

Chapter One

The only way for a better tomorrow was to fight. Aedan knew that. He knew what he had to do. He just had to do what he had always done. Fight.

Aedan wasn't born a warrior. He was molded into one from his desire to fight, both for himself and for others. From his desire to protect, those he loved and those who loved him.

And from the day his home had been taken, his destiny was already set in stone.

He would be a warrior who fought, protected, and saved.

On that day when his home was taken, he had begged, almost cried out for a savior. But that savior, that warrior never came, no matter how hard he wished. No matter how many screams cut through the air or how many homes were set on fire and razed to the ground.

But now, Aedan was older, stronger. He was quicker, smarter. He knew what he had to do.

And so he charged. At the slavers, he charged. He cut down the guards, his sword making a sharp clang with every guard lucky enough to parry a hit. He swung, slamming into the slavers as his blood-stained sword glinted in the sun.

He wouldn't let history repeat itself. It was the reason he fought.

As the fights raged around him—his companions busy fighting off the guards—Aedan continued to slash, sending slavers and guards both to the ground in a bloodied, battered heap. There were screams of agony as limbs flew off. The metallic taste of blood smothered the air.

Aedan hated suffering. More than that, he hated prolonging the suffering of others. In one swift move, he sliced his blade across a slaver's throat, making a deep dark-red gash. Blood spilled onto his armor, dripping onto the ground.

Soon, the screams quietened and completely stopped.

And then there was silence.

They won. He had won.

One of his companions stepped forward, dust rising from his shoes as he addressed the shaking captives. It was Erik, a man of the blade, and a charismatic and trustworthy leader. He was someone Aedan respected throughout their time fighting together.

When he spoke, there was authority in every breath.

“From this moment on, all of you are free. You’re free to go home. But if that’s not possible, you are also welcome to come with us, we are going home to our town in the mountains. It will be a few days’ journey.”

Aedan looked away from Erik. His eyes trailed along the captives. Cold, pale, desolate. Their eyes felt like soulless husks. Aedan knew better than anyone else. While they may no longer be called captives in the eyes of the world, they’d always be slaves to their past and their suffering.

Aedan knew it best. He could rescue someone and yet not be able to truly save them.

And then his eyes widened.

Among the captives was a girl around his age. She stood a little further off in the distance from the others, hesitant and meek. Shaking hands clasped together, she stared at the ground. Her long honey blonde hair falling around her face, her eyes wet.

Aedan felt his heart sink. A girl like her should have never gotten caught up in this.

Aedan’s eyes continued to be fixed on the girl as some captives moved along, bowing and weakly mumbling their thanks to the warriors as they passed by. They trudged along on the path back to their homes, kicking up dust as they went. Amongst them, there was little to no conversation. No one had the strength to talk.

Aedan soon realized the girl had not moved an inch.

Then came the others. With pain, fear, and uncertainty in their eyes, they dragged themselves over to the warriors. It was as Aedan had feared, these must be the ones who had no homes left. The ones whose homes had been burnt to the ground. The ones who would forever have to reconcile the pain of yearning for a new beginning and crying out to their old past.

When Aedan turned around, a body collapsed against his bloody armor.

“M-my family... my h-home... they’re all gone...”

Tears streaked her face as her blue eyes frantically held onto Aedan’s. He reached out to hold her in his arms, and his own body, hardened by battle instincts, trembled. In that moment, Aedan didn’t know if he was strong or weak. Was it strong of him that he had managed to rescue her... or was he weak for being unable to save her?

He already knew the truth. He couldn't even save himself.

At the very least, he had to try to save her.

Letting out a breath he had been holding, he slowly wrapped his arms around her. She pressed her head into his shoulder, tears forming and flowing freely. It was the only freedom she had now.

He hugged her, even though he could barely feel her small body through the armor. He hugged her, even though maybe it was for him just as much as it was for her.

Aedan couldn't remember what happened next. All he remembered was that the crying stopped. And that she raised her head and looked at him with her glistening eyes.

And she smiled at him, the sweetest, purest smile he had ever seen.

He had never seen brokenness look so beautiful.

As the sunset dawned upon their heads, turning the tips of their hair golden, Aedan slowly let go of her and helped her onto her feet.

It was time to go home.

Home, for most people, was the place they were born in. A place they grew up in. For many, they knew they would die there and be buried there.

For both Aedan and Valya, home was now a place they could only remember in their dreams. It was the only way it'd never be taken away again.

Chapter Two

Even as a child, Valya was told to move forward. When she lost her precious teddy bear at the age of 7, her family simply bought another one to replace it—they never bothered to find it.

Even as a teen, she had to move forward. When she finally saw the hole in her basket after an afternoon of gathering herbs during her healer training, she was simply told to head on to the next location. No turning back.

Even as a young adult, she had to move forward. When Furst, their family dog passed away, she was told to move on.

Move on. You can't bring the dead back. No one can.

It's what she'd always known. It's what she'd always been told. While it was hard to move on at first, hard to let go of the guilt, the remorse, the feeling that something could have—*should have* been different, it always got easier.

It got easier because she always knew what she had to move on from. She could visualize walking away. Away from her worn-out teddy bear, away from the trail of herbs behind her, away from her sweet, excited Furst.

Away. Away. Until she could no longer see them.

It was easier because she always had something to move on to. Mirabel, her next teddy bear. Florian Forest, for the next trail of herbs. Seneca, the next dog her family took in.

But now, Valya felt like she was stuck in a neverending blizzard on a stormy winter night. She couldn't look behind her. She couldn't see the road ahead. All she knew was that she was cold and alone.

Everything felt like a dream. No, like a nightmare. In just the blink of an eye, everything was snatched out of her hands that one night. Her family. Her home. Her friends. The happy lives they led together. The hopes and dreams they had kept within their hearts and yet also shared with one another.

Everything had all been taken away so easily. Shattered and swept away as though scattered by a storm. A storm that raged and raged until it crossed and blew away everything in its path. There was no stopping a menace that couldn't be stopped.

No, Valya wasn't able to protect anyone or anything. Not even herself. All she could do was watch destruction run its course as everything around her fell apart. And nothing could ever come together again.

She was smart enough not to wish or pray. Mother always taught her to wish for things she wanted to happen, not for the things that were already long gone. Prayers were meant for the future, not the past. Mother always joked that if prayers could change the past, perhaps a lot more people would be religious.

Each step she trekked towards the mountains was a step further and further away from her own home. It reminded her that the warm, sunny days she had spent there were lost eternally and never to return.

Even as her body trudged forward, her heart and mind didn't know how to move on.

How do you move on from a life that was supposed to be yours? A life cut short by a million unsaid goodbyes?

Chapter Three

Aedan was not one for good conversation. It wasn't that he didn't like to talk or that he didn't like people. He simply only spoke whenever he had something important to say. And seeing as most conversations were made up of small talk anyway, he never found himself having much to contribute.

He knew he wasn't very good with words, and he was also self-aware enough to know that expressing his emotions and comforting other people weren't his strengths. He always felt awkward in those situations, unsure of what to say and feeling like he would just make things worse.

And he was stuck in one of those situations right now.

He soon found out the name of the girl. It was Valya. Her name meant "strong", and he felt it suited her perfectly despite the obvious irony.

He truly didn't know how to comfort her or if he should even. He felt sorry for her and more than a little helpless that his extent of helping her had ended when he sheathed his sword.

Out of the fear of saying the wrong things to her, he chose to give her some space. Though he had been through the same ordeal, he still wasn't sure how to comfort someone going through the same pain without revealing his past.

However, as they traveled together, he still found himself gravitating towards her. It was very hard for him to leave her alone when he could see the pain in her eyes and how much she longed for her home.

It was even harder when he saw her flinch from every sudden movement, eyes wide with fear as though she was reliving the nightmare. He felt his heart sink whenever he saw her clasp her trembling hands tightly and hunch over, as though she was trying to make herself seem smaller.

It reminded him of how he used to be and all that he had lost, and that made it impossible for him not to care.

Though her clear anxiety fueled his own insecurities about conversing with her, he did end up mustering the courage to talk to her. From his own experience, he knew it would be dangerous for Valya to be left to her own thoughts when she was all alone and had no one to rely on. It would seem almost heartless of him to do so, seeing as he had been in her place before.

It made him happy to see Valya ease up the more he spoke with her. She hadn't spoken very much ever since the confrontation with the slavers and guards went down. Not to the other warriors nor to the other released captives. Though she was still visibly on edge, Aedan could see that she was starting to have more moments where she was more relaxed.

As they got closer to the mountains, he wondered what Valya would think of their town. Would she like it? He truly hoped that she would adapt well to her new home. For a young girl like her, it was her only practical shot at survival. It was unfair, but he truly hoped she would be happy there.

Aedan being Aedan, he didn't say a word about his inner musings, choosing to keep it all to himself. After all, how could he ask her how she felt about seeing his home without reminding her that her own was gone?

The last thing Aedan wanted to do was to bring up memories that would be painful for her. He didn't ask what happened to her home or how she felt. He believed it wasn't his place to do so. Mostly, he feared seeing her break down again. The image had been seared into his mind, and it affected him more than he let on.

So whenever he did speak, it was simply to ask if she was hungry or tired. She would always say she was fine and smile gently at him before thanking him for his concern. But Aedan would catch on. So whenever she looked tired, he would encourage her by telling her they only had a bit more to go before they reached the mountain town. Her expression was inscrutable, a mixture of sadness, fear, and hope.

Aedan thought that it was very human, and very beautiful. He felt the urge to protect her, but he also felt that space was what she needed right now for her to heal.

It surprised him when just the night before they were due to arrive, she turned to him and asked him, "Were you born a warrior?".

He was surprised that she was curious about him. He looked at her and saw that her eyes were brimming with anticipation. While most people simply made small talk with him just to fill the silence or to be polite, he could tell Valya was actually interested in his answer.

"No..." he muttered, unsure of what else to say. He didn't want her to think he was trying to shut her down, but it was true that he wasn't the most comfortable talking about this topic. The most he could manage was a yes or no at this point.

"Then..." Valya looked over at him, her lips parted in a way that hinted at the smallest bit of hesitation to say the next words. "...Why did you become one?"

"To protect what was important to me." He said simply. It was the truth, and he knew it by heart. He had drilled it into himself ever since he started training as a warrior.

Valya smiled at him, her eyebrows cocked with a curious gaze. As though she could sense his reluctance and perhaps even his inability to elaborate, she simply stopped talking and continued walking forward.

Their footsteps fell into a steady rhythm with the rest of the group. Then, it was night and it was time to sleep.