

Chapter Twenty

The chapter opens with Chaol and Yrene navigating the quiet streets of the city during a sunrise ceremony honoring Tehome. They visit a small house where an elderly man, severely ill with a persistent disease, lies bedridden. Yrene, a healer, tends to him with remarkable calm and compassion, using her magical abilities to alleviate his suffering. Despite her efforts, the man's condition remains critical, and Yrene's frustration with her inability to fully cure him is evident, though she hides it behind a serene demeanor. Chaol observes her dedication, noting the contrast between her professional composure and private disappointment.

As they leave the house, Yrene's demeanor shifts, revealing her inner turmoil over the man's prognosis. Chaol, sensing her distress, offers to accompany her to another patient, a young mother recovering from childbirth. The streets remain empty due to the ongoing ceremony, allowing for a peaceful ride. Their conversation turns to the khagan's policy of religious tolerance, which Yrene explains as a cornerstone of the empire's unity. Chaol reflects on how such policies can be leveraged for intelligence gathering, though he avoids delving into his own past experiences, leaving the topic unresolved.

Their journey takes them to a middle-class neighborhood, where they meet the young mother and her newborn. The woman's cheerful demeanor and playful teasing of Yrene lighten the mood, providing a stark contrast to the earlier somber visit. Yrene's laughter and relaxed expression reveal a side of her that Chaol hasn't seen before, hinting at a deeper, more personal connection between the two women. The scene underscores the duality of Yrene's life—her professional burdens and the moments of joy she finds in her work.

The chapter closes with Chaol and Yrene continuing their ride through the city, their interactions marked by unspoken understanding and mutual respect. Chaol's curiosity

about Yrene's past and her healing abilities grows, while Yrene remains guarded yet occasionally lets her guard down. The quiet streets and shared moments foster a tentative bond between them, setting the stage for deeper revelations in future chapters. The chapter effectively balances themes of healing, duty, and the beginnings of trust, all against the backdrop of a richly described urban setting.

