

FOR ALL MANKIND

(Placeholder)

Prologue: Entrée

Keep going. Don't stop.

It was painful. Every muscle ached from the sustained tension, every movement inching her closer to that inevitable moment when she would break. Her determination was faltering. Focus was slipping away and it was becoming more and more difficult to find the path ahead. *How long has it been? How far have I gotten?*

A shiver passed over her, eliciting a whimper and she gasped at the sound of it, forced both hands over her mouth and pressed tight, waiting. She eased her right hand down, understanding that the sound had already escaped; it was lost to her. *Had it been heard?*

She found herself suspended in the silence of night, too afraid to even breathe and strained to discern any sign of having been discovered. It was too dark, too cold. The wind came in sharp gusts biting at her skin and the trickle of sweat gliding down her neck turned an icy dagger as it reached her back.

There was nothing. Nothing that didn't belong. She released a breathy sigh that had been held too long, wincing as the hot air passed chaffed lips.

Don't stop, Roua.

Too much effort was required to start moving again. The ache returned or maybe it hadn't even eased; impossible to tell. It felt familiar somehow, like the feel of an old shawl enveloping her just right. Suddenly, she shut her eyes trying to dispel the image. *A shroud.*

And then it came. Her movement stopped. She fell to her knees and when they hit the ground - pain. So intense, it surged like lightning. As it reached her chest it felt constricting, bending her forward. Arms too weak to offer any support, she collapsed into prostration.

A wailing laugh escaped her lips. It lingered on the wind, turning on itself.

The irony of the situation did not escape her in this, her last moment. How many times had she been told about her purpose, an obligation to something more, her destiny. And how many times did she fight the urge to give in, to lose herself in the chanting, to embrace the adoration, to accept and play her part. She had endured and she escaped. She got so close. A brief moment of clarity. *I cannot escape fate.*

It was like the cold wind was taking away her want as she acquiesced to the futility of it all.

She pushed to lean against a fallen trunk and tried to stretch her legs. The pain was gone. It started snowing or maybe it was already snowing. She refocused her gaze away from the ripped cloth around her knees, away from the profane immixture of muddied snow and blood.

Tilted her head up, eyes chasing snowflakes, but only for a moment. Her sight turned unfocused, stars, frozen leaves and snow indistinguishable - her shroud.

Surrender. Darkness took her.

Chapter 1: Adagio

The ringing in her ears knew no end; all encompassing, depriving her of all other senses, preventing every thought from even forming.

When she next came around, the sound of alarm was muted. Present still, but not as demanding now, it was giving way to something more - uncomfortable heat. Engulfing her.

Somewhere in the void of mind, the realisation that she was its source was struggling to form. Roua tried to reach inward, grasp at it and just as she took hold it dissipated, the effort in vain.

The world was jerking or she was, but in any case there was too much movement, and that incessant hum would not subside. Pressure and spikes of pain, all dancing inside her head, spinning, not letting, not even for a moment. It was suffocating and she was still unbearably warm, feverish. Forming any coherent thoughts was still beyond reach, mind now overloading with fleeting sensations.

The events of the previous night were crashing against memories past, some long forgotten: a flash of light, the sound of steel meeting flesh, fire roaring at her back. Trying to steal a glance she was met with the quiet crackling of a hearth and a sense of comfort. The room was warm and the logs were

giving off a sweet scent of burning cedar. She was surrounded by the lingering fragrance of its smoky notes. No... that didn't happen, at least not the night before, but it had been real - once. The image faded into dark night. *Is it still the night before? Before, what?*

Panic started to rise. Too many questions competed for attention and her answers - insufficient. Clearly she was denied the eternal sleep and, as awful as she felt, she was very much alive.

Every breath a burning struggle, throat dry, her lips sore, and her mouth was filled with that all too familiar metallic taste. The pain pulsing upwards from her knees combined with the numbness of her other extremities and the haze behind her eyes, yet this was all very real and she decided this was not her afterlife.

More questions invaded: where was she, how much time had she lost and where were they going.

You are not alone.

It was a silent scream; all the confusion collided into this singular, self-evident affirmation. Pushing away at the exhaustion, the haze and pain she willed open her eyes and reached out an unsure hand seeking confirmation. Shadows played around her, it was dark, still night, *still the night before?*

One shadow had form and was moving with her, holding her too tight.

Panic turned to dread, heart stilled and she felt like broken ice was scraping through her veins. This hollow tension gathering in her chest was threatening to break through. It could not be contained. It rose still, strangled at the back of her throat, but it would not be denied.

It was supposed to be a scream, commanding and powerful. It was supposed to leave no room for interpretation, no possibility for disobedience. What surfaced was merely a whisper.

“Stop”, a low plea.

She was unsure there had even been a sound and if it had, was it enough to pierce the tumult of their advance. Howling wind, the rustling of leaves, a steady galloping of hooves on frozen dirt, more and more sounds were registering now. Probably not.

Dread gave way to despair at the realisation of having exhausted all her strength on that futile attempt. What would it have achieved anyway? How did she convince herself that one word would accomplish the impossible - ensure her deliverance. And from what or whom exactly?

She was weak, evidently so in her state and more so compared to her shrouded keeper. She was aware of that much, at least. *Or is he my captor?* Even if she had a weapon, moving was pure torture. Speech seemed to be just as improbable and his grip on her felt strong. He smelled of ash, and something else, deep, dark and visceral.

And yet... they seemed to be slowing down; the cut of cold wind was dulling some, the cadence of hooves broke in an uneven pace before settling into a stately tempo.

"It's not safe to stop.", the shadow said, also low in tone.

It came from behind and sounded distant. It could have been just rumbling carried by the wind, but for the throbbing of his chest that reverberated through hers. The grip on her waist did not falter.

It was true; it was not safe to stop, but he didn't quicken the pace and she was left with yet another question - *But is it safe to continue?* She dared not ask and after what felt like a lifetime of silence, the shadow added "It won't be long now." and picked up the pace. His voice was not harsh, instead his tone felt detached and composed, like he was offering some piece of mundane observance.

It did not serve to temper her fear, nor provide any indication of what was their destination. It made it all feel that more eerie. And did she sense a promise, a threat, *both?*

Aleksander felt her stir, rejoining the world, slowly. With each breath more determined, life was pulsing in the palm he had wrapped around her. Good. This had not been a waste after-all.

Too much effort had been expended, too much time spent reading tedious reports and one too many lives lost securing the information that had gone into planning this operation. Then there was the cost, and the taste of bile filled his mouth at the thought of having to explain that; not the time, nor the loss of his men, no, he would be expected to justify the cost. *One could not wage war on empty coffers.*

She stirred again and he felt his mood improving. Sure, the incursion didn't yield the expected results and he would have to present valid excuses, but save for a few wounds, none of his had been lost. What remained of the enemy was soon to become food for the Wilds and fortunately, one such excuse was nestled closely against his chest and she was important.

The number of troops in her escort had been a strategic mistake and ultimately what made tracking their movements so accessible. The fact this one girl was guarded by no less than four of those feral, half formed creatures the enemy enjoyed breeding so much - *Moroi, dreadful abominations* - only confirmed it. There were no orders, there was no munitions cache, no weapons, no deployment plans, nothing to guard that could be intercepted. *Just the girl.*

The girl he felt, before he saw. The girl he knew would be there even before they reached the clearing where the

enemy had set camp for the night. The girl that bolted as the fighting started. That girl he felt compelled to chase.

Blades hissed and were quickly muted by the rush of blood as they sliced through pale skin and flesh. Vocal cords severed, Michal and Jano seemed to move in unison and eased the two lookouts to the ground. The Moroi stirred, one unleashed a harrowing growl.

Hoyan soldiers jumped to alert. The initial surprise concluded, true resistance was met. They moved fast, his team engaged the enemy men and he turned towards the field tent where they kept her.

A half formed beast dashed towards him, lunged, and they hit the ground. Another two were pacing on each side, circling, stalking. The abomination on top growled, hissed and snapped around his arm. Jagged fangs pierced sleeve and skin, seeking tender flesh. The taste of blood enraged it further. It screamed gurgling frustration, slobbering against the woollen sleeve that wouldn't give.

His blade dropped, switched hands and pierced the tender under jaw. It pushed deep. The creature spasmed and then went limp. He shoved it to the side just as a second broke its stride and lurched. It ripped into already-decayed flesh and preoccupied itself with the carcass.

Raising to his feet, he quickly took note of the clearing. Michal's blade danced with death, his preferred choice of weapon. Jano had set a wagon ablaze and several men were

being consumed by the flames and Sofia was cutting off stragglers.

The third Moroi was tempted by the easy promise of flesh of its own kind, but turned last moment and darted at him. Without thought, he flicked his wrist. A thick tendril lashed from the shadows, grabbed the beast by its hind leg, pulled it back and ripped into it. Darkness, made solid.

The surge of power filled him, raw and seducing, it demanded to be unleashed. It alerted the other two and they charged at him. He was suspended in the moment, only marginally aware some of the enemy soldiers were also turned to him. The flow inside him amplified the silent pull from before. It fed it until it became so urgent that he abandoned all logic. A wave of shadow exploded and cut down every man and beast standing in his reach.

That had been a mistake on his part and one, no doubt, he would regret later. Whatever information was to be had, gone, but he wasn't thinking then. He mounted his horse and rushed into the forest.

It took some time to find her trace and chose a direction, but, once the decision was made he increased his pace. Maybe he had been a bit too eager, considering the uneven terrain and the very real risk of his battle horse ending up with a broken leg, but that hardly seemed of concern in the moment.

Again, he felt her before he saw her. *How?*

He dismounted and proceeded on foot. He needed to follow her; all sanity now forgotten, seemingly made worse by their proximity, he watched her, moved when she moved, stopped when she stopped. Do you feel it too? Can you feel me?

It dawned on him that she did share this connection; it didn't seem she was aware of him parse, but she was aware. Her movements were erratic, strained, lost, but when she failed to stifle the faintest of sounds, her hand retracting as if burned on her own breath it was clear she was listening for something. Listening for you.

And his breath hitched.

When she exhaled, he exhaled.

Moments later she willed herself to move. Maybe she had convinced herself it was all in her mind, there was no one following her, the soldiers still engaged in fight, and maybe she was intent on putting as much distance between them as she could before the battle was decided. It was the sensible course of action. She was running from them or... *was she running from me?*

Before he had a chance to move, she stopped again. Something felt wrong. Beyond the inherent strangeness of this entire evening, something was wrong. It irked at him to move, exit the shadows, reach her and at the same time he was unable to advance, an aberrant curiosity for what would happen next, prevented it.

He saw her fall to her knees.

His mind roared for him to move. Go to her!, but still he kept to the shadows. It was all too surreal and for a moment he doubted she was even there. When she bent in prostration, his mere presence felt profane, like he had stumbled into something not meant for the likes of him.

Surely, his imagination had turned to madness - they were in the Wilds, after all. There was no otherworldly radiance, just snow, and what little light pierced the clouds reflected in the fresh fallen covering on the ground. He did not believe in miracles, despite his own nature, but they hadn't been in the Wilds that long.

Is this arrogance? And his mind seemed to answer itself. *No... Yes...*

Neither answer was comforting, the implications behind each too laborious to consider in that moment and both pointed to a different kind of weakness.

His attention was drawn back to the scene unfolding in the clearing when he was pierced by that wailing shrill.

The pang of recognition shattered the illusion he had been playing in his mind, so indulgently. He felt a call and was compelled to answer the reality of her situation. She was injured, she was weary, she was ill clothed for the weather and none was a result of this short run through the forest.

And you are a fool.

His thoughts kept pulling him back to that moment, now coloured by a permanent tint of shame.

He had indulged too much and let himself suspend reason too frequently this past year. It was now evident, no matter his efforts to dismiss it or ignore his purposely silenced conscience. It was objectionable and would deem it such if observed in another. He was aware of his reputation - it had been elaborately curated, a mixture of truth and fiction, useful propaganda, but this was a weakness. And still, it was entirely of his own creation; another mistake in a long list of mistakes.

“Stop.”, faint, a whisper, and yet... imperative.

His mind rushed to press that they couldn't stop. Had the directive come from within, from some seclusive part of his mind, unknown even to himself? He strained to locate its origin, but it was hers. Her voice, her command, and he obeyed. His thoughts stilled. He was taken out of his spiral of self-flagellation and found himself pulling on the reins, letting Shasta set his own pace.

“It's not safe to stop.”, his own voice felt displaced and low as he released... a truism. Really not something worthy of more than a fleeting acknowledgement, but somehow he put great care to remain measured and unassuming.

He did, however, take the opportunity to allow some respite for his horse, of whom he had demanded more than planned this night. He was nothing, if not practical. The steep

trek through the overgrowth and this longer route that made use of what passed for a path in the Wilds added a couple of hours back to their agreed meeting point. It would have been too much for a sustained sprint.

Once an appropriate amount of time, he estimated, was provided for Shasta, it also looked like dawn was upon them and he found himself adding:

“It won’t be long now.”, then increased to a gallop.

Chapter 2: Respite

As they passed out of the Wilds and crossed onto the western bank of the Fold, with only an hour into the day, the morning sun was already at their backs, dulling the chill and dampness that clung to their clothes. Aleksander allowed himself to ease his stance, grateful for the warmth.

His now-companion was leaning halfway between his chest and left arm, back laid somewhat flat against his coat, draped with the fur-lined cape, head propped against her own shoulder. There was nothing extravagant in his attire. The uniform was standard imperial issue for their Chapter, designed to prioritise function and practicality; rank was only revealed by colour: black doublet and trousers, black boots and the black cape that kept them warm, its hood let back. *A bit on the nose*, he often chuckled to himself, but visuals were useful.

Hers were also practical, not for the Wilds, but definitely some type of uniform. Somber cut, no obvious embellishments, the only striking detail was the fabric. Pattern was weaved into the light grey cloth, it was delicate, monotone, with just a hint of silver here and there. The detail coiled around the collar, over the shoulders and down the side of the sleeve. Unlike typical Hoyan garments which from all reports were plain in the extreme, hers seemed to indicate some sort of higher station. He made a note to ask Jano about it.

Another anomaly was the intricate way she wore her hair. Beyond the mess of strands come undone, it had been braided and arranged with intention. It wouldn't warrant a second glance on Devian streets, but it was in stark contrast to Hoya's stern styles. *More questions...* Other than that, she bore the uniform Hoyan features - light hair, pale complexion, the results of generations of intentional selection and artificial living conditions. Difficult to tell age, but that was common for her kind.

Her fever broke some time before and she was breathing steadily. That hum within, the one Aleksander felt even before they came upon the campsite, had also stabilised sometime along the way. Destination in sight, he was growing curious over what answers he would get from this unusual woman.

There was little risk of being followed out of the Wilds and even at this narrow point, crossing was difficult. It would take time to regroup and pursue, even if there was anyone left to endeavour it. Direct incursions into Deva were rare enough and anyway, for decades now, Hoya carefully planned their attacks, their execution elaborately designed to inflict maximum damage and casualties with minimal expense.

No one ventured through the Wilds without preparation; no one could - most went mad within hours.

Blessing and curse, the mountainous range that had kept Hoya at bay for over 2 centuries also prevented any significant offensive. They were stuck. The war had slowed to a

grind; their mundane existence punctuated by explosive strikes
- a smouldering reminder of half-forgotten grievances.

Aleksander found himself snickering at a fleeting thought. *What were they saying now?*

That tale, always told in whispers, late at night and cautionary, ultimately tempered with a gentle kiss over tired brow. Now and then over cups, the man, braggart or chastened, the ending was the same - a glint of regret in distant eyes. The truth of it forgotten and it made no real difference; he'd heard them all through the decades. The only important truth was always there. The Wilds were dangerous, forbidden. Those that lingered went mad, became aggressive and feral. They either turned on each other, were taken by the elements or simply wasted away. Some lasted longer than others, but never enough. There was nothing to be done about it, they simply didn't have the time, and so he let the stories flow.

They came to a junction and veered north aiming for a cluster of buildings atop the slope in the distance.

It would be a long winter. The frost had come early and there were crops still in the fields, frosted over where the sun was yet to touch. Beyond the waste and vacancy, there was beauty in the way the light reflected off thawing spikes of grain. The air was crisp and the soft drafts of wind and the rush of the Fold were only broken by the cadence of hooves on broken asphalt.

Imperial reach was waning at the borders and they were settling in for complacency. The district was scarcely populated this close to the Wilds, but every viable plot had to be used and effectively so. It also wasn't an isolated case. There had been multiple reports each year, it was brought up in Council every harvest season, complaints abounded for a few weeks and were then forgotten when public attention refocused. No one wanted to admit scarcity was creeping in the shadow cast by the ridge. She'd been awake for some time as they reached the small farmhouse, but had remained silent, distracted by this unfamiliar land and their surface living.

Shattered glass glinted from behind warped boards. A final, desperate grip, clung to the openings by rusted nails. Fallen tiles lay scattered near the steps that led to the front door and to the left, a line of rags, tattered in the wind.

The place was silent - when, moments before they halted, the door creaked open and a man started towards them, grabbed the bridle and ran a hand down the horse's flank.

"Michal!" Her keeper nodded. "Everyone make it back alright?"

"Yes, Commander. Jano and Sofia are inside. Nothing major to report" the new man, Michal, replied. Then, as though she was not there, "They're taking bets on how long you...", with just a flicker of amusement in his voice.

"We have a guest," the Commander cut him off, and she saw Michal straighten at the reproach. He dropped the bridle,

gave the horse another pat, then reached for her waist, caught hold, and pulled her from the saddle.

Her feet found the ground, but she could not support herself and began to lean away from him. “Steady, you...” he said, tightening his grip to keep her from falling.

“I got her.”

It was the Commander that lifted her again and headed for the door.

Their accents were fascinating; the flow of their words effortless. The door loomed closer, then disappeared around her as they passed through. She was still hazy and let this, whatever it was, play itself out.

She struggled to adjust to the low light, but took note of the room around her — the door behind, boarded up windows on two sides, stairs towards the back and another door, old dusty furniture interspersed between. It was warm and once the Commander turned them, she could see the other two near the fireplace.

Sofia stood up from the armchair and approached, Jano remained still, leaning against the mantelpiece.

“Sir.”

“Commander Kino.”

“Sofia, where...” and nodded towards the woman in his arms.

“Upstairs, second door on the left.”

“Lead the way. You too, Jano. Need you to check her.”

The door opened and the light poured over them, blinding her once again. She shut her eyes and felt being deposited on a bed.

“I don’t think it’s bad, but... just make sure. Looks like they’d been there for a while.”

She opened her eyes when she felt a hand on her leg, pulling at the rip at her knee, raised her head and saw him, Jano — *He is Hoyan*. Panic surged and she pushed back on the bead drawing herself away from him, wincing in the process.

“Easy. He’s not going to hurt you. He’ll just check your wounds,” and Sofia placed a hand on her shoulder, grounding her.

She looked from Sofia to Commander Kino, back to the woman. Dark brown curls tightly drawn and tied at the back of her head, a few loose strands framing her face, her expression was vague, maybe intentionally stern, but her eyes seemed kind.

“What’s your name?”

“Roua,” she breathed out and with her name, the tension also left her.

She straightened her legs to allow Jano inspect her wounds. He didn’t, not straight away, instead exchanged looks with Kino — “After.” Jano nodded and placed his hand on her.

A low hum took shape in the back of Roua’s mind; unfamiliar, coming in waves, it pulled at her attention, inviting. Resisting would have been torture, she *knew* instantly. The allure grew in flashes; she was both inside the wound and apart from it, platelets swarmed a sudden glittering mass, sticking, locking, weaving a net. Bleeding slowed and so did her pulse, but then the hum grew higher, urgent and as the signals spread, cells pushed through vessel walls, spilling into the gap. Flashes of chemical fire, invaders burned away. It was violent, precise and beautiful, and Roua felt herself leaning closer, drawn into the choreography, aching to dissolve into it.

Pink. The wound flushed pink as vessels branched and crawled, feeding the new ground. Edges pulled tight, the gap closed like lips pressed shut.

She tore herself away, muscles locking as if she’d been ripped from a current. Pain shot through her chest, a hot and twisting ache that spread into her throat. Her skin prickled, her stomach lurched; every nerve screamed to turn back. Then silence — a brutal, ringing silence that pressed against her temples like a fist, leaving her hollow.

A thin, pale layer of skin was the only trace of what Jano had made happen. The body moved on.

But the experience lingered, pulsing behind her eyelids, a craving that burned and refused to be quelled, like the ache over the forbidden Roua could not touch again. *Must not touch again.*

Breathing now under control, she could still hear the faint hum, not coming from Jano, but in Kino. She fixed her eyes on his and recognised the inward stare, saw the slight dilatation of his pupils; the same abandon she'd just been tempted with also pulled at him. Roua saw him blink and he was back.

"Sofia, I need you downstairs," then turned to Jano — "finish up and then we'll start." Sofia removed her hand from Roua's shoulder and followed Kino through the door.

"Have you other wounds?" She flinched at the familiar cadence of his accent, but undid her tunic all the same, lifted her shirt to expose her left flank and a makeshift bandage and showed Jano where she had been slashed. He placed his hands on her once more, to keep her in place, to mend, to offer temptation.

Chapter 3: Detour I

They left before noon, five horses moving in a disciplined line along the narrow road that cut through the melting frost. The farmhouse shrank behind them, no sign of life remained there

Commander Kino's orders had been clear, as always. "Secure a transport. Enough fuel for our return." No explanation, no tone beyond command, but Sofia had seen the shift in him that morning, the brief disquiet when his gaze drifted toward the closed door of the room. A similar unease troubled her now and wished she could have been present for the Hoyan woman's answers.

Realising she was falling behind, Sofia pressed her knees to the horse's sides, guiding it around a patch of cracked asphalt until she caught up with Michal. He rode beside her now, reins loose in his gloved hands, posture easy, brown eyes scanning the pale horizon. His jacket was open at the throat, regulation forgotten, the crimson lining flashing whenever the wind caught it. He looked amused, always did.

"She's of the Order," he said finally, as if continuing a thought he'd been holding since dawn.

"Looks like it," Sofia replied and Michal turned to glare at her before remembering himself.

“Looks it? It was plain—” and returned to looking in the distance.

Sofia frowned. “She flinched when Jano used his power.”

“She flinched?” Michal turned again, surprised.

“She did. Only for a second.”

“Huh.” He leaned forward on the saddle. “You think she has value?”

“I think she’s alive after crossing the mountains,” Sofia said. “That’s value enough in that for Kino to care.”

“Care. There’s a word I never thought I’d hear tied to him...” Michal gave a low whistle. “He doesn’t care. He studies.”

Sofia didn’t answer. She remembered the moment vividly: Jano’s hand hovering over the wound, the faint shimmer of energy, the soft hiss of tissue knitting. Roua’s breath had caught: fear first, recognition after. Kino had watched too long, unmoving, eyes darker than usual filled with abandon. The woman had hidden her reaction. He hadn’t.

“She noticed him,” Sofia said quietly. “The way he reacts when someone uses power. It’s the same as hers.”

Michal gave her a side glance. “You saw all that?”

“I was in the room. You weren’t.”

He chuckled. “And here I thought you didn’t believe in intuition.”

“I believe in patterns.”

They rode on, the landscape unfolding in fragments of decay and persistence: rusted silos, thin strips of farmland bordered by skeletal trees, the faint glint of solar glass patched with metal scraps. Smoke rose from chimneys where life clung on stubbornly. The empire’s borderlands weren’t dead yet, just fraying.

Michal adjusted his collar. “Do you think she’ll talk?”

“She will. You’ve seen what happens when people don’t.”

“You’ve always admired him...”

Sofia hurried an “I respect efficiency.”

“That’s what you call it?”

“Don’t. I’m not in the mood.” She looked ahead.

He laughed under his breath, a sound that used to please her but now only thinned the silence between them. They'd spent too many nights on the road, too many missions where humour was the only insulation against exhaustion and his warmth had a way of finding the cracks in her discipline.

"You didn't sleep," he said.

"Neither did you."

"I had better company."

"Your ego?"

"Your memory."

She shook her head, fighting the smile that tried to rise even now. "You'll talk both of us into trouble one day."

The horses slowed as the road widened and the first signs of the town appeared, low houses of cement and improvisation, gardens boxed with wire fencing; a windmill's blades creaked overhead. The air carried smoke and humidity from the Fold beyond the hills. Children paused to stare as they passed, mud streaked on their faces, curiosity bright but cautious.

Sofia watched the people studying them. The faint recognition in their eyes—imperial uniforms, even stripped of insignia, still meant something. Not respect nor fear. Just memory of authority, thin and reluctant. "Feels different," she said. "Last time it was busier."

“They’ve learned noise makes them look too alive.”

“Alive is good for trade...”, but seeing the once animated town, she struggled to believe her own argument.

“Desperate is better to stay that way.” For a moment he seemed lost in thought, transported somewhere else.

She briefly glanced at Michal. “Now, you sound like him... Remember—no names, no ranks.”

Michal nodded, straightening in his saddle. “Right. Just two travellers with expensive taste and standard issued uniforms.”

“Try not to set anything on fire this time.”

“That was one time.”

“It was a house.”

“A small one,” he laughed again, the sound too bright for the grey air.

Sofia felt the tension between them ease, the familiar rhythm of their banter returning like muscle memory and she cursed her own recklessness.

They dismounted at the edge of the square where an old transit sign leaned at an angle, letters half erased. The market stretched beyond: a tangle of stalls under patched canvas, traders calling out prices in the habitual cadence.

It smelled of fish, wet earth, and boiled grain. A thin crowd moved between the stalls, wrapped in patched coats and makeshift masks against the dust that came with every gust of wind from the quarry. The place still breathed, slowly, tiredly, but it breathed.

Sofia adjusted her collar to hide the edge of her uniform. Michal had already done the same and was now rolling his sleeves and pushing his hair back like a man on casual business. His posture said traveller, but his eyes said looked sharper.

They passed vendors selling copper wire, dried roots, rifle parts, jars of thick green vaseline. Conversations drifted in fragments: complaints about harvest quotas, activity along the Ridge, new taxes from the capital no one had seen in years. A woman behind a cart of bread looked up at Sofia with soft expectation, then turned to suspicion when she saw the imperial cut of her jacket and quickly gave them a nod. Habit ran deep.

“Still pretending to be loyal,” Michal murmured.

“They are loyal,” Sofia said. “To what they remember.”

Ahead, the transport yard welcomed them with corroded metal and silence. Sofia handed her reins to a stablehand who didn’t look old enough. The boy hesitated at the sight of their weapons, then nodded quickly and led the horses away.

Michal called after the boy to get the scrapper then leaned closer. "Let's hope they have what passes for a vehicle."

"I'm more worried about finding enough fuel," pulling herself away, she gave him a look that might have been a warning; it was hard to tell, even for her.

They saw the scrap trader exit from the shell of an old freight depot and wave them over. A metal sign hung over the entrance, its original letters melted into a single streak of rust, new designation sprayed over in paint. Inside, the air was heavy with grease and ozone. Machines half-dismantled lay under canvas tarps; tools hung from ropes like the dried herbs from the market stalls they just passed. The man in a stained coat looked them up, squinting through the smoke of a thin cigarette.

"Help you?" His accent was the local borderland drawl with the consonants flattened.

Sofia nodded toward a hulking frame under a tarp. "We're looking for transport. Something with range."

He eyed her gloves, the cut of her jacket. "Range costs. You military?"

"No."

He didn't believe it, but he liked the lie. "Then you know what you're looking for."

Michal moved past her, pulling the tarp free. Beneath it sat a rust-coloured carrier—wheeled, armoured, one of the old patrol models stripped for parts. The glass was cracked but intact; the engine block looked scavenged from three different eras.

“*This* will move?” Michal asked.

The trader shrugged. “For a while.”

Sofia looked skeptical. “How long is ‘a while’?”

“Long enough to get you somewhere you shouldn’t be,” she heard the man say and her irritation grew at their being so unprepared with their obvious attire.

Michal laughed. “Perfect.”

Sofia stepped closer, running a hand along the dented hull. “Fuel type?”

“Hybrid, mostly ethanol. Tank’s a fifth full.”

She glanced back at Michal. He nodded slightly and she caught the spark in his eyes, that same reckless confidence that always made him look at challenges like a game.

The trader folded his arms. “Two med-packs, five ration kits, three horses.” The boy had clearly been through their supplies.

Sofia considered. “Too much.”

“Then walk.”

Michal stepped forward, smile lazy. “You’ll take one med-pack, three rations and one horse. You’ll still be eating when the rest of this town’s coughing blood.”

The trader snorted. “You’ve got nerve.”

“Flame,” Michal said softly while his eyes lit up copper.

“What?”

Sofia cut in before the word turned into demonstration “One med-kit, three rations and two horses.” The man paused. His eyes flicked between them, calculating, uncertain but settling on Michal. “Fed and healthy.” She added.

Tapping ash to the floor, the scrapper let out a hearty laugh, his features softening — “Deal.”

They sealed it with a handshake; Michal started inspecting the vehicle. The engine coughed, then caught with a low, uneven growl. The sound made the scrap man smile despite himself.

“See? Still life in her.” Sofia heard him yell as she passed outside.

She hesitated a few steps away. She was distracted and was allowing Michal to take lead despite herself; old habit

ran deep, indeed. Deep breath, then started towards the back where the boy had disappeared with their load earlier.

As she was returning with the remaining horses, Sofia caught the scrap man lowering his voice. “Official channels are dry.”

“Unofficial?”

The trader pointed with his chin toward the far edge of town as Michal’s eyes followed. “Old freight tunnel. You’ll find the people you’re looking for.”

“Names?”

He shook his head. “You don’t ask names there.”