

Chapter Twenty

In this chapter, the scene opens with a quiet morning in the city, where most residents are gathered at the docks for a sunrise ceremony honoring Tehome. Chaol and Yrene arrive at a modest, dusty house, where they encounter an elderly woman and a patient suffering from a severe illness marked by crusting lesions. Yrene, demonstrating her healer's skill and compassion, gently tends to the old man, using her healing light to treat his wounds. Her serene expression and delicate touch highlight her dedication and the emotional weight she carries, especially when she reveals the disease's persistent nature and her ongoing battle to manage it.

Yrene's actions reveal her deep commitment to her work and her internal struggle with the limitations of her healing abilities. Despite her efforts, she confesses to Chaol that the disease is not curable, only manageable—she is effectively buying time rather than providing a definitive solution. Her frustration and disappointment are palpable, reflecting the burden she bears as a healer striving for more effective cures. Chaol observes her quiet anguish, sensing her high standards and relentless pursuit of excellence, which contrast with the helplessness she sometimes feels in the face of incurable conditions.

The narrative then shifts to their walk through the city streets, which remain eerily empty during the holiday. Yrene explains the empire's history of religious tolerance, a legacy of the first khagan's inclusive policies that absorbed multiple deities and protected minority beliefs. Their conversation touches on the use of spies in other kingdoms, hinting at Chaol's past covert activities and his strategic mindset. As they traverse a well-kept, peaceful neighborhood, the story emphasizes the city's vibrant yet serene atmosphere, contrasting with the earlier scenes of suffering and disease.

The chapter concludes with their visit to a modest yet lively household, where Yrene's familiarity with the community shines through. They meet a young woman with a

baby, and the interaction hints at Yrene's connections and the warmth of the local society. The scene underscores themes of compassion, community, and the ongoing efforts to heal and support others. The chapter ends with a lighthearted exchange, revealing the layered personalities of the characters and setting the stage for further developments rooted in love, duty, and the enduring human spirit.

