wake up.”

The boot crushed his shoulder, leaving the rest of his arm as useless as his shattered hand was. Blood trickled down his side. A ridiculous sensation, almost like a soft touch, a trace of warmth and gentleness in all this agony.

“Wake up!”

He was shoved and grabbed, pain exploding in his head and shoulder. There was no breath left in him to scream or cry. Why did Gaston even care? Just to hurt him some more. Damien wouldn’t do him that favor, not when the end was finally so close.

“Wake up. Damien, please wake up.”

He didn’t want to wake up. Never again. Even if waking up wouldn’t mean more pain, he didn’t want to face a world without her; a world where she had died because of him.

“Please, you need to wake up.”

It was her voice, though. It couldn’t be her voice, but it was. A desperate spark of hope made his heart beat faster. Even if she was dead, if it was only her memory haunting him, he couldn’t deny her this wish.

“Please...”

Something about her tone, almost-but-not-quite crying, finally managed to snap him out of it. He opened his eyes, expecting to see the dungeon. Instead, he saw a room; moonlight falling through the open window, illuminating a bed and a table and a chair and... Merridy.

It took him a moment to realize that he was sitting on the floor, his back against the wall, and she was kneeling in front of him. She wasn’t close enough for him to touch her. Before he could reach for her, to beg her to come closer and hold him, his gaze fell on her face.

It was covered in blood. Damien sobbed, willing himself

to wake up, while knowing deep down that he was already awake, that this was real. She was hurt, she was dying, because of *him*. He pressed himself into the corner, shaking and freezing, his vision swimming with fresh tears.

Merridy came closer, her face mostly in the shadows, but he still could see the gaping wound, leaving her cheekbones exposed. He should look away, but he couldn't; if he did, he'd find her fingers cut off, her chest sliced open, and the wound in her stomach, letting her slowly bleed out.

He would see her die, all over again, and again, and again, and he couldn't take it, he couldn't take it.

"Damien, please, it's me. Merry. It was just a dream. You're safe."

It wasn't a dream though, not anymore. He stared at the blood, glistening on her lips as she spoke. She raised her hand to her lip, wincing as she touched it, then flinching.

"Fuck," she mumbled, frantically wiping her sleeve over her face. "Fuck. Damien?"

She looked at him, her storm-gray eyes shimmering so unlike the dull ones in his dream; or was he still dreaming? There was so much blood, despite her attempt to wipe it away, and more welled up every second.

"Damien, can... can you close your eyes for me? Please?"

The moment he closed his eyes, he was back in the dungeon, and back in the steppes, and bound and bleeding and dying. He owed it to her though, for all he had done. He sobbed as Gaston reached for him, and Ed touched his face, and it was neither of them, because the touch was soft and warm and gentle. For a moment, he was nowhere, leaning desperately into the touch.

"Listen to me, please. We're safe. We're in Dragon's Reach, in our room. No one hurt you." She swallowed audibly, her fingers on his temples trembling. "No one hurt me. It was just a dream."

One hand stayed on his temple, moving towards his hair-line. The other followed his arm from his shoulder to his hand, closing around his fingers. The touch made Damien flinch, but she didn't let go; this once she didn't. Instead, she pressed her palm against his, interlacing her fingers with his. His fingers, not a bloody pulp; no shackle around his wrist as he lifted his hand to return her grasp.

With his eyes still closed, he felt everything so much more. How she inched her way towards him, her legs pressing against his thighs. How the pressure on his hand increased as she steadied herself to lean against him. The soft touch on his temple, and the smell of blood, and the wooden panels at his back, and her head under his chin.

"Everything is all right."

Her voice was muffled, her words tickling his chest as she spoke. The smell of blood was still there, but the lavender scent of her soap was stronger now. Damien buried his face in her hair, taking a deep breath, even though he hated that his tears would drip into it.

They sat like this for a while. Long enough for his racing heartbeat to calm down, for him to dare open his eyes. The room was warm and familiar and comforting. Not as warm and familiar and comforting as Merridy's weight on him, the slow and steady rise and fall of her chest. She was breathing, and she was alive, and this, this was real.

"Are you back with me?" she asked after a while.

Damien nodded, weakly pressing her hand, not trusting his voice.

"Okay. I'll get you some water."

Only when he heard her words did Damien realize how much his throat hurt. Perhaps he had been screaming for real. He only hoped he hadn't disturbed any of the other patrons, but then, if he had, they'd probably have come knocking at their door by now.

He noticed that Merridy was careful not to face him. Not as she pushed herself up, not as she let go of his hand, not as she walked to the table. She poured some water into his cup, and some in the washing bowl. When she dipped her hands into the bowl, cupping a bit of water and splashing it in her face, the drops falling down were dark. She scrubbed her face, leaving dark stains on her fingers, and on the towel she picked up to dry herself.

Panic spiked again. The blood was real, it was *real*. But when she turned around, the blood was gone, and there was no cut, just the red, swollen skin around her split lip. Which still meant that she was hurt, that *he* had hurt her.

"Merry," he croaked, pressing himself against the wall as if he could vanish into it.

"Hey. It's fine." She picked up the cup and hurried back to him, sitting down in front of him. "It's nothing. Here."

When she lifted the cup to his lips, he drank. The water was soothing and cool and so real, he clung to the feeling as it ran down his throat. As soon as the cup was empty, she put it aside, reaching for his hand once more. Her other hand, she raised to wipe some stray drops off his chin, then let her fingers rest there, brushing over his stubble of a beard.

Always those small touches. Damien wondered if she even knew how much he needed them, how much they meant to him. Perhaps she knew. She kept watching him, as if she was looking for something in his expression. The gods only knew if she found it.

"Let's go to the beach," she said. Her voice was unsure, but it wasn't a question. He wouldn't have to decide, but he knew he could decline. He didn't.

She got up, still holding his hand, pulling him to his feet as well. When she took a step back, he tightened his grip around her fingers.

*Please don't let go.*

He managed to hold back the words, but a quiet, desperate noise slipped out. He looked away, trying to avoid her gaze, afraid of what he'd find in there.

"I'm here," she whispered, crossing the distance between them. "It's all right. Come."

This time she pulled him with her, her fingers firmly closed around his. She nudged a pair of wooden slippers closer, the ones they usually used when going to the toilets at night. Damien slipped his feet in without letting go of her hand.

Merridy found her own shoes, grabbing a blanket off the bed and the room key off the table before leading him to the door. He let her guide him, hold him, anchor him in this reality. It was dark in the hallway, but after so many months, they both knew every corner, every step. Side by side they walked down the stairs and into the backyard, illuminated by pale moonlight.

It was late; or early. Not quite morning yet, but the night was already fading, the faintest hint of light at the horizon. The air smelled a bit of fish and a bit of salt, and it was nowhere close to the stench of his dungeon cell. The city wasn't yet awake, not here. Their footsteps were the loudest noise, a quiet clattering on the cobblestone, then an even quieter crunching noise when they left the city behind and reached the beach.

Merridy led him along their usual path, towards the cliff, to a spot with soft sand and tufts of grass. She only let go of his hand to spread the blanket on the ground, pulling him down with her as soon as she was done.

Damien settled on the blanket, his legs crossed, his hand in hers. She shuffled closer, leaning against him, looking out across the ocean. He followed her gaze, taking in the view. It was calm and peaceful, soft moonlight glistening on the waves lapping at the shore. This was his life now. The beautiful sea, and crowded marketplaces, and a cozy inn room.

And Merridy at his side, because she *had* saved him.

When she leaned her head against his chest, he let go of her hand, to wrap his arm around her instead. Holding her, but this time she was alive, huddling up to him. The rushing of the waves and the smell of salt and seaweed helped him to push back the images, but some parts of the nightmare still lingered.

*Watch someone you love die.*

Did he love her? He never thought he could love, but right now, he knew he'd rather die than ever see her get hurt. Holding her like this filled him with a strange warmth, unlike any he'd ever known. Her touch, her laugh, her voice made him feel alive. Not having her at his side left him feeling empty, like something was missing. Something he had never missed before, because he had only just found it, and now he couldn't imagine ever living without it again.

When Merridy twitched, the involuntary movement of someone almost falling asleep, it startled him out of his thoughts.

"Sorry..." she mumbled sleepily. She tried to sit up, but Damien pulled her close.

"It's all right. Sleep," he whispered.

Damien had no idea how long she had managed to sleep before his nightmare had woken her up. He was tired as well, but he wouldn't dare to go back to sleep anytime soon; not even with her next to him like that. But perhaps she could get a bit more rest. She surely deserved it.

Merridy mumbled something he couldn't make out, snuggling closer. Her hands were clenched into fists, clinging to his shirt, but her breaths were even and calm. They stayed even and calm as her body relaxed, and Damien made sure to keep holding her.

He didn't know where the tears were coming from. He wasn't sad, not at this moment. Lost in thought, he stared out

across the ocean, watching the seagulls wake up as the sun rose. The dark sky above had turned blue, gradually becoming paler towards the ocean. The last stars were fading quickly, the moon hidden behind the cliff at his back. Above the sea, the horizon was gleaming orange, almost on fire, turning golden, then white to meet the sky.

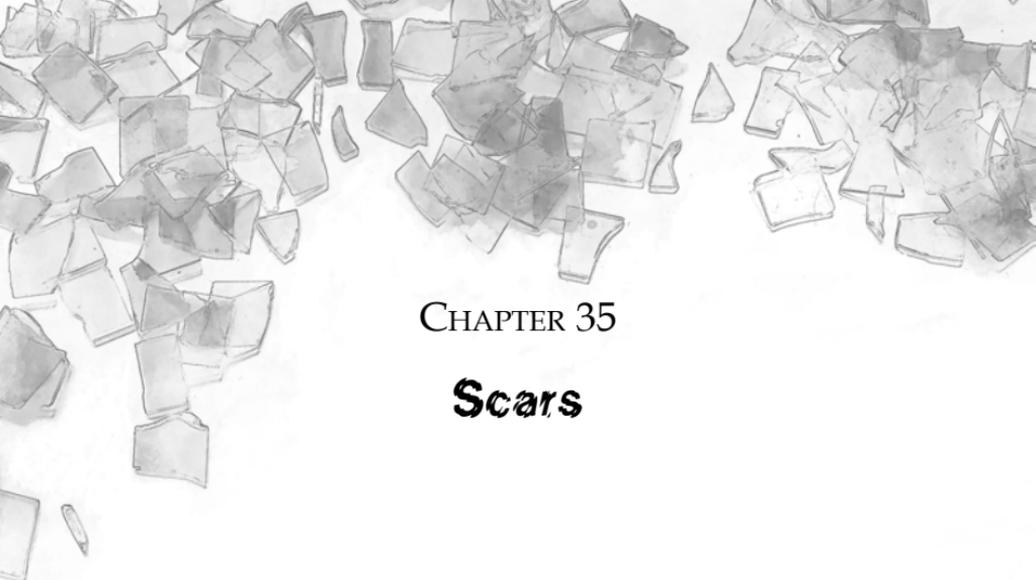
It was beautiful. Like so many sunrises before, and so many that were still to come. So many he had watched with her, and so many he would still watch with her. Perhaps he didn't have to figure out the details. Perhaps just knowing was enough. He leaned his head against hers, watching the golden streaks the rising sun painted on the crests of the waves.

*I love you*, he thought.

It felt right.

## *Part 3*

Nimrisé



## CHAPTER 35

### **Scars**

This, Valadan mused, was truly one of the most perfect days of his life. He stared up toward the sky: an endless blue, not a single cloud in sight. The sun had passed its zenith a while ago, was now casting long shadows. The air was so hot, it was glimmering above the fine sand of the beach, but above him a parasol made from light fabric shielded him from the brunt of the heat.

It was no weather to do anything but alternate between lying around on the blankets they had spread over the warm sand, or cool down in the sparkling waves of the sea. So that was exactly what he had been doing all day. Valadan currently toyed with the thought of going for another swim, but was too lazy still. Instead he listened to the laughter reaching his ears—Josephine and Merridy playing with Christian at the shore. He couldn't help but smile, the love he felt for his family warmer than the sun and the sand together. His family—all of them.

Valadan shifted to lie on his side, to watch his brother. Damien sat on the same blanket under the same parasol. He had taken his shirt off, but unlike Valadan, Damien had kept his pants on. It wasn't like he would go swimming

anyway. Not that Valadan could blame him for his dislike of the ocean. He couldn't swim well, and as far as Valadan knew, he hadn't tried since the unfortunate incident on the day of his arrival.

Something else was off, though. He seemed too small, arms wrapped around the legs he had tucked close to his chest. Arm, Valadan reminded himself. The other one was an illusion, nothing more. Sometimes it was slightly unnerving to watch Damien move it as if it was real. But if it helped him in some way to feel better, that was all that mattered.

He didn't seem to be feeling particularly well right now. He was staring straight ahead, his gaze lost somewhere between the sand at his feet and the horizon.

"Valadan?" he asked without moving.

There was something in his brother's voice that made Valadan's smile falter. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Damien ignored his question. "When they... you..." He broke off, not looking at him. On closer inspection, Valadan could see that his left hand was shaking. His right one wasn't. "When they thought you were me," Damien continued. "When they arrested you. Did they..." Finally, he looked up, a strange mix of sadness and fear on his face. "Did they... do. Something. Anything. Did they... hurt you?"

Valadan laughed. "I guess? They weren't exactly gentle." Something was wrong. He couldn't figure out what. He remembered a dislocated shoulder, courtesy of his attempt to resist the wrongful arrest—and a split lip, courtesy of voicing his opinion about the virtue of his attacker's mother. "I'm sure you know the deal," he continued, cursing himself as he saw Damien flinch. "Those fucking morlit shackles and a shove or two." He shrugged, trying to sound light. Well, perhaps it had been a few more shoves, the last of which had sent him stumbling face-first against a wall, but in the grand scheme of things, nothing too bad had happened to him.

The words didn't have the desired effect. Damien didn't seem to calm down. The fingers of his left hand were digging into his knee, pressed tightly against his chest, while his right arm hung forgotten at his side. Valadan was half surprised he even kept the illusion up. If only he could manage to figure out what was going on before he'd have talked himself into a hole he couldn't crawl out of.

"Why do you ask?" Slowly, understanding dawned. It twisted his stomach into knots. "Damien. Why do you ask? What did they do to you?"

Fuck. The way Damien flinched at these words sent a shiver down his spine. Fuck fuck fuck. "Hey. Talk to me." He tried to sound gentle, he really tried. He had no idea if it worked. It probably didn't. The mere thought that someone had hurt his brother made him want to punch things.

In any case, Damien didn't seem like he wanted to talk. He shook his head and braced himself against the ground, slowly getting up.

"Damien, please wait."

Valadan's hand darted forward, to grab his brother's wrist. Something changed. For a moment, reality didn't match what he was feeling. The skin beneath his fingers was smooth and uneven and somehow thick, and something *flickered*.

It hadn't been long enough to truly comprehend, but whatever he had seen in that split second, it made Valadan's skin crawl.

"Dami..."

His voice broke, but he didn't let go. Instead he tried to pull his brother down to him. "Please talk to me."

Damien was frozen for one more moment, then he collapsed back onto the blanket. As if all strength had left him he sat in front of Valadan, who now shifted to take a better look at him. Was there... fuck, there was a tear, running down Damien's cheek. His big brother was *crying*. Valadan

didn't dare to let go of his arm, as if there was still a risk of him jumping up and running away.

A few moments passed. Valadan could feel that Damien was trembling. He tried to find the right words, but his mind was blank. A part of him had started to figure out the truth, hidden somewhere between silence and deception. Then something flickered again, all too familiar, and the illusion vanished.

Valadan couldn't help himself, his gaze wandered lower. Yes, the arm was gone. He had expected that, even if seeing the crude scar on his brother's right shoulder made him swallow. What he hadn't expected were all the other scars. There were dozens of them; long and short, wide and thin. Cuts and burns must have littered every part of Damien's torso once, some leading around his ribs or down his arm. Where Valadan was holding his wrist, a thick scar had become visible. It was exactly where the shackle would have been. He let go so hurriedly as if he had burned himself on it.

"Fuck," he muttered, staring at the scars. So many. So, so many. Thinking about what had caused them... "Fuck." Valadan scrambled to the edge of the blanket, bending over, fighting to keep his breakfast down.

"I know it isn't a pretty sight."

Damien's words barely made it through the rushing of blood in his ears. He jerked his head up, wiping at his mouth with the back of his hand. What? "Fuck, no. That's not..."

The look on Damien's face broke his heart; or what was left of it. The illusion was back up, his skin as smooth as it had been, his right arm hanging loosely at his side.

Valadan wanted to assure him that it wasn't that bad. It would have been a lie. Not because of how they looked, from his time as a mercenary he was more than used to scars. It was the thought of what had happened to his brother that made him feel sick – that and the knowledge that it was his

fault. He had left Damien in the hands of these monsters. He had made them capture him, he had left him behind in this fucking cage, without water or medical treatment. At the thought Valadan felt like he might throw up again.

“Who did this to you?” he asked instead through clenched teeth.

Damien shrugged. It looked strange, because he forgot to let his right arm follow the motion. “Doesn’t matter,” he muttered tonelessly.

“Doesn’t matter?” Valadan’s voice had been louder than intended. “Of course it fucking matters! If I get my hands on this—” He shut his mouth with an angry growl, glancing hurriedly towards Merridy and Josephine. They were still playing near the water. Good. They didn’t need to hear this. “I’ll kill that son of a *mok*. Which one was it? Was it that goldilocks fucker?”

For the first time, there was another emotion on Damien’s face. Confusion. It faded as he shook his head. “Not him. None of them.” He shivered, making himself small again, wrapping his arm around his legs. “One of the guards. In Caldeia,” he whispered.

Well, that would make killing slightly harder. Not that it would stop Valadan with how furious he was. Somehow, he had always managed to tell himself that it couldn’t have been so bad if Damien had still managed to escape. Even when he had learned that Merridy had helped him, Valadan had held on to the belief that it had been a glorious escape. Nothing about the broken man sitting in front of him was glorious.

“I’ll kill him,” Valadan muttered.

“Please don’t. Promise me. Promise me you’ll never look for him.” The urgency in Damien’s voice made Valadan’s skin crawl. “Promise me.”

Valadan looked at him, studying those purple eyes, wide in fear, and the lines on those oh so familiar features. There were

more of them than a six year difference in age should have caused. His anger could wait. He could always go chop some wood later or whatever, though chances stood good that he'd accidentally split the chopping block. Fuck, he didn't know why this was so important to Damien, but at this moment, he'd have promised him everything for the smallest chance of easing the pain he saw on his face.

"I promise."

Damien let out the tiniest sigh of relief, squeezing Valadan's heart. It didn't make sense. It couldn't be that Damien was in any way concerned for the monster who had done all this to him.

"Why?" he asked, against better judgment.

"You have a family. They need you. I— it's not worth it." Damien's voice was so quiet, Valadan had trouble understanding his words. It didn't help that he was staring at the ground as he said, "If anything happened to you. I couldn't live with it."

Valadan's breath caught in his chest. Fuck. "Dami... look at me. Look at me." When he did, when those endlessly sad eyes met his, Valadan couldn't hold back his own tears anymore. "You *are* my family. I promise, I won't do anything to put us into danger. But if anyone ever hurts you again, I *will* kill them. I don't fucking care if it's the queen herself. No one will *ever* touch you again."

The look of vulnerability and disbelief on his brother's face broke whatever was left of Valadan's heart. He crossed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around Damien. Perhaps, if he only held him tightly enough, he'd be able to believe that he'd never lose him again. Both times it had been him walking away. Knowing that didn't ease the desperation with which Valadan clung to his brother.

With each shaky breath he could feel all those fucking scars he knew he wouldn't see if he opened his eyes. He wanted to

beg for forgiveness. He didn't. It wouldn't be fair. He knew his brother had already forgiven him — he had known it from the moment he had realized Damien had come all the way to apologize to *him*. Those words would only serve to ease the weight on his shoulders, and Duriath knew he didn't deserve that. All those years his brother had protected him, and he had let him down the one time he had needed him. Never again.

“Dami, I—”

A shaking arm returned his embrace, and every chance of him finishing his sentence without sobbing vanished. Instead he pulled Damien closer. His brother sank into his arms, collapsing until his head was leaning against Valadan's chest. Valadan kept holding him, one arm around his shoulders, one at the back of his head. Eventually the trembling subsided and Damien relaxed.

Brushing his fingers through Damien's hair and feeling his breaths on his skin, Valadan eventually calmed down as well. There were so many words on his mind. He wanted to offer him to listen, if his brother could bear to talk about what had happened to him. He wanted to apologize for everything, from his behavior so many years ago to leaving him behind when he should have helped him. He wanted to tell him how much he had missed him, how glad he was that after all this time, Damien was back in his life — not only as brother, but as his friend, too.

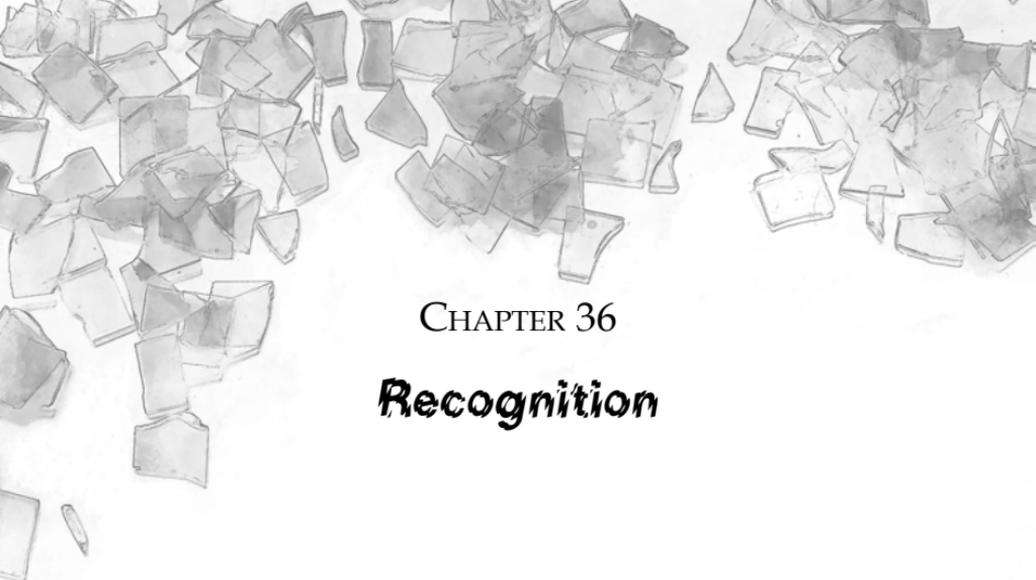
But right now, Valadan found that there were only three words that mattered.

“Dami, I love you.”

His brother shivered at those words, and the quiet, choked noise he made prompted Valadan to hold him even closer.

Never again. He'd never again let his big brother go.





## CHAPTER 36

# Recognition

Boring.

This job was boring. This town was boring. Its people were boring. Riordan had been here for almost a week and he could swear he had already seen everything Nimrisé had to offer on the second day. Which was about two taverns, three merchants and the marketplace.

Unfortunately, he would probably have to stay for at least another week—more if his employer decided to accept the position at this citadel of the Order of Fire. Leaving the marketplace behind, strolling along the shore, he wondered if his services would even still be needed.

For the last two years, he had followed this strange little rat man around as he gathered plants in all corners of the world. Originally hired for his sword, to keep him safe, Riordan had quickly figured out that the better way to do that was to not let him talk himself into trouble. Whoever handed out manners at birth seemed to avoid nyvi in general, and this guy in particular. It was easy money, though, and while it wasn't the most glorious job, it was a decent one.

Riordan slowed his steps as he saw someone standing near the water, looking towards the horizon. Watching the ocean,

which was calm today, or perhaps the sun, which wouldn't set for another hour. What a boring thing to do. And yet, the man seemed happy. Riordan couldn't help but smile a bit. Then he froze.

He knew that face. The man looked different now, with his hair no longer reaching below his shoulders and his beard trimmed, but it was undeniably him. Wearing clean clothes, not covered in blood and dust, surely did its part to make him look different, too.

Riordan drew his sword without even thinking about it. The familiar weight in his hand reassured him as he called out, "Hey. Nightmare!"

The man froze. Then, ever so slowly, he turned around, his arms strangely stiff at his sides. Riordan could see the purple glow of his eyes and swallowed. Fuck. He had forgotten about the man's chaos magic. He didn't know if he needed direct contact to use it. Only one way to find out. There was no way back now.

"On your knees," he commanded. "I arrest you in the name of her majesty, Queen Estelle."

Not that he had the authority to do that, but that barely mattered. He couldn't let a criminal—a traitor—like this nightmare get away. But he'd have to get close to arrest him, and he didn't have anything to even tie his hands, let alone some morlit to protect himself. Fuck.

"Jonathan!"

Someone called out behind him, then attempted to run past Riordan. He reached out with his free hand, grabbing the young woman around the waist, holding her back. Trying to keep his focus on the man, he didn't see much of her; just a mass of light brown hair, moving as she tried to break free of his grip. Riordan closed his hand around her wrist, pulling her towards him.

"Don't. He's dangerous."

Something didn't add up. She probably knew him, if both were living here. Nimrisé was a small town. Still, he couldn't let her get close, the Nightmare might be desperate enough to take her as hostage, and she surely had no idea how dangerous he was.

"Please don't hurt her."

Those words were... not what he had expected. Riordan could only stare as the man sank to his knees, crying. His hands resting on his thighs were trembling. Hands. That also didn't add up. He... that was the right man, wasn't it? Fuck, he had reacted to that damn nickname. It couldn't be the other brother. Riordan hadn't spent much time with him, but his whole demeanor had been different.

"Please. Please, let her go." The man's voice was shaking. "Take me, but let her go."

Riordan's hand holding the sword wavered. This was wrong. The woman stopped struggling for one moment—then pain exploded between his legs. Gasping for breath, bending over forward, he couldn't stop her from breaking free of him. He tightened his grip around the sword hilt, afraid she'd try to take it from him, but she only ran.

"Fuck," he hissed.

When his gaze cleared and he managed to at least raise his head again, she was kneeling in front of the man. Her hands on his shoulders, on his face, spoke of clear concern. Then she stood up, turning around facing Riordan.

"Who are you?" she demanded to know.

"I'm—" he started to answer before stopping himself. He was asking the fucking questions. Her glare was enough to almost make him forget that it was him holding a weapon. "I'm the one asking the questions here," he saved his attempt, nodding into Damien's direction. "What do you have to do with this criminal?"

"He's my husband," she said, squinting at Riordan. "And

the only one behaving like a criminal here is you. Or is it normal now, attacking people who've done nothing but walk along the beach?"

Riordan let the sword sink, pointing it towards the ground, but not putting it away. "You don't know what a dangerous man he is," he said, but found himself sounding less sure now. This man really seemed anything but dangerous right now; on his knees, crying, looking smaller than her that way, even though she was rather petite.

"I'm sure I know him better than you do." There was no hint of doubt or hesitation as she spoke. "But I still don't know who *you* are."

This was ridiculous. He took a step forward, sword raised. "I am—" he started, but was interrupted once again.

"Please. Merry, don't. Don't." The Nightmare tried to pull her away, behind him, but she didn't budge. When his attempt remained unsuccessful, he turned towards Riordan, raising his left arm to put it between the woman and the blade, as if it could somehow protect her.

"Please, she has never harmed anyone. Don't hurt her."

"It's okay," she said, not looking away from Riordan for one second. Instead she shifted, so she was standing fully in front of the man. "I'm not letting him touch you."

Riordan stopped. He probably would have managed to overpower her, but... he couldn't. He couldn't hurt what seemed to be an innocent woman, and moreover, he couldn't hurt a man who was kneeling in front of him, begging him to spare her. He looked absolutely terrified. There was no other way to put it.

Memories flooded him unbidden; the man screaming as they had to hold him down, to cut off his ruined hand. Crying in this damn cage Riordan had put him in. Suffering the cruelty of the others, the mockery and the attempts to torment him even more.

Fuck. Three years had been enough time to banish those memories, to replace them with his image of a hardened criminal who somehow had managed to escape from the royal dungeons. But this was wrong. Riordan finally put his sword away.

He couldn't just let him go like that, though.

"Fine. Let's talk," he said, hoping his voice sounded steadier than he felt. It wasn't like he could stop them if they just walked away. Sure, he could take a portal and get one of the royal guards, but by the time he returned to Nimrisé, the two of them would long be gone.

"I wouldn't know what we have to talk about," the woman said, glaring him down. No longer facing the sword, she seemed to be even braver—not that she hadn't been brave before.

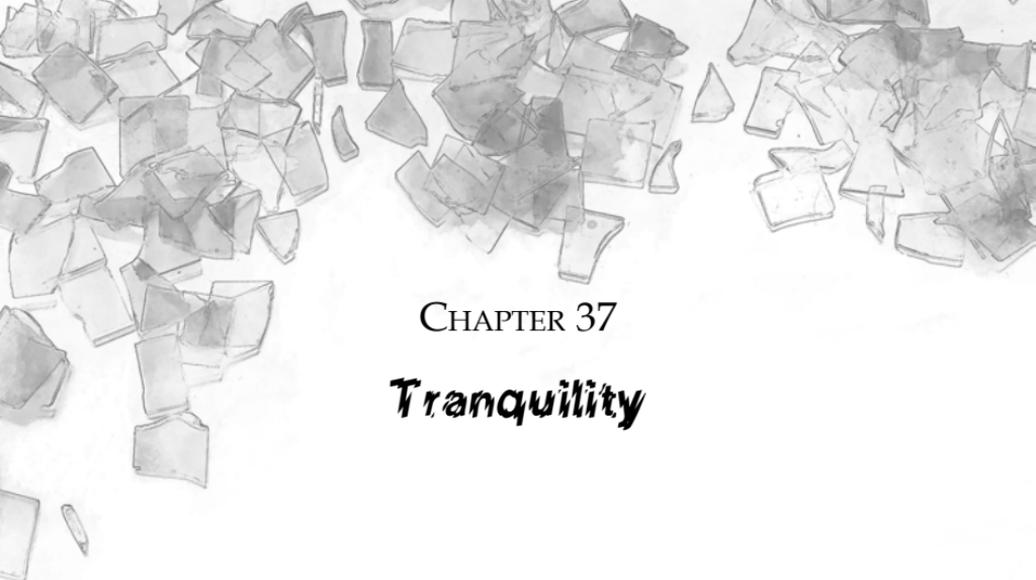
"You live here?" he asked, ignoring her words. While she stayed silent, the man behind her nodded weakly. "Then it's like this: You *will* talk to me, and convince me why I shouldn't arrest him and drag him back to the capital. Perhaps I can't arrest him on my own, and perhaps you'll be gone by the time I return with reinforcements, but then you'll lose your life here. Is it worth it just because you don't want to talk to me?"

He would have thought this would be an easy decision. It apparently wasn't. Instead of replying, she turned towards the man, perhaps asking him a silent question. Whatever it was the two of them exchanged, she turned her head towards Riordan, nodding curtly. "All right," she said, "but keep your fucking sword sheathed and stay away from him."

Then she helped the man up, holding on to his left hand when he was standing. Riordan's attention was drawn to the right arm, the right *hand*, hanging loosely at the man's side. It was a puzzle, but an unimportant one. Perhaps some kind of prosthesis. Much more pressing was the question of what

the fuck he was doing here, living in a small town like a good citizen, apparently having a *wife*.

A wife who looked like she'd rip out his throat the moment he'd made one wrong move. Well, that would be a fun talk.



## CHAPTER 37

### *Tranquility*

Following the two of them through the streets of Nimrisé was surreal at best. The woman had picked up a basket she had dropped when trying to run past him. In it Riordan had spotted a few blocks of soap and some colorful linens. She walked hand in hand with the man—the Nightmare—occasionally even greeting people they passed.

It looked so fucking normal, it was ridiculous.

Even more ridiculous was the house in front of which they stopped. An unremarkable little thing, with whitened walls and a dark roof and a garden surrounding it. There were bushels of lavender lining the path leading to the door, next to which a large window made it almost seem like it could be a shop. Behind the window, he saw colorful things; hanging from the ceiling, standing on little shelves, catching the last of the evening's light.

The two walked around the house, past more flowers, most of which he didn't know the names of. There were orderly fields of vegetables and some bushes, then they reached the back door, which wasn't locked.

The man walked in first, while the woman turned towards Riordan, giving him one last glare—at the same time making

sure he couldn't follow too closely. Riordan raised his hands, palms outwards. He'd play nice. For now.

When he was finally allowed to enter, the interior of the house looked every bit as fucking normal as he had expected. The door had led him into a kitchen, the countertops filled with copper pots, wooden ladles, cutting boards, dried herbs and more. A polished wooden floor with colorful rugs matched the polished wooden table with a similar tablecloth. The man had sat down on the bench at the wall. Keeping the woman's words in mind, Riordan walked to the chair furthest away from him, pulling it out.

"So... your name?" he asked as he sat down, still too baffled by everything to remember the tiniest bit of politeness.

"It's Damien," the man said.

Strange. That wasn't the name the woman had called.

"And hers?" Riordan asked, casting a glance in the woman's direction. She was leaning against the counter. The fact that she was standing next to a wooden block full of what probably were very large and very sharp knives surely was no coincidence.

"*She* can hear you." The woman glared at him. "*Her* name is Merridy. Would be nice if we knew yours, but I can just call you Asshole if you prefer that."

"Look. I'm—" Wait. He wasn't fucking sorry. It wasn't him who was a wanted criminal. Riordan buried his face in his hand, taking a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. This was so not going as he had expected. "My name is Riordan," he then said, each word carefully measured. "I assume you know who he is?"

Merridy didn't reply, but Damien nodded mutely. Riordan couldn't interpret the look on his face.

"So you know what he's done? How he made a name for himself among the rebels? That he was about to be tried for attempted murder and treason, and escaped?"

"I—" Merridy started, and this time it was her who was interrupted.

"She does know," Damien said, looking at her intently.

Okay, no, there was no way to put this nicely. "Then what the fuck is this? What are you doing here?" he blurted out. "Living like... like that!" He gestured broadly, encompassing the whole room. At least he managed to stop himself from saying 'like normal people', because the chances that he'd get acquainted with one of the knives weren't too bad. "How do you go from torturing people for the rebels to returning home to a wife and a nice home cooked meal?"

"It's him who cooks."

"What?" Riordan looked from her to Damien and back. She couldn't be serious. Not that he doubted that the man could cook, but... really, that was her problem with what he had said?

"Listen, Riordan." The way she said his name surely still sounded like Asshole. "I know what he has done. And I know how much it haunts him, how deeply he regrets it. If you think he needs to pay for what he's done... he has." There was a sudden sadness on her features she couldn't fully hide, no matter how hard she tried to keep her angry glare up. "If you think he's a danger, to anyone... he isn't. All we want is to live in peace, live like *that*." With her last words, she had imitated his earlier tone. "Are you going to let us?"

Fuck, he couldn't answer that question. He knew he should return to Caldeia and report Damien. He could even say he wouldn't, then do it anyway, hoping they'd still be here when the guards arrived. There was no way he'd be that much of an asshole, though.

Still, knowing what he *should* do... the last time it had led to him doubting his whole line of work. Perhaps this time he could doubt it before anyone came to harm. If he was honest, between the three of them, Damien looked like the

least dangerous one at this very moment. He remembered how it had felt, leaving him in the dungeon. How wrong. And Damien had paid for what he had done, at least with his hand. Even if it seemed to be still there, now resting on the table. The fingers were moving, mirroring the motions of the left hand. It was intriguing. There was time to figure it out later. Hopefully.

"I can't promise that." The way Merridy's gaze darkened made him raise his hands in a defensive gesture. "I'm not gonna do anything just yet. But before I make such promises, I have to understand. I have to truly believe it. Sorry."

Well fuck, now he had apologized after all. And for what? For making himself a traitor, too, by protecting both of them? It should feel wrong, but it didn't.

"Would you like to come over for dinner tomorrow?"

"Damien," Merridy hissed.

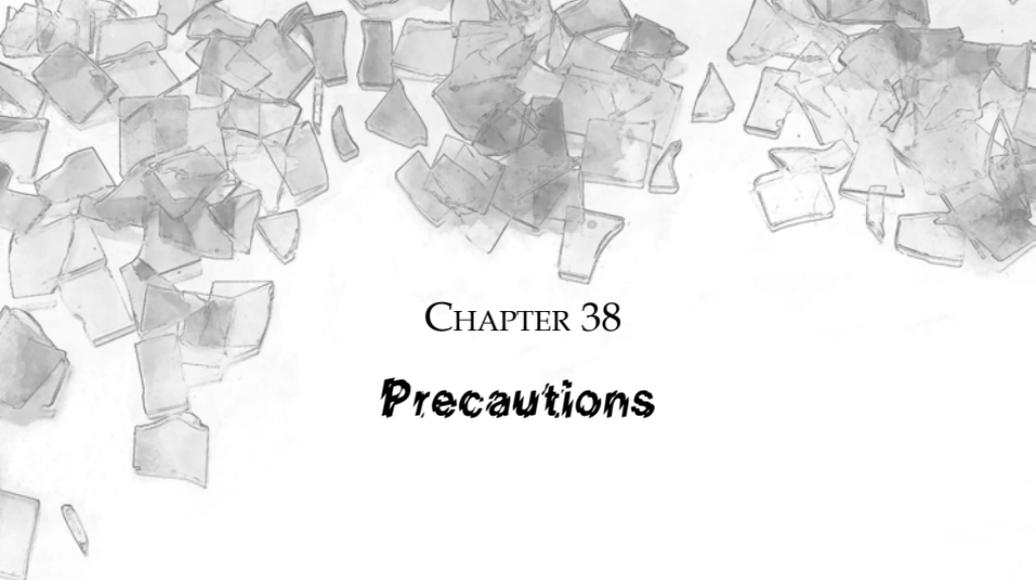
But Damien only sighed. "Might as well get it over with. Perhaps a nice steak can convince him to leave us alone."

"I don't eat meat," Riordan said without thinking. He expected a comment, or at least an eyeroll, for making demands half a second after he had pretty much invited himself, but all he got was a slight nod.

"You're cooking, right?" When Damien didn't reply, just furrowed his brows, Riordan gestured in Merridy's direction. "She'd probably poison me, then bury me under the lavender bushes."

Riordan thought he saw the hint of a smile on Damien's face. "Not under the lavender. She likes it too much."

The softness on his features as he looked in her direction. The tone of his voice when he spoke of her. The way he had tried to protect her. Riordan sighed. Back then, what he had done had felt wrong. Right now it felt right. He just hoped it wouldn't turn out to be a mistake.



## CHAPTER 38

# Precautions

Merridy scowled at the door as it fell shut behind this Riordan. What an asshole. She could still feel his grip around her. She should have kicked him harder. Her anger faded to worry when she looked at Damien. A minute ago, he had seemed calm, had almost smiled, but now he sat hunched over, his face buried in his hand.

“Hey...”

However harsh she had talked to Riordan, now her voice was soft and careful. As soft and careful as her touch as she put her left hand on Damien’s shoulder and reached for his face with her right. She nudged him to look up.

He was crying, just like he had been at the beach. The memory made Merridy shiver. The only times she had ever seen him like this before—so absolutely hopeless and terrified—was when he awoke from his nightmares. If only it was one. If only she could just hold Damien close and promise him that everything was all right, that it had been nothing but a dream.

Unfortunately, it was all too real.

“Do you think you can trust him?” she asked.

“What?”

“Do you trust him not to betray us right away?” Merridy clarified. “Do you think we need to leave? Now?” In her mind, she had already made a list of what they’d have to grab, how quickly they could get out of here.

“I... I don’t know.” Damien swallowed. “He was. Decent.” It seemed like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t. Instead he lowered his head, stared at the tablecloth. “I hope he won’t. I don’t want to leave,” he whispered.

The quiver in his voice broke Merridy’s heart. It wasn’t like she would be happy to leave; she loved this town, and this house, and her new life here. But it was him who would have to leave his brother behind – again. She had seen how much being close to Valadan after all those years had healed him.

“What do we do?” she asked, trying to keep at least her own voice steady.

“I don’t know. I’m – I’m sorry.” Damien’s remaining composure crumbled and his voice broke with a sob. “I don’t... it’s all my fault. I should never...”

“Hey. Don’t. Come, move.” She nudged Damien until he made room for her on the bench, then sat down next to him. “It’s gonna be okay.”

She wrapped her arms around him, pulling him closer until his head was leaning against her chest and she could run her fingers through his hair. They’d have a moment. Nimrisé had no guard to speak of, and so late in the day, a portal to Caldeia would require an emergency protocol. Which this guy probably wouldn’t use. And even if he did, it would still take a while for him to go to the capital, find someone who cared, return. Enough time to calm down and decide what to do next.

“It’s gonna be okay,” she whispered into Damien’s hair. “I’m not gonna let him take you.”

He shivered, and she felt how his tears soaked her shirt. Her own weren’t far behind. She’d do anything to keep him safe.

But for that, she'd have to figure out what the best course of action would be.

By the time Damien's tears had dried up, she had made a plan.

"Do you think that's really necessary?"

Merridy looked down at Damien from where she was balancing on one of the kitchen chairs, attempting to somehow put a bowl full of glass shards on top of the door frame.

"I sure hope it's not," she said. "But I'm not taking any risks."

Reasonably satisfied with her construction, she climbed down again and put the chair back in place. Similar bowls full of glass were above the front door and each window on the ground floor. It should make it impossible for anyone to enter the house without causing enough noise to wake an army up.

"That's everything, then. I think we should get some sleep."

Her gaze wandered back to Damien, taking in his hunched posture, his haunted expression. For the last hour of her preparations, he had followed her around like a ghost. Today's events must have left him no less exhausted than his nightmares did.

"Come." Merridy forced herself to smile as she reached for his hand, pulling him closer. "Let's go upstairs."

Damien nodded, following her as she led him up the stairs and into her room. Merridy touched the crystal lamp at the wall, then inspected the two backpacks next to the bed for what was surely the sixth time that day. One of them she had packed three years ago, the very moment they had moved in here. A bit of money, some clothes, the most important things to make it out there for a while. Enough to start a new life somewhere, should it be necessary. The second one she had

packed today, gathered some blankets and provisions and Damien's sword.

They wouldn't need it. It was just a precaution, she told herself. If only she could truly believe it. But she didn't, so they would sleep in their clothes tonight, so they'd be able to run the moment they would hear the sound of falling glass.

Merridy leaned the backpacks against the wall and sat down on the bed with a sigh. She was tired too, and there mere thought that this could be the last night in this very room was enough to almost bring tears to her eyes. Almost. She had to keep it together for Damien's sake.

"Come." She crawled under her blankets, holding them open for Damien to join her. When he did, she reached up to turn off the crystal lamp. At first she could see nothing in the sudden darkness, then the slightly brighter shape of her window became visible again. In front of it, shimmering in the light of a half full moon, were the glass shards Damien had gifted her. It felt like a lifetime ago now.

"Can you do the... the door thing?" she whispered.

Damien mumbled an agreement, and Merridy couldn't help but look in the direction of the door. She saw nothing. Outside the room, he would now have set up an illusion to hide the door, and create a fake one next to it. If it came to the worst, it would probably buy them little more than a few seconds, but those were a few seconds that could be saving their lives.

"I've done the door thing."

He sounded calmer now, and his hand he was wrapping around her wasn't trembling any longer. Merridy found herself relaxing as well. It was hard not to when she was lying in his arm, no matter what.

"You know, if the Silver Blades don't break down our door tonight," she started, then hesitated. Was it really appropriate to joke about it? But what else could they do, whatever

would happen, there was nothing they could change about it. "Then you'll have to cook for this guy tomorrow," she eventually decided to finish her thought.

"I didn't think that through, did I?" Damien's breath was warm on her skin, and his hand on her back eased the last bit of her tension. "Whatever the fuck am I supposed to cook?"

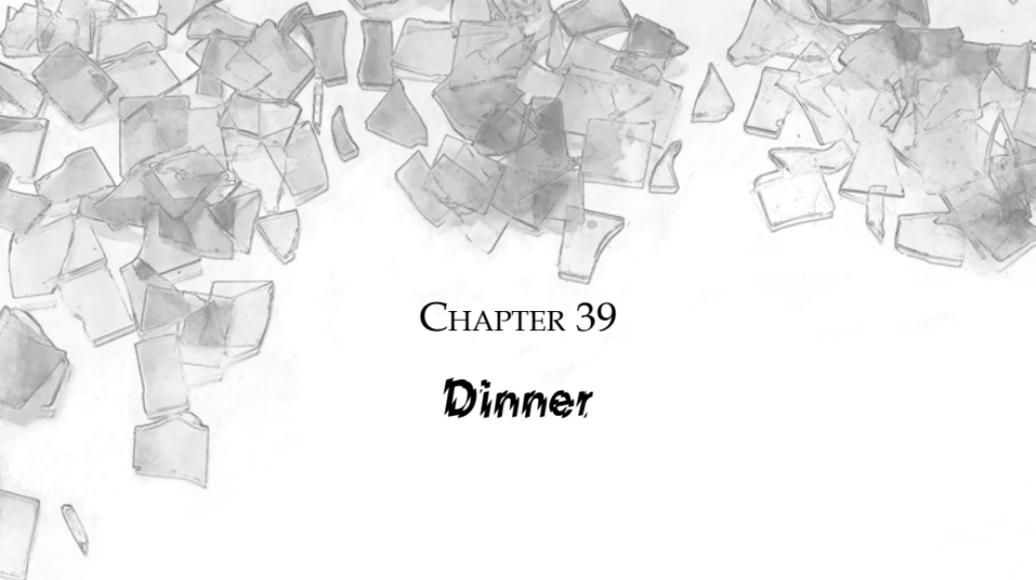
"Boil a cabbage and tell him that's gonna be his head if he talks," Merridy suggested. The thought of greeting that asshole with the delicious smell of an overcooked cabbage made her chuckle.

"Hey, I'm trying to get him to believe me." Damien's protest sounded light. "Can't tell him I can cook and then do that. No, I need to find something better. Delicious. Magnificent."

Merridy couldn't help but laugh, snuggling against him. He would, she was sure of it. "You really think he's coming for dinner?" she asked.

"I think he could have attacked us today, but he didn't. Perhaps..." He pulled her closer, almost clinging to her. When he spoke again, his voice had lost its lightness. "You know. He saw me as a person. When no one else did. Perhaps there is a chance. I have to take it."





## CHAPTER 39

### **Dinner**

This was ridiculous. Riordan paced in a circle at the far end of the road. At one point of his restless round, he could make out the fence surrounding the garden of the little house his legs refused to carry him to. He couldn't believe he was doing this. Having dinner with a wanted man, instead of handing him over to the authorities, like it was his duty.

Was it still his duty, though? All such obligations he had left behind when he had quit his service in Caldeia and joined the Order of Fire. Now it was his duty to protect their members, and preserve knowledge—neither of which was in any danger due to this Damien, that much was certain.

That didn't mean it wasn't the worst fucking idea he had ever had.

He had joked about this woman poisoning him, but after a restless night, it didn't seem that much of a joke to him. Riordan hadn't told anyone what he was doing, where he was going. Perhaps he should have. There was only one problem with that idea. Well, two problems, really. One problem was that there was no one who would give a fuck about where he was going. He'd only been here for a couple of days and knew no one. The second problem was that there really was

no innocuous way to put it.

"I'm meeting some friends for dinner tonight, but if I don't come back, try to find my dead body."

Too late he realized that he had mumbled these words under his breath. Luckily, he was alone. Another round, another glimpse at the fence, and Riordan forced himself to stop. This was pointless. Might as well get it over with. Nervously fidgeting with the side of his belt where the scabbard of his blade was missing—by the Seven, why had he decided on being *polite* and left it at home—he started to walk down the street.

Before following the path around the house, to reach the back door they had used on the previous day, he paused in front of the large window. Those colorful things behind it were intriguing and totally not a way to stall for a bit of time. There were bowls and lanterns on the shelves, and baubles and stars and birds hanging from the ceiling. Some of them were moving slightly, perhaps set in motion by whatever breeze might waft through a house people were living in. Where the light of the setting sun fell onto them, they sparkled and glittered, and it looked so fucking pretty and peaceful, Riordan could almost forget the dread in his stomach.

He remembered it when he started to walk, finally reaching the back door and raising his hand to knock. The door opened, and whatever he had expected, it wasn't... *that*.

The man standing in front of him, wearing a colorful apron dusted with flour, was the absolutely least threatening thing Riordan had ever seen.

"Come in," Damien said, taking a step aside.

Riordan did, stepping into the smell of freshly baked bread and roasted onions. It made his mouth water. If he was going to be poisoned, this would definitely be one of the better ways to go about it.

The woman was just finishing setting the table, and the

glance she cast in his direction... well he wouldn't go as far as to call it friendly, but at least she didn't seem to consider murdering him straight away anymore, which was definitely an improvement.

"Hello," Riordan said.

Very eloquent, he had to give himself that. But what the fuck was he supposed to say? Thanking them for the invitation would seem like mockery.

"Hello." Her posture was as stiff as her tone, but not openly hostile. She gestured at the chair he had sat in the previous day. "Have a seat."

Riordan followed her invitation, sitting down and staring at the plate in front of him. Pristine white with a fine blue pattern around the edge. He raised his head as the two started to walk back and forth between the counter and the table, placing down the food. A woven basket with slices of freshly baked bread, an earthen casserole dish, still steaming hot, and bowls of various sizes.

Damien placed down the last thing—a plate with a golden block of butter—and sat down on the bench.

"Wasn't sure if you only avoid meat, or animal products in general, so the butter is on the side, as is the sauce," he said, pointing to a second bowl.

"Only meat," Riordan replied, finding his voice strangely weak.

"Go ahead, help yourself, then." Damien gestured across the table.

Merridy had already grabbed a piece of bread and was now spreading butter on it, while Damien apparently waited for him to start. It would be awkward not to, so Riordan reached for the spoon in one of the bowls, piling some of the roast vegetables on his plate. Next he cut off a piece of the brown loaf in the casserole dish, eyeing it curiously as soon as he had maneuvered it next to the vegetables. He could make out

the shape of various legumes, glazed onions and little brown strips he couldn't identify.

Too curious to wait any longer, he picked one up with his fork, noticing from the corner of his eye how Damien started to serve both himself and Merridy. Riordan almost hated himself for the fleeting thought that it was reassuring, seeing him use the same utensils, taking from the same bowls. Finally raising the fork to his mouth, Riordan found the taste unfamiliar, but the texture of the little brown thing that of some kind of mushroom. Fuck, it was good. He took another bite, a proper fork full this time, before he remembered to take some of the rest of the food. The sauce, which—if the smell was any indication—contained cheese, as well as some potatoes and a slice of bread.

“This is really good.”

There was a small smile on Damien's face. The way it didn't quite reach his eyes made Riordan lower his head, look at his plate instead. For a while, the sound of silverware on dishes was the only thing that could be heard. Whatever questions he had brought with him, they were forgotten over how delicious everything was. This was absolutely not what he would have expected. He was used to picking scraps of meat out of a stew on the days where his traveling company was too lazy to fulfill even the tiniest request of putting it in later.

And here he was, sitting at the kitchen table of two people who had every reason to hate him, and yet they had made sure to cook specifically for him. He cast careful glances around, more thoroughly than the previous day, where he had been almost fully focused on the people in this room. Everything looked so cozy. There was no other way to put it. The curtains and the towels, colorful scraps of cloth. The polished, worn countertops, little bushels of dried herbs and clay pots with fresh ones. Somehow even the pile of split wood next to the oven managed to look perfectly placed.

This wasn't a trick, no careful deception. They really *did* live like that, in this sleepy town. Gardening and cooking and doing whatever else normal people who didn't live with a sword in hand did. He really couldn't ruin that, could he?

Still, he also couldn't forget who this man had been, what he had done. As likely as it seemed, he had to make absolutely sure the days of the Nightmare were over. Riordan wouldn't be able to live with himself if he let Damien go and later learned that he had hurt someone. He just had to figure out how to best accomplish that.

It was Damien who started to speak, while Riordan still tried to put his questions into words.

"So, what brings you here?"

"I'm with the Order of Fire now," Riordan said. "Going out with their researchers to keep them safe while they stick their noses where they don't belong. My current employer is in this citadel for a week or two, and I have little to do while he's stuck in meetings all day."

He could have used the chance to take a portal and spend a couple of days in any major city, but that had lost its appeal a while ago.

"Really? From squad leader to babysitting scholars?" Damien sounded amused. It almost seemed like a normal conversation between acquaintances; it was dangerously easy to believe it was.

"Wouldn't call it babysitting," Riordan hesitated for only one moment, then he dared to take another piece of the bean dish, as well as a second slice of bread. "Babies get in less trouble than those guys. And they grow out of it." He grinned.

"What kind of trouble?"

Damien leaned back as he asked this question, obviously done eating. Merridy's plate was empty as well, except for a slice of bread she was steadily ripping into smaller pieces.

"Oh, you have no idea. One time..." Riordan almost forgot to eat as he started to tell of some of the more hilarious ideas the little rat man had gotten into his head. From wandering into a bear cave to get his hands on a bunch of rare fungi, over taking flowers straight out of peoples' gardens, to making him climb trees to harvest some moss that was growing on the highest branches.

By the time he had finished telling of the one time the nyvi had tried to get a sample of a kalani, it had become dark outside the windows. The leftover food had long grown cold, and it was clear that this was an excellent moment to bid his farewell.

"Now we talked about me all evening," he said, wondering briefly if it had been on purpose. It hadn't seemed that way. "There were... some questions I had." Questions he wouldn't be able to ask right now, because he still hadn't figured out how to phrase them. "Would you mind if I come back tomorrow? Perhaps in the afternoon."

As much as he had enjoyed this dinner, it would be unfair to make them cater to him again. Now that he was reasonably sure he had not been poisoned, and he probably also wouldn't get stabbed in the back and buried under something that wasn't lavender, it might be easier for him to think about what he wanted to ask.

"Sure."

Riordan wasn't oblivious enough to not notice the strained tone of Damien's voice. He opted to ignore it. One more evening, and they'd be rid of him for good. That really wasn't too much to ask for his silence, was it?

Well, if Merridy's gaze was any indication, it was. Riordan decided to ignore it as well as he pushed his chair back to get up.

"Thank you. The food was excellent. I'll come by tomorrow sometime after noon."

He walked to the door, half expecting at least one of them to accompany him there, perhaps to make sure he'd actually leave. But neither got up. Merridy was sitting at the edge of her chair, leaning in Damien's direction. When Riordan turned around with a nod, to open the door, his gaze fell on a bowl of glass shards, sitting on a shelf next to it. How curious.

"Good night," he said, suddenly overly aware that he had overstayed his welcome. He avoided looking back, even as he turned around one last time to pull the door closed behind him.

Hands buried in his pockets and staring at the ground in front of his feet, he had a lot of things to think about on his way back to the citadel.



A watercolor illustration of numerous broken glass shards, some sharp and some rounded, scattered across the top of the page. The shards are rendered in various shades of grey and white, with soft, painterly edges. They are concentrated more towards the left and right sides, leaving a clear space for the text in the center.

## CHAPTER 40

### **Tears**

The sound of the closing door made Damien flinch. Merridy's hand, holding his under the table, pressed his fingers encouragingly. He tried his best to smile at her, but there was no way she didn't see how shaken he was.

"Let's clear the table," he said, his voice rough.

Merridy nodded, lingering with her hand on his shoulder for a moment before she let go to pick up the used plates. Damien shuffled out from behind the table, picking up the casserole dish. The leftovers would be a decent stew tomorrow. He scooped all together in the largest bowl, then placed the others next to the sink.

"Do you want me to help?"

"No, I'm... I need a moment." He had to keep himself busy until the numbness would subside, until he could think again. "Could you..." He swallowed. "Could you put up the bowls again?"

He didn't want to believe Riordan would betray them. No, he didn't even believe it, not truly. The fear that had gripped him was less specific than that. It had crept into his limbs and mind, leaving him feeling like he was a mere guest in his own body. It was an all too familiar feeling.

Some parts of the evening had seemed almost normal. This Riordan was a funny guy, and in another life the two of them might even have become friends. It was hard to forget the reason why he was here, though, no matter how many anecdotes he told from his time in the Order. Damien wasn't even sure what he had hoped for. To show the guy that he wasn't a threat. To be left alone after that. Really, that was all he asked for. Perhaps it was too much.

A part of him was convinced that it *was* too much, that he didn't deserve this way too perfect life he had built for himself here. Scrubbing the dishes was a nice distraction from these thoughts. It couldn't distract him from his emotions. At least the sink was already full of water, so the tears falling down into it didn't matter. Stolen time, that's what it was. He had always known it. A couple of years if he was lucky, until it all would catch up with him eventually. And now it was about to catch up, and it was too sudden, too much for him to handle.

Damien bit his tongue in the attempt to hold back a sob. The copper taste of blood mixed with the salt of his tears and a sudden wave of nausea washed over him. He barely managed to place the plate he was holding in the sink before his legs gave way under him.

Riordan's voice had been pleasant all evening. And yet it was the same voice that had shouted orders in the ambassador's camp. That had mocked him at first, then shown him a bit of compassion when he had been at his lowest. That had spoken to him as they had held him down, to cut off his hand. It had saved his life. That didn't make the memory any less horrifying.

Damien pressed himself against the counter, trying not to throw up. The taste of blood and tears and leather, and those fucking hands, all over him, holding him down while the pain and terror were tearing him apart. Hands that were holding

him *now*. Damien screamed, the sound feeling strange in his throat. He lashed out, hitting something soft, something hard, slamming his hand against it. It hurt, but not as much as the other one; the one that was gone, if only his fucking brain would finally believe it.

He pulled his legs closer, trying to curl up. It wouldn't save him. Nothing would, but he had to try. The hands were back, trying to pull him, to drag him out to where he'd be hurt. *Please stop. Please...* He wasn't sure if he managed to speak, if anyone would even listen.

They stopped. Let go of him. Damien sobbed, not trusting the peace, pressing himself against the counter. The voices were mocking him, calling this fucking nickname he hated so much. That's what he was, a nightmare. To others, to himself. That's what his fucking life was. An endless nightmare, with no way to get out of it. He knew it even without the voices, still relentlessly calling his name. His name. His real name.

"Damien. Hey. Are you back with me?"

Somehow he managed to look up, to find ruffled light brown hair and gray-blue eyes, shimmering with tears. She was kneeling in front of him, just out of reach of his... fuck.

"Merry." He swallowed, pressing his trembling hand against his chest, as if it could escape his control if he didn't. "Did I hit you?"

"No."

Damien was sure it was a lie. He almost choked on a sob, wanting to close his eyes, but not daring to. Right now, she was the only thing that kept him grounded. Like she always did. And if he couldn't touch her, didn't *dare* to touch her, he at least had to see her.

It was her who reached out to him. She still reached out to him, even though it was his fault that her life would fall apart once more. Even though he couldn't control himself, had hurt her. He didn't deserve it. He wasn't strong enough to resist it,

lifting his hand in her direction. Instead of taking it, she came closer, wrapping her arms around him. The lavender smell of her hair and the soft touch of her hands on his neck helped him to calm down.

Neither could do anything about the pain in his missing hand, though. Merridy's searching fingers found his shoulder, traced muscles cramped in the desperate attempt to escape the agony.

"Give me your hand," she whispered, leaning back a bit. When Damien raised his hand, to reach for her, she shook her head. "No. The other one."

Damien stared at her. He could see the exact moment his illusion came to life. He hated the way her eyes widened, the way she clenched her jaw. He hated that he still did this to her every time, because he couldn't deal with the pain.

Lowering his gaze, he saw his hand, looking like it felt. Charred and torn apart, ruined fingers clenched into a fist. It was horrible and disgusting, and yet she didn't hesitate to reach for it.

Damien knew it wasn't real, but he could feel her touch as she placed her left hand under his, stroking it with her right. Where her fingers brushed over his skin, it became new and whole, and where she coaxed his fingers to follow her, the pain subsided. Tears of relief ran down his face as it slowly became bearable, then turned into a faint burning he'd be able to all but ignore.

Merridy kept holding his hand, and Damien tried to move the illusion. How careful she was, following his motion, to not accidentally break the spell by ending up inside his fingers. He moved slowly, to make it easier for her. His shoulder relaxed as he raised his hand, placing his fingertips against hers. Almost feeling the touch.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Always," she replied.

Merridy held the position for a bit longer, smiling through the tears that had spilled from her eyes. Then she let her hand sink, watching his face as she did so, to see if he would be fine.

Damien nodded, not quite able to return the smile. Instead, he opened his arms, inviting her to come closer. When she did, when she bedded her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around his back, Damien finally dared to close his eyes.





## CHAPTER 41

### **Fury**

Four. Four fucking days. It was the fourth day, and this asshole had come back *again*, using open questions as an excuse. Well, if he had those questions, he should ask them already. But no, instead he talked about trivial things; about the town, and the Order, about food and travels and everything. Merriidy had no idea what his plan was, but whatever it was, her patience was running thin.

Right now she was lurking out of sight as Damien must have shown something to Riordan.

“No way, how do you even get something like this out here?” the hated voice asked. “Or do you use the portals? I mean, from what I’ve seen this town is all but dead.”

Damien laughed. “Just because the shops don’t have any signs, doesn’t mean they don’t exist. There’s no need for that here. Everyone knows everyone. A lot of artisans live here. Some use the portals, but most trade traditionally. The port isn’t big, but it’s not a long detour when taking the route between Dragon’s Reach and the Sentient Wilds.”

“So you’re saying this town has more to offer than two taverns and the marketplace?”

“Of course.”

Merridy listened as he described some of the local craftsmen. Really, his glass business had found an excellent place here, with visitors sometimes taking their time wandering the streets when their schedule in the Order allowed it.

He wasn't selling much yet, still learning how to work the tools with one hand, picking up the craft he had neglected for so long. He didn't need to. Between the remaining money from the sale of the Ebonheart family home and her job at the seamstress, they were able to live comfortably.

"Wait. Ours? Are you saying you have a shop, too?"

Merridy wasn't sure what exactly had led to Riordan asking that, as she had stopped paying attention a while ago. Now she listened again, half a smirk on her face as Damien said, "Sure. What did you think my front door was?"

Footsteps moved across the kitchen, into the narrow hallway, and Merridy hurriedly retreated to the top of the stairs, ducking out of sight.

The two men entered the workshop, the sound of exclamations muffled by the half closed door. She shuffled closer, hoping to understand some of the words. For all the trouble this Riordan guy brought into their house, at least his admiration for Damien's work seemed to be real.

"Feel free to look around. Just please don't touch anything. Many of these things are fragile, and some of the unfinished pieces are dangerous. I'll change, so I can start cooking."

With a sigh, Merridy left her position and hurried to the kitchen door before she'd be found eavesdropping. She had things to do anyway. They wanted to make green beans for dinner, and she hadn't finished plucking them by the time Riordan had waltzed in here. Leaving the door to the garden open, she picked up her basket and set out to fill it.

She was almost done when she heard a noise from, the kitchen. She wasn't sure what it was, and she couldn't make out the words that followed, but something about the tone

made her hair stand on edge. She dropped the basket, running back to the house.

Riordan was standing there, in the doorway that led to the stairs and the workshop, an utterly baffled expression on his face. There was no trace of Damien, but her brain supplied the memory of muffled footsteps on stairs she had paid no attention to in her hurry.

“What did you do?”

There was no point in hiding her hostility any longer. She turned her back on this asshole for one moment, and he somehow managed to hurt Damien.

“I... nothing. I just. He was. Changing. To cook. And I came in before. I saw...”

It was almost satisfying to see him stammer like this, shutting his mouth, gesturing at his right arm and torso instead. Almost. The thought how much Damien would hate that Riordan had seen him like that drove away the satisfaction, replaced it with more anger.

“And? Happy now? Did that finally answer some of your fucking questions?”

She had seen the look he had given Damien’s illusionary hand, every time he had thought no one would notice. Had caught on how he had asked Damien to hand him this or that, always something from his right side, always watching as he ended up using his left hand to grab it. It was one of the questions she had expected him to ask, but instead he had talked about random bullshit for four days.

Riordan stared at her as if he dared to be offended by her tone. “What *happened*?”

“What do you *think* happened?” Merridy snapped. “You’re the one who cut off his hand!”

“But... the scars... his arm...”

“The one that was rotting away after you left him in the dungeon? Did you think they’d treat him any better than

your men did? That they wouldn't hurt him? Or that anyone would care if they did?"

She hated the tears of anger that welled in her eyes. The memory of the state she had found Damien in was enough to make her feel sick, so she usually tried to avoid thinking about it. But now, with this asshole intruding into their lives, there was nothing else she could think about. Because that was what would be waiting for him, if this Riordan decided to hand him over to the guards. That, and a gruesome death.

"You come back here every day, reminding him about everything he's been through. Talking as if you were *friends*. He won't say anything, because he's terrified. Terrified that all it takes is one wrong word and you'll sell him out. Terrified that he won't be good enough for you to decide that he deserves to *live*."

She wanted to hit Riordan, to shake him until he got it into his empty skull that it was Damien's *life* he was toying with. She managed to stop herself at the last moment, balling her hands to fists instead, her nails digging into her palms.

"I can't watch this anymore. You have no idea what it took for us to get here. What it means to us. You're a fucking asshole, holding this threat over our heads, while you play whatever it is you're playing. And every time you leave, I have to pick him up again, to tell him that he won't go back. Because I am not letting them put their hands on him ever again. So ask your fucking questions and decide already, but stop tormenting him!"

Merridy had shouted the last words. As she was trying to catch her breath, she realized her hands were shaking. With anger, but also with dread as the realization of what she had just done set in.

Riordan stared at her, his expression unreadable. He didn't say anything. A few seconds passed, then he nodded briskly, taking large, deliberate steps towards the door. She wanted

to hold him back, to apologize, to beg him to *please, please don't destroy our lives*.

She knew it was too late for that.

A moment after the door had closed behind Riordan, footsteps sounded behind her. Merridy turned around, shoulders dropping.

"Sorry. I'm so sorry. I fucked up."

She walked towards Damien, stopping halfway, not daring to cross the rest of the distance. For four days he had managed to keep his composure, and now it was her who had ruined it all. The thought made it impossible to hold her tears back any longer, turning Damien all blurry as he came closer, reaching out to her.

"Hey. Hey, it's okay." He held her, pressing his face into her hair. "Did he say anything?"

Merridy shook her head, feeling Damien's sigh on her hair. They stood like this for a long time, clinging to each other. The light coming through the windows became dim and the sound of falling rain filled the air. Of course it had to start raining now.

As long as it wasn't evening, the portal in Caldeia would be attuned to some city. No matter how angry he was, it was unlikely Riordan would try—or manage—to get someone to send an emergency signal. That meant they had a few hours at least before anyone could be here.

"Perhaps he isn't angry," Damien said. It didn't sound hopeful. Not that anything he had said in those last four days had sounded truly hopeful.

Perhaps he wasn't. It was a risk too large to take.

"I'll get the bags," she mumbled, finally managing to take a step back. She didn't look at Damien as she left the kitchen, to walk up the stairs and into her room. She also tried not to look around, but she couldn't help it. Her bed buried under purple pillows and blankets, words spoken as half a joke, and

yet not forgotten months later when he had bought them for her. Her book shelf, half filled by now, each single book a memory of shared evenings. The glass shards in front of the window, looking dull with the overcast, dark sky in the background. A sign of a love that was all she had ever wanted, never imagining she'd be able to find it.

She would go to the edge of the world for him if she had to. With grim determination, she walked to the spot where she had dropped the backpacks, picking up one in each hand. There was no point in delaying it any longer.

"Do you have the letter?" she asked as she arrived back in the kitchen.

Damien nodded mutely. He had written a letter for Valadan, knowing very well that every attempt to talk to his brother would end up with Valadan trying to stop them, or to murder Riordan – perhaps both.

Taking a deep breath, Merridy reached for his hand, smiling sadly.

Then someone knocked on the door.



## CHAPTER 42

### **Regret**

Riordan walked through the garden without seeing the flowers or the path he had to follow. He barely realized that the light had grown dim while he had been inside, talking and joking and looking at pretty glass baubles. The first rain drops took him by surprise, and it was nice to think that it was the coldness running down his neck that made him shiver.

He couldn't get the images out of his mind. The missing arm. The scars. The hurt on Damien's face, and the hate and anger on hers. He couldn't blame her. The questions had been all but an excuse to come back. There really was no need to ask them, not anymore. He had already guessed Damien wasn't a threat from the moment he had begged him to not hurt Merridy. His guess had turned into certainty the more he had watched the two of them.

This man wasn't the monster everyone had seen in him. *He* had seen in him. It wasn't only the painfully normal home they lived in, or the way he treated Merridy. Even the cruellest person could love their spouse and hang up some pretty curtains. No, it was the way he had treated everyone. The merchants on the market, kids running by, fuck, he had even bought a scrap of fish for a stray cat.

If he was faking his kindness, he was the best fucking actor Riordan had ever seen.

He couldn't turn him in. He should have told them so and moved on. Instead, he had come back, day after day. Had actually enjoyed himself. Enjoyed talking to people from home instead of scholars who thought the different parts of a leaf were sufficient for dinner conversation. He had indulged in a few days of distraction and curiosity, not even realizing how much he had hurt them with it.

He'd leave them alone. No, first he would *tell* them that he would do so, then leave them alone. It was the least he could do. Assure them that they were safe, at least from him. Would they even believe him? They had to know that there was nothing stopping him from promising them whatever he wanted, then still getting the Silver Blades.

Perhaps there was a way to make them trust him. Riordan looked up to the citadel and started to run through the rain.

By the time he was back at the house, he was panting and soaked from head to toe. He could only hope this would work, wouldn't make everything worse. But if he didn't at least try it, if he left them in the dark, they might keep wondering when he'd change his mind, when someone would come for them. They didn't deserve that.

It took him a moment to gather the courage to knock on the kitchen door. It took a longer moment for the door to open. Merridy peered through the crack, a wary expression on her face and a kitchen knife in her hand.

Riordan raised his free hand, palm outwards. "I'm unarmed. And alone," he added after a moment.

"And what do you want?"

There wasn't much of her hostility left. She sounded tired. Somehow, that was worse.

"I..." He squeezed the leather in his hand, trying to

remember the words he had picked out so carefully on his way here. He failed. "I just have to say one more thing. Then I'll leave. May I come in? Please."

Something moved behind Merridy, then Damien opened the door fully, placing his hand on her shoulder. Riordan tried not to look at the knife as he stepped in.

By the time he stopped in the middle of the room, Damien had taken the knife from Merridy and put it on the counter. Behind them, on the floor, were two backpacks. Riordan swallowed. He must have come just in time to stop them from leaving. Fuck. Now their wary expressions made sense, the way Damien made sure to always stand between him and Merridy. They must have expected him to turn them in.

"I'm sorry. I'm not gonna tell anyone about you," he blurted out. Which was exactly how he hadn't wanted to start this conversation. "I..." He paused. It was clear that they didn't believe him. How could they?

Riordan took one step forward, raising his hand to offer Damien what he had brought. He pretended not to see how Damien flinched at his movement, staring down at what he was holding instead. The waterskin he had picked up before leaving the palace in Caldeia. It was clear that the man recognized it, reaching for it with his trembling hand.

With his thumb, Damien stroked over the silly bands Riordan had attached to the cork, then over the side, over large, dark stains of red wine and — probably — blood.

The moment he had handed the waterskin over, Riordan took a step back. "I kept it to remind me... It was wrong. What they —" Not they. He had been a part of it. "What *we* did was wrong. It showed me an ugly side of... of people I thought I could trust. Of myself. That's why I left."

Perhaps babysitting scholars wasn't as glorious of a job as leading a squad of mercenaries had been, especially at his rather young age, but it was a decent one. One where he

truly protected people.

"I hope you can believe me," he said into the silence that had followed his words. "I'll keep your secret. My loyalty is with the Order now, not the crown. Just... don't burn any books or anything, okay?"

It was a half-hearted attempt at a joke, earning him nothing more than some raised eyebrows. Or the eyebrows rose in reply to his other words, he couldn't tell. The one thing he could tell was that it was time for him to leave. As he should have done days ago, but the second best time was now. He walked towards the door.

"What's the question?" Damien asked.

"What?" Riordan paused with his hand on the handle, glancing back over his shoulder.

"The question you wanted to ask. What is it?"

Riordan turned around, leaning against the door. He shouldn't. He had hurt them enough. But Damien had asked, and he at least owed him some honesty, didn't he?

"Why did you do it?" Riordan asked before he could decide otherwise. "You're... Why? Why did you torment people like that?"

"He made me do it. If I hadn't, he'd have killed them."

Whoever that 'he' was, Riordan was sure there was more to it. A whole fucking story about guilt and regret and self-loathing, he could see on in Damien's face. A story that in the end didn't matter. It was clear as day that this man hadn't enjoyed it, hadn't done it voluntarily. Wouldn't do it again. That was all Riordan had to know to be sure he had made the right decision. He nodded, ready to turn around and leave for good.

"That's it?"

Damien's voice made him pause once more.

"No 'Was there nothing else you could have done?' No 'Could you have stopped him?'"

“Could you have?” Riordan asked.

The look on Damien’s face showed him the truth. It wasn’t him who was asking, not really. It was a question the man was asking himself, must have asked himself many times before.

“I don’t know,” Damien said quietly. “Most likely not. I think he would have killed me.”

Merridy reached for his arm as he spoke, holding onto it. From the expression on his face, Riordan was sure that there had been times Damien might have considered that a preferable outcome. From the expression on hers, he was equally sure she knew. He only hoped Damien didn’t still think that way.

“I’m glad he didn’t. I think the world is a better place with you in it.”

If more people were as kind as Damien, perhaps the world would need less people like him, making their living with a sword in hand. He didn’t manage to say anything else over the lump that was suddenly sitting in his throat. Not even *Farewell* as he finally opened the door and stepped back out into the rain.

After the short reprieve in the warm kitchen, the weather felt even more miserable. Riordan shivered as water dripped onto his neck. Shitty weather to conclude a shitty day. Which was fitting, all things considered. This time, he had almost messed it up for good.

“Sorry, mom,” he muttered, looking up ahead to where the citadel of the Order was barely visible in the dim light. “I should have listened to my heart. Like you said.”

Perhaps he should take a few days and visit his family in Caldeia. Hang around people who were actually glad to see him. Would be nice for a change. It had been months since the last time he had found the time for more than a short visit. While the progress of negotiations made it likely his employer

would stay in Nimrisé for a while, it was unwise to plan that far ahead before he had certainty, though.

“Hey!”

The shout made Riordan freeze. He turned around, squinting through the falling rain. A figure was approaching him, jogging until it had almost caught up. Damien. Already completely soaked, somehow even the illusion of his arm was dripping with water.

Riordan only watched him, entirely unsure what he was supposed to do now. He had said what he had come to say, and offered to leave them alone, and he really didn't know what else he could do.

“Do you like green beans?” Damien asked.

Riordan stared at him. “I do,” he answered after a moment. He didn't understand the question, but not answering would be rude, so that was the least he could —

“Would you like to stay for dinner?”

Would he... The question took a moment to truly sink in. “I would.” Riordan wasn't sure his voice was audible at all over the sound of falling rain.

“Then come.” Damien beckoned him to follow him before he turned around, to jog back through the rain.

Riordan followed.

Back at the house, Merridy was waiting for them. Well, it was obvious she was waiting for Damien, a towel in hand, but she at least nodded in Riordan's direction. She didn't even glare at him, which was not what he had expected at all. Still, he stood awkwardly to the side, not sure if he was truly welcome to enter.

“You should change,” she said, ruffling Damien's hair with the towel. “And you should come inside,” she added, looking at Riordan for a moment only before turning her attention back to Damien.

Riordan stepped into the kitchen, closing the door behind him. Even through his soaked clothes the warmth of the hearth was welcome, and he rubbed his hands together. He looked at his fingers, stiff from the cold, bending and stretching them. Somewhere around him people moved.

“Hey. Asshole.”

Strange. This time it didn’t sound like an insult at all. It made Riordan smile as he looked up, just in time to catch the towel Merridy was throwing at him.

“Go sit in front of the fire before you freeze to death and I’ll have to bury you after all.”

Wrapping the towel around his shoulders he did as he was told. He pulled a chair next to the stove, in front of a shelf with a flat surface serving as a table if needed. After a moment of consideration, he slipped out of his boots, pushing them closer to the stove. Wet socks weren’t pleasant. Wet socks in wet boots were another level of annoying.

“Anything I can do to help?” he asked, hoping to avoid sitting around awkwardly until dinner was done.

“Damien’s gonna need an onion. So...” She grabbed a bunch of things, placing them in front of Riordan. “Peel and cut it, please.”

With his fingers warmed up, he could do that. While he peeled the onion, Riordan watched Merridy walk over to the big table, a bowl and a knife in hand. She sat down and started to clean the beans, only looking up when Damien came back into the kitchen. He had changed clothes and now grabbed the apron from its hook, pulling it over his head.

Then he walked over to Merridy, turning his back towards her so she could tie the bands of the apron. When she was done, she said something, too quiet for Riordan to understand, and Damien laughed and pressed a kiss on the top of her head. For once, both looked truly happy. It was as if a weight had been taken off their shoulders. A weight he had

put there. Riordan hacked away at the onion, which was a particularly strong one, making his eyes water until he could barely see what he was doing.

"I think that's fine enough. Any more and it's onion puree."

He stopped, giving Damien the chance to reach for the cutting board and take it over to the counter. At least he assumed that was what Damien did, because he barely managed to see anything through the tears blurring his vision. Without thinking about it, he raised his hand.

"Don't."

His hand was caught, held for a moment, then released hurriedly.

"Sorry. Just. Don't touch your face like that," Damien said. "There's soap at the sink."

The motion with which he gestured into said direction was blurry at best, but enough for Riordan to find the way. While he scrubbed his hands and dried his eyes, Damien started to roast the onions and prepare the rest of the dish. Riordan watched him walk to a small trap door in the far edge of the kitchen, lift it and kneel to reach into it. With a wrapped bundle he returned to the counter, unwrapping it, which revealed a block of sheep cheese.

While Damien mixed beans, cheese, potatoes and whatever else might be waiting in a couple of bowls, Riordan turned his back to the stove. Most of him was reasonably dry again, but his back was still freezing.

His back, and his heart.

He couldn't even put his finger on it, but something had changed. The way Damien held himself, the small smiles on his lips: so much more genuine than before, no longer overshadowed by *something*. The way Merridy was no longer watching Riordan's every move, occasionally daring to turn her back on him. The glances she cast in his direction

were still wary. How much of her hostility had been fear? The worry that he might turn them in, might get the person she loved killed.

Fuck, he really hadn't stopped one moment to see it this way.

"Hey, let me talk to you for a bit, to see if you're worthy to live," he said, barely audible, under his breath.

"What?" Merridy asked from where she was leaning over Damien's shoulder, while Damien didn't seem to have heard anything at all. He was happily cutting the sheep cheese into small cubes, while Merridy was happily stealing some of them; not quite as happily now, giving Riordan another scrutinizing look.

"Nothing. Sorry. Bad habit of talking to myself," he mumbled, turning around to face the stove once more. Only to warm up his hands, get the last bit of chill out of his shirt; not to avoid their gazes, obviously.

By the time Damien put the dish in the oven, Riordan wasn't fully dry, but had stopped shivering. He couldn't help but glance longingly in the direction of the stove. It already smelled delicious, and it wasn't even done.

"It'll take a while," Damien said, wiping his hands on a towel. "Let's go sit at the table while we wait. Can I offer you something to drink? We currently have watered apple juice, but I can probably —"

"That's fine," Riordan interrupted him, realizing a moment too late that this was also pretty rude.

His mom would surely disapprove of his lack of manners, but Damien didn't seem to. He just shooed him out of the way so he could reach the shelf, picking up a pitcher and a stack of cups. Riordan followed him to the table, sitting down at his — had he really started to consider this chair his? — spot. Moments later, he was holding a cup of watered down juice and was facing both of his hosts, sitting side by side on the bench.

“You know... there’s one thing I’ve been wondering,” Damien said.

Riordan tightened his grip around the cup, trying to keep his worry off his face. There were a dozen questions he could imagine, most of which would be anything but pleasant. He owed it to them though, after all the pain he had caused them. Whatever it would take to put their minds at ease.

But when Damien asked his question, when the words truly reached Riordan, he couldn’t suppress a laugh. It broke out of him, almost hysterical, leaving no room for the worries that had plagued him a moment ago. His laughter was shaking him and left him gasping for breath as new tears streamed down his face. He tried his best to control it, to regain enough of his composure so he’d be able to answer the question of:

“How the fuck did you manage to get that kalani to give you some of their petals?”



## CHAPTER 43

### **Fancy**

“Did you remember the chocolate ones?”

“Yes. Ten chocolate, ten vanilla.” Damien grabbed Merridy’s hand, to stop her from lifting the cloth covering the basket a third time. “It’s all there. Those, and the little sandwiches, and a bowl of fruit salad. You’ve *seen* them.”

“Yes. I have.” Merridy sighed. For a moment, she seemed to calm down, then she started to pace through the kitchen, towards her shawl she had flung over one of the chairs.

“Do you think it’s really enough?” she asked as she picked it up.

“Merry. You’re meeting with three friends, not feeding an entire army. I assure you, it’s enough.”

In a rather botched attempt to hide his laugh, Riordan bit into the apple he had grabbed from the fruit basket on the counter. In those last few weeks he had seen her angry at first, turning into a polite guardedness most of the time. While she had started to warm up towards him—occasionally being almost *friendly*—it was the first time he saw her like this; innocently frazzled, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining with barely contained excitement. It reminded him of his older sister, and it was *adorable*.

He had the sneaking suspicion that saying his thoughts out loud would probably end with him getting stabbed, so he chewed on his apple instead.

"Merry." Damien stepped next to her, tucking the shawl into place before pulling her into his arm and pressing a kiss on the top of her head. "It'll be alright. Go, or you'll be late."

"Oh no. I'll be late. I'll be late!" Merridy freed herself, wrapped the shawl tighter around her shoulders, and picked up the basket. "Thank you. Have fun, you two!" she called out, running to the door.

The moment the door closed behind her, Damien sighed a deep sigh. As he turned around, his gaze met Riordan's. Damien was smiling, the purple glimmer of his eyes warm.

"Think she'll come back in a minute, to ask again?" Riordan said.

Damien laughed. "I don't think so. She'll be fine as soon as she arrives. She's just nervous. One of her friends is getting engaged, and it's the first time Merry's been invited to that kind of party, even if it's a small one. She's happy here. She doesn't want to mess it up."

Riordan knew that it wasn't supposed to be a jab. Unlike Merridy, Damien had never once blamed him, no matter how justified it would have been. Still, he couldn't help but blame himself for almost messing up their lives.

"Let's go upstairs," Damien said, pulling him out of his thoughts. "If you take the food, I'll bring the tea."

As Riordan pointed to a tray on the counter, a questioning look on his face, Damien nodded. Riordan picked it up, making his way towards the stairs. With the workshop taking up most of the ground floor, the living room was upstairs. After opening the door with his elbow while hazardously balancing the tray, Riordan entered and walked towards the coffee table. He put the food down next to a wooden, hexagonal board, pushing the fabric bags containing polished stone

marbles to the side.

Waiting for Damien, Riordan sat down on the sofa, leaning back, arms spread over the backrest. He let his gaze wander through the room, lingering on the armchair, laden with colourful quilts, and the fireplace, decorated with little trinkets – and a shimmering rock. Footsteps sounded, and he turned his attention towards the door, watching Damien enter.

“Here we go,” Damien said, putting down the pitcher of tea and the stacked cups. Turning towards Riordan, probably to sit down next to him, Damien paused. “Hey, get your fancy boots off the carpet,” he said with a laugh. “We just cleaned it.”

Right. Manners. Riordan looked at his shoes – not very dirty, but still obviously dusty – and pulled up his left foot to take the shoe off. Holding it in his hand, fumbling with the buckle of the second one, he raised his head. “What’s so fancy about them?” They barely counted as boots, and they were nothing but plain leather.

The silence that followed was weird. Riordan had to turn his attention back to his shoe, taking the second one off as well, so he could lean to the side and put both down next to the sofa – on the uncarpeted floor.

When he looked up, Damien was frozen on the spot, looking like a boy who had been caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“What?” Riordan asked, mostly baffled, but a tiny bit worried.

“I... I didn’t...” Damien didn’t look at him, making sure the tray and the pitcher were perfectly aligned with the coffee table instead. “I didn’t know your name, and I had to call you something, at least in my head, so I... those damn fancy boots were the first thing I ever saw of you, okay?” He had spoken quicker and quicker, ending his little speech out of breath.

Riordan remembered that day. The captured would-be

assassin, bound and bleeding on the ground. The rush of adrenaline, caused by a last minute warning and the sound of the explosion. How all he had seen had been a murderer, deserving the pain and the humiliation.

“Right before they kicked you in the face,” he said, voice heavy with regret.

“I probably deserved it,” Damien replied. The sadness and resignation in his voice broke Riordan’s heart.

“No. You didn’t deserve it.” His words turned out grimmer than he had meant to. No one would have deserved it. “I am sorry,” he added. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

Damien froze again, for a moment only, before he stumbled backwards towards the fireplace.

“Damien? What’s wrong?”

There was no reaction. His eyes were wide, his expression haunted. When the mantelpiece touched his back, he flinched, whirling around, then back, pressing against it.

“Damien?” Riordan tried again. “Can you hear me?”

It didn’t look like it. Damien stared straight ahead, seemingly past Riordan. His eyes wide, the hand gripping the mantelpiece shaking.

Riordan had seen it before, the quickened, panicked breaths, the pain and fear on his friend’s face. It made him press his lips together, suppressing whatever concerned question he had wanted to ask. Merridy’s words sounded in his ears. The first time it had happened, it had left him utterly confused. She had explained to him that it was his voice—his fucking voice, as if he could help it—that sometimes dredged up some of Damien’s worst memories. Horrified, Riordan had offered to leave, to stay away, but Merridy had stopped him.

‘He wants to be your friend. Don’t take this decision away from him,’ she had said. So when Damien had insisted that he should stay, Riordan had stayed. Knowing that Damien wanted him here, fully aware of the risks it brought, did little

to ease his guilt. It was his fault. Whatever he had said wrong this time, and all that he had done back then.

He got up from the sofa, moving closer to Damien, hoping it wouldn't be close enough to make him feel cornered. Arms at his side, his palms pointed outwards, he only raised his hands when Damien looked at him; when the faraway look of terror faded, making room for recognition.

"Do you want me to leave?" he signed.

Damien stared at him, then slowly shook his head. Riordan knew Damien wasn't fluent, only knowing whatever one picked up by living in a port town for almost a year. It was enough for simple questions, and this one he had asked often enough. Only once had the answer been yes.

"Can I help?" Riordan asked, his signs slow.

Even though he seemed to have understood him, Damien didn't react. He looked so forlorn. Riordan approached him, slowly reaching out to grab his hand, watching his face for any kind of reaction. Damien didn't pull back as Riordan closed his fingers around his. He could feel that Damien was trembling.

"Come," he signed with his free hand, leading Damien back to the sofa.

Both were quiet as Riordan walked around the table. By the time he sat down on the other side of the sofa, Damien was reaching for the cups, separating them. Riordan watched with concern how much Damien's hand was shaking, making the cups clatter quietly as he placed them on the table. Then he reached for the pitcher, lifting it, trying to pour the tea.

Before the first cup was even half full, Damien's arm started to shake. He tried to put the pitcher down, but wasn't fast enough; or his strength left him quicker than he had anticipated. Before the pitcher was standing, it slipped out of his fingers, tipping over.

Riordan caught it, but not before a bit of the tea had spilled,

splashing hot onto his pants. He hissed, swatting at it, pulling the hot fabric away from his skin. He managed not to curse. His mom would have been proud.

Damien stared at him wide eyed, then buried his face in his hand.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, his voice muffled.

Riordan pressed one hand against his leg, and tapped Damien's shoulder with the other, to make him look up. When he did so, he signed, "Don't apologize." There was no understanding on Damien's face. Riordan paused, hand raised, then tried again. "You're not sorry. I'm sorry."

"Are you hurt?" Damien asked, his voice trembling.

"No." Riordan accompanied the shaking of his head with a firm gesture. It wasn't pleasant, but the tea hadn't been hot enough to cause real damage. "No," he assured him again.

Damien sighed, but as he leaned back, he kept his head raised. Watching Riordan, probably to see if he would say anything else. He wasn't sure what to say, though, instead finishing what Damien had started by filling both cups. When he handed one to Damien, he noticed with concern how much he was still shaking.

As Damien tried to drink, it became clear that this wouldn't work. Riordan grabbed the cup before the tea could spill, putting it back onto the table.

"May I give you a hug?" he asked as soon as his hands were free again.

Once more, there was only confusion on Damien's face. It didn't surprise Riordan that he didn't know that word. The vocabulary of Dragon's Reach was probably rather suited for trading and haggling – and to tell others to fuck off in various colorful ways.

Riordan didn't think long. He repeated the sign, then spread his arms in a universal gesture. Understanding dawned on Damien's face, but he still hesitated. When a nod of his head

still wasn't enough to convince him, Riordan shuffled closer. Giving Damien enough time to voice his protest or retreat, he pulled him into a hug. Careful at first, then his reservations vanished as Damien leaned into it, sinking against him.

There was no way to speak to him while he was holding him like this, so Riordan just waited, his arms wrapped tightly around his friend. It reminded him of his younger brothers, how when they were little they had come to his room after a nightmare. Like his brothers, Riordan wanted to protect Damien, to tell him that he wasn't alone and it had only been a dream. If only it had been nothing but a dream.

While Damien slowly calmed down, Riordan let his thoughts wander. He wondered if there was anyone else other than Merridy who could be there for Damien, whom he would trust enough to tell them about his past. It was unlikely. He knew Damien had a brother, and he knew this Valadan lived somewhere nearby. It was almost a miracle they hadn't crossed paths yet. Riordan wondered if the two brothers were close, if their relationship had recovered from what had happened in Raqhar – and possibly before. Perhaps he'd ask; another time.

Eventually Damien leaned back, a suspicious shimmer in his eyes. Riordan ignored it, picking up his cup instead. After a moment, Damien followed his example. For a while they sat in silence, sipping their tea.

“Wanna play?” Damien eventually broke the silence.

Riordan nodded, adding a rather crude gesture that was used in many rowdy taverns to announce one's strong belief in their victory. Unfortunately, Damien's raised eyebrows told him that he had understood it. Oops. Fucking Dragon's Reach.

Damien shook his head, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he reached for one of the bags on the table. Riordan shrugged and grinned, grabbing the second

bag of marbles, to place them on the board.

"If you're hungry, help yourself," Damien said with a nod towards the table. Then, under his breath, "I sure hope it tastes better than balls."

Riordan choked on his breath, coughing and laughing until tears ran down his cheeks. He wiped them away, blinking to try and see enough so he could place the last three of his marbles on the board.

When he was done, Riordan let his gaze wander over the tray. It mirrored what Damien had prepared for Merridy; there were two of each kind of muffin he had made, as well as two small bowls of fruit salad. Riordan had watched Damien prepare some of the food, the bite sized sandwiches in particular. Homemade bread and more than half a dozen different things to put on them. In the pile Merridy had taken with her, there had been slices of meat and sausages. On the tray, however, were only ones with cheese, cream cheese and assorted vegetables. And—Riordan reached for one—grilled mushrooms. Suspiciously many with grilled mushrooms. Perhaps Damien had made more this time, in the futile attempt to be able to keep one for himself, before Riordan would have eaten them all.

Riordan leaned against the backrest, taking a bite off the tiny sandwich while moving the first marble with his free hand. He really wished there was a way for him to express just how much he loved the food, but there was little chance Damien would understand him. He tried anyway.

"You know, you're the best damn cook I know. Those things are fantastic."

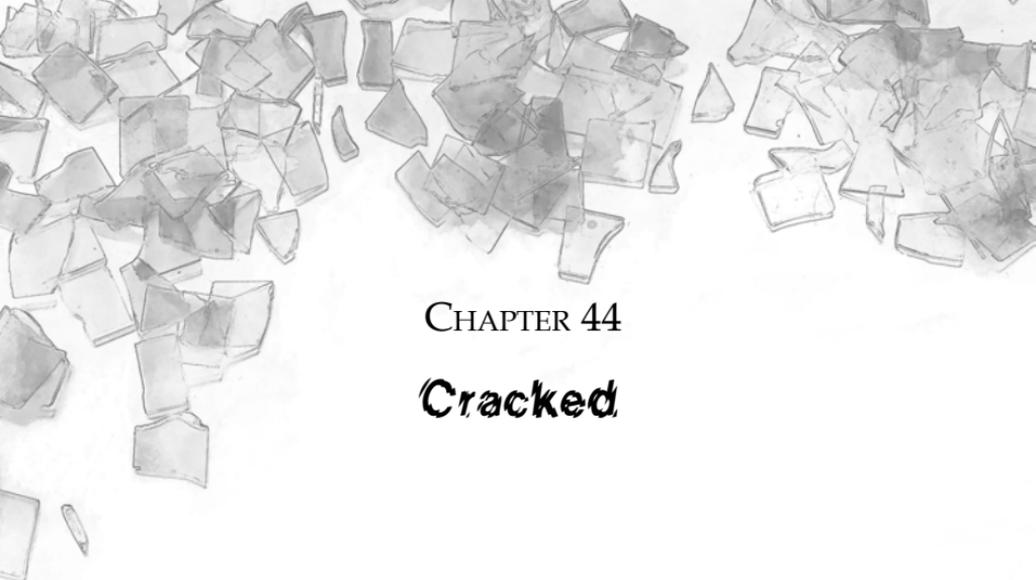
As expected, Damien's face showed confusion. It probably wasn't helpful that Riordan had signed it with one hand, the other already reaching for the next sandwich.

"Those." He made a wide gesture, encompassing the contents of the tray. "Damn good."

Damien smiled, obviously happy about the compliment, even though he tried to hide it. "Better than balls, huh?"

Riordan laughed again, but managed not to choke this time. He finished the second sandwich before he raised his hands, still laughing as he signed, "Yeah. Better than balls."





## CHAPTER 44

### **Cracked**

Morning light streamed through the windows, finding Rior-dan comfortably wrapped into a blanket on the sofa. It had become late the previous evening, and he had decided to stay; partially because he had been too lazy to walk all the way back to the citadel, but also because he really hadn't wanted to leave Damien alone.

All in all, it hadn't been a bad night. The sofa was still better than some of the camps he'd seen during his time before he had joined the Order — or, if he was honest, even after.

He listened, but everything was quiet, the only sound he could make out some birds singing outside the window. Shaking off the blanket (and folding it before placing it on the sofa — his mom would be proud) he left the room in his search for Damien. A quick glance into his room, through the door that was partially open, revealed it to be empty. This early in the morning, the most likely place for him to be would be the kitchen, so Riordan made his way down the stairs, only to be greeted by the smell of freshly baked bread.

"Good morning," Damien said, without turning around from whatever he was doing at the counter. He must have heard his footsteps on the stairs.

“Morning,” Riordan replied, then paused. He hadn’t thought about if it was safe for him to speak again, so he watched Damien intently. Luckily, he didn’t seem to be bothered by his voice, but Riordan still decided to keep an eye on him as he sat down at the table. He could have asked, but he was wary of bringing up memories of the previous evening.

“Eggs?” Damien asked, waving two uncracked ones over his shoulder.

Well that was some kind of answer, Riordan guessed. “You know I’d never say no.”

“I know.” Damien looked back over his shoulder, grinning broadly. “You can set the table, if you want to help.”

Despite his obvious display of cheerfulness, Damien looked tired. Instead of asking him about it—because really, it wasn’t hard to imagine what had kept him from finding rest—Riordan got up, walking over to the cupboard he knew held plates and cups. How long had he been visiting here already, to know the place of most things in the kitchen? With a small smile, he took two plates out, then rummaged in a drawer for two butter knives.

Setting the table felt a bit like being home. Digging into some of the best food he had ever had even more so. He piled the scrambled eggs on his plate, as well as freshly baked bread with golden butter and homemade raspberry jam.

Damien laughed while he poured the two of them a cup of tea each. “I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said, gesturing to Riordan’s plate.

Riordan nodded, managing not to talk with his mouth full. “It is,” he signed when he remembered that he had a hand free.

Damien’s expression turned earnest. “Thank you for...” he said, sitting down. “Thank you,” he then signed.

Riordan lowered his gaze to his plate. Damien shouldn’t be thanking him for doing the bare minimum to keep the damage he had caused in check. If only he hadn’t been such an

asshole back then, perhaps his voice wouldn't send him into a panic in the first place.

The sound of the door opening saved Riordan from having to find something to reply. He turned around, still chewing on a piece of bread, to watch Merridy walk into the kitchen.

"Morning," Damien said next to him.

At the sound of his voice, Merridy raised her gaze from the door she had been closing. A smile lit up her face. She looked Damien up and down, as if she had to make sure he was fine, even though she had only been gone for a night.

"Hey," she said.

Then her gaze fell on Riordan, and this once, her expression didn't change. Her smile stayed, and the soft wrinkles around her eyes stayed, and all she did was nod.

"Hey, Riordan."

Riordan nodded as well, thankful that his mouth was full. He had the suspicion that any attempt to speak right now would have ended utterly pathetic.

She didn't often use his name, and she never smiled at him. At best, she ignored him. He couldn't blame her. Not when his mere presence was enough to remind them what they had been through. The fact that she now included him in her greeting was odd enough, but then she dropped herself on the chair next to him and snatched a piece of scrambled egg off his plate.

The moment she put it into her mouth, Merridy froze, raising her head to shoot Riordan an uncertain glance. He smiled, pushing the plate in her direction while he shook his head.

"You sent her with enough food to feed an army, and she comes back starving."

The tension left Merridy's shoulders. "I let them keep the leftovers, since I'm returning to the source," she said, taking another piece of egg. "It's only fair to share a fortune such as this."

"Merry." Damien laughed. "It's just eggs."

"Nah. She's right." Riordan nudged Merridy's finger aside with his fork, so he could skewer a piece of egg himself. "We're lucky to have you."

Too distracted by the incredulous look Damien gave him, Riordan didn't stop Merridy from stealing the rest of his bread. At least she was busy with that now, so he could finish his eggs in peace.

After licking the raspberry jam off her fingers, Merridy laid her head on her arms, barely suppressing a yawn. Damien watched her with a smile, raising his hand to brush a strand of hair off of her forehead.

"Did you sleep last night?" he asked.

She grumbled something, sounding vaguely like an affirmation.

"More than one hour?"

"Mh."

Riordan laughed. His plate was empty now, so he put the fork down, tilting his cup to find out if there was still some tea left. There wasn't. As much as he'd have liked to stay a bit longer, perhaps drink another cup of tea, this was definitely an excellent moment to leave.

"That sounds like the celebration was a success." He grinned. "I'll leave you alone, so you can catch up on some sleep."

She probably wouldn't mind him staying, but he had the impression that Damien might just join her for a while. Riordan had to get back to the citadel anyway; to use the rest of his week off for some laundry and other things he loved to put off.

"See you tomorrow, perhaps. I'm here for another three days."

Damien nodded, starting to get up to bring him to the door, but Riordan gestured for him to remain sitting. With a nod

of his head, he pointed towards Merridy, and Damien sank back to his chair. His hand was still on her shoulder, and she already looked half asleep.

“See ye t’mrw,” she mumbled anyway, from somewhere between her folded arms.

After he had pulled the door closed behind him, Riordan buried his hands in his pockets. He let his gaze wander over the plants framing the sandy path that led to the front of the house. Low bushels of lavender behind colorful little flowers whose names he didn’t know. Dots of yellow and red and white, embedded in emerald green leaves. Flowerpots with more plants he didn’t know stood next to the house wall, and a dogrose bush grew where the path split, one direction leading to the vegetable patches. Most of the small, white and pale pink blossoms were already withered, but it was still a pretty sight.

Movement in the corner of his eye made him raise his head—just in time to see the fist, thrown right into his face. Riordan stumbled backwards, tasting blood, his vision spinning and blurry. The silhouette behind the fist caught up quickly. He was grabbed and shoved, then pain exploded in the back of his head, making his whole world shake. His knees threatened to buckle, but a hand around his throat kept him pinned against the wall.

“Hel—”

The hand squeezed, cutting off his scream for help, turning it into a pitiful wheeze. Riordan blinked, trying to clear his gaze, to focus it on the shadow in front of him. A face, painfully familiar and yet so different. Looking so much younger than Damien, with a fury in his eyes Riordan had never seen on his friend’s face. The instinctive panic of the sudden attack made room for a more conscious one.

It was Damien’s brother, and he looked like he was about

to fucking kill him.

“What have you done to them?” Valadan asked, his voice furious.

Blood rushed in Riordan’s ears as he stared at him, uncomprehending. Valadan shook him, slamming his head against the wall a second time, and Riordan’s vision turned black. Blood dripped wet and warm onto his neck.

‘Nothing!’ he wanted to scream, but he didn’t have the breath for it.

Riordan tried to grasp the hand, to pull it away from his throat. He might as well have tried to rip a fucking tree out of the ground. When his attempts remained unsuccessful, he started hitting Valadan’s arm instead. His strength was fading quickly, his lungs burning, his heart hammering in his chest. In a last, desperate attempt he raised his hands to sign.

“Nothing. Please stop. Stop.” His hands were shaking, his signs crude and choppy. “Let go. Stop.”

If Valadan understood him, he didn’t care. He swiped one of Riordan’s hands aside, slamming it against the wall. Then he punched him in the face again, and again, tinting Riordan’s blurry vision red.

“If you’ve hurt them... if you’ve hurt my brother...”

He stopped for a moment, but didn’t let go. Instead, the pressure on Riordan’s throat increased, crushing it. It was all a big misunderstanding. If only he could tell him. If only he had sat at the table a minute or two longer, so Valadan would have come inside and seen that Damien was fine.

Damien. Damien needed to come out, to save him. Perhaps he’d notice what was going on if he’d manage to make a noise – any noise.

*Help me. Please.*

With what little strength he had left, Riordan kicked the house wall. His soles slid off, merely scratching over it. He tried again, pushing his foot against the wall, not finding a

better angle. Then his toes touched something else; something round, something that wobbled as he struck it.

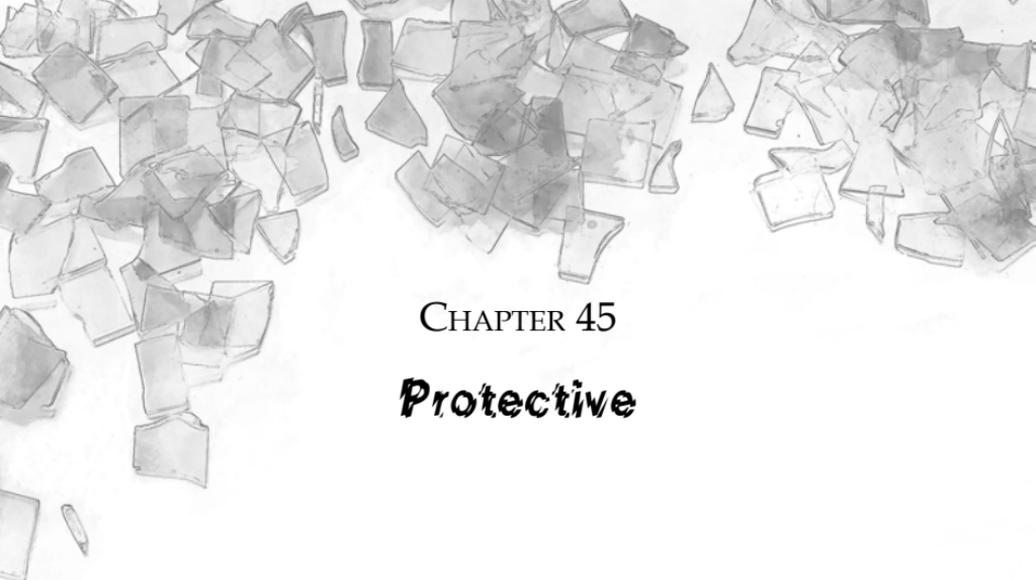
One of the flowerpots.

Fueled by despair, Riordan kicked at it. The effort cost him his balance, letting his other leg buckle under him. For a moment, he all but hung from his neck, his hands grappling uselessly at the wall, trying to find something to hold onto. At least he had managed to topple the flowerpot. The sound of shattering ceramic was quiet in his ears, barely making it through the pounding of his frantic heartbeat in his temples. Too quiet. They'd never hear it. They'd never find him in time.

He wasn't sure anymore if it was tears or blood running down his face. There was no strength left for him to try again. His legs were shaking, while his arms hung uselessly at his sides. Only his chest still twitched desperately, trying to pull in air, the movements growing weaker with every passing second.

*Damien. Help me.*





## CHAPTER 45

### **Protective**

“What was that?” Merridy raised her head, not sure if she had imagined the sound. Trying to blink away the sleepiness, she looked at Damien. It didn’t seem like he had heard anything. Plates he had just started to put away in hand, he gave her a questioning look.

“Mh?”

“I don’t know.” Merridy stared at the kitchen wall. “Sounded like something broke.”

“Want me to look?”

With a wistful glance at the door that led to the stairs, Merridy sighed. “I’ll check. If he broke one of my flowerpots, he can take care of the mess himself.” She pushed herself up, stretching and yawning. “Because I’m gonna take a nap.”

As would Damien. He must have slept badly last night. She could tell it from the way he moved, from the look in his eyes, no matter how happy he had been.

Looking back at him before she left the kitchen, Merridy smiled. Happy because this Riordan was here. At first, Merridy had been less than thrilled about Damien’s insistence on inviting him back. She would have been glad to never see him again. A few weeks later now, she had to admit that he

wasn't such a bad guy. He could be funny, and he tried to help where he could. Besides, he cared about Damien—and that was more important than his lack of manners or her personal grudge.

He deserved a chance.

"Hey Riordan, if you broke one of—"

She turned the corner and froze. It took her a second or two to grasp the severity of what she was seeing, but then she sprinted towards the two men.

"Let him go let him go let him go!"

Merridy rammed her shoulder into Valadan's chest. Blind-sided by her sudden attack, he took a step back, then another as she started to hit him.

"Get away from him. Damien!" she shouted. "Damien!"

She didn't bother keeping her attention on Valadan for a moment longer than necessary. She wasn't afraid of him, didn't think he would hurt *her*; and as long as she was here, he wouldn't hurt Riordan, either. Without hesitation, she put herself in between the men.

Riordan had collapsed and was now sitting on the ground, gasping for breath. His face and clothes were bloodied, and fresh blood dripped onto his neck from a wound somewhere on his head.

The moment Merridy heard Damien's footsteps, she kneeled down, not missing the way Riordan winced at the sudden movement. His gasps turned into coughs, and tears ran down his face as he doubled over in pain.

"Hey. It's okay." She reached for his shoulder, feeling him shake under her touch. "You're gonna be okay."

It didn't seem like he had heard her at all. Riordan pressed himself against the wall, apparently trying to calm his breaths, to suppress the coughs. He wasn't very successful. The next coughing fit made new tears well up in his eyes as he raised his hand to his throat.

Merridy shuffled closer, keeping her hand on Riordan's arm. Stroking it gently, she hoped she'd be able to calm him down somehow. Perhaps calm herself down as well. Between his left eye, already swollen shut, and the blood covering his face and soaking his clothes, he reminded her too much of a time she didn't want to think about.

She took a deep breath, trying to focus. Blood was still running down the back of his neck. She had to find out how badly he was hurt.

The moment Merridy tried to pull her hand back, Riordan grabbed her arm. His fingers, twisted in her sleeve, were trembling, and the look of despair on his face was all too familiar.

"It's okay. I'm not going away."

A quick look around told Merridy that Damien and Valadan were gone. She didn't know where they had gone, and if she was honest, she didn't fucking care. If she got her hands on Damien's brother right now, she might as well strangle him herself.

"I'm not going away," she repeated, then looked along the path. "But I'd like to get you inside. We gotta do something about the bleeding."

Riordan's gaze was so unfocused, she wasn't sure he had understood her at all. Keeping his hand firmly in hers, she stood up, pulling him with her. His legs were shaking, barely able to keep him standing, so she put his arm around her shoulders.

The way back to the kitchen door took forever. Inside, she led him to the bench, where she helped him to sit down. His head lolled to the side, his eyes half closed.

"Hey." Merridy crouched down in front of him, raising one hand, but not daring to touch his bloody face. Instead, she put her hand on his shoulder, nudging him to sit upright. "Hey, stay with me."

Riordan blinked slowly, his gaze, while not quite focusing

on her, at least somewhat following her movements. When she let go of his shoulder, he remained sitting.

“Just like that. I’ll get some things. It’ll be just a moment. Promise.”

He didn’t reply, but she got up anyway. It wasn’t like she had a choice. She crossed the kitchen, opening the door to the washing room. Her hands slid over the wall, searching for the glowing crystal next to the door. Her worry made her movements jittery, and she dropped the bucket twice before she managed to place it under the faucet.

When she walked back into the kitchen, Riordan sat hunched over. He was pressing one hand against his throat, crying soundlessly. His clothes, as well as the rug at his feet were stained from where he had thrown up.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” she mumbled, hurrying back to his side. It was too late to do anything other than try to clean him up as best as she could, without outright changing his clothes.

She kicked the rug away and placed the bucket of water on the bench next to her, dipping one of the towels into it. When she touched his face, to wipe away half dried blood and spit, Riordan winced, drawing back from her touch.

“Fuck, I’m sorry.”

The movement of his head could have been an attempt to shake it, but he squeezed his eyes shut quickly, breathing heavily. He needed a healer. He *so* needed a fucking healer, but she couldn’t leave him alone to get one.

“Fuck,” she said again, more desperate this time. One thing after another. First, she’d finish cleaning this up, then she’d get fresh towels and water, and then she’d see.

Avoiding the side of his face that was bruised, she cleaned his chin, then moved on to his shirt. When she was done, his shirt was damp, making him shiver. She’d have to get him a new one—no, a complete set of fresh clothes, she thought as she looked at his pants, no less stained than everything else.

In the washing room, Merridy threw the soiled towels into a corner, picking up a fresh bucket, instead of cleaning the other one. She had just put it under the faucet when a door sounded.

“He put you in a fucking cage!”

Valadan’s shouted words made Merridy sprint back into the kitchen, hands empty, just in time to see Riordan trying to get up.

“Yeah, well, and you told him how to keep me there.” Damien’s voice was weary. “Listen, he’s not—”

“Don’t.” Riordan hadn’t even managed to get to his feet before sinking to the floor. Now he was kneeling, a white-knuckled hand on the back of a chair all that kept him upright. “Don’t. Fight.” His voice was barely more than a hoarse whisper.

The brothers froze, staring at him. It gave Merridy enough time to hurry to his side.

Valadan scoffed. “What do you—”

“That’s enough! You” – Merridy pointed at Valadan as if she wanted to stab him with her finger – “are gonna get me the healer, and you” – no stabbing accompanied her words as she looked at Damien – “go make the mildest tea you have, and then find me some clothes that might fit him.”

For a moment, no one moved. Then Valadan nodded, expression grim, and started to walk towards the door. Damien looked at Merridy, a mixture of worry and awe on his face, before he did as he was told as well.

With an almost soundless sigh, she pressed Riordan’s shoulder. It would be fine. If there was one healer in this world she trusted, it was Elijah. He would fix this.

Riordan opened his mouth, but another coughing fit left him hunched over and struggling for breath.

“No. No healer,” he signed instead of speaking, hands shaking. “No.”

Merridy looked from him to Damien, standing at the

counter but watching them, and back to Riordan. "Why?" she asked.

"Question. You. Questions. Danger."

She couldn't make out everything he was saying; either she didn't know all the signs, or they were too sloppy. It still was enough to get the gist of Riordan's worries.

"It's all right. He knows us. He's fixed me up before." Merridy tried to swallow the lump suddenly sitting in her throat, before she added, "It won't put Damien into danger."

The words seemed to take a moment to sink in, but when they did, Riordan's shoulders dropped. He swayed, but Merridy grabbed him to keep him from falling over. There was little chance of her managing to get him back onto the bench like this.

She sat down next to Riordan, one arm wrapped around him. The bucket and the towels were out of reach now, but she didn't dare to leave him alone to get them. At least he had stopped bleeding; it was a little consolation, considering the state he was in.

After a while, Damien walked over to her, putting down a cup of tea, the surface rippling with how much his hand was shaking. "Here."

Merridy took a deep breath. Chamomile. She smiled weakly, raising her head to find Damien looking at Riordan with a concerned frown.

"Could you get me some water and fresh towels?" she asked.

Damien nodded and vanished into the washing room. When he reappeared, he carried the bucket she had left behind, a heap of colorful fabric draped over his arm. Merridy reached up to take the rags from him, so he could put down the bucket in front of her.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Damien nodded again, his posture strangely stiff as he

straightened up. He avoided Merridy's gaze, and she watched him in confusion as he walked across the kitchen. It took a moment for her to realize what was wrong, but when she did, she cursed herself. Fuck. She had forgotten that his father had died from a head injury.

"Damien," she called, making him stop in the doorway to the stairs. "He'll be fine." She tried to put all her confidence into her words.

Damien smiled, but it was a weak smile, and he didn't reply.

"You'll be fine," she whispered, trying in vain to catch Riordan's far-away gaze.





## CHAPTER 46

### **Fragile**

Damien opened the lid of the chest that held his clothes. It took him three attempts to prop it up, so he could dig around for a pair of pants. Riordan was a good bit taller than him, but it would probably work out in an emergency such as this. At the bottom of the chest he found an old shirt, one where Merridy hadn't yet removed the right sleeve. It was easier for him to keep up his illusion if he didn't have to take care of that himself, but now it was fortunate that she had kept some of the older ones as they were.

When he walked back into the kitchen, Merridy had cleaned up most of the blood. She was holding the cup of tea to Riordan's lips, letting him take small sips. The pained expression on his face as he swallowed made Damien grimace. He remembered too well how fucking much it hurt, having one's neck treated like this.

After putting the clothes on the table, he sat down next to Merridy. "Hey," he said.

He wanted to say so much more; tell Riordan how sorry he was, promise him that everything would be fine. The words got stuck in his throat, and he could do nothing but watch helplessly as Merridy put the cup down.

"You're gonna be all right," she said what he couldn't. Damien hoped so much that she was right.

It felt like an eternity before the kitchen door finally opened. Damien turned around, exhaling with a relieved sigh when he recognized the healer. Valadan hovered behind him, barely entering the room.

"We're here," Damien called out, since the table hid Riordan and Merridy from the view of someone standing at the door.

At the sound of his voice, the healer started to walk across the kitchen.

"This is Elijah," Damien introduced him to Riordan, before he had even arrived.

"El..." Riordan's gaze tried to focus on the moving person, but he had to squeeze his eyes shut after a moment. "El... a," he attempted to form the healer's name with his broken voice.

"The healer. He'll take care of you," Merridy explained.

Riordan's look became panicked. He pressed himself against the bench at his back, raising his trembling hands to sign, "No healer. He'll ask questions. Too dangerous."

Damien swallowed the lump in his throat at seeing the same signs, the same worry as before. He reached for Riordan's hand, taking it to stop him from repeating the words over and over.

"It's fine. Hey. Look at me." Damien waited until Riordan did so, before he squeezed his hand. "It's fine. No danger."

The healer looked from Riordan to Damien, shooting him a questioning glance. Damien had no idea if Elijah understood sign, or if he had paid enough attention to notice Riordan's words, but he decided to play it down.

"He's a bit shaken," he said while getting up, hesitantly letting go of Riordan's hand to make room for Elijah.

"A bit." Elijah put his bag down, then sat on the floor in front of his patient. "What happened?"

"A misunderstanding," Merridy chimed in before any of the others had a chance to reply. "Valadan thought we were in danger."

Elijah made a huffing noise, speaking of his displeasure about having to fix what Valadan broke once again, but he said nothing. Instead, he raised his hand, touching Riordan's face, then tilting his head to the side to get a better look at what he was dealing with. Damien watched with worry how Riordan's breaths quickened from this tiniest of movements.

He took a step back, feeling utterly useless. When he turned around, Valadan was gone. Damien only hesitated for a moment, then decided to follow him. Between Elijah and Merridy, Riordan was taken care of, and he couldn't let his brother walk away; not like this. Not *again*.

Damien hurried out of the door, to see Valadan already at the corner of the house.

"Wait."

Valadan froze, but didn't turn around. Damien took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Now Valadan spun around, to stare at his brother. "What... what are *you* apologizing for?"

Damien swallowed. "I shouldn't have said that."

The look of hurt on his brother's face was etched into his memory, like so many times before. Perhaps he didn't hit people, but he used his words to try and push them away. More often than not successfully.

"It's the truth, isn't it. All I ever did was hurt you." Valadan's tone was strange; cold and emotionless on the surface, but Damien knew better now. He recognized the pain and guilt in his eyes. "And now I'm hurting your friends,"

Valadan added quietly, "even if I don't understand how you can be friends with him."

"It's... it's complicated." Damien looked back over his shoulder, making sure Riordan and Merridy were fine, before he pulled the door closed behind him. "I should have told you. But I was... I don't know."

He paused, not sure how to put his conflicting emotions into words. It had been hard enough to convince Merridy to give Riordan a chance, and she had never met the man before. "I... understand why you did it," he added quietly.

It was hard to recall the image Valadan must have of Riordan—of the squad leader, throwing his brother into a cage. Denying him water and medical treatment, for all he knew. He had never seen him change his mind the following night, or protect Damien in the days after. He hadn't seen him apologize, wholeheartedly, bringing a trinket of his regret.

"You both did things you aren't proud of. We..." Damien swallowed. "We all did." He himself most of all, and still his friends were ready to forgive him. If he deserved forgiveness, then Riordan did as well. "I'm not asking you to like him, or become his friend. Just... he's *my* friend, and he is not a threat. Promise."

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Please... please tell him that." Valadan's shoulders dropped, his whole posture defeated. "I would but... I'm sure he doesn't wanna see me. I'll stay away, so he won't have to worry. It's probably better for everyone."

"Valadan." Damien crossed the distance between them, to wrap his arm around Valadan and pull him into a hug. "I love you. Please don't ever think I'd be better off without you."

Valadan stood stock-still for a few seconds, before he dared to return the embrace. "Dami..." he said, his voice trembling. "I thought he hurt you. I thought he was here to take you

away. I can't stand the thought of losing you again."

Damien smiled, despite the tears welling in his eyes. "It'll be all right. Just... give us a few days." He didn't allow himself to dwell on the thought of what would be if Riordan wouldn't be all right, if there would be any complications.

"When he's better, I'll let you know. Then we can all sit together and talk. I think... I think he'll understand."

Well, that might be a bold assumption, but a part of Damien really was convinced Riordan would understand. They had talked about his family, and Damien knew how much he loved his own siblings.

"I better go back inside," he then said. Reluctantly, he let go of Valadan. "Go to Josephine. Don't be alone, please."

Valadan nodded. Damien watched him walk away, wiping his tears away as Valadan vanished behind the corner of the house. He had to keep it together. See if there was anything he could do to help.

When he was sure his tears had dried up for now, Damien returned into the kitchen, closing the door quietly behind him. He stood for a moment, watching the healer do his thing. Riordan didn't look much different than before. His face was still bruised, and he had his eyes closed, a pained expression on his face as the healer touched the back of his head.

Merridy held Riordan's hand, the worry on her face so painfully familiar. She made sure to stay out of the way of the healer, but didn't let go of Riordan for a moment. Damien remembered her care; remembered how much it had helped him. He hoped it was helping Riordan as well.

"How does it look?" he found himself asking the moment Elijah lowered his hand.

The healer made an unwilling noise. "That was some misunderstanding," he said, shooting Damien a dark glance. "But he should be fine. I focused on getting the swelling down, both on his head and throat. He'll need a few days'

rest; a week would be better. And he should take it slow for at least a month."

He reached out to take Riordan's hand from Merridy, wrapping a bandage around it with curt, quick motions. "His wrist is sprained as well. Nothing I can do about that, not after everything else," he said, accompanied by another dark look. "But that's probably the least of his problems now. Does he live nearby?"

"He lives in the citadel," Damien said.

"That's a bit far in his condition. It would be good if he could stay the night—"

"He can stay as long as he wants," Merridy interrupted. "I'm not letting him go back there alone."

Her outburst made Riordan open his eyes. He stared at her, unbelieving, while Damien smiled at her resolve.

"I'll get the bed ready," he said. "He can have mine."

By the time he returned to the kitchen, Elijah was gone. Riordan sat on the bench, wearing the pants Damien had brought him. Merridy was just pulling the shirt over his head, directing his arms into the sleeves. Riordan looked tired, but not as terribly out of it as he had before. He followed her instructions to lower his arms and lean forward, and when he did open his eyes, his gaze was clear.

When she was done, Damien stepped next to her, to help her get Riordan onto his feet. Together, the two of them managed to lead him up the stairs and into Damien's bedroom. By the time he was laying down, he was out of breath, pressing one hand against his temple. Merridy stood next to the bed, but cast an uncertain glance at the door.

"I left everything on the floor..." she said, dejected.

"It's okay. Stay with him. I'll go clean up."

Leaving all doors open, so he would be able to hear anyone calling for him, Damien walked back into the kitchen. It didn't take long for him to gather the dirty clothes, used rags

and the stained rug. He rinsed them quickly before dropping them into the laundry basket. After cleaning the buckets, wiping the floor and putting away the empty tea cup, he grabbed a pitcher of water to bring it into his bedroom.

When he arrived there, Riordan seemed to be sleeping already. It wasn't a surprise; he had looked as if he could hardly keep his eyes open. Merridy sat on the floor next to the bed, leaning against the nightstand. She looked very worried, and very tired.

"You should go to bed, get a bit of sleep," Damien said.

"No. I'm staying here. I'm not leaving him alone."

Damien sighed. This, too, was all too familiar.

"Okay," he said, reaching past her to put the pitcher of water on the nightstand.

He knew there was no way to convince her otherwise, and he didn't truly want to. What he wanted was to help her get a bit of rest, though. And if she didn't want to go to her bed, her bed had to come to her. Well, or at least a part of it, he thought as he left the room.

When he returned, as many pillows and blankets stuffed under his arm as he could carry, she had leaned her head against the bed. He dropped the pillows next to her, and the blankets at her feet.

"What..."

"If you stay here, I stay here," he explained. "Come."

She made room for him to sit down, and Damien did so, putting one of the pillows between him and the nightstand. When he was done, Merridy shuffled closer, then leaned back against his chest, resting her head on his shoulder. Damien pulled one of the blankets around her legs and up to her waist. Wrapping his arm around her, to hold her close, Damien pressed a kiss on top of her head.

"Thank you for saving him," he said.

He wouldn't have heard anything, wouldn't have gone

outside to check. Damien wasn't sure if his brother would truly have killed Riordan, but one more ill-placed hit and it could have easily happened. One moment was all it would have taken to lose his friend – and to destroy the relationship with his brother.

“He needs to be fine,” Merridy whispered.

“He will be.”

Damien looked up at the bed, at the motionless shape of his friend, listening to his quiet, regular breaths. A few days' rest, Elijah had said. He would make sure Riordan would get them.



## CHAPTER 47

### **Rest**

His head hurt. That was the first thing Riordan felt when he woke up. Fuck, and how his head hurt. Trying to move his hand, he noticed that his wrist hurt, too. With every passing second, he found more things that hurt: His throat. His arms. His whole fucking face.

Riordan froze, focused on his breaths, and on trying to remember what had happened. His memories were blurry. Faces, and fragments of words. Hands killing him, hands keeping him safe. Blood on his lips, and a wet rag on his forehead.

Realizing that this would get him nowhere, he finally decided to open his eyes, despite the light making his headache worse. He was lying in an unfamiliar room; a small one, by the looks of it. Clean wood panels and soft blankets usually didn't mean danger, so that was good. It still didn't tell him what had happened, though.

"Hey."

The soft voice made him flinch and look around frantically. It took him a moment to find the source of it, and he had to turn to the side to get a good look at Damien. He sat next to the bed, surrounded by a bunch of pillows and blankets, and

held Merridy in his arm. Wrapped in one of the blankets, she seemed to be asleep.

"Why are you two sitting there on the floor?" Riordan asked. His voice was hoarse, but the pain he had subconsciously awaited remained absent. There was only a scratching in his throat, like from a beginning cold.

"She didn't want to leave you alone." Damien looked at her with a soft smile, stroking his thumb over a strand of hair between her shoulder blades. "Neither did I, if I am honest. You scared us."

"I did?" Some of the fragmented memories returned. Faces. Her face, and one that looked like Damien's, and didn't. Pain. Panic. Automatically, Riordan raised his hand to his throat. Touching the bruised skin made him wince, and he focused on taking a deep breath, on feeling that he *could*.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You don't remember?"

Riordan shook his head, a motion he instantly regretted. He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his head against the pillow.

"You ran into my brother. He... he thought you were here to hurt me or something. He didn't take it well. He attacked you, and... fuck, I should have told him about you. I'm so sorry."

That would explain the face in his memories. And, he guessed, why he was feeling like someone had beaten him up. It was because someone *had* beaten him up.

"Merry heard you fighting, and she ran out to check what was going on. It seems she came just in time to get him off you. You should have seen her. She looked about ready to tear Valadan into pieces."

Riordan turned his head and stared at Damien, trying to comprehend his words. To remember. It didn't make sense. Well, Valadan wanting to beat him up did, if he was honest. Back then, the man had already radiated hate while obviously

trying his best to remain civil. It seemed like this time he had given up on such pretenses.

What didn't make sense was Merridy coming to his rescue.

"Why would she do that?" he asked.

"Because you're my friend," Merridy mumbled. "Asshole."

She opened her eyes, pulling her blanket with her as she turned around, so she could look at Riordan.

"I thought you hated me," he said, cursing himself as her gaze darkened.

"I wanted to hate you. Because you hurt him, and you threatened us, and you have no manners." For a moment, the angry glare in her eyes was back. It didn't last long. Instead, it made room for a strange sadness as she said, "But I don't. I can't."

Turning away from him, Merridy freed herself from the blanket and got to her feet. "I need to get something," she said, her voice rough and husky from what sounded like barely suppressed tears.

She hurried out of the room, ignoring Riordan as he called out to her, "What... what's wrong?"

Damien had looked after her, and now turned his attention back to Riordan. The sadness on his face was the same as on hers.

"She was worried out of her mind about you," he explained. "And it's hard for her to see you like this."

"Like this?"

Damien raised his hand, gesturing at his own temple, then his throat. "I probably looked similar when she saved me," he said. "You're in a bit better shape than me, though," he added with a weak smile.

"She saved you?"

Damien was quiet for a while, his face mirroring what could only be conflicting emotions.

"She did," he finally admitted. "She came across me while trying to escape on her own, and refused to leave me behind."

You have to promise me you'll never tell anyone. If they ever find me again, I can't drag her down with me."

Riordan nodded, keeping the thought to himself how doubtful it was that Merridy would ever allow anyone to get their hands on Damien. Not without a fight. She surely wouldn't have allowed him to.

"All those scars." Riordan remembered the day Merridy had finally lost her patience with him. It had only been a short glance, but that had been enough to burn the image into his memory. "They tortured you there, didn't they," he whispered.

"What makes you think they're from the dungeon?" Damien asked tonelessly, without looking at him.

"You didn't have them before. After..." Riordan raised his right hand, before dropping it back onto the blanket. "I took your armor off, cleaned you up. You didn't have them then."

Damien stared blankly ahead, perhaps trying to accept this new information. He felt for the collar of his shirt, as if he remembered the tattered clothes he had been wearing back then. When he eventually started to speak, his voice was quiet, shaking.

"It was one of the guards. He wanted revenge. Thought I hurt his cousin. It wasn't..." He inhaled shakily, followed by what sounded suspiciously close to a sob. "It couldn't have been me. I never... it was all..." Damien paused, raising his gaze to the ceiling. Above him, the air shimmered, and a few pastel butterflies danced through the air, before dissipating in a shower of sparks. "All this, all illusions. I never physically... hurt them. Not like him."

Riordan didn't ask who 'him' was. Perhaps the same son of a *mok* who had forced Damien to do all those horrible things. Not that it mattered. They were far away from Raqhar, and his time with the rebels a thing of the past. The people in the capital probably thought the Nightmare was long dead. And just

like Merridy, Riordan would do anything to keep it that way.

"She saved me. She dragged me out of there, telling me not to give up. I was barely alive, and I... I didn't want to go on. But every time she called my name, every time she touched me, she gave me back a bit of hope."

A sound coming from the door made Riordan turn his head. Merridy was standing there, a cup in hand and tears glistening in her eyes.

"I sometimes still dream of it. He's dying, and there's nothing I can do, and no one cares, because everyone thinks he's some evil monster." She avoided looking at Damien as she spoke, keeping her gaze anchored somewhere between the bedsheet and Riordan. "You don't think so. That alone is reason enough not to hate you."

Riordan watched her walk towards the bed, a lump in his throat. She held the cup in both hands, careful not to spill the contents as she sat down on the mattress.

"The healer gave me this. Said you'd probably have a monstrous headache for a while. And by the looks of it, you do." Her smile was weak, overshadowed by the tears now running down her cheeks. "Want it?"

Riordan nodded, pushing his shoulders up against the pillow so he could raise his head better. She helped him drink, some sweet fruit juice with a bitter note of whatever medicine the healer had given her beneath.

When he was done, Merridy put the empty cup aside, but remained sitting. She wiped at her eyes, which didn't help much against her tears. A day ago, he wouldn't have dreamed of doing so, but now Riordan dared to reach for her, ignoring the pain in his sprained wrist. She looked at his hand as it grabbed her sleeve, then at his face. When he tugged at her sleeve, she followed the motion, lowering herself until he could wrap his other arm around her.

"Thank you for saving me," he said.

At his words, she seemed to fall apart. With a choked sob, she wrapped her arms around him, pressing her face against his chest. Riordan froze for a moment, but then he held her close. It was surreal, to think that she had been this worried about him.

He'd wonder about that another time. Even though the headache started to fade, he was still so tired. Keeping his eyes open was exhausting, so he left them half closed, until the shadow of a movement made him turn his head.

"You two need some rest." Damien had gotten up, was standing at the foot of the bed. "I'll go do the laundry while the sun's still out, and then I'll tell Valadan that you're..." He paused, his gaze resting on the bruises on Riordan's face. "As fine as the circumstances allow, I guess. And I'll ask Josephine to notify the Citadel that you're incapacitated for a while, if that's all right with you?"

"Mhm."

Half of the words scattered the moment they reached Riordan's ears, and the other half settled somewhere in the fog that had taken over his brain. He tried to pull himself together for a moment longer. "Thanks," he said. Letting the Citadel know that he wouldn't be able to come back for his next mission was probably a wise idea.

The next time he blinked, Damien was closer, holding the end of a blanket in his hand and pulling it over Merridy. She had calmed down a bit, but didn't seem like she wanted to let go of Riordan anytime soon.

Riordan searched Damien's face for any hint of jealousy, but there was none. He smiled softly as he stroked Merridy's hair, then rested his hand on Riordan's shoulder.

"Try to rest," was all he said.

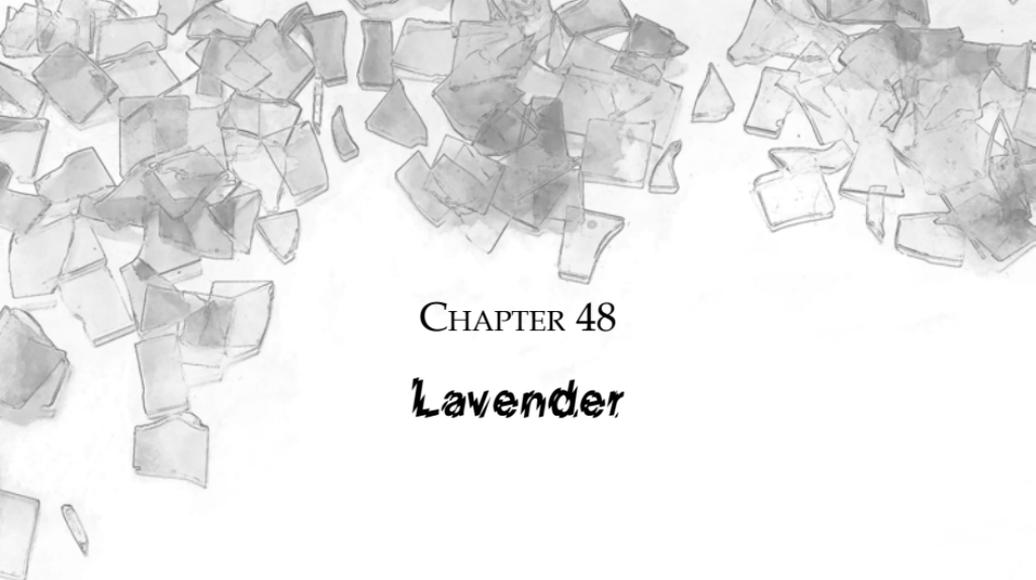
Riordan closed his eyes. Rest sounded good. Especially now that Merridy's presence chased away the lingering terror of his fragmented memories.

When Damien's steps had faded, she grasped the fabric of his Riordan's, shifting to a more comfortable position. Her head rested on his shoulder now, her face no longer buried in his chest as she mumbled, "Hey, Asshole."

"Mh?"

"You have to get better." Her voice was shaking, making him want to laugh and cry at the same time as she added, "You need to help me fix that flowerpot you broke."





## CHAPTER 48

### **Lavender**

Riordan made his way down the stairs on unsteady legs. Merridy hovered behind him, ready to catch him should he stumble. She had become a bit less clingy in the last days, but every time he left the bedroom, she was at his side. Perhaps he would have protested more, if he hadn't felt like shit; always a bit dizzy, with a persistent headache, and quickly out of breath from the tiniest bit of exertion.

At first, he had doubted the healer's instructions to take it slow for a month. A month! But now, four days later and barely able to walk across the house without collapsing, it didn't seem to be that far-fetched anymore.

As soon as he had made it safely to the bottom of the stairs, Merridy took a step back, but still followed him through the kitchen.

"You really don't have to help me," she said, not for the first time.

Riordan paused close to the door that led outside, one hand on the counter to steady himself as he turned around to face her.

"Hey. I broke it." He grinned, then instantly regretted doing so. His face still fucking hurt. He had avoided looking into a

mirror, but if her permanently concerned expression was any indication, he probably looked as shit as he felt.

“Riordan...”

“I know. But I need. To get out. For a bit.” If he spent another day staring at the bedroom ceiling, he’d lose his mind. “I’m not in good. Shape. But perhaps. I can hold. A shovel.”

“It’s called a trowel.” She sighed. “A shovel is what I need to bury you under the lavender if you overdo it. Come.”

Merridy reached for his arm, to help him to the door. Stepping outside, Riordan closed his eyes at the sudden brightness. It made his headache worse, but the warmth of the autumn sun on his skin was wonderful. Blinking his eyes open just often enough to not run into the wall, he followed Merridy along the path that led around the house. She didn’t stop at the spot where Valadan had attacked him, but stepped off the path and walked across the meadow. Short grass dotted with wildflowers filled the space between low fruit trees, and a row of blooming berry bushes surrounded the area.

“You better sit down.”

He didn’t disagree with that assessment. Merridy helped him lower himself to the ground, then lean back against one of the trees. An apple tree, if the blurry fruits at the edge of his vision were any indication. He didn’t bother focusing on them, closed his eyes instead while catching his breath. The leaves still let enough sunlight through to warm him, but not overly so. It was nice.

Merridy walked away to fetch something. Riordan listened to her steps, fading away, approaching again. When she put something down, he opened his eyes to find a bucket in front of him. It was filled with a bit of soil and some plants that didn’t look all too happy – even to his eyes.

“You know. We’re not where I broke it,” he said.

“That’s the fun thing about flowerpots. You can pick them up and move them.” She did just that, placing an empty

flowerpot next to the bucket. There were no obvious seams, so it probably wasn't the same one he had broken.

"No way."

Merridy had already started to walk away. "Wait until you hear about the watering cans," she mumbled under her breath.

It made Riordan grin, which in turn made his face hurt. Perhaps he should just not move. At all. Instead, he listened to Merridy, how she started to do whatever she wanted to do, while humming quietly to herself. Being out here was comfortable, peaceful, and way more pleasant than being stuck in bed all day.

After a while, he opened his eyes once more. The flowerpot was filled with soil now. Merridy used her fingers to dig some holes into it, while a metal tool lay discarded to the side.

"So, that shovel..." he started.

"Trowel."

"That trowel."

Merridy picked it up and held it out for him to take. Riordan closed his fingers around the handle. There was earth on the blade, so she had probably used it while he had been dozing off.

"What's it for?"

Merridy looked from the trowel to him. A few seconds of silence followed, before she said, "Shoveling."

This time, Riordan burst out laughing. His laugh quickly turned into a cough, bringing tears to his eyes and making him grimace in pain. His throat was mostly healed, as long as he didn't speak too loudly, and only ate soft things. Laughing was not on the list of recommended activities, though.

"I'm sorry." She took the trowel from him, grasping his hand instead. "Are you all right?"

Not having the breath to speak, he merely nodded, quickly signing 'don't apologize' with his free hand. Merridy gave

him a quizzical look, but whether she didn't believe him, or didn't understand his signs, he couldn't tell.

"Do you need anything? Should I get you some water?"

Riordan shook his head. "I'll just rest a bit." His words were followed by another cough, and he leaned his head back against the tree. Closing his eyes, he focused on keeping his breaths calm. After a moment, Merridy started to hum again. It made him smile, and he slowly relaxed.

When Riordan awoke, he felt surprisingly rested. At first, he couldn't remember where he was. He wasn't that warm anymore, and the ground under him was uncomfortably hard. He smelled earth and grass, the same earth and grass he saw when he finally opened his eyes.

He was outside, he remembered, and Merridy was still here, humming another tune now. He had probably fallen asleep and dropped to the side. When he tried to sit up, something slid off his shoulders. Riordan reached for it, finding a knit jacket in pastel pink and blue colors.

He held it in one hand, propping himself up with the other; the one where his wrist didn't hurt. Merridy watched him, with that seemingly permanent look of worry on her face. She was — obviously — not wearing her jacket anymore, which seemed to be a bit too cold, even on a sunny day such as this. Riordan held it out to her, a lump in his throat.

"Merridy..."

She wiped her hands on her pants before reaching for the jacket and slipping it on. "You should call me Merry," she said, her gaze fixed on the buttons. Closing them must be quite complicated, since it seemed to take all of her attention.

Riordan looked from her hands to a row of flowerpots; the large one she had worked with earlier, as well as a couple of smaller ones. Each one of those held fresh soil and a single plant. She must have brought it all here, to stay at his side

while he had been sleeping.

"We should probably get inside," she said. "I need to wash my hands and change. Valadan will be here any time now."

Riordan closed his eyes with a sigh. Valadan. He had managed to completely forget about that particular appointment.

"I can tell him to come another time, if you don't feel well," Merridy offered instantly.

"Nah." Riordan took a deep breath, not opening his eyes. "Let's get this over with."

To claim that he wasn't nervous would have been a lie. It wasn't that he was truly afraid — there was no way Valadan would hurt him. No way Merridy would *allow* Valadan to hurt him. But the irrational part of him really didn't want to be in the same room with the man who had almost killed him, while the rational part of him knew it would be an awkward conversation.

And yet, he wanted to forgive him. He didn't want for this incident to stand between the brothers. Between drifting off to sleep and staring at the ceiling, there had been plenty of time to think over the last days. In a way, he could understand Valadan. The thought alone that someone could ever hurt one of his siblings as much as Damien had been hurt turned his stomach. And Valadan must have thought he was here to arrest Damien, to bring him back, if not outright kill him.

It still would have been nice of him to allow him to answer his fucking questions, instead of beating him half to death without giving him the chance to get a single word out. But now the damage was done, and not forgiving him wouldn't fix anything.

When he finally opened his eyes, Merridy crouched in front of him, a concerned look on her face. Riordan forced himself to smile — barely so, as to not strain his bruised face too much — and took her offered hand.

Side by side, they made their way back into the kitchen, where Merridy led him to the bench before vanishing into the washing room. Looking around, Riordan realized he must have slept for a while. A loaf of fruit cake was placed on the table, next to a steaming can of tea. When they had left the house, Damien hadn't even started baking yet.

Damien entered the kitchen from the hallway, tugging at a shirt he had most likely just changed into. "Hey. How do you feel?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

Reminded of the fact that he had slept outside for a while, Riordan looked down on himself, plucking a grass stalk off his sweater.

"Mhm," he mumbled. He didn't want to lie and say 'good', but Damien looked worried enough already. Telling him that his head was killing him, and he hoped he'd make it through the next hour without either collapsing or throwing up would not help his worries.

"The sun was nice," he decided on a positive sounding non-answer.

Damien gave him one more scrutinizing look, but then decided to lay the table. Riordan closed his eyes, listening to the sound of dishes and cutlery being put down, which was a bit too loud to be comfortable. He found himself wishing he could just go back to bed, but besides wanting to get this talk over with, he was hungry.

When Merridy returned, she didn't take the chair at the end of the table, instead sitting down on the bench next to Riordan. The sound of ceramic moving over cloth told him that Damien moved one of the plates over in front of her.

"Remember the obnoxious amount of apricot jam Holly gave us last year?" he asked. There was no audible answer, but Merridy probably nodded, for he continued, "I might finally have found a use for it. Let me know what you think of it."

"I don't even have to try it to tell you that it's gonna be the best fruit cake I've ever had," Riordan chimed in.

"You said that the last three times," Damien pointed out.

"It was true the last three times."

A knock on the door put a quick end to the conversation. Damien got up, to open the door and invite his brother in, while Merridy and Riordan sat in sudden silence.

Riordan's memories of the incident were still too blurry to recall more than Valadan's angry face. The one time before that Riordan had seen him, he had been wearing black leather armor. Now he wore a dark green sweater and seemingly comfortable, dark brown pants. He looked way less like the mercenary Riordan had expected, and way more like just some guy.

Just some quite good looking guy, if he was honest. The similarity between the brothers was striking, but Valadan looked at least a decade younger. From his carefully trimmed stubble of a beard, over a few copper strands falling into his eyes, to excellently matching colors of his clothes, Riordan was certain little about his appearance was a coincidence. His eyes had the same purple shimmer as Damien's, but his hair was longer, and his whole posture different. Where Damien always seemed like he wanted to blend into the masses, Riordan had no doubt that Valadan was used to—and enjoyed—standing out.

"Hello," Riordan eventually said; because the silence had been too long, and because he didn't like the way Valadan was looking everywhere but at him. He couldn't bring himself to offer his hand for a handshake, though; to invite him to come *that* close.

Valadan didn't seem to have any intentions to do so anyway, instead picking the chair that was the furthest away from Riordan. "Hello," he replied while sitting down.

Well, this whole thing was every bit as awkward as Riordan

had feared, and then some. It wasn't him who was here to apologize, though, so he said nothing. Tapping his fingers against his empty plate, he nodded thankfully as Damien offered him some tea.

For a while, the only sounds were the clanking of cutlery and splashing of tea as Damien served all of them. When Riordan looked up, he found that Merridy looked as uncomfortable as he felt. It made him grin, but he tried to suppress it—both because it fucking hurt, and because it probably wouldn't help the already tense mood.

With a piece of cake in front of him, and seemingly no one willing to break the silence anytime soon, Riordan decided he might as well start eating. His battered condition would certainly allow him to ignore a few social rules he already barely adhered to on his better days.

He ate slowly, noticing from the corner of his eye that Merridy followed his example. The cake was just as good as he had expected, but the situation made it hard for him to truly enjoy it. The situation, and the way each bite scratched in his throat when he swallowed.

"I'm sorry," Valadan eventually said. He hadn't touched his cake yet. "I really am. I thought you were... fuck, I *didn't* think."

He exhaled a shuddering breath. His gaze rested on Riordan's face, making him wonder once more just how bad he looked. He resisted the urge to raise a hand to his aching temple, instead dissecting his piece of cake into increasingly smaller bites.

"I panicked, and I let my anger get the better of me, and I should never have done that," Valadan continued, his voice deliberately calm. Perhaps he had rehearsed his words before coming here. It was an endearing image. "I am truly sorry I hurt you. If there's anything I can do to help, please let me know."

It was a nice offer, Riordan had to give him that. There wasn't anything he could think of, though. The Order had been informed that he was incapacitated for the time being, Merridy had fetched some of his clothes, and other than that, all he could do was rest and wait.

Riordan took another bite of his cake, chewing it more thoroughly than necessary. Perhaps he should have rehearsed his own words, because his concentration was fading quickly.

"I forgive you," he said. For all he had thought about it, now that decision came easily. Valadan's regret was genuine. He hadn't attacked him out of spite or hate, but out of love for his brother. "So." Riordan looked up, searching Valadan's gaze, despite his increasing headache. "We're good?"

"You can't be serious." Valadan stared at him. "Just... like that? I mean, look at you."

Riordan tried for another grin, slowly getting the hang of how to move as little of his face as possible. "Pretty handsome, right?" he asked. "Don't be jealous. You're not so bad yourself."

Valadan seemed to be at a loss for words. That was a small victory, and also made it easier for Riordan to relax. It was definitely worth getting nudged under the table by Merridy, who rolled her eyes at him. Riordan smiled, then winced when a sudden stabbing pain behind his left temple made him squeeze his eyes shut.

"I'd do anything for my family," he said, voice strained. "I understand." He was lucky he had never been in a situation where he had feared for his family's safety like that, and he hoped he never would be.

The pain had brought the nausea back. There was no way he'd finish his cake now; he'd be lucky if he made it back to bed without throwing up. Merridy must have noticed it. Her fingers closing around his helped him relax and breathe a bit easier.

"I'd like to lie down," he said so quietly, it was almost a whisper.

"Of course. I'll help you."

She had to let go of his hand to walk around the table, taking his arm instead when she had arrived next to him. The others were quiet, which was nice, because the moment Riordan stood up, the pain got worse.

When Merridy started to lead him, Riordan blinked his eyes open, to at least regain some of his orientation. He found that both Damien and Valadan were watching him. Concern was written on the older brother's face, while the younger one's still showed his guilt.

Riordan looked away, staring at the floor in front of his feet. Just because he had forgiven Valadan, didn't mean everything was fine or forgotten. But it was a start. Even if they'd never be friends, he hoped they'd be able to be civil to each other — for Damien's sake.

The way up the stairs took three times as long as usual. Halfway up, he considered sitting down and never getting up again. Merridy pulled him along, even when he decided to keep his eyes closed, feeling his way along the walls instead.

"Thank you," he said when he was finally sitting on the bed. He was out of breath, and his hands grasping at the mattress were shaking.

"Here." Merridy offered him the cup from the nightstand, in which she had mixed some of the healer's medicine with cold tea. It didn't help much, but was better than nothing.

When Riordan was done, she pulled the blanket back and helped him lay down. At first, he had planned to return to the Citadel as soon as possible, to not burden them longer than absolutely necessary. Now, the thought of lying alone in his room, with nothing to distract him from the pain, wasn't very appealing.

Merridy pulled the curtains closed, then made sure the blanket was tucked in. It smelled faintly of lavender, making him smile.

"Lavender," he mumbled without opening his eyes.

"What?"

"You said." Riordan was drowsy, but he tried to keep his thoughts from scattering for a moment longer. "You'd need the shovel. To bury me. Under lavender."

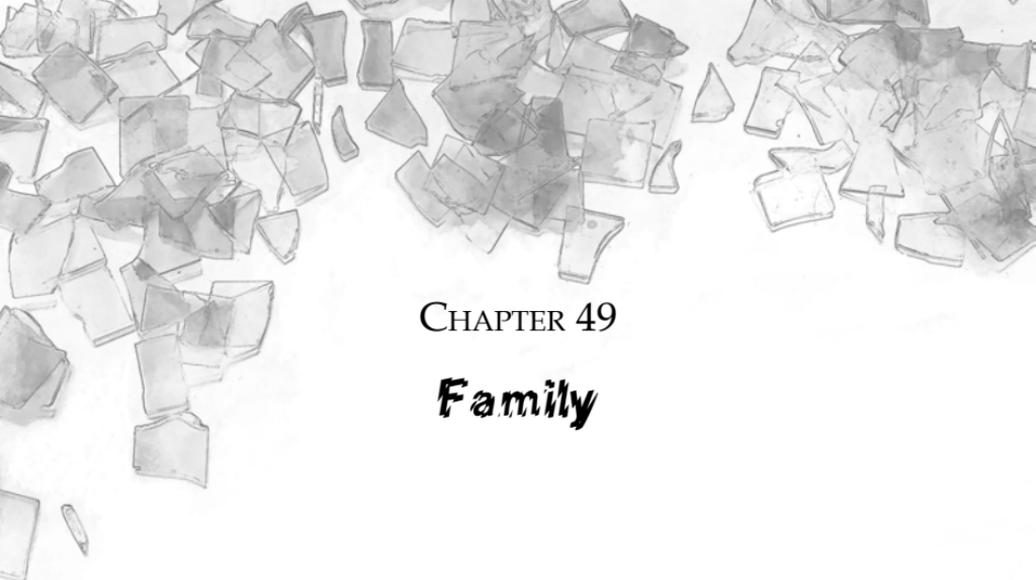
"So what?"

"You like. Lavender."

Merridy sighed. "Sleep," she said. Riordan felt her reach under the blanket, so she could take his hand. "No one's getting buried."

Sleep sounded good. Before he drifted off, he could have sworn he heard her whisper, "And I like you."





## CHAPTER 49

# **Family**

Damien looked from the closing door to his brother. Valadan seemed utterly shocked. Which was fair, Damien guessed. Even he wouldn't have expected for Riordan to just forgive Valadan like that.

What might have shaken his brother just as much was the state Riordan was still in. The healer had brought the swelling down, but half of Riordan's face as well as his neck were covered in bruises. Damien had gotten used to seeing him like that, but Valadan's shock upon laying eyes on him had been obvious.

Looking at the untouched cup of tea in front of his brother, Damien sighed. "I'll get you something stronger," he said as he got up, to walk over to the stove.

The fire in the hearth was still burning, the water hot enough it took only a few minutes for him to prepare a cup of coffee. Damien added a bit of milk to it before bringing it to the table and setting it down in front of his brother.

For a while, the two of them sat in silence. Valadan sipped his coffee, Damien the rest of his tea, and neither of them touched the food on their plates. Damien glanced at the door, hoping that Riordan would be able to find rest quickly. His

spirit was clearly unbroken, which helped ease Damien's worries, but he hated to see him in pain like that.

Valadan followed his gaze. "He's..." He broke off, staring at the door. He swallowed visibly, his gaze darting over to Damien, his expression uncertain. "I could ask Elijah to come back," he offered.

"He was here yesterday." Damien sighed. "He's done all he can. We can only wait."

"Fuck." Valadan's expression darkened. "I... I almost killed him. How can he forgive me just like that?"

"We're a mess. All of us." Damien took a deep breath, wondering if honesty would be a wise choice right now. But perhaps some honesty was long overdue.

"When he saw me, he tried to arrest me. We tried our best to convince him that I'm not a threat. And when we thought we had fucked it up, and wanted to leave—"

Ah fuck. He obviously hadn't told Valadan about that. Ignoring his brother's widened eyes and questioning gaze, Damien continued, "He convinced us that *he* was not a threat. To show me he was serious, he brought me the waterskin you left me. Back then, he... I think, if— if not for him, I wouldn't have survived." No, he was sure he wouldn't have survived. He would have died to thirst or fever or some cruel joke gone too far long before reaching Caldeia. "And now I had to convince *you* that he is not a threat."

It was absolutely ridiculous. Even more ridiculous that somehow, between all the fear and mistrust, they had managed to become friends.

"If Merridy's behavior is any indication, you'll have to convince her next. That I'm not a threat, I mean." Valadan stared at his plate, and at the untouched cake on it. "Perhaps she won't believe you this time. I couldn't blame her."

When, as if on cue, the door opened, Valadan raised his head.

"Merridy..." He put the half-empty cup down, ready to get up. "I should leave."

She had stopped in the doorway, eyeing him warily. "Why? Do you need someone to convince you that I'm not a threat?"

"You heard us?" Valadan asked.

"Mhm."

Merridy walked back to her spot on the bench, sitting down heavily. She hadn't finished her cake before escorting Rior-dan to the bedroom, but her appetite seemed to be gone as well. Reaching for her cup she asked, "Do you think I am?"

"No, but... I obviously make you uncomfortable." Not that Valadan looked anything but uncomfortable himself. Damien had the impression his brother might jump up and run away any second. "I'm not that oblivious not to notice that you always took care to stay between him and me."

Merridy looked up, cup in hands, but not drinking from it. It could barely be lukewarm by now, yet she clung to it as if it could warm her.

"Even if he forgives you. Even if he trusts you not to attack him again. That doesn't mean he... or some part of him isn't afraid. I would be." She paused, averting her gaze. "I was," she whispered.

Damien got up and walked around the table to sit down on the bench next to her. He couldn't put his arm around her like this, but she leaned against his side, tilting her head up to shoot him a smile. Damien returned her smile with a heavy heart. It had taken so long for her and Valadan to truly be comfortable around each other. He hoped this incident hadn't ruined it all. It felt selfish, but all he wanted was for the people he loved to get along.

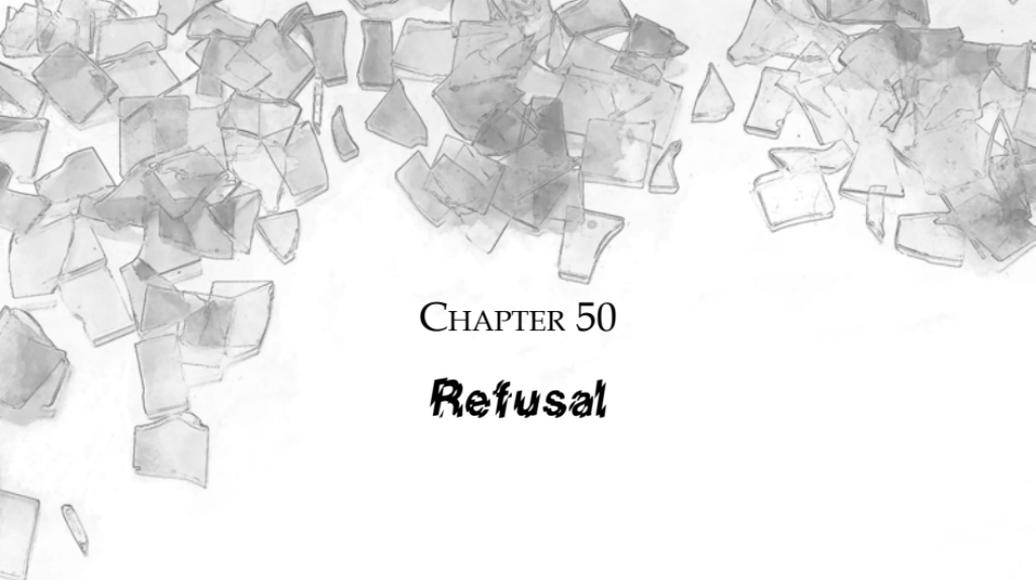
"You're afraid to lose your family. That's what it comes down to, doesn't it?" Merridy suddenly asked.

Valadan stared at her, as if he wasn't sure that question had been directed at him. He didn't answer, but his expression

was so sad and vulnerable, it broke Damien's heart.

"So am I." Merridy reached out to him, placing her fingers on Valadan's hand, clinging to his coffee. The smile on her lips was sad and tired. "But you... we're the *same* family now."

Damien looked from his brother's unbelieving expression to his hand, slowly letting go of the cup to return the touch. He smiled, blinking against the tears in his eyes as he placed his hand on top of theirs and said, "My family."



## CHAPTER 50

### **Refusal**

“No.”

“No?” Ed turned towards Damien, a dangerous gleam in his eyes. “What do you mean, no?”

“I—” Damien swallowed, his gaze flitting back and forth between Ed and the woman. “I can’t *do* that.”

The woman whimpered. Damien had no idea who she was, or what she had done to attract Ed’s attention. By the looks of it, she was innocent: a mere farmer, with sun-tanned skin and sun-bleached brown hair, wearing plain clothes, the style common for those who lived in the steppes. With the cloth gag shoved between her teeth and tied behind her head, whatever she had wanted to say—a plea for mercy, if earlier words were any indication—was unintelligible. Not that it mattered; there was no mercy to be found here, Damien knew that much.

“You know how it is, Nightmare.” Ed’s hand wandered to his side, to the hilt of the fucking dagger he loved too much. “If you don’t do it, I will.”

At his words, the woman sobbed. She tried to get up, only to be slammed back into the chair she had been sitting in. The rebel behind her put his hands onto her shoulders, holding

her down, while another tied her arms to the scratched up and bloodstained armrests.

Damien didn't think. It was a reflex that made him call for his magic, reaching out to Ed's mind. He couldn't even have said what he was trying to do, what he could hope to gain in a tent full of rebels. It didn't matter anyway. Instead of finding a trace of consciousness to manipulate, he found nothing. A horrible, all consuming, burning cold and freezing hot nothing.

His magic was drawn to it, slipping out of his grasp, taking his strength with it. A moment later, he was cowering on the floor. His left hand pressed against his temple, his eyes squeezed shut as he dug the fingers of his right hand into the hard packed earth.

Fuck, it felt as if someone had rammed a nail straight through his eye.

"That wasn't a very wise decision, Nightmare."

Someone yanked his arms back, pulling him to his feet. If not for their grip, Damien would have collapsed. It was hard enough to keep standing as it was. Between the pain in his head and the sickening feeling as if his insides had attempted to squeeze through the eye of a needle, it took all of his energy just to keep from throwing up.

Ed stepped closer, tugging at his sleeve to reveal an unremarkable metal band on his wrist. The sight made Damien's blood run cold. He should have known.

Ed's thumb brushed over the band before he flexed his fingers a few times, as if warming them up. "You know," he said, balling his right hand into a fist and smiling, "I always thought you'd try that eventually. Wouldn't have thought it would take you this long."

The smile stayed on Ed's face as he pulled back, and as his fist smashed into Damien's face. He had expected as much, but fuck, it *hurt*. The second hit brought the taste of blood to

his lips, while the third, aimed at his stomach, drove the air out of his lungs.

Damien gasped for air, coughing as he choked on his own blood. The punches came quicker now, harder, giving him no chance to recover, to catch his breath. His vision started to dim and his knees buckled, giving way under him when Ed punched his stomach a few more times. The only thing keeping him from dropping to the ground were the hands wrapped around his upper arms, digging painfully into his skin to keep him standing.

Ed said something before slamming his fist against Damien's chin, his nose, his temple. Damien couldn't understand him, his panicked heartbeat picking up with each strike. Everything in him screamed for him to curl up and protect himself.

He might have been able to break free, but there was no point in trying. There were half a dozen rebels in the tent; too many to take on in combat, or to use his magic on. One or two of them had the decency to look away, but Damien knew none of them would go against Ed. No one with any sense of self-preservation would.

Too bad that self-preservation apparently wasn't his strong suit.

A few of the punches must have broken skin. Half of Damien's vision turned red as blood dripped down from his eyebrow, mixing with the tears on his cheeks. Damien hadn't even realized he was crying. He tried to blink the tears away, as if there was any dignity left for him to save.

The moment he was successful, his gaze met the woman's. She was staring at the scene with wide eyes, almost as if she had managed to forget her own precarious situation. For a moment, a desperate hope flared up in Damien. If Ed was busy with *him*, he might forget about her. Whatever good that would do her, in the hands of her enemies. Three more

punches, the last of which made his head snap back and blood pour out of his nose, and his hope shattered.

“Where are my manners?” Ed said, taking a step back, shaking his bloody hand. His voice sounded thin through the rushing of blood in Damien’s ears. “I should take care of our guest before I allow myself to get distracted by... internal affairs. You! And you.” He pointed at two of the rebels. “Bring him outside and tie him up. I’ll deal with him later. And if he’s not at the pole by then...”

Ed trailed off, pulling his dagger out of its sheath. Damien wasn’t sure who the threat was directed at—the two rebels, each grabbing one of his arms, or him. He *was* sure it worked equally well for all of them. They wouldn’t allow him to escape, and he wouldn’t take the chance, even if offered.

They tried to pull him up, without much success. Damien’s head was spinning, his legs not having the strength to keep him upright, much less allow him to walk. The last thing Damien saw as he was dragged out of the tent was how Ed brought a chair over to sit down in front of the woman. It was a scene he had seen too often before, turning his stomach as he realized what Ed would do. What he could have prevented, if only he hadn’t been such a damn coward, if he had thought about his actions for one fucking second.

It was too late now. A muffled, terrified shriek behind him made him almost lose his non-existent breakfast as he was dragged away from the tent. The group had been here for several weeks already. At the height of summer, what little grass hadn’t been trampled into the ground by countless soles was brown and withered. The few crooked trees dotting the landscape were less bothered yet; a week or two without water wasn’t nearly enough to kill them.

Damien envied them. If not for the ever-present lack of water in this godforsaken steppe, he might have tried his luck with running away years ago.

The two rebels dragged him past another row of tents and across a barren field behind. They walked toward a pole in the middle of it, where one of the two men let go of him. Damien slumped to the side, managing to catch himself at the last moment.

“Sorry, man,” the one in front of him said as he reached for Damien’s hands.

Damien didn’t bother to reply. The one holding him—steady-ing him more than trying to prevent his escape—was an older man, whose kindness had been all but replaced with bitterness. He had been driven to join the rebels after losing his land and family to Raqhar, that much Damien had learned when occasionally talking to him. The one tying his hands to the pole was almost a kid still. There was no way Ed hadn’t chosen them on purpose. He must have known Damien wouldn’t risk hurting them. Damien was starting to believe there was nothing this sadistic asshole didn’t plan.

As soon as he was tied in place, the two men left without another word. Damien pulled half-heartedly against the rope, wrapped tightly around his wrists and secured to a metal hook at the opposite side of the pole. It was rather low, he realized; low enough to allow him to kneel, but not to sit. For now, he kept standing, balling his hands into fists and leaning his forehead against the wood. His legs were trembling, his breathing still labored. His ribs were probably not broken; he wasn’t so sure about his nose. He tried to wipe the blood away with his sleeve, but quickly gave up. It hurt too fucking much. His whole face hurt too fucking much.

Tears were still streaming out of his left eye, thanks to one ill aimed—or well aimed, who knew—blow to it. Damien tried not to think about what was happening right now, not to listen to the muffled screams in the distance. How long had it been since the last time Ed had ‘had some fun’? It must be years at this point.

Years in which Damien had lived up to his name. The threat had always been there—you do it, or I will. So Damien had done it, stopping Ed from cutting his victims apart or slicing their throats open. Instead, Damien had destroyed their minds. Sometimes, lying awake at night, haunted by all he had done, it was all he had held onto: the desperate hope that as long as they were alive, they had a chance to recover, however small. The woman would get no such chance, Damien was sure of it. Ed would make an example of her.

A desperate sob tore out of Damien's throat when he realized the screams had stopped. If Ed was done with her, it meant he was next. He wasn't sure what he dreaded more; learning that she was *dead*, or meeting the same fate.

"Comfortable?"

His head snapped up, while the terror Ed's voice had caused settled in his stomach. Damien looked to the side, squinting against the light of the midday sun to make out the silhouettes that had appeared. One of them was Ed; a head taller than most of his men, and with the posture of a self-assured asshole deeming himself invincible, he wasn't hard to recognize. The other two were the same men who had brought Damien outside earlier. They didn't look at him as they dragged the limp body of the woman closer, to dump her in front of him, just out of his reach.

Damien closed his eyes, burying his face in his arm to fight down the rising nausea. It didn't help against the image that had burned into his mind. Her fingers cut off—all of them. Each wound crudely cauterized, to stop her from bleeding out too quickly. Her face a bloody mess, the skin split and bruised. One eye missing. Ed wouldn't have taken both of them; he liked his victims to see what was happening to them.

Worst of all, she was still alive. Her remaining eye was glazed over, but her chest rose in weak, shivering breaths,

jostling the crude blade sticking out of her stomach. The woman's clothes were soaked with blood, making it hard to see if there were other injuries – other than the giant fucking stab wound, that was.

"You know this is your fault, don't you, Nightmare? If you had just done what you were supposed to do..." Ed clucked his tongue, shaking his head. "Now I had to pick up your slack."

He came closer to the pole, still holding a bloody dagger. Damien instinctively tried to shrink back as far as the rope allowed him as Ed looked him up and down. But Ed only grabbed his shirt, cutting the fabric apart with quick, angry motions. That he nicked Damien's skin as he did so seemed more of an accident than planned, which unfortunately didn't make it hurt any less. Blood trickled down his back and his side, quickly cooling in the breeze, making him shiver.

"You'll have all day to think about if your little act of defiance was worth it. I have other things to take care of, but don't worry." Ed raised the dagger, pulling it almost gently over Damien's arm. Blood welled up in the thin cut left in its wake. "I'll come back after sunset, and then we'll talk about the... consequences of disobeying my orders."

Nodding at the other two, Ed turned around. After sunset. It was barely noon. Damien failed to suppress a sob. He didn't feel warm right now, not freshly exposed and shaking with terror. He knew that would change soon. He propped his hands against the post, trying not to lean against it with any other part of his bruised body as he listened to the fading footsteps.

A pained groan made him lower his gaze. From one moment to the next, his own pain was forgotten. Fuck, he was complaining about a few bruises and some sun, while she was *dying*.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, his voice hoarse.

He carefully tested the rope, making sure it would hold, before sinking to his knees. His legs wouldn't carry him much longer, so he might as well get it over with. His hands were tied a bit too high for comfort—as if there was anything remotely comfortable about kneeling on coarse sand, littered with stones—and the ropes dug painfully into his wrists. That, too, was insignificant compared to the suffering in front of him.

“Sorry.”

Damien closed his eyes as tears burned in them. Ed was right; it *was* his fault. He had told him about what would happen if he refused often enough. If only he had found another way, anything to stop her from getting killed.

When he opened his eyes, he found that the woman was looking at him. One of her hands twitched weakly into the direction of the blade, but there was no way for her to pull it out; not without her fingers. He couldn't even imagine how much pain she must be in. Blood trickled out of the wound, seeping into the already soaked fabric of her dress. Bleeding out quickly was another mercy Ed had denied her.

Damien's head hurt, though it was hard to tell if it was from the beating, or from the shock of casting his illusions against morlit. It made it hard for him to focus on his magic, and almost impossible to move past the mental barrier trying to stop him from reaching out with it. He paused, bracing himself and taking a deep breath, then tried again.

This time, he found what he expected.

“Hey,” he croaked, carefully opening his eyes. The light stung in them, more than before, and his vision was blurry. “What... what's your name?”

The woman looked at him. The pain on her face was hard to bear, but Damien forced himself not to avert his gaze. He watched her lips move, forming a word, the same word over and over again. No sound made it out, yet the effort was

enough to make her tremble.

"Arta... Ar... Arla? Marla?" he tried to speak the syllables he thought he saw on her lips. "Martha?"

She stopped, closing her eye. Her features relaxed for a moment, before they distorted in pain as her body seized up. A trickle of blood ran from the corner of her mouth.

"I'm—" He froze. How long had it been? How long had he been the Nightmare, nothing more? "I'm Damien," he said quietly, choking down the emotions upon speaking his own name. "I'm sorry, Martha. I can't save you."

She didn't react to his words. It was probably not a surprise to her, seeing as he was bleeding and bound to a pole next to her. He still wished he could have saved her. Saved everyone else. Saved *anyone* else. As it was, he couldn't even save himself.

"But I can..." Damien paused, licking his lips. They were dry already. "I can take away your pain."

What if he was promising too much? If he couldn't? He had to try, though. It was the least he could do.

"Do you want me to?"

At first, there was no reply. She only stared at him, unmoving except for the occasional shiver and involuntary twitching of her body. He wondered what she saw in him. One of her enemies, sent to hurt her, punished for refusing, now offering her comfort. Or perhaps she wasn't lucid enough anymore to even think that far. The more time passed, the more Damien doubted she had even understood him.

When she eventually nodded, the weakest movement of her head, it came as a surprise and relief at the same time.

Carefully, Damien cast his illusion, nudging her mind to find peace while locking out the pain. It was hard to figure out if he was successful. Her body still struggled against the impending death, even as her eye fell shut and her hand dropped to the ground. He had to be certain.

Damien reached out further, following the trail of his illusion, feeling, *seeing* what shape it had taken. This was a facet of his talent Ed didn't know about. Damien would make sure it stayed that way. He had no doubt that son of a *mok* would find a way to exploit it. It wasn't quite reading thoughts, but could come close under the right circumstances.

Not under these circumstances, though. All he caught was a scene of her lying in what he assumed to be her bed, surrounded by people. Two children, about ten years old, and a man, holding her hand. They were smiling, and crying, and Damien retreated before he could make out what words were spoken, tears in his own eyes.

It didn't mean her family was still alive. It was a wish, nothing more; her dying wish. To go in peace, knowing her family was safe. Damien hoped they were.

He kept staring at the steppe, ignoring the pain growing behind his eyes, and the grisly sight next to him. All that counted now was keeping the illusion up, for as long as necessary.

Damien couldn't say how much time passed. The sun rose higher, blazing down and down and down on him. His back was burning. His throat was burning. His knees were burning. He had long given up on his attempts to shift his weight, to try and ease the pain. The rope had dug deep into his wrists, and his arms were trembling, sticky with blood or sweat or both.

He could have checked, but for that, he would have had to open his eyes. The mere thought of allowing any more of the mercilessly bright light in was unbearable.

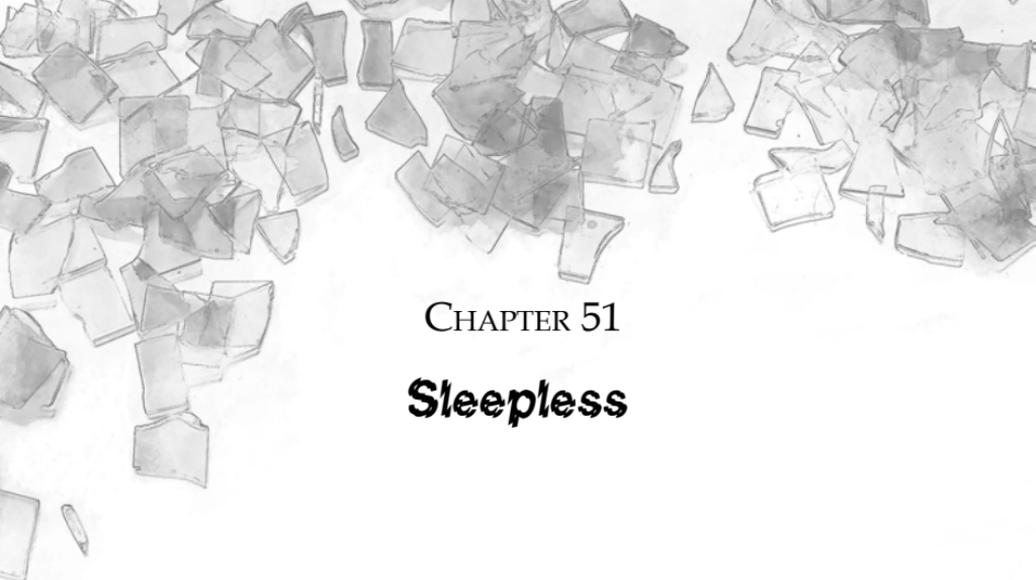
Even his breaths felt slow and sticky, as if the hot air ran down his lungs instead of getting sucked into it. It didn't matter, nothing of it mattered. Not the heat, not his pain, not his thirst. All that mattered was keeping the illusion up, second after agonizing second.

Until, from one moment to the next, his magic's target was gone. It startled him so much he flinched, sending a wave of pain through his shoulders. He turned his head, the stiff muscles in his neck protesting at the movement. Forcing his eyes to open, he thought he would throw up from the pain. He had to check, though, had to be sure.

She lay still, almost peacefully. Her chest no longer rose, and no more blood seeped out of her wounds. It had formed clumps in the sand beneath her, and a few flies were already buzzing around her head. Before Damien could stop it, a sob left his lips, then another. Soon, he was crying, unable to stop as pain and exhaustion and guilt all came crashing down on him. She was dead. Killed, because he had *failed*.

He slumped against the pole, pressing his cheek against the wood. It felt almost cold under his overheated skin. Perhaps he would be next. It was his last thought before his world turned black.





## CHAPTER 51

# **Sleepless**

Damien couldn't remember how he had ended up sitting on the floor of the little hallway in front of his bedroom. He also couldn't remember why his hand was bleeding, or why his shoulder hurt.

All he could remember were the remnants of a nightmare; the worst nightmare he'd had in months. Swirling images of blood and death. The memory of pain and despair and the merciless sun. The taste of dust on his lips, and Ed's cruel voice in his ears.

He shouldn't have gone to bed, but it was the second day since Merridy had left and he had been so tired. He still was, because what little sleep he had managed to get had been all but restful. Damien leaned back against the wall, trying to wipe a tear away, but only managing to smear blood across his cheek.

How pathetic he was. Couldn't even be on his own for three days without completely losing his shit. Merridy would come back, and she would see the state he was in, and she would feel bad for having left in the first place.

Damien hated it. He hated himself for doing this to her. She should have a normal life. She shouldn't have to sleep with a

backpack under her bed in case his past ever caught up with him and they had to run. She should be able to talk to her friends without losing her smile if one of them asked how they met. She should be able to visit her old friends without having to worry about him.

Instead, she was stuck with him. With his nightmares and panic attacks, when her presence was the only thing keeping him grounded. He had never understood what she saw in him. The only good he saw in himself was through her eyes. But her joy and her smile when she told him she loved him were genuine. She had made herself at home in his life and in his heart, and refused to leave. And Damien was way, way too selfish to send her away, no matter how much better than him she deserved.

He dragged himself to his feet, hoping he wouldn't leave any blood stains on the wall. He had to find something to do, something to keep himself busy, to stop his thoughts from spiraling out of control. That was the only benefit of being so fucking tired. He couldn't focus on more than one thing at once, so he had to momentarily drop his self-hate to convince his limbs to move.

After walking down the stairs in almost complete darkness, he ignited every glowing crystal he could find. The kitchen was already spotless after the previous day, but Damien grabbed a rag anyway, to wipe every surface again.

By the time he was done with that, and with polishing the silverware, and with pulling out, inspecting and stacking all pots—surprisingly in exactly the same order as before—the sun was rising. Another day and a half until she'd come back.

Damien sat down on the bench, burying his face in his hand. There was no way he'd be able to focus on the glass in his condition. On anything, really. He could make a simple bread, keeping himself busy with kneading the dough for an

hour if he pushed it, but he had barely eaten since Merridy had left, and it would only go to waste.

He didn't want to go outside, where he would inevitably meet people. He didn't think he'd be good at hiding his condition. That was the problem with being a wanted criminal, wasn't it. He could never leave the house without hiding who he was; without the illusion hiding his missing arm, and the smile hiding how he felt, and the fucking fake name hiding what might be written on some faded wanted poster halfway across the continent.

He couldn't visit his brother, either. Valadan had taken his family for a week-long visit to the Sentient Wilds. It was a shame Damien could accompany neither him nor Merridy, but it was way too risky for him to show his face anywhere near a portal guard.

Not that he missed Caldeia much, but he allowed himself a moment to imagine the Wilds. A jungle so vast, it stretched from horizon to horizon. A tree so huge, it seemed to touch the clouds. Buildings grown from living plants, colorful by day, glowing softly at night.

When his head started to drop, Damien jolted awake. His heart was pounding up to his throat. He couldn't risk falling asleep; not now. He might try to sleep again later during the day. The nightmares found him anyway, no matter the time of day, but sometimes, coincidence or not, it worked. Falling asleep while the sun shone through the windows held the nightmares at bay that brought him back into the dungeons. The nightmares leaving him at the mercy of Gaston, where he had to watch himself die, over and over again. Or worse, watch *her* die.

The sunlight wouldn't do much against the other kind of nightmare that haunted him lately, though. Who knew what had caused them, if there even was a cause. Nightmares of his time with the rebels. Of hopelessness and despair and the

endlessly burning sun. Of all the things Ed had done. Of all the things Ed had made *him* do.

Damien shook his head as he pushed himself to his feet. He needed something to do. Anything. With all other options exhausted, he took down the curtains, bringing them into the washing room. The soap stung in the wound on his hand, but it was a welcome pain; one that didn't sit deep inside his chest, squeezing his throat. He still didn't know what exactly had caused it, but it didn't matter. He must have hit the bedpost while thrashing in his sleep or something.

Once the curtains were put up to dry, Damien grabbed a bucket of water and started cleaning the windows, as if they hadn't been spotless before. It came with the downside of catching glimpses of his reflection in the glass. He really looked as shit as he felt.

Next came the dried goods. Damien opened and inspected each container of grains, of legumes, of sugar and spices. He took some notes, which things would have to be replaced in the foreseeable future, but his kitchen was well stocked, and it would be weeks before he'd have to go out and buy more. The letters danced before his eyes as he wrote down the word 'cinnamon', grabbing the charcoal pen so hard his knuckles turned white.

He put each container back carefully, sorted by size, the labels meticulously aligned. By now, the thin curtains were reasonably dry, so he put them up again. It took more than twice as long as taking them down. His fingers were shaking, and he dropped most hooks multiple times before managing to slide them into place.

When he was done, Damien dragged himself back to the bench. For a while, he just sat there, fighting down nausea and dizziness alike. He needed to rest, but the thought of returning to his nightmares made him feel sick. How much longer would he manage to stay awake? How long *had* he been

awake already? He couldn't have gotten much more than an hour of sleep those last two nights, two at most.

He was pulled out of his thoughts when someone knocked on the kitchen door. Damien raised his head, staring blankly at it for several long moments. He didn't want to get up and open it. He didn't want to fake a smile for whoever had decided to visit for some trivial banter or some annoying request. He just wanted to sit here and drown in self-pity.

The person knocked again, and Damien rose with a sigh. It was five steps to the door; five steps was all it took for him to plaster a fake smile onto his face. It wouldn't reach his eyes, but he would be able to find an excuse for it, if this unexpected visitor would even notice. He hadn't slept well—couldn't sleep well without his wife at his side. Normal people were like that sometimes, weren't they?

He pulled the door open, and the smile froze on his face. Outside stood the last person he would have expected. The only person he hadn't considered visiting, because he was supposed to be on a mission for another week. Golden curls, and warm brown eyes, and that fucking half-smile-half-grin that made him simultaneously look like a teenager and an older brother.

The mask slipped. There were three people in Damien's life—four if he counted Valadan's wife—he could be honest with. Riordan was one of them.

Riordan's smile faded just as quickly. "What's wrong?" he asked. He *signed*.

Perhaps it was for the better. His voice was one of the things reminding Damien of Raqhar, as much as he hated it.

Damien shook his head, wrapping his arm around himself. When Riordan pushed through the door, closing it behind him, he took a step back. It was an involuntary reaction, and one he instantly regretted when he saw the worried frown on his friend's face.

"Nightmares," he whispered. It barely even was a whisper, his voice toneless and cracking after two days without using it. "Just... nightmares," he tried again, a bit steadier this time, but no less desperate.

"Where's Merry?"

"In Caldeia." Damien swallowed. "Visiting friends."

Riordan raised his hands, a questioning look on his face, but he didn't start to sign. After a moment, he sighed, crossing the distance between him and Damien. When Riordan pulled him into a hug, Damien's resistance vanished. It was pathetic, but he could have cried at no longer being alone with his miserable thoughts of despair and self-hatred.

After a moment, Riordan took a step back, scrutinizing Damien more thoroughly than before. He kept his right hand on Damien's arm.

"Are you all right? There's..."

Damien didn't know the last sign, could only stare at Riordan trying to figure out what he had meant, why he was pointing at his face.

"B-l-o-o-d," Riordan spelled.

It had taken the two of them too long to figure out that learning the alphabet would make some things easier than trying to describe words with an already lacking vocabulary.

Following Riordan's gaze, Damien raised his hand to his face. There was a crust on his cheek, but his fingers came back clean. It was probably from this morning, and long dried. He let his hand sink, staring blankly ahead. He should do something about that, shouldn't he? He couldn't remember what.

"Sit down," Riordan signed, nudging him towards the table.

Damien sat down on the bench. He watched as Riordan strolled over to the sink, pulling one of the towels off its hook and running some water over it. That wasn't right. They were for drying things, not for getting them wet. He said nothing.

Riordan returned, tilting Damien's head to the side so he could reach the spot with the dried blood better. The towel was cool on Damien's skin. Thinking about it, he couldn't remember if he had put any water in the kettle today. He couldn't remember drinking, either. Suddenly, his throat felt way too dry. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out, and a moment later, Damien wasn't sure anymore if there had ever been any words he had attempted to speak.

Riordan walked away and returned, having replaced the towel with a cup. "Drink," he signed before holding the cup to Damien's lips. He didn't attempt to hand it to Damien, and Damien didn't attempt to take it.

The cool water was way more pleasant running down his throat than on his face. When the cup was empty, he raised his hand to sign his thanks, but his world started spinning the moment he didn't hold onto the table anymore. Then he remembered that he could speak. "Thank you," he said, his fingers clasped around the edge of the table.

"You..."

Damien wasn't sure if he didn't know the signs, or if he was merely too tired to understand them. A warm hand grabbed his, making him aware of just how cold his fingers were. He was pulled to his feet, then an arm wrapped around his shoulder, pushing him. Damien let himself be led out of the kitchen and up the stairs, until they were standing in the little hallway where he had woken up this morning.

"Where?" Riordan asked with one hand, without letting go of Damien with the other.

Damien slowly looked from one room to the next. His thoughts were as slow and sticky as honey. It would be wrong to sleep in Merry's bed when she wasn't here. His own bed wasn't very appealing, either. Not after two nights of nightmares. Eventually, Damien pointed at the door to the living room.

Riordan led him inside and to the sofa. Damien sat down heavily. He looked at the window, the sky outside slowly turning dark. It was late already. No more sunlight for him. He wasn't sure if that was good. It probably didn't matter.

Distantly, he watched as Riordan took off his boots. Fancy boots. The thought could have made Damien smile, if he hadn't been too exhausted to smile. Then Riordan's arms were around him, and he hadn't even seen him sit down.

Black spots were dancing in front of Damien's eyes, so he allowed himself to close them for just one second. He was trembling, and he didn't even know why.

Riordan moved Damien's hand. Once. Twice. The gesture was familiar, in a way. It took Damien a moment to recognize it.

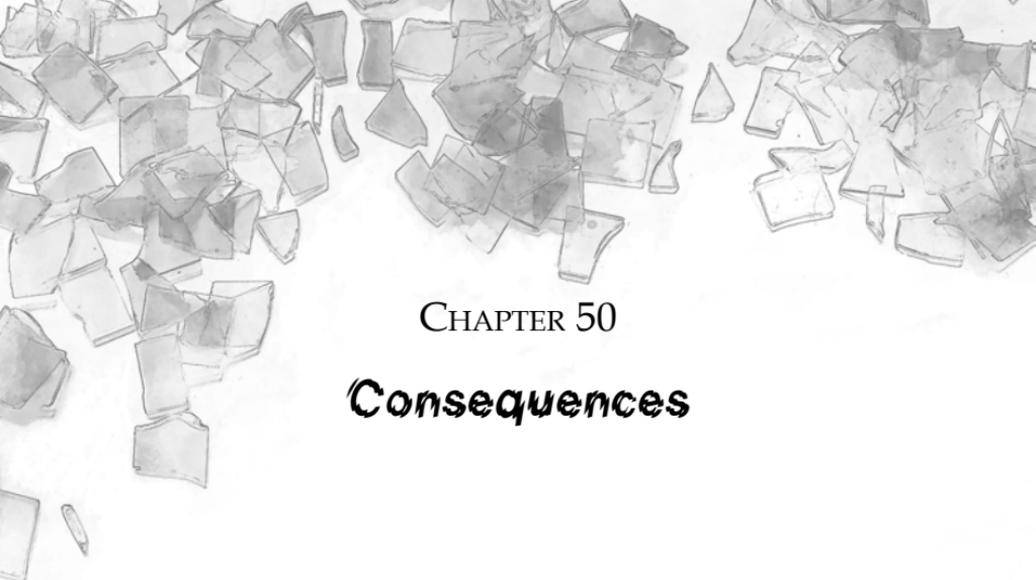
*I'm here.*

Forcing his eyes to open, he looked at his friend's face. Riordan's gaze was concerned, earnest.

"I'm here," he repeated, using only his own hands. There was another sign. Damien pondered it while Riordan pulled a blanket around his shoulders. He had seen it before. It was so hard to remember. It changed something. Present to future.

*I will be here.*

Then his arms were around Damien, pulling him close. Damien closed his eyes, giving up his pitiful attempt to resist sleep. He would dream again. He didn't dare to believe he wouldn't. But at least this time, when he awoke, he wouldn't be alone.



## CHAPTER 50

# Consequences

It was the unrelenting pain that dragged Damien out of his unconsciousness. There wasn't a spot on his body that didn't hurt. His head, agony pounding behind his eyes, telling him he had used all of his magic and then some. His arms above his head, swollen and with the rope digging deeply into his wrists. His knees, almost numb after hours of being pressed against the ground; unfortunately, only almost. His skin, burnt on his back and stretching over countless bruises everywhere else. His forehead and nose pressed against the rough wood he was tied to.

The latter was the only thing he could do something against. Damien turned his head, taking a shaky breath, and the smell hit him all at once. His body convulsed and he threw up before he had even a chance to remember. The stench of coagulated blood and excrement was so heavy in the air, he thought he could feel it on his skin.

Being left in the sun for what might have been hours had done its part to speed up the process of decomposition. Flies buzzed in the air next to Damien, occasionally landing on his exposed back and arms. His body shook with exhaustion as he pressed his face against the post, eyes and throat burning.

The woman was dead because of him. Ed had killed her because of him.

Ed.

Thinking of the murderous gleam in the man's eyes, Damien couldn't suppress a sob. Ed had promised to return after sunset, to talk about the consequences of Damien's actions. Damien might follow the woman before the day was over, but before that, endless, agonizing hours awaited him.

The sun was burning mercilessly down on him, not a single cloud in sight. Damien felt as parched and lifeless as the sad tufts of brown grass that surrounded him. He closed his eyes and buried his face in his arm, trying to block out the light that felt like needles in his eyes.

He tried to raise his arms, to keep the weight off his wrists, but he couldn't keep it up for long. Then he slumped against the post, drifting half conscious as waves of heat and pain and nausea kept him from finding rest. Every time the wind shifted, carrying the stench of blood and decay, bile rose in his throat. He threw up a few more times, pulling his strained muscles as his body convulsed. He didn't look at the woman, didn't want to see the color drain from her flesh and the flies taking over her body.

When the sun finally slipped below the horizon, it was no relief. Damien's body was still burning, but now the cool breeze made him shiver as well. That, and knowing that his time was running out.

Even without any hope left in his heart, there was such a primal terror about knowing that he would *die*. It pressed down on his chest, everything in him screaming to run, when all he could do was wait. Wait for whatever sadistic cruelty Ed had in mind for him.

The sound of approaching footsteps turned his stomach into a knot, but he had nothing left in him to throw up. There were more footsteps in the distance, as well as muffled voices,

but only one pair of feet approached him. He didn't have the courage to look up.

"Hello. Nightmare."

A hand came down between his shoulder blades, eliciting a strangled scream. Damien didn't know what was worse; the touch on his burning skin, or the strain the sudden movement put on his shoulders.

"Do you hear them? They're all coming to watch. I made sure of it."

Cold fingers trailed down his back, leaving traces of agony in their wake. Damien wasn't sure if his skin had blistered already. He wouldn't be surprised if it had.

"Some think what I'm about to do might be a bit harsh," Ed continued. "All they know is that you disobeyed my orders. But we know the truth, don't we? We know what you tried to do back there."

When Damien didn't reply, sharp nails dug into the bruised skin at his side.

"Don't we?" Ed hissed.

Damien nodded frantically, trying to turn his sob into something that resembled agreement. There was no point in denying it. Not if Ed had been wearing morlit on his skin the whole fucking time.

"So let me make one thing very clear, Nightmare. If you ever try something like that again. If you ever attempt to attack me in any way whatsoever." Ed grabbed Damien's chin, tilting his head and forcing him to look into his face. "You will *beg* me to punish you, instead of whoever I pick in your stead. I will break every bone in their body and cut them to pieces right in front of you. You will look into their eyes as they slowly drown in their own blood, knowing that it's your fault."

Ed's gaze was cold. Damien had no doubt the man would do everything he had threatened, and more. Realizing that

Ed didn't plan to kill him after all should have been a relief. It wasn't. Not when from now on every mistake wouldn't put only his own worthless life at risk.

"Oh, and if you try to run away..." Ed turned Damien's head, twisting his arms and neck as he forced him to look at the dead woman. "If you run away, this" — he shoved the body with his foot — "is only the beginning. I will make sure the Nightmare's reputation pales against the one I will make for myself. And I will start with everyone who has ever so much as smiled at you. Do we have an understanding?"

Damien barely managed to nod against the fingers digging into his chin. The horror Ed's words had caused was freezing him from the inside. He would be trapped, with no way out; with no way to refuse whatever Ed would demand from him. Damien wished he would just kill him instead.

"See. That's more like it." Ed patted Damien's cheek, pure glee in his eyes. Then he let go and took a step back. "Stand up."

Damien sank back against the post, dizzy from pain and exhaustion. It had to be a joke. He couldn't move, let alone stand. The ropes around his wrists were all that kept him from sinking to the ground. The wood under his cheek scratched his skin as Damien turned his head to look up, his vision blurry with unshed tears.

Ed's features twisted into a frown, but the amused gleam in his eyes stayed. "Disobeying again?" he asked, treacherously calm. "You know that will double your punishment."

Suddenly, there was a wooden rod in his hand. Freshly cut from one of the scattered steppe trees, by the looks of it.

"Fifteen strokes if you take them standing like a man. Thirty if you decide to remain on your knees."

As Ed turned away from him, raising his voice to address the crowd, Damien closed his eyes. He didn't listen to the announcement of his crime and punishment. A tear ran down

his cheek as he wondered if he would survive either of those numbers. He should just give up, let this sadist beat him to death. It might be better for everyone. It would certainly put an end to the Nightmare of Raqhar.

He couldn't. The fear was stronger. It made him grit his teeth, clenching his half-numb hands into fists. He had to get up. His knees were too stiff to move, his legs too weak to push him up, his arms shaking too much to hold him. Despite all that, he somehow managed to drag himself up bit by bit, putting too much weight on his wrists. His hands were swollen, his wrists rubbed raw, and every joint and muscle protested against moving after so long. When he was standing, he leaned his forehead against the post, clinging to it as if it was his lifeline. Perhaps it was. He was out of breath, his legs about to give in any moment.

There was no warning. Damien didn't have a chance to process the sound of the rod whizzing through the air before the fire tore him apart. He screamed, pressing against the post, digging his fingernails into the wood. Standing. He had to keep standing.

"One."

Ed's voice as he called out the number was too fucking gleeful. It sent a chill down Damien's spine, being reminded how much this asshole enjoyed all of this. As the rod struck again, he managed to bite back a scream by pressing his face against the back of his hands.

"Two."

Fuck, it felt like his skin was being torn off his back. Perhaps it was. Perhaps he deserved it, for having been a tool in Ed's hands for so long. For inflicting all this pain on others, instead of finding a way out before it was too late.

"Three."

Damien couldn't prevent his legs from buckling. He sank down halfway, pressing his feet into the ground and his chest

against the pole to stop himself from falling further. The bruises on his torso were only half as bad as his back now.

Every muscle tense, he waited for the next strike to come. It didn't. Seconds passed, until Damien realized that Ed was waiting for him to get back up. Forcing him to choose between fighting the exhaustion and the agony in his tormented muscles, or receiving twice as many strokes.

The moment he had struggled back up, the rod came crashing down. He screamed again.

"Four."

Damien locked his arms as his knees lost their strength. The rope kept him upright for another strike, his shoulders and wrists burning almost as much as his back.

"Five."

He couldn't keep standing any longer. Every time the rod came down, he crumpled, slamming against the post. Every time, Ed waited for him to drag himself up again, slower than before.

"Six."

He wasn't sure anymore if he was still screaming, the rushing of blood too loud in his ears. His heart hammered in his chest, as if it wanted to break out of his ribs.

"Seven."

Blood ran down from his wrists, pooling in the crook of his arms as he stood. When the next strike made him falter, it dripped onto his chest, his arms stretched above him.

"Eight."

He tried to scream, but his voice was gone. His knees crashed onto the ground, sand crunching beneath them. When he struggled back onto his feet, blood ran down his shins.

"Nine."

Red filled his vision. Too much red. There should be no blood on his face, not when Ed was hitting his back. Damien

tried to blink the red away as he pulled himself up. The skin above his left eye was burning. He might have slammed his head against the post. He couldn't remember.

"Ten."

The red turned gray as his vision dimmed. Blood ran down his back from where the rod had split blistered skin. Blood ran down his front from where the rough wood of the post had torn open his chest. Blood was in his eyes and on his lips and in the air.

"Eleven."

The wood of the post was slick. It shouldn't be. It made it harder for him to cling to it, to pull himself up. He slipped, and something snapped in his right shoulder. Damien hung limply for a few seconds, his chest heaving against the wood. His eyes burned, but he had no more tears left. He couldn't do this. He had to. Mercy was not a word Ed knew.

Pulling himself up with only his left arm was twice as hard. He couldn't feel his hand anymore. He couldn't feel the ground under his feet anymore. He couldn't feel anything but the pain, taking over every part of his body as the rod crashed down.

"Twelve."

His legs gave way under him one last time. Damien's chin cracked against the wooden post, filling his mouth with blood as his consciousness left him.

When Damien came to, everything was pitch-black. The pain slammed back into him before he was truly aware. A weak moan left his lips, turning into a desperate sob. His back felt like it had been torn to shreds. Every breath was liquid fire in his lungs, unable to carry enough air. It left him lightheaded, on the edge of panic, but he was too exhausted to panic.

He was still bound to the pole, half hanging from his bound wrists, half kneeling. Perhaps Ed had merely played with his

hopes. Perhaps he would let him die here. It certainly felt like he was dying.

Too weak to do anything, and in too much pain to even consider finding rest, he kept kneeling. His head lolled to the side, and he realized that it wasn't so pitch-black after all. His face had just been buried between his arms. Now that his cheek pressed against the wood, he could see the faint silver moonlight illuminating the steppe.

Something rustled, not too far away. Damien's heart picked up its pace. The steppe was home to foxes and wolves, but they rarely ever approached humans. It was more likely one might encounter a pack of stray dogs. They were more vicious than their wild counterparts; not afraid of humans, and desperate after having been displaced from their homes.

Somehow, the thought of being torn to shreds by a pack of hungry dogs was one that still managed to increase his terror.

The rustling came closer. Damien scanned the steppe, not seeing anything. Then something brushed his shoulder, and he yelped. Or rather, it would have been a yelp if not for his ruined throat, raw from retching all day and screaming until his voice had failed him.

"Shh. It's me."

Damien stared into the night with eyes wide in fear. No wild dogs then. They rarely talked. The person walked around him until they stood in front of him. It was the kid, reaching up to his bound hands. Panic shot through Damien.

"Don't," he croaked.

"But..."

"Ed." The name was all Damien managed to say before his broken voice refused to cooperate any longer. His eyes burned at the thought that there was actually someone willing to help him—and his throat closed, imagining what Ed would do to both of them if he found out.

The kid hesitated, then let his hands sink with a sigh. "I guess you're right. But..." He reached for something, putting it to Damien's lips. "Here."

Water. Blissfully cool water, wetting his cracked lips and running down his throat. Damien almost choked as he drank too greedily. The kid kept giving him time to catch his breath before putting the waterskin back to his lips. Damien closed his eyes. Slowly, the taste of blood and bile and dust faded.

"Wh... why?" he asked when the waterskin was pulled away the next time.

"Because this isn't right." The kid paused for a moment, but Damien was too exhausted to open his eyes, couldn't see if he accompanied his words with a gesture. "All this because you didn't want to hurt that woman."

That wasn't the whole truth. Damien couldn't admit to him how he had tried to turn his magic against Ed. He wasn't sure why Ed had kept it a secret; telling his men of a worse transgression than merely disobeying an order might have swayed those who now considered his response needlessly cruel. Perhaps he enjoyed playing with fire. Perhaps he wanted to draw out those who would openly rebel against a punishment such as this. Those like the kid. The grip around Damien's heart grew tighter.

"What's... your name?"

"Jesse."

When Damien didn't say anything, Jesse returned the question. "What's yours? We all only know you as..."

He didn't say it out loud. That was nice of him. Damien hated that name.

"Does... doesn't matter." It was all he was. All he would be, from now until the end of his pathetic life. Ed's pawn, to be used at will. "Should. Leave."

Jesse stayed. He lifted the waterskin to Damien's lips again, even steadying his head as it started to drop. When Damien

turned his head away, Jesse put the waterskin down, but he still didn't leave.

Now that his thirst was quenched, and he had time to get used to the pain, Damien became aware of the cold. As hot as it was in the late summer sun, as chilly the nights could be. He started to shiver, unable to suppress it, no matter how much it hurt.

Something touched his back. Damien's head jerked up, a pained whimper on his lips.

"Shh."

Jesse was standing behind him, and the soft touch returned. Fabric. It was placed on his shoulders and back, the weight, as little as it was, pure agony on his burnt skin and open wounds. But it trapped his body's warmth and kept the cool breeze out. Against all odds, Damien managed to relax—as far as it was possible in his position.

Jesse sat down at the foot of the pole. He wasn't wearing his jacket anymore. Damien didn't have the strength to insist that he should leave. He didn't have the strength to do anything but lean against the pole, trying to keep as much weight as possible off his wrists. It was impossible to sleep like that, but he closed his eyes, drifting close to unconsciousness.

When the first light of dawn tinted the sky, Jesse got up. He apologized as he took his jacket back, slipping it on. Damien tried his best to make no sound, even though the slight touch had been enough to set his back on fire. He watched through half closed eyes how Jesse left, vanishing in the shadows between two tents. Damien only hoped the kid wouldn't get into trouble for his kindness.

Once Jesse had vanished from sight, Damien pressed his burning forehead against the pole, barely conscious. Despite the water, his body was at its end. His heart was beating both too fast and too weakly, somehow out of rhythm. His thoughts

kept slipping away, as blurry as his vision. He wouldn't survive another day out here. Perhaps not even another hour. Somehow, the thought wasn't as terrifying anymore.

He couldn't run, but if he died, it was over. He wouldn't be forced to hurt anyone else. Ed would continue his terror, there was no doubt about that, but it wasn't like Damien could stop him. Even if neither sun nor injuries would kill him, perhaps this was the one way out he still had. Sooner or later, Ed would demand something of him he couldn't do. He would choose to end his own life over seeing anyone else suffer the consequences of his refusal.

As the sun started to rise above the horizon, Ed returned. He wasn't alone. At his side were two of the bulkier men – and Jesse. The kid was white as a sheet, lips pressed together into a thin line. Damien took care not to meet his gaze while the fear turned his stomach. The terror would surely be visible on his face. He hoped Ed would think he was merely afraid of him. Gods knew he had every reason to fear that man.

"Ah. Nightmare. Good to see you survived the night." Ed walked around him in a close circle, eventually stopping next to him. "I had planned to let you down sooner, but it was rude of you to faint in the middle of your punishment. I had to triple the remaining strokes. That's only fair, don't you think?"

Damien shivered, closing his eyes, hiding his face between his arms so Ed wouldn't see the hate in his eyes. As if it had been his choice. As if he hadn't done everything to meet Ed's impossible demands.

Ed traced the welts on Damien's back, pressing down on some of them until Damien screamed.

"I don't like it when someone ignores my questions," Ed said in a casual tone. "I would have thought you'd have learned that lesson by now."

He found a spot where blistered skin had split over dark bruises, trailing his fingers along the gash. "Haven't you?" he asked while increasing the pressure.

Damien's whimper was muffled by his arm as he nodded, unable to speak without sobbing. Ed's hand rested on his back, an unspoken threat as the second stretched on. Damien couldn't stop himself from shaking, couldn't even convince himself it was merely because of his exhaustion.

"Hm. Good enough." Ed took a step back, snapping his fingers at the two men. "Take him down and bring him into his tent."

The men stepped next to Damien, one on his left side, one on his right. His relief that it was finally over didn't last long. When the rope around his wrists was cut and his arms dropped down, he screamed. The pain shooting through his shoulders and arms felt like they were ripped apart.

He must have passed out for a second, because the next thing he was aware of was that he was hanging between the two men, hands wrapped around his upper arms, his feet dragging over the ground. Blood trickled down his back in two thin rivulets in the rhythm of his gasping breaths. The movement must have reopened some of his wounds.

"And Jesse." Ed's hand came down hard on the kid's shoulder. "Seeing as you're so concerned with our Nightmare's health, it's your responsibility now to make sure he recovers. Go with him, and take care of his wounds. Do your best." Ed stared straight into Damien's eyes, a knowing cruelty in his voice as he added, "If he dies, you die."



## CHAPTER 53

### **Comfort**

That wasn't quite how Riordan had imagined his evening would go. Instead of shamelessly inviting himself to dinner, he found himself sitting on the sofa, Damien's sleeping figure leaning against him. His friend had fallen asleep almost instantly, telling him how fucking tired Damien must have been.

Riordan leaned his head against the backrest and looked towards the window. Night was falling, and in a bit, it would be completely dark. He had not thought to light a lamp or crystal before entering the room, and now he couldn't get up to do so. He couldn't do anything but sit and let his thoughts drift, unless he wanted to risk waking up Damien.

His mission had ended almost a week sooner than planned. After a whole fucking month in the north, he had been eager to leave ice and snow behind. To remember how it felt when his toes were warm. To eat something that wasn't dried meat or half-burnt gruel. To come home.

Home.

He still wasn't sure if he had a right to call it that. After his injury, Merridy and Damien had insisted he stay with them. He had been reluctant at first, not wanting to burden them.

But his recovery had taken so much longer than anticipated. For almost ten weeks, he had been out of commission. Plagued with weakness and headaches at first, then slowly building his stamina back up, until he hadn't felt like collapsing after merely walking across the garden. The headaches had never fully vanished, but they had become rare enough now that he could deal with them. Not that he had a choice, really.

After three months, he had returned to the citadel, worrying if he would even still have a job. The nyv he had worked with before had been impatient. In week one, he had sent his best wishes. In week two, he had inquired as to how long Riordan planned to be absent. In week three, he had let Riordan know that he had found a replacement for him, and thanked him for his work.

Luckily, the citadel had taken over his contract, turned it into a general one. Ever since, he had come back for a few days whenever he had been between missions. For the first time in almost a decade, he found himself bound to a place. Fuck, he had even toyed with the thought of purchasing a house in the neighborhood for himself. He had never before had the urge to settle down, but... it was nice to have a place to come home to.

Riordan's finger brushed over the blanket he had wrapped around Damien's shoulders. There were stitched letters he could only feel in the dim light, not see. His name. Merridy had put it there after yet another discussion of whether he should really stay. It had been half a silly joke, half assurance that he would always have a place here. He had mocked her for it, because that had been less embarrassing than starting to cry, and she had thrown a pillow at his head.

When Damien's body started to slide, Riordan didn't stop him, merely guided him until his head lay on his lap. That was a bit more comfortable and allowed him to relax as well.

He hoped his friend would be able to sleep for a while. He had wanted to ask how long Merridy had been gone, how long those nightmares had been going on, but in the end, did it matter? One day, or two, or three, Damien was clearly miserable.

Riordan hated to see his friend like this. He hated all the glimpses of the horrors Damien had been through. He hated knowing that he had been a part of it, however small.

When Damien twitched in his sleep, Riordan lowered a hand to his head, stroking his temple. Perhaps knowing that he wasn't alone would help to keep the nightmares at bay. He would do his best until Merridy came back. She would know how to help. She always knew what to do. Riordan paused, giving his hand a moment of rest. He hoped. He hoped she would come back. Soon. Back soon. Until then. He would.

The spot beneath his hand was empty. The weight on his legs was gone. Riordan flinched, suddenly aware that he had almost fallen asleep. Almost?

Where it had still been dim twilight a moment ago, now everything was pitch-black. He couldn't see his hand in front of his eyes as he raised it, couldn't hear – he heard something, turning his head in the direction of the sound. An icy hand seemed to grip his heart. Someone was crying, and it wasn't hard to figure out who that was.

Riordan's faint hope that his eyes would only need a moment to get used to the darkness turned out to be false. Everything stayed black. He couldn't sign like this, and he didn't know if he could dare to speak.

"Damien?" he whispered anyway, because he couldn't just do *nothing*.

"Please. I can't. I can't do this." Damien's voice was shaky, his words interrupted by desperate gasps, coming too quickly. "I can't. Don't. Don't make me."

The cushions of the sofa were slightly tilted, telling Riordan

that Damien must still be sitting on it. He shuffled closer, one hand feeling along the cushions, trying to find him.

The moment Riordan touched him, Damien screamed. He flinched, shifted somehow, but didn't draw back. There must be nowhere for him to go on the sofa. Riordan pulled his hand back and pressed it to his chest, his heart racing. Fuck. He needed some light.

He nearly fell over the coffee table as he got up, stumbling towards the door. It was his luck that he had spent so many nights here, because he found the crystal mounted next to the door frame almost instantly. A quick touch, then soft yellow light filled the room. Riordan squeezed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath, before he dared to open them; slowly, very slowly.

The sudden light stung in his eyes, the pain so horribly familiar it made him feel nauseous. But unlike his headaches, this pain was fading after a moment, allowing him to finally see what he had already assumed.

Damien sat at the far end of the sofa, cowering into the corner. Tears were running down his face and his eyes were wide open, but he didn't seem to see anything.

"Please. No. No." He sobbed. "No."

Riordan approached him slowly, pausing after each step. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't sign while Damien wasn't looking at him, and he couldn't speak without freaking him out. Touching him had also been a bad idea. Fuck; what *could* he do?

"Please. Please don't..." Damien's breaths came so quickly, Riordan had no idea how he still managed to speak. He pressed himself into the corner, grasping at his shoulder. When he found nothing where once his arm had been, he started to cry, gasping for breath in between each sob.

The moment Riordan's shadow fell over Damien, he looked up. Something shifted in his gaze. Blind panic made room for

recognition, only to be replaced by a new kind of fear. "I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry. Please don't leave me here. Please. I don't want to die."

Riordan swallowed dryly. Damien's nightmares were bad enough, but this... he didn't see merely a shadow of his dream, he saw *him*. Instead of Riordan, his friend, he saw Riordan, the fucking squad leader who had dragged him into the dungeon and left him to die.

In any other situation, he would have left, but he couldn't. He couldn't leave Damien alone like this. He looked to the door, as if hoping for a miracle, for Merridy to appear and fix this. Of course she didn't.

A strangled noise made him snap his attention back to the sofa.

"Please. Please don't let them kill me." Damien clawed at his throat, finding nothing, but leaving bright red marks on his skin. "Don't let them kill me don't let them kill me, please."

Riordan couldn't bear it any longer. He crossed the distance between them, sat down on the sofa and wrapped his arms around Damien. He knew this wasn't exactly a great idea, but he couldn't let him hurt himself, either.

Damien froze for a moment, then he started to struggle. Riordan resisted the urge to talk to him. It wouldn't help. All he could do was hold him until he snapped out of it, pressing his arm against his side to stop him from hurting himself.

It didn't take long for Damien to realize he was trapped. His body went limp, but he was still shaking violently. Riordan lost the fight against his own tears as he felt him sob in his arms. Fuck. This wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

*It's me. It's me it's me it's me.*

Riordan wanted to scream it, but didn't even dare to say it out loud.

It seemed to take forever for Damien to calm down, and even longer until something shifted. It was the way Damien held himself, the way his breathing changed, a fleeting touch on his arm.

“Riordan?” Damien’s voice was trembling.

Riordan let go of him instantly, only keeping his right hand on Damien’s arm. With his other he signed, “I’m here. Everything’s gonna be fine. It was just a dream. Just a dream.”

There were too many words, too quickly, that much was clear from Damien’s confused expression. It didn’t matter. Now that his friend was awake, Riordan pulled him into a hug, a real one. Damien leaned into it, even raising his arm to return it weakly.

“Can we. Can we get up?” he mumbled after a while. “Light a fire? I’m cold.”

“Of course.”

Riordan pulled back, still not daring to let go fully. With his free hand, he picked up the blanket that had dropped to the ground, draping it around Damien’s shoulders.

“Come.”

He helped him to his feet, leading him around the coffee table and in front of the fireplace. Once Damien was sitting on the rug, Riordan turned his attention towards the fireplace, brushing cold ashes aside and piling up fresh logs. While he worked to ignite the flames, his gaze kept wandering back to his friend.

Damien sat wrapped in the blanket, his eyes fixed on nothing in particular. The way he sometimes raised his hand to wipe away a tear tore at Riordan’s heart. Finally the fire was burning, slowly taking over the wood. Riordan put the fire poker back, brushed his hands against his pants and got up. He tapped Damien’s shoulder, to grab his attention.

“Anything I can do?” he asked as soon as Damien was looking at him.

Damien didn't reply, but Riordan had the feeling it wasn't because he didn't understand him. Riordan sat down next to him.

"Your dreams," he started, his hands freezing mid-air. He didn't know how to ask. He wished he knew what they were about, so he could help better. At the same time, he wasn't sure he could bear the full truth. "Are they always like this?"

Damien shook his head, not looking at him. "Usually, I... I dream of my time in the— in Caldeia. In a way. It's... It's not what happened, not always. It's what could have... or couldn't, but it feels real. In that moment." He had that panicked look on his face again. "I should know. Sometimes I *do* know, but—"

Riordan tapped Damien's arm, signing "I understand" as soon as he looked at him. Dreams didn't always make sense. That didn't make them any easier to bear.

When Damien nodded, ceasing his attempt to explain, Riordan reached for his arm. He could feel him tremble under his touch. "But not this time?" he asked with his free hand.

Damien shook his head. "I dreamed of my time in Raqhar. And of... of Ed."

He had mentioned that name before. Riordan's research had revealed that Ed had been the leader of a particularly notorious band of rebels, long before the first rumors of the Nightmare of Raqhar. Little was known about his whereabouts these last years, but it was probably futile to hope he had found his end out there.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't want you to hate me," Damien mumbled, pulling the blanket tighter around himself.

"What you had to do doesn't change who you are. I know your heart." To emphasize, and in case Damien didn't know all the words, Riordan placed his hand on his chest, above his heart. "I could never hate you."

There it was again, the look that always broke Riordan's heart. Absolute disbelief every time someone saw something good in him. Riordan shuffled closer, so he could wrap his arms around Damien. Damien leaned against him, like he had on the sofa. He watched the fire, or at least looked into the direction of the fireplace. Long minutes passed until he suddenly started to speak.

"I fell for their propaganda when I was at my lowest. After my father died, and my brother left, and the family business was gone. I wanted to belong somewhere. To... I don't know." Damien's voice shook as he whispered, "I don't even know."

Holding him like this made it all but impossible for Riordan to sign. Instead, he found Damien's hand under the blanket, interlacing his fingers with Damien's, waiting for him to continue.

The words came slowly at first; telling of meetings in a tavern, of false promises, of leaving his home. Riordan listened quietly, his heart sinking with every detail, every casual act of cruelty, every glimpse of Damien's despair. A pattern formed in his mind of how Ed had dug his claws into Damien, with no intention of ever letting him go. A pattern Damien obviously couldn't see.

When Damien came to the point where he had been punished for trying to use his magic against Ed, Riordan was so startled, he almost forgot he shouldn't speak. He made a choked noise, pulling Damien out of his tale.

"You told me... back then, you told me you never tried to stop him," he explained when Damien gave him a questioning look. "But you did. You tried."

Damien laughed; quietly, desperately. "Didn't do me much good, did it." He freed his hand to grasp his right shoulder, his fingers trembling.

"What did he do to you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes." Riordan's reply had been too harsh, the motion too forceful, making Damien flinch. "Yes," he repeated, taking care to keep his signs small, to not scare him again. "It matters. *You* matter."

Damien's expression told Riordan that he might disagree. He rubbed his shoulder.

"He returned after sunset. Made everyone watch as he punished me. Fifteen strokes standing, or thirty kneeling."

Riordan pressed his lips together to not let a curse slip out. He felt sick. Fucking son of a *mok*. "Did you...?" he signed when the silence stretched on.

Damien was staring into the fire, his voice trembling. "I... I tried, but I couldn't. I was... I had no strength left. I must have fainted, because when I came to, it was night. He had just left me hanging there, burnt from the sun and beaten half to death."

A shiver ran through Damien. He pulled the blanket closer around his shoulders, burying his hand in it.

"One of the men... He was almost still a kid. Jesse. His name was Jesse." Damien shook his head, tears glistening in his eyes. "He came and gave me some water, and stayed with me until sunrise. If not for him... I think I would have died that night. And then—" He swallowed. "Then I wished I had, because Ed knew. He always knew. Everything. And he started to use Jesse against me. The moment I stepped out of line, he would have punished him in my place." His voice was barely a whisper at the end.

It wasn't a surprise to Riordan. From the moment Damien had stepped in trying to save the man, Ed must have known his weakness. If only he could make Damien see it, too.

"Do you—" Riordan let his hands sink. This was too important to risk Damien missing the point of what he was trying to say.

"May I speak?" he signed quickly, pointing at his mouth.

Seeing Damien think about it was good. It meant that when he finally nodded, it was more likely to actually be true.

"Do you think it was hard for Ed to..." Fuck. There really wasn't a good way to phrase this, was there? "To do that to this woman?"

"No." Damien didn't hesitate with his reply. "He made no secret of how much he enjoyed it."

Riordan took a deep breath. He had to be careful about this. "He enjoyed hurting people?" he asked, as if that hadn't been clear already from what Damien had told him.

Damien nodded.

"And yet, for years, he made you do it. What for? He didn't care if he killed them. Cleaning up wasn't his problem. His own reputation was bad enough, he didn't need the Nightmare. What did he get out of it?"

It hurt to see the conflicting emotions on Damien's face. Riordan wished he could help him forget his past, instead of poking around in it. Damien would never be able to move past it as long as he blamed himself for everything that had happened, though.

"I don't know," he eventually admitted.

"I do," Riordan said. "He wanted to see you suffer. He lost his chance to lay his own hands onto his victims, but he got you. He enjoyed how much you hated yourself. He could see you despair, trying to make the best out of it, while he held all the strings to make it worse."

Damien opened his mouth, then closed it again. Riordan continued, needing to get it all out before he lost his courage.

"He manipulated you, raised the stakes every time he pushed you too far." His tone had been too harsh, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm down. "The first time, you didn't want that man to die from his injuries, and he *used* it.

When that wasn't enough anymore, he straight out threatened to kill them. And when *that* wasn't enough anymore, he threatened to kill those closest to you instead. He gave you enough freedom to make you think it was your decision, but every time you didn't do exactly what he wanted, he found a way to punish you."

Damien stared at him in stunned silence. Afraid he had spoken too harshly, Riordan reached for his hand through the blanket.

"You were also his victim. Not in the same way, but you were."

"Can you..." Damien's voice was strained, his gaze blank. "Can you give me a moment?"

"Of course." Fuck, it hurt letting go of him. Riordan pulled his hand back, scrambling to his feet. "I'll go check the fire in the hearth," he mumbled, grabbing the tinderbox and fleeing the room.

In the kitchen, he found still enough embers to rekindle the fire. Riordan filled the kettle, pushing it over the flames and watching it until it boiled, and then a bit longer. He hoped he hadn't messed everything up now. It was killing him to see Damien hate himself so much. If only he could see half of what his friends saw in him. If only Riordan could make him see.

With worry twisting his stomach, Riordan grabbed a teapot and scouted the shelf that held the containers of tea. He decided on a herbal mix; calming, at least supposedly so. A few minutes later, he climbed up the stairs, the freshly brewed tea in one hand, two empty cups in the other.

When he entered the living room, Damien sat almost as he had left him. He must have moved, though, because the flames in the fireplace burned brighter, a few new logs thrown in. Damien's eyes were red as he looked up.

Riordan returned to his spot next to him, putting teapot

and cups down in front of them. He poured some tea, picking up his own cup and watching Damien reach for his. His fingers tried to close around the handle, but slid off. Damien paused for a moment, taking an audible, deep breath, before closing his hand around the whole cup. When he raised it, his gaze met Riordan's.

"At first I thought I was just bad at it," he said, taking a sip before putting down his cup. "At using my left hand, I mean. But sometimes it still gives me trouble, even after all this time." He raised his hand, and his sleeve slid back, revealing the scars around his wrist. "Perhaps I never noticed before, because the other hand was worse." Damien turned his hand, looking at it, and suddenly, his right arm was back. He bent his fingers, the illusionary hand mirroring the movement of the real one. "Something never quite healed right. The shoulder, or the wrist, or... I don't know. Guess it doesn't matter anymore." He laughed dryly. "At least I blew up the right one."

"Damien..."

Ignoring him, Damien let the illusion vanish. He didn't look at Riordan as he said, "In a way it saved me. I would never have gotten out. I knew that, but still..." He raised his head, his eyes dark and so full of pain. "I couldn't give up. I was close, sometimes, but..." A tear ran down his cheek, quickly followed by another as he whispered, "I didn't want this to be *all* there was."

He closed his fingers around his shoulder, taking a shaky breath. "Some days it hurts. The spot where my hand should be, and the scars, and the memories, and it's all too much, but as long as this..." His voice broke and he wiped at his eyes. "As long as I have Merry and Valadan and you, and this *life*, it's all... It's all been worth it. To hold on. To survive."

Riordan's cup was empty. He set it down with trembling hands. Tears welled up in his eyes at the thought of how

close Damien had been to losing his life without ever getting a chance to *live*. How easy it would have been for them to never meet. He found the lump in his throat didn't allow him to speak, so he raised his hands.

"I'm glad you did," he signed, his fingers trembling. "I'm glad you're here."

Damien looked at him as if he wanted to ask him *why*, but he didn't. He didn't do anything, so it was Riordan who reached out for him, carefully wrapping his arms around him. So close, he could feel just how much Damien was shaking. In his attempt to comfort him, Riordan rubbed his back in circling motions. It didn't seem to help.

"I'm scared," Damien said, his voice shaking just as much. "You found me. What if someone else does? I try not to think about it, but then I dream of being back, and I can't help it. I am *afraid*, because all they'll see is the Nightmare. I can't be him anymore, I can't take what they'll do to me, I can't—"

"Hey. Breathe." Riordan grabbed his arm, snapping him out of his panicked ramblings. "No one's going to take you."

Damien laughed, the sound breathless and almost a sob. "You can't know that."

"Listen to me. Listen to me." Riordan could barely stop himself from shaking Damien, merely twisting the blanket in his fist. "I mean it. We won't let them. We would fight for you. We would get you back."

Riordan had no doubt about that. Valadan had almost killed him after merely assuming he was here to hurt his brother, and Merridy would rather have stabbed him than allow him to take Damien. As for him...

"I'd burn the damn palace into the ground if I had to. I won't let anyone hurt you."

Damien froze for a moment, his heavy breaths the only sound besides the crackling of the fire. Then he fell apart. He

sank against Riordan, his shoulders heaving as he started to sob. Riordan held him, losing the fight against his own tears.

All the pain, all the fear. He had the suspicion Damien would never have talked about any of it, if not for the lack of several nights' worth of sleep. Time would tell if his words had helped. As for tonight, it would be a victory already if Damien found a bit more rest.

When after a while Damien started to calm down, Riordan straightened up. He made sure Damien was sitting safely on his own before he leaned to the side, to grab the half-full cup Damien had put down.

"Here. You need to drink something."

Riordan handed Damien the cup, his hand hovering nearby to make sure he wouldn't drop it. When it was empty, he refilled it, waiting patiently until Damien had finished it as well. Then he got up, not missing the way Damien's hand grasped at the air where his leg had been a moment ago, before being hurriedly pulled under the blanket.

"I'm not leaving. Give me a second."

He took the teapot and put it on the coffee table, placing the cups next to it. When he returned, he brought two of the cushions with him. After handing one of them to Damien, he walked to the door, to dim the glowing crystal. The light of the fireplace was enough for him to find his way back and settle down on the rug.

"You don't have to—" Damien started, only to break off when Riordan put his hand on his arm.

"But I want to."

Damien obviously wanted to avoid every place where he had had a nightmare those last days. To evade any further discussion, Riordan flopped down, only to almost miss the cushion. He lifted his head as he pulled it closer, then dropped down on it with a sigh. Not that the rug was a worse place than a shitty tent at a research site. At least it was warm

in the living room.

After a moment's hesitation, Damien followed his example. He lay down as well, facing the fire, his back towards Riordan. They were as close as they could be without touching.

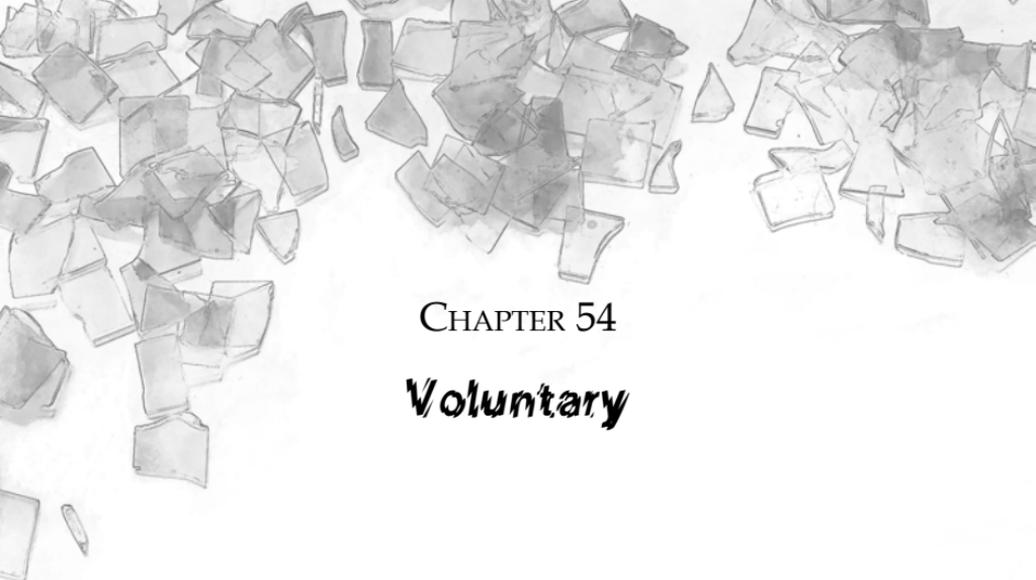
Slowly, Damien seemed to calm down. His breaths became more even, but he was still crying. Riordan listened to it for a while, staring at the flickering shadows in the room, until he couldn't take it anymore. He reached for him, carefully draping his arm over Damien's side, trying to offer him a bit of comfort. When Damien's hand found his, he released the breath he had been holding. He didn't want to make this weird, and he was glad Damien didn't seem to see it as such.

Encouraged, Riordan shuffled closer until Damien's back was against him. Feeling the rise and fall of his friend's chest, he found himself relaxing as well. He was tired. He didn't know how late it was, but the journey back had taken all day, and now they had spent a considerable amount of the night talking. He might as well try to get some sleep.

When Damien winced, startling awake at the edge of falling asleep, Riordan pulled him closer, pressing his hand.

"You can sleep," he whispered. "I'm here. I won't let anyone hurt you."





## CHAPTER 54

### *Voluntary*

“You wanted to see me?”

“Ah. Nightmare.” The amused grin on Ed’s lips upon calling Damien by that name was reserved for when there was no one else around. “Come on in.”

Damien closed the tent flap behind him as he entered. Meeting Ed face to face, on his own, always felt a bit like walking to his own execution. Which was a pretty good comparison, after having been dragged once to what he had thought to be his execution. His nervousness made his fingers tingle, not unlike the sensation that still lingered in his right arm, two years later. No matter what that man wanted from him, it was never something good.

“Have a seat.”

Damien’s gaze followed Ed’s outstretched hand to one of the chairs around a shoddy table. He didn’t want to sit. Sitting in Ed’s presence was unnerving. He did what he was told anyway, keeping to the edge of the seat and taking care not to put his arms on the armrests.

Ed sat down across from Damien, propping his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands. In front of him was a map of Raqhar, with several colorful markers, one of them

showing the current location of the rebel camp. Damien tried not to look at how close they were to one of the bigger cities. It didn't matter. He couldn't leave.

"What do you want?" Damien asked.

Some years ago, he would never have dared to talk to Ed that way. Now, it didn't matter. There was no point in pretending he didn't hate that man. As long as he showed no disrespect when anyone was around to witness it, Ed didn't care, either. Why would he, when he held all the power? It was like an invisible chain around Damien's neck, allowing him the illusion of freedom, only to strangle him the second he stepped out of line.

"So rude." Ed clicked his tongue. "Fine. Straight to the point, then." He stabbed one finger at a marker roughly half a day's travel away from the camp. "The raqharian ambassador is going to meet with an envoy of the queen in a few days. They decided to meet on neutral ground, so he'll be traveling from Gorin here, along this route. He'll be heavily protected by his own guards, as well as hired mercenaries."

Damien watched Ed's finger trace invisible lines on the map as he spoke. He didn't like where this was going.

"The guards are not a surprise, seeing as he is hated by most of his own people, as well as ours. You might remember that he's the king's cousin? All he does is fill his own pockets with what should be reparations for farmers and commoners."

Damien had heard of it. "And?" he asked against the lump in his throat.

"And." Ed pulled his finger back, folding his hands under his chin once more. "You're going to kill him."

The invisible chain around Damien's neck seemed to tighten. "I'm not a killer," he choked out, but the words felt stale on his lips. Wasn't he? How many people were dead because of him? Killed by his blade, by his magic, by his refusal to do as he was told?

“Oh. My bad.” The grin on Ed’s lips was worse than his anger could have been. “Say, do you think Jesse’s a good shot?”

Damien’s mouth went dry. He should have known. A part of him had known. It was the one trick up Ed’s sleeve, one that never failed to make Damien do what he wanted.

*Hurt him, or I’ll hurt Jesse.*

*Do what I tell you, or I’ll send Jesse.*

*Don’t run away, or I’ll kill Jesse.*

Damien stared at the map, and at the rendezvous spot, blurring before his eyes. Sending the kid there was a death sentence. He wasn’t sure Jesse had ever fired a gun in his life. He surely wouldn’t come close enough to the ambassador to even try.

Damien would, though. His magic would allow him to remain undetected, one way or another. He knew enough of those damn contraptions to use them, instead of having them blow up in his face. His right hand still gave him trouble, but it would be enough to pull a trigger. And he had nothing left to lose.

Perhaps he should fuck it up on purpose, let himself get caught. No, he knew he was too much of a coward for that. He didn’t want to die, clinging to this pathetic excuse of a life. Finding a tiny spark of strength in each peaceful moment, each quiet sunset, as if there was still any hope left to one day find a way out. As if he deserved it.

“I’ll do it,” he whispered.

“What?” Ed straightened up, folding his arms behind his head. “I’m sorry, I didn’t hear you.” His grin betrayed his lie.

For a moment, the hate blazed bright in Damien’s heart. He wished he had a gun right now. He’d use it without hesitation, even if it would cost him his own life.

But Ed knew he was playing with fire. He never took the morlit band off. He made sure Damien had no access to any

weapon more dangerous than a butter knife. He always knew where Damien was, what he was doing, who he was talking to.

"I will do it," Damien said. He spoke slowly, putting all his willpower into keeping his voice even and swallowing his hate. "Leave Jesse out of this."

"I knew I could count on you." Ed clapped his hands, all excited, as if he hadn't just forced Damien to tear the last shred of humanity out of his already ruined heart. "They're already on the road, and will be here in about two days. Meet me tomorrow evening for further instructions. Not a word to anyone until then."

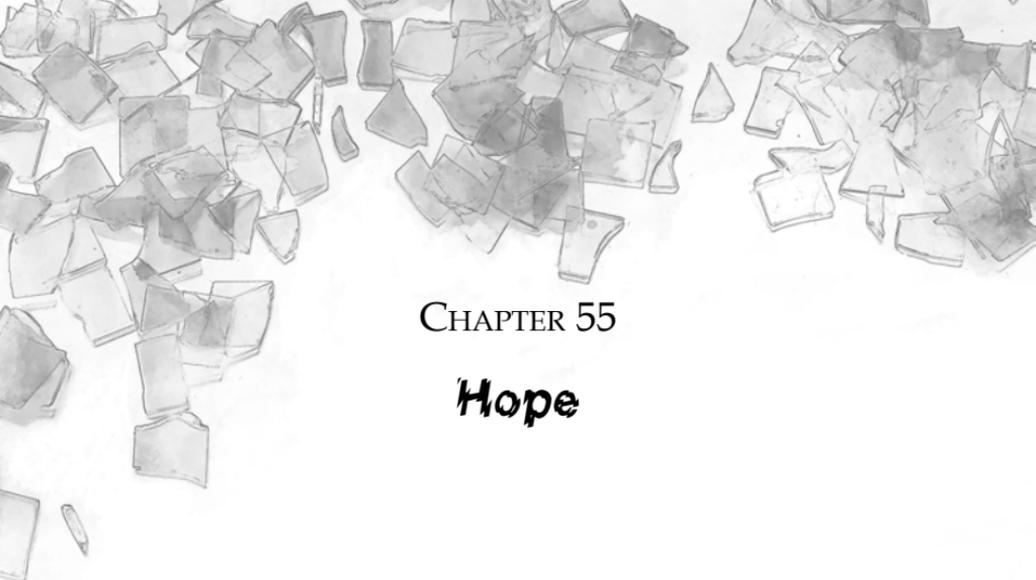
Damien nodded mechanically. So soon. A sudden wave of nausea washed over him. "Is that all?" he asked, voice pressed.

When Ed nodded with a dismissive hand gesture, Damien jumped up. He had to get out. He stumbled to the tent flap, pulling it aside with shaking hands. The light outside was too bright, the air too dry, the sand under his feet crunching too loudly. Everything was too much.

Ed's tent stood at the edge of the camp. Damien started to walk towards the open steppe, his body numb, his mind focused on nothing but to get away. He had to get his nerves under control before he could dare to face anyone.

Under a scrubby tree he sat down on the ground, despite the urge to keep walking. Nothing was physically stopping him, but the mere thought of what Ed would do if he left was enough to almost make him throw up. Damien leaned back against the tree, staring up at the sky, absentmindedly massaging his right hand.

Every single choice Ed had given him had been nothing more than an illusion. Every possible decision he could make would only be in that sadist's favor. There would never be a way out for him. It was a game he had already lost.



## CHAPTER 55

# Hope

Damien stared at the fireplace, the orange glow of the dying embers the only speck of light in the darkness. They flickered and danced as tears blurred his vision. He couldn't stop crying, had long given up on trying to wipe them away.

At least his nightmare hadn't left him in a panic this time. He would have hated to wake Riordan up, to make him worry a second time this night. Gods knew he had already kept him up long enough. Fuck, what had he been thinking, telling him everything. All he had done, every fucking, horrible detail.

He had been so tired, he hadn't been able to think straight. He still was. It must have been far after midnight by the time they had returned to sleep. The fact that it was still dark told him that he couldn't have slept for more than two, perhaps three hours. Which was still more than he had managed the previous nights.

Twisting the blanket in his hand, Damien tried to calm his breaths, so he would at least cry quietly. He was simultaneously clinging to and trying to forget Riordan's words. Words that had somehow managed to penetrate the barrier he had put around his heart for so long.

His thoughts were in turmoil, flicking back and forth between memories. Wherever they landed, they stirred up more pain, more questions, more doubts.

*What if what if what if.*

At some point, the shadows started to lift, the approaching dawn tinting the sky outside the window a pale gray. Damien waited until it was bright enough to see his hand in front of his eyes, then he freed himself from Riordan's grasp.

He didn't want to get up, but he had to. Crying all night had the unfortunate side effect of leaving him completely parched, and with a pounding behind his eyes that had all means to grow to a full blown headache.

After pulling the blanket over his sleeping friend, Damien shuffled over to the coffee table, sitting down on the sofa. His hand was shaking, so filling one of the cups with tea took a while. Cup in hand, he pulled his leg up onto the sofa, huddling against the cushions in the corner.

His thoughts were still unable to find rest, but after the second cup of tea, at least the pounding in his head faded. When the pot was empty, he remained sitting for a while, staring into the quiet room. Only when his head started to drop did he get up, realizing he needed to find something to do, or he would fall back asleep.

Damien sat down in front of the fireplace. He took his time stoking the fire, putting in fresh logs. Lost in thought, he picked up a handful of wood shavings, flicking them into the growing flames one by one. They glowed brightly for a second, before turning to ash. He wished he could throw in his memories just as easily.

Memories of all the times he could have left, but hadn't. Afraid of dying out there in the steppe. Afraid of having no place to return to. Afraid of being recognized as the traitor he was, and arrested. Afraid afraid afraid.

Was Riordan right? Had Ed pulled the strings all along?

What would he have done if Damien had refused to use his magic a second time? Would he have continued as he always had? And what would have happened if Damien had found the courage to leave before that fateful day? Would Ed have let him go?

When his hand was empty, and his thoughts had returned to the same questions for the third time in the span of minutes, Damien got up. There was no helping it, he had to try to get some sleep, or he would just fall over at some point.

As he laid down, he made sure not to touch Riordan. He didn't want to wake him up, and he didn't want to impose. Feeling him close was already more than he could have asked for, seeing as Riordan was sleeping on the floor because of him. Staring into the flames, Damien tried to relax. His body was completely exhausted, but his mind didn't find rest.

He was no closer to falling asleep when something behind him shifted. He stiffened, trying his best to keep his breaths calm. Fingers touched his side, making him flinch as they felt along his shirt. Riordan made an unwilling noise, then the blanket was pulled over Damien.

Riordan moved his hand, half above and half in front of Damien—perhaps a sign, impossible to make out—before dropping his arm and pulling him closer. Damien immediately relaxed, the promise of safety ingrained in his memory. He closed his eyes, but didn't quite manage to fall asleep, drifting somewhere in between instead. His mind mixed confusing dreams with the thoughts that had plagued him all night, creating images that were unsettling more than frightening. A few times he opened his eyes, to remind himself where he was, only to doze off again moments later.

When the back door opened and closed, the familiar sound pulled him out of his half-sleep.

“I'm back!”

It was surreal how merely hearing Merridy's voice made his heart flutter. Damien sat up at once, Riordan's arm slipping off. He considered getting up and quietly leaving the room, so he wouldn't wake him, but his friend was already stirring.

"Up here," Damien called out.

Riordan's eyes shot open. His gaze was full of unspoken concern as he looked Damien up and down. Damien tried to smile. It probably turned out rather awkward, but he guessed not sitting in a corner and crying was already enough of an improvement.

He flinched when the door slammed open and Merridy rushed into the room. She was still wearing her coat, her face glowing with excitement. Seeing her smile falter as she took in the scene before her hurt almost physically. He wanted to see her happy, to hear her laugh, to listen as she told him all about her visit to Caldeia.

Instead, she approached him slowly, carefully, as if one wrong move might set him off. In front of him, she sank to her knees, putting her arms around him. Damien held on to her, closing his eyes and burying his face in her hair. He took in the faint smell of lavender, and the even fainter one of burnt sugar. His breath hitched, and his hand around her started to shake.

Fuck, he was crying again. Overjoyed she was back, and hating himself for making her sad, and worried about how he should explain to her what had happened, and too fucking tired to deal with any of this.

Next to him, Riordan made an attempt to get up. Something moved, and he froze. Damien opened his eyes to find Merridy had grabbed Riordan's sleeve, holding him in place.

Merridy held Damien for a moment longer, then she let go of him, only to pull Riordan into a hug.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Riordan returned the hug, awkwardly putting his arms around her. His uncertain gaze met Damien's, as if he was wondering what she was thanking him for. As if there could be many reasons to find both of them on the floor like this; Damien looking like shit, and Riordan hovering over him like a mother hen. As if he didn't even know what an incredible friend he was.

*Thank you,* Damien mouthed.

When she let go of him, Riordan made another attempt at getting up. "I better go," he signed.

Now it was Damien's time to grab his sleeve. "Don't."

Riordan gave him an uncertain look. "You need some more rest," his free hand said, *and you might have a chance of getting it, now that Merridy is back,* his gaze added.

Damien shook his head. Yes, he was tired, but...

"I need a moment," he said. "I need to feel it's real. You." He brushed his fingers over Merridy's shoulder. "Both of you. Me. This life."

It needed to feel more real than his dreams.

"It's a bit late for breakfast but..." Now what had the least chance of fucking it up by falling asleep over the stove? "How do pancakes sound?"

Both Merridy and Riordan nodded. Damien had the distinct feeling they would have agreed to him preparing a pile of dry bread crusts.

"Kitchen," was all Damien caught from Riordan's signs as he got up, to grab the teapot and cups before leaving the room.

"I'm sorry I was gone so long."

Merridy's words made new tears well up in Damien's eyes. Crying really seemed to be all he could do anymore. He pulled her against his chest, her head tucked under his chin.

"Don't," he said. "I want you to live your life. I *need* you to live your life."

Merridy leaned against him, raising one hand to brush her thumb over his temple and her fingers through his hair. Feeling her so close calmed a part of his soul that had been riddled with anxiety and worry since the moment she had left.

“So. Pancakes?” she asked after a while. Her voice was trembling. “Are you sure you want to—”

Damien nodded before she had finished her question. He couldn’t go back to sleep, not yet. He started to get up, but Merridy beat him to it, offering him her hand to help him. It was needed. His legs were wobbly, and his head all dizzy, reminding him how severely he had neglected his needs those last days. Perhaps it was for the better if he ate something.

When they arrived in the kitchen, Riordan had already cleaned the dishes and prepared a jug of coffee. The kettle over the fire was steaming, and he turned around from where he was studying the jars of tea.

“Mint?” he asked.

Damien didn’t care, but Merridy nodded, so he nodded as well. She gave his hand a squeeze before walking over to the door, to finally take off her coat and put it on the hook.

Pancakes. That shouldn’t be too hard. Damien reached into a cupboard, taking out a bowl, and pulled open a drawer, grabbing the whisk. Mechanically, he started cracking a couple of eggs into the bowl, adding a spoonful of sugar, only to blank on what else he needed. With the container of flour in his hand he couldn’t help but shake the feeling that something was missing.

“Here.”

Riordan was suddenly next to him, holding the jug of milk. Damien took it, feeling a bit silly, and very grateful for the assistance. It wasn’t the only thing Riordan did to help. He set the table, and by the time Damien had finished the batter, a pan was already on the stove, butter melting in it.

Damien listened to the whispered voices behind him as he

poured a bit of batter into the pan, not paying attention to the words. He could imagine the look in Merridy's eyes as she asked Riordan what had happened. Damien didn't want her to worry, but he also wouldn't lie to her. In a way, he would appreciate it should Riordan spare him from having to tell her himself.

The first pancake was soon ready. Damien put it on a plate, which he brought to the table where butter, honey, and a jar of blueberry jam were already waiting. He sat the plate down in front of Merridy and returned to the stove. As he poured fresh batter into the pan, he was vaguely aware of playful bickering behind him. He turned to look, only to see how Riordan tried to steal a piece of Merridy's pancake, which she defended vigorously. She slapped his hand aside and poked the fork into the table, creating a barrier with her arm.

Despite their banter, the pancake was still untouched when Damien arrived with the second plate. He smiled to himself as he turned his attention back to the stove, lifting the last pancake to see if it was done. The smell of fried batter and blueberries filled the air, sweet and homey. Sunlight streamed through the windows, softened by the light curtains. Merridy laughed about something Riordan had said. It could have been perfect. No, it *was* perfect.

There was a different kind of pain in Damien's chest. Not quite happiness, and not quite sadness, but something in between, or maybe both. A happiness so large, it was hard to grasp, making him acutely aware of how rare it was, and how much he wished it wasn't.

Damien put the last pancake on a plate, then pulled the pan off the stove. When he walked over to the table, Merridy got up. She took the plate from his hand and ushered him to sit down on the bench. It was a bit of a close fit, but they could all sit side by side, their shoulders and legs touching.

Damien lowered his gaze to the table. The pancake in front

of him had a smiling mouth drawn with honey, two blobs of jam as eyes and a piece of butter as a nose. At the edge, a tiny bit of the pancake was missing. Damien smiled; his smile widened as he realized he couldn't be sure which of the two had done that.

As Merridy sat down, Riordan put one arm around Damien, handing him a cup of tea with the other hand. The tea was lukewarm, with a hint of honey. Damien drank half of it before he put the cup down, afraid it would slip out of his shaking grasp any second. He closed his eyes, taking a deep breath trying to fight the sudden dizziness. The more he relaxed, the more his exhaustion caught up with him. He didn't feel hungry at all, but he knew he had to eat, at least a few bites.

A tap on his arm made him open his eyes, to meet Riordan's concerned gaze.

"Are you all right?" Riordan signed.

Damien turned his head, finding the same concern mirrored on Merridy's face. He put his arm around her, pulling her close and pressing a kiss on her hair. Then he leaned his head against Riordan's shoulder, looking at the smiling pancake on his plate.

"I will be."



## **His life shattered like glass**

When Damien—better known as the infamous Nightmare of Raqhar—is given a murderous task, his plan is simple: weave an illusion, kill the ambassador, vanish unseen.

Unfortunately, even the simplest plan can fail, and he finds himself gravely injured and in the hands of his enemies. The punishment for treason is death, if he lives long enough to be brought to trial. Some of his captors hate him even more than he hates himself, and they know what horrible things he has used his magic for.

Between his tormentors' desire for revenge and the memories of his past haunting him, only one thing is certain: he deserves everything that's coming for him. Doesn't he?